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Introduction

Most villains have a chip on their shoulders, some perceived slight or insult that leads them to act out, causing mayhem and destruction. And who has a bigger chip than the outsider, the misfit who cannot blend in despite his best efforts? Shakespeare wrote 36 plays (or 37 or 38, depending on how one counts), and eight of them feature an outsider character. Typically, this outsider character is the villain of the play. This affinity towards evil leads me to question whether wickedness is an innate characteristic of outsider characters in general, and how this informs on the few outsider characters who do not turn to evil.

To begin, I group the eight plays by sliding scale of evil. Chapter One discusses the outsider characters who are blatantly evil to a cartoonish degree: Edmund of King Lear, Don John of Much Ado About Nothing, and Aaron the Moor of Titus Andronicus. Each of these three characters is inarguably evil, and embraces his evil nature. In Chapter Two, I examine characters who, while clearly evil, present complicated reasons for their wickedness and do not adhere to the relatively simple motivations of the Chapter One characters: Richard of Richard III and Caliban from The Tempest. Finally, in Chapter Three, I look at characters who are either so morally grey they can be construed as hero or villain depending on how the play is performed, and outsider characters who are protagonists and heroic: Shylock of Merchant of Venice (in addition to Jessica and the Prince of Morocco), Othello of Othello, and Philip Faulconbridge of King John.

Shakespeare presents a diverse group of outsiders. Edmund, Don John, and Philip are each bastards; Aaron, the Prince of Morocco, and Othello are persons of color; Shylock and Jessica are Jews; Caliban is half-human; and finally, Richard is a hunchback
and a cripple. No single group presents uniform characteristics and personalities. Edmund celebrates his illegitimacy, Don John bemoans it, and Philip is gladdened by confirmation of his illegitimacy, though not simply for the sake of it, but because he prefers King Richard as his true father over Faulconbridge. Aaron and the Prince of Morocco both celebrate their skin color, though Aaron uses it as an excuse for evil while the Prince of Morocco does not, while Othello is simultaneously proud of his ethnicity and wary of negative personality traits associated with it. Jessica despises her Jewish blood and quickly converts out, while Shylock is proud to be Jewish and disparages the Christians. This lack of consistency makes it difficult to resolve such disparate characters and understand how Shakespeare could put Aaron and Othello, Edmund and Philip, into the same canon.

My analysis first begins by attempting to answer whether evil is an innate quality of outsider characters. I quickly revise this question to whether negative personality traits are innate to outsider characters. Shakespeare appears to attribute certain characteristics to outsider characters. Across the plays, multiple characters make references to innate qualities. Edmund claims he is more interesting and clever than his brother Edgar because of his illegitimacy. Othello speaks of the passion inherent in members of his race, cautioning himself to remain logical and cool (he is not successful). Aaron goes as far as to say that as a person of color, he is particularly suited towards wickedness since he will not betray his thoughts by blushing. Occasionally, characters make reference to the stars and astrology, such as when Don John wonders why Conrade cautions restraint when he was born under Saturn. Shakespeare sets up a world in which the circumstances of one’s birth, or another situation similarly out of an individual’s control, have a great influence
on the individual’s personality. Thus, Aaron and Othello are innately passionate, Shylock innately greedy, Richard twisted, and so on.

However, how can a person be truly evil if there he has no choice in the matter? Shakespeare introduces the theme of possible redemption into several of his plays. Edmund repents his numerous sins as he lies on his deathbed, even making a valiant attempt to save Cordelia. Richard is visited by the same dreams that haunted his brother Clarence; the fact that Clarence in the same situation chose repentance indicates that Richard had the option of redemption and rejected it. Caliban too finds redemption at the end of *The Tempest*, apologizing for his actions and promising to serve Prospero faithfully from then on. Jessica successfully converts to Christianity, though her final line implies she may have trouble finding happiness in her new life.

Therefore, Shakespeare does believe that while certain characteristics are innate to these outsider characters, the villains choose evil. Wickedness is not a given, despite Don John’s claims that his hand has been forced by his brother.

However, Shakespeare places the outsider characters in a fairly difficult position. An outsider must simultaneously overcome his innate negative qualities while accepting his place in society, a place that is lower because the person is an outsider. It is in an outsider character’s nature to possess negative characteristics, but the outsider character cannot upset the order of Nature – that is, the order of the world and its hierarchies according to Shakespeare. Most villainous outsiders fall into villainy by attempting to upset that balance and overstep their bounds. Edmund attempts to steal his elder and legitimate brother’s inheritance and title; Aaron sleeps with Tamora; Richard tries to seize the throne from his numerous relatives; and Caliban tries to take the island back
from Prospero. Even Othello, the protagonist of his play, is subtly critiqued for marrying Desdemona. Of all the outsider characters, only Philip manages to harness in his negative innate qualities while accepting his lower position in the larger hierarchy of society.

The question of nature over nurture is brought up multiple times. Prospero and Miranda reveal that they initially attempted to educate and civilize Caliban, but gave up after Caliban attempted to rape Miranda. They abandon the idea of nurture entirely, saying that it is impossible for Caliban to overcome his nature. However, the end of the play and Caliban’s subsequent repentance indicates that Caliban can be taught. Caliban learns not through kindness, but through cruelty. It is only after Prospero thoroughly defeats him and his drunken comrades that Caliban submits properly. While this outcome might offend modern readers’ moral sensibilities, especially if *The Tempest* is read with a post-colonial lens, the important information here is that Caliban can be taught, and that nurture (however hard and cruel) can overcome nature. Perhaps this too can explain Philip’s unusual behavior. Philip was raised as his father’s legitimate son and heir, not as a bastard (notably, all the outsider characters save Philip are publicly known to be outsiders from the start). While Faulconbridge expressed doubts as to Philip’s true parentage, Philip nonetheless likely had a normal childhood without the cloud of illegitimacy hanging over his head. Therefore, it is possible, even probable that Philip was raised in an environment in which he learned *not* to be evil and to fight against innate negative traits. Richard’s mother describes him as a troublesome infant from the beginning, but her hateful description of the young Richard, along with Richard’s response to his young nephew’s jest at his crippled back and his admittance of total alienation and loneliness in his speech following his dream point to a Richard who had
troubled childhood, disliked by his mother and taunted by other children. In other words, Richard was nurtured in a manner to encourage, rather than repress, his negative innate qualities. Together, Caliban, Philip, and Richard indicate that nurture can either successfully combat negative innate personality traits or promote them to greater and more destructive heights.

In sum, an outsider character is naturally disadvantaged by innate, often negative characteristics that are caused by their outsider status. However, nurture can overcome nature, and all outsider characters have the option of redemption. Therefore, evil is not a foregone conclusion and an outsider villain can be held accountable for their crimes.

Shakespeare plays with the concept of hidden and revealed throughout his plays. All the outsider characters save Philip are publically known as outsiders (Aaron, Othello, the Prince of Morocco, Richard, and Caliban are visually obvious; Shylock wears identifying clothing; and Edmund and Don John are introduced in their first scenes as illegitimate). Of these, almost all engage in some kind of subterfuge, using deceit to hide their nefarious schemes (the exceptions being the Prince of Morocco, who engages in no evil plans and Shylock, who is remarkably transparent about his plans to cut out Antonio’s heart from the beginning). This idea is further explored in King Lear, in which Edgar and Kent, both protagonists, must disguise their true identities; Merchant of Venice, in which Portia and Nerissa disguise themselves as lawyers; and The Tempest, in which Caliban himself is temporarily disguised by a blanket and Prospero, the supposed hero, pulls off a far greater deception than Caliban could ever hope to achieve. The idea of deception and disguise in general interests Shakespeare; disguises of various sorts often appear in his plays, and most of his villains operate through deception and lies. But
there is something unique about the position these outsider characters are forced into. In the public eye, they are naked, revealed. And yet so many of them use lies and concealment to get their way. Perhaps it is merely symptomatic of villainy in general. But the fact that Philip, the only outsider who spent the majority of his life unrevealed as an outsider, is also one of the most open and honest characters in his play indicates that there is some greater intention at work.

Across all the plays, Shakespeare also explores the theme of deviltry. All the outsider characters are compared multiple times to the Devil (Caliban takes the metaphor the furthest, being the literal son of the Devil). The Devil is a fitting comparison for the outsider characters. He is best known in Christian literature for attempting to usurp God and launching a rebellion, which bears a remarkable similarity to the usurpations of the various outsider characters. The Devil is typically viewed as a negative figure who tempts the innocent and righteous into sin and punishes the wicked. The latter job is somewhat at odds with the merciful nature of God and Jesus in the New Testament (or, at least, interpretations of the New Testament). Interestingly, Philip compares himself on multiple occasions to the Devil, despite being so different from the other outsider characters.

Using Philip as an example, Shakespeare seeks to separate the two tasks of the Devil into two entities: on the one hand, the tempting liar and deceiver, and on the other, the neutral punisher according to Divine justice. Outsider characters are often put into the position of the Devil. The Devil could not accept a position lower than Jesus, and eventually rose up against God himself. So too, illegitimate sons, persons of color, and the rest watch their legitimate, pale-skinned, able-bodied peers ascend to heights denied to them. However, by offering the possibility of redemption to his outsider characters, Shakespeare places
his misfits in the Devil’s position before the Fall. They have the choice to rebel or accept their lower position. And those that do accept, as Philip does, fulfills the more neutral task assigned to the Devil. Philip casts himself as a purveyor of the monarchy’s justice, meting out punishment on those who have wronged the king. He is the Devil as the Devil should have been had he not rebelled.

My original question is, is evil innate for outsider characters in Shakespeare? The answer I reach was yes and no. Outsider characters possess innate, typically negative qualities as a result of their outsider status. But evil is not a given, and redemption is an option, though most do not take it. Rather than seeking to do harm, outsider characters could use their qualities for good and make themselves useful, as Philip does. However, most choose not to. Perhaps this is because of the bitterness the outsider characters feel, rejected by their peers as tainted and lesser. Perhaps outsider characters are innately bent towards evil, as their innate negative characteristics suggest. Certainly this bitterness is not unique to the outsider characters. Besides the usual usurping suspects of Macbeth and Claudius, within the plays discussed in this thesis are alternative non-outsider characters: Tamora, Antonio and Sebastian, Goneril and Regan, and Iago, to name a handful. Jealousy, bitterness, and alienation are often the prime motivations for Shakespeare’s villains. However, outsider characters are uniquely disposed towards jealousy and bitterness by their situation and innate characteristics. They are disadvantaged, per se. But just as Shakespeare refuses to accept excuses from his other villains, he similarly gives his outsider villains short shrift. He, like his protagonists, expects the outsiders to be better than they are, to rise above their nature. Unfortunately, they rarely make it.
Chapter One: The Evil Ones

This chapter examines the most obviously evil ‘outsider’ characters in Shakespeare’s plays: Edmund, Don John, and Aaron from King Lear, Much Ado About Nothing, and Titus Andronicus respectively. No one can argue against their utmost villainy; rather, this chapter examines whether these characters are evil by nature or nurture, and how themes explored more extensively in other plays are played with here.

One of Shakespeare’s most tragic plays, King Lear features a rather jolly antagonist in the form of Edmund, the illegitimate son of the Duke of Gloucester. As an illegitimate son, Edmund is the obvious villain for the story, and he fulfills this role amiably and with much gusto.

Edmund openly acknowledges his villainy and its connection to his base origins in his opening monologue: “Why brand they us with base, base bastard,/ Who in the lusty stealth of nature take/ More composition and fierce quality/ Than doth within a stale, dull-eyed bed/ Go to the creating of a whole tribe of fops/ Go ‘tween asleep and wake?” (King Lear I.2.10-15). According to Edmund, his nature and personality is shaped by his illegitimate birth; however, he sees this as a positive. Because he was begot in fun, he is therefore a cleverer and more enjoyable person than his brother, whose conception and thus personality was utterly boring. Edmund mentions the word “nature” twice in his speech, driving home the point that his character comes almost exclusively from his nature, i.e. his bastardry, and not because of the way he was raised.

Edmund continues to explore this theme of nature over nurture throughout the play. When his father Gloucester attributes Edgar’s supposed betrayal to “these late eclipses in the sun and moon”, Edmund roundly mocks him in private (King Lear
I.2.102). “This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune... we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars, as if we were villains by necessity, fools, by heavenly compulsion...” (King Lear I.2.112-116). Shortly after, he deceives Edgar while loudly bemoaning the recent state of eclipses, so much so that Edgar bemusedly asks, “How long have you been a sectary astronomical?” (King Lear I.2.143). To a modern ear, Edmund’s speech has a certain appeal, as astrology and horoscopes are no longer given scientific credence and Gloucester’s attribution of bad events to the movements of the heavenly bodies sounds ridiculous. He finishes his speech by saying that since “my father compounded with my mother under the Dragon’s tail, and my nativity was under Ursa Major, so that it follows I am rough and lecherous” (King Lear I.2.122-124). Edmund claims that he would still be so even had he been born under “the maidenliest star” (King Lear I.2.125). However, this short speech comes not long after Edmund attributes his entire personality to his bastard origins. Edmund is hypocritical, choosing to embrace his illegitimacy as a popularly misunderstood positive trait while rejecting outright the negative stars associated with his conception and birth. Edmund attempts to create his own birth mythology, but picks and chooses the myths and tropes this will include, much as he picks and chooses how he will view Gloucester’s line of succession (Edmund is more than happy to ignore legitimacy and birth order to move himself up in line, but never questions whether someone who isn’t even Gloucester’s blood could possibly inherit). Thus, Edmund’s illegitimate conception is a major influence over his personality, though not, as he believes, for the positive, and the unfortunate stars under which he was conceived and born only add to his evil nature.
Claude Summers’ article “Stand Up for Bastards!” refutes this idea, however. Summers views Edmund’s villainy as not being caused by his illegitimacy, but rather “by the fact that in the reality of Edmund’s feelings those distinctions [that Gloucester made between his two sons] are never obscured (226). Edmund is not a villain because of his illegitimate nature; rather, he is evil because of the stigmas he faced as an illegitimate son. Summers reads condescension and bigotry in Gloucester opening introduction of Edmund in the first scene (227). While Gloucester makes ribald and embarrassing jokes in this introduction, there is no indication that Gloucester is cruel or that Edmund takes offence. Summers dismisses Gloucester’s claim that Edgar “is no dearer in my account” than Edmund with little evidence for why Gloucester’s statement shouldn’t be taken at face value (King Lear I.1.19-20). Summers objects to the language that Gloucester uses when referring to Edmund: “knave” and “whoreson” (King Lear I.1.20, 23). However, Gloucester uses these names as terms of endearment: “knave” is used for the word ‘rascal’, and while “whoreson” can be used as a derogatory term, it was also used to “express humorous familiarity or commendation,” or “jocular familiarity”, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Gloucester doesn’t read his son’s illegitimacy as a bad quality, merely a fact of life, and enjoys poking fun at the duality of language here. Summers also reads Edmund’s monologue at the start of Act I, scene 2 as self-deceptive and further indication of the stigma he faces as an illegitimate son. In fact, the only indication of self-delusion is Edmund’s idea that his bastard birth has attributed him with positive qualities. He embraces his bastard status, claiming to be more beautiful and clever for it. Summers claims that the audience feels sympathy for Edmund, who has dealt with heavy stigma and social abuse his entire life. However, Edmund is never
shown to be mistreated because of his illegitimacy; rather, he is raised in status by Gloucester and accepted into Gloucester’s family. Edmund is the vice character, and while always appealing and charming, is never actually sympathetic. The so-called stigma that Edmund supposedly faces is never seen on stage.

In fact, the language of the play itself implies nature as the reason for Edmund’s villainy. Edmund invokes nature in his opening monologue: “Thou, Nature, art my goddess” (King Lear I.2.1). When Gloucester believes Edgar to be a traitor, he curses him, calling him “unnatural” (King Lear I.2.78). Since it is Edmund in fact who is treacherous, Gloucester’s curses should be read as being aimed at him. Edmund is a bastard, also known as a ‘natural child’, but his very existence is the overturning of nature. Gloucester broke his marriage vows by impregnating Edmund’s mother. Thus it is in Edmund’s nature to be unnatural. When Lear and Gloucester are sent into the wilderness by their respective children, they are tormented by a vicious and fierce storm. Nature itself has gone mad, and become unnatural: the great are fallen low, the strong fathers made weak and helpless by madness and blindness. Lear himself refers to nature many times throughout the play, often in reference to his daughters’ characters or his own. His use of the word implies that Regan and Goneril were rotten from the start due to their natures; so too, his pride and temper were natural follies that would inevitably destroy him. Similarly, Edmund is a rotten twist of nature, usurping the natural order of succession.

Another theme present, though less overt, is that of the hidden and the revealed. Edmund is publicly known as an illegitimate son. In fact, Gloucester informs the audience of this within the first few lines: “His breeding, sir, hath been my charge. I have
so often blushed to acknowledge him that now I am brazed to it” (*King Lear* I.1.8-10). Even before this, Edmund is introduced in the stage directions of the 1608 quarto text as “Bastard [Edmund].” Thus, the audience is made aware of Edmund’s status as quickly as Shakespeare can make possible. Edmund, proud as he is of them, sees no reason to hide his illegitimate origins. However, Edmund is also exceedingly proud of the clever and vile schemes he thinks up and executes. He explains, “Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit,” and his wit he attributes to his illegitimacy (*King Lear* I.2.168). Nevertheless, he must keep his villainous plots a secret always. He has no true confidente. After disposing of his father and brother, Edmund quickly becomes entangled in a love triangle with Goneril and Regan. As with his father and brother, Edmund takes delight in playing the two off of each other in the hopes of taking both sisters’ wealth and power. It is only at the very end, as he lies dying, does Edmund at last reveal all his hidden treachery. In parallel with Edmund is his brother Edgar. Edgar, unlike Edmund, must physically disguise himself. There are numerous connections drawn between the two brothers. Edmund tells himself before convincing Edgar that their father has turned against the latter, “My cue is villainous melancholy, with a sigh like poor Tom o’ Bedlam” (*King Lear* I.2.131). When Edgar does into hiding, he takes on the “precedent of Bedlam beggars” and pretends to be “poor Tom” – in other words, poor Tom of Bedlam (*King Lear* II.3.13-14, 20). When Edmund pretends to hide a letter from his father Gloucester, the latter says, “The quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself” (*King Lear* I.2.34-35). When Edgar disguises himself, he declares, “Edgar I nothing am” (*King Lear* II.1.21). Even as Edgar declares himself to be “nothing”, his father’s words should echo in the audience’s ears. Since “the quality of nothing hath no such need to hide itself,”
Edgar should have no need to hide himself. However, Edmund has usurped his natural place as Gloucester’s heir (both in terms of legitimacy and birth order). Therefore, while Edmund may parade about unconcealed while Edgar feigns madness and hides in the wilderness, taking on aliases with ease.

One must raise the question, however, of how the characters in the play could have trusted Edmund so considering all they knew of him. Gloucester places great importance in the eclipses, yet never connects the evil stars under which Edmund was conceived and born as a portent of his later wickedness. Edgar and Gloucester trust Edmund implicitly, believing all his lies at once and without any doubts. *King Lear* is a play about good people bringing about their own follies. Lear himself causes much of his own woe by disowning Cordelia and placing himself solely in the care of the wicked Regan and Goneril. Gloucester and Edgar also bring about their own misfortunes by allowing themselves to be so hoodwinked by Edmund. The play implies that Lear should not have been won over by the pretty, false words of his elder two daughters; so too, Gloucester and Edgar should not have been won over by Edmund’s pretty, false worse either.

The theme of devilry is quite common in *King Lear*, although never explicitly leveled at Edmund. Lear cries out that Goneril possesses “ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend”, and Albany calls Goneril a “devil,” adding that “thou art a fiend” (*King Lear I.4.256; IV.2.61,67*). Most instances in which the term ‘fiend’ appears are in Edgar’s mad ramblings as Poor Tom. When Lear and company first meet Edgar in disguise, Edgar cries that “the foul fiend follows me” (*King Lear III.4.41*). It quickly becomes evident that this “foul fiend” is the wind, which constantly follows and torments Poor
Tom. The cold wind is nature, and it is nature that torments Edgar and Lear. The wind is normally invisible, hidden from all eyes like Edmund, Regan, and Goneril’s true characters. Now, the wind and their characters are out in full force, hidden no longer, buffeting and tormenting Edgar and Lear without relief or pity. Edgar still believes Edmund is righteous, and therefore, when Gloucester enters, calls his father “the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet” (King Lear III.4.105). While Edgar disguises his accusation as more mad ramblings, he shows the audience that the “foul fiend” who truly torments him is the family member who is the cause of all his woe. Sadly, Edgar is looking to the wrong family member. Edgar later says, “The foul fiend haunts Poor Tom in the voice of a nightingale” (King Lear III.6.25-26). While Edgar still believes the fiend to be his father, this is an apt description of his brother Edmund, who used sweet words and fair speech to disguise his villainous intents. After Edgar leads his father to the supposed ‘cliffs of Dover’, he changes identity and exclaims at Gloucester’s miraculous ‘fall.’ Edgar tells Gloucester that instead of the beggar at the top of the cliffs, he saw a creature whose eyes “were two full moons. A had a thousand noses,/ Horns whelked and waved../ It was a fiend” (King Lear IV.5.70-72). Gloucester believes him, saying, “That thing you speak of,/ I took it for a man. Often would it say/ “The fiend, the fiend”” (King Lear IV.5.77-79). It is difficult to interpret exactly what Edgar meant. Did he mean to say that he himself was a fiend to trick his father so? Surely not, for earlier he explained to the audience that “I do trifle thus with his despair/… [In order] to cure it” (King Lear IV.5.34-35). Rather, I believe Edgar meant the fiendish beggar, whose creation was forced by his brother Edmund, to become a symbolic representation of Edmund. The imaginary cliffs are the depths of treachery and despair to which Edgar and Gloucester
were led by Edmund. Edgar means to revitalize his father’s will to live by showing him that he has survived a great treachery. Gloucester lost his eyes, which was horribly cruel, but he retained at least his life. Edgar was forced to hide himself and play mad, but he too kept his life. The fiend that brought them to the cliff’s edge was Edmund, but the two have survived their crossing and can put it behind them. The devil figure is a complicated one in Christian theology. On the one hand, the devil is the evil tempter who seeks to seduce man into sin. On the other, the devil is the punisher of the wicked and an integral part of the heavenly judicial system. Without a punishment, why should people act righteously? Edmund, as demonstrated above, is often described by Edgar as a fiend (that is, a devil). Edmund clearly is the tempting form of devil. He leads Edgar and Gloucester astray, turning one against the other. The fiend whom Edgar described at the top of the cliff would have led Gloucester to commit suicide, a terrible crime.

Ultimately, Edmund acknowledges Edgar’s superiority only after Edgar bests him in a duel. Edmund has no respect for birth order or legitimacy. However, he does respect cleverness and might. Edgar successfully disguises himself and mortally wounds Edmund. Edmund notes with irony that “the wheel is come full circled” (King Lear V.3.170). Now it is Edmund who is fooled and defeated. Edmund agrees to tell Edgar and the others of what became of Lear and Cordelia, saying, “Some good I mean to do,/ Despite of my own nature” (King Lear V.3.242-243). Fascinatingly, Edmund demonstrates at the very end of the play that he was, in fact, perfectly capable of overcoming his wicked base nature. Edmund gives a deathbed confession and repents his sins. This final line of Edmund’s shows that while it was in his nature to be evil, and that this nature was caused by his illegitimate birth, Edmund was able to put aside his nature
if he wished. This adds an unusual twist to the nature over nurture debate. This theme of overcoming, or failing to overcome, one’s evil nature will be seen in many of the later plays. In essence, it explains why Gloucester and Edgar placed their trust in Edmund. They believed the best of him, and thought he had overcome his nature. Unfortunately, they were wrong. Edmund is naturally evil, but he chose it as well.

Don John, the villain of *Much Ado About Nothing*, like Edmund, is an illegitimate child. Similar to Edmund, Don John addresses the relationship between his birth situation and his personality very quickly. In an early scene, he complains to Conrade that he must always behave politely and cheerfully in public instead of when it suits his mood. Don John explains, “It better fits my blood to be disdained of all than to fashion a carriage to rob love from any” (*Much Ado About Nothing* I.3.25-26). Don John’s words could be interpreted several ways. He could mean that as a bastard, he is more likely to be disdained and spurned by society. However, since he says that he is unlikely to “fashion a carriage to rob love from any,” which connotes an action taken, Don John most likely means that it better suits him as an illegitimate son to act in a manner that would make others disdain him. Don John goes on to admit that “it must not be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain” (*Much Ado About Nothing* I.3.28). Like Edmund, Don John is honest about his nature and who he is.

However, Don John is not an entirely reliable source of information on himself. Don John presents himself as an afflicted and injured party, since he is forced to act cheerful even when he is not in order to remain in his brother’s good graces. Yet Don John is not obligated to remain with his brother. He is perfectly capable of leaving, as he does in the second half of the play. Don John also tells Conrade that “if I had my mouth, I
would bite; if I had my liberty, I would do my liking” (*Much Ado About Nothing* I.3.31-32). Don John then proceeds to “bite” and “do [his] liking” for the rest of the play, causing mischief and mayhem at every chance he gets. In addition, despite Don John’s protests of having to behave happily in public, he seems to do a poor job of it. Beatrice calls him “tartly,” and Hero says that “he is of a very melancholy disposition” (*Much Ado About Nothing* II.1.3,5). It seems that Don John’s idea of faking good humor and cheerfulness is to hide his malicious nature rather than cease to be a melancholic misanthrope.

*Much Ado About Nothing* is full of deceptions and lies, secrets and hiding. Benedick and Beatrice hide their love for each other behind sharp tongues and bitter wit. Claudio, Hero, and their friends deceive Benedick and Beatrice in order to push the two together. This deception is a kind one, and no doubt Benedick and Beatrice will not begrudge them should they ever learn the truth. Don John is full of deceptions as well. He lies to Claudio about Don Pedro’s intentions for Hero at the party, and again to convince him of Hero’s infidelity. Just as Benedick and Beatrice instantly believe their friends’ fake conversations, so too Claudio falls both times for Don John’s lies. This contrast presents an interesting message: lies and deceit are acceptable if the intentions and intended outcomes are positive. Claudio, Hero, and the others’ scheme could have easily fallen into ruin had only Benedick believed the overheard conversation but Beatrice hadn’t, or the reverse. But the play decides not to dwell on such an outcome, instead playing the scene for comedy. Richard Henze’ paper “Deception in *Much Ado About Nothing*” notes that Claudio plays a key role in both deceptions; in one scheme he is the deceiver who helps trick Benedick, while in the other he is the gullible victim (Henze
Henze also notes that in both deceptions, the victims were self-deceivers in their own right (Henze 188-193). Beatrice and Benedick are each, despite numerous protests, madly in love with each other throughout the entire play; Claudio, Hero, and the others’ false conversations merely give the unwilling couple the push necessary for each to admit their true feelings. Similarly, Don John’s scheme would not be successful if he did not prey on Claudio’s self-doubt and weakness. Notably, the men are all easily persuaded to believe Hero’s infidelity; not just Claudio, but Don Pedro and Leonato as well, believe Don John’s lies with little persuasion. Leonato, who did not even witness Don John’s ‘evidence’ of Hero’s falseness, wishes his daughter dead because of “her foul-tainted flesh” (*Much Ado About Nothing* IV.1.143). Only Benedick, whose love of Beatrice and desire to remain in her good graces likely causes him to side with her, and the friar, who, as a celibate member of the clergy, is not a man in the same sense as Claudio and Don Pedro, doubt the accusations. Just as Edmund justifies his actions against Gloucester and Edgar as being deserved, since if they are fooled by him, they don’t deserve the title to the dukedom, so too does Don John implicitly justify his own meddling. Don John never kills anyone directly; instead, he uses words and suggestions on suggestible people to cause mayhem. When Claudio learns how he was tricked, he begs Leonato for forgiveness, saying, “Impose me to what penance your invention/ Can lay upon my sin: yet sinn’d I not/ But in mistaking” (*Much Ado About Nothing* V.1. 264-266). While Claudio admits that his sin was an honest (as opposed to malicious) error, he still calls it a sin and accepts Leonato’s punishments without protest. That Leonato makes Claudio suffer, forcing him to take part in Hero’s funeral procession and withholding the information that Hero is still alive, implies that Claudio should have known better than to
be deceived (though Leonato himself was fooled). In other words, Shakespeare blames
Don John for his wicked and misleading words, but he also blames Claudio for believing
them. Claudio, as with Gloucester and Edgar, is a maker of his own misfortunes in
trusting the likes of Don John and Edmund respectively. Ironically, Claudio and Don
Pedro mistrust and publicly humiliate the innocent Hero instead of the true deceiver,
Don John.

The theme of one’s birth situation influencing one’s nature is explored with others
besides Don John. Don John says that he wonders how Conrade, who was “born under
Saturn, goest about to apply a moral medicine to a mortifying mischief” (Much Ado
About Nothing I.3.9-11). The superstition at the time was that those born under Saturn
would be of a unfavorable and malicious nature. Beatrice tells Don Pedro that she is
merry because, although her “mother cried… a star danced, and under that I was born”
(Much Ado About Nothing II.1.316-317). Both these lines are given in passing and not
explored further, but all imply the importance of the circumstances surrounding one’s
birth and that it directly influences one’s character and personality.

Similarly, while devil imagery is not thoroughly explored in Much Ado About
Nothing, it is certainly present. Both sides of the Devil, the punisher and the tempter,
appear. Beatrice jokingly tells Leonato that when she dies, “the devil will meet me… and
say, ‘Get you to heaven, Beatrice, get you to heaven; here’s no place for you maids”
since by not marrying, she has not sinned enough to deserve the Devil’s punishment
(Much Ado About Nothing II.1.40-43). In Beatrice’s speech, though she speaks largely in
jest, the Devil is not an evil figure, but merely the gatekeeper to Hell. He does not punish
indiscriminately, and will send the unmarried Beatrice on her way for lack of sinfulness.
The other side of the Devil, the malicious tempter, is seen later. Borachio brags to Conrade that “the devil my master” fooled Don Pedro and Claudio into believing that Margaret was Hero (Much Ado About Nothing III.3.153). Don John clearly falls into the ‘tempter’ category of devilishness; he, like Edmund, tempts his victims into sin by turning their loyalty against the very ones they should trust most.

To return to the matter of blame: how at fault are Claudio and Don Pedro (and by extension, Edgar and Gloucester) for believing in Don John’s (or Edmund’s) false words? Both Claudio and Don Pedro knew of Hero’s impeachable character, and Don John had, in addition to his melancholic personality, quarreled with Don Pedro recently: “You have of late stood out against your brother” (Much Ado About Nothing I.3.18-19). Still, they trusted Don John, to their folly. Don Pedro hoped that Don John would change and cease to strive against him. To this, Don John replies, “Let me be that I am and seek not to alter me” (Much Ado About Nothing I.3.32-33). As with Edmund, Don John refuses to be altered from his natural evil disposition. Unlike Edmund, Don John makes no last-minute reform. His demand to Conrade to “seek not to alter me” implies that he believes that any attempt to change his nature is futile. Considering the failure of any character to make a positive impact on Don John’s character, Don John appears to be correct. And yet Don John is often incorrect about himself. As explained above, while Don John believes he has successfully appeared cheerful and polite in public, everyone recognizes him as depressed and rude. This opens the possibility that Don John really could have reformed himself and his character, but does not confirm either way. In truth, Shakespeare is not very interested in Don John as a character. He is afforded only two brief scenes in which
he can speak his true mind, and following a short line at the disastrous wedding, he disappears entirely from the play.

*Titus Andronicus* returns to the chatty, charismatic villain archetype that Edmund fulfilled with Aaron, a Moorish slave. *Titus Andronicus* is a strange play. Titus kills Alarbus to revenge his sons’ deaths in the war. Tamora condones the rape of Lavinia because of Alarbus’ murder. Titus kills Chiron and Demetrius and feeds them to their own mother before killing her as revenge for Lavinia’s rape and mutilation and the deaths of Martius and Quintus. All the characters speak longingly of revenge; the word appears in the play thirty-four times. Each character’s revenge escalates until there is none left alive to seek vengeance. In the midst of this, Aaron’s strange, unmotivated desire for evil stands out. He does not seek revenge or power; he commits crimes for the schadenfreude. He takes others’ evil inclinations and gives them direction, orchestrating much of the madness. Aaron is evil by nature, given unique qualities by his dark skin that grant him an affinity towards evil. Aaron is by nature evil, and if redemption is possible for him, as it was for Edmund, it is an option he does not take.

There is perhaps no character in Shakespeare’s works as evil as Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus*. Unlike Edmund, who desires his father’s titles and lands, or Don John, who lashes out when forced to behave like a civilized human being, Aaron seems to have no motivation for his wicked crimes other than the simple joy of causing other people misery. He tells Lucius, “I have done a thousand dreadful things/ As willingly as one would kill a fly” (*Titus Andronicus* V.1.141-142). Aaron tells Tamora that he plans Lavinia’s rape and Bassianus’ murder because “vengeance is in my heart,” but he does not reference revenge again, nor does he, unlike Tamora, seem truly motivated by desire
for vengeance against Alarbus’ murder (Titus Andronicus II.3.38). In his article “Aaron and Melancholy in Titus Andronicus”, Eldred Jones comments on this: “His whole life is devoted to the execution of a vengeance the cause of which is never clear.” Jones suggests that Aaron feigns melancholy, and the vengeance associated with the stereotype, like a disguise. “He is merely assuming one of the many roles which he takes on during the play as a cloak for his actions.” In other words, Jones counsels us not to take Aaron’s claims of vengeance too seriously as a motivation for the mayhem he causes. Aaron only gains real motivation when his illegitimate son with Tamora is born. Aaron goes so far as to betray his and Tamora’s secrets in order to save his son’s life: “Lucius, save the child…/ If thou do this, I’ll show thee wondrous things” (Titus Andronicus V.1.54-56).

Both Edmund and Don John attributed their personalities to their illegitimate origins. Aaron too believes his nature is a product of his skin color. Like Edmund, he believes the qualities that come with a darker skin tone to be positive. When the nurse insults his son’s skin color, Aaron replies, “Zounds, ye whore! Is black so base a hue?” (Titus Andronicus IV.2.71) He later explains, “Coal-black is better than another hue in that it scorns to bear another hue” (Titus Andronicus IV.2.99-100). Unlike the paler Goths and Romans, who “will betray with blushing/ The close enacts and counsels of thy heart,” he and his son can disguise their malicious intents behind skin that can neither blush nor blanche (Titus Andronicus IV.2.117-118). Earlier, having successfully persuaded Titus to chop off his own hand, Aaron gloats, “Aaron will have his soul black like his face” (Titus Andronicus III.1.205). Although the phrasing implies that Aaron has yet to reach in morality the darkness of his skin tone, Aaron himself draws the comparison between his character and his ethnicity, linking them. Before realizing the depths of Aaron’s villainy,
Titus calls him “gentleAaron” and “good Aaron”; these epithets are descriptions of Aaron’s character, at least as Titus sees him (Titus Andronicus III.1.157, 161, 193). Once Aaron’s true colors are revealed, Titus and his family call him a “Moor” and a “coal-black Moor” (Titus Andronicus III.2.72, 78). This implies that Titus recognizes how Aaron’s skin tone informs of his true nature. He needn’t call Aaron ‘wicked’ when calling Aaron ‘black’ means exactly the same thing. In addition, Aaron is often defined as an extremely sexual creature, a trope commonly associated (even to this day) with those of African descent. In other words, both Aaron and his enemies believe his evil nature to be a direct result of his skin tone.

The theme of hidden and revealed reaches a different level in this play than in the two previous. As a Moor, Aaron’s ‘outsider’ status is even more obvious and visible than Edmund and Don John’s. However, as quoted above, his darker skin comes with certain advantages. While Aaron cannot hide his skin, he can hide his true emotions. He calls pale skin a “treacherous hue” that can be betrayed by an involuntary blush (Titus Andronicus IV.2.117). Aaron has no such weakness, and consequently is best suited for villainy (or espionage, a career Aaron never considers but is perhaps uniquely appropriate). Like Edmund and, to a lesser extent, Don John, who is not nearly as successful in hiding his morose nature as he believes, Aaron cannot hide what makes him an outsider but can keep hidden his true wickedness. This begs the question why Titus and his family ever trusted Aaron in the first place; as the right-hand man of Tamora and a person of color besides, surely they should have known better. In this respect, Titus falls into line with Edgar, Gloucester, Don Pedro, and Claudio as those poor fools who should have seen through the villains’ deceptions but failed. And yet, Titus seems to take
a page out of Aaron’s book. Later in the play, Titus feigns madness, just as Aaron feigned goodness, in order to lure out Chiron and Demetrius. He also leads Saturninus and Tamora into a trap by organizing a feast, just as Aaron led Martius and Quintus to the fatal pit. Titus castigates Aaron’s cruel deception, but just as Edgar learns to disguise himself like Edmund, so too does Titus learn trickery from Aaron.

As is to be expected with a black character, the devil imagery is very strong in this play. The nurse calls Aaron’s son “a devil” because of his dark skin (Titus Andronicus IV.2.64). Aaron replies that if so, Tamora would be “the devil’s dam” (Titus Andronicus IV.2.65). Demetrius, upset, curses the baby, “the offspring of so foul a fiend” (Titus Andronicus IV.2.79). This scene plays ironically; Chiron and Demetrius are guilty of the terrible sin of rape, which was suggested to them by Aaron. Whereas they once praised Aaron’s sexual wickedness, now that the tables have turned on them they hypocritically criticize him. To defile the unwilling Lavinia is one thing; to defile the willing Tamora is wholly another. Aaron’s insistence of including Tamora as the “devil’s dam” indicates that he wishes to make clear Tamora’s consent in the affair. If the child is a devil and he a fiend, Tamora was a willing participant and therefore also guilty. Later, when captured, Aaron is called a “devil” several times by Lucius (Titus Andronicus V.1.40,145; V.3.5). Aaron accepts this title on himself willingly, declaring, “If there be devils, would I were a devil,/ To live and burn in everlasting fire,/ So I might have your company in hell/ But to torment you with my bitter tongue!” (Titus Andronicus V.1.147-150). Aaron makes for an obvious devil figure. He is the tempter, the one who misleads and sends his victims astray. He tells Lucius, “I was [Chiron and Demetrius’] tutor to instruct them./ That coddling spirit had they from their mother/… That bloody mind I
think they learned of me” (*Titus Andronicus V.1.98-101*). Aaron’s role as their teacher is seen clearly in the text; in addition to instructing Chiron and Demetrius on how to both ‘achieve’ Lavinia without fraternal conflict, he also helps them solve the problem of dealing with Tamora’s distinctly un-white progeny. Though Chiron and Demetrius rail against and hurl insults at Aaron for impregnating their mother and putting her at risk, they still obey him and turn to him for advice: “Advise thee, Aaron, what is to be done,/ And we will subscribe to thy advice” (*Titus Andronicus IV.2.129-130*). Chiron and Demetrius are helpless without Aaron as their teacher; indeed, once he departs with his son, Chiron and Demetrius are quickly captured by Titus. Chiron and Demetrius commit hideous acts of murder, rape, and mutilation, but they are not devils. They do not mean to punish or tempt. That role falls to Aaron. His final salvo to Lucius that he wishes to “torment you with my bitter tongue” in hell indicates a desire to fulfill the role of the punishing devil, but in truth, Aaron is clearly the tempting sort. While Chiron and Demetrius inherited their lustful nature from their mother, it is Aaron who gives them direction and action. Lucius calls Aaron’s son “the base fruit of [Tamora’s] burning lust” (*Titus Andronicus V.1.43*), recalling the Garden of Eden story. One interpretation of the story reads the serpent as the Devil in disguise. Therefore, Aaron’s devilish serpent and Tamora’s lustful Eve have produced a monstrous fruit. Lucius also calls the baby the “growing image of thy fiendlike face” (*Titus Andronicus V.1.45*), harking to the language from the Garden of Eden story in which God created Adam in His image. Aaron, the Devil, has created his own twisted image of himself in his child.

What of Aaron’s son? The baby’s fate is unclear at the end of the play. Will Lucius honor his promise to spare the infant’s life? Based on the contents of the play, he
would be wise to kill the child. The baby is both black and a bastard, a double curse, and
the offspring of Aaron and Tamora. According to the play, it is inconceivable for such a
child to become anything other than evil and monstrous. Aaron gleefully notes that while
he and Tamora can hide their affair from even Chiron and Demetrius, the baby is unable
to hide his parentage: “All the water in the ocean/ Can never turn a swan’s black legs to
white” (Titus Andronicus IV.2.101-102). Aaron is both proud that he and his son are
openly dark-skinned, yet simultaneously glad that the dark skin allows him to hide his
true character. He delights in being both forcibly revealed and secretly hidden. Should
Lucius spare the child, Aaron will have pulled off his greatest trick yet. Aaron may die,
which was a certainty from the moment of his capture, but if his son lives, the son will
surely carry out even greater mayhem than Aaron was capable of.

To conclude, Edmund, Don John, and Aaron are all evil by nature; more so, their
wicked nature is a direct result of whatever made them an outsider: illegitimacy or skin
color. All are obvious misfits hidden in plain sight, manipulating those around them who
should have known better than to trust these three. Edmund has “been out nine years”,
implying some kind of falling out with his family; Don John has “of late stood out against
[his] brother”, and Aaron is an associate of Tamora and the Goths (King Lear I.1.31;
Much Ado About Nothing I.3.19). Edmund alone is granted an attempt at redemption; as
he lays dying, he reveals crucial information in the hopes of saving Lear and Cordelia.
This last-minute confession allows for the possibility that negative qualities caused by
one’s outsider nature does not necessarily make one evil. Edmund was given many
qualities because of his bastard nature, qualities that are easily applied to wickedness. But
the very existence of his deathbed redemption means that Edmund had that possibility
within him the entire play; he chose to not overcome his nature, and instead succumbed
to villainy. Don John and Aaron do not confess or attempt redemption, but Edmund’s
confession means that they had that option at their disposal as well; they simply chose not
to take it.
Chapter Two: The Complicated Ones

This chapter also deals with plays containing outsider villains. However, unlike the prior three plays, the villains in these are not so straightforwardly evil, and their motives and methods bring about a far more nuanced picture of evil.

Richard III, the titular character of Shakespeare’s historical masterpiece *Richard III*, has fascinated theater-goers and scholars for centuries. Richard is both alike and apart from the outsiders of Chapter One. Like Edmund, he is a vice character: engaging, charismatic, witty, and prone to breaking down the fourth wall in order to discuss his plans with the audience, but also evil beyond a shadow of a doubt. Like Don John, Richard embraces the title of ‘villain’ with open arms. Don John’s claim that “it cannot be denied but I am a plain-dealing villain” mirrors Richard’s opening assertion that “I am determined to prove a villain” (*Much Ado About Nothing* I.2.28, *Richard III* I.1.30).

Richard goes on to explain that he is “subtle, treacherous, and false”, and has turned his brothers against each other (*Richard III* I.1.37).

Different reasons are given for Richard’s wickedness. In his opening soliloquy, he attributes it as an indirect result of his deformity. Unlike the able-bodied men of court who woo and flirt with ladies, he is “not shaped for sportive tricks… Therefore, since I cannot prove a lover/… I am determined to prove a villain” (*Richard III* I.1.14, 28, 30). Richard gives similar reasons in the earlier play *Henry VI Part 3*: “Well, say there is no kingdom then for Richard -/ What other pleasure can the world afford?/ I’ll make my heaven in a lady’s lap,/ And deck my body with gay ornaments,/ And ‘witch sweet ladies with my words and looks./ O, miserable thought! And more unlikely/ Than to accomplish twenty golden crowns” (*Henry VI Part 3* III.2.146-152). Richard speaks with great
bitterness about his crippled back. Like Edmund, he invokes nature, but in anger, not
gladness: “I… am curtailed of this fair proportion,/ Cheated of feature by dissembling
Nature,/ Deformed, unfinished” (Richard III I.1.18-20). Richard speaks loathingly of his
back. He claims that “dogs bark at me” and that even seeing “my shadow in the sun” is
hateful to him (Richard III I.1.22, 26). This sets Richard apart from the villains of
Chapter One. Edmund and Aaron take obvious joy and pride in their outsider quality, and
while Don John is less enthusiastic and more resigned, he never shows outright
repugnance for his bastard status in the same way that Richard does for his crippled back.

Richard claims as reason for his villainy the fact that he cannot woo ladies as
other men can. However, in the very next scene, Richard woos Anne, whose husband and
father were killed by Richard. Richard is successful despite going up against significantly
greater adversity than most young men face in their courting. Richard’s success in not
only courting a woman, but also one who has every reason to despise him, undermines
his claim that he cannot “prove a lover.” Is Richard’s wicked personality an innate result
of his crippled body, his blood tainted and his soul malformed as his body is? The play is
not clear. When characters insult Richard, they do so by insulting his appearance. Anne
calls him a “diffused infection of a man” and a “hedgehog” (Richard III I.2.78,103). She
wishes him a child who is like him; her language when she says that his child should be
“prodigious, and untimely brought to light” echoes Richard’s earlier speech when he said
that he was “sent before my time/ Into this breathing world” (Richard III I.2.22, I.1.20-
21). Anne continues, saying that the future child should bear an “ugly and unnatural
aspect”, implying that Richard possesses one himself (Richard III I.2.23). However, it
seems that insulting someone you dislike by their appearance is par for course in this
play; when Queen Margaret begins insulting everyone left and right, Richard scornfully calls her a “foul wrinkled witch” and a “hateful withered hag” (Richard III 1.3.164,215). That Anne insults Richard’s appearance does not necessarily mean that his looks correlate with his personality. However, it is worth noting that in Henry VI Part 3, Margaret insults Richard and his brothers by calling them “the wanton Edward and the lusty George.../ And… that valiant crookback prodigy,/ Dickie” (Henry VI I.4.75-77). Edward and George are each insulted for their behavior, but only Richard solely for his appearance.

Nevertheless, there appears to be something innately wrong with Richard. His mother, the Duchess of York, tells him, “A grievous burden was thy birth to me;/ Tetchy and wayward was thy infancy;/ Thy schooldays frightful, desp’rate, wild, and furious;/ Thy prime of manhood daring, bold, and venturous;/ Thy age confirmed, proud, subtle, sly, and bloody,/ More mild, but yet more harmful, kind in hatred” (Richard III IV.4.168-173). In other words, Richard has been a royal pain from the moment of his birth. This is not a learned evil, according to the Duchess of York, gained over years of mistreatment, perceived or real, over his deformity. Rather, Richard was simply a rotten egg. Richard seemingly refutes this, however, in Henry VI Part 3. After killing King Henry, Richard exclaims, “Since the heavens have shaped my body so,/ Let hell make crooked by mind to answer it” (Henry VI Part 3 V.6.78-79). This line implies that Richard makes a conscious choice to let his mind mimic his body, rather than a quality imposed by nature. His use of the word “crooked” in reference to his mind recalls the term “crookback”, which Richard is called several times throughout the play. Although Richard has been
less than a paragon of virtue the entire play – quite the contrary, in fact – he seems, in this final scene, to embrace evil fully and willingly.

Richard’s language in his opening speech speaks of hatred and frustration with his appearance. He calls himself “lamely and unfashionable,” claims that “the dogs bark at me”; would not these words have been learned by others calling him thus, is it not likely that dogs and people too barked and jeered at him (Richard III I.1.22-23)? He later says that Anne “finds (although I cannot)/ Myself to be a marvelous proper man” (Richard III I.2.253-254); Richard is incapable of thinking well of himself physically. Those who do not yet realize Richard’s evil refrain from insulting him. But if Richard was born with an ugly personality, then his childhood companions would have surely insulted him, feeding into his poor self-image and growing hatred for the world. In this view, Richard started bad but grew worse over time; yet this is all speculation, with no solid proof either way.

York, the child prince and younger brother of Prince Edward, who had previously been established of possessing quick wit and a sharp tongue, alludes perhaps to some childhood malcontent. York tells his uncle, “I am little, like an ape… you should bear me on your shoulders,” a reference to Richard’s deformed back (Richard III III.1.130-131). Richard does not speak directly on this comment later, merely saying that York is “bold quick, ingenious” and deeply under his mother’s influence (Richard III III.1.155). Richard’s reaction is left for the actor to interpret. Does Richard let the comment slide, uncaring, or is it indicative of something deeper? Again, the play remains vague.

At the very end of the play, Richard awakes from a dream in which the ghosts of his victims taunt him. For once, Richard is unhinged, unable to articulate clearly with the words that have served him so well. He babbles, argues with himself.

Richard loves Richard, that is, I and I.

Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am.

Then fly. What from myself? Great reason why –
Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?

Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good

That I myself have done unto myself?

O no, alas, I rather hate myself

For hateful deeds committed by myself.

I am a villain. Yet I lie: I am not.

Fool, of thyself speak well. Fool, do not flatter…

I shall despair. There is no creature loves me;

And if I die, no soul will pity me.

And wherefore should they, since that I myself

Find in myself no pity in myself?

-Richard III V.3.183-204

In this one speech, Richard reveals more of himself than he ever has. He has lured the audience into believing that he has been bearing his soul to them, revealing his true self in his monologues that he hides from his family. In fact, Richard has fooled both the audience and himself. The narrator of this speech, who knows not whether to love or hate himself, who swings between the two extremes even as he cries out in loneliness, longing for affection – this is the true Richard. He contradicts himself: “Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am”; “I love myself… O no, alas, I rather hate myself”; “I am a villain. Yet I
lie: I am not”; “Fool, of thyself speak well. Fool, do not flatter” (Richard III V.3.185, 188-190, 192,193). Richard is terrified of himself and what he has done. He wishes to flee, but is trapped in his body with himself. He cannot escape. He fearfully asks Ratcliffe if “our friends will prove all true?” (Richard III V.3.214). Despite Ratcliffe’s answer in the affirmative, Richard responds, “I fear, I fear!” and bids Ratcliffe come with his so that he can eavesdrop among his men “to see if any mean to shrink from me” (Richard III V.3.216,223). Richard is at the height of his self-loathing; if he only stays because he is incapable of leaving his own body, why should any of his men stay? Anne had made mention of bad dreams before: “Never yet one hour in is bed/ Did I enjoy the golden dew of sleep,/ But with his timorous dreams was still awaked” (Richard III IV.1.82-84). For all his rejection of conscience and morality, Richard is haunted, literally, by his wicked actions. Though he ignores his conscience most assiduously, he still possesses it.

Richard rejects redemption out of hand: “I did but dream./ O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me,” a sentiment he echoes in his speech to his soldiers: “Let not our babbling dreams affright our souls./ Conscience is but a word cowards use” (Richard III V.3.179-180, 309-310). But though Richard refuses to repent, his nearly incoherent speech reveals the possibility of redemption for Richard in his twisted soul. He flies from one extreme to the other, cursing himself in one breath and praising himself in another. He is close to the breaking point, close to giving all up and redeeming himself. But Richard does not; he determines that no one, not even himself, pities him, and returns to sanity. Richard begins his speech by calling out to God: “Have mercy, Jesu – “ (Richard III V.3.179). When Richard states that no one pities him (as Margaret had predicted: “his piteous and unpitied end”) he implies that God as well has no pity for him (Richard III
IV.4.74). Richard refuses to redeem himself because he believes that God will not accept it.

Richard’s dream mirrors Clarence’s earlier dream shortly before he was murdered, in which the ghosts of Clarence’s victims came to taunt him; Clarence reacts, like Richard does eventually, with acceptance for his crimes, but unlike Richard, prays for redemption: “O God, if my deep prayers cannot appease thee,/ But thou wilt be avenged on my misdeeds./ Yet execute thy wrath on my alone” (Richard III I.4.69-71). Immediately after Clarence’s murder, one of the two murderers hired by Richard says, “Like Pilate, would I wash my hands/ Of this murder… I repent me that the duke is slain”, and refuses to accept his part of the reward (Richard III I.4.272, 278).

Buckingham, the closest thing Richard has to a confidant, also repents before his execution: “This All Souls’ Day to my fearful soul/ Is the determined respite of my wrongs” (Richard III V.1.18). That Buckingham and a hired murderer can find redemption, and that Clarence too finds redemption in a dream identical to Richard’s in character the night before his death indicates that redemption for Richard is possible, but is an option he does not take. In his article “The Recapitulation Dream in Richard III and Macbeth,” Aerol Arnold concurs: “The effect of the dream sequence and Clarence’s discussion with the murderers is to set up a contrast between repentant Clarence and remorseless Richard” (53).

Richard trembles between love and loathing, and cries that “no creature loves me” (Richard III V.3.201). He resembles a child crying out for its mother to love it, for affection and attention. Did the Duchess of York despise the infant Richard for the “grievous burden” of his birth and the “tetchy and wayward” behavior of his babyhood
(Richard III IV.4.168, 169)? In this view, one ill fed on another; the ill-formed baby
Richard was an annoyance to his mother, resulting in poor behavior as a child, resulting
in taunts from his playmates, resulting in crueler behavior on Richard’s part, and so on.
All of this is mere speculation; certainly it would have wonderful parallels with the
circular nature of revenge of the War of the Roses, a theme also addressed in Titus
Andronicus.

The theme of hidden and concealed is explored in great depth within the play. At
the end of Richard’s opening speech, Clarence enters. Richard admonishes himself,
“Dive, thoughts, down to my soul” (Richard III I.1.41), verbally showing the audience
how he manages to disguise his true character and intentions so well throughout the play.
The Duchess of York describes how Richard grew in evil, changing from an outwardly
“frightful, desp’rate, wild, and furious” child into a “confirmed, proud, subtle, sly, and
bloody” adult (Richard III IV.4.170, 172). The Duchess notes that it is his “subtle and
sly” adulthood phase that is “more harmful” (Richard III IV.4.173). She does not
publically decry Richard until later in the play, when the two princes are killed, but early
on she seems to be aware of Richard’s treachery. When Clarence’s son tells her how
Richard wept and kissed his cheek, the Duchess replies, “Ah, that deceit should steal such
a gentle shape/ And with a virtuous visor hide a deep vice./ He is my son – ay, and
therein my shame” (Richard III II.2.27-29). Interestingly, the Duchess of York describes
Richard as appearing outwardly as “gentle” and “virtuous”; she refers not to his physical
appearance, but his sweet and clever words. Richard uses words to adopt a false
virtuousness, convincing Anne to marry him, Edward to trust him, and the English lords
to allow Prince Edward and York into his care. As with Edmund and Aaron, all Richard
has are words – but they are enough. It is worth noting that all Shakespeare has as well are words, and that just as Richard uses his words to deceive his family and manipulate them into feeling and believing what he wishes them to feel and believe, so too does Shakespeare deceive his audience and manipulate them into feeling and believing certain things.

Richard III is rife with devil imagery. Richard is called a devil on many occasions. Anne calls him, among other names, a “foul devil” (Richard III I.2.50); Richard describes himself as “the plain devil [with] dissembling looks” (Richard III I.2.236); and so on. Margaret expands on this, calling him the “foul defacer of God’s handiwork” and “hell’s black intelligencer” (Richard III IV.4.51,71). Richard, the devil-figure, is the betrayer. As the younger brother of the king, he should have served as the king’s hand, obeying the king’s order and meting out the king’s justice as Clarence did. Richard and Clarence, younger brothers both, should have been punishers of evil on behalf of the King. Instead, Richard twists the role, tempting Anne into marriage and deceiving and dissembling all he speaks to. Queen Elizabeth exclaims when Richard explains his wish to marry her daughter, “Shall I be tempted by the devil thus?” “Ay,” Richard replies, “if the devil tempt you to do good” (Richard III IV.4.418-419). Needless to say, however, Richard does not tempt Queen Elizabeth to do good; having used up his deceptions, however, Elizabeth does not capitulate and deceives Richard instead. Richmond and Richard’s orations to their soldiers are structured to mirror one another. Richmond exhorts his soldiers to remember that “God and our good cause fight upon our side… Richard… is falsely set… [on] a base foul stone, made precious by the foil of England’s chair” (Richard III V.3.241, 251-252). Richmond says that Richard “hath ever
been God’s enemy” and that the soldiers fight “in the name of God” (*Richard III* V.3.253, 264). Richard, like the Devil, is a usurper, who attempted to overthrow the King’s throne and sit upon it himself. By contrast, Richard’s speech is more of a fear-mongering variety: “You sleeping safe, and they bring you unrest;/ You having lands, and blessed with beauteous wives,/ They would restrain the one, and distain the other” (*Richard III* V.3.321-323). In this final speech to his men, Richard is still the misleading tempter, casting the armies of Richmond as “vagabonds, rascals, and runaways” who want to pillage England (*Richard III* V.3.317). It is apparent that the audience is meant to believe Richmond’s speech over Richard’s; indeed, the final words of the play are, “God say amen” (*Richard III* V.4.40). With Richard as the evil Devil figure, and Richmond as the leader of God’s army, the correct balance has been restored, even going so far as to recast the Devil into Hell, as Margaret predicts: “But at hand, at hand,/ Ensues his piteous and unpitied end./ Earth gapes, hell burns, fiends roar”, and Richard finally acknowledges: “March on…/ If not to heaven, then hand in hand to hell” (*Richard III* IV.4.73-75, V.3.313-314). Even their language mimics each other, repeated the word “hand” twice in each quote. In *Henry VI Part 3*, Richard speaks of being abandoned by God, like the Devil. He explains that he is deformed because “love forswore me in my mother’s womb,” giving him his misshapen body (*Henry VI Part 3* III.2.153). At the end of the play, Richard returns to this idea of love: “This word ‘love,’ which graybeards call divine,/ Be resident in men like one another/ And not in me – I am myself alone” (*Henry VI* V.6.82-84). Richard calls love “divine”, meaning that love is either Divine – that is, God – or it is divine-like, extremely enjoyable and wondrous. Right before this, Richard says, “I had no father, I am like no father” (*Henry VI Part 3* V.6.80). He most likely
refers to his biological father, Richard of York, since he goes on to disavow his brothers as well. However, the line also implies a disavowal of the Heavenly Father, who Richard feels abandoned him by giving him his physical form. In sum, Richard blames God for his physical appearance, and chooses therefore to be a devil-figure, wrecking havoc and mayhem wherever he wills. In this light, Richard’s complaints that he cannot win the ladies’ love takes on a new meaning; not only is he incapable of winning female affection through no fault of his own, he is also incapable of winning Divine affection as well.

To conclude, Richard is a difficult character to interpret. Seemingly unapologetically evil to his core, yet racked by terrible guilt that manifests itself in dreams, desirous of pity and redemption yet equally rejecting and in contempt of it, Richard is a man full of contradictions. The charismatic, confident man who opens the play has become a shell of his former self by the end, arguing with himself, Gollum-like, as he awakens from a nightmare. The play hints that Richard’s wicked personality is a natural result of his hunchback: a twisted soul to match a twisted body. Yet the play also hints that Richard was scorned and disdained, resulting in his evil personality. Richard discards everyone – his family, his friends, his advisors – before they can discard him, it seems, yet still craves love and companionship: “I shall despair. There is no creature loves me” (Richard III V.3.201). Richard’s personality and motivations are not easy to interpret and understand like the misfit villains of Chapter One. He is an enigma even to himself.

Like Richard, Caliban of The Tempest is an unusual villain, though his motivations are for more clear than Richard’s. However, Caliban presents a seemingly
strange difficulty to the reader in that he is a largely ineffectual villain, and perhaps not even the true villain at all.

The Tempest is one of the last plays Shakespeare wrote, and its themes are in line with an older Shakespeare concerned with his age and legacy. The villains in this play are as numerous as they are ineffectual: Sebastian, Antonio, Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano provide no challenge at all for the powerful magician Prospero. At most, the villains serve as a momentary irritation for Prospero that he quickly dispatches with a wave of his hand. Of these villains, all are usurpers of their betters’ rightful positions, as in line with Edmund and Richard III from King Lear and Richard III respectively. However, it is only Caliban that holds interest for us.

Caliban is a creature that lived alone on the nameless island upon which The Tempest is set until the fateful arrival of Prospero and Miranda twelve years before the start of the play. He is the child of the presumably human witch Sycorax and “the devil himself” (The Tempest I.2.319). Neither human nor demon, he lives in a half state in between, though Prospero expects him to be governed solely by human morality. Because of his not entirely human origins, Caliban is an outsider on his own island, a fact he points out readily. Among the human characters, he is tolerated, but never, not even among Trinculo and Stephano, accepted.

The cause of Caliban’s evil is addressed directly in the play itself. Like the previous outsider characters, Caliban was trusted and betrayed that trust. Unlike in the prior plays, however, all of this happened before the opening of the play. Caliban’s betrayal is relayed in a dialogue between Caliban, Prospero, and Miranda. Prospero explains, “I have used thee/ (Filth as thou art) with humane care, and lodged thee/ In
mine own cell till thou didst seek to violate/ The honor of my child” (*The Tempest* I.2.345-348). This is an unusual move for Shakespeare; it validates the cruelty with which Caliban is treated by Prospero and Miranda, and prevents any real obstacle to Prospero by setting Caliban’s betrayal in the past. Miranda addresses the effect of a human moral education on Caliban: “I pitied thee,/ Took pains to make thee speak.../ But thy vile race,/ Though thou didst learn, had that in’t which good natures/ Could not abide to be with” (*The Tempest* I.2.353-354, 358-360). According to Miranda, therefore, there is something twisted and vile in Caliban’s nature that nothing can change or turn to good. Miranda further says that “any print of goodness wilt not take” with him (*The Tempest* I.2.352).

Near the end of the play, which Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano come to murder Prospero, Prospero calls Caliban “a devil, a born devil, on whose nature/ Nurture can never stick; on whom my pains,/ Humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost!/ And as with age his body uglier grows,/ So his mind cankers” (*The Tempest* IV.1.188-192). Prospero clearly spells his position on Caliban’s evil out: Caliban is innately evil because of his (literally) devilish nature, and no nurture by Prospero or any other can change that.

But how seriously should these claims be taken? Prospero and Miranda are happy to judge Caliban by their own standards of morality, and do not take into account different standards Caliban would have learned from his mother. Caliban protests Prospero’s intrusion into his life at the beginning of the play: “The island is mine by Sycorax my mother,/ Which thou tak’st from me.../ I am all the subjects that you have,/ Which first was mine own king; and here you sty me/ In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me/ The rest of the island” (*The Tempest* I.2.331-332, 341-344). Caliban has a valid claim by heredity; his mother Sycorax had owned the island and ruled as its queen,
and as her son, the island should rightfully be his. It certainly adheres to the laws of primogeniture that Prospero (and Shakespeare) hold so dear. Caliban complains that he has been kept away from the rest of the island “in this hard rock”; this echoes Prospero’s situation of the duke cruelly banished from his rightful kingdom. Prospero’s decade-long crusade to regain his dukedom is solely based on his rights by primogeniture. Prospero was by his own admission a terrible duke; he spent his time studying while “the government I cast upon my brother” (The Tempest I.2.75). Nevertheless, he feels his cause his righteous because he is the elder brother and the dukedom belonged to him. This does not prevent him from taking control of the island away from Caliban, who has an identical claim. In fact, upon reuniting with Antonio, Prospero calls him “unnatural” for usurping the dukedom (The Tempest V.1.79). It is an interesting conundrum: nature is responsible for making Caliban, Edmund, and their ilk as they are, and when they follow their nature they behave wickedly. And yet to be wicked and usurp others ‘rightful’ claims to land and power is considered unnatural, making their natural unnatural.

In Prospero’s earlier speech about Caliban being a “born devil,” quoted above, he castigates Caliban as a natural monster upon whom nurture and education has no impact. While he begins this speech talking about Caliban, by the end, Prospero could well be speaking of himself. He despairs of how all his efforts are “all, all lost, quite lost!” Prospero says that “with age his body uglier grows”, but it isn’t entirely clear if he’s speaking of Caliban or himself, or perhaps both. The “mind [that] cankers” could be Caliban’s mind descending further into evil, or Prospero’s mind descending into the senility of old age. Certainly the play as a whole and Prospero in particular are concerned with the effect of old age on a person, something that would have been a pressing topic
for the aging Shakespeare. Just as Prospero projects his ideas of morality and ethics on Caliban, so too does he project his fears of aging.

Prospero and Miranda both return to the nature argument: it is in Caliban’s nature to be evil, and any attempt at nurture fails to positively impact this. However, Prospero and Miranda view Caliban as human, and judge him according to those standards. But Caliban is not wholly human. Should he be judged by a different set of morals and ethics exclusive to his unique situation? But then, shouldn’t Edmund and Don John and the others also by extension have their own ethical standards? Prospero castigates Caliban for failing to live up to human morals, but sees no issue in enslaving Caliban (and Ariel) and taking the island from him on the grounds that Caliban is not human. But then again, that treatment is not limited to just Caliban; the human characters too are Prospero’s puppets to move and play with as he wills. Even Miranda, his beloved daughter, is Prospero’s plaything. He has no qualms placing a sleeping spell on her and keeping her in the dark about Ariel’s existence, seemingly for no reason. Most disturbingly, as he makes her fall asleep, Prospero says, “Thou art inclined to sleep; ‘tis a good dullness,/ And give it way: I know thou canst not choose,” implying deeper meddling in Miranda’s life and calling into question whether Miranda has free will at all in the entire play (The Tempest I.2.185-186). He similarly has no problem manipulating not just his traitorous brother, but also his king and even his old friend Gonzalo, who Prospero admits saved his life. In light of the utter incompetence of Antonio, Sebastian, Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano as villains, that role seems to fall instead on the highly manipulative and scheming Prospero.

Previously, the topic of the progeny of these outsider characters had been addressed by Aaron in Titus Andronicus. Aaron praised his son for his skin color, saying,
“Coal-black is better than another hue/ In that it scorns to bear another hue” (*Titus Andronicus IV.2.99-100*). Aaron means that his child will take after him not just in skin tone, but in character and personality as well. After all, dark skin tones are well suited to villainy since it cannot “betray with blushing” its intents (*Titus Andronicus IV.2.117*). *The Tempest* continues to explore this idea. When reminded of how he attempted to rape Miranda, Caliban replies, “Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else/ This isle with Calibans” (*The Tempest I.2.350-351*). Caliban’s choice of words is revealing; he does not speak of populating the island “with Calibans and Mirandas,” but only “Calibans.” Ergo, it can be assumed that the hypothetical progeny of Caliban and Miranda would have taken after Caliban only, with none of Miranda’s presumably positive features. The offspring of the outsider will always take after the outsider, regardless of who the other parent is.

This all leaves Caliban in a strange position: not quite human, not quite not, an aggrieved victim of an identically aggrieved victim, and a villain incapable of any actual villainy. Perhaps to drive the last point home better, Caliban joins up with Trinculo and Stephano, who serve as the play’s comic relief. Caliban is quickly impressed with their wine and swears allegiance to Stephano by the bottle in the place of the bible. Caliban’s eagerness is childlike; he takes Stephano’s jest of having been the Man in the Moon seriously, proclaiming his affection for the moon and “thy dog, and thy bush” (*The Tempest II.2.138*). His actions mimic what his actions must have been when Prospero first arrived on the island. Just as Caliban was likely dazzled by Prospero’s magic, so too is he dazzled by the magical alcohol that Stephano bears. Previously, Caliban expressed regret over how he had “loved [Prospero]/ And shown [him] all the qualities o’ th’ isle,/
The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile” (The Tempest I.2.336-338).

Immediately after meeting Stephano, Caliban declares him his “new master” and promises to “show thee every fertile inch o’ th’ island” (The Tempest II.3.181, 145). The language in these two speeches mirror each other; both refer to the “fertile” places, and “o’ th’ island” recalls “o’ th’ isle.” Caliban is regressing, returning to his initial stage when Prospero first arrived on the island. Caliban complains initially of how cruel a master Prospero is and how he stole the island from Caliban, but Caliban quickly seeks to replace one master with another rather than gain true independence. Trinculo calls Caliban “a very weak monster” and “a most poor credulous monster”, emphasizing how poor a monster and villain Caliban makes in the play as a whole (The Tempest II.2.142-143). Caliban is pitiable, offering to lick Stephano’s feet and proclaiming “Freedom!” in the same breath that announces his new master (The Tempest II.2.183). Caliban’s cry of freedom is sadly funny and his attempts to ingratiate himself with Stephano and Trinculo are similarly melancholically humorous.

Ultimately, there’s no real evidence beyond the words of Prospero and Miranda for why Caliban has his personality. It’s ironic that the offspring of an incredibly powerful witch and the Devil himself should be so ineffectually weak and miserable. Ultimately, Caliban realizes that Prospero is the truly powerful force on the island, saying “I’ll be wise hereafter,/ And seek for grace. What a thrice-double ass/ Was I to take this drunkard for a god/ And worship this dull fool!” (The Tempest V.1.296-298). However, Prospero isn’t powerful in his own right either; he has the magic he learned from books, but all he can make throughout the play are mere illusions. His feasts, spirits, and hellhounds are all phantasms he has conjured, not reality. There are clear parallels
between Prospero and Shakespeare throughout, and this revelation returns to Puck’s final speech in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, when Puck tells the audience that if they were offended by the play, they should think “that you have but slumbered here/ While these visions did appear” (*A Midsummer Night's Dream V.1.417-418*). Like Prospero’s magic, Shakespeare’s plays and words are illusions. Caliban – and perhaps the audience as well – is a fool to believe it is real. Caliban finds a redemption of a sort; having learned his lesson, he promises to “seek for grace”, implying that he will pursue the Christian religion. However, the impetus of this reversal in Caliban is more of Prospero’s illusions. It cheapens Caliban’s final redemption (which, it is worth noting, is possible, like Edmund’s, somewhat refuting Prospero and Miranda’s earlier claims that nurture has no effect on Caliban). The play leaves Caliban’s ultimate fate ambiguous. Last seen ordered into Prospero’s cell, it is unclear if Caliban will go to Milan with Prospero or stay on the island. Caliban’s thrall of Prospero was a direct result of Prospero’s magic, and since Prospero throws away his books at the closing of the play, it seems to be a foolish thing to bring Caliban back with a now powerless Prospero. Logically, it would make sense for Caliban to stay behind, forever in thrall of Prospero.

The island is a magical place, filled with illusion and waking dreams, and a clear metaphor for the illusion of the stage. Caliban, if he remains behind (as surely he must, unless Prospero wishes to tempt fate), will never realize how illusory Prospero’s magic really was. Caliban is the foolish audience member who believes that everything he sees on stage is real. The only audience member foolish and naïve enough to believe such a thing would be a child. And so Caliban is; capricious, foolish, innocent, gullible. Prospero and Miranda complain that no matter how they tried to teach Caliban, he
remained true to his nature. In another light, does that not sound like a parent complaining about their willful six-year-old? If Miranda is the successful child, the one allowed to marry and leave the island, then Caliban is the failed child who remains behind, believing false fancies forever. Even if left alone, even if given back his rule of the island, Caliban will never escape from Prospero’s shadow. Caliban is an outsider, but he is not the villain of the story. He is the one everyone gives up on.

It is worth noting that, like the outsider characters before him, Caliban can never hide his outsider status. When Stephano initially encounters the cloaked Caliban and Trinculo, he calls them “some monster of the isle, with four legs” (*The Tempest II.2.63*). The cloaked creature is soon revealed, after some comedic discourse, to be Trinculo and Caliban. Stephano and Trinculo persist in calling Caliban “monster” and “mooncalf”, which means essentially the same thing (*The Tempest II.2.142, 132*). Caliban has never encountered Stephano or Trinculo before, but he is instantly marked as an ugly monster by his appearance. At the end, the villainous Antonio calls Caliban “a plain fish” upon laying eyes on him for the first time (*The Tempest V.1.266*). In other words, Caliban is immediately identifiable as ‘other’ and ‘outsider’ by the humans, and treated as such.

As in the preceding plays, the epithet “devil” is often applied to Caliban. In this play, however, the term takes on another meaning, since Caliban is the literal son of the devil. Interestingly, Prospero calls Caliban at the end “this demi-devil--/ For he’s a bastard one--“ (*The Tempest V.1.272-273*). Prospero’s line could be taken literally. Caliban is part-devil, because he is the offspring of the Devil. Since it is unlikely that Sycorax and the Devil were married, Caliban is illegitimate, a bastard. Prospero draws to the audience’s attention the fact that Caliban is doubly an outsider. He is both non-human
and illegitimate, though the characters in the play exclusively focus on the former feature. In this sense, Caliban is quite like Aaron’s son, who is both black and illegitimate. Prospero’s line could also be read more figuratively – Caliban is called a “demi-devil” because he is “a bastard one” – that is, wicked. In all likelihood, the literal meaning is intended while the figurative is only implied, but the figurative interpretation does return to the idea that illegitimate offspring are wicked by nature as well. As only a half-devil, Caliban makes a poor Devil figure. He successfully tempts the drunken Stephano and Trinculo, but causes no ill harm to any other character. As with Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo’s ultimate fates are left unknown, but it is unlikely that they will suffer much for their antics on the island. Therefore, Caliban’s temptation of Stephano and Trinculo is fairly tame compared with the machinations of previous outsider characters. Part-human, part-devil, Caliban is unable to be either entirely and makes a poor mash-up of the two. He lacks human morality and his mother’s apparently frightening magic powers, but he’s an ineffectual devil-figure and villain. Caliban is a pitiable devil.
Chapter Three: The Good(-ish) Ones

This final chapter deals with outsider characters who are either, as in the case of Shylock, a more understandable and certainly more complex sort of evil than the villains of the prior plays, or outsider characters who serve as their plays’ protagonists, and unusual move that initially seems at odds with the analysis of outsiders developed thus far.

Most of the plays dealt with thus far have had one ‘outsider’ character that served as the primary villain. The only possible exception is Titus Andronicus, as the birth of Aaron’s son introduces a second person of color, albeit one that is more of a plot device than anything else. Merchant of Venice, by comparison, is practically swimming in outsider characters: the dark-skinned Prince of Morocco, the Jewish Shylock, Tubal, and Jessica, and the briefly mentioned Moorish woman who Launcelot gets pregnant. To this day, Merchant of Venice has proven difficult to interpret and stage, largely due to its confusing mixed messages. Shylock, the seemingly obvious villain, is portrayed unusually sympathetically, but perhaps that is our modern sensibilities intruding in; after all, anti-Semitic versions of the play were performed in Nazi Germany. Is Shylock a repulsive, utterly evil villain, or a conflicted, unpleasant man pushed slowly in increments to his ultimate heinous act of villainy in which he attempts to cut out Antonio’s heart in court? Should the viewer laugh as Portia makes snidely racist comments behind the well-meaning Prince of Morocco’s back, or be horrified?

First, the minor outsider characters must be dealt with. The Prince of Morocco is one of Portia’s unsuccessful suitors. Portia and her serving lady, Narissa, are introduced as witty, deeply sarcastic women who poke fun at the long line of suitors. No one is
spared from their verbal barbs. Portia dismisses the French, English, Scottish, and German suitors for various petty reasons; for example, she dislikes the German when he is sober for not being drunk and when he is drunk for not being sober, and criticizes the English suitor for his clothes. However, her comments about the Prince of Morocco stand out because of the reasons she insults him, namely, his skin tone. When he is first announced, Portia exclaims to Narissa that even “if he have the condition of a saint,” because he possesses “the complexion of a devil,” she’d rather he take confession from her than marry her (*Merchant of Venice* I.2.120-121). The Prince of Morocco is the only suitor to whom she objects due to skin color, but considering she rejects other suitors for petty reasons, it is unclear how serious one should take Portia. The Prince of Morocco directly addresses Portia’s complaints. He opens his first (and only) scene by declaring, “Mislike me not for my complexion” (*Merchant of Venice* II.1.1). His use of the word “complexion” mirrors Portia’s earlier language. The Prince of Morocco is proud of his skin, praising it and saying, “I would not change this hue” (*Merchant of Venice* II.1.11). He offers a direct rebuttal to Portia’s criticisms, though he could not have heard them, insisting that if she rejects him, it should be on better grounds than his skin tone. Portia does not seem to hear; after picking the wrong box and departing, Portia closes the scene by saying, “A gentle riddance. –Draw the curtains; go: let all of his complexion choose me so” (*Merchant of Venice* II.7.78-79). Again, she uses the word “complexion”; she rejects out of hand the Prince of Morocco’s plea that she “mislike” him not for his skin color, leaving one to wonder what kind of marriage theirs would have been if he had chosen correctly. It seems no more trivial and silly a reason to reject a suitor than for his
clothes, as she does with the English suitor, but while the Englishman could choose his clothes, the Prince of Morocco could hardly choose his skin color.

Much later, Lorenzo delivers a throwaway line to Launcelot about a woman he has impregnated: “The Moor is with child by you, Launcelot.” Launcelot replies dismissively, “It is much that the Moor should be more than reason: but if she be less than an honest woman, she is indeed more than I took her for” (Merchant of Venice III.5.42-45). This matter is never again addressed. Launcelot uses circular language to remove any blame or responsibility from himself, and it is evident that he will not marry the Moorish woman or play any part, financial or parental, in the child’s life. It is also worth noting that Launcelot’s child will both be black and illegitimate, a double stroke of misfortune in Shakespeare’s world. Like Portia’s Caucasian suitors, the dismissal of the Prince of Morocco and the Moorish woman is played for laughs, and not taken very seriously by the characters. Hennig Cohen connects the Prince of Morocco (and, one assumes by implicit extension, the Moorish woman) to the Devil (“Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice” 79). The Prince of Morocco would have been seen in a religious light, Cohen explains, rather than a purely racial one. Therefore, Portia expresses relief that she has not been chosen by the Devil. These themes are further explored with Shylock.

Shylock is a tantalizing villain. He attempts to cut out a man’s heart, one of the most brutal acts ever attempted in Shakespeare (aside from everything in Titus Andronicus, of course, but Titus does set a rather high bar). But he also delivers an impassioned speech in which he makes compelling arguments for his version of events. Shylock is not evil for the sake of it, as Aaron and Edmund are. He is not gleeful and
malicious in the same manner as them, and every action he takes has a carefully reasoned logic behind it.

Perhaps most importantly, Shylock evolves throughout the play. Shylock is first introduced as an unpleasant man who exhibits many anti-Semitic stereotypes: he is greedy, a moneylender, and despises Christians. He cites the bible constantly, relating the biblical story of Jacob and Laban at great length and using the words “if I can catch him once upon the hip” – a reference to Jacob’s wrestle with the angel and subsequent injury – to describe how he shall ensnare Antonio (Merchant of Venice I.3.47). Shylock also casts himself as a representative of the Jews and Antonio as a representative of the Christians, locked in eternal struggle: “I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him” (Merchant of Venice I.3.48). But despite this, Shylock doesn’t hate Antonio merely because he is Christian; he singles Antonio out because Antonio lends money without interest, hurting Shylock’s business. He also “hates our sacred nation, and he rails,/ Even there where merchants most do congregate,/ On me, my bargains, and my well-won thrift” (Merchant of Venice I.3.49-51). In other words, Antonio has made Shylock’s life miserable for years before the play began. Further, Shylock complains, Antonio has called him “misbeliever, cutthroat dog,/ and spit on [his] Jewish gaberdine” and “upon [his] beard/ And foot [him] as [Antonio] spurn a stranger cur” (Merchant of Venice I.3.112-113,118-119). With such a list of wrongs, is it no wonder that Shylock loathes Antonio? And yet he lends him three thousand ducats. Why? Shylock explains in an aside to the audience that he does it for a chance at revenge upon Antonio, but tells Antonio and Bassanio that he will lend to them without interest because “I would be friends with you, and have your love” (Merchant of Venice I.3.139). Shylock notes that Antonio and
Bassanio reject this attempt at friendship, even though it could become a kind of redemption for Shylock; they would rather borrow at interest than befriend the Jew. Much is made later in the play over Shylock collecting the pound of flesh, but when Shylock initially offers the deal, Antonio willingly accepts it, even calling Shylock “kind” (Merchant of Venice I.3.179). For which reason did Shylock lend? For eventual revenge, or in an attempt at bridging the gap between himself and Antonio and preventing future abuses? As Antonio points out, the chances of all his ships sinking are miniscule and highly unlikely. Shylock goes to great lengths to appease Antonio, far beyond the means necessary to get Antonio to take out the loan. Despite his earlier statements to the contrary, Shylock even goes to dine with Antonio after the loan has been signed, an unneeded effort if revenge is all Shylock seeks.

Shylock is not a good father. He sermonizes to Jessica, fails completely to understand her and her desires, and keeps her locked up in the house. Jessica describes their home as “hell” filled with the “taste of tediousness” (Merchant of Venice II.3.1,3). Coupled with the earlier traits of greediness and general unpleasantness, Shylock emerges at the start of the play as an unlikable person. But an evil one? He doesn’t manipulate Antonio with his words the way Edmund or Richard III do. The loan he offers Antonio is probably intended to be seen as a deal with the Devil, but Antonio is well aware of what he is getting into and accepts the loan anyways.

Shylock changes for the worse after Jessica runs away, however. Ever a miser, he mourns the loss of the money she stole at least as much as he mourns the loss of his daughter. Jessica running away is a final straw for Shylock. The Christians have gone too far, stealing his possessions right out from under his nose (for Shylock views Jessica as
akin to a possession). Salanio describes Shylock’s initial reaction of running outside back and forth, crying out alternatively for his daughter and his ducats. “Justice! The law!” Shylock cries, “… Stolen from me by my daughter! Justice!” (*Merchant of Venice II.8.17, 21*). Interestingly, Shylock’s first instinct is to call for the law. Jessica has been stolen from him, but the courts are unlikely to prosecute Lorenzo for that. But she has stolen money and jewels from him, a criminal offence. Say what one will about Shylock, he is law-abiding. When Salanio and Salarino encounter Shylock later, they find a very different man from the one at the start of the play. The early Shylock was unpleasant and disgruntled, but this one is vicious and furious. He hisses at the two that they knew of Jessica’s flight, and they willingly acknowledge their assistance in the matter. Shylock bewails how his “own flesh and blood” has betrayed him (*Merchant of Venice III.1.37*). His language suggests that he sees his extraction of a pound of flesh from Antonio as fair recompense for the flesh and blood stolen from him in the form of Jessica. This, then, is a new development that only arose once Jessica absconded. When Shylock hears of how Antonio’s ships have been lost, he is not initially gleeful, instead bemoaning yet “another bad match” he has made (*Merchant of Venice III.1.46*). This too implies that he did not initially plan to actually extract the pound of flesh, else he’d have been overjoyed immediately. When Shylock lists the various injustices Antonio has committed against him (and it is a lengthy list), he begins with the fact that Antonio “hath disgraced me” (*Merchant of Venice III.1.56*). Perhaps this refers to how Antonio would call Shylock rude names in public, or perhaps to the disgrace Shylock feels at Jessica’s loss. Continuing his theme, Shylock notes that Antonio’s only complain against him is that Shylock is a Jew. Shylock questions the audience: “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew
hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?” (Merchant of Venice III.1.61-62). Shylock is a greedy, miserable, rude, pathetic old man. But he is human, and Antonio and the other Christians do not treat him like one. Shylock notes earlier that Antonio calls him “cur” and “dog”, robbing him of his humanity (Merchant of Venice I.3.122, 123). Shylock explains that his actions are not so inhuman or strange; a Jew will also laugh when tickled, will also seek revenge when wronged. During the court scene, Portia declares that, unlike the Jews, the Christians will show mercy and spare Shylock the death penalty. But the Christians are vengeful in this play. Shylock loses his fortune to his enemy Antonio and his errant daughter, and he is forced to convert. “If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute” (Merchant of Venice III.1.70-74). Shylock asserts that he did not learn revenge and villainy from his fellow Jews; rather, he learned it from the Christians. The play attempts to draw parallels between Christian mercy and Jewish revenge, New Testament forgiveness and Old Testament hard law, but it is not entirely successful. The War of the Roses, detailed in the Henry VI plays and Richard III, was all about Christians seeking revenge against various grievances. One person kills a second, and a third seeks revenge for the second by killing the first. This is the revenge Shylock claims to have learned. Shylock tells Antonio, “Thou call’dst me dog before thou hadst a cause./ But since I am a dog, beware my fangs” (Merchant of Venice III.3.6-7). Shylock is the enemy Antonio made him into. Antonio and his friends have created their own worst nightmare out of Shylock through their ill treatment of him. In short, Shylock is not evil by nature.
Shylock has plenty of negative characteristics, many of which are associated with Jews: greediness, isolationist tendencies, and miserliness. These are all, it is safe to assume, innate qualities because of his Jewish blood. But Shylock is not the evil monster at the beginning of the play that he becomes by the end. That is brought on by the loss of Jessica, and therefore not innate. Shylock chose to become evil.

Jessica herself is able to choose to leave Judaism and become a Christian. She is teased throughout the play by Lorenzo and Launcelot over whether or not she can escape her Jewishness, but her inclusion at the final party with all the thoroughly Christian heroes implies that she is successful in doing so. She is often described as being “Gentile” and “Christian” in behavior, and she tells the audience that “though I am a daughter to [Shylock’s] blood,/ I am not to his manners” (*Merchant of Venice* II.3.10, II.6.51, II.3.18-19). In other words, Jessica, despite being born an outsider Jew and possessing Jewish blood, along with all the negative qualities associated with it, is allowed to leave. Redemption is possible for her through conversion, because she can choose to be evil and did not.

In that case, Shylock is forced into a kind of redemption when he is forced to convert. But it is a strange redemption, one that is foisted on him without his consent. He leaves the court a broken man, muttering, “I am not well” (*Merchant of Venice* IV.1.396). One does not imagine he will live for much longer; he will find no company among Antonio and the other Christians, and his Jewish counterparts will shun him for converting. Paul Cantor notes that Antonio does not mention redemption or any similar theme when he demands that Shylock convert, and Shylock’s response of “I am content” is subdued and ambiguous (253; *Merchant of Venice* IV.1.394). Even Jessica is unable to
escape entirely; Launcelot’s gentle teasing that “there is no mercy for [her] in Heaven, because [she is] a Jew’s daughter” hints at a more sinister underlying tension (*Merchant of Venice* 34-35). Jessica’s final line in the play is at the party at Belmont. In the midst of flirting with her husband Lorenzo, she suddenly says, “I am never merry when I hear sweet music” (*Merchant of Venice* V.1.69). It is a strange final line. Jessica has been shown thus far to have adapted remarkably well to her new Christian life, but upon hearing the “sweet music” played at the Christian parties she has longed to attend for so many years, she is sad. Perhaps Jessica has not entirely left behind her Jewish identity. Jessica is redeemed, as is her father to an extent, but the redemption comes bittersweet.

The theme of hidden and revealed is played with in this play. Portia and Narissa disguise themselves as a lawyer and clerk, and Jessica makes her escape with Lorenzo disguised as a boy. Jessica’s disguise is successful and is able to leave with Lorenzo, surrounded by people wearing masks for a masque ball; Portia and Narissa’s disguises are so convincing, they manage to persuade their husbands to give them their own rings. By contrast, the outsider characters besides Jessica are unable to disguise themselves. The Prince of Morocco is blatantly black, and Portia is able to ascertain his skin color before even meeting him by his country of origin. Similarly, everyone knows Shylock for a Jew. He makes reference to his “Jewish gaberdine” that Antonio spits on, implying that the Jews wear unique or identifying clothes (*Merchant of Venice* I.3.113). Unusually for the villainous outsider, however, Shylock never disguises his intentions. He and Antonio enter into the bond in full agreement on the pound of flesh terms. Antonio knows what Shylock is; he calls him “a villain with a smiling cheek,/ A goodly apple rotten at the heart” (*Merchant of Venice* I.3.101-102). Shylock takes Antonio to the public and open
court to murder him rather than doing so in private. He even informs Antonio’s friends two scenes before he has Antonio arrested that he means to hold Antonio to his word on the pound of flesh, giving Antonio ample time to flee if he chooses. In contrast to Portia, who must resort to disguise to save the day, Shylock is never in hiding. This sets him apart from the prior outsider villains, who rely on subterfuge and lies to work their mischief.

As a Jew, Shylock is a classic devil figure. As mentioned above, the Prince of Morocco serves as a devil figure himself; Portia describes him as possessing the “complexion of a devil” (*Merchant of Venice* I.2.144). Shylock is called a devil on many occasions throughout the play; in the dichotomy of the tempting malicious devil and punishing neutral devil, Shylock attempts to fall in with the latter. He sees himself as punishing Antonio and all the Christians of Venice for their cruelty to him; in his mind, he is the avenger seeking only his due and no more. Shylock never tries to tempt anyone; as stated above, Antonio knows exactly what he’s getting into when he takes the bond. And yet this results in something strange. As a Jew, Shylock is naturally associated with the Devil, for just as the Devil betrayed and strived against God, so too the Jews betrayed and strived against Jesus. But since Shylock never tempts and never succeeds in punishing (in fact, his ‘punishment’ does not equal Antonio’s crimes and is far too harsh), he is a failed devil. As a comedy, no one can die, but Don John proved in *Much Ado About Nothing* that no one need die for a devil figure to succeed. Shylock is not so much an avenging angel of God as a pathetic, total failure.

Edmund, Don John, Aaron, Richard III, Caliban, Shylock: all are ‘outsiders,’ misfits in their societies, and all are villains. They cause varying degrees of havoc for
reasons of varying morality and importance, but they are each nonetheless the villains of their stories. *Othello* breaks with that tradition. The titular character of Othello is not the villain of the story; that dubious honor falls to Iago, who gleefully destroys the heroes’ lives with the same charismatic gusto as Edmund and Aaron. Othello is the flawed protagonist, the tragic hero with the tragic flaw that proves to be his undoing. In Othello’s case, it is his Moorish qualities, his hot temper, pride, and passion, that ruin him.

Othello is, in many ways, the antithesis of the similarly black Aaron of *Titus Andronicus*. Although it has been debated whether Othello was actually black or ‘merely’ brown-skinned like an Arab, both Othello and Aaron are called Moors and hence a comparison is appropriate. Aaron is vicious, malicious, and takes pleasure in causing senseless pain and anguish. He is a villain without a cause, and relishes in the role. His evil disposition is attributed to his Moorish blood, black skin matching his black, devilish heart. Othello, by comparison, is noble, naïve, and proud, traits all associated with his Moorish identity in the play. He is the antithesis of Aaron’s senseless evil, excepting their shared traits of extreme sexual passion (a stereotype that persists to this day). Why this discrepancy? Perhaps the answer lies in status. Aaron is a slave, and repeatedly calls his infant son a slave as a term of endearment and pride. Othello is a free man, but at the end of the play, Lodovico laments, “O thou Othello, that wert once so good,/ Fall’n in the practice of a damned slave” (*Othello V.2.291-292*). This line illustrates why Othello can be good and noble while Aaron vicious and cruel; Aaron is a slave, both literally and figuratively; Othello rose above this figurative slavery, but ultimately regressed with his murder of Desdemona.
From the start, Othello is defined by his skin color. The title “Moor” is used 59 times throughout the play; in the opening scene, when Iago informs Brabantio that his daughter has eloped with Othello, Othello is never referred to by name. Iago calls him “the Moor,” “an old black ram” and “the Devil”, but never ‘Othello’ (Othello I.1.39,88,91). Constant attention is drawn to Othello’s skin tone through comparisons between black and white; for example, Iago warns Brabantio that “an old black ram is tupping your white ewe” (in fact, there’s good evidence that Othello and Desdemona never managed to consummate their marriage, but Iago will be Iago) (Othello I.1.88-89). Numerous character traits are attributed to Othello solely because he is black. Iago assumes that Othello and Desdemona’s marriage will quickly fall apart because “these Moors are changeable in their wills… the food that to him now is as luscious as locusts shall be to him as bitter as coloquintida” (Othello I.3.353-355). Iago assumes that Desdemona will similarly lose interest “when she is sated with his body”, indicating that Othello’s primary positive feature in Iago’s mind is his sexual prowess and he has nothing else to recommend him (Othello I.3.356). Indeed, Iago’s professed reason for attacking Othello is that he believes that “‘twixt my sheets/ He has done my office”, meaning that he suspects Othello of sleeping with his wife (Othello I.3.393). Again, Othello’s primary feature is his sexual abilities. Iago admits he has rumor only to go on, but believes that since Othello is black and therefore highly sexual, it must be true. Iago continues with his Moorish stereotypes: “When the blood is made dull with the act of sport, there should be, again to inflame it and to give satiety a fresh appetite, loveliness in favor, sympathy in years, manners, and beauties, all which the Moor is defective in” (Othello II.1.229-233). Again, Iago believes that Desdemona’s primary interest in Othello
must have been sexual, and once lust faded she would be disgusted by Othello’s brutish and simple mind. In fact, this seems to be far from the case. That Desdemona and Othello seemingly fail to consummate their marriage indicates that Desdemona had some other interest; surely if sex was her primary objective she could have found an opportunity. In addition, Othello is neither brutish nor simple, delivering eloquent speeches and tenderly soliloquizing his love for Desdemona. For her part, Desdemona’s love appears genuine; the point of the play is to demonstrate that contrary to Othello’s suspicions, Desdemona loved him and was faithful.

Iago’s stereotypes of Moors do not always hold true, and many can be dismissed outright. Not so easily dismissed are Othello’s own stereotypes. Othello warns himself, “My blood begins my safer guides to rule, and passion, having my best judgment collied,/ Assays to lead the way” (*Othello* II.3.205-206). Othello means by “my blood” that it is in his blood, i.e. his nature, to make hasty judgments based on passion rather than reason. The Moor is passionate and hot, not logical and cold. It is these selfsame qualities, which are caused by his Moorish blood, that prove to be his undoing. Iago tricks the gullible Othello, and consumed by rage, Othello murders Desdemona.

Nature plays a prominent role in the play. Brabantio initially accuses Othello of having cast an enchantment on Desdemona to induce her to fall in love with him: “It is a judgment maimed and most imperfect/ That will confess perfection so could err/ Against all the rules of nature…/ I therefore vouch again that some mixtures powerful o’er the blood/ … He wrought upon her” (*Othello* I.3.99-106). Brabantio sees Desdemona’s elopement to Othello as “against all the rules of nature”, since it is according to nature, apparently, that one should only marry another of similar skin color. Later, Iago claims
that Desdemona and Othello’s marriage is inevitably doomed regardless of his actions:

“Her delicate tenderness will find itself abused, begin to heave the gorge, disrelish and abhor the Moor. Very nature will instruct her in it and compel her to some second choice” (Othello II.1.234-237). As with everything Iago says, this too must be taken with a grain of salt. However, Othello’s temper was always present, and would have sooner or later caused trouble. ‘Nature’ itself has a double meaning: on the one hand, someone’s nature is his personality and character; on the other, Nature is more than just an individual’s character. Nature as a universal entity dictates the laws of the world, prescribing what is ‘natural’ as what is normal and right. Othello and Desdemona play with fire by marrying, for their marriage breaks the normative laws of Nature to which their world (and Shakespeare’s) subscribes. Iago is a monster, but Shakespeare also ascribes some blame to Othello and Desdemona. Othello attempts to overcome his own nature, as well as Nature itself when he marries Desdemona. Strangely, Shakespeare seems to say that while the outsider characters should work to overcome their personal nature, they cannot break out of Nature and its universal laws and hierarchies. Othello uses the nurture of Western society to help him overcome his temper, and also uses a nurture of a sort to persuade Desdemona to upset Nature and marry him. Shakespeare is contradictory.

What is fascinating about Iago is that he should, by all rights, be the outsider villain. He postures, prances, and pontificates like many previous outsider characters. Like the Edmund, Don John, and Richard III, he has his own half-baked reasons: he suspects, based on a rumor, that Othello cuckolded him and slept with his wife. Initially, Iago follows his claim by admitting, “I know not if ’t be true,/ But I for mere suspicion in
that kind/ Will do for surety” (Othello I.3.394-396), immediately weakening the audience’s trust in him. Iago later tells Othello that “it is my nature’s plague/ To spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy/ Shapes faults that are not” (Othello III.3.146-148). Iago in this scene is working to deceive Othello, and consequently almost everything he says is a lie. But this line stands out, for it is true. Iago often construes slights where there are none; he takes Cassio’s promotion as a personal offence, and doubts his wife’s faithfulness based on a rumor. Is Iago lying to himself, or is he actually aware that his official reasons for tormenting Othello are fictions of his own devising? This would place him closer to Don John, who wishes to do as he pleases and be a misanthrope and, being unable to do so, acts out by being a misanthrope, and Richard III, who justifies his villainy because he is unable to woo the ladies in the same scene that he successfully woos a lady. Given that Iago spends the entire exchange with Othello lying, it is likely that he is unaware of this admittance, though the matter could be argued either way. Regardless, the angry, eloquent, charismatic man who feels the whole world is against him and has a lengthy list of perceived wrongs that rarely match up with reality is typically an ‘outsider’ character. By flipping the expected ethnicities of the noble victim and malicious villain, the audience’s expectations for the play are subverted.

As a person of color, Othello is often compared to the Devil. When Iago initially informs Brabantio of Othello and Desdemona’s marriage, he tells him to get up quickly “or else the Devil will make a grandsire of you” (Othello I.1.91). Iago continues to call Othello a devil throughout the play. Yet it is Iago who is the real Devil. When Cassio gets drunk, he repeatedly refers to alcohol as a “devil” because it influences him to act badly and leads him astray (Othello II.3). In the same conversation, Iago gives Cassio advice to
seek help from Desdemona, knowing that this will inflame Othello’s jealousy.

Shakespeare wants the audience to draw parallels between the devilish wine and Iago’s devilish speech. After Cassio leaves, Iago professes, “When devils will the blackest sins put on,/ They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,/ As I do now” (*Othello* II.3.357-359). At the end of the play, Lodovico calls Iago a “viper”, a reference to the serpent in the Garden of Eden who was popularly believed to be the Devil in disguise (*Othello* V.2.284). Othello tells Iago, “If that thou be’st a devil, I cannot kill thee” (*Othello* V.2.287). Othello then fails to kill Iago, seemingly confirming that Iago is a devil, perhaps not even entirely human. Othello asks Cassio to “demand that demidevil/ Why he thus ensnared my soul and body”, indicating that the devilish Iago took a hold on Othello through temptation and led him to sin (*Othello* V.2.301-302). Interestingly, Othello fulfills the same devil-role as Shylock in *Merchant of Venice*. He too seeks to punish the wicked, not realizing that his punishment is unjustified and unwarranted.

Othello is ultimately granted a kind of redemption; he regrets his actions and kills himself as punishment. Iago, conversely, tells the assembled company, “From this time forth I never will speak a word.” Lodovico asks, “What, not to pray?” True to his word, Iago remains silent, refusing redemption (*Othello* V.2.303-304). In this way, Iago takes after Aaron, who never repents his actions and goes to his grave cursing Lucius. Interestingly, Iago is offered the chance for redemption before he rejects it, meaning that it was at least a possibility; that possibility is never explicitly given to Aaron.

As with the roles of villain and devil, the theme of hidden and revealed is also played with. Othello wears his heart on his sleeve. Not only is his outsider status obvious (and referenced by everyone constantly), he is also a poor liar and his anger at
Desdemona is fairly obvious. Othello cannot be a villain because he cannot dissemble and lie. Aaron claimed that dark skin made a better villain because it could not betray blushing, but Othello would make a poor poker player indeed. By contrast, Iago is a masterful liar, hiding his true intentions and weaving a complex web of deception and falsehood. Once again, the protagonists fall from grace because they mistakenly, foolishly put their trust in the villain. Yet this time, there is no reason for Othello and Cassio not to trust Iago. After all, he’s not an outsider. Brabantio initially suspects Othello of foul play specifically because he is black, but Iago has no such impediment. The previous plays seem to gently chastise the protagonists for trusting the outsider characters; this play does not entirely dispel that idea (Desdemona should have taken Emilia’s advice and not stuck around for the final scene), but it does call into question how well one can trust anyone. Iago constructed the perfect lie and the perfect mask to hide behind. Othello should have remained cool and rational – and, the play suggests, it was his Moorish blood that prevented him from doing so – but how could he have known not to trust Iago?

In his essay “Othello’s Alienation,” Edward Berry argues that Othello is forced into the uncomfortable position of either being viewed entirely as a European or entirely as a Moor, with no option in between. In fact, I argue, Othello is never allowed to be viewed as and to view himself as a European; despite his numerous military victories and high standing in Venetian society, Brabantio immediately reacts with outrage and accusations of witchcraft upon learning of Desdemona’s marriage to Othello, and as outlined above, Othello is constantly called “the Moor” and defined as a Moor by the other characters. Othello himself self-defines as a Moor on several occasions. Berry
agrees, at least, that Othello has been defined within the play as Moorish entirely and not European. Berry further argues that “Othello’s tendency towards self-dramatization, his susceptibility to Iago, his fury at Desdemona, and his final attempts at self-justification” are not caused by innate ‘Moorish’ characteristics, but are an expression of “his anxiety about his blackness” (325). Berry notes that Othello attributes to the falsely accused Desdemona stereotypically Moorish traits; he calls her “black” and believes her to be sexually promiscuous. Berry argues that when Othello kills Desdemona, he is actually attacking these Moorish stereotypes he has worked to overcome. However, there is little textual evidence for it. Othello’s constant identification as Moorish doesn’t just serve as a rejection of Othello by Venetian society, but also as a tag for the audience as they watch Othello fall to ruin because of the stereotypical Moorish characteristics. Just as Edmund and Don John are known as “the Bastard”, Richard III “the Cripple”, Shylock “the Jew”, and Caliban “the creature”, these terms serve to both alienate the outsider character as well as provide handy identification for the viewer as the outsider behaves in the appropriate tropes. Othello’s preoccupation with Desdemona’s supposed infidelity mirrors Claudio’s fears of Hero’s betrayal in Much Ado About Nothing (note that Iago and Don John fulfill the same role). In both plays, the cause of their gullibility is that neither believes he truly deserves his bride. This lack of self-confidence is rooted in Claudio in a weak will; Claudio is introduced as Benedick’s companion, his second fiddle who serves to laugh at his jokes. Consequently, he can scarcely believe his luck when he is elevated to main character status and spends the rest of the play convinced that it must be some elaborate ruse by first the Prince and then Hero. Othello is naïve and trusting, fulfilling the noble yet simple savage stereotype that he attempts so desperately to
undermine. Berry notes that Othello does work hard to steer away from his ethnicity’s common tropes, admitting when he feels his passion is beginning to get the better of him, seeking out as much proof as possible of Desdemona’s cuckolding, and attempting to concoct a rational argument for her murder before committing the act. However, the act itself is a savage act, and Othello is rightly chastised as behaving like a “slave” afterwards. Othello does not see Desdemona as a secret Moor whom he must eradicate; he waxes rhapsodic about her fair beauty right before he kills her. Rather, she is a problem he must deal with, a task he attempts to do fairly but one in which he is ultimately gotten the better of by his nature.

In sum, Othello is a flawed hero, and he retains characteristics caused by his Moorish heritage. His personality is directly influenced by his skin color in an innate sense. It is these qualities of passion, pride, and hot temper that lead to his ultimate downfall. Although Iago is the clear villain of the piece, there are subtle indications throughout that Othello and Desdemona were doomed tragic lovers from the start, much like Oedipus, another tragic hero, and Jocasta, whose unknowingly incestuous relationship could never end well. Othello broke with Nature when he married Desdemona, causing disaster. This falls in line with previous outsider characters, many of whom break with the natural order of things by attempting to usurp their betters’ place. Shakespeare wants the audience to like and sympathize with Othello, but he also has a clear agenda about what is natural and what is not, and how far one can bend the rules. One should overcome his personal nature, and the innate negative qualities caused by their outsider status. Othello is educated in Western society and makes a valiant, if ultimately futile, attempt to overcome his nature. Caliban, for all of Prospero and
Miranda’s assertions that he is impossible to teach, eventually learns his lesson and pledges loyalty to Prospero. But Shakespeare refuses to allow the outsider character to move up in the world, to overturn the larger, universal laws of Nature. Caliban cannot people his island with offspring by Miranda. Edmund cannot change the order of inheritance. Othello, a person of color, cannot marry the fair-skinned Desdemona. Shakespeare levies heavy demands for his outsider characters.

The final play, *King John*, builds off of *Othello*, presenting an outsider character as a positive protagonist. Unlike *Othello*, however, *King John*’s outsider character succeeds in overcoming his outsider origins and does not fall into ruin.

Shakespeare’s historical drama *The Life and Death of King John* is less well-known than the prior plays discussed thus far. One of the primary characters, Philip Faulconbridge, is an outsider character, being the illegitimate offspring of his mother’s affair with the late King Richard (Philip goes by several names in the play; he is initially introduced as Philip Faulconbridge, then renamed Richard Plantagenet by King John; he is simply called ‘Bastard’ in the stage directions; here, he will be referred to by his original name, Philip). Philip is based off of Philip of Cognac, an illegitimate son of King Richard, of whom little is known. Shakespeare largely invented Philip’s character, including his Faulconbridge family ties, and vastly expanded Philip’s historical role. In the classic outsider character tradition presented up until now, Philip should give long soliloquies about his wickedness and tempt poor King John into sin, causing his inevitable downfall. Instead, Shakespeare makes an astonishing choice: Philip is in fact one of the most morally good characters in the play, and certainly more moral than the often petulant and hypocritical King John. His own moral uprightness and refusal to
squabble over an inheritance that is not rightly his stands in contrast to the main conflict of the play, the succession of the English throne. Philip is the only outsider character in Shakespeare’s works that manages to overcome his inner nature while accepting his Natural place in the hierarchy.

Philip is highly unusual among his outsider cohorts in that his outsider status was unknown to him for quite some time. Most of the previously discussed misfits are visually obvious as outsiders: Aaron, the Prince of Morocco, and Othello are all distinguished by their skin tone, Richard III cannot hide his twisted back, and Caliban is so malformed that characters remark on his unusual appearance the very instant they meet him. Of the rest, Shylock is well-known to all the other characters as a Jew, and his reference to his “Jewish gaberdine” indicates that he wears clothing that designate him as such (Merchant of Venice I.3.109). Edmund and Don John, who are fellow bastards with Philip, are well-known to all as illegitimate. Philip, on the other hand, only discovers his illegitimacy in adulthood. He is initially presented in the opening scene in a dispute with his brother; each claims the late Faulconbridge’s inheritance. Philip grew up hearing rumors of his illegitimacy, and his own father names his younger brother Robert as heir in his will. Nevertheless, Philip does not believe these rumors, and was raised at least by his mother as the heir of Faulconbridge. In addition, these rumors are not far-spreading; when Philip and Robert bring their case to King John, the king has no idea who they are and requires both an explanation of who they are and the intricate details of the rumor, indicating that he’d never heard anything about Faulconbridge’s wife cuckolding him before. Therefore, Philip had the luxury of growing up without the shadow of illegitimacy hanging over his head in the same way that Edmund, Aaron, and the rest do.
Most of the previous outsider characters keep their true, wicked identity hidden, only revealing their dastardly plots to the audience. By contrast, Philip, whose outsider identity was kept hidden from him, is completely open about his thoughts and plans. When he dislikes a person, he insults him to his face. When he wants to kill a man, he tells him. In this manner, Philip is similar to Othello and Shylock, who are also both open about their feelings.

The major plot of King John is the matter of inheritance of the throne of England. Both John and Arthur have good claims, John as Arthur’s uncle and Arthur as the son of John’s elder brother. At the start of the play, Philip is caught up in his own inheritance dispute with his brother. However, upon learning of his illegitimacy by the late King Richard, he withdraws his claims: “Brother, take your land, I’ll take my chance” (King John I.1.151). This makes him the unique among the outsider characters for being the only one to accept the limitations of nature and not to try to overstep them. Even Othello and the Prince of Morocco are seemingly chided for attempting to marry outside their race, something characters in both their plays condemn as ‘unnatural.’ the audience expects Philip, as an illegitimate son, to attempt to steal his brother’s inheritance, and his refusal to do so immediately highlights him as a hero in the audience’s eye. Philip was a little-known historical figure; Shakespeare consciously chose to make Philip illegitimate as a subtle contrast to John and Constance’s wars over the monarchy. Constance and John fight constantly over the throne, often resorting to underhand techniques (Constance allies herself and Arthur with England’s historical enemy France; John orders the assassination of young Arthur). Philip, on the other hand, admits himself ineligible and gives his brother the Faulconbridge land and title.
Like Othello, Philip is well aware of the tropes associated with his particular brand of outsider. In his first speech to the audience, Philip determines to make his fortune himself, saying, “he is a bastard to the time/ That doth not smack of observation.” But he pauses and ruefully notes, “And so am I, whether I smack or no” (King John I.1.207-209). Philip means that whoever is not either observing or obsequious, depending on how “observation” is to be understood, is not a true son to the time period. However, he is not a true son no matter what he does. Were Philip to take after Richard III or Don John, this would then be his launching point for justifying all sorts of future mayhem. Instead, Philip does the opposite: he notes how just as he is a bastard in “exterior form, he is also likely to possess bastard qualities in his “interior motion” (King John I.1.211-212). These unsavory qualities are the “sweet, sweet, sweet poison for the age’s tooth”; still, Philip is determined that he “will not practice to deceive,/ Yet to avoid deceit, I mean to learn” (King John I.1.213-215). In other words, Philip decides not to use flattery or clever words to worm his way up in courtly society. He will learn the method, if only to know how to avoid its practice. Edmund was a great orator, and both he and Don John caused their mischief through sweet lying words alone. Philip decides to be different, and in his first speech directly to the audience no less. The traditional venue for the outsider villain to admit their evil is transformed into the venue for Philip to admit his good.

Edward Gieskes in his essay “‘He is but a Bastard to the Time: Status and Service in ‘The Troublesome Raigne of John’ and Shakespeare’s ‘King John’” views this scene somewhat differently. He sees Philip as having exchanged “financial security” for social mobility (787). Philip will also likely make a great deal of money thanks to the patronage of Queen Eleanor, which he accepted in exchange for giving up the title of
Faulconbridge. Gieskes quotes Philip’s line that the “worshipful” nature of his society “fits the mounting spirit like myself,” interpreting this as evidence that Philip seeks social gain by aligning himself with the nobility instead of the gentry (*King John I.1.205-206*). However, Gieskes fails to read further in Philip’s speech. Philip’s acknowledgement that he will always be a “bastard of the time” no matter what he does implies that there will be negative consequences that Philip will face as a publicly acknowledged illegitimate son. Gieskes ignores any social stigma Philip will likely suffer as a bastard, focusing only on (often theoretical) gain. Gieskes places a period after “smack or no,” ending the phrase. He then understands the following lines “And not alone in habit” onwards as referring to the things Philip must learn in order to fit in with the nobility (791). However, this interpretation reads “and so am I” as meaning that he does “smack of observation.” This reading ignores the follow-up, “whether I smack or no” (*King John I.1.207-210*). “Whether I smack or no” means that “so am I” cannot refer to the observation, since he states he is whatever it is he refers to regardless of whether he smacks of observation. Therefore, “and so am I” must be in reference to “a bastard of the time,” and it logically follows that “and not alone in habit…” explains how exactly he is a “bastard of the time.” Gieskes misses the heavy subtext of the negative implications of Philip’s bastardry, which devalue Philip’s gains at declaring himself an illegitimate noble. With Philip acknowledging these negative implications and his permanent status as “a bastard of the time,” his decision to give up the title of Faulconbridge becomes much less selfish, since he has less to gain. Gieskes concludes by reading the final lines of the play, in which Philip inaugurates Henry as king and pledges his fealty, as Philip “cement[ing]… [his] position as royal servant and … trusted administrator,” resulting in his complete
integration into the nobility (793). However, this reading ignores the fact that Philip refuses to seize the throne. As King John’s right hand man and the son of a very popular king, Philip could easily make a case for himself. He would achieve the pinnacle position on the social hierarchy, which would align with Gieskes’ reading. His failure to do so weakens Gieskes’ thesis.

Philip seeks to normalize illegitimacy in the play. While he acknowledges the pitfalls of character that are typical to illegitimate children and attempts to avoid them, he also points out that illegitimacy is fairly common, and perhaps not a huge fuss. When King John declares that he has brought “twice fifteen thousand hearts of England’s breed” to Angiers, Philip interrupts, “Bastards and else.” When King Philip of France rushes to assert that he has “as many and as well-born bloods as those,” Philip adds, “Some bastards, too” (King John II.1.275-279). Queen Eleanor calls Prince Arthur a “bastard,” but Philip points out that both sides have in their supposedly noble and pure-hearted armies numerous illegitimate sons (King John II.1.122). Quite simply, according to Philip, it isn’t a big deal and not worth getting hung up on.

Philip is likable. He delivers lovely speeches, and his dialogue is quite funny. He is gloriously irreverent, insulting dukes, lords, and kings as he pleases. He is loyal to King John, and though King John is not the best king (though Richard III can always remind us that it is possible to go worse), Philip is praised, not criticized, within the play for his staunch loyalty to England. He is not privy to King John’s greatest crime within the play, the order to assassinate the young Prince Arthur. Hubert too is a highly moral character, but he initially agrees to go along with the murder and must be talked out of it in a lengthy scene with Arthur. When Philip finds the body of Prince Arthur, he is upset
and furious. He tells Hubert, “If thou didst this deed of death/ Art thou damned… If thou but didst consent/ To this most cruel act, do but despair” (*King John IV*.3.117-118, 125-126). This violent speech implies that had King John commanded Philip to kill Arthur, he would have refused. The speech also implicates Hubert in Arthur’s death, since Hubert had indeed “consent[ed] to this most cruel act.” Like most of the history plays, *King John* is filled with complicated, morally grey characters who gleefully inflict pain and misery on their enemies but cry foul when the same is done to them. In this crowd, Philip stands out for his strong morality. In a strange twist, the bastard is the real moral hero of the play.

The theme of deviltry has been explored in each play thus far. Almost all the outsider characters thus far have been compared to or explicitly called the Devil. The paradoxical Christian understanding of the Devil is of a dichotomy made up of the evil Devil who tempts humans to sin and the neutral Devil who punishes the wicked. While the Devil is a hated figure for the former, sin without consequence of punishment creates an unenforceable system of morality; this results in the Devil, loathed as he may be, being necessary for the functionality of society. Edmund, Aaron, Don John, and Richard III were all the evil tempting sort. Shylock and Othello aimed for the punishing sort of devil but messed up by attempting to punish those that did not deserve punishment, or at least such a degree of punishment. Caliban aimed to punish Prospero, but only managed relatively weak tempting of Trinculo and Stephano. Philip casts himself as the punishing sort of devil, and he is the only successful one of the group to do so.

Philip refers to both versions of the Devil during the play. When he first confronts his mother about his true parentage, she asks him, “Hast thou denied thyself a
Faulconbridge?” Philip replies, “As faithfully as I deny the devil” (*King John* I.1.251-252). The devil that Philip denies is the devil of temptation – the temptation to seize his brother’s inheritance for himself. Philip consciously wants to not become evil like Edmund, Don John, and the rest. Following the Angiers debacle, Philip wonders at the hypocrisy of France and England. He refers to “commodity,” or self-interested gain, as “that sly devil” that upsets the balance of the world (*King John* II.1.574, 567). He condemns France and England’s “most base and vile-concluded peace” instead of “a resolved and honorable war” (*King John* II.1.585-586). “Vile-concluded” recalls his description of commodity as “this vile-drawing bias”; “base” recalls his own origins, although in this context he divorces himself from the term (*King John* II.1.577). He castigates the self-interest and greed of King John and King Philip of France, but he also acknowledges that he is able to “rail… on this commodity” because “he hath not wooed me yet” (*King John* II.1.587-588). For Philip, the real temptation is money. He worries that while poor he will criticize the rich, but when rich he will criticize the poor. Philip claims that he too is ultimately ruled by greed, but he is surprisingly selfless, turning down the opportunity to inherit the title of Faulconbridge and all its lands. Later, he refers to a thunderstorm as “some airy devil” that “pours down mischief” (*III.2.2-3*). The thunderstorm is a metaphor for the havoc being unleashed on the characters in the play; in Philip’s mind, the trouble is all caused by the devil of temptation, which he manages to skillfully avoid.

Even as Philip deftly sidesteps the devil of temptation, he casts himself as a very different kind of devil. Philip sees himself as the neutral punishing devil. He tells Austria that he “will play the devil… with you”, meaning that he will punish Austria for Austria’s
crime of siding with France and Arthur (King John II.1.135). Several scenes later, Philip makes good on his threat and arrives on stage with Austria’s severed head. Later, he threatens Salisbury, telling him that “thou wert better gall the devil” than him, and that if Salisbury does not put away his weapon, Philip will “so maul you and your toasting iron/ That you should think the devil is come from hell” (King John IV.3.95, 99-100). Again, Philip compares himself and his actions to the punishing devil. Once again, his threat comes true. At the end of the play, the weary Salisbury says, “That misbegotten devil, Faulconbridge,/ In spite of spite, alone holds up the day” (King John V.4.4-5). Salisbury survives the day by switching back to the English side, but not before Philip has properly taught him a lesson by routing his troops on the field. When King John dies, Philip cries, “I do but stay behind/ To do the office for thee of revenge,/ And then my soul shall wait on thee to heaven” (King John V.7.70-72). The revenge that Philip promises is in his role as the punishing devil. Interestingly, Philip promises to serve King John in heaven as he did on earth; this recreates the biblical narrative of God and Satan, but changes the story so that Satan was never tempted by power and envy to rebel against God. In Philip’s version, he as the punishing devil-figure will dwell in heaven and serve his king. This devil-figure that Philip has embraced is wholly neutral then, without evil. Because the outsider characters have so consistently been associated with the Devil, the implication becomes that the outsider character must be intrinsically tied to the Devil. However, Philip proves that one can choose his own role. The devil can cause terrible evil and destruction, but the devil can also maintain society by punishing the wicked and dissuading others from villainy. Philip’s point with his interjection about bastards being a part of the English and French armies at Angiers was that illegitimate children are an
integral part of society, and without them neither King John or King Philip of France would have an army. Similarly, his role as the punishing devil is necessary; without his efforts, France would have won the day and Prince Henry would never have become king.

Philip is never redeemed, but that is because he never sinned and therefore had no need for redemption. In a play about mistakes and poor decisions, Philip makes all the right choices. He accepts the role nature has given him, but determines to make it his own by choosing the positive attributes of his outsider role and overcoming the negative ones. He doesn’t try to overstep his bounds by attempting to usurp his brother Robert’s inheritance, nor is he ever tempted to lay claim to the English throne through his connection as King Richard’s son (one can be sure Edmund would have leapt at that opportunity). Philip proves that an illegitimate character, and by extension an outsider character, need not be evil or make bad decisions. Like Othello, he is aware of his shortcomings; unlike Othello, he does not nevertheless fall prey to these same shortcomings. He punishes those that deserve punishment and harshly rebukes those who he believes have hurt the innocent, as with the death of Prince Arthur. Shakespeare chose to make an obscure illegitimate historical figure one of the main characters in the play, and this choice has major implications for the other outsider characters. Many of them feel trapped in their role as outsiders, forever on the margins of society. But Philip proves that Don John, Richard III, and the rest chose evil; it was not something out of their control and not inevitable. Shakespeare believes that there are innate, often negative qualities associated with each of the outsider categories, but he also believes that these qualities can be overcome or reined in and used for good. The other outsider characters
cannot blame their innate negative qualities for their wickedness. Philip definitively proves that they had other options, ones they consciously decided not to take.
Conclusion

Outsider characters certainly have a difficult lot in life. Shakespeare gives to each character traits that are innately caused by their outsider status. Thus Aaron is malicious, passionate, and lustful, Shylock miserly and vengeful, and so on. But the increasingly complicated role of the outsider villain, coupled with both the possibility of redemption presented to several of the outsider characters and the existence of an entirely good outsider character, Philip, demonstrates that while the misfits of Shakespeare’s plays are predisposed towards evil, it is by no means a foregone conclusion.

Some modern scholars attempt to label Shakespeare as racist or anti-Semitic based on his treatment of Jewish and non-Caucasian outsider characters. Such labels are largely unproductive. While he does attribute innate negative characteristics to these characters, he views them as a challenge that can, and should be overcome. Shylock is contrasted with Jessica, Edmund and Don John with Philip, Aaron with Othello. A character might receive similarly negative attributes simply for being born under the wrong star. Yes, Shakespeare views Judaism as inherently flawed, and sees converting to Christianity as a means of elevating oneself in a way that does not go against Nature. He similarly believes that Caliban can elevate himself from his simple island origins, and Othello from his ethnic origins through Western culture and values (note that when Othello murders Desdemona, he is called “slave”, having reverted to his lower origins). All three of these shifts are not in class position or financial status, but rather, an elevation of the soul. Edmund questions rhetorically, “Wherefore base?” He embraces his bastard origins, celebrating them when he should seek to rise above them and reject his negative personality traits.
An outsider character cannot rule, especially not over ‘insider’ characters. They can make themselves useful tools, as Philip and Othello do (at least, before Othello’s breakdown). Therefore, Caliban’s position at the end of *The Tempest* as Prospero’s willing servant is the perfect conclusion. It is also worth noting that while Prospero causes quite a lot of havoc and mischief of his own throughout the play, he does not try to usurp Alonso’s throne. Instead, he works within the system, arranging a marriage between his daughter and Alonso’s son to raise his stock. At the end, just as Caliban is subservient to his master Prospero, Prospero too is subservient to his king.

From a cultural perspective, this all fits in fairly well. Anarchy is usually troubling and disorganized, and after the struggle to find an heir to Henry VIII’s throne, no doubt everyone craved stability. In addition, Shakespeare performed his plays for the Queen herself, and therefore a thesis of loyalty to the monarchical system and the ‘proper’ order of things would be advisable.

Nature can refer to both a character’s inner nature – which the outsider character must overcome to become good – as well as Nature, the overall hierarchy and organizational system of the world. Nature lowercased is animalistic, simple. But Nature capitalized refers to God’s laws and system. Shakespeare conceives of Nature as not just referring to the heavenly hierarchies, but extending to the human hierarchies as well. This legitimates the human monarchy as a system approved of by God; to go against the king is to go against God Himself (this also causes great trouble in *King John* when the Pope, God’s representative on earth, excommunicates John, delegitimizing the English monarchy). Outsider characters are asked to rise above their animal-like inner nature to operate within God’s Nature. Rejection of God’s Nature is akin to the Devil’s rejection of
God, a comparison that is clearly drawn across all eight plays through the repeated use of the terms “devil” and “fiend” to describe the outsider characters. Shakespeare imagines a restorative redemption for his outsider characters in which they undo the Devil’s foolish rebellion and conform to God’s Natural order, accepting their lower status. Outsiders are therefore asked to elevate themselves spiritually but not financially or socially. Perhaps it is most remarkable that the one outsider character who succeeds in this is a character from a history play about various historical figures attempting to elevate their social and financial position and gain greater power. The contrast between these characters and Philip is far more clearly drawn than if Philip had been placed in a comedy or tragedy, which typically figures fewer power-obsessed individuals.

In general, a person’s failure to accept his place in society within Shakespeare’s plays will face rejection and expulsion from society. Outsiders are at a distinct disadvantage in that they are often automatically rejected by society simply for their outsider status, as Shylock loudly complains. However, the introduction of nearly all the outsider characters as currently accepted by (whatever their past relations with) their family and comrades attempts to set up a system in which an outsider character is afforded all chances of redemption, reducing the validity of any excuse not to. Shakespeare consistently sets up scenarios in which an outsider character is afforded the chance to repent and join society properly, albeit in his proper place: Edmund is returned to his father’s household after nine years away, for unspecified reasons; Don John is recently welcomed into his brother’s company after a falling out; Aaron is welcomed into the house of the Roman emperor himself; and so on. However, Shakespeare recognizes that outsider characters often have legitimate complaints against their treatment by
society: Edmund was sent away for nine years, Aaron was a slave, Richard is implied to have suffered a fairly awful childhood, Caliban lost possession of his island and his freedom, and Shylock provides a lengthy list of past mistreatment that includes being spat on and kicked. Therefore, while Shakespeare primarily blames the outsider characters for turning to villainy, and often provides them with avenues for redemption that they invariably refuse, he also blames the surrounding culture as well to some extent. On the one hand, the main protagonists should not trust the outsider characters too much, but on the other, Antonio would not have nearly died had he and his Christian friends not treated Shylock with, if not kindness, then at least civility. However, it is crucial to stress that most of the responsibility, and therefore most of the blame, lies on the outsider characters. Antonio is ultimately a victim, whatever his crimes against Sherlock may be. It is Sherlock, the outsider, who is blamed for his failure to accept his place in the Natural order. A motive explains but does not excuse.

Outsider characters are all possibility. Shakespeare advises caution, as many trustworthy protagonists fall to ruin by placing their trust in villainous outsiders. Yet Shakespeare allows his outsider characters the chance of redemption. It is up to them to accept or deny it as they will.


