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Shakespeare's Villains: The Displacement of Iago and Edmund

by

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Introduction

Iago and Edmund are Shakespearean villains that are displaced from their positions. Iago manipulates Othello into thinking his wife has been unfaithful which leads to her murder while falsifying the reputations of characters in the play. Edmund, Gloucester's bastard, distorts the truth about his brother to gain the advantage. While it is simple to condemn Iago and Edmund, it is important to recognize why they commit such heinous actions. Both characters have been removed from the thing they desired the most: Iago's duty as a soldier and husband, and Edmund's aspiration to be a beloved son.

Othello's decision to choose Cassio over Iago as lieutenant leaves Iago perplexed and angry. He begins to compare himself to other people who are dutiful and responsible. Iago recognizes the insignificance of duty. Since *Othello* is a play that is dominated by soldiers, Iago creates an illusion that everything is a battlefield and he must become victorious. His schemes work when he is left isolated with each character as he whispers deceitful lies into their ear. Iago uses all of their weaknesses to benefit his goal: Roderigo's ignorance, Cassio's vices, and Othello's pride. In Iago's mind, all of these characters become casualties of war. The female characters in *Othello* also fall victim. Desdemona's loyalty to Othello is her biggest flaw. Emilia's willingness to go against Iago by the end of the play is the cause of her death. Women were not meant to participate in war, but her choice in revealing the truth was her challenging the traditional norms of the Elizabethan period.

Edmund's villainy is palpable because of his title as "the bastard." His father, who seems ashamed even talking about him, instead brags about his legitimate son, Edgar. Edmund has never experienced an actual home due to his birth—at the beginning of *King Lear*, he has been away, and is soon to be dismissed from Gloucester's household again. Unfortunately for

Edmund, Gloucester has never recognized how unfairly he has treated his bastard son. As the play unfolds, Edmund recognizes that all he has fought for amounts to nothing. He gains power but loses everything else in the process. Edmund's last request, an attempt to save Cordelia and Lear, is Shakespeare's way for him to atone for his sins. However, the request comes too late, and, ironically, Edmund's moment of goodness counts for nothing.

My paper has less to do with sympathizing with Shakespeare's villainous characters, and more to do with the displacement felt by each character. The removal of position, location, and familial relationships is the source of Iago's and Edmund's malevolent decisions. Their experiences as soldiers allow them to outmaneuver and strategize against those who have displaced them. Displacement is a motif that interweaves throughout other characters in *Othello* and *King Lear* such as the female characters, and the protagonists themselves. This essay will be broken up into two main parts: an examination of the displacement of Iago's character, then an analysis of Edmund's downfall.

Before examining the characters, it is essential to provide context using previous criticisms about the play. The motif of war is critical in *Othello* because of the mindset of each character. For instance, when Cassio is stripped of his lieutenant rank, he loses his sense of identity and begins to count on Iago. The relationship between Ensign and the lieutenant is explored by Paul Jorgensen, who argues that the soldiers of Elizabethan England are associated with barbarism due to their experiences of war (Jorgensen 7). This trait is important because it can be seen as the catalyst for Iago's ruthlessness, Othello's rage, and Cassio's willingness to fight while intoxicated. While other Shakespearean plays show actual battle scenes, there is not one single battle scene in *Othello*, yet military title and position hold a great significance to the characters. Criticism on *Othello* has not always taken into account Iago's military background,

even though the first complaint Iago has in the play involves his military experience. War then becomes a metaphor, and Iago—believing he is displaced as a lieutenant—takes initiative to win the war.

Now that there is an established war metaphor recognized throughout *Othello*, we must analyze Iago's biggest weapon: his rhetoric. Most notably, his soliloquies and dialogues with Roderigo serve as an insight for the audience into what he is really thinking. "Honest Iago," as he is referred to throughout the play, is the voice that everyone attends to. He also understands the nature of the foe he is facing. With Roderigo, he does not hesitate to command him, knowing that he is not a military man. Cassio lacks the experience of being on actual battlefields and is easily duped into intoxication. Othello, the most difficult to persuade, is moved with words and tricked by emotion.

One problem that critics have in discussing a lack of sympathy toward Iago is his treatment of women. He is seen victimizing and sexualizing women based on his actions towards Emilia and the conversation he has with Desdemona in act two scene one. While these two female characters become casualties of "war," there is one single silver lining in all this: they are the only characters that Iago does not fool using rhetoric. If this is meant to be a figurative war in the mind of Iago, then the female characters are out of place. They are not soldiers, but they are caught in the trenches of battle. Iago's silencing of Emilia displays his inability to persuade her. Both Desdemona and Emilia question whether they should speak out or stay silent. Speaking out would be equivalent to picking up a sword and joining the battle, and we see the consequences first when Desdemona joins her husband in Cyprus rather than staying in Venice, and a second time when Emilia chooses to speak out against her husband, which ultimately leads to her death.

Iago's murder of Emilia can be seen as an act of desperation to save himself, or as a way to put her back in place.

Displacement in *King Lear* is also relevant but in a different way since this play focuses on the home and familial relationships. Chih-Chiao Joseph Yang explores the idea that the displacement of home is pertinent in this play. He claims that the characters' fear of being removed from home is what ultimately drives them on, and the removal of the comfort of home and lifestyle, i.e. into the natural world, is at the heart of the tragedy. As many critics have pointed out, "nature," defined as both the natural world and the essence of man, is a motif found throughout *King Lear*, even though both understandings of the term are consistently at odds. Edmund was conceived in the most "natural" manner, from pure passion, yet this same passion out of wedlock establishes his position as a bastard. Lear, the Fool, Edgar, and Kent are sent out into and endangered by the ravages of, the natural world. Yet these characters all have to come to terms with the natural world from which they have hitherto been removed. As Gordana Galić Kakkonen and Ana Penjak summarize, early moderns understood that man must follow the rules of nature, and, if they did not, then all would end in tragedy. Because Edmund is already seen as an outsider, he embraces his reputation and decides to execute a plan where he is finally part of a home. Edmund's displacement from society gives him no choice but to cast everyone out into nature and think for himself.

Chapter 1: Iago's Displacement and The Mentality of War

Shakespeare uses the idea of displacement both as a removal of location and as the metaphorical representation of a place in society. Being a lieutenant encompasses everything Iago has worked for. He was the one who remained loyal towards Othello. In "Military Ranks in Shakespeare," Jorgensen describes the relationship between the rank of ensign and lieutenant in the early modern period, stating "it is urgent that the lieutenant be considerate of the ensign's jealousy, and it may even be advisable to merge the two offices. The seriousness of the situation is further shown by the attention paid to it by virtually all military" (Jorgenson, *Military Ranks in Shakespeare* 37). Iago's anger is not held towards Cassio but towards Othello. He believes that Othello is removing the one good thing Iago is known to do—how to lead in battle. Iago must use his intellect and wit to survive while emphasizing his experience in the field. He announces his displeasure stating, "I know my price, I am worth no worse a place" (1.1.10). Iago reminds Roderigo that Cassio has "never set a squadron in the field" (1.1.19). Iago feels that his security has been stripped away from him. He diminishes Cassio's experience as only learning from books while Iago has proved he is deserving based on the years of service under Othello. Julia Genster points out Iago's obsession with place and rank. She states, "In part such attention derives from his festering sense of his own improper subordination; but it stems primarily from his belief in his own power to make and remake identities, to place and displace. All dispositions, whether blessed or cursed, are in his making" (Genster 798). To Iago, the denial of the lieutenant rank forces him to see everything else as a battleground. Genster attributes Iago's desire to displace other characters as coming from his own sense of being displaced himself.

To grasp the meaning behind Iago's pain, it is essential to dissect Othello's own demise. Othello's descent into madness happens through his fear of being displaced as Desdemona's

husband. Iago's incessant whispering into Othello's ears in the hopes to bring out "the green-eyed monster" prevails (3.3.170). Both Iago and Othello feel displaced as husbands because of a rumor circulating about their wives' infidelity. Othello was so distraught with thoughts of Desdemona's unfaithfulness, he renounces his duties as a soldier:

Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content
 Farewell the plumed troops and big wars
 That makes ambition virtue! O, farewell,
 Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,
 The spirit-stirring drum, th' ear-piercing fife,
 The royal banner, and all quality. (3.3.353-357)

Othello no longer sees prestige in his occupation due to his bruised reputation. The difference between Othello and Iago is that Iago still recognizes the value of being a soldier.

The only times Iago reveals his true nature is through his soliloquies. While he directly states his plan to Roderigo, he hides his true emotion and still manages to wear a mask. In an article that serves as a defense of Iago, Marvin Rosenberg explores how Iago's soliloquies reveal his true anguish. He argues that the conversations with Roderigo serve enough purpose to reveal the plot, but without the soliloquies, the audience would have seen only a cold, calculated, and passionless Iago. His soliloquies paint him as an afflicted man who is "one great fury of passion, the more furious because so much of his passion is smothered when he is with people"

(Rosenberg, 153). To understand his rage, let us see exactly what is revealed in his soliloquy:

I stand accountant for as great a sin,
 But partly led to diet my revenge,
 For that I do suspect the lusty Moor
 Hath leap'd into my seat; the thought whereof
 Doth, like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards;
 And nothing can or shall content my soul
 Till I am even'd with him, wife for wife. (2.1.218-224)

He believes that it would not be enough to take Desdemona regardless of the rumor between Othello and Emilia. Iago emphasizes his “seat” has been taken, which parallels a previous line: his "office" (1.3.370). His “seat” can be interpreted as both his role as a husband and his job as a lieutenant. Genster claims that the role of lieutenant and husband can be blurred:

In choosing a subordinate a captain is, in effect, choosing a second self; he is empowering someone to play him, to be him in his absence. In *Othello* the image is most ferocious when it provides the putative cuckold with the emblem of his own cuckolding: someone unauthorized is standing in for him, holding his place, doing his office. Yet the cuckold is present, imaginatively, watching as the adulterous lover displaces him. (Genster 785)

In this case, Othello appoints Cassio to be his lieutenant. Iago perceives that both positions as husband and as lieutenant are rightfully his, and that Othello has removed him from both of his “seats.” Iago dupes Othello into thinking Desdemona has made him a cuckold. Similarly, Emilia’s infidelity is a rumor. Regardless, Iago's anger goes beyond taking revenge. To him, that would be simple. The question then is: why? In the middle of the play, Cassio is stripped off his position, and Othello has already put so much trust in Iago. So why does he persist when he seems to have what he wants?

Instead of claiming he is the embodiment of a devil or stating that he is a wronged individual consumed with vengeance, we might instead consider whether his position and experience in the battlefield have influenced his morality. In "Shakespeare and War," Catherine M.S. Alexander discusses how war is in the background of almost all Shakespearean plays. She responds to the work of the English antiquarian William J. Thoms:

Thoms felt it was irrelevant or a statement of the obvious to say that 'war,' while occasionally in the background of comedies, is only foregrounded in tragedies and histories where it is an integral part of the plot. Had he been writing two hundred years later he might, too, have commented on the gendering of these genres. A more subtle observation, then and now, would be to note how 'war', while largely

absent from the plot, is present as a metaphorical feature of the comedies.
(Alexander 9)

While *Othello* falls under the category of tragedy, the war motif is ubiquitous throughout the play. In fact, Alexander points out that the word "war" was used 88 times in all of Shakespeare's tragedies (9). The protagonist and antagonist of *Othello* are both soldiers, yet battle is not staged in the play and is often in the background and unseen by the audience. Perhaps Shakespeare's decision to exclude battle scenes was deliberate so his audience can see each death that Iago causes as a casualty of war. Ironically, Iago is the one who says "Though in the trade of war I have slain men, / Yet do I hold it very stuff o' the conscience / To do no contrived murder" (1.3.1-3). While he may be saying this to fool Othello, there might be some truth hidden in the statement. While he schemes of murder, he devises plans so each character can do the actual deed. In fact, his two murders, of Roderigo and of Emilia, were not planned. When Roderigo is about to kill Cassio, Iago says as an aside: "Now, whether he kill Cassio, / Or Cassio him, or each do kill the other, / Every way makes my gain" (5.1.12-14). He is hopeful that both characters slay each other, but he ends up murdering Roderigo because he knows too much. The only reason he murders his own wife is because she was beginning to reveal his treachery to Othello. Both characters are unfortunate casualties of war that Iago created.

Iago's characterization as deceitful and conniving stays the same throughout the course of the play. Othello, on the other hand, transforms from an honored individual to a murderer. Iago's change must have happened before the events of the play. According to Paul Jorgensen, war was understood in Elizabethan England as changing men from honored soldiers to poor individuals that lack morality. He claims that "they, the poor soldiers, are also affected by less pay, less honor in battle, and morality" (Jorgensen, *Moral Guidance and Religious Encouragement for the*

Elizabethan 245). Hence we might say that being a soldier would have changed Iago into the immoral character that is introduced to the audience in the first scene. Both Othello and Iago have gone through battles together and have seen the terrible aspects of war. This is evident in the stories that Othello whispers to Desdemona when they were getting to know one another. Iago's jealousy for Cassio's promotion goes beyond reputation. Iago's claim that Cassio has never set foot on a battlefield depicts the betrayal Iago must have felt when Othello disregarded the honor of fighting together. Iago is left with no choice but to see Othello as a villain. Iago argues that there are negative effects of being genuinely subservient to one's master when he describes,

Many a duteous and knee-crooking knave,
That, doting on his own obsequious bondage
Wears out his time, much like his master's ass
For nought but provender, and when he's old, cashier'd. (1.1.48-51)

Iago understands that staying loyal without concern for one's self often ends in disappointment. He is correct in his assessment since his years with Othello felt meaningless the minute Cassio was named lieutenant. If he stayed truly loyal, he would have been "cashier'd". Yet, his proclamation of "I am not what I am" indicates his true loyalty is to himself (1.1.65). There is an irony in him stating this to Roderigo, who acquiesces to him. Instead of falling second in command, Iago starts taking the lead beginning with the revelation of their relationship to Brabantio. Like a true lieutenant, he strategically maneuvers his pieces to ensure victory against Othello. In addition to Iago's need to become lieutenant, he reveals "it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets / He's [Othello] done my office" (1.3.323-325). Not only is Iago displaced as a soldier, but also his home is thought to have been invaded by his own superior. Iago's jealousy is as vehement as Othello's. Iago mentions Emilia's infidelity twice in the play. The repetition of the word "my" when Iago speaks of the bedroom and office encompasses his rage for Othello's

rumored intrusion. Iago initiates the idea of Othello murdering Desdemona in the bedroom as retribution for what Othello has done. Iago persuades him to “strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated” (4.1.197-198). Shakespeare uses the word "office" with its double meaning of a husband's job and their work on the battlefield. In Iago's mind, Othello has displaced him not just as a soldier but also as a husband.

In order to counteract the displacement, Iago's most lethal weapon is his rhetoric. Joseph T. McCullen, Jr. discusses the types of rhetoric Iago uses to try and persuade other characters. McCullen states, "The use to which proverbs are ... put illustrates two distinctive characteristics of Iago's ability to persuade. The first is skillful repetition ... [while] a second feature of Iago's persuasive force is effective, deceptive logic" (McCullen 253). This is true in a sense since Iago uses logic to manipulate Othello into thinking Desdemona is unfaithful. The first seed of doubt is planted when he reminds him, "She did deceive her father in marrying you" (3.3.206-207). The logic is that if the noble daughter was able to lie to her father, then she would do the same exact thing with her husband. Benjamin Beier argues that Iago's ethos is his most powerful tool because of how the characters view him as honest. Iago uses his reputation and his role as an ensign. Beier argues that Iago reminds Othello about Desdemona's deception "not only to testify his own ethos but also to diminish Desdemona's" (Beier 41). Iago never tells Othello what to feel nor does he state that Desdemona has intentions of being unfaithful. Through logic, Iago manages to sway Othello into thinking that she has wronged him. Iago finds victory in the most silent places, a contrast to the chaotic battle scenes of other Shakespearean plays. Shakespeare decides to stray away from big battles and deaths that are made spectacles. Iago's victory only occurs when he is isolated with his opponent. This is evident in the exchanging vow scenes with Othello at the end of act three scene three:

OTHELLO. To the Propontic and the Hellespont,
 Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,
 Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,
 Till that a capable and wide revenge
 Swallow them up. Now, by yond marble heaven,

[*Kneels*]

In the due reverence of a sacred vow
 I here engage my words.

IAGO. Do not rise yet.

[*Kneels*]

Witness, you ever-burning lights above,
 You elements that clip us round about,
 Witness that here Iago doth give up
 The execution of his wit, hands, heart,
 To wrong'd Othello's service! Let him command,
 And to obey shall be in me remorse,
 What bloody business ever.

[*They rise*] (3.3.465-471)

After seeing "ocular proof" of his wife's infidelity, Othello renounces all love for Desdemona (3.3.365). Othello at this point is consumed with hatred and seeks vengeance. This recalls an earlier scene when Othello declares to Desdemona, "when I love thee not / Chaos is come again"(3.3.92-93). The act of kneeling abandons the sacred vow he has with Desdemona. Iago capitalizes on this moment and orders him not to rise. Before this moment, Iago has not given a command to Othello. He joins Othello and takes a knee to make it seem like he is not in command of the situation. Iago knows this is a crucial moment to win the battle. Othello's decision to kneel is not part of Iago's plan since Othello was the one to kneel first without being provoked. This scene displays Iago's genius, not only as a rhetorician, but his brilliance in improvisation. He kneels with him to be at eye-level in order to maintain a sense of trust. He seemingly gives up his "wit, hands, heart" to Othello (3.4.469). Iago knows Othello's vengeance can only be satisfied if Othello does the murdering. By vowing to obey him regardless of the

"bloody business" that will occur, Iago has planted the idea that Othello is the one who must do it (3.4.472).

Iago understands the importance of reputation. Not only does he care about his own position, but he also uses others' reputations to manipulate the world around him. When talking to Roderigo, he uses repetition to emphasize the dishonest nature of Cassio:

a knave very voluble; no further conscionable than in putting on the mere form of civil and humane seeming, for the better compassing of his salt and most hidden loose affection? why none; why, none: a slipper and subtle knave, a finder of occasions, that has an eye can stamp and counterfeit advantages, though true advantage never present itself; a devilish knave. Besides, the knave is handsome, young, and hath all those requisites in him that folly and green minds look after: a pestilent complete knave; and the woman hath found him already. (2.1.225-240)

Iago uses Roderigo's affections towards Desdemona for his advantage. But how does he persuade Roderigo to kill Cassio? The repetition of the word "knave" alludes to Cassio's dishonest yet charming manner. Iago doesn't quite villainize Cassio in the same way that he does Othello. He consistently refers to Othello as "The Moor" to belittle him and remind Roderigo that Desdemona will eventually leave him due to his lack of worth. "Moor" also alludes to the fact that Othello lacks whiteness. While other characters refer to Othello's ethnicity, Iago says it with abhorrence. When he accuses Othello of stealing Desdemona, he tells Brabantio that "an old black ram is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.88-89). Iago uses Othello's ethnicity to devalue his character. By contrast, Iago highlights Cassio's good looks and youth to suggest that Desdemona will choose him as the perfect suitor. Iago is painting a narrative that Cassio is the most polished suitor and a bigger threat than Othello, which will prove beneficial later on when he asks Roderigo to kill him. His continuous plea for Roderigo to "put money in thy purse" shows the perception that women were keen to acquire powerful and wealthy husbands (1.3.344). He

repeats this throughout this conversation to persuade Roderigo that this will be the only way to win Desdemona's affection.

Iago's ability to fabricate stories mirrors Othello's own powers of persuasion. Shawn Smith argues that Iago's forgery mirrors Othello's ability of storytelling: "Othello's ability to make others (the Senate, Desdemona) submit to his narrative is a form of power that is mirrored by Iago, who constructs the narratives about Desdemona's adultery to which Othello ultimately submits" (Smith 2). This is evident in act one, when Othello is asked to explain how he won Desdemona's heart. He begins with the following:

For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith,
Till now some nine moons wasted, they have used
Their dearest action in the tented field,
And little of this great world can I speak. (1.3.83-86)

Like Iago, Othello speaks of his years of service as a soldier. Despite his characteristics as a Moor, his reputation and high rank allow deference from the Duke of Venice. In contrast to Iago, whose true nature is revealed to the audience in the very first scene, Othello's temperament does not come out until he is triggered in the later scenes. When asked if he used foul spells to charm Desdemona, Othello responds that telling stories about his life was "the only witchcraft" he has used (1.3.168). Then later, when accusing Desdemona of losing his mother's handkerchief, he fabricates a backstory of the magic behind it. Othello and Iago share a similar rhetorical prowess. The biggest difference is Iago has learned to hone his anger to create a sense of calm in his rhetoric; Othello's entire tone and cadence changes when he learns of Desdemona's possible infidelity.

Iago's inquisitive nature allows him not only to mirror Othello's storytelling but also to create a series of events that ultimately leads to Othello's downfall. Smith argues that the visual

and narrative go hand in hand in the play. In other words, the visual is a necessity for Othello the way same way that speech is essential for Iago: "the verbal and the visual are not discrete elements of the play ... 'seeing' is a metaphor for Othello's mode of storytelling ... just as 'narrative' is a metaphor for Iago's manipulation of visual action" (Smith 2). This explains Othello's constant plea for "ocular proof." In contrast, Iago's jealousy stems from a rumor without any visible evidence. Iago identifies this demand for proof as a weakness in Othello. In act two scene three, Othello concludes that a bleeding Montano and a drunk Cassio is enough evidence to prove his guiltiness. Similarly, the handkerchief is enough evidence to make Othello question Desdemona's loyalty.

While male characters worry about their positions as soldiers, one would think there is an absence of strong female characters. While it may seem like there is a lack of connection between female characters and Iago's displacement, the women play a different role. Iago's words and influence do not work on them since they are not soldiers. Some critics argue that Desdemona's and Emilia's voices are silenced throughout the play. The female characters in *Othello* actually rebel against male characters. To understand why Iago's persuasion does not work on them, it is important to analyze why they rebel in the first place.

Desdemona's and Emilia's refusal to adhere to their male counterparts foreshadows their fall. Desdemona's rebellious act against her father at the play's beginning and Emilia's refusal to stay silent at its end show that women in this play can make decisions on their own. According to Gordana Galić Kakkonen and Ana Penjak, "patriarchal daughters had to listen and obey the decision made by their father on the issue of marriage" (Kakkonen and Penjak 27). Desdemona willingly disobeys Brabantio, and when confronted, she responds, "I am hitherto your daughter: but here's my husband, / And so much duty as my mother show'd / To you" (1.3.187-189). Duty

is once again brought up, but this time in terms of the responsibilities of a wife. Kakkonen and Penjak state that the actions of daughters were based on the “natural laws, and laws of the patriarchal society, customs,” while discipline “played an essential part in educating children in the family of the Elizabethan age” (21). Desdemona’s disregard for Brabantio was enough for Iago to use to manipulate Othello into thinking his wife has the capacity for disloyalty. His logic is that since she does not adhere to societal norms as a daughter, she will eventually betray her husband.

During the Elizabethan era, women who behaved like Desdemona were often frowned upon. Her fierce personality is seen through her disobedience towards Brabantio. Amongst her peers, Desdemona also reveals her feisty nature. Her most memorable but overlooked conversations are her back-and-forth with Iago in act two scene one. Daniel Derrin argues that Iago's misogynistic views are hidden in jest, but also that the conversation reveals something about Desdemona:

It is possible that Desdemona is simply being sociable herself, rendering her apparent disgust in a relatively polite manner. It is also possible that Iago has managed to create a laughable category, contiguous with himself, to share as such. (Derrin 3)

The implication here is that Desdemona is not always herself when speaking to other characters even before Othello's jealousy. Her plea of "if thou shouldst praise me?" deviates from her humble and modest nature (2.1.120). This gives the notion that Desdemona also knows how to change her tone and persona. She understands that Iago is belittling his own wife. Her lack of trust for Iago allows her to have this conversation, and she is never vulnerable when speaking to him.

While this exchange is in jest, it is in front of Emilia who remains mostly silent.

Desdemona tells Emilia, "O most lame and impotent conclusion! / Do not learn of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband" (2.1.163-164). The silencing of the female characters in *Othello* can be interpreted as their lack of power under a Patriarchal society, but it can also be seen as way of them keeping their power. Dana Ramel Barnes argues that, "the women in tragedy seem to split into two basic types: victims or monsters, good or evil" (Barnes 2). Many critics believe that female characters in Shakespeare's plays can be labeled through the consistency of their actions. Shakespeare's female characters can be seen in a different light if we focus in on their language and the relationships with their male counterparts. The female characters use both the power of speech and the power of silence to attain a sense of place in a patriarchal world. Most of the female characters are silenced by men or use silence as a means to protect themselves.

Male characters choose silence as a means to achieve their objectives, but women usually have silence "thrust upon them" because of traditional social or dramatic expectations. This holds true if we consider Iago's final words of the play, as his choice to be silent gives him power. His ending contrasts with Emilia's because she chooses to speak up. Why would this be important for Iago's displacement? Emilia's change from a silent obedient wife to someone who speaks out against him is another way he believes that he is displaced. Iago thinks he has the authority to silence his wife. Emilia was literally silenced by being murdered. Emilia's death represents what happens to women who attempt to go against a patriarchal society. In Iago's mind, Emilia is merely a casualty of war. She was able to be a soldier but she decides to go against traditional norms. Iago's states that he will "charm" her tongue (into silence), and Emilia's response, "I will not charm my tongue; I am bound to speak," shows her figuratively picking up a sword, and joining the battle (5.2.191). Shakespeare creates this seemingly obedient female

character who becomes the biggest challenge to Iago. Becoming an “outspoken” woman all but confirms to Iago that he has no secure place in this world, something that he has known, and fought against, since the beginning of the play.

Chapter 2: Edmund's Displacement: Home and the Natural World

Displacement—in particular displacement from the household—runs throughout *King Lear*. Edmund's displacement is similar to Iago's in *Othello* because he feels that he has been removed from his title and his right—in his case from being son and heir—because of the circumstances of his birth. Lear and Gloucester fear being displaced by their children early in the play, and by midway through come to be displaced because they are both physically removed from their home. Chih-Chiao Joseph Yang argues that the home in *King Lear* is figured as a place that provides comfort and security for the characters. The tragedy of the play is spurred when "the imagined image of a homely space is shattered" (Yang 3). When Lear begins to lose his mind, the sisters with their husbands plan to take over, and focus in particular on Lear's place in their homes. Gloucester, meanwhile, believes that "he no longer belongs inside his own house" (Yang 5). What Yang fails to mention is that Edmund never felt like he belonged; Edmund has no real voice in the household. Even in the opening scenes of the play, Edmund is subjected to staying silent until he is allowed to speak. Kent asks Gloucester if Edmund is his son, to which Gloucester responds, "his breeding, sir, hath been at my charge: I have so often blushed to acknowledge him, that now I am brazed to it" (1.1.8-9). Gloucester admits to having "often blushed" in answering questions about Edmund. Yet he stands proud when mentioning that he has another son "by order of law" (1.1.4). Edmund stands mute as Kent and his father discuss his own illegitimacy. If the removal of home brings disharmony, then Edmund's desire for a home should be justified. As William C. Carroll argues, Edmund wants to "become someone else, almost anyone else because he cannot stand himself. His goal is to become Edgar, and he does; and then he becomes his father as well, dispossessing him as he himself was dispossessed" (Carroll 427). The idea of Edmund's desire to become Edgar resonates when he

says, "Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land. / Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund / As to the legitimate" (1.2.16-18). He seeks not only his father's land but also the recognition of being an actual son.

Like Iago, Edmund plays a role as a means of deception. Iago fools those around him by using his reputation of "Honest Iago" and by playing the role of ensign to perfection. Edmund, while illegitimate, knows and is able to perform the duty of a true son. Similar to Iago's argument about obsequious servants, Edmund acknowledges that he should also serve himself when he proclaims that he is working against "a credulous father, and a brother noble" (1.2.156). Cornwall acknowledges this when he tells Edmund, "I hear that you have shown your father / A child-like office," to which Edmund responds "'Twas my duty, sir" (2.1.103-105). In both *Othello* and *King Lear* words connoting forms of work, "office" and "duty," are utilized to highlight both socio-political and familial responsibilities. Iago uses the word "office" to emphasize the duality of husband and soldier. Cornwall's evocation of Edmund's "child-like office" is meant to praise Edmund of his loyalty towards his father. Edmund has the characters duped into thinking that he is honorable.

Nature allows characters to see the truth. Lear's inability to see his daughters' betrayal slowly changes once he is removed from the protections of a household. Gloucester begins to see the truth the minute he is physically blinded and tossed out of his home. Lear and Gloucester begin to see the truth during the storm. When Lear is stranded in the storm with a disguised Edgar, it is Gloucester who says:

Go in with me. My duty cannot suffer
To obey in all your daughters' hard commands.
Though their injunction be to bar my doors
And let this tyrannous night take hold upon you,
Yet have I ventured to come seek you out

And bring you where both fire and food is ready. (3.4.131-136)

Gloucester mentions the duty he has to take care of Lear. Ironically, he is dismissive of Edgar, his legitimate son, because he is figuratively blinded by the truth (indeed, Edgar is on stage with his father, albeit in disguise as Poor Tom). Gloucester is disgusted with the daughters' order to bar the doors and physically remove Lear from his home (as yet, neither he nor Lear recognizes that in effect this is what they have done to their “good” children, Edgar and Cordelia). At the start of the play, Gloucester remarks how Edmund's mother "grew round-wombed, and had, indeed, sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed. Do you smell a fault?" (1.1.13-14). Gloucester finds not only jest but also a fault in Edmund's birth. He considers him an offense in the eyes of the court.

The key to understanding Edmund is his status as a bastard. As Brian Carroll argues, Shakespeare's bastards are more than just overlooked characters. In Shakespeare's *King John*, the Bastard stands as an index of the nation: “the Bastard's patriotism is not simply reflexive; it is considered and questioning, crystallizing as the character becomes a noble, even kingly citizen.” (Carroll 2). Edmund, in comparison, also operates as an index of the nation, but in a far less positive manner. Edmund both envies the love that Edgar receives and envies the title he feels that he is meant to have. Carroll outlines (by way of Alison Findlay) the cultural meaning of bastardy in Renaissance England:

as a bastard, the character draws attention to the nature of order, authority, legitimacy, and, for this play, all-important "right" and "rightness," especially for a society organized on paternal authority. Plays with a prominent bastard character advertise an awareness of the false consciousness which creates legitimacy. (Carroll 6)

Findlay alludes to the fact that the bastard character is one of the few character types who is aware of order and authority and their ambivalent place within it because he is constantly

reminded that he does not have a title and a clear line of inheritance. What separates Edmund from the other villains of *King Lear* is that Goneril and Regan were given power while Edmund has to take it. Cristina Alfar argues that while Edmund does not inherit power, he possesses a sort of masculine brutality that Lear and their own husbands do not have. When Lear appoints them monarchs, Goneril and Regan desired to rule with a ruthless aggression that Edmund solely owns. Alfar states, “Edmund, as a man, represents the lawful definitions of masculine brutality, and as a consequence, he enables both women to perform the brutality that they are culturally prohibited from performing” (Alfar 186). Even then, Edmund does not think that Goneril and Regan acknowledge his competence sufficiently. His title as a bastard is a stain that cannot be removed. Alfar notes, “As a bastard, Edmund is not entitled to power, to legal existence. Consequently, only attaining Edgar’s inheritance will satisfy him, for verbal acknowledgment pales in comparison to legal and material acknowledgment” (Alfar 189). John Drakakis notes how a similar Shakespearean bastard, Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing*, occupies neither “legitimate political position, nor self-identity; he is literally nothing” (Drakakis 66). Like Don John, Edmund is perceived as nothing, which releases him from the constraints of social norms. Drakakis points out that the term “bastard” will “return and threaten to undo the social formation” (Drakakis 67). Edmund, while far from a kingly citizen, feels displaced from a place of honor as a son because of the vagaries of the law.

It perhaps comes as little surprise that bastardy was seldom looked upon in a positive light during the early modern era. As Michael Neill argues, the bastard "is habitually figured as a creature who reveals the 'unnaturalness' of his begetting by the monstrous unkindness of his nature. An 'out of joint' member of a hybrid genus, he is defined as neither one thing nor the other." He is also seen as "energetic, witty, iconoclastic, and profoundly resentful of the

legitimate order" (Neill 272-273). Neill suggests that the bastard is monstrous and unkind because that is how he is perceived. Edmund reveals he is aware of the arbitrary connections between baseness and being a bastard in his first soliloquy:

Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law
 My services are bound. Wherefore should I
 Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
 The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
 For that, I am some twelve or fourteen moon-shines
 Lag of a brother? Why bastard? wherefore base?
 When my dimensions are as well compact,
 My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
 As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
 With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base? (1.2.1-10)

Edmund claims that nature is his goddess. He is obsessed with the idea of the natural because he was created through natural passion. Because of this, he must submit to the rules of the court and the denial of his father's approval all because he was a child born out of wedlock. He calls these rules a "plague" that causes affliction to not only him but also to all those branded as bastards. He questions that "curiosity of nations," and blames the nation's traditions and legal system for his experiences. He argues that his physical attributes and mental state are natural, yet the perception of him will never change. The repetition of the word "base" indicates how Edmund loathes the title given to him. He feels his brother is less deserving not just of the inheritance but also of his father's love.

King Lear differs from *Othello* because its plot revolves around the sense of displacement (and the subsequent physical removal) from an English court rather than from military or domestic life. As *Lear* moves from the court to the natural world, there is a shift in the characters' natural characteristics—a removal seemingly inevitable because of the chaos already ensuing within the court, caused by Lear but embodied by Edmund. Lear's questioning of his

daughter's love towards him often overshadows the fact he was divvying the kingdom to their husbands, including the future husband of Cordelia. Lear places great significance in his role as a father by seeking validation from their declarations of love. But, as Kakkonen and Penjak claim,

Marriage and marriage ritual in the sixteenth and seventeenth century was a pattern of the community that surrounded it, as well as the only initiation point of and for every young woman/daughter if she wanted to be accepted in the society. This type of pattern was seen as a 'contract' traditionally intended for women and perceived as their basic obligation – their only career. (22)

Furthermore, Kakkonen and Penjak add that "The custom of the time also dictated that, once a daughter was married, the father was to change his role from the protector to an observer" (25). Hence Lear's first failing is in his inability to successfully marry off his youngest daughter, despite the fact that this would have been understood as his obligation. Cordelia's refusal to embellish her love through false narratives like her sisters triggers Lear's descent into madness. Lear's fear of being displaced as a loving father forces him to react in a pointless threat that "nothing will come to nothing" (1.1.88). Lear forgets his strategy in breaking up the kingdom, of course, and his duty as a monarch, but moreover he forgets his role as a father. He is too overcome with emotion to have rational thought. As a result, he casts out—or displaces—Cordelia from her home in England and she is forced to live, in virtual exile, in France.

The displacement of Cordelia begins the breakdown of Lear's own mental health. For Lear, his anguish and guilt towards Cordelia prove too much to handle. When in the storm, he calls out nature stating, "Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! spout, rain! / Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters" (3.I.13-15). The storm, though violent, cleanses him of his burden. Locked out of his own home, Lear finds solace in the outside world. After the betrayal of his two daughters, he seeks absolution from nature.

Earlier in the play, Gloucester points out that "nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects: love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father" (1.2.97-99). This connects to Edmund's lines about the astrologer's prediction when he states he does not understand the "unnaturalness between the child, and the parent; death, dearth, dissolutions of ancient amities" (128-129). In this scene, Edmund is pretending to be interested in astrology to trick his brother. Yet Shakespeare includes this scene to show the irony of other characters believing in the power of nature. Kent later claims that "It is the stars, / The stars above us, govern our conditions; / Else one self-mate and mate could not beget" (3.6.31-32). Gloucester and Kent (and perhaps Edgar too) all share the same mentality. It is their position of nobility that causes them to believe that the outside world, nature, and the stars are to blame for their disposition.

Gloucester is in complete disbelief as to why disaster and discord are happening in his life. He fails to see that his error emanates from his quips regarding Edmund's illegitimacy. Gloucester's breakdown occurs when Edmund dupes his father into thinking Edgar has betrayed him. Gloucester's own fear of displacement causes him to react irrationally. He renounces his legitimate son as unnatural, in front of Edmund. This delights Edmund, who knows that in order to find a place in his father's eyes, he must dispose of his brother. Edmund wants to find a place in the world, but he knows he cannot do that as long as Edgar is alive. Thus, just as Lear's priority becomes blurred the minute he exiles Cordelia, Gloucester prioritizes getting answers as to why Edgar has seemingly betrayed him. The idea of betrayal from their favorites becomes the cause of both Lear and Gloucester's downfall.

Lear and Gloucester are removed from their home out into the natural world, while Edmund has always been a character looking in from the outside. He comes to take control while his father and brother are the ones who are left outside. Gloucester's attempted suicide can be seen as cowardice so as to avoid guilt for his treatment of his legitimate son and/or for his belief in his illegitimate one, or simply as an acceptance of his fate in the tragedy. Regardless, it is in the outside realm, through nature, that Gloucester attempts this act. Moreover, it is through nature that he is saved, when his son compels him to see the folly of committing suicide atop Dover Cliff. It is not so much his blindness that brings forth an ability to see the truth; rather it is blindness as experienced in the wilderness, and significantly outside the home, that leads him to recognize the folly of his ways.

By contrast, Edmund, embraces his villainy as the play progresses, because it allows him a way to be inside. When he describes himself as "rough and lecherous" and as someone who "should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing," he also dismisses how foolish it is to simply blame nature and fate for the misfortune of man (1.2.119-121). Edmund smirks at his father's naiveté when he blames the stars for his misfortune. He claims, "we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars, as if we were villains by necessity" (1.2.118-119). Edmund understands that while being a bastard puts him at a disadvantage, his astute nature makes up for it: "Let me, if not by birth, have lands by wit" (1.2.177). This is a moment of self-recognition, as he realizes that he has no other choice but to use his cleverness to get what he wants. Ironically, of course, once Edmund is on the inside he gains little of the insight offered by the natural world to his father, his brother, and the king; instead, he wallows in court intrigue and machinations, until the final moments of the play.

Shakespeare provides a last attempt for readers to feel sympathy for Edmund. When Lear and Cordelia are caught, Lear finds positivity in this as long as they are together:

Come, let's away to prison
 We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage
 When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
 And ask of thee forgiveness. (5.3.8-11)

After spending time outside in the natural world, Lear is absolved through nature and through Cordelia's forgiveness. The world that he imagines for him and Cordelia, while contained, is one that reflects the world of nature outside the court, as he compares them to birds—a representation of nature—that are caged. Lear understands that even prison will not bring him down as long as they are together; indeed, in his vision, they will outlast many at court (a vision that of course does not come to fruition).

Edmund's last-second attempt to save Cordelia also evokes nature, albeit very differently to Lear:

I pant for life: some good I mean to do,
 Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send,
 Be brief in it, to the castle; for my writ
 Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia. (5.3.243-246)

Perhaps Edmund changes his ways as a result of his impending death. It could possibly be the context that Edgar gives that "moved" Edmund. After all, he does not feel remorse upon hearing the deaths of the sisters and almost gloats when he says they are "all three to marry" in the afterlife (5.3.222-223). He mentions that despite his nature, he wants to do one more good deed. This implies that he begins to see himself the way that everyone else has seen him throughout the play—as someone trustworthy, dependable, and of a noble family. Due to his displacement, he accepted his baseness—accepted, that is, the words of his father reminding him of his bastardy. That was until this moment. Despite being too late, his attempt in stopping the assassination

gives him a little more consideration from the audience. And it seems to be of significance that this change happens outside in nature, where he has been defeated in single combat by his brother. As someone who claims to worship nature, Edmund has spent the whole play trying to secure a place inside. Yet like Lear, Gloucester, and Edgar, albeit in miniature, he manages to find some kind of insight and greater meaning when left exposed in the natural elements.

Edmund's end contrasts with Iago's. Iago chooses not to say another word: "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know: / From this time forth I never will speak word" (5.3.309-310.). Iago bleeds but is not killed, another contrast to Edmund. Iago's choice of not saying a word gives him power. He is not the dutiful, obedient lieutenant. He becomes a general of his own kind. Even though he is caught, he is victorious in accomplishing his goal. We might note that this scene takes place not in the open—indeed so much of *Othello* takes place in claustrophobic interiors—but in the bedchamber of his General, the very place from where Iago feels has been displaced.

Conclusion: Iago, Edmund, and the Displaced English

Othello and *King Lear* represent two Machiavellian characters who are spurred to action because they are displaced. They are the characters that are detached from society. Even Iago, while married to Emilia, has detached himself from her because of the rumor between Othello and his wife. Shakespeare's antagonists experience isolation, which we might take as a commentary on the isolation that soldiers felt during and after war. Critics perceive Iago's jealousy as a catalyst for his viciousness. Some argue that he is the embodiment of evil. While his actions are deplorable, it is important to understand Iago's background as a soldier. Iago's displacement as the rightful lieutenant fosters his hatred towards Othello. He believes that his experience as a soldier has been overlooked. Iago sees each character as a metaphorical battle that he must win. His most useful weapon is his power as a rhetorician. Through the use of speech, Iago manipulates the other characters. The only characters Iago has trouble manipulating are the female characters because they are not soldiers of war. Though Emilia starts out as a submissive wife who is loyal to her husband, she ends up speaking out against Iago and is the only character to reveal Iago's true nature. With Emilia breaking gender stereotypes, Iago feels displaced not only as a soldier but also as a husband because of his inability to keep his wife silent.

In *King Lear*, displacement happens through the removal from home. Edmund feels displaced because of his title as a bastard. His father openly admits his disapproval from the very first scene of the play. Like Iago, jealousy can be seen as a catalyst for his actions. Nature plays a prominent role in *King Lear*. Edmund, conceived from natural passion, represents nature. Lear and Gloucester cannot see their wrongdoing until they are thrust into the outside world. Both Edmund and Iago's detachment from other characters allow them to maneuver and out-smart

everyone else. Iago isolates himself from everyone, while Edmund is isolated because of his diminished role in society. The question remains however: why is Shakespeare, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, so interested in the psychology of the displaced—in a courtier who is denied advancement because of an accident of birth and a soldier who is denied advancement because of preferment. Given that both Iago and Edmund could be said to be figures who attempt to conquer others by reaching far beyond themselves, and given that both are martial figures (even if only Iago is a soldier by “occupation”), we might map this sensibility onto England’s own place in the world at the beginning of the seventeenth century—or rather its own sense of displacement.

Detachment and isolation are not only found in soldiers during wartime but in England itself. In his article "The Elizabethan Idea of Empire," David Armitage discusses how England's isolation is actually detrimental to the nation. Armitage argues with Ferdinand Braudel's point that England’s “detachment from its traditional trading links with Europe opened it up to a grander destiny as a central player in the emergent Atlantic and global economy" (Armitage 269). Armitage believes that although being detached "from continental Europe and from the surrounding Atlantic" set them on their way to being an economic power, it was not progressive: "The backwardness and derivativeness of the Elizabethan imperial idea appear even more starkly when it is compared with continental European concept" (Armitage 273). Shakespeare's characters such as Iago and Edmund might symbolize the same detached, isolated England. These characters are powerful in their intellect and their decision-making. Edmund and Iago both have the intuition that other characters lack. They are the ones pulling the strings, and duping prominent main protagonists. Yet, they are backward in their thinking. This can lead to further studies of Shakespearean characters that represent an isolated England. Not only do tragic heroes

feel isolated, but also so do Shakespeare's villains. Loneliness is interwoven throughout *King Lear*. Each character but Edmund had someone to lean on. Lear had his Fool and Kent, the daughters had their husbands, and even Gloucester had the disguised Edgar. Due to his detachment, it was easy for Edmund to maneuver in schemes. Iago, on the other hand, was not isolated by anyone; this was his choice. His ability to manipulate other characters rests on his detachment and disinterest in other characters.

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