

THE CULTIVATION OF PITY ON THE ELIZABETHAN STAGE

By

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# THE CULTIVATION OF PITY ON THE ELIZABETHAN STAGE

## Abstract

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Chair: William M. Hamlin

As a term, “pity” carries a huge load and seemingly innumerable definitions. Do we use it to indicate contempt and superiority? Compassion and mercy? Is it a good thing to be pitied, or something to be avoided at all costs? This piece begins with a consideration of the term itself – seeking to illuminate how we understand pity in common parlance and how the term has evolved since through language and literature.

Though most would agree that *being* pitiful is an unappealing prospect in the real world, the emotion takes on a different significance and value when used on the stage. I argue that William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe use pity to highlight certain characters and render them more compelling to the audience. This distinction is made particularly interesting by the disparity: often the characters that are crafted to inspire audience sympathy are somehow fundamentally *unappealing*. By distinguishing certain characters through pity, both Shakespeare and Marlowe take advantage of the benefits of theater – using the audience’s distance from the onstage action to render appealing what might otherwise be repugnant or contemptible.

In the first chapter, I consider the application of pity in comedy, focusing particularly on the villains or irritants of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, and *The Tempest*. This section investigates the existence of pity in comedy, and considers the ways in which the application of pity *onstage* differs from our experience with it offstage.

In the second chapter I consider the cultivation of pity for the fallen kings in the history plays of Shakespeare and Marlowe, focusing specifically on the title characters in *Edward II* and *Richard II*. The depiction of a king as pitiful provides a unique contrast, given the king's elevated social position. In presenting the image of a weak and pitiful king, the playwright effectively highlights the humanity of kingship, allowing the audience to consider the problems of kingship and the nuance of historical figures.

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## Introduction:

### The Many Faces of Pity

Early in my childhood, I learned that if there was one thing you *didn't* want to be, it was pitiful.

The year was 1991; I was seven years old. Our house was only a short walk from my elementary school, and since even little legs could cover the distance in about ten minutes, my mother always came to meet me so we could walk home together. One afternoon she found me waiting for her, perched on the outskirts of the playground with tear-stained cheeks and eyes rubbed red.

That day, I'd been selected as the school bully's newest victim. She was just your typical third-grade girl, I am certain, though in this moment I saw her as an unstoppable force. To demonstrate her power over me, she had decided to rename me. Now, instead of my nice, friendly, reliable name, I was "Tortilla." Never one for Mexican food, I was less than thrilled. I wanted to stop this nonsense, but I wasn't strong enough to be threatening, and I didn't relish the idea of being punished for exacting revenge. I was in a bind. Fortunately my mother, who was always a paragon of maternal wisdom, immediately gave me my answer.

"The best thing to do," she told me, "is to march straight up to that girl and tell her that if she can't think of a better name than that, then you *pity* her. I promise you, she won't like it."

As a seven year old, I'd never really given much thought to pity. It wasn't a concept that came up all that much in Saturday morning cartoons (at least, not directly). But I could see the brilliance of the idea, just from the way that word came out of my mother's mouth: it was a direct shot, a gauntlet to throw at someone's feet. I didn't have to push, or scream. I just had to inform this girl that she had failed to impress me with her purported brilliance. I couldn't wait for

school the next day.

It didn't take long, the next morning, for me to find my moment.

“Hey Tortilla, where's your sombrero?”

I took a deep breath, cleared my face of any emotion, and delivered my line. And then there was silence. This girl, who only moments ago had been so full of her own wit, couldn't think of anything to say. I held her stunned gaze for a moment, and then – silently praising the ultimate genius of my mother – returned to my multiplication tables. I was never “Tortilla” again.

Though it's a simple example, my early introduction to the power of pity is only one example of the pervasive emotion. Today, we see it employed in obvious places – the dramatic scenes of a soap opera, or the heart-wrenching rhetoric of a commercial concerning abused animals or neglected children. It can be a weapon – as it was for me – or a call to action. Charities, for example, often highlight the plight of their wards, using pity to inspire us to help those unfortunate ones who cannot help themselves. In any case, we learn that as we are cultivating our identities, “pitiful” is not a characteristic to which we should aspire. It makes us weak, separates us from those around us, strips us of our self-sufficiency and sometimes depicts us as low and unworthy of the rights and considerations enjoyed by others.

There is significant evidence to suggest that like today, pity was a prevalent term in the parlance of early modern Europe.<sup>1</sup> As a noun, “pity” first appeared in the English language in 1250, and was soon incorporated into the work of Chaucer, Ben Jonson, and later, Shakespeare's *Tempest*.<sup>2</sup> Numerous early 17<sup>th</sup> century texts use “pittie” in varied circumstances, giving a clear idea of the weight and significance of the word in early modern England. In John Bodenham's

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<sup>1</sup> In this case, “pity” also refers to its various derivatives, such as piteous, pitiful, and pitiable.

<sup>2</sup> Oxford English Dictionary (online).



discussion of friendship, for example, he writes of the characteristics of a true friend, arguing that such an individual should be steadfast, trustworthy, and should “Be enuied of thy foe, rather than pitied.”<sup>3</sup> This comment suggests that pity has never been an emotion one tries to inspire in others. However, the *capacity* for pity is seen as an attribute. Christopher Marlowe, whose work will be considered in my second chapter, writes in *Hero and Leander* that “In gentle thoughts, / Relenting thoughts, remorse, and pittie rests.”<sup>4</sup> We can gather from this that pity was (and is) often associated with sentiments of mercy, and is built around a reciprocal relationship. In order for someone to be *pitiful*, another person (or group of people) must see him that way. Inversely, one requires the presence of a legitimately pitiful character in order to demonstrate the merciful nature of dispensing pity.

From these definitions of pity, it seems that the only legitimate way to *benefit* from pity is to be on the appropriate side of the aforementioned relationship. To be the dispenser of pity indicates not only that one is merciful and compassionate, but also hints that the person is sufficiently distanced from the unsavory characteristics of the person pitied that he can offer some consolation and assistance. We ourselves cannot be pitiful, if we are to help another out of his pitiful plight. In the real world, we want to be the magnanimous figure that sympathizes with the suffering and shortcomings of others; we do not wish to be on the receiving end of this magnanimity, since with it comes a tarnished social image. However, all the positive associations with dispensing pity must vanish if the pity given is laced with contempt; after all, it seems wrong to use the classification of another human being as fundamentally inferior as an argument

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<sup>3</sup> From pg. 95 of *Bel-vedère, or, The Garden of the muses*, 1600.

<sup>4</sup> *Hero and Leander*, lines 215-216. This line is also cited in *Englands Parnassus: or the choyssest flowers of our moderne poets, with their poetically comparisons Descriptions of bewties, personages, castles, pallaces, mountaines, groues, seas, springs, riuers, &c. Whereunto are annexed other various discourses, both pleasaunt and profitable*. Robert Albott, 1600.

for one's own magnanimity. We might say that compassionate pity springs from genuine concern for the pitiful subject. However, it is just as easy to use pity as a form of judgment. We can therefore begin to see the complicated nature of pity: it can be a weapon, or a sign of mercy and compassion. It is not just that pity is associated with myriad definitions; it is that the definitions themselves often contradict each other. How is it possible to use one word to deal with such a nuanced subject?

It is apparent just from this brief discussion that pity is an inherently abstract notion, and it is difficult to define it concretely. We can at least say that pity requires at least two clearly defined sides, each motivated by separate desires, personal and public concerns. It can evolve from any kind of disparity: educational, economical, physical, or moral to name only a few. Or, as I will argue here, pity can evolve from a common thread of humanity. Given the complexity of the idea, it should therefore come as no surprise that numerous scholars have discussed the nature of pity, offering various definitions, outlining the necessary conditions for its employment, discussing the ramifications of its application, and considering the extent to which pity reflects both on the *pitiful* person and the *dispenser* of the pity. To give a recent example, Martha Nussbaum notably discusses the emotion in her *Upheavals of Thought*, positing that the sentiment is grounded in the dispenser's recognition of mankind's "common lot" – we offer compassion because we recognize that we too could easily fall victim to the misfortune that affects the pitiful character.<sup>5</sup> However, my mother's solution to my problem at school had

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<sup>5</sup> Because the emotion associated with pity is often labeled with myriad terms – compassion, sympathy, and mercy, to name only a few – it should be said here that Nussbaum sees "pity" and "compassion" as interchangeable terms. However, Nussbaum herself recognizes the varying definitions associated with "pity," writing that "there is more than the usual degree of verbal confusion in the English language concerning what to call the experience I have just defined. 'Pity,' 'sympathy,' and 'empathy' all appear in texts and in common usage, usually without clear distinction either from one another or from what I am calling 'compassion.' 'Pity' has recently

nothing to do with recognizing anything fundamentally *human* about my tormentor. In my case, using the word “pity” was not intended to form a bond. Rather, I was effectively cementing the distance between us; at that moment, pity had everything to do with contempt and superiority, and nothing to do with compassion and understanding. At that moment, I wanted revenge, and pity seemed like the best possible weapon to employ.

The confusion surrounding pity and its definitions makes it a tricky term to use. Aristotle claims that we feel pity when an undeserving agent encounters misfortune, and goes on to say that we cannot feel pity unless we believe in someone’s goodness.<sup>6</sup> For Rousseau, we must identify with someone’s suffering in order to feel pity for them.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, Nietzsche offers a vision somewhat more in line with the definition I used as a child, classifying pity as a degrading emotion. For Nietzsche, pity sprouts from the inherent belief that the pitiful person is contemptible and low. He adds that dispensing pity is *enjoyable* insofar as it produces a feeling of superiority and power.<sup>8</sup> Given the confusion associated with the term, the common trend is to lump pity with a slough of similar terms – mercy, compassion, sympathy, empathy – in order to provide a clearer picture of the author’s intention.<sup>9</sup> At any rate, use of the term in any scholarly sphere seemingly demands a deliberate moment of definition, and it is this power– associated with only one brief term – that demands further investigation.

Perhaps the largest problem with pity is that all the definitions offered have merit, depending upon the circumstances. However, the expansive list of possible definitions can create

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come to have nuances of condescension and superiority to the sufferer that it did not have when Rousseau invoked ‘*pitié*’ and still does not have when ‘pity’ is used to translate the Greek tragic terms *eleos* and *oiktos*. I shall avoid it here because of those associations” (301).

<sup>6</sup> *On Rhetoric* 2.8.

<sup>7</sup> *Émile*, 794.

<sup>8</sup> *The Dawn, or Daybreak*, 18.

<sup>9</sup> For an example, see Maureen Whitebrook’s “Compassion as a Political Virtue” 529.

a certain amount of discomfort, both for the dispenser and the receiver of the pity. Is it a good thing to give someone your pity? Sometimes, but not always. Is it beneficial to receive that pity? Sometimes, but not always. Is pity an insult, or an olive branch? Though more modern discussions recognize a certain trend toward condescension in the social employment of pity, the classic, compassionate notions of pity are very much alive in literature.<sup>10</sup> While both classical writers like Aristotle and modern scholars like Nussbaum focus on pity as an equalizing force – something that forges an equal connection between the pitiful and the dispenser of pity – in literature an author often cultivates compassionate pity for the unsavory characters who (hopefully) are not our equals in terms of morality or behavior. This piece will deal specifically with the stimulation of audience sympathy for unsavory characters in Shakespeare’s comedies, and will go on to examine the cultivation of pity for weak monarchs in Shakespearean and Marlovian history plays. Certain characters in these plays, though they are written as ineffectual and fundamentally unattractive in personality, morality, or even physical appearance, ultimately resonate with audiences in significant ways. The appeal of these characters to audiences stands in sharp contrast to their reception from their onstage peers: we as audience members often find ourselves gravitating toward characters that are ostracized or attacked onstage. The disparate reactions of audience members and cast members demonstrate an important feature of pity: we may associate certain characteristics, such as weakness, as universally pitiful, but our response is largely dependent on the other factors that define our relationship with the pitiful character. I argue that in English Renaissance drama, our tendencies toward compassion and sympathy are prompted by the privileges we enjoy as audience members – namely, the scope of our

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<sup>10</sup> For an example of compassionate pity in literature, Maureen Whitebrook’s article entitled “Compassion as a Political Virtue” discusses the cultivation of audience pity for flawed or unattractive characters in Toni Morrison’s work.

knowledge, and our distance from the pitiful characters in question. I go on to suggest that both Shakespeare and Marlowe use the ambiguous, shifting nature of pity to prioritize the humanity of lofty characters like kings. Since pity itself is such a complicated notion, its appearance in these plays is not only useful in the immediate sense of crafting the moral message or highlighting specific issues, but also solidifies the appeal of these plays across cultures and time periods. If, as Nussbaum and others suggest, pity relies on some type of core humanity, the inclusion of pity in these plays contributes to their relevance and appeal for any audience.

To clarify the purpose of my investigation in this piece, it is useful to return once again to the case of my childhood bully. Despite innumerable definitions of pity that include notions of compassion or sympathy, my attitude toward this girl was anything but sympathetic. I imagine this attitude stems from two primary issues: the scope of my knowledge, and the reality of the situation. By the first point, I mean that my knowledge of the girl was limited to our interactions in school. Certainly, I knew she felt the need to tease me about my name, so I had my own opinions about her general character. But more important factors like her history or her motivations remained a mystery. However, her presence was very real to me; she shared a desk with me in class, and we spent every recess on the same playground. In short, she was a constant, physical presence in my sphere, and an immediate threat to my happiness. In that situation, I was a player, and as such was not afforded the opportunity to be a coolly distant observer. Sympathizing with her, and trying to understand her as something more than my tormentor would have required a certain sacrifice on my part. At the very least, it would have been harder to justify seeking any revenge.

However, personal investment of that nature changes when the villain is placed upon the stage. As an audience member, one is granted a clearer vision of all the characters, and can more

successfully evaluate the characters and the context of their situation. Most importantly, characters that might be threatening in the real world are safely quarantined onstage. As such, the audience is afforded an opportunity to become more involved with and committed to certain characters without risking their own happiness. The reduction of a threat to the audience is especially important when discussing the villains of a given piece. After all, the attraction felt by the audience for a play's heroes is unsurprising; the playwright easily constructs the heroes of a given piece by prioritizing their lines and establishing their good reputations among the rest of the players onstage. The appeal of the clever Portia, the fair Viola, or the powerful Prospero is unquestionable. However, it is interesting that in each of these plays the revenge-driven Shylock, pompous Malvolio, and base Caliban also command so much audience attention, and, ultimately, their pity and sympathy. This is important because these characters are not designed to be reflections of people who are normally well-received in society; these men are deeply flawed. They are not particularly likeable, and their interests often run counter to those of our heroes. Nevertheless, when placed *onstage* they are compelling, intriguing, and often the more memorable characters.

Throughout this piece, I argue that seemingly pitiful characters are compelling not because of their onstage strength, but their weakness. In the sphere of each play discussed, each of these characters is undeniably pitiful, but since they are on the stage, what might normally be seen as a flaw becomes an asset. In rendering these weak or pitiful characters, the playwright effectively distinguishes them from the other players. That distinction, in turn, breeds memorability. Would we remember Shylock as clearly had he not questioned, "Hath not a Jew eyes?"<sup>11</sup> *Twelfth Night's* Malvolio, a character that is essentially unnecessary to the play's main

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<sup>11</sup> *Merchant of Venice* III.i.55.

action, stands out because he is subjected to such a severely disproportional punishment for his arrogance. Caliban's physical deformities immediately distinguish him from the other players in *The Tempest*, but his vengeful nature and social status also separate him from the other characters.

My first chapter deals with these three characters for several reasons. The primary reason to investigate pitiful characters in comedy is of course that the genre itself seems a strange place for pity to emerge. We may rightly expect to encounter pity on the tragic stage, but the appearance of pitiful characters on the comic stage must be seen as a deliberate move on the part of the playwright to distinguish that particular character's situation. Our reaction to these characters also offers a clear demonstration of pity's shifting significance. Shylock, Malvolio, and Caliban are all depicted as unsavory characters. Their interests often run counter to those of their play's heroes, and it is easy to classify these men as malicious, morally corrupt, or otherwise unappealing. Nevertheless, each of these characters inspires audience sympathy by their respective play's conclusion. Given the privileged position of the audience that sees and understands the onstage action from an unbiased, distanced perspective, it is easy for the audience to dispense pity to these unappealing characters. The presence of characters like Shylock, Malvolio, and Caliban verifies Shakespeare's knowledge of the *power* of pity. The placement of these pitiful characters on the stage further demonstrates the *problem* of pity: there is no standard response to a pitiful character. Rather, the manifestations of pity depend on one's distance from and knowledge of the character in question. In each of the comedies discussed in the first chapter, the pitiful character prompts disparate reactions from the audience and the onstage players. In the sphere in which the pitiful character actually exists – the stage – he is met with contempt, and we can easily imagine this as a reflection of a conventional social response.

However, for the outside observers in the audience, to whom the pitiful character poses no threat, that character's sympathetic elements are more apparent. Significantly, it is much easier for an audience to recognize a common strain of humanity in the motivations of even the worst villains, and we can see that Shakespeare depends on demonstrated humanity to cultivate audience pity for these characters.

The existence of pitiful characters on the comic stage is helpful because it isolates certain elements of the pity problem. Given the nature of comedy, the situation of the pitiful characters is more easily isolated; for example, in a cast full of mirthful characters, Malvolio's torment provides a sharp contrast. Though pity more frequently manifests itself in tragedies, one might argue that in that case pity is a necessary component of the genre itself. However, the emergence of pity in comedy allows for a more precise study of the emotion's effect on the individual. While the widespread pity evoked in a tragedy casts a pall over the entire story and all its players, the controlled emergence of pity in a comedy demonstrates the intricacies of the emotion itself, and its effect on an individual's standing within society.

While the first chapter seeks to demonstrate the relationship between pity and the stage, and establishes pity as a playwright's instrument for isolating one particular character's situation, the second chapter investigates the use of pity to blur the line between onstage action and offstage reality. The first chapter's concentration on comedy demonstrates that it is possible to cultivate compassionate pity for unsavory characters, so long as those characters are placed in a certain context. The plays detailed in chapter one, since they are fictional and restrained to the stage, more easily facilitate audience sympathy for unappealing characters. The audience may freely dispense pity for even the worst characters onstage, because they run no risk of encountering these characters in real life. Chapter two moves beyond the use of pity as an



isolated dramatic tool, and discusses the use of onstage pity to provide perspective on historical figures. Both Marlowe's *Edward II* and Shakespeare's *Richard II* recount historical events, and for early modern audiences the distance between the onstage presentation and the offstage reality was not so great. By capitalizing on the distance enjoyed by a theatrical audience, Marlowe and Shakespeare prompt the audience to pity historically weak and ineffectual kings. The significance of this is twofold: first, by placing real-life events on the stage, the playwrights prompt their audiences to consider these events from the distanced perspective of a theatrical viewer. Secondly, Marlowe and Shakespeare use pity and heightened audience perspective to delve into the intricacies of kingship and explore the humanity of the institution. Just as the depictions of pitiful characters in comedy prompt audiences to recognize mankind's common humanity, the depiction of fallen kings in Shakespeare and Marlowe underscores the basic humanity of even society's most elevated figures. Though historically Edward II and Richard II may be remembered as weak, pitiful examples of kingship, the onstage depiction of their fundamentally *human* flaws implicitly comments on the dual nature of kingship: a king's very position insists that he be a *symbol*, but he is also necessarily a *man* – though it is easy to overlook the humanity of a such an important figure. As is discussed in chapter one, the playwright may utilize pity to ensure that the audience feels a connection with a certain character, but since these are *history* plays, I would argue that in this case the employment of pity on the stage has real-life ramifications because it prompts a consideration of the complexities of a historical figure.

As a whole, this piece examines what I shall call *the pity problem*, by which I mean the shifting nature and application of pity. Why is it that a trait that is so unappealing in the real world should be so useful when depicted on the stage? What are the ramifications of cultivating

support for and connection to inherently weak characters? To discuss the employment of pity I point specifically to Shakespeare and Marlowe as playwrights who both understood the pity problem and harnessed it in a way that is useful for advancing specific characters and moral issues within their plays. I seek to highlight a prominent method of seizing an audience's attention: putting a character that might normally be pitiful or unimpressive onstage, and forcing a more intimate consideration of his background and motivations. By placing these characters safely on the stage, the playwrights facilitate proximity without inviting legitimate threat or discomfort. We can therefore see pity not only as a useful dramatic tool in character identity creation, but also an instrument of audience manipulation that affords the playwright the ability to prompt a certain emotional response, thereby provoking a specific line of moral reflection.

## Chapter One

### **Villains, Irritants, and Miscreants: Pity on Shakespeare's Comic Stage**

In Shakespeare's comedies, pity is often employed as a dramatic tool, something invoked in order to secure audience support for a previously unlovable character. In this discussion the appeal of the character in question – or rather, the absence of that appeal – is crucial. We do not direct our pity at the dramatic heroes; we root for them, we find ourselves naturally invested in their successes and are disappointed when they encounter obstacles. However, our affinity with these characters is always established early on. As such we know that it would be a mistake to pity these characters when they are inevitably faced with an obstacles; since the heroes always prevail, it would be a waste of energy to seriously lament the woes of a character like Bassanio or Viola. However, there is always some character whose fate is less certain. These characters generally stand as their play's villain, and are necessarily complicated by their interference with the happiness of a play's heroes. For their stance against the favored characters, these villains are not guaranteed a merry resolution. Our relationship with these villains is complicated by our preference for the heroes: since each party is pitted against the other, we must know that only one can emerge victorious. This knowledge contributes to our perception of the villain; we recognize the villain as somehow inferior or dastardly, and spend much of the play hoping for his demise. And yet, the villains of Shakespeare's plays often emerge as the most compelling, intriguing characters. If these characters are fundamentally unattractive, why do we, as the audience members, find ourselves drawn to them?

In this chapter I will argue that Shakespeare intentionally cultivates these unsavory characters as pitiful personages so as to inspire some audience sympathy. Because they each suffer overwhelming and often embarrassing defeat at the hands of the supposed heroes, these

characters prompt a certain amount of audience compassion. The cultivation of this compassion creates a fundamental conflict: viewers simultaneously support the heroes and sympathize for the villains, and this conflict is what renders the villains complex and ultimately compelling characters. Furthermore, because we are left with only vague estimations of the final fate of these characters, we continue to think of them long after the play concludes. Since Shakespeare denies his audiences closure in this area, he ensures his villains' complexity: since we are not given a concrete ending for these characters, we are left with limited options beyond speculation.

Though these characters are often subjected to humiliation onstage, it is easy to see that their trials are rewarded with an elevated status offstage. This pattern of onstage defeat and offstage strength can be seen in numerous unsavory characters: Shylock, the classic villain; Malvolio, the pompous but harmless annoyance; and Caliban, the bitter and deformed blight on Prospero's island empire.

Shylock is the obvious villain of *The Merchant of Venice*. From the beginning, he is set entirely apart from all of the other players: an old man in a cast of predominantly young men and women, seemingly the only person with direct access to a fortune, he is widowed, hated by his only daughter (and indeed, the majority of the cast), and perhaps most significantly, a person of the Jewish faith. Shylock is unable to compete with the rest of the cast in terms of physical prowess, and with only a small percentage of the play's lines, he is given only a limited opportunity to develop his onstage voice. Utterly defeated in the fourth act, Shylock disappears entirely from the stage, never to be seen or heard from again. Despite all this, Shylock is one of *Merchant's* dominant characters, at least in terms of audience reaction.<sup>12</sup> But why should this be

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<sup>12</sup> In his essay entitled "The Realization of Shylock: A Theatrical Criticism," John Russell Brown points to onstage conventions to confirm Shylock's significance in the play. Brown writes, "[Shylock] takes the final curtain-call, without Portia or Bassanio, without Antonio, the

so? What makes Shylock such a compelling character to the audience, when he is so universally hated onstage? His position is hardly enviable at the conclusion of the trial scene, when he is stripped of all his worldly possessions and his religious freedom. Even at the beginning of the play, when he still has his wealth, he is socially ostracized. Far from embodying a desirable character or social position, Shylock's strength as a character stems from his decidedly *negative* characteristics. His faults, paired with the ill treatment that perhaps encourages the worst in him, render him morally useful to the audience. In becoming a cautionary figure, Shylock not only provides a happy contrast to the audience members but also speaks to those moments of weakness common to anyone. Shylock's appeal, therefore, begins with his unsavory social position.

The animosity between Shylock and the rest of the cast is apparent in many instances throughout the play, but the tension between Shylock and Antonio sets the tone for Shylock's interactions with the rest of the players. Antonio's treatment of Shylock inspires a great hatred in the Jew, and drives him to his lust for revenge. Antonio's opinion of Shylock is important on multiple levels: as he is perceived by the rest of the cast as an upstanding character, Antonio's public denunciations of Shylock help establish his role as a villain in the minds of the audience members. However, the extremity of Antonio's abuse is such that it lends Shylock some credibility with the audience. There is no question that Shylock is bloodthirsty and driven toward revenge, but Antonio's behavior allows the audience to see a clear motive for Shylock's behavior.

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merchant of Venice. This tradition is so strong that it is easy to forget how strange it is: how odd that a villain – the one who threatens the happiness of the others – should so run away with a play that is a comedy by other signs, and that makes only a passing, unconcerned allusion to him at its conclusion” (264). Brown is not clear as to when this tradition began, but does mention that it was Charles Macklin's performance in 1741 that clearly established Shylock as *The Merchant of Venice's* leading role.

Antonio attacks Shylock during their first exchange in Act I, gladly admitting that in the past he has both verbally and physically abused him. When Shylock recalls this abuse, Antonio responds

I am as like to call thee so again  
To spit on thee again, to spurn thee too.  
If thou wilt lend this money, lend it not  
As to thy friends...  
But lend it rather to thine enemy... (I.iii.130-135)<sup>13</sup>

As an audience, much of our early knowledge of Shylock comes from Antonio's perspective. After Shylock offers numerous biblical references as justification for his money-lending practices, Antonio warns Bassanio that

The devil can cite Scripture for his purpose.  
An evil soul producing holy witness  
Is like a villain with a smiling cheek,  
A goodly apple rotten at the heart. (I.iii.98-101)

Though it would be easy to argue that Antonio is clearly biased in his opinions of Shylock, at this point in the play we as an audience have all the reason in the world to trust his judgment: Antonio establishes his ethos early on with his unwavering support of Bassanio. Antonio's devotion to the young lover easily puts him in good graces with the audience, for if we cannot trust the opinion of this champion of friendship and love, to whom should we look for guidance in evaluating the characters onstage?

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<sup>13</sup> All citations from *The Merchant of Venice* come from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

Notably, the only person to speak in defense of Shylock is Shylock himself. This impulse toward self-defense is arguably best demonstrated by his famed speech in Act III, but Shylock jockeyes for audience sympathy far earlier in the play as well. This begins with Shylock's depiction of his prior history with Antonio, which is described as hateful and abusive. Shylock references this past relationship and then *appears* hopeful that their business dealings will make strides toward improving their relationship. In response to Antonio's aforementioned assessment of Shylock as a rotten apple, Shylock says

Why, look you how you storm!

I would be friends with you and have your love,

Forget the shames that you have stained me with,

Supply your present wants, and take no doit

Of usance for my moneys, and you'll not hear me.

This is kind I offer. (I.iii.137-142)

Shylock's comments here are at once seductive and suspicious. On the surface of things, Shylock appears to offer the very charity and forgiveness that *should* characterize Antonio as a good Christian. In this respect Shylock may win some audience sympathy for his purported goodness, but at this point in the play he remains in the shadow of public opinion. As Shylock appears to be universally hated by his fellow players, these few words do little to redeem him. As an audience, we have no real reason to trust charitable words from a man who has already been established as a villain. Nevertheless, Shylock's contribution to the ongoing portrayal of his relationship with Antonio is important, because it hints at the expanded sphere of the audience's knowledge. Both Shylock and Antonio have different opinions of their relationship, and the audience is privy to

each. The scope of the audience's insight will eventually prove crucial to Shylock's development as a sympathetic character; in order to pity Shylock, we must know the specifics of his situation.

For the purposes of this argument it is relevant to briefly touch upon the drastic shift in audience reception with regard to Shylock. Shylock's alleged goodness in his initial dealings with Antonio would have almost certainly been more suspicious to a Renaissance audience just by virtue of his religious affiliation. By contrast, we can assume that a modern, post-Holocaust audience would be far less likely (decidedly reluctant, in all probability) to use Shylock's Judaism against him in any sort of character assessment. Certainly any number of historical events contribute to general audience sentiment, but it is fair to say that Shylock's reception has been particularly altered by this phenomenon. My focus, then, in discussing Shylock's development as a character and his subsequent effect on the audience will be on exchanges that hint at Shylock's fundamental humanity, rather than his specific identity as a Jew.<sup>14</sup>

Shylock's religion certainly plays a central role in his identity, but he is distanced from the other players in other notable ways as well. This distance is especially evident in the depiction of the various characters' drives at the beginning of the play: Bassanio is motivated by his desire for Portia and her fortune, Antonio is focused on his devotion to Bassanio, even Launcelot frets over his warring interests in wealth and the integrity of his soul. Shylock, by contrast, worries almost exclusively about his money and his opportunity to hurt Antonio. The obvious dichotomy between the varied and frequently noble pursuits of the Christian characters and the base desires of Shylock may not bolster Shylock's worth as a moral character, but his

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<sup>14</sup> Marjorie Garber, in her book entitled *Shakespeare After All*, argues that the significance of Shylock's religion to his identity within the play is constantly evolving, progressing from a simple comic device grounded in Elizabethan stereotypes to a more complicated commentary on anti-Semitism. According to Garber, Shylock's appeal is based on his ability to reflect innumerable attitudes about religion; his lines demand more than a simple classification as "a Jew" (4-5).



distinct priorities do establish him as an individual, set apart from the rest of the cast members who are more motivated by light-hearted interests.<sup>15</sup> Though Shylock does not receive positive attention from the audience at this moment, this scrutiny remains a crucial step in his establishment as a compelling presence.

Though it later becomes apparent that Shylock's willingness to do business with Antonio is rooted in his desire for revenge rather than a single-minded focus on finances, Shylock's preoccupation with wealth taints his introduction to the audience. Shylock's first words of the play, "Three thousand ducats, well" quickly solidify his classification as a Jewish moneylender, and potentially invite the audience to reduce Shylock to mere stereotype (I.iii.1). As the scene progresses, Shylock frequently repeats the terms and sum of the agreement, reaffirming his reputation in the mind of the audience. Particularly as the majority of the surrounding characters have already been shown as a high-spirited cheerful bunch, focused on the promise of love and friendship, it is easy to view Shylock as moving on a lower, less attractive level than the others. Since Shylock is operating with a far different attitude than the other characters, a distance befitting a conventional villain is easily established. The Shylock of Act I is clearly driven by money and is an outcast of the Christian society modeled by the other characters. However, the events of Act I also force us to consider the possibility that Shylock is willfully planning Antonio's demise. This vision of a vindictive Shylock does not make him an immediately

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<sup>15</sup> Garber suggests that Shylock's ultimate quarrel with the other characters is not based on religious conflict, but rather his commitment to "joylessness." "Shylock's villainy," she writes, "if he has any, derives from his preferring unpleasure to pleasure, the same joylessness that makes Lancelot so happy to leave him" (299). The real issue in this case would have more to do with fundamentally different attitudes towards life, as demonstrated by the esteem in which the Christians hold Belmont and its merry atmosphere.

obvious candidate for audience sympathy and support, so how is it that he manages to prompt audience empathy by the play's conclusion?

Though Shylock's history with Antonio is detailed in the first act – establishing some justification for the Jew's animosity - he remains a likely villain for the majority of the play. For example, upon learning of Jessica's escape and thievery, his primary concern seems to be for the money she has stolen. Shylock's interaction with Tubal, the man sent to find Jessica, does not reveal a caring father so much as an enraged businessman. When told Jessica has not been found, Shylock's first response is

Why, there, there, there, there! A diamond gone, cost me two thousand ducats in Frankfort! The curse never fell upon our nation till now; I never felt it till now.

Two thousand ducats in that, and other precious, precious jewels. (III.i.83-87)

That Shylock's thoughts go immediately to his financial loss certainly does not cast him in a sympathetic, fatherly light, and he only worsens his reputation as he continues, saying

I would my daughter were dead at my foot, and the jewels in her ear! Would she were hearsed at my foot, and the ducats in her coffin! No news of them? Why, so – and I know not what's spent in the search. Why, thou loss upon loss! The thief gone with so much, and so much to find the thief, and no satisfaction, no revenge (III.i.87-94)

The most obvious problem with Shylock's reaction, in terms of garnering audience support, is not his preoccupation with the lost money. Rather, it is his desire to seek retribution against his own daughter. Shylock desires not only revenge, but seemingly covets his daughter's death as retribution for her betrayal. This lack of compassion is particularly significant at this point in the

play, when Shylock has just delivered what is arguably his most sympathetic speech concerning his own humanity.

In his famed speech in Act III, Shylock directly addresses his Judaism, which seemingly inspires the abuse he suffers at the hands of the Christian characters. To discourage the notion of his inferiority, Shylock focuses on highlighting the common ground everyone shares as members of the human race. To justify his desire for Antonio's flesh, he reminds both Salerio and the audience members that

He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses,  
mocked at my gains scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends,  
heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes?  
Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with  
the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed  
by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a  
Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If  
you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we  
are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. (III.i.54-68)

Shylock's speech is effective on multiple levels. First, the logical progression is almost seductive in its persuasiveness, effectively placing the Jew and Christian as equals on so fundamental a level it is impossible to deny the similarities.<sup>16</sup> By uniting the Jew and the Christian under the common classification of mankind, Shylock effectively critiques the previous abuse he has

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<sup>16</sup> In *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Harold Bloom classifies *The Merchant of Venice* as a "profoundly anti-Semitic work" and flatly denies Shylock any claim to pathos (171). However, Bloom's analysis willfully skims over this particular speech, which one must question, considering the speech's focus on the common characteristics shared between Christians and Jews.

suffered and justifies his intent to punish Antonio. By this logic, Shylock's desire for a pound of Antonio's flesh is not the cruelty of a revenge-crazed heathen, but rather a human response to years of abuse.<sup>17</sup> This display of humanity on the part of Shylock, though it seeks to explain his bloodlust, should be seen as an important landmark in the relationship between Shylock and the audience: by pointing out the physical similarities he shares with Antonio (or in fact, any human) Shylock subtly draws the same parallels between himself and the members of the audience. Establishing these physical commonalities ensures a strengthened bond between character and audience, which is crucial to the cultivation of audience sympathy. In this way, Shylock is able to compare himself to his audience in a way that Caliban, for example – as a deformed, half-human creature – cannot. Because Shylock is able to draw physical parallels between himself and the audience, he is able to relate to the audience on a fundamental level.

Shylock's exposition of his common humanity has a significant appeal to the audience, and in fact, all of the characters discussed in this chapter have similar elements of a common humanity. However, Shakespeare employs another method to cultivate audience sympathy: defeat. Each character, at the conclusion of his respective storyline, suffers overwhelming defeat. This defeat is particularly poignant in the case of Shylock, who is overcome by Portia's logic and as a result loses his chance for revenge, his money, and his religious freedom. While an audience can certainly enjoy Portia's victory over Shylock, who has proven himself to be merciless, the

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<sup>17</sup> In *Re-Humanising Shakespeare*, Andy Mousley also highlights Shylock's famous speech as significant to the development of onstage morality. Of Shylock's argument, he writes, "The basic but basically sound psychology appealed to by Shylock is that if you treat a person like a dog, then he or she may well act like a dog. The scapegoat vilified for his inhumanity talks back here to the scapegoater and his inhumanity" (70-71). Demonstrating the inhumanity of the Christians is important for Shylock's development as a pitiful character: recognizing their culpability in his behavior lessens his appearance as a villain.

exchange moves beyond the realm of proportional response.<sup>18</sup> Shylock is crushed and left with nothing. He is even stripped of his onstage presence when he is guided out of view, never to be heard from again. Portia's drive to punish the defeated villain is problematic in its extremity. By pushing beyond the bounds of reasonable response and mercy, Portia and her fellow players relinquish some audience support.<sup>19</sup> In so totally victimizing Shylock, literally breaking him down onstage, they inspire the audience to pity him.<sup>20</sup>

Logically and dramatically speaking, Portia's method of dealing with Shylock is truly masterful: the progression of her argument builds Shylock's confidence in the beginning, convincing him that the exaction of his revenge is inevitable. When Portia finally turns the case in Antonio's favor, she is careful not to declare immediate and total victory, instead offering a

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<sup>18</sup> Garber points to this scene to demonstrate a pattern of contradictory behavior in *Merchant*, saying "The most magnificent of its speeches are also, in some ways, the most wrongheaded. (I am thinking here, for example, of Portia's eloquent and oft-quoted speech on the "quality of mercy," which, in the context of the trial scene, urges on Shylock a generosity of behavior that Portia herself will ultimately fail to show toward him)" (283).

<sup>19</sup> Though Shylock's forced conversion may only be inherently wrong by contemporary standards, the method Portia uses to bring about this conversion can be seen as fundamentally cruel. The incremental devastation of Shylock's hopes, security, and livelihood cannot be seen as essential. While it is possible that in early modern England, a conversion to Christianity would have been seen as the ultimate show of mercy, Portia's *approach* is only useful insofar as it showcases her own intellect, and can hardly be called merciful. In his essay, "The Problem of Shylock," Bill Overton argues that "Shylock's treatment only appears merciful in contrast to the dire penalties with which he is threatened and in accordance with a Christian perspective the Venetians may consider they are favouring a Jew by converting him. That is not how Shylock experiences it...and he accepts the conditions only on pain of death" (303).

<sup>20</sup> The significance of Shylock's devastation in the trial and the opportunity it represents for the cultivation of pathos is best described by Garber when she notes that "...the public defeat and discomfiture of Shylock, has often seemed to overshadow the moonlight, music, and "manna" of the events in Belmont that actually end the play. Modern productions often include a type of wordless acknowledgment on the part of Jessica, Shylock's daughter, that she feels some empathy for the father she has so merrily abandoned for her Christian husband, Lorenzo..."(282). This production decision just underscores what is already abundantly clear in the scene: Shylock's isolation in this moment is complete, devastating, and noticeable both to the audience and to the rest of the cast as well.

slow unraveling of Shylock's position. In doing so, Portia ensures that Shylock experiences each point made against him as a separate defeat: He loses the right to Antonio's flesh, then his claim on a grossly inflated payment of the bond, then is forced to forfeit the original sum of the bond itself. Since each step in Portia's legal argument strips Shylock of a right or an opportunity he had earlier in the play, it can be said that Shylock is being punished not only for failing to be merciful, but also for miscalculating his situation; he has multiple opportunities to profit from his dealings with Antonio, but is so overcome by greed and a desire for revenge that he fails to capitalize on these opportunities. Certainly one might argue that what happens to Shylock at this point is nothing more than justice: Portia has already pushed Shylock to publically declare his desire to strictly adhere to the wording of the bond, so Shylock's suffering is his own doing. When Shylock has only lost the amount of the original bond, audience sympathy likely remains with Portia and the rest of the Christians. Shylock's defeat, at least on some level, is a necessary byproduct of Antonio's rescue. Antonio, though his behavior toward Shylock has been hateful, has been unwavering in his devotion to Bassanio. Since the audience is already invested in the interests of these characters – Bassanio, the only suitor who overcomes the casket challenge, and Antonio, who willingly lays down his life to advance his friend's interests – Shylock's suffering seems a relatively insignificant price to pay for Antonio's safety. After all, the loss of three thousand ducats – even when added to the money Jessica stole from him – is not a crippling blow to a man of Shylock's purported wealth. However, when Portia continues with her argument outlining the potential consequences of Shylock's legal situation, she begins to seem just as malicious as Shylock. The punishment that Portia metes out is debilitating; in protecting Antonio Portia effectively gives the audience another victim to pity and care for: Shylock.

Throughout the play, Shylock shows himself to be primarily concerned with two things: his money, and his hatred of the Christians. By the end of the trial, however, he has been forced not only to relinquish all of his money to the Christians he hates (specifically, the very daughter who robbed and betrayed him by marrying a Christian) but also will be compelled to convert himself. Shylock's punishment therefore is not just a response to his villainous behavior, but also an attack on his identity. Portia succeeds not only in rescuing Antonio, but also forcibly alters Shylock's character – at least so far as we can see. The shift in Shylock's character is clearly demonstrated in the trial scene.<sup>21</sup> Whereas before Shylock has been marked as a vocal character, whose command of rhetoric is apparent in the aforementioned speech about the commonalities between Jews and Christians, he is left near-speechless when stripped of his wealth and religion. True, Portia's legal argument has left him essentially powerless, but Shylock seems incapable of even offering a few words in his own defense. Perhaps no line better demonstrates his breakdown than his answer to Portia, when she asks “Art thou contented, Jew? What dost thou say?” (IV.i.390). The obvious answer of course is that Shylock is anything *but* contented: he started the day anticipating the satisfaction of exacting revenge on his bitter enemy, but finishes as an impoverished Christian. At the close of the scene, Shylock is, in every way, the antithesis of the character we meet in the first act.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, his response to Portia is “I am content”

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<sup>21</sup> E.E. Stoll's essay, “Shylock” also discusses the trial scene as a crucial moment for the audience's emotional response to Shylock. Stoll writes, “Shakespeare is less intent on values than on the conduct and *direction of our sympathies* through the scene” (my emphasis, 258).

<sup>22</sup> Bill Overton, in his essay entitled, “The Problem of Shylock,” details the extent of Shylock's devastation at the end of the trial scene: “After Portia's verdict his earlier words of triumph are turned against him and he crumbles. He breaks the oath he had sworn, offers to take money instead and finally escapes by pleading sickness” (295).

(IV.i.391). This, from a man who has previously been so forceful in defending his character, speaks volumes; Shylock has lost the will to fight.<sup>23</sup>

Shakespeare's depiction of Shylock's crushing defeat is reaffirmed as the Jew makes his exit. Pleading, he says "I pray you, give me leave to go from hence; / I am not well. Send the deed after me, / And I will sign it." (IV.i.393-395). At this moment, the only solace Shylock can find is in his escape. With his utter destruction, Shylock begins to assert a more permanent hold on the audience. After all, Shylock's early advances with the audience are usually accompanied by some kind of setback – the "Hath not a Jew?" speech immediately followed by harsh and bitter language directed at his daughter, to name only one example. However, the vague and abrupt ending to his story actually works in his favor, as far as the audience is concerned. As the Christians get the last word, and maintain the upper hand in their final conflict, they essentially deliver the audience's sympathy into Shylock's waiting hands. And, since the Jew accepts his punishment and disappears, he has no opportunity to lose the good will of the audience. Suddenly concerned with Shylock's inchoate future, we are consumed by questions. What will Shylock become? Can he exist in the world as a penniless Christian? Though we do not see Shylock after his exit in Act IV, the uncertainty of his future remains a pressing issue in the minds of the audience members. He is gone, but not forgotten. However, it would be easy to imagine the Shylock of the early acts fading into the background. That Shylock is clearly malevolent and concerned entirely with money. That character *should* be defeated. An audience could very well revel in his demise and then forget about him in favor of the happy unions that occur in the fifth act. But how should an audience respond to *this* character's destruction? The

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<sup>23</sup> Bloom rightly argues that the audience also experiences Shylock's discontentment here. He writes, "When Shylock brokenly intones, 'I am content' few of our audiences are going to be content, unless you can conjure up a cheerfully anti-Semitic audience somewhere" (175).



trial scene in particular is crucial to our understanding of Shylock's character, since it is here that we see Shylock amongst numerous Christians. His defeat, and the depiction of his inferior status shed light on the life Shylock has likely led to this point. The Christians here are portrayed as powerful and educated, but they quickly become retributive once they gain control: one must wonder if they are abusing the privilege of their position in punishing Shylock so completely. Portia, representing the other Christians, clearly demonstrates a superior intellect. Bassanio and Antonio both become exceedingly wealthy. For the Christians, all ends happily, but we can assume this is not the case for Shylock, the newly-minted Christian. Shylock's quiet despair at the time of his exit invites reflection. In this case, is it not enough to simply overcome an enemy, or is it permissible to exact such an extreme revenge? Can any foe merit such a punishment? Given Shylock's reaction to his punishment, it would be difficult to maintain our early estimation of the Christians as light-hearted. They are still merry, but their merriment now comes at Shylock's expense. Given the severity of their behavior, one must wonder if Shylock (who remains the clear villain of the piece) was entirely unjustified in his hatred.

If Shylock inspires compassionate pity from the audience, it is not because he represents an admirable moral code. It is not just because his rhetoric is particularly noble, or because his intentions are good. Shylock's appeal to the audience is a two-step process: first, he implicates his audience during his speech in the third act. It is difficult to deny the soundness of Shylock's arguments regarding the similarities between Jews and Christians. Having established that bond, Shylock's demise in the fourth act is all the more poignant: we initially support Portia in her endeavors to free Antonio, and that support makes us complicit in Shylock's destruction. As Shylock slips further and further into despair, we become uncomfortably aware of both the Christians' zeal in punishing their foe and also our implicit involvement in the near-obliteration

of this man who shares many of our elemental characteristics. Though there is nothing explicit that we as audience members could do help Shylock, we are implicated by our enjoyment of Portia's cleverness and our willing observation of his demise. Our awareness of our own complicity grows as his demolition becomes more severe, and we finally end with feelings of guilt and sympathy. Shylock may be the loser of the play itself, but he still remains the dominant figure in the minds of the audience members.

Certainly, Shylock pays for his bloodlust. But as we watch the Christians exact their revenge in act four, we must wonder: was his original bloodlust, in some ways, justified? Have we been deceived about the Christian characters? Admittedly, Shylock is not killed. But his punishment requires the forfeiture of everything that is dear to him, and attacks the very core of his identity. In this respect, one might argue that Shylock's punishment is cruel. Shylock's actions throughout the course of the play are admittedly inexcusable, but given the treatment he has endured, Shylock may be little more than a reflection of any man who has been pushed too far. Shylock's unyielding desire for retribution may not make him the hero of the piece, but his tribulations set him apart from the rest of the characters because his are the only problems left unresolved by the play's conclusion. Though abhorred onstage, Shylock is compelling because he is undone by his fundamentally understandable objection to the Christians' interference in his life. This reasonable objection turns disastrous with his poorly planned solution to his problems, but because we have watched his demise – and even reveled in it, to a point – we are implicated in it. The lack of resolution to Shylock's story ensures that his character stays with the audience, even after the play has reached its conclusion.

Unlike the other characters to be discussed in this chapter, Shylock is the primary villain in his play. He is undoubtedly malevolent, and we know from his voiced intentions in the court

scene that he is capable of profound cruelty. Given these circumstances, it is all the more significant that Shylock inspires a compassionate reaction from the audience. We cannot necessarily blame the Christians for their contempt of him. Certainly, it is easier for the audience to feel sympathy for Shylock because we have a better understanding of his complexity. This complexity admittedly makes a straightforward evaluation of Shylock's character more difficult, but perhaps there is something fundamentally compelling about that challenge.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the distance between Shylock and the audience ensures that he is not a directly threatening character to the audience, even if he is, for much of the play, a threat to the Christians onstage. While this distance between audience and character reduces the threat of *any* character – even the most malevolent villains – Shakespeare exploits this distance in order to develop audience sympathy for Shylock. It is unlikely, after all, that we would extend our sympathy to someone who poses any serious risk. As far as the audience is concerned, the idea of Shylock as a threatening character is further diminished by the audience's knowledge of his history with the Christians. Because we know that the relationship between Shylock and Antonio is mutually abusive, it is easier to see his reaction (though extreme, and cruel) as just that: a *reaction* to abuse already suffered. Given our knowledge of and distance from Shylock, we can see in him a thread of common humanity: abused and isolated, Shylock is primarily motivated by his desire to live his life without being attacked for his religion or business. And while our concern for the safety and happiness of the heroes is a priority, we can still pity Shylock for his failure to secure a life free from molestation.

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<sup>24</sup> John Russell Brown also views Shylock's complexity as his defining characteristic. He writes, "By many devices Shakespeare has ensured that in performance Shylock is the dominating character of the play; none other has such emotional range, such continual development, such stature, force, subtlety, vitality, variety; above all, none other has his intensity, isolation, and apparent depth of motivation" (286).

Shylock is not alone in his appeal to an audience, and he is frequently compared to Malvolio, probably because his importance to *Twelfth Night* is comparable to that of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*. These characters are show-stealers.<sup>25</sup> Because my thesis is concerned with pitiful characters that somehow become pivotal in the minds of the audience, Malvolio warrants attention. Unlike Shylock, Malvolio is not a traditional villain; though his personality arguably renders him the least appealing character of the *Twelfth Night* cast, he does not share Shylock's bloodlust. Nevertheless, it is toward Malvolio that the other players (and initially, the audience) direct their disdain. For certain members of the cast that disdain manifests itself in an unnecessarily cruel punishment, and though Malvolio's onstage suffering is significant, it is through these tribulations that the steward inspires audience sympathy. Since *Twelfth Night* is often called one of Shakespeare's most important comedies, the cultivation of pity in Malvolio's character is particularly important.<sup>26</sup> And while it is true that the strength of Malvolio's connection with the audience is similar to that of Shylock, Olivia's steward is an interesting character simply because he is so *unimportant* to the central plot in *Twelfth Night*.<sup>27</sup> Whereas Shylock, as the villain, is crucial to the plot of *The Merchant of Venice*, Malvolio is really just an annoyance; he could easily be lifted out without damaging the integrity of the story. Even so, the play's conclusion leaves us curious about Malvolio's fate. But why should we be so invested in Malvolio, when the players onstage are content to dismiss him? Like Shylock, Malvolio is victimized, and his story is left unfinished. The extremity of Malvolio's abuse, paired with the

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<sup>25</sup> Bloom writes, "Malvolio is, with Feste, Shakespeare's great creation in *Twelfth Night*. It has become Malvolio's play, rather like Shylock's gradual usurpation of *The Merchant of Venice*" (238).

<sup>26</sup> See Bloom, Garber.

<sup>27</sup> Bloom compellingly argues that much of Malvolio's suffering stems from his obvious misplacement in *Twelfth Night*. In another play, Bloom asserts, Malvolio's pompous nature and strict moral code would not have so tragically distanced him from his peers; it is just because Illyria is so marked by frivolity and revelry that Malvolio must be ostracized (238-239).

fact that he is denied a proper ending, ensures that he stays with the audience long after he leaves the stage threatening revenge.

All of the characters discussed in this chapter are united by their social inferiority; each personage is defined by a characteristic that seemingly necessitates his exclusion from normal society – such as Shylock’s religion, for example. These flaws are useful for the onstage division of characters, easily demonstrating the favored characters from the somehow tainted individuals. However, Malvolio’s status in *Twelfth Night* is a bit more complicated: he is not physically inferior, and since one of his priorities is grooming himself for a position in society, we can say that his fundamental concern is being *included*. And while it is true that Malvolio is immediately recognizable as an inferior by virtue of his social position as Olivia’s steward, it is really his obsession with social propriety that sets him apart from both his fellow cast mates and the audience members: he is extreme in his opinions and unafraid of voicing his evaluations of those around him. This mindset may be understandable in other circumstances, but given the mirth and general happiness that pervades *Twelfth Night*, Malvolio sticks out like an incorrigible prig. Malvolio’s willingness to showcase his harsh temperament makes him a natural target for punishment later in the play, and his inability to recognize what the audience can plainly see helps to establish a distance between the steward and his audience. Malvolio’s lack of self-awareness earmarks him for ridicule, because “As a general rule, we laugh with the characters who know the role they are playing and we laugh at those who do not.”<sup>28</sup> To the audience, which is separated from the action, Malvolio’s very disposition seems to write his storyline: his comments in the first act hint at his future and set up the expectation of his comeuppance. While it is true that Malvolio’s early lines provide the motivation for the plot set against him, his

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<sup>28</sup> Joseph H. Summers “The Masks of *Twelfth Night*” pg 87.

character is complicated beyond that of the simple villain. Malvolio's unfounded haughtiness is admittedly an annoyance and an irresistible opportunity for comedy, but he never presents a real threat to the interests of the play's heroes. His stake as a potentially threatening character – either to the audience or the onstage players – weakens as he proves to be an easily defeated opponent whose final threat of retribution in the final act seems more like a last-ditch effort to preserve dignity than a credible concern. Therefore, it seems that pity is the natural response to Malvolio's ineffectual attempts to establish his credibility with the other players, but he inspires additional audience sympathy when a core weakness is revealed. Malvolio falls victim to a rather thinly veiled ruse, but this is because he (perhaps foolishly) hopes to see his feelings for Olivia reciprocated. Because Malvolio is a victim of unrequited love and an overinflated ego, it is a simple matter for Sir Toby and company to trick the steward and force him to face his own foolishness. Since Malvolio's only real crimes are haughtiness and an unreasonable vision of his social position, the extremity of his punishment inspires support from an audience that watches his suffering but is unable to assist him. Particularly because Sir Toby's ruse starts as a source of comic entertainment, the audience's complicity with the action is underscored: when faced with Malvolio's ultimate breakdown, the audience cannot help but recognize the essentially *human* hope that facilitated the trap, and must guiltily remember laughing at his expense earlier in the play.

It is significant that Malvolio's first lines are an evaluation of the fool Feste, particularly because Malvolio will unwillingly fulfill the role of the fool as the play progresses. Malvolio points out that Feste lacks the talent to match wits with those around them, and depends on the reception of others to survive in society; as the play continues, it becomes clear that Malvolio could be similarly described. However, the force of Malvolio's judgment indicates that he does

not recognize these similarities: when Olivia calls on Malvolio to deliver his opinion of Feste, he replies

I marvel your ladyship takes delight in such a barren rascal. I saw him put down the other day with an ordinary fool that has no more brain than a stone. Look you now, he's out of his guard already. Unless you laugh and minister occasion to him, he is gagg'd. I protest I take these wise men that crow so at these set kind of fools no better than the fools' zanies. (I.v.83-89)<sup>29</sup>

Malvolio's words are crucial to the initial development of his character; the delivery of the opinion is laced with unnecessary acerbity, and stands out in the company of the other merry Illyrians. These opening remarks reveal Malvolio to be judgmental and full of his own importance; it is also clear that Malvolio is more than comfortable forcing his opinions on those around him. Since his remarks strongly resemble a sermon, it is easy to imagine that Malvolio often finds himself distanced from his fellow players; his attitude and rhetoric are a poor fit for the pervading atmosphere in Illyria. Olivia's response to Malvolio's proclamation confirms this much when she replies, "O, you are sick of self-love, Malvolio, and taste with a distemper'd appetite" (I.v.90-91). This evaluation is poignant coming from Olivia, as she is Malvolio's social better. She effectively informs the audience that Malvolio's attempts to force his drastically different values on those contented individuals around him are unwelcome. As someone who shuns conventional opinion (in this case, the appeal of a fool), Malvolio is unable to establish common ground with those around him, and the early establishment of this disharmony signals Malvolio's role as an ostracized character in *Twelfth Night*.

While it later becomes apparent that they take their punishment too far, Sir Toby and

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<sup>29</sup> Textual references to *Twelfth Night* are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

Maria are not entirely unprovoked in their disdain for Malvolio, and they are therefore able to cultivate audience support in the early stages of their plot against him. Malvolio gives his tormentors due cause, and maintains his aforementioned reputation as an enemy of comedy and mirth when he attacks Sir Toby's crowd, saying

My masters, are you mad? Or what are you? Have you no wit, manners, nor honesty, but to gabble like tinkers at this time of night? Do ye make an alehouse of my lady's house, that ye squeak out your coziers' catches without any mitigation or remorse of voice? Is there no respect of place, persons, nor time in you? (II.iii.86-92)

Malvolio may be justified in his comments, but still they cast him a poor light because they are directed at a fun-loving group that has thus far provided the main source of comedy in the play. Malvolio's opinions cannot endear him to the audience members, because in attacking Sir Toby's cohort, he essentially attacks the audience that has assembled to be entertained by lighthearted comedy. If the theatre is an opportunity to temporarily escape the constraints of everyday life and proper behavior, Malvolio's ever-serious presence serves as a constant reminder of responsibility, and piety. However, while these qualities might be seen as virtues in some scenarios, Malvolio's unwillingness to temper himself makes him the object of derision in the fantastical Illyria.<sup>30</sup> Too extreme in his devotion to his own particular brand of morality, at this point Malvolio lacks human appeal – he is too strict, and his standards of goodness are too high. For this reason he is easily dismissed by many of his fellow characters – Olivia, for example, only really takes notice of him when she believes that he has gone mad. For those

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<sup>30</sup> The incompatibility of Malvolio, according to Bloom, is intentional. He claims, "Shakespeare has inserted him into a context where he must suffer" (239).



characters that do focus on Malvolio – the revelers – they attack him for being a steward with a deluded projection of himself as a superior being. Malvolio’s construction of his own identity, especially in the beginning of the play, invites the others to find and showcase his weaknesses. Since Malvolio is so quick to act as though he is above the others, it can be little wonder that Sir Toby and Maria refuse to treat him as their equal and punish him for their own entertainment.

Before he falls victim to their ruse, Malvolio is happy to foster an inflated image of himself. In fact, Malvolio’s delusions of grandeur are crucial to the success of the plot: when he first hears of Olivia’s alleged feelings for him, he immediately begins to imagine himself as “Count Malvolio.” His vision is detailed, though punctuated by the opinions of Sir Toby and the others: his words hint at an already inflated opinion of himself. Malvolio paints an image of himself as a natural master to those around him, saying

Having been three months married to her, sitting in my state – [...] Calling my officers about me, in my branched velvet gown; having come from a day – bed, where I have left Olivia sleeping – [...] And then to have the humor of state; and after a demure travel of regard, telling them *I know my place*, as I would they should do theirs, to ask for my kinsman Toby – (my emphasis, II.v.44-55)

Malvolio’s depiction here has very little to do with Olivia, though she is mentioned tangentially. Instead, Malvolio’s projection of the future focuses on the power and status that a union with Olivia can offer. However, Malvolio’s rhetoric suggests that this elevated vision is not so much a daydream as it is a reflection of his rightful place.<sup>31</sup> Malvolio’s problem is certainly not that he

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<sup>31</sup> Elliot Krieger’s article entitled “Malvolio and Class Ideology in *Twelfth Night*” briefly touches upon Malvolio’s inflated perception of his destiny, citing the steward’s acquiescence to “Olivia’s” wardrobe requests: “The yellow stockings that he is asked to wear will not, he feels, win Olivia; they will merely *seal the contract that Fortune has drawn up*” (my emphasis, 23).

*underestimates* his worth, but rather that those around him have failed to recognize it. In this moment, Malvolio is vulnerable to Sir Toby and Maria's scheme because he wants to believe that his worth has become apparent to those around him. Malvolio is undeniably weak here, having been so easily played by Sir Toby, but in no way does this moment foster a bond between the steward and the audience. Rather, this scene only serves to underscore Malvolio's reputation as an intrusively didactic character and to support Sir Toby's motivations for punishing him in the first place.

As Malvolio continues with his description of his future role as master of the house, it becomes apparent that he is chiefly concerned with imposing his rigid moral code on everyone around him. Notably, his tormentors figure prominently in his proposed reform, and Malvolio professes that when he sends for Sir Toby

Seven of my people, with an obedient start, make out for him. I frown the while, and per-chance wind up my watch, or play with my – some rich jewel. Toby approaches; curtsies there to me – [...] I extend my hand to him thus, quenching my familiar smile with an austere regard of control – [...] Saying, "Cousin Toby, my fortunes having cast me on your niece, give me this prerogative of speech."  
[...] "You must amend your drunkenness." (II.v.58-74)

Malvolio's first consideration – and it is a lengthy consideration at that – is of the opportunity to improve his social position. Aware that an alliance with Olivia will enhance his abilities to reform the behavior of men like Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, this speech is an indulgence, the vocalization of Malvolio's dearest goals. We are led to believe that Malvolio so willingly falls into Sir Toby's trap because he has been expecting – and indeed, preparing for – this moment for some time. This much is confirmed by Maria who, just before leaving the note in Malvolio's

path, confirms that she has seen him “yonder i’ the sun practicing behavior to his own shadow this half hour...” (II.v.15-17). Though Malvolio’s speech upon first receipt of the letter indicates that he is motivated by the promise of power and advancement, this insight into his private behavior hints at just how much Malvolio craves the respect of those around him. Malvolio wants to be recognized for his worth, and while his approach is unappealing, there is in that desire a fundamentally human element. Malvolio’s deception is undoubtedly comical, but because it depends on a decidedly *human* weakness, it is also the root of his appeal as a sympathetic character.

Malvolio begins to make progress with the audience when he finally reads the letter Maria has left in his path. Unfettered by Malvolio’s fervent desire to rise in society, the audience can plainly see how Sir Toby and Maria have played on his weaknesses. Maria’s letter reads “In my stars I am above thee, but be not afraid of greatness. Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them” (II.v.140-143). This sentiment is obviously tailor-made for Malvolio, who aspires to be a part of an elite social circle and devotes his spare time to perfecting the airs and movements of a gentleman. Since Malvolio’s every air and action point to the belief of his impending elevation, it is easy for the audience to see that he believes in the veracity of the letter because he wants to believe his long-anticipated moment has come.<sup>32</sup> While we know that Malvolio is hungry for power and influence, he is so wholly duped because Maria and Sir Toby intentionally play upon his weaknesses. Malvolio’s mistake is not

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<sup>32</sup> As Bloom says, “What matters most about Malvolio is not that he is Olivia’s household steward but that he so dreams that he malforms his sense of reality, and so falls victim to Maria’s shrewd insights into his nature” (238).

uncommon: how often has man believed in something too good to be true?<sup>33</sup> Of course, no one would accuse Malvolio of being wise, but his demonstration of typical human weakness is a crucial moment in the development of his pathos.

Though Malvolio is making a classic error, that alone is not enough to win audience favor. While this moment hints at Malvolio's common humanity, which is crucial to his evolution as a sympathetic character, this scene is more important because it encourages us to laugh at Malvolio's misfortune. Our laughter implicitly suggests our approval of the situation, and therefore also makes us partially complicit in his punishment. And given what we know of Malvolio's haughtiness, why shouldn't we laugh? As audience members, it is gratifying to see him punished for his arrogance, and we can enjoy the privilege of information. Also Malvolio's humiliation at this point is fairly contained: he has only been made to look foolish in front of the revelers. The punishment therefore is proportional: Malvolio suffers a little discomfiture, which is a reasonable sentence for a character that is annoying but still essentially harmless. It is only when his humiliation moves into the very circles he hopes to join that Malvolio becomes a public fool. When the smiling Malvolio approaches Olivia wearing yellow stockings with cross-garters, he becomes a fool to the gentry. To add to his degradation, Olivia, whom he has identified as his gateway to the lifestyle he covets, views Malvolio's actions as a clear indication of his madness. While it is undeniably humorous, watching the normally disdainful Malvolio smile and moon about in ridiculous clothing, this scene moves Sir Toby's ruse away from the realm of mere comic subplot. Though Olivia never considers Malvolio as a viable suitor, Sir Toby turns the

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<sup>33</sup> This idea is developed by Summers, who essentially postulates that audiences enjoy characters who are both unpredictable *and* occasionally flawed because these characters are a truer reflection of human nature. As Summers says, "we wish our fools occasionally to be wise, and we are insistent that our wisest dramatic figures experience *our common fallibility*" (my emphasis, 87).

steward into Olivia's babbling fool – the very role he criticizes in the first act. This metamorphosis, though a pleasantly ironic turn, can also be seen as a direct attack on Malvolio's very character. In essence, Malvolio has been pushed backwards in his goal to improve his station. Since so much of Malvolio's identity is committed to the preservation and cultivation of his reputation – hence his numerous declarations concerning proper behavior and morality – Sir Toby's manipulation of Malvolio's reputation is a costly joke that seems an overzealous response to Malvolio's offenses.

However, most of Malvolio's early development onstage is humorous; certainly the groundwork is provided for his eventual transformation into a sympathetic character, but the steward's pathos is not definitively established until the third act. If we were to identify a specific moment in which Malvolio wins the audience, it must be Sir Toby's decision to lock the steward up. Since Malvolio has already left the stage when his fate is decided, he does not hear Sir Toby's plan:

Come, we'll have him in a dark room and bound. My niece is already in the belief that he's mad. We may carry it thus for our pleasure and his penance till our very pastime, tired out of breath, prompt us to have mercy on him, at which time we will bring the device to the bar and crown thee for a finder of madmen. But see, but see! (III.iv.137-143)

Malvolio's relationship with the audience thus far has been marked by disparate access to information: the audience is always far more aware of reality. Indeed, Malvolio's actions are so humorous in the beginning *because* he is so unaware of his own situation. However, when Sir Toby reveals Malvolio's fate, the audience is no longer complicit in a light-hearted prank; they are party to cruelty and torture. Before, the audience knew the details of the plot and laughed

when Malvolio is tricked. Now, we wait for the realization of Sir Toby's plan, unable to warn him or intervene. When Malvolio reappears, abused and alone, we are no longer laughing.

By the time we meet the imprisoned Malvolio, he is befuddled but has not descended into madness, despite the efforts of the disguised Feste. In his meeting with Feste, Malvolio repeatedly proclaims himself to be an abused man but is only answered with assurances of his madness. Malvolio's recognition of his false imprisonment does little to improve his situation; since his tormentors have some completely outwitted him, everyone around Malvolio is equally convinced of his insanity. The plot against Malvolio is admirable in its comprehensive nature – Sir Toby and his co-conspirators effectively turn the rest of the cast against Malvolio – but the extremity is so unnecessary that the fun-loving pranksters end up relinquishing their audience support to the victimized Malvolio. When Malvolio is pushed to breaking point, we are similarly pushed to pity him: once the punishment begins to seriously damage him, we must question how justifiable it is to prey upon someone's weaknesses. Malvolio is easily tricked, and to a point, he invites the treatment he receives. Sir Toby effortlessly showcases Malvolio's foolish nature, but what begins as an impressive display of Toby and Maria's manipulative prowess turns ugly as Malvolio starts to break down. Malvolio is admittedly an annoyance in the beginning of the play – a stodgy, puritanical voice amidst otherwise merry characters – but his offenses are relatively minor. Malvolio preaches morality, and is perhaps overzealous in doing so, but he is also a loyal steward and is never particularly malicious in his exchanges with the other characters. Even Olivia, when she discovers the full extent of Malvolio's tribulations, notes that “He hath been most notoriously abused” (V.i.379). This gives justification for Malvolio's vow to “be revenged on the whole pack of you!” though considering the ease with which he was defeated, there may be some doubts about his ability to make good on his promise (V.i.378).

Malvolio's hold on the audience sympathy remains intact even as the play closes, though his threat of revenge is not his most appealing moment. Some critics have used Malvolio's final lines as justification for denying him audience sympathy, claiming that his failure to learn from his mistakes negates any sympathy he may inspire earlier in the play.<sup>34</sup> However, I believe that it is this very powerlessness that allows Malvolio to remain a compelling character. One must note that in Malvolio's crucial sympathetic moment – in which Sir Toby plots to imprison him – the steward himself does not speak. Malvolio's sympathy does not stem from his own actions; rather, Maria and Sir Toby unwittingly push Malvolio into a sympathetic light through the extremity of their prank. However, Malvolio's powerlessness pervades the play and inspires pity both onstage, in Olivia's final instructions that someone be sent after the wounded steward, and offstage in audience reaction. When confronted with a character who is unable to realize his dreams of greatness, unable to recognize a deception, and finally unable to issue a serious threat to his tormentors, what is left for the audience but to offer pity?

In Malvolio we can see Shakespeare apply pity to a different kind of character: Malvolio is certainly unlikeable, but he does not share Shylock's villainous nature. As with Shylock, we are moved to pity Malvolio because his punishment is so unnecessarily harsh, but we do not initially withhold our sympathy from the steward because we feel threatened by him, or view him as petty and dangerous. To pity Shylock, we need to learn more of his history; we need to understand his motives. As we learn more about the Jew, we are better able to see his humanity; for both characters pity can only come by expanding the audience's knowledge of the character. Similarly, we need more information to pity Malvolio, but in this situation we do not need his

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<sup>34</sup> Both Garber and Krieger criticize Malvolio's actions at the end of the play. Summers, for his part, calls the steward "ridiculous in his arrogance to the end," going on to claim that "his threatened revenge, now that he is powerless to effect it, sustains the comedy and the characterization and prevents the obtrusion of destructive pathos" (95).

history; we need his *humanity*, which is difficult to locate among his haughtiness. Shakespeare does not develop Malvolio's humanity in an insular fashion, but rather uses his tormentors – and their lack of humanity – to provide a contrast. We are given no insight into Malvolio's history, and so cannot know the cause of his arrogance. Left alone, this character would remain unlikeable. However, in attacking Malvolio's human weaknesses, his tormentors inadvertently highlight his humanity. Toby and Maria are happy to prey upon Malvolio's vulnerability, but in their drive to strip him of his reputation and his sanity, they only demonstrate their own inhumanity. We can say, therefore, that Malvolio does not have *greatness* thrust upon him, but his tormentors do thrust *pity* upon him.

So far, I have argued that one of the key elements in the cultivation of compassionate pity is the demonstration of common humanity: both Shylock and Malvolio, though inarguably flawed, are motivated by fundamentally human concerns. *The Tempest's* Caliban is similarly preoccupied by a human desire – this time, for freedom – but he faces an additional challenge in the construction of his humanity: his physical appearance.<sup>35</sup> Caliban's physicality is often discussed, both in the play itself and in criticism.<sup>36</sup> Since Caliban's physical appearance is monstrous, he is immediately distanced from the audience. Since his appearance separates him from the others, we might say that he is stripped of the most immediate claim to common humanity. Therefore, we might think of Caliban's development into a sympathetic character as a

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<sup>35</sup> Hallet Smith's introduction to the play, called "*The Tempest* as a Kaleidoscope," argues that Caliban's "yearning for freedom is in no way respectable, since if he had it he would use it for devilish purposes" (5). It seems to me that this assertion is based in pure speculation, but for my part I would point out that the *desire* for freedom is in itself a fundamentally human drive. How one uses that freedom, though important, is another matter altogether.

<sup>36</sup> In his essay entitled "Monster Caliban," John W. Draper notes that "Of all the characters in Shakespeare, Caliban is the most fully and repeatedly described" which is interesting, since these onstage discussions seemingly do little to establish a clear vision of Caliban (89). Though most every consideration of Caliban includes some mention of his deformities, the lack of clarity provided in *The Tempest* is discussed particularly well in Frye (1986, 180-181).



tall order. However, Caliban stands out in the Shakespeare canon despite being “at the bottom of the ladder of nature.”<sup>37</sup> Because the details of Caliban’s character are left ambiguous, his storyline has been viewed as representative of numerous conflicts – the struggle between nature and nurture, or native and colonial, to name only a few popular examples – but the deformed man is consistently characterized by his marginalization.<sup>38</sup> Like the audience, many of the onstage characters are initially unsure of how to handle Caliban because he is such a difficult character to evaluate. Other characters, however, have a clear opinion of the treatment he deserves. Throughout the play, Caliban’s movement within the makeshift society of the island demonstrates his simultaneous desire and inability to blend in with his colleagues as an equal. Caliban’s underdeveloped moral and physical humanity keeps him from the acceptance he desires onstage, and it is this obstacle that finally inspires some pity from the audience. Caliban’s physical monstrosity also emphasizes the moments in which he seems to pursue the reasonable human goal of freedom and equality: the existence of these goals makes Caliban an intriguing blend of humanity and monstrosity. By rendering Caliban as such a complicated blend, Shakespeare not only effectively develops him into a pitiful character but also uses our pity for the monstrous man to showcase the less appealing aspects of our common humanity. Though Shakespeare’s grasp on pity as a dramatic tool is clearly established in his earlier work, in Caliban he shows a real mastery, finding humanity in the inhuman, and writing pity into the base nature of a deformed man.

For a lowly slave that spends minimal time onstage and has relatively few lines, Caliban

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<sup>37</sup> Frye (1986), 180. Frye goes on to say that “No character in Shakespeare retains more dignity under so constant a stream of abuse” (180).

<sup>38</sup> In their *Shakespeare’s Caliban: A Cultural History*, Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan also focus on the ambiguity of Caliban’s character, noting that “Of all the characters in *The Tempest*, Caliban is the most enigmatic and the most susceptible to drastic fluctuations in interpretation. He is Shakespeare’s changeling” (7).

commands a lot of attention – mostly negative – from the other characters. Nevertheless, Caliban’s presence is felt throughout the play simply because the other characters so frequently mention him. Caliban’s popularity as a topic for conversation is at least partially due to his peculiar appearance: it seems that no one can speak of him without wondering at his physicality. Caliban’s physicality seems to prove a challenge to everyone he encounters: it is not *just* that he looks strange; it is that this appearance separates him from the more normal characters. Prospero notes that he is “not honor’d with a human shape” and later, when Trinculo first encounters the “monster” he wonders, “What have we here? A man or a fish? Dead or alive?” (I.ii.283; II.i.24-25). Trinculo’s initial wonderment at Caliban’s odd form mirrors the fascination held by the audience for this bizarre creature, but Prospero is more concerned with the his *moral* deformities. Prospero and Miranda, who are arguably the most familiar with Caliban, offer a different reason for their preoccupation with the slave: their hatred for him.

Miranda and Prospero abuse Caliban, often cursing and belittling him with labels like “Abhorred slave” (I.ii.352). While their rationale for this behavior is immediately established in Caliban’s first moments onstage, this scene really demonstrates his complexity as a character by demonstrating Prospero and Miranda’s role in their relationship. Caliban first takes the stage accusing his masters of misconduct, saying

When thou cam’st first,  
Thou strok’st me and made much of me, wouldst give me  
Water with berries in’t, and teach me how  
To name the bigger light, and how the less,  
That burn by day and night. And then *I loved thee*  
And showed thee all the qualities o’th’isle,

The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile.

Cursed be I that did so! All the charms

Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!

For I am all the subjects that you have,

Which first was mine own kings; and here you sty me

In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me

The rest o'th'island. (my emphasis, I.ii.332-344)

Caliban's speech – demonstrating his capacity for love – might be seen as an appeal to pity were it not directly followed by Prospero's point that their relationship only deteriorated after Caliban attempted to rape Miranda. Nevertheless, Caliban's opening comments prevent an easy classification of a villain: he is not just a perpetrator, but also a victim of manipulation and lost love. He resolutely presents his perspective and thereby forces the audience to immediately consider him as more than just a foil to the interests of our heroes.

Caliban is not just a slave to Prospero and an aggressor to Miranda: he is also, at least in his own mind, the island's rightful inhabitant and the victim of Prospero and Miranda's manipulation. Caliban's immediate establishment as a complicated character sets the tone for his development in *The Tempest*. Since he begins the play as a problematic character – sympathetic in some ways but also repugnant, Caliban cannot have the big transformation that inspires audience pity in the previously considered plays. Though Caliban is eventually defeated, his defeat – particularly when compared to that of Shylock or Malvolio – is relatively manageable, and lacks the overwhelming humiliation that marks the experiences of the others. In many ways we can say that in Caliban, the monstrous man, Shakespeare gives his greatest portrayal of a fundamentally human villain. What Caliban lacks in big dramatic moments, he makes up for by

showcasing the inconsistency of human nature. Caliban is sometimes vindictive and violent, sometimes trusting and vulnerable, and always aware of his inability to blend in with normal society. Though he is hardly human in appearance, the cultivation of Caliban's humanity is an accurate depiction of human nature: he learns from some mistakes, repeats others, and represents a combination of unattractive and appealing characteristics. Though he may not be a conventional depiction of manhood, Caliban brilliantly represents human fallibility; in mirroring weaknesses similar to those of the audience, he inspires our pity and compassion.

Caliban's first appeal to audience pity is evident in his very first speech; he recalls his early interactions with Prospero and Miranda and focuses specifically on his own behavior – eager, trusting, and almost child-like in his devotion to Prospero. The presentation of this relationship's extremes – once loving and nurturing but now broken and marked by hatred on both sides – lends considerable pathos to Caliban's character because though he is revealed as Miranda's aggressor, he still appears tormented by his nostalgia for their earlier relationship. Regardless of Caliban's transgressions, the very root of his speech indicates a sentiment of deep-seeded betrayal. He is wounded, and yet in the attempted rape of Miranda he is shown as a legitimate villain. Caliban's aggression, however, is in some respects understandable given his enslavement in his own home: in giving the history of the characters, Shakespeare ensures that Caliban retains a connection to the audience even as the negative elements of his personality are presented.<sup>39</sup> Though Caliban cannot reasonably be seen as an entirely innocent character, his

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<sup>39</sup> Northrop Frye's 1959 introduction is particularly useful here in its discussion of Caliban's natural drives and the roots of his audience appeal: "His ambitions are to kill Prospero and rape Miranda, both, considering his situation, eminently natural desires; and even these he resigns to Stephano, to whom he tries to be genuinely loyal. Nobody has a good word for Caliban: he is a born devil to Prospero, an abhorred slave to Miranda, and to others not obviously his superiors either in intelligence or virtue he is a puppy-headed monster, a mooncalf, and a plain fish. Yet he has his own dignity, and he is certainly no Yahoo, for all his ancient and fishlike smell" (61).

relationship with Prospero and Miranda is a clear inspiration for his later deviance. Miranda and Prospero's implication in the evolution of Caliban's character is crucial to his subsequent power with the audience: their negative involvement preserves Caliban as (at least on some level) a sympathetic character, and that role is only further underscored as the play continues.

Regardless of Caliban's immediate connection to the audience, Miranda makes his *onstage* status perfectly clear: he is reviled and receives no sympathy. However, Miranda's interaction in scene two is crucial to our knowledge of Caliban's development: Miranda readily admits that her first impression of Caliban, particularly his physical and intellectual shortcomings, inspired her initial kindness.<sup>40</sup> Responding to Caliban's verbal attack on her father, Miranda announces

I *pitied* thee,  
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour  
One thing or other. When thou didst not, savage  
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like  
A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes  
With words that made them known. (my emphasis, I.ii.353-358)

Though this speech comes on the heels of Miranda's assertion that Caliban's very nature repels "any print of goodness," it is important to note that Miranda's initial efforts with Caliban were a result of her evaluation of Caliban's pitiful character (I.ii.352). Though the Caliban known to the audience has already exhausted Miranda's charity, he has yet to violate or offend the audience itself, and as such the value of his character remains ambiguous as far as the spectators are

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<sup>40</sup> Vaughan and Vaughan point to Prospero and Miranda's effort with Caliban as conclusive evidence of Caliban's humanity, saying, "They have attempted what can be done only to a human; there is no hint that they tried to teach language and astronomy to an animal or a fish...he did learn their language, and he continues to serve them in wholly human ways" (11).

concerned. It is possible, after all, to take Miranda's experience as a warning: perhaps we should not be quick to pity him, for fear that he may violate us as well. Nevertheless, Caliban's conversion from a friend, or at the very least a ward, to an abhorred inferior is a compelling element of Caliban's character, though the audience experiences it through the characters' reflections. Caliban's fall hints that he was at some point a good character, and this early in the play his character is insufficiently developed for an audience to classify him as a strictly villainous personality.

In many ways, Caliban's image as a villain is complicated by his demonstrated weakness in social situations. When faced with the slave's inability to blend into society, it is difficult to deny him compassion. Caliban's weakness in social situations is particularly apparent when he drunkenly allies himself with Stephano and Trinculo. In many ways this scene showcases Caliban's humanity and invites audience sympathy, though Stephano and Trinculo focus instead on Caliban's physical monstrosities. Caliban, entirely ignorant of alcohol, falls victim to the pitfalls common to the first-time drinker: he quickly loses his faculties, and devotes himself to two men who are only interested in using him. This scene underscores Caliban's humanity because he so willingly repeats the mistake he laments at the beginning of Act I: rather than breaking from Prospero in order to assert his own liberty, he instead binds himself to a new master. The rhetoric he uses with Stephano is eerily similar to his recounted tale of his early relationship with Prospero. To Stephano, Caliban vows

I'll show you the best springs. I'll pluck thee berries.

I'll fish for thee and get thee wood enough.

A plague upon the tyrant I serve!

I'll bear him no more sticks, but follow thee,

Thou wondrous man. (II.ii.160-164)

Here we get a clear vision of the Caliban first encountered by Prospero and Miranda; once again he is offering up his knowledge of the island in exchange for the promise of affection. However, Caliban's offer to Stephano is a little pitiful because Stephano is a significantly less impressive master than Prospero. Though Caliban doesn't realize it, he has replaced Prospero, who effectively controls the island and the spirits on it, with an opportunistic drunk. The audience is not alone in this realization – Trinculo himself calls Caliban “A most ridiculous monster, to make a wonder of a poor drunkard” (II.ii.165-66). The sadness of this moment stems from Caliban's ignorance, because everyone else – both on and offstage – can clearly see Stephano for what he is: the antithesis of Caliban's godlike vision.

Though Caliban's bottle-inspired adoration of Stephano is admittedly amusing, the scene ends on a bittersweet note. Content with his new master, he cries

No more dams I'll make for fish,  
Nor fetch in firing  
At requiring,  
Nor scrape trenchering, nor wash dish.  
'Ban, 'Ban, Ca-Caliban  
Has a new master. Get a new man!  
Freedom, high-day! High-day, freedom! Freedom, high-day, freedom! (II.ii.180-187)

Despite the fact that Caliban has just volunteered to do all of the aforementioned work for his new master, he still celebrates his freedom. In reality, he has just tied himself to another, inferior master, and we must pity him for it. Though Caliban's actions are often reprehensible, at the root

of things he seems to be driven by reasonable desires. He wants to be free of the imprisonment he suffers at the hands of Prospero and Miranda, and he wants to be recognized as the true master of the island, the native son and heir. Though we are left to imagine Caliban's life before the appearance of Prospero and Miranda, it is easy to believe the quality of his early life was better. What, realistically, should the audience expect of a man who has been enslaved, abused, and held to the standards of a foreign civilization? Though we cannot necessarily condone Caliban's behavior, we can in this respect see his rationale. However, the vision of Caliban's character is irrevocably complicated by his attempted violation of Miranda (and his subsequent lack of remorse). Though Caliban's aggression clearly marks him as hostile to the better interests of the play's heroes, he is softened by his own suffering and perhaps also by his ineffectual attempts at violence. His intentions may be villainous in nature, but in reality he lacks the cunning to successfully carry his plans through.

While Caliban does orchestrate an attempt on Prospero's life, the depiction of the plot only wounds Caliban's image as a legitimate villain. Caliban's plan itself is sound, but since Ariel is present to hear it, Prospero never really relinquishes control. As such, Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo never represent a genuine threat: they are easily thwarted and promptly forgotten as Prospero reunites the castaways and reveals his scheme. In this we can see the disparity in Prospero and Caliban's relationship: Prospero dominates Caliban's thoughts, but for Prospero he is a pest to be handled whenever it's convenient. While it is true that Caliban's defeat is not accompanied by crippling humiliation, Prospero effectively demonstrates Caliban's insignificance. Caliban's failure to be a legitimate threat to Prospero makes him look like a weak, petulant child: since he is not really a threatening character, it is easy to feel sympathy as he is presented with his own insignificance. Prospero eventually accepts responsibility for



Caliban, saying “This thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine” (V.i.275-76) and Caliban seemingly repents, promising “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!” (V.i.295-298). Though the two seem to reach an accord, their relationship is once again based on Caliban’s inferior status. Prospero publicly labels him as a blight and an unsavory dependent, and Caliban seems to acknowledge his mistake, but Caliban’s ending feels rushed and superficial and is ultimately unsatisfying since it lacks closure.

It may be true that Caliban is generally disliked within the sphere of the play, but the complexity of his character is intriguing to the audience. The interest in Caliban is particularly interesting considering his relatively small presence in the play: though he is only present for five scenes, his circumstances – and his brief interactions with the other characters – pervade the play as whole. Given the placement of the play’s ending, the audience has no way of knowing if Caliban has in fact learned from his mistakes; his ending is left unresolved. In that way Caliban cannot be seen as the conquered villain, because the negative aspects of his character are rooted in inability – or unwillingness – to adequately conform to the social rules observed by the more civilized characters. If then, Caliban is to be viewed as a sympathetic character, his pathos is rooted in his inability to fit in, even in his own home. Isolated from his fellow characters, noticeably different in his physical appearance, manner, and style of speech, Caliban’s separation from the rest of the characters inspires some level of pity from the audience, and a desire to see his situation improved.

However, the lack of resolution and the shallow growth depicted in Caliban’s storyline also contributes to his development as a compelling character. Though Caliban’s growth over the course of the play is questionable, in this respect he seems marked with a more realistic

humanity. Caliban's experience within the play is not particularly drastic – particularly when compared to Shylock or Malvolio – but the very absence of this drama forges a connection with the audience, who surely do not often experience crushing humiliation themselves. Though Caliban's physical characteristics make him a naturally dramatic character, his existence on the stage is not particularly marked by great highs and lows; he just exists and is guided to action by his violent, sullen nature. Caliban errs and is forgiven, and because his storyline lacks closure, we are especially aware of his inchoate future.<sup>41</sup> The lack of definition associated with Caliban's character in many ways mirrors the human experience: the monster showcases the uncertainty of our own futures. While Caliban's story lacks the drama of the other characters considered, his appeal comes from the common humanity that emerges in spite of his inhuman characteristics. Caliban is deeply flawed – inside and out – but his inner faults mirror our own weaknesses: he rails against his own feelings of insignificance, wants his freedom, and desires the consideration of his fellow players. In this regard, Caliban represents some of the most common features of the human experience.

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<sup>41</sup> Vaughan and Vaughan also connect Caliban's ending with his appeal, hypothesizing that "Perhaps this is why so many sequels to *The Tempest* have been written, most fo them concerning Caliban's subsequent career. Caliban is a loose end; for centuries readers and playgoers have wanted to tie him up" (19).

## Chapter Two

### The Piteous King: Marlowe's *Edward II* and Shakespeare's *Richard II*

While my first chapter considers the seemingly incongruous appearance of pity in Shakespeare's comedy, the use of pity in Marlowe's and Shakespeare's history plays seems much more predictable. The kings who serve as the inspiration for the plays discussed in this chapter – Edward II and Richard II, respectively – are, after all, historically regarded as weak and ineffectual. Their association with pity, therefore, is more understandable. Unlike the comedies of chapter one, in which pity is used to distinguish certain characters and highlight the humanity of unappealing, ostracized personalities, I argue that the existence of pity in these history plays serves a different purpose. While in these examples pity once again supports the notion of a common humanity, in *Edward II* and *Richard II*, Marlowe and Shakespeare cultivate pity for the *highest* member of society – the king. Though both Edward and Richard are historically known for unsuccessful reigns, the rendering of their onstage personalities as sympathetic characters affords the audience a unique perspective on kingship. Both Marlowe and Shakespeare demonstrate the disparity between the *figure* of the king and the *man* behind that figure, and through Edward and Richard we can begin to understand additional characteristics of the pity problem. Specifically, the appeal of these characters is diminished by their weaknesses as rulers and their inability to execute the duties of their position. Though each king is demonstrated to have unique flaws, the depiction of each man's demise is an invitation for the audience to pity him as a *man* and also a call to consider the peculiarities of kingship as an institution.

In Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*, the king's weakness stems from his inability to prioritize his public duties over his personal desires. Edward's preoccupation with his favorites –

specifically demonstrated in his relationship with Gaveston – defines his public image as a distracted, ineffectual leader. Gaveston’s position with the king is, in fact, the first reality with which the audience is confronted. Significantly, Gaveston speaks for the king, reciting the king’s letter to him, “My father is deceased. Come, Gaveston, / And *share the kingdom* with thy dearest friend” (my emphasis) (I.i.1-2).<sup>42</sup> The timing of Edward’s letter in itself is troubling: Edward’s opening announcement of his father’s death implies that he seeks to restore his friend immediately upon his ascension. Reuniting with a lost friend may be an appropriate concern for a private citizen, but a king’s primary focus should be on his people and his kingdom rather than his personal life. Equally concerning is the behavior of the king’s minion, whose tendency toward manipulating the king to his advantage is repeatedly demonstrated throughout the play.<sup>43</sup> Edward’s problem therefore is not just that he focuses on his favorite; it is that he lacks judgment and favors an undeserving man. By using Gaveston to open the play and present his personal relationship with the king, Marlowe chooses to present Edward as a private citizen before he depicts him as the king. Gaveston’s opening speech also makes it clear that Edward’s life is overrun with outside opinions, and this is a damaging portrayal of the man who *should* be the unquestioned ruler of England.

The connection Gaveston and Edward share is obvious in the king’s offer to share his kingdom, which seemingly contradicts the very notion of the king as the single greatest man in England and the direct representative of God. Gaveston, who is neither chosen by God nor noble by birth should not have such power over the king. Though certainly service to the king brings

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<sup>42</sup> All references to Marlowe’s *Edward II* are taken from the Charles R. Forker edition for The Revels Plays, 1994.

<sup>43</sup> In his book entitled *Christopher Marlowe and the Renaissance of Tragedy*, Douglas Cole calls Gaveston’s opening speech an indication of “his opportunistic and exploitative outlook on his relationship with Edward” and notes that the minion’s plan for the king “creates the impression of a man of cunning and detachment” (109).

with it an expectation of upward mobility, Gaveston's vision of his future with the king should be troubling to the audience: the king's readiness to share his kingdom (thus, presumably, also dividing his duties) is dangerous and inappropriate, and there is no evidence to suggest that the king has control over the relationship. The king's obsessive preoccupation with Gaveston puts him in a weakened position, and our impression of Gaveston as the controlling figure of the relationship is only reaffirmed when he muses

I must have wanton poets, pleasant wits,  
Musicians that with touching of a string  
May draw the pliant king which way I please.  
Music and poetry is his delight;  
Therefore I'll have Italian masques by night,  
Sweet speeches, comedies and pleasing shows...(I.i.50-55)

Gaveston's comments here make obvious his ability to control the king, and the clarity of his vision hints at his resolve to do so. However, the passage also informs the audience about the king's character before he appears onstage. From Gaveston, we know that the king favors the arts, but the only descriptor he uses for the king is *pliant* – hardly a reflection of strong leadership skills. Before Edward has a chance to present himself to the audience, we have an image of a sensitive, impressionable poet-king rather than a fearless and capable ruler.

Edward's initial appearance onstage does little to change our impressions. In his first words onstage, he requests permission to keep Gaveston, asking the earl of Lancaster "Will you not grant me this?" (I.i.76). Though he assures the audience that Lancaster's response is irrelevant, asserting that he will have his way regardless, the request is damaging nevertheless. The king, by virtue of his social position, should not have to ask his nobles permission for

anything. While Edward's priorities are tragically mismanaged and his power seems minimal, this scene does provide an early introduction to the fundamental tensions between the two Edwards: the monarch, and the man. Clearly demonstrating that the prioritization of his personal life will wound his public, political life, Mortimer Sr. proclaims, "If you love us, my lord, hate Gaveston" (I.i.79). Mortimer Sr. effectively points out the impossibility of reconciling Edward's personal interests with his public responsibilities, and it speaks volumes that the king only seems to find an authoritative voice when his private life is jeopardized. When the nobility clearly state their feelings about Gaveston and threaten to withdraw their support of the king, only then does the king begin to sound like a true ruler, saying

Well, Mortimer, I'll make thee rue these words.

Beseems it thee to contradict thy king?

Frown'st thou thereat, aspiring Lancaster?

The sword shall plane the furrows of thy brow,

And hew these knees that now are grown so stiff.

I will have Gaveston, and you shall know

What danger 'tis to stand against your king. (I.i.90-96)

Edward's language here is forceful and appropriate for his position, but it is a clear misapplication of his power. Rather than focusing his attention on the strength of the kingdom, he invokes his power in an effort to secure individual gain. Since Edward *should* use his power as king to protect his kingdom, it is a clear abuse of his position to use his position against the lords, who seemingly only want him to focus and *rule*. If anyone is jeopardizing the kingdom, it is Edward, who abandons his responsibilities for other pursuits. Therefore, the king's willingness to abuse his public power in the interest of protecting his private interests puts him on boggy

moral ground. Lancaster's reaction reflects the implicit error in Edward's actions when he responds, "My lord, why do you thus incense your peers / That naturally would love and honor you / But for that base and obscure Gaveston?" (I.i.98-100). Lancaster's reaction indicates a certain respect for the king as a figure, but it also conveys dissatisfaction with the practical application of Edward in this role.

Throughout the play Marlowe highlights the separation between the King and the man who serves the office, thus driving a wedge between Edward and the office he serves. The Earl of Kent, for example, reaffirms Edward II's weakness by referencing Edward I's ability to stop an argument between warring nobles with only a look. Kent uses this example to chide Mortimer and Lancaster, saying "Yet dare you to brace the King unto his face!" but in defending his brother, Kent fails to concede the most obvious point: he is speaking of two very different kings (I.i.115). From Kent's story, Edward I's strength as a ruler is clearly established while Edward II's relative weakness is only cemented. Not only has Edward II failed to exert the same influence over the nobles that his father enjoyed, but he has become the object of the nobles' anger rather than the intervening peacekeeper. The history of Edward I's prowess, paired with the onstage demonstration of Edward II's shortcomings, conclusively demonstrates that the monarch is not a static figure but a position filled by a line of individual men. Edward I may have been suited to his role, but the same cannot be said of his son, who seems genuinely surprised when he asks, "Am I a king, and must be overruled?" (I.i.134). Nevertheless, the threats of the nobles do little to shock Edward into a reorganization of his priorities, which is clear when he announces, "I'll bandy with the barons and earls and either die or live with Gaveston" (I.i.136-137). With this Edward ignores more of his responsibilities as king: not only is he focusing only on his individual desires, he is also neglecting his duty to protect his position

as the head of the government.

The initial portrayal of Edward's shortcomings as a ruler is really only the beginning of the king's offenses: Edward seems capable of only bad decisions, and this is a reality that the audience sees with particular clarity. The king offers open access to his power and money to Gaveston, encouraging him to behave however he pleases; he also ignores and abuses his wife, neglects his son, and willfully flouts the counsel of his nobles in repeatedly devoting all of his energy to undeserving minions. However, because he is *the king*, Edward's failures are hardly entertaining; to the contrary, Marlowe makes the problems of Edward's reign our primary concern. In the depiction of Edward II's many faults as a leader and in his personal life – because they so seriously affect the safety and harmony of the kingdom – Marlowe makes it difficult for the audience to side with the king. However, Edward's repeated failure to adequately fulfill the role of king – or perhaps the brutal consequence he must face because of these mistakes – eventually prompts the audience to recognize his flawed humanity and offer some sympathy.<sup>44</sup> Since Edward in his capacity as king can affect the happiness of so many people, he arguably does the most damage of any of the characters. In light of these offenses, it is especially interesting that Marlowe manages to cultivate pity for his character. Edward's eventual effect on the audience is undeniable, but it is important to note that he only inspires compassionate pity toward the end of the play, when he has lost the crown. Marlowe's use of Edward to effectively

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<sup>44</sup> Clifford Leech's article entitled "Marlowe's *Edward II*: Power and Suffering" similarly notes the initially unattractive nature of the king and his subsequent power over audiences, saying "And for Edward Marlowe does not ask our liking: he is foolish, he is at his best pathetic in the belief that Gaveston loves him more than all the world, he is cruel to his wife and drives her to Mortimer, he knows himself so little that he think he erred only in too much clemency. There is barely a redeeming moment in the long presentation of his conduct. Yet what Marlowe has done is to make us deeply conscious of a *humanity that we share with this man who happened to be also a king*" (my emphasis, 79).



demonstrate the humanity inherent in kingship is clear, but Marlowe also illuminates the extent to which *power* hinders audience sympathy.

Edward forges a connection with the audience in the final two acts, beginning with his recognition of the duality of his life, then again when he is forced to relinquish his crown. By the time Edward is murdered he is no longer king, though he can blame his inability to honor the responsibilities of his position as the cause of his demise.<sup>45</sup> At the end of the fourth act, Edward really begins to voice the problems of kingship when he addresses the abbot, saying

Oh, hadst thou ever been a king, thy heart,  
Pierced deeply with sense of my distress,  
Could not but take compassion of my state.  
Stately and proud, in riches and in train,  
Whilom I was, powerful and full of pomp;  
But what is he whom rule and empery  
Have not in life or death made miserable? (IV.vii.9-15)

Edward's comment here is an explicit invitation to the audience to consider the peculiar burdens of his position, perhaps encouraging us for the first time to truly examine the difficulty of kingship *from the sovereign's perspective*. For his part, Edward is similarly able to examine the difficulties of kingship from a distance, since he is soon to be defeated and separated from his crown. The drama of Edward's fall also invites audience pity – as the preeminent person in the kingdom, he has the farthest to fall. Once he has been separated from his former splendor, his separation from the audience is diminished; the grimness of Edward's position in the final acts is

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<sup>45</sup> Irving Ribner, in his "*Edward II* as Historical Tragedy" also focuses on the king's failure to fulfill his role, calling Edward's ultimate flaw that "he is born into a position where he must be capable of controlling absolute power in order to survive, and since he is not he is doomed to destruction" (99).

far easier to imagine than the splendor of the sovereign. The defeated Edward – soon to be stripped of his crown and title – can establish a closer tie to the audience. Once defeated, Edward can be evaluated (and subsequently pitied) because he is separated from his office: it is difficult to pity the king who sacrifices everything – even his people – for his minions. However, it is easy to pity Edward the *man*, who has lost everything in the name of his friends.

Edward's appeal to the audience continues when he is confronted by Leicester and Winchester and formally relinquishes his crown. Here he again references the peculiar positions of kings, and speaks directly to the trouble of handling private conflict, saying

The griefs of private men are soon allayed,  
But not of kings. The forest deer, being struck,  
Runs to an herb that closeth up the wounds;  
But when the imperial lion's flesh is gored,  
He rends and tears it with his wrathful paw,  
And, highly scorning that the lowly earth  
Should drink his blood, mounts up into the air. (V.i.8-13)

What Edward asserts here is that kings are incapable of suffering in the same way that commoners do, and implies that the very nature of kingship dooms him in his private grief. Edward's reference to the forest deer and the imperial lion offers a clear parallel to the differing reactions of a commoner and a king in the face of weakness: the deer and the common man, Edward seems to suggest, happily address their weakness, seek help and are thus saved. The lion and the king, by contrast, are isolated in their grandeur and therefore feel compelled to act alone; though the lion bleeds, he still feels compelled to leap and assert his superiority to the earth, though the leap kills him. Similarly, the king cannot willingly put himself at the mercy of

another, since doing so would damage the king's image as an infallible, impenetrable ruler. In essence, the king cannot admit personal weakness and maintain his public persona.

While it is true that Edward's private life has doomed him, it is important to note that it was his very attempt to prioritize that life over his ordained role that brought about his suffering. However, it is the clarity with which Edward speaks in this scene that inspires the audience to support him. Though he continues to struggle to make the decision to relinquish his crown, Edward has already realized that his reign is over, regardless of the outcome. He asks

But what are kings, when regiment is gone,  
But perfect shadows in a sunshine day?  
My nobles rule; I bear the name of king.

I wear the crown but am controlled by them... (V.i.26-29)

In recognizing his own failures as king, Edward opens the door to audience pity; his sudden clarity of vision is a refreshing change from his lack of self-awareness in the first half of the play. For the majority of the play, Edward's missteps have been obvious to everyone but him: the nobles certainly recognize his weakness, Gaveston sees and exploits it, and the audience is certainly aware of his every fault as a ruler. Therefore, Edward's sudden acknowledgment of his own shortcomings – as well as his recognition that his reign is essentially over – provides a certain amount of vindication for the audience, and gives Edward added credibility as someone capable of seeing the obvious truth. Edward is fallen, a victim of his own mistakes, but his vocalization of his situation noticeably boosts his appeal with the audience. Edward, for this moment defining his character with his own voice, and finally embodies the authority he lacked as king. Perhaps the inconsistency of Edward's voice contributes to the tragedy of his character: he cannot sound like a king when his only concern is for his minions, and even when he does slip

into regal language it is always temporary. Though Edward may not truly understand where he went wrong, saying “Yet how have I transgressed / Unless it be with too much clemency?” he does admit that his rule has been a failure (V.i.122-123). When he addresses Winchester, saying, “Commend me to my son, and bid him rule / Better than I” we can simultaneously lament that Edward has understood his weakness too late and hope that his mistakes will be corrected in the course of Edward III’s reign.

Edward III’s behavior at the play’s conclusion will offer another clear depiction of his father’s various shortcomings, but must for the moment be postponed to allow for a closer investigation of Edward II’s final scenes. The scenes depicting the king’s transport to Killingworth Castle and his gruesome murder offer the most obviously pitiful moments for Edward: the cruelty to which the king is subjected all but forces the audience to pity him. Though we may expect Edward to be punished for his various faults, the severity of his punishment goes a long way to redeem his previous transgressions. The treatment Edward suffers, though humiliating, is effective with the audience: Edward’s tormentors act so inhumanely they force us to consider the common humanity we share with the fallen king, finally allowing us to pity him for the severity of his fall and his disgrace.<sup>46</sup> Matrevis and Gurney, Edward’s escorts, deny him even the most basic necessities: his request for proper accommodation, food, and clean water are all ignored. When Edward asks for water to clean himself, Matrevis and Gurney forcibly shave his beard with dirty water, “Lest you be known and so be rescued” (V.iii.32). Though we might say the entire play is a gradual deconstruction of the

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<sup>46</sup> Charles G. Masinton discusses the importance of Edward’s humanity in his book *Christopher Marlowe’s Tragic Vision*, writing that “Edward becomes fully human (and wins back some of the dignity he carelessly loses early in the play) only through experiencing great misery and gradually realizing the value of his lost kingship” (86). Masinton goes on to trace Edward’s appeal, stating that “As our sympathies for him increase, we recognize that Edward shares a common humanity with us and realize that his imperfections mirror our own” (106).

king's identity, this scene is a literal attack on Edward's identity: he has already lost his crown and his power, but now he is also stripped of his image. Since shaving his beard, according to Matrevis and Gurney, will effectively make him unrecognizable, we can see this moment as the finalization of Edward's divorce from kingship as an institution: he now no longer even *looks* like the king; he is just a man. While Edward's onstage humiliation is profound, this separation from the trappings of kingship is important as we move on to the murder scene. Not even a shadow of his former, regal self, Edward is now defined by his offended humanity, and that humanity is forefront in the audience's mind as we encounter his final moments onstage.

Perhaps the strongest call to pity Edward comes in his murder scene. Here, Edward's role as a sympathetic character is based on much more than the basic reality of his impending death. The murderer Lightborn only expands on the complete disregard shown for Edward by Matrevis and Gurney; Lightborn in fact *uses* pity as a tool against Edward, pretending to sympathize with the fallen king's plight. Though Edward seems to understand the significance of Lightborn's presence, commenting that "These looks of thine can harbour nought but death. / I see my tragedy written in thy brows" the atmosphere between killer and victim is charged by the pretense of Lightborn, who repeatedly proclaims his innocence with comments like "These hands were never stained with innocent blood, / Nor shall they now be tainted with a king's (V.v.72-73; 80-81). The tension in this scene is palpable; the audience – indeed, everyone on and offstage – is aware that Edward is about to be killed, and yet Lightborn steadfastly denies the obvious truth.<sup>47</sup> Instead, the murderer feigns concern and pity for the king's trials, encouraging him to rest. Since the king is weak and defenseless, there is no practical reason for Lightborn's approach beyond the added cruelty. Lightborn's evasive behavior seems like an insult the

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<sup>47</sup> See Eugene M. Waith's "*Edward II: The Shadow of Action*," page 190.

obvious injury; he's playing with the king's already worn emotions, and denies Edward even the common courtesy of the truth.<sup>48</sup> Lightborn's behavior can be seen as a clear indication of Edward's final defeat: entirely separated from the prestige of the crown, Edward no longer even commands enough respect to warrant the truth. This blatant disregard – which is plainly mirrored in the grotesque manner in which Edward is killed – cements the severity of his fall. It is not just that Edward has lost the benefits of kingship: the explicit lack of mercy shown by Lightborn indicates that the king has also lost the right to common human courtesy.<sup>49</sup> At this, the lowest of Edward's onstage moments, the audience must respond with pity in the face of Lightborn's demonstrated heartlessness, as the audience members are the only people left with the power to dispense compassion.

It would be easy to argue that the grisly details of Edward's death represent the height of his humiliation, and the final depiction of his fundamental weakness. After all, the king proclaims his own weakness just before his unfortunate end, proclaiming "I am too weak and feeble to resist. / Assist me, sweet God, and receive my soul" (V.v.107-108). And indeed, Edward's inability to resist *anything* characterizes him throughout the play: at this moment, he lacks the physical strength to defend himself, but he finds himself in this position precisely because as king, he was unable to resist the appeal of his personal desires. Edward's weakness as a king – *and* as a man – is apparent throughout the play, and notably this demonstration continues after his murder through the depiction of his son's *strength* as a ruler.

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<sup>48</sup> Cole calls this scene Marlowe's remark on "the irony of Edward's life – a man lulled into false security by those who befriend him in order to control him" (119).

<sup>49</sup> In his book *Comic Sensibility in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, Emmanuel B. Asibong argues that Lightborn's "heartless efficiency emphasizes more than ever the king's suffering humanity" (32).

Arguably, Edward's failings as a king are best demonstrated when his son takes the throne as Edward III and shows an alternative vision of kingship. Edward III's strong hand at the play's conclusion provides a sharp contrast to his father's attitude, and signals a return of appropriate monarchical behavior. His ascension to the throne demonstrates the degree to which his father failed to take up the mantle of his position. Edward II's success in garnering audience sympathy by the time he is killed is irrelevant within the play, but Edward II does prove to have some utility at the end of the play. His memory is useful to the newly crowned Edward III, who avenges his father fiercely at the end of Act V and simultaneously establishes the strength of his leadership. The voice with which Edward III address Mortimer Jr. is the voice of a true sovereign, and his capacity for his role as king is clear when he says

Think not that I am frightened with thy words  
My father's murdered through thy treachery,  
And thou shalt die, and on his mournful hearse  
Thy hateful and accursed head shall lie,  
To witness to the world that by thy means  
*His kingly body* was too soon interred. (my emphasis, V.vi.27-32)

Though Edward III's main function as king is to punish the people responsible for his father's death, it is important to note that Edward III responds to the loss of his father the *king*, appropriately punishing Mortimer Jr. (and perhaps his mother) for the loss of a political leader. Edward III's threat here echoes the threat his father issues to the nobles in the first act, but here, importantly, Edward III wields his power on behalf of a kingdom deprived of its rightful leader through treason. While his father distributed threats like a petulant child, Edward III's first

thought is for the peace of his kingdom and his own reputation as king, and so his actions give the audience hope that the boy will succeed where his father has failed.

In each interaction he has in this scene, Edward III demonstrates that as a king, he will be his father's antithesis. Edward III's unwillingness to sacrifice his political responsibilities for personal reasons is only reaffirmed by his treatment of his mother. To Isabella he says

Mother, you are suspected for [Edward II's] death,  
And therefore we commit you to the Tower  
Till further trial may be made thereof.  
If you be guilty, though I be your son,  
Think not to find me slack or pitiful. (V.vi.78-82)

Edward III's claim that he will judge his mother's case impartially is a testament to his commitment to the crown. After all, Isabella has been always been loyal to her son and concerned with his safety. The willingness to sacrifice his mother and primary ally in order to demonstrate his devotion to the crown shows that unlike his father, Edward III is ready to dedicate his life to the business of ruling.

The Edward II that seizes audience sympathy is not really a king but rather a broken man. Perhaps then it can be said that Edward's strength as a character, at least as far as the audience is concerned, is only really established when his hold on the throne is completely dissolved. When Edward loses his crown and can no longer use his position to champion personal causes, his character shifts in the eyes of the audience. No longer straining under the burden of being both man *and* figure, Edward can appeal to the audience just as a human character; the extremity of his defeat can be fully weighed, and the audience can pity this man for his weaknesses and missteps. Marlowe's depiction of the pitiful king demonstrates a fundamental problem with



kingship as an institution – an issue that Shakespeare also addresses in his comparable *Richard II*: a human, *fallible*, man necessarily fills the exalted position. The occasional disharmony between the role and the man who fills it must be seen as a necessary product of man’s common humanity. Marlowe’s Edward illustrates just one of the possible problems of kingship – the man’s prioritization of his personal needs over his kingly priorities. Shakespeare’s Richard II, as we will see, falls victim to a different fault. The two are united by their mutual demise, and the peculiar nature of their social position. Edward is an unusual character because he is never *really* all that *good*.<sup>50</sup> His personality never really changes, though he experiences brief moments of lucidity in which he can recognize his mistakes. Marlowe’s genius here is in cultivating pity for a character without also providing any significant moral revision: Edward’s circumstances change drastically, but the character himself remains largely the same.<sup>51</sup> What changes, then, is our attitude toward him. We are prompted to pity Edward not because of any sympathetic actions on his part, but rather in response to the actions of others *against* him. Edward’s strength as a character, therefore, rests in his weakness: he is unable to act against his tormentors, and it is that torment that finally highlights his common characteristics and inspires audience sympathy.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Asibong points out that Edward is depicted as a “wayward king” who is “punished for his shortcomings. Nevertheless, Asibong asserts that “the excessive punishment of Act V, Scene v purges the victim of his defects, generating in its wake an unutterable sympathy” (34). For his part, Cole rightfully argues that Edward “creates his own enemies” (111).

<sup>51</sup> F.P. Wilson, in his “Ironies of Kingship” is concerned with the *audience’s* shift in attitude toward both Edward and Richard. He writes, “In both characters there is change, but the change is not so much in them as in our feelings to them, as we see them passing from the cruelty and selfishness of power to the helplessness and suffering of powerlessness” (63-64).

<sup>52</sup> Wilson similarly notes that our changed perspective on Edward is at least partially due to “the change in the characters of Mortimer and Isabel” (66). The king’s development as a pitiful character is not necessarily due to Edward’s individual change, but rather the evolution of the characters around him.

In *Edward II*, Marlowe presents a pitiful king and in doing so invites the audience to consider the King's Two Bodies – the great political figure, and the man behind it.<sup>53</sup> Shakespeare's *Richard II*, clearly inspired by Marlowe's *Edward II*, similarly focuses on the king's weakness in order to say something larger about kingship. Here Shakespeare illustrates the duality of kingship, and also explores the disconnect between the *promise* of kingship and its *reality*; Shakespeare's Richard may be divinely appointed, but he is not divinely inspired.<sup>54</sup> Richard's demonstrated lack of talent as king calls into question the sovereign's divine right, leading the audience to wonder if we should push beyond the supposed connection between God and King, and instead evaluate a monarch as a man with a varying capacity to rule.

The image of Richard as an ineffectual ruler is presented early in the play's action, with Richard's mediation of the conflict between Bolingbroke and Mowbray. Though the accusations on both sides involve treason – an attack on both the kingdom and Richard himself – Richard seems more interested in keeping the peace than handing out punishments. In the face of the fiery tempers of Bolingbroke and Mowbray, Richard urges them to “Forget, forgive, conclude and be agreed” but not before he urges them both to “be ruled by me” (I.i.156; I.i.152, respectively).<sup>55</sup> The challengers' immediate refusal to settle things amicably is significant in two ways. First, and perhaps most importantly, their refusal of Richard's will for reconciliation immediately undercuts the monarch's power, for as king and as the conflict's mediator, he

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<sup>53</sup> The idea of the King's Two Bodies is further explored in Ernst H. Kantorowicz's 1957 book of the same name.

<sup>54</sup> In his article “In One Person Many People: *King Richard the Second*,” A. Norman Jeffares astutely points out that for Richard, “The problems add together into one large issue: that of the man too small for his post” (58).

<sup>55</sup> Textual references to *Richard II* are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

should be obeyed.<sup>56</sup> One might also argue that Bolingbroke's and Mowbray's fervor in this matter represents their devotion to England itself; each man views an accusation of treason as a point of honor. Richard's willingness to brush aside these charges creates an unflattering contrast; if as King, Richard is England itself, one could reasonably expect him to more seriously address accusations of treason.

If Richard's actions demonstrate his weakness as a ruler and challenge our expectations of kingship, his words show us just how unaware he is of that weakness. Throughout the play Richard references his position as king, and this scene is no exception. As he is justifying to Mowbray his capacity to moderate the conflict with Bolingbroke, Richard cites his own "sacred blood" and assures Mowbray that his family connections with Bolingbroke will not interfere with "The unstooping firmness of my upright soul" (I.i.119; I.i.121). It goes without saying that Richard should not have to justify to Mowbray his ability to fulfill his duties as king, but Richard's assurances here only make clearer what is obvious by the end of the scene: Richard's *perception* of his power and influence is sharply contrasted by the onstage reality. This lack of self-awareness on the part of Richard must be seen as the ultimate cause of his onstage reputation as a weak character – even as the play progresses and Richard inches closer to his demise, he remains largely ignorant of the reality of his situation.

This lack of vision is obvious to the audience members, who watch as Bolingbroke steadily advances towards the throne. Certainly, the audience's heightened awareness is a customary function of theater, but it quickly becomes clear that the audience members are not alone in their perception: most of the other characters seem to be better informed than Richard, as is demonstrated by both Gaunt and later, a common gardener. Since both title and convention

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<sup>56</sup> Marjorie Garber also points to this scene as an indication of Richard's weakness, in her *Shakespeare After All* (241).

suggest that Richard is favored by God, the king's ignorance – particularly in the face of the clarity of vision enjoyed by most of the other characters – is deeply troubling, and leads us to the logical question: how could a divinely appointed sovereign be so inept?

While Shakespeare hints at Richard's weakness with Mowbray and Bolingbroke's resistance to his peacekeeping efforts, the playwright confirms the gritty realities of Richard's reign through the dying Gaunt. Gaunt's grasp of Richard's situation is complete; the dying man presents Richard's faults in great detail during his deathbed speech, but he is equally able to reduce the realities of Richard's reign to several concise lines. Significantly, Richard is able to recognize the truth neither in Gaunt's pith nor his extended explication. When Gaunt asserts "O no, thou diest, though I the sicker be," Richard's obvious, rather ignorant response is "I am in health, I breathe, and see thee ill" (II.i.91-92). Richard cannot see beyond what's immediately in front of him, which only reaffirms his restricted vision when it comes to his reign. Fortunately, Gaunt is all too happy to go into the details of Richard's trouble, saying

Thy death-bed is no lesser than thy land,  
Wherein thou liest in reputation sick,  
And thou, too careless patient as thou art,  
Commit'st thy anointed body to the cure  
Of those physicians that first wounded thee.  
A thousand flatterers sit within thy crown,  
Whose compass is no bigger than thy head,  
And yet, [incaged] in so small a verge,  
The waste is no whit lesser than thy land. (II.i.95-103)

Through Gaunt we see the reality of what we could have guessed: Richard has a weak and damaged reputation throughout the kingdom, and he is unaware of it because he surrounds himself with flatterers. Gaunt goes on to inform Richard that though he does not realize it, “Landlord of England art thou now, not king” (II.i.113). We might expect this to be a moment of clarity for Richard; Gaunt, whose connection to the truth is established when he calls himself “a *prophet* new inspired,” clearly elucidates the weakness of Richard’s reign (II.i.35, my emphasis). Richard, however, willfully denies the truth of Gaunt’s words, preferring instead to remain ignorant of his problems. When Richard interrupts Gaunt’s speech to call him “A lunatic lean-witted fool,” it is clear that Gaunt’s better efforts are lost on the king (II.i.115). Richard’s response to Gaunt underscores the portrayal of the king as a near-sighted man, but it is also ironic; in this situation, it is Richard – not Gaunt – who is playing the fool, and both Gaunt and the audience know it.

Gaunt’s opinion of Richard’s reign is crucial for a few reasons beyond his apparent grasp on the truth. Perhaps the most important of these is that Shakespeare paints Gaunt as a loyal subject – at least, a subject loyal to the crown as an *institution* – before Gaunt speaks against Richard as a man filling a position. Gaunt’s loyalty to the crown is demonstrated in his response to the Duchess of Gloucester, when he refuses to act against Richard’s alleged involvement in her husband’s death. Gaunt asserts

God’s is the quarrel; for God’s substitute,  
His deputy anointed in His sight,  
Hath caus’d his death; the which if wrongfully,  
Let heaven revenge; for I may never lift  
An angry arm against His minister. (I.ii. 37-41)

Gaunt's disparate attitudes toward the king himself and the King as an institution showcase the fundamental problems of kingship that Shakespeare explores in *Richard II*: the King is *figure*, but that role must be fulfilled, ultimately, by a *man*, who may be weak or even ill-suited to the role. For Gaunt and indeed for many, the king's connection with God demands a certain amount of loyalty. However, Gaunt is finally overcome by Richard's ineptitude and is compelled to speak. In this regard Gaunt is pushed to speak out because his vision is so superior to Richard's. Gaunt's experience therefore parallels that of the audience: we can appreciate Richard's position as king, but our knowledge of his missteps – particularly in light of his ignorance of them – leads us to question his legitimacy as a ruler.

Gaunt's opinion of Richard also carries weight because of his elevated social position: he is the king's uncle, and one of Edward III's sons. Gaunt's position in society is important because it establishes a span in the public recognition of Richard's shortcomings. Gaunt's speech is followed in the next act by another unflattering appraisal, this time delivered by a common gardener who appears onstage and further outlines the weaknesses of Richard's rule in an extended metaphor. The gardener begins his speech with a discussion of the steps necessary to maintain a garden/kingdom, and moves on to a direct reference to the king, proclaiming

...O, what pity is it  
That he had not trimm'd and dress'd his land  
As we this garden! [We] at time of year  
Do wound the bark, the skin of our fruit-trees,  
Les being over-proud in sap and blood,  
With too much riches it confound itself;  
Had he done so to great and growing men,

They might have liv'd to bear and he to taste  
Their fruits of duty. Superfluous branches  
We lop away, that bearing boughs may live;  
Had he done so, himself had borne the crown,  
Which waste of idle hours hath quite thrown down. (III.iii.55-66)

Though the gardener does not share Gaunt's social status, the two men are bound by their recognition of Richard's mistakes. This speech further underscores the image of Richard as an ineffectual king: Richard has managed to conceal his weakness from no one; everyone from the highest noble to the lowliest gardener is aware of the king's impotence. The gardener's words make another significant point against the king when he elucidates the steps he has to take to succeed in his own work in the garden. If a mere gardener can demonstrate that kind of self-awareness, how can that clarity of vision elude the king, who should be the most powerful man in the kingdom?

Throughout the play, Richard's weakness as a ruler is undeniable; what is less obvious is the king's pitiful appeal.<sup>57</sup> However, in Richard's demise I see a clear appeal to audience pity and sympathy, though I do not deny that this appeal takes some time to develop. While Richard remains in power, he is certainly weak but not yet a candidate for the audience's compassionate pity. In some respects Richard's repeated missteps could be seen as a source of frustration for the audience; Richard is willfully stubborn in refusing to confront the reality of his situation, despite Gaunt's overt efforts to enlighten him. There are repeated references to Richard's hand in the Duke of Gloucester's death, which hint at the king's corrupt and unstable reign. As a character,

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<sup>57</sup> Harold Bloom, for his part, completely denies the appeal of Richard, writing in his *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* "that *Richard II* seeks to distance us from pathos as far as possible. We wonder at Richard, we admire his language, but we never suffer with him" (252).

Richard's connection to the audience is only really established with as his defeat is realized, and this is unsurprising considering the common assumption that compassionate pity springs from a common thread of humanity. While deposition is not an experience common to all of mankind, the resulting identity crisis Richard experiences is easily comprehensible, and it is in these moments that Richard's character becomes more palatable to the audience. Furthermore, with Richard's defeat comes – finally – a heightened awareness of his mistakes; once Richard loses the crown, he gains the ability to evaluate his reign, and the character therefore becomes a useful image of the problems of kingship. So while we ultimately feel some bond with Richard, that connection is only forged through his defeat, breakdown, and recognition of his previous errors.

Shakespeare cements the utility of Richard's character through the sovereign's discussion of his position, which is crucial to our understanding of the problems of kingship. The clarity with which Richard describes his plight forges a connection between the deposed king and the audience members. Equally important to Richard's altered reception with the audience is the development of his self-awareness. Once defeated, Richard is finally able to survey his reign with the clarity of vision he has previously lacked, which is crucial as we have already established this lack of vision as both the root of Richard's onstage troubles and also a shortcoming that alienates him from the audience. However, Richard's behavior after losing his crown allows the audience to see the toll of kingship. Stripped of his crown, Richard becomes unsure of his own identity. When Bolingbroke summons him to officially rescind the crown, a befuddled Richard wanders in, saying

Alack, why am I sent for to a king

Before I have shook off the regal thoughts

Wherewith I reigned? I hardly yet have learned



To insinuate, flatter, bow and bend my knee.  
Give sorrow leave awhile to tutor me  
To this submission. Yet I well remember  
The favors of these men. Were they not mine?  
Did they not sometime cry "All hail!" to me?  
So Judas did to Christ; but he, in twelve,  
Found truth in all but one; I, in twelve thousand, none.  
God save the King! Will no man say amen?  
Am I both priest and clerk? Well then, amen!  
God save the King! Although I be not he;  
And yet amen, if heaven do think him me. (IV.i.162-175)

As far as the audience is concerned, it is not just Richard's isolation that inspires sympathy but also his recognition of that isolation. Suddenly it becomes clear to Richard that the loyalty he enjoyed was just a function of his position as king, rather than a reflection of his individual popularity. Deprived of his title, Richard is confronted with the realization that his supporters are few, and the respect and power of his past was tied not to him, but to institution and convention. Seeing Richard without the protective veneer of the sovereign, the audience is moved to extend the support his onstage counterparts deny him. His only chance now is to call on God for support, and to entice the audience through reformed behavior and improved vision.

The severity of Richard's fall is cemented in his final scene, in which he interacts with a groom who has remained loyal to the displaced king. At this moment Richard's abandonment is complete, as the groom confirms that even Richard's horse is now proudly in Bolingbroke's service. Though the groom has no good news for Richard, his presence as well as his salutation,

“Hail, royal prince!” demonstrates loyalty and compassion, which is only underlined by the sudden appearance of the king’s murderers, since these men have neither loyalty nor compassion for Richard on their minds (V.v.67). The groom’s final kindness must be seen as just that – a kindness extended to a wholly defeated king. And yet, the groom still clearly views Richard as a monarch, and the groom’s willingness to attend to the fallen king is indicative of both compassion and pity. The groom’s actions should serve as an invitation to the audience to extend their sympathies to Richard, but Richard’s exchange with the groom also demonstrates the severity of his fall; though this man was England itself, his only remaining servant is there out of kindness and pity. In this exchange, it is the groom that comes away looking magnanimous. With this encounter Richard’s status as a pitiful character is confirmed: he has fallen the greatest possible distance, and that fall is what makes him compelling for the audience. Confronted with a fallen king, we can gain better perspective on what caused the fall, but our perceptions are not limited to Richard’s numerous mistakes; they extend to larger problems involving monarchy as an institution. In depicting Richard’s demise, Shakespeare not only confronts us with the individual failings of a single man, but also invites us to wonder at the varying aptitude of kings.

In the demonstration of Richard’s weakness, Shakespeare easily separates “the godhead and manhood of a king,” showing the audience a similar tension to that established by Marlowe’s earlier play, *Edward II*.<sup>58</sup> In each play, the playwright concentrates on the individual failings of the sovereign, and in doing so distances the man from the institution he embodies. Since neither Edward nor Richard can be seen as adequate representatives of the crown, the playwrights invite their audiences to consider them as separate agents; we must consider the humanity of the fallen Richard and Edward, and with their depiction as pitiful characters we are invited to do so.

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<sup>58</sup> Ernst H. Kantorowicz uses this terminology in *The King’s Two Bodies*, 73.

Richard, for example, becomes unsure of his identity when he is no longer king. This particular experience is by no means universal – I have already discussed the fundamental isolation of kingship – but the elemental characteristics of Richard’s position are easily understood.

Shakespeare’s Richard has no aptitude for his office: the realities of his fallible human character translate to his inability to fulfill the duties of the sovereign. Though the experience of being the King is not a universal one, the recognition of our common fallibility certainly is, and in Richard Shakespeare presents an unquestionable model of human weakness. Richard’s lack of talent for his office is most immediately showcased by the apparent ease with which Bolingbroke seizes the throne, but perhaps it is another, more legitimate ruler who offers the clearest contrast to Richard’s leadership skills: Edward III.

I have already discussed Edward III’s importance in *Edward II*, wherein the boy-king demonstrates the aptitude and concern for his kingly duties that his father lacked. Though Edward III is only referenced in *Richard II*, his presence is still felt and provides an easy model of how a king’s reign *should* look. Throughout the play, Edward III is used as the standard of kingship: Richard’s shortcomings are repeatedly pitted against Edward III’s successes. An example of this is given in Gaunt’s speech against Richard, in which Gaunt informs the king that

O, had thy grandsire, with a prophet’s eye,  
Seen how his son’s son should destroy his sons  
From forth thy reach he would have laid thy shame,  
Deposing thee before thou wert possessed,  
Which are possessed now to depose thyself. (II.i.104-108)

Gaunt directly casts Richard as an unfit ruler, and implicitly accuses him of lacking “the prophet’s eye” that made Edward III a successful king. However, this reference to Edward III’s

gift of sight only confirms Richard's isolation as king: Edward III, who understood how to be king and would clearly see Richard's impending doom, is dead. According to the very mechanics of monarchy, Richard is separated from the only people who can grasp his position. Though the isolating nature of kingship is a common theme for history plays, it is of particular concern in these plays highlighting ineffectual kings. Edward III, whose role in both *Edward II* and *Richard II* is either minimal or purely referential, serves as the antithesis to the inadequate monarchs embodied by Edward, his father, and Richard, his grandson. Edward III is useful in this sphere because he represents the happy harmony brought about by a capable ruler. Some men, it seems, are made for the job; for these men, there is no question of capability or divine backing: his title, his vision and his aptitude to rule all confirm a divine association. Gaunt's argument seems to cast Edward III as a legitimate King – one with *both* the title and the vision to rule. Richard, lacking that vision, has become something less than his title indicates.

Edward III casts a long shadow over Richard's rule, and is similarly impressive in *Edward II*, where he eclipses his father's reign in the final moments of a play entirely devoted to Edward II's history. In Marlowe's play, Edward III provides a sharp and immediate contrast to his father's failings. In that instance, we might see Edward III's aptitude as a divine inspiration that comes with the crown: while still a prince, Edward shows little evidence of what he will become. However, once he ascends the throne as Edward III, he shows the confidence, strength, and authority we might rightfully expect of a monarch. This is even more surprising since his father has hardly provided a strong example to emulate. However, Edward III has a different significance for Richard II. As his grandfather, one could argue that Edward III provided an excellent model for a strong ruler, but Richard has just failed to live up to Edward III's standard.

Richard has the right, perhaps, to the throne, but not the talent demonstrated by earlier sovereigns.<sup>59</sup>

Shakespeare is clear in his depiction of Richard's onstage failure, but his portrayal of Richard's disintegration as a man invites the audience to make some distinction between the king's legacy as an historical figure and Richard's fallibility as a man.<sup>60</sup> Richard's is a unique case because he seems to invite many *types* of pity: his failures as a monarch make him in some sense contemptible. He is unable to control his people or inspire obedience and loyalty, and as such is a pitiful excuse for a king, particularly when compared to the success his grandfather had as sovereign. On a purely practical level, not considering issues of divine right, his deposition is hardly surprising. However, Richard's character also inspires compassionate pity as the play draws to a close, when he loses his power and begins to understand his errors. Once deposed, Richard is no longer a threat to the kingdom; he cannot, through his ineptitude, cause war and corruption. Now powerless, Richard must be evaluated on the basis of what remains: his humanity. At this point we can see that Richard is, and has always been, just a man. He is perhaps not a great man, as we might expect the King to be, but he does share a common element of humanity that is easily understood by the audience: Richard lacks the talent to execute the duties of his office, and fails to emerge from the shadow of another, greater member of his

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<sup>59</sup> Garber compares Richard to his grandfather as well, arguing that Richard's reign is weak because he lacks Edward's scope. While Edward fought external enemies and sought to develop and expand his kingdom, Garber points out that "...Richard's wars are all civil wars: wars against his own land, which he farms out for money to support his own corruption and mismanagement; and, of course, wars against himself" (248).

<sup>60</sup> Given his legacy and his deposition, the ultimate failure of Richard II's reign is beyond question. However, Peter Saccio's *Shakespeare's English Kings* notes that "Richard stayed on the throne for twenty-two years, distinguishing himself in several crises by great personal courage..." (7). Saccio goes on to claim that Richard's reign was compromised by the tyranny that marked the later years of his reign. Like Shakespeare, Saccio points to Richard's seizure of Gaunt's estates as an overreach that prompted his demise (7).

family.<sup>61</sup> And while these problems sound reasonable, or even common, they are not issues we might normally associate with a king, because the king by nature is meant to be divinely chosen, and inherently above the common failings of mankind.

We must therefore see Shakespeare's portrayal of Richard as a deliberate exploration of the common humanity that unites us all – even the highest figures in society. Throughout the play, Richard is weak, ineffectual, stubborn and tragically shortsighted, but he must also be seen as something of a victim – and not just a victim of Exton and his servants. If Richard's primary weaknesses can be seen as a lack of talent for ruling, and a lack of vision, then he must also be seen as a victim of human constraints. Given the opportunity to objectively view the problems of kingship and the challenges of the office, the audience might easily consider Richard as being *too human* for the job. Richard's weaknesses, after all, only become tragic when applied to his reign: a typical man might have no trouble living with the same faults. Under this lens, Richard becomes a casualty of his position: he is a failure, certainly, but perhaps that failure is understandable. By cultivating Richard as a weak and pitiful character, Shakespeare invites the audience to pity the fallen king, thus fostering a relationship between the sovereign and the audience. Given common human weaknesses, the onstage Richard inspires the audience to expand its ideas of the historical figure, and also invites the audience to consider the humanity of *any* monarch.

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<sup>61</sup> Though Richard is clearly unsuitable for the throne, he does have some redeeming qualities. For example, the strength of his language is often seen as one of his most impressive features. Almost every scholar who profiles Richard comments that he often sounds more like a poet than a sovereign, and this idea is only underscored by Bolingbroke's direct rhetoric. While Richard's preoccupation with language does seem to distract him from the business of ruling, it could certainly be seen as an attribute of Richard the *man*.

## **Conclusion:**

### **Participating in the Pitiful Spectacle**

This study has investigated the employment of pity in English Renaissance drama, focusing particularly on the relationship between pity and humanity and the disparity between onstage perceptions and offstage reality. In many ways, using pity to develop compelling dramatic characters reifies certain theatrical phenomena: specifically, the playwright's freedom to present something grotesque or repugnant as entertaining or even sympathetic. Tracing the existence of pity in these plays can help us understand the mechanics of character construction. In discovering the ways in which a playwright forges connections between character and audience, we can more easily comprehend our affinity for characters who are ostracized or humiliated onstage.

The use of pity as a tool for the manipulation of audience emotion is certainly not the only available option for a playwright: it is easy enough to render a hero using onstage reputation, a solid moral code, or a valiant personality. If we consider the spectrum of characters in Shakespeare's comedies, it is plain to see a wide range of moralities: we have the heroes, whose interests are advanced throughout the play, and the villains, who ultimately suffer for interfering in the happiness of the heroes. In the course of these plays, the audience maintains a kinship to the hero: we want Prospero to successfully avoid Caliban's plots on his life, and we hope that Portia will find a way to outsmart Shylock. Though we expect that the heroes will emerge victorious (therefore implicitly hoping for the defeat of the villains), at the play's conclusion we are commonly left thinking of the villain's fate. This is largely due to Shakespeare's tendency to deny these characters the closure that the heroes enjoy, but we must also consider the significance of these different treatments.

Shakespeare's heroes are usually constructed in a similar way. They are built upon their goodness, or their onstage reputation, for example. At any rate, it is made immediately clear that the hero is a favored character within the society presented onstage, and this construction facilitates a certain amount of audience support. As long as the play lasts, we primarily support these characters because we are guided to do so. The villains, by contrast, are developed in the audience's mind through the showcase of *negative* characteristics: we see every weakness. While the moral corruption of these characters inhibits our ability to prioritize them *over* the more morally upstanding characters, these unsavory personalities win a more enduring relationship with the audience. We may not support Malvolio's behavior within the sphere of *Twelfth Night*, but we are guaranteed to remember the torment he suffers long after the play's conclusion. We should view these differing approaches to character development as a conscious effort on Shakespeare's part to control the long-term value of his characters.

This habit of relying on pity to distinguish certain characters in the minds of the audience is just as clearly demonstrated in Marlowe's *Edward II* and Shakespeare's *Richard II*. In these history plays pity again functions to distinguish the title characters, but the significance of these characters is markedly different from that of the characters operating in the comedies. Given the disastrous reigns of Edward II and Richard II, we can say that these history plays are largely tragic. While we may be surprised to encounter pity and feel it for the villainous characters in comedies, the existence of pity is more natural in the histories of Edward and Richard. Once again we encounter pity in an unexpected place: just as it feels somewhat unnatural to feel for a play's villain, it is similarly confusing to be forced to consider the humanity of a historically impotent king. Regardless of the king's purported alliance with God, however, both Marlowe and Shakespeare highlight their king's pitiful nature. If Edward and Richard endure as



*characters*, it is this focus on their humanity as *men*. Edward and Richard are intriguing because their pitiful natures necessarily conflict with their social positions: they are weak men, but as kings they also represent a tradition of strength and courage. Whereas pity in the comedies serves to highlight the humanity in low, ostracized characters, in the history plays the emotion underscores the humanity in characters elevated above the rest of the populace. In both cases, the appearance of pity is surprising, but it ultimately contributes to the offstage longevity of the character to which it is applied.

If we are to consider the *significance* of studying the use of pity in Renaissance drama, we must note that of all the available tools for character construction, Shakespeare and Marlowe rely on *pity* to create their truly enduring characters. In and of itself, this pattern warrants an investigation into the nature of pity, and the relationship between the emotion and the construction of memorable characters. In exploring the use of pity in different dramatic genres, this piece seeks to demonstrate the malleable nature of pity. The various definitions associated with pity carry numerous repercussions. On the stage, the existence of pity in a certain character usually distinguishes that character in the minds of the audience members, but the reasons for that distinction are innumerable. At the very least, the confusion surrounding pity warrants the investigation. If pity has come to mean so many things, what does it mean on the stage? It seems that pity is such an effective dramatic tool simply because it invites so many possible reactions. If theatre is intended to cultivate a response, then pity must be seen as a natural match. Because pity by definition requires two parties – the dispenser and recipient of pity – its dramatic use necessitates a certain degree of audience involvement. The very act of dispensing pity solidifies a relationship between audience member and character, thus implicitly making the audience member a participant in the action. The beauty of pity as a dramatic tool is the complexity of the

emotion, and the sheer number of possible appeals to pity: since pity is such an abstract concept, we all have unique perspectives on potentially pitiful characters. In this regard these pitiful characters are compelling because they are subject to myriad evaluations: the shifting nature of pity necessarily affects the characters with which it is associated, opening the door for countless audience reactions. Therefore, we can conclusively say that while pity may weaken characters *onstage*, it also adds the complexity necessary in the creation of compelling, enduring characters.

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