

Where's the
motivation?



Often instead of the gallant, chivalrous hero, it is the deceptive, wicked villain that leaves a lasting imprint on the audience. The subversive and incorrigibly horrendous actions of the villains in Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Titus Andronicus*, especially when compared to the helpless protagonists, demonstrate how a character can leave a deep impression on the reader and audience member. Iago and Aaron the Moor, although distinct in their fashion of wreaking havoc on the lives of their victims, do share one horrifying quality that ensures their literary reputation as true agents of evil; they lack motive. Although Iago claims that his hatred of Othello stems from the alleged adultery in which his commander and wife engaged, this reason is never substantiated nor expounded upon. As Iago creates his traps, it becomes clearer to the reader that he is a man intent on destroying Othello simply because he wants to. Just like Iago, Aaron is devoid of a clear motive for why he seeks to annihilate Lavinia and her father, Titus. He fervently plots to bring the Andronicus family to a horrible end, simply because he can. It is because these villains lack a motive and appear as malevolence incarnate that the audience is truly horrified and cannot, unlike the antagonists in other Shakespearean plays, downplay their actions and locate some tenable justification. At the conclusion of each play, the audience feels uneasy as to the fate of the villain. Though the persons of Iago and Aaron are sentenced to death, their introduction of pure wickedness into the world of the play's characters seems to remain indefinitely. At the beginning of *Titus Andronicus*, Aaron seems to play an auxiliary role to his lover, the Queen of the Goths. He initially acts in the capacity of a quasi-jester – he puns and provides witty insight into the proceedings leading up to the “marriage” of Saturninus and Tamora. As the play progresses, however, his role as villain

begins to surface with the rape and mutilation of Lavinia. In initiating what could be almost morbidly considered as cliché villainy, Aaron, apparently consulting the villain's playbook, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, suggests to Tamora's lustful sons to rape Lavinia and cut off her tongue and both hands. The similarities between the actions of the characters in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and those of Tamora's sons are shocking and serve to show that evil actions, even those as inconceivable as the ones perpetrated by Chiron and Demetrius, are always recurring. Aaron revels in his sin and, as he mentions many times throughout the play, regrets being revealed only because he cannot commit a thousand more horrors. In the third act of the play, Aaron tricks Titus into cutting off his own hand to save two of his sons. After Titus detaches his hand, the audience sees he was tricked. Titus is left with only one hand and the heads of his two sons. Aaron's following aside supports the lack of motive for his deceit and spiteful actions. He declares that, while good men will attempt to perform justly, "Aaron will have his soul black like his face" (3. 1. 204). The mention of a soul implicitly suggests that Aaron, in his capacity as an evil force, is immortal and though evil's incarnation may eventually perish, evil itself will remain. The comparison between the darkness of his soul and his complexion not only hints at Shakespeare's stereotype of Moors as essentially bad men, but it also connects the invisible and despicable qualities of Aaron with his perceivable physicality. As he indicates to the audience in his aside, the villain grows by perpetuating acts of painful trickery, stating "O, how this villainy/ Doth fat me with the very thoughts of it!" (3. 1. 201-2). As is indicated by the scoundrel himself, his soul and his face both darken merely by committing such acts; it seems as if he desires to do evil because, by doing so, he

becomes ever increasingly the very embodiment of the vile. As Aaron's "confession" in act five illustrates, he no longer is simply a man doing bad things and, by virtue of his inability to do good, he is marked as evil. As his language indicates, he is in fact incapable of doing anything but that which is considered horrendously dreadful. After enumerating the deeds of which he is most proud, in particular exhuming dead bodies and setting "them upright at their dear friends' door," he states that he has done all this "As willingly as one would kill a fly" (5. 1. 136, 142). This passing analogy goes to say that just as a regular human being, if the bug were presented as a vex, would kill a fly without thinking, so does Aaron commit murder, rape, scandal and all other unmentionable horrors. The audience and reader's reaction must be the shocking realization that this is truly no man, for within the mind of a person there should exist a battle of good thoughts versus evil thoughts. For Aaron, and unfortunately for the Andronicus family, there is no such mental dichotomy; just as one could swat away a fly, Aaron as easily presents himself as absolutely wicked. In the same way that Aaron fails to cite any particular grievance that would fuel his plot of ruining Titus and his family, Iago commits his treachery without any discernable reasons. At the beginning of the play, Iago alleges that he has a "peculiar end" which drives his plan to destroy Othello for, as "it is thought abroad," the Moor had "'twixt [Iago's] sheets/ He has done [Iago's] office" (1. 1. 60, 369-70). There is only one more mention of this allegation said in passing later in the play; since it is only rumor as Iago himself admits, the audience member and the reader cannot count on this proposed reason as particularly valid. In a statement which echoes Aaron's aside to the audience in Titus, Iago declares that his "outward action doth demonstrate/ The native act and figure of my

heart” (1. 1. 61-2). Just as Aaron’s face will darken as his sins accrue, Iago’s appearance, as his “heart” begins to blacken, will relate to the other characters what he plans. In the second act of the play, Iago speaks to the audience after advising Cassio to plead with Desdemona in order to be reinstated as lieutenant. When Cassio exits and Iago is left alone, he begins by jesting “And what’s he then that says I play the villain,” when, he feels, he has provided Cassio with only the most truthful of advice and council (2. 3. 310). Superficially it appears as if this joke is meant to be an earnest entreat to the audience to find Iago to be, in fact, an honest person and the farthest thing from an evil man. But, keeping in mind his frightening preoccupation with torturing any and all of the other characters in the play, one can see that the joke is made tongue in cheek. Iago knows he is a villain, and since he has readily assumed the position of such, he can joke about his status as the antagonist. He partakes in a small confession in this scene, but the confession is not offered in hopes of reconciling his naughty ways; Iago is utterly proud of his treachery. Any other individual would perhaps still be proud that his or her plot had been successful thus far, but he or she would expectedly attempt to justify the reasons during his speech directed at the audience; Iago makes no attempt to do this. Iago refuses to try and rationalize his hatred because he doesn’t want to and, more importantly, he cannot; he has become the embodiment of unadulterated malice. The plays *Othello* and *Titus Andronicus* achieve their dramatic effect not through grandiose speeches or the noble and gallant actions of their protagonists. Quite oppositely, it is through that which remains unsaid that the audience is profoundly disturbed. The motivation that should logically drive the malicious actions of the villains remains undisclosed and, upon analysis of the

language of Aaron and Iago, appears to be entirely nonexistent. Each antagonist thrives upon the accumulation of sin and, as Aaron explicitly states, his only regret is being unable to perform “a thousand more” (5. 1. 124). The ability and desire to do evil is the only motivating factor that drives the action of Iago and Aaron, and as they create more and more chaos within the lives of their victims, their despicable natures become physically visible on their persons. They eventually become a reflection of their minds; Aaron is as dark as his soul, and Iago, as the reader can imagine, can barely contain his glee at witnessing Othello's demise.