

“Very fine people ...”

Louis Fantasia

Empires collapse. Gang leaders

Are strutting about like statesmen. The peoples

Can no longer be seen under all those armaments.

So the future lies in darkness and the forces of right

Are weak. All this was plain to you

When you destroyed a torturable body.

“On the Suicide of the Refugee W.B” - Bertolt Brecht¹

Let’s assume for the moment that President Donald J. Trump is right when he said, in 2017, that there were “some very fine people” on both sides of a white nationalist “Unite the Right” rally held in Charlottesville. A young woman was killed and dozens injured at this rally by some “very fine people.”²

Let’s assume, too, that there were very fine people at the Nuremburg rallies, Cambodian killing fields, and Klan lynchings. Let’s also assume that there were very fine people on both sides in Kosovo, Myanmar and Rwanda. And let’s assume (despite the stellar contributions of my collaborators in this volume) that there is no such thing as evil, and that there are only fine people on both sides, doing what they think is right and good.

Let’s assume that the fine people on both sides send their kids to school, pay taxes, vote, and go to church. Let’s assume, too, that because they are good and very fine, these people love more than they hate. They love their country, their race, their family, tribe and clan. They love their God, who usually is an angry God, and they love their neighbor, as long as their neighbor is like them. They love all this more than they hate the enemy – the other – whomever or whatever that “other” might be. As the President said in his 2018 speech from the Oval Office, people “don’t build walls because they hate the people on the outside but because they love the people on the inside” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/08/us/politics/trump-speech-transcript.html>).

Next, let’s assume that someone named Iago lives among these very good, fine people, as do Richard Gloucester, Mrs. Macbeth, and the Lear sisters, whom we shall visit in a moment. I know that it is always dangerous to mistake literary constructs for real persons, but in the theater our job, or at least part of our job, is to bring these two-dimensional literary figures to three-dimensional life. So let us assume that this Iago lives amongst the very fine people of both sides.

Notice that the President did not say that these people were very “nice,” even though he often says there are very “bad” people everywhere. Very fine, good people often have to do things that are not nice, like exterminate Jews or hang Negroes, or torture leftists, or fly planes into tall buildings, or lock migrant children up in cages. It’s not nice, but good people sometimes have to do these things because, as stated above, they love their God or their country or their family or their clan more than they hate their enemy. While there may be very good people on

both sides of the border, we have to build a wall to keep the rapists, murderers and “dirty people” out because we love our country.³

I suppose at this point, other than explaining the concept of irony, I should, in the context of current literary and educational theory, post “trigger” warnings about the content to be discussed. But since there are no warnings for the knock on the door at midnight, or the suppression of your vote, or the car that runs you over at a rally, or the beating you get on a barbed wire fence, just get over it.

Iago is very fine, but not nice, which is an important distinction. I once saw a production of *Othello* by a major theatre company in a nice Northwestern American city, where Iago was nice, and Othello was nice, and Desdemona was nice and they all tried to be nice to one another but stuff just happened. When I asked the artistic director about his choices (I was a guest at the theatre, so I, too, was being nice), I was told that he didn’t want to show racism on stage.

Then why do the play?! Good grief! There are at least 36 other plays by Shakespeare, and I can think of at least a few of them (*Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *As You Like It*, perhaps? *Julius Caesar*?) that don’t have anything to do with racism. But *Othello*? Lest I seem unkind to my colleague, it should be noted that outside this theatre, or more precisely, out beside one of the parking lots near this theatre, was a billboard advertising a unisex perfume called “Unbreakable” by Kloé Kardashian and her then husband, the basketball star Lamar Odom.⁴ Ms. Kardashian is white. Mr. Odom is black. The ad seemed to suggest that they were (mostly) naked, happy and, apparently, sexually and romantically intimate. That their perfume’s brand name was ironic, to say the least, given the subsequent state of their relationship, is beside the point here.

In the billboard they were very fine people, of two different races, who were being nice to each other. Their relationship and marriage went bad. That’s sad. That’s life. But it is not *Othello*. But the image the ad for their perfume was trying to project was one that I think this director was trying to stage inside: we are all nice people; we can all get along. We can accept our differences, can’t we?

No, we cannot. We are not nice. We are fine. We are good. And very fine, good people, have to do what’s right. Prior to the 1960s, that is, well within my lifetime, such mixed race coupling would have been illegal in many states, if not just immoral. For those of you not familiar with the crime of miscegenation in our post-modern, multi-cultural, multi-racial society, I refer you to the 2016 film *Loving* about the inter-racial marriage of Richard & Mildred Loving, and their trials, personal and legal, in the American south (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4669986/>).

Still, even in the Twenty-first century, some very good, fine people consider such an “amalgamation” of races as against God’s will. For example, this from the *Faith & Heritage* website, a webzine presenting “the views of Occidental Christians who are determined to preserve both Western Civilization and Western Peoples,” on mixed race relationships:

“...then it follows that God intentionally made the different races of mankind, and moreover, that He intentionally made the exact number of races of mankind. God created racial diversity for a good purpose (Acts 17:26-27), and did not intend for the diversity He created to be undone through amalgamation. Interestingly, this was the specific reasoning of Leon Bazile, the judge whose 1959 anti-miscegenation decision was overturned in the *Loving v. Virginia* case of 1967:

‘Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his

arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix.’

This is important: the premise of racial realism immediately points us to the conclusion that racial amalgamation is wrong. If God has created us with a specific racial identity, which we ought to love and cherish, then how could we think it permissible (in ordinary circumstances, at least) to cut off our identity? We ought to preserve our own people, and therefore we ought not to interracially marry. We should, when confronted with God’s creation, perceive all the boundaries He has embedded in His created order, and honor them by maintaining their distinctions. Interracial marriage, consequently, has very strong moral weight placed against it. It is unnatural, and it can run against the purposes and teleology of the Lord in creating the races. It is not hatred of other races, but love of our God, to maintain the diversity with which He has imbued His creation.”⁵

As I was saying, very fine people. On both sides. Let’s assume Iago is a good Christian and a good defender of Western Civilization and Culture. After all, he does go out to sea with Othello to battle the infidel Turks. Othello’s inter-racial love with Desdemona might have landed him in jail (as it did Richard Loving), were it not for the fact that the Duke has summoned Othello to defend the Venetian state. Othello is dispatched against the Ottomans with Iago by his side. The tragedy begins when Desdemona begs to be sent to the Cypriot front with her husband. Fortune is smiling on Iago. Desdemona is clearly a woman who doesn’t know her place!

II

Iago is 28. He has “looked upon the world for four times seven years” (1.3.352). Othello is an “old black ram” (1.1.97), offending Iago’s youth and virility as much as his race. Michael Cassio, whom Iago feels has unjustly been given his promotion, is an effete arithmetician, an arty, intellectual Florentine (not even a real Venetian!), and a man who cannot hold his liquor. In other words, not a real man. Roderigo, whom Iago gulls for money and murder, is a simpleton. Bianca is a camp-following whore. Iago suspects his wife Emelia is not much better, having, in his mind at least, slept with Othello and possibly Cassio. Desdemona is the worst, a race traitor who bandies dirty jokes with Iago as soon as she sets foot on the sultry Cypriot shore (2.1.115- 95). When her black husband arrives, they shamelessly kiss in public in front of his troops. It’s the end of civilization as we know it, despite Ms. Kardashian’s and Mr. Odom’s best efforts.

Very fine people need to put a stop to this. I *know* that there are reasons given in the text for Iago’s hatred, such as his jealousy, his stifled promotion, his wanton villainy. I have read the play a few times and directed it more than once since the late 1970s! But, as I said above, let’s assume for the moment that not only is there no evil, but that Iago is a patriot and defender of the faith. Today Iago is a “Proud Boy”, an incel (involuntary celibate), a member of the Fraternal Order of the Alt-Knights, and so on. I know you will say these are “hate groups” (the U.S. Federal Government has actually designated some of them as such), but is that how they see themselves? Perhaps (although I doubt he thinks this deeply) Iago is a “paleoconservative,” someone who, according to the international relations scholar Michael Foley, presses for

“... restrictions on immigration, a rollback of multicultural programs, the decentralization of federal policy, the restoration of controls upon free trade, a greater emphasis upon economic nationalism... and (has) a generally revanchist outlook upon a social order in need of recovering old lines of distinction and in particular the assignment of roles in accordance with traditional categories of gender, ethnicity, and race” (Foley, 318).⁶

More likely, Iago belongs to a young man’s group, like the Atomwaffen Division, who go about God’s work as (as one member reportedly put it), “a one man gay Jew wrecking crew.” (<https://www.propublica.org/article/atomwaffen-division-inside-white-hate-group>). Now, this is nothing new, at least in America, going back to the Know Nothing Party, the KKK, the John Birch Society, and the Council of Conservative Citizens, among others. Europe had its Nazis and Fascists, Russia its Stalinists, and there are plenty of “national front” parties today on all continents. In Shakespeare’s day Catholics and Protestants burnt each other’s heretics with relish, all the while claiming God was on their side. Iago is not evil. Everyone else is. Just ask Steve Bannon.⁷

Shakespeare populates his plays with a surprisingly large number of young, male losers. As I wrote in my essay in the first volume of this series, “we tend to think of Shakespeare’s lovers as “successful,” in that they get the girl, even if they, too, wind up dead at the end of a tragedy... But Shakespeare’s plays are littered with “surplus men”... (who) have no function outside of battle... Male energy has descended into (online) debates about cosmic order.”⁸

Who knows what websites this construct named Iago subscribes to, but I am certain they reinforce, rather than challenge, his world view, providing him safety in numbers, and more important, the reassuring comfort that there are “some very fine people” just like him out there and they are not afraid to act. Just ask Dylan Roof, Robert Bowers, or James Alex Fields, Jr. For those of you who don’t remember, Roof killed nine African-Americans in a Charleston, S.C., church on June 17, 2015. Bowers murdered eleven Jews at a Pittsburgh Synagogue on October 27, 2018. Fields drove his car into the crowd at Charlottesville during at “Unite the Right” rally, killing 32-year old Heather Heyer. The American Psychological Association has recently declared this toxic form of “traditional masculinity” as “harmful” – an understatement if there ever was one.⁹ Very fine people indeed.

III

As in many fairy tales, the king has three daughters. Invariably one is pretty, and the other two not so much. They may be step-sisters, with a wicked witch or step-mother lurking around somewhere, but there are very few mothers in Shakespeare’s plays. Sometimes the good daughter gets lost going into the woods or racing back from the ball. Ultimately, though, her goodness shines through in an evil world and the Prince finds her, she evades the wolf, or escapes the clutches of the aforementioned wicked step-mother or witch.

Not in Shakespeare, however. He is too much of a realist. Cordelia and Lear die, victims of a cruel world that doesn’t care about goodness, or even love. They are very fine people – sensitive, intelligent, articulate (Cordelia is incapable of speaking only in front of her father), if somewhat rash and stubborn. But there are very fine people on both sides – like her sisters and their husbands, and her sisters’ shared lover.

Regan and Goneril got bad raps for centuries. Had they mustaches, they would have twirled them. Edmund, who seduces both of them, was Gloucester's bastard son, and his illegitimacy was all one needed to know for his motivation. Goneril, the ruthless eldest daughter, is married to Albany, a man so unlike her father as to invite immediate Freudian analysis. Regan, the middle child who never seems to be quite enough for anyone, has married Cornwall, who is a cardboard cut-out version of the worst parts of her dad. Again, Freud might have helped. Yet these are all very fine people. They dress well and speak well. They have sense enough not to go out in raging storms. They band together to fight off the invading French army, led (from their point of view) by their traitorous baby sister. Right from the beginning, when Lear asks his daughters to tell him how much each of them loves him in order to gain their portion of the kingdom, we understand that the (significantly) older sisters have a point:

GONERIL. Sir,
 I love you more than word can wield the matter,
 Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty,
 Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare,
 No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honor;
 As much as child e'er loved, or father found;
 A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable.
 Beyond all manner of so much I love you. (1.1.60-67)

And then:
 REGAN. I am made of that self mettle as my sister
 And prize me at her worth. In my true heart
 I find she names my very deed of love;
 Only she comes too short, that I profess
 Myself an enemy to all other joys
 Which the most precious square of sense possesses,
 And find I am alone felicitate
 In your dear Highness' love. (1.1.76-84)

The fact that little sister will not or cannot play along and says "nothing" repeatedly, provoking the old man's fury, is not their problem. The sisters, like all very fine people, are completely rational. Why does Lear, who has given the kingdom to them, need a hundred knights, or even one? The two daughters, as any adult child with a senile parent knows, put up with Lear's abuses:

GONERIL. By day and night he wrongs me. Every hour
 He flashes into one gross crime or other
 That sets us all at odds. I'll not endure it. (1.3.4-6)

But they do. There's too much at stake not too, despite being called "marble-hearted fiends," "detested kites" (crows) and the like. Even by the end of Act II, when Lear rails against both daughters ("Reason not the need..."), we still, in a successful production I believe, see Lear's reaction as being out of proportion to his two daughters' actions:

LEAR. No, you unnatural hags,
 I will have such revenges on you both

That all the world shall—I will do such things—
 What they are yet I know not, but they shall be
 The terrors of the Earth! You think I'll weep.
 No, I'll not weep.
 I have full cause of weeping, but this heart
 Shall break into a hundred thousand flaws
 Or ere I'll weep. O Fool, I shall go mad!

Storm and tempest. Lear, Kent, and Fool exit... (2.4.219-29)

They have done nothing wrong, and are perfectly rational in their justifications:

REGAN. This house is little. The old man and 's people
 Cannot be well bestowed.

GONERIL. Tis his own blame hath put himself from rest,
 And must needs taste his folly.

REGAN: For his particular, I'll receive him gladly,
 But not one follower.

GONERIL: So am I purposed. (2.4.229-35)

They are very fine people. And if the old man would just be “nice”, everything would be all right. But Lear will not be nice. He feels abused and violated by his daughters’ treatment (when in fact it is his own guilt over his treatment of Cordelia that lashes him). He behaves rashly, impulsively; tragically. But he is not a “very fine” person now. Very fine people do not go naked in storms or shelter in hovels with fools and madmen. Very fine people do not speak up for the homeless, weak, and oppressed, as Lear does:

LEAR. Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
 That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
 How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
 Your looped and windowed raggedness defend you
 From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
 Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp.
 Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
 That thou may'st shake the superflux to them
 And show the heavens more just. (3.4.31-41)

Lear is irrelevant here.¹⁰ He has taken himself out of the society of very fine people, and we must return to his daughters. But we will find them missing. As the Act III storm rages, they do not appear until scene 7, the last scene of the act, where they encourage Cornwall to either hang Gloucester or pluck out his eyes, because, thanks to Edmund’s betrayal, they have discovered he has helped Lear escape. Very fine people. They decide to pluck out his eyes.

This cruelty and lack of empathy is not new in the world. “Critics as different as George Steiner and Terry Eagleton pointed out that some of those in charge of the Nazi concentration camps had been cultivated men who listened to Mozart and read Goethe.”¹¹ So what have Goneril and Regan been reading and listening to since last we met? Fox News?

Goneril rides off with Edmund to try and capture Lear. Regan and Cornwall pin Gloucester down and blind him, forcing out the “vile jelly” of his eyes. A Servant, one of the

poor naked wretches of the world, has the guts to stand up to Cornwall and stabs him. Cornwall will bleed to death offstage. His wife will immediately demand her sister's lover be her next husband. What happened to these women?!

At this point in the play (and from this point forward to the end of the play) it is no longer possible to give these very fine people the benefit of the doubt. The car has been driven into the rally. The shooter is in the synagogue. The cross has been set afire. There is no going back. The director Peter Brook calls this the "shifting point,"¹² where we not only, as an audience, re-evaluate a character but also our own relationship to that character. We were willing to give Regan and Goneril the benefit of the doubt (and Edmund, too – how many people cheer his "gods, stand up for bastards" speech (1.2.21))?

And then we realize that we've been had. These "very fine people," to whom we listened, and nodded, and understood their points of view, now want to pluck out the eyes of the man who helped the king. What were we thinking? How could we have been so naïve? Maybe earlier productions were right to cast the sisters as evil and Edmund as a villain, but perhaps that was because that time had clearer (if often wrong-headed) ideas of good and evil, right and wrong. For a hundred and fifty years, *Lear* was performed in Nahum Tate's version, where Lear and Cordelia are rescued, in the end, by Edgar, whom she marries. Lear then retires, leaving the peaceful kingdom safely in the next generation's hands.

No one will buy that happy ending today. We had our Camelot moment and it ended on a grassy knoll and was followed by Viet Nam, the deaths of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Watergate and the rest. For two generations we have given very fine people the benefit of the doubt, as we launched wars on drugs, terror, aliens and anything that could be perceived as "other."

Regan and Goneril go into battle in the fourth act to defend the homeland. Cordelia leads an invading army of French mercenaries, and she and her father are defeated. Why aren't we cheering? Because we know now, now that it is too late, that these are "tigers, not daughters" (4.2.49) as Albany says, but, despite his moral core, he is as guilty as anyone else in letting things get to this point. Among the very fine people he is perhaps the worst: the good, weak person who will close his window's shutters and turn away.

Some of Shakespeare's best female characters play what used to be called "breeches parts," where they dress as men: Rosaline, Imogen, Viola and so forth. Regan and Goneril are the perversions of these parts. They do what "traditional" men do – ride into battle, plot, scheme, murder, cheat, and fight over the same lover, who has no problem, figuratively or literally, screwing them both. Goneril goes so far as to write Edmund a letter (intercepted!) urging him to kill her husband. She wants Edmund to free her from husband's bed, "the loathed warmth whereof deliver me and supply the place for your labor" (4.7.295-99).

Is it that Goneril and Regan always lacked empathy or compassion? Certainly, in the modern sense, they have suffered the slings and arrows of their father's abuse. Having been given half the kingdom each, was it greed that made them want more? Married to inadequate men, was it Edmund's male sexual energy, his lupine hunger and restlessness, that stirred long-dead emotions? Make them as sympathetic as you want, they have still gone too far.

This is the progression of evil I spoke about in my introduction. It begins with what the Catholics used to call "the near occasions of sin": a white lie to make Dad happy, a flirtatious look at the new boy at court, an inflexibility with your father's servants, a stickler for which days he resides with you. "Reason not the need!" (2.4.304). The friend of my enemy is my enemy. We have too much at stake. The border must be protected, and so on and so on. Suddenly anything is

permissible, all is allowed, and no one may judge. By the fifth act the sisters are squabbling over Edmund as if were sexual booty from a battlefield, right in front of Goneril's husband:

REGAN. He led our powers,
Bore the commission of my place and person,
The which immediacy may well stand up
And call itself your brother.

GONERIL. Not so hot.
In his own grace he doth exalt himself
More than in your addition.

REGAN. In my rights,
By me invested, he compeers the best.

GONERIL. That were the most if he should husband you.

REGAN. Jesters do oft prove prophets.

GONERIL. Holla, holla!
That eye that told you so looked but asquint.

REGAN: Lady, I am not well, else I should answer
From a full-flowing stomach. *To Edmund.*
General,
Take thou my soldiers, prisoners, patrimony.
Dispose of them, of me; the walls is thine.
Witness the world that I create thee here
My lord and master.

GONERIL. Mean you to enjoy him?

ALBANY. The let-alone lies not in your goodwill. (5.3.73-94)

Finally, Albany has had enough and shows some spine, some sense of shame, but the sisters have no shame, or if they did, are beyond it now. As I have argued elsewhere,¹³ while we have been right in the last half of the Twentieth century to eliminate the toxic result of shaming in our lives, we live in a society where celebrities, and indeed our highest public officials, have no shame. What ultimately saves Lear and Cordelia, or rather saves their humanity, since they die in the play, is that they are ashamed of the way they have treated each other, and have the love, the power of love, to forgive one another.

Shame goes back to the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve realized they had done wrong and knew they were naked in front of one another. I have always advocated going for the forbidden fruit, exploring what was around the corner or down the road, intellectually, spiritually, sexually, creatively. But perhaps, in my old age, my point of view has shifted, and looking back, wonder if it was worth it. Goneril and Regan and Edmund should have been stopped before intermission. But we are very fine people, and we try and understand and see things their way. But now, in the final act, we see them for what they are and what they have done and what they have wrought: chaos and destruction. Regan dies by her own hand, after poisoning her sister. Edmund is slain in a duel. As he is carried off, he has his most pathetic line, "Yet Edmund was beloved" (5.3.287), as if that justified everything.

And what is left? The fine, clever, smart people were given the kingdom and ruined it. That doesn't make Lear or Cordelia right, only human. Unlike in *Hamlet*, most of the dead bodies are off stage for the final scene, except for the inverted pieta of Cordelia, dead in her

father's arms, with Kent, Edgar and Albany grouped behind them. All very fine people, with nowhere to go:

The weight of this sad time we must obey,
 Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say.
 The oldest hath borne most; we that are young
 Shall never see so much nor live so long. (5.3.391-95)

The comedy is over. The Iagos, Edmunds, Regans and Gonerils have met their just desserts, but there is no happy ending. The curtain will rise again tomorrow. The very fine people will get another chance.

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