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Once a Villain, Always a Villain: Edmund's "Reformation" in *King Lear*, 5.3.241-2

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Abstract

The article examines possible motives behind the alleged change of heart shown by Edmund at the end of King Lear when, defeated by his brother Edgar, he decides to revoke his former order to execute Lear and Cordelia. Edmund's decision has been almost unanimously interpreted by critics as a sign of genuine remorse and repentance in the face of death. However, I will argue that far from denoting any moral reformation, Edmund's delayed decision to call off the execution is coldly calculated in self-interest, both to play for time and to mollify his captors, Albany and Edgar. Interpreting Edmund's show of pity as feigned rather than genuine helps preserve both the dramatic consistency of the scene and the psychological unity of Shakespeare's stage villain.

Keywords: King Lear; Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616; Drama; Tragedy; Villains in literature.

At the close of a long and eventful scene from the end of *King Lear* the play's main male villain, now defeated in a duel with his brother Edgar, famously decides to revoke his earlier order to have Lear and Cordelia executed, a decision that has almost unanimously been accepted by critics as a sign of Edmund's moral transformation at the point of his death:

> Some good I mean to do,
> Despite of mine own nature. Quickly send—
> Be brief in it—to the castle, for my writ
> Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia;
> Nay, send in time (5.3.241-45).[1]

In the event the reprieve comes too late and Cordelia is hanged in the prison (Lear saves himself by killing his daughter's executioner [5.3.272]). What matters here, however, is Edmund's apparent good will in revoking his earlier cruel decision and his, again apparent, repentance in the face of his own death. Despite Edmund's explicit and genuine intention to save Lear and Cordelia at this stage, I want to argue that there is enough evidence in the play to indicate that Edmund's decision is not motivated by a true change of heart, as is usually

[1] William Shakespeare and R. A. Foakes, *King Lear*, Arden Shakespeare: Third Series (Walton-on-Thames: Nelson, 1997). Subsequent parenthetical references will refer to this edition.

accepted, but is coldly calculated in self-interest, completely without remorse, in the spirit of unscrupulous self-advancement that characterizes all of Edmund's actions throughout the play. In other words, the last scene does not offer us a melodramatic picture of a converted, repentant sinner, but rather one of a confirmed and unrepentant stage villain, who remains so to the last. Such an interpretation of Edmund's character and actions may not fully satisfy the audience's moral sense, but it de-sentimentalizes the figure and in the dramatic sense helps preserve its psychological unity and consistency.

The sentimental view of Edmund's "conversion" has indeed dominated the critical readings of this scene in the past. G. Wilson Knight for example found Edmund "nobly repentant at the last," although a page later in his book the critic calls the character, rather incongruously, "the most villainous of all."[2] Similarly in his detailed four-hundred-page long scene-by-scene analysis of *King Lear* the critic Marvin Rosenberg subscribes to the melodramatic view of Edmund's decision to spare Lear and Cordelia, motivated allegedly by the character growing "more tender-hearted after the evidence that he is lovable"[3] (by Goneril and Regan, [5.3.238-40]). Kenneth Muir too accepts emotional frustration rather than ruthless thirst for power as Edmund's primary motive in the play: "it is a brilliant stroke to reveal here that Edmund's career of crime was caused by his feeling that he was not loved."[4] The critic likewise accepts Edmund's final transformation at face value, attributing a voice of conscience to a character who consistently lacked any scruples throughout the play: "Edmund, who believes only in his own will, and seems at first to be as ruthless as Iago, is moved by the story of his father's death to do some good 'in spite of his own nature'; and he is constrained to admit that there is a moral order in the universe."[5]

However, to argue that Edmund was "moved by the story of his father's death to do some good" ruins in my view the psychological coherence of a dramatic villain, who was earlier able, callously, entirely without remorse, and with full awareness of the consequences of his action, to effectively sign a death sentence on his father by betraying him to Cornwall. The editor of the Third Arden *King Lear*, R. A. Foakes, also believes that Edmund's final lapse "into traditional conceptions of nobility and breeding"[6] is authentic, a view shared by Harry Levin for whom Edmund is "sincerely moved" by Edgar's report of their father's death, and genuinely "resolves to do some good," but his "one humane impulse" is thwarted by the delay caused by Edgar's lengthy retrospective narration.[7]

Other critics in turn refrained from sentimentalizing Edmund's villainous character but still remained puzzled by his sudden, and indeed psychologically inexplicable apparent transformation. A. C. Bradley found Edmund's stroke of nobility "mysterious" and "peculiarly strange" precisely because it disrupted the otherwise "perfect consistency" in the actions of this "professional criminal."[8] The critic Bernard McElroy also finds Edmund's sudden conversion "if not unconvincing, at least not very compelling either in the text or in the theatre."[9] For Howard Felperin the lack of naturalism in Edmund's reformation should be

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[2] G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy*, 4. rev ed., repr (London: Routledge, 1995), 173–174.
[3] Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of King Lear* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 310.
[4] William Shakespeare and Kenneth Muir, *King Lear*, The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare (London ; New York: Methuen, 1985), 279.
[5] Ibid., lii.
[6] Shakespeare and Foakes, *King Lear*, 377.
[7] Harry Levin, *Scenes from Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities, v. 2197. (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), 105.
[8] Andrew Cecil Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, 2nd ed., reprint (London: Macmillan, 1978), 279.
[9] Bernard McElroy, *Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1973), 158.

seen in the context of the play's homiletic structure and moral emblematization, together with equally unnaturalistic scenes of Gloucester's "suicide" and "salvation."[10] Similarly, the critic William R. Elton concedes a degree of psychological inconsistency in Edmund's behaviour, linking his unexpected *pris de conscience* with the Renaissance dramatic convention of the repentant sinner, as in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*.[11] Acceptable within the homiletic tradition still strong in Renaissance drama, Edmund's radical transformation does nonetheless spoil the character's psychological coherence and realism, leaving Harold Bloom puzzled as to the true identity of Edmund from the end of the play: "The change is persuasive, but by it Edmund ceases to be Edmund . . . We do not know who Edmund is as he dies, and he does not know either."[12]

As I intend to argue, the problem of baffling psychological inconsistency in Shakespeare's characterization of his stage villain disappears, if we accept that Edmund's sudden change of heart is only apparent: that is, it is pretended and not indicative of any real moral reformation in the character. In fact, far from denoting any character change, Edmund's behaviour in the final scene is perfectly in harmony with his villainous, ruthless, unscrupulous disposition displayed so consistently in the play. For the purpose of the present argument I assume that a "villain" is a person motivated solely by his own advantage and profit, unhampered in his ambitions by any scruples or considerations for the interests or safety of others, including members of his family. I also assume that this extreme egotistical disposition, like all other psychological dispositions, is part of a person's inherent character and as such remains by and large stable and independent from external circumstances.[13] How a person behaves in a particular situation does of course depend partly on that situation, but it is also important to accept that human behaviour is not solely determined by circumstances, because it depends in part on one's innate, individual psychological dispositions.[14] For example, Edgar in *King Lear* should have all the reasons in the world to hate and avenge himself on his father for the injustice done to him. However, he harbours no such feelings because they would be inconsistent with his inherently conservative character, which includes respect for the traditional values represented by the older generation, and for such general moral virtues as charity and forgiveness.

Edmund's external situation on the other hand is defined first of all by his status as the illegitimate, second-born son of Gloucester, which obviously puts him at a considerable social and economic disadvantage compared with Edgar. However, these external circumstances alone do not produce Edmund's villainous character; it is the extreme egotism he possesses to begin with that compels him to use his social disadvantage as a pretext for unprincipled self-advancement. Similarly, it would be difficult to find any compelling external circumstances that alone would explain the Macbeths' murderous and ruthless actions. In fact, after Macbeth's well-deserved promotion to Thane of Cawdor he and his wife have everything going for them, and the decisive motive for their subsequent unscrupulous behaviour comes ultimately from their innate insatiable thirst for power, advantage, and profit. By the same token, Lear's favouritism towards Cordelia, as well as his paternalism and petulance, cannot be treated as sole reasons for Goneril and Regan's callousness and

[10] Felperin, Howard, *"Plays within Plays" in King Lear, William Shakespeare*, ed. Kiernan Ryan, New Casebooks (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2002), 36.
[11] William R. Elton, *King Lear and the Gods* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1988), 145–146.
[12] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999), 505.
[13] Piotr Sadowski, "Psychological Configurations and Literary Characters: A Systems View," *Journal of Literary Semantics* 29, no. 2 (2000): 105–22, doi: http:/dx.doi.org/10.1515/jlse.2000.29.2.105; Piotr Sadowski, *Dynamism of Character in Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies* (Newark : London: University of Delaware Press ; Associated University Presses, 2003).
[14] Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (London: Penguin, 1998).

maltreatment of their father. These external factors only fuel or trigger actions that spring ultimately from the motives and tendencies already present in the elder daughters' given psychological constitutions (again unscrupulous self-interest). Similarly with Edmund: he cannot help using his social disadvantage as a pretext for his vicious plot, which is motivated primarily by his innate egotism and thirst for power.

Like Iago in his play, Edmund has successfully concealed his dangerous tendencies behind the mask of decency and propriety, remaining totally unsuspected both by his father and his brother. He introduces his true character to the audience in his first soliloquy (1.2.1-22) — a dramatic device that not only reveals to the audience a character's private thoughts, but also emphasizes the fact that the character has something important to hide. Edmund's true colours are promptly revealed in his undisguised contempt for law, custom, and conventional morality, and in his enthusiastic appeal to Nature conceived as a jungle, where everyone selfishly fends for themselves and only the fittest survive. As a villain to begin with Edmund does not really need any justification for his overblown ambitions, lust for power and profit being in itself a sufficient motive for him. At the same time as a character in a play Edmund must explain his intentions in a way that the audience, comprised for the most part of people abiding by certain generally accepted moral norms, would find convincing. Power-thirsty opportunists and careerists in real life are as a rule reticent and secretive about their true motives and plans, but as stage villains they are usually more open and talkative (in their soliloquies), eager to share their dark secrets with the audience. Hence the tradition of the morality Vice and the stage Machiavel, like Richard Gloucester or Iago, dramatic figures who talk at length and with visible relish about their evil plans.

In the absence of any relevant antecedent action in the play that would introduce Edmund as a villainous character, he must justify himself for what he is directly before the audience to become a dramatic character of believable psychology. He achieves this by dwelling at some length on the objectively unfair circumstance of his illegitimate birth, which for no fault of his own placed him in a disadvantageous and inferior position compared to his brother. In keeping with the definition of a stage villain adopted above, I would argue that Edmund's emphatic and embittered repetition of the words "bastard" and "base" ("Why brand they us / With base? With baseness, bastardy? Base, base?" [1.2.9-10]) expresses primarily his resentment about lack of material prospects (things he cares much about), rather than his sense of shame, humiliation, or hurt pride (emotions he seems to care little about). In the above-quoted line therefore Edmund vents his spleen primarily about his frustration at the lack of social and financial prospects arising from his illegitimacy, rather than about the moral stigma attached to his status.

Indeed, the word "bastard" did not become a vulgar term of abuse in the moral sense it has today until the early nineteenth century.[15] During the Renaissance illegitimate status did not necessarily determine one's inferior standing in society, still less one's moral character, once and for all. For example, in his treatise *The Triall of Bastardie* published in 1594 William Clerke stated that in certain circumstances the bastard might prove more virtuous than the legitimate child, and that "vertue sometimes springes from lawlesse knowledge, and vice from lawfull."[16] Francis Bacon too conceded that handicaps such as bastardy or physical deformity could produce envy, "except these defects light upon a very brave and heroic nature, which thinketh to make his natural wants part of his honour."[17] As the critic Alison

[15] J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner eds., *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) s.v. "bastard", 1c.
[16] Alison Findlay, *Illegitimate Power: Bastards in Renaissance Drama* (Manchester ; New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 43.
[17] Francis Bacon, *The Essays*, ed. John Pitcher, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1985), 84.

Findlay also reveals in her comprehensive study of illegitimacy in Renaissance drama, a strong stage tradition of the bastard villain bound to wreak destruction on society did not stop some dramatists from presenting examples of the type that directly contradicted the norm. In drama as in real life, illegitimacy was more of an inconvenience than a mark of "evil nature," and for some individuals this social disadvantage could even be an asset, a form of alienation that enabled them to remain untainted by corrupt society. Hence the dramatic type of the virtuous or heroic bastard, who "strove to model [himself] on traditional ideas of what is good or right."[18] What determines Edmund's status as a stage villain is therefore not the social handicap of his illegitimate birth, but the egotism and lust for power he inherently possesses as a dramatic character, traits he shares in the play with Goneril and Regan, perfectly "legitimate" characters of comparable ruthlessness and unscrupulous ambition.

Enterprising and cold-blooded opportunist that he is, Edmund cannot miss the chance to reap his own benefit from the generational shift in political life initiated by Lear's division of the kingdom. The forged letter with which Edmund compromises his brother contains ideas that genuinely express his own view, namely that estates should be managed by the younger generation freed from the "oppression of aged tyranny" (1.2.50). Besides, as the younger and illegitimate son Edmund cannot legally inherit his father's estate in any case (2.1.67), which means that he cannot even wait until his father dies or retires like Lear, but he must take matters into his own hands at the nearest opportunity. To gain the estate Edmund must therefore eliminate his elder, legitimate brother and, what is even more difficult to do, he must vilify Edgar in his father's eyes to present him as unworthy of his patrimony. Edmund cleverly strikes his father at his weakest point, his conservative patriarchal views, including the fear of parricide (2.1.46) and the paranoid (but in the circumstances not unjustified) terror of political chaos and of revolution supplanting the "natural" order: "Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father . . . Machinations, hollowness, treachery and all ruinous disorders" (1.2.106-14). Gloucester's diatribe offers an accurate description of the political turmoil in Britain at that moment, to which it seems everyone has contributed, both the political adventurers like Goneril, Regan, and Edmund with their schemes and intrigues, and the order-loving traditionalists like Lear and Gloucester with their unwitting and rash decisions.

Edmund finds it easy to rid himself of his brother, and later, to betray his father, because true villains, motivated solely by self-interest, have no family feelings: they treat all people, relatives or not, either as allies or as opponents, depending on their current interests, and they have no scruples in eliminating their opponents, relatives or not, if they stand in their way. For example, the *dramatic personae* of *Richard III* include for the most part casualties, many of them members of Richard's family, all victims of his ruthless rise to power. Likewise Edmund not only has no qualms about arranging a death sentence for his brother, but he also does not think twice about denouncing his father before Cornwall and Regan to further his career. The degree of Edmund's cunning on this occasion is measured by his success in betraying his father without revealing his true motives before Cornwall, Edmund's temporary ally. Edmund's oily hypocrisy and a show of subservience to the Cornwall-Regan party thus help him to achieve two important goals with one move: after denouncing his father he becomes de facto the new Earl of Gloucester (3.5.16), while his pretence of troubled conscience (3.5.9-13) allays Cornwall's possible suspicion about the danger posed by a new upstart. What makes Edmund's action particularly disturbing to the audience is that it is perfectly clear to him that by revealing Gloucester's secret

[18] Findlay, *Illegitimate Power*, 212.

communication with Lear and Cordelia, he is effectively signing a death sentence on his father (3.5.20-21). The moral gravity of this implication is brought home to the audience in Edmund's feigned filial concern before Cornwall: "I will persever in my course of loyalty, though the conflict be sore between that and my blood" (3.5.19-22). This is meant to sound like a voice of troubled conscience designed to fool Cornwall, but it also reminds the audience of the "unnaturalness" of Edmund's unscrupulous behaviour towards members of his family.

With his brother and father now out of the way, the new Earl of Gloucester becomes a political partner of potential significance, especially in the context of the growing mistrust between Goneril and Regan, now sharing Britain between themselves. With the two Queens either widowed (Regan) or planning to be (Goneril, [4.2.22-24]), Edmund's involvement in their political rivalry acquires also a sexual dimension, as each Queen tries to woo him to her side, ultimately with the prospect of sharing the throne of united Britain and the bed with one of them. The political stakes are thus getting higher for ambitious Edmund, who carefully bides his time by simultaneously courting the two women. In the event Edmund replaces the dead Cornwall as the commander of Regan's forces in the war with France (4.7.88-89), and for as long as Albany is of two minds as to which side to follow (either Cordelia's French forces or his own against Cordelia), Edmund comes close to being effectively in charge of the kingdom. The arrest of Lear and Cordelia following the defeat of the French army consolidates Edmund's position as the man in command, and to secure his gain he issues an order to execute the captured King and his daughter (5.3.28-33). This is Edmund's last act of merciless destruction, perfectly consistent with his villainous character, and dramatically necessary if the play is to be a tragedy.

The ultimate nemesis for Edmund and Lear's elder daughters comes first in the person of the hitherto underestimated, "milk-livered" Albany, who recovers in time from his crisis, asserts his legitimate authority over the "half-blooded" upstart Edmund (5.3.60-62, 81), and challenges him to a duel for capital treason. This is where the dramatically more important avenger steps in, Edmund's wronged brother Edgar. Although true villains generally avoid fighting fair duels as it exposes them to open risks and dangers, poetic justice demands a final, violent confrontation between the two brothers, not only to settle their private scores but also to decide the future of Britain.

The fall of the villainous usurper at the hands of his "just" and legitimate brother marks an important step towards at least a partial restoration of justice in the midst of very depressing developments (Lear's and Cordelia's death sentence). However, from Edmund's point of view the defeat and the wound he receives in the duel with Edgar do not necessarily mean the end of his career, only a temporary setback. Even Edmund's ally Goneril, with admirable presence of mind reacts promptly to invalidate the result of the duel, arguing on legal grounds that Edmund had no obligation to accept a challenge from an unidentified enemy:

> This is mere practice, Gloucester.
> By the law of war thou wast not bound to answer
> An unknown opposite. Thou art not vanquished,
> But cozened and beguiled (5.3.149-52).

Goneril's intervention, however, is in turn invalidated by Albany, who produces his wife's compromising secret letter to Edmund, at which point the flustered and "desperate" Goneril leaves the scene. The letter also provides another setback for Edmund, who shrewdly refuses

to supply any explanation as to his part in Goneril's intrigue ("Ask me not what I know" [5.3.158]). He again bides his time, waiting for further developments: as long as Goneril and Regan, his main allies, live and remain in charge of their armies, and assuming that his wound is not mortal, Edmund might still win in his political game. Time is of the essence for Edmund now, for although he remains for the moment in the hands of his enemies, his fate ultimately depends on what will happen to Goneril and Regan. Edmund also has an important trump card up his sleeve, namely his knowledge of the death sentence on Lear and Cordelia, but the use of this crucial piece of information again depends on what happens to Goneril and Regan. If one of the sisters emerges victorious, the execution of the old King and his loyal daughter (now rivals to the throne of Britain) is in Edmund's political interest. So until Edmund hears further about the fate of his royal allies, he keeps quiet about his order to execute Lear and Cordelia.

At the same time Edmund craftily avoids aggravating his captors by appealing to their sense of justice: he freely admits his involvement in the anti-Lear plot ("What you have charged me with, that have I done," [5.3.160]), and he pretends to concur with Edgar's sententious pronouncements about the working of Fortune: "Thou'st spoken right, 'tis true; / The wheel is come full circle, I am here" (5.2.171-72). Contrary to the prevailing reading of this scene, Edmund's resigned, conciliatory tone is not, in my view, a sign of a miraculous conversion of a cynical and ruthless villain into a contrite sinner, now "moved" (5.3.198) by Edgar's story of their father's suffering and death. To the contrary, the show of contrition is craftily calculated to mollify and fool the decent Albany and Edgar, as well as to gain Edmund more time. He obviously remembers his order to execute Lear and Cordelia (5.3.27-40, 46-48), because it was given only minutes before in continuous dramatic time. Moreover, as said earlier, as long as he is still confident in Goneril's or Regan's victory, the deaths of the old King and his youngest daughter play into his hands. This is why to gain yet more time Edmund pretends to be touched by Edgar's story, egging his brother on to tell more:

> This speech of yours hath moved me,
> And shall perchance do good; but speak you on,
> You look as you had something more to say (5.3.198-200).

Edmund's diabolical trick works, as his cue triggers Edgar's rather long and emotional speech recounting mostly his own experience, perfectly known to the audience, interrupted only by the messenger reporting the deaths of Goneril and Regan (5.3.221-26). This is of course bad news for Edmund, but interestingly even at this stage he still keeps his cool and says nothing about the impending deaths of Lear and Cordelia. This is because for someone as cunning and intelligent as Edmund a mere verbal report of a critical event cannot be trusted, let alone acted upon, in case it turns out to be a mistake or a bluff. To change his course of action Edmund needs a visible, tangible proof that his chief allies are really dead, and that his political plans are consequently dashed. The proof is quickly supplied in the form of Goneril's and Regan's dead bodies brought onto the stage, prompting Albany's moralistic remark that "This judgment of the heavens that makes us tremble / Touches us not with pity" (5.3.230-31). It is rather unusual in drama for dead bodies to be brought on stage (usually the problem is how to get rid of them), but here I think the device serves more purpose than to occasion Albany's rather banal comment. First of all, as R. A. Foakes[19] persuasively suggests, by bringing all three daughters of Lear dead on stage in the final scene (the body of Cordelia is brought in by Lear a moment later) Shakespeare wanted to create an emblematic, ironic contrast with the opening scene, where Lear distributes parts of his kingdom among his

[19] Shakespeare and Foakes, *King Lear*, 382.

daughters so "that future strife / May be prevented now" (1.1.43.44). Secondly, in the more immediate sense, the display of Goneril's and Regan's dead bodies on the stage is designed in my view to give the distrusting and calculating Edmund a visible proof that his political enterprise has irreversibly failed: he now has no allies and is entirely at the mercy of Albany and Edgar. It is only after seeing his political ambitions buried together with Goneril and Regan that Edmund decides to stop the execution of Lear and Cordelia, presumably in the hope that his gesture will be interpreted as a sign of remorse that would arouse pity in his moralistic captors, preventing his present bad fate from getting even worse. Where earlier the deaths of the old King and his daughter were in Edmund's political interest, now his "noble" decision to let them live is calculated, again in self-interest, to soften his victorious enemies. Characteristically for his selfishness however, Edmund does not "remember" about Lear and Cordelia until he satisfies his vanity that Goneril and Regan died, as he likes to see it, for him (5.3.238-40). In the event the revocation of the death sentence comes too late for Cordelia, whose death is dramatically necessary to complete the tragic pattern of the play. But even without her death Edmund's meteoric rise to power comes to an end due to circumstances beyond his control: he dies of the wound received in the duel with his brother (5.3.293), which symbolically restores political legitimacy over usurpation and adventurism.

Accepting Edmund's show of pity and nobility in the last scene as hypocritical rather than genuine thus preserves both the dramatic coherence of the scene and the psychological unity of the character. A. C. Bradley's concern that "no sufficiently clear reason is supplied for Edmund's delay in attempting to save Cordelia and Lear"[20] can thus be allayed by the logic of Edmund's characterization as a stage villain, who consistently thinks and acts in exclusive self-interest, who can lie unblinkingly, manipulate emotionally, and exploit the honesty and gullibility of all who stand in his way. There is no need it seems to sentimentalize Edmund by attributing to him qualms of conscience and residual nobility of character, which he is so spectacularly and consistently lacking throughout the play. It may be morally more reassuring, if naïve, to suspect some good in everyone, but the existence of irredeemable villains, totally egotistical and ruthless, is permitted in literature, just as it is also possible in real life.

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[20] Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 253.

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