

Richard III and Edmund

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Introduction

Shakespeare's Richard III and Edmund are ambitious antagonists who treat family bonds as obstacles to power. The original comparison correctly notices that both men use deception, manipulate relatives, and rise by exploiting political disorder. Yet the two villains are not identical. Richard begins *Richard III* by announcing that he has "determined to prove a villain," turning self-conscious theatricality into a political weapon. Edmund begins *King Lear* by rejecting the social shame attached to illegitimacy and asking the gods to "stand up for bastards." Richard seeks the English crown and orders a widening series of deaths; Edmund seeks inheritance, status, and military authority, then becomes entangled with Goneril and Regan. Their similarities reveal Shakespeare's interest in intelligence without conscience, while their differences show how grievance, social exclusion, performance, and choice shape villainy. Richard is the more extensive political murderer, but Edmund is the more psychologically divided figure because his final attempt to reverse Cordelia's execution suggests a conscience that Richard rarely displays (Shakespeare, *Richard III*; Shakespeare, *King Lear*).

Ambition as a Rejection of Assigned Place

Both characters resent the place society assigns them. Richard interprets his exclusion from courtly love and peacetime celebration through the language of bodily difference. He decides that if he cannot participate in the pleasures of the age, he will dominate it through intrigue. Edmund is legally and socially disadvantaged because he is Gloucester's illegitimate son. His opening soliloquy attacks the convention that makes Edgar "legitimate" and therefore heir. In each case, the grievance contains a real social injury: Richard is mocked for his body, and Edmund is stigmatized for circumstances of birth he did not choose. Shakespeare does not present these injuries as excuses for murder and betrayal. Instead, he asks how a person turns humiliation into a theory of entitlement. Richard and Edmund answer exclusion by claiming the right to redesign the social order around their own desires, even when that redesign destroys innocent people.

Self-Conscious Villainy

Richard's defining quality is his awareness that he is performing. He speaks confidentially to the audience, explains his plots before carrying them out, and invites spectators to admire his control. His cynical remark about Clarence—"Simple, plain Clarence, I do love thee so / That I will shortly send thy soul to heaven"—converts fratricide into a private joke shared with the audience. Edmund also explains his plans in soliloquies, but his rhetoric is less devoted to entertainment and more to

argument. He presents “Nature” as his goddess and describes legitimacy as an artificial rule that should not restrict his ability. Both men make spectators complicit by revealing the machinery of deception. Richard, however, turns villainy into a sustained theatrical identity. Edmund behaves like an opportunist who repeatedly adapts to new possibilities, whereas Richard directs a long campaign whose public goal is the crown.

Manipulating Fathers and Brothers

The family is the first arena in which both characters test their power. Richard arranges the death of his brother Clarence by exploiting King Edward’s fear and manipulating a prophecy about the letter “G.” He later uses the royal family’s mistrust to isolate rivals and present himself as a necessary protector. Edmund forges a letter that appears to show Edgar plotting against Gloucester, then warns Edgar to flee and wounds himself to make the accusation credible. The scheme allows Edmund to play loyal son to the father he betrays and concerned brother to the man he frames. In both plots, kinship becomes useful camouflage: people trust the villain partly because they assume a brother or son possesses natural loyalty. Shakespeare exposes that assumption as vulnerable. Richard and Edmund do not merely attack their families; they weaponize the moral expectations that normally hold families together (Shakespeare, *Richard III*).

Language as an Instrument of Control

Neither villain depends mainly on physical strength. Their principal weapon is language. Richard persuades Lady Anne to consider him as a husband while she mourns a man whose death he caused. He stages reluctance when offered the crown, presenting calculated ambition as humble duty. Edmund controls Gloucester and Edgar by giving each a different version of events, then uses the language of loyalty to conceal treason. Their speech works because it is fitted to the listener’s fear or desire. Richard gives anxious nobles a story about national stability; Edmund gives Gloucester a story about filial danger and gives Edgar a story about paternal rage. Shakespeare makes their success unsettling because the lies are not convincing through eloquence alone. They exploit institutions already weakened by succession conflict, patriarchy, suspicion, and civil war.

Richard’s Body and the Ethics of Interpretation

The original essay treats references to Richard as a “lump of foul deformity” or an “elvish-marked, abortive, rooting hog” as evidence that his outward appearance signals inward evil. A modern reading should resist that equation. These insults show how other characters stigmatize Richard’s body and how Richard himself uses that stigma in constructing his identity. Disability or bodily difference does not cause cruelty. Shakespeare’s stage tradition often linked physical irregularity with moral disorder, but the play also reveals the political usefulness of that convention. Richard can describe himself as

rejected, encourage others to underestimate him, and later blame hostile interpretations of his appearance. The ethical point is not that his body makes him villainous. It is that a society's contempt becomes material he chooses to convert into resentment, performance, and violence.

Edmund and the Politics of Illegitimacy

Edmund's grievance is embedded in law and inheritance. He has ability and courage, but primogeniture gives Edgar the estate because Edgar is legitimate. Edmund's famous appeal—"Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed ... Edmund the base / Shall top th' legitimate"—shows both rebellion and ruthless calculation. His criticism of legitimacy exposes an unjust hierarchy, yet his proposed remedy is not equality. He wants to replace Edgar, not abolish the system that privileges one heir over another. Once he gains status, he reproduces the same competition for power. This contradiction makes him more socially complex than Richard. Edmund can articulate a genuine criticism of inherited rank, but he uses that criticism to justify harming people who did not create his stigma. Shakespeare separates the validity of a grievance from the morality of the response (Shakespeare, *King Lear*).

Women, Desire, and Political Advancement

Richard and Edmund both use women as pathways to legitimacy or influence, though the relationships differ. Richard's courtship of Lady Anne is an astonishing demonstration of rhetorical domination. By winning even temporary consent from a grieving widow, he proves to himself that he can rewrite reality through performance. His marriage strengthens his connection to the royal line. Edmund becomes the object of competition between Goneril and Regan after gaining military power. He encourages both relationships and imagines benefiting regardless of which sister prevails. Yet Goneril and Regan are not merely passive victims; they pursue their own ambitions and violence. The triangle becomes one more arena in which desire and sovereignty collapse into each other. Both villains understand intimacy politically, but Edmund's sexual opportunism helps produce the jealousy that accelerates his fall.

Scale and Severity of Violence

Richard is responsible for a broader and more deliberate sequence of killings. Clarence, Rivers, Grey, Vaughan, Hastings, the young princes, and Buckingham become casualties of his movement toward the crown or his attempt to secure it. The murder of the princes is especially important because it destroys children whose existence threatens his legitimacy. Edmund's violence is also serious. His deception leads to Gloucester's persecution and blinding; his alliance with Goneril and Regan sustains the civil conflict; and he orders the secret deaths of Lear and Cordelia. The original essay understates Edmund by saying that he only conspires against Edgar for property. Nevertheless, Richard's political

career depends more consistently on serial elimination. His villainy becomes a governing method rather than a limited inheritance plot.

Conscience and Recognition

The villains differ most clearly in their final moments. Before Bosworth, Richard is visited by the ghosts of those he has killed. He wakes in fear and briefly recognizes that he lacks self-love, yet the recognition does not become repentance or an attempt to repair harm. He returns to battle and dies fighting Richmond. Edmund, after being mortally wounded by Edgar and learning of Goneril and Regan's deaths, says that "some good I mean to do, / Despite of mine own nature." He reveals the order to hang Lear and Cordelia and tries to stop it. The attempt comes too late to save Cordelia, but it matters dramatically. Edmund's identity as villain is not entirely closed; at death he acts against the logic that guided him. Richard's late self-awareness remains more inward and despairing.

Downfall Through the Systems They Create

Richard and Edmund fall when the networks built through fear and betrayal cease to support them. Richard alienates Buckingham, terrifies Stanley, and loses the trust required to maintain rule. Stanley does not simply reduce Richard's army through a personal refusal; his divided allegiance reflects the king's failure to secure durable loyalty. At Bosworth, Richmond defeats Richard and establishes a new political order. Edmund's downfall comes through Edgar, the brother he displaced, and through the destructive rivalry of Goneril and Regan. Each villain assumes that other people can be manipulated indefinitely. Shakespeare shows the limit of that assumption: deception may produce rapid advancement, but it cannot create stable allegiance. Their political intelligence is therefore incomplete because it understands fear and appetite better than responsibility and trust (Greenblatt, 2018).

Who Is the Greater Villain?

If "greater" means more destructive, politically consequential, and committed to killing, Richard deserves the title. He plans for the crown from the beginning, destroys numerous relatives and nobles, and continues violence after becoming king. He also makes the audience watch the transformation of criminal skill into sovereign authority. Edmund is dangerous, but his goals evolve from inheritance to larger power as opportunities arise. If "greater" means more psychologically complicated, Edmund may be the richer figure. His critique of illegitimacy, his need for paternal recognition, his military competence, and his final effort to save Lear and Cordelia complicate a purely monstrous reading. Richard is a master of theatrical villainy; Edmund is a case study in how justified anger can be corrupted into predatory ambition.

Conclusion

Richard III and Edmund resemble one another because they reject assigned identities, manipulate family trust, use language as power, and seek advancement through deception. Both are products of unstable political worlds, but neither is merely a victim of circumstance. Richard converts bodily stigma and exclusion into a consciously performed campaign for the crown. Edmund converts the injustice of illegitimacy into a scheme that disinherits Edgar, betrays Gloucester, and eventually threatens Lear and Cordelia. Richard's violence is wider and his commitment to villainy more sustained, making him the more severe antagonist. Edmund's last attempt at good, however ineffective, reveals a capacity for moral reversal absent from Richard's final conduct. Shakespeare's comparison ultimately separates grievance from responsibility: society may wound these men, but their villainy lies in choosing to make other people pay for those wounds.

References

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