

A response to remarks on whether evil characters could be redeemed
made by Edward Eriksson and Cheryldee Huddleston, 3May2013
in the Shakespeare group on LinkedIn:

<https://www.linkedin.com/groupAnswers?viewQuestionAndAnswers=&discussionID=235432136&gid=1017337>

People change. It's in the nature of being alive. And the change simply isn't fully predictable. So, where there's life there's hope. No matter how evil, if one is still alive, one still has a chance at redemption.

But it can still be highly unlikely. And in the matter of how likely it is...well, we have a number of different phenomena under discussion here, and I'd like to think about what some of them have to do with one another.

If I understand you correctly, Edward, you equate 'turning against the evil they have done' and 'repenting' and 'redemption'; and I'm good with that. But 'they don't know how to stop'; bad dreams; a bad conscience; a wish to relieve themselves of their miserable plight; prayer to somehow get rid of his guilt; sentiment or sensitivity for others; concern for another's pain; and even, Cheryldee, the experience of understanding: those are not the same thing.

There is a significant distinction between remorse and repentance, as I'll call them for our present purposes. Crudely speaking, let me identify repentance as 'If only I could find some way to undo what I've done!' while remorse is, rather, 'I did NOT want to do THIS to myself!' Remorse is unhappiness with corollaries of what one has done, but it remains rooted in reaching, however futilely, for what I want. Repentance is rooted in reaching for what I ought.

Leontes is a spectacular example of repentance without remorse: he is very unhappy that he no longer has his queen or his son or his trusted advisor, but he fully concedes that it's right that he lacks them. Claudius, on the other hand, is a powerful example of remorse with no trace of repentance. As you say, he tries to pray to get rid of his guilt – but not to get rid of his crown or his queen. He flinches to contemplate the consequences he has pulled down onto himself, but he can't drum up any willingness at all to give up what he wants (and has gotten) out of the evil he's done. Buckingham can be played to exhibit both: 'I really don't like this' along with 'I did wrong, and I wish I'd done right instead.'

Now let's look again at these various phenomena.

§ They don't know how to stop?

Just Say No can be excruciatingly painful, far more so than a person is willing to tolerate, even unto death. (There are those who die rather than do what they ought not; but our reaction to that is *not* 'well, duh'!) Nevertheless, to say that someone 'just doesn't know how' is to deny the existence of the core moral aspect of being human that we're exploring here. The bear doesn't know how to not pursue Antigonus and tear out his shoulder bone; but precisely for that reason, the bear isn't evil. Leontes, on the other hand, knows how to consent to the oracle. The storm doesn't know how to stop pouring down onto Lear; but the wind and rain aren't evil. Even Lear calls them no worse than servile ministers of those capable of willing evil. Regan, on the other hand, knows perfectly well how to stop with only one of Gloucester's eyes.

The problem isn't ignorance. Rather, they never decide that stopping is important enough to pay the price of doing so. Claudius is rare in that he actually considers what the price is and whether he's willing to pay it; most of them just shrug away the possibility. 'For mine own good, / All causes shall give way... / Returning were as tedious as go o'er' doesn't mean 'I can't see how to do anything else' but at best 'There's no difference between doing evil and backing off from evil' (measured, please note, by the standard of whether I can get what I want, even if in this case that desire has dwindled to just a hopeless longing to escape from the tedium). He is aware that 'returning' is an option. His choice is to harden

himself against 'the initiate fear' so as to put a stop to his discomfort – his 'strange and self abuse' – instead.

§ Bad dreams?

They may well be part of the unanticipated undesirable repercussions, and thus stimulate remorse. One can also read them as a call to recognize and retreat from the evil – to repent. But even if they demonstrate the character's own deep horror at the evil, they don't automatically carry with them the readiness to take 'I ought' rather than 'I want' as the standard for action.

§ A bad conscience?

That's trickier. I believe one could play Lady M as subliminally repentant, as it were: entirely willing to pay the price of losing everything she gained by the evil, if only she could undo the doing of it...but only in her sleep. In her waking life she never makes the transition. As her dream is ending, she turns away from the struggle to cleanse her hands and back to the struggle to keep behaving as if nothing is wrong. Of course, one can also play her as simply horrified by the evil, with a horror that begins in the first moment the act becomes real to her, when she stands looking down at the sleeping Duncan and sees his resemblance to her father, and grows until her feelings of horror overwhelm any ability even to perceive the things she committed it for, let alone think about letting go of them.

§ A wish to relieve themselves of their miserable plight? a prayer to somehow get rid of his guilt?

These, lacking as they do the subordination of 'I want' to 'I ought', are the essence of remorse without repentance.

§ Sentiment or sensitivity for others? concern for another's pain?

Awareness of something doesn't carry with it the willingness to react to it in a particular way. 'Well, yes, I saw the red light, officer, but I was late for my appointment.'

This is not to deny that such things might be jumping-off places for something that ultimately leads to repentance. They might. But so might just about anything else. That brings us back to my first point, that people do change, and not always in likely ways. But a direct jump from a tender thought to repentance is the stuff of melodrama (or farce), not tragedy. As a first-time playwright explains a villainous role to an actor in Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*, 'you make up your mind to destroy yourself. But, just as you are raising the pistol to your head, a clock strikes—ten. ... You pause...you recollect to have heard a clock strike ten in your infancy. The pistol falls from your hand—you are overcome—you burst into tears, and become a virtuous and exemplary character for ever afterwards.'

§ Well, then, how about understanding?

No, still not. An accurate assessment of the moral situation doesn't inherently include the willingness to choose 'I ought' over 'I want' either. In fact, Cheryldee, I think it could work to play Lady M as understanding, and losing the battle to repress the understanding. Remorse in any degree is an ugly and wretched thing; but truly understanding and yet not repenting sounds to me like an appallingly effective recipe for psychosis.

Just as a point of contrast, I've seen Gertrude played as experiencing real repentance: taking her son's bedroom rebuke to heart and choosing, greatly to Claudius' dismay, not to continue in the enjoyment of the benefits she received from her all-too-facile marriage. But now I'm straying far from our topic; Gertrude is hardly a likely candidate for classification as an evil character.