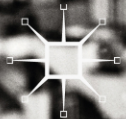


Joel Elliot Slotkin

*Sinister
Aesthetics*

The Appeal of Evil
in Early Modern
English Literature



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For my parents, Richard and Iris Slotkin

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Introduction: Representing Evil in Early Modern England

This book addresses a fundamental contradiction between theory and practice in the literary culture of early modern England. On the one hand, Renaissance theories of poetry emphasize that literature must morally improve its audience; indeed, a preponderance of Renaissance theorists treat this didactic imperative as a defining feature of literature. On the other hand, Renaissance writers are responsible for some of the most compelling and attractive literary representations of evil ever produced: demonic villains like William Shakespeare's insidious, enigmatic Iago or the Machiavellian Richard III; protagonists who descend to baroque acts of sadism or depravity, like Marlowe's Tamburlaine or Beatrice-Joanna in *The Changeling*; and the lush, cruel depictions of infernal landscapes we see in *The Spanish Tragedy* or Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. Such representations frequently seem to undermine the very moral systems that early modern poetry was supposed to inculcate. This conflict of literary values was itself the expression of larger cultural crises in early modern England concerning the role of evil in a Christian cosmos and the proper relationship between religion and art. These crises were fueled by the rise of Protestantism and the political and sectarian conflicts of the seventeenth century.

Understanding the relationship between the treatment of evil in literature and religion requires careful attention to the central role played by aesthetic constructs and aesthetic experience in both spheres of activity. The domain of aesthetics encompasses abstract intellectual principles (ideas

about beauty), concrete cultural constructions (works of art that embody these ideals), and affective responses (the reactions of audiences to these works). Thus, an approach through aesthetics can bridge the gap between literary theory and practice by showing how the embodiment of general poetic principles in a particular poem may generate a particular audience response. An aesthetic approach can be similarly productive for an investigation of religion, because it helps to illuminate what Perry Miller, discussing early American Puritanism in *The New England Mind* (1954), calls “piety”: “the inner core of Puritan sensibility apart from the dialectic and the doctrine” (6). For Miller, piety is a form of subjectivity that includes aesthetic elements.

In recent years, scholars of the early modern period have sought to reorient the still-influential new historicist paradigm by re-engaging with aesthetics and its associated concerns. Literary scholars have focused attention on two of its key components: artistic construction and affective response. New formalist or historical formalist critics have re-emphasized questions of literary form and its effects.¹ Scholars belonging to the so-called “affective turn” have investigated the importance of emotion and the passions in early modern literature and culture.²

At the same time, scholars of the “religious turn” have moved away from the new historicist and Marxist tendency to look through religion to the networks of social and political power that undergird it. Instead, they have sought to foreground the cultural manifestations of religious belief as important objects of study in their own right.³ Scholars such as Debora Shuger and Kevin Sharpe have rightly asserted that religion is not only a system of theological beliefs; rather, aesthetic and affective elements are also essential to its nature and function.⁴ As Sharpe notes in *Remapping Early Modern England* (2000), “Religion was not just about doctrine, liturgy or ecclesiastical government; it was a language, an aesthetic, a structuring of meaning, an identity, a politics” (12). He urges further attention to “religion as a visual, sensual and emotional experience—as opposed to a theological system or polemical sermon” (390). These scholars highlight the interplay between theological concepts and arguments and the subjective experience and perspective of believers. Their work raises a central question in the cultural history of religion, which is well stated by Sharpe: “Were aesthetic revolutions the motor of changing religious sensibilities or driven by them?” (390). *Sinister Aesthetics* addresses this question by looking closely at what happens when writers of the English Renaissance—poets and playwrights, as well as authors of

ballads, pamphlets, and sermons—try to integrate literary aesthetics with religious piety in their accounts of evil.

In addition to clarifying the relationship between aesthetics and religion, this focus allows us to analyze the intersection of two overarching problems regarding evil's nature and function in the culture of the English Renaissance. In religion, the so-called "problem of evil"—why an omnipotent, omniscient, and totally benevolent God would permit evil to occur—is the central challenge of Christian theodicy. It is traditionally considered as a logical and theological problem, but this study will concern itself primarily with the aesthetic and affective aspects of the problem that seem to resist or survive resolutions of the logical conundrum. In early modern art, the problem is to explain why artists at least nominally committed to the inculcation of virtue would devote so much energy and skill to the production of aesthetically pleasurable representations of evil, and the monstrous, grotesque, and demonic forms conventionally associated with evil. The latter problem has proved nearly as intractable for literary scholars as the first has been for theologians, because critics have lacked an appropriate language to talk about the appeal of aestheticized evil. Indeed, both early modern writers and modern scholars of the period all too frequently discount the idea that evil can possibly have aesthetic appeal, or they dismiss positive aesthetic responses to evil as exceptional or perverse.⁵ Such neglect inhibits their understanding of both the real aesthetic complexity of Renaissance poetry and the affective complexity of Renaissance piety.

This study speaks to both of these problems by recognizing at the outset that attractive representations of evil are intrinsic to the production of Renaissance poetry, to the pleasures of literary experience, and to early modern English Protestant religious sensibilities. The appeal of evil in both secular and religious writings of the period rests crucially on the aesthetic qualities associated with evil, and the power of this appeal derives from the interplay between two kinds of aesthetic systems: normative aesthetics, which associate attractive beauty with prevailing notions of the good; and sinister aesthetics, which evoke pleasure in the dark side of divine creation, and thereby offer a potential resolution to the affective component of the problem of evil.

No single work of literature better exemplifies the contradictory treatment of evil in Renaissance thought and poetry than John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674), which provides early modern England's foremost instance of poetic theodicy and, in the character of Satan, its most

notoriously engaging villain. Many Milton critics over the centuries have framed this paradox as an opposition between the poem's poetic and theological aspects, between aesthetic pleasure and religious doctrine. This study argues instead that in *Paradise Lost* explicit theological arguments are necessary for but prove inherently insufficient to the task of theodicy, and that the poem's justification of God ultimately relies on aesthetic manipulation to supplement its theological arguments. Specifically, the poem employs a complex aesthetic in which evil and good, infernal and celestial, "dreadful shade" and "holy light" are seen as integral to the beauty of God's creation (6.828, 3.1).⁶ This reading of *Paradise Lost* offers a more productive context for understanding Satan's attractiveness, a major crux (or deadlock) in Milton criticism. It also elucidates the poetic strategy behind the theodicy of *Paradise Lost*: to develop an aesthetic sensibility in readers that will make them capable of loving a God whose creation includes the darkness of evil and the cruelty of punishment.

Although aspects of Milton's solution are strikingly original, *Paradise Lost* is important because it brings together several major strands of Renaissance discourse that explored the appeal of evil for both artistic and religious purposes. This study traces the historical development, and the poetic and religious effects, of sinister aesthetics through a range of early modern English texts (in the context of such non-English writers as Saint Augustine and Torquato Tasso): Sidney's *The Defence of Poesy* (written 1580s, published 1595), Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596), Shakespeare's *Richard III* (c. 1592), and the popular print literature of ballads, pamphlets, and sermons. I examine how these authors have used the sinister to attract audiences to representations of evil, and in many cases to produce affective theodicies that aim to make divine punishment viscerally appealing, rather than simply morally justifiable. *Paradise Lost* represents the culmination of these strategies in the period, and it serves as one of the foremost inspirations for subsequent theorists to develop an aesthetic paradigm—the sublime—that can encompass the pleasures of the sinister.

AESTHETICS AND MORALITY

Immanuel Kant's seminal *Critique of Judgment* (1790) represents aesthetic judgment as a subjective, individual response that aspires to universality (47). While I share Kant's insistence that judgments about beauty imply a "subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure" (35), my approach more

closely follows Joseph Margolis's *Art and Philosophy* (1980), which argues that "works of art exist only in cultural contexts" and posits a mutually constitutive relationship between the work's "rule-governed order" and culturally specific "appreciative traditions" (49). Crucially for my purposes, Margolis's theory allows for "divergent appreciative systems" within a single culture (227).

Instead of treating *aesthetics* or *the* aesthetic as a universal philosophical category, this book focuses on the idea of *an* aesthetic; that is, a specific set of aesthetic standards operative in a given cultural, historical, and artistic context. This context could be broad or specific; for example, we could speak of a Renaissance aesthetic, or a Miltonic aesthetic, or even an aesthetic that operates only in a particular poem. More precisely, an aesthetic is a culturally specific system comprising a set of artistic *ideals* governing what should be depicted, and *conventions* governing how things should be depicted, the successful use of which produces a pleasurable *affective response* in the observer. A Petrarchan aesthetic, for instance, would express a particular ideal of feminine beauty through the culturally determined conventions of golden hair, ruby lips, ivory neck, and so on. Presumably, this evocation of feminine beauty would be expected to produce certain emotions in the poem's target audience. When referring to more than one of these aesthetic systems, I use the plural form, *aesthetics* (not to be confused with the singular noun).

Morality and aesthetics have a complex and interdependent relationship. Aesthetic ideals are inherently prescriptive and reflect the values of a given culture; as such, they can include or imply a moral component. For example, Petrarchan depictions of feminine beauty are also invested in certain notions of feminine virtue, as when Sir Philip Sidney, in *Astrophil and Stella* (written c. 1582, published 1591), calls Stella's face "Queen Virtue's court" and provides a blazon of her physical features that emphasizes her purity and chastity (sonnet 9, line 1). Aesthetic conventions, on the other hand, are more or less arbitrary signifiers possessing moral valences only through their traditional association with ideals—there is nothing inherently moral or immoral about golden hair, for instance. Nonetheless, early modern writers routinely use such iconography to suggest the moral nature of whatever object they are representing. The Platonic idea that beauty and goodness were ultimately one was highly influential in the Renaissance. In Renaissance literary practice, moral and aesthetic elements frequently bleed into one another, and this study will trace some of these slippages.

An aesthetic whose ideals derive from culturally sanctioned conceptions of beauty and/or virtue is what I term a *normative aesthetic*: it makes pleasing those things that are positively valued within the relevant cultural context. Most theories of early modern literature presuppose that normative aesthetics are the only aesthetics operative in Renaissance poetry. Early modern theories such as Sidney's in *The Defence of Poesy* assume that artistic depictions of the opposites of beauty or virtue are unpleasant because they violate normative standards. In Sidney's model, images of evil ought to function as a kind of aversion therapy by producing an educational revulsion in readers. This theory explained the potential appeal of evil characters in a few different ways. They could charm audiences through normative forms of aesthetic beauty, like the seductive disguise of Spenser's evil witch, Duessa. They could also inspire approval or admiration by invoking normative moral values, such as the heroic virtues of Milton's Satan, his "courage never to submit or yield" (*Paradise Lost* 1.108). In other words, evil could appeal by deceptively masquerading as good or ambiguously combining with good. A properly moral poem would eventually resolve such confusions, making the evil identifiable or separable and therefore repugnant to a right-thinking audience. Evil or ugliness as such could only appeal to audiences whose own sensibilities were corrupt and perverse.

Like Renaissance critics, modern scholars have had difficulty fully addressing the appeal of evil in literature because of their reliance on normative models. Moreover, many modern critics have been just as suspicious as Renaissance moralists of the myriad capacities of literature to cause pleasure, although often for quite different ideological reasons. Milton criticism has been especially susceptible to moralistic interpretations that, in an attempt to respect Renaissance poets' own stated theories about poetry and theology, often treat these theories too uncritically as accurate representations of poetic and religious practice. The most prominent example of this critical mode, which William Empson in *Milton's God* (1961) refers to disparagingly as "neo-Christian" (26), is Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin* (1967). Fish's work has been and remains influential; indeed, scholars such as John Rumrich, Neil Forsyth, and Peter Herman argue that it has become the foundation for a kind of repressive "orthodoxy" in Milton studies.⁷ Fish reproduces key aspects of Sidney's account of vice in poetry, particularly the idea that representations of evil should disgust readers and thereby incite them to virtue, and the assumption that

evil can appeal to healthy readers only by incorporating elements of misguided virtue or deceptive beauty.

In fact, far from simply revolting audiences, the passages that describe infernal landscapes, wicked villains, and demonic or monstrous beings have been among the most attractive parts of *The Faerie Queene*, *Richard III*, *Paradise Lost*, and many other works of poetry and drama in the period—attractive in that they have drawn readers' attention, interest and emotional engagement, and they have inspired discussion, praise, and debate. The catalog of such passages includes not only instances of evil concealed within a fair exterior (which are readily explained in terms of normative aesthetics) but also those generally described as repugnant: Spenser's serpentine Errour, who vomits pamphlets and blind toads; *Macbeth's* hideous witches, with their cauldron of unsavory spell ingredients; and Milton's depiction of Sin, a literary descendant of Errour with a pack of "hell hounds" (2.654) that crawl in and out of her womb. For many readers, these supposedly distasteful representations have often proved more poetically engaging than others that adhere to a normative aesthetic.

To understand these representations, and readers' responses to them, we have to broaden our concept of what an aesthetic system can contain. In theorizing the seemingly paradoxical appeal of evil and the monstrous in art, it is helpful to consult scholarship on a genre whose very existence depends upon the reality of this appeal: the modern horror film. Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror: Or Paradoxes of the Heart* (1990) and Cynthia Freeland's *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror* (2000) are useful indicators of the gap between Renaissance critics and critics of later periods. These authors, in effect, provide serious analyses of the "Horror-Comic or drug-like thrill" that even a pro-Satan critic like Empson dismisses as both contemptible and irrelevant to an authentically Miltonic appreciation of *Paradise Lost* (Empson 272).

Carroll notes that the debate over horror tends to alternate between two extremes:

Many journalists . . . underscore only the repellent aspects of the work—rejecting it as disgusting, indecent, and foul. Yet this tack fails to offer any account of why people are interested in partaking of such exercises. Indeed, it renders the popularity of the genre inexplicable.

On the other hand, defenders of the horror genre . . . often indulge in allegorical readings that make their subjects appear wholly appealing and that do not acknowledge their repellent aspects. (160)

Commentators in the Renaissance often resort to analogous tactics, condemning poetic texts for their supposedly repugnant foulness, or defending them with elaborate allegorical interpretations that render the foulness safely abstract.⁸ Carroll's dichotomy of responses also finds an echo in the work of "orthodox" Miltonists, who labor to make unappealing the poetic elements that readers should find unappealing, while demonstrating that these supposedly unattractive elements effectively convey a commendable didactic message.

Carroll offers two hypotheses that enable a more productive view of the problem. The first is that a love of horror is not in itself pathological or anomalous: "it does not seem plausible to regard these consumers—given the vast number of them—as abnormal or perverse in any way that does not beg the question" (160). More importantly, Carroll theorizes that "the monster—as a categorical violation—fascinates for the self-same reasons it disgusts and, since we know the monster is but a fictional confection, our curiosity is affordable" (189). The idea that fascination and horror are sparked by the same elements, as part of a distinctive aesthetic, is essential to any understanding of the appeal of evil.⁹

SINISTER AESTHETICS

Representations of evil, and the imagery associated with evil, can indeed be described as ugly, to the extent that they violate normative aesthetic principles. But artistic representations of evil are also aesthetic constructions, crafted according to principles and traditions analogous to those governing beautiful things. Thus, if these supposedly ugly representations are in some way pleasing, we could also say that they possess a kind of beauty.¹⁰ Ultimately, though, the terms *beautiful* and *ugly* are equally misleading ways to describe this category of aesthetic objects. Neither is adequate by itself, and together they are oxymoronic. Indeed, part of the difficulty in discussing attractive representations of evil is that the language we use to describe them makes their very existence seem paradoxical and implausible, when in fact they are quite common.

For that reason, I propose the concept of *sinister aesthetics* to describe imagery that appeals aesthetically while violating normative standards of beauty. The word “sinister” can refer to moral evil or to the aesthetic conventions associated with it; the *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter *OED*) definitions include such phrases as “full of dark or gloomy suggestiveness” and “Of looks, etc.: Suggestive of evil or mischief” (I.6.a,b). Its secondary meanings relating to “the left hand” (II.9.b) suggest a dichotomy of normative and alternative rather than superior and inferior, which more accurately describes the role of sinister aesthetics in art.

Whereas a *normative aesthetic* derives its ideals from culturally sanctioned conceptions of beauty and virtue, a *sinister aesthetic* is a set of poetic conventions that generates pleasure by representing things we are supposed to dislike, including deception and cruelty, filth and disease, deformity and monstrosity, destruction and punishment, and the demonic and infernal.¹¹ In this scheme, poetic objects would be *ugly* only insofar as they violate a normative aesthetic without evoking a sinister one. Although the sinister stands in opposition to the normative (what we are supposed to like), it could be described as normal, in that artists frequently make use of it, audiences frequently take pleasure in it, and there is nothing inherently pathological about either of these practices.¹²

Like any aesthetic judgment, distinguishing between the beautiful, the ugly, and the sinister necessarily involves a subjective component. We can empirically demonstrate the existence of particular artistic traditions for representing evil, but they can evoke a wide variety of affective responses from readers in practice. In this study, I have tried to focus on the kinds of responses that texts appear to model or encourage, with the understanding that these textual cues do not ineluctably determine whether actual readers will experience attraction, aversion, or some combination of the two. If a reader takes no pleasure from a given representation of evil and is simply repulsed by it, then for them it is not sinister but ugly.

The normative/sinister relationship I propose is more complex than the mutually defining binary model of containment and subversion popular in new historicism and derived from post-structuralist linguistics and anthropology. In a post-structuralist framework, the subversive represents all that opposes the hegemonic, and for that very reason, so the logic of the argument goes, the subversive defines and is defined by the hegemonic.¹³ Theodor Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* (*Ästhetische Theorie*, 1970) describes how this idea works when translated into the realm of aesthetics: “According to traditional aesthetics, the ugly is that element that opposes

the work's ruling law of form; it is integrated by that formal law and thereby confirms it" (60).

This paradigm has been productive, but it can also lead to oversimplification, reducing the subversive to the mere negation of whatever is hegemonic, of order itself. Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject has been very influential on these kinds of models, particularly for early modernists analyzing monstrosity.¹⁴ Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982) describes the abject as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). The abject is useful because it offers a more inclusive notion of what motivations can be psychologically realistic by theorizing a fascination with what is horrifying, disgusting, or otherwise rejected by normative standards. However, when defined purely in these terms, the abject ultimately serves to re-inscribe the order that it violates.¹⁵

Another problem with overuse of this binary is that, as Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank's "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold" (1995) tartly notes, it becomes all too easy to label everything as "kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic" (500). Shuger's analysis of early modern English Protestantism in *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance* (1990) reveals that the supposedly "orthodox and subversive" elements are quite mingled in actual religious discourse, to the point where "it is not always clear what precisely is subversive with respect to the dominant ideology, nor does orthodox ideology seem quite as monolithic and hegemonic" (1, 2–3).¹⁶

In their discussion of sexuality, Sedgwick and Frank advocate "an affect system described as encompassing several more, and more qualitatively different, possibilities than on/off" (504). The same could be said for aesthetic responses to art and literature. Critics need to keep seeking more precise and flexible alternative models for talking about the things we associate with categories such as the other and the subversive. The sinister and the normative do exist partly in symbiotic, mutually defining opposition to each other, but the sinister is above all a category of competing aesthetic orders that exploit the appeal of objects rejected by normative aesthetics.

Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756) offers a productive model for a binary system that nonetheless maintains these qualitative distinctions between its opposing aesthetics. Burke wrote almost a century after Milton, but he and most other early theorists of the sublime were inspired in no small part by a desire to explain the poetic power of *Paradise Lost*, which they saw as

the defining example of sublimity. Burke ascribes to the sublime a set of concrete aesthetic traits, such as large size, dark colors, rough textures, and bitter tastes. Although most of these traits have corresponding opposites in Burke's definition of the beautiful, the accumulation of detail and texture reveals the sublime to be a distinctive style, not merely an anti-style. On the affective side, the sublime stirs a kind of paradoxical pleasure in things that are supposed to be unpleasant. Finally, the aesthetic qualities Burke identifies have inescapable moral valences, particularly in the sublime's association with darkness, terror, and pain, and yet Burke refuses to simply identify the beautiful as good and the sublime as evil. Burke's distinction between the beautiful and the sublime is thus a useful example of the distinction between a normative and a sinister aesthetic. I have coined the term "sinister" because Burke's sublime is not quite synonymous with the concept I will discuss, and because theories of the sublime after Burke have drastically expanded the term's meaning in directions less relevant to the aesthetics of evil.¹⁷

Like Burke's sublime, the sinister uses its own representational standards and conventions that do not merely reproduce or invert normative aesthetics. It has what Umberto Eco's *On Ugliness* (2007) describes as an "autonomy" . . . which makes it far richer and more complex than a series of simple negations of the various forms of beauty" (16).¹⁸ This autonomy allows the sinister to produce qualitatively distinctive forms of pleasure. A sinister aesthetic is thus not simply the violation of aesthetic order, but an aesthetic order in its own right, partly overlapping with the normative, partly conflicting with it, and partly independent of it. As such, the sinister encompasses literary traditions of substantive representational techniques that are amenable to classification. They include the medieval Vice tradition for representing villains, the classical and Dantean traditions for representing the underworld and hell, some aspects of the early modern grotesque, and the chimera (a creature composed of disparate animal parts) as a paradigm for constructing monsters.¹⁹ By the early modern period, there were many rich traditions of visual iconography that could be categorized as sinister, such as the conventional depiction of devils with horns, bat wings, tails, and cloven hooves.

Renaissance authors faced a dilemma in confronting these traditions. Sinister aesthetics constituted a significant and powerful portion of the poetic repertoire they inherited. Unfortunately, although these conventions were not evil in themselves, their association with evil rendered them problematic for a culture that placed such great emphasis on literature's

moral responsibilities. Authors in the early modern period thus felt powerful pressures to contain and assimilate the sinister within a larger whole that was morally and aesthetically normative. As a philosophical grounding for this practice, early modern writers could draw on Augustine's depiction of the universe as a chiaroscuro painting that derives its beauty from the combination of good and evil elements (see *The City of God* book 11, Chapter 23). Similarly, the neoclassical aesthetic principle of *concordia discors*, or discordant harmony, allowed authors to employ sinister elements provided that they were balanced with normative ones.

While they strove to circumscribe the dangerous power of the sinister, early modern authors—often the very same authors—also pursued a contrary impulse: to push the limits of readers' tolerance for the horrible with elaborate depictions of physical and psychological cruelty, baby-eating hags, the torments of hell, wasting diseases, and blind toads in puddles of vomit. The level of intensity and sensuous detail in such descriptions often accumulates to a point of excess that becomes a sinister technique in its own right, insofar as it violates normative principles of literary decorum, harmony, order, and restraint for its own aesthetic purposes.

Central to the nature and significance of the sinister are the complex cognitive and affective responses that it evokes in audiences. Whereas pure ugliness is simply unpleasant and produces aversion or repulsion, the sinister offers a pleasure that is analogous to but qualitatively distinct from the response to beauty. Moreover, because an object that conforms to a sinister aesthetic must also, by definition, violate a normative aesthetic, appreciating it involves an attraction to something that one simultaneously also recognizes as evil, horrifying, or disgusting. The sinister thus requires audiences to balance opposing sensibilities, emotions, and systems of value. Works that employ the sinister almost inevitably rely on the normative as well, and this combination of elements within a single work can demand a kind of code-switching from audiences. Ultimately, they must negotiate their relation to the dark and morally questionable subject matter and reconcile their interest in it with their ostensible moral and aesthetic values. Enjoying a representation of evil is not the same as committing an evil act oneself, but the sinister can create a powerful imaginative engagement that raises questions about the audience's complicity. Renaissance authors who wished to capitalize on the sinister had to help readers manage this process: to decide which aesthetic sensibilities should govern their responses in a given instance, and to assimilate their appreciation of the sinister into the context of their own moral standards. The result was a poetry that played

complex games with readers' understanding of the difference between reality and fiction and the interplay of good and evil in the moral universe.

Sinister aesthetics have several consequences for the poetic enterprise, consequences that are both enabling and, for poets and critics with a moral agenda, potentially problematic. On the one hand, they provide the poet with a much wider range of sensuous, emotional, and symbolic expression. On the other hand, the pleasure they produce complicates the normative presumption of a mutually reinforcing relationship between beauty and virtue. Since sinister aesthetics have their own appeal as major elements of the poet's art, the poems run the risk of making evil itself appealing. Concern about this fascination with evil was strongly felt in the Renaissance, and not without reason.

Although critics and philosophers often moralize aesthetic issues, poetry inevitably aestheticizes moral ones. Literary depictions of evil are poetic constructions like any other, and therefore capable of producing aesthetic pleasure. It follows that we must understand the aesthetic principles behind these constructions and the responses they elicit, if we are to understand how poetry functions. Without a concept like sinister aesthetics, all representations of evil must be considered either ugly or deceptively beautiful. This limited paradigm makes it difficult to explain or even discuss the appeal of literary epics such as *The Faerie Queene* and *Paradise Lost*, as well as the mysterious poetic energy associated with so many villains in early modern drama. It prevents critics from accurately describing the aesthetic structures out of which representations of evil are built, and it makes readers' engagement with representations of evil look like bad aesthetic and/or moral judgment: either they naïvely take beauty for virtue, they wickedly take vice for virtue, or they perversely and inexplicably take ugliness for beauty. In fact, an appreciation of the sinister reflects a more sophisticated aesthetic sensibility, not a failure of aesthetic judgment, and acknowledging the sinister complicates moral judgment rather than impairing it.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

While the idea of the sinister could productively be applied to a wide variety of historical periods and art forms, from medieval sculpture to contemporary popular music, part of its value as a concept is that it allows us to identify historically and culturally specific aesthetic traditions for representing evil. Moreover, the sinister can play very different roles in

different cultural contexts: demonic iconography does not function in the same way for Milton as it does for heavy metal fans. Accordingly, although I hope that the sinister as a theoretical paradigm may find a wider scholarly application, this study will not attempt to prove its universal or transhistorical validity. Rather, I will focus on the development, use, and cultural significance of certain particular sinister aesthetics in English literature from the Elizabethan period through Milton.

Concerns about evil manifested in a variety of early modern literary, dramatic, and popular texts. Some of the most important literary works of the period were Christian epics that took the conflict between good and evil as their central focus. There was also an explosion of newly sophisticated theatrical productions and of cheap printed material that examined evil from a variety of angles. These developments allowed elite and popular culture, as well as secular and religious culture, to overlap and enter into dialogue in new ways. Playwrights, ballad-makers, and preachers and publishers of sermons competed with each other for market share.

All of these writers used the sinister in order to attract audiences. Underworld set pieces had been an essential feature of the epic genre since its inception, long before Milton made Satan one of his main characters. Dramatists built on the medieval tradition of the demonic Vice figure to create a range of engaging villains. Marlowe's Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1590) seeks to draw the audience in with his gloating evil even though he quickly sheds any redeeming human qualities with which he began the play. Shakespeare's Richard III seduces other characters and many audiences despite—or rather, by means of—his villainy and monstrosity. Although Protestant anti-theatrical writers derided the London theater as Satanic, religious writers and dramatists freely appropriated sinister poetic techniques from each other. Writers of ballads and sermons employed the sinister not only to terrify audiences but also to engage them. It is important to emphasize that, with the exception of compulsory churchgoing, early modern audiences chose to invest their time and money in experiencing these representations.

In this period, the sinister is not merely an artistic element; it has significant religious consequences and is fundamentally linked with shifts in early modern Protestant piety. The aesthetic appeal of evil, as both a theoretical problem and a practical poetic resource, becomes entangled in important religious debates about divine providence and the problem of evil. These concerns grew particularly urgent with the Protestant Reformation, the rise of Calvinism, and the conflicts between more and

less radical Protestants. The opposing branches of early modern Christianity distinguished themselves in no small part through their disagreements about what kind of moral agency human beings possessed, and whether and how sinful behavior could be avoided and/or expiated. Their differing answers to these questions necessarily had implications for understanding God's responsibility for evil.

If we acknowledge the intimate relationship between aesthetics and religious ideology, we can see that the Christian problem of evil has both a logical and an affective component. Solving the problem of evil requires more than a proof of God's innocence based on abstract moral and theological principles, as many early modern writers and modern scholars assume. Logical theodicy is obviously necessary for resolving the problem of evil, but by itself, it cannot offer a complete solution because it does not satisfy the aesthetic sensibilities, which are a fundamental component of religious piety.²⁰ It is challenging but not insurmountably difficult to demonstrate, as a matter of doctrinal logic, that humanity is morally responsible for its own sins. Indeed, the Christian theological tradition is littered with such justifications. But God shapes the form that evil takes; as Shuger says, he "plots the didactic narrative of crime and punishment" (*Habits* 201). It is precisely when we see divine providence as a literary narrative—as in the narratives of the Bible, of history, and of personal experience—that troubling questions arise about the sensibilities of the author. The weakness of any merely logical theodicy is that it does not assuage the repugnance inspired by a God whose aesthetic sensibilities determine both the horrifying details of the human crimes he permits and the cruel forms of the punishments he inflicts in response. This disjunction between divine and human aesthetic sensibilities is the aspect of monotheistic divinity that has always been most in need of justification.

In seeking an affective solution to the Christian problem of evil, one that would work not simply on the level of theology but on the level of piety, some early modern writers exploited the poetic techniques that their contemporaries used to make evil engaging. Sermon writers such as Thomas Adams (1583–1653) and Jeremy Taylor (1613–1667) used sinister imagery not only to describe Satan, as we might expect, but even more to describe God and thereby make his punishments appealing. Milton's *Paradise Lost* represents the period's most searching and ambitious attempt to address both aspects of the problem of evil. The poem demonstrates the limits of logical theodicy and the necessity of a poetic theodicy that uses aesthetics to generate an appropriate affective response to God.

As a poetic theodicy, *Paradise Lost* must convince its readers not just to accept but to actively approve the universe and all of the many evils within it. By presenting divine punishment, particularly its infernal manifestations, as a source of aesthetic pleasure, the poem in effect grants God some aspects of the appeal of a Renaissance stage villain. Of course, Milton also powerfully presents some of God's more conventionally positive aspects. Overall, in fact, the God of *Paradise Lost* is characterized by a chiaroscuro aesthetic, the fusion of light and dark elements, and the poem thereby presents an Augustinian vision of the universe as a troubling but ultimately beautiful combination of good and evil.

This study thus offers an answer to Sharpe's question about whether "changing religious sensibilities" produced new aesthetic sensibilities or vice versa: the two are causally interdependent. Christianity inflects sinister aesthetics by emphasizing the importance of evil as a moral category and by providing a wealth of demonic cosmology and iconography for early modern authors and playwrights to exploit. Christian writers, from lowly ballad-makers to preachers to Milton himself, re-appropriate sinister aesthetics in order to attract audiences and to offer affective theodicies. Finally, sinister aesthetics inflect Christianity by shaping the religious sensibilities of believers who experience an affective response to them—and by becoming part of how early modern Christians represent the divine.

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This book examines the development of sinister aesthetics in England from the late sixteenth century to the late seventeenth century, through the interaction and competition between several different forms of early modern cultural discourse: elite literature (as embodied particularly in poetic theory and the epic tradition), cheap print, religious writing, and drama. That development culminates in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which combines and transforms the various strands of sinister poetics into a new kind of poetry and a new conception of God.

The second chapter ranges over a generically diverse set of ancient and early modern texts in order to provide some of the intellectual–historical context for the more historically focused chapters that follow. It highlights the tensions between early modern literary theory and practice regarding the attractiveness of artistic representations of evil by looking briefly at selected elements of the literary philosophy and epic poetry of Sidney, Tasso, and Spenser. As theorists, these writers were unable to fully

reconcile the appeal of literary representations of evil with their own models for how poetry ought to function. However, they did open up the possibility of acknowledging the sinister and assimilating it into a Christian context by drawing on the ideas of Augustine, who conceives of the universe aesthetically, as a chiaroscuro composition of good and evil elements that together produce a divinely ordained beauty. Moreover, as epic poets, Tasso and Spenser helped to develop an elaborate repertoire of images and techniques for representing evil in appealing ways, thereby generating and refining several varieties of sinister aesthetics for subsequent early modern writers.

Chapter 3 uses Shakespeare's *Richard III* as a model for the treatment of evil and the demonic in English Renaissance drama. Theater in this period saw a tremendous proliferation of figures that challenge or overturn traditional moral and aesthetic standards: attractive villains, malign gods, and humanized or even sympathetic devils. *Richard III* is one of the most influential examples of a Renaissance stage villain whose physical and moral monstrosity empowers him to dominate his play and charm other characters and audiences. Not only is the play unusually comprehensive in the kinds of sinister aesthetics that it explores but it also offers some of the most explicit theorization available within an early modern play about the appeal of ugliness and evil. While *Richard III* primarily presents evil as a form of entertainment, it also raises questions about divine providence, which in the play appears to operate largely through the sinister curses of the vengeful "hag," Queen Margaret (1.3.212).

Early modern theater lies at the intersection between literary and popular culture, and the popularity of demonic figures on the stage reflects larger cultural interests and concerns, including the theological problem of evil. The fourth chapter therefore examines the depiction of divine punishment in two kinds of Renaissance cheap print texts: broadside ballads and sermons. The market competition between plays, ballads, and sermons encouraged their appropriation of infernal and monstrous aesthetics from each other. Ballads about so-called monstrous births not only present them as pleurably fearful spectacles but they also employ what Helaine Razovsky in the title of her 1996 essay calls "Popular Hermeneutics," treating monsters as texts written by God. Depicting God as a monster-maker has important implications for early modern English conceptions of God and his relationship to evil. The chapter concludes with a look at seventeenth century sermons that explore this relationship and cultivate an approval of monstrous and infernal forms of divine punishment.

In choosing to write *Paradise Lost* as a poetic theodicy and not a treatise, Milton inherits both the literary and religious problems of evil faced by early modern English Protestants. He must offer a theological explanation for God's apparent tolerance of evil, but more importantly, he must make his vision of God poetically compelling. The resulting work fundamentally integrates the aesthetic and the theological. Milton sees God's creation as a chiaroscuro composition in which darkness and light, evil and good, are closely intermingled. The poet's task is to bring the reader to a state of mind in which that mingling seems divinely beautiful. From drama, Milton borrows the model of the attractive villain and applies it, first to Satan but eventually to God himself. Milton's representations of divine evil and punishment recall and transform the imagery of popular religious discourse. He constructs a poetic theodicy that engages with the darkest elements of God's nature, and he seeks to justify these elements affectively by infusing them with pleasingly sinister qualities.

Milton's Satan, the period's most notoriously appealing villain, is essential to this strategy. Accordingly, the fifth chapter analyzes Satan's attractiveness and his gradual degeneration. The centuries-old critical debate about Satan has traditionally placed Milton's poetic impulses in opposition to his theological principles. Understanding that piety includes aesthetic and affective components as well as abstract dogmas, however, allows us to see the ways in which Milton's Satanic poetry can express his religious sensibilities. Attending to Satan's own changing aesthetic perspectives elucidates the poem's interweaving of moral and aesthetic concerns, as well as the importance and the dangers of engaging with the infernal.

The sixth chapter examines the crux of Milton's poetic response to the problem of evil in *Paradise Lost*, which is to gradually transfer the poetic power of the sinister from Satan to God, and it explains the religious consequences of this strategy. Milton develops the poetic power of evil while revealing the ultimate origin of that power in God, thus creating a poetic universe that encourages approval of and pleasure in God's punishments, not merely reluctant acceptance of them. In this way, Milton depicts God himself as a *sinister allegorist*: one who afflicts his creations with punishments that are horrible representations of their own evil for artistic purposes, namely to delight and instruct heavenly and human audiences. Milton seeks to show that God's justice is a poetic justice and that the aesthetic principles behind that poetry are sinister.

The epilogue summarizes the book's analysis of how early modern authors made aesthetic use of the appeal of evil, and how the sinister

aesthetics they developed affected their religious piety and theodicy. It then briefly considers the life of the sinister after Milton. The rise of the sublime as a major aesthetic paradigm in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries offered a theoretical validation for taking pleasure in artistic representations of evil, one that ultimately allowed sinister aesthetics to become more independent from religious concerns. Finally, the epilogue suggests some of the uses of—and anxieties about—the sinister in the modern era.

NOTES

1. See Susan J. Wolfson's "Reading for Form" (2000) and the other essays in the *Modern Language Quarterly* special issue of the same title, Mark David Rasmussen's collection *Renaissance Literature and Its Formal Engagements* (2002), Stephen Cohen's collection *Shakespeare and Historical Formalism* (2007), Marjorie Levinson's "What Is New Formalism?" (2007), Verena Theile and Linda Tredennick's collection *New Formalisms and Literary Theory* (2013), and Frederic V. Bogel's *New Formalist Criticism: Theory and Practice* (2013).
2. See Gail Kern Paster's *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (2004) and several collections, including *Reading the Early Modern Passions* (2003) edited by Paster, Katharine Rowe, and Mary Floyd-Wilson; *Politics and the Passions, 1500–1850* (2006) edited by Victoria Kahn, Neil Saccamano, and Daniela Coli; and *Passions and Subjectivity in Early Modern Culture* (2013) edited by Brian Cummings and Freya Sierhuis.
3. Ken Jackson and Arthur Marotti, in "The Turn to Religion in Early Modern English Studies" (2004), contrast Marxist scholars who "decode religious language and ideas as mystifications of economic, political, and social conditions and relationships, usually assuming that religion itself is a form of 'false consciousness'" with scholars who "take seriously religious beliefs, ideas, and history" (168).
4. See, for example, Shuger's *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance* (1990).
5. C. S. Lewis's *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942) and Stanley Fish's *Surprised by Sin* (1967) have helped promulgate this perspective among Miltonists.
6. *Paradise Lost* passages are cited by book and line number.
7. See, for example, Rumrich's 1996 study, *Milton Unbound: Controversy and Reinterpretation* (1).
8. Stephen Gosson's *Plays Confuted in Five Actions* (1582), for example, castigates playgoing as sitting in "the chaire of pestilence" (B7, Kinney 154) and eating the "pollution of idoles" (B8v, Kinney 155). On retrospective moralizing, see my [Chapter 2](#), especially regarding Tasso's

“Allegoria del poema” and Lodovico Ricchieri’s comparison of allegory to an antidote.

9. Most scholars of monstrosity focus on the monster as a “categorical violation”; see, for example, Jeffrey J. Cohen’s “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” (1996), which associates monsters with “Category Crisis” (6). I emphasize the monster’s status as a “fictional confection.”
10. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, whom I quote in the epilogue, uses “beautiful” in this sense.
11. In this book, “demonic” and “infernal” are by default aesthetic terms, not moral ones, pertaining to the representational traditions of demons and hell.
12. As an umbrella term for a variety of deviations from normative expectations, the sinister resembles Bryan Reynolds’s concept of the “transversal,” which he describes in *Transversal Enterprises in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (2006) and elsewhere. But the transversal is constituted by its boundary violations (2, 37), whereas the sinister ultimately represents an alternative aesthetic order.
13. For a seminal new historicist example, see Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), where the binary terms are “authority” and “alien” (9). For Greenblatt’s use of the terms “subversion” and “containment,” see *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988; 30–39 and elsewhere).
14. See also Eric B. Song’s Kristevan reading of Milton in *Dominion Undeserved: Milton and the Perils of Creation* (2013; 5–7).
15. Joel Fineman’s *Shakespeare’s Perjured Eye* (1986) attempts to move beyond this limitation, arguing that the dark lady of Shakespeare’s sonnets “is not a negative version of, nor is she an alternative to, conventional sonneteering ideals” but “the perversion of any such idealization, not simply the lowest rung on the ladder of love, but a power that kicks the ladder out altogether” (58–59). But this approach still relies on negation, rather than attending to what Linda Charnes, in *Notorious Identity* (1993), calls “the structural operations of transgression” (47).
16. This suspicion is not new. Louis Adrian Montrose’s *The Purpose of Playing* (1996; 12) traces it back to Raymond Williams’s *Marxism and Literature* (1977).
17. Another largely post-Renaissance term overlapping with the sinister is the macabre, which can suggest a pleasurable gruesomeness and is applied to literary style beginning in the late 1800s (*OED* A.2).
18. Eco’s formulation is based on Karl Rosenkranz’s *Aesthetic of Ugliness* (*Aesthetik des Hässlichen*, 1853). Because the sinister encompasses Eco’s pleasurable ugliness, I typically reserve the term “ugly” for things that are genuinely unpleasant, with some exceptions when it is shorthand for “that which is conventionally considered ugly.”