

HOW COULD YOU?

YOUR BROKER,
YOUR BOSS,
YOUR BEST FRIEND—
SOMETIMES IT'S THE
PEOPLE YOU TRUST
THE MOST WHO HURT
YOU THE WORST.

BY LYNN SHERR

BIRTH MAY BE our earliest betrayal. There we are, floating snug as a bug in our safe little womb, when—whoosh!—we're shot out into a waterless world by the only person on the planet we know and trust. Or trusted. Little wonder that our initial life-saving gasp for breath is actually an ear-piercing howl. It's a harsh lesson, our first breach of confidence, and probably wasted on such tiny, innocent beings. But the message is unambiguous: "Get used to it."

In a complex society of mutual dependence, where we count on others to fulfill what we have neither time nor talent to accomplish, we are inevitably betrayed, at least temporarily, by everyone and everything we hold dearest: our beaux, our bodies, our bosses, our buddies, our parents, our children, our leaders, our lawmakers and, yes, even our financial institutions.

Look at our history: from Cain and Judas to Brutus and Benedict Arnold, they live among us, and then they do us in. Look at our celebrities: from Brad Pitt to Mel Gibson, they dance into our hearts—and the souls of their lovers—and then waltz on.

Look at our politicians: Eliot Spitzer, Rod Blagojevich, Jim McGreevey—and that's just the governors. We even celebrate them in the arts, from the villainous Iago to the dastardly Don Giovanni to the lusty Madame Bovary. And then there's Lucy, of the late, lamented *Peanuts* cartoon strip. For more than four decades, she teed up the football for her trusting pal, Charlie Brown, then snatched it away at the last minute with a triumphant grin. *Aaugh!* Our best friends, our closest allies, our chosen role models—all have the potential to embody the basic definition of betrayal: when the people or systems we trust the most break their bonds with us, falsifying the facts while they ruin our lives. Or our field goals.

Historically, most have been romantic cheaters—swashbuckling lovers who sought greener pastures for their passion, backstabbing adulterers who made our blood boil. We've also seethed at political traitors—disloyal villains who sold out their office or their country.

But today, as we sweep up after the excesses of a decade or so



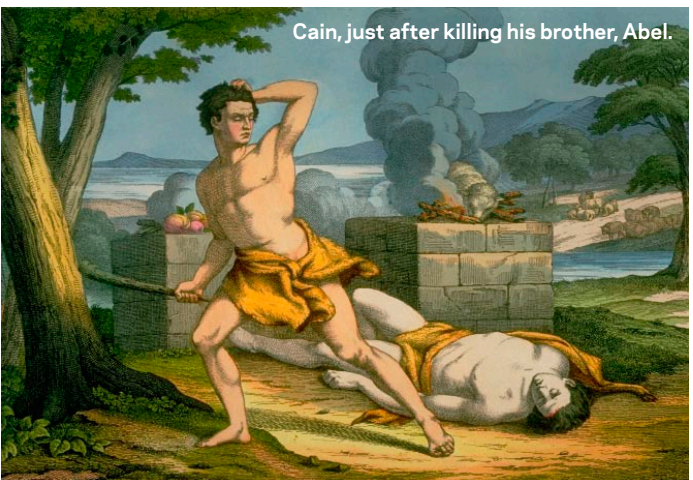
Bernard L. Madoff.



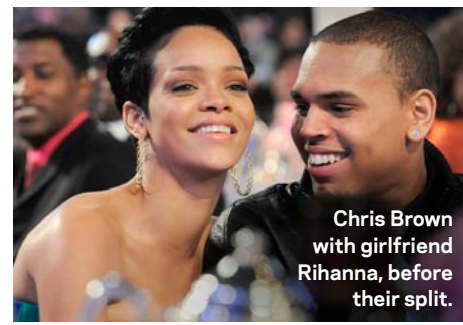
Benedict Arnold.



Eliot Spitzer resigns, with wife Silda at his side.



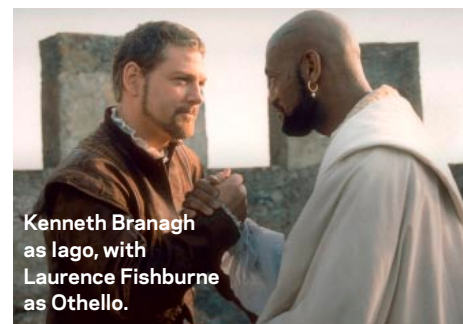
Cain, just after killing his brother, Abel.



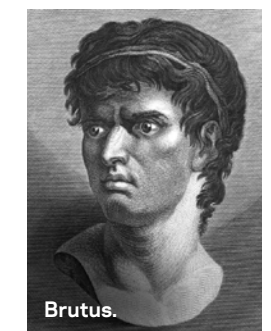
Chris Brown with girlfriend Rihanna, before their split.



WWII propagandist Iva Toguri D'Aquino, a.k.a. Tokyo Rose.



Kenneth Branagh as Iago, with Laurence Fishburne as Othello.



Brutus.



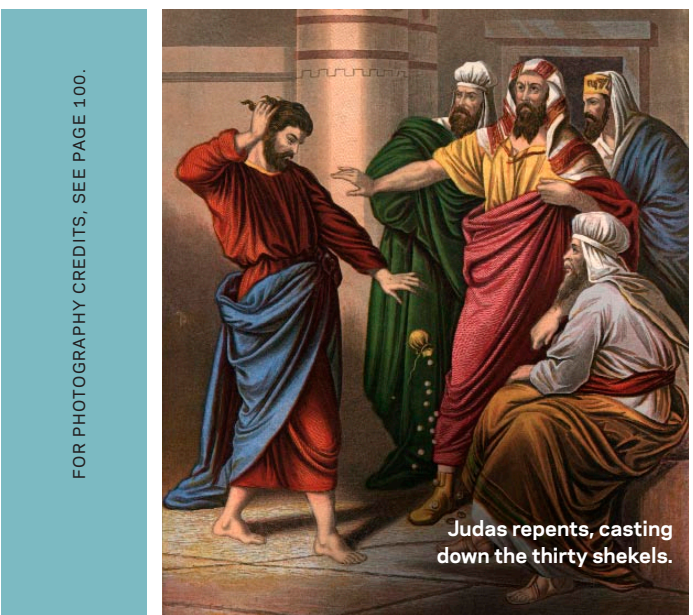
Maria Callas as Medea.



Former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich.



Sir John Gielgud as Macbeth.



Judas repents, casting down the thirty shekels.

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of corporate greed and personal gluttony, the face of betrayal reflects a new subspecies: the financial traitor. Mix them in with the traditional backstabbers and we are swimming in an unusually eclectic alphabet soup of deceivers: A-Rod. Bear Stearns. Chris Brown. Enron. Not to mention a few of my ex-boyfriends who could fill in most of the missing letters. If you've skipped ahead to *M*, for Madoff, you get the point. They were our gods; they are our double-crossers. And whether they deceive our hearts or our purses, what they all have in common is the power to hurt us very, very deeply.

"Betrayal feels awful," writes psychiatrist Eve Wood, M.D., in her new book, *The Gift of Betrayal*. "What you counted on to be true is false.... You don't know who you are anymore or who that other person really is. Your whole notion of your life history is challenged. What was real, and what was not?"

Your self-esteem shrivels. "You begin to question your own sense of judgment, your ability to assess reality," Arnold Richards, M.D., a Manhattan psychoanalyst, tells me. "It goes to your core being—who you are and how you understand yourself and your relationships."

Which may be why in his "Inferno" Dante reserved the final and deepest Circle of Hell, the ninth, for the sin of betrayal, after lust, murder and theft. An icy sea imprisons the guilty in a frigid grave, forever devoid of light and warmth, a fitting sentence for their own lack of compassion. I've got a few candidates who'd fit in fine there; an even larger population would likely think it too

**"BETRAYAL FEELS
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Richard M. Nixon says
goodbye to Washington.



good for Bernard L. Madoff. How come? Why such special venom for our money managers?

Like most Americans who invested in the stock market to nurture some of the money they'd earned over the years, I felt sucker punched when the masters of the universe turned out not to understand the consequences of their dealings, sending Wall Street, and my relatively modest stake in it, crashing down. I hadn't asked for a guarantee; I know the market is a gamble. But the surprising nosedive and the nonexistent underpinnings seemed to violate the deal we had, the deal that said I'd trust them with my money if they'd do the job they were being paid to do, which was to at least give my investment a fair chance. So much for playing by the rules. So much for trusting a system that was founded on—guess what?—trust. The word *credit* comes from the Latin *credere*, "to believe," as in "to trust your bankers." Too bad so few people on Wall Street studied Latin.

Still, my battered balance sheet pales in comparison to those of the people whose fortunes evaporated in the poisonous \$65 billion Ponzi bomb detonated by Bernie Madoff. Their rage is reflected in the language of their complaints: "You must be void of any human emotion, which makes you truly evil," wrote one in an e-mail released to the media. "You are a rapist," wrote another. Another refers to the man who bankrupted her as simply "the MF."

So why do it? Why wipe out the life savings not only of the rich but also of the retired schoolteacher from Montana and the seventy-four-year-old who lost his grandson's education fund in a heartbeat? How do you scam Elie Wiesel, for heaven's sake, who survived the Holocaust only to lose millions from his charitable

foundation as well as his personal savings because of a common swindler? What makes a betrayer betray?

"There is a secret pleasure in being able to put one over on someone," explains psychiatrist Sam Herschkowitz, M.D., of Brooklyn, New York. "Betrayal really starts with a sense of entitlement, and underlying grandiosity."

So it's very selfish?

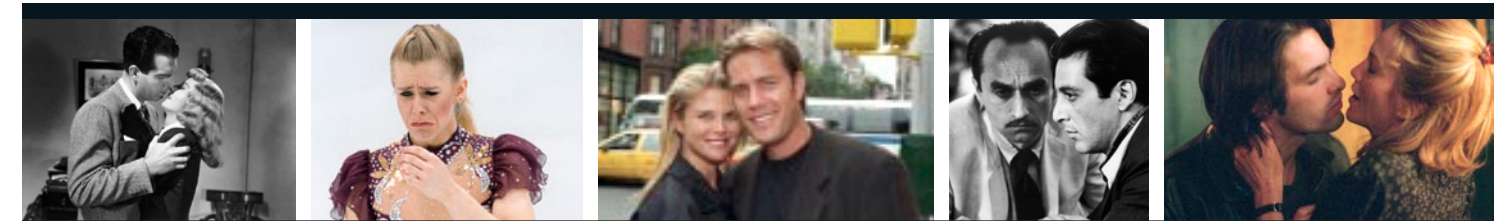
"Oh, yes. And it inevitably ends up being masochistic, because reality bites. You cannot consistently get away with betraying without being caught. And some people think getting caught is what it's about."

Herschkowitz is one of several therapists I consult who labels Madoff a sociopath, a man operating without conscience or any moral compass. "Did you notice when he came out of the courtroom, that s---eating grin?" Herschkowitz asks me. "He did

not look like a man in despair. He looked as if his betrayal had some sense of notoriety: 'Look what I could do, right in front of your noses.'"

Since Madoff hasn't talked, we can't verify his inner monologue. But I got some insight into the mind of another notorious scoundrel—one who betrayed his victims in bed, not at the bank—on a recent night at the Metropolitan Opera, when I heard Don Giovanni, played by Peter Mattei, rationalize his womanizing. "If you're faithful to one, you're cruel to the others," he sang with charming candor, as translated by the Met. "Unenlightened women call this betrayal." Oh, signore, your generosity is overwhelming.

On the other hand, I have no problem with the real-life German *Oberstleutnant* Claus von Stauffenberg, who justified his attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler as a humanitarian necessity



▶ Betrayers' Hall of Shame

POLITICALLY INCORRECT

- Rod Blagojevich
- Brutus
- Andrew Johnson
- Richard M. Nixon
- Marshal Pétain

BIBLICAL BETRAYERS

- Cain
- Joseph's brothers
- Judas

BAD SPORTS

- Chicago White Sox ("Black Sox") team of 1919

- Jose Canseco
- Tonya Harding
- Marion Jones
- Pete Rose

STRANGE BEDFELLOWS

- Bill Clinton
- John Edwards
- Jim McGreevey
- Eliot Spitzer

TURNCOATS

- Benedict Arnold
- John Wilkes Booth
- Guy Burgess

- Salvatore "Sammy the Bull" Gravano
- Alger Hiss
- Julius Rosenberg

WOMEN OF INFAMY

- Delilah
- Mata Hari
- Medea
- Tokyo Rose

ROLE REVERSALS

- Matt Damon in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*
- Peter Graves in *Stalag 17*

- Jeremy Irons in *Reversal of Fortune*
- Diane Lane in *Unfaithful*
- Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*
- Kathleen Turner in *Body Heat*

RISKY BUSINESS

- David Begelman
- Dennis Kozlowski
- Kenneth Lay
- Bernard L. Madoff
- Charles Ponzi

Above, from left: Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*; Tonya Harding; Christie Brinkley and Peter Cook in happier times; John Cazale and Al Pacino in *The Godfather: Part II*; Olivier Martinez tempts Diane Lane in *Unfaithful*.

to rid the world of the Nazi scourge. Killing the head of state is high treason in any government; in this case, it would have been a blessing.

So not all betrayers are similarly motivated or equally roguish. But many do share an uncanny ability to worm their way into our consciousness. Madoff pulled it off with panache. “What Mr. Madoff brought to the table, I think, was a sense of *mish-pocha*, of being part of an extended family, but one you carefully chose rather than being arbitrarily born into,” wrote noted author Daphne Merkin—whose brother J. Ezra Merkin was charged with funneling 2.4 billion of other people’s dollars into the Madoff pot—in the *New York Times*. “He seemed to humanize the cold, frequently anonymous business of investing by giving it an avuncular face.”

Ah, yes, the concerned uncle. He, or a version of him, has conned us all: the paternalistic factory that promised a reward for years of loyalty, then fired workers just days before their pensions would have kicked in; the chummy candidate who vowed to vote for the causes embraced by steadfast supporters, then pulled out when a better deal appeared; the comforting government agency (NASA, led by Uncle Sam) that promised and delivered the moon, then blew the trust with the corrupt management that led to the explosion of the *Challenger* space shuttle.

There may be no sharper portrait of misplaced institutional confidence than country-music star Hank Williams Jr.’s new release “Red, White, & Pink-Slip Blues.” Back in the simpler 1950s, his father, Hank Williams, scolded garden-variety cads with “Your Cheatin’ Heart.” Today, in a ballad released on income-tax day, the son has created a more contemporary character who laments that his professional home, the mill (once “humming 24/7” when he was “foreman on the line 3 to 11”), has “closed down and moved to Mexico.” “I’ve paid my bills / I’ve paid my dues / And I’ve paid my share of taxes too,” he croons, proving that he’s played by the rules. “Now I can’t buy my baby shoes.” Chorus, everyone: “I’ve got the red, white and pink-slip blues.”

“Betrayal is deeply ingrained in country music because it’s such a persistent part of the human experience,” explains John Rumble, senior historian at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, in Nashville. “Country music is not about fantasy. It’s about life as it is. And it’s such a storytelling medium that it



Mata Hari.

ONE FRIEND STILL WANTS TO KILL—YES, KILL—THE MAN WHO DUMPED HER AFTER A LONG, CLOSE RELATIONSHIP.

lends itself well to exploring real life, real emotions. You can express any depth of pain. You can wear your heart on your sleeve and get away with things that in any other genre would feel maudlin.” Its stock-in-trade, he reminded me, is romantic betrayal. And no one mourns it better. Patty Loveless, for example, exhausts her supply of adjectives when she explains her reason for walking out on her guy. Blame it, she sings, “on your lying, cheating, cold / deadbeating, two-timing, double-dealing, mean mistreating, loving heart.”

Women, according to most observers, are more often the victims of extramarital affairs. And several studies show that women suffer more from violent betrayals than men—as the victims of abusive relationships in both childhood and adulthood.

But definitive investigations on the role of gender have yet to be done, and every now and then you have to ask, Who’s betraying whom? That’s playwright Harold Pinter’s point in the stage and film versions of *Betrayal*, the famously backwards-told tale of seven years of marital infidelity in which three people—two men and a woman—ultimately deceive one another more or less equally. Fraudulence, in the Pinter drama as well as in real life, has no gender.

Neither does vengeance. Whether it’s a violation of public trust or private lust, we are uniformly enraged when we are betrayed. And we can get very creative. One friend still wants to kill—yes, kill—the man who dumped her after a long, close relationship. When another found out that her fellow had lied about his holiday plans—that he was really slipping off with another woman—she called the airline and canceled his plane ticket. “I didn’t know her name, so I only wiped

out his,” she tells me. “I got such pleasure out of that.”

Nashville, as usual, nails it. Porter Wagoner sings about a man surprising his wayward wife with a knife after he witnesses her lover buying Champagne to take to her. It’s just, he sings, “the cold hard facts of life.” And Garth Brooks, in “The Thunder Rolls,” describes a woman as “she reaches for the pistol,” saying of her wandering husband, “He won’t do this again.”

Many centuries earlier, Medea (from Euripides’ play of the same name) was so enraged when her husband, Jason, cheated on her that she murdered their children.

Wiesel decreed an unusually vindictive punishment for Madoff: “I would like him to be in a solitary cell with only a screen,” said the usually temperate author during a panel discussion in Manhattan about the confessed crook. “And on that screen for at least five years of his life, every day and every night, there should be pictures of his victims, one after the other after the other, all the time a voice saying, ‘Look what you have done to this old lady, look what you have done to that child, look what you have done,’ nothing else.”

The consequences are far uglier in the “biggest money betrayal in Greek tragedy,” according to classics scholar and retired Wellesley College professor Mary R. Lefkowitz. She points me to Euripides’ *Hecuba*, in which Polydorus, the youngest son of Queen Hecuba and King Priam, is entrusted during the Trojan War to Polymestor, King of Thrace. Plenty of money accompanies the child to ensure his safekeeping. But Polymestor steals the cash and murders the youngster, pretending to his mother that he’s doing fine. When Hecuba learns the truth, she kills Polymestor’s own two sons and blinds him. “All this happens,” Lefkowitz says, “without direct intervention of the gods.”

And that may be the ultimate point. In her book *Greek Gods, Human Lives: What We Can Learn From Myths*, Lefkowitz writes: “Myths do not offer hope so much as a means of understanding. They enable us as onlookers to place ourselves in the world and to get a sense of what we may reasonably expect in the course of our lives. Suffering and hardship cannot be avoided; death is inevitable; virtue is not always rewarded.” And as



Marion Jones.



Pete Rose.

we’ve learned, betrayal is everywhere.

Is it possible, I ask psychoanalyst Richards, to go through life and never be betrayed? “I doubt it,” he tells me. “You have to trust.” Psychologist Harriet Lerner, Ph.D., author of *The Dance of Anger* and *The Dance of Deception*, elaborates on the dilemma, saying, “The only way to avoid the possibility of betrayal is to sit in the corner and take no risks.”

Which is unthinkable. But the risk is not without reward. Our first betrayal—birth—is surely worth it. And so are all the rest, according to psychiatrist Wood, who suggests we use the experiences as growth opportunities. In *The Gift of Betrayal*, she cautions those who have been dumped, dissed or detached from their bank accounts not to obsess about the particulars but to “learn *only* as much as you *need to know* about your betrayal experience in order to heal your life.” You don’t need every phone record, every detail, every bit of evidence. That leads, she tells me, to “analysis paralysis, keeping the person from being in control of his or her life.” Instead, she says, abandon the crusade, let the vengeance go and “just learn enough to be able to move on.”

“It’s not about blame,” she continues, “because the word *blame* says that it’s somebody else’s fault. It’s more, What is our responsibility? What is it about me that was responsible for doing that, and how do I make sure I don’t keep doing that?”

Then she sends it home.

“We’ve created a system that rewards those who win as opposed to those who care,” she explains. “There will always be people who will be betrayers. I don’t think that will ever go away. But what we all have the capacity to do is become more wise at figuring out what we need to do to take better care of ourselves—financially, emotionally, spiritually. And how to minimize the degree to which we step into, or stay in, situations that replay that level of betrayal dynamic.”

In other words, don’t give the football to the Lucy in your life. Do read the statement from your broker every month, every word. And move on when the guy—or gal—does you in. You won’t wipe betrayal off the face of the planet, but maybe, just maybe, you’ll manage to keep the next knife out of your own back. ❖

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