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MENTAL AND MORAL MONSTROSITY IN SHAKESPEARE'S *OTHELLO*

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ABSTRACT: *This essay examines the ways in which the notions of monstrosity and the monstrous are negotiated during the dramatic interaction in Shakespeare's* Othello. *While Renaissance theories of the body (Michel de Montaigne and Francis Bacon) acknowledged that physical and mental deformity were interlinked and influenced each other, Shakespeare's play destabilizes all preconceived constructions of racial otherness and mental monstrosity by having most characters use animal imagery and display monster-like features at the emotional level. Medieval notions of monstrous creatures existing at the margins of the world, drawing on travel narratives, were gradually replaced in Renaissance discourses by an understanding of the monstrous depending on psychological traits. As a result, in Shakespeare's* Othello, *it is not only Iago who displays features of psychological and moral deformity, but also the other characters, including Othello, who use animal imagery that is suggestive of base impulses leading to distorted perceptions of reality. During dramatic interaction, most characters undergo a subtle transformation suggesting the grotesque features of an imaginary medieval bestiary, under the influence of Iago's Machiavellian rhetoric. The paradoxical opposition between Othello's unchecked passion and Iago's apparent rationality creates an imaginary "beast with two backs"—a rational/irrational monster-like creature whose existence challenges previous notions of mental and moral deformity. In the metatheatrical context created by Iago's psychological manipulation, Othello suffers a transformation and becomes a monstrous figure because emotions lie at the threshold between rational and irrational behaviour, while deformity is not a trait of the body, but of the mind.*

Keywords: Othello, *perspectivism, animal imagery, Cyprus, meta-theatricality, monstrosity, rhetoric, Venice*

Lately, concepts of monstrosity and the "monster" have garnered greater and more specific attention in literature than before, and there has been a greater focus on how monsters and alterity are represented in various literary texts. While in medieval texts about monsters these creatures were depicted as physically strange beings belonging to distant lands, in early modern English drama, monsters are represented as human-like creatures who usually hide monstrous moral and mental features. As distinct from medieval literary representations of monstrosity, and similarly to other early modern dramatists, Shakespeare creates characters whose bodies are not generally indicative of their corrupt mental state. Instead, physical traits, race, and ethnic origins of these characters might sometimes even mislead the audience into misjudging characters based on the first impression. This dynamic form of reversal of commonly accepted assumptions—and even stereotypes—makes Shakespeare's plays the locus of debate and negotiation of different perspectives, while none of them is taken for granted and there is no judgemental attitude.

This essay examines how drama applies the concepts of monstrosity and the monstrous differently and how these notions can actually be distinguished as social and cultural constructs. *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* is just one example of Shakespeare's plays that explores what it means when monstrosity is turned inwardly. Shakespeare represents characters who are physically different, yet the true monstrosity is not located in, or is the result of, the characters' bodies; instead, the play depicts the threat of mental deformity. At the beginning, both Othello and Iago invite to deceiving portrayals leading the audience to consider that their social status, race, and origin might be compelling indicators of their future actions. However, throughout the play, it is revealed that Iago, the character who appears "normal" and acts kindly, hides monstrous intentions, while Othello, the Moor, who appears to be different and marginal, because of his race, is not necessarily a monster, at least in the beginning. Nonetheless, it is important to observe how, by the end of the play, Othello's

vulnerability is also transformed into a grotesque attribute, which, by means of Iago's manipulative machinations, facilitates Othello's transformation into a monster-like figure.

In the early modern period, there were many debates about the connection between body and mind, with thinkers such as Michel de Montaigne and Francis Bacon arguing that a misshapen body typically indicated a deformed and violent mind. Montaigne claims that abnormality is linked with character and, although he cites Socrates as an example of how physical deformity does not always indicate a corruption of the spirit, he also claims that more often than not it does. Montaigne argues that the particularity of the human body influences the quality of the soul:

> Nature did [Socrates] an injustice. There is nothing more likely than the conformity of the body and relation of the body to the spirit. It matters a great deal in what sort of body the soul is lodged; for there are many things about the body that sharpen the mind, many that blunt it (Cicero). (Montaigne 986)

According to Montaigne, having a deformed body can damage the spirit and mind, so Socrates should have had an attractive body to accompany his great spirit. Montaigne then continues by distinguishing between ugliness and true deformity; the former is less detrimental to the spirit than the latter: "This superficial ugliness, which is very imperious for all that, is less prejudicial to the state of the spirit and not very certain in its effect on men's opinion. The other, which is more properly called deformity, is more substantial and more apt to strike home inwardly" (Montaigne 986). Thus, the uglier or more deformed a person is, the more likely they are to be inwardly deformed as well.

Francis Bacon similarly argues that deformity is usually a sign of a bad character, and he also warns that those who are deformed are not to be trusted:

> Deformed persons are commonly even with nature: for as nature hath done ill by them, so they do by nature, being for the most part (as the Scriptures saith) *void of natural affection*; and so they have their revenge on nature. Certainly, there is consent between the body and the mind and where nature erreth in one, she ventureth in the other. (Bacon 113)

Bacon's argument is particularly interesting because, on the one hand, he claims that deformed people are largely "devoid of natural affection," thus nature made them behave in the way they do, since their bodies and minds are linked. However, he also implies that people often choose to make their minds match their deformed bodies: they "do by nature" and "have their revenge" for the bodies that nature gave them. He then continues by claiming that deformed people should be watched carefully, since they may try to "somewhat repay" nature and society for their outsider status, and "it is [therefore] good to consider deformity, not as a sign, which is more deceivable; but as a cause, which seldom faileth to the effect" (Bacon 113). Thus, Bacon acknowledges that signs of inner deformity are sometimes false, but having physical deformity can affect the mind as well.

Early modern interpretations of monstrosity and the "monster," unlike earlier (medieval) understanding of these notions, focus on the moral and mental state of characters who appear human yet behave in monstrous ways. As Wes Williams argues, "[t]o call something 'monstreux' in the mid-sixteenth century is, more often than not, to wonder at its enormous size […. but] by the late seventeenth century the term 'monstreux' is more likely to denote hidden intentions, unspoken desires" (Williams 1). Size and shape, therefore, have taken the place of moral deformity, which in the past was associated to religious non-conformity; in Western European thought, moral "monstrosity" was associated with non-Christian religions. Similarly, Daston and Parks claim that "European authors [of the Middle Ages] certainly used the exotic races to test and explore fundamental boundaries in their own culture—between male and female, wild and civilized, human and animal—as is clear from the prominence in travel narratives of beings such as centaurs, satyrs, hermaphrodites and cross-dressers" (Daston, Parks 34). These medieval narratives about the

monstrous were, paradoxically, a form of knowledge and a way of coping with the world's still undiscovered mysteries, with people lying at the margins of the civilized world.

Even monstrous races that were not linked to a particular sin or membership in the wrong faith (i.e. non-Christian) were still interpreted as carrying some sort of divine message. For example, monstrous races—such as the cynocephali, panotii, and sciopods—were typically viewed as part of the wonder of God's creation, which, as argued by St. Augustine in *De Civitate Dei*, were meant to remind human beings of God's infinite capabilities and were often interpreted as having metaphorical meaning (Augustine 21.8, 980).[1] For example, as Daston and Parks aver, the fourteenth-century *Gesta Romanorum* claimed that the "dog-headed Cynocephali signified ascetic preachers in hair shirts […] while the enormous ears of the Scythians stood for willingness to hear the word of God" (Daston, Parks 45). These monsters did not represent a particular sin, but they did carry a divine message that was meant to be interpreted by those who viewed them. Moreover, medieval travel bestiaries addressed a visual imagination that was later used to interpret the incongruities of outlandish geographic locations and faraway spaces.

With the increase in travel and the slave trade, however, the world began to appear to be much less full of far-away monsters. The type of monstrosity attributed to foreign races necessarily began to change in the late medieval period when, as argued by Theo David Goldberg, there was "increasing contact with peoples geographically, culturally, and seemingly physically different from people of familiar form. [Because of this contact,] over time, then, the Plinian categories grew increasingly empty" (Goldberg 23). As the world became less mysterious, the monsters described in Pliny's *Natural History* were pushed to the edges of the known world; according to John Block Friedman, "Although sceptical travellers even at the height of the monstrous races' popularity questioned their existence on the grounds of simple common sense, this attitude grew widespread in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—not only from the impact of new discoveries and interest in the Americas, but also from the force of Renaissance empiricism generally" (Friedman 198). As Norman Smith claims, "The monstrous races still are found in Renaissance geographies and histories, but the Renaissance was less interested in the far-off monstrous races of Africa and Asia than in the monsters they could see about them—anomalous births, strange events, occurrences contrary to nature" (267). As knowledge about the world expanded and testing by reason and experiment became the rule, monstrous creatures were relegated to areas closer to home, as compared to the faraway spaces of the medieval travelogues.

Monstrous individuals, thus, had immediate meaning for the communities in which they lived. As Daston and Parks contend, "If marvelous races were a phenomenon of the margins, an embellishment and completion of the natural order, individual monsters erupted in the Christian center, brought about by its corruption and sin. They were suspensions of that order, signs of God's wrath and warnings of further punishment" (51). In *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Jeffrey Cohen also argues that: [T]hrough the body of the monster, fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space. Escapist delight gives way to horror only when the monster threatens to overstep these boundaries, to deconstruct the thin walls of category and culture (Cohen, "Monster Culture" 17). Cohen's interpretation shows that monstrosity might initially seem alluring while being isolated, but the proximity to it changes this intriguing feeling into something threatening. Cynthia Lowenthal adds meaning to this interpretation by remarking that "Sometimes monsters become monsters because they've been preyed upon by other monsters" (144). Accordingly, as I argue, it is through Iago's constant evil influence that Othello finally becomes a monster-like figure himself.

[1] Some medieval monsters (both black skinned and not) were claimed to be descendants of Ham or Cain, with their physical difference read as a marker God's displeasure. For more on this interpretation of monsters in travel literature see Irina Metzler (382); Mary Floyd-Wilson (10); and John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, in which he discusses both Aristotle and Alexander of Hales' description of these monstrous races as being descended from man (186).

The idea that monstrosity and the "monster" are later understood as social and cultural constructs is more clearly represented in Mark Thornton Burnett's *Constructing* '*Monsters*' *in Shakespearean Drama and Early Modern Culture* (2002). In chapter four, Burnett explains how Othello is the monster who acts irrationally by letting himself be deceived by the fairground exhibitor, Iago. Through the character of Othello, which is the result of significant cultural mediation, the play "makes available a 'monstrous' construction of Africa which is accommodated within specifically English modes of interpretation and mentalities" (Burnett 96). Burnett cogently argues that at the basis of the preconceptions about Othello lie the well-established views about the indigenous inhabitants of Africa and the sub-Saharan regions, giving examples from early modern geographer Johannes Boemus and the ancient writer Caius Julius Solinus concerning the barbarity of the people in these regions (96). According to Burnett, early modern accounts "saw Africa as the repository of 'monstrous' indigenous inhabitants, of a population 'defective' in European standards of physical attractiveness" (96). While accepting Burnett's view about the culturally determined representation of Othello, I add the notion of Shakespeare's perspectivism in the construction of "monstrosity" in the play. Not only is the character of Othello shaped under the influence of contemporary discourses about the Africans' barbarity or supposed monstrosity, but also Iago, Cassio, Roderigo, and even Desdemona are touched by connotations drawn from earlier discourses of monstrosity, and this is demonstrated through the use of animal imagery. As the African Othello, the Venetian Iago and Desdemona, as well as the Florentine Cassio, incorporate monster-like features when seen from different perspectives.

Although he does not appear monstrous, Iago never feels any guilt for his actions. More like his Vice predecessors, Iago is simply evil, and his only delight, according to his confession, is in pouring pestilence in the ears of others (2.3.335-353).[2] Iago brings "monstrous birth to the world's light" (1.3.402) when he infects and deforms Othello's mind with jealousy, turning the once noble Othello into a monster. Iago manipulates the characters around him so that their happiness and security becomes perverted into anger and jealousy: he can turn "virtue into pitch" (2.3.351) and he turns "nothing" (3.3.37)—the lack of crime or fault—into monstrous jealousy and eventually murder. Iago is a chaos maker because he turns the order and goodness of the world back into chaos. When Iago declares, "I am not what I am" (1.1.65), he does more than declare his own duplicity; he tells the audience that he will act as an antagonist to God's creation.[3] While God *creates from nothing*, Iago *uses nothing* to make monsters and destroy Othello and Desdemona, whom Cassio calls the "essential vesture of creation" (2.1.64). Furthermore, Iago never feels any guilt for his actions and he uses Othello's difference as a way to manipulate him. As Iago's words work on Othello, "chaos is come again" (3.3.93) and Othello loses his noble self to the monster-like creature that Iago plants into his mind.

Othello is a noble character whose outward difference neither indicates nor causes his eventual monstrous actions. Othello is physically different from the other characters, but the opening scenes of the play carefully establish that Othello is not one of the monstrous Africans frequently depicted in medieval romances or on the Renaissance stage, such as George Peele's Muly Mahamet in *The Battle of Alcazar* (1589), Christopher Marlowe's Ithamore in *The Jew of Malta* (1590), Thomas Dekker's Eleazer in *Lust's Dominion* (1599), or even Shakespeare's Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* (*c.* 1588-1593). As Eldred Jones claims, these characters "were usually embodiments of villainy, needing no elaborate psychological reason for their character; they were bad because they were black" (48). In Shakespeare's *Othello*, however, these ideas about undesirable blackness and connections with the

[2] All references to *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice* are keyed to the Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare, edited by M. R. Ridley (1974). Further references are to this edition and will be given parenthetically in the text.

[3] David Rosen and Aaron Santesso similarly argue that Iago is declaring himself to be counter to God. They gloss "the deeper meaning of Iago's blasphemy" (26) thus: "by evoking God's self-identification in *Exodus*, Iago (and Shakespeare, we may safely add) is suggesting that, in this world, an uncomplicated, tautological identification of self and role is possible only for a transcendent being. Iago's little joke is on all of us" (26).

monstrous are distorted and driven to a different level: not only does the North African Othello display monstrous traits, but also the European characters show signs of moral monstrosity; among them, Iago's personality is the worst.

The connection between black skin and villainy was certainly not a new idea. In the medieval period, in addition to associating black skin with religious difference and physical monstrosity, the hot climates of Africa and the Middle East were believed to cause humoral imbalances that led to excessive lust and violent temper. Heat was not only believed to affect the physical appearance of a person, but it was also thought to negatively affect the body's humours and therefore the personality. People of darker skin were not only assumed to be sinful, but it was also believed that "the 'intense heat' of Africa produced intemperate lust" (Floyd-Wilson 23), as well as aggression, laziness, and a lack of faith. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes, "Since skin color was a bodily signifier of the distribution of passions within the individuals and groups it characterized, Christian texts could link corporeal difference to a foundational difference in character among unbelievers" ("On Saracen Enjoyment" 118).[4] Shakespeare's *Othello*, however, distorts and reverses the period's beliefs about black monsters by showing that other characters, beside the Moor, display various degrees of moral deformity.

In the discussion about Othello's apparent monstrosity it should be noted that Othello's black skin marks him as an outsider, but he is a noble and good character, until Iago infects his mind with jealousy, the "green-ey'd monster" (3.3.170). Shakespeare inverts the expectation that being black or a Moor marks a character as lustful and violent (like Ithamore in Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* or Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*); instead, the true psychological monstrosity comes from Iago, the "normal looking" Venetian. Iago makes nothing—insinuations and accusations—appear to be real evidence of Desdemona's infidelity. He thus performs a sort of reverse creation, or mockery of God's creation, making monstrous jealousy out of nothing, and deforming Othello's mind until Othello cannot tell illusion from reality. Iago makes Othello insane with jealousy, and all the while, he works on convincing Othello that amidst the intrigue and betrayal playing out around him, he can always trust his loyal friend Iago. A friend so loyal as Iago warns Othello to be mindful of his own emotions: "O beware jealousy" (3.3.169). The declaration is ironic because it is a true statement delivered under false pretences and heightens the dramatic irony at work in the play.

This scene in *Othello* (3.3) reveals one of the most devious and expert manipulations at work, with Iago as the manipulator, who plays all sides of the lie. Iago is not interested so much in pushing any one lie in particular as in pushing all of them at once. Through Iago, Shakespeare shows how one motivated liar can have power over those around him simply because of the destructive force of his lies. In the context of apparently warning Othello about falling prey to his negative emotions, Iago invites him to beware of jealousy, since "It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock / The meat it feeds on" (3.3.170-171). Jealousy determines people to do awful things and this is why Iago calls it a "monster." Why does the metaphor include the green-eyed figurative expression attached to the word "monster"? Probably because it is one of the rawest human emotions and, if left unchecked, it can lead to the most devastating consequences. In this connection, it is noteworthy that the ancient Greeks believed that jealousy occurred as the overproduction of bile, which turned human skin slightly green. This synaesthetic metaphor leads to the inference that jealousy can become a living-colour emotion; therefore, colour becomes associated with feeling. Regardless of the various interpretations of this metaphor, Iago's use of it proves the point that the real monster in this discussion is not necessarily jealousy, but Iago himself, who turns Othello's emotions against him.

Othello's human limitation prevents him from seeing that he is committing a monstrous murder until it is too late for him and Desdemona. In order to understand how Othello becomes an apparently monstrous figure—while he is not—it is essential to examine his physical and moral features at the beginning of the play, as well as his transformation throughout the play and the motives

[4] Cohen also cites many more excellent sources linking black skin with sinful natures, including Isidore of Seville, Bartholomaeus Anglicus, and Gregory the Great (119).

that trigger his alteration. One of the reasons why Othello can be perceived as the *other* is because he has dark-coloured skin—an aspect frequently emphasized within the play. He impersonates a marginal individual who is different from the white Christian Venetians through race and ethnic origin, physical traits, and even the religion he had during his childhood. He is called "the Moor," instead of being called by his name, and he is repeatedly referred to as "an old black ram" (1.1.88), "Barbary horse" (1.1.111), "an extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere" (1.1.135-136), and "an erring barbarian" (1.3.356-357). Othello himself declares that his origins are not Venetian and during his life's adventures he met monsters: "the Cannibals, that each other eat; / The Antropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders" (1.3.143-145). Even if Othello narrates about strange-looking creatures, he does not show to have been touched by their monstrosity until he falls under Iago's influence, the "super-subtle Venetian" (1.3.357). Moreover, since Othello is a Christian convert, as Iago claims (2.3.334), this fact adds to his character representation: he is the *other* and yet similar to Venetian citizens.

The transformation of monstrosity in Shakespeare's play, from a vilified feature transferred from medieval bestiaries into a constant of civilized nature in cosmopolitan Venice and militarized Cyprus, is made possible by means of rhetorical bathos and inversion. Rather than explaining in theoretical terms what monstrosity means in the hierarchy of Renaissance cultural values, audiences are made to see contrasts between Venetian civility and exotic barbarity, while all the time the animal imagery deflates the grandiloquent phrases about honour and racial prejudice. Examining how the rhetoric of animalization in *Othello* compels us to think early modern categories of race in connection with early modern discourses of "human" versus "animal," Steven Swarbrick declares that "in much Renaissance drama, the black Moor takes over some of the structural functions of the 'other' left by certain religious identifications" (79). However, as Swarbrick points out, "in Shakespeare's *Othello*, some of the more complex figurations of blackness do not simply juxtapose black characters to white characters but situate both in a larger field of bodies that include, quite prominently, animals" (79). Animal imagery, therefore, enhances Othello's monstrous depiction and drives the audience into perceiving the Moor as a grotesque impersonation even before eloquent action truly occurs.

Othello and Iago are constructed in rhetorical lines of opposition, in which animal imagery suggests monstrous traits, while the world of civility in Venice is expected to produce rational creatures. The Venetian Iago uses animal imagery in his description of Othello as the Moor holds the highest position in the Venetian military hierarchy—a symbol of civilized, though aggressive, behaviour. A similar dichotomy is observed by Mark Thornton Burnett, who states that "…Iago is realized as a fairground-type impresario who shows 'monsters', and Othello as a sort of Baconian 'rationalist' who requires 'proof' of their existence" (6). As Burnett rightfully concludes, "*Othello* can be most profitably regarded as a work in which two rival cultural traditions interlock and compete for prominence" (*Constructing* '*Monsters*' 6). Iago frequently uses animal imagery in order to give a brutalized impression of Othello. In the first act of the play, he refers to Othello and Desdemona's love making in speaking to Brabantio: "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.88-89) and "you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you" (1.1.110-112). By using these animal images (he is comparing Desdemona to a white sheep and Othello to a male adult sheep whose only aim is breeding), Iago calls attention to Othello's distinctive origin and race. Although Othello is a noble gentleman and a general, Iago mischievously manages to turn Brabantio against Othello.

The paradoxical opposition between Othello's passion and Iago's apparent rationality creates an imaginary "beast with two backs"—a rational/ irrational monster-like creature. When Iago says to Brabantio: "I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter and the Moor, are now making the beast with two backs" (1.1.115-117), he is actually recreating an imaginary medieval bestiary in which the paradigms rational/ irrational annihilate each other. By using this euphemistic metaphor for sexual intercourse, Iago's pursuit makes Brabantio even angrier at Othello. Sandra Young also observes the "incendiary images" (26) used in reference to Othello, which "render him more animal

than human" (26) in the discursive context of "offensive images that emerge from Iago's evident mischief-making" (26). Yet, as I argue, it is not only the postcolonial "global context" (21) analysed by Young, and the representation of identity "within the shifting psychic terrain of early modern global expansionism" (27) that is framed in the play, but also the dramatic negotiation of paradoxical miscreation that helps engender the monsters of imagination during the sleep of reason.

Despite the fact that Iago appears to behave rationally in an environment in which most characters are guided by passions, the ensign is the one who uses animal metaphors most frequently. Moreover, these images are deployed both in the civilized world of Venice, with its republican Senate and cosmopolitan commercial milieu, and in the confined space of the island of Cyprus, governed by dark passions and overarching ambitions. Shortly after their arrival on Cyprus, Cassio tells Desdemona that Iago "speaks home . . . you may relish him more in the soldier than in the scholar" (2.1.165–66), which occasions Iago's first real promise to take his revenge. Yet Iago's revenge is in words and action, not in theoretical principles, as a scholar would do. Iago uses animal imagery not only to portray Othello, but also, when he talks to himself, to imagine Cassio's behaviour to Desdemona: "He takes her by the palm; ay, well said, whisper; as little a web as this will ensnare as great a fly as Cassio" (2.1.167-169). Iago uses this metaphor to promote his own reasons for manipulation, in relation to the helplessness of those who cannot defend themselves from his traps. Iago casts himself in the role of the spider, the symbol of reason in classical mythology, which enmeshes the helpless fly (Cassio). By comparing Cassio to a fly—while the spiders' web refers to the net of lies that Iago uses in order to achieve his monstrous ambition—Iago distorts the Renaissance belief in rhetorical artifice that had shaped European mentality for centuries. Emily Pitts Donahoe observes this tension between rhetoric and reason in Iago's behaviour: "If Iago has been passed over because of his rhetorical failings, he will make up for it by taking advantage of the rhetorical failings of Cassio and Othello to work their destruction" (326). It is the paradox of reason guided by emotion and imagination that lies at the centre of the play's metatheatrical construction of monstrosity.

In the scene in which Iago imagines himself as the spider weaving the web of reason in order to ensnare a vulnerable fly (Cassio), Iago engenders the monstrous hybrid double-backed creature reason/ imagination. When he sees Cassio taking Desdemona's hand, Iago casts himself as the playwright/ director of a theatrical production in which he would use the rhetorical artifices of his artistic trade to entrap those who do not know what lies in wait for them. In other words, Iago uses his capacity for reason to create suggestive metaphors that would engender monsters in Othello's imagination—but also, implicitly, in the audience's fictional worlds. By directing his own play-within-the-play, through which Iago ensnares Othello, Cassio, Desdemona, Roderigo, and Emilia in a web of lies, Iago manipulates discourse and other characters' imaginations. Just as Othello's speech in his defence before the Venetian senators (1.3.128-170) becomes a meta-narrative in which he describes his own skill of storytelling, Iago's projection of his manipulative intentions is the meta-theatrical response to the action he sees in front of him in Cyprus—that of Cassio taking Desdemona's hand. In this meta-theatrical context, the handkerchief is just a theatrical prop, as Cyprus is the setting of a play-within-the-play. Shawn Smith has noticed the meta-theatrical aspect in *Othello*: Iago "acts as a stage director manipulating the handkerchief from one association to another" (33).[5] Indeed, the metaphorical beast with two backs, formed of opposite cultural and moral constructs, reveals disturbing notions of meta-theatricality in a play that is known for its perspectivism.

Blood is also associated with animal imagery and the base passions engendered by the senses, which are attributed to the lower nature in humans. In a study analysing violence and identity in *Othello*, Jennifer Feather observes: "Iago calls love 'merely a lust of the blood and a permission of the will,' invoking a guiding consciousness absolutely in control of the animal nature contained in

[5] Shawn Smith further argues for the opposite emotions (compassion and cruelty) as triggered by the use of the theatrical prop: "Shakespeare's use of the handkerchief in *Othello* can thus be viewed as a kind of metatheatrical contemplation of its ambivalence as a prop that is alternatively associated with kindness and compassion, on the one hand, and cruelty and vengeance, on the other" (33).

the blood" (255). Feather alludes to the connection of blood with passions in Renaissance physiology, as in the animal "spirit" of Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* (129), derived from Aristotle's physiology. Being possessed by the "animal spirit" means that a person is inclined to act rashly, in accordance with the impulses provoked by sanguine reactions, without the control of passions by reason. Yet Othello's violent impulses are always counteracted by civility and a certain rhetoric of both body and mind. He is eloquent in sustaining his point before the Senate of Venice, but he also acts rashly at the strained moment of killing Desdemona. Even if his actions might be interpreted as being those of a monster, who acts out of impulses produced by animal passions, there is always a rational imperative in Othello's mistaken convictions, which makes him demand the "ocular proof" (2.3.366) in support of Iago's instigations. As Jean Porter argues, Othello acts as he does out of "mistaken belief" (27) about Desdemona's infidelity, one of Othello's "factual mistakes" (27), because he is a victim of "deliberate deception" (28). Although he seemingly acts unencumbered by ethical rules, there is always an element of rationality in Othello's inner conflict, which destabilizes any preconceived idea about the terrible blood vengeance taken under the pressure of base animal impulses.

Not only does Iago employ animal imagery, but also, as a result of Othello's moral transformation, Othello himself uses animal symbolism. Already under the effect of Iago's malicious efforts to plant jealously, Othello says to himself:

> O curse of marriage,
> That we can call these delicate creatures ours,
> And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad,
> And live upon the vapour of the dungeon,
> Than keep a corner in the thing I love,
> For others' uses. (3.3.272-277)

Othello compares himself to a frog (toad) and alludes to the fact that his wife, Desdemona, is cheating on him. He then concludes that it would be better for him to be trapped in a dungeon, similar to a frog, than prolong his relationship to the allegedly dishonest Desdemona. The foul "vapour" or air of a dungeon can be assimilated to the animal spirits, the instinctual impulses that often replace reason in a human being. Yet Othello projects the speech into the realm of imagination and make-believe by means of the subjunctive: he does not say that he (thinks he) is a toad, but that he "had rather be a toad." Just as, in Venice, he constructs fictional stories to impress Desdemona with his deeds, in Cyprus, Othello creates a fictitious world of terrifying animal-images, which corresponds to his mental state.

Othello's inner struggle becomes even more visible when he associates Iago to a devil, just before stabbing him: "I look down towards his feet, but that's a fable, / If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee" (5.2.287-288). Othello becomes so infuriated with Iago having deluded him that he compares Iago to the devil, expecting to see actual devilish physical features on Iago's body (the cleft feet). Since these marks are not visible, Othello's anger grows so high that he eventually stabs Iago, but does not kill him. This final scene is the counterpart of the opening scenes, when Iago casts himself as the "devil of the play," according to Julia Lupton (77). As most Protestant sermons and Renaissance treatises aver, the devils' human incarnations are considered monstrous creatures, whose morality is non-existent and who do not obey any kind of principle. Iago professes such immoral (or rather amoral) behaviour when he argues nonchalantly: "Virtue? A fig. 'tis in ourselves, that we are thus or thus" (1.3.319). Even if Othello, at the peak of his transformation, sees Iago as a morally monstrous creature who is incapable of human compassion, a "devil" in every sense of the word, Iago does not see himself that way. For Iago, the moral principles propagated by holders of orthodox convictions are just formal ideologies that merit no attention, while he believes identity is based on self-knowledge. The nature of Shakespeare's perspectivism is such that there is no way of

counteracting any of these opinions. Whether a saint or a devil, or neither of these hypostases, human nature is a mystery and nobody can be called a monster, even if there are serious reasons to believe so.

Compassion is an essential human virtue yet Iago denies them all, as he implicitly repudiates the capacity of empathizing with other people's sorrow and pain. Divergent attitudes about pity are inherited and amplified by Renaissance thinkers, who recognize the social and religious significance of Christian charity, but also the potential use of compassion as a tool for deception. This is what Victoria Kahn has called "Machiavellian rhetoric": "a rhetoric of *de facto* political power—a rhetoric of theatrical violence, sembling and dissembling, whether in the service of the commonwealth … or in the interests of the self-aggrandizing tyrant" (237). This rhetorical ambivalence is exploited in the figure of Iago, whose manipulation of logical proof as part of his Machiavellian rhetoric is a deception in itself. It is possible to interpret Iago's particular form of Machiavellian rhetoric and his lack of compassion as signs of his mental monstrosity, but the play's dynamics contradicts such interpretations. Paradoxically, it is Othello who uses animal imagery when referring to Desdemona's supposedly false tears, which imply lack of human compassion, as he compares her to a "devil": "If that the earth could teem with women's tears, / Each drop she falls would prove a crocodile" (4.1.239-241). In Othello's distorted perception, it is his wife who shows false human compassion, like the crocodile's tears. In the 1601 English translation of the *Natural History*, Pliny writes that "the River Nilus nourisheth the Crocodile: a venomous creature, foure footed, as daungerous upon water as the land" (208). In Othello's distorted imagination, not only crocodiles are dangerous, but women are "venomous" as well, because of their lack of compassion, as their tears show hypocrisy.

Deception is a mental monstrosity that affects every character in the play: not only does Iago deceive Othello, but also Desdemona deceives her father, Brabantio; Cassio deceives Bianca; Othello deceives Brabantio and is under the false impression that his wife deceives him; Emilia deceives Desdemona and Othello; and even Roderigo, apart from being deceived by Iago, accepts to deceive Othello by means of Iago's machinations. Just after being stabbed by Iago, Roderigo exclaims: "O damn'd Iago! O inhuman dog!" (5.1.62). Since he knows how Iago, wickedly and cold-heartedly, betrayed everyone around him, Roderigo senses Iago's inhumanity and compares him to a dog. The frequent use of animal metaphors in *Othello* creates a tension between the general conviction concerning racial otherness, as well as the inhuman passions attributed to animals, and the reality of Venetian civility. In the distorted mental world of the play, monstrosity belongs to those who wilfully deceive the others, while base animal instincts are assigned not only to Africans, but also to members of the Venetian (or Florentine) civilized society. During dramatic interaction, mental monstrosity becomes a hybrid creature, a beast with two backs, composed of rational and irrational impulses. Regardless of race, skin colour, or cultural and social hierarchy, Shakespeare's perspectivism invites the audiences to detect degrading and irrational inclinations in characters whose apparent civility is undeniable. Mental and moral monstrosity on Shakespeare's stage is a metatheatrical feature of human nature, showing that the real monsters lie hidden in civilized norms of social behaviour.

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