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Monstrosity as a Problem of Moral Proximity in Shakespeare's *Othello*

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, the titular character deals with the problem of being considered a monster due to his "otherness." Othello's monstrosity is a topic of much literary criticism. First, Othello being seen as a monster is a representation of the "other" for Shakespeare in his time. Maria Perez Cuervo writes "Societies create their own concepts of "self" and "other", and what is seen as "other" often acquires monstrous traits. Analysing a society's monsters will reveal who the dominant groups are, and who they mark as inferior. A monster is, therefore, more often than not, a political construct" (Perez Cuervo). If Othello is seen as more and more monstrous, he becomes more and more feared by his society, and therefore more and more outcasted. Because of this, Othello is seen as trying to control his narrative. Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin write:

Despite Othello's attempts to control the exotic tales he invokes, his otherness preconditions him, locating him within powerful narratives of difference. Constructions of the human in peripheral space were enmeshed in discourses based on fear of difference, and impulses to dominate (Hatchuel and Vienne-Guerrin 24-25).

Although Othello attempts to control his own narrative, the way he is seen by the other Venetians controls how they think of him. Mark Thornton Burnett writes "From Iago's

perspective, Othello is an 'erring Barbarian'(I.iii.356) one 'defective' (II.i.226-8) in 'loveliness...sympathy...manners and beauties' (II.i.226-8)" (Burnett 96). While Othello's otherness remains a crucial part of his narrative, his monstrosity could be argued as less an evil nature of the other, but rather as a problem of moral proximity, and that Othello's demise comes more from corrupting his humanity than his monstrosity.

The problem of moral proximity is the idea that good and evil are not on two polar opposite sides of a black and white spectrum of ethical behavior, rather they are the byproducts of the debasement or esteeming of certain neutral characteristics. For example, a person could be very careful with money. If this person were particularly savvy with their money and tried to save money where they could creatively without it completely taking over their personality, they would probably be considered frugal or thrifty. If that same person became obsessed with pinching every single penny, to the point where they were considered cheap by those around him, such as Ebenezer Scrooge from Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, they would be considered miserly, a tightwad, and probably wouldn't have tons of friends. Another example would be if a person was courageous, or in other words lacking fear, they could be seen as brave if they were willing to, say, lay down their life for their loved ones. However, they could also be considered reckless by ignoring their fear and doing something stupid and dangerous. The theme of monstrosity could also be seen as a problem of moral proximity.

Monsters in literature are typically aggressive, animalistic and violent, and when the monsters are human, they are seen as intelligent, and without empathy, sometimes even seen as a face for the "other." However, these characteristics of monsters are also traits that are sought after. In the world of athletics, for example, the terms "monster," "beast" and "freak" are

considered compliments. These terms even work their way into nicknames: Patrick Ewing (Hall of Fame NBA player) was known as the “Beast of the East,” Marshawn Lynch (NFL running back) is known as “Beast Mode” and Giannis Antetokounmpo (NBA player) is known as the “Greek Freak.” These players earned these nicknames because of their monstrosity between the lines of their respective sports. However, these characteristics, being strong, intelligent, aggressive and animalistic, are all considered admired and coveted traits in the world of athletics. These athletes, like LeBron James (Los Angeles Lakers) and Zion Williamson (Duke Basketball) fit all the criteria of monsters, and are even considered the “others” of society. These “freaks of nature” are usually much bigger, stronger, and have skills and abilities that to the normal people see as unnatural. This is so apparent in the world of sports that most team names are either the names of aggressive animals, (Bears, Lions, Falcons, Bulls, etc.) or are the names of warrior groups who share these monstrous qualities, (Giants, Warriors, Patriots, Vikings, etc.). Society, then, has come to expect those who are warriors or serve in the military to have these characteristics. In fact, soldiers are now trained to attain these monstrous qualities, including being able to take a life. These are things that Othello had developed in

This idea of monstrosity as a neutral characteristic rather than an automatic evil is best explained with an example from cinema. In the movie *Space Jam*, five aliens are sent to earth looking to capture the Looney Tunes, and to do so, they need to win a basketball team against the cartoon characters. Being incredibly undersized, as well as knowing nothing about the sport, the aliens decide to steal the “talent” of some famous NBA players and store it in a basketball until they are ready to unleash it. They then use this talent to become the Monstars—giant, super talented basketball playing monsters who do nothing but abuse the Looney Tunes during their

“Ultimate Game.” After defeated, the talent is taken back by Michael Jordan to the NBA players so they can play basketball again. The characteristic of “monstrosity” in this case, the players’ talent, is a neutral quality. While the talent is stored in the ball, those monstrous traits from those athletes is neither inherently good nor evil. However, when this neutral trait is put into a being who is corrupt, like the evil aliens trying to kidnap cartoon characters, that monstrosity becomes corrupt and evil and vice versa.

Othello, as a character, embodies this idea of the morally neutral monster. Othello was sold into slavery when he was young, was shipped around the mediterranean and never knew his family. Shakespeare shows that Othello’s experience helped him to develop the strength and physicality that one would expect of a warrior, as Othello, explaining to a war council that Brabantio, Desdemona’s father “oft invited me;/Still question'd me the story of my life, /From year to year, the battles, sieges, fortunes, /That I have passed/ I ran it through, even from my boyish days,” (Othello 1.3.128-132). As Brabantio learns, Othello had been battling foes since his youth, having to develop these monstrous qualities need of a warrior for years. It is also interesting to note that in this same scene, the senators heading the war council are reluctant to charge Othello with any crime when Brabantio comes to report his belief that his daughter had been seduced and corrupted by Othello. At first, the Duke is very willing to condemn whomever Brabantio was accusing, saying “Whoe'er he be that in this foul proceeding/Hath thus beguiled your daughter of herself/And you of her, the bloody book of law/You shall yourself read in the bitter letter/After your own sense” but recoils and defends Othello when accused: “To vouch this, is no proof,/Without more wider and more overt test/Than these thin habits and poor likelihoods/Of modern seeming do prefer against him” (1.3.65-68, 106-109). The Duke

understands the importance of Othello to Venice's militaristic goals, due to his noble use of his monstrous warrior tactics. The Duke, then gives Othello a mission at Cyprus rather than punishing him for marrying Desdemona.

Desdemona as well sees the morality in which Othello's monstrosity resides. Othello was first able to gain the attention of Desdemona through his telling of stories from his past: tales of slavery, travels, fighting cannibals and the like. "These things to hear/would Desdemona seriously incline" (1.3.145-46). "She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd," said Othello, "And I loved her that she did pity them" (1.3.167-68). Desdemona fell in love with Othello because of his experiences, and because he was able to survive and overcome the dangers that had befallen him. In other words, Desdemona had fallen in love with Othello because he was a monster, not in spite of it. Joan Ozark Homer writes of Desdemona and Othello's marriage "these martial exploits occur within a marital context in which the lovers face challenges to the type of faithful love that constitutes true marriage. The love relationships, therefore, are not supposed to be divorced from the warrior's occupation, as we might typically expect" (Homer 133). This also shows that Desdemona didn't just love him because of his past experiences in war, but that he would continue to do so in the future. Desdemona even acknowledges her prevailing understanding of Othello's monstrosity as he goes to kill her:

**Desdemona.** "Talk you of killing?"

**Othello.** "Ay, I do."

**Desdemona.** "Then heaven

Have mercy on me!"

**Othello.** "Amen, with all my heart!"

**Desdemona.** “If you say so, I hope you will not kill me.”

Desdemona understands in this moment that Othello is very capable of taking another life, but here she is just begging him not to take *her* life. In this moment, she attempts to deflect the corrupted monster of Othello and appeal to his wholesome side. Even as he is trying to kill her, Desdemona still believes in the monster that she fell in love with--the noble warrior, not the insecure, green-eyed murderer.

If monstrosity, as a neutral quality, is to be a problem of moral proximity, then it must also be corruptible. Iago is able to use the gentlest of insinuations of Desdemona’s supposed infidelity in order to use jealousy to corrupt the monster of Othello. Iago makes an interesting observation while explaining his plan to the audience in an aside:

The Moor is of a free and open nature,  
 That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,  
 And will as tenderly be led by the nose  
 As asses are.  
 I have't. It is engender'd. Hell and night  
 Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light. (1.3.377-382)

This line is very telling of Iago’s thoughts on Othello. Iago sees “the Moor” as honorable and trusting, but also gullible like an ass. I point out this detail because it reinforces the idea that Othello, although having this neutral monstrous quality, is honest and trustworthy of those he believes to be honest. Iago also believes that Othello is also so easily corruptible, that it would be like leading an ass by the nose. This comparison of Othello to an ass is interesting because it also shows that Iago also sees Othello as a beast of sorts. Iago’s plan is not to corrupt the beast, but

corrupt the humanity of Othello, and thereby “bring this monstrous birth to the world’s light” (1.3.382).

Mark Thornton Burnett writes “Othello is seen as ‘monstrous’ because [he was] overtaken by the bilious imbalance of his inner constitution” (Burnett 103). Othello’s monstrosity was succumb to corruption because of his humanity. In Act 3 Scene 3, while discussing the developments of Desdemona’s relationship with Cassio, Othello begs of Iago “Nay, stay: thou shouldst be honest,” and in a foreboding moment of wisdom, Iago responds “I should be wise, for honesty’s a fool,/and loses that it works for” (3.3.378-380). In other words, Iago says that it’s crucial Othello should be wise and skeptical rather than trusting, because blind trust can lead to demise. While Othello automatically assumes that Iago is urging him to be skeptical of Desdemona, Iago is also making a harrowingly honest indictment of himself. Othello is being told by “Honest Iago” what Iago wants him to hear. Iago is able to exploit the reputation that he has as well as his relationship to drive a wedge between Othello and his wife, simply because Othello trusts him. This trust leads Othello to believe all of Iago’s lies, corrupting his emotions, leading his monstrosity to then become corrupt as well. By appealing to Othello’s more humanizing characteristics of honesty and trust, Iago corrupts the monster that Desdemona fell in love with, which then consumed her.

While Othello is written to be viewed as a monster, Shakespeare does very interesting things in portraying Othello as the “other.” Humans have a tendency to divide people into an “in-group” and “out-group,” the “accepted” and the “other.” Maria Perez Cuervo writes “Societies create their own concepts of ‘self’ and ‘other’... what is seen as ‘other’ often acquires monstrous traits... [Monsters] stand for anything that is hideous, morally objectionable,



abnormal, or taboo” (Perez Cuervo). Othello is a moor, his actual ethnicity is unknown. It’s clear to all of Venice that he does not belong. Along with this is the mystery of Othello’s past. Sarah Hatchuel and Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin write “As a black other these [tales of his past] are dangerous discourses to invoke, for Othello himself is a marvel from peripheral space, and thus potentially ‘monstrous’ both to himself and to those around him” (Hatchuel and Vienne-Guerrin 24). Othello’s otherness is portrayed by the fact that he has no real home, has many dangerous and violent experiences in his past, and has a different skin color than the rest of Vienna. It’s no wonder that Shakespeare used this character to explore the moral proximity surrounding monstrosity. Says Perez Cuervo, “Analysing a society's monsters will reveal who the dominant groups are, and who they mark as inferior. A monster is, therefore, more often than not, a political construct.” Othello, then, shows how Shakespeare’s society viewed those of African descent. However, in the play, Shakespeare points out that while Othello’s otherness contributed to his monstrosity--his experiences as a slave likely taught him how to fight and gave him strength both physically and mentally, and his military background gave him experience with taking life-- his monstrosity and his otherness are not the same. While Othello was not the choice of husband Brabantio would have made for his daughter, Othello did not enchant Desdemona with witchcraft as Brabantio suggests, nor did he seduce Emilia as Iago suggests. While Shakespeare codes Othello as monstrous by the visual depiction of the character, Othello became a monster in the neutral/good sense through his experience and not from birth. Not only that, but Othello is able to utilize those experiences to contribute to the state productively.

The problem of Monstrosity in Othello is the idea that Othello’s evil monstrosity was actually created by what people saw from him on the surface, his otherness, rather than how his

otherness contributed to his understanding of the world. Othello was really only seen as a moor derogatorily by Brabantio and Iago. Brabantio saw Othello as a danger to his daughter. He was only really friendly towards Othello as a comrade, but as a potential mate, Brabantio's opinion of Othello's otherness became a hangup for him. To Iago, Othello was always dangerous and considered a monster. Iago's lying and meddling, while unwarranted, turned Othello into the beast that everyone secretly thought he was. This is an interesting lesson from this play. We as people can make others into the monsters we think they are by treating them like the monsters they are.

The trope of monstrosity is not a new lens with which to view *Othello*. However, modern interpretations of the word "monster" from other fields disassociated with literature can give us a new, fresh lens with which to view Shakespeare's Tragedy. Through this lens, Iago did not create the monster of Othello, nor was Othello born a monster due to the color of his skin. Othello became monstrous due to his experiences in slavery and at war, and this monstrosity was an admirable trait for him in Vienna. It was only through Iago's corrupting of Othello's humanity that brought out the evil monster we typically associate with the term. This play also teaches that we can create monsters of people simply by treating them as such.

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