Othello – Monsters and Monstrosity (emagplus)

Diane Crimp asks questions about who the real monsters are in Shakespeare's Othello.

The word 'monster' comes from the Latin monstrum, meaning 'a malformed person or animal'. In Shakespeare's day, such unfortunates would be displayed, perhaps in a fairground, for money. They would include such figures as the giant, the bearded lady, conjoined twins and exotic animals and were popularly known as 'freaks of nature'. (Once such 'freak shows' were banned, of course, they were replaced by the Hall of Mirrors, in which the visitors to the fair became the freaks themselves.)

When, in Act 1, Scene 3, Othello tells the Senate the story of his life and how he won Desdemona's love by regaling her with it, he recalls meeting monsters on his travels:

> *the cannibals that each other eat,*
> *The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads*
> *Do grow beneath their shoulders.*

These are typical figures in the tall tales associated with travellers, but their mention here does more than add exotic colour to Othello's spellbinding account. In a play where the characters are too busy preparing for the obvious enemy (the Turks) to perceive the true enemy within their own ranks (Iago), it is equally ironic that these obvious, physical monsters should be the ones at whom the listeners are invited to tremble when the truly dangerous monsters are actually within. Monsters such as those Othello lists reappear throughout the play in various forms.

The first time we encounter monster imagery in the play is, of course, when Iago uses it to exploit Brabantio's already racist attitude to Othello. The monstrous picture of 'the beast with two backs' is quickly followed by an evocation of descendants who are, grotesquely, half-person, half-horse. It is interesting that even the inn Othello and Desdemona elope to is called the Sagittary, a place which would originally have been used as an arsenal, called after the mythical half-man, half-horse Centaur or Sagittarius, showing how the play is permeated with monster imagery that reflects the obsessive horror of an 'unnatural' mixed marriage among many Europeans of the time. Yet a man with two faces (like the god Janus by whom Iago appropriately swears) is surely as much a monster as an animal with two backs and, in his shocking shift from loving Othello and inviting him to his house to demonizing him as 'a thing', it could be argued that Brabantio is the real monster here.

A monster image it is easy to pass over is the one describing Desdemona in Othello's tale of how he won her love. Straight after the mention of the

> *men whose heads*
> *Do grow beneath their shoulders*

we are told how Desdemona would

> *with a greedy ear*
> *Devour up [Othello's] discourse.*

She is, thus, presented as another unnatural creature with a part of the body in the wrong place (an ear where a mouth should be) – as she is again later in Iago's declaration that 'Her eye must be fed.' These images show us her father's view of her (which presumably extends to that of most of Venice), as someone who had behaved in a monstrous way in falling in love with a Moor: 'For Nature so preposterously to err…'. They may also, however, hint at a more discomfiting fact: that inside all of us, even a young woman as apparently pure as Desdemona, there lurks a monster, only waiting for the right provocation to emerge. She did, after all, deceive Brabantio.

Another apparently virtuous character with an inner monster in this far-from-black-and-white play is Cassio. It is at first wine that releases this and Cassio speaks afterwards as though wine itself is a monster, entering through the mouth to take away the reason:

> *O God, that men should put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains!*

He acknowledges that, with the help of wine, we can 'transform ourselves into beasts!' He is probably unaware that his drunkenness not only made him quarrelsome but also brought out an arrogance we had not before suspected: 'the lieutenant is to be saved before the ancient'. Finally, he comes out with the most obvious monster image of all when he compares himself with Hydra, a many-headed serpent in Greek mythology: 'Had I as many mouths as Hydra …'.Once we see him with Bianca and hear the previous courtly speech he used of Desdemona, 'The riches of the ship', transformed into the insults he uses to sneer at 'this bauble' Bianca, we realise that he is, indeed, able to speak with many tongues.

A type of monster very familiar to the Jacobean audience was the cuckold, the man whose wife was unfaithful and who, in consequence, was said to sprout horns from his forehead (presumably because everyone could see them except him and, as the saying goes, the husband is always the last to know). One of the few ways in which a woman had the advantage over a man was in knowing who the father of her child was and men lived in fear of the dishonour cuckoldry would bring as well as the dread of bringing up a child (possibly an heir) who was not their own son. Othello replies to Iago's exhortation to be 'a man' that it is impossible since 'A horned man's a monster and a beast.' Iago replies,

> *There's many a beast, then, in a populous city,*
> *And many a civil monster.*

Cynical as this is, we are reminded again of the many Januses there are in life and how many monsters are hidden beneath civilised exteriors.

The poison Iago uses to release the monster inside the noble Othello is, of course, jealousy, itself presented as monstrous in the most famous monster image of the play:

> *It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock*
> *The meat it feeds on.*

This portrayal is reminiscent of the cannibals Othello speaks of meeting on his travels, supposedly exotic creatures he thought he had escaped falling prey to only to find them waiting in the harbour of his marriage.

It could be said that Iago's whole aim in the play is to turn Othello into the monster he would like to prove to the 'civilised' world that he is. In advising him to strangle Desdemona rather than poison her (a method we would expect Iago, with his love of 'medicine', to favour), he succeeds in making him look savage and unnatural as well as framing him conclusively. In the end, however, it is the 'demi-devil' Iago, with his metaphorical cloven hoof, who proves to be the true monster of Othello.

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