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Race and the Spectacle of the Monstrous in *Othello*

Whoever believed in the Ethiopians
before actually seeing them?

Pliny

Near the end of *The Tempest*, Antonio jests that the monster Caliban "is a plain fish, and no doubt marketable." As an earlier remark in the play makes clear, however, Caliban would be valuable not only in a fishmarket but also as an exotic creature for display at court, "a present for any emperor that ever trod on neat's leather."¹ When Shakespeare was writing *Othello*, his attraction to Cinthio's narrative about a black Moor in Venice may likewise have been a playwright's recognition that Othello's skin color would give him a "marketable," spectacular charge on the stage, as a character whose appearance marked him as Other, as having originated somewhere beyond the boundaries of the familiar. Although blacks had appeared on stage in earlier English plays, such roles were still extraordinary in 1604, when *Othello* was probably first performed.² The opening scene of the play further exoticizes Othello with its references to him not by name but as "the Moor," and as an "extravagant and wheeling stranger" (1.1.58 and 1.1.37). Blacks were outsiders in a more profound sense as well, at this time, for they were associated in the popular imagination with

1. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington, 3d edition (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1980), 5.1.269 (act 5, scene 1, line 269), and 2.2.70-71. Subsequent citations to Shakespeare's work are from this edition.

2. See Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (London: Oxford UP, 1965), 40-50, and M. R. Ridley, Introduction, *Othello*, Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1958), xv.

monsters, so that the play's numerous references to monstrosity would have resonated with Othello's racial characteristics to establish his extreme difference from typical Europeans. Whether some biographical Shakespeare actually considered such ideas "marketable" is not a question I can answer, but I will show that Othello's character is constructed in a way that would have engaged such popular associations of blacks with monsters and thereby would have intensified audience responses to early performances.

From the thirteenth century, monstrous races were increasingly reported to be living in Africa rather than in Asia, as Rudolf Wittkower notes.³ Other critics have suggested that the English in the early 1600s still thought of blacks much as they thought of monsters, as strange creatures from outside the boundaries of the known world. Michael Neill touches the issue when he discusses linkage between blackness and moral monstrosity.⁴ Emily C. Bartels locates Othello's power as a character partly in the audience's perception of his racial difference, on the basis of which people "demonize an Other as a means of securing the self."⁵ Karen Newman asserts that there is a cultural association of blacks with monsters: by virtue of his color, "Othello is a monster in the Renaissance sense of the word."⁶ Although precise attitudes in the early seventeenth century are not recoverable, documents from that time can enable us to understand more about what constituted this "Renaissance sense" of Othello's monstrousness.

The most useful evidence is, of course, contemporaneous with *Othello*. An example is the pamphlet translated in 1605 by Edward Gresham, who summarizes the contents in an arresting title:

Strange fearful & true news, which happened at Carlstadt, in the kingdom of Croatia. Declaring how the sun did shine like blood nine days together, and how two armies were seen in the Air, the one encountering the other. And how also a Woman was delivered of three prodigious sons, which Prophetised many strange & fearful things, which should shortly come to pass.

3. Rudolf Wittkower, "Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* 5 (1942):197.

4. Michael Neill, "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 40 (1989):409.

5. Emily C. Bartels, "Making More of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance Refashionings of Race," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (1990):454.

6. Karen Newman, "'And wash the Ethiop white': Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*" in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (New York: Methuen, 1987), 153.

Whether or not Gresham's London bookseller believed the report to be true, he evidently believed that there was a paying readership for such "news" and sold it with a cover illustration just as sensational as the contents (Figure 1). The cover visually represents the battle in the air and the three "prodigious sons," described inside as follows: "The first of these Prodigious Children had four heads, which spoke and uttered strange things. The second Child was black like a Moor, and the third Child like unto Death." Depicted as fully grown and articulate, these newly-born "children" prophesy eventual defeat of the Turks and a time of dearth "both here and in other places." Devout buyers no doubt took the pamphlet seriously; others probably bought it for the kind of textual pleasures available today from supermarket tabloids. The predicted conflict in Croatia may seem ironic to historians of the late twentieth century, but of more historical interest is the cover's use of black skin as a sign of monstrosity, indeed, as the child's only monstrous characteristic.

Social anthropologists would say that this idea, that blacks and monsters are related, if not equated, on some level of the popular imagination, constituted part of early modern London's "habitus," what Pierre Bourdieu defines as "a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions*," or more simply, "a socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures."⁷ If there was a social disposition in 1604-5 to regard blacks and monsters as similar manifestations of the Other, as *Strange News* implies that there was, such a disposition would have affected both the generation and the reception of *Othello* at that historical moment. Indeed, as parts of the same habitus, each text simultaneously reflected and reinforced that very mental linkage.

Strange News and *Othello* are by no means the only documents of the late-sixteenth or early-seventeenth century to connect blacks and monsters. In 1569 *Histoires Prodigeuses* was translated as *Certain Secret Wonders of Nature*, in which Pierre Boiastuau rehearsed various explanations for "monstrous childbearing" including "the influence of the stars," the "superabundance or default and corruption of the seed and womb," or "an ardent and obstinate imagination, which the Woman hath, whilst she conceives the child." Boiastuau illustrates this last cause both verbally and visually, first with two anecdotes:

7. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice, *Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology* 16 (1972; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977), 76, 82-83.

Damascenus a grave author doth assure this to be true, that being present with Charles, the iiv. Emperor and king of *Bohemia*, there was brought to him a maid, rough and covered with hair like a bear, the which the mother had brought forth in so hideous and deformed a shape, by having too much regard to the picture of S[aint] John clothed with a beast's skin, the which was tied or made fast continually during her conception at her bed's feet. By the like means Hippocrates saved a princess accused of adultery, for that she was delivered of a child black like an *Ethiopian*, her husband being of a fair and white complexion, which by the persuasion of Hippocrates, was absolved and pardoned, for that the child was like unto a [picture of a] *Moor*, accustomedly tied at her bed.⁸

If the first child had been the offspring of hirsute parents, or if the second child had been the offspring of an adulterous, interracial union, they would not have been considered monsters. Boiastuau considers them to be monstrous because of the "unnatural" intervention by the female imagination during the process of conception. Whether or not Shakespeare read Boiastuau, he would have recognized in this folk-theory of teratogenesis a consistency with the Biblical story he cites in *The Merchant of Venice*, the story of Jacob's intervention to produce parti-colored lambs by placing striped wands in front of ewes while they mate (1.3.75-85).

Boiastuau's contemporary Ambroise Paré, in his treatise *Of Monsters and Prodigies*, recounts a story that is similar to Boiastuau's but which reverses the colors, as a white child is born to black parents:

We have read in *Heliodorus* that *Persiana*, Queen of *Ethiopia*, by her husband *Hidustes*, being also an *Ethiope*, had a daughter of a white complexion, because in the embraces of her husband, by which she proved with child, she earnestly fixed her eye and mind upon the picture of the fair *Andromeda* standing opposite to her.⁹

Here, too, it is not the color but the extraordinary process by which the child's skin color is determined that gives this child the status of monster, the fact that its "formation is contrary to the general rule and to what is usual"—as Aristotle once defined monstrosities.¹⁰

The illustrations in both Paré and Boiastuau, however, unlike the verbal texts, suggest that black skin alone could constitute a sign of monstrosity (Figures 2 and 3). Regardless of who the illustrators may

8. Pierre Boiastuau, *Certain Secret Wonders of Nature*, trans. Edward Fenton (London, 1589), 13-14.

9. Ambroise Paré, in *Works*, trans. Thomas Johnson (London, 1634), 25.

10. Aristotle, *Generation of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1979), 439.

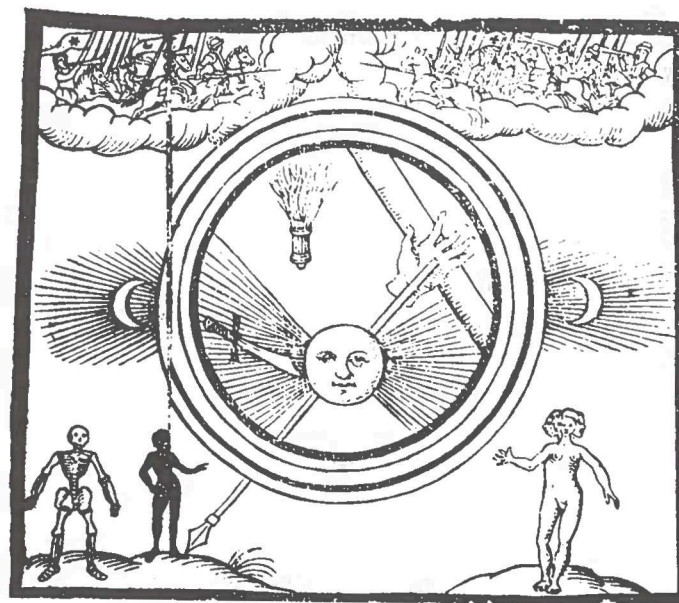


Fig. 1. Cover illustration for the pamphlet *Strange News*, 1605.



Fig. 2. Two "monsters," one black and one hairy, from Pierre Boiastuau's 1569 *Certain Secret Wonders of Nature* (page 12).



Fig. 3. Illustration from Ambroise Paré's *Of Monsters and Prodigies* (Book 25, page 978).



Fig. 4. Headless monster, from *The Voyages and Travels of Sir John Mandeville, Knight* (1582).

have been, or whether the second copied the first, both chose to depict as a monster—along with the hairy girl—the black child born to white parents rather than the white one born to black parents. The illustrators must on some level have recognized that for a white audience of readers, the representation of a white child-monster would appear “normal” rather than “monstrous” until one had read the accompanying narratives. The illustrators’ artistic decision to show only the black child points to the existence of a deep cultural centrism, linked with what would come to be known as racial identity, centrism of a kind which is likely also to have shaped audience responses to the still extraordinary sight of a black person seen on the street—or represented on the stage of a predominantly white culture such as France or England.

It is hard to imagine that Shakespeare is not deliberately exploiting such Anglo-centrism in the way he prepares an audience for Othello’s entrance. In the first scene, Iago awakens Brabantio with the cry that “an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe” (1.1.89-90)—an image of Othello and Desdemona intended to horrify her father. Iago next represents their sexual union as “your daughter cover’d with a Barbary horse” (1.1.112). Desdemona’s imagined mating with an African animal is the kind of act which Paré describes among the causes of monsters, a “copulation with beasts” that leads to “the confusion of seed of diverse kinds” (25.982). Reminding her father that Othello and Desdemona may be generating monsters, Iago further baits Brabantio, “you’ll have your nephews neigh to you,” then reinforces the idea with a final image of Othello and Desdemona during sexual intercourse with the conventional figure of “the beast with two backs” (1.1.112-18). The first scene of the play thus prepares an audience verbally for the entrance of some “thing” that is not-human; that this “Barbary horse” will turn out to be more human than Iago—who initially seems to be the audience’s kinsman—is an irony that can prove as unsettling as Gulliver’s discovery that Houyhnhnms behave like people and the creatures that look like himself behave like animals.

In scene two, the metaphors applied to Othello take on more social and political overtones. Brabantio addresses Othello as a “foul thief” whose enchantment of his daughter has led her to flee from “the wealthy curled darlings of our nation” to “the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou” (1.2.62-72). Although the word “thing” is in accord with Iago’s earlier beauty-and-beast metaphors, Brabantio seems to see Othello’s offense as more political than personal, a transgression of the boundaries of acceptable behavior in Venetian culture because Othello’s “sooty” color marks him as ineligible to

compete legitimately for Desdemona with the white males of "our nation." Anthropologist Robin Fox has observed that "[g]roups speaking the same language and being alike in other ways might well exchange wives among themselves—but the connubium stopped at the boundaries of the language, territory, or colour, or whatever marked 'us' off from 'them.'"¹¹ A marriage between an African black and a Venetian white would have seemed clearly beyond the bounds of acceptable exogamy to Shakespeare's audience—especially to the white, aristocratic males, whose marital options in England Lawrence Stone has described as "very limited" in social and geographical range and reflecting "a very high degree of social and economic endogamy."¹² Even without the language depicting Othello as less than human, then, Desdemona's unauthorized choice of husband would itself have seemed socially and politically "monstrous."

Persons watching the play would not yet appreciate Othello's virtues when he appears at court in Scene Three, so his self-justification must persuade a theater audience as well as the Duke of Venice. To indicate how he captivated Desdemona, Othello mentions two exotic races he has told her about: "The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders" (1.3.146-47). Desdemona evidently has responded to his exotic stories with awe:

She swore in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful.
She wish'd she had not heard it, yet she wish'd
That heaven had made her such a man.

(1.3.161-64)

Desdemona's response to the "wondrous" and "strange" narratives is confused with her response to the wonderful stranger who narrates them; as she puts it, the tales themselves "woo her" (1.3.168). Shakespeare gives Othello's wooing additional credibility by including exotic but recognizable travel lore such as the anthropophagi, which Montaigne had recently written about in his essay "Of Cannibals." The headless monsters were formerly described by Pliny as "some people without necks, having their eyes in their shoulders," in ancient India; but they also had been described in the more recent, 1582 edition of Mandeville's *Travels*, where they were illustrated (Figure 4), and in Hakluyt's expanded *Voyages* published between 1598 and

1600, where Sir Walter Raleigh was said to have been assured that headless monsters could be found just two rivers away from the place he was visiting in Guiana.¹³ If the existence of this monstrous race was commonly thought to have been validated by recent travelers to remote places, then surely theatergoers—the auditors of Othello's auditors—would, like Desdemona, have found the teller as exotic as his tales.

Of course, Othello's most obvious difference is his skin color, a sign of his African origin. Pliny once remarked, "Whoever believed in the Ethiopians before actually seeing them?" (511), and black Africans seem not to have lost their associations with such marvels by 1581, when Stephen Bateman in his *Doom Warning All Men to the Judgment* turned first to Africa in his catalogue of monsters whose existence testifies to God's continuing punishment of man. Bateman's catalogue includes *Negritae*, with lips that hang down to their breasts, who are labeled in the margin as "Black Monsters," and what seems to be something of a catch-all:

Ethiopes a people in the west part of Ethiopia: also there are of those black men, that have four eyes: and it is said that in Eriopia be found very comely bodied men, notwithstanding they are long necked, and mouthed as a crane, the other part of the head like a man: also sundry strange and deformed men and women there are, which we omit. . . .¹⁴

However suspect such reports may have become by the late sixteenth century, they still were being published and read. Even if Othello was not considered to be a Bateman-esque "black monster" himself, as an African he might have been assumed to know first hand about monstrous races.

There seems to have been further confusion over, or failure to distinguish between, traditional races of monsters in far-off lands and the occasional birth closer to home of a monstrous, individual child. Readers could find discussion of both kinds of monster in James Rueff's treatise *The Expert Midwife*, translated into English in 1637, whose chapter "Of Unperfect Children, Also of Monstrous Births" contains both a description of a terribly deformed, yet human child

13. Pliny, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP), 2:521; John Mandeville, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, trans. C. W. R. D. Moseley (1582; New York: Penguin, 1983), 137; Richard Hakluyt, *Voyages and Discoveries: The Principal Navigations Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, ed. Jack Beeching (1598-1600; New York: Penguin, 1972), 402.

14. Stephen Bateman, *The Doom Warning All Men to the Judgment* (London, 1581), 6-7.

11. Robin Fox, *Kinship and Marriage: An Anthropological Perspective* (1967; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), 178.

12. Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England: 1500-1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), 60.

born in Oxford in 1551, and a description of a beast with a man's head, a beast's tail, and dogs' heads at its elbows and knees, followed by a description of a mythical creature with two wings and one foot. Rueff notes that such misshapen offspring must be manifestations of God's will but that "through the insight of our reason, we may perceive also the detestable sin of Sodomy." Rueff's assumption that particular births of monsters indicate breeding between humans and animals suggests that he considers even animal-like monsters to be individual cases rather than the offspring of monstrous races, but he goes on to mention Pliny's "reports of living creatures in Africa that have such various forms and shapes."¹⁵ Even Rueff seems unwilling to let go completely of the older explanations of monsters that associates them, like Blacks, with Africa.

Anthropologists have noticed a relation between attitudes toward such outsiders and stories of monsters. Claude Lévi-Strauss refers to the Gobineau hypothesis as a way of accounting for the proliferation of fantastic beings in a culture as less the result of rich imagination than of "the inability of fellow-citizens to conceive of strangers in the same way as themselves."¹⁶ Othello as "blackamoor" is visibly marked as a member of a culture different from that of everyone else on the stage or in the audience; he may have seemed as fantastic as the monsters associated with him.

There is another kind of historical evidence on which to base an inference that theatergoers would have felt a thrill of disturbed awe at the sight of Othello: the fact that a black person would still have been an unusual sight to most English theatergoers. The exact size of the black population in England at the turn of the seventeenth century is uncertain, and historians are reluctant even to guess, but there is no doubt that their numbers had been growing over the forty years since the first West Africans had been introduced to London in 1563.¹⁷ Ruth Cowhig has written that "there were several hundreds of black people living in the households of the aristocracy and landed gentry, or working in London taverns," so she imagines

that "the sight of black people must have been familiar to Londoners."¹⁸ Even if most Londoners had seen blacks, however, the appearance on stage of a black person who spoke and felt must still have seemed remarkable. And even if blacks were visible on the streets, they may not have been accepted as "familiar." Parish records from Barking for 1 October 1599 show two blacks living in the parish of All Hallows: "Clare a Negra at Widdow S[tokes?]" and "M[a]ry a Negra at Richard Wood." W. E. Miller used this in 1961 as evidence that there were Blacks in London in 1599, a point no longer in doubt; what is more interesting is that the two blacks are further described not as inhabitants but as "'Straungers' in the parish."¹⁹ This word may be merely an expression of parochialism, a reference to the fact that they were not locally born, but the term also suggests that they were thought of in terms of their "otherness."

The 1601 draft of a royal proclamation further indicates the extent to which blacks in England were thought of as "strangers" at the turn of the seventeenth century. Endorsed by Queen Elizabeth, the document authorizes the transportation to Spain or Portugal of any "Negroes and blackamoors . . . within the realm of England." She justifies this action partly in terms of the precedent of prisoner exchanges, the tradition that a captive may be enslaved by the victor in warfare. A second justification is a perception of social unrest. Both these arguments are based on an assumption of cultural centrism and racial difference:

Whereas the Queen's majesty, tendering the good and welfare of her own natural subjects, greatly distressed in these hard times of dearth, is highly discontented to understand the great number of Negroes and blackamoors which (as she is informed) are carried into this realm since the troubles between her highness and the King of Spain; who are fostered and powered here, to the great annoyance of her own liege people that which co[vet?] the relief which these people consume, as also for that the most of them are infidels having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel: hath given a special commandment that the said kind of people shall be with all speed avoided and discharged out of this her majesty's realms.²⁰

15. James Rueff, *The Expert Midwife, or an Excellent and most Necessary Treatise of the Generation and Birth of Man*, trans. E. Griffin (London, 1637), 157-58.

16. Claude Lévi Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 46.

17. James Walvin, *The Black Presence: A Documentary History of the Negro in England, 1555-1860* (London: Orbach and Chambers, 1971), 8, 12.

18. Ruth Cowhig, "Blacks in English Drama and the Role of Shakespeare's *Othello*," in *The Black Presence in English Literature*, ed. David Dabydeen (Manchester, UK: Manchester UP, 1985), 5, 7.

19. W. E. Miller, "Negroes in Elizabethan London," *Notes and Queries* 206 (1961):138.

20. "Licensing Casper van Senden to Deport Negroes [draft]," Proclamation 804.5 (1601), in *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, ed. Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin (New Haven: Yale UP, 1969), 3:221.

The proclamation goes on to license Casper van Senden, a merchant who had rescued eighty-nine English subjects detained by Spain and Portugal, to take "such Negroes and blackamoors to be transported as aforesaid as he shall find within the realm of England." Van Senden is not authorized to use force, but if any persons "possessed of any such blackamoors . . . refuse to deliver them," the proclamation authorizes him to "advise and persuade them by all good means to satisfy her majesty's pleasure therein" and to report the names of anyone who refuses to cooperate.

The proclamation indicates that a black person can only be a servant, "possessed" by a master who should hand over the possession. Blacks are a "kind of people," different not only in color but also by virtue of their religion—rather, their lack of Christian religion—which makes them "infidels." The concern expressed in the proclamation is perhaps over their probable lack of political as well as religious fidelity, for the comment about infidels follows close upon a description of the English people as Elizabeth's "liege," or loyal subjects. And political concerns seem to be what have led at least some people to feel annoyed that blacks are "powered" as well as "fostered" at the expense of the English. The black population is said to be "great," but the document includes a parenthetical "as she is informed," perhaps indicating some doubt in Elizabeth's mind over the claimed growth in size of the black population. Or, the absence of a numerical estimate could be a deliberate omission, if the approximate number was small enough to have reduced the force of the argument that deportation of blacks would significantly ease the shortages of food.

The proclamation perhaps exaggerates the problems in order to further the financial interests of van Senden, who had been petitioning for this kind of support for more than four years.²¹ Nevertheless, the arguments were evidently thought plausible enough by the court that the power of the monarchy was invoked to formally delineate a social boundary based on skin color and even to bring the power of the state to bear on racially-marked strangers in what amounted to a kind of cultural exorcism. Given the presence of such an attitude among the English toward blacks as unwelcome intruders, the character of Othello as both different from Venetians but powerful within that culture must have contained a particularly powerful social charge for those who originally watched *Othello*.

A perception of African blacks as "not English" would further have reinforced the idea that Africa is an exotic, mysterious world.

21. See Cowhig, "Blacks in English Drama and the Role of Shakespeare's *Othello*," 1-25.

In 1600 that world was of sufficient interest that John Leo's *A Geographical History of Africa* was translated into English and published in London. Leo was a Moor from Morocco who had converted to Christianity, according to John Pory's introduction.²² His book had first been published in Italian around 1526.²³ Leo did not offer just one more traveler's rehearsal of sights mixed with legends but an ethnographer's report, sometimes describing particular details from particular kingdoms in a given geographical area, sometimes drawing inferences from the observations, and sometimes making moral judgments. Leo's "General Description" notes that there are five "principal nations" in that part of the world, the Cafri, the Abyssins, the Egyptians, the Arabians, and "the Africans or Moors, properly so called; which last are of two kinds, namely white or tawny Moors, and Negroes or black Moors."²⁴ Members of these groups can be found in various regions, he goes on to point out, but later, in Book Seven, he states that "the fifteen kingdoms of the land of the Negroes known to us, are all situated upon the river of Niger, and upon other rivers which fall thereunto" (285). In his description of these kingdoms, Leo is not inclined to offer sweeping judgments, but in his General Description he offers some statements about the vices of the people of Africa which would have reinforced English fears and stereotypes of blacks, attitudes implicit in phrases such as Ben Jonson's "quick Negro"²⁵ or Shakespeare's "lascivious moor" (1.1.126):

The Negroes [compared to the "lewd" and "brutish" inhabitants of Libya] likewise lead a beastly kind of life, being utterly destitute of the use of reason, of dexterity of wit, and of all arts. Yea they so behave themselves, as if they had continually lived in a forest among wild beasts. They have great swarms of harlots among them; whereupon a man may easily conjecture their manner of living. (42)

Perhaps John Leo's tone of abhorrence is a sop to European readers, or perhaps the Western-educated Leo was feeling an urge to scrawl in the margin, "Exterminate all the brutes!" as Conrad's Kurtz would do in his report on dark Africa. In any case Leo's *History of*

22. *A Geographical History of Africa, Written in Arabic and Italian by John Leo a Moor, Born in Granada and Brought Up in Barbary*, trans. John Pory (London, 1600), not paginated.

23. See Winthrop D. Jordan, *The White Man's Burden: Historical Origins of Racism in the United States* (New York: Oxford UP, 1974), 18.

24. *A Geographical History of Africa*, 6.

25. Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, ed. Alvin Kernan (New Haven: Yale UP), 3.7.232.

Africa tended to reinforce the European view of black moors as "beasts," and it was probably known to Shakespeare, as it certainly was to Jonson.²⁶ The book's London publication at the turn of the seventeenth century is one more event that helped to constitute the London habitus from which *Othello* emerged and into which it was received.

Much as associations of monsters and Blacks would have affected how a playgoer regarded Othello in the first act of the play, ideas about how monsters were conceived, carried, and delivered inform many other passages in the play and would further have shaped responses to characters on stage.

The language of monstrous childbearing appears frequently in the play, often in the tradition of prodigious births hinting at some ominous event to come. At the end of the first act of *Othello*, Iago appeals to Roderigo to plot with him against the Moor:

[L]et us be conjunctive in our revenge against him; if thou canst cuckold him, thou does thyself a pleasure, and me a sport. There are many events in the womb of time, which will be deliver'd. (1.3.369-72)

Iago's description of time as a womb from which events will issue gives him a role something like that of Edward Gresham, the doomsday pamphleteer who warned that the monstrous births in *Strange News* portended future calamities. Iago is a more cheerful prophet, perhaps because he sees himself less as human victim than as divine ordinator of the supernatural events: "I have 't. It is engender'd. Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light" (1.3.404-05). The emphasis is on the "I have 't." Iago, not God or the devil, is engendering, or conceiving the offspring. "Hell and night" are cast in the lesser role of midwives, as enabling rather than causative agents.

Iago's metaphor is noteworthy for its implied equivalence between an idea and a birth, a concept and a conception—a metaphor that will recur. The idea that the brain gives birth to thoughts as the body gives birth to children—or monsters—was well-embedded in the culture of early modern England. Other examples of the metaphor include the dedication of Shakespeare's sonnets to "their only begetter" and the complaint of Sidney's Astrophil that he feels "great with child to speake," as well as Thomas Underdowne's compliment to Edward De Vere: "in your Honour is, I think, expressed the right

26. Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama*, 21.

pattern of a Noble Gentleman, which in my head I have conceived."²⁷ In *Othello* the metaphor is used deliberately, almost literally, so that the comparison becomes explicit between mental conception and physical birth. Iago plays with the metaphor in Act Two, when Desdemona asks him to compose some lines of praise; he describes how his invention is taxing his brain, then announces: "But my Muse labours, / And thus she is deliver'd" (2.1.127-28). As the comparison is extended with reference to Iago's plot, however, playgoers are reminded of the metaphor's basis in ideas about biological generation, and they may also recall Iago's reference at the end of Act One to the impending "birth" as "monstrous"; as the metaphor becomes conscious, it helps to convey the morally monstrous nature of Iago's "conception."

In Act Three, Iago transfers the monstrous conception, which includes the idea of Desdemona's infidelity, from his own mind to Othello's. Othello comments in an aside that Iago seems to echo Othello's own doubts about Cassio, "[a]s if there were some monster in his thought, / Too hideous to be shown" (3.3.111-12). He then says to Iago that there must be some reason Iago has looked concerned as they were discussing Cassio:

[Thou] didst contract and purse thy brow together,
As if thou then hadst shut up in thy brain
Some horrible conceit . . .
[Thou] weigh'st thy words, before thou giv'st them breath,
Therefore these stops of thine fright me the more;
For such things in a false disloyal knave
Are tricks of custom, but in a man that's just
They're close dilations, working from the heart
That passion cannot rule.

(1.3.118-29)

The first lines, about a "horrible conceit," seem an obvious continuation of the metaphorical language of generation that has previously represented Iago's thoughts as some hideous progeny awaiting birth, confined in the womb of his brain. The contracting and pursing of Iago's brow are symptoms of metaphorical labor to bring forth the offspring, to present the idea to Othello—who is afraid to see it. The description of Iago's pausing before giving breath to his

27. For a discussion of Shakespeare as the begetter of the sonnets, see Donald W. Foster, "Master W. H., R.I.P.," *PMLA* 102 (1987):42-54; Philip Sidney, *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. William A. Ringler, Jr. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1962), 165; Thomas Underdowne, "Epistle Dedicatory, to the Right Honorable Edward Devere," *An Ethiopian Historie* (London, no date [1569]), no pagination.

words may also be a continuation of the birth imagery, as well as a literal declaration that Iago thinks before he speaks; although the "stops" Othello refers to are what he senses to be Iago's hesitations, that is, stoppages of the breath that gives voice to his thoughts, they also resemble the breathing of a prospective mother in labor. Indeed, this pattern of references to childbirth provides a justification for the Folio reading of "dilations" instead of the First Quarto's "denotements," since dilations (of the cervix) could be one more reference to the birth process, whose ineluctability "passion cannot rule." All these images of childbirth help to constitute an understanding that Iago is carrying a monstrous idea as a mother might carry a deformed child in her womb.

In subsequent lines of the play, however, Iago does not give birth to his monstrous thoughts but, somehow, transfers the metaphorical pregnancy to Othello. Perhaps the metaphor breaks down, here, since pregnancy could not (until the late twentieth century) be moved from one womb to another. Elizabeth Sacks has tried to explain the process of transfer as metaphorical "theft," first by showing that wombs were sometimes compared to purses in the seventeenth century, then by suggesting that Othello somehow, "psychosexually," has stolen Iago's "purse" of "trashy thoughts."²⁸ The pregnancy is not necessarily shifted from Iago to Othello, however, if one thinks of this mental conception, like physical conception, as a process requiring two partners. The idea that Desdemona has been unfaithful is generated by verbal intercourse between partners, analogous to sexual intercourse with Iago as male and Othello as female, impregnated through his ear. The conception process can be understood in terms of Aristotle's theories about the *Generation of Animals*, current well into the eighteenth century, according to which male seed is not simply deposited in the female, nor does it join with female seed in the womb, but it shapes the female seed. Aristotle describes the process with a comparison to carpentry, where the artisan forms wood into a shape but does not join himself with the material; "the active partner is not situated within the thing which is being formed" (113). As Thomas Laquer has summarized this way of understanding generation, "conception is for the male to have an idea, an artistic or artisanal conception, in the brain-uterus of the female."²⁹ Aristotle's theory would also allow the play's metaphorical impregnation of one

28. Elizabeth Sacks, *Shakespeare's Images of Pregnancy* (London: MacMillan, 1980), 71.

29. Thomas Laquer, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1990), 42.

male by another male to seem less strained, for in this traditional view of human generation, neither mind and body nor gender and sex were so clearly distinguished as they have since come to be. In *Othello*, then, the possibility that Desdemona has been unfaithful is the idea actively imparted by Iago, like a formative male seed, into the brain-uterus of Othello, whose tractable character provides the passive material to be shaped. Then, like a pregnant woman with a seemingly irrational desire for something, Othello insists that Desdemona show him the misplaced handkerchief decorated with strawberries—the fruit commonly associated with maternal cravings, the frustration of which could supposedly result in "strawberry marks" on children.³⁰ Othello's "maternal" imagination thus deforms the gestating conception of possible infidelity into the "green-eyed monster" of jealousy he had been warned to beware (3.3.170-72).

Although the metaphorical language is not perfectly consistent, this underlying idea that a monstrous birth is impending continues to inform the play. Later in Act Three, Othello refers to cuckoldry as a matter of destiny: "Even then this forked plague is fated to us / When we do quicken" (3.3.282-83). The audience hears a statement capable of another construction than Othello's intended fatalism, however, for he will be plagued when he suspects that he is a cuckold, when the green-eyed monster will "quicken" in the womb of his own brain. A few lines later Othello says, "I have a pain upon my forehead here" (3.3.290)—as the monstrous thought kicks in its mental womb, perhaps, or as Othello feels a mental contraction that anticipates the birth of the idea. In the next scene, Emilia repeats the comparison of jealousy to "a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself," to which Desdemona replies "Heaven keep that monster from Othello's mind!" (3.4.161-63). Anyone attending to the play has heard enough auditory images to know that Othello already is bearing that very monster of a conception, as he announces to Desdemona in Act Five:

... confess thee freely of thy sin;
For to deny each article with oath
Cannot remove, nor choke the strong conception,
That I do groan withal. Thou art to die.
(5.2.56-59)

For Othello to contemplate the murder is for his mental womb to labor painfully to give birth to its deformed "child"; his monstrous conception will issue forth as horrifying action.

30. *Othello* 3.3.439; see Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, ed. Homer Goldberg (New York: Norton, 1987), 176.

Othello has always been one of Shakespeare's most moving dramas, but it moves its audiences in different ways as their mentalities differ. A part of its effect when first performed in the early seventeenth-century England would have resided in the confused mixture of powerful ideas about monsters and about blacks circulating in the culture that was producing Shakespeare and *Othello*, as that culture was in turn being reproduced by them.

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