

MENTAL AND MORAL MONSTROSITY IN SHAKESPEARE'S *OTHELLO*

Mihaela Ilinca Tănăselea

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.*

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