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The Monster in the Moor

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The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice, William Shakespeare
Something can be disguised, but a disguise implies an immutable essentiality. The two main characters of Shakespeare’s *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice* test the validity of this statement. Throughout the course of the play, Othello and Iago reveal a shared characteristic: monstrous identities which dominate and pervert their other traits. However, Shakespeare initially occludes his characters’ deviation with extraneous social and contextual factors, such as Othello’s military prowess or Iago’s façade of honesty, and audience members must watch and wait as Othello and Iago unravel their disguises through their
own actions. This essay will begin by explaining how these
differentiated social factors initially converge to temporarily
mask the immutable essentiality which assures Othello
and Iago’s exclusion from Venetian society and conclude
by explaining the means and methods by which these
masks are shed. Because this unmasking proves Othello
and Iago incompatible with their social context, their
eventual removal from Venetian society is an inevitable
conclusion—a conclusion luridly unveiling the monstrous
essentiality which they share.

Nuanced definitions of the word *monster* are crucial
tools in understanding the relationship that monsters like
Othello and Iago have to society at large. Scholars who
study monstrosity broadly agree that a monster is something
existing near or outside the farthest outlier of acceptable
human behavior. Something monstrous identifies the limits
of inclusion by providing an example of something (perhaps
a living being, action, or concept) which must be excluded
from society based on its deviation from a set of communally
agreed upon standards. Laura Knoppers and Joan Landes
specify monstrosity’s ability to construct category when they
write, “The monstrous Other served to define (European,
white, male, Christian) selves and nations. But that Other
both marked and violated boundaries, threatening the
identities it served to define” (21). Knoppers and Landes’
assertion that monsters both mark and violate boundaries
indicates that monstrosity is a condition which can exist as a
hybridization of human and non-human qualities. In addition
to their function in defining limits, monsters offer an outlet
for repressed desires, yet prove dangerous in close proximity. In Monster Theory: Reading Culture, Jeffery Cohen argues the following:

[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. (17)

Cohen’s definition shows that, though society is entertained by monitoring monsters, close proximity to a monster quickly changes entertainment to terror at the prospect of being contaminated by monstrosity. Cynthia Lowenthal explicates the consequences suggested by Cohen’s definition when she tells us that “the monster always infects with monstrosity everything that it touches [...] Sometimes monsters become monsters because they’ve been preyed upon by other monsters” (145, 144). In addition to clarifying the subversive and poisonous capabilities possessed by the monster, Lowenthal’s definition also reveals that because “difference most often functions to exclude” (145), fear of monstrosity can be analogous to fear of exclusion.

These three academic explications all focus on different aspects of the term monster because of the broad implications of the word. Monstrosity’s many connotations result from its position as the opposite of social norms,
where the criterion defining monstrosity is capable of changing as social norms change. The implications of changing social norms are explored in *Othello*. Initially, the idea that “sometimes monsters become monsters because they are preyed upon by other monsters” (Lowenthal 144) seems to indicate that Iago initiates Othello’s “conversion” into monstrosity. Though Iago’s corrosive influence is important, it must be understood that both men are incapable of conforming to Venetian conventions from the start. However, the deviance shared by Othello and Iago has been hidden by participation in the military, where normative behavior greatly contrasts standards in the larger social sphere. Though Othello and Iago are overtly characterized by aesthetic and cultural differences, their shared inability to exist peacefully inside a new social system proves to be a strong commonality between the two; each man is eventually and inexorably discovered to be “a beast in a populous city […] a civil monster” (4.1.63-4).

Capitalizing on the unique properties of theater, Shakespeare encourages interaction between the audience and the characters to show that Othello and Iago share a similarly monstrous identity. Through the eloquence and intensity of Iago’s soliloquies, Shakespeare succeeds in intimately bonding the audience to the play’s antagonist. This shift in dramatic focus produces a skewed sense of perception, one that ultimately leads the audience toward a dual, competing opinion of each main character. The audience can admire Iago for his charisma and efficaciousness, while simultaneously despising him for
his amorality. Despite the separation between the stage and the seats, the members of the audience are manipulated by Iago simply because they are privy to his thoughts and his powerful speech craft. His influence engenders empathy for Othello because audience members pity the victim of an adept charlatan, a sentiment complicating the natural disgust at the general’s gullibility and distrust in his wife. The contrasting emotions felt toward both characters are indicative of the hybridity characterizing the monster itself, a status Cohen explains when he states that “the monster resists any classification built on hierarchy or merely binary opposition, demanding instead a ‘system’ allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction) and resistance to integration” (7). Through this “mixed response” to Othello and Iago, Shakespeare forces his audience to both identify with and against his hybrid characters, allowing viewers insight to the complexity of the monstrous condition. The audience’s confused and contradictory feelings also imitate the social disorder created when a monstrous entity enters a system unequipped to contain and classify the hybridity which defines monstrosity. Cohen’s explication of hybridity as a “difference in sameness” also applies to Othello and Iago on another level, as both characters are broadly identical in their monstrous essentiality but are perceived as radically different from one another because of tangential factors like skin color or personal mannerisms. Iago, who will be discussed next, accepts and revels in his monstrous identity, as he actively seeks to corrupt his surroundings and exhibits
remorselessness even after seeing the violent consequences of his machinations.

Iago’s monstrous identity is immediately evident to audience members. In the very first scene, Iago reveals his intent to abuse Othello’s trust when he tells Roderigo: “I follow him to serve my turn upon him. We cannot all be masters, nor all masters cannot be truly followed (1.1.44-46). Because Iago consistently uses dialogue, soliloquies, and asides to explain his erratic, hateful, and manipulative conduct, it is easy for audience members to place him outside not only the moral boundaries of early modern Venice but also the limits of universal human decency. However, Iago’s ability to hide his fiendish motives from the play’s other characters makes it difficult for anyone else to identify his monstrosity, despite its undeniable presence. Because monsters are characterized by an essential deviation from social norms, they are expected to mirror this deviation in their physical appearance. By contrast, the “visibly invisible” Iago, who goes about his business unsuspected because of his outward compatibility with Venetian appearance and mannerisms, proves that an inward anomaly is not always marked by an outward signifier. However, when presented with the essential Iago’s wickedness, many of the characters in the play recognize his disaffection and subsequently address him using language fit to describe a monster. After Iago informs him of his daughter’s elopement using coarse, unnatural imagery, for example, Brabantio reacts to this grotesquely communicated revelation by questioning the source: “What profane wretch art thou?”
Instead of providing his identity, Iago continues to spout profanity and derision, which prompts Brabantio to confirm Iago’s separation from conventional society by retorting, “[T]hou art a villain” (1.1.120). More than just scatological humor, the importance of this exchange actually stems from the fact that Iago expresses his true identity only when invisible to his peers, be it through anonymity or soliloquy.

Because Iago understands that he is essentially monstrous, it is out of necessity that he uses trickery and manipulation to divert focus from his essentiality. Mastery in concealing the most odious aspects of his personality renders Iago an especially effective and destructive monster. Cohen’s assertion that “escapist delight gives way to horror only when the monster threatens to overstep these boundaries” (17) is only partially applicable in Iago’s situation. Because Iago displays external congruency with the moral, cultural, and physical standards held by the citizens of Venice, masking his essential deviance allows Iago to operate undetected inside Venetian custom. Because Iago possesses a human body containing monstrous capacity, the ease with which he can overstep boundaries deprives his peers of the “escapist delight” which Cohen asserts is evoked by watching monstrosity from a safe distance. As a result of the disparity between Iago’s appearance and actuality, Othello, Cassio, and Emilia are brought directly to horror when “honest, honest Iago” (5.2.163) suddenly reveals himself to be a “Spartan dog, more fell than anguish, hunger, or the sea” (5.2. 372-373). His manipulation of Othello and his
varying levels of involvement in the deaths of Roderigo, Desdemona, and Emilia confirm Iago as the “civil monster” whose presence destabilizes the social sphere.

Fred West explains how Iago would be perceived in modern society when he writes that “the play itself shows clearly enough that Iago goes off as he comes on, devoid of conscience, with no remorse. ‘This guiltlessness,’ according to [William] McCord and [Joan] McCord, ‘is one of the central features of psychopathy’” (27). West’s psychiatric diagnosis is important because it shows that, even across boundaries of time and place, whether villain or psychopath, Iago is still essentially monstrous. Through assertions of the differences between Iago’s character and the characters of his Venetian contemporaries, from both those who interact with him and the scholars who study him, it is clear that Iago’s monstrous essentiality assures his exclusion from society.

Though both Othello and Iago are definitively monstrous, the manner in which audience members become aware of Othello’s essentiality is more complicated than Iago’s blatant admissions in his dialogue. Othello’s monstrosity is more gradually revealed by a series of actions and events which indicate his inability to conform to changing social circumstances. However, many recent critics underplay the effects of Othello’s failure in adjusting to change and instead analyze Othello using postcolonial tropes, which claim that his integration into European society is doomed to failure because of his racial status. Arthur Little is a good example. He writes that “no amount of rhyming or coupling (or punning) will leave unseen the black Othello
whom the audience suspects is within Othello” (304). This statement implies that qualities stereotypical of blackness are the primary determinants of the general’s fall. However, the qualities which contribute to the Moor’s monstrosity are less the result of Othello’s physical blackness. Indeed, Othello’s status as an outsider, his militaristic mindset which ignores the secondary implications of his actions, and his cultural identity exert stronger influence than his racial identity. Daniel Vitkus observes:

By 1604, when *Othello* was first performed, there had been extensive and direct contact with Muslim pirates—both in the British Isles and in the Mediterranean, where English merchant ships sailed with greater frequency after trade pacts with the both the Barbary principalities and the Ottoman sultanate were signed. (151)

Because the English had already felt the fighting prowess of Turkish renegades on the seas, they created “demonizing representations of ‘the Turk,’ [...] from fear of being conquered, captured, and converted” (Vitkus 147). Because of this unique viewpoint, the Venetians respect and honor Othello due to his proven status as a successful general and the already established reputation of fierce Turkish warriors.

However, under Iago’s destructive directions, Roderigo and Brabantio attempt to, in typically monstrous fashion, mutate the fear commanded by Othello’s presence into racially based discontent. Iago’s contemptuous claims: “an old black ram is tupping your white ewe” (1.1.90),
“you’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you’ll have your nephews neigh to you” (1.1.113-115), and “your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs” (1.1.118-120), all contort Othello’s attributes which indicate his separation from Venetian society—namely his strength, origin, and appearance—and channel these attributes into negative animal imagery to create an early, crude version of racial stereotyping. In contrast to Iago’s gleefully pernicious insults, the verbal attacks of Brabantio and Roderigo are more unwitting propagations of the same ignorant stereotyping. Roderigo’s “By heaven, I would have rather been his hangman” (1.1.35) and Brabantio’s elitist “sooty bosom” (1.1.71) emulate the snide and scathing hatred of Othello initially introduced by Iago, thus reifying that “the monster always infects with monstrosity everything that it touches” (Lowenthal 145). However, it is because each man is goaded by Iago and because both have personal motives against Othello—Roderigo wants Desdemona for himself and Brabantio is offended because Othello circumvented social norms and eloped with his daughter—that these disgruntled gentlemen employ a stock set of insults equating blackness and monstrosity. Though blackness is central to the slurs directed at him, it is important to remember that Othello is not being castigated simply because he is black. Rather, the Moor’s own actions in disregarding social norms and eloping with Desdemona are the catalyst allowing Roderigo and Brabantio an opportunity to use racial insults.

The problem complicated by Othello’s race, social
transgression, and value to the state is temporarily resolved during the trial scene. Here, the general is judged using two sets of competing stereotypes, where Brabantio’s opinion represents the stigma conferred by Othello’s race and externality and the Duke’s opinion is more informed by Othello’s military success. Othello calmly foreshadows the eventual outcome of the council’s decision in the line, “my services which I have done the seigniory shall out tongue his [Brabantio’s] complaints” (1.2.18), but for Brabantio, the hearing is a frenetic and emotional affair. In the presence of the Duke, Brabantio expresses his disgust toward Othello and Desdemona’s elopement using language which subtly insults Othello’s ethnicity, specifically in the lines, “to fall in love with what she feared to look on! It is a judgment maimed and most imperfect […] against all rules of nature” (1.3.100-103). Brabantio, using the phrase “rules of nature,” equates his own Venetian cultural views with the natural order and specifically laments that his daughter is marrying an African adventurer, instead of Venetian noble. Also, Brabantio’s revelation that Desdemona both loves and fears Othello adds credence to Cohen’s claim that observers are both fascinated and terrified by narrowing the boundaries between themselves and the Other. However, Othello’s earlier prediction comes true, and the Duke brushes aside Brabantio’s accusations in favor of weightier matters pertaining to Venetian state affairs. Mitigating the effects of the earlier ethnic slurs, the Duke passes official judgment on Othello by chastising Brabantio with a second opinion of the Moor’s character: “[Y]our son-in-law is far more
fair than black” (1.3.393). Though facilitated by Othello and Desdemona’s seemingly sincere profession of love, the Duke’s decision to immediately enlist Othello’s service in defeating the Turkish threat in Cyprus prioritizes Othello’s value to the state over his cultural otherness and dubious elopement. Through these events, it is obvious that each character, whether they be aligned with or against Othello, is more informed by Othello’s individual actions than his skin color or the stereotypes that characterize blackness.

Othello’s race is also not a crucial component of process by which he is manipulated by Iago. In exerting his monstrous influence over Othello, Iago only occasionally directs focus on Othello’s appearance. One such instance occurs when Iago subtly states, “She did deceive her father once, marrying you; and when she seemed to shake and fear your looks, she loved them most” (1.3.218-220). Just as Brabantio alluded to it in the trial scene, Iago uses Othello’s appearance to pinpoint the strange combination of attraction and fear created by close contact with the Other. However, the conniving demi-devil emphasizes Desdemona’s behavior more than Othello’s appearance. This is because Othello’s body already indicates separation from the physical and visual qualities of a typical Venetian; observers need not be reminded that Othello is potentially an “embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other” (Cohen x). Though the Moor’s essentiality has not yet been revealed to be completely congruent with the deviance exuded by his externality, Othello’s outward appearance still generates questions about his internal identity, unlike the
armor that is Iago’s native Venetian countenance.

Overemphasizing Othello’s race also mitigates the importance of Iago’s influence over his former commander. Because Othello’s appearance lends itself to suspicion, the “visibly invisible” Iago becomes Othello’s main source of social guidance, and can concentrate on abusing Othello’s trust to the point of corruption. Unfortunately for the oblivious Othello, the former general is so used to receiving the benefit of his lieutenants’ advice in the context of battle that he cannot imagine the possibility of deception. Iago cunningly keeps Othello fixated on the possibility of Desdemona’s untrustworthiness, rather than his own, by pointing out her previous deception to Brabantio. This tactic works because together, Othello and Iago have seen “proof at Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds” (1.1 29-30) and now at Cyprus again. For Othello, who has mentally never left the army, his camaraderie with Iago is a stronger relationship than the relationship he has with a woman whom he has only recently met and with whom he may or may not be truly in love. Othello’s relationship with Iago, during the context of battle, may be a pivotal factor separating the two soldiers from life and death whereas Othello’s relationship with Desdemona is a means of occupying the commander while he is domestically grounded. This trust in Iago helps illustrate that Othello’s tendencies and identity as a soldier, rather than his blackness, are most crucial in revealing his innate monstrosity to the audience.

In order to fully understand how Othello’s soldierly identity dooms his social excursion, the general’s past must
be compared to his present. As a former warlord, Othello’s strengths and experiences are built upon “battles, sieges, fortunes that I have passed” (1.3.132-133), as opposed to any type of familiarity with intricate Venetian social customs. C.F. Burgess illustrates the vast differences between these two realms when he writes:

The military world is, perforce, regimented, disciplined, and above all, equivocal […] But unlike the warrior’s world, the social world allows for all manner of qualifications, conditions, and compromises […] Society deals, so very often (as does with Shakespeare), with the appearance which is not reality, with the shadows and not the substance, with what seems and is not; with such duality, Othello has no experience. (211)

Burgess explains how Othello lacks the ability to solve social problems that require flexibility of thought because his military experience has conditioned him to think only in absolutes. In the military, Othello was required to singularly complete executive orders to achieve the intended and most outwardly visible result of a specific action. Othello’s militaristic mindset, conditioned to achieve a static goal, renders him ill-equipped to deal with challenges in the public domain, which requires successful socialites to make decisions with broadly affecting secondary consequences. Othello displays his occupationally conditioned intransigency when he begins to suspect an affair between Cassio and Desdemona. Though Iago, playing the
compassionate confidant, requests “patience, I say, your mind may yet change,” Othello responds with “Never, Iago […] Like the Pontic Sea, whose icy current and compulsive course, ne’er feels retiring ebb […] so my bloody thoughts with violent pace shall ne’er look back, ne’er ebb to humble love” (3.3. 468-474). Interestingly enough, the adjectives that Othello chooses to characterize the sea—“icy” and “compulsive”—are also applicable to his own actions: “icy” characterizes Othello’s deliberate emotional detachment as he smothers Desdemona while “compulsive” embodies his impetuous decision-making. This inability (or refusal) to exchange combative logic for civilian logic shows the audience that Othello, always imbued with militaristic “bloody thoughts” and “violent pace,” is essentially different from the Venetian citizens with whom he interacts. Vitkus describes the differentiation between Othello and his Venetian counterparts when he writes, “He is, in the words of Iago, ‘an erring barbarian’ who has strayed from his natural course into the civilized, super subtle environment of Venice” (161). Vitkus’ decision to differentiate Othello’s “natural course” from the “civilized, super subtle environment of Venice” further demonstrates the differences between military and social mannerisms. Edward Berry further illuminates the chasm of separation between Othello and his homogenous Venetian constituents: “Shakespeare’s protagonist is not only richly complicated, but individualized and set apart from Venetian society in almost every respect—in his blackness, his past, his bearing, and, above all, his language, with its unusual rhythms, grandeur, and exoticism”
Therefore, due to the stark contrast between his soldierly identity and the norms of the society in which he seeks to assimilate, Othello’s arrival on the Venetian social scene does not signify the coming of a competent citizen but rather the entrance of an alien governed by principles existing outside social conventions: an alien who is later revealed to be a monster.

Two specific soldierly traits, encompassed by the lack of social reasoning illustrated by Burgess, contribute to Othello’s failure as a citizen: the aforementioned trust in a certain military subordinate and his desire for adventure. Though Othello’s blind faith in his lieutenants is appropriate in the previous context of his wartime experience, where intense bonds of loyalty are generated between men through rank and shared experience, this trust betrays him through the choosing of Iago as a personal advisor. Burgess explains that “in Othello’s view, Iago is admirably qualified as a confidant and confederate. Iago is both a soldier and a Venetian, and therefore, both an honest man and a savant of the customs of the country” (212). The general’s decision to fully trust Iago’s indictment of Cassio and Desdemona shows how Othello believes that Iago has retained the honor and trustworthiness found in a valuable military adjutant. While arguing with Emilia near the play’s conclusion, Othello cites his lieutenant’s perceived integrity as justification for smothering Desdemona, saying: “[A]n honest man he is, and hates the slime that sticks on filthy deeds” (5.2.154-155). It does not matter that Emilia is Iago’s wife and that she has correctly identified her husband’s lies because Othello
believes the military bond created by shared experience is more credible than a matrimonial bond. Therefore, Othello, accustomed to receiving absolute loyalty and honesty from his military subordinates, identifies Iago’s charlatanism only after passing the point of redemption.

In addition to his misplaced trust, Othello’s desire for the excitement which characterized his previous exploits further mars the Moor’s judgment. As a military adventurer, Othello has been routinely privilege to extraordinary feats, experiences, and exotic imagery. Because Othello the general was so fulfilled through sensational instances of “hairbreadth scapes i’ th’ imminent deadly breach […] the Cannibals that each other eat, the Anthropophagi, and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders” (1.3.138-147), Othello the civilian is also fascinated with the wondrous and sublime. Othello himself has not changed, but his social circumstances have. Unable to partake in exoticism and adventure through a stable life in Venetian high society, the former commander extracts from his relationship with Desdemona the quixotic emotion characteristic of his previous occupation. In his two most important speeches, Othello’s imagery illustrates how his courtship of Desdemona is a continuation of the torrid emotion which was so commonplace during his adventuring years. While standing in front of the Senate council, Othello states, “I do confess the vices of my blood, So justly to your grave ears I’ll present how I did thrive in this fair lady’s love, and she in mine” (1.3.125-128). By employing such dramatic language, Othello indicates that he is infatuated with action.
As a result, Othello has completely immersed himself in Desdemona as he would have completely immersed himself in a campaign, and audience members begin to see the complicated nature of Othello’s “love” for Desdemona. Because Desdemona is the vehicle allowing Othello to re-immurse himself in dramatic narrative, the maiden’s value to the Moor is not singularly based on their romantic relationship.

Regardless of circumstance or juncture in the play, Othello’s speech and actions continually indicate his preference for adventure (and narrative of adventure) over affection, and audience members learn that Othello is concerned more with his reputation as an epic, adventurous figure than the actuality of his criminal actions. For example, after Desdemona’s murder, audience members might expect Othello to offer a contrite apology or forlorn lament. Instead, spectators are treated to a superfluous, ornamental metaphor “of one whose hand, like the base Indian, threw a pearl away richer than all his tribe” (5.2.357-358). There are shades of contrition and sadness in Othello’s speech, but exotic imagery and hyperbole—the elements engendered by Othello’s love for narrative—supersede what should be the emotional substance of his final monologue. The Moor’s pleasure in delivering this dramatic language indicates that he never fully realizes how his preference for adventure over affection is part of the immutable essentially that excludes him from Venetian society. Indeed, just as Othello reveled in the opportunity to present an account of his relationship with Desdemona to the council’s “grave ears” at the beginning
of the play, he exits the play still captivated by adventure narratives, and specifically, his centrality in such tales. By prefacing his last words with “and say that in Aleppo once” (5.2.362), Othello requests that the story of his relationship be preserved and disseminated, ultimately revealing that his “love” for Desdemona is secondary to, yet intertwined with and inseparable from, his love of all things dramatic.

By connecting Othello’s ill-fated choice to bond himself absolutely to Iago with his pursuit of drama and excitement, it is obvious that the former commander is, knowingly or not, reliving the circumstances of his adventuring days. Perhaps Othello has the necessary attributes to persevere through the duress and turmoil of a battlefield, but these characteristics which ensured his success in battle now contribute to his mistakes in social situations. Instances such as Othello’s dark directive to “put thee [Iago] to ‘t, within these three days let me hear thee say that Cassio’s not alive” (3.3.447-489) or his refusal in acquiescing to Desdemona’s pleas of “kill me tomorrow, let me live tonight […] but while I say one prayer” (5.2.83-87) provide additional examples of Othello’s inability to implement anything other than military methodology. Therefore, because “monsters deviate from agreed-upon social norms” (Lowenthal 144), Othello’s failure to eschew military modes and methods brings to light the monstrous essentiality previously occluded at the beginning of the play.

Just as his actions confirm his monstrous essentiality, Othello’s speech also helps unveil the monster in the Moor. After his contemporaries see that he has murdered
Desdemona, Othello declares, “And say besides that in Aleppo once, where a malignant and turbaned Turk beat a Venetian and traduced the state, I took by the throat the circumcised dog and smote him, thus” (5.2.362-363) just before goring himself with his own blade. This statement and subsequent action show that Othello recognizes himself as the source of genuinely monstrous behavior and that he places himself in a category different from the other Venetians who function within the law. To separate himself from these men, Othello uses self-deprecating language implying estrangement from the society which he has just “traduced.” Phrases such as “a malignant and turbaned Turk” and “circumcised dog” place Othello definitively into the monstrous realm. Ironically, though Othello verbally recognizes and condemns himself for the violence he has wrought, he still resorts to violence as a viable method of “correcting” the situation, thus reinforcing that the general is inexorably bound to military “logic.”

Because monstrosity is always accompanied by hybridity, Othello’s actions defy easy categorization. The phrase “where a malignant and turbaned Turk beat a Venetian” refers to Othello’s internal battle with the socially incongruous aspects of his personality and his goal to become an obedient and ordinary citizen. This hybridity asserts Knoppers and Landes’ claim that the monstrous other “both marked and violated boundaries, threatening the identities it served to define” (21). In what is perhaps an attempt to finally assume an identity unadulterated by hybridity, one aspect of Othello’s dualistic personality
is prompted to stab the other. Through his suicide, any remaining humanity harbored in Othello’s body is forever lost, thus ending his internal struggle but ultimately opening new questions for the audience, allowing viewers to further analyze the hybridity of the monstrous condition. Is the general’s suicide a final victory for the monster within the Moor or a virtuous attempt at redemption? How does Othello’s hybridity complicate interpretations of his death? Regardless of how spectators interpret Othello, these conflicting interpretations indicate that Othello is indeed hybrid and monstrous.

In addition to Othello’s own identification of his immutable essentiality, those observing the death and chaos of the final act also recognize his monstrous identity. Aghast at the carnage resulting from the monstrous interplay between Othello and Iago, Lodovico bemoans the once venerated commander’s fall from grace in the line, “O thou Othello, that was once so good, fall’n in the practice of a cursed slave, what shall be said to thee?” (5.2.299-301). Othello, who “was once so good” as a military leader, has been visibly debased to criminal status because of his inability to adjust to changing social norms. Though Iago certainly senses and amplifies Othello’s monstrosity, Othello’s actions as a physical instrument of death, destruction, and disorder reveal that the Moor has always possessed monstrous capacity, a trait less visible in the blithely self-placating alien the audience sees at the beginning of the play. Through the severity of the repercussions following Othello’s failure to execute proper
social reasoning, Shakespeare shows his protagonist to be every bit as monstrous as the most obvious monster in the play: Iago. If Iago’s personality traits are typical of the stock villain character that uses intelligence and mind craft to control others for his own gain, then Othello also conforms to another monstrous stereotype: one who is incredibly strong and impulsive, but lacks finesse and foresight, and prioritizes his emotional fulfillment. Because “monsters become monsters because they’ve been preyed upon by other monsters” (Lowenthal 144), audience members may resonate with Lodovico’s piteous lamentations at the victimization of his commander. However, due to his inevitable failure to readjust to a new social structure, Othello the Moor was lost to Othello the monster long before the final act, and his death represents not the loss of a proper citizen but of a violently conflicted, hybrid creature incompatible with Venetian society from the onset.

Whether it is Othello who is revealed to be a monster because of changing social circumstance or Iago who is always monstrous because he exists so far outside moral boundaries, the play shows its audience the relationship between a monster and the system which the monster violates. Despite all their aesthetic and cultural dissimilarities, Othello and Iago both defile Venetian society through the violence resulting from their interaction. Because Othello provides an example of this dynamic interplay between multiple monsters, it validates the assertion that “the monster always infects with monstrosity everything that it touches” (Lowenthal 144). However,
Shakespeare’s most pertinent explication of the monstrous condition comes from his use of Othello and Iago to demonstrate the immutable incompatibly that broadly defines a monster. Because “difference most often functions to exclude” (Lowenthal 144), the monster’s essential deviance will eventually be discovered regardless of extraneous social or cultural factors that may, intentionally or not, disguise that deviance. Ultimately, Othello and Iago prove that the masquerading monster is always incapable of integrating into the society from which he deviates.
Works Cited


