

# ‘CIVIL MONSTERS’

## The Enlightened Dialectics of *Othello*

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*Whatsoever is beyond the compasse of custome, wee deeme likewise to bee beyond the compasse of reason, God knowes how, for the most part, unreasonably.*

Montaigne, ‘Of Cannibals’

In *Othello* Shakespeare illustrates how humans can become enthralled by ideas of their own making; this is a process that can be usefully described as hypostatization, in which abstract and transient concepts are ripped from their immediate context and ascribed material properties. The primary aim of this essay is to examine how the play betrays the paradoxical irrationality that lies behind reason’s domination of and assertions about nature, while also illustrating how Iago’s dangerous instrumentalism flourishes within the narrow ‘composse of custome.’ More specifically, I contend, the tragedy shows petrified ideas about the essential nature of women and black people destroying the very individuals who confound these assumptions.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* attempts to comprehend how post-Enlightenment culture, which had sought to liberate the mind from fear, could descend into a ‘new barbarianism,’ characterized by the rabid intolerance to otherness that reached its

nadir in the anti-Semitism of Hitler's Germany.<sup>1</sup> *Othello*, a play written on the cusp of the modern era, is manifestly concerned with the destructive consequences of racial intolerance. This thematic parallel could provide grounds for a reading of the play informed by the *Dialectic*. However, if one attends to the concerns about hypostatization and its relationship to instrumental reason tacit in the play, a more nuanced reading, which takes into account not only what the *Dialectic* can tell us about the play, but also how the play presages the *Dialectic*, is possible; it is this reading that I will here undertake and that will hopefully allow us to penetrate the reasons behind the intolerance to that which does not fit into pre-conceived categories, of which Othello and Desdemona—not to mention the exiled Horkheimer and Adorno—were victims.

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The idea that 'myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology'—the central thesis of the *Dialectic*<sup>2</sup>—is apparent in Robert Hornback's studies of blackface folly. Hornback traces how the links between folly, lust, sin, abjection and black skin colour in medieval mystery plays, which deal with mythological biblical events, are developed in *Othello*.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, the morality plays presage the association of virtue with self-control, order and cleanliness that Adorno and Horkheimer identify in enlightenment thought, ('myth is already enlightenment').<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere, Hornback illustrates how the implications about black people tacit in the morality plays became reified into objective facts in the 'pseudo-scientific theories of race' of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Since these theories merely recapitulate an already alleged correspondence between black skin colour and irrationality, apparent in the less-than-scientific discourse of medieval theatre, the reversion of 'enlightenment . . . to mythology' can be seen

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<sup>1</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xviii.

<sup>3</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. vii; Hornback 2009, p. 52; Hornback 2008, p. 200.

<sup>4</sup>See esp. Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, pp. 22-30.

<sup>5</sup>Hornback 2009, p. 52; see also Hornback 2001.

as made manifest by them.

Iago's warning to Brabantio offers a compressed expression of some of these stereotypical associations:

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram  
Is tuppung your white ewe. Arise, arise!  
Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,  
Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you.

(I. 1. 88-91)

As a consummate dramatist, Iago starts things *in medias res*; he rouses the old man with an insistent repetition that Desdemona and Othello “are *now* making the beast with two backs” (116, my emphasis). His grotesquely comical allegory plays on the contrast between the divine connotations of whiteness and the diabolic connotations of the ‘old black ram,’ who is later explicitly associated with the ‘devil’ of mystery play provenance. Since the verb ‘tuppung’ signified both the ram’s copulation with the ewe and the ewe’s acquiescence,<sup>6</sup> a perverse—even ‘monstrous’ (I. 3. 94)—reciprocity is implied. In this period, ‘tuppung’ also held connotations of a violently ‘lascivious’ (125) ‘ramming’<sup>7</sup> and, pertinently enough for a play in which adultery has such central importance, could also signify ‘furnishing someone with horns’<sup>8</sup>

Iago’s quip exemplifies his faith in hypostatized, essentialist ideas. He expresses them through commonplaces, pearls of wisdom, about women and race. His reductive opinion of women, which in contrast to the source is not based on being spurned by Desdemona, is expressed, as Desdemona puts it, in “fond paradoxes to make fools i’t’h’ alehouse laugh” (II. 1. 136-7). However, in his riddling exchange with Desdemona and Emilia when they disembark at Cyprus, his received wisdom is exposed as unfounded and puerile:

LAGO: She that in wisdom never was so frail  
To change the cod’s head for the salmon’s tail;

<sup>6</sup>*Oxford English Dictionary*, definition nos. 1a, 2a.

<sup>7</sup>*Oxford English Dictionary*, definition no. 4.

<sup>8</sup>*Oxford English Dictionary*, definition no. 3.

She that could think and ne'er disclose her mind  
See suitors following and not look behind:  
She was a wight . . .

DESDEMONA: To do what?

IAGO: To suckle fools and chronicle small beer.

DESDEMONA: O most lame and impotent conclusion! Do not  
learn of him, Emilia, though he be thy husband.

(II. 1. 152-60)

This exchange warrants close attention because it epitomizes many of the salient concerns of the play. His riddling couplets manifest staid beliefs. He suggests that even if there was a woman who could keep a secret and was not tempted by other lovers, or by the vanity of attentions from 'suitors,' then she still would only be of use for bearing children and doing the household accounts. This is comparable to the pattern of thought that Adorno and Horkheimer observe is at work in anti-Semitism, in which people are attacked on the grounds of the very powerlessness or weakness (political or physical) that social conditions foist upon them.<sup>9</sup> Women had no hand in shaping the conditions that rendered them fit only for such a mediocre existence. These bawdy comments, so enlivened by the grotesque connotations of fish, are typical of Iago, who frequently equates women with whores and thus with exchange. This 'modernizing fox'<sup>10</sup> is compelled by the *quid pro quo* logic of the market place. For Iago, what applies to goods or services holds true for people too: "nothing can or shall content my soul / Till I am evened with him, wife for wife" (II. 1. 289-90), he exclaims. Shortly after this, he hopes his machinations will 'undo' Desdemona's 'credit with the Moor' (II. 3. 244).

As we saw, Iago's warning to Brabantio acts as an urgent and caustic denigration of Othello and Desdemona's love, while also illustrating how he cannot comprehend a human relationship that is not based on one party's violent domination of the other. Perhaps part of Iago's motive can be accounted for by the fact that the logic of the market place by which he lives—in the first scene he informs the audience

<sup>9</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, esp. p. 135.

<sup>10</sup>Grady 1996, p. 125.

that “I know my price” (I. 1. 10)—is confounded by Othello and Desdemona’s exceptional love. The narrator of the play’s source, Cinthio’s *Gli Hecatommithi*, moralizes that the story shows “that neither men nor women can ever escape the passion of love since human nature is so disposed to it that (even against our will).”<sup>11</sup> The idea that anything could determine a man except his own will and market values—“make all the money thou canst” (I. 3. 347), Iago advises Roderigo—is evidently abhorrent to Iago. In her love for Othello, Desdemona has challenged his belief in equivalence. By his estimation, in choosing the Moor she has traded a valuable ‘salmon’s tail’ for a worthless ‘cod’s head.’

## 2

The very notion of some things’ being natural is shaken up in *Othello*. “Virtue? A fig! ’Tis in ourselves that we are thus, or thus. Our bodies are our gardens to which our wills are gardeners . . . ” (I. 3. 315-7). In his mock-sermon in praise of man’s capacity for violent self-assertion, Iago uses a metaphor drawn, appropriately enough, from the manipulation of nature to express man’s capacity to fashion the world according to his will. This instrumentalism finds contemporaneous philosophical expression in Francis Bacon’s statement that man should “command her [nature] by action,” quoted by Adorno and Horkheimer at the start of Chapter 1 in the *Dialectic* to express the irrational, violent urge to dominate, which they see as underlying Enlightenment reason.<sup>12</sup>

Iago’s garden analogy neatly encapsulates the way in which the play as a whole suggests that nature is anything but natural. Both in the sense of something or someone’s essential identity and in the sense pertaining to the natural world, nature is a consequence of man’s reason. And because reason’s primary purpose is ‘self-preservation,<sup>13</sup>’ what is considered natural is what is expedient for

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<sup>11</sup>Neill 2008, p. 444.

<sup>12</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 2.

those in power. Brabantio repeatedly evokes the concept of nature to show that his daughter's love is "Against all the rules of nature" (I. 3. 102; see also 63, 97). Nature is thus exposed to be the hypostatized construct it was and still is. As Montaigne writes, "The laws of conscience, which we say to proceed from nature, rise and proceed of custome,"<sup>14</sup> by which he means that man is conditioned by the society into which he is born to consider certain actions, beliefs and ideals either natural or unnatural and, concurrently, moral or immoral. Is it not striking how closely 'all the rules of nature' correspond with Brabantio's personal beliefs?

Elsewhere the play complicates conventional associations between blackness and irrationality. Unlike the blacked-up Demon—or the nigger minstrel—Othello is an eloquent speaker.<sup>15</sup> This confounds assumptions about behaviour based on racial categories. He calmly responds to Brabantio, and the Venetian lynch mob thus:

Keep up your bright swords, for the dew will rust them.  
Good signor, you shall more command with years  
Than with your weapons.

(I. 2. 59-61)

His put-down to the Venetians nonetheless conforms to their heroic myths. Rather than calling on demonic powers, he quotes the Gospel, Christ's words to Peter: "Put up thy sword into thy sheath"<sup>16</sup> against these ostensible agents of Christian civilization. He then affirms the ethos of patriarchy, the dubious values of which are exposed during the course of the tragedy.

This lies in stark contrast to Brabantio's outraged invective that counters Othello's response:

O thou foul thief, where hadst thou stowed my daughter?  
Damned as thou art, thou hadst enchanted her;  
For I'll refer me to all things of sense,

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<sup>14</sup>Florio 1613, p. 98.

<sup>15</sup>See Hornback 2010; Hornback 2008.

<sup>16</sup>KJV, Peter 11.18, cf. Honingmann, in Neill 2008.

If she in chains of magic were not bound,  
 ...  
 Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom  
 Of such a thing as thou—to fear not to delight?

(I. 2. 62-65, 70-71)

The links between blackness, irrationality and the demonic, which we saw in Iago's warning, are also apparent here. But there is even more vehemence: Othello is reduced from the bestial to the innate. Once the objectifying tendencies tacit in Brabantio's comments reached their peak, the word 'sooty', which connotes the abject, being smeared with dirt and grime, was to take on an altogether different significance. By 1835, 'sooty' was part of racist jargon. The minstrel stage even boasted of a clumsy, lazy and lecherous character called 'Old Sooty':<sup>17</sup>

### 3

For Adorno and Horkheimer, enlightenment reason's belief in the universality of its categories and violent intolerance to what falls outside of them is fundamental in its counterintuitive development: such intolerance breeds the very 'fear' and 'suffering' that enlightenment is supposed to counteract.<sup>18</sup> Desdemona and Othello's love, which confounds essentialist categories, is so extraordinary that, rather than being seen to expose the limitations of racial and sexual stereotypes, it can only be explained as a deceitful trick, 'magic'. It is the return of the repressed, the old, savage, order of which Othello is an unworthy example for the Venetians of the play and, as Kiernan Ryan illustrates, many of its critics.<sup>19</sup>

Far from the excessive passion and inability to control emotions associated with diabolical blackness, Othello embodies the philosophical standpoint of stoicism—popular in Early Modern Eu-

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<sup>17</sup>*Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>18</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup>Ryan 2002, p. 89.

rope—which was considered proto-Christian due to its emphasis on accepting suffering:

IAGO: Can he be angry? I have seen the cannon  
When it hath blown his ranks into the air  
And, like the very devil, from his very arm  
Puffed his own brother—and is he angry?

...

There's matter in't indeed, if he be angry.

(III. 4. 130-3, 135)

Othello is civilized in the sense that he is capable of emotional restraint. Yet such values are covertly attacked in this comment: it is surely not unreasonable to respond to the death of one's brother at the hands of an enemy with anger. He is also stoical in that he considers himself as primarily defined by his public role. He wants to leave Desdemona in Venice lest his "great business" be "taint[ed]" by his erotic rapture, which would induce a "wanton dullness" (I. 3. 265, 269, 267; see also V. 2. 338). Not least because it emphasizes the individual's role in an organized society, emotional repression and, most significantly, reifies suffering into a universal condition, which cannot be changed; this ancient philosophy is identified by Adorno and Horkheimer as nothing other than 'the bourgeois philosophy.'<sup>20</sup> Thus it is complicit in the perpetuation of preventable misery.

Indeed, when Othello becomes irrational, fulfilling Iago's assumption that "these Moors are changeable in their wills" (I. 3. 240-1), it is in response to human actions:

Arise, black vengeance from thy hollow hell,  
Yield up, O Love, thy crown and hearted throne  
To tyrannous Hate. Swell, bosom, with thy fraught,  
For 'tis of aspics tongues

...

O blood, blood, blood!

(III. 3. 451)

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<sup>20</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. 76.



Othello's moment of great personal anguish is clichéd: he imagines a battle between allegorical figures for his soul—as found in plays such as William Wagner's didactic *The Longer Thou Livest the More Foole Thou Art*. Othello cannot resist rephrasing the consequences of Iago's instrumentalism and the dangers of hypostatization in deterministic terms. As Ryan illustrates, many critics of the play have also viewed *Othello* as the deterministic battle between abstractions like wisdom/folly, good/evil, back/white and civilized/barbarous.<sup>21</sup>

Yet the diabolical imagery of the play is pervasively associated with the consequences of 'modern instrumental reason,' not Faustian temptation.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Desdemona is not a hapless victim of "wretched fortune" (IV. 2. 127). She is no Griselda. Rather, as the marginal voice of Emilia makes clear in her remarkable *copia*, Desdemona is a casualty of "some eternal villain, / Some busy and insinuating rogue" (131), and is destroyed as part of someone's carefully calibrated and particular aims: "Some cogging, cozening slave, to get some office . . . devised this slander" (131-2).

Iago's power over his master is reflected by the way in which Othello's language absorbs his demotic discourse, the association of blackness with lust and the association of women with money and equivalence. Othello considers Desdemona to have "Turned to folly" and to be "a whore" (V. 2. 130). He signifies her irrational, even monstrous, sexual voracity through imagery of the abject, darkness and the bestial: she is as faithful "as summer flies are in the shambles, / That quicken even with blowing. O thou black weed" (IV. 2. 64-5). At the end of the notorious brothel scene, Othello reinforces the relationship between money—and therefore equivalence and exchange—and sex by casting Emilia as a bawd, remarking to her that he and Desdemona have "done our course; there's money for your pains" (94).

As the tragedy unfolds, it becomes clear that Desdemona is circumscribed to play the pre-conditioned roles of whore or virtuous wife, despite the two-fold way in which she suggests things could be other than how they are. First, her scurrilous put-down to Iago, in

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<sup>21</sup>Ryan 2002, p. 87.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 105.

which she reprimands his 'impotent conclusion,' suggests that the real reason behind his commonplaces about women lies as much in male anxiety about impotence as in female sexual voracity. Second, in loving Othello and "Tying her duty, beauty, wit, and fortunes / In an extravagant and wheeling stranger" (I. 1. 134-5), she transcends the constructs of class, age and race. Nonetheless, even her corpse serves as a prop in Othello's patriarchal rhetoric. In what he nauseatingly calls his "sacrifice" (V. 2. 66), Othello employs the very colour symbolism that the play exposes as a hypostatized fallacy. He does not wish to

... scar that whiter skin of hers than snow  
And smooth as a monumental alabaster—  
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.

(V. 2. 4-5)

This is much more than a conventional piece of maudlin Early Modern *Liebestod*. In the source, the character that inspired Othello does not wish to leave obvious marks on the body for fear of "the inviolable justice of the Venetian Lords."<sup>23</sup> Shakespeare, however, uses this idea in such a way as to show the destructive possibility of ideals of femininity, even as it expresses them. Essentialist, objectifying discourses have, quite literally, transformed Desdemona into an object, a cadaver, a 'monumental alabaster.' This is further emphasized when Othello comments: "Cold, cold, my girl? / Even like thy chastity" (274-5); the conventional metaphorical coldness associated with chastity has been unconventionally literalized by the fact he is holding the hand of an unconscious woman. The pervasive association between money, whoredom and exchange is apparent in Othello's eventual reason for killing her: solidarity with other men. She is a piece of impure currency in circulation, she must be destroyed lest she "betray more men," as Brabantio predicted (I. 3. 290-1) and Iago insinuated (III. 3. 209).

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<sup>23</sup>Cinthio 2008, p. 477.

## 4

To speak with certainty about the intrinsic or essential nature of a person or a group of people is to make a violent generalization and to reduce humans to mere things. Particular individuals become mere instances of a pre-determined, ostensibly natural, category. Adorno and Horkheimer redeploy the dehumanizing implications that lie dormant in the idea of nature against itself by stating that “nature is filth.”<sup>24</sup> The First Quarto version of *Othello* contained sixty-three swear words, oaths and curses that had either to be omitted or made milder for the publication of the Folio after the 1606 Profanity Act.<sup>25</sup> The foundations of both patriarchy and racial stereotypes, the play suggests, are identifiable in the demotic discourse of curses, absent from the source, which continue to reaffirm the essentialist notions about the nature of things and people. In *Othello* (false) nature is affirmed by the filthy insults, curses and oaths of which I can only provide a brief consideration of before concluding.

Insults such as ‘thick-lips’ (I. 1. 66), Emilia’s still more vehement “O gull, O dolt / As ignorant as dirt, thou hast done a deed” (V. 2. 160-1) and ‘whore’ (IV. 2. 21, 86) are characteristic of the ‘normative humour’ that Hornback considers to be at work in the play.<sup>26</sup> As Ryan puts it: “For Iago, the Moor is not a man at all. He is an animal: a ram, a horse, an ass.”<sup>27</sup> As we have seen, insults based on Othello’s colour objectify him to such an extent that he is no longer even credited with being sentient. Like Desdemona’s cadaver, he is ‘a thing,’ which is also pervasively associated with the abject—Emilia describes the tragic hero as ‘dirt’ and a ‘filthy bargain’ (V. 2. 155).

This discourse serves a three-fold purpose. First, it enforces categories regardless of whether they actually fit by violently denying any difference between the stereotyped behaviour of women or blacks and their actual behaviour. It exemplifies what Adorno calls ‘idealistic-

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<sup>24</sup>Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, p. 210.

<sup>25</sup>Neill 2008, p. 405.

<sup>26</sup>Hornback 2001, p. 72.

<sup>27</sup>Ryan 2002, p. 87.

identitarian' thought.<sup>28</sup> The elision between idealism, identity and totalitarianism effectively sums up the relationship identified in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* between the categorical impulse of Enlightenment reason and the violently irrational intolerance to difference found in totalitarian thought—a 'nigger' or a 'Jew' reduces a particular individual to simply an instance of an unchanging category. Second, insults offer a way of treating people as things that are systematized, exchanged and manipulated by instrumental reason. Finally, since the curses in *Othello*, with the exception of those aimed at Iago, are more or less wholly unwarranted they encapsulate rhetorically the point that the play makes as a whole: aggressive generalizations about human nature ultimately thwart its capacity to fashion a freer society; they embody that lethal 'fusion of power and validity,'<sup>29</sup> which keeps people tragically enslaved by conditions constructed by their forebears and perpetuated by their oppressors.

In *Othello*, such generalizations about a person's nature, 'identitarian' exclamations, are quite literally expressed impurely, though insults.<sup>30</sup> These insults attest to the irrational prejudice that those who blindly accept as universal and natural the modes of thinking and living formed by the 'compasse of custome' feel towards those who break with custom. They consider the Othellos and Desdemonas of this world to be irrational deviants, 'beyond the compasse of reason,' despite the fact it is they who, by assuming that historically contingent customs and ideals are natural and universal, are behaving 'unreasonably.' In his commentary on the *Dialectic*, Jürgen Habermas argues that it is only possible to "escape from the entwinement of myth and Enlightenment"<sup>31</sup> by examining the mutability of customs and the paradoxical irrationality of reason's attempt to dominate man's nature and the natural world—as Shakespeare does in *Othello*.

Not least because drama falsifies nature, the form of the play enables "a discourse which admits [the] eternal impurity"—that is, par-

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<sup>28</sup>Adorno 2003, p. 42 et passim, my translation.

<sup>29</sup>Habermas 1982, p. 30.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 30; translation modified.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

tiality and provisionality—of any concept of the nature of someone or something.<sup>32</sup> *Othello* offers a non-subsumptive, almost dialectical, play of values and worldviews, which does not violently assert the nature of things or persons. In doing so it implies that to avoid violent, cursing, assertion about the nature of things and people, ‘contradiction is necessary.’<sup>33</sup> The voice of Emilia competes with the deterministic beliefs of her mistress by gesturing to the evidence of human will at work; the clown’s grotesque banter makes the self-destructive Eros of *Othello* look absurd. Most suggestively, the prostitute Bianca’s resigned sigh that she “must be circumstanced” (III. 4. 196) neatly encapsulates what the play as a whole shows: when particular circumstances are hypostatized they force people to play out a role regardless of whether it happens to suit them or not.

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 30.

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