

'Civil Monsters': race, eroticism and the body in early modern literature and culture

Maurizio CALBI¹

Università degli Studi di Salerno

ABSTRACT

Taking its theoretical cue from the work of Rosi Braidotti and Judith Butler, the paper explores some examples of the construction of the body of the racially and sexually 'other' as monstrous, abject and 'de-formed', with particular reference to early modern medical treatises and Shakespeare's *Othello*. Yet, the paper argues, the demonisation of these bodies does not fail to reveal the anxiety about boundaries of gender and race at the heart of the 'dominant'.

The whitest faces have the blackest souls.
(Lust's Dominion)

Rosi Braidotti argues that "the peculiarity of the organic monster is that s/he is both Same and Other. The monster is neither a total stranger nor completely familiar; s/he exists in an in-between zone" (Braidotti 1996:141). S/he is the 'foreign' at the heart of the 'domestic', a paradoxical entity or non-entity the rhetoric of the 'human' represses but does not fully suppress. In short, s/he is the uncanny.

In order to develop her point, Braidotti refers to early modern discourses on reproduction, and in particular to the quasi-paranoid connection they establish between the role played by women and women's 'imagination' in the process of 'generation' and the production of monsters.² Indeed, early modern anatomical and gynecological treatises are replete with advice to women on how to conduct themselves during coition and pregnancy. To stay with the latter, I want to cite from Jacques Guillemau's *Childe-Birth* (1612),

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² 'Generation' commonly stands for 'reproduction' in early modern treatises.

whose first book is dedicated to 'The government and ordering of a woman the nine monethes that she goes with childe'. Part of this 'government and ordering' concerns the disciplining of women's imagination:

Discreet women [...] will not give eare unto lamentable and fearefull tales or storyes, nor cast their eyes upon pictures or persons which are uglie or deformed, least the imagination imprint on the child the similitude of the said person or picture. (Guillemeau 1612:26)

To Guillemeau, therefore, a pregnant woman is highly impressionable, a passive recipient of *fictio* who has nonetheless the power to leave an indelible mark on the child and turn what should be a happy delivery into a monstrous birth.

Guillemeau's warning is by no means unique. The burgeoning literature on monsters of the early modern period routinely evokes the spectre of maternal imagination. Ambroise Paré's *Des Monstres* (1573), for instance, which first appeared in English in 1634, lists 'imagination' as the fifth of the thirteen causes of monsters.³ The French physician quotes the opinion of those who think that "the infant once formed in the wombe [...] is in no danger of the mothers imagination", but concludes that it is "best to keep the woman, all the time she goeth with child, from the sight of [deformed] shapes and figures" (Paré 1634:979).

It has often been claimed, in relation to the early modern sex-gender system, that women do not simply *have* a body. They *are* the body. As Phyllis Rackin argues, there is an inextricable linkage between femininity and that negatively marked and reviled entity which is the body / flesh. "The body itself", she sums up, "was gendered feminine" and subordinated to a 'masculine' soul / spirit (Brink 1993:39). Therefore, even before one begins to consider the extent to which maternal bodily imagination is involved in the making of monsters, one must emphasise that the female body qua body / flesh bears the mark of monstrosity.

I want to refer now to the title page of Helkiah Crooke's 1615 anatomical treatise *Microcosmographia* to illustrate this distinction between 'masculine' spirit and 'feminine' flesh, but also to recast it slightly, using Judith Butler's work, as the difference between bodies that matter (bodies that are significant), on the masculine side, and bodies that do not matter (bodies

³ Paré's teratological treatise was first translated into English as a section of his monumental *Works*. See Paré (1634:961-1026). For the complex textual history of this treatise, see Pallister (1982:viii-xv). By 'naturalisation' I mean, following Park and Daston, the shift of discursive emphasis in teratological literature from "final causes (divine will) to proximate ones (physical explanations and the natural order)." See Park and Daston (1981:35). See also Céard (1977), especially pages 437-479.

that are *not* significant), on the feminine side (*Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*).

Crooke's title page presents two bodies standing next to each other. The male body has had its skin removed and exhibits its arteries, veins and muscles. It is nothing but a hypermasculine armour, almost a cyborg *avant la lettre*. It stays in mid-air, as if to signify some kind of 'virtual' transcendence of the flesh. This is compounded by the fact that it is sexually undifferentiated.⁴ It bears no sexual organs. It is a body that matters *precisely because* it is a figure of 'dis-embodiment'. Moreover, although it is fully exposed, it haughtily averts the eyes of the observer. The female figure, instead, meets the eyes of the –potentially male– observer. She is an 'object' of display, and conscious of being so. Unlike the male figure, she is sexed. In fact, to an extent, she is the only body there is. She 'em-bodies' the realm of the flesh, which belongs to the earth and lacks transcendence. She bashfully hides her breasts and genitals and yet, by doing so, she draws attention to them. Moreover, this gesture of covering herself seems to be simultaneous with her folding back of the layer of skin standing underneath her breasts, which reveals her insides and reproductive organs. This is a body that matters, I would want to argue, only insofar as it is inserted in an ocular economy, an economy which displays to the eye and –sadistically– dismembers the body.⁵ This ocular economy is a process of 'monstering', if I may speak a little preposterously. It shows (*monstrat*), and what it shows, as Crooke's treatise unfolds, is, first of all, that the womb stands synecdochically for the female body as a whole, and, second, that it is a sign of radical 'dis-figuration' and formlessness.

Thomas Laqueur argues that in the early modern period the 'one-sex body' is still the predominant way of figuring sexual difference in Western Europe. Women are nothing but men turned outside in. In 'normal' circumstances, they lack sufficient heat to extrude the penises they bear within. Their sexual organs are inverted mirror images of those of the male. In short, the womb is a penis. Yet, the examples from Crooke's treatise I now want to present tell a different story. Far from being a reassuring double, the womb re-presents itself as an uncanny threatening double, and this is facilitated by the fact that in early modern discourses on reproduction one cannot separate the erotic from 'generation': a woman's orgasm is essential to reproduction. The womb, in other words, takes on the features Rosi Braidotti attributes to the 'organic monster'. It is, to quote Braidotti again, "neither a total stranger nor completely familiar" (Lykke & Braidotti 1996:141).

⁴ I owe much to Karen Newman's reading of Crooke's title page. See Newman (1991:3-4).

⁵ For an acute analysis of early modern ocular economy, see especially Parker (1993:60-95). See also Sawday (1995: *passim*) and Calbi (2001:43-120 and *passim*).

Men and women, according to Crooke,

in their mutual imbracements doe either of them yeeld seede the mans leaping with greater violence. The woman at the same instant doth not onely eiaculate seede into her self, but also her womb *snatcheth* as it were and *catcheth* the seed of the man, and *hideth* it in the bottom and bosome thereof. (Crooke 1615:262)

Later in the text, he clarifies that the simultaneous emission of “seed” is not entirely necessary for a successful conception to take place. Yet,

if at the same time both sexes yeelde their seede, then is the conception sooner [...] because the wombe at that time being as it were *enraged*, doth *more greedily draw* and *more narrowly embrace* the seede which is cast unto it. (Crooke 1615:295)

The passages from Crooke I have just cited show that, once considerations of the erotic are introduced, the womb qua double of the penis re-emerges as a hybrid less-than-human or super-human ‘entity’ which remains nonetheless the condition of possibility for the (re)production of the ‘human’.⁶ In fact, to paraphrase one of Judith Butler’s central critical arguments, the womb qua double is ‘re-marked’ as a site of ambivalence, as the ‘dis-figured outside’ of the (phallic) logic of the one-sex body, providing “the necessary support” for such a logic but also continuously posing a threat to its coherence (Butler 1993:16). It is domestic and foreign, central and marginal, relentlessly coming back to haunt. Therefore, one could argue that the one-sex model Laqueur describes, and subscribes to, turns out to be, to a large extent, an anxious response to a threat.⁷

It might seem a little far-fetched to move from this anatomical drama of distorted and dangerous reflection to early modern theatre and to *Othello* in particular, if only briefly. Yet, I believe that early modern plays, too, offer a complex, often contradictory, *mise-en scène* of the process of materialization of bodies. This is a process, I maintain, taking my theoretical cue from Butler’s work, which is simultaneous with the violent institution of “a domain

⁶ In other words, the womb remains a half-human and half-animal roaming womb, in spite of the fact that all early modern anatomists ostensibly reject the Platonic idea that the womb moves up and down a woman’s body. Janet Adelman, taking her cue from the representations of the wandering womb in *King Lear*, suggests that these representations “might [...] partly destabilize the hierarchical tidiness and stability implicit in the Galenic model.” She adds that “the body in which a womb can wander [...] may figure not a comfortable homology with the male but rather a fearful interior.” See Adelman (1992:301n.) On the ambivalence of the ‘figure’ of the wandering womb, see also Paster (1993:175).

⁷ For a more extensive critique of Laqueur’s approach, see Parker (1993:337-64). See also Calbi (2001:16-23 and 179-228).

of radical *unintelligibility*”, “a domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation”– the realm of monstrosity, one may add here, constituted as an outside and yet constitutive and, as such, menacing (Butler 1993:35). In other words, early modern plays dramatise *and* problematise the dividing line between bodies that matter / are significant and bodies that do not matter/ are not significant.

To Othello, Desdemona unmistakably stands for a ‘body that matters’. It matters especially because it consolidates, or is supposed to consolidate, Othello’s transformation –what the play ambiguously calls “redemption” (I.iii.138)– from the monstrous black and Islamic ‘other’ to the valiant noble white Moor of Venice.⁸ She is “the fountain, from the which [his] current runs” (IV.ii.60), as well as a shield from “chaos”, as Othello states in the following poignant lines: “I do love thee, and when I love thee not / Chaos is come again” (III.iii.92-3).⁹ Crucial to this transformation is the acquisition of the body of white masculinity, which defines itself, in early modern discourses, in opposition to lust, a desire to desire, a bestial appetite which is tantamount to a monstrous undermining of manhood. The early modern name for this delusion is ‘effeminacy’, and the ‘racial other’ is construed as particularly susceptible to it.¹⁰ As a result, soon after pleading with the senators to let Desdemona go to Cyprus with him, Othello feels the need to justify himself, not only as a man but also as an outsider: “I [...] beg it not / To please the palate of my appetite, / Nor to comply with heat” (I.iii.261-3). In fact, he promises that “light-wing’d toys, and feather’d Cupid” (I.iii.268-69) will not “corrupt and taint [his] business” (I.iii.271), the “business” of war against “the general enemy Ottoman” (I.iii.49).

From Othello’s point of view, therefore, to access the body of an aristocratic Venetian maiden is yet another step towards the attainment of the ‘normative’ body of white masculinity. This has a price: Othello cannot but “put into circumscription and confine” (I.ii.27) his treasured “unhoused free

⁸ All references to *Othello* are from the New Arden Edition, ed. M.R. Ridley (London and New York, Methuen, 1965), and are included parenthetically in the text.

⁹ Much of my interpretation of the play is indebted to Ania Loomba’s groundbreaking work. See Loomba (1989:48-62).

¹⁰ Many critics have recently underlined differences between early modern and modern and late modern erotic systems. Male ‘effeminacy’, the result of excessive and/or non-reproductive contact with women, is often referred to as an emblematic example of some of these differences. See Rackin (1993:37-63). On masculinity as an anxious performance, endlessly attempting to dispel the spectre of ‘effeminacy’ as emblematised by the ‘default body’ of the female, see Levine (1994) and Breitenberg (1996). Yet, all these studies fail to emphasise that effeminacy, just like sodomy, emerges as a charge against men only as a way of signifying a wider undermining of boundaries, including, and most importantly for my purposes here, ethnic and racial boundaries.

condition" (I.ii.26), which speaks obliquely of the boundlessness of desire.¹¹ From Iago's point of view, instead, Othello's access to the body of Desdemona is yet another episode in Othello's "travel's history" (I.iii.139). It shows the extent to which Othello pursues his career as an "erring" (I.iii.356) Barbarian pirate in Venice. Talking to Cassio about Othello's marriage, Iago half-jokingly observes: "He to-night hath boarded a land carrack: / If it prove lawful prize, he's made for ever" (I.ii. 50-1). In other words, to Iago, as well as to other characters who operate through strategies of demonisation of 'racial alterity', Othello remains "an extravagant and wheeling stranger, / Of here and every where" (I.i.136-7), an oxymoronic fluctuating monstrous 'non-identity' which confounds ethnic, religious, cultural and sexual affiliations.

Daniel J. Viktus persuasively argues that there is a spectre haunting early modern English and European imagination: the spectre of 'turning Turk'. Indeed, for Viktus, we witness a spate of demonising representations of the Turk, "not from the perspective of cultural domination but from the fear of being conquered, captured and converted" (1997:145-76). As Viktus adds, this fear of conversion does not fail to leave its imprint on *Othello*. The play continuously raises the spectre of 'turning Turk.' Yet, its reverse form (i.e., conversion from Islam to Christianity) does not cause less panic. To the proto-racist *imaginaire* of the play, the Moor's "redemption" (I.iii.138) simply means that the one who 'turns', even the one who 'turns Christian', is bound to turn again or turn back. 'Turning Christian' is, as far as the Moor is concerned, nothing but the symmetrical uncanny equivalent of 'turning Turk'. It speaks the same lascivious story. In this sense, one does not have to wait for Othello to metamorphose into a "turban'd Turk" (V.ii.354) at the end of the play. He has been one all along. In short, a renegade is a renegade...

Representations of the 'Christian Turned Turk' proliferate in travel writings and religious literature of the early modern period. The English translation of the lavishly illustrated *Navigations, Peregrinations and Voyages, Made into Turkie* (1585), for instance, describes the French traveller Nicholas de Nicholay's encounter with the multitude of renegades who live in Algiers. They are typically portrayed as the 'dis-located' and 'dis-locating' antithesis of an incipient sense of European normativity and civilisation:

The most part of the Turkes of Algiers [...] are Christian renied, or Mahumetised, of all Nations, but most of them Spaniards, Italians, and of Provence, of the Ilands and Coastes of the Sea Mediterane, given all to

¹¹ That Othello is willing to exchange his "unhoused free condition" for the domestic pleasure of the *oikos* is one of the elements which differentiates him from stereotypical representations of the Moor such as Aaron's in *Titus Andronicus* or Eleazar's in the anonymous *Lust's Dominion* (1600). Yet, as Lyotard reminds us, and as *Othello* bears out, the *oikos* is never a place of safety. It is, rather, "the place of tragedy". See Lyotard (1991:97).

whoredome, sodometrie, theft, and all other most detestable vices, lving onely of rovings, spoyles, & pilling at the Seas.
(de Nicholay 1585:8)

If these depreciatory constructions of the renegade are brought to bear on Shakespeare's play, one is in a better position to gauge Othello's reaction to the "barbarous brawl" (II.iii.163) which breaks out in Cyprus: "Are we turned Turks?" (II.iii. 161) This question, of course, is part of a speech in which Othello appeals to Christian values in order to mark his distance from the Ottoman 'other' just vanquished by a providential storm: "For Christian shame, put by this barbarous brawl" (II.iii.163). Yet, this is also a speech which furtively announces the eruption of the Islamic enemy within himself.¹²

Early modern discourses on Islam situate themselves within a long-standing Western tradition which routinely interpreted it as nothing but idolatry, in fact, as no religion at all. For these discourses, Islam is indistinguishable from devilish witchcraft. The attraction of Islam has also to do with the fact that it is a religion of sensuality, a cover for monstrous sexual practices. Moreover, its followers keep on converting, and converts are Islam's most zealous 'sexual' adherents.

It is this kind of enticing 'sexual proselytism' which obsessively informs Brabantio's speeches and dreams: "Thou hast enchanted her" (I.ii.63); "Thou has practis'd on her with foul charms" (I.ii.73). To Desdemona's father, Othello is an impostor, "an abuser of the world, a practiser / Of arts inhibited, and out of warrant" (I.ii.78-79). Brabantio, of course, would not concede that his daughter is "half the wooer" (I.iii.176). As he learns of her active role in the affair –what Desdemona herself calls her "downright violence" (I.iii.249)–, he contents himself with instilling into the Moor the suspicion that it may be impossible to put an end to the trespassing of the boundaries of gender instigated by Desdemona: "Look to her, Moor, have a quick eye to see: / She has deceiv'd her father, may do thee" (I.iii.292-3).¹³ The changeability of the 'wheeling convert' Othello thus begins to intersect with the changeability of the 'converted', monstrous Desdemona, whose most poignant expression will be the following: "She can turn, and turn, and yet go on / And turn again" (IV.i.249-50).¹⁴ The tragedy of the play

¹² The expression 'turning Turk' often recurs in the drama of the period. The spectre of conversion to Islam is so widespread that it becomes the central theme of plays such as *A Christian Turn'd Turke* (1612) by Robert Daborn, fictionalising the life of the famous English renegade John Ward, and *The Renegado* (1624) by Philip Massinger. See Matar (1993:489-505).

¹³ It is not by chance that Brabantio's warning will become part of Iago's repertoire of 'seductive strategies' later on: "She did deceive her father, marrying you" (III.iii.210).

¹⁴ Cf. Newman (1991:71-93) for a reading of the monstrous conjunction of blackness and femininity in and around *Othello*.

mostly lies in the fact that it is precisely by speaking and acting from the orthodox and rigid position which damns them both that Othello will terminate all kind of 'turning'.¹⁵

Juxtaposed to the construction of the abjected body of Othello qua 'Islamic other', is the casting of the Moor as a stereotypically rampant black male (Catherine & Wells 2000:203-4). As Ania Loomba reminds us, one cannot simply replace the black pagan with the Islamic other as the embodiment of the outside / inside threat to the dominant. In short, Othello is not only figured as a monstrous Barbary horse 'covering' Brabantio's daughter; he is also imagined as "an old black ram [...] tugging [a] white ewe" (I.i.88-9).

For Leo Africanus, a Moor born in Granada who converted, or was forced to convert, to Christianity after being captured by Italian pirates, Barbaria "is the most noble and worthie region of all Africa, the inhabitants whereof are of a browne or tawnie colour, being a civill people, and prescribe wholesome lawes and constitutions unto themselves"(Africanus 1600:2). Yet, Leo's panegyric on the people of Barbaria seems to be a function of the utter abjection of one of the remaining four principal 'nations' of Africa,¹⁶ which he calls "the land of the Negroes": "the negroes [...] lead a beastly kinde of life, being utterly destitute of the use of reason, of dexteritie of wit, and of all artes [...]. They have great swarmes of harlots among them" (Africanus 1600:42). Later on, he adds that they live

a brutish and savage life, without any king, governour, common wealth, or knowledge of husbandrie. Clad they [are] in skins of beasts, neither [have] they any peculiar wives [...]: when night [comes] they [resort] ten or twelve both men and women into one cottage together, using hairie skins in stead of beds, and each man choosing his leman which he [has] most fancy unto. (284-5).

Yet, in most early modern texts I am aware of, the distinction established by Leo seems to be inconsequential. One form of demonisation feeds upon the other. Lasciviousness provides the code that allows writers to move with nonchalance from blacks to Muslims and back. Iago, for instance, effortlessly switches from the "old black ram [...] tugging [a] white ewe" (I.i.88-9) to the Barbary horse covering Brabantio's daughter to "the beast with two backs" (I.i.116). To Iago, all these 'dis-figured' figures emblemise a monstrous

¹⁵ Othello kills Desdemona, as well as himself, acting and speaking on behalf of 'all men', adopting a universalistic construct of man which in fact excludes him as a non-white and non-Christian man. Cf. Loomba (1989:59-60).

¹⁶ This eulogy becomes more complicated in other sections of the text, but I cannot dwell on this here.

sodomitical conjunction.¹⁷ Yet, monstrosity does not merely lie in the sodomitical act. Iago also evokes the spectre of the production and reproduction of a new breed of Venetians: “You’ll have your nephews neigh to you; you’ll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans” (I.i.112-3).

To conclude, I now want to associate Iago’s fantasy of a ‘monstrous progeny’ with a passage from Paré’s *Des Monstres*, in which he discusses the monstrous reproduction resulting from “the mixture or mingling of seed”, from bestiality, a pre-eminent example of ‘sodomy’ in the early modern sense:

There are monsters that are born with a form that is half-animal and the other human, or retaining everything about them from animals, which are produced by sodomists and atheists who “join together” and break out of their bounds – unnaturally– with animals, and from this are born *several hideous monsters that bring great shame to those who look at them or speak of them*. (Paré 1982:67, my emphasis. Cf. Paré 1634:982)

Leaving *Des Monstres* for the moment, I want to return to *Othello* one last time. The audience understands, as do the characters at the end of the play, or at least those who survive, that *Othello* performs a rhetorical inversion of black and white. As Martin Orkin has argued, the play “reverses the associations attached to the colors white and black [...]. It is Iago, the white man, who is portrayed as amoral and anti-Christian”(1987:170).¹⁸ Moreover, it is Iago who takes on the traits of the stereotypical Moor or the cruel Turk. He embodies deceit, duplicity, cruelty and lasciviousness. He can thus be identified as the “civil monster” (IV.i.64) he mentions in the first scene of the fourth act. He can also be associated with almost everything else he claims the ‘other’ to be, with almost everything he attributes to the ‘other’. Bearing this in mind, I want to return to the passage from Paré I have just cited, to the “hideous monsters that bring great shame to those who look at them or speak of them.” I want to interpret the French surgeon’s words allegorically, as words that speak otherwise. They not only summarise my analysis of *Othello*’s monsters but also re-mark my own theoretical position on monstrosity. Paré’s words suggest that there is “great shame,” that there is monstrosity, and perhaps terror, at the centre of the process of ‘monstering’, at the heart of the ‘dominant’ production of monsters as abject and deformed

¹⁷ By ‘sodomitical’, I am not simply referring to the way the sexual act between Othello and Desdemona is visualised. Sodomy, as many studies of early modern erotic systems have pointed out, after Foucault, is also a way of naming the unnameable, everything that undermines the early modern dispositif of alliance. See especially Bray (1982) and Goldberg, (1992).

¹⁸ See also Smith (1998:168-186), an essay which argues that, by means of inversion, the play disrupts and interrogates the binarism of early modern racial hierarchies.

'others'. It is this, indeed, this monstrosity at the centre, the monster "too hideous to be shown" (III.iii.112).

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Author's address:

Università degli Studi di Salerno
Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari
Via Ponte don Melillo
84084 Fisciano, Italy
mcalbi@unisa.it