### 3. The Sacred and the Beast

If the debates around veiling spring from the use of the veil as a political force and if that political force culminates in the sovereign as Schmitt argues, then the image and theory of the sovereign plays an important role in the construction of the headscarf debates. Questions and theories around sovereign power have existed for centuries, it inspired Schmitt, his major influence Hobbes, and the work of Machiavelli. In their work they all compare the sovereign to a beast. With this comparison to the image of the beast, the Middle English Romance *Richard Coer de Lyon* which depicts the crusading adventures of Richard I of England, presents an interesting example of a juncture point in national identities coalesced around racial or animal distinctions. Geraldine Heng writes that in this romance English national identity forms upon Richard’s cannibalism. Thinking his meal is pork (a meat which Jews and Muslims could not consume and therefore were associated with), he actually devours a Saracen:

The basis of a communal English identity rests on that prior identification when Richard grasps for the first time that he has committed cannibalism ... Richard’s gaze instantly takes in, and establishes beyond question, the evidence of cannibalism and the evidence of racial-religious difference, in what is undeniably a racial recognition ... racial difference pulls into stark focus the Islamic otherness of the enemy, in opposition to English Christians. ... the first thing that we, and Richard, are forced to see, in acknowledging the victim: for the black face ... and widely grinning lips ... definitively establish the dead Saracen (and not the cannibalistic Christian king) as the “devil” ... that Richard immediately designates him. ()

More than serving as the foundation of English communal identity, this episode exposes both the transformation of both king and Saracen or Other into beasts. Richard’s men (“the terrified cook” []) witness their king’s transformation into a cross between lion and man. They eventually laugh with him when comforted by his protection, but simultaneously the Saracen transforms into a swinish, goat-like devil fit for consumption and excretion[[1]](#footnote-1). Hardly new at the time of this romance, this transformation of Muslim into monster has continued both explicitly and subtly throughout the centuries: “The positive and even romantic treatments of Muslims are, however, trivial when considered alongside the grand narrative about Islam, an overwhelmingly negative and dehumanizing treatment that has its origins in the Middle Ages, sees its development in pre-modernity, and is cemented into the Western consciousness through colonialism and Orientalism” (Arjana 7).

Sophia Arjana argues in *Muslims in the Western Imagination* that this treatment is a “political act, and monsters are political creatures. By dehumanizing the Muslim as a dangerous monster, one can justify the extermination of this threat” (12) and that this image of the Muslim in contemporary imagination makes black sites, ABu Ghrab, and Guantanamo Bay palatable to Western society. One could argue that modern society no longer engages in such practices: that we no longer compare Mohammed to the beastly Anti-Christ and that terrorists in film merely reflect the reality of the situation. However, both occidental and oriental scholars and critics defend Shakespearean characters that subtly convey the same message and appear on the stage and on screen today. Othello represents the typical “hyper-masculine—aggressive, overly sexual, and violent—characters” (Arjana ) and his marriage to Desdemona, the prime example of the miscegenation theme in the play, is described as “an old black ram. . . tupping [a] white ewe” and “the beast with two backs” (Arjana). Scholars argue that these lines come from Iago, the villain of the play, and therefore do not reflect the sensibilities of the author; nevertheless, Othello strikes Desdemona to the horror of the Venetian court and in concert with the audiences beliefs about Muslim’s treatment of their wives. Even though Othello is a tragic character, his unrestrained passion and lack of thought reflect a pre-existing view of Muslims. His tragic flaw is predicated upon his racial and religious heritage: “Yet, his descent into madness is predicated on his racial and religious foundations. He is unable to escape either his blackness or his Muslim bloodlines” (Arjana). Like Othello, Cleopatra represents the other half of the gendered prejudice as “a queen who frequently threatens to disrupt conventional notions of proper gender demarcation” (Johanyak 77). She threatens male power by seducing and disorienting them. She threatens Western society by “turning Turk” the men with her womanly ways. Though from an ancient era, her Greek blood but Egyptian culture reflects this idea of “turning Turk” and associates her with “holy women whom the Christians claim prostituted herself in order to convert men to Islam” (Archer 160). This image of the seductress gained new purchase in the colonial era with the rise of more formally recognized forms of Orientalism in the arts; however in contemporary society, the split between female and male has dissolved. The veil is partially responsible for that as well as terrorism. In Hollywood films like *Iron Man 3* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, men or women with weapons powerful enough to kill strong men disguise themselves beneath veils. This dissolution of gendered characteristics further emphasizes the animality and beastly qualities of the veiled Muslim.

The importance of transforming the Muslim into a beast revolves around the relation of beast to sovereign and the sovereign’s importance to politics. As previously mentioned, the Saracen is not the only man turned into beast; King Richard is transformed as well. His act of cannibalism and bestial nature are crucial to his sovereignty “because Sovereignty causes fear, and fear makes the sovereign” (Derrida 40). Giorgio Agamben’s theorizes this position as a merger of beast and man: as *bios* (the political life of man) and *zoe* (bare animal life). The sovereign internalizes the exterior (i.e. the state of nature in which all war against all) by instituting the sovereign ban: “The relation of exception is a relation of ban” (28). The juridico-order issues from the exception and the ban decides who is at the mercy of the law. There is no inside or outside the law on a relation to the sovereign:

Accordingly, when Hobbes founds sovereignty by means of a reference to the state in which "man is a wolf to men," \_homo hominis lupus\_, in the word "wolf " (lupus) we ought to hear an echo of the wargus and the \_caput lupinem\_ of the laws of Edward the Confessor: at issue is not simply \_fera bestia\_ and natural life but rather a zone of indistinction between the human and the animal, a werewolf, a man who is transformed into a wolf and a wolf who is transformed into a man -- in other words, a bandit, a homo sacer ... And this lupization of man and humanization of the wolf is at every moment possible in the \_dissolutio civitatis\_ inaugurated by the state of exception. This threshold alone, which is neither simple natural life nor social life but rather bare life or sacred life, is the always present and always operative presupposition of sovereignty. (106)

So King Richard’s lion animality mirrors the animality of those outside the law, that is the Saracens. What Agamben does not account for and what Ernesto Laclau points out, the *homo sacer* can collectivize on the margins of society. Laclau writes, “[R]evolutionary forces-strictly speaking, according to the State juridical order, outside the law-create their own new law” which results not in “lawlessness as against law, but two laws that do not recognise each other” (). Laclau actually cites Fanon as an example, “The lumpenproletariat, once it is constituted, brings all its forces to endanger the security of the town and is the sign of the irrevocable decay … ever present at the heart of colonial domination” (). While Laclau insists that the *homo sacer* can bring about an anti-politics from this space, we actually see the rise of a competing sovereign as has so often happened in former colonies. Nowhere is this process more clear than the current rise of ISIS caliphate and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Young men and women (most already Muslims) on the margins of Western society have flocked in surprising numbers to join ISIS. Media has described them as lonely, isolated individuals who do not fit in Western society. For these members of ISIS, the West’s attitude seem as beastly as Baghdadi does to the West. As Laclau points out, “When a supreme will is not confronted by anything politics necessarily disappears” (), so it always creates one.

1. This consumption and excretion calls to mind Judith Butler take on Julie Kristeva and the bodily construction of the discrete subject through the excretion of the Other: “Signiﬁcantly, Kristeva’s discussion of abjection in Powers of Horror begins to suggest the uses of this structuralist notion of a boundary-constituting taboo for the purposes of constructing a discrete subject through exclusion. The “abject” designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered “Other.” This appears as an expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is eﬀectively established through this expulsion. The construction of the “not-me” as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the ﬁrst contours of the subject” (181) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)