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Animal Imagery and Its Significance in *Othello*.

Animal imagery is often seen throughout *Othello,* and its presence serves to create an association between Othello and the animalistic, not just to signify a lesser status, but also a savage-like quality. Concepts of domestication also arise as Othello has undergone conversion, however it is to be noted that he remains an outsider and is never fully accepted. Othello’s character is then a creation constructed out of superficial description and sweeping generalizations.

As the play opens, the reader is immersed in a conversation between Iago and Roderigo, as they both use derogatory terms to describe Othello. In regards to Iago’s servitude to Othello and his desire to be more than a subordinate, Roderigo comments, “What a full fortune does the thick-lips owe” (I.I.67). Describing Othello as having thick lips is not just an insult, but also a way of generalizing dark skinned persons as having undesirable and exaggerated physical features. The quality of having full lips begins to be associated with someone that has dark skin and is most likely from Africa, while his specific ethnicity is seen as unimportant and is overlooked. The reasons behind a subordinate speaking in such a manner about his master suggests a lack of respect for the general, and that because Iago and Roderigo are fair of skin, they have the right to misspeak and discriminate against Othello, whom is assumed to be less than they are because of where he is from.

Roderigo and Iago soon after approach Brabantio to spite him so that he will stand in the way of Othello and Desdemona’s union. Iago says to Brabantio as he greets him, “Zounds, sir, you’re robbed…an old black ram is tupping your white ewe. Arise, Arise! ... Or else the devil make a grandsire of you” (I.I.88-94). Iago’s choice of diction in the passage hints at the specific way in which Othello is viewed among his peers. Saying that Desdemona has been “stolen” from her father makes Othello out to be a thief and in no way a gentleman. Also choosing to describe Othello as an old black ram creates the image of a muscular and threatening ram that is not only bestial, but also highly aggressive. Paired alongside the word “tupping” to suggest copulation, the word “ram” takes on a sexual connotation in labeling Othello as sexual and deviant. The mixing of the races is also portrayed as a negative, as saying that Brabantio’s grandchildren will be like the devil because they will be black.

Poking Brabantio further, Iago forewarns him, “you’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you’ll have your nephews neigh to you” I.I113-114. Here again emerges the comparison between Othello and an animal, in this case an African horse. Similar to the ram, the horse is also muscular and full of stamina and vitality. Horses are also known for the size of their penis, therefore signifying Iago’s desire to animalize Othello and over sexualize him. The idea of Othello being a horse also could mean the sense in which he was domesticated. Othello’s integration into the Venetian white world seems contingent upon his being tamed and being forced to suppress assumed savage-like qualities. In regards to reproducing, it is assumed that Othello’s qualities will overpower Desdemona’s and only his physical traits will manifest in their offspring, which is another sign of the fear of miscegenation present in the play.

While sarcastically trying to pinpoint Othello’s origins, Roderigo says that Othello is a “wheeling stranger of here and everywhere” I.I.137-138 to instill in Brabantio a feeling of distrust. The Venetian community is a closed circle, where anything “other” is deemed unacceptable, unless they are fair skinned or offer some sort of benefit to the community, in this case Othello’s military capacity. The variety of Othello’s presumed origins also sheds light on the ignorance of the characters in the play and their blunt disinterest in where Othello actually came from. It is much easier to label Othello as a vagabond with no sense of place, that could take off at any minute, than to actually explore his back-story and give him a fixed ethnicity and individual identity. The Venetians know each other, but they do not know Othello, so they cannot fully accept or trust him.

Furthermore, the desire to brand Othello as the lesser is exhibited by almost all the characters in the play. Surprisingly enough, even though Desdemona has fallen in love with Othello, instead of holding him as an equal she still refers to him as “the Moor.” If Othello has been “accepted” in the community and his African past forgotten, there should not be a need to still refer to him with the generalized label of “Moor.” Alongside of being the Moor, Othello is also connected to the generalization that all Africans perform witchcraft. “Thou hast practiced on her with foul charms, abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals” I.II.74-75. Othello is now seen as the conjuring figure only capable of obtaining a fair lady through force, stealing, or witchcraft.

Another theme in the play is sexuality and the need to hyper-sexualize Othello as Moors are generalized as being “changeable in their wills” I.III.339, to suggest Othello as promiscuous and unable to control his passion and emotion. There is also the link between Othello’s hyper-sexuality as it spreads onto Desdemona because she has chosen to be with him. “She must change for youth; when she is sated with his body, she will find the error of her choice” (I.III.341-342), depicts Desdemona as an insatiable sexual creature that is with Othello perhaps out of curiosity, or for a wish to sleep with a man that is like an animal instead of the usual gentle Venetian. Although Iago is spiteful towards women, had Desdemona not married Othello, she would most likely not have been labeled as sexually insatiable. It is through her marriage to Othello that Desdemona begins to gain his qualities.

In expressing his hatred for Othello, Iago once again reaffirms his perceived similarity of Othello to an animal. “The Moor is of free and open nature, that thinks men honest that but seem to be so, and will as tenderly be led by the nose as asses are” I.III.382-385. Another way to devaluate Othello is to treat him as ignorant and unknowledgeable. Iago boasts of Othello being naïve for thinking all good men honest, and for being easily dominated and manipulated. Like an ass or an animal incapable of thinking for himself, Othello needs a smarter man to control him and manipulate him. Being naïve is then seen as the result of a minority status and therefore being easy to trick.

In addition, when Michael Cassio is demoted for fighting Roderigo, he utters the words “I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial” II.III.240-241. Seeing as Othello is constantly degraded and categorized as a black sexual animal, his reputation has always been mocked and not genuinely acknowledged, therefore suggesting that because Othello is not respected among his peers, that he is then justly reduced to the bestial. If what lies under the conventional or traditional reputation of the white knave is a beast, Othello’s not having such a reputation in the first place ultimately deprives him of him even being seen as anything other than an animal.

As the play progresses, Othello begins to adopt Iago’s idea of him in that Othello begins to voice “I am black” III.III.280, and also to compare himself to an animal. “I had rather be a toad and live upon the vapor of a dungeon” III.III.286-287. Perhaps it is because he has lost Desdemona, but Othello does begin to show concerns of inferiority, whereas in the beginning he seemed intent on proving himself and on standing up for his marriage. Othello’s emotional deterioration, his heartache, and jealousy has demised the eloquent general to a man that now sees himself as the source of blackening and of corruption. “Her name, that was as fresh as Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black as my own face” III.III.404-405. Othello blames himself for indirectly having corrupted Desdemona. Desdemona became deviant for desiring Othello, and because of her desire she has turned promiscuous and black like him.

Initially, it was Iago that expressed his loath of becoming a cuckold, but in Act 4, Othello is now the one that labels himself as the cuckold. “A horned man’s a monster and a beast” IV.I.60. The physical representation of infidelity seems to alter and denigrate the individual to the point where he develops invisible horns to demark his misfortune. Instead of saying “I have now become a cuckold” Othello opts to describe himself as a horned animal that could either represent him as an animal, or as the devil because his skin is black.

In the final act, for his final speech, Othello compares himself to the base Indian, as well as describes himself as “a turbaned Turk beat by a Venetian [and] took by th’throat the circumcised dog” V.II.362-365. The comparison to the base Indian reinforces again Othello’s ignorance as a consequence of his ambiguous ethnicity, and his mistake in falling for the lies of someone presumably cleverer than him. The final comparison then to the malignant Turk and to the circumcised dog refers to Othello turning into the enemy, and his otherness gaining the evil component he was accused of throughout the play. Othello as the circumcised dog shows the complexity and impossibility of his conversion where he mutilates his body to fit in, but is never fully accepted as anything other than a dog whose only worth lies in his labor.

Moreover, in her article “O blood, blood, blood”: Violence and Identity in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Jennifer Feather addresses the “collective cultural attempt to stabilize existing categories of difference by attaching them to fixed biological characteristics” (240). Feather proposes that Othello’s utterance of the words “O blood, blood, blood” not only mark Othello’s descent into barbarism, but also address the way in which Othello tries to negotiate the “tension between stability and fluidity” (240), whether he can have the option of expressing himself without being boxed into the aggressive African stereotype.

Feather discusses the word “blood” as meaning both racial difference and racial essence paired with violent connotations. Othello’s physical appearance is attributed to his lineage, and his blood is a “signifier of race” (242) that through its utterance “reveals a conception of identity rooted in violent action rather than fixed bodily essence” (242). The conception of identity is not innate in Othello but rather a concept imposed on him by the community he inhabits. Othello having murdered Desdemona is seen as his barbarous side emerging, not because this is the reality of the situation, but because of Elizabethan society’s “reliance on violence to connect word and deed, meaning and reality.” (242).

Feather also addresses the prominent fear of the mixing of the bloodlines, in respect to the initial belief that Desdemona’s identity is comprised of her blood, and how her involvement with Othello constitutes as perpetration “not only of her physical body but against her blood” (246). The horror then for Brabantio lies in realizing that “blood is not a stable marker of identity, [but] that it can in fact be wrought upon by mere words” (249). A person’s pureness or racial essentialism, if denoted by blood, can be easily mixed and changed just as a person can begin to develop the same qualities of another due to association/ marriage.

Overall, the use of animal imagery in Othello is used as a means to reduce the individual out of a fear of the unknown. There is also a hidden concern of being penetrated by what is deemed “other” not only physically, but culturally as well. The final comparison between Othello and a Turk embodies the lack of acceptance toward the foreigner, and the hardship of reaching a balance between keeping one’s own original identity, and also fitting in with the dominant culture.

Works Cited

Feather, Jennifer: 'O Blood, Blood, Blood': Violence and Identity in Shakespeare's *Othello.*  
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