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“A Monster Turned to Manly Shape”:
Monstrosity on the Renaissance Stage

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“A Monster Turned to Manly Shape”: Monstrosity on the Renaissance Stage

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This dissertation examines the change from medieval descriptions of physically monstrous races and creatures to the depictions of monstrosity as a moral or mental state on the Renaissance stage. Renaissance audiences were still fascinated by physically grotesque monsters, as evidenced by the popularity of broadside ballads featuring monstrous births, but despite the fact that the stage is an ideal vehicle for displaying visual difference, there are very few visually remarkable monsters in Renaissance drama. This work therefore examines the villains and avengers of the Renaissance stage who look human but behave like monsters in order to provide a more complete understanding of the social, moral, and philosophical significance of their actions.

Although there have been many studies of medieval monsters, there have been few studies of Renaissance monsters aside from scholars who examine the significance of the monstrous or deformed body in public exhibitions and broadsides, such as Lorraine Daston, Katherine Parks, and Mark Burnett. This study, therefore, offers a new understanding of monstrosity in the Renaissance, and how these villains are conceived of as monsters of the mind: they reject human reason and sympathy in favor of fulfilling their own monstrous passions. This dissertation contributes to the growing field of monster studies. It offers a new interpretation of what it means to be a monster on the Renaissance stage, expanding upon the definition of monstrosity in the Renaissance to more closely align with period debates and ideas about the boundary between the human and inhuman.

This study begins by outlining the late medieval understanding of monstrosity and then examining the diminishment of physical monsters in Renaissance literature. The first chapter considers medieval works such as *The Sultan of Babylon* and Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. The study then moves to the consideration of early modern discussions of monsters and monstrosity in Francis Bacon, Sir Thomas Browne, Michel de Montaigne, Thomas Wright, and William Rankin in order to establish what type of behavior is categorized as monstrous. In the remaining chapters, the study proceeds through a selection of Renaissance tragedies, including Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc*, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine The Great*, and William Shakespeare's *Richard III* and *Othello*. Instead of simply creating monsters whose appearances reveal their moral corruption, these dramatists create a range of characters whose bodies may or may not be indicative of their mental state: a character who appears different (whether because of race or other physical difference) is not necessarily villainous, but the character who appears "normal" and acts kindly may hide monstrous intentions. They demonstrate that the line between human and monster lies not in the body, but in the ability to control the passions through human reason and conscience.

This dissertation by Kristen Danielle Wright fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in English Language and Literature approved by Michael Mack, Ph.D., as Director, and by Tobias Gregory, Ph.D. and Lilla Kopár, Ph.D., as Readers.

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*For my loving and supportive husband, Edward Wright,
and our two “puppy-headed” monsters, Lord Byron and Fable.*

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Chapter 1 Introduction

In recent years, there has been a great deal of interest in how monsters are depicted in literature. The medieval period has been particularly fruitful for research in this area, with scholars such as John Block Friedman and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen studying monsters in art and literature respectively.¹ Although the term “monster” appears frequently in Renaissance texts, there has been little study into the significance and meaning of the term on the Renaissance stage, aside from scholars such as Lorraine Daston, Katherine Parks and Mark Burnett, who have focused on monstrous births and public exhibitions of the monstrous or deformed body.² Yet, despite the popularity of monstrous spectacles, there are very few physically monstrous

¹ John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000) and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). Other significant works in this area include (but are certainly not limited to): David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Medieval Thought and Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996); *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, ed. by Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills (Cardiff: Univ. of Wales Press, 2003); Karl Steel, “Centaurs, Satyrs, and Cynocephali: Medieval Scholarly Tetralogy and the Question of the Human,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. By Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012); and Debra Higgs Strickland, “Monstrosity and Race in the Late Middle Ages,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. by Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012).

² Lorraine Daston and Katherine Parks, *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (New York: Zone Books, 1998) and Mark Thornton Burnett, *Constructing ‘Monsters’ in Shakespearean Drama and Early Modern Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). A few other scholars who have worked on Renaissance monsters include Wes Williams, *Monsters and their Meanings in Early Modern Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Norman Smith, “Portentous Births and the Monstrous Imagination in Renaissance Culture,” in *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*, ed. by Timothy S. Jones and David A. Sprunger (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2002); and Surekha Davies, “The Unlucky, the Bad, and the Ugly: Categories of Monstrosity from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. By Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012).

characters on the Renaissance stage except for a handful of prodigies and monstrous births,³ and the characters who are called monsters on the Renaissance stage do not tend to look like monsters.

However, the changing use of the word “monster” does not mean that “monster” has merely become an insult. Instead, Renaissance writers eschew the grotesque physical forms of their predecessors in favor of treating monstrosity as a moral and mental state: a “monster” becomes a character who appears human yet behaves in monstrous ways. As Wes Williams argues, “To call something ‘monstreux’ in the mid-sixteenth century is, more often than not, to wonder at its enormous size [... but] by the late seventeenth century the term ‘monstreux’ is more likely to denote hidden intentions, unspoken desires.”⁴ His claim can be seen in the many French works that he discusses, and in English theology, philosophy, and especially drama, with increasing numbers of Renaissance thinkers using “monster” to describe both something hidden and a person whose form hides the fact that he or she desires to act in the same extreme and violent ways as their physically monstrous counterparts; their bodies are not extreme but their inhuman or unnatural actions are. Furthermore, in creating monsters who look human, these dramatists contribute to the widespread inquiry into what exactly it means to be human; if a human body can hide a monstrous mind, then the line between human and monster becomes much more difficult to see.

In the medieval period, the boundary between monster and man was easier to delineate. Long before Renaissance dramatists created hidden, mental monsters on the stage, medieval writers and artists depicted a vast array of medieval monsters, and as Cohen and others have

³ For example, Caliban and Richard III who will be discussed in Chapters Four and Five.

⁴ Wes Williams, *Monsters and their Meanings in Early Modern Culture*, 1.

already established, these medieval monsters tend to have certain characteristics in common. For example, medieval monsters typically live in far away and often chthonic places, and they have strange and frightening bodies, such as *Beowulf*'s Grendel and his mother (c. 950) who live in an underwater cave, or the dragon of the same poem, another cave dweller, the Middle English romance *The Sultan of Babylon*'s Ethiopians with "bores hede[s], blake and donne (c. 1400),⁵ or Sir Thomas Malory's giant of Mont St. Michel in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485). Pliny the Elder's first century work *The Natural History* was filled with monstrous races such as the Sciopods, who possessed only one enormous foot, and these races appeared in other texts long into the Middle Ages. Additionally these and other monsters would usually eat strange foods or were cannibals; for example, when Arthur arrives, Malory's giant is preparing to eat "twelve young children late born, like young birds."⁶

Of course all of these attributes allow the monsters to fulfill a specific role in literature and art: they warn about the dangerous other and the behaviors that humans must not engage in lest they become monstrous as well. As Cohen argues, "the monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us [...]. Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across (constructed through) the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual."⁷ Daston and Parks similarly claim that "European authors [of the Middle Ages] certainly used the exotic races to test and explore fundamental boundaries in their own culture — between male and female, wild and civilized, human and animal — as is clear

⁵ *The Sultan of Babylon*, in *Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances*, ed. by Alan Lupack (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1990), lines 346-348.

⁶ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur vol 1*, ed. by John Rhys (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1906), 137.

⁷ Cohen, "Monster Culture," 7.

from the prominence in travel narratives of beings such as centaurs, satyrs, hermaphrodites and cross-dressers.”⁸ This can be seen in a variety of monsters, with religious and racial difference being popular forms of monstrosity in medieval literature, particularly in late medieval romances such as *The Sultan of Babylon*, which contrasts violent, dark-skinned, Muslim monsters with noble, white, Christian Crusaders.⁹ The brave Christian knights must fight monsters such as Alagolofure, who is a “gaunt” with “a body longe / And hede like an liberde. / Therto he was devely stronge; / His skynne was blake and harde. / Of Ethiope he was bore, / Of the kinde of Ascopartes. / He hade tuskes like a bore, / An hede like a liberde.”¹⁰ Their bodies visually demonstrate that the beliefs and behavior of these peoples are unacceptable for western Christians.¹¹ These monsters look different and act with extreme violence, destroying human civilization and representing humanity’s most sinful and forbidden impulses. They are

⁸ Daston and Parks, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 34.

⁹ Not all Muslims were depicted as physically monstrous, and these works also depicted Muslim knights whose black skin was their only physical marker of difference. Sometimes these black Muslims were even miraculously whitened when they converted to Christianity, visually symbolizing their movement from monstrosity to humanity. For more on this see Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “On Saracen Enjoyment: Some Fantasies of Race in Late Medieval France and England,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 1 (2001); Robert Bartlett, “Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity,” *Journal of Early Modern and Medieval Studies* 31, no. 1 (2001); and Jacqueline de Weever, *Sheba’s Daughters: Whitening and Demonizing the Saracen Woman in Medieval French Epic* (New York: Garland, 1998).

¹⁰ *The Sultan of Babylon*, lines 2191-98.

¹¹ For more on the Saracen as monstrous in late-medieval romances see Michael Uebel, “Unthinking the Monster: Twelfth Century Responses to Saracen Alterity,” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1996): 264-291 and John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002).

sometimes even described as descendants of sinful humans who have become degraded and monstrous creatures.¹²

Even monstrous races that were not linked to a particular sin or membership in the wrong faith were still interpreted as carrying some sort of divine message. For example, monstrous races — such as the cynocephali, panotii, and sciopods — were typically viewed as part of the wonder of God’s creation, which, as argued by St. Augustine in *De Civitate Dei*, were meant to remind man of God’s infinite capabilities and were often interpreted as having metaphorical meaning.¹³ For example, the fourteenth century *Gesta Romanorum* claimed that the “dog-headed Cynocephali signified ascetic preachers in hair shirts [...] while the enormous ears of the Scythians stood for willingness to hear the word of God.”¹⁴ These monsters did not represent a particular sin, but they did carry a divine message that was meant to be interpreted by those who viewed them.

However, with the increase in travel and the slave trade, the world began to appear to be much less full of far away monsters. The type of monstrosity attributed to foreign races necessarily began to change in the late medieval period when, as argued by Theo David Goldberg, there was “increasing contact with peoples geographically, culturally, and seemingly,

¹² Some medieval monsters (both black skinned and not) were claimed to be descendants of Ham or Cain, with their physical difference read as a marker God’s displeasure. For more on this see Irina Metzler, “Perceptions of Hot Climate in Medieval Cosmography and Travel Literature.” *Medieval Ethnographies: European Perceptions of the World Beyond*, ed. by Joan Pau Rubies (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 382; Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 10; and Friedman, “*The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*,” 186, in which he discusses both Aristotle and Alexander of Hales’ description of these monstrous races as being descended from man.

¹³ St. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, trans. by Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1984), 21.8, pg 980. This is discussed much more fully in Daston and Parks, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 39-48.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

physically different from people of familiar form. [And because of this contact,] over time then the Plinian categories grew increasingly empty.”¹⁵ As the world became less mysterious, the monsters were pushed to the edges of the known world, and as John Block Friedman claims, “Although skeptical travelers even at the height of the monstrous races’ popularity questioned their existence on the grounds of simple common sense, this attitude grew widespread in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—not only from the impact of new discoveries and interest in the Americas, but also from the force of Renaissance empiricism generally.”¹⁶ Or as Norman Smith argues, “The monstrous races still are found in Renaissance geographies and histories, but the Renaissance was less interested in the far-off monstrous races of Africa and Asia than in the monsters they could see about them—anomalous births, strange events, occurrences contrary to nature.”¹⁷

As monstrous races faded from popularity, the increased focus on unnatural or monstrous individuals added new interest in the long-standing philosophical and theological debates about whether or not monsters could be human and where monsters fit within God’s ordered universe. Categorizing and interpreting a monstrous birth is much more challenging, and philosophers and theologians in both the medieval period and the Renaissance often interpreted these monstrous individuals as carrying a specific meaning for the community into which they were born. Earlier theologians did not distinguish between monstrous individuals and monstrous races, and Augustine never connected monstrous individual births with a particular message or impending

¹⁵ Theo David Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 23.

¹⁶ Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, 198.

¹⁷ Norman Smith, “Portentous Births and the Monstrous Imagination in Renaissance Culture,” 267.

evil, focusing instead on monstrous races or species as possessing general metaphorical significance. However, medieval scholars such as Thomas of Cantimpré distinguished between monstrous races or species and “a monstrosity of birth,”¹⁸ and Isidore of Seville described how “God wishes to signify the future through faults in things that are born, as through dreams and oracles, by which he forewarns and signifies to peoples or individuals misfortunes to come.”¹⁹ These monstrous individuals thus had immediate meaning for the communities in which they lived, and as claimed by Daston and Parks, “If marvelous races were a phenomenon of the margins, an embellishment and completion of the natural order, individual monsters erupted in the Christian center, brought about by its corruption and sin. They were suspensions of that order, signs of God’s wrath and warnings of further punishment.”²⁰

Renaissance philosophers continued this debate about the nature and role of monstrous individuals, attempting to align God’s ordered universe with these deviant births. For example, in his *Essays* (1580), Michel De Montaigne, after seeing a Siamese twin, claims that:

What we call monsters are not so to God, who sees in the immensity of his work, the infinity of forms that he has comprised in it; it is for us to believe that this figure that astonishes us is related and linked to some other figure of the same kind, unknown to man. From this infinite wisdom there proceeds nothing but that is good and ordinary and regular; but we do not see its arrangement and relationship [...] We call contrary to nature what happens contrary to custom.²¹

¹⁸ Thomas of Cantimpré, *De natura rerum*, ed. by H. Boese (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1973), 8.3, 278.

¹⁹ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, 11.3.4, ed. by W.M. Lindsay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911) Translated by Daston and Parks, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 50.

²⁰ Daston and Parks, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 51.

²¹ Michel de Montaigne, “Of a Monstrous Child,” *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. by Donald M. Frame (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 654.

In *Religio Medici* (1642), Thomas Browne similarly argues that even though man may think that something is ugly or grotesque, there “are no Grotesques in nature; nor any thing framed to fill up empty cantons and unnecessary spaces.”²² For Browne, all things on earth were created according to God’s plan, even monsters. He believes that humans are amazed by monsters simply because they are outside of our typical experience; wonder is a reaction to novelty and humans classify things as monstrous that look unusual.

With the interest in monstrous births and the marvelous, there were also debates about the nature of “monstrous children” and whether or not they could be considered human. Thomas Browne, for example, argues that even though the soul is inorganic and not housed in a particular place in the body, “the equivocal and monstrous productions [from] the copulation of man with beast” do not have souls because they lack the human body which is “the instrument and proper corps of the Soul [...] and that the hand of Reason.”²³ However, the problem of humanity became even more urgent when the monstrous child looked more human, as in the case of conjoined twins. As Daston and Parks note, “writers like Augustine and Thomas of Catimpré could speculate at length on the status of monstrous races, but the parents, the midwife, and the parish priest had to determine if a monstrous baby was human and should be baptized — and if so, whether as one person or two.”²⁴ Monstrous children born to human mothers were a theological challenge, and the debate over the nature of their souls would continue throughout the Renaissance.

²² Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici and Hydriotaphia*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and Ramie Targoff (New York: NY Review of Books, 2012), 18.

²³ Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, 53-54.

²⁴ Daston and Parks, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 57.

Furthermore, as broadside images became more common, they allowed wide-ranging audiences, both literate and illiterate, to experience the fear and wonder evoked by these monsters. Smith notes that in Renaissance England, “the forerunner of the modern newspaper, the broadside, is largely devoted to reporting and interpreting the contemporary monstrous births. Often luridly illustrated and sensationally written, they were bought on street corners and at fairs by the barely literate masses.”²⁵ Longer, illustrated works on monsters were also incredibly popular, and Smith describes how “One of the greatest best-sellers of the sixteenth century was the *Histoires Prodigieuses* of Pierre Boaistuau, a sort of Renaissance Ripley’s Believe-It-Or-Not containing marvelous tales on everything from the man who washed his hands in molten lead to the miraculous properties of gemstones. Seventeen of the *Histoires*’ forty tales are about monsters.”²⁶ These included monsters as various as deformed births such as the monsters of Ravenna and Krakow, and conjoined twins.²⁷ Daston and Parks point out that these images “were also integral to the cultural meaning of the monster as prodigy, since they allowed the audience to determine for whom the warning was intended and when the threatened disaster might occur.”²⁸ These images allowed the audience to participate in the viewing and judgment of the monster, serving to both reinforce community bonds (the community of viewers opposed to the monster that is being viewed) and spreading the lesson gleaned from the monster’s body to a much wider audience than was previously possible. These monsters could not be dismissed as far away wonders; instead, they reflected (negatively) on the community from which they came,

²⁵ Norman Smith, “Portentous Births and the Monstrous Imagination in Renaissance Culture,” 281.

²⁶ Ibid., 282.

²⁷ For much more on this see Daston and Parks, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 177-189.

²⁸ Ibid., 182.

setting the stage for continued changes in how Renaissance philosophers, theologians, and artists viewed monstrosity and its potential meaning as a more direct commentary on the behavior of members of their own community.

With the increased focus on monstrosity as something that can occur within the local human community came increased concern with where the physical and, more importantly, the behavioral differences between man and monster truly lie. Since monsters were usually defined by both their strange appearances and inhuman behavior, this opens up the question of how to classify individuals who appear human but who act in inhuman or unnatural ways. The idea that a normal looking human could hide monstrous impulses accords with Renaissance thought about the tension between human reason and corrupt human nature. There is therefore a conflict within man between his higher human nature and his lower corrupted or animal like nature that is driven by passions and baser instincts.²⁹ This idea is displayed in the writings of many period philosophers. For example, in *Passions of the Mind in General* (1601), Thomas Wright warns that although the soul should be man's highest guide, man's passions can become so inflamed that they alter his sense, leading to a failure of reason.³⁰ Thomas Browne also warns that man possesses a dual nature and that

the practice of man holds not an equal pace, yea, and often runnes counter to their theory; we naturally know what is good, but naturally pursue what is evil: the Rhetoric wherewith I persuade another cannot persuade my self: there is a depraved appetite in us, that will with patience hear the learned instruction of Reason; but yet perform no farther than agrees to its own irregular Humour. In brief, we are all monsters, that is, a composition of man and beast.³¹

²⁹ This is also described by Northrop Frye, "Nature and Nothing," in *Essays on Shakespeare*, ed. by Gerald W. Chapman (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1965), 38.

³⁰ Thomas Wright, *Passions of the Mind in General*, ed. by William Webster Newbold (New York: Garland, 1986), 94-95.

³¹ Browne, *Religio Medici*, 55.

Here Browne imagines man as a composite of both good and evil and in this mixture of “depraved appetite” and “Reason” is a monster. According to Browne, humans are a moral paradox: they can act against their nature and are thus naturally unnatural. However, he later goes further, arguing that in man’s divided nature, he often yields to his lesser nature, and thus becomes monstrous:

Let me be nothing if within the compass of my self, I do not find the battle of Lepanto, passion against reason, reason against faith, faith against the Devil, and my conscience against all. There is another man within me that angry with me, rebukes, commands and dastards me [...] I am not singular in offenses, my transgressions are Epidemical, and from the common breath of our corruption. For there are certain tempers of body, which matched with an humorous depravity of mind, so hatch and produce viscosities, whose newness and monstrosity of nature admits no name.³²

The human mind is a place of conflict, and Browne imagines the conscience “against all.” The conscience is thus at once a balancing force, ideally preventing man from yielding entirely to the other forces in his mind, but it is also fallible. The conscience can reprimand for offenses but cannot prevent them entirely, and when the mind’s inherent “depravity” matches with “tempers of body,” the conscience is overwhelmed and a monstrous nature wins out.

The idea that man can possess a monstrous mind makes its way more explicitly into Robert Burton’s, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). In it, Burton claims that “As Hercules purged the world of monsters, and subdued them, so did he fight against envy, lust, anger, avarice &c. and all those feral vices and monsters of the mind.”³³ The passions that drive man to extreme actions and insanity become “monsters of the mind,” and Burton warns that even having

³² Ibid., 101-102.

³³ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. by Thomas C. Faulkner (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989), 62.

a consuming love can become a “perturbation of the mind, a monster of nature.”³⁴ He notes that passions are not necessarily bad, but when they are unchecked by human reason, they become extreme versions of themselves. He then continues by warning that man can “become a monster by stupend metamorphoses,”³⁵ and that if man yields to his appetite and inclination he becomes “like so many beasts”;³⁶ when man yields to his emotions rather than reason he becomes “bad by nature, worse by art.”³⁷ Man should naturally follow his reason and soul rather than yielding to his baser passions and feelings.

This concern that man possesses the potential for monstrosity if he allows his reason to be unnaturally overtaken by his passions appears in both period poetry and drama. For example, in *The Spider and the Flie* (1556), John Heywood’s Flie asks:

Without accusation or detection:
 Werby might appere anie colour of law:
 To kill him. This lo doth my conscience gnaw.
 And yet more: The nombre here in ire so sturd
 That they wold have him hangd, and not speak one wurd.
 Which deede: if we do, wheare are our like monsturs?³⁸

He wonders if killing a man against the urgings of his own conscience and without a fair hearing makes him like a monster. The human conscience and reason are therefore contrasted with monstrous impulse and violence.³⁹

³⁴ Ibid., 448.

³⁵ Ibid., 85

³⁶ Ibid., 108

³⁷ Ibid., 162.

³⁸ John Heywood, *The Spider and the Flie* (London, 1556), *Early English Books Online*.

³⁹ The *OED* cites this as one of the earliest recorded usages of the word “monster” to mean a “person of repulsively unnatural character” or who exhibits “such extreme cruelty or wickedness as to appear inhuman.” The earliest, however, appears in Robert Henrysons’ late medieval poem *Orpheus and Eurydice* (1505): “monster, n., adv., and adj.”. *OED Online*. March 2016. Oxford University Press. In the poem Henryson writes that “It is contrair the lawis of nature / A gentill

Later, Edmund Spenser makes the connection between unnatural passions and monstrosity more explicit. In *The Faerie Queene* (1596), although there are many physical monsters, the character Malbecco begins as a human but has such powerful passions that he turns both mentally and physically monstrous. Malbecco is a miserly and jealous man whose beautiful young wife, Hellenore, cuckolds him with Sir Paridell and then with a band of Saytres. Despite these betrayals, Malbecco still loves his wife, but when Hellenore refuses to return home with him he runs away and

Greife, and despight, and gealosie, and scorne
Did all the way him follow hard behind,
And he himselfe himselfe loathed so forlorne;
So shamefully forlorne of womankind;
That as a Snake, still lurked in his wounded mind.⁴⁰

As with Burton's "monsters of the mind," Malbecco's love turns to jealousy that lurks like a snake in his mind. However, unlike the mental monsters of the stage, Malbecco undergoes a more literal "monsterring" because of his corrupted mind. He flings himself off a cliff, "But through long anguish, and selfe-murdring thought / He was so wasted and for pined quight, / That all his substance was consum'd to nought." He lands unhurt on the rocks below and "with crooked claws so long did crall."⁴¹ His feelings of jealousy are so strong that he actually becomes a monstrous incarnation of jealousy:

Ne ever is he wont on ought to feed
But toades and frogs, his pasture poisonous,

man to be degenerat, / Noucht following of his progenitour / The worthé rewill and the lordly estait; / A ryall rynk for to be rusticat / Is bot a monsture in comparesoun, / Had in dispyt and foule derisioun": Robert Henryson, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, in *The Poems of Robert Henryson*, ed. by Robert L. Kindrick (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997): lines 8-14.

⁴⁰ Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. by Thomas P. Roche (London: Penguin, 1978), 3.10.55.

⁴¹ Ibid., 3.10.57.

Which in his cold complexion do breed
 A filthy bloud, or humor rancorous,
 Matter of doubt and dread suspitious,
 That doth with curelesse care consume the hart,
 Corrupts the stomacke with gall vitious,
 Croscuts the liuer with internall smart,
 And doth transfix the soule with deathes eternal dart.⁴²

He is changed both outside and inside by his jealousy so that he is no longer human; he “Forgot he was a man, and *Gealosie* is hight.”⁴³ The monsterring of his mind is reflected in the monsterring of his body.⁴⁴

Although Malbecco’s melancholy is so extreme that it distorts his physical body, he is different from many of the monstrous characters depicted on the Renaissance stage whose bodies appear human but whose actions reveal them to be monstrous. For all that Malbecco’s body is extreme, with his long claws and emaciated body, his only truly extreme actions are his attempted suicide and choice of food. In contrast, Hieronimo, Videna, Tamburlaine and the others who will be discussed here never change in appearance, but their monstrosity is derived from their extreme and unnatural actions. Although Shakespeare depicts two physical monsters in Richard (in *Richard III*) and Caliban (in *The Tempest*), he eschews the type of physical transformation used by Spenser. Instead, their monstrosity is either entirely internal or their internal monstrosity is much more threatening than the external.

With the idea that man’s nature, in the words of Francis Bacon, can run to “either herbs or weeds,”⁴⁵ came claims from critics of the theatre that watching sinful or violent actors could

⁴² Ibid., 3.10.59.

⁴³ Ibid., 3.10.60.

⁴⁴ This is also an interesting reversal of the medieval depictions of Muslims who are miraculously whitened by their conversion to Christianity; however, this type of conversion only worked on Muslim characters who appeared otherwise human.

overwhelm the viewer with monstrous passions. John Northbrooke and William Rankin both claim that the act of viewing drama inspires both unhealthy and immoral passions in the audience, threatening to infect them with the evil that they are witnessing. In his *Treatise* (1577), Northbrooke argues that in the theatre “Satan hath not a more speedie way, and fitter schoole to work and teach his desire, to bring men and women into his snare of concupiscence and filthie lustes of wicked whoredom, than those places and playes, and theatres are.”⁴⁶ Although he does not use the idea of monstrosity here, he does argue that watching plays will make people take on the sinful passions that they are witnessing. Rankin is much more explicit about the threat of drama creating monsters of the mind in his treatise *A Mirror of Monsters* (1587). He not only rails against theaters for corrupting their audiences with scenes of sex and villainy, but also calls the actors themselves monsters because they infect the world with their corruption: “Some term them Comedians, othersome Players, manie Pleasers, but I Monsters, and whie Monsters? Because under colour of humanitie, they present nothing but prodigious vanitie. These are [...] fiends that are crept into the worlde by stealth, and holde possession by subtile innation.”⁴⁷ The actors that Rankin warns against are not portraying physical monsters, but rather are portraying mental monsters, and Rankin believes that they will spread this mental monstrosity to the audiences who watch the play.

Despite the arguments of Rankin and others, Renaissance playwrights not only continued to depict sin and crime on the stage, but many of them also began to depict this new type of

⁴⁵ Francis Bacon, *Selected Writings of Francis Bacon*, ed. by Hugh G. Dick (New York: Random House, 1955), 103.

⁴⁶ John Northbrooke, *A Treatise*, ed. Arthur Freeman (New York: Garland Publishing, 1974), 59-60.

⁴⁷ William Rankin, *A Mirror of Monsters*, (London, 1587) *Early English Books Online*.

monster whose human appearance hides inhuman and extreme desires. This dissertation will therefore consider characters who are portrayed as monsters on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage. In Chapter Two, I discuss two plays in which grief turns two loving parents into monstrous revengers: Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville's *Gorboduc* and Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. In their quests for revenge, both Videna and Hieronimo cast aside their human reason, choosing violent murders over legal justice, and their "monstrous deeds" threaten to tear apart the societies in which they live.⁴⁸ In *Gorboduc*, Videna refuses to wait for her husband to cast judgment on her younger son, instead committing filicide to avenge her elder son and throwing the kingdom into civil war. Similarly, in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Hieronimo never truly attempts to seek legal justice for his murdered child, instead setting on a path of vengeance that leaves innocent bystanders dead and the throne without an heir. Both Videna and Hieronimo allow their grief and passion for revenge to overwhelm their reason and consciences, and in seeking their private revenge they threaten to destroy their societies entirely.

In Chapter Three, I examine Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great I and II*, whose titular character is so consumed by ambition that he murders entire towns. Tamburlaine is an unrepentant monster whom neither god(s) nor Nature strikes down. He never feels any guilt for his actions nor exhibits a human conscience, and the only sign of his humanity is that his monstrous nature finally overwhelms his human body, causing a mortal "heat" and illness. He is

⁴⁸ Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, In *Drama of the English Renaissance: The Tudor Period*, ed. by Russell A. Fraser and Norman Rabkin (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 4.4.251.

a “monster turned to manly shape,”⁴⁹ and his handsome form with “stature tall, and straightly fashioned” gives no hint that he hides monstrous ambition underneath.⁵⁰

While the previous chapters feature monsters who appear human, in Chapter Four I consider William Shakespeare’s *Richard III* and *Othello*, which both feature characters whose physical differences are false indicators of monstrosity. Richard III is not a monster because of his deformed body; instead, he is a monster because he decides to act like a monster: he wants revenge against both Nature and man for his deformed body and poor treatment, so he chooses to act like the monster whom others see when they look at him. On the other hand, Othello’s black skin marks him as an outsider, but he is a noble and good character until Iago infects his mind with jealousy: the “green-ey’d monster.”⁵¹ Shakespeare inverts the expectation that being black or a Moor marks a character as lustful and violent (like Ithamore or Aaron), and instead the true monstrosity comes from Iago, the “normal looking” Venetian. Iago makes nothing — insinuations and accusations — appear to be real evidence of Desdemona’s infidelity. He thus performs a sort of reverse creation, or mockery of God’s creation, making monstrous jealousy out of nothing, and deforming Othello’s mind until Othello cannot tell illusion from reality. Othello’s human conscience cannot see that he is committing a monstrous murder until it is too late.

⁴⁹ Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great I and II*, In *Drama of the English Renaissance: The Tudor Period*, ed. by Russell A. Fraser and Norman Rabkin (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 2.6.16.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 2.1.7

⁵¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd Edition. ed. by G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 3.3.170.

Finally, in Chapter Five I examine how all of these plays portray characters whose true monstrosity is hidden within their deformed minds. In their various villains, these writers explore what it means to be human by examining where the boundaries of human behavior lie. Whether for revenge, ambition, or some other passion these characters commit crimes that place them outside of their community, and their normal appearance makes them a more subtle and real threat than their more visibly frightening medieval counterparts.

Chapter 2 The Monstrous Revenger

Although the English revenge tragedies Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc* (1561/2) and Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. late 1580's) do not contain the same visibly grotesque monsters as medieval romances, they present a different type of monster: the hidden and monstrous revenger who appears normal but behaves in horrible and unnatural ways. These monstrous revengers are human, but driven by their love for their families, they move outside of the range of human behavior and in the process threaten the surrounding social and political structure. *Gorboduc*'s Videna and *The Spanish Tragedy*'s Hieronimo do not look like monsters, but when they eschew human legal structures and social conventions in favor of their own passions and bloody desires, they become the monstrous destroyers of their own societies.

Although many Renaissance revengers cause social and political upheaval, not all of these characters fall into this monstrous revenger category. Videna and Hieronimo are monstrous because, unlike other period revengers, they do not seek private revenge out of necessity; instead, they are acting because their grief causes them to reject legal justice in favor of their own private revenge. When her younger son Porrex murders her favored, elder son Ferrex, Videna believes that the king, her husband, will not punish his own son, so she must kill Porrex herself. Likewise, when Hieronimo's son Horatio is murdered by the King's nephew, he believes the King will refuse to punish his own family member. But both characters are wrong, and there is the potential for their still functioning legal systems to deliver justice. Neither of them acts from necessity, nor do they consider the dire consequence of their actions on the society around them.

Despite the disconnect between the reality of their situations and what Videna and Hieronimo *think* that they must do, scholarship surrounding these plays has largely neglected the fact that Videna and Hieronimo reject the possibility that justice could be delivered through legal means. Much of the previous scholarship on *Gorboduc* has focused on the fact that it was written during Elizabeth I's rule and at the height of concern over her lack of a husband and production of an heir;¹ the play has thus easily lent itself to interpretation as a critique of female rule and a warning about women who do not fulfill typical female social roles. Jacqueline Vanhoutte provides one example of this interpretation when she claims that Norton and Sackville's "depiction of monarchy connects the problems of the monarchy to abuses of the feminine will and justifies masculine interference in matters of state."² Like many other critics, she focuses on Videna as simply an unruly wife and reads the play as a call for a return to rational, masculine rule (in contrast to irrational, feminine rule).

Other critics, such as Tom MacFaul, have briefly looked at Gorboduc's actions, but typically have only done so in order to excuse him and to villainize Videna. MacFaul claims that the fall of the kingdom "is not Gorboduc's fault, or at least not directly: if he has a tragic flaw (and one should be suspicious of such a notion), it is his indispensability."³ He then goes on to

¹ See, for example, Mortimer Levine, *The Early Elizabethan Succession Question* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1966), 30-44; Jessica Winston, "Expanding the Political Nation: *Gorboduc* at the Inns of Court and Succession Revisited," *Early Theatre* 8, no. 1 (2005): 11-34; and Laura Estill, "New Contexts for Early Tudor Plays: William Briton, an Early Reader of *Gorboduc*," *Early Theatre* 16, no. 2 (2013): 197-210.

² Jacqueline Vanhoutte, *Strange Communion: Motherland and Masculinity in Tudor Plays, Pamphlets and Politics* (Toronto: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 119.

³ Tom MacFaul, *Problem Fathers in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 24.

claim that Gorboduc is the rare tragic figure who met his end because he was “too good.”⁴ It is true that Gorboduc’s actions are motivated at least in part by his desire to give lands to both his sons, and although shortsighted, his desire to yield power and placate his youngest son seems motivated at least in part by goodness and affection. However, Gorboduc is guilty of trying to unnaturally divide the kingdom against typical linear succession, and Videna is more complicated than just an unruly or villainous wife. While Vanhoutte and MacFaul are correct that Videna is a powerful force in the play and that her passionate actions do precipitate the final fall of the kingdom, they are far too quick to read the play merely as a condemnation of a wicked woman who attempts to rule. Instead, I argue that *Gorboduc* depicts the threat that private, passion-driven revenge poses to the social structure, and that Videna’s crime is monstrous because she rejects both natural, maternal feeling and the dysfunctional but not yet irredeemable legal system in favor of monstrous anger and revenge.

On the other hand, critics of *The Spanish Tragedy* have usually talked about Hieronimo as a revenger, but most critics have focused on him as a justified and noble avenger working in a corrupt system.⁵ In some ways, the fact that Hieronimo is not acting against his own family makes his actions less monstrous. Since he is simply trying to avenge the murder of his son by the Duke’s son Lorenzo, the seemingly clear cut nature of this plot has led critics such as Northrop Frye and Norman Rabkin to view Hieronimo as a man taking revenge on a hopelessly corrupt court from which he cannot expect justice. Frye describes *The Spanish Tragedy* and other

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ A few examples of this include Northrop Frye, *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967) and Norman Rabkin, introduction to *The Spanish Tragedy*, in *Drama of the English Renaissance: The Tudor Period*, ed. Russell A. Fraser and Norman Rabkin. New York: Macmillan, 1976.

similar plays as “the tragedy of blood” or “the tragedy of the sick society,” in which “a society, usually a court, [is] so hopelessly rotten and corrupt that we can expect nothing from it but a long series of treacherous murders. There is no order-figure: the head of state is as bad as everyone else, and the only action we feel much sympathy with is that of revenge — revenge on him usually.”⁶ Similarly, in his introduction to the play Norman Rabkin argues that this type of revenge tragedy

regularly creates a situation in which the hero must turn villain in order to do what his initial virtue and his victimization demand, and his gyrations provide the kind of ambiguous hero-villain that would fascinate the audiences of Webster and Shakespeare and Middleton and Ford. It also provides a crucial test of the possibilities for justice: by creating in the audience an ambivalent awareness that a wrong must be righted and that the only feasible vengeance is unacceptable, the revenge play insists on the tragic complexity of the human predicament.⁷

While this description is in some ways accurate, like Frye’s description it falsely assumes that Hieronimo is justified in his actions since there is no other possible recourse. The play does in fact demonstrate the “tragic complexity of the human predicament,” but it does so in a way that is much more complex than a heroic revenger committing a violent but necessary murder in his quest for justice. Instead, like *Gorboduc* before it, we see a world that is not perfect, but in which the revenger *chooses* to act outside of any legal recourse, even when that legal solution is a real possibility. The Spanish King, who is often unjustly portrayed as corrupt, never has a chance to offer justice to Hieronimo because Hieronimo is so passionate about seeking revenge that he allows his own paranoia and anger to get the better of his natural reason. Thus, Hieronimo, who was once sympathetic as a grieving father, allows his flaws and passions to overcome his

⁶ Northrop Frye, *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy*, 44.

⁷ Norman Rabkin, introduction to *The Spanish Tragedy*, in *Drama of the English Renaissance: The Tudor Period*, 167-8.

capacity for human reason so that he becomes an insane and destructive monster that threatens to overturn the entire society.

Before discussing these revengers and whether their actions are justified vengeance or monstrous murders, it is first useful to further define the terms revenge and revenge tragedy, especially since the later term was not used in the Renaissance. Revenge itself is a somewhat fraught concept in the early modern period. Roland Broude notes that “*revenge* and *vengeance* were appropriate to denote the response of an outraged party, whether individual, state, or God.”⁸ Therefore, revenge could be used to mean private, extra-legal vengeance for a perceived slight, or the legal sentence passed by a court, or the supernatural comeuppance delivered by God.⁹ Period rulers were greatly concerned with citizens taking justice into their own hands, and as a result, the Tudors passed a number of laws forbidding private revenge and setting dire punishments for any transgressions, laws which, Fredson Bowers argues, “punished an avenger who took justice into his own hands just as heavily as the original murderer.”¹⁰ Furthermore, theologians were also almost uniformly against private revenge, instead looking to either God or the divinely appointed State to mete out justice because, as claimed by Lily Campbell, “the teaching of the Scriptures seemed to Elizabethans to include both a command and promise; not only did God forbid man to recompense evil for evil; he also proclaimed vengeance as his own

⁸ Roland Broude, “Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England.” *Renaissance Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (1975): 41.

⁹ For more on the etymology of this term in the early modern period see Broude, “Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England,” 40-43 or for a history of the concept of revenge and legal prohibitions see Fredson Thayer Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1959), 1-40.

¹⁰ Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*, 11.

prerogative.”¹¹ The Epistle to the Romans made God’s stance on vengeance clear: “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, sayeth the Lord.”¹² However, theological arguments aside, private vengeance remained common as evidenced by the frequent appearance of blood feuds and dueling in legal records throughout the period, which Broude attributes to the “Renaissance Englishmen’s continued belief in the principles of self-government.”¹³ The church and state argued against private vengeance and even made it illegal, but that did little to dissuade the average Englishman from turning to revenge when he felt that he had been wronged.

Despite the legal and moral prohibitions against private revenge, the common acceptance of revenge in English society indicates that the typical revenger in a tragedy would not necessarily have been viewed as particularly villainous or monstrous; after all, he (or she) is just seeking revenge in a time-honored fashion. This perception of the revenger as heroic is also reinforced by the fact that, as Frye argues in his definition above, revengers in drama are often denied legal recourse by a corrupt or uncaring ruler. Other scholars have also used this type of criterion; for example, Katherine Maus similarly defines revenge tragedies as “typically featur[ing] a man whose family members have been raped or murdered by a king, a duke or an emperor. Because the administration of justice rests in the hands of the very person who has committed the outrage, no redress is obtainable through established institutions. As a result, the hero takes matters into his own hands.”¹⁴ According to these definitions, revenge is precipitated by a power imbalance that cannot be remedied unless the protagonist seeks out and kills the

¹¹ Lily Campbell, “Theories of Revenge in Renaissance England,” *Modern Philology* 28, no. 3 (1931): 282.

¹² Epistle to the Romans 12:19.

¹³ Broude, “Revenge and Revenge Tragedy,” 46-7.

¹⁴ Katherine Maus, introduction to *Titus Andronicus*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 371.

original evil-doer personally, and the protagonist is therefore justified in his or her actions. Even Francis Bacon, who called revenge “a kind of wild justice; which the more man’s nature runs to it, the more ought law to weed it out,” concedes that “the most tolerable sort of revenge is for those wrongs which there is no law or remedy.”¹⁵ Plays such as William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, in which Hamlet cannot go to his murderous uncle King Claudius for justice, or Thomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (1606), in which Vindice cannot go to the lecherous and murderous Duke for justice, fit well in this category; however, in both *Gorboduc* and *The Spanish Tragedy*, this type of definition and claim for the necessity of private vengeance is problematic. In *Gorboduc*, the king, although certainly flawed and guilty of committing unnatural acts, is neither evil nor corrupt, and the revenger is the Queen, thus complicating matters since the murderer, victim, judge, and revenger are all in one family. *The Spanish Tragedy*, on the other hand, at first appears to fit Frye or Maus’ definition more closely. Hieronimo’s son was murdered by the nephew of the King, and Hieronimo believes that he cannot achieve justice without taking matters into his own hands. However, this understanding of the play disregards multiple displays of the King’s justice, and Hieronimo fails to even appeal to his King for assistance, making the necessity for his revenge questionable.¹⁶

Instead of the necessity for private vengeance brought about by a corrupt system that needs to be destroyed, what we see instead in *Gorboduc* and *The Spanish Tragedy* is closer to Broude’s definition of revenge tragedy: “Revenge tragedy is usually understood to center around

¹⁵ Francis Bacon, “On Revenge,” *Selected Writings of Francis Bacon*, ed. Hugh G. Dick (New York: Random House, 1955), 15.

¹⁶ The ways that *The Spanish Tragedy* does not entirely fit Frye’s definition are also discussed in James T. Henke, “Politics and Politicians in *The Spanish Tragedy*,” *Studies in Philology* 78, no. 4 (1981). This argument will be discussed at greater length below.

a figure who conceives himself to have been seriously wronged, and who, overcoming obstacles both within and outside himself, contrives eventually to exact retribution, becoming in the process as depraved as those by whom he has been wronged.”¹⁷ The last part of his definition, that the characters become “as depraved” as the original murderer is significant because it points toward the degraded mental state frequently exhibited by these characters.¹⁸ Furthermore, Broude’s idea that characters need only to “conceive” that they have been wronged points to the serious problems with the decision to take matters into their own hands without first appealing to any sort of legal system. They might “conceive” that they have been wronged by a corrupt system, when really it is their own unnatural impulse or wild passion that leads them to believe that they must act. Broude’s definition, therefore, does not apply to all plays typically placed into the revenge tragedy category, but it does provide an excellent definition of some of the characteristics of a monstrous revenger. In these two plays, *Videna* and *Hieronimo* are not simply upset or impassioned about what has been done to them, but they both become so bent on personal vengeance that they neither seek legal redress from the characters in positions to grant justice, nor do they consider the ramifications of their violent actions. They become so passionate that they completely lose rational, natural, human thought, and abandon both human and divine systems of justice in favor of unnatural and monstrous murders that achieve vengeance at the cost of destabilizing their political, social, and familial structures. Excess love of family becomes a sort of madness, and unnatural or extreme affection leads to actions that destroy all. The monsters of these revenge tragedies are no longer the foreign *other* of medieval

¹⁷ Broude, “Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England,” 38-9.

¹⁸ Similarly, Maus acknowledges that these revengers, whom she claims are at least initially justified, often “lose [their] own moral bearings and even [their] sanity” in their quest for vengeance: Maus, introduction to *Titus Andronicus*, 371.

romance; now the monsters are located not just inside the community or family but are the protagonists themselves.

In *Gorboduc*, Videna demonstrates the threat of rejecting the justice system (even when it is a flawed one) in favor of individual revenge, and she further demonstrates the special type of monstrosity of a mother who is willing to kill her own child. Although the play rarely uses the term “monster,” the characters’ motivations are frequently described in terms of what is natural versus what is unnatural or unkind.¹⁹ It is not just Videna’s filicide that is described as unnatural: the play is filled with discussions about what actions by the king, queen, princes, advisors, and even their subjects fall into either the categories of natural or unnatural. It seems notable then that among the many unnatural actions in the play (a king dividing his kingdom, rebellion, fratricide, filicide, and regicide), it is only Videna’s filicide that the other characters treat as a truly monstrous and unforgivable crime.²⁰ The idea that a mother would kill her own child is more horrible and unnatural than any of the other crimes that are committed, and this is the act that truly throws the kingdom into chaos and rebellion. The play, therefore, examines where the boundaries of human emotion and action exist and when motivation and action become monstrous. The other characters commit individual actions that are unnatural and often ill-advised, but they do not cross the boundary into inhumanity or cause the final destruction of their family or social structure. The play is full of flawed characters who allow their emotions to override their reason, but Videna is marked out as worse than the others. Videna, driven by her unnatural love of Ferrex and her consuming need for revenge outside of legal or divine justice,

¹⁹ This connects them with period conceptions of humans who commit extreme and unnatural behavior as being monstrous as discussed in Chapter One.

²⁰ This will be discussed at much greater length below.

casts aside both reason and maternal affection and becomes a monster who destroys both her family line and her kingdom.

In order to understand both why Videna's act is considered so horrible and how family/royal relationships are depicted as either natural or unnatural, it is useful to look at where Norton and Sackville found the basis for this story, what changes they made to it, and how all of the main characters talk about nature. Norton and Sackville took the story of Gorboduc from Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*,²¹ however, Geoffrey does not have Gorboduc choose to divide the kingdom (rather the sons are fighting over what they *desire* to inherit from him), and the people do not rise up against Videna's crime. Instead, the country falls into civil war only because the death of both sons leaves the line of succession broken.²² Thus, in Geoffrey of Monmouth's story, the only actions that would be considered unnatural or evil are the younger brother's greed for what the rules of primogeniture would traditionally allot to the elder and the resulting fratricide. Norton and Sackville, therefore, appear to conflate Gorboduc's story with the story of King Lear, which is located immediately before it in Geoffrey of Monmouth's history. This conflation then provides them with a way to complicate the characters' motivations, and it perhaps provides inspiration for a much more in depth look at family dynamics than the original tale affords. Despite the disastrous civil war caused by his predecessor Lear, Norton and Sackville's Gorboduc makes the same mistake by also dividing his kingdom among his children. Furthermore, although there appears to be little love lost between the two brothers, there is no indication in Norton and Sackville's play that the sons were actively

²¹ Norman Rabkin, introduction to *Gorboduc*, in *Drama of the English Renaissance: The Tudor Period*, ed. by Russell Fraser and Norman Rabkin (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 81.

²² Geoffrey Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain* (New York: Classic Books International, 2010), Book II, Chapter XVI.

fighting before the play begins. While Geoffrey of Monmouth's Porrex and Ferrex begin to fight before their father has given the kingdom to either of them, Norton and Sackville's princes only begin to fight after their father effectively abdicates his throne. Like Lear, Gorboduc precipitates the problems of his kingdom by attempting to yield his responsibilities as ruler, and this disastrous mistake begins the course of events that turn Videna into a monstrous revenger.

The conflation of Lear and Gorboduc sets up a largely dysfunctional family and kingdom, and the potential for danger is evident from the first scene of the play. Videna, in fact, foregrounds her role as a revenger in the opening scene when she predicts that Gorboduc will divide the kingdom, listening only to the advice of his pandering advisors:

When lords and trusted rulers under kings,
To please the present fancy of the prince,
With wrong transpose the course of governance,
Murders, mischief, or civil sword at length,
Or mutual treason or a just revenge,
[...]
Brings them to cruel and reproachful death
And roots their names and kindreds from the earth.²³

Videna anticipates that Gorboduc will be the one who first acts unnaturally, and she imagines that a "just revenge" will follow. This not only hints at Videna's later action, but it also presents the idea that Videna is not the only one who will act unnaturally, a fact that is then reaffirmed by Gorboduc's own advisors when they hear his plan.

When Gorboduc presents his plan to divide the kingdom, his claims about his motivations for the disastrous decision emphasize his weakness as both a father and ruler, and in trying to justify his actions as natural, he draws greater attention to how unnatural they really are.

²³ Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville, *Gorboduc*, in *Drama of the English Renaissance: The Tudor Period*, ed. Russell A. Fraser and Norman Rabkin (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 1.1.59-67.

Gorboduc tells his advisors that “[Ferrex and Porrex’s] age now asketh other place and trade, / And mine also doth ask another change: / Theirs to more travail, mine to greater ease.”²⁴ But both of Gorboduc’s reasons for the division are flawed. He first claims that he wants to divide the kingdom because his sons are old enough to need “another place and trade,” but there are other traditional duties, such as allowing them to rule regions under him, that he can give to his sons in order to keep them busy. Gorboduc also claims to be engaging in what Tom MacFaul calls “a natural husbandry of resources,”²⁵ yielding his “decaying years”²⁶ to their “riper state of mind and strength.”²⁷ Although Gorboduc couches his desire to abdicate in favor of his sons in selfless terms, he is also acting out of selfishness. Gorboduc does not want the strain of rule anymore, and he refuses to give the throne to only one son because he wants to “joy to see [Ferrex and Porrex] ruling well.”²⁸ Rather than ruling well himself and making sure that his sons eventually inherit positions appropriate to their births, Gorboduc chooses to divide the kingdom in an effort to appease both sons. The best interests of the kingdom are subjugated to Gorboduc’s desire to both please his sons and himself.

Gorboduc attempts to explain his strange decision to divide his kingdom by repeatedly invoking the ideas of “law and kind,”²⁹ which he envisions as the natural order of the old yielding to the young. However, this defense is flawed since both law and the natural order (or at least the medieval and Renaissance conceptions of the natural order) give primacy of inheritance to the eldest son. This is also the exact point that Videna makes in the first scene when she

²⁴ Ibid., 1.2.55-57.

²⁵ MacFaul, *Problem Fathers in Shakespeare and Renaissance Drama*, 24.

²⁶ Norton and Sackville, *Gorboduc*, 1.2.50

²⁷ Ibid., 1.2.51.

²⁸ Ibid., 1.2.67.

²⁹ Ibid., 1.2.21.

complains that Gorboduc is going to take Ferrex's "birthright and heritage, / Causeless, unkindly, and in wrongful wise, / Against all law and right."³⁰ Videna correctly points out that Gorboduc is acting unnaturally in giving his elder son only half of his kingdom. Her motivations may be based on her unnatural love of Ferrex over both Gorboduc and Porrex, but she is actually upholding the patriarchal system of primogeniture by claiming that Ferrex should inherit the entire kingdom. Even without the concerns of infighting between the sons, to split the kingdom risks the family's wealth, land, and power. As Lawrence Stone points out, the late medieval and Renaissance family "was held together by shared economic status and political interests, and by the norms and values of authority and deference. This was a family type [...] in which property was the only security against total destitution [...] in which power flowed to the eldest male under systems of primogeniture."³¹ Videna is motivated by love for her son, but she also argues for tradition and order.

Gorboduc, somewhat ironically, claims his right to divide his kingdom through "lineal course of king's inheritance"³² while also trying to disrupt both the natural order and the stability of the kingdom. One of Gorboduc's advisors, Eubulus, does recognize the risk inherent in Gorboduc's plan and warns that Gorboduc is risking strife and possibly civil war by cheating Ferrex who "shall think that he doth suffer greater wrong, / Than he perchance will bear."³³ Eubulus points out that "kind and custom gives [Ferrex] a rightful hope to be [Gorboduc's] heir

³⁰ Ibid., 1.1.26-9. Note that in the Renaissance the word "kind" typically meant "nature" or "natural."

³¹ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 88.

³² Norton and Sackville, *Gorboduc*, 1.2.24.

³³ Ibid., 1.2.287-288.

and to succeed,”³⁴ so Gorboduc is acting unnaturally or unkindly as a father by attempting to change the distribution of inheritance. As mentioned, the tradition of primogeniture was meant to preserve the wealth and goods of a family from being split among too many children. In a kingdom, this splitting of an inheritance is even more perilous, and Eubulus warns that “To part your realm unto my lords, your sons / I think not good for you, ne yet for them, / But worst of all for this our native land. / Within one land one single rule is best. / Divided reigns do make divided hearts.”³⁵ As king, Gorboduc owes his country the benefit of a good ruler, but dividing the kingdom puts the entire nation at risk from the ambitions of two kings. Gorboduc is not merely splitting a private inheritance, and in his desire to please both sons, he completely disregards what is best for the kingdom. Furthermore, Eubulus’ comment about dividing the kingdom can be viewed as a warning about Gorboduc’s own family: Gorboduc and Videna are divided on the issue of their sons, and the sons become literally divided in their separate kingdoms. This division of family is emphasized by the structure of the play itself: Videna and Gorboduc are never in a scene together, nor are their two sons ever together, and the second act is divided into two distinct scenes, one per son. The family should be bound in love and loyalty, but the divided reign of their parents leads to the “divided hearts” of the two brothers and eventually the fracturing of the kingdom.

Even Gorboduc appears to be aware of the problems and risks associated with yielding his power to his sons when he tells his advisors that although he is giving his throne to his sons, he still wants to advise them. Prefiguring Lear in this respect, he wishes to continue to be their father while making them his kings, but once he yields his power to them, they have no reason to

³⁴ Ibid., 1.2.285.

³⁵ Ibid., 1.2.256-260.

obey him. Gorboduc's advisor, Philander, even warns him of the danger of giving his sons a king's power before their natural time. Philander imagines Gorboduc as the head of state attempting to bow beneath the two shoulders (his sons), and, like Videna, he points out that this is unnatural and against reason: "But now the head to stoop beneath them both, / Ne kind, ne reason, ne good order bears."³⁶ He then goes even further and warns that "oft it hath been seen where nature's course / Hath been perverted in disordered wise, / When fathers cease to know that they should rule, / The children cease to know they should obey."³⁷ Philander, perhaps remembering his history better than Gorboduc, rightly recognizes that Gorboduc is attempting to pervert the very "lineal course of king's inheritance."³⁸ Just as Gorboduc cannot stop being a father, he also cannot cease to be a king; to attempt to do these things is a perversion of nature. Furthermore, the removal of one natural superiority (kingship) will throw the other (fatherhood) into question. If Gorboduc does not maintain his position of superiority as king, which would make his sons kings over him, then his sons may not feel obligated to look to Gorboduc for any kind of guidance as a father.

Just as primogeniture was viewed as the natural order of inheritance, Philander's argument that children must remain subservient to their parents was also a common idea in Renaissance tracts and treatises. One example of this type of treatise is *Dauids Eubrich*, in which Conrad Sam wrote the following advice on raising children: "Whether you are a king, prince, count, knight, or servant, whether a townsman or a peasant, if you want to know joy in your children, take care that you teach them virtue. Do not do as is now done in the world, where

³⁶ Ibid., 1.2.203-4.

³⁷ Ibid., 1.2.205-8.

³⁸ Ibid., 1.2.24.

children are taught to rule, but not to serve.”³⁹ Or as summarized by Steven Ozment, “The Cardinal sin of child rearing in Reformation Europe, a common one, according to the moralists, was willful indulgence of children.”⁴⁰ Even as adults, sons and daughters were expected to show deference to their parents in order that they might learn and fulfill their role in society.⁴¹ Gorboduc should teach his sons to rule, but like Sam, Philander recommends that the best way to make Gorboduc’s sons into strong leaders is teaching them to obey him, and thus they will learn the virtues that they need in order to rule. He advises that “If you desire to see some present joy / By sight of their well ruling in your life, / See them obey; so shall you see them rule. / Whoso obeyeth not with humbleness / Will rule with outrage and insolence.”⁴² Philander believes that the best way to make good leaders is to show a good example. The natural progression of power in a family involves sons obeying their fathers before they someday have power over families of their own.

Like the concern over primogeniture, the issue of teaching your children their proper place is important enough that two advisors repeat it. After Philander, Eubulus again entreats Gorboduc to teach his sons their proper places and obedience before giving up his throne: “And let them both now obeying you / Learn such behavior as beseems their state: / The elder, mildness in his governance, / The younger, a yielding contentedness.”⁴³ Eubulus goes further than Philander by pointing out that it is not only unnatural for Gorboduc to give his power to his sons, but it is also Gorboduc’s responsibility to teach his sons their rightful place in relation to

³⁹ Translation in Steven Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 133.

⁴⁰ Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*, 133

⁴¹ Stone, *The Family Marriage and Sex*, 122-3.

⁴² Norton and Sackville, *Gorboduc*, 1.2.226-230.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1.2.301-4.

each other. The elder son is rightfully above the younger son, just as Gorboduc is rightfully above both of his sons. By having two advisors warn Gorboduc that he is making the wrong decision immediately after he acknowledges that “their grave advice and faithful aid / [which] Have long upheld my honor and my realm,”⁴⁴ Norton and Sackville emphasize Gorboduc’s stubbornness in not listening to his trustworthy advisors now and his guilt in what happens later. History, nature, and his advisors are against his plan, but Gorboduc decides to proceed anyway.

While Gorboduc creates a potential for strife by dividing the kingdom, Videna does nothing to help remedy the situation (as a good wife and queen should), and instead she exacerbates the problem by decrying her husband’s decisions. Echoing his mother,⁴⁵ Ferrex complains that being given only half the kingdom to rule is a slight since he should have received the entire kingdom, “which by course / Of law and nature should remain to me.”⁴⁶ His hotheaded advisor Hermon agrees and says that taking away half of the inheritance would only have been right if Ferrex had rebelled against his father or “stained [his] stock with murder of [his] kin.”⁴⁷ The older advisor Dordan, however, argues that Gorboduc gave Ferrex half of the kingdom early due to love. Yet, no matter Dordan’s efforts to maintain peace, Hermon is able to convince Ferrex that he has been wronged and that his brother poses a threat, and the primary argument that he uses is based on the idea that kings are above natural law. He tells Ferrex not to fear because if he does kill Porrex, “the gods do bear and well allow in kings / The things they abhor in rascal routs.”⁴⁸ Hermon then goes even further and asks Ferrex “Think you such princes

⁴⁴ Ibid., 1.2.1-2.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1.1.26-29.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 2.1.3-4.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 2.1.11.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 2.1.144-5.

do suppose themselves / Subjects to laws of kind and fear of gods?”⁴⁹ Gorboduc has already demonstrated that kings are above natural law by dividing his kingdom, and Videna has already convinced Ferrex that his father does not love him as much as his brother. Thus, even though Ferrex at first rejects the idea that he is truly above the natural law and order, it is not surprising that he begins to build an army to defend himself against his brother and in defiance of his father. Ferrex attempts to act in what he believes is a filial and natural way, but the unnatural division of the kingdom has disastrous results almost immediately, and just as Gorboduc loses sight of what the natural order is, so too do his sons.

Once Ferrex decides to build an army, it is easy for Porrex’s young advisor to convince him to act against his brother. Tyndar tells Porrex that he has seen Ferrex’s army and that the court believes that Porrex is also preparing to try to take what is rightfully his brother’s. He even tells Porrex that “The rascal numbers of unskillful sort / Are filled with monstrous tales of you and yours,”⁵⁰ with the “monstrous tales” being his plans to unnaturally overthrow and kill his own brother. The older advisor, Philander, tries to calm him and to get him to appeal to his father, but Porrex believes, perhaps rightly, that he cannot appeal to his father “while such a mother lives / That loves [his] brother, and that hateth [him].”⁵¹ Like Ferrex, Porrex does not go to his father with his concerns, which demonstrates that Gorboduc’s belief that he could still advise his sons (and that they would want his advice) after he abdicated is entirely misguided. Porrex knows that his mother favors Ferrex, and he believes that she will do something to ensure Ferrex’s victory (presumably either convincing Gorboduc to take Ferrex’s side or convincing

⁴⁹ Ibid., 2.1.150-1.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 2.2.23-4.

⁵¹ Ibid., 2.2.50-1.

Ferrex to attack). While this may or may not have been the case, the fact that Porrex does not even try to talk to his father before he kills his brother further emphasizes the fractured nature of the family and realm. Or, as the chorus states moments later: “Ne fear of angry gods, ne lawes kind, / Ne country’s care can fired hearts restrain / When force hath armèd envy and disdain.”⁵² Reason has given way to envy and hatred, and as a result, duty to country and fear of natural laws cannot restrain the two sons.

It may seem, at this point, that Porrex is clearly a monstrous character since even though he is given half the kingdom, he still builds an army and attacks and kills his own brother, and it may also seem that Videna is justified in her actions since Gorboduc has committed so many unnatural actions himself, creating a broken justice system. However, this act of fratricide, while met with horror by the other characters, does not truly launch the kingdom into chaos, and until Videna commits her bloody act of revenge, there is still hope that the King’s justice and reason will win out, reunifying the kingdom. Furthermore, Porrex acts rashly when he wages “unkindly war,”⁵³ but he is responding to Ferrex building an army, and he doesn’t completely destroy his family or the state with his actions. Porrex, like his father, may be acting unnaturally, but he does not lose his human reason and allow his passions to completely override his judgment. In the end, Porrex yields himself to the King’s justice, an act that almost prevents the play from tipping over to tragedy. The contrast between these flawed but still human characters is made more obvious when considered next to how Videna is driven by her unnatural passions to love one son over the other and her willingness to destroy both her family and kingdom in order to get revenge. Despite Gorboduc acting unnaturally in his kingship and parenting, and Porrex

⁵² Ibid., 2.2.91-4.

⁵³ Ibid., 3.1.81.

unnaturally killing his brother Ferrex, it is Videna who is truly monstrous and unnatural when she commits filicide, thus removing any chance for her lineage or kingdom to continue.

Porrex's willingness to come before the King for judgment further highlights the unnatural nature of Videna's decision to murder him. This scene is also particularly important because it demonstrates Gorboduc's anguish over losing one son, and how he does not let that anguish override his ability to cast judgment about what is best for the kingdom. It is not unnatural for Gorboduc, as the king and father, to cast rational judgment, even including a death sentence, but it is entirely different if Videna, as queen and mother, takes matters into her own hands. When Porrex arrives, Gorboduc describes how Porrex has committed a horrible act against nature and how if Gorboduc were also unnatural, he would take Porrex's life in retribution:

Porrex, if we so far should swerve from kind
And from those bounds which law of nature sets
As thou hast done by vile and wretched deed
In cruel murder of thy brother's life,
Our present hand could stay no longer time,
But straight should bathe this blade in blood of thee
As just revenge of thy detested crime.⁵⁴

Gorboduc, in a moment that demonstrates his ability to put reason over passion, says that if he allowed his passion to rule him, he would think that it is "just revenge" to commit the unnatural crime of killing his own son, just as his son committed the unnatural crime of killing his own brother. However, he then vacillates and claims that the law of nature that would otherwise prevent him from killing his son would not be offended if he passed a sentence that avenged his murdered son:

⁵⁴ Ibid., 4.1.15-21.

No; we should not offend the law of kind,
 If now this sword of ours did slay thee here;
 For thou hast murdered him, whose heinous death
 Even nature's force doth move us to revenge
 By blood again; And justice forceth us
 To measure, death for death, thy due desert.⁵⁵

He now says that he would not offend nature to avenge Ferrex, and nature is actually driving him toward revenge. However, Gorboduc again vacillates and is restrained from passing a death sentence because of his fatherly love, and because he agrees that he must hear Porrex's side of the story before he makes his decision:

Yet sithens thou art our child, and sith as yet
 In this hard case what word thou canst allege
 For thy defense by us hath not been heard,
 We are content to stay our will for that
 Which justice bids us presently to work.⁵⁶

In a demonstration of fair and rational justice, Gorboduc agrees to hear Porrex's argument that "nature moved [him] to hold [his] life" against the threat of his brother,⁵⁷ and although he denies this argument's validity, Gorboduc chooses not to judge Porrex before he has had time to think more clearly and rationally about what happened. Porrex may have committed a horrible and unnatural act, but Gorboduc uses his legal and natural prerogative as both a king and a father to justify sparing his life at least until he can truly render a fair verdict.

Videna's choice to violently override the King's justice then highlights the difference between her irrational and passionate motivations and Gorboduc's rational and comparatively calm considerations. Gorboduc may not always be able to tell what is truly the most natural course, but he tries to rely on rational thought to guide him. This does not always work, as

⁵⁵ Ibid., 4.2.22-27.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 4.2.28-32.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 4.2.125.

evidenced by Gorboduc's decision to divide the kingdom, but his mistakes do not make him monstrous. However, Videna, who rejects rational thought in favor of passion and action in opposition to both heavenly and earthly justice, chooses the path that is less than human. Even the division of Act Four emphasizes the contrast between them: Videna's wild laments and promises of vengeance form the first half, and Gorboduc's judgment and realization of Porrex's murder both occur in the second half. Videna's revenge therefore engulfs Gorboduc's attempts to maintain order. Furthermore, the King's ability to think rationally even when faced with the death of Ferrex, which clearly affects him deeply, makes Videna's response even more striking. Videna acts from her passions, and although she claims that she will get "just revenge,"⁵⁸ the lack of justice in her action is made clear by the King's calm ability to hear his son's defense and to rule fairly even in the face of his own great sorrows. Videna never talks to Porrex at any point in the play, so she has never heard his side of the story, nor does she try to talk to the King. Videna is thus guilty of committing an unnatural act of revenge because she goes against her expected nature as a mother, wife and subject.

Though Videna is an unnatural, rebellious wife and subject for acting against the wishes of her king and husband, thus making her at least a villainous revenger, she becomes truly monstrous because of her willingness to kill her own son. From the earliest moments of the play, Videna's distorted and limited love for her own family is clear. The audience is told that Videna "more dearly loved"⁵⁹ her elder son, and Videna even hints that Gorboduc has been jealous of the love that she bears to Ferrex over both him and Porrex. She then blames this jealousy for his decision to divide the country:

⁵⁸ Ibid., 4.1.77.

⁵⁹ Ibid., "The Argument of the Tragedy."

Therefore the more unkind to thee and me.
 For knowing well, my son, the tender love
 That I have ever borne and bear to thee,
 He, grieved thereat, is not content alone
 To spoil me of thy sight, my chieftest joy,
 But thee of birthright and heritage,
 Causeless, unkindly, and in wrongful wise.⁶⁰

There is, however, no evidence that Gorboduc loves one son more than the other, especially since he seems to be motivated to divide the kingdom by his equal love for his sons, and he is clearly grieved at the death of Ferrex. Videna has a point when she blames Gorboduc for his “unkind” division of the country and deprivation of his eldest son’s right, but she admits to her own unnatural rationing of a wife and mother’s love since she is guilty of loving Ferrex to the exclusion of her other family members. Both Gorboduc and Videna commit faults out of love, but Gorboduc at least claims that he makes his decisions based on equal love for his children, while Videna admits that she is motivated by her exclusive love of Ferrex. Videna thus acts as an unnatural mother and wife.

Videna, however, still struggles with the decision to kill Porrex in order to avenge Ferrex; since she bore and nursed Porrex, her human nature/reason rebel against what her passions encourage her to do. This provides some interesting overlap with another murderous woman: forty years before Shakespeare writes Lady Macbeth crying to the spirits to “unsex” her and “take [her] milk for gall,”⁶¹ Videna also invokes images of breastfeeding when plotting her younger son’s murder. This imagery is especially significant in the Renaissance and helps to reveal why these women are viewed as so reprehensible for their later actions. For an early

⁶⁰ Ibid., 1.1.21-27.

⁶¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare, 2nd Edition*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 1.4.41, 48.

modern audience, breastfeeding was more than a way to feed a child; then as now, it symbolized the role of women as sustainers of life and provided an additional bond between mother and child. In her research on breastfeeding, Marylynn Salmon explains that early modern physicians believed that breast milk was merely whitened blood,⁶² and in his 1612 medical text on child birth, Jacques Guillimeau explains “that every mother should nurse her owne child: because her milke which is nothing else, but the blood whitened (of which he was made, and wherewith hee had been nourished the time he staide in his Mothers wombe) will bee always more natural, and familiar unto him, than that of a stranger.”⁶³ Breast milk was literally a blood tie between the mother and the child. A woman’s ability to give birth and produce breast milk made her into both a life giving and sustaining figure; the idea that such a figure could then take life, particularly the life of their own child, was therefore viewed as a horrible perversion of the natural order.

Videna is fully aware of the mother’s expected role as life giver through birth and breast milk, and Videna disowns Porrex as her child both by birth and nursing before killing him. Perhaps in an attempt to convince herself that her planned actions are not filicide, and therefore less monstrous, Videna exclaims:

Shall I still think that from this womb thou sprung?
That I thee bare? Or take thee for my son?
No, traitor, no; I thee refuse for mine!
Murderer I thee renounce; thou art not mine.
Never, O wretch, this womb conceived thee,
Nor never bode I painful throes for thee.
Changeling to me thou art, and not my child,
Nor to no wight that spark of pity knew.
Ruthless, unkind, monster of nature’s work,

⁶² Marylynn Salmon, “The Cultural Significance of Breastfeeding and Infant Care in Early Modern England and America,” *Journal of Social History* 28, no.2 (1994): 251.

⁶³ Jacques Guillimeau, *On Child Birth*, London, 1612. *Early English Books Online*: 1.

Thou never sucked the milk of woman's breast,
But from thy birth the cruel tiger's teats / Have nursed thee.⁶⁴

Videna attempts to disown Porrex as her child and declares him a “monster of nature’s work” instead of her own. She denies that he came from her womb, attempting to make her murder of him less monstrous and to displace blame for his behavior. However, although Videna attempts to claim that he is a changeling or sucked his ruthlessness from a “cruel tiger’s teats,” she also implies that she is the “cruel tiger.” If she nursed her own child, then Porrex became a “ruthless, unkind, monster” at least in part due to her influence. Videna attempts to separate herself from Porrex’s birth and nourishment because if her blood does not run through his veins, then she need not feel obligated to him as a mother, and if he is not her son then her murder of him to avenge Ferrex is not a monstrous act. Ironically, however, declaring that Porrex is a monster for killing his brother also implies that Videna will be a monster if she kills her own child. She does not care why Porrex killed Ferrex, so her justifications and feeble attempts to disown Porrex will not justify her familial murder either; Videna chooses to become the same type of “ruthless, unkind, monster of nature’s work” that she is attempting to kill.

The extended dialogue discussing Porrex’s murder also reinforces the monstrosity of Videna’s actions. Although the action of the play is driven by violence, Porrex’s murder, like the rest of the actual violence, occurs offstage. However, unlike the brief account of Porrex’s fratricide, the queen’s maid Marcella recounts Videna’s filicide in much greater detail. Marcella not only laments the death, but she also immediately draws attention to the fact that women are not expected to be natural killers: “Is all the world / Drowned in blood and sunk in cruelty? / If

⁶⁴ Sackville and Norton, *Gorboduc*, 4.1.64-74.

not in women mercy may be found, / If not, alas, within the mother's breast."⁶⁵ Videna fails to be merciful to her own son, and this cruelty from a mother, who should be a nurturer, is horrifying in its unnaturalness. Videna's proper role of giving her own red blood in the womb and white blood as breast milk contrasts with her murderous shedding of Porrex's life sustaining blood. The contrast is reinforced by the three separate times that Marcella emphasizes that it was Porrex's own mother who killed him:

Will ever wight believe that such a hard heart
 Could rest within the cruel mother's breast,
 With her own hand to slay her only son?

 Porrex, alas, is by his mother slain,
 And with her hand – a woeful thing to tell –
 While slumbering on his careful bed he rests,
 His heart, stabbed in with knife, is reft of life.⁶⁶

Later she elaborates on the story telling how Porrex called for his mother as he died: "And hearing him oft call the wretched name / Of mother and to cry to her for aid / Whose direful hand gave him the mortal wound."⁶⁷ Finally she asks, "Should nature yet consent to slay her son? / O mother thou to murder thus thy child!"⁶⁸ For Marcella and the other characters, the fact that Porrex's own mother was his killer is more horrifying and unnatural than the fact that he was murdered. Although Gorboduc points out several times that Porrex was unnatural for killing his brother, the characters react with much more shock and condemnation to what Videna has done. She is presented as truly unnatural and irredeemable for so exceeding the bounds of natural motherly action.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 4.2.169-71.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 4.2.181-3, 187-190.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 4.2.211-213

⁶⁸ Ibid., 244-245.

However, while pointing out Videna's abnormal nature, Marcella also reminds the audience of what a natural woman should be like. She is caring and acts more compassionately toward Porrex than his own mother did. She cannot refrain from weeping for the death of a young and noble man, let alone consider committing such a horrible act, and she declares: "Not I alas! That heart is not in me."⁶⁹ Marcella employs approximately one hundred lines to emphasize the horror of what the queen has done. In contrast, the king's advisor Eubulus spends a mere eight lines informing the king that one of his sons has killed the other. The true horror is more about the perpetrator than the act itself: an early modern (and perhaps even a modern) audience would not be as shocked by the murder of Porrex itself as by the fact that it was committed by his own mother.

Videna is not an isolated example of an unnatural and murderous mother, but instead she is part of an overall increase in the portrayal and discussion of women who commit murder. During the Renaissance there was an increase in the number of broadside ballads telling stories and depicting images of unnatural and monstrous wives and mothers who killed family members.⁷⁰ These women were the subjects of great social concern because, like Videna, they cast aside their traditionally accepted role as life giver for the unnatural role of life taker. Interestingly, the wildly popular depictions of murderous women were just as popular as

⁶⁹ Ibid., 4.2.264.

⁷⁰ Randall Martin, "English Child-Murder News and the Culture of Equity," in *Masculinities, Childhood and Violence*, ed. Amy Leonard and Karen Nelson (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 267-282. In his work on women and murder in early modern news, Martin Randall provides an excellent collection of these news stories, the striking woodcut images that accompany them, and the cultural interest in these stories.

depictions of “monsters” (either individual births or monstrous foreign races).⁷¹ In his work on monstrous births in the Renaissance, Norman Smith notes that “the forerunner of the modern newspaper, the broadside, is largely devoted to reporting and interpreting the contemporary monstrous births. Often luridly illustrated and sensationally written, they were bought on street corners and at fairs by the barely literate masses.”⁷² This format of lurid stories with shocking images was also perfect for printing the increasingly popular depictions of murderous wives and mothers, and from the late sixteenth through the seventeenth century there are dozens of examples of these broadsides including *The Bloody Mother; No natural mother, but a monster; The Unnatural Grand Mother; The Cruel Mother; and The Unnatural Mother*.⁷³ As demonstrated by the titles of these selected broadsides, women who kill their children are frequently depicted as unnatural or monstrous, and just as Videna is cast out and killed in the play, the printing of these broadsides provides the chance for the community to hear stories about monstrous mothers being caught and executed.

At the end of the play, the common people rise up and kill Videna for her murder of Porrex, but the country still descends into civil war. As critics such as Sara Ruth Watson and James Emmanuel Berg have pointed out, this final act does warn about the danger of a foreign ruler conquering England (a topic much on the minds of the subjects of the still unmarried and

⁷¹ For a fuller description of the depiction of monstrous births and prodigies see Lorraine Daston and Katherine Parks, *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (New York: Zone Books, 2001).

⁷² Norman S. Smith, “Portentous Births and the Monstrous Imagination in Renaissance Culture,” in *Marvels, Monsters and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*, ed. Timothy S. Jones and David A. Sprunger. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2002), 281.

⁷³ Martin, “English Child-Murder News and the Culture of Equity,” 268.

childless Queen Elizabeth).⁷⁴ However, none of this would have occurred had Videna not cast aside both natural maternal feeling and legal order by taking justice into her own hands. The kingdom can withstand the unnatural act of fratricide, but once Videna commits the monstrous act of filicide, her family is destroyed and the country with it. Although his unnatural division of the country started the tragic events of the play, the chorus still does not blame Gorboduc, who acted out of misguided love and attempted to rule according to reason rather than passion: the people “are.../ moved, / With Porrex’s death, wherein they falsely charge / The guiltless King, without desert at all, / And traitorously have murdered him therefor, / And eke the Queen.”⁷⁵ Videna committed the final, unrecoverable act that both stripped her of her humanity and broke the political and social order. Like medieval monsters before her, Videna brings chaos and threatens the structure of human society, but she is more threatening because she does not look like a monster. When the mother, the nurturing center of the family, can be a secret and murderous monster, then the family and social structure are truly threatened.

In contrast to Videna, *The Spanish Tragedy*’s Hieronimo does not kill his own child, and the potential for the state to render fair justice is less clear. As discussed previously, the nature of revenge and whether or not personal vengeance is ever justified was frequently debated in this period. However, the popular sentiment regarding these revengers, shared by some period thinkers and modern scholars, seemed to be that if the state were either corrupt or unwilling to render justice, it was acceptable and even commendable for someone to take justice into their own hands. Hieronimo, like Videna, is mourning the death of child, and he believes that he must

⁷⁴ Sara Ruth Watson, “Gorboduc and the Theory of Tyrannicide.” *The Modern Language Review* 34, no. 3 (1939): 355-366 and James Emmanuel Berg, “Gorboduc and the Tragic Discovery of Feudalism.” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 40, no. 2 (2000): 199-226.

⁷⁵ Norton and Sackville, *Gorboduc*, 5.1.13-17.

kill Lorenzo and Balthazar in order to achieve justice. Thus, the main problem in claiming that Hieronimo is, as the King of Spain says, acting according to a “monstrous resolution,”⁷⁶ lies in determining whether or not the King of Spain is a corrupt king who denies Hieronimo justice. If the King is corrupt, then Hieronimo is acting out of necessity to correct a corrupt system. But if the King is just, then Hieronimo taking vengeance into his own hands is clearly more problematic.

In his detailed discussion of public sentiment on revenge, Broude acknowledges that vengeance sought outside of the order of a divinely appointed ruler was generally viewed negatively in this period, yet he still considers Hieronimo to be in the right, claiming that “with the exception of hero revengers such as Hieronimo, Hamlet, and Clermont (who are products of carefully contrived combinations of circumstance, motivation, and actions providing maximum provocation and manifest evidence of divine mandate), vengeance which bypasses the king or magistrate is usually represented as irresponsible or dangerous.”⁷⁷ The only problem with this claim is that Hieronimo does not fit the category that Broude has created. He is certainly the product of “carefully contrived combinations of circumstance,” but these circumstances, rather than showing a justified revenger, more accurately show a revenger who falls into the category of one who is “irresponsible or dangerous.” Katherine Maus similarly argues that the revenger can simultaneously fulfill two roles:

On the one hand, the revolt of the subordinate constitutes treason — in a hierarchically ordered society, the most heinous of crimes. On the other hand, in so far as the revenger aims not to overturn social hierarchy but to restore its proper functioning, he is a conservative, not a revolutionary figure. Caught in a

⁷⁶ Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, in *Drama of the English Renaissance: The Tudor Period*, edited by Russell A. Fraser and Norman Rabkin (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 4.4.241.

⁷⁷ Broude, “Revenge and Revenge Tragedy in Renaissance England,” 57.

double bind, the revenger seems simultaneously an avatar and enemy of social order.⁷⁸

While this description certainly applies to many revengers from early modern drama, the problem when applying this to Hieronimo is that he is not trying to restore proper functioning to a corrupted political system. Instead he is seeking revenge at the expense of the existing and properly functioning political system. The events that Kyd carefully constructs around Hieronimo actually demonstrate that he is acting outside of law and divine mandate without reason or justification, and in his rejection of the social and religious order he becomes an unreasonable and monstrous murderer.

In fact, there is evidence that the King of Spain is actually a good and fair ruler.⁷⁹ The first time that we see the King interact with Hieronimo is after the battle to defeat the rebellious Viceroy of Portugal. The King gives thanks to both God and his generals, he gives out rewards, and he promises “more to come.”⁸⁰ He also compliments and thanks Hieronimo on hearing of the role that his son Horatio played in capturing the Viceroy’s son, Balthazar. These are not the words of an unfair or unjust king, and even Hieronimo seems pleased with the King’s recognition of his son’s service. He proclaims to the King, “Long may [Horatio] live to serve my sovereign liege, / And soon decay unless he serve my liege well.”⁸¹ These words are not only ironic considering Horatio’s imminent demise, but may also foreshadow Hieronimo’s later decayed mental state when he ceases to serve his king.

⁷⁸ Katherine Maus, *Four Revenge Tragedies* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), xiii.

⁷⁹ In many part of this section I agree with and will cite accordingly the excellent analysis by James Henke of Hieronimo’s relationship with the king and the Spanish legal system: James Henke’s “Politics and Politicians in *The Spanish Tragedy*.”

⁸⁰ Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 1.2.86.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1.2.98-99.

In addition to these examples of the King's praise and largess, this early moment also demonstrates the King's ability to act as a fair judge, and rather than this moment revealing the King's lack of justice, the King proves to be, as Henke describes, "as a judge [...] a type of Solomon, and as a ruler, a model of Erasmus' Christian Prince."⁸² When Lorenzo and Horatio both arrive holding on to the captured Balthazar, the king very reasonably asks Balthazar to tell him "To which of these twain are thou prisoner?"⁸³ Lorenzo and Horatio then proceed to argue over which of them more rightly captured Balthazar, who admits that technically it was both of them, thus putting the king into an awkward situation: he must determine which of them can claim the lucrative honor of being Balthazar's captor even when he is being presented with conflicting accounts. It is, in fact, unclear which of the two men deserves greater credit for capturing Balthazar, so as Henke rightly points out, the King is placed into a Solomon like position.⁸⁴ If the King were corrupt, this would have been a perfect moment for him to favor his nephew over the son of his Knights Marshall; however, we are instead presented with a demonstration of a fair and wise ruler who takes a difficult and touchy situation and finds a solution that appeals to both parties. After hearing the claims by both Lorenzo and Horatio, he tells them:

You both deserve and both shall have reward.
Nephew, thou took'st his weapon and his horse;
His weapons and his horse are thy reward.
Horatio, thou didst force him first to yield;
His ransom therefore is thy valor's fee.
Appoint the sum as you shall both agree.⁸⁵

⁸² Henke, "Politics and Politicians in *The Spanish Tragedy*," 353-354.

⁸³ Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 1.2.153.

⁸⁴ Henke, "Politics and Politicians in *The Spanish Tragedy*," 355.

⁸⁵ Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 1.2.179-184.

This is an excellent compromise as it allows both men to take valuable rewards and no one is slighted. However, the King's careful consideration goes even further when he tells Lorenzo, "but, nephew, thou shalt have the prince in guard, / For thine estate best fitteth such a guest."⁸⁶ Again, this is an excellent solution that saves everyone's honor without slighting anyone. Horatio still has the honor of receiving Balthazar's ransom, but he and his father will not be asked to spend a good portion of that revenue on housing the noble prisoner. As Henke says, "the king lifts a heavy financial burden from the shoulders of Horatio by ordering that Lorenzo, because of his greater means (not desert), entertain Balthazar."⁸⁷ This allows Horatio to save face by not having to deal with a potential financial strain, and it also allows the King to honor Balthazar by housing him within his own family, which may already be a concern since he will soon try to engage his niece to his prisoner.

The importance of this scene is highlighted by the very next scene in which the audience is presented with an impassioned and unjust ruler: the Portuguese Viceroy. While the Spanish King listened to all arguments impartially, the Viceroy has already decided that his son, Balthazar, is dead, despite having no evidence to that effect. Furthermore, when a scheming courtier tells him that it was Alexandro who, in an act of ultimate betrayal, killed Balthazar, the Viceroy is not only willing to believe the worst without any evidence, but he also refuses to hear Alexandro's protestations, exclaiming, "Hold thou thy peace!"⁸⁸ As Henke notes, this scene does an excellent job of highlighting good ruling and justice versus irrational rule and injustice. As Henke claims: "The King carefully gathers and weighs testimony; the Viceroy eagerly embraces

⁸⁶ Ibid., 1.2.185-6.

⁸⁷ Henke, "Politics and Politicians in *The Spanish Tragedy*," 356.

⁸⁸ Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 1.3.73.

lies and prohibits any possible refutation of them. The King renders judgment rationally; the Viceroy — albeit under greater emotional stress — dooms hysterically.”⁸⁹ The Viceroy demonstrates the threat of a bad ruler, in stark contrast to the King of Spain. This scene also first presents the specter of unjust revenge, both on a personal and on a legal level. The Viceroy, in failing to act as a fair and impartial ruler has instead given way to his emotions, and although he calls Alexandro a “false, unkind, unthankful, traitorous beast,”⁹⁰ the Viceroy is the one who is acting unnaturally and unthankfully when he rules based purely on his emotions.

In addition to demonstrating the threat of a bad ruler, and demonstrating the King’s goodness by contrast to the Viceroy, it is also worth noting that this scene offers the first mention of revenge, and it is put in the mouth of the anguished and unjust Viceroy. When Alexandro tells the Viceroy not to despair because his son has only been taken prisoner not killed, the Viceroy responds that Spain has surely executed him “for his father’s faults.”⁹¹ The exchange that follows demonstrates the potential for revenge to be misused:

ALEXANDRO: [To kill Balthazar] were a breach to common law of arms.

VICEROY: They reck no laws that meditate revenge.

ALEXANDRO: His ransom’s worth will stay from foul revenge.⁹²

The Viceroy, moments before he himself will cast aside law and justice in order to seek revenge against the falsely accused Alexandro, acknowledges that when people seek revenge they are not stopped by concern for the law. While this anticipates the Viceroy’s own actions moments later, it also foreshadows Hieronimo’s actions later in the play. Like the Viceroy, Hieronimo will not seek legal justice for his son’s murder, but will instead seek bloody, private revenge. Considering

⁸⁹ Henke, “Politics and Politicians in *The Spanish Tragedy*,” 359.

⁹⁰ Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 1.3.77.

⁹¹ Ibid., 1.3.46.

⁹² Ibid., 1.3.47-49.

that the Viceroy is about to execute an innocent man, Hieronimo's eventual similarities to the Viceroy can hardly be considered flattering (especially when one of Hieronimo's victims, Don Cyprian, is guilty of nothing more than having an awful son).

While the scene in which the King divides the money from capturing Balthazar between Lorenzo and Horatio seems to clearly show a fair monarch, critics have long cited the much later scene in Act Three, in which Hieronimo finally approaches the King for justice, as proof of the King's indifference at best and his corruption at worst. However, like Henke, I argue that this scene has been misread and does not account for the indications that the King is unable to fully understand what the distraught and frantic Hieronimo is trying to tell him.⁹³ First, there is textual evidence that the King, who is extremely busy finalizing the treaty with Portugal, does not even realize that Hieronimo is there. As the King speaks to the Ambassador, Hieronimo bursts in and exclaims "Justice, oh justice to Hieronimo!"⁹⁴ He is immediately intercepted by Lorenzo, but the King, who evidently heard some sort of commotion responds, "Who is he that interrupts our business?"⁹⁵ It therefore appears that the King has neither clearly heard nor seen Hieronimo, and then, rather than taking this chance to make himself heard, Hieronimo replies only with "Not I. Hieronimo, beware: go by, go by."⁹⁶ Again it is unclear if the King hears Hieronimo's response, and even if he did, Hieronimo fails to take this chance to explain. The Ambassador immediately returns to presenting the response of the Viceroy to the marriage negotiations, and the King returns to very important state business. Furthermore, even if Hieronimo did make himself heard,

⁹³ Henke, "Politics and Politicians in *The Spanish Tragedy*," 359-362.

⁹⁴ Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 3.12.27.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 3.12.30.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 3.12.31.

he didn't say anything to make the King believe that he had business for which it was worth interrupting the peace negotiations.

Later in the same scene, Hieronimo has another chance to ask the King for justice, but once again it is not the King who denies justice, but Hieronimo who fails to make himself heard and understood. When the Ambassador proffers the money that is due to Horatio for Balthazar's ransom, Hieronimo hears his son's name and again cries out. This time, despite Lorenzo's attempts to block him, the King does recognize and partially understand what Hieronimo is saying:

HIERONIMO: Justice, oh justice, justice, gentle King!
 KING: Who is that? Hieronimo?
 HIERONIMO: Justice, oh, justice! Oh, my son, my son
 My son, whom naught can ransom or redeem!
 LORENZO: Hieronimo, you are not well-advised.
 HIERONIMO: Away, Lorenzo, hinder me no more,
 For thou hast made me bankrupt of my bliss.
 Give me my son! You shall not ransom him.
 Away! I'll rip the bowels of the earth.⁹⁷

Hieronimo then proceeds to stab the ground with his dagger while exclaiming that he will be revenged on all of them. At this point the King has certainly heard Hieronimo. He responds by asking what is the cause of this "outrage," and then asking if no one will "restrain [Hieronimo's] fury."⁹⁸ The King is clearly confused by what has happened, and although he tells them to restrain Hieronimo, this is probably because Hieronimo is frantically stabbing the ground and appears insane. It is also not unreasonable to assume that the King had neither realized before that Horatio was dead (since he tells a servant to "see [the ransom] given to Don Horatio"),⁹⁹ nor

⁹⁷ Ibid., 3.12.63-71.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 3.12.79-80.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 3.12.62.

does he realize it now (since he asks Lorenzo, “What accident hath happed Hieronimo?”)¹⁰⁰.

Hieronimo will later claim that he cannot tell anyone what has happened for fear that Lorenzo and Balthazar “as a wintry storm upon a plain, / Will bear me down with their nobility,”¹⁰¹ but since the King has acted justly thus far, there is no reason for Hieronimo not to trust his justice now. The King is not neglecting to give Hieronimo justice, he just doesn’t understand why Hieronimo has been seeking justice at all. Then, at the moment when Hieronimo could have finally explained that this son has been murdered and revealed the murderer to the King, Hieronimo instead runs off stage.

Finally, the King is given one more moment in which he demonstrates his justice and compassion. Far from being angry with Hieronimo for interrupting the negotiations and then running off without explanation, the King is instead concerned for his mental condition. Although Lorenzo attempts to claim that Hieronimo’s lunatic passions are based on desire for Horatio’s ransom money, the King refuses to remove him from his spot as the Knight Marshall. Instead, he responds that “We should increase his melancholy so. / ’Tis best that we see further in it first.”¹⁰² The King does not want to agitate Hieronimo further, and in a repeat of his earlier careful consideration of both Lorenzo and Horatio’s claims, he wants to hear more evidence before he decides what to do about Hieronimo. Furthermore, he even makes the extremely generous offer of giving the ransom to Hieronimo and promising that “for what he hath Horatio

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 3.12.83.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 3.12.37-38.

¹⁰² Ibid., 3.12.99-100.

will not want.”¹⁰³ The King will make sure that Horatio still gets his own money even after he gives the original ransom money to Hieronimo.

These scenes all indicate that Kyd has not created a corrupt King who will not administer justice, but rather he has presented a King who is just and good, but who has some corrupt family members. Hieronimo might worry that since Lorenzo is the King’s nephew, the King would not render justice against him, but this is impossible to know since Hieronimo’s madness and assumption that the King is corrupt prevents him from ever truly pleading his case. Lorenzo blocks Hieronimo at some points, but Hieronimo has ample opportunities in this scene and others to make himself heard. Instead he runs off just at the moment that he has the King’s attention. Or, as Henke puts it, “Admittedly, Kyd assures neither his hero nor his audience that the old man can obtain genuine justice. Yet what revenger in the annals of Renaissance drama ever had such an opportunity to legally right a wrong committed by such a high placed villain?”¹⁰⁴ Hieronimo even has a sympathetic ear in the person of Lorenzo’s own father, who questions Lorenzo about trying to keep Hieronimo away from the King, and even tells him “to my sorrow I have been ashamed / To answer for thee, though thou art my son.”¹⁰⁵ Don Cyprian would have been horrified by his son’s actions and possibly sympathetic to Hieronimo had he known the truth.

Since Hieronimo is not seeking revenge against a corrupt ruler, his actions and their eventual consequences are much more difficult to justify. Furthermore, he is a legal authority himself whom other characters come to in order for their wrongs to be redressed, so it is perhaps ironic that Hieronimo knows how to seek legal justice but refuses to do so. He of all people in

¹⁰³ Ibid., 3.12.94.

¹⁰⁴ Henke, “Politics and Politicians in *The Spanish Tragedy*,” 367.

¹⁰⁵ Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 3.14.60-61.

the play should turn to the King and government for legal recourse, and this point is emphasized three times when we see Hieronimo approached to arbitrate justice. When Pedrigano is brought before Hieronimo — and at this point Hieronimo has no idea that Pedrigano is an accomplice to Horatio's murder — Hieronimo justly condemns him for Serberine's murder and sees him executed. It is an obvious case, since Pedrigano was caught red handed. Hieronimo even calls Pedrigano a “monster, murderer of men.”¹⁰⁶ Hieronimo does not know or apparently care why Pedrigano murdered Serberine, and for all that Hieronimo knows, Pedrigano might have been seeking revenge himself. In his mind a “murderer of men” is a “monster,” so anyone who kills someone else, even a revenger, outside of the legal system is a murderer and must be punished. This falls in line with Tudor law, and (despite being in a fictionalized Spain) Hieronimo rightly uses the law and his authority as Knights Marshall to administer legal revenge, albeit still bloody: “For blood with blood shall, while I sit as judge, / Be satisfied and the law discharged; / And though myself cannot receive the like, / Yet will I see that others have their right.”¹⁰⁷ Hieronimo cannot get legal justice now because, at this point, he only has the mysterious letter dropped by Bel-imperia to tell him the identity of the murderers, and this is perhaps not sufficient to convince the King of their guilt. However, it appears that if he had evidence he would seek out legal justice for his son's murder too. Pedrigano is a “monster,” just like the “savage monster, not of human kind,” who killed Horatio, and in this case legal, public justice has worked. Hieronimo laments that he must “toil in other men's extremes, / That know not how

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 3.6.24

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 3.6.35-38.

to remedy our own, / And do them justice, when unjustly we, / For all our wrongs can compass no redress,”¹⁰⁸ but he has not actually tried to get legal justice for his own case.

Hieronimo’s interest in administering justice to others wanes as his grief and passion for vengeance increase. Later in the play, Hieronimo is approached by a painter, Bazardo, who is also seeking justice for his murdered son. When Bazardo pleads his case, Hieronimo’s response is that there is no justice to be had in the world, there is only justice from God: “Oh ambitious beggar, wouldst thou have that / That lives not in the world? / Why all the undelvèd mines cannot buy / An ounce of justice, ’tis a jewel so inestimable. / I tell thee, / God hath engrossed all justice in his hands, / And there is none but what comes from him.”¹⁰⁹ This certainly fits with Renaissance religious conceptions of God as the divine revenger, but it disregards the fact that Hieronimo, by virtue of being appointed by the King, is empowered to act as a legally and divinely appointed bringer of justice for the common people. Instead, Hieronimo is so busy mourning his own loss that he becomes the corrupt or uncaring authority figure who refuses to administer justice; he acts like the exact type of negligent authority figure that he believes the King to be. This negligence is then repeated in the very next scene, when the aged Bazulto, whose son has also been murdered, approaches Hieronimo. Once again, Hieronimo is in the position to act as a bringer of justice, but again he can only focus on his own grief. Hieronimo even sees his son and then himself in the visage of the grief stricken old man, telling him, “Thou art the lively image of my grief; / Within thy face, my sorrows I may see.”¹¹⁰ Hieronimo should, as Jordi Escolà claims, be “deeply committed to the pursuit of justice in the name of God and His

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 3.6.1-4.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 3.12A.84-90.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 3.13.162-163.

community. However, much of the excitement of *The Spanish Tragedy* resides in its radical overturning of these initial expectations: in a play with almost as many avengers as main characters, it is the Justicer of the Realm that proves the wildest of them all.”¹¹¹

Within all of these scenes, Hieronimo not only rejects legal recourse both for himself and others, but Kyd also uses these scenes to demonstrate Hieronimo’s descent into madness and loss of natural reason. As with Videna, Hieronimo becomes mentally isolated from those around him, and this isolation, both caused and enhanced by his extreme grief, leads to his deteriorating mental condition. As soon as he sees his murdered son, Hieronimo’s sanity and reason begin to slip, and after he first denies that the dead man is his son, he admits “How strangely had I lost my way to grief.”¹¹² Hieronimo then seems to slip back and forth between moments of sanity and moments of insanity, but unlike Shakespeare’s Hamlet, there is little indication that he is simply pretending to be insane in order to catch a murderer. On the contrary, just as after Horatio’s murder, Hieronimo realizes that he “lost [his] way to grief.”¹¹³ He also realizes the necessity of hiding his mental turmoil, lest he miss his chance to catch the murderers:

Thus therefore I will rest me in unrest,
Dissembling quiet in unquietness,
Not seeming that I know their villainies,
That my simplicity may make them think
That ignorantly I will let all slip.¹¹⁴

He may not realize that he is acting irrationally in his distrust of the King, but he does realize that he must appear more calm than he actually is (a resolution that he is only sometimes able to

¹¹¹ Jordi Coral Escolà, “Vengeance is Yours: Reclaiming the Social Bond in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Titus Andronicus*,” *Atlantis* 29, no. 2 (2007): 63.

¹¹² Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 2.5.99.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.13.29.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.13.30-33.

keep, as evidenced by his interaction with the King). Hieronimo, despite his incredible anger, does manage to never directly accuse Lorenzo of the murder, and Lorenzo, perhaps, believes that Hieronimo is not a threat because of his crazed behavior. Michael Levin claims, “despite the incipient madness that springs from frustration, Hieronimo remains master of his emotions until his vengeance is complete,”¹¹⁵ but that control seems to be haphazard at best.

Further, as noted above, Hieronimo is nearly incoherent during his best chance to present his case to the King. Before the meeting, Hieronimo is already uncertain that the King will listen to him, and debates killing himself, thus taking the path down into hell where “down by the dale that flows with purple gore, / Standeth a fiery tower; there sits a judge,” from whom Hieronimo will get “justice for Horatio’s death.”¹¹⁶ However, Hieronimo decides that he will not take his own life because that way does not leave anyone on earth to avenge Horatio; Hieronimo deliberately does not trust supernatural justice. Then, when the King arrives, Hieronimo takes up his sword and rope again, declaring that rather than following the path to hell for justice, he will seek justice from the King: “This way I’ll take, and this way comes the King.”¹¹⁷ Hieronimo once again seems ready to seek justice from the King, so it is even more surprising, and perhaps indicative of Hieronimo’s extremely unsteady mental state, that he then does not actually plead his case. Hieronimo may have been misunderstood or held back somewhat by Lorenzo, but his eventual failure to talk directly to the King may also be because he did not really try; just as he aborted his idea about seeking justice from a supernatural judge, he does not trust justice from a human judge. Hieronimo goes to the King armed, which may indicate that he is already

¹¹⁵ Michael Henry Levin, “‘Vindicta Mihi!’: Meaning, Morality and Motivation in *The Spanish Tragedy*,” *SEL* 4, no.2 (Spring 1964): 309.

¹¹⁶ Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 3.12.7-8,13.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.12.20.

convinced that his own actions are the only justice that he will receive. His growing madness and distrust of the legal system leads him to forgo this opportunity for legal justice.

Hieronimo at times seems to be aware of the fact that his grief and his desire for vengeance are driving him mad, and just as he vacillates between divine and legal justice above, he repeats that debate in other scenes. However, he is increasingly unwilling, and perhaps unable, to appeal to his logical or reasonable side, and in his increasing madness Hieronimo calls on the Furies, the Greek goddesses of vengeance. At first Hieronimo hopes that the Furies will afflict his son's murderers, saying:

Well, heaven is heaven still,
And there is Nemesis and Furies,
And things called whips,
And they sometimes do meet with murderers.
They do not always scape; that's some comfort.
Ay, ay, ay, and then time steals on,
And steals and steals, till violence leap forth
Like thunder wrapped in fire,
And so doth bring confusion to them all.¹¹⁸

Hieronimo seems to be imagining that the Furies will avenge his son's murder for him, and according to Greek mythology, the Furies were supposed to drive murderers mad. But rather than seeing Lorenzo or Balthazar mad, it is Hieronimo who becomes increasingly unhinged. As time "steals on," the thunder and confusion depict Hieronimo's own turbulent mental state much more accurately than they do the murderers.

Later, the imagery of the Furies is repeated when Hieronimo is speaking with Bazulto and others who have come to him for justice. At first Hieronimo seems to be talking to them and

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 3.11.41-49.

perhaps hearing their complaints, but his mental state has deteriorated even further, and his speech quickly turns to his own guilt for not having yet avenged Horatio:

Then shames thou not, Hieronimo, to neglect
 The sweet revenge of thy Horatio?
 Though on this earth justice will be not found,
 I'll down to hell, and in this passion
 Knock at the dismal gates of Pluto's court,
 Getting by force, as one Alcides did,
 A troop of Furies and tormenting hags
 To torture Don Lorenzo and the rest.¹¹⁹

Hieronimo's guilt has increased, and he is frustrated that no supernatural aid has arrived to assist in his revenge, so he again imagines himself traveling to Hades, this time to demand that the Furies avenge his son. He is also clearly losing his ability to reason, since he follows this declaration by tearing apart the legal documents that were brought to him, declaring that when he finds "them that murdered my son. / Then will I rent and tear them thus and thus, / Shivering their limbs in pieces with my teeth."¹²⁰ This moment can be read as Hieronimo symbolically tearing apart the legal system that has failed him, but in imagining that he is tearing apart Lorenzo and Balthazar, Hieronimo looks more like a raging animal than a man. Just as he has cast aside legal justice, he is now turning away from natural human reason too.

This is not the first time that Hieronimo imagines rending his son's murderers, however. In the previous scene when he meets the painter Bazardo he exclaims:

Oh no, there is no end; the end is death and madness. As I am never better than when I am mad, then methinks I am a brave fellow, then I do wonders; but reason abuseth me, and there's the torment, there's the hell. At the last, sir, bring me to one of the murderers; were he as strong as Hector, this would I tear and drag him up and down.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 3.13.106-113.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 3.13.121-3

¹²¹ Ibid., 3.12A.167-173.

At this point he attacks the painter and drives him off stage. This is therefore both an example of Hieronimo acting mad when he has no strategic reason to do so, and an example of how Hieronimo is losing his natural human reason in favor of irrational urges. There is no reason for Hieronimo to make Bazardo think that he is insane, nor is there a logical reason for Hieronimo to attack the grieving painter as a stand in for his son's murderers. Hieronimo has decided that the "end is death and madness," so he is ready to cast aside reason to escape the misery of rational thought. Reason has become a hell for Hieronimo; he will instead welcome madness as a relief that allows him to imagine himself tearing apart his enemies with his own hands. His desire for vengeance has now led him to attack a fellow grieving father who only seeks justice.

After Hieronimo attacks Bazardo, we see Hieronimo not only reject justice in the form of the King, but he convinces himself that he is the proper instrument of divine justice. In his monologue, Hieronimo's inner turmoil is made clear when he vacillates between yielding himself to divine revenge and determining to seek that revenge himself. Hieronimo walks onto the stage reading a book that seems to have passages from multiple sources, and he exclaims, "Vindicta mihi!"¹²² If he were reading a Bible, the expected conclusion of that phrase would be "ego retribuam, dicit Dominus."¹²³ However, by only saying the first part of the passage, Hieronimo creates ambiguity. He first seems to be passionately claiming vengeance for himself, but the unspoken words imply that he should look to God for vengeance, a fact that is reinforced by his next, more subdued lines. Hieronimo recognizes what the biblical passage actually means when he says "Ay, heaven will be revenged of every ill, / Nor will they suffer murder unrepaired. /

¹²² Ibid., 3.13.1. This translates as "Vengeance is mine."

¹²³ Epistle of Paul to the Romans 12:19. This translates as "I will repay, sayeth the Lord."

Then stay Hieronimo, attend their will.”¹²⁴ Hieronimo tries to reconcile himself to the idea that heaven will assure that his son is avenged. However, as soon as Hieronimo seems to yield himself to divine will, he reads a different passage, possibly by Seneca, that once again spurs him on to seek personal vengeance:

Per scelus semper tutum est sceleribus iter.¹²⁵
Strike, and strike home, where wrong is offered thee,
For evils unto ills conductors be,
And death’s the worst of resolution;
For he that thinks with patience to contend
To quiet life, his life shall easily end.¹²⁶

His resolution to attend heaven’s will is now subsumed by his new conviction that he must seek revenge himself, and he even seems to think that Heaven will be on his side: “Heaven covereth him that hath no burial. / And to conclude, I will revenge his death!”¹²⁷ Hieronimo uses this book to finally convince himself to seek his own revenge against Horatio’s murderers, and he interprets this book of mixed sources to accommodate his own desire for vengeance. Vengeance is now his, and he will not be denied it. Furthermore, Hieronimo recognizes the manipulative power of words, and he determines to use “milder speeches”¹²⁸ in order to trick Lorenzo and Balthazar into trusting him. Hieronimo recognizes that language and truth are not necessarily connected, and this fact will become increasingly important for Hieronimo, which will contribute to both his disordered mental state and his rejection of human speech and reason.

As scholars such as Carol McGinnis Kay have pointed out, the ambiguous relationship of language and truth in this play is not limited merely to Hieronimo. It is demonstrated perhaps

¹²⁴ Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 3.13.2-4.

¹²⁵ This translates as “The safe way for crimes is always through crimes.”

¹²⁶ Ibid., 3.13.6-11.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 3.13.19-20.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 3.13.41.

most clearly by the five different versions of Andrea's death that are presented within the first Act.¹²⁹ Hieronimo's distrust and eventual rejection of language, graphically displayed when he bites out his own tongue, is also directly connected to his loss of reason and his descent into monstrosity. In both the medieval period and the Renaissance, the ability to reason was closely tied to the ability to speak, both being considered faculties possessed by man but not animals. In his *De Animalibus* (c. 1450), Albertus Magnus denies humanity to the pygmies because they do not connect their language to their reason. He claims that:

the sounds [the pygmy] takes in by his ear, he cannot divide into sound and meaning. Though the Pygmy seems to speak, he does not dispute from universal, but rather his words are directed to the particulars of which he speaks. Thus, the cause of his speech is as a shadow resulting from the sunset of reason. Reason is twofold. One part is its reflection of the particulars of sense experience and memory, the other the universals derived from the particulars of the first part, which is the principle of all art and learning. The Pygmy does not have even the first of these two parts of reason, and so does not have even the shadow of reason.¹³⁰

Speech and reason are therefore inextricably linked, and a creature must have both in order to be truly human. Sir Philip Sidney expresses a similar sentiment about the importance and connection between these two faculties when he claims that "*oratio* next to *ratio*, speech next to reason, be the greatest gift bestowed upon mortality, that cannot be praiseless which doth most polish that blessing of speech."¹³¹ The loss of reason and the ability to speak that reason is therefore a mark that a person has shed their humanity. Thomas Browne, when discussing man's ability to be both good and evil, man and monster, uses as an example the fact that "the Rhetoric wherewith I persuade another cannot persuade myself: there is a depraved appetite in us, that will

¹²⁹ For an analysis of the many versions of Andrea's death see Carol McGinnis Kay, "Deception Through Words: A Reading of *The Spanish Tragedy*," *Studies in Philology* 74, no. 1 (1977).

¹³⁰ Qtd in John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races*, 193.

¹³¹ Sir Philip Sidney, "The Defense of Poesy," *Sir Philip Sidney: Selected Prose and Poetry*, ed. by Robert Kimbrough (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 134.

with patience hear the learned instruction of Reason; but yet perform no farther than agrees to its own irregular Humour.”¹³² Humans are able to speak with reason, but we cannot convince ourselves of that same reasonable argument. In Hieronimo’s previous speech, we see him reading arguments to himself, and then convincing himself that he should seek revenge anyway. Similarly when Hieronimo has the chance to seek justice from the King, he convinces himself that the King will not grant justice, thus Hieronimo is justified in seeking private vengeance, which is what he wanted anyway. There is thus a disconnect between Hieronimo’s ability to reason and his desires or passions. Michel de Montaigne also warns about the threat of passion to overcome reason when he says that “he who, outraged and stung to the quick by an injury, should arm himself with the arms of reason against his furious appetite for vengeance.”¹³³ The passion of vengeance is in contrast to good human reason, but Hieronimo, like Videna before him, fails to listen to his own faculty for reason and instead descends into madness and inhumanity.

At the end of the play, both Hieronimo’s desire for vengeance and his rejection of language/reason culminate in the deadly play that Hieronimo stages for the Viceroy and King. In what appears to be a strange stylistic choice, Hieronimo tells Balthazar, Lorenzo, and Bel-imperia that they must all speak in different languages “that it may breed the more variety.”¹³⁴ When Balthazar very rationally notes that this “will be a mere confusion, / And hardly shall we all be understood,”¹³⁵ Hieronimo brushes aside his concern, claiming simply that “the conclusion

¹³² Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, 61.

¹³³ Michel de Montaigne, “Of Cruelty,” *The Complete Works*, trans. Donald M. Frame (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 372.

¹³⁴ Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 4.1.173.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.1.179-180.

/ Shall prove the invention.”¹³⁶ While it might seem that this confusion is merely a whim of Hieronimo’s insanity, it also symbolizes his desire to create the same type of chaos in the real world that he is experiencing in his increasingly disordered mind. Just as Hieronimo earlier imagines himself singing with his wife and Bazulto “three parts in one, but all of discord framed,”¹³⁷ he now imagines creating a play in many languages where the discordant speech fits with his disordered mind and view of the world. The play within a play therefore “contribute[s] to the play’s general atmosphere about the validity of words, and they add to our sense that we are watching a society bordering on dissolution and chaos.”¹³⁸ The play within the play then fittingly ends with the chaotic murder and suicide of all the players except Hieronimo.

This ending, in which the children who form the basis of both the next generation and the cultural link between Spain and Portugal are all killed, creates chaos and allows Hieronimo to tear down the society from which he was brutally alienated by the murder of his son. Ever since Horatio’s murder, Hieronimo loses his connection to the familial and cultural structures that bind society together, or as described by C. L. Barber, “the murder [...] prevents the transmission of heritage from generation to generation and is felt to destroy the basis of the hero’s identity. The result is that the initial general allegiance to society is called in, so to speak, and reinvested in a new, obsessive piety centered in the lost child. Desperate remonstrance and complaint express shocked disillusionment and alienation.”¹³⁹ Hieronimo’s earlier claim that “the conclusion / Shall

¹³⁶ Ibid., 4.1.181-182.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 3.13.172.

¹³⁸ Kay, “Deception Through Words,” 30.

¹³⁹ C.L. Barber, *Creating Elizabethan Tragedy: The Theatre of Marlowe and Kyd*, ed. Richard P. Wheeler (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 132.

prove the invention” and that he “shall see the fall of Babylon”¹⁴⁰ (probably a reference to both Babylon and Babel) are both true; he has displayed a chaotic place where words are of uncertain meaning and he has torn it down both in his play and in the larger context of the play’s setting.

The disjointed nature of the play’s final moments, with the King’s repeated demands that Hieronimo explain what he has done even after Hieronimo has already explained in detail, may be the result of some corruption of the original text,¹⁴¹ but it also highlights the extent to which communication and culture have crumbled. The once calm King now passionately demands Hieronimo’s torture, and the same Viceroy who once called for Alexandro to be burnt based only on the false accusation that he murdered Balthazar now promises Hieronimo that if he “inform[s] the King of these events, / Upon mine honor thou shalt have no harm.”¹⁴² The King’s passion and seeming loss of reason may therefore be read as a final warning about allowing your passion to overtake you. The King, like Hieronimo, is distraught at the murder of his family members, and he wants answers immediately; however, the King is now experiencing the same discord and confusion that has plagued Hieronimo. He cannot understand Hieronimo’s explanation because to him it makes no sense; he is overwhelmed by what has happened since he did not even know that Horatio was dead before the bloody stage scene. The Viceroy has learned the danger of letting passion overtake reason, and he tries to calmly listen to Hieronimo. However, it is too late, and Hieronimo refuses to give any further explanations.

Hieronimo’s final violent acts of biting out his own tongue and killing Don Cyprian are his most monstrous ones as a revenger – after all at this point he has only killed Lorenzo and

¹⁴⁰ Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 4.1.194.

¹⁴¹ This has been suggested by many scholars including Peter B. Murray, *Thomas Kyd* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1969), 144.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 4.4.157-158.

Balthazar since Bel-imperia died at her own hand. First, in his self-mutilation Hieronimo acts according to what the King accurately calls the “monstrous resolution of a wretch,” thus severing himself from human language and the remnants of the community. Lawrence Danson claims that, in her mutilated form, Lavinia from *Titus Andronicus* is “a conceit for the nearness of man to monster when deprived of the humanizing gift of expression.”¹⁴³ Likewise, Hieronimo can no longer engage in any sort of speech, rational or otherwise. He thus deprives himself of language and its associated social bonds. He is now only an agent of chaos and confusion; there are no more answers to be had. Then, as if to emphasize his final conversion to monstrosity, Hieronimo takes his first innocent victim and destroys the last of the Spanish succession: He stabs Don Cyprian, Lorenzo’s father, leading the King to lament, “What age hath ever heard such monstrous deeds? / My brother, and the whole succeeding hope / That Spain expected after my decease [...] I am the next, the nearest, last of all.”¹⁴⁴ Unlike *Gorboduc*, the country is not yet in a chaos of civil war, but with the Spanish King bereft of heirs there appears to be little hope for the future. Hieronimo, now physically monstrous, has done his last monstrous act and effectively brought chaos to society.

They may not appear to be monsters, but Videna and Hieronimo are part of the larger movement in Renaissance drama toward depicting people who shed the natural reason and goodness that separates man from monster. They are driven solely by their passions and desires, and once they lose the familial bond with their children, they no longer care about any of the remaining social or family structures that define normal human society. Through their monstrous

¹⁴³ Lawrence N. Danson, “The Device of Wonder: *Titus Andronicus* and Revenge Tragedy,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 16, no. 1 (1974): 34.

¹⁴⁴ Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 4.4.251-253,257.

and unnatural acts of revenge, Hieronimo and Videná reject human reason and justice systems in favor of the “wild kind of justice” of monstrous vengeance. They yield to their melancholy and anger, and in doing so they lose the reason that makes them human. Hieronimo himself notes that murder is a “bloody monster,”¹⁴⁵ and by committing this act outside of their still functioning legal systems, Videná and Hieronimo become monstrous murderers themselves. They are not the just revengers who destroy corrupt systems, but rather they are the hidden monster who destroys society from the inside out.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 3.6.100.

Chapter 3

Marlowe's Monster of Ambition

Family tragedy and the desire for vengeance caused Videna and Hieronimo to sacrifice their humanity in favor of bloody revenge; however, this is far from the only type of motivation that drives monstrous characters on the Renaissance stage. Videna and Hieronimo at least had the excuse of extreme love for family driving them, but the main character of Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* (1587) is motivated not by a desire to avenge a wrong done against someone else but by his own ambition and desire for power. Tamburlaine seeks "the ripest fruit of all / That perfect bliss and sole felicity / The sweet fruition of an earthly crown,"¹ and over the course of two plays he becomes increasingly monstrous in his single-minded focus on ruling more and more lands. He believes that he is destined for greatness, and he allows this to spur his ambition and to justify any action that he deems necessary. He becomes a Machiavellian monster who is willing to sacrifice anyone who stands in the way of his conquest.

Yet despite his obvious flaws and crimes, Tamburlaine evokes fascination and excitement from the audience. Part of the reason for this fascination lies in the fact that Tamburlaine, who the audience at once cheers and is repelled by, reveals the potential for monstrosity in the imagination: he is a monster because he ambitiously and violently pursues his imagined destiny, and in his ambitious fantasies we can see our own deepest desires. As described by Alexander Leggatt, we feel "some horror at the carnage produced by Tamburlaine, but we also respond, with an amoral excitement, to the glamour of his visions."² Tamburlaine acts out fantasies of

¹ Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great Part I & II*, In *Drama of the English Renaissance: The Tudor Period*, ed. by Russell A. Fraser and Norman Rabkin (New York: Macmillan, 1976), 2.7.27-29.

² Alexander Leggatt, "Tamburlaine's Sufferings," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 3 (1973): 33. Harold Bloom makes a similarly argues that "Macbeth terrifies us partly because that aspect of

human action, and in doing so he simultaneously achieves greatness and ceases to be human; his ambition is as familiar as it is frightening. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues, “through the body of the monster fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression in a clearly delimited and permanently liminal space.”³ However, since Tamburlaine does not look like a monster, he is both a more subtle and a more threatening monster. In seeing, and possibly cheering for, a human who becomes a monster in a quest to fulfill his ambitions, the audience must consider where the liminal space really exists: where does the manly valor and conquest turn into monstrous pillage? Like Videna and Hieronimo, Tamburlaine is driven by natural human desires, but in the violent fulfillment of those desires he crosses a line that places him outside of human society. So, despite his monstrous actions, there is something fascinating about a strong, charismatic character that makes us cheer his ambition as a recognizable human trait even as he pushes that trait beyond the acceptable bounds of human action. Tamburlaine demonstrates the dangers of allowing ambition to override reason and human sympathy; he is driven by ambition to the exclusion of almost all other human interaction or feeling, and he thus becomes a monster.

This potential for ambition to turn humans into self-serving monsters is why ambition, then as now, was often viewed with suspicion if not outright condemnation. While it would be insupportable to claim that ambition was universally considered a vice in the Renaissance, more often than not this was the case. As William King states, it was often “identified as one of the

our own imagination is so frightening; it seems to make us murderers, thieves, usurpers, and rapists”: Harold Bloom, “An Essay by Harold Bloom,” *Macbeth*, ed. Burton Raffel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 170.

³ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 17.

major causes of rebellion; and associated with Satan, madness, damnation, and sin.”⁴ The Renaissance thinkers, of course, were preceded by classical writers such as Cicero and Seneca who warned that ambition, while not necessarily bad, was something that needed to be kept in strict moderation. In a letter to his son, Cicero warns that although some ambition can be a good thing, “the great majority of people, however, when they fall prey to ambition for either military or civil authority, are carried away by it so completely that they quite lose sight of the claims of justice.”⁵ Cicero warns of the danger of ambition again when he writes that “the higher a man’s ambition, the more easily he is tempted to acts of injustice by his desire for fame.”⁶ Seneca too warns of the danger of ambition and how it, and other passions, are dangerous because they can be so easily hidden: “So with greed, ambition, and the other evils of the mind, you may be sure that they do most harm when they are hidden under a pretense of soundness.”⁷ Although, as King notes, ambition was also praised as a motivator for action and endeavor, there was often a hesitancy: ambition was good, but not too much and only for the right things.⁸

Renaissance philosophers, scientists, and artists then expanded on this idea that ambition can be both dangerous and hidden. Scientists such as Francis Bacon and Robert Burton specifically argued that excessive ambition was a disease of the mind that could threaten social structure. In 1601, Francis Bacon warned princes of the problems with employing ambitious men

⁴ William Casey King, *Ambition, a History: from Vice to Virtue* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 46. In this book, King gives an excellent overview of the complex history of how ambition was regarded by philosophers, theologians, scientists and artists in both the classical and early modern periods.

⁵ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Officiis*, ed. by T.E. Page and W.H.D. Rouse, trans. by Walter Miller (New York: MacMillian Company, 1912), 1.8.

⁶ Ibid., 1.19.

⁷ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Moral Epistles*, trans. by Richard M. Gummere (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1917), LVI.

⁸ King, *Ambition*, 12-44.

who will become frustrated and dangerous if they are not able to achieve everything that they want. He claimed:

ambition is like choler [...] So ambitious men, if they find the way open for their rising, and still get forward, they are rather busy than dangerous; but if they be checked in their desires, they become secretly discontent, and look upon men and matters with an evil eye, and are best pleased, when things go backward; which is the worst property in a servant of a prince, or state.⁹

For Bacon, ambitious men can be used, but they must be used carefully. Just as Tamburlaine is infuriated whenever a city resists conquest, and even moments before his death is imagining how much more he must conquer, Bacon's ambitious man looks upon those who hold him back with an "evil eye." In *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), Robert Burton warns his readers that ambition is a disease of the mind which will divide the mind against itself: "if wee labour of a bodily disease, we send for a physitian; but for the diseases of the minde, we take no notice of them: lust harroes us on the one side; envy, anger, ambition on the other: We are torne in peeces by our passions as so many wilde horses, one in disposition, another in habit, and one is melancholy, another mad, and which of us all seeks for helpe, or doth acknowledge his error, or know he is sicke?"¹⁰ Later he cautions his readers to resist "envy, lust, anger, avarice &c. and all those ferall vices and monsters of the minde,"¹¹ Just as Hieronimo and Videna were driven mad by their anger and desire for revenge, Tamburlaine risks madness, melancholy, and other mental and physical illness from giving in to ambition.¹² The mind is the basis of their human reason, so

⁹ Francis Bacon, "On Ambition," *The Selected Writing of Francis Bacon*, ed. by Hugh G. Dick (New York: Random House, 1955), 98.

¹⁰ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 36.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹² Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth* also exhibit both physical and mental illness as a result of their ambition driven actions.

if they allow themselves to be controlled by “monsters of the mind,” they themselves become monsters.

In addition to Burton’s usage and Marlowe’s Tamburlaine, other Renaissance poets also described ambition. In the 1606 poem *The Lamentation of Britain*, W. H. describes ambition as a monster that comes from men’s desire:

Inhumane monster, borne of Adam’s pride,
Eves wish, sinnes scourge, God’s wrath, heavens just ire,
Earths shame, hells sonne, bloods river, envies pride,
Natures defect, Deaths Queene, intestine fire,
Mens grave, Kings feare, worlds woe, mans first desire,
Ambition is th’ essential cause of ware,
Heavens bad prophet, murther blazing star.¹³

According to W.H., ambition is the cause of the world’s woe, and “Ambition is the root of every ill, / Whence discord (civil monster) doth arise.”¹⁴ Throughout the poem he returns repeatedly to the image of ambition as a monster that causes other monsters; it is unnatural and must be fought against. Slightly later, in the 1609 poem *Troia Brittanica*, Thomas Heywood uses images of monstrous consumption when describing ambition, even though he does not use the term “monster” itself. Heywood imagines ambition as a beast that drinks men’s blood and eats their bodies, describing how:

Oh blind Ambition and desire of Raigne
How camst thou by this rule in mortal breasts?
Who gave thee this dominion ore the braine?
Thou muredrest more, then plagues or fatall pests;
Thy drink Mans bloud, thy food dead bodies slaine.¹⁵

¹³ W. H., *The Lamentation of Britain* (London, 1606), ll. 799–805.

¹⁴ Ibid, 820-821.

¹⁵ Thomas Heywood, *Troia Brittanica; or, Great Brittaines Troy* (London, 1609), 2.11–15.

Here, ambition is not just a desire, but it is one that can rule the brain of man; if not watched against, it can rule where human reason should be dominant.

Tamburlaine is certainly a monster of ambition, and in his drive for conquest he commits increasingly brutal acts that separate him from the rest of humanity. However, Marlowe also connects Tamburlaine's monstrous ambition with a complicated look at religion: the monstrous Tamburlaine is not just a rampaging Eastern monster that the good Christians must defeat, as might have been expected in a late medieval romance, but instead Tamburlaine is a monstrous man against whom religion fails to offer relief. Marlowe uses Tamburlaine to depict a world in which man is neither beset nor helped by supernatural or religious forces, but rather man is responsible for his own actions and morality. In a play that features Christianity, Islam, and paganism, there is a remarkable lack of divine intervention. Although Tamburlaine frequently refers to himself as a "Scourge of God" and claims to be acting according to divine mandate, he refers to many different gods and is more frequently irreverent than pious. Furthermore, there is no clear distinction in morality or outcome for the Christian and Muslim characters; neither the Christian God, nor Allah, nor Jove seems particularly interested in interfering in the lives of men. The play therefore, as argued by Leila Watkins, "produce[s] skeptical interpretations of every religious order — and thus of religious justice as a concept."¹⁶ Instead of the expected outcome of an immoral or monstrous character meeting a bloody end (as Shakespeare depicts in *Macbeth*), Marlowe tells a different type of story in which there is little (or no) poetic justice, and the monster merely suffers an anticlimactic illness brought about by his own monstrous and choleric nature. In *Tamburlaine*, therefore, Marlowe depicts a world in which man's greatest

¹⁶ Leila Watkins, "Justice Is a Mirage: Failures of Religious Order in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* Plays," *Comparative Drama* 46, no. 2 (2012): 164.

danger is not from a ravening and horrible looking monster from afar, but rather the danger comes from man himself allowing his ambition to turn him monstrous, and just as there is no supernatural explanation for this monstrosity, there is no supernatural solution.

Unlike his predecessors Hieronimo and Videna, Tamburlaine is directly called a monster many times. Typically the term is used in relation to an act of brutality that Tamburlaine has committed in his ceaseless conquests, and it helps Tamburlaine's victims to separate themselves and humanity in general from his "inhuman" cruelty. One such example occurs when Tamburlaine lays siege to Memphis and demands that the Soldan of Egypt surrender. At first the Soldan is defiant saying that even if "Tamburlaine / [were] As monstrous as Gorgon prince of hell, / The Soldan would not start a foot from him."¹⁷ The Soldan is confident that Tamburlaine cannot be so dreadful and monstrous as people have claimed. However, after hearing of the brutal lengths to which Tamburlaine will go, the Soldan finally seeks out assistance from the King of Arabia against this "monster of five hundred thousand heads, / Compact of rapine, piracy, and spoil."¹⁸ But their late alliance is not enough to defeat Tamburlaine.

This identification of Tamburlaine as a monster only increases in Part II, just as the violence and spectacle of Tamburlaine's actions increase. When Tamburlaine's son Calyphas proves to be insufficiently martial and chooses to stay in his tent rather than join the battle, Tamburlaine is infuriated by his lack of "manly" ambition and kills him. This moment clearly demonstrates Tamburlaine's uncaring and brutal nature, but it also highlights the difference between definitions of what it means to be "manly." Tamburlaine does not want his soldiers to

¹⁷ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part I*, 4.1.17-19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.3.7-8.

“defile / [their] manly fingers with so faint a boy,”¹⁹ claiming that being violent, cruel, and ambitious (like the monstrous Tamburlaine) is the more “manly” way. However, Calyphas is not unwilling to act, but rather he is unwilling to act with indiscriminate violence, thus challenging his father’s idea of what it means to be a man. Before the battle, Calyphas declared “I know, [...] what it is to kill a man; / It works remorse of conscience in me; / I take no pleasure to be murderous, / Nor care for blood when wine will quench my thirst.”²⁰ Calyphas rejects his father’s idea of manhood, and instead he believes that manhood is not merely the willingness to engage in physical action but that one must also temper that urge with human reason; action is fine and admirable when it is necessary.²¹ Calyphas has killed before, but he takes no pleasure in it, unlike his monstrous father.²² Tamburlaine cannot stand the thought of his son not embracing his version of monstrous manhood, and (like Videna) demonstrates his own lack of humanity when he kills his son. The King of Jerusalem calls Tamburlaine a “damned monster”²³ in response to the crime. Furthermore, the King of Amasia later tells Bajazeth’s son Callapine that they will kill Tamburlaine, whom he calls “the monster that hath drunk a sea of blood, / And yet gapes for more still to quench his thirst,”²⁴ echoing Calyphas’ statement that he does not “care for blood when wine will quench his thirst.” Tamburlaine’s monstrous thirst for blood is clearly contrasted with his son’s more human desires.

¹⁹ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part II*, 4.1.165-166.

²⁰ Ibid., 4.1.27-30.

²¹ The Renaissance linking of martial action and manliness is discussed at length in Ian Frederick Moulton, “‘A Monster Great Deformed’: The Unruly Masculinity of Richard III,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1996).

²² Shakespeare will explore this tension between manliness and humanity in much greater length in *Macbeth*.

²³ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part II*, 4.2.171.

²⁴ Ibid., 5.2.13-14.

In addition to his brutality being tied to his monstrosity, many of the characters also marvel that Tamburlaine can be so fearsome and harbor such great ambitions when he was born a common man; in trying to understand Tamburlaine, they thus directly connect his ambition with his monstrosity. The other characters do not expect or understand how someone who was not born of a great family can defeat so many kings, and this is expressed most clearly by Cosroe, one of the earliest kings whom Tamburlaine defeats. After Cosroe allies with Tamburlaine to overthrow his own brother, he immediately begins to chafe at Tamburlaine's ambition to rule over those who have familial claims to greatness:

COSROE: What means this devilish shepherd to aspire
 With such a giantly presumption,
 To cast up hills against the face of heaven,
 And dare the force of angry Jupiter
 But as he thrust them underneath the hills,
 And pressed out fire from their burning jaws,
 So will I send this *monstrous* slave to hell,
 Where flames shall ever feed upon his soul.

MEANDER: Some powers divine, or else infernal, mixed
 Their angry seeds at his conception;
 For he was never sprung of human race,
 Since with the spirit of his fearful pride,
 He dares so doubtlessly resolve of rule,
 And by profession be ambitious.

ORTYGIUS: What god, or fiend or spirit of the earth,
 Or *monster turned to a manly shape*
 Or of what mold or mettle he be made,
 What star or fate soever govern him,
 Let us put on our meet encountering minds
 And in detesting such a devilish thief,
 In love of honor and defense of right,
 Be armed against the hate of such a foe,

Whether from earth, or hell, or heaven, he grow.²⁵

For Cosroe and his advisors, Tamburlaine is monstrous because his “giantly presumption” will not yield to the natural order, and he is willing to do anything to satisfy his “fearful pride.” They also interpret Tamburlaine’s successes in terms of supernatural assistance (“divine, or else infernal”) in order to explain how he has been able to defeat them all. To them, Tamburlaine must be a demon or monster, because he is ruled by ambition to the near exclusion of all other emotions, and he is willing to risk everything or do anything in order to achieve his ambition; to the other characters, this single-mindedness does not seem “of human race.”

However, as the characters note, while Tamburlaine acts like a ravaging monster who will consume all that is before him, he does not look like one. Instead he is a “monster turned to manly shape”²⁶ who exhibits all of the behavior and mentality of a monster while still possessing a human form; he looks manly and yet does not act human. This is even more interesting since Tamburlaine comes from the same Middle Eastern regions that provided the physically grotesque monsters of many medieval romances. As discussed in Chapter One, characters from medieval romances such as *The Sultan of Babylon* have a monstrous appearance that emphasizes the perceived villainy of the religion of Islam. For these characters their religion is tied to both their monstrosity of appearance and action; they form a stark contrast to their beautiful and noble Christian enemies. It would then seem that for Marlowe, it would be easy to quickly identify Tamburlaine as a Muslim in order to highlight his monstrosity. As Joel Slotkin claims, the association of Tamburlaine with Muslim regions, even if he does not follow the faith himself, paired with “his savage behavior, highlights his connections to the Renaissance stereotype of the

²⁵ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part I*, 2.6.1-23. Emphasis added.

²⁶ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part I*, 2.6.16.

raging Turk.”²⁷ Yet, Tamburlaine, despite his provenance, rarely self-identifies as a Muslim, and just as frequently mocks Mahomet and speaks of pagan deities. He may be from a Muslim region and behave like a monster, but he is neither faithful nor grotesque looking (or even described as dark skinned). In Tamburlaine, Marlowe thus creates a character who retains all the background and behavior of a foreign monster but looks undeniably human.

In one of the earliest scenes of the play Menaphon gives an extended description of Tamburlaine to Cosroe and marvels over how his appearance is not at all what they would expect from an upstart warlord who behaves so monstrously. He describes Tamburlaine as:

Of stature tall, and straightly fashionèd,
Like his desire to lift upwards and divine;
So large of limbs, his joints so strongly knit,
Such breadth of shoulders as might mainly bear
Old Atlas’ burthen; twixt his manly pitch,
[....]
Pale of complexion wrought in him with passion,
Thirsting with sovereignty and love of arms;
His lofty brows in folds do figure death,
And in their smoothness amity and life;
About them hangs a knot of amber hair,
Wrapped in curls, as fierce Achilles’ was,
On which the breath of heaven delights to play,
Making it dance with wanton majesty.
His arms and fingers, long, and snowy
Betokening valor and excess of strength —
In every part proportioned like the man
Should make the world subdued to Tamburlaine.²⁸

Tamburlaine looks like a warrior king, not like a monster. However, even within this description of Tamburlaine’s impressive appearance, there are hints that he is, if not monstrous, then at least fearsome: “His lofty brows in folds do figure death,” and he looks “fierce as Achilles,” a warrior

²⁷ Joel Elliot Slotkin, “‘Seeke out another Godhead’: Religious Epistemology and Representations of Islam in *Tamburlaine*,” *Modern Philology* 111, no. 3 (February 2014): 413.

²⁸ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part I*, 2.1.7-11, 19-30.

not known for his mercy. Tamburlaine's "manly" appearance threatens violence and promises greatness simultaneously. There is thus again a tension between manly action and monstrosity. Tamburlaine is not a monster because of his appearance or even his willingness to fight and kill; he is a monster because his ambition drives him past all human concerns, and he is willing to do anything to achieve his goals. His passions override his humanity.

Although Tamburlaine's human appearance does not fit his monstrous actions, he does understand the importance of spectacle and appearance in intimidating those he wishes to conquer and in redefining the existing social structure to accommodate his ambitions. While most medieval monsters were frightening because of their grotesque bodies, Tamburlaine is frightening because of his huge army and unwavering cruelty; Tamburlaine's own body does not need to be monstrous when he commands his loyal army, a "monster of five hundred thousand heads."²⁹ Furthermore, Tamburlaine recognizes the value of repeated, gruesome spectacle in order to strike fear in the hearts of those who would oppose him, so that his actions become a mocking version of the public executions that were used in the Renaissance to "teach through reiterated terror."³⁰ As Greenblatt argues, in the Renaissance legal system "each branding or hanging or disemboweling was theatrical in conception and performance, a repeatable admonitory drama enacted on a scaffold before a rapt audience. Those who threatened order, those on whose nature nurture could never stick — the traitor, the vagabond, the homosexual, the thief — were identified and punished accordingly."³¹ Tamburlaine takes this expectation of performative punishment and flips it on its head. The monster is not punished, but instead the

²⁹ Ibid., 4.3.7.

³⁰ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 201.

³¹ Ibid.

monster does the punishing. He performs his monstrosity, creating gruesome demonstrations of the lengths to which he is willing to go in order to achieve his goals, and as Mark Burnett argues “common to all of these scenes is the opening of the enemy, his degradation [...] and Tamburlaine’s consequent elevation.”³² Tamburlaine, the shepherd’s son who has become a monster full of “giantly presumption,” degrades and terrifies his enemies in order to elevate himself, and this elevation then challenges the entire social structure.

This social inversion can be seen early in Part I, when Tamburlaine defeats Bajazeth and Zabina. It is not enough for him to conquer them, but he enslaves and brutalizes them so that even “the majesty of heaven [will] behold / Their scourge and terror tread on emperors.”³³ He orders that Bajazeth be pulled around in a cage, and he delights in both withholding food from Bajazeth and suggesting unpleasant and eventually monstrous replacements if Bajazeth becomes too hungry. Tamburlaine tells his men that “[Bajazeth’s] wife, shalt feed him with the scraps”³⁴ from Tamburlaine’s table, and that anyone who augments Bajazeth’s meager fare will “sit by [Bajazeth] and starve to death himself.”³⁵ Later, when Bajazeth is half-starved, Tamburlaine suggests a more monstrous replacement for his food, telling Bajazeth that he should “pluck out” his own heart since it will feed both he and his wife.³⁶ At this point even Tamburlaine’s general Theridimas seems sympathetic to the captives and suggests that “if his highness would let them be fed, it / would do them more good,”³⁷ but Tamburlaine is unswayed. Instead Tamburlaine

³² Mark Thornton Burnett, “*Tamburlaine* and the Body,” *Criticism* 33, no. 2 (1991): 35.

³³ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine, Part I*, 4.2.31-32.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.2.87.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.2.90.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.4.13

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.4.34-35.

mockingly asks Bajazeth: “Are you so / daintily brought up, you cannot eat your own flesh?”³⁸

He even goes further and threatens that if Bajazeth doesn’t eat what he is offered from Tamburlaine’s plate, Tamburlaine will make him “slice the brawns of [his] arms into carbonadoes / and eat them.”³⁹ Tamburlaine’s other general, Usumcasane, then picks up the theme and suggests that Bajazeth should instead kill and eat his wife, since she would provide for a “month’s victual.”⁴⁰ Although it cannot be denied that there is a level of mockery in Tamburlaine’s words, he also clearly derives enjoyment from suggesting the monstrous act of cannibalism.⁴¹

These threats to Bajazeth and his wife once again reveal the extents to which Tamburlaine is willing to go because of his ambition. It is not enough for Tamburlaine to conquer the Kings of the east, but he wants the public recognition of his power and display of their submission. Tamburlaine even acknowledges this when he describes why Bajazeth will be drawn before him in a cage:

Not all the kings and emperors of the earth
If they would lay their crowns before my feet,
Shall ransom him, or take him from this cage.
That ages shall talk of Tamburlaine,
Even from this day to Plato’s wondrous year,
Shall talk how I have handled Bajazeth.⁴²

The treatment of Bajazeth announces to the world that Tamburlaine is a powerful king who should be feared. Tamburlaine will never free Bajazeth because he is too important of a

³⁸ Ibid., 4.4.36-37.

³⁹ Ibid., 4.4.45-46

⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.4.49.

⁴¹ For more on monstrous food and eating habits see John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

⁴² Ibid., 4.2.92-97.

propaganda tool, and Tamburlaine repeats this propaganda when he harnesses the Turkish Kings and makes them draw his chariot in Part II. This dehumanization and display of his captives serves to highlight his power. Tamburlaine is able to turn social structures upside down so that kings are treated as beasts while Tamburlaine is elevated.

However, his desire to show his greatness and punish those who would dare to oppose him goes further than just degrading kings. Tamburlaine not only wants cities to surrender to him, but he demands that they do it quickly, or else he will kill everyone inside. This brutality also demonstrates Tamburlaine's disregard for human life and his willingness to sacrifice innocent citizens in order to expedite his conquests. Immediately following Tamburlaine's declaration that he will never release Bajazeth, comes Tamburlaine's description of his policy of only giving cities three days to surrender (marked by his cycle of white, red, and black tents and flags). This is then displayed in all of its cruelty when Tamburlaine executes the virgins sent out to negotiate for Damascus. The Governor of Damascus even acknowledges that Tamburlaine makes his threats in order to display his power, saying: "I fear the custom, proper to his sword, / Which he observes as parcel of his frame, / Intending so to terrify the world, / By any innovation or remorse / Will never be dispensed with till our deaths."⁴³ Tamburlaine's "custom" is as binding and formidable as any law. Despite the virgins' innocence and pleas, Tamburlaine cannot be bargained with and by his own admission "now [...] fury and incensed hate / Flings slaughtering terror from his coal black tents,"⁴⁴ and his "customs are as peremptory / As wrathful planets, death, and destiny."⁴⁵ He is driven by both his need to inspire fear and by his fury. He is

⁴³ Ibid., 5.1.13-17.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 5.1.72-73.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 5.1.127-128.

therefore unwilling to deviate from his monstrous custom; he kills the virgins and displays their bodies as a preface to what he will do to the rest of the town.

As with the display of captive kings, Tamburlaine's display of innocent victims is also repeated in Part II. When Tamburlaine conquers Babylon, it is not enough to "hang [the governor] in chains upon the city wall" and have his soldiers publicly execute him⁴⁶ (at which point the Governor declares Tamburlaine to be a "vile monster! born of some infernal hag")⁴⁷, but Tamburlaine also orders that every man, woman, and child in the city be tied up and drowned in Asphaltis' lake.⁴⁸ Techelles returns to report that Tamburlaine's gruesome orders have been carried out:

Thousands of men, drowned in Asphaltis' lake,
Have made the waters swell above the banks,
And fishes, fed by human carcasses,
Amazed, swim up and down upon the waves,
As when they swallow assafoetida,
Which makes them fleet aloft and gasp for air.⁴⁹

While Meg Pearson claims that Tamburlaine has faced increasingly recalcitrant spectators, and this moment in which Tamburlaine kills the governor, drowns the citizens, and calls for the Koran to be burnt, demonstrates that Tamburlaine's spectacles have become "meaningless, even to him,"⁵⁰ I argue that this moment actually shows a crescendo of Tamburlaine's monstrous power and spectacle. While the virgins of Egypt were executed off stage, the governor is executed gruesomely onstage and the description of the men, women, and children being

⁴⁶ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part II*, 5.1.108.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 5.1.110.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 5.1.168.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 5.1.202-208.

⁵⁰ Meg Pearson, "'Raving, Impatient, Desperate, and Mad': *Tamburlaine's* Spectacular Collapse," *Marlowe Studies: An Annual* 2 (2012): 100.

drowned is more detailed than any other description of death thus far. The idea that a lake's banks have swelled with dead bodies and the fish are so gorged on corpses that they float to the surface is truly monstrous to imagine. This moment also comes after both Zenocrate's death (representing the severing of Tamburlaine's last tie to humanity) and after Tamburlaine's murder of his own son Calyphas on stage in Act 4, so the violence of the play and Tamburlaine's rages are becoming greater and more terrifying.

While the other characters clearly view Tamburlaine's displays as evidence of his unnatural passions, Tamburlaine himself argues that he is simply acting according to his own nature. Tamburlaine believes that it is only weakness that prevents other men from following their ambition and seizing power, but the other characters believe that the natural order and kindness that Tamburlaine disdains are part of natural human reason and society. This focus on monstrosity being a form of unnatural human behavior occurs within the first scene of Part I; however, "monster" is not used to describe Tamburlaine, but rather Mycetes, the King of Persia, describes his brother Cosroe as a "monster of nature" for not showing him the proper amount of respect and coveting Mycetes' crown.⁵¹ Mycetes believes that there is something unnatural or monstrous about a younger brother who does not understand his place, but instead has the ambition to overthrow his elder brother. Cosroe, however, believes that he should be able to overthrow his brother, whom he views as weak, and ironically he commits the same crime for which he is later so furious at Tamburlaine. When social order is only based on who is strongest and most willing to act, no one is ever safe.

⁵¹ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part I*, 1.1.104.

While Mycetes calls Cosroe a “monster of nature,” implying that his ambitions are a perversion of nature, Tamburlaine argues that his ambition is actually a part of his nature when he explains why he has not only defeated Mycetes but will also be turning against Cosroe. He argues that “Nature that framed us of four elements, / Warring within our breasts for regiment, / Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds.”⁵² Tamburlaine justifies his desire for an “earthly crown” by claiming that all men really want the same thing; he is acting according to his natural instinct. Alan Shepard argues that

the self-elected scourge of God asserts that the actions of the mind are inescapably grounded in the mechanisms of the body. And that pedagogic “Nature” — by which Tamburlaine surely means the antithesis of civilization — teaches him to pre-empt the civil desires of communities, such as the legal acquisition of property. Nature emancipates him from the obligation to express in civilized ways ambition he considers innate.⁵³

Tamburlaine is not interested in man’s natural reason, but instead he looks to wild Nature, its opposite; Nature made man to be ambitious, so it is natural for man to follow that instinct. Since nature inspires humans to have “aspiring minds,” Tamburlaine views his own actions as natural, and thus not being violent and ambitious is unnatural. A man who will not fight, like Calyphas, is unnatural and unmanned. Tamburlaine disregards the other sense of man’s nature: man’s ability to reason, the faculty that sets man above the animals. As Browne warns, Tamburlaine “naturally pursue[s] what is evil”⁵⁴ rather than following the other part of his nature (his reason) that would inhibit these monstrous excesses of ambition. It is natural for man to have ambition, but it is not natural for him to allow that passion to override the natural reason that makes him truly human.

⁵² Ibid., 2.7.18-20.

⁵³ Alan Shepard, “Endless Sacks: Soldiers’ Desire in Tamburlaine,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 46, no. 4 (1993): 736.

⁵⁴ Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici*, 55.

Tamburlaine's ambition and ensuing monstrosity are a natural part of his being not tempered by human reason. Thus, while Tamburlaine may look human, he is not using his human reason; his ambition causes him to reject human nature in favor of monstrosity, leading Cosroe to describe Tamburlaine and his followers as "the strangest men that ever nature made."⁵⁵

Additionally, Tamburlaine and the other characters connect Tamburlaine's nature and ambition to his destiny. Cosroe, after hearing about Tamburlaine's appearance exclaims that "Nature doth strive with fortune and his stars / To make him famous in accomplished worth,"⁵⁶ and Meander claims that Tamburlaine was created by "some powers divine, or else infernal."⁵⁷ Furthermore, like Macbeth, Tamburlaine is apparently inspired toward his ambition by a prophecy. In the play's first scene Meander notes that Tamburlaine "Daily commits incivil outrages, / Hoping (misled by dreaming prophecies) / to reign in Asia, and with barbarous arms / To make himself the monarch of the East."⁵⁸ Later Tamburlaine himself claims that "fates and oracles [of] heaven have sworn / To royalize the deeds of Tamburlaine."⁵⁹ This, of course, brings up questions of agency and free will, but regardless of whether or not Tamburlaine is destined for greatness, his ambition and desire to achieve greatness lead him to commit monstrous acts. Tamburlaine, however, only mentions "the fates and oracles" once, indicating that a belief in prophecy is more of another convenient piece of propaganda rather than what he is really basing his actions on.

⁵⁵ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part I*, 2.7.40.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 2.1.33-34.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 2.6.9.

⁵⁸ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part I*, 1.1.40-43.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 2.3.7-8.

Although Tamburlaine does not mention the oracles very frequently, he does refer to himself as a “scourge of God” many times,⁶⁰ and he is also referred to by others as a scourge,⁶¹ creating the questions of whether or not a monster can work for a divine purpose, and whether or not Tamburlaine actually believes that he is a scourge for any particular God, or if this is just another crafty piece of rhetoric to frighten his enemies. Furthermore, if Tamburlaine really is a “scourge of God,” then his displays of violence and social upheaval are actually displays of divine justice. Roy Battenhouse claims that the term “scourge of God” is “no mere phrase that happened to catch the playwright’s fancy; it is a definitive concept,”⁶² whereby God uses a sinful person to punish other sinners:

The concept of the ‘Scourge of God’ has, therefore, two complementary aspects: it serves to explain historical calamities by showing that they are chastisements of sin permitted by God; and it assures tyrants that God is not helpless before their power but that he will, when he has used them, destroy them utterly.⁶³

This makes a great deal of sense because Tamburlaine does kill numerous corrupt kings, particularly many Muslim or non-Christian kings, and Tamburlaine does die at the end of Part II, struck down by a mysterious malady. At least in these ways, he does fulfill the pattern for a scourge.

Furthermore, a monster could certainly act as a scourge, since monsters were usually viewed as a purposeful deviation from nature according to God’s will. However, Tamburlaine, as the new type of monstrous man, does not fit cleanly into the categories of monstrosity discussed by medieval theologians, who usually broke monsters into the categories of monstrous

⁶⁰ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part I*, 3.3.44 and 4.2.32; Part 2, 2.4.80, 4.1.151, 4.1.156, 4.3.24, 4.3.99, 5.1.183, 5.3.249.

⁶¹ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part I*, 4.3.9 and Part 2, 3.5.21.

⁶² Roy Battenhouse, “Tamburlaine, The ‘Scourge of God’,” *PMLA* 56, no. 2 (1941): 337.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 342.

individuals (defined by their horrible appearance at birth) or monstrous races. Tamburlaine can most closely be categorized with the monstrous individual since even though he does not look monstrous, he certainly behaves in monstrous ways.⁶⁴ There is not a whole race of Tamburlaines, although Tamburlaine is very concerned with passing on his warlike temperament to his sons, whom he tells to “scourge and control those slaves.”⁶⁵ Instead, Tamburlaine’s monstrosity demonstrates the potential for individuals to be or become monsters even when they do not look like one at birth. Viewing Tamburlaine as a monstrous individual then affects how he might have been perceived in relation to the Christian God. While theologians such as St. Augustine typically agreed that marvelous species were surely a sign of the wonder and diversity of God’s creation, the monstrous individual was somewhat more problematic. Daston and Parks explain the changing view of the difference between monstrous species and monstrous individuals:

This distinction rested on the view of nature that treated it no longer as immediately reflecting divine command — the Augustinian position — but as possessed of an independent internal order located in the chains of causes that produced particular phenomena. God had created the physical universe and the casual principles that moved it [...] He retained the prerogative to suspend that order at any moment, producing miracles and other supernatural events.⁶⁶

As a monster, Tamburlaine can be read as a purposeful deviation by God so that Tamburlaine’s nature is more ambitious and martial, allowing him to conquer and punish the unfaithful. If we follow this reading, Tamburlaine is naturally monstrous because God created him in order to punish the sinners around him.

⁶⁴ Although, the fact that he is human also has broader implications for the potential of humans themselves to be a monstrous race when they do not follow their higher faculties.

⁶⁵ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part II*, 5.3.229. This moment also parallels Caliban’s later desire to reproduce himself and people “the isle with Calibans” (1.2.354).

⁶⁶ Lorraine Daston and Katherine Parks, *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (New York: Zone Books, 2001), 49.

Despite these points, the argument that Tamburlaine is a scourge created by the (Christian) God does not entirely work within the world that Marlowe has created. There are three religions depicted within the play, and no matter what atrocities Tamburlaine commits, none of the gods answer the prayers of any of the followers, whether they are faithful or not. As Leila Watkins argues, “all three religions’ failures to enforce divine justice produce resounding doubts in God’s or the gods’ power.”⁶⁷ So, while Tamburlaine may call himself a scourge, the conflicting religions and lack of a clearly superior religion in the play instead reinforce the idea that Tamburlaine is a monster because he has allowed his crueler and more choleric nature to override his human reason, not because he has been created and sent by God/the gods to punish sinners. Instead, Tamburlaine depicts both the threat of monstrosity within man’s own self and how allowing human divisions of religion and ambition provide an opportunity for a monster like Tamburlaine to take over. Rather than fighting Tamburlaine, the other kings allow familial and religious infighting to divide them, while they wait for some sort of divine intervention that never arrives. Tamburlaine, whose own faith is uncertain at best, claims that he is a “scourge of God” because it fits with his own sense of destiny and because it contributes to the pageantry of his conquests; just as he understands the power of violent spectacle, claiming that he is a “scourge of God” contributes to his fearsomeness. Despite his frequent religious references, Tamburlaine is not faithful to any particular religion; he frequently refers to Jove, and he occasionally refers to Mahomet (and once he even swears on him), but he also uses religious invocations to curse or mock the power of God/the gods. As Mark Hutchings claims, by Part II Tamburlaine uses the term so irreverently that he might either be saying that he is the “scourge

⁶⁷ Watkins, “Justice *Is* a Mirage,” 165.

of God — God’s servant to punish others — or — blasphemously — the scourge of God himself.”⁶⁸ Tamburlaine’s lack of faith does not preclude him from being a “scourge of God.” However, the lack of a clear divine presence in the play makes it more likely that this title is part of Tamburlaine’s own public image and monstrosity rather than an indication that he is acting according to divine mandate. Therefore, examining the play’s complex depictions of religion can provide a deeper understanding of Tamburlaine’s role as a monster.

Although Tamburlaine is from Muslim regions, his own references to religion are infrequent. He only refers to his Muslim faith once, and that does not occur until Part II when he says that he has “sworn by sacred Mahomet / To make [Natolia] parcel of [his] empery.”⁶⁹ While this seems to be a clear statement of faith, his other references to religion are infrequent, and as Joel Elliot Slotkin argues, “this is in stark contrast to his enemies, who regularly swear by Mahomet,”⁷⁰ thus drawing attention to Tamburlaine’s lack of Islamic faith. Not only does he not frequently swear by Mahomet, but he becomes increasingly hostile and mocking toward both Christianity and Islam. Furthermore, while Tamburlaine may act as a scourge by punishing the wicked kings of the East, he does not act in the name of the Christian God or cause anyone to convert or even repent. Instead, he actually causes Bajazeth and Zabina to lose their faith altogether when their prayers for rescue go unanswered. When Bajazeth first encounters Tamburlaine, he still swears on Mahomet reverently and asks for his aid. Even after he loses his battle, Bajazeth prays to Mahomet, asking the “holy priests of heavenly Mahomet” to “suck up

⁶⁸ Mark Hutchings, “Marlowe’s ‘Scourge of God,’” *Notes and Queries* 51 (2004): 246.

⁶⁹ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part II*, 1.3.109-110.

⁷⁰ Joel Eliot Slotkin, “‘Seeke out another Godhead’: Religious Epistemology and Representations of Islam in *Tamburlaine*,” 415.

poison from the moorish fens, / And pour it in this glorious tyrant's throat."⁷¹ Tamburlaine responds to these pleas by declaring that "The chiefest God, first mover of that sphere" will never "conspire [his] overthrow,"⁷² which may be a comment that God would not want to overthrow him or that God cannot overthrow him. Furthermore, the term "chiefest God" is ambiguous and may refer to either the Christian God or the Islamic one.⁷³ While a period audience may have interpreted Tamburlaine's call to a "chiefest God" as a Christian reference, Tamburlaine's characteristic vagueness may actually imply that Tamburlaine is referencing whatever God keeps him in power.

As Tamburlaine continues to torment and starve Bajazeth and Zabina, they eventually lose both their faith and their will to live, with Zabina declaring that "there [is] left no Mahomet, no God, / No fiend, no fortune, nor no hope of end / To our infamous monstrous slaveries."⁷⁴ They have suffered so much under Tamburlaine, that Zabina not only loses her faith in Mahomet, but she loses her faith that there is any divine presence who would allow them to suffer at the hands of the monstrous Tamburlaine. Driven to despair, she and Bajazeth both kill themselves. Slotkin claims that in this scene Marlowe "appears to present their loss of faith more as a sign of abjection than as a model for imitation [...] they do not articulate a coherent theological position."⁷⁵ They are certainly abject at this point, but I argue that this scene also demonstrates the failure of faith or any God (note that Zabina rejects all gods) to offer relief. The scene does not offer a "coherent theological position" in the sense that it does not offer one

⁷¹ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part I*, 4.2.1,5-6.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 4.2.8,11.

⁷³ While the Christian God and the Islamic God are technically the same, a period audience would not have viewed them in that way.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.1.239-241.

⁷⁵ Slotkin, "'Seeke out another Godhead'," 418.

religion as superior to the others, but it does present the idea that maybe no religion can help at all.⁷⁶

The play does not simply show the ability of Tamburlaine to cause despair and a lack of faith; it also demonstrates that man is his own greatest threat, both in his potential monstrosity and in the belief that religion or divine intervention will protect him. Tamburlaine does not distinguish between Muslim and Christian regions when he makes plans to conquer, proclaiming that

Those wallèd garrisons will I subdue,
And write myself great Lord of Africa.
So from the East unto the furthest West
Shall Tamburlaine extend his puissant arm.
[....]
Even from Persepolis to Mexico,
And thence unto the straits of Jubaltèr;
[....]
Keeping in awe the Bay of Portingale,
And all the ocean by the British shore;
And by this means I'll win the world at last.⁷⁷

Tamburlaine's ambition is not just to conquer or punish the Muslim kings, but he wants to conquer the entire world regardless of their religious or political affiliation. While one might expect a play with a scourge character to punish Muslim or pagan characters exclusively, Tamburlaine does intend to attack Christians, and it is only the Christians' own treachery that destroys them before Tamburlaine can do it. There is no distinction in result between faithful and

⁷⁶ Although there have been several readings of the play as reaffirming Christian beliefs such as Roy Battenhouse's *Marlowe's Tamburlaine: A Study in Renaissance Moral Philosophy* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1964) and Jeff Dailey's "Christian Underscoring in *Tamburlaine the Great, Part II*," *Journal of Religion and Theatre* 4 (2005), several scholars have read the play as rejecting religious order such as Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* and Watkins' "Justice Is a Mirage: Failures of Religious Order in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine Plays*."

⁷⁷ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine*, 3.3.244-247, 255-256, 258-260.

unfaithful characters, or a distinction between those of the “right” or “wrong” religion. The Soldan is a good and faithful Muslim, but he is spared because of his daughter Zenocrate’s entreaties, not divine intervention. Other Muslims, both faithful and faithless, are conquered and killed, as are Christians.

The idea that religion does not offer solace or assistance against a monstrous threat is most clearly shown in Part II when Marlowe brings together a Muslim king and a Christian king in a potential alliance. Orcanes, the King of Natolia, attempts to make an alliance with Sigismund, the King of Hungary, in order to stand against Tamburlaine, who threatens them both. However, rather than showing the Christians as superior, it is the Muslim rulers who behave more honorably. Orcanes suggests an alliance with Sigismund so that they can stand against Tamburlaine’s army together. His subject kings and lords all agree that their religious differences must be put aside since they “have a greater foe to fight against,”⁷⁸ even though it is clear that they have held the military advantage over the Christian kings for some time. When Sigismund arrives, things are immediately tense, with Sigismund demanding to know whether Orcanes will have “peace or deadly war,”⁷⁹ and then there is some brief argument about which king actually holds the advantage. Finally Gazellus, another Muslim king, steps in to remind Orcanes and Sigismund that they are there to talk not to fight: “We came from Turkey to confirm a league, / And not to dare each other to the field. / A friendly parley might become you both.”⁸⁰ Then another Christian king responds by arguing that they are there for the same reason, but he

⁷⁸ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part II*, 1.1.15.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 1.1.80.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 1.1.115-117.

cannot resist again reminding the Muslim kings that they are ready to fight.⁸¹ This posturing back and forth, and in particular the aggressiveness of the Christians, clearly makes the Muslim kings come across as more rational and less mercurial than their Christian counterparts. Despite this rocky start to their alliance, Sigismund does eventually agree to help Orcanes fight Tamburlaine. Orcanes then swears by “sacred Mahomet,”⁸² and Sigismund swears by “Sweet Jesus Christ,”⁸³ and the pact is sealed. While this treaty makes sense because the two rulers are of different faiths, as Watkins argues:

Even if both parties were to keep their sides of the bargain, such an exchange comes perilously close to suggesting the relative nature of religious devotion — that is, the truce implies that different groups of people have different religious convictions but that all symbolic orders fulfill similar social functions as guarantors of human morality.⁸⁴

Religious oaths are only as good as the men who make them; they are merely symbolic of human social contracts, not divine mandate.

If both rulers had upheld the agreement, the monstrous Tamburlaine could perhaps have been defeated at this point. But instead of having the Muslim king betray the Christians, as might have been expected by a period audience, it is the Christian king who goes back on his word. Baldwin tells Sigismund that they “are not bound to those accomplishments” to honor a pact made with “such infidels / In whom no faith nor true religion rests.”⁸⁵ Then Frederick continues by saying that since Orcanes has killed so many Christians in previous battles, God’s anger will

⁸¹ Ibid., 1.1.118-121.

⁸² Ibid., 1.1.137.

⁸³ Ibid., 1.1.135.

⁸⁴ Watkins, “Justice *Is* a Mirage,” 179.

⁸⁵ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part II*, 2.1.35,33-34.

“be poured with rigor on [their] sinful heads, / If [they] neglect this offered victory.”⁸⁶ Sigismund eventually agrees that their religion obliges them to betray the Muslim kings; however, rather than the Christian God helping Sigismund to victory, the betrayal is immediately costly for Sigismund, and he quickly loses to Orcanes. Sigismund even realizes that he has acted in bad faith, when he laments that “God hath thundered vengeance from on high, / For my accursed and hateful perjury.”⁸⁷ Orcanes, for whom the vow to Mohammed was binding, also seeks divine retribution for Sigismund’s treachery, and he even calls on Christ to help him to avenge this perjury: “On Christ still let us cry! / If there be Christ, we shall have victory.”⁸⁸ Orcanes cannot understand how Sigismund can treat his vow so lightly.

Sigismund’s defeat can be seen as Orcanes acting as a scourge of God, punishing Sigismund for his treachery, and Orcanes’ defeat by Tamburlaine can also be read as Tamburlaine acting as a scourge to defeat another Muslim king, but these battles may instead demonstrate the complete lack of divine intervention. Sigismund was convinced to betray Orcanes’ trust on the argument that they are not bound to an agreement with Muslims, and that they must not “lose the opportunity / That God hath given to avenge our Christians’ death, / And scourge their foul blasphemous paganism.”⁸⁹ As Watkins points out:

Frederick’s use of the word ‘scourge’ subtly recalls Tamburlaine’s title as the ‘scourge of God,’ a designation repeatedly used to justify his acts of cruelty and conquest. To a discerning spectator who picked up this echo, the stage might have seemed to be suddenly overrun by multiple characters claiming to be the scourge of God in order to gain land or revenge or political power. How is one to discern

⁸⁶ Ibid., 2.1.58-59.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 2.3.2-3.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 2.2.63-64.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 2.1.51-53.

when a person is a legitimate instrument of God to scourge the wicked or when he adopts the title as a convenient excuse for pursuing his own agenda?⁹⁰

The term “scourge” then can be applied to anyone who is victorious and able to claim that God or the gods were on their side after the fact. Orcanes claims that God helped him to punish Sigismund, just as Sigismund would have claimed the same had he won. Tamburlaine also claims that he is divinely guided to his victories, but as Gazellus points out, the result of the battle “’Tis but the fortune of wars”⁹¹ rather than a clearly divine intervention.

Religion and claims that one is the “scourge of God” therefore read more like propaganda in this play than a claim to legitimate divine intervention. It allows characters to justify their actions and to convince others to join their side, but any actual heavenly influence is lacking. For Tamburlaine, who is so concerned with spectacle and the creation of fear, the repeated claim that he is the “scourge of God,” despite the apparent lack of his own religion makes sense. Tamburlaine, whose monstrosity is related to his own monstrous ambition, can create an even more horrible and powerful aspect for himself by claiming that he is acting according to the mandate of God. He even acknowledges that this is a term that people call him, and that he fits his actions to the horrible things that they expect of him:

Villains! These terrors and these tyrannies
 (If tyrannies wars’ justice ye repute)
 I execute, enjoined me from above,
 To scourge the pride as such as heaven abhors
 Nor am I made arch-monarch of the world,
 Crowned and invested by the hand of Jove
 For deeds of bounty or nobility;
 But since I exercise a greater name,
 The scourge of God, and terror of the world,
 I must apply myself to fit those terms,

⁹⁰ Watkins, “Justice *Is* a Mirage,” 180.

⁹¹ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part II*, 2.3.31.

In war, in blood, in death, in cruelty,
And plague such peasants as resist in me,
The power of heaven's eternal majesty.⁹²

He does claim that he is working according to "heaven's eternal majesty," but as with many of Tamburlaine's religious references, he is vague as to what heaven he is speaking of, and the deity whom he directly references is Jove. Tamburlaine, therefore, acknowledges that what he calls "war's justice" is called "tyrannies" by others, and he also acknowledges that he is not a scourge or king because of "deeds of bounty and nobility." Terminology is important, but it is assigned not by God but by the men who win the battles. Watkins also argues that Tamburlaine "inhabits his received title as 'the scourge of God' not because it is accurate, but because it makes sense to others. Thus, the audience is led to wonder if Jove in any way contributes to Tamburlaine's power or if the god merely serves as a convenient concept for the tyrant to manipulate further those who believe in a world controlled by a deity."⁹³ Tamburlaine knows that his power comes from fear and acts of terrible violence, and he moves freely between identifying Jove or a nameless God as the source of his power because the deity does not matter; Tamburlaine's primary concern is creating the frightening and powerful image of himself, which apparently works since the King of Jerusalem responds by calling him a "damned monster."⁹⁴

Although Tamburlaine references himself as the "scourge of God" many times in the play, by the end of the play Tamburlaine, now confident in his great power, ceases any display of reverence and instead mocks Mahomet openly. Tamburlaine worships only his own monstrous ambition and power; ambition has replaced God and faith for him. Furthermore, when

⁹² Ibid., 4.1.148-159.

⁹³ Watkins, "Justice *Is* a Mirage," 169.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 4.1.171

Tamburlaine taunts Mahomet, it is not clear that he is presenting the Christian God as his alternate. He proclaims:

In vain, I see, men worship Mahomet:
My sword hath sent millions of Turks to hell,
Slain all his priests, his kinsmen, and his friends,
And yet I live untouched by Mahomet.
There is a God, full of revenging wrath,
From whom the thunder and the lightning breaks,
Whose scourge I am, and Him will I obey.⁹⁵

Tamburlaine might have sworn by Mahomet in the beginning of Part II, but after seeing how many faithful Muslim kings have fallen to his armies, he realizes that Mahomet does not answer their prayers. However, Tamburlaine does not put forward a distinctly Christian God as an alternative. Instead, he acknowledges a God “full of vengeful wrath” whose scourge he is. This might be a Christian God, but it might not. Later in his speech Tamburlaine again declares that Mahomet is powerless:

Well, soldiers, Mahomet remains in hell;
He cannot hear the voice of Tamburlaine;
Seek out another Godhead to adore,
The God that sits in heaven, if any God;
For he is God alone, and none but he.⁹⁶

Tamburlaine here acknowledges that there may be a god in heaven, but the only thing that he is sure of is that “if any God” is there, it’s not Mahomet. As Slotkin points out, this can be read as a call for Protestant monotheism since the “contrast between a transcendent deity dwelling in heaven and a false idol would be compatible with Protestant rhetoric”; however, “the speech, like the *Tamburlaine* plays more broadly, wavers between reproducing standard anti-Islamic myths — specifically accusing Muslims of worshipping Mahomet as a false idol — and, more

⁹⁵ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part II*, 5.1.177-183.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.1.196-200.

accurately, acknowledging that Islam shares Christianity's monotheism and distinguishes between God and Prophet (5.1.194)."⁹⁷ Tamburlaine's belief, if he has any, is non-specific at best. However, at this moment when Tamburlaine has renounced Mahomet, and he even has "all the heaps of superstitious books / Found in the temples of Mahomet"⁹⁸ burnt, he is suddenly stricken with a mortal illness.

Tamburlaine's sudden illness has caused a great deal of debate among scholars, and is typically viewed as leaving open two possible interpretations: the Christian God strikes Tamburlaine down now that his time as a scourge is complete, or Marlowe boldly empowers Mahomet to take his own vengeance counter to prevailing Christian thought. The problem with either of the interpretations of the ending as a Christian God striking down Tamburlaine is first that Tamburlaine has just blasphemed Mahomet, and second, is that, as Watkins claims:

even if this 'true God' is in fact the Christian God, the play confirms a version of Tamburlaine — his carefully tended sickbed experience is hardly comparable to the deaths he inflicts on others throughout the play. Or worse still — if Tamburlaine really *is* the 'true God's' representative, his life then illustrates the essential cruelty of God's nature.⁹⁹

Aside from the danger of including an ending that promotes Islam, the idea that Mahomet is meant to strike down Tamburlaine doesn't work any better than the Christian reading since it involves inserting a suddenly active Godhead into a play which has spent a great deal of time demonstrating the lack of divine intervention in man's affairs. Furthermore, not only does Tamburlaine have a relatively easy death, but his empire is left intact, and there is every indication that his two remaining sons, whom he has trained to be equally monstrous, will

⁹⁷ Slotkin, "'Seeke out another Godhead'," 430.

⁹⁸ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part II*, 5.1.172-3.

⁹⁹ Watkins, "Justice *Is* a Mirage," 176-177.

continue to rule after his death. There is no just punishment for Tamburlaine or end to his monstrous lineage or tyranny but instead a peaceful succession.

There is, however, another possible way to interpret these final scenes. As noted before, Tamburlaine is a monster because his ambitious nature makes him choleric and violent, and his violence and displays of cruelty become greater and greater across the course of the two plays. Furthermore, the idea that Tamburlaine is being punished for his sins is difficult to argue, considering how many horrible deeds he committed without any divine retribution. As Greenblatt argues:

The slaughter of thousands, the murder of his own son, the torture of his royal captives are all without apparent consequence; then Tamburlaine falls ill, and when? When he burns the Koran! The one action which Elizabethan churchmen themselves might have applauded seems to bring down divine vengeance. The effect is not to celebrate the transcendent power of Mohammed but to challenge the habit of mind that looks to heaven for rewards and punishments, that imagines human evil as the “scourge of God.”¹⁰⁰

At the very moment when Tamburlaine commits an action that an Elizabethan audience might have approved of, he is struck down. Tamburlaine is not punished in the visible and theatrical way that an angry God should punish a blasphemous scourge, but instead he simply becomes ill. Based on these claims, I argue that Tamburlaine’s death not only fails to confirm divine action and rejects the idea that man should “look to heaven for rewards and punishments,” but it also shifts the responsibility for order, punishment, and monstrosity back to man himself. The other kings might have defeated Tamburlaine if they had been able to put aside their religious and power squabbles long enough to unify against him. When this human action fails to defeat Tamburlaine, it is not God who strikes Tamburlaine down, but Tamburlaine’s own choleric and

¹⁰⁰ Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 202.

monstrous nature finally overwhelms him. There is no divine retribution. Instead, Tamburlaine has allowed his nature to overrun his reason, and while that made him a dangerous monster for a time, it also causes dangerous physical ailments.

The idea that man could make himself fatally ill by allowing his passions (such as ambition and anger) to overrun his human reason was actually quite common in this period. Burton writes that “if we give reines to Lust, Anger, Ambition, Pride, and follow our owne wayes, wee degenerate into beasts, transforme our selves, overthrow our constitutions, provoke God to anger, and heape upon us this of *Melancholy*, and all manner of incurable diseases.”¹⁰¹ Thomas Wright also warns about the physical danger of allowing passions to run wild claiming that “there be three properties consequent to inordinate passions: blindenesse of understanding, perversion of will, alteration of humours, and by them maladies and diseases.”¹⁰² King notes that in this period, “the passions, like the plague, were linked or likened to humoral imbalance, corrupted air, and sin. Ambition, in fact, was called a ‘plague,’ a ‘choler,’ a ‘canker on the soul,’ like the cankers on the bodies that wasted with ubiquity.”¹⁰³ If passions can cause a man to become a monster by “stipend metamorphoses”¹⁰⁴ and passions can also cause illness, it stands to reason that the monstrous men and women whose passions are already running wild might also become ill or even die.¹⁰⁵ Tamburlaine is not afflicted by a specific disease, but rather he

¹⁰¹ Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Partition 1, Section 1.

¹⁰² Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Mind in Generall* (London, 1601), 86, *Early English Books Online*.

¹⁰³ King, *Ambition*, 96.

¹⁰⁴ Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Partition 1, Section 1.

¹⁰⁵ For a more detailed look at many of the medieval and Renaissance treatises on passions and illness related to *Tamburlaine*, see Johnstone Parr, “Tamburlaine’s Malady,” *PMLA* 59, no. 3 (1944).

falls victim to his own monstrosity; the very choleric and ambitious nature that brings him to power, eventually consumes him from the inside.

As discussed above, it seems unlikely that Marlowe would have Mahomet strike down Tamburlaine, but in those final scenes Tamburlaine does engage in a large number of violent acts, killing innocent bystanders and his own son, and he has recently lost his beloved wife Zenocrate, for whom he burned down an entire town in mourning. The peaking of his passions in Part II was also commented on by Johnstone Parr who argues that Tamburlaine's "inordinate lust for conquest and his fiery temperament have indeed led the seemingly invincible Scythian to ravage, pillage, and devastate. Particularly after the death of Zenocrate (II, iv), his raging anger attains a noticeable crescendo."¹⁰⁶ After burning down the town Zenocrate dies in, "he burns continually thereafter with an increasing ardor for conquest."¹⁰⁷ Tamburlaine is obviously a man of great passions and his rages throughout the two plays are part of what makes him so intimidating. Furthermore, Tamburlaine's own doctor warns him that his nature is causing his illness. When Tamburlaine falls ill, the doctor tells him to drink a potion that "will abate the fury of [his] fit, / And cause some milder spirits to govern [him]."¹⁰⁸ Then the doctor offers his full diagnosis, telling Tamburlaine:

Your veins are full of accidental heat,
Whereby the moisture of your blood is dried.
The humidum and calor, which some hold
Is not a parcel of the elements,
But of a substance more divine and pure,
Is almost clean extinguished and spent;
Which being cause of life, imports your death.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 700.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part II*, 79-80.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 5.3.84-90.

Tamburlaine's passions have been running so hot, that they have burnt up his "humidum and calor," which are considered part of the "spirits" that give man both his life and his humanity. Tamburlaine's monstrous passions have burned up his humanity so much that he cannot live any longer.

Despite the doctor's warnings, when a messenger arrives to warn about an approaching army, Tamburlaine cannot resist preparing for the fight claiming that "Jove hath sent / A present medicine to secure my pain." But Tamburlaine's recovery is only momentary, and after seeing his son crowned, he dies. Tamburlaine does not have the violent or gruesome end that seems appropriate to a monster who has killed so many; instead he dies because his own monstrous passions finally consume him. While this seems anticlimactic, it is an appropriate ending for a play in which both man's monstrosity and the punishment for that monstrosity come from within himself. Tamburlaine's human body makes him at once a more frightening and a more realistic monster: he is handsome and appears like a hero even as he commits crimes worthy of the most horrifying medieval monster. Tamburlaine believes that his actions are just because he is stronger than other men, and just as Tamburlaine's monstrosity comes from his own distorted mind and perception of the world, his destruction also comes from within himself. There is no divine intervention or correction for his actions, and when other men fail to kill or stop him, Tamburlaine's own monstrous passions consume his distinctly human body. The monster in this play is not a far away or divine wonder; instead, monstrosity and its defeat both come from within the human community.

Chapter 4

Shakespeare's Mental Monsters

In *Richard III* and *Othello* Shakespeare continues to explore what it means when monstrosity turns inward. He presents characters who are physically different, yet the true monstrosity in each play is not located in or the result of the characters' bodies, and instead Shakespeare depicts the threat of mental deformity. In this period, there were many debates about the connection between the body and the mind, with period thinkers such as Michel de Montaigne and Francis Bacon arguing that a deformed body typically indicated a deformed and violent mind. With Richard III's declaration that since he "cannot prove a lover" he is "determined to prove a villain,"¹ Shakespeare places Richard within these debates: he may either be bad by birth (so that his body and mind have always been equally deformed)² or he may be bad by choice, as Richard himself claims. Montaigne claims that deformity is linked with character, and although he cites Socrates as an example of how physical deformity does not always indicate a corruption of the spirit, he also claims that more often than not it does. He argues that "Nature did [Socrates] an injustice. There is nothing more likely than the conformity of the body and relation of the body to the spirit. *It matters a great deal in what sort of body the soul is lodged; for there are many things about the body that sharpen the mind, many that blunt*

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Richard III*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd Edition. ed. by G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 1.1.28, 30.

² The argument that Richard is an example of outward deformity indicating inward or mental deformity is explored much more fully by Michael Torrey, "'The plain devil and dissembling looks': Ambivalent Physiognomy and Shakespeare's *Richard III*," *English Literary Renaissance* 30, no. 2 (2000).

it (Cicero).”³ According to Montaigne, having a deformed body can damage the spirit and mind, so Socrates should have had an attractive body to accompany his great spirit. Montaigne then continues by distinguishing between ugliness and true deformity, the former of which is less detrimental to the spirit than the latter: “This superficial ugliness, which is very imperious for all that, is less prejudicial to the state of the spirit and not very certain in its effect on men’s opinion. The other, which is more properly called deformity, is more substantial and more apt to strike home inwardly.”⁴ Thus, the uglier or more deformed a person is, the more likely they are to be inwardly deformed as well.

Francis Bacon very similarly argues that deformity was usually a sign of a bad character, and he also warned that those who are deformed are not to be trusted: “Deformed persons are commonly even with nature: for as nature hath done ill by them, so they do by nature, being for the most part (as the Scriptures saith) *void of natural affection*; and so they have their revenge on nature. Certainly there is consent between the body and the mind and where nature erreth in one, she ventureth in the other.”⁵ Bacon’s argument is particularly interesting because, on the one hand, he claims that deformed people are largely “devoid of natural affection,” thus nature made them behave in the way that they do since their bodies and minds are linked. However, he also implies that people often choose to make their minds match their deformed bodies: they “do by nature” and “have their revenge” for the bodies that nature gave them. He then continues by claiming that deformed people should be watched carefully, since they may try to “somewhat

³ Michel de Montaigne, “Of Physiognomy,” *The Complete Works*, trans. by Donald M. Frame (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 986.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Francis Bacon, “Of Deformity,” *The Selected Writings of Francis Bacon*, ed. by Hugh G. Dick (New York: Random House, 1955), 113. Emphasis Original

repay” nature and society for their outsider status, and “it is [therefore] good to consider deformity, not as a sign, which is more deceivable; but as a cause, which seldom faileth to the effect.”⁶ Thus, he acknowledges that signs of inner deformity are sometimes false, but having physical deformity can affect the mind as well.

However, being born deformed may not just be read as a commentary on an individual’s character, but could also be read by a period audience as indicating that Richard was a monstrous or portentous birth. This interpretation is supported by the many references to and discussion of Richard’s birth in *Richard III* and in *3 Henry VI*. For example, Margaret tells Richard that he is the “slander of thy heavy mother’s womb! / Thou loathed issue of thy father’s loins!”⁷ and she taunts Richard’s mother, Duchess Cecily, with reminders that Cecily birthed the downfall of her own family: “From forth the kennel of thy womb hath crept / A hell-hound that doth hunt us all to death: / That dog that had his teeth before his eyes / To worry lambs and lap their gentle blood, / That foul defacer of God’s handiwork.”⁸ Under Margaret’s taunts, Cecily’s womb becomes a kennel fit to birth her hell-hound son who, even before his eyes were open, was prepared to attack indiscriminately and to destroy the gentle “lambs” created by God. Cecily did not give birth to a son; she gave birth to a beast, connecting her to period broadsides depicting women who gave birth to monstrous animal-human hybrids.⁹

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 1.3.230-231

⁸ Ibid., 4.4.47-51.

⁹ There are many examples of these such as the monster of Ravenna, which was depicted in numerous period broadsides or the ones recorded by James Duplessis in his work *A Short History of Human Prodigious and Monstrous Births*, Sloane MS 5246, British Library, London (1680).

It is Richard's own mother, though, who most explicitly connects Richard to monstrous births when she laments that she gave birth to such a murderous child: "O ill-dispersing wind of misery! / O my accursed womb, the bed of death! / A cockatrice hast thou hatch'd to the world, / Whose unaided eye is murtherous."¹⁰ Here, she connects Richard's appearance and behavior to monstrosity, calling him a "cockatrice" or basilisk who can kill by looking at someone. Earlier in the play, Margaret anticipates this image when she hopes that Richard's conscience will someday afflict him so that "No sleep close up that deadly eye."¹¹ But once Richard has already killed both his brother and his nephews, his "deadly eye" becomes the mark of a "cockatrice" that kills all whom he looks upon. Cecily has birthed a monster whose monstrosity is in both his body and his actions: he looks monstrous but his killing eye is, of course, also a metaphor for his violent nature and willingness to kill his friends and family.

Considering the Renaissance fascination with monstrous births and their incredible popularity in printed broadsides,¹² it is not surprising that Shakespeare chooses to emphasize Richard's birth and deformity on the stage. However, these monstrous births were viewed as more than just a visual spectacle, and there were many efforts to read divine messages in their forms. In their work on these births, Lorraine Daston and Katherine Parks argue that according to common medieval and Renaissance beliefs, "temporary deviations from the natural order [...] were deliberate messages, fashioned by God to communicate his pleasure or (much more frequently) his displeasure with particular actions or situations."¹³ Whether born from an animal

¹⁰ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 4.1.52-55.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1.3.224-225.

¹² See Chapter One for more on this.

¹³ Lorraine Daston and Katherine Parks, *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 52.

or a human, the birth of a deformed or monstrous offspring can be read allegorically to warn the community of an impending punishment for a great sin.¹⁴ Shakespeare and his audience would have been familiar with both woodcut images of these births and the reading of the body of the deformed child as portentous, so it is reasonable to assume that they would have interpreted Richard's body as both indicative of his own potential moral corruption (fitting with period beliefs about deformity) and also as a warning about, as Daston and Parks argue, "the sin or sins that has prompted divine punishment and the punishment itself, which could take the form of plague, famine, war, or the like."¹⁵

The monstrous and portentous nature of Richard's birth is discussed even more fully in *3 Henry VI*. Henry VI tells Richard that there were many portentous signs at his birth: "The owl shriek'd at thy birth, an evil sign; / The night-crow cried, aboding luckless time; / Dogs howl'd, and hideous tempest shook down the trees; / The raven rook'd her on the chimney's top, / and chattering pies in dismal discords sung."¹⁶ Just as Macbeth's regicide causes storms and monstrous animal reactions, Richard's unnatural birth is met with an unnatural response; he creates discord from the moment he is born. Even his mother's birthing pain is out of proportion since she felt "more than a mother's pain, / And yet brought forth less than a mother's hope."¹⁷ She is rewarded for her travail with a "deformed lump" that already has teeth, and Henry VI interprets these teeth "to signify that [Richard] cam'st to bite the world."¹⁸ Richard is figured as a

¹⁴ See also Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribners, 1971): 89-96.

¹⁵ Daston and Parks, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 181.

¹⁶ Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, 5.6.44-48.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.6.49-50.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.6.51,54.

ravenous and consuming creature who will devour his family and the world, and Henry VI at least, attempts to read portents of Richard's future in his birth and body.

The interpretation of Richard as portending war and divine punishment or intervention comes to be true, since he does bring about the end of the now corrupted house of York. Since the king's body was considered a metaphor for the state, the audience may see, as Burnett claims, "in the shape of Richard's 'monstrous' proportions a commentary on England's uncertain political fortunes."¹⁹ Thus, as Jessica Walker argues, Richard is "more than simply a figure of moral corruption, he is a symbol of the political decay."²⁰ If the king's body is deformed then that indicates a deep corruption in the government itself, so by giving Richard a monstrous body, Shakespeare (like Thomas More) makes the arrival of Henry Tudor even more praiseworthy. Henry does not simply kill the evil king, he also kills the monstrous embodiment of the corruption of the English monarchy, in fulfillment of the divine displeasure and punishment signaled by Richard's birth. Henry VII arrives as the divinely appointed hero who kills the monstrous Richard, ending the corruption of the English throne.

However, if Richard is a monstrous portent, that fact would not necessarily indicate that he is inwardly deformed as well. In fact, Daston and Parks argue that "Christians usually interpreted monsters as signaling not individual but collective sin; it is for this reason that they rarely blamed

¹⁹ Mark Thornton Burnett, *Constructing 'Monsters' in Shakespearean Drama and Early Modern Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 6.

²⁰ Jessica Walker, "'We are not safe': History, Fear, and the Gothic in Richard III," in *Shakespeare Gothic*, ed. by Christy Desmet and Anne Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), 185. Linda Charnes similarly argues that the audience would have recognized Richard's deformed boy as a metaphor for the state: Linda Charnes, *Notorious Identity: Materializing the Subject in Shakespeare* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993), 30.

the monster's parents, still less the monster itself."²¹ So Richard may be read as being a deformed man whose body indicates the expected inner deformity, or he may be the exception to that expectation (who *chooses* to act as if he were naturally inwardly deformed as well), or he may be a portentous birth who is unfairly mistreated. Rather than depicting a character who is naturally evil, as might be expected based on his body, Shakespeare uses these different influences or interpretations of Richard's form to create a character whose motivations are much more complicated; instead of being a straight forward monster whose mind matches his body, Richard demonstrates the ability of monstrous imaginings or desires to detach a person from their own human conscience. Richard is not evil because his mind naturally matches his monstrous body; he is evil because he chooses to make his mind match his body in order to get revenge on the world (both Nature and humanity) that he believes has wronged him.

Richard's physical differences clearly alienate him from the other characters in the play so that he inhabits a liminal space even within his own community. His extended family calls him names, pointing out his deformity and using it to explain his past actions, and Richard acknowledges his alienation in the opening scenes. He not only recognizes his own deformity, but he "descants" of it, singing his own criticisms rather than praises.²² Tzachi Zamir points out that in his "delight" at seeing and descanting his own deformity in his shadow, "Richard becomes one with society. He, too, mocks the ugly. This process of conforming to conventional reaction allows Richard to belong."²³ This alienation makes Richard a somewhat sympathetic character, at least to a modern audience, but when he declares that since he "cannot prove a

²¹ Daston and Parks, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 181.

²² Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 1.1.27.

²³ Tzachi Zamir, "A Case of Unfair Proportions: Philosophy in Literature," *New Literary History* 29, no. 3 (1998): 507.

lover” he is “determined to prove a villain,”²⁴ Richard embraces his monstrosity and chooses to act in the monstrous way that the characters and the audience expect.²⁵ Thus, in seeking his revenge, Richard fulfills the expectations of the other characters, but in order to get that revenge he must hide his true intentions and appear innocent. He thus creates a double illusion: he must convince those around him that he is not acting as a villain, but he must convince himself that he really is the internally deformed, conscienceless creature whom they see him as in order to suppress his natural human conscience.

In descanting his own deformity, Richard sees himself (physically) as the monster that everyone else sees him as, so he decides to embrace the behaviors that are expected of him. He even acknowledges this desire to make his mind match his body at the end of *3 Henry VI* when he declares that “since the heavens have shaped my body so, / Let hell make crook’d my mind to answer it.”²⁶ As discussed above, period thought connects deformity and mental state, so it makes sense that a character who is portrayed as physically monstrous would behave in the way that his body indicates. But Richard’s behavior is made more horrifying by the fact that he willingly fulfills the expectations that are placed upon him. He wants his mind to match his body so that he can be like a true monster, Machiavel, or Vice, not seeing the horror of his own crimes or being afflicted by guilt. Richard even uses the rhetorical skills of the Vice (“like the formal Vice, iniquity”)²⁷ in order to trick his victims (a feat that is made more impressive by the fact

²⁴ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 1.1.28,30.

²⁵ Many scholars have discussed that Richard frequently uses the language of acting to describe his villainies including Thomas F. Van Laan, *Role Playing in Shakespeare* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1978) and Anthony Hammond, introduction to *The Arden Edition of King Richard III* (London: Bloomsbury, 1981).

²⁶ Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, 5.6.78-79.

²⁷ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 3.1.82.

that Richard is already a figure of suspicion because of his appearance). Alan Somerset points out that the Vice used “disguises or their verbal equivalent, false names,” in order to claim good personal qualities instead of sinful ones,²⁸ but Richard goes a step further and uses verbal deception to hide his mental *and* physical difference. He is so skilled at speaking that he can “with a virtuous visor hide deep vice,”²⁹ convincing the other characters to overlook the warning that his deformed body provides. Even Richard seems amazed at this ability, wondering aloud to himself that Anne is willing to “abase her eyes” on him and forget that he “halts and [is] misshapen.”³⁰

In “determin[ing] to prove a villain” and acting according to the expectations placed on his already socially isolated form, Richard behaves in unnatural and inhuman ways that are so extreme that he makes his behaviors as out of proportion as his body. While there are many terms used to insult Richard’s appearance, the issue of Richard’s proportions appears several times. As discussed, his mother’s excessive labor pains yielded “less than a mother’s hope.”³¹ Richard himself claims that he was “curtail’d of this fair proportion, / Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,”³² implying that his body is both strange looking and out of balance. Balance and proportion are thus equated with beautiful, human features, and his lack of proportion and cheated features are a trick of nature. Richard brings up this issue of proportion again when he compares himself to Anne’s first husband, Edward. After he successfully woos Anne, Richard

²⁸ Alan Somerset, “Damnable Deconstructions: Vice Language in the Interlude,” *Comparative Drama* 31, no. 4 (1997-98): 578.

²⁹ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 2.2.28.

³⁰ Ibid., 1.2.246,250.

³¹ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 5.6.50.

³² Ibid., 1.1.18-19.

wonders that she will “abase her eyes” on one whose “all not equals Edward’s moi’ty.”³³ He is a fraction of Edward, who was “framed in the prodigality of nature.”³⁴ Nature gave Edward a fair and balanced form, but Richard possesses a deformed and fractional body. Later, Richard’s mother tells the young Duke of York not to listen to Richard’s claim that slow growth indicates grace, since Richard “was the wretched’st thing when he was young, / So long a-growing and so leisurely.”³⁵ The young Duke then immediately points out that despite Richard’s body growing so slowly, he “grew so fast / That he could gnaw a crust at two hours old” even though the young Duke was “full two years ere [he] could get a tooth.”³⁶ Richard’s body has therefore grown awry and out of balance: he had his teeth too early and his deformed body grew too slowly.³⁷ His body is out of proportion, so he commits crimes that are enormous and out of proportion too; he commits “murther in the direst degree.”³⁸

This is not the only time that Shakespeare uses the terms “monster” or “monstrous” to describe extreme, unnatural behavior. Most notably, he uses the word “monster” repeatedly in *King Lear* to describe people who commit horrible crimes, with the King of France using the word twice when trying to understand how Cordelia has done something so horrible that she has lost her father’s love. He wonders how she could:

Commit a thing so monstrous, to dismantle

³³ Ibid., xxx

³⁴ Ibid., 1.2.244.

³⁵ Ibid., 2.4.18-19.

³⁶ Ibid., 2.4.27-29.

³⁷ Mark Thornton Burnett argues that the disconnect in Richard’s body, with part growing too quickly and the rest being unfinished indicates that “As Richard is poised between finished and unfinished states, so was late sixteenth century England in the throes of discontinuing the Elizabethan dynasty and making plans for its replacement”: *Constructing ‘Monsters’ in Shakespearean Drama and Early Modern Culture*, 68

³⁸ Ibid., 5.3.197.

So many folds of favor. Sure her offense
 Must be of so unnatural degree
 That monsters it, or your fore'vouch'd affection
 Fall into taint.³⁹

Lear treats Cordelia as if she has done something of such “unnatural degree” that it is monstrous and thus worthy of banishment and hatred even though Cordelia is really kind (in both senses of the word) and her sisters are unnatural. Thus to be monstrous is to be an unnatural human: one who commits actions of such extreme violence or cruelty that they cast aside their natural human reason and compassion.⁴⁰ For something to be monstrous, it is not enough for the act to be villainous or wicked, it must also be out of proportion or of a degree that a human would not commit. With the repeated references to Richard’s own physical proportions and his own admission that he committed “Perjury, perjury, in the highest degree; / Murther, stern murther, in the direst degree,”⁴¹ Richard is depicted as monstrous both outwardly and inwardly.

Richard’s increasing inner deformation and self-monstering can then be seen in the development of his inability to cry. When Richard woos Anne in *Richard III*, he tells her that she has drawn tears from him because of her rejection of his love, and he tells her that this is even more amazing since his eyes have “never shed remorseful tear,”⁴² and his “manly eyes did scorn an humble tear”⁴³ when his father died. Here, in the interest of wooing, Richard frames his inability to cry as manly fortitude, but he also reveals that he has suppressed normal emotions.

³⁹ Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.1.217-221.

⁴⁰ It is also worth noting that according the *OED*, this moment is the first recorded use of the word “monster” as a verb, perhaps reflecting the new conception of monstrosity as something that is not an innate physical state but as something that can be chosen or that can even infect an otherwise human person (as with Othello): “monster, v.,” *OED Online*, March 2016, Oxford University Press.

⁴¹ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 5.3.196-197.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 1.2.155.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1.2.164

This suppression is first revealed in *3 Henry VI* when Richard was, in the words of Ian Frederick Moulton, not yet “as monstrous as he will later become.”⁴⁴ Immediately after his father’s death, Richard declares:

I cannot weep, for all my body’s moisture
Scarce serves to quench my furnace-burning heart;
Nor can my tongue unload my heart’s great burden,
For selfsame wind that I should speak withal
Is kindling coals that fires all my breast,
And burns me up with flames that tears would quench.
To weep is to make less the depth of grief.
Tears, then, for babes; blows and revenge for me.⁴⁵

At once Richard is claiming that he is too consumed by his anger at his father’s murder to weep for him, but he also decides that to “weep is to make less of grief,” and “blows and revenge” are for him. Richard focuses on his anger so that it consumes his grief, preventing him from crying. His emotions are then bound within his own resolution about how he wants to behave as much, if not more so, than they are in his nature.

While these scenes indicate a combination of emotion and self-deformation resulting in Richard’s inability to cry, when he is speaking only to himself, Richard attributes his inability to cry to his own extreme behavior: “But I am in / So far that sin will pluck on sin. / Tear-falling pity dwells not in this eye.”⁴⁶ Richard is not claiming that he is naturally unable to cry but that he is so far committed to sin now that he imagines the sin self-perpetuating, causing him to lose the ability to feel human emotion (an image of self-perpetuating inner monstrosity that Shakespeare will repeat in *Othello*). The loss of his ability to cry fits with Richard attempting to monster his

⁴⁴ Ian Frederick Moulton, “‘A Monster Great Deformed’: The Unruly Masculinity of Richard III,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1996): 259.

⁴⁵ Shakespeare, *3 Henry VI*, 2.1.79-86.

⁴⁶ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 4.2.63-65

own mind, considering that in the Renaissance, crying for the death of a family member was considered a sign of noble human emotion rather than an unmanly weakness. Or as Ian Frederick Moulton describes, “just as in patriarchal cultures of antiquity, men were traditionally permitted, even expected to weep on just the occasion when Richard proves unable to—the death of a comrade in battle.”⁴⁷ Like most of Richard’s public utterances, his claim that he cannot cry is therefore a careful combination of artifice and self-convincing: he wants to convince Anne that he is manly, and he wants to convince himself that he is not bound by the human emotions that would cause him to feel guilt for his actions.

This is not to say that Richard does not commit legitimately shocking and monstrous actions, just that Richard’s actions are based more on his self-delusion and determination to seek revenge for his deformity than they are on any sort of natural or innate monstrosity. Richard convinces himself that he is the monster whom others view him as, and then he proceeds to commit the monstrous and unnatural actions that others expect of him, including killing his brother and nephews. As the killers approach, George refuses to believe that his own brother is so cold hearted that he would order his death, exclaiming “O, do not slander him, for he is kind.”⁴⁸ George may either mean that his brother is gentle or that he is natural (and a natural brother would not commit fratricide), but the first murderer mocks both of these meanings, responding that Richard is as kind “as snow in harvest” and that George “deceive[s] himself.”⁴⁹ Richard is unkind or cruel in that he arrives to destroy like a snowstorm during the harvest, but he is also unnatural like a snowstorm that arrives in the wrong season. This also fits with the

⁴⁷ Moulton, “‘A Monster Great Deformed’: The Unruly Masculinity of Richard III,” 261.

⁴⁸ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 1.4.241.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 1.4.242.

descriptions of Richard as being out of proportion or mis-timed (as demonstrated by his baby teeth). He is an unbalancing and unnatural creature who throws the proportion and nature of the world out of balance as well.

The extreme nature of Richard's crimes is again emphasized when he orders the murder of his nephews. Once the deed is done, Tyrell calls it "the most arch deed of piteous massacre / That ever yet this land was guilty of."⁵⁰ The murder of these two innocents is the greatest crime ever committed in the kingdom, and it was ordered by their own uncle. Again, nature is evoked with Tyrell calling the princes the "most replenished sweet work of Nature,"⁵¹ implying a stark contrast between their fair forms and their unnatural and deformed uncle. This scene also reinforces Richard's lack of proper sadness or guilt for the deaths of family members. While Richard was unable to cry for his father's death, the murder of his nephews appears to bring him pleasure. Tyrell, who was eager to gain Richard's goodwill when he agreed to arrange the murder, is now clearly disgusted at both the enormity of the crime and his master's response; when Richard asks if Tyrell brings happy news, Tyrell responds that "If to have done the thing you gave in charge / Beget you happiness, be happy then, / For it is done."⁵² Tyrell's quick exit afterward, despite Richard's eagerness to hear more details about the murders reinforces his discomfort with Richard's unnatural reaction.

Just as Richard's unnatural and portentous birth was met with a reaction from the natural world, at least one of his unnatural actions is met with a similarly unnatural display. When Richard approaches the body of the dead King Henry VI, the body begins to bleed anew

⁵⁰ Ibid., 4.3.2-3.

⁵¹ Ibid., 4.3.18.

⁵² 4.3.25-28.

prompting Anne to exclaim that his “deeds inhuman and unnatural / Provokes this deluge most unnatural.”⁵³ As with his birth, Richard has disturbed the natural order, causing an unnatural reaction in the world around him, but while his birth was a portent, the bleeding corpse of Henry VI indicates Richard’s own unnatural actions. Furthermore, in calling Richard’s deeds “inhuman and unnatural,” Anne connects the two terms and implies that Richard is monstrous because a human would not do the things that Richard has done. By committing deeds of such extreme wickedness in fulfillment of the expectations demonstrated by his monstrous body, Richard invites comparisons with monstrosity, especially since the term “monster” or “monstrous” was often used to describe a person who commits actions that are so extremely cruel or wicked that they indicate a lack of humanity.⁵⁴

Despite his decision to make his actions match his physical deformity, Richard cannot truly convince himself that his monstrous actions are justified, and in the final scenes of the play, his very human conscience begins to torment him. The night before the Battle of Bosworth Field, Richard is visited by the ghosts of those whom he has murdered; however, Richard’s reaction to the ghosts and his sudden pangs of conscience reveal that his inner deformity has broken his sense of self. In making the decision to “play the villain,” Richard divided his nature. He was able to cast aside his “coward conscience” for a time,⁵⁵ but the ghostly visitation reminds him of how deformed his inner being has become:

What do I fear? Myself? There’s none else by.
 Richard loves Richard, that is, I [am] I.
 Is there a murtherer here? No. Yes, I am.

⁵³ Ibid., 1.2.60-61.

⁵⁴ As Shakespeare uses it in *King Lear* or in the period definition in the *OED*: “monster, n., adv., and adj.,” *OED Online*, March 2016, Oxford University.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 5.3.179.

Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why—
 Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?
 Alack, I love myself. Wherefore? For any good
 That I myself have done unto myself?
 O no! Alas, I rather hate myself
 For hateful deeds committed by myself.
 I am a villain; yet I lie, I am not.
 Fool, of thyself speak well; fool, do not flatter.⁵⁶

Richard is his own worst enemy. He is a monstrous murderer, but he cannot flee from himself.

He has committed horrible crimes, but even though he feels guilty, he cannot punish himself without being his own enemy. Because he loves himself, he acted out against others, but in acting against others he committed horrible murders that make him hate himself. Thus, within his conscience he finds “a thousand several tongues / And every tongue brings in a several tale, / And every tale condemns [him] for a villain.”⁵⁷ He cannot lie to himself the way that he lies to others, and so he must face that the monstrous crimes that he committed are now a part of himself; no matter how he tries to justify his monstrous actions, Richard must eventually face the reality of what he has done. He cannot even ask for the pity of others, since in his awful self-realization he laments that he can “find in [him]self no pity to [him]self.”⁵⁸ Richard is both a man and the monster that torments man; he chose to make his inner-self match his outward deformity, but in doing so he acted against his own human nature.

Richard is not the only deformed person whom Shakespeare depicts on the stage.

However, for all of Richard’s difficulty in convincing himself to act monstrously to match his

⁵⁶ Ibid., 5.3.182-192

⁵⁷ Ibid., 5.3.193-195.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 5.3.203.

body, *The Tempest*'s Caliban is a "strange fish," "puppy-headed monster," and "moon-calf"⁵⁹ who has no difficulty acting in the monstrous way that is expected based on his body. Prospero attempts to teach Caliban and to instill higher virtues in him, but Caliban proves to be a "savage" who rejected knowledge even "though [he] didst learn,"⁶⁰ and an "Abhorred slave / Which any print of goodness will not take."⁶¹ As Jonathan Goldberg claims, "in Miranda's lines there is a tension between, on the one hand, a belief that those characteristics that would secure humanity and the essential freedoms attendant upon it may be acquired by any subject through a system of deliberate and structured pedagogy and, on the other, a belief that some beings may be nominally human but nonetheless incapable of the achievement of full humanity."⁶² Caliban never achieves the same levels of evil as Richard, but he also never expresses a mental conflict or a tormented conscience. Caliban acts against Prospero and Miranda because his body and mind are aligned; he is a monster outside and in. Caliban does eventually declare that he will be "wise-hereafter / And seek for grace,"⁶³ but this brief moment appears to be regret that he followed clowns instead of kings rather than a true repentance or change. He is the "thing of darkness," who is as "disproportion'd in his manners / As in his shape."⁶⁴ Caliban is a monster with a hint of human reason, but Richard is a human who tries and fails to become a monster.

⁵⁹ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd Edition. ed. by G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 2.2.27, 154, 106.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 1.2.344, 355, 358-9.

⁶¹ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1.2.352-3.

⁶² Jonathan Goldberg, *The Tempest in the Caribbean* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 120.

⁶³ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 5.1.295-296.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 5.1.275, 291-292.

In the end, Richard cannot “put on some other shape / And not be Richard that hath done all this,”⁶⁵ because his deformed “shape” is both internal and external. His outer shape betrays his guilt, but it did not cause it, and in trying to punish the world and nature for “cheat[ing him] of feature,” he acts like a monster but feels guilt like a human. Jessica Walker describes Richard as “inhabiting a liminal space somewhere between king and beast—at once loathsome monster and attractive seducer, stage Machiavelli, morality Vice and tragic hero—Richard defies boundaries of characterization and genre, becoming a Proteus who changes shape at will.”⁶⁶ While Shakespeare never uses the term “monster” to describe Richard, by making Richard’s persona a hybrid (as described by Walker), giving him an unnatural and deformed body, and having him commit “Murther, stern murther, in the direst degree,”⁶⁷ Shakespeare gives Richard many of the characteristics of a monster: he is a deformed and liminal creature who commits unnatural and enormous crimes.

Although he does not appear monstrous, Iago (unlike Richard) never feels any guilt for his actions. More like his Vice predecessors, Iago simply is evil, and his only delight is in pouring pestilence in the ears of others.⁶⁸ Richard was a monstrous birth, but Iago brings “monstrous birth to the world’s light” when he infects and deforms Othello’s mind with jealousy, turning the once noble Othello into a monster.⁶⁹ He manipulates the people around him so that their happiness and security becomes perverted into anger and jealousy: he can turn “virtue into

⁶⁵ Ibid., 4.4.286-287.

⁶⁶ Jessica Walker, “‘We are not safe’: History, Fear, and the Gothic in *Richard III*,” in *Shakespearean Gothic*, ed. by Christy Desmet and Anne Williams (Univ of Wales Press, 2009), 185.

⁶⁷ Shakespeare, *Richard III*, 5.3.197.

⁶⁸ Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Othello*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd Edition. ed. by G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 2.3.356.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 1.3.386.

pitch,”⁷⁰ and he turns “nothing” — the lack of crime or fault — into monstrous jealousy and eventually murder. Iago is a chaos maker; God made the world out of chaos, but Iago turns the order and goodness of the world back into chaos. When Iago declares, “I am not what I am,” he does more than declare his own duplicity, he tells the audience that he will act as a counter to God.⁷¹ While God creates from nothing, Iago uses nothing to make monsters and destroy Othello and Desdemona, the “essential vesture of creation.”⁷² Furthermore, while both Richard and Iago hide their evil intentions from others, Iago never feels any guilt for his actions, and while Richard manipulates others in spite of his physical difference, Iago uses Othello’s difference as a way to manipulate him. As Iago’s words work on him, “chaos is come again,” and Othello loses his noble self to the monster that Iago plants in his mind.⁷³

While Richard makes his actions match his outward deformity, Othello is a noble character whose outward difference neither indicates nor causes his eventual monstrous actions. Othello is physically different from the other characters, but the opening scenes of the play carefully establish that Othello is not one of the monstrous Africans frequently depicted in medieval romances⁷⁴ or on the Renaissance stage, such as George Peele’s Muly Mahamet in *The Battle of Alcazar* (1589), Christopher Marlowe’s Ithamore in *The Jew of Malta* (1590), Thomas Dekker’s Eleazer in *Lust’s Dominion* (1599), or even Shakespeare’s Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*

⁷⁰ Ibid., 2.3.360.

⁷¹ David Rosen and Aaron Santesso similarly argue that Iago is declaring himself to be counter to God and they add that “And this, finally, is the deeper meaning of Iago’s blasphemy: by evoking God’s self-identification in Exodus, Iago (and Shakespeare, we may safely add) is suggesting that, in this world, an uncomplicated, tautological identification of self and role is possible only for a transcendent being. Iago’s little joke is on all of us.” *The Watchman in Pieces* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2013), 26.

⁷² Shakespeare, *Othello*, 2.1.64.

⁷³ Ibid., 3.3.93.

⁷⁴ Such as the ones discussed on Chapter One.

(c. 1588-1593). As Eldred Jones claims, these characters “were usually embodiments of villainy, needing no elaborate psychological reason for their character; they were bad because they were black.”⁷⁵

This connection between black skin and villainy was certainly not a new idea. In the medieval period, in addition to associating black skin with religious difference and physical monstrosity, as discussed in Chapter One, the hot climates of Africa and the Middle East were believed to cause humoral imbalances that lead to excessive lust and violent temper. Heat was not only believed to affect the physical appearance of a person, but it was also believed to negatively affect the body’s humors and therefore the personality. In *Chroniques des Ducs de Normandie* written around 1150, Benoît of Saint-Maure describes far southern regions of Africa in which “the days are hot and burning [...] people of different kinds who have no law, religion, or reason, justice, or discretion; not knowing the difference between right and wrong, they are more felonious than dogs.”⁷⁶ Another example occurs in Jacques de Vitry’s 1597 work *Libri duo, quorum prior orientalis, siue Hierosolymitanae*: “In the East, especially hot regions, bestial and wanton people, to whom the austerity of the Christian religion seems intolerably burdensome, [...] easily embark on the path which leads to death.”⁷⁷ So, people of darker skin

⁷⁵ Eldred Jones, *The Elizabethan Image of Africa* (The University Press of Virginia for The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1971), 48.

⁷⁶ Translation found in Irina Metzler, “Perceptions of Hot Climate in Medieval Cosmography and Travel Literature,” *Medieval Ethnographies: European Perceptions of the World Beyond*, ed. by Joan Pau Rubies (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 77.

⁷⁷ Jacques de Vitry, *Libri duo, quorum prior orientalis, siue Hierosolymitanae: alter, occidentalis historiae nomine inscributor* (Douay: 1597) Vol 1, chap 6, 25-26. In *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, trans. by John Boswell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 279: “in partibus Orientis, et maxime in calidis regionibus bruti et luxuriosi homines, quibus austeritas Christianae religionis intolerabilis et importabilis videbatur, ... viam que ducit ad mortem, facile sunt ingressi.”

were not only assumed to be sinful, but it was also believed that “the ‘intense heat’ of Africa produced intemperate lust,”⁷⁸ as well as aggression, laziness, and a lack of faith. As Cohen notes, “Since skin color was a bodily signifier of the distribution of passions within the individuals and groups it characterized, Christian texts could link corporeal difference to a foundational difference in character among unbelievers.”⁷⁹

Iago tries to connect Othello with these stereotypes, calling Othello “an old black ram,”⁸⁰ and telling Brabantio that his “daughter / [is] covered with a Barbary horse,”⁸¹ and that his “daughter and the / Moor are now making the beast with two backs.”⁸² Iago evokes cultural fears about the “lascivious Moor,”⁸³ who as Daniel Vitkus points out, is not only a foreign other but, as a Moor, is also visually and socially associated with the threat posed by Ottoman Turks.⁸⁴ However, contrary to the claims of Iago and some modern critics such as Albert Gerard and Laurence Lerner,⁸⁵ Othello is not inherently barbaric. He is, as the Duke calls him the “Valiant

⁷⁸ Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 23.

⁷⁹ Cohen, “On Saracen Enjoyment,” 118. Cohen also cites many more excellent sources linking black skin with sinful natures including Isidore, Bartholomaeus Anglicus, and Gregory the Great.

⁸⁰ Shakespeare, *Othello*, 1.1.88.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1.1.111-112.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 1.1.117-118.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 1.1.127.

⁸⁴ Daniel J. Vitkus, “Turning Turk in Othello: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (1997): 146. It is also worth noting that in this period the words Moor was often conflated with other terms for people from Africa and the Middle East such as Saracen. For more on this see Frank M. Snowden Jr., *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1970), 1-7) and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “On Saracen Enjoyment: Some Fantasies of Race in Late Medieval France and England.” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no. 1 (2001), 114-115.

⁸⁵ Albert Gerard, “‘Egregiously an Ass’: The Dark Side of the Moor. A View of Othello’s Mind,” in *Aspects of Othello*, ed. by Kenneth Muir and Philip Edwards (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977) and Laurence Lerner, “The Machiavelli and the Moor,” *Essays in Criticism* 9 (1959).

Othello,”⁸⁶ and his nobility and importance to the Venetian state is clear. Even when Brabantio accuses Othello of witchcraft and claims that Desdemona could never have loved “what she fear’d to look on,”⁸⁷ Othello is confident in his status and Desdemona’s love, offering the rebuttals that “My services which I have done the signory / Shall out-tongue his complaints,” and “My parts, my title, and my perfect soul / Shall manifest me rightly.”⁸⁸ And Othello is right: the Duke and senators are obviously indebted to Othello’s skill, and the Duke quickly agrees that Othello’s story could have won his daughter too.

Despite Iago’s attempts, Brabantio’s racial slurs and accusations do not turn the Venetian Senate against Othello. Brabantio claims that Othello must have used magic to woo Desdemona, since she could never love a “sooty bosom” meant for “fear, not to delight” and that “she feared to look on.”⁸⁹ But the Venetian state relies on the “Valiant Othello” to save them from the Turks,⁹⁰ and they seem disinclined to believe Brabantio’s claims. The Duke even tells Brabantio that “to vouch [his claims] is no proof”⁹¹: Brabantio has no evidence that Othello has done anything wrong aside from his own hysterical accusations (a sentiment that Othello would have done well to remember later).⁹² Furthermore, the other characters never express doubt about Othello’s goodness. Some scholars have argued that these early scenes reveal the inherent racism against Othello in the Venetian society, including Paul Cantor, who notes that “we can see the

⁸⁶ Shakespeare, *Othello*, 1.3.48.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 1.3.98.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 1.2.18-19, 31-32.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 1.2.70, 71; 1.3.98.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 1.3.49.

⁹¹ Ibid., 1.3.106.

⁹² Many scholars have talked about the language of trials for witchcraft and magic in this play including Millicent Bell, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Skepticism* (New Haven, Yale UP, 2002) and David Kaula, “Othello Possessed: Notes on Shakespeare’s Use of Magic and Witchcraft,” *Shakespeare Studies* 2 (1967): 112-132.

attitude of the city as a whole reflected in Brabantio's reaction to the prospect of Othello marrying his daughter."⁹³ However, the other senators seem disinclined to listen to Brabantio's accusations, and there is no evidence that they all secretly disapprove of Othello's marriage. They also readily believe Desdemona's confirmation that she sees Othello's "visage in his mind,"⁹⁴ seeing him as the noble man whom he believes himself to be, rather than as a different looking foreigner. Later, Desdemona even dismisses his propensity for jealousy, believing — contrary to period beliefs that living in hot climates can cause a violent nature — that Othello is never jealous because "the sun where he was born / Drew all such humours from him."⁹⁵ Othello's life and actions have proven that he is not like the stereotypical Moor. The high regard in which he is held is also reinforced by the surprise at his later anger and violence toward Desdemona. When Othello's jealousy leads him to strike Desdemona, Ludovico is shocked to see such a change in his behavior, wondering "Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate / Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature / Whom passion could not shake? Whose solid virtue / The shot of accident nor dart of chance / Could neither graze nor pierce?"⁹⁶ Othello seemed so confident and trustworthy before that Ludovico cannot reconcile his actions now; he seems like a different man with a different nature.

⁹³ Paul Cantor, "The Erring Barbarian Among the Supersubtle Venetians," *Southwest Review* 75, no. 3 (1990): 300.

⁹⁴ Shakespeare, *Othello*, 1.3.252.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 3.4.29-30. In this moment Desdemona may be contradicting the more common period belief that the hot sun could cause a violent temper, or she might be offering a version of the opposing argument that the heat could dry up the bodies humors causing a more calm personality. For example, Albertus Magnus argued that "Because of evaporation their hearts are made timid and cold having few humors": Albertus Magnus, *De Naturis Locis*, In *An Appraisal of the Geographical Works of Albertus Magnus and his Contributions to Geographical Thought*, trans. by Sister Jean Paul Tilmann (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1971), 101.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 4.1.264-268.

Othello's movement from noble to murderous is difficult for both the audience and the other characters to reconcile, and the audience is left wondering how Iago is able to infect Othello with "the green ey'd monster."⁹⁷ Many scholars have noted Othello's quick transition from nobility to violence, including Millicent Bell, who comments that "Othello's own noble strength, the slowness to anger that rules his early responses to Brabantio and to the drunken scuffle that awakens him from his wedded bliss in Cyprus, the majesty of his normal language — all fail to prepare us for the speed with which he casts reason and refinement aside and becomes brutal and coarse — and shakes our sense of life's legibility by doing so."⁹⁸ However, it is this very contrast that makes Iago a frightening villain and Othello a truly tragic victim: turning the noblest of men into a monster using whispers and trifles (nothings) is much more frightening than corrupting an average man. The shock of Othello's transition is the shock that monstrosity does not come out of expected sources, but rather it can come from nothing.

Iago's true villainy springs from his ability to create weakness and jealousy where there was none: to take nothing, which by definition is insubstantial, and to make it appear substantial, using it to create monstrous delusion in Othello's previously rational mind. Northrop Frye argues that Shakespeare presents two opposing forces in his plays: "One is the vision of nature in its original human sense, the cosmic order forfeited by the Fall, an event recalled by every act of treachery or usurpation committed since. The other is nothingness, the abyss of annihilation and nonbeing into which everything so far as we can see, disappears."⁹⁹ He then argues that this can be seen in *King Lear*'s Edmund who "has no principle of order within himself, and hence the

⁹⁷ Ibid., 3.3.170.

⁹⁸ Millicent Bell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism*, 86.

⁹⁹ Northrop Frye, "Nature and Nothing," in *Essays on Shakespeare*, ed. by Gerald W. Chapman (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1965), 44.

force he incarnates is, like Macbeth's, purely destructive and self-destructive. The world he helps bring into being is the world headed toward nothing."¹⁰⁰ These characters bring the world toward nothing and chaos, with Macbeth and Edmund (like Richard) tearing down lines of kingship. However, Othello, unlike the others, tries to live according to a "principle of order." He does not want to tear down existing natural structures, and instead he views himself as upholding those structures; he fights for the state and attempts to live as an honorable man. Iago uses nothing — insinuations that appear to be truths — to distort Othello's perception of the world so that Othello becomes an instrument of destruction; Macbeth, Edmund, and Richard, distort their own minds and cause chaos, but Iago gives "monstrous birth," using nothing to turn Othello monstrous.

From the beginning, Iago recognizes the power of nothing to corrupt the mind. Early in the play he claims that he hates Othello because he "suspect[s] the lusty Moor / Hath leapt into my seat, / [and] the thoughts whereof / Doth like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards."¹⁰¹ Iago does not seem particularly jealous anywhere else in the play, but his recognition that jealousy, a nothing, can "gnaw" a person's inwards, points to its ability to alter a person's mental state so that "judgment cannot cure."¹⁰² Jealous thoughts, like the evidence that Iago provides, may be insubstantial nothings, but they have the ability to fundamentally alter those whom they infect. Iago's suggestions thus become real in Othello's mind, and Othello's mind becomes poisoned and deformed: "The Moor [is] already changed with my poison. / [And] Dangerous

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 45.

¹⁰¹ Shakespeare, *Othello*, 2.1.282-4.

¹⁰² Ibid., 2.1.289.

conceits are in their natures poisons.”¹⁰³ Iago’s nothings invade Othello’s mind, turning into the jealousy that destroys him from the inside out until he is a fallen, violent man whose former nature has been subsumed. Iago thus uses nothing to fulfill his role as the counter to God indicated by his declaration of “I am not what I am”: Iago does not create from nothing, but instead he makes nothing appear to be real evidence, that “imputation, and strong circumstances [...] lead directly to the door of truth.”¹⁰⁴ Then, once Iago has deformed Othello’s mind so that he cannot tell truth from nothing, Iago can bring Othello down to nothing or chaos, turning “virtue into pitch,”¹⁰⁵ stripping the beauty and order from the world. Iago’s nothings turn into the jealousy that deforms Othello’s mind and leads him to commit monstrous actions.

Howard Caygill also discusses Shakespeare’s “monster of nothing” using the word “monster” primarily as a verb meaning to show something in an exaggerated form (which is similar to how the King of France uses the term in *King Lear*). Caygill then argues that “the role played by nothing in Shakespeare’s dramas is far more equivocal than anything dreamt of in philosophy; in them Shakespeare ‘monsters’ the equivocal spectacle of nothing, but without arriving at an affirmation of being.”¹⁰⁶ However, Iago does not just exaggerate nothing, testing the boundaries between nothing and reality, but he also deforms Othello’s mind so that Othello cannot tell the difference between nothing and real evidence. Iago monsters nothing, exaggerating it so that it seems real, but he also makes monstrosity from nothing, creating the monster of jealousy in Othello’s mind. Jealousy is, in fact, referred to as a monster multiple

¹⁰³ Ibid., 3.3.329-330.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 3.3.411-412.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 2.3.360.

¹⁰⁶ Howard Caygill, “Shakespeare’s Monster of Nothing,” *Philosophical Shakespeares* ed. by John J. Joughin (London: Routledge, 2000), 105.

times in the play, including Iago's famous reference to the "green-ey'd monster" and Emilia's warning to Desdemona that Othello is acting dangerously: "But jealous souls will not be answered so. / They are not ever jealous for the cause, / But jealous for they're jealous. It is a monster / Begot upon itself, born on itself."¹⁰⁷ Desdemona responds with "Heaven keep the monster from Othello's mind,"¹⁰⁸ but by this point Iago has already led Othello into a jealous rage; the monster is already in his mind. Emilia recognizes that jealousy can be begun by a mere suggestion, that it can come from nothing (it is "begot on itself") and that once jealousy exists, it self-generates, reproducing itself with no need for actual proof. Iago only needs to make the smallest of suggestions before Othello's mind fills in the rest, causing him to lose faith in Desdemona and imagine crimes from nothing.

Iago is effective at turning nothing into monstrosity because he is able to infect Othello with jealousy while acting as if he wants to spare Othello from that same jealousy. He does not directly tell Othello that he should be jealous; in fact, he does the opposite, warning Othello against jealousy: "O beware my lord of jealousy. / It is the green-ey'd monster which doth mock / The meat it feeds on."¹⁰⁹ However, Iago obviously does not mean to warn Othello against jealousy but to inspire it, and from the moment when Iago says that he "like[s] not that" when he and Othello spy Cassio speaking to Desdemona, Iago stokes Othello's suspicions even as he pretends to downplay them.¹¹⁰ If Iago had directly voiced his suspicions, Othello may have been more likely to disregard his concerns, but by speaking in hesitant suggestions, Iago plants doubt in Othello's mind. Then that doubt begets more doubt, turning brief suggestion into a consuming

¹⁰⁷ Shakespeare, *Othello*, 3.4.154-157.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 3.4.158.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 3.3.169-171.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 3.3.35.

certainty. Iago tells Othello that he has seen “Nothing, my lord; or if —I know not what,”¹¹¹ but that “nothing” is quickly confirmed in Othello’s mind as evidence that Desdemona is false. Iago’s skillful use of hesitation, “or if —,” invites Othello’s to fill that empty space with his worst fears, and the following “I know not what” leaves that gap, the nothing, intact so that Othello must think that Iago is hiding some terrible knowledge. Iago pretends to admit that his own fault is “to spy into abuses, and oft [his] jealousy / Shapes faults that are not,”¹¹² but these doubts, presented as the kind concerns of a friend, quickly begin to strip away Othello’s confidence in Desdemona’s love. Iago then uses this nothing or empty speech, repeating Othello’s own words until the frustrated Othello exclaims: “By heaven thou echo’s me / As if there were some monster in thy thought / Too hideous to be shown!”¹¹³ Iago’s nothings and empty words have now morphed into monsters, but they are not in Iago’s mind, they are in Othello’s.

Since Othello is so confident in himself, Iago uses Othello’s inability to know or control Desdemona’s thoughts as a way to instill doubt. Initially, Othello sees Desdemona’s love for him as natural; he is confident in his worth and Desdemona even acted as “half the wooer,” asking Othello to teach a friend to tell the stories that will woo her.¹¹⁴ However, Iago takes advantage of Othello’s status as both an outsider to Venice and a novice with women to cast doubt on what Othello previously held to be true. While Othello is confident in his own worth, Brabantio’s accusations and warning “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived her

¹¹¹ Ibid., 3.3.36.

¹¹² Ibid., 3.3.152-153.

¹¹³ Ibid., 3.3.110-112.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 1.3.176, 165-166.

father, and may thee,”¹¹⁵ introduces the idea that Desdemona is not trustworthy. Desdemona is true to Othello, but once the specter of her infidelity is introduced, Iago’s insinuations seem more plausible. The damage to Othello’s confidence does not show yet, and it may not exist yet, but once Iago begins to work his rhetorical manipulations on Othello, Brabantio’s words become evidence of Desdemona’s infidelity. Othello wants to believe that Desdemona is faithful because “she had eyes and chose [him],”¹¹⁶ but as Iago reminds him, “She did deceive her father, marrying you,”¹¹⁷ and it is shocking that one “so young could give out such seeming / To seal her father’s eyes up.”¹¹⁸ As with *Macbeth*’s Malcolm, once Desdemona’s potential to lie and dissemble has been introduced, it becomes an unpleasant potential for the future, and it only takes a little prompting from Iago to make Othello mistrust Desdemona too.

Iago then stokes Othello’s uncertainty about Desdemona by reminding him of his outsider status. Here I agree with scholars such as Edward Berry, who argues that although Othello is not depicted as a stereotypical African, “paradoxically, however, Othello’s ‘Africanness’ is crucial to his tragedy not because of what he is innately or culturally, but because of how he is perceived by others and by himself.”¹¹⁹ If only because of Brabantio’s warning, Othello knows that some people view his relationship with Desdemona as unnatural, and this opens the possibility that Desdemona herself may come to view the match as unnatural. Othello may be confident in his worth, but he cannot control how Desdemona sees him; this is

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 1.2.291-292.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 3.3.189.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 3.3.206.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 3.3.210-211.

¹¹⁹ Edward Berry, “Othello’s Alienation,” *SEL* 30, no. 2 (1990): 318.

the point of weakness that Iago can exploit, turning a nothing, a mere possibility, into monstrous jealousy.

The impact of Iago's "Nothing, my lord" can even be seen in the increasingly unsure way that Othello speaks about Desdemona's love. After Brabantio's warning, Othello confidently replies "my life upon her faith."¹²⁰ Then when Iago first warns Othello not to be jealous, Othello responds strongly and declares that he will "see before [he] doubt[s]" since "she had eyes and chose [him]."¹²¹ At this point, there is nothing to make Othello believe that Desdemona is untrue, yet within the course of a few more lines Iago manages to shake Othello's confidence in Desdemona's love. However, Iago does this not, as some scholars have claimed, by playing on Othello's sense of inferiority, but with a combination of presenting Desdemona as untrustworthy and Othello as lacking knowledge about Venetian women and how "their best conscience / Is not to leave't undone, but to keep it unknown."¹²² Iago presents himself as the loyal and helpful native Venetian who is simply revealing to his friend the unchaste tendencies of Venetian women. Within the course of a few lines, Othello's confidence in Desdemona has become the much less sure statement that "I do not but think Desdemona's honest."¹²³

Iago is also quick to point out that Desdemona's actions were unusual for a Venetian woman, further emphasizing that she is unnatural and perhaps untrustworthy for acting against her father's wishes and loving Othello.¹²⁴ Othello attempts to use his difference as a reason why

¹²⁰ Shakespeare, *Othello*, 1.3.294.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 3.3.189-190.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 3.3.203-204.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 3.3.225.

¹²⁴ Patricia Parker even argues that Othello draws a connection between Desdemona "devouring" Othello's stories of Anthropophagi: Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 244-245. Then Mark Burnett argues that in this moment "it

Desdemona is faithful, since she saw him and chose him willingly, but as soon as Othello wonders about Desdemona's nature, Iago seizes on the chance to put this fear into Othello's mind:

OTHELLO: And yet how nature erring from itself—
 IAGO: Ay, there's the point; as (to be bold with you)
 Not to affect many proposèd matches
 Of her own clime, complexion, degree,
 Whereto we see in all things nature tends.
 Foh, one may smell in such a will most rank,
 Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.
 But (pardon me) I do not in position
 Distinctly speak of her, though I may fear
 Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,
 May fall to match you with her country forms,
 And happily repent.¹²⁵

Iago suggests that it was unnatural for Desdemona to choose a dark skinned foreigner over one of her "country forms," and so she may be prone to unnatural desires or she may repent of her first unnatural choice. This moment shows how far jealousy has worked on Othello. Early in the play he swears "[his] life upon her faith,"¹²⁶ but before long Othello declares that Desdemona's "name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage is now begrimed and black / As [his] ownse/ face."¹²⁷ Once Othello has begun to doubt Desdemona's loyalty, he searches for a justification for his doubts, and Iago is eager to reinforce the idea that Desdemona would naturally seek a companion of her own race. Iago even makes this seem more likely by continuously encouraging Desdemona and Cassio to be together, since Cassio looks like someone to whom Desdemona

might be argued that Othello's [tale] witnesses the inception of his own construction of Desdemona as 'monstrous' other": Mark Thornton Burnett, *Constructing 'Monsters' in Shakespearean Drama and Early Modern Culture*, 103.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 3.3.227-238.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 1.3.294.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 3.3.389-391.

should be attracted. For all that Othello appears different, Cassio “hath a person and smooth dispose / To be suspected, framed to make women false.”¹²⁸ Iago thus reminds Othello of his status as an “other” and pushes Othello toward monstrous jealousy and revenge.

Before Iago ever warns Othello to “beware the green-ey’d monster,” he both connects Desdemona’s alleged behavior to Othello’s good name, and he demonstrates his ability to turn nothing into something and vice versa. Iago inverts his earlier claims to Cassio that reputation is nothing, telling Othello that reputation is man’s most valuable possession: “Good name in man and woman, dear my lord, / Is the immediate jewel of their souls. / Who steals my purse steals trash, ’tis something, nothing; / ’Twas mine, ’tis his, and has been slave to thousands.”¹²⁹ The meaning is clear, money is tangible, yet it is nothing and of no importance, but good name, which is intangible, is of the dearest value. Iago does not state the implied reverse: if a man’s purse is something that is really nothing, then a man’s good name is nothing (intangible) that is really something. Good name is literally a “nothing,” it has no concrete form, and while Othello’s good name has been built on military accomplishments and victories, Iago shakes Othello’s confidence in his own honor by using trifles and nothings; the smallest moments and insinuations become evidence that Desdemona is false and Othello’s good name has been tarnished. Iago thus begins to destroy the boundary between something and nothing, creating the chaos that will allow him to manipulate Othello with nothing. Othello’s demands for “ocular proof” are quickly abandoned as he accepts Iago’s nothings as evidence of infidelity.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 1.3.397-398.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 3.3.155-158.

Once jealousy takes hold of Othello's mind, he is increasingly willing to accept "trifles light as air [that] / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ."¹³⁰ The handkerchief, which Othello himself tossed onto the ground in a fit of frustration, suddenly becomes important proof of Desdemona's infidelity. Othello wants to "see before [he] doubt[s],"¹³¹ and he demands "ocular proof."¹³² However, as Iago points out, like Othello's good name, "[Desdemona's] honor is an essence that's not seen." Since infidelity is largely invisible (it does not mark the participants in any visible way), Iago offers other types of evidence, which he can manipulate in order to turn "nothing" into evidence of wrongdoing. Iago admits that he can only give Othello circumstantial evidence, telling him that "If imputation, and strong circumstances, / Which lead directly to the door of truth, / Will give [Othello] satisfaction, [he] might ha't."¹³³ However, by this point Othello does not see that these "proofs" of Desdemona's infidelity are only convincing because he is already jealous, and as Millicent Bell argues "jealousy is so unsure of the meaning of what it sees that faith in reality itself is threatened."¹³⁴ As Othello accepts trifles and Iago's arranged "ocular proof" in the form of the stolen handkerchief, reenactments of Cassio's dreams, and finally the staging of Cassio's "confession," Othello loses his grip on reality. To his jealous mind, these "nothings" are now proof of Desdemona's infidelity and "chaos is come again."

In a remarkably short period of time, Othello's jealousy consumes his mind. While Othello earlier claims to be losing sleep over his suspicions, in Act IV the physical and mental

¹³⁰ Ibid., 3.3.322-324.

¹³¹ Ibid., 3.3.193-194.

¹³² Ibid., 3.3.360.

¹³³ Ibid., 3.3.411-413

¹³⁴ Millicent Bell, *Othello's Jealousy*, 84.

toll on Othello becomes clear when, like Tamburlaine, his passions so overwhelm him that he falls into a swoon. Iago questions whether Desdemona is really guilty, even if she were naked in bed with Cassio “if they do nothing.”¹³⁵ This, coupled with Iago’s earlier reenactment of Cassio’s (supposed) dream about Desdemona,¹³⁶ and Cassio’s possession of the handkerchief, causes Othello’s passions to push him into a “trance.”¹³⁷ Daniel Vitkus argues that “Othello’s epileptic fit is a kind of sexual swoon, an impotent mockery of the climax he imagines Cassio experiencing.”¹³⁸ But this moment demonstrates that Othello’s mind is now so consumed with jealousy that it has begun to unbalance him physically. As discussed previously, monstrosity often takes a physical toll on Renaissance protagonists, so it is not surprising that Othello collapses at the moment when his jealous imaginings are seemingly confirmed by Iago. Even Othello recognizes the significance of the onset of his trance, although he misinterprets it. He cries out that “Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shakes me thus,”¹³⁹ but it is words that “shake him” since Iago’s words are all the evidence that Othello really has. He is infected by Iago’s language, and rather than taking his fit as a warning that he is allowing unnatural thoughts to consume him, Othello views his fit as a natural reaction to Desdemona turning him into a monstrous cuckold. He tells Iago that “a horned man’s a monster and a beast,” to which Iago wryly replies that “There’s many a beast then in a populous city, / And many a civil monster.”¹⁴⁰ Iago knows that being a

¹³⁵ Shakespeare, 4.1.9.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 3.3.415-424.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 4.1.43.

¹³⁸ Daniel J. Vitkus, “Turning Turk in Othello: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor,” 155.

¹³⁹ Shakespeare, *Othello*, 4.1.39-43.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 4.1.62-63.

cuckold is not what makes a man monstrous, but a man's reaction and jealousy to his suspicions can.

Iago can use nothing to create monstrous jealousy, stripping a man of his human reason. With his seeming and his manipulations, he creates faults where there are none and creates chaos where there was once natural order. Iago tells Othello that "Men should be what they seem, / Or those that be not, would they might seem none."¹⁴¹ He argues that a man should either seem to be who he truly is or he should seem to not be a man at all. Iago craftily redefines what it means to be a man in order to provoke Othello to the actions that Iago wants. He reminds Othello that grief is a "passion most unsuited a man,"¹⁴² preventing Othello from succumbing to his grief rather than acting, but Iago also tells Othello to have patience for his revenge or he "will say that y' are all in all in spleen, / And nothing of a man,"¹⁴³ preventing Othello from rushing off to murder Desdemona before Iago is ready. Iago claims that allowing his passions to overwhelm him is unmanly, but at the same time he is encouraging Othello toward the jealousy that will make him "nothing of a man" by monsterring Othello's mind. Iago tells Othello the truth while also convincing him to act monstrously, but Othello is so consumed by his jealousy that he cannot tell the difference between Iago's monstrous nothings and the truth. Othello cannot tell the difference between reality and seeming, so he does not realize that he is becoming "nothing of a man" as he surrenders his grasp of reality to jealousy.

Once Othello yields to his jealousy, he loses his identity as a noble and brave man, and he becomes the monstrous foreign beast. He has given up the nobler part of his nature and lost his

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 3.3.131-132.

¹⁴² Ibid., 4.1.77.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 4.1.88-89.

identity. Iago has successfully made monstrosity out of nothing and “chaos [has] come again” in a reversal of God’s creation. Othello is now “the blacker devil” who is “rash as fire”; he is no longer Othello but “The Moor [who] hath killed [Emilia’s] mistress.”¹⁴⁴ In fact, he has lost touch with objective reality to such an extent that, as Robert Heilman argues, “Othello’s assurance in his error so resists correction that it takes all of Emilia’s verbal violence and Iago’s murderous attempt upon her to break Othello’s set closure against the truth.”¹⁴⁵ However, once Othello does realize the truth, like Richard, his conscience must face the truth of his actions.

At the same time that Othello begins to realize the truth, Iago’s plans begin to unravel and his own true nature is revealed. But unlike Othello or Richard III, Iago is not beset by human conscience. As John Wall also discusses, when witnesses crowd into the bedchamber, Iago’s corrupting lies are less effective;¹⁴⁶ he cannot infect the entire room the way that he was able to infect individuals with his insinuations. It is Othello who realizes that visual expectations have been distorted and manipulated. Othello, whose black skin marks him as different was truly a good and noble man, but he was corrupted by the white, Venetian Iago. Othello, like the audience, did not expect the villain to be the one who does not look different. He has seen “the Cannibals that each [other] eat, / The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads / [Do grow] beneath their shoulders,”¹⁴⁷ but he did not expect a monster who looked like a friend. Othello even draws attention to this visual disconnect when he and Iago are brought together:

LODOVICO: Where is this rash and most unfortunate man?

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 5.2.131,134,167.

¹⁴⁵ Robert Heilman, “‘Twere Best not Know Myself’: Othello, Lear, Macbeth,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (1964): 92.

¹⁴⁶ John Wall, “Shakespeare’s Aural Art: The Metaphor of the Ear in *Othello*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 30, no. 3 (1979): 364.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 1.3.143-145.

OTHELLO: That's he that was Othello. Here I am.

LODOVICO: Where is that viper? Bring the villain forth.

OTHELLO: I look down toward his feet, but that's a fable.
If thou beest a devil I cannot kill thee.¹⁴⁸

Othello knows that by yielding to his monstrous jealousy he abandoned his former identity: he is “he that was Othello.” But Othello’s words also draw on both the history of the Vice as being the devil’s son¹⁴⁹ and the expectation that someone who commits monstrous acts should look monstrous. Othello looks toward Iago’s feet, but as Othello realizes, it’s a fable that Iago would have cloven feet or any other mark of his villainy. Just as Iago was able to spin Othello’s jealousy out of nothing, there are no visual indicators of inner evil.

Unlike in *King Lear* or *Macbeth*, there is no great response from nature at the monstrous crimes that have occurred. Frye notes that, “Macbeth’s murder of Duncan is a breach in the order of nature, which lets in a detractive force, represented by the Tempest raising witches, and by the prodigies and portents of the murder itself, with which Macbeth allies himself, to his own inevitable destruction.”¹⁵⁰ However, Othello’s monstrous jealousy and unnatural murder evoke no such reaction from Nature. Othello looks to the sky for a disruption in the natural world and comments that “Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse / Of sun and moon, and that th’affrighted globe / Did yawn at alteration.”¹⁵¹ Just as Tamburlaine is not struck down by Nature or the gods, but rather by his own corrupted nature, in *Othello* man’s worst danger comes from within. Like Macbeth, Othello’s crime has shaken his “single state of man.” But Othello’s divide between man and monster is expressed as the divide between his civilized Venetian side

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 5.2.283-287.

¹⁴⁹ F.P. Wilson, *The English Drama 1485-1585* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 63.

¹⁵⁰ Frye, “Nature and Nothing,” 40-41.

¹⁵¹ Shakespeare, *Othello*, 5.1.99-101.

and his side that is a “malignant and a turban’d Turk,”¹⁵² repeating the language of difference and hybridity that Iago and Brabantio labeled him with at the beginning of the play. Just as Richard’s inner self is divided between his human and deformed sides, Othello is divided between the valiant Othello and the Moor. Even the structure of this last speech emphasizes this dual nature: he is “one that liv’d not wisely but too well; [...] one not easily jealous, but being wrought / Perplexed in the extreme.”¹⁵³ His self is, in fact, so divided that in his last moment he imagines his higher, civilized self taking his lower bestial side and killing it: “I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog, / And smote him—thus.”¹⁵⁴ But of course Othello cannot kill only that part of himself, and by killing the monstrous part of himself the human part of Othello dies too.

While Othello tries to explain why he committed his monstrous acts, the once loquacious Iago falls silent, telling them only “Demand me nothing; what you know you know; / From this time forth I never will speak word.”¹⁵⁵ It is fitting that a character who spun monstrosity out of nothing will now answer nothing. Unlike Hieronimo, who reveals all to an uncomprehending audience and then refuses to speak more, Iago truly refuses to reveal any of his motives. However, Iago cannot reveal his motives anyway since his motives are inconsequential. He is truly the Other: a monster who does not feel any human compassion or guilt and who brings chaos to the previously ordered, beautiful world. In one of his most revealing lines, Iago says that Cassio must die because “He hath a daily beauty in his life / That makes me ugly.”¹⁵⁶ Iago envies and hates everything greater than himself, so he seeks to destroy and bring chaos into the

¹⁵² Ibid., 5.2.353.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 5.2.344-346.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 5.2.356-357.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 5.2.303-304.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 5.1.19-20.

world. Iago's evil is that he can use "nothing" to create monstrosity and destroy the people around him, bringing them back to nothing. Thus, the monster in this play is that there is no real monster except for the ones that are made in the minds of men.

Both Othello and Richard commit monstrous actions, but while Othello's mind is deformed by the machinations of Iago, Richard chooses to self-monster in his desire for revenge at how he has been treated. However, with both men their monstrosity is at odds with their human reason and consciences. While Othello is more sympathetic than Richard, they both try to justify their actions according to a distorted perception of the world around them: Richard seeking to justify his hatred of his own family and Othello seeking to prove that his jealous suspicions are true. Richard wants to be a monster, acting in the way that his body indicates to get revenge for being treated like a monster his entire life, but no matter how hard he tries to discard his conscience, he cannot hide the reality of his actions from himself. Othello believes Iago's nothings, so his mind becomes warped with jealousy and he cannot tell what is real. Then, he acts monstrously in response to his new deformed vision of the world. Othello and Richard are physical outsiders, but their monstrosity does not come from their bodies; instead, their monstrosity comes from their deformed minds.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

In all of these works, characters conceal their inner monstrosity behind their human appearance. Monstrosity is no longer easily seen and fought against, but as Shakespeare, Marlowe, Norton, Sackville, and Kyd demonstrate, monstrosity can be hidden, and perhaps more frighteningly, it can infect a previously rational and good person. These characters are more than simply villains; they are so consumed by the “feral vices and monsters of the mind”¹ that they have lost their human reason and become monsters. Their perspective of the world is fundamentally altered by their mental deformity, and they believe that they act in ways that are justified even as they kill innocent people and tear down social structures. However, when they reject law and the natural order in favor of the “wild justice” of revenge,² brutal ambition, or any other consuming passion, they reject higher human reason and conscience, acting like their medieval monster predecessors.

While all of the monsters discussed here have different motivations, their unifying trait is that the deformity of their minds leads them to believe that their actions are justified in contradiction of what their human consciences should tell them. In *Gorboduc* and *The Spanish Tragedy*, Videna and Hieronimo both believe that they must commit murders in order to avenge their dead children, even if those murders circumvent working legal systems and destroy the existing social order. Neither character ever feels guilt for his/her actions, and they both go to their own deaths believing that their acts of revenge were a necessary form of justice. They are

¹ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. by Thomas C. Faulkner (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1989), 62.

² Francis Bacon, “On Revenge,” *Selected Writings of Francis Bacon*, ed. by Hugh G. Dick (New York: Random House, 1955), 15.

so consumed by their grief that they cannot see the monstrosity of what they have done. Their love and grief become the “perturbation of the mind, [the] monster of nature” that Robert Burton warns about later,³ and they feel no guilt for the destruction that they cause.

Tamburlaine is not driven by love for others, but by his own consuming ambition; he is the “monster turned to manly shape,”⁴ who appears to lack entirely any human conscience. He believes that his actions are just, because he is strong enough to commit them. While his motivations are different, he still engages in self-delusion, convincing himself that he is not bound by human law or unmanly sympathy, and he rejects his conscience in favor of his passion for power. However, in the end, Tamburlaine cannot entirely separate himself from his own human nature: he is not struck down by a vengeful society or even divine intervention, but his human body rebels against his monstrous mind, creating so much “heat” that his body succumbs to his humoral imbalance. His body does not indicate the state of his mind, but they are still linked.

While Hieronimo, Videna, and Tamburlaine become so deluded by their passions that they do not feel guilt for their deeds, Richard III and Othello both must eventually face the horror of their actions. Richard III tries to embrace his own monstrosity, while simultaneously hiding the truth of his actions from his own conscience, and Othello’s mind is so distorted by jealousy that he cannot see the truth anymore. However, neither man can escape his conscience entirely, and when their mental deformities (either self-imposed or caused by another) fall away, their

³ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 448.

⁴ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine Part I*, 2.6.16.

human consciences recognize the monstrosity of their actions.⁵ They have acted like monsters, but they are still men, and unlike their predecessors, they cannot escape the truth of what they have done.

All of these characters convince themselves that their actions are just, so they need not feel guilt. Many of them also imagine that the lack of divine or natural intervention is a sign that their actions are justified, or they view themselves as responding against a mistake in Nature. While the natural world responds violently to the actions of Macbeth and King Lear, the crimes of the characters discussed here go largely unanswered by God or Nature. Hieronimo waits for a “troop of Furies and tormenting hags” to avenge his son, and then uses their absence to justify his crimes.⁶ Videna never looks to Nature or God to avenge Ferrex, instead focusing on the rightness of destroying Porrex, whom she views as a “monster of nature’s work.”⁷ She believes that she is correcting a flaw in Nature even as she becomes a monstrous murderer herself. Tamburlaine has entirely different motivations for his actions, seeking his own advancement rather than revenge, but still there is no response from either God or Nature to what he does, leading Tamburlaine to brag that “The chiefest God, first mover of that sphere” will never “conspire [his] overthrow.”⁸ Even when Othello believes that his actions are justified, he imagines that his murder will elicit a divine response, saying that there “should be now a huge eclipse / Of sun and moon, and that th’affrighted globe / Should yawn at alteration,” but Nature

⁵ A trait that is shared by some of Shakespeare’s other characters such as Lear, Edmund, and Macbeth.

⁶ Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, 3.13.112.

⁷ Norton and Sackville, *Gorboduc*, 4.2.71.

⁸ Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great Part 1*, 4.2.8,11.

is quiet.⁹ Finally, Richard III comes closest to eliciting a response from the natural world in the bleeding corpse of Henry VI and the ghosts of the final scene, but for most of the play he rejects Nature, which gave him a deformed body, and there is no response from Nature when he kills his brother or nephews.

Whether they look to the lack of divine or natural intervention to validate their actions or believe that they are avenging themselves on the unnatural actions of others, these characters demonstrate that the new monstrous threat is not from natural monsters, such as Caliban, but from man himself. These plays show that monstrosity can come from inside the deformed human mind, which uses a corrupted perception of the natural world to justify monstrous actions. The characters cannot perceive the world rightly; they believe that their actions are justified, so they cannot see the true horror of what they are doing. The fact that neither God nor Nature intervenes provides them with another faulty self-justification. However, just as this new monstrosity comes from humans, so too does the destruction of the monsters. Videna is killed by an angry mob, Hieronimo and Iago are (presumably) executed, and Richard III is killed by Henry Tudor after his own conscience torments him before their battle. Richard's conscience contributed to his death (causing his guilt and grief before battle), but Othello commits suicide when he realizes the truth of what he did. Finally, Tamburlaine is not destroyed by either his conscience or outside forces, but by the effects of his own monstrosity on his human body. All of these characters are humans who commit monstrous actions because their human conscience cannot tell the difference between the truth and their deformed imaginings, and all of them are destroyed by either their own humanity or other men. These characters are monstrous, not because they are

⁹ Shakespeare, *Othello*, 5.2.107-109.

part of the “infinity of forms” created by God and discussed by Montaigne and others;¹⁰ they are monstrous because they reject their human nature in favor of their monstrous delusions. The monstrosity in these plays comes from inside the human, and the destruction of these monsters comes from humanity as well.

These characters provide a sample of the monsters on the Renaissance stage, but they are not the only characters in whom playwrights examine the connection between delusion and mental monstrosity. As mentioned before, in *The Tempest* Shakespeare creates the monstrous Caliban, whose physical and mental monstrosity are largely aligned: he looks and acts like a monster. In the human Antonio, Shakespeare presents another character who engages in self-delusion, and in the contrast between Caliban and Antonio, Shakespeare further explores what behavior truly indicates a monster. In both his name and actions Caliban acts as a reference to new world monsters and to Montaigne’s essay “Of Cannibals.”¹¹ In his essay, Montaigne discusses the cannibals and savages of foreign lands, and he notes that “those people are wild, just as we call the fruits that Nature hath produced by herself in her normal course; whereas really it is those we have changed artificially and led astray from the common order, that we should call wild.”¹² Like these cannibals, Caliban is a wild and Natural creature who acts according to his nature.

¹⁰ Michel de Montaigne, “Of a Monstrous Child,” *The Complete Works of Montaigne*, trans. by Donald M. Frame (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 654.

¹¹ For more on Shakespeare’s use of Montaigne in this and other plays see Arthur Kirsch, “Virtue, Vice, and Compassion in Montaigne and *The Tempest*,” *SEL 1500-1900* 37, no. 2 (1997): 337-352.

¹² Michel de Montaigne, “Of Cannibals,” *The Complete Works*, trans. Donald M. Frame (New York: Knopf, 2003), 185.

However, Montaigne's most interesting commentary is not on the natural state of the cannibals, but on the contrast between cannibals and supposedly "civilized men," and on the ease with which civilized men critique cannibals and savages while missing their own, often worse, faults. He first notes that even among civilized men, possessing greater knowledge or intelligence does not guarantee a superior nature. Montaigne argues that he "is not sorry that we notice the barbarous horror of [the cannibals'] acts," but he is sorry that "judging their faults rightly, we should be so blind to our own."¹³ He also argues that while a simple man can:

bear true witness [...], clever people observe more things and more curiously, but they interpret them; and to lend weight and conviction to their interpretation, they cannot help altering history a little. They never show you things as they are, but bend and disguise them according to the way they have seen them; and to give credence to their judgment and attract you to it, they are prone to add something to their matter, to stretch it out and amplify it.¹⁴

Caliban is like one of Montaigne's cannibals, whom it is easy to critique for his obvious differences and barbarity. Antonio, on the other hand, is like Montaigne's clever and civilized man who lies and dissembles in order to present a new version of reality to fit his own desires.

Antonio is:

Like one
Who having into truth, by telling of it,
Made such a sinner of his memory
To credit his own lie — he did believe
He was indeed the Duke, out o' th' substitution,
And executing the outward face of royalty.¹⁵

He convinced himself that he was the Duke, so he feels no guilt about overthrowing his brother.

He has created his own reality to, as Montaigne warns, "alter history a little [...] to give

¹³ Ibid., 189.

¹⁴ Ibid., 184.

¹⁵ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1.2.99-104

credence to [his] judgment.” He even strives to attract others to his deformed viewpoint, attempting to convince Sebastian to oust his brother too. Just as Othello believes (for a time) that Desdemona has been false and her murder is justified, Antonio corrupts his own memory so that he has no pangs of conscience about what he has done.

While Antonio is never called a monster directly in the play, the monstrous nature of his actions is indirectly referenced when Prospero sends a group of “strange shapes” carrying food and drink for Alonso, Gonzalo, Antonio and the other lost men. The arrival of the monstrous forms prompts Gonzalo to comment that:

If I should say I saw such islanders
(For certes these are people of the island),
Who though they are of monstrous shape, yet note
Their manners are more gentle, kind, than of
Poor human generation you shall find
Many, nay, almost any.¹⁶

By providing food for the wanderers these islanders act more “kind” (which can be read as both caring and natural) than many humans. They look different but behave in a way that Gonzalo associates with the best of humanity. Again, this reflects Montaigne’s argument that supposedly civilized men are often unable to see their own crimes, which are just as barbarous as those committed by the cannibals: “So we may call these people barbarians, in respect to the rules of reason, but not in respect to ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarity.”¹⁷ Antonio appears civilized, but he has distorted his own mind, and he proudly claims that he does not know where his own conscience lies.¹⁸ Caliban is thus the natural monster who seeks for grace, and Antonio is the human who deforms his own mind and never repents of his actions. Both

¹⁶ Ibid., 3.3.29-34.

¹⁷ Montaigne, “Of Cannibals,” 189.

¹⁸ Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 2.1.276.

Caliban and Antonio commit monstrous crimes, but Antonio, who does not look like a monster, is by far the bigger threat.

Shakespeare and the other playwrights discussed in this work are neither the only, nor the last, to explore the mental boundaries between humanity and monstrosity. For example, in the *Duchess of Malfi* (1613/1614), John Webster's villainous Ferdinand demonstrates the same sort of mental deformity as his villainous predecessors. Ferdinand exhibits a "perverse and turbulent nature" in contrast to his kind and loving sister.¹⁹ Additionally, he is obsessed with his sister's marital status and sexuality, demanding that she remain unmarried. He constantly schemes to find out if she has been secretly married, and then when he discovers that she is married, his rage and subsequent actions are both disproportionate and incredibly cruel, with him ordering that she be driven mad and then murdered along with her children.

Ferdinand's hatred of his sister is further complicated by the fact that they are twins,²⁰ and that he wants to punish her because he believes that her marriage has tainted her noble blood, which they share: "Damn her! That body of hers, / While that my blood ran pure in't, was more worth, / Than that which thou wouldst comfort call a soul."²¹ Thus, Ferdinand, like many of the mental monsters before him believes that he is justified in committing his monstrous actions. In his mind, the Duchess has sullied her blood with her marriage, and he must punish her and dispose of the "young wolves" that her sinful marriage has created.²²

¹⁹ John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, in *Drama of the English Renaissance II: The Stuart Period*, ed. by Russell A. Fraser and Norman Rabkin (New York: MacMillan, 1976), 1.1.179.

²⁰ Ibid., 4.2.265.

²¹ Ibid., 4.1.121-123.

²² Ibid. 4.2.258.

Yet, despite his strong convictions of rightness, Ferdinand cannot achieve the same disconnection from his own conscience as Iago or Tamburlaine, nor the conviction of rightness possessed by Hieronimo and Videna. Ferdinand is little affected by the death of his nieces and nephews, but when he sees his dead twin, and Bosola reminds him that he has “bloodily approved the ancient truth, / That kindred commonly do worse agree / Than remote strangers,” Ferdinand’s conscience rebels.²³ He first demands to know why Bosola did not act as a barrier between the Duchess’s innocence and his revenge, and he claims that his desire for her death was only because he was “distracted of [his] wits,” even though he admits that he wanted to gain an “infinite mass of treasure” if she died while still a widow from her first marriage.²⁴ Ferdinand’s reason for ordering his sister’s death shifts even as he tries to blame his disordered wits and the actions of others; he wants to explain his reason for murdering her while disowning responsibility for her death. He then returns to the wolf imagery that he evoked earlier when describing her children, but now he imagines that “the wolf shall find her grave, and scrape it up; / Not to devour the corpse, but to discover / The horrid murder.”²⁵ Ferdinand imagines that the wolf, perhaps the Duchess’ husband Antonio, will find out about her murder and avenge her death.

Ferdinand’s guilt and inability to accept responsibility for his sister’s murder leads to his madness and diagnosis with lycanthropy. When Ferdinand cannot accept that he has committed the horrible crime of filicide, he begins to imagine himself as a wolf. He succumbs to mental delusion, which the doctor diagnoses as “lycanthopia” or “a melancholy humor” that causes

²³ Ibid., 4.2.268-270.

²⁴ Ibid., 4.2.277,283.

²⁵ Ibid., 4.2.307-309.

those who are afflicted “to imagine / Themselves to be transformed into wolves.”²⁶ Ferdinand believes that he is a werewolf, so he acts the way a werewolf would act; his body is the same, but his mind is so tormented by his actions that he cannot face the reality of what he has done. He thus imagines himself as the wolf who will avenge his sister rather than the monster who killed her. While Richard III tries to convince himself not to feel guilt for his monstrous actions but is eventually tormented by his own conscience, Ferdinand’s imagined physical monstrosity, with him digging up graves and eating raw flesh, is an attempt to align his physical body with his mental deformity (in reverse of Richard III). However, Ferdinand still possesses a human body, and despite his attempts to turn monstrous, he is still a man.

Lycanthropy, along with other mental diagnoses for monstrous behavior, continues to appear throughout the Restoration and beyond. The image of the wolf or were-wolf is not the only way that mental monstrosity is depicted after Shakespeare, but it is a popular one, and it provides a useful example. For example, when discussing the violence of the English Civil War, James Howell writes that “They err who write no wolves in England range. Here men are all turned wolves. O, monstrous change!”²⁷ Here the men of England, who are fighting and killing each other are imagined as werewolves, monsters who are driven by animal urges rather than human desires. Later, when Thomas Hobbes writes that “man is a wolf to man” (“homo homini lupus”) in his Epistle Dedicatory to *De Cive*,²⁸ he draws on the same imagery of man turning to

²⁶ Ibid., 5.2.6, 9-10.

²⁷ James Howell, “Letter LVIII, December 1, 1644,” in *Epistolæ Ho-Eliaæ: The Familiar Letters of James Howell*, introduction by Agnes Repplier (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1907), 2:115.

²⁸ Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive*, ed. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998), 3.

wolf.²⁹ In yielding to his passions, man becomes like a monstrous hybrid between man and animal.

For Renaissance playwrights and after, monstrosity is no longer a predominantly physical trait; characters are not monsters because they were born as physical monsters, but because their extreme actions and rejection of human reason deform their minds. These playwrights thus explore the mental differences between monsters and humans; they grapple with the fact that if emotions and passions can so overwhelm us that we lose our reason, then our physical body is an uncertain indicator of humanity. The body may indicate mental deformity, as it does in Caliban, but the connection is tenuous. Deformity or physical difference is not a good indicator of who can be trusted and who should be feared, and even the noblest characters can turn monstrous when their minds are distorted by their passions and they reject their own consciences. Instead the line between human and monster lies in the ability to control the emotions through reason and the conscience. For the monsters of the Renaissance stage, passions overwhelm reason and sense, deforming the characters' view of the world until they cannot tell that what they are doing is inhuman in its extremity. For the few who finally realize the nature of their actions, those for whom their reason reveals their crimes to their human consciences, the resulting guilt fractures their minds and perhaps even destroys their bodies. Monsters no longer live in faraway places, nor are they easy to visually identify. Instead, "monsters of the mind" leave no physical mark, and when monsters no longer look like monsters, they are much more frightening.

²⁹ This is much more fully argued by Diego Rossello, "Hobbes and the Wolf-Man," *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (2012).

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