

## The Ominous Fate of Monstrosity in *King Lear*

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Monstrosity plays a decisive role in *King Lear*. The development of the concept throughout the tragedy contributes to the fatalistic resonances that the text entails. In 1904, Bradley established that: “(...) the idea of monstrosity—of beings, actions, states of mind, which appear not only abnormal, but absolutely contrary to nature— [is] an idea, which, of course, is common enough in Shakespeare, but appears with unusual frequency in *King Lear* (...) (1904: 217).

Before attempting a specific interpretation of the several occurrences of the term *monster* in its paronomastic deployments in the play, I shall pay attention to some useful etymologies. It goes without saying that the word *monster* means a different thing in the twentieth century from the conventional significance it used to carry in Shakespeare’s time. As Chris Baldick puts it, “In modern usage ‘monster’ means something frighteningly unnatural or of huge dimensions” (1987: 10). But earlier denotations of the term (extending up to the nineteenth century and beyond) bore other implications, conveying not only physical but also moral nuances. In his influential *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault emphasizes that a *monster* is someone or something “to be shown”, taking into account the Latin term *monstrare*, from which the word in English and other languages ultimately derives (qtd. in Baldick 1987: 10). The role of monsters in this period of history is to serve the purpose of showing God’s revelation of the outcome of vice, lunacy and evil to disoriented human beings. In the Miltonian sense, monsters functioned in a rational world in order to “justify the ways of God to men”. Baldick provides Shakespearean illustrations of this ideological appropriation of monsters, and I devoted another article to underline the projections of monstrosity in *Richard III* as compared to those appearing in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (Ballesteros González 1996). One of the most recurrent uses of the notion in Shakespeare is the portrayal of monstrosity as an example (Lat. *exemplum*, a word with evident moral connotations) of a particular vice or transgression (Baldick 1987: 11). Baldick stresses the fact that “The monster is one who has so far transgressed the bounds of nature as to become a moral advertisement”, and states that “to be a monster is to break the natural bonds of obligation towards friends and especially towards blood-relations” (1987: 12-3).

These definitions seem to coincide with aspects of monstrosity related to *King Lear*, a play full of instances of monstrous behaviour from the part of Nature and/or most characters in it. From the very beginning, Shakespeare presents the fatal consequences of the political division of a territory carried out by an old monarch. This image of dismemberment can be connected with the notion of a monstrous body politic, epitomized by the senile king. Lear seems to have been a successful and respected ruler, but now, at the onset, he is merely a stubborn and capricious old man. The kingdom

resents the monarch's decision, a geography distributed into ill-assorted parts. Like in *Richard III*, the fate of a kingdom depends on the fate of its ruler, and vice versa.

However, compared with other characters in the play, Lear is a pitiful caricature of a monster, no matter how excessive, arbitrary and grotesque his behaviour can be when he becomes a lunatic. As Bradley asks, "What are we to say of the world which contains these five beings, Goneril, Regan, Edmund, Cornwall, Oswald?" (1904: 252). Despite the confusing examples of good deeds provided by some *dramatis personae* in the play contrasted to those cited above, evil is indeed the protagonist throughout most of *King Lear*, a tragedy composed of a grim vision of nothingness and sterility. It is ironical that the first explicit allusion to monstrosity is applied to Cordelia.<sup>1</sup> France says to Lear:<sup>2</sup>

This is most strange,  
That she, whom even but now was your best object,  
The argument of your praise, balm of your age,                    215  
The best, the dearest, should in this trice of time  
Commit a thing so monstrous, to dismantle  
So many folds of favour. Sure, her offence  
Must be of such unnatural degree  
That monsters it (...) (I. i. 213-219).

With the unusual and hyperbolic occurrence of "monster" as a verb ('makes it a monster'), Shakespeare emphasizes the absurdity of a world where reason and justice have been put into quarantine, as the spectator will learn when s/he contemplates the development and results of this preliminary action and the hypocritical and wicked performance of the many evil characters.

The fragment also evidences that monstrosity in *King Lear* is clearly linked to Nature. Shakespeare is constantly punning on the polysemic meanings of "Nature", "natural" and "unnatural". France conceives something monstrous as unnatural, but we should take into account that monsters are the product of Nature, that supposedly maternal and nurturing principle that is subject to ambiguity here (in a play where, by the way, the figure of the mother is coherently absent). Edmund's soliloquy opening I.ii is even more symptomatic of the controversies of the text with regard to the role of Nature in the tragedy:

Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law  
My services are bound. Wherefore should I  
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit  
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,  
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moonshines                    5  
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base?  
When my dimensions are as well compact,  
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,  
As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us  
With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base? (I. ii.1-10)

<sup>1</sup> A similar instance of irony is latent in loyal Kent's denigratory portrayal of Oswald: *Osw.* What dost thou know me for? // *Kent.* A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats; a base, / proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred- / pound, filthy worsted-stocking knave; a lily-livered, / action-taking, whoreson, glass-gazing, super- / ser- / viceable, finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting slave; / one that wouldst be a bawd in way of good service, / and art nothing but the composition of a knave, / beggar, coward, pandar, and the son and heir of a / mongrel bitch: one whom I will beat into clamorous / whining if thou deni'st the least syllable of thy / addition (II. ii. 12-23).

<sup>2</sup> Quotations are from Muir (1972). I have also consulted other editions: Hunter (1972) and Greenblatt *et al.* (1997).

Edmund's resistance to be typified as "unnatural" (an illegitimate son) symbolically expresses his desire not be considered a monster. But here is the paradox: from a metaphorical perspective, he becomes the faithful quintessence of a Machiavellian miscreation. More than Richard III, the *flagellum dei* betrayed by his physical and moral deformity, Edmund deceives and manipulates those surrounding him, taking advantage of the situation of utter chaos and decay, in a context where the healing and retributive powers of Nature seem to be enigmatically occult. Therefore, the excuses for his malevolent actions are ultimately unjustified, without even the feeble alibi of a monstrous face and/or body, as is the case of Richard III, or Frankenstein's creature. The problem is that a monster whose countenance does not show his malignant impulses by means of deformity is doubly dangerous (Dorian Gray and other Victorian representatives of monstrosity are significant in this respect). It is paradoxical that this servant of a pagan goddess, Nature, is unnatural or monstrous, not because of social or conventional motives, but mainly because of moral reasons. Nevertheless, dramatic irony appears again: it is Edgar, not Edmund, who is to be blamed for his monstrosity. When Gloucester is shown Edgar's fake letter by his natural son, the bewildered father utters: "He cannot be such a monster-" (I. ii. 91), a sentence connected with the old man's bestial view of his son as unnatural and monstrous some lines above: "O villain, villain! His very opinion in the letter! Abhorred villain! Unnatural, detested, brutish villain! worse than brutish! Go, sirrah, seek him; I'll apprehend him. Abominable villain! Where is he?" (I. ii. 72-5). To respond to Edmund's deliberate adscription to Nature as his goddess, this principle is described in the play as sharing in the same internal confusion and chaos as human beings (who are, consequently, part of her). Although her role in the *dénouement* of the plot remains textually mysterious and ambiguous, in spite of the gullible and superstitious beliefs of Gloucester –counterpointed by Edmund's relativistic approach to the matter–, Nature seems at first glance to be inexorable and alien to human aspirations and expectations. In fact, she manifests monstrous features, revealed by the eclipses, catastrophes and storms impregnating the action of this tragedy. The animal world, belonging to the scope of Nature as well, is portrayed with monstrous connotations and linked to ingratitude, the paroxysm of monstrosity, for, I repeat with Baldick, being ungrateful means destroying the 'natural' bonds of obligation and duty towards blood-relations (1987: 13; my emphasis): "Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend, / More hideous, when thou show'st thee in a child, / Than the sea-monster" (I. iv. 257-9). The relationship between ingratitude and monstrosity is almost obsessive in Shakespeare (let us remember quotations like "The monstrous bulk of this ingratitude" in *Timon of Athens* V. i. 65), and emerges with powerful despair in Lear's exclamative syntagm "Monster Ingratitude!" of I. v. 37, at the end of Act I, when Lear begins to realize the injustice committed with Cordelia. On the other hand, the image of the sea-monster, akin to the "monsters of the deep" with which the horrified Albany compares Humanity in (IV. ii. 49-50), whatever they can be, reminds us of the Leviathan, a metaphor used by Thomas Hobbes in his eponymous work to represent political deformity. Most aspects of Renaissance monstrosity are closely and subtly interconnected in *King Lear*.

Bestly and animal imagery is recurrent throughout the play, asserting the brutish and monstrous facets of Nature. This perspective is disclosed in Lear's diatribe against Goneril, where the old king, like Edmund, begins by invoking Nature as a goddess:

Hear, Nature, hear! dear Goddess, hear!  
Suspend thy purpose, it thou didst intend  
To make this creature fruitful! 275  
Into her womb convey sterility!  
Dry up in her the organs of increase,  
And from her derogate body never spring  
A babe to honour her! If she must teem,  
Create her child of spleen, that it may live 280  
And be a thwart disnatur'd torment to her!  
(I. iv. 273-281).



thrown together without order or intention, Horace attacks the aesthetic transgressions against *decorum*, mocking at the category of the grotesque, which, as Baldick defines it, constitutes “an artificially contrived violation of nature” (1987: 14). Horace’s disquisition is essentially in keeping with the conflict between Art and Nature, one of the main topics of the play, as Kenneth Muir has proposed (1972). Edgar’s answer to Lear’s question “What hast thou been?” is undoubtedly the very epitome of the grotesque, a mixture of *disjecta membra*, of ill-assorted parts:

A servingman, proud in heart and mind; that curl'd  
my hair, wore gloves in my cap, serv'd the lust of my  
mistress' heart, and did the act of darkness with her; 85  
swore as many oaths as I spake words, and broke  
them in the sweet face of Heaven; one that slept in  
the contriving of lust, and wak'd to do it. Wine lov'd  
I deeply, dice dearly, and in woman out-paramour'd  
the Turk: false of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand; 90  
hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in  
madness, lion in prey. (III. iv. 83-92)

Edgar, in his lunatic confusion, stands for grotesque heterogeneity, and this picture is complemented by his feigned self-description after taking place the Dover-cliff episode in the company of the obnubilated Gloucester (IV. vi). To the wretched son’s question to his father: “(...) what *thing* was that / Which parted from you? (my emphasis; IV. iv. 66-7), the blind man answers: “A poor unfortunate beggar” (IV. iv. 68). Then comes Edgar’s enigmatic account:

As I stood here below methought his eyes  
Were two full moons; he had a thousand noses, 70  
Horns whelk'd and wav'd like the enridged sea:  
It was some fiend; therefore, thou happy father,  
Think that the clearest Gods, who make them honours  
Of men's impossibilities, have preserved thee.  
(IV. iv. 69-74)

In this brief concatenation of hyperbolic *adynata* or *impossibilia*, Shakespeare collects Horatian influences. It is the climax of monstrosity and otherness, a grotesque picture that accentuates Edgar’s schizophrenic complexity, which precisely from that point on will be gradually mitigated. On the other hand, Horatian nuances are also evinced in Lear’s characterization of his wicked daughters as mythological monsters: “Down from the waist they are Centaurs, / Though women all above” (IV. vi. 123-4).

In conclusion, through the dramatic action of *King Lear* permeates the haunting presence of monstrosity. Many more minor examples could be adduced, beginning with the old king’s monstrous banishment of Cordelia which ultimately provokes the tragic catharsis of the play. However, it will suffice to quote the deterministic and fatal words of Albany addressed to Goneril: “Humanity must perforce prey on itself, / Like monsters of the deep” (IV. ii. 49-50), a prophetic sentence which turns out to be true in the ominous and pessimistic realm of *King Lear*, a world emptied of meaningful content where monstrous nothingness and ambiguity reign.

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