

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Possessed by trauma: Infamous Narrative in *Othello* (1603) and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (1608)

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Since G. Wilson Knight confidently announced in 1930 that ‘*Othello* is eminently a domestic tragedy’, Shakespeare’s play has often been included in the canon of domestic tragedy as a play dealing with intimate, non-royal murder.¹ In his 2012 monograph, Sean Benson persuasively made the case that ‘domestic tragedy is not merely one more form assimilated into the complex configuration of the play, but the dominant one upon which Shakespeare relies’, while Peter L. Rudnytsky has even suggested that *A Woman Killed with Kindness* (1603) was ‘deliberately imitated by Shakespeare in the writing of *Othello*’.² Looking specifically at these two plays is a fruitful avenue of comparison: Lois Potter has suggested that they were originally performed together. Potter suggests that *A Yorkshire Tragedy* may have been written as a response to a shorter, earlier version of *Othello*, the two plays performed together as part of a four-play sequence discussing marital fidelity.³ Both are also engaged in debate on the nature of crime, and

¹ G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1930; repr. 1972), p. 108.

² Although Benson’s arguments on genre and genre theory are sound, they are undermined by the fact that many other genres seem to perfectly ‘fit’ over the play, including that of Shakespeare’s own comedy, as has been argued widely in the past. Sean Benson, *Shakespeare, ‘Othello’ and Domestic Tragedy* (London: Shakespeare Continuum Studies, 2012), p. 95. See Stephen Orgel, ‘*Othello* and the End of Comedy’, *Shakespeare Survey* 56 (2003), 105-16. See also Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix of Shakespeare’s Tragedies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 70-4; Micheal Bristol, ‘Charivari and the Comedy of Abjection in *Othello*’, *Renaissance Drama* 21 (1990), 3-21; Peter J. Smith, “‘A good soft pillow for that good white head’: *Othello* as comedy’ *Sydney Studies in English*, 24 (1998-9), 21-39. Peter L. Rudnytsky, ‘*A Woman Killed with Kindness* as Subtext for *Othello*’, *Renaissance Drama*, New Series, 14, Relations and Influences (1983), 103-124 (p. 107).

³ Lena Cowen Orlin has also examined the strong thematic links between the plays, concluding that the couples, in not setting up proper households, have violated ‘the moral code of domestic place’, eventually

the role of the devil in penetrating place and person. It seems likely, following Potter's argument, that the writer of *A Yorkshire Tragedy* was influenced in some ways by *Othello*; the fabricated plot of the wife's infidelity, for example, is a specific commonality.

While many attempts have been made to define the genre of domestic tragedy, and exactly which texts are part of the canon,⁴ one important factor that unites this genre of plays is trauma. Often showing and dealing with the lead-up to and aftereffects of brutal murder, violence within the seemingly safe space of the home is a crucial element of most domestic tragedy. Bloody onstage violence was an expected feature of the genre: before the action of Robert Yarrington's 1601 domestic tragedy *Two Lamentable Tragedies* begins, he promises, 'no mirth, unlesse you take delight, / In mangled bodies, and in gaping wounds, / Bloodily made by mercy wanting hands'.⁵ The audience is about to see something painful for them to watch. Trauma studies, or the study of psychological injury, has long recognised the power of narrative in understanding and articulating traumatic events.⁶ Influential theorist Dominick LaCapra summarises, 'Victims of trauma tend to relive occurrences, or at least find those occurrences intrude on their present existence, for example in flashbacks or in nightmares or in words that are compulsively repeated'.⁷ The plays themselves, in presenting violence to their audience, recreate traumatic events, but they are also deliberately traumatic for their audience to watch. Thomas Heywood famously attests to this affective power in his *Apology for Actors* (1612): 'If we present a Tragedy,' he argues, 'we include the fatall and abortive ends of such as commit notorious murders, which is aggravated and acted with all the Art that may be, to terrifie men from the like abhorred practises'.⁸ If bloodless punishment – such as the scaffold scene that closes *Two Lamentable*

provoking murder and proving 'that prevailing domestic formulas were in these instances ineffectual'. Lena Cowen Orlin, *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 194. Lois Potter, "'All's One': Cinthio, *Othello*, and *A Yorkshire Tragedy*", in *Othello: The State of Play*, ed. by Lena Cowen Orlin (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2014), pp. 45-62 (pp. 52-3).

⁴ Alongside their frequent origin in real-life events, the social status of the protagonists is a key difference from the wider genre of early modern 'tragedy', Sean Benson arguing that 'Shakespeare's decision to write a domestic tragedy signifies his own interest in and break from the traditional social stature necessary for tragic standing' (p. 18).

⁵ Robert Yarrington, *Two Lamentable Tragedies* (London, 1601), sig. A3r.

⁶ Although trauma studies generally explores mass trauma, such as the mass psychological impact of natural disasters, I will be exploring a very different type of mass phenomenon; the impact of retold violence on its audience.

⁷ Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 142-3.

⁸ Thomas Heywood, *An apology for actors* (London, 1612), sig. F3v.

Tragedies – has this terrifying effect, what will audiences feel watching two children be stabbed to death onstage?

Is it valid, however, to understand the plays using a framework of psychological wounding when, as Patricia A. Cahill has pointed out, ‘no literal lexicon of trauma exists in the early modern period’?⁹ She has found evidence of trauma instead ‘in the period’s war plays’, reading ‘what contemporary theorists have described as the repetitive structure characteristic of trauma’, identifying traumatic experience through narrative structure.¹⁰ Matthew R. Martin has argued that early modern tragedy was in fact closer to our current understanding of trauma than our current understanding of the word ‘tragedy’, the theatrical genre defined ‘according to the physical and psychological wounds... that it dramatizes’.¹¹ This closely parallels (and indeed Martin uses) Philip Sidney’s definition of the genre: ‘the high and excellent Tragedy, that openeth the greatest wounds, and sheweth forth the Ulcers, that are covered with Tissue’.¹² The question that these readings do not address is: what function does tragedy play in repeating traumatic narratives? One of Philip Sidney’s principal arguments in his *Apology* (c. 1579) is that poetry is superior to history writing because writers of fiction, including tragedians, can alter the truth; ‘if evill men come to the stage, they ever goe out... so manaced, as they little animate folkes to followe them’.¹³ In short, tragedians can balance the scales of justice, creating meaning from chaos. Historians, in contrast, are bound by true events. According to Sidney, this can make history ‘an incouragement to unbrideled wickednes’, evoking an out-of-control moral structure.¹⁴ LaCapra, building on Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), casts doubt on historical retellings that convey ‘relatively unproblematic closure’.¹⁵ Closed narratives with a clear structure, as he points out, rarely happen in real-life histories, which the domestic tragedies are generally attempting to reframe. Sidney’s version of history is worryingly ‘unbrideled’ precisely because it does not make have moral closure, whereas in fiction closure can be manufactured: the bad can be properly punished, the good rewarded.

⁹ Patricia A. Cahill, *Unto the Breach: Martial Formations, Historical Trauma, and the Early Modern Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Matthew R. Martin, *Tragedy and Trauma in the Plays of Christopher Marlowe* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), p. 1.

¹² Philip Sidney, *An apologie for poetrie* (London, 1595), sig. F3v.

¹³ *Ibid.*, sig. E2v-E3r.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, sig. E3r.

¹⁵ LaCapra, p. 15.

If we follow this moral structure, then, how do we as an audience understand *A Yorkshire Tragedy*: why does a father kill his innocent children? This question is difficult because of its apparent senselessness: in framing it I have stressed the children's innocence, and therefore the fundamental injustice of the crime. Framed in another, broader way, this question would read: why do bad things happen to good people? *A Yorkshire Tragedy* resolves the senselessness inherent within these questions: the Husband kills his children because he is possessed by the devil, and the play ends with an exorcism that simultaneously exorcises uncertainty for its audience. In dehumanising violence as a property of the devil, *A Yorkshire Tragedy* heals the very sense of rupture it creates through its portrayal of brutal murders. The Wife asks, 'What is it has beguiled him of all grace / And stole away humanity from his breast?' (7.32-3)¹⁶ The unequivocal answer, I would argue, is the devil. Violent, apparently senseless acts are part of a greater battle between good and evil. Using the language of trauma, of psychological wounding and healing, then, reveals a potentially cathartic function in the domestic tragedies that situate murder within a grander schema of good and evil. Aristotle's notion of catharsis refers to the affective impact of music, art or mimetic performance, and their ability to carry one through an extreme of emotion, emerging safe on the other side. Focusing on music, he argues of pity, fear and enthusiasm that,

Some people are liable to become possessed... but we shall see that, when they have made use of the melodies that fill the soul with orgiastic feeling, they are brought back by these sacred melodies to a normal condition as if they had been medically treated and undergone a purge [catharsis].¹⁷

For Aristotle, catharsis closes a structured journey, in which the patient's symptoms (extreme emotion) are remedied, returning them 'to a normal condition'.¹⁸ The language of bodily cure maps onto trauma's psychological wounds. *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, in bringing clear structure to violence, offers a similarly cathartic function with its mimetic depiction of brutal murder. *Othello* seems set up to follow the same narrative pattern, tantalising its audience with hints at devils, witchcraft, and possession. However, through Iago's refusal to explain his motivations for murder, the unfairness of his crime is never resolved, leaving a distressing aura of senselessness. Why are two innocent women killed? (Emilia being the often-overlooked second spousal murder of the play.)

¹⁶ Anon, *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, ed. by A. C. Cawley and Barry Gaines (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986).

¹⁷ Aristotle, 'Politics', in Humphrey House, *Aristotle's Poetics*, trans. by J. Burnet (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1961), p. 110.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Violence cannot be dehumanised because it is not explained: the devil is not exorcised, and the audience experiences no catharsis.

For the catharsis of *A Yorkshire Tragedy* to take effect, there must first be senselessness. The path towards destruction that the Husband is on at first appears entirely without moral purpose or sense. The Husband has wasted his fortune on dicing and drinking. He spends his time in the corrupting space of the tavern rather than at home, and abuses his wife for no very clear reason, other than that he originally wanted to marry someone else. His brother at University has stood as security for the Husband's debts, and during the course of the play is made 'a prisoner... his hope struck dead' (4.10). Even before the murders of his children, the Husband is responsible for smearing his own reputation, publicly denouncing his wife as a 'strumpet' and children as 'bastards' (2.103-4). Three gentlemen attempt to intercede with him, crying 'he's more than mad... whose own words do proclaim / Scandals unjust to soil his better name', and urging 'kindness' (2.108-10). They cannot conceive of a sane person who would want to broadcast this scandalous information about private affairs that so damage his public reputation. However, the Husband is completely 'unbrideled' in his way of riotous life, replying 'Farewell instructions, admonitions!' (2.115).¹⁹ This Faustian rejection of morality is a choice that the Husband repeatedly makes and, like Dr Faustus, there are tantalising glimmers of possible redemption, before the Husband again makes the wrong choice.

The Master who arrives to plead with the Husband on behalf of his jailed brother summarises the Husband's immoral trajectory. Thanks to his rejection of a proper way of living, the Husband has become alien in multiple senses:

Unnatural, flinty, more than barbarous.
The Scythians in their marble-hearted feats
Could not have acted more remorseless deeds
In their relentless natures than these of thine (6.17-20).

In the same scene, and following the Husband's murder of his children, the Master theorises, 'He's shed so much blood that he cannot blush' (6.26). The Husband has undergone a physical transformation following these shocking acts, becoming a creature one cannot understand, lacking even basic physiological indicators. The murder scenes themselves are brutally violent, the Husband stabbing his children and wife, and injuring two servants, within full view of the audience. The servant recreates the action, 'Then did he bruise me / And rent my flesh and robbed me of my hair' (7.28-9), a

¹⁹ Sidney, sig. E3r.

graphic description designed to elicit a sympathetic, perhaps even empathetic and painful, response. Blood seems to be everywhere: it is the first thing the Wife sees when she wakes up, crying, 'O me, my children! Both, both, both bloody, bloody!' (5.16-17). This kind of inarticulate communication is typical of the Wife's utterance immediately after the death of her children. Compulsively repeating words and the cry 'O', the Wife enacts horror for the audience as beyond the boundaries of speech. The Master too cannot fully articulate what has happened; the Husband is 'more than barbarous' (6.17), too Other to express.

What the Master does not say, but that the Wife, Servant, Servingman and Knight suspect (as well perhaps as the three gentlemen who term Husband 'more than mad'), is that the original point of infection, the cause of all the Husband's ills, is the devil. Lois Potter has seen the devil's influence as a convenient fiction, arguing that the Husband willingly convinces himself that he has indeed been the victim of demonic possession.²⁰ However, this is belied by exclamations like the Servingman's: 'I should think the devil himself kept open house in him' (3.25-6). It is the Wife who first suspects (as early as Scene Two) that 'some vexed spirit / Had got his form upon him' (2.38-9). If a spirit has taken over the Husband's body, directing his vital force, it is no surprise that the lands have sickened, hinting at a power we cannot see with the naked eye. He is described as 'An unclean rioter', his 'lands and credit / Lie now both sick of a consumption' (2.130-1). Thinking he has succeeded in forcing his wife to sell her dowry lands, the Husband's vision becomes myopic, and his speech choppy, crazed. Descending into prose, he asks:

Where's the money? Let's see the money! Is the rubbish sold, those wiseacres, your lands? Why, when? The money, where is't? Pour't down, down with it. Down with it, I say, pour't o'th' ground! Let's see't, let's see't (3.34-8).

Here is the source of the land's sickness: as the Wife pours money on the ground, the poisonous properties of money are graphically literalised as the land is consumed by wasteful avarice, reflecting the wasting that the disease of consumption causes the body.²¹

The Husband's speech becomes more frenetic as the play progresses and he approaches the moment of murder. Barry Gaines and A.C. Crawley have also noted his monstrous

²⁰ Potter, p. 52.

²¹ There is a strong parallel with the actions of the demon Titivillius in the earlier play *Everyman* here, who makes the land barren when Mankind tries to work it. G.A. Lester, 'Introduction' in *Three Late Medieval Morality Plays*, ed. by G.A. Lester (London: A&C Black Publishers, 1981; repr. 2006), pp. xi-xxxvii (p. xxii).

strength, one of the signs of possession, and uncovered a lexis belonging almost exclusively to the Husband.²² While the Wife speaks in terms of ‘heaven’ and ‘soul’, the Husband speaks of ‘bastards’, ‘devil’, ‘damned’, ‘whore’ and ‘strumpet’.²³ However, Gaines and Crawley assert that this is an innovation made specifically by the playwright of *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, and that demonic possession is absent from the source pamphlet, *Two most unnaturall and bloodie murthers* (1605). While the content of the pamphlet may not stress demonic possession in the same way, Calverley is invested with a remarkable strength in both texts. The interpretation of the text by the engraver of the title page, at least, seems to be unequivocal. The engraving shows Calverley lifting his club, having already struck down two of his children and his wife. A dog cringes in the background, and to the left of Calverley, almost supporting the elbow that raises the club, is a demon, clearly identifiable from his claw-like hands and feet.²⁴ The pamphlet itself perhaps suggests sudden madness as the cause of the murders, but I would argue that, thanks to this image, the devil is always present for the text’s reader and therefore encoded within *A Yorkshire Tragedy*’s source.²⁵

To return to the play itself: the Husband’s demonic possession ends in an exorcism of sorts (a thoroughly Protestant one, however, without the intercession of a Priest). The change is triggered by the Wife’s Griselda-like goodness. For the Husband, her saintly forgiveness triggers a dramatic and intensely physical transformation:

... now glides the devil from me,
 Departs at every joint, heaves up my nails.
 O catch him torments, that were ne’er invented,
 Bind him one thousand more, you blessèd angels,
 In that pit bottomless, let him not rise
 To make men act unnatural tragedies,

²² Superhuman strength is a factor the Servingman explicitly discusses; ‘a fouler strength than his / o’erthrew me with his arms’ (7.27-8), suggesting a devil makes use of the Husband’s physical form.

²³ Baines and Crawley, p. 19.

²⁴ Stanley Wells, rather than seeing this image as a demon, describes it as ‘talons on the hands and feet of the dark figure of an old man’, a figure that prompted Middleton’s original idea of demonic possession. Quite why a be-taloned old man features on the title page remains unexplained. Stanley Wells, ‘Introduction: A Yorkshire Tragedy’, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. by Gary Taylor et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 452-5 (p.453).

²⁵ Lisa Hopkins points out another essential difference: in the pamphlet, no indication of the brother’s vocation is made, whereas in the play text he is to have been a preacher, perhaps saving thousands of souls. This is further evidence of the Husband’s pervasively destructive effect. ‘*A Yorkshire Tragedy* and Middleton’s Tragic Aesthetic’. *Early Modern Literary Studies* 8.3 (2003): 2.1-15 <<http://purl.oclc.org/emls/08-3/hopkyork.html>> [accessed 28/02/2018].

To spread into father and, in fury,
Make him his children's executioners,
Murder his wife, his servants (8.18-26).

The repetition of 'make' denies the Husband's agency. The worrying senselessness, the unnaturalness, of the crime is attributable instead to the devil's agency. This infamous criminal has become part of a divine/demonic battle for souls. On the Wife's long-suffering goodness, he claims 'Thou hast given mine eyes / Seven wounds apiece', presumably a comparison with the seven wounds of Christ, and so implying that this change is only possible through Christ's mercy (10.17-18). The Husband's final repentance, therefore, can be read as symbolic of Christ's victory over the devil, a comprehensible ending that fits within a much greater moral narrative. This is reflected in many of the 'repentances', or speeches in domestic tragedy that follow the discovery of murder, which contain similar or more explicit allusions to Christ.²⁶ The Husband being caught within a divine/demonic struggle makes sense of his apparently senseless violence, the exorcism engendering a moment of psychological exorcism and catharsis for the audience. They hear the devil leaving, and as he is bound 'unnatural tragedies' stop (8.22). Instead, events will now presumably pursue their 'natural' course.

Like the Husband's downward moral trajectory, the narrative closure provided by exorcism in the play is paralleled by character discussion. To stop the Husband from killing his third child, the Master plans 'To raise the town upon him' (7.17), activating the power of communal condemnation (and force) with a report of the murder. One of the gentlemen who capture the Husband and stop the spree from continuing tells us, 'A gentleman of worship dwells at hand; / There his deeds shall be blazed' (8.29-30). In retelling the murders in the form of a public sermon, they can be understood within an extant moral framework, making meaning from the disturbingly chaotic. It is significant that he immediately relies on a familiar ritual; that of the sermon, 'closing' the narrative through the very act of making it into a comprehensible narrative form, paralleling the narrative catharsis of exorcism as well as its religious significance.

In *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, then, Husband is possessed by the devil, dehumanising the violence of his brutal murders. He is released after seeing the truth of God's salvation and sincerely repenting, enabling audience catharsis by the imposition of a clear moral structure, and the very clearly-rendered eradication of evil, stopped at the source so that,

²⁶ It should be noted that the Husband's repentance speech falls earlier in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* than is usual within the canon, as when the source pamphlet was written, the trial had not taken place, precluding a scaffold speech. However, judgement is introduced in the form of the Knight, who regrets that he has to embody justice in this sad case; 'I'm sorry for / This time that I am in place of justice' (9.7-8).

before leaving the theatre, we have returned to a more ‘natural’ state of affairs. Today, in our more secular society, this is generally framed as a person overwhelmed by temporary/longer-term insanity. Once the fit has passed, they are able to acknowledge the negative impact of their own actions through public repentance. This idea penetrates scholarship of *A Yorkshire Tragedy*; Joost Daalder’s reading sees the Husband as experiencing a generalised madness which contrasts against ‘what ordinary mortals consider kindness’.²⁷ Daalder replicates the Husband’s dehumanisation in the play through his setting up of an ‘us’ and ‘them’ paradigm – us, the normals, and most of the characters in the play, are the opposite of the Husband, singled out by abnormal behaviour. This explains the Husband’s traumatic actions without challenging our sense of self; he is fundamentally different. The Husband’s ‘real’ motivation for the crimes, however, is much more difficult to penetrate: perhaps some combination of disappointment, shame, remorse, and anger. His emotional complexity in fact is so difficult to decipher that madness/possession can be used as a catch-all, even as this sets up a tension between the developed backstory of the play, and the exorcism that finally explains and negates the traumatic power of the play’s murders. In Shakespeare’s domestic tragedy *Othello* no such moment is engendered, preventing a cathartic conclusion for the audience. His play, therefore, resists a type of narrative, closing with moral purpose, that Philip Sidney sees as *the* defence of fiction.

At first glance, however, Iago could be figured as a demon, an embodied version of Othello’s demonic possession, relating *Othello* and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* even more closely. As Thomas M. Vozar has pointed out, Othello’s last words prior to his epileptic fit are ‘O devil!’ (4.1.42).²⁸ As Othello’s utterance becomes increasingly akin to a stream of consciousness – ‘Pish! Noses, ears, and lips! Is’t possible? Confess? Hankerchief?’ (4.1.40-1) – the ‘truth’ of his possession by Iago could be said to emerge. And, alongside extraordinary strength, some of the proofs of possession include ‘cryinge, gnashing teeth, wallowing,’ and ‘foming’.²⁹ According to the rare Protestant exorcist John Darrel, this physical evidence is good enough for a conviction; ‘where smoke is, there is fier’.³⁰ Reading Othello’s fit as the reduction of personality to body,

²⁷ Joost Daalder, ‘Madness in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* and *The Pilgrim*’, in *Renaissance Poetry and Drama in Context: Essays for Christopher Wortham*, ed. by Andrew Lynch and Anne M. Scott (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), pp. 159-74 (p. 165).

²⁸ ‘Body-Mind Aporia in the Seizure of Othello’, *Philosophy and Literature* 36. 1 (2012), 183-6 (p. 184). William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. by E. A. J. Honigmann (London: Bloomsbury, 1997; repr. 2014); all subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

²⁹ John Darrell, *A true narration of the strange and grevous vexation by the Devil, of 7. persons in Lancashire, and William Somers of Nottingham* (1600), sig. A5r.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

James L. Calderwood argues ‘if the body is the Devil’s empire, as Luther maintained, and Iago is a devil, then Othello is now most fully within His Satanic Majesty’s dominion’.³¹ Othello, then, is displaying multiple proofs of possession, ready for an exorcism. The fact that Iago must search for external points of entry, accessing Othello through his ears, opens the possibility of a distinct yet related state: demonic obsession. ‘Obsession’ is often understood as working alongside possession, as obsession is more closely connected to inspiration and possession to the physical signs of demonic influence.³² In his *The mystery of witch-craft* (1617), Thomas Cooper sets ‘possession’ – ‘Real possessing of the soules & bodyes of men’ against ‘obsession’ – ‘inspiring them with his evil counsels’.³³ This description of obsession almost perfectly encapsulates Iago’s role in the play; with one third of the lines, counsel is Iago’s speciality, and it comes in a form that is far from benevolent. Othello himself refers to his ‘shadowing passion’ (4.1.40), potentially referring to an obsessive exterior presence, or both possession and obsession acting simultaneously. Is this, as James L. Calderwood has suggested, proof of the shadowy hand of the devil working through our hero, a supernatural explanation that will give meaning to Desdemona’s murder? Part of a greater battle between good and evil, her death is an unfortunate consequence of the devil feeding the husband with poisoned ideas. We might expect, therefore, a narrative in which Othello is on a downward moral trajectory, before blame is assigned to Iago and finally this devil is exorcised.

The identity of devils, however, slips strangely throughout the play. ‘Devil’ is a word that, as Mark Rose has pointed out, appears more times in *Othello* than in any other of Shakespeare’s plays.³⁴ It is applied at one time or another to almost every character. Iago refers to Othello several times as ‘the devil’, specifically in his connection with Desdemona. Her ‘eye’ will not be ‘fed’ from looking at ‘the devil’ (2.1.226, 227). Far from summarising Othello’s personality, the word is used as a judgement one character makes about another. Othello repeatedly refers to Desdemona as a devil, and speaks of

³¹ James L. Calderwood, ‘Speech and Self in *Othello*’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 38.3 (1987), 293-303 (p. 298).

³² See John Cotta, *The infallible true and assured witch* (London, 1625), H4r. See also ‘obsession, n’. in *OED Online*, Oxford University Press <Oxford University Press, July 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/129901> [accessed 19 October 2018].

³³ Thomas Cooper, *The mystery of witch-craft Discovering, the truth, nature, occesions, growth and power thereof. Together with the detection and punishment of the same. As also, the severall stratagemes of Sathan, ensnaring the poore soule by this desperate practize of annoying the bodie: with the severall uses thereof to the Church of Christ. Very necessary for the redeeming of these atheisticall and secure times* (London, 1617), Sig. A8v.

³⁴ Mark Rose, ‘Othello’s Occupation: Shakespeare and the Romance of Chivalry’, *English Literary Renaissance*, 15.3 (1985), 293-311 (p. 306).

Iago as a 'demi-devil' (5.2.307). Rather than Desdemona, Iago and Othello literally being devils or demons, the devil is a way of conceptualising them when they slip beyond what each speaker perceives to be the accepted norms of behaviour. Othello, certainly, prefers the explanation of Iago's devilry to any other; 'demand that demi-devil / Why he hath thus ensnared by soul and body?' (5.2.307-8).³⁵ If there is this devilish purpose, a schema of the forces of good and evil, behind Othello's crime, the traumatic event can be externalised and explained coherently to its audience, enabling catharsis through this imposition of structure.

Perhaps one of the most indicative instances of this is Cassio's referring to 'the devil drunkness', which has given place 'to the devil wrath; one unperfectness shows me another, to make me frankly despise myself' (2.3.289, 290, 290-1). Within this world of inner desire, the devil is merely a stand-in for one's own anger, just as the 'devil' within wine seems to transform 'a sensible man' into a 'fool, and presently a beast!' (2.2.298-9). For Cassio, 'devil' is a term to express elements of himself he is uncomfortable with and would like to create personal distance from, assigning blame to these corporealised emotions.³⁶ However, if any fault is characterised as a 'devil', no one can escape implications of devilishness. Interestingly, clergyman and self-appointed advisor on witchcraft Richard Bernard was well aware of a propensity to blame witches for 'when any, the v[e]ry least crosse happeneth unto them, because they are ever imagining Witchcraft'.³⁷ Just as blame can be assigned to witches, then, distancing the influence of alcohol as a 'devil' renders it into an opponent that can be overcome.

Bernard's fascinating psychological analysis of blame and witchcraft is dramatised, I would argue, by Brabantio. When he learns that Desdemona has fled, Brabantio's first reaction is that 'she deceives me / Past thought!' (1.1.167-8). However, after some time to reflect he returns to the stage with the story that Othello 'hast enchanted her' (1.2.64). In fact, Brabantio seems to accuse Othello of being in direct contact with devilish forces:

...thou hast practised on her with foul charms,
Abused her delicate youth with drugs or minerals
That weakens motion...

³⁵ The reference to both 'soul' and 'body' would seem to support a reading of 'possession' and 'obsession'.

³⁶ It is perhaps significant that most of the action of the play takes place on the island of Cyprus, well known by Shakespeare's contemporaries as the birthplace of Venus, emotion is perhaps closer to the corporeal, just as the goddess is the corporealisation of love and lust.

³⁷ Richard Bernard, *A guide to grand-jury men* (London, 1627), p. 144.

I therefore do apprehend and do attach thee
For an abuser of the world, a practiser
Of arts inhibited and out of warrant (1.2.74-80).

In tracts about possession, bewitchment and demonic possession is often conflated.³⁸ A practitioner of magic is, after all, a servant of the devil's agents. Brabantio's accusations, therefore, foreshadow the notion of supernatural influence.

Brabantio concocts a tale in which Othello has bound his daughter in 'chains of magic' (1.2.66). Rather than acknowledging his daughter's true nature, Brabantio describes her as 'A maiden never bold; / Of spirit so still and quiet, that her motion / Blush'd at herself' (1.3.94-6), denying any strong emotions on her part, particularly the sexual desire that may have led to her partnership with Othello. She, conversely, tells the court 'That I did love the Moor to live with him, / My downright violence and storm of fortunes / May trumpet to the world' (1.3.248-50), suggesting that her father has completely misjudged her personality. Rather than blushing at herself, she is willing to publicly announce the intensity of her passion.³⁹ 'Violence', 'love' and 'enchantment' by some seducer are, of course, tropes of domestic tragedy and the overwhelming passions that precipitate murder, but Desdemona takes public ownership of her violent love, exposing magic as a fallacy manufactured by Brabantio to disguise a truth he finds uncomfortable. Desdemona's self-knowledge, combined with Brabantio's delusional fabrication, foreshadows the notion of devilish possession and undercuts its reality.

This foreshadowing is significant when we turn to the play's central prop: the 'ocular proof' Othello requires to convict his wife of her licentiousness. Othello tells Desdemona,

... That handkerchief
Did an Egyptian to my mother give.
She was a charmer, and could almost read
The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it

³⁸ Richard Bernard uses 'bewitched and possessed' as seeming synonyms, *A guide to grand jury-men*, p. 48. See also Cotta, sig. N2v.

³⁹ This word 'violence' also has other, more archaic meanings that were common in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when it could also be used as a verb, and Desdemona's sentence construction plays on this ambiguity. She is violencing or compelling her fortunes, forcefully shaping her own fate. In this she is the opposite of Othello, taking full responsibility for her emotions and resultant actions. 'violence, v', in *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, January 2018 <www.oed.com/view/Entry/223639> [accessed 28 February 2018].

'Twould make her amiable, and subdue my father
Entirely to her love; but if she lost it
Or made gift of it, my father's eye
Should hold her loathèd and his spirits should hunt
After new fancies. She, dying, gave it me (3.4.55-63).

He weaves his own magical fable to explain the suddenness of the breakdown in his and Desdemona's relationship. Like Brabantio, when confronted with the uncomfortable, Othello imposes magic onto his own narrative. The fact that an Egyptian wove the magic is potentially significant, 'Egyptian Enchanters' or sorcerers being frequently quoted in tracts about witchcraft, possession and obsession.⁴⁰ Thomas Cooper refers to the competition between Moses and Aaron and Pharaoh's 'magicians of Egypt', in which, after Aaron and the magicians transformed their rods into serpents, Aaron's serpent ate all the others.⁴¹ According to Cooper, this is because the magician's serpents were 'a plaine delusion of the eye, by Sathans forgerie'.⁴² The eyes of those watching the contest deceive themselves: this kind of sorcery, for Cooper, is a stand-in for self-delusion. By assigning magic to his change of feelings towards his wife, then, Othello can temporarily live in a fantasy of self-delusion, in which the lovers are pawns in a greater, magical fate. On realising the truth of what he has done, Othello characterises himself as, 'one who loved not wisely but too well', finally acknowledging the entangled emotions of obsessive love and overwhelming jealousy (5.2.333). This explanation, however, is incomplete. He still looks to Iago for resolution: 'demand that demi-devil / Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?' (5.2.298-9). Iago's control of body and soul, alongside of course the accusation of devilry, suggests a supernatural reading, and an eventual exorcism of this demi-devil's influence.

Iago, however, refuses to answer that fundamental question: why did you do it? Shakespeare similarly refuses to answer, denying the structured resolution necessary for catharsis following the play's traumatic murders. Rather than 'one that loved not wisely, but too well' (5.2.341), Iago is a complex sea of shifting motivations that scholars over centuries have attempted to unpick, a conundrum perhaps best articulated by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who called Iago's justifications, 'the motive-hunting of motiveless

⁴⁰ See William Perkins, *A discourse of the damned art of witchcraft so farre forth as it is revealed in the Scriptures, and manifest by true experience* (London, 1610), sig. ¶4r, Anon, *The witches of Northamptonshire* (London, 1612), sig. B1r, and Bernard, *A guide to grand-jury men*, p. 4.

⁴¹ Exodus 7:10-12, King James Version.

⁴² Cooper, p. 173.

malignity'.⁴³ Even Iago cannot pin down his own motivations. His actions prior to the beginning of the play have garnered positive fame, building a public reputation as 'full of love and honesty' (3.3.450, 451), but he also contains a mix of vices. His repeated insistence that Roderigo 'Put money in thy purse' suggests avarice, while he lusts after Desdemona and is jealous that 'it is thought abroad that 'twixt my sheets / He [Othello] has done my office' (1.3.339, 379-80). Confusingly, not only does Iago have the same motivation for murder as Othello – jealousy – he also takes the spouse's typical role in domestic tragedy, stabbing his own wife onstage. All or none of these vices could be the key motivating factor behind his schemes, the antithesis of Othello's furious jealousy or the Husband's avarice. While Iago's profound influence over Othello in some ways mimics demonic possession, and he does have some similarities with medieval Vice figures,⁴⁴ Iago in fact seems to be an overdetermined set of motivations for murder. And Iago's impact on Othello relies, not on magic, but the power of talk and of reputation, explicitly 'by wit and not by witchcraft' (2.3.367). Iago's words find fertile ground. Even though Othello accurately dissects a mode of dishonest speech performance ('these stops of thine'), he is unable to distinguish Iago's performance of honesty from real spoken truth (3.3.123). As Iago puts it, Othello, 'thinks men honest that but seem to be so' (1.3.399).

Iago refuses to be distilled into an easily comprehensible figure that could serve as a cautionary tale of vice or virtue, finally telling the questioners eager to know the 'authentic' version of events, 'Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word' (5.2.309-10). In front of authority figures Lodovico and Gratiano, who providentially arrive from Venice exactly as justice needs to be restored, Iago's refusal to speak leaves the story frustratingly unfinished. This is particularly disturbing because Iago has hitherto been the audience's point of access into the play, with more instances of direct address than almost any early modern play. When Iago abandons the audience, therefore, and refuses to explain his motivations for murder, it is doubly disconcerting. Lodovico and Gratiano certainly intend to get to the truth of events, threatening 'Torments' and 'torture', so that Iago 'shall close prisoner rest / Till that the nature of your fault be known / To the Venetian state' (5.2.312, 379, 344-6). They wish, through torture, to find the unequivocal truth of the murders committed on Cyprus, yet they do not *need* this truth: the blame has been assigned, and Othello has already dispatched himself. The strength of their need for narrative closure will be forcefully inscribed on Iago's body, torture paralleling the brutally physical

⁴³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819 On Literature*, Vol. 2, ed. by R.A. Foakes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 315.

⁴⁴ See Douglas W. Hayes, *Rhetorical Subversion in Early English Drama* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), p. 108.

exorcism of *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, in which the Husband's nails are heaved up and the devil departs from every joint. Significantly, early modern torturers tend to deny its existence while emphasising its legality, suggesting that those obstructing the justice system from accessing the 'truth' of a crime deserve to be treated in a different way to common criminals.⁴⁵ Because we do not see the outcome of their tortures, the question remains: will the eventual explanation that Lodovico and Gratiano extract through torture be more satisfying than Iago as a 'demi-devil' (5.2.307)? Will physical prying into the truth remove his influence on events, akin to the physical performance of exorcism? Iago tells his audience, 'What you know, you know' (5.2.309). The repetition of 'know' here suggests a superfluity of knowledge about the crime and its attendant circumstances: the audience of the theatre have watched every participant in the crime, have watched the crime itself, heard the dying woman's last words. Is there any more knowledge it is possible to know? Nothing further can explain the traumatic violence of Desdemona's death. Iago, in denying his audience their godlike omniscience over his crimes, defies categorisation, so challenging narratives of infamy that use binaries of good/evil, sane/mad as a way to make sense of traumatic events. He denies the audience catharsis or – to use an overused phrase – a sense of closure.

Unlike the writer of *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, Iago does not allow the Venetians or us, the play's audience, to come to terms with the violence we have witnessed through a sense-making narrative: the spectre of it haunts us as a traumatic set of images, precisely because we can never fully understand why it happened. The expected exorcism of trauma never takes place, despite hints that Othello may be devilishly obsessed and/or possessed by Iago. *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, in dehumanising the violence of domestic tragedy as a property of the devil, ends with an exorcism that simultaneously exorcises trauma for its audience. But can violence really be resolved through this particular narrative form? Does domestic crime now make sense for its audience? Problematizing a structured, cathartic narrative of notorious crime, *Othello*, after displaying a traumatically violent set of events, leaves its audience with an open wound, an out-of-control moral structure, and the unsettling sense that 'Chaos is come again' (3.3.92).

⁴⁵ James Simpson, 'No Brainer: The Early Modern Tragedy of Torture', *Religion & Literature* 43.3 (2011), 1-23 (p. 6).