



RESEARCH ARTICLE

**HISTORICISING THE MONSTROSITY OF JEALOUSY IN *OTHELLO* AND *THE WINTER'S TALE***

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This article historicises the monstrosity of the passion of jealousy and situates it in its early modern cultural context with special reference to *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*; hence, the study is separate from the pure discussion of the nature or causes of jealousy. The cultural effects of the Reformation and the Renaissance and the abundant availability of literature, both original and in translations, inspired Shakespeare to portray the monstrosity of jealousy with all its early modern character. Most of such literature retained a strong influence from the classical antiquity. Moreover, the patriarchal standards of the period and residual elements of the shame culture rendered jealousy such a strong inflammability that it could, in early modern culture, "Burn like the mines of sulphur" (*Othello*: III.3.323).¹ The study contextualises and historicises the monstrosity of the passion of jealousy in the chosen plays and concludes that jealousy in Shakespeare's society was regarded as a complex male-oriented malady, accompanied by monstrosity of violent passions capable of wreaking havoc in the family life of the victim. Shakespeare portrays Othello and Leontes as the epitome of this monstrous passion as was known to the people, the intelligentsia and the stage-goer which gave it an axiomatic status.

Keywords: *Shakespeare, Historicising, Jealousy, Monstrosity, Early Modern Society, Renaissance, Patriarchal Standards, Drama.*



INTRODUCTION

This article historicises and contextualises the monstrosity of Shakespeare's "green-eyed monster" (*Othello*: III.3.162) in *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*, and the havoc it brings in a victim's marital life in early modern England. Therefore, both these plays portray a microcosmic reflection of the history of the extremity of jealousy and a mirror to comprehend the Elizabethan and Jacobean understanding of the violent aspect of this malady. Recent criticism in the history of emotions claims that "emotion is culture", that passions have histories. Therefore, Shakespeare's treatment of the monstrous facet of the passion of jealousy cannot be understood in isolation from the patriarchal, historical and cultural constructs of his society in which these plays were formulated (Reddy, p. ix). However, it is also imperative to note that jealousy has been discussed extensively in Shakespeare criticism and a brief introduction to this critique does not mean that the article's focus is jealousy per se, but it is just to set the background against which different aspects of jealousy originated which would result in its monstrosity and found their way into the plays. In other words, the sole purpose of this study is to find the answer to the question: where does the monstrosity of jealousy originate from? To answer this question, this study will particularly focus on these early modern concepts associated with the monstrosity of jealousy: a woman's involvement in extra marital sexual activities; concept of ownership; jealousy as a male humoral disease; jealousy's power to incapacitate the reason or jealousy as the tyrant of the mind; concept of chastity; woman's image as a diabolical creature and a sea of evils in early modern

literature; jealousy as a monster itself; misinterpretations; and jealousy as a mortal flaw in a man.

INVOLVEMENT IN EXTRA MARITAL SEXUAL ACTIVITIES

It would be useful to note two factors as a background to the culture and history of this passion: first, Shakespeare's society was thoroughly patriarchal which had a long history; and second, this masculinist attitude had unbroken connections to the "shame culture" that preceded early modern society in which behaviour was controlled by "concepts of pride and honour" and men were in the dominant position to control women's behaviour (Breitenberg, p. 389; Lloyd-Jones, p. 26). As a result of this social outlook, honour and pride were valued highly among men. This patriarchal narrative was further strengthened by the introduction of Senecan "stern Stoic moralist" ideals into the education system that were meant "to make the young boy manly and courageous" (Ong, p. 115). Contrary to these ideals, the ethos for women was founded on the principles of humility and passivity, taught and propagated through conduct books. Therefore, in an environment like this, if a man's honour or pride was challenged by women who were not supposed to be the equal of men, strong negative emotions, jealousy being one of the strongest amongst them, could be expected. Moreover, "extra marital sexual activity of whatever kind was in social theory abhorred as hateful to God" and "subject to legal penalty"; however, this applied only to the early modern woman (Ingram, p. 125). On the other hand, the man had freedom in this regard as a result of their masculine prerogative:



A man is the head and Lord of the woman, therefore she hath no power at all over him, and so consequently it is lawful for him, without any contradiction to abandon her and give himselfe to all voluptuous pleasures (Anon, p. G7r).

The idea of male “voluptuous pleasures” juxtaposed with forceful emphasis on female chastity, outlined in conduct literature and religious tenets, created a “double standard for sexual behaviour” in which “men are expected to have extensive sexual experience, whereas in women” it was “dishonest” (Jardine, p. 130). It is for this reason that “fornication and adultery were more seriously regarded in the female than in the male” because in the period “sexual reputation was more central to the female persona” (Ingram, p. 302). Therefore, patriarchal, religious and legal principles, directly or indirectly, nourished the man’s pride and honour and his expectations to faithfulness, loyalty and chastity irrespective of his own voluptuousness. From raising a man to the status of a lord first and then equating him with Christ—“For the husband is the wifes head, euen as Christ is the head of the Church”—the woman was emphatically advised to be obliged to her lord (Primaudaye, p. 512). Any action by the woman that brought shame and disgrace to the man could be equated to high treason and heresy; and in Shakespeare’s England these violations were treated with atrocious ruthlessness, a microcosmic reflection of which is found in *Othello* and *The Winter’s Tale*. Othello’s confession regarding strangling his wife “For nought I did in hate, but all in honour (*Othello*:

V.2.29)” and Leontes’s desire to burn his wife, “she were gone, / Given to the fire” (*TWT*: II.3.7-8) could be the representation of the punishments for high treason (death) and heresy (burning alive) respectively as discussed later in this article.

CONCEPT OF OWNERSHIP

Another aspect of jealousy that resulted in the monstrosity of this passion was the concept of ownership. Rebecca Olson argues that “the discourses of early modern jealousy depended on the institution of private property, and often aligned women with objects, property, or commodities” (Olson, p. 9). The woman was divided into three categories in early modern discourses in England: “the delight of mankind”, “laudable” and “the dregges and scumme [...] of woman kinde”, whereas there was no such classification for men (Newstead, pp. 4,5,6). If the early modern man believed that his wife, upon whom he had a “Clayme, which one challengeth to any thing as his owne” and “wherein no other can (truely) demand any share or part” is a “scumme”, his jealousy was inevitable as in the case of Othello and Leontes who believe, owing to their jealousy, that someone else has a share in what is owned by them (Varchi, p. 19). Peter Stearns, discussing the contextual perspective of jealousy in Western history, elaborates that “jealousy [...] may conjure up emotions such as sadness (loss), anger (betrayal), fear / anxiety (loneliness)” in a situation that Othello finds himself in because in early modern patriarchal society, losing a partner who was regarded as husband’s property or at least a claim to have “some kind of entitlement over another person” triggered monstrous passions of jealousy (Stearns, pp. 7-26; Aaron, pp. 40-54).



IEALOVSIIE springeth from the Propertie or Right that wee haue, when we (enjoying our Lady or Mistresse) would haue her soly and wholly vnto our selues [...] that another man should haue any part or interest in her, any way, or at any time (Varchi, p. 19).

JEALOUSY AS A MALE HUMORAL DISEASE

Jealousy was treated as a male disease in the humoral theory; and its focus was the man in a "marital relationship" who suffers from a sexual jealousy which causes matrimonial chaos (Cipriani et al., p. 468). Moreover, as Katharine Maus puts it, jealousy or rather "sexual jealousy" was "typically the weakness and prerogative of the male" in that age (Maus, pp. 563-64). In the case of Othello and Leontes, it is men who are suffering from an intense form of jealousy that "conuert[s] marriage into a most miserable and wretched estate", making the marital relationship an unbearable vexation (Clever, p. 186).

JEALOUSY'S POWER TO INCAPACITATE THE REASON OR JEALOUSY AS THE TYRANT OF THE MIND

Furthermore, as being a physical or medical condition known to the people of the day, jealousy was considered to have a negative potential to blind a jealous person's judgment, thus rendering bestiality to the victim. Shakespeare alludes to these facts in *The Winter's Tale* in these words by Leontes:

LEONTES [Aside.] Too hot, too hot:
To mingle friendship farre
is mingling bloods.
I have *tremor cordis* on me.
My heart dances,

But not for joy, not joy.

(TWT: I.2.108-111)

Leontes interprets the simple actions of courtesy in such a negative way that he equates them with "mingling bloods", which results in "*tremor cordis*", that is the quivering of the heart, a physical condition known to the people of the day. Here, Leontes mentions the adverse effects of jealousy on his heart, which "dances" due to his jealousy despite the fact that their affair has not yet been proven. In this way, his misinterpretations of Hermione's actions preoccupy his diseased mind and he asks his son: "Mamillius, art thou my boy?" (TWT: I.2.119-20). Jealousy envelopes Leontes's sound judgement and ruins his love and happiness despite his close confidants' assurances that Hermione is chaste and warnings to "be cured / Of this diseased opinion, and betimes" (TWT: I.2.296-97). Shakespeare, thus, portrays jealousy as a strong negative emotion in line with prevalent attitudes toward this passion and its potential to "ruine *Loue*, like vnto a thicke smoake which smothers the brightest flame" if a jealous person could "expell it not" (Coeffeteau, pp. 183-84). In *The Winter's Tale* Leontes's jealousy is expelled after receiving the Oracle and he is able to reconcile; in *Othello*, the Moor's jealousy ruins his true love in the form of Desdemona's and his death, thereby transforming humans into "most ferocious beasts" (Wagschal, p. 7).

With regards to jealousy's potential to incapacitate the reason and to transform one into an aggressive tyrant and morbid beast, there is yet another early modern belief that concerns a person of authority, position, pride and honour like Othello and Leontes. Writing about these cultural attitudes



towards jealousy that dominated Shakespeare's society and continued to influence writers down to the eighteenth century, John Dryden says that jealousy is the "tyrant of the mind" because of the subjection of reason to passion (Dryden, p. Fr). "This subjection of reason to passion was, in the Elizabethan view, what made a monarch a tyrant" (Siegel, p. 303). In *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes "is proclaimed to be a [jealous] tyrant by the oracle of Apollo" which is a godly attestation of his tyranny, and the Elizabethans believed that "the tyrant is inevitably punished" which means that the subjection of reason to passion will lead to destruction (Siegel, p. 302). Leontes predicament in the form of separation from his wife and daughter for years, his son and close confidant's deaths and his own mental agony over a long period of time is, as per early modern attitudes, a godly punishment because of his jealousy. Othello's punishment is worse than Leontes's because he allowed his monstrous passion to incapacitate his reason completely, which leads to his and Desdemona's deaths.

Shakespeare, however, makes it clear that though the man who suffers from jealousy goes through pain and misery, it is the women (Desdemona, Hermione and Perdita) who have to pay the real price. In Shakespeare's culture, as Robert Burton explains in his treatise, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, "women are sufficiently curbed in such cases, [while] the rage of men is more eminent, and more frequently put in practise" and "jealous husbands," he concludes, "tyrannise over their poore wifes" (Burton, p. 684). For Burton, moreover, men from hot countries like "Greece, Spaine, Italy, Turkey, Africke, Asia" are more prone to rage (Burton, p.

684). Othello is a Moor and Shakespeare is not unaware of the implications of his protagonist's identity.

CONCEPT OF CHASTITY

Monstrosity of jealousy also originated from the concept of chastity because in early modern England, the man's honour and reputation were closely associated with chastity, and in the patriarchal society of the time valued it highly. Even if a woman were falsely accused of being unchaste, despite her acquittal, she would lose her good reputation and such a woman was disowned by her husband. This was because of the "tightened regulation of morality" in which "notions of honor that moral regulation tended to advantage men over women"; and if women "approached the courts for protection against seducers, they were now more likely to be condemned for fornication. Penalties for adultery were harsher for women" (Reddy, p. 305). Desdemona and Hermione represent these ideas as well. The early modern concept was that "a woman of suspected chastity liueth but in a miserable case, for there is but small difference by being naught, and being thought naught" (Swetnam, p. 54). Shakespeare encapsulates this belief in these words:

OTHELLO I had been happy if the
general camp,

Pioneers and all, had tasted
her sweet body,

So I had nothing
known. (*Othello*: III.3.339-
41)



In these ironical remarks, Othello does not mean that he would have been happier if all the army men would have tasted her "sweet body", but he yearns for ignorance in this regard because honour as well as the perception of honour matter. In Othello's opinion, the knowledge that Desdemona is not chaste is shared by Iago, Emilia and Cassio, and hence, it is a challenge to his honour. Therefore, as an archetypal representation of early modern patriarchy, he is unable to bear this intolerable disgrace and wishes that he were ignorant in these matters. Moreover, he is not ready to forgive her for bringing him shame and tarnishing his honour and decides to punish her with death, which is nothing but his intense reaction to uphold his pride and masculinity. Forgiveness in adultery cases was a very rare phenomenon in those days. The anonymous author of *Fancies Aque-fittes* (1590) explains this cultural attitude in these words:

God is more readie to pardon
and forgiue a sin, then man is,
he forgets (withall) a sinne so
soone as he hath pardoned it,
but a man dooth continually
remember it, in regard that
honour is like to a glasse, which
beeing once broken can neuer
be made whole agayne (Anon, p.
H8v).

Othello's honour is like a broken glass which cannot be made whole again as the author of *Fancies Aque-fittes* observes, therefore he entertains no possibility of forgiveness, and his monstrosity is conspicuous especially because it is Michael Cassio, his subordinate and a long-time acquaintance, with

whom Desdemona is said to be involved. Similarly, Leontes's royal persona values honour and reputation more emphatically and before he is enlightened with the truth, his unforgiving behaviour destroys Hermione's good reputation and tragic incidents follow.

WOMAN'S IMAGE AS A DIABOLICAL CREATURE AND A SEA OF EVILS IN EARLY MODERN LITERATURE

Women's image as wicked and diabolical creatures is also compared to a sea of evils in the Renaissance conduct literature that finds its representation in *Othello*. Such an image is yet another reason for fuelling the monstrosity of jealousy. According to Alexander Niccholes, "a wicked woman is a sea of euils, and in her tyde more full then that element of monsters" (Niccholes, p. 5). In *Othello*, the uneasy sea "with high and monstrous mane" (*Othello*: II.1.13) in a "high-wrought flood" (*Othello*: II.1.2) upon which Othello travels to Cyprus is a symbolic representation of a wicked woman, for whom Othello will be trapped, as in the words of Pierre Charron, into "the tempest of iealousie" which to Shakespeare is a "violent tempest" (*Othello*: II.1.35), thus foreshadowing multiple deaths at the end of the play (Charron, p. 175). Keeping in view Othello's Moorish background, Shakespeare also foretells his death owing to his jealousy as "The desperate tempest hath so banged the Turks / That their designment halts" (*Othello*: II.1.21-22) because "The Moor himself [is] at sea" (*Othello*: II.1.29). That is why Niccholes advises men of the day on how to choose a good wife, elaborating in the following maritime metaphor:



This undertaking is a matter of some difficulty, for good wiuers are many times so like vnto bad, that they are hardly discerned betwixt, they could not otherwise deceiue so many as they do, for the deuill can transforme himselfe into an Angell of Light, the better to draw others into the chaines of darkenesse, so these, his creatures, themselues into the shape of honesty, the better to intangle others in the bonds of repentance.... and because it is such a sea, wherein so many shipwracke for want of better knowledge and aduise vpon a Rock, that tooke not better counsel (Niccholes, pp. 8-9).

With such a diabolical representation of the woman in the conduct literature, marriage, in Othello's opinion, is a curse or a 'shipwracke' as per its contemporary definition. In a patriarchal setup, a man would feel more devastated by the idea of being deceived by his wife whom he considered inferior to him in social status. Such a thought created the intensity of male sexual anxiety and, hence, monstrosity of jealousy. Although Desdemona is not unfaithful, Othello wrongly considers that she is a devil transformed into an "Angell of Light". His fear and anxiety originate from the fear of a wicked deceiving wife that not only prevailed in Shakespeare's society, but also "pervades the drama of the English Renaissance" as evident in *Othello* and

The Winter's Tale (Maus, p. 561). Historical records show that concerns regarding "female sexual fidelity ran high in English Renaissance culture" and "terms cuckold, whore, and whoremaster account for most of the defamation suits brought in sixteenth century church courts" are a part of the history of England (Maus, p. 562).

JEALOUSY AS A MONSTER ITSELF IN EARLY MODERN LITERATURE

Emilia similarly refers to jealousy as monstrous suggesting the popular understanding of jealousy in early modern period.

EMILIA 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.

(*Othello*: III.4.148-151)

This is when Desdemona confesses to Emilia that she never gave Othello any cause to be jealous ("Alas the day, I never gave him cause", III.4.147). Upon this confession, Emilia tells her that jealousy is a monster which does not need any cause to be born. Emilia's lines reflect Shakespeare's close familiarity with Varchi's seminal work *The Blazon of lealousie* in which the author addresses jealousy [care] thus: "Care, thou that nourishest thy selfe", which seems an imitation of "monster begot upon itself" (Varchi, p. 10). Moreover, there are two very subtle points implied in Emilia's lines. Firstly, she knows that Othello's jealousy has no cause, no reason and it



“Begot upon itself” as Othello is merely a victim of a “jealous toy concerning” (*Othello*: III.4.146) Desdemona, who, according to Emilia’s judgment, is innocent. Iago’s jealousy of the Moor and Cassio is also without any reason, as some Shakespearean critics believe. Secondly, both Emilia and Iago, being husband and wife, believe that jealousy is a monster. Even Desdemona, in her prayer “Heaven keep the monster from Othello’s mind” (*Othello*: III.4.152) acknowledges the monstrous aspect of jealousy. Shakespeare, in this way, depicts a widespread awareness of jealousy among households as a monster at the time.

Similarly, the monster of jealousy is “begot” without any reason in the case of Leontes too, who keeps a close eye on Hermione and her movements around Polixenes; and from their acts of royal courtesies, he misinterprets that his wife is unfaithful. When Camillo tells Leontes that Hermione is chaste, Leontes replies:

LEONTES Is whispering nothing?
Is leaning cheek to cheek?
Is meeting noses?
Kissing with inside lip?
Stopping the career
Of laughter with a sigh? —a
note infallible
Of breaking honesty.
Horsing foot on foot?
Skulking in corners? (*TWT*:
I.2.284-89)

Camillo instantly understands that Leontes has misinterpreted everything so much so that he advises Leontes to “be cured / Of this diseased opinion, and betimes” (*TWT*: I.2.296-97) because he realises that Leontes has become the victim of the monster—jealousy, and “tis most dangerous” (*TWT*: I.2.298) for him and for everyone around. Leontes turns into a monster and thinks of extreme consequences for Hermione, for example, burning her at the stake, and for those who are begotten of her—Perdita and Mamillius.

JEALOUSY AND MISINTERPRETATIONS

Shakespeare’s representation of this monstrosity of jealousy, and a husband turned into a beast was commonly known in early modern period based on the oral and literary traditions of the time. That is why, Shakespeare’s portrayal of the monstrosity of jealousy closely matches with the description recorded by Burton, in his *Anatomy*—an encyclopaedic collection for which the author “ransacked about 1500 classical texts” to produce it and the author of *Fancies Ague-fittes* (Berrois, p. 428):

What comfort or contentment
can a poore woman haue, to be
accompanied with such a beast
[jealous husband], as is euery
houre watching her, holdes his
wife as a prisoner, cannot
endure shee should speake to
anie one, because he reputes
her fraile and easie to fall?
(Anon, p. H2v)



This description of jealousy by the author of *Fancies Ague-fittes*, and its outcomes truly reflect the miserable states of Desdemona and Hermione, whose husbands have transformed into beasts because of their monstrous jealousy and made their lives a vexation. Both Othello and Iago admit, in the following dialogue, that a cuckold is a monster and a beast because of sexual jealousy.

OTHELLO A hornèd man's a monster
and a beast.

IAGO There's many a beast then
in a populous city,

And many a civil monster.
(*Othello*: IV.1.58-60)

The author of *Fancies Ague-fittes*, notes that a jealous husband keeps a very strict eye on his wife, makes her life like a prisoner's and cannot tolerate that she speaks to anyone. Similarly, Burton in his *Anatomy* also creates a sketch of a monstrous jealous beast in these words:

lealosie [...] begets vnquietnes in the mind night and day: he hunts after euery word he heares, euery whisper, and amplifies it to himselfe...he misinterprets every thing is said or done, most apt to mistake and misconster, he pries in euery corner, followes close, obserues to an haire: Besides all those strange gestures of staring, frowning, grinning, rolling of eyes, menacing, gastly looks, broken pace, interrupt,

precipitate, halfe turnes.

(Burton, pp. 681-82)

All these qualities, mentioned in *Fancies* and *Anatomy*, make him a beast and his partner's life a living hell because he would resort to violence and aggression, as demonstrated in *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*. Othello keeps a very vigilant eye on Desdemona on the instructions of Iago first and later, on his own purpose, notes her moves and even asks Iago to use Emilia as a spy. In Act IV, Scene 1 of *Othello*, Iago advises Othello to hide ("Do but encave yourself", IV.1.78) and listen and watch Cassio's "fleers" and "gibes" (*Othello*: IV.1.79) to find any traces of affair with Desdemona. Iago's planning is to ask Cassio questions about Bianca to make him smile and jeer at, which is misinterpreted by Othello. These are the first steps to transform Othello into a beast.

JEALOUSY AS A MORTAL FLAW IN A MAN

According to early modern understanding, jealousy resulted in extreme form of violence, and it was considered to be a mortal flaw or imperfection, particularly in a man. In this connection, the author of *Fancies Ague-fittes* says that "when a man is lealous without a cause...it is a verie great blemish to him" (Anon, H1v). Shakespeare introduces this "blemish" or mortal flaw in Othello and Leontes in this specific case. In *Natvral and Morall Questions and Answers* (1598), another famous work of the period, the author points out that "louing too much turneth" to "lealousie" which he calls "mortall hatred", expressed in the form of extreme violence (P., p, Diiiiv). Othello and Leontes incarnate this early modern concept of jealousy. Othello's passionate love for Desdemona turns into a "mortall hatred" because of his rancorous fits of rage and frenzy



owing to his "jealousy [which] gives rise to fatal violence against the partner, this may be followed by suicide" as well as homicide (Kingham and Gordon, p. 211). Roderigo's "strong sexual feeling" for Desdemona instigates him to violence which results in his own death; and Iago's jealousy of the Moor and Cassio also brings about violence and deaths (Mieszkowski, p. 16). On the other hand, Leontes's monstrous jealousy results in the deaths of his own son and Antigonus, whereas he loses the company of his wife, daughter and his friends for many years. All these characters undergo various stages of jealousy, as per early modern understanding. In this connection, Burton underscores that jealous people, if they are not "relieved, proceed from suspicion to hatred, from hatred to frensie, madnesse, iniury, murder, and despaire (Burton, p. 687). Shakespeare's understanding of the different stages of jealousy that lead to violence, as portrayed in Othello, Leontes, Roderigo and Iago, evince a close symbiosis between his dramatic representation and contemporary sources and practices.

CONCLUSION

The historicisation of the monstrosity of jealousy in this article reveals that in the early modern period, jealousy was known to be a monstrous and "furious passion", a "sore vexation, a most intollerable burden, a frenzie, a madnesse it selfe" unleashing a cornucopia of ghastly emotions such as "wrath, solemnesse & such tiranicall fecions", pain as well as blindness of judgement (Burton, p. 687; Castiglione, p. 314). The factors that have been the focus of this study and that resulted in the monstrosity of jealousy were popular during the early modern period and occupied considerable space in conduct books, plays

and poetry of the day. As mentioned already, "emotion is culture" and Shakespeare, like an ethnographer, studied all these different facets of jealousy meticulously and portrayed it in *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale* in consonance with the prevailing attitudes (Reddy, p. ix). For Shakespeare's society, "Loues most iniurious enemy" was "Ielousie" and it was considered as "the chiefe procurer of greatest miserie" (A, pp. A2r, I4r). It is these contemporary attitudes that Shakespeare, as a shrewd playwright, capitalises to create his monstrously jealous characters to enthrall his audience.

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Notes

ⁱ All citations are from Shakespeare, W. (2017). *The New Oxford Shakespeare: Modern Critical Edition*. G. Taylor and et al. (Eds.). Oxford University Press., unless otherwise stated.

ⁱⁱ *The Winter's Tale*