ABEI Journal — The Brazilian Journal of Irish Studies, v.22, n.1, 2020, p. 53-55

The Cage Door Open: Depictions of Monstrosity in Banville and Shakespeare

A Porta da Gaiola Aberta: Representações da Monstruosidade em Banville e Shakespeare

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In 2016, when I was Literary Manager of the Abbey Theatre, we began a series of events called The Shakespeare Conversations, co-hosted by playwright Marina Carr; a brave attempt to read and discuss every one of the plays of Shakespeare in the company of theatre professionals, with extracts read by actors. Each session was guided by a different playwright, director, actor – the invite list was extensive, and different practitioners put themselves forward to lead the group each month.

As a busy Literary Manager with 20 playwrights under commission and a hectic schedule of developmental workshops and events, my homework for the meetings was generally done on the fly; a quick re-read of the play on the morning of the day in question, and a scramble for a few of the obvious questions and themes which struck me. There was something quite liberating in this quick reading of texts we have been taught to view as weighty, difficult, serious. It taught me how much of the text is already embedded in our psyche – because Shakespeare is the great architect of the language, but also because of the echo chamber of popular culture. One of the most memorable moments was during our discussion of Iago, Shakespeare's seemingly motiveless villain, when playwright Mark O'Rowe quoted Michael Caine's line about Joker from Christopher Nolan's Batman film *The Dark Knight Rises*: "Some men just want to watch the world burn."

This brings me to Freddie Montgomery, the protagonist of John Banville's *The Book of Evidence* (1989), a novel which I picked up again recently for the first time in 15 years. I've always been a fan of Banville's lavish prose-style and his facility for ventriloquism, and Montgomery's monologue is immediately theatrical, full of allusion and evasion, bringing to mind Thomas Kilroy's masterful *Double Cross*, another fascinating study in Irish identity and morality, first performed in 1986. And, to continue the theatrical theme, the Shakespearean echoes in *The Book of Evidence* – both overt and subtextual – demanded my attention. On the very first page, Montgomery introduces an image of monstrosity which evokes the final scenes of *Macbeth*:

> I am kept locked up here like some exotic animal, last survivor of a species they had thought extinct. They should let in people to view me, the girl-eater, svelte and dangerous, padding to and fro in my cage, my terrible green glance flickering past the bars, give them something to dream about, tucked up cosy in their beds of a night. (1)

ISSN 1518-0581 | eISSN 2595-8127 | DOI 10.37389/abei.v22i1.3847
Received: 1 March 2020

This passage echoes Macduff and Macbeth's last exchange, where the former threatens the latter with a life of humiliation: "Then yield thee, coward,/ And live to be the show and gaze o' the time:/We'll have thee, as our rarer monsters are,/ Painted on a pole, and underwrit,/ 'Here may you see the tyrant."

It's always been intriguing to me that humiliation is proffered as the worst fate that Macbeth could suffer in return for the many horrors he has inflicted on others. His best (and worst) characteristic is bravery, and so his agreement to fight Macduff and die rather than be caged perhaps demonstrate the tiniest inkling of a redemption for the man; at least he wasn't a coward. It's intriguing to watch Montgomery play with this idea of monstrosity – the elegance of the beast, "svelte and dangerous", and the transgressive thrill experienced by the onlookers, his desire to "…give them something to dream about."

In the description of the caged beast, Montgomery also calls forth echoes of Caliban: "the girl-eater", with a "terrible green glance" are similar markers of monstrosity as "hag-seed" and "strange fish", and both characters attempt or achieve great harm to women. Much like Caliban, Montgomery is also one of the last of his kind; a ghostly remnant of a fading order, whose father taught him that "the world, the only worthwhile world, had ended with the last viceroy's departure from these shores" (32). The Montgomeries have spent much of their married life drifting between various Mediterranean islands: "It was always an island", Montgomery tells us, adding, "That life, drifting from island to island, encouraged illusions." (12). In these passages his tone shifts from caged monster to powerful arbiter: "We presided among this rabble, Daphne and I, with a kind of grand detachment, like an exiled king and queen waiting daily for word of the counter-rebellion and the summons from the palace to return." (11). If Montgomery on the island was Prospero, his return to Dublin has unleashed his inner Caliban, in the form of "Bunter", Montgomery's overweight childhood alter-ego:

> That fat monster inside me just saw his chance and leaped out, frothing and flailing. He had scores to settle with the world, and she, at that moment, was world enough for him. I could not stop him. Or could I? He is me, after all, and I am he. But no, things were too far gone for stopping. Perhaps that is the essence of my crime, of my culpability, that I let things get to that stage, that I had not been vigilant enough, had not been enough of a dissembler, that I left Bunter to his own devices, and thus allowed him, fatally, to understand that he was free, that the cage door was open, that nothing was forbidden, that everything was possible. (169-70)

But beyond echoes of *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*, my re-reading of *The Book of Evidence* brought me back to Iago, and to Mark O'Rowe's abovementioned reference to that pop culture icon, Joker – two archetypally motiveless villains. Like them, Montgomery's motives are opaque to us, and his testimony is compelling because it teases us with the notion that we will be able to piece together some meaning from the fragments of his life and experience. Early in the book, Montgomery tells us that he doesn't believe he ever had a choice:

> I used to believe, like everyone else, that I was determining the course of my own life, according to my own decisions, but gradually, as I accumulated more and more past to look back on, I realised that I had done the things I did because I could do no other. Please, do not imagine, my lord, I hasten to say it, do not imagine that you detect here the insinuation of an apologia, or even of a defence. I wish to claim full responsibility for my actions – after all, they are the only things I can call my own – and I declare in advance that I shall accept without demur the verdict of the court. I am merely asking, with all respect, whether it is feasible to hold on to the principle of moral culpability once the notion of free will has been abandoned. (12-13)

This is an eloquent evasion, but an evasion nonetheless, and tells us little except that Montgomery has at some point made an arbitrary decision to dissociate will from action, as we have seen from his references to Bunter. Similarly, despite his vague protests that Othello has slept with his wife, or passed him over for promotion, the final lines of Iago's soliloquy in Act One Scene Three of *Othello* betray a similar tendency for the speaker to follow their ideas as if they are independent things, acting upon their authors rather than vice versa: "I have't. It is engender'd. Hell and night/ Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light." (55) These are men who give themselves over to chaos.

In the final pages of Montgomery's confession, he does grant us some startling glimpses into the "failure of imagination" that led him to brutally murder Josie Bell: "I killed her because I could kill her, and I could kill her because for me she was not alive." (243-44). This reveals much about Montgomery; even on deep reflection, the only crime he finds himself guilty of is not possessing a sufficiently God-like power to imbue others with life – a rather skewed interpretation of the human quality of empathy, and a return to his Prospero fantasy. The book's ending reintroduces a note of uncertainty: "True, Inspector? I said. All of it. None of it. Only the shame."(249). These lines tell us little more than Iago's infuriating final speech: "Demand me nothing: what you know, you know:/ From this time forth I never will speak word." (261)

This final evasion makes Banville's work all the more satisfying; we have been tantalised by the prospect of understanding a cold-blooded killer, and yet a modicum of mystery must remain in order for us to feel that compelling frisson of fear. As Harold Bloom says of Iago: "According to the myth, Prometheus steal fire to free us; Iago steals us as fresh fodder for the fire." (459). Murderers, tricksters and monsters have obsessed us throughout history, and allowing ourselves to become complicit in their actions through the safety net of fiction is an important part of our processing the risks that surround us – we see this pattern arising in folk tales, in Shakespeare's use of the tragic mode, and in the exploits of comic book villains. Banville's masterstroke in *The Book of Evidence* is his unique collision of high art and pop culture, applying the principles of the crime thriller to a philosophical meditation on evil in a manner that would have pleased the most demanding Elizabethan audience. Our time spent with Montgomery allows us to explore the boundaries of our own humanity, before retreating, safe in the knowledge that true evil is impossible to understand. We have glimpsed the monster, but for now he is safely returned to his cage, and speaks no more.

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