

**MULTICULTURAL PERCEPTIONS IN ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND:  
SHAKESPEARE'S OTHERNESS OF THE MOOR**

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*Abstract: The paper deals with the perception of the Blacks in Elizabethan England and the research is formulated from a modern perspective in accordance to the question What is the extent of Shakespeare's understanding of the Other? Even if Otherness is encountered in many of his plays such as Aaron, the Moor of Titus Andronicus, Othello, the Moor of Venice, Caliban of The Tempest, we will focus on Othello's personality on the background of the Early Modern (pre)conceptions on race and Otherness.*

*Keywords: multiculturalism, Elizabethan Age, race, the Other, Shakespeare*

“I can't say Shakespeare reached a point of closure and an emancipated, enlightened view of people of color. He didn't. But he did put persons of color into European culture, there to remain. And that enriches the cultural discourse.” ~ Imtiaz Habib

The London of Shakespeare's time – Tudor London – underwent a major transformation: what had previously been a medieval city, in which economic and political power was based mostly on the guild system and the church, now become a worldwide trading centre and the headquarters of the national government.

The present-day cosmopolitan aspect of London seems to find its roots much earlier, in Shakespeare's lifetime, as it becomes obvious from a much quoted open letter send by Queen Elizabeth I herself to the Lord Mayor of London.

“An open le[t]tre to the L[ord] Maiour of London and th'alermen his brethren, And to all other Maiours, Sheryfes, &c. Her Ma[jes]tie understanding that there are there are of late divers Blackmoores brought into this Realme, of which kinde of people there are already here to manie, consideringe howe God hath blessed this land w[i]th great increase of people of our owne Nation as anie Countrie in the world, wherof manie for want of Service and meanes to sett them on worck fall to Idlenesse and to great extremitie; Her Ma[jesty]s pleasure therefore ys, that those kinde of people should be sent for the of the lande. And for that purpose there ys direction given to this bearer Edwarde Banes to take of those Blackmoores wee Req[ui]re you to be aydinge & Assysting unto him as he shall have occacion, and therefore not to faile.” [1]

The Queen was not satisfied with the results, and one week later she resumed the matter of the Blackamoors, by expressing her “good pleasure to have those kinde of people sent out of the lande.” and commissioned the merchant Casper van Senden – a merchant from Lübeck – to “take up” certain “blackamoors here in this realme and to transport them into Spaine and Portugall.” [2]

<sup>1</sup> Queen Elizabeth to the Lord Mayor et al., 11? July 1596, in *Acts of the Privy Council of England*, n.s., 26 (1596–97), ed. John Roche Dasent (London: Mackie, 1902), 16–7.

<sup>2</sup> Queen Elizabeth to the Lord Mayor et al., 18 July 1596, in *Acts of the Privy Council*, pp.20–1.

Finally, in 1601, she complained again about the “great numbers of Negars and Blackamoors which (as she is informed) are crept into this realm,” defamed them as “infidels, having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel,” and, one last time, authorized their deportation.” [3]

Some of the words in the Queen’s letter commented by Emily Bartels shed light on the reality of Shakespeare’s time: the Blackamoors had “of late” been “brought into this realme” or, even worse, “are crept into this realm” – they did not simply relocate in England willingly; and there were already too many of them in the country. The Queen’s reason of requesting their deportation to Spain and Portugal is that they are “infidels,” that is non-Christian, and “having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel,” which – to the head of the Church of England – was an unpardonable sin. [4] Obviously the discrimination we are witnessing is religious in nature, not overtly racist. One more detail: the Queen mentions both “Negars” and “Blackamoors” which, in contemporary English translates as Negroes (or Africans), and Black Moors (or dark-skinned Arabs). It is an interesting detail which might explain Shakespeare’s models for Othello. Nevertheless, the Queen’s open letter has often been considered a way of avoiding the social problems of her reign, and an attempt to put the blame on the Negroes in the country. The Queen’s reference to “Negars and Blackamoors” as opposed to her English subjects – who she calls “her own liege people” – draws a clear-cut distinction between the two categories, and prevents the Africans from becoming Englishmen. They are regarded as a completely different nation, defined by their skin colour, and the Queen’s statement is replete with the interpretation of Africans as undesired infidels. We should not forget that these contested Africans were also the slaves of England’s political rival, the social and cultural outsiders of Spain. It was a rivalry of a special kind: as the notion of blackness was imbued with notions of political and cultural inferiority, the two powers were drawn together by their whiteness and European heritage.

According to Karl E. Westhauser (cited in Sharon Tewksbury-Bloom), ever since their appearance in Queen Elizabeth I’s Realm, the blacks were the subject matter of a “multicultural ideology.” Though the examples given refer to a much later period, more than half a century after Shakespeare’s death, the basic idea is that the Africans attending the parades marking the annual celebrations of the inauguration of the New Lord Mayor of London “presented conflicting understandings of race.” The explanation resides in the special status conferred to the Africans partaking in the parades. No longer considered inferior, the Africans and the Asians alike were seen as worthy representatives of their nations. This is all closely connected with the developments in cartography and map printing; far from being the extremities of the known world, Asia and Africa were essentially presented as equals. [5]

Nobody knows whether George Best had had first-hand knowledge of a relationship between a (white) British woman and a (black) Ethiopian, prior to his statement, but the text undoubtedly suggests his being aware of the reality of interracial relations. The Queen was right, after all: the growth of the slave trade – with Liverpool and Bristol becoming major slave ports – brought about an increase of the number of Africans in England, and, consequently, more and more encounters between the English and the Africans, which turned the Africans into “elements of fascination and fear.” [6]

<sup>3</sup> Qtd. in Eldred D. Jones, *The Elizabethan Image of Africa* (Charlottesville: Univ. Press of Virginia, 1971), p. 20. See also “Licensing Casper van Senden to Deport Negroes [draft],” in *The Later Tudors (1588–1603)*, vol. 3 of *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, ed. Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin, 3 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 221–2, 221.

<sup>4</sup> Emily C. Bartels, “Too Many Blackamoors: Deportation, Discrimination, and Elizabeth I” in *SEL* 46, 2 (Spring 2006): 305–322. <[http://cms.press.jhu.edu/timeline/sel/bartels\\_2006.pdf](http://cms.press.jhu.edu/timeline/sel/bartels_2006.pdf)>

<sup>5</sup> Westhauser, Karl E. “Revisiting the Jordan Thesis: ‘White over Black’ in Seventeenth-Century England and America”. *The Journal of Negro History*, 85 (Summer, 2000): 112-122. Cited in Sharon Tewksbury-Bloom, “Social Construction of Race in 17th Century England” – Refer to Fig. 4 for visual reference to the better understanding in differences of cultures.

<sup>6</sup> Wood, 45-66; Fryer, 5-16; Michael Craton, *Sinews of Empire: A Short History of British Slavery* (New York: Anchor Press, and London: Temple Smith, 1974), 14-22.

Before the seventeenth century there were differences among people, in most cases supported by religion as the major source of discrimination and categorization. The 17<sup>th</sup> century Englishmen were becoming more conscious of the differences between themselves and the Africans, with whom they could not easily identify, and were right to question the nature of such differences. What they needed was a logical, biological explanation that would put an end to the impulse “to wash an Ethiop white.” Attempts to wash away the “natural infection” of blackness were more than mere aversion to the colour of the skin; they were expressions of deeply embedded and widely understood associations of African inferiority. Blackness was quickly becoming a key signifier of a much broader, indelible inferiority. To cite Tewksbury-Bloom, “blacks had to be different on an elemental level before one could justify treating them like animals or supernatural beings.”

Not until the sixteenth century did the word “race” enter into the English language. Meanings of the term in the sixteenth century included, among others, “wines with a characteristic flavor”, “people with common occupation”, and “generation”. A meaning of “tribe” or “nation” emerged in the seventeenth century. The modern meaning, “one of the major divisions of mankind”, dates to the late eighteenth century, but it never became exclusive (note the continued use of the expression “the human race”). Irrespective of its numerous meanings, the main use of the term was related to lineage, which explains such uses as in ‘the race of man’, ‘the race of animals’, and even ‘the race of minerals’. Only towards the middle to late seventeenth century, did the term come to be associated with people of common physical features and skin colour. It means an obvious shift in the perception of race and the general status of the black-skinned people in the Western world. The English were fascinated with and afraid of the African’s blackness, which is explained by their own whiteness and the standard understanding of the contrast between the two. During Elizabethan times, fairness became associated with beauty; for example, the Queen herself – the poets’ *Fairy Queen* – led the country as an example of an ideal fair complexion. According to Kim Hall, the contrast of light and dark in discussions of beauty began around 1550 (Hall, 5).

Whether we like it or not, the Englishmen’s perception of race was closely connected to and dependent on the institution of slavery.

The Elizabethans’ perception of the ‘Moor’ was more comprehensive than it is today. They had a clear-cut knowledge of the Muslims who were either Turks or Arabs, but – due to the numerous reports of the travellers – Ethiopians and other Africans were often taken for Muslims. Othello himself is often described as ‘black’: statistics mention as many of fifty-six uses of the word in the play.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘black’ applies to Negroes and other non-European races, which leads to a complete exclusion of the Other from the civilized, European identity. For us, ‘black’ means ‘African,’ but for Shakespeare’s audience – so familiar with the presence of ‘blackamoors’ in the streets of London, the term ‘black’ could equally apply to the Arabs.

There was a common general assumption that early modern citizens of London had scarcely seen a black face, which – because of Shakespeare’s *Othello* – is now contradicted by modern scholarship. One example is *Islam in Britain 1558-1685*, an interesting study by Nabil Matar, who contradicts this assumption by stating that there was no insurmountable geographic and cultural gap separating the Muslims in the Near East and Northern Africa from the English Christians. According to Matar, during the Elizabethan and Jacobean Ages the English had ample opportunities to meet and trade with the Turks and Moors who visited in great numbers the ports of England and Wales.<sup>[10]</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Nabil I. Matar, *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999)

The matter of the black presence in Early Modern England was also commented by American scholar Imtiaz Habib, author of *Shakespeare and Race*, who – after examining original documents of Elizabethan Age, such as parish registries – came to the conclusion that there were blacks in London in the seventeenth century.

One interesting detail, which might account for the plot of such a play as *Othello*, is evidence of the presence of interracial couples and their offspring in Tudor London. Thus Shakespeare had ample reason to refer to racial relations in his plays, and to examine the unavoidable tensions in such a way that suited the taste of the Elizabethan playgoers. It also gave Habib plenty of reasons to conclude:

“We now have documented proof of the residences of black people, which must be reckoned into the colors of Shakespeare’s world, in a very literal sense. Shakespeare knew people of color. He walked through their neighborhoods every day. [...] What I’ve discovered, I think changes the contours of existing knowledge on the English Renaissance. What I have tried, and am trying to do, is to use the urgent lessons of the present to correct and supplement the legacies of the past.”

And if we have come as far as to accept that, to the Elizabethans, the black man was the equivalent of a villainous and treacherous character, then we can estimate the surprising impact *Othello* had on Shakespeare’s audiences, who were suddenly confronted with a black protagonist endowed with outstanding qualities. Regarding this particular case, Ruth Cowhig was positing a number of questions not readily answerable, wondering about Shakespeare’s reasons in choosing a blackamoor as the protagonist of one of his greatest tragedies, or whether Shakespeare had had any direct interaction with the blacks in London to justify his choice of the tale of Othello from the great number of Italian sources available. <sup>[11]</sup>

Some of the answers may be found in Eldred Jones’s *Othello’s Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (1965), in which he provided evidence that Shakespeare’s resources for his black characters were not only literary: the black presence in the streets of London was an uncontested reality, mentioned in the documents of his time, such as the twelve volumes of sailors and traders’ narratives collected by Richard Hakluyt in his *Principal Navigations*.

We cannot say that Shakespeare’s choosing a black protagonist for *Othello* was the result of his having met blackamoors in the streets of London. Obviously, his choice was deliberate, and he resorted to a printed source available: the Italian Geraldini Cinthio’s *Hecatommithi* (1565). Cinthio’s tale follows the demands of his time, and the love story between a noble Venetian girl and a Moor has a declared moral purpose, recommending his young readers not to marry against their parents’ wishes, and to avoid relationships with someone racially different in nature. Shakespeare’s adaptation of the tale has little to do with the original, and there is a trace of irony in his use of Cinthio’s moral.

Shakespeare addresses a number of issues about blackness and whiteness without fully answering them, and allowing his audiences to provide the answers. This act of deliberation involved a disturbance of racial stereotypes. We do not know whether Shakespeare’s purpose was to unsettle or perplex his audience, but he succeeded beyond expectation, for the question of Othello’s blackness, and his relation with the white Desdemona, is one that provoked contradictory and heated responses in subsequent centuries.

There is no written evidence of Shakespeare’s interaction with blacks, but – with his keen eye for human behaviour and the details of daily existence – he must have spent time analyzing the cultural differences between whites and blacks. There was a whole range of

<sup>11</sup> Ruth Cowhig, “Blacks in English Renaissance Drama and the Role of Shakespeare’s *Othello*,” in *The Black Presence in English Literature*, Manchester University Press, 1985, pp. 1-25.

differences (cultural, religious, linguistic, and ethnic) which, according to Loomba, Shakespeare studied. Some examples would include cultures, religions, languages, skin color, and family arrangements.

As a matter of fact, to the Elizabethan audience, Othello's origins – whether he was a north-African or a sub-Saharan Black – did not matter that much. What counts is the dimension of *Otherness* he provides in a speech in which he gives his own reasons for his intimate relationship with Desdemona:

OTHELLO

“[...] I spoke of most disastrous chances:  
 Of moving accidents by flood and field,  
 Of hair-breadth scapes i'th' imminent deadly breach,  
 Of being taken by the insolent foe  
 And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence  
 And portance in my travel's history;  
 Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,  
 Rough quarries, rocks, and hills whose heads touch heaven,  
 It was my hint to speak – such was my process –  
 And of the Cannibals that each other eat,  
 The Anthropophagi, and men whose heads  
 Do grow beneath their shoulders. These things to hear  
 Would Desdemona seriously incline;  
 But still the house affairs would draw her thence,  
 Which ever as she could with haste despatch,  
 She'd come again, and with a greedy ear  
 Devour up my discourse. Which I observing,  
 Took once a pliant hour, and found good means  
 To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart  
 That I would all my pilgrimage dilate,  
 Whereof by parcels she had something heard,  
 But not intently  
 [...]
 My story being done,  
 She gave me for my pains a world of sighs;  
 She swore, in faith 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange;  
 'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful ...  
 She loved me for the dangers I had passed,  
 And I loved her that she did pity them.  
 This only is the witchcraft I have used.”  
 (*Oth*, 1.3.128-67)

We are confronted with a multi-dimensional discourse: one dimension refers to the complexity of the travel adventures the Moor had been through, his experiences meant to impress an audience more than willing to hear stories of incredible adventures and unheard-of exploits. There is a dimension of ‘having-already-been-accepted’ – Othello does not refer to himself as being Black, as he has already been accepted as a distinguished officer of the Venetian army (which partially explains the ‘whiteness’ in the title of this chapter). Then, we have the personal, sentimental dimension, his love-affair and marriage to a white woman, which complicates things and triggers the tragic end of the play and its protagonists. Underlying them all, there is the dimension of alterity – or Otherness – and the reception or (un)acceptance of race that confronted the Elizabethan audience who might have seen not only the blackamoors in the London streets, but also the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Morocco and his impressive host of attendants receiving all the honours possible at the Court.

Obviously, Othello’s ethnicity was not Shakespeare’s main interest in the play. We have already established that the term “Moor” was used with reference to members of the Arab and Berber peoples of North Africa who were also present in considerable numbers in medieval Spain. Barbara Everett thinks that there might be a connection between Shakespeare’s protagonist and the Moors who remained in Spain after the fall of Granada in 1492 until the 1609 expulsion or with the people of Barbary in North Africa. <sup>[4]</sup>

It is clear that Shakespeare portrays Othello’s race as setting him apart in some respects from the predominantly white European society in which he lives. Although Othello is respected for his military prowess and nobility of character, he inhabits a culture in which underlying racial tensions, in particular anxieties about the mixing of races through intermarriage, can be exploited. In *Othello*, racial stereotypes are both evoked and problematised. The racial divide between Othello and Desdemona is portrayed in intentionally shocking language: Iago tells Brabantio that ‘an old black ram/ is tuppung your white ewe’ (*Oth*, 1.1.87-8). In calling Othello ‘Barbary horse’ and ‘black ram’, Iago associates carnality and animality with Othello and blackness. Yet as much as Iago’s rhetoric, and Othello’s own later self-construction, makes Othello carnal, exotic or monstrous, he is also human and sympathetic, vulnerable to Iago’s machinations partly because his difference makes him an easy target.

Throughout the play, Shakespeare explores a rhetoric of ‘blackness’, but always with an ironic distance. When Desdemona believes that the sun has drawn away Othello’s jealous ‘humour’ (*Oth*, 3.4.31), she refers to black bile, one of the four ‘humours’ that were thought to affect human emotion. Othello uses ‘black’ to refer to Desdemona’s fraught reputation, ‘begrimed and black/ as mine own face’ (*Oth*, 3.3.390-1), and also talks of ‘black vengeance’ (*Oth*, 3.3.450). Yet, Shakespeare problematises the use of ‘black’ as a negative signifier. Desdemona’s name is not in fact ‘begrimed’, because she is innocent, and only believed to be guilty by Othello; neither is Othello’s face ‘begrimed’, since it is naturally dark. The association of blackness with staining or impurity recalls Iago’s attempt to portray Desdemona as being polluted by Othello’s love, and yet their love is strong and wholesome until Iago interferes. ‘Black’ vengeance is associated with Iago himself before Othello seeks vengeance on Desdemona. Ultimately, we are made aware that it is Iago, a white character, who is guilty both of causing Othello’s descent into ‘dark’ emotions, and of evoking Othello’s difference in racially charged rhetoric.

It is interesting to follow the way Shakespeare handles race relations in his plays. Thus, in *The Merchant of Venice*, he clearly departs from conventional portrayals of “coloured” people and shows an awareness of the complexities of “coloured” – “white”

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Everett, ““Spanish” Othello: the Making of Shakespeare’s Moor”, in *Shakespeare and Race*, ed. by Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 64-81.

relations. His development reaches its zenith in *Othello*. The Prince of Morocco is, in a way, a sketch for the character of Othello: he is “coloured” but estimable; he selects the golden casket because of his simple idealism. Love between members of “coloured” and “white” races was a minor theme in *Titus Andronicus* (the Aaron-Tamora relationship), but in *Othello* it is central and handled with incomparably greater skill and insight. Even in Shakespeare’s portrayal of Othello, there is an element of conventionality. In the opening scene of the play, Roderigo slightly and significantly refers to Othello’s “thick-lips”; though Shakespeare calls Othello a Moor and he is constantly referred to as such by the other characters, thick lips are a racial characteristic of negroes, not Moors. Thus, as in the case of Aaron, Shakespeare unconsciously portrays Othello, not in terms of a Moor, but in terms of a composite figure of a “coloured” man. But in other respects Shakespeare has advanced tremendously and Othello is presented with almost complete realism. This is indicated by the very fact that Othello is black but essentially different in character from Aaron; he is not just “tawny” like the Prince of Morocco, but still a hero, and a hero of full tragic proportions, too. It is a “white” man, Iago, who is in line with Aaron in point of character. Shakespeare has realised that the value of a human being is not determined by the colour of his skin or his race.

Physically and culturally, Othello differs from the other members of Venetian society in the play. They respect him as a successful general whom they cannot do without; at the same time, they look down on him as a social inferior because he is a “coloured” alien belonging to a race with little power.

In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois – outstanding African American intellectual and activist – stated that “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour-line.” Du Bois’s prediction may have been premature with respect to Shakespearean tragedy, where *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* continued to dominate critical attention throughout most of the twentieth century. But today, *Othello* speaks to readers and audiences alike with unusual power, largely because it explores race and racism in an unsettling fashion. Does this emphasis, centred on the dark skin of the title character, belatedly recognize a crucial issue previously neglected or misconstrued? Alternatively, does the recent preoccupation with race impose contemporary concerns on material with a different orientation? The answer is affirmative in both cases. Interpretation is always influenced by both past and present – here by the play itself, together with its theatrical and critical heritage, and by the current preoccupations of contemporary audiences and readers. A complex work elicits different responses in different times or places: in *Othello*, to oversimplify, one issue (jealousy) was formerly more prominent, while another (race) has emerged – or re-emerged – only recently. Neither race nor jealousy is the play’s sole concern. *Othello* provocatively investigates gender and sexuality. It is preoccupied with class conflict, morality and metaphysics. And it sets its central domestic disaster against the international conflict between Venetians and Turks over the island of Cyprus – a religious, political and military antagonism that subtly informs the characters’ catastrophic personal relationships.

In today’s world, the “problem of the colour-line” seems both related to and distinct from the persistence, in the eastern Mediterranean and beyond, of the very religious and military conflicts evoked by *Othello*. Hence, the uneasiness of the ending, where the unwarranted projection of guilt entirely beyond the confines of Europe is the precondition of that noble acceptance of responsibility with which *Othello* so memorably leaves the world and the play.

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