Washing the Ethiopian white: conceptualising black skin in Renaissance England

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The proverb of my title, 'to wash an Ethiopian white is to labour in vain', was repeated so frequently in Renaissance English texts that it was understandable even when either half of the sentence was omitted. It was often coupled with biblical references to how leopards cannot change their spots or blackamoors their skin, and unwashable Ethiopians even appeared in tavern signs. The impossibility of 'whitening' black Africans became a paradigm for all that was useless, impossible and irrational. But why did Ethiopians need to be 'washed white'? In this chapter, I shall look at what black skin meant to white Englishmen of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Even in England, people at this time were faced with a growing number of individuals who looked 'different' from local norms. What did people actually see when they encountered darker-skinned individuals, either real people, or textual and visual representations of black Africans? This is a question both of discourse and of visual logic, of the interplay of knowledge, imagination and experience. The discourse could be approached from many angles, but here my main interest lies in conceptions of beauty and deformity, and with what looking at early modern appearance can tell us of the cultural evaluations involved in judgements of skin colour.

In English literary sources, descriptions of and allusions to Africa and its inhabitants are numerous but brief: often they are stereotypical and copied from earlier sources, and sometimes they are completely fanciful and untrue. The fact that African skin was 'black' was mentioned without fail, but usually only in passing, almost mechanically, as a fact that was already well known. Travellers to African coasts, for example, wrote down dutifully that the people they encountered had black skin and recounted other bodily features considered typical of Africans, but rarely paid closer attention to these details. Portrayals of African skin, like African practices, were however loaded with wonder and could induce unease. Black skin was thus both an African commonplace and a strange variation on the norm of white beauty the travellers carried in their interpretative arsenal of the human body.

For the English, sub-Saharan Africa, known as 'the Land of Negroes', was a mysterious continent inhabited by unknown peoples whose main bodily characteristic was the colour of their skin. When these people were brought to England – and a few of them were on some sixteenth-century voyages – they retained their mysterious quality, embodying the legends and fanciful stories familiar from Mandeville's Travels and other early travel narratives. At first glance, it may seem difficult to discern a cohesive logic in the brief and sometimes strange allusions in Renaissance texts, but examined more closely, certain interpretative schemes emerge clearly. These include deformity, monstrosity and the overwhelming mystery of black skin, but skin colour was also directly related to the rampant sexuality and the lack of reason and sense which European writers assumed to be true of black Africans. The enigmatic nature of black skin was central to the construction of black 'otherness', and, by implication, therefore, to white identity as well. In the cultural moment when the concept of race had not yet emerged as a labelling device, skin colour could act to define the borders of civility and barbarism.

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1 Although black Africans were by no means a common sight in Renaissance England, it seems that their number has been underestimated and that African appearance must have been much more familiar than has been thought. See Eldred Jones, Odisha's Countrypmen: The Africans in English Renaissance Drama (London, 1968), pp. 12-14; Ruth Cowgill, 'Blacks in English Renaissance drama and the role of Shakespeare's Othello', in David Dabydeen, ed., The Black Presence in English Literature (Manchester, 1981), pp. 5-7. On the lack of firsthand accounts of Africa and Africans, see Kim E. Hall, Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England (Oxford, 1999), p. 11. English travellers had visited African coasts regularly since the mid-sixteenth century, but compared with many continentised countries, this is quite late. It is notable, however, that the African slave trade started almost as early as the first English visits to Africa. For accounts of the early English slave trade, see Sir John Hawkins's three voyages in Richard Hakluyt, Principal Navigations, Visions and Discoueries of the English Nation (London, 1589) and especially Richard Hawkins, Declaration of the Troublesome Voyage of Sir John Hawkins to Guina and the West Indies (Amsterdam, 1590), sig. C2v-A4; and cf. Richard Johnson, The Golden Trade (London, 1631), pp. 88-9 and Emily C. Bartels, Othello and Africa: postcolonial reconsidered, The William and Mary Quarterly 54/1, 1997, pp. 59-61. Drama and literature scholars have been much more interested in representations of African origin in England than historians, who are only now starting to trace historical records for 'real' black Africans.


3 On the importance of Mandeville's Travels in constructing African 'otherness', and on bringing black Africans to England, see Jones, Odisha's Countrypmen, pp. 5-6, 12-13.

ideals of whiteness as beauty, and darker skin as its opposite, were most influential, the nose, lips and hair were focuses of particular attention. Conversely, in the popular genre of the mock encomium, ugliness and deformity were evoked through the same facial scheme. For example, in the cruelly satiric poem by the Scottish courtier William Dunbar, called ‘Of ane blak moir’, the ‘beautiful’ black woman is likened to apes and cats on the basis of her facial features.13

These tropes seem to be an enduring feature of the representation and understanding of blackness, and they continue to occur all through the early modern period. According to John Bulwer, a mid-seventeenth-century naturalist, the flat nose of the Tartars, Chinese and Ethiopians was ‘native to an Ape’ and could ‘never become a man’s Face’.14 These typical features were also portrayed, and used as local colour, in English court masques in which white courtiers played black characters.15 The act of perceiving black skin thus always presupposed at least an implicit evaluation of beauty, and the inherent cultural value of whiteness. In everyday life, blackness was of course primarily visual: the ‘racialising’ gaze directed at black Africans was a process of giving meaning to perception and direct observation, to the sight of blackness. This was a cognitive, interpretative process. Seeing is never neutral. Even when the sources purport to be simple statements of the fact of blackness, we as historians need to read into that statement its unuttered cultural context before any kind of understanding of the past is possible.16

In this case, the context dictated that black skin could only be discussed through its explicit futility, both in a physical and in a metaphorical sense. This assumption gave Renaissance writers, always delighting in paradox, the possibility of playing with diametrically opposed interpretations, as Dunbar does in his poem. The lady — some have suggested it may have been Elen More, a real African presence at the Scottish court — both was and emphatically was not beautiful. If, and when, black skin was given positivemes, these people of African origin were depicted or understood in texts. Bulwer, on the other hand, notes that Africans tended to regard these features, so despised by Europeans, as particularly beautiful. Despite its apparent relativity, this notion is hardly very friendly, soon afterwards Bulwer describes these women as enjoying ‘the statute beauty of our awain’.


Bulwer, Anthropomaneiaenephos, p. 86. 16 Jones, Othello’s Counterparts, p. 143.


meanings necessarily embodied cultural negotiation, since interpreting black as foul was the primary mode of thinking. In the blazon system of beauty, skin colour was conceived of as an absolute quality, something insurmountable and overpowering. Through the satirical blazon, black women entered a field of laughter and sexuality, a potent mixture often used to contextualise black skin. There is of course a difference between the imaginary colour scheme of human skin envisioned by early modern Europeans, forcing a clear dichotomy of black and white, and the visual experiences of real encounters, where black became an approximation, a simplified abstract term bringing together a variety of skin hues, none of which was actually black. Although there were some writers who displayed an awareness that the degree of blackness varied from African to African, this was of little interest to the majority of early modern writers. In popular culture, blackness was fictionalised into a highly abstract but simply observable bodily category. Proverbs, sayings, biblical quotations and many passing remarks in Renaissance texts all come together to construct blackness as an absolute, without differences or degrees, juxtaposed with a whiteness similarly simplified and categorised.

Black skin was perceived as a spectacle produced by this opposition, particularly when it was coupled with something white, be it white skin or white clothes, or with something precious and beautiful, such as gold, silver or jewels. Creating the dichotomy between black and white was essential to judging black as black, the conceptual and ‘racial’ black, not just a darker hue. ‘A blacke face with a white garment, is like a flye drowned in a spoonful of milke’, wrote the printer and publisher Nicholas Ling.17

This dichotomy could then be used, for example, in proverbs and sayings, where black was simply black: it could not be washed white, purified, or redeemed.18 No other part of human appearance could wipe away the stamp

13 Nicholas Ling, Politicus (London, 1597), ed. 289.
14 Stephen Greenow, The Epigrams of Phileas (London, 1590), ed. 62-624; Arthur Dent, The Plaine Man of Punny in Harre (London, 1601-1748), p. 156. Maurice Palmer Tilley, A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries (Ann Arbor, 1966), p. 31. According to Carolyn Prager, the proverb was used in 17 works in the field of Renaissance drama, not to mention the countless times it appears in other forms of writing. However, Prager believes that during the seventeenth century, the trope changed from ‘a reference that is essentially racially neutral to one that is ethnically charged’. It seems to me that the proverb was never racially neutral, although in negative connotations seem to have grown stronger. Carolyn Prager, “If I be Devil’ English Renaissance response to the proverbial and eccenical Ethipion,” Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 12.2 (1982) pp. 256, 264. On the overwhelmingly negative English view of Africans, see Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, Before Othello: Elizabethan representations of sub-Saharan Africans. The William and Mary Quarterly, 54.4 (1997), pp. 23, 42-44.
all fix their gaze on the spectacle of black skin, and see it first and foremost as sexual.

But how does this coupling of skin and sexuality work in terms of beauty and ugliness? There is a connection between beauty and lust, a key conceptual union affecting the lives of white English women, and also relevant to how black African women were perceived. Renaissance theorists of emotion believed that 'beauty' in women produced 'love' in men who saw them (and vice versa, with some gendered differences). Thus, emotion was a reaction to some outward stimulus, perceived through the human senses. Love was an affect which a white male felt when looking at a beautiful white female. So where, in this scheme, does blackness take us?

In white women, true beauty was conceptually linked with virtue, although some forms of beauty – especially cosmetically enhanced, 'painted' beauty – could also point towards immorality and vanity. The line between virtuous and depraved beauty was very thin, and it was placed within the realm of sexuality. In terms of affect, a clear difference between white and black appearance emerges. White beauty invited love, an emotion that was intellectually turned into admiration and Platonic adoration, where sexuality also received a transformed interpretation as a cult of controlled passion. Black deformity, on the other hand, aroused the corresponding emotion, but without the exciting power of beauty – not love, then, but lust. And this is where the sexual availability of black women obtained its rationale: the African origin of black women testified *ipso facto* to their sexual corruption, and the colour of their skin appeared as deformity, without the power of white skin to elevate and produce sublime emotions. Seeing foul blackness produced an impure passion, a sin, denigrating, demonising lust. This kind of ugliness is of course something entirely different from how we think of ugliness in our everyday language. Foulness was deformity, the opposite of beauty, but beauty itself was felt as something producing sublime affects and experiences. Everything that led away from God and virtue, on the other hand, was foul and deformed.

As almost all our Renaissance sources were written through the male gaze, it is self-evident that the black woman appears as doubly 'other' – firstly as a woman, and secondly as a black African. When the object of this desiring gaze was powerfully sexualised in seventeenth-century texts, we are faced with the dilemma of white male sexuality: how was one to treat lust, which was understood as always shameful and wrong, and which became even more problematic in relation to black women? The Christian patriarchal model of manhood, and the experience of white superiority, demanded a self-control that incorporated the conceptual prerequisites for maintaining the power of the father and the master. Man was to control woman, and white was to control black. Neither of these objects seemed totally within reach, however, and furthermore, sometimes man could not even control himself when he saw a black woman. In this context, perceiving black women as others rationalises both fear and desire: while they are presented as objects of sexual desire, they are also conceptualised as other, inferior beings, whose lot was to be overpowered and controlled. Black sexuality was twice as great a threat as white sexuality, which itself was difficult enough to handle.

On the other hand, in unions between black men and white women in English Renaissance literature, which are in fact depicted more often than the other way around, sexuality is also always an issue. Here, not surprisingly, given the problematic nature of female sexuality, sinful connotations encircle the white woman as well. In drama, the desire black Africans were shown to feel towards white European women usually ended in disaster, because these relationships seem to be more about lust for power than about sexuality. Black African characters are portrayed as engaging in illicit relationships, often with socially superior women, in order to climb up the social ladder. The women, on the other hand, allowed themselves to be overcome by their animal lusts and were destroyed, whereas the men, even if they succeeded in acquiring an influential position with all the accompanying honour, power and wealth, were shown to resent and envy whiteness and the unquestioned cultural superiority it entailed. Indeed, it was often envy and jealousy that spiralled them towards their inevitable ruin: dark-skinned social climbers, such as Eleazer in *Lust's Dominion* or Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, became pitless tyrants, and grew increasingly isolated both socially and psychologically. Black desire for power is often accompanied by an internalised realisation of marginality, and black inferiority. Thus, even here, the visual marker of black skin is linked,

also hurl himself down from a tower window and meets his maker. That
the murderer is black is not fortuitous. The protagonist of the ballad is a
'threatening and blood-thirsty Blackamoor', who does not shy away from
violence of any kind, be it sexual or directed at innocent children, who has
no respect for social hierarchy or order, and who feels no pity or human
emotion towards any of his family'. Heathenish cruelty combined with black
skin did not sound all that strange to Renaissance readers. The black servant
of the ballad is turned into a demon, a personification of evil. It is clear that
this visual imagery carried inside it pure fear of the unknown, but the horror
evoked by blackness also had an extensive Christian background.

Demonisation of black skin was helped by a long and powerful Christian
tradition of depicting demons and the devil himself as black. Their dark skin
was both comic and horrifying: it embodied vice, sin and terror. Sin was
black, virtue was white; the body was black, the soul was white. In many
texts of the Renaissance, black Africans are actually referred to as 'devils', and
the link between blackness, vice and sin is graphically emphasized. On the
stage, this tradition can already be found in medieval mysteries, where
Lucifer and his fallen angels turn black as a visible sign of their sin against
God. Again, the familiar images of blackness were so powerful that the text
could evoke them even without much actual description.

Beauty and deformity in Renaissance thinking were also intimately con-
ected to reason and intelligence. Like all creatures driven by their bodily
lusts, black Africans were thought of as foolish or lacking understanding. In
terms of outward appearance, there was one European conceptual tradition

14 A Lamentable Ballad of the Tragical End of a Gallant Lord and Virtuous Lady Together with the
Un Geli Death of their two Children, Wickedly performed by a heathenish and blood-thirsty
Blackamoor; their servant, The like of which Cruelty and Murder was never before heard of", in

15 See Dorothy Hoodland Yerkh, 'Black servant, black demon: color ideology in the
This interpretation was enhanced by the connection which English travellers constructed
between black skin and ignorance of the Christian message. See Hall, Things of Darkness,
p. 103.

16 This idea was often presented in the commentaries of the Song of Songs, where the bride calling
herself black was explained as symbolizing people living in sin, and her inner whiteness as
reflecting the brightness of the redeemed soul and the salvation offered by the church. Balduin,
The Canticles, sig. A 4v; Briccoli, A Commentary, sig. B3r–B5r; Amyot, Solomon's Song of Songs,
sig. B4v–C3r; see also Poll Edwards, The Early African presence in the British Isles, in: Jago.,

17 See for example Christopher Marlowe/Thomas Dekker, Love's Discovery (London, 1657), sig. B3r,
C8v, C9v, D11v, E6v, etc.; Bulwer, Arcadia, epigraphische, p. 168.


that offered a very handy framework for the link between lack of intellect
and black skin: physiognomy. This collection of pseudo-scientific categoriz-
ing principles based on outward appearance was designed to make sense
of European faces and bodies, but if we look closely at how physiognomy
approached bodily features, it soon becomes clear how well suited the ide-
ology was to interpreting black appearance as inferior. For example, in the
physiognomical system, thick lips and large noses, traditionally ascribed to
Africans, signified stupidity. Even if physiognomy says nothing of black
skin, it deals out social judgements on skin hues that belonged to those not
completely white — and by extension, noting how stridently black skin was
determined as deformity, we might infer a connection here too. If someone
familiar with physiognomy wanted to use the system to interpret black skin,
it allowed him to do so. I do not want to give the impression that any of
the guidelines for physiognomical interpretation actually talked about black
Africans; they did not. What I want to show is that most of the intellectual
systems at the disposal of white Renaissance Englishmen guided them to
dem black skin inferior to their own, and to give it meanings far beyond
its actual bodily manifestations. The same conceptual arsenal could be drawn
upon in everyday interpretative processes as well, when looking at actual black
Africans. The white gaze that viewed black skin, through the awareness that
white skin was more beautiful, was not just dichotomising, it was always also
hierarchising.

So far, we have hardly touched on what English Renaissance writers thought
black skin actually was. Skin colour here has been linked, connected and tied
to something, it has appeared in connection with something, it has been read
through something else. This is because Renaissance English authors hardly
ever describe the appearance of black skin in a direct way. Black was black, a
fact of life, not something to be taken apart in a rigorous visual or aesthetic
exercise. On the other hand, a form of knowledge that definitely was of acute
importance to these writers, particularly those of a more scientific persuasion,
was the cause for black skin. This fact alone reveals how forceful was the idea
of whiteness as origin. There was never any need to explain how white skin
came about, but an explanation continually had to be sought for black skin.

19 The Governance of Physique (London, 1828), pp. 231–5; Bartholomew Cadell, Le compendium de brii
margem de physiognomie et chronos (Paris, 1539), sig. B3r–B4v; Jeanne Indigene
Chromatisme (London, 1598), sig. H14r–H14v; see also Juliana Schermer, 'The face of domestication: physiognomy, gender politics and humanitarian's others', in Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker,
eds., Women, Race, and Writing, pp. 61–2.
detailed analyses of the topic, it became an ongoing quest for knowledge. As Kim Hall has argued, the theoretical vacuum emphasised the mystery not only of the origins of black skin, but of black Africans in general. And the recognition of this theoretical vacuum is one of the crucial moments of producing racial difference.

The whole point of explaining black skin was to fix whiteness as the origin and the norm, and therefore beautiful, and blackness as a corrupted, deformed, and re-formed variant. Thus any explanation for skin colour points to the hierarchical relationship between different types of skin, redefining the connection between whiteness and goodness, and reasserting the power relations whereby white was always controlling black. This is why skin colour could not be discussed neutrally, and why black African inferiority could be condensed through bodily markers. Were it not for the enormous cultural potency of beauty (or appearance more generally) in the Renaissance, this would not mean much, but beauty and deformity were central social signifiers for women in particular (but also for men), both in categorising appearance and in judging the place of others.

We have seen that skin colour, although a theory or category of 'race' had not yet emerged, was a mark of status in many ways. Renaissance English culture was one of visual marking, in which skin colour was itself a category— an identity-marking, morally-defining, 'otherness'-creating category in many ways analogically functioning like the later category of race. I would argue that the visual and aesthetic category of blackness/whiteness was the grid that contained or led to theological, moral, geographical and other normative judgements, which also in turn took part in constructing that particular category of otherness.

And yet there is a twist. The colour of one's skin was a fact that could be used to categorize people and assign them their place. But it was not strong enough to act as the stable cultural marker demanded by the weight of its associations and meanings. After all, skin colour was only a bodily fact, and the body was changing, transient and temporal. Consequently, the meanings of blackness were floating on the mortal surface; they were without philosophical and scientific fixity. More stable theoretical underpinnings were needed, ostensibly to 'explain' racial difference, but also to fix the meanings of black skin to something more ideologically and historically visible than the body's outer boundary. Uncertainty about the origins of black skin did not mean uncertainty as to its current meanings, but a quest for validating those meanings from a philosophical and scientific standpoint. When, later, the idea of race emerged, truths located on the body's surface could be transposed into biology, and visual experience could be justified and stabilised into scientific notions and categories. This is a process of abstraction, but also of stabilisation of everyday experience.

Skin colour was perhaps not 'the most defining feature for constructing Otherness' in Renaissance England (as Lynda Boone has suggested), but in the encounter between white English and black Africans, it was certainly exceedingly powerful. Joyce Green MacDonald has rightly pointed out that being black was not just about skin colour, but about a vast array of meanings that constructed racial thinking even before the concept of race was born. To MacDonald, skin colour 'as the chief determinant of race is a modern rather than a Renaissance phenomenon'. Yet black skin occurs everywhere in early modern constructions of Africans, and I feel it is necessary to look at what was read into skin colour in general, and in this case, black skin. I would argue that black skin, as a visible and observable sign, was already the principle that allowed the various meanings ascribed to Africa and Africans to be gathered together. Black skin came to embody much of the interpretive apparatus that Europeans engaged in when looking at and understanding Africans; but as a bodily and transient signifier, skin was not powerful enough to contain these meanings when contacts with Africa and Africans became ever more frequent.

Whichever way we look at it, we are still facing an ethnography created and appropriated by white Europeans, a narrative constructing the black African as emphatically 'other'. But what we should recognise is that there are different ways of theorizing and even describing that 'other'. Looking at early modern discourses distances blackness from the idea of 'scientific race' or 'rationalism', but at the same time it shows how previous European constructions of difference disturbingly point in a similar direction. Perhaps it is still useful to lay one's finger on the different kinds of fictions we create, in order to tear down the fictions of race, or deconstruct the construction of race altogether.

What this should tell us is that we do not need the concept of race to harbour the kinds of prejudices which race entails. The same prejudices can be fixed in other forms of difference and in other intellectual categories. And

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41 See for example Harwell in Lopez, A Report, p. 188.
42 Hall, Things of Darkness, p. 42; for a similar situation in early America, see Chaplin, Subjekt Minor, pp. 52, 119, 160.
43 This formulation comes from Lynda Boone's question on whether skin colour should in fact be focused on as the most important 'racialising factor' in Renaissance England. See Boone, "The getting of a lawful race", pp. 33-6.
44 Joyce Green MacDonald, Women and Race in Early Modern Texts (Cambridge, 2009), p. 44.
this partly explains the tenacity of the fictions of race: cultural categories are too devious and multifaceted for us even to grasp in everyday life, let alone simply to do away with. This is one of my main points. But while we can see that doing away with the concept of race does not necessarily allow us more freedom if we continue to be burdened with its intellectual content, considering Renaissance beliefs also shows us that race is a cultural, historical concept, born out of the needs of a specific period in time to define the ‘other’ that needed containing. It is not a universal, and its scientific value is easily questioned, if the meanings attached to it could be explained at an earlier time through other cultural categories. However tenacious, it is still simply a fiction.
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