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Washing the Ethiopian white: conceptualising black skin in Renaissance England

ANU KORHONEN

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.[1] 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 topic could be approached from many angles, but here my main interest lies in conceptions of beauty and deformity, and with what

[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, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (London, 1965), pp. 12–13; Ruth Cowhig, 'Blacks in English Renaissance drama and the role of Shakespeare's Othello', in David Dabydeen, ed., *The Black Presence in English Literature* (Manchester, 1985), pp. 5–7. On the lack of firsthand accounts of Africa and Africans, see Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca and London, 1995), p. 11. English travellers had visited African coasts regularly since the mid-sixteenth century, but compared with many continental 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, Voiages and Discoveries of the English Nation* (London, 1589) and especially Richard Hawkins, *Declaration of the Troublesome Voyadge of Sir John Hawkins to Guynea and the West Indies* (Amsterdam, 1569/1973), sig. A2v–A4; but cf. Richard Jobson, *The Golden Trade* (London, 1623), pp. 88–9 and Emily C. Bartels, 'Othello and Africa: postcolonialism reconsidered', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 54:1, 1997, pp. 59–61. Drama and literature scholars have been much more interested in representations of people of African origin in England than historians, who are only now starting to trace historical records for 'real' black Africans.

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.[2] 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.[3] 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.[4] 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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[2] See for example Richard Eden's description of Africa, Thomas Wyndham's journey to Benin and Guinea, John Lok's and William Towerson's travels to Guinea, in Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voiages and Discoveries of the English Nation*, 3 vols. (London, 1599–1600), II. 2, pp. 10, 12, 19–21, 25, 30–31, 39; Jobson, *The Golden Trade*, pp. 27–30.

[3] On the importance of Mandeville's *Travels* in constructing African 'otherness', and on bringing black Africans to England, see Jones, *Othello's Countrymen*, pp. 5–6, 12–13.

[4] See also Marjo Kaartinen, 'Toinen – vieras. Näkökulmia kolonialistisen toiseuden tutkimukseen', in Kari Immonen and Maarit Leskelä-Kärki, eds., *Kulttuurihistoria. Näkökulmia tutkimukseen* (Turku, 2001), p. 391.

In early modern thinking, a desire for order and for a clear relationship between the human 'inner' character and 'outer' appearance was a typical feature. An emerging national English culture was envisioned as a system of orderly hierarchical relationships, where every thing and person had its proper, divinely ordained place. The principle of natural order also entailed the assumption that inner human characteristics were mirrored on the outside, and what was seen on the surface of the body was a reflection both of the inner being and of its cultural niche. Outward appearance could never be wholly separated from the soul and human nature, although some significant exceptions to this rule were also recognised.

Individual bodies characterised by black skin were interpreted through this schema. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that in the English Renaissance black skin was equated with ugliness, or, rather, with deformity. African appearance, both skin colour and the facial features seen as specific to people of African origin, were used to oppose stereotypical images of beauty and ugliness. 'Fair' meant both beautiful and light-skinned. 'Foul' was of course the opposite of 'fair', but it was also associated with the opposite of 'blondness', as dark or black. As Kim Hall has noted, 'black' was often not so much the opposite of 'white' as of 'beautiful' or 'fair'.[5] This of course entails seeing 'white as beautiful' and its necessary opposite 'black as deformed' or ugly. It is a peculiarity of the English language that the same word was used for beauty and blondness – in many other European languages these two are much more clearly differentiated.

In a mid-sixteenth-century conduct book, for example, it is asserted that a silent and chaste woman was always fair, even if she looked like an Ethiopian.[6] A century later, in 1653, Thomas Hall could sentence vain women who constantly combed and curled their hair or wore wigs to a suitable punishment: they should be burned for their sins and forced to scorch their skin in the sun until they acquired the 'hue of the Black-moores'.[7] The punishment for sin was to be burnt in hell-fire; the African sun could be imagined as its earthly equivalent. The whiteness and 'naturall fairenesse of mans skinne' could also be found in Africa – but not on men; it was epitomised in ivory, as Robert Gainsh mentioned in his description of elephants.[8]

Whiteness, then, represented the 'origin'; blackness meant variation and deviation. White Englishmen believed that they quite literally carried the

[5] Hall, *Things of Darkness*, p. 9.
[6] Thomas Becon, *The Iewel of Ioye* (London, 1553), sig. I7–I7v.
[7] Thomas Hall, *The Loathsomnesse of Long Haire* (London, 1653), p. 123.
[8] Gainsh in Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* (1589), p. 94.

image of God in their bodies and faces, whereas black Africans, whose bodies lacked the clear, pure, white, physical reflection of the divine presence, were seen in terms of sin and alienation from God. In English texts, it is taken for granted that all people wanted to be white. Black skin was a mark of a curse, an affliction, a weakness and a stain.[9]

To understand the Renaissance idea of beauty, two elements are essential: the premise that bodily attractiveness consists in the harmonious proportions of all body parts and features; and the Petrarchist conventions of seeing, enumerating and describing those body parts as linked together by a sweeping gaze that travels over the (female) body. Pure and shining whiteness was the primary quality in the woman deemed fair by the Petrarchist gaze; but if the very canvas where beauty was to be discerned was too dark, the light and harmony of beauty could not be reached.[10] Such foulness was not, however, merely a question of aesthetic judgement. In a late sixteenth-century book discussing human intelligence, a rationale is presented based on Aristotelian and Galenic conceptions of geography and medicine, again linking the inner with the outer: people of extremely hot and dry complexions were foul and deformed. Africans living under the scorching sun could serve as convenient examples, and vice versa – the bodies of beautiful people were neither too hot nor too black.[11]

The idea that beauty is constructed by harmony was especially important when looking at the face: ideally, all the facial features needed to be in perfect balance in terms of their shape and size. The vision of foulness embodied by African appearance, on the other hand, included the stereotypes of thick lips, flat nose and black curly hair. All of these were considered foul not only in themselves, but also in combination; in fact they further highlighted the in any case unquestioned ugliness of black Africans.[12] In poetry, where Petrarchan

[9] See for example Joseph Hall, *Salomons Diuine Arts* (London, 1609), pp. 4–5; William Baldwin, *The Canticles or Balades of Solomon* (London, 1598), sig. A3v–A4; Antonio Brucioli, *A Commentary upon the Canticle of Canticles* (London, 1623), sig. B3–B4; Henry Ainsworth, *Solomons Song of Songs* (London, 1623), sig. C1v.
[10] For the Petrarchist gaze on beauty, see Nancy Vickers, 'Diana described: scattered women and scattered rhyme', *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1981), pp. 265–79; see also Linda Woodbridge, 'Black and white and red all over: the sonnet mistress among the Ndembu', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 40:2 (1987), pp. 247–97.
[11] Juan de Dios Huarte, *The Examination of Mens Wits* (London, 1594), p. 281.
[12] Duarte Lopez, *A Report of the Kingdome of Congo* (London, 1597), pp. 71–86; Samuel Purchas, *Purchas his Pilgrimage* (London, 1614), pp. 649, 688–9; John Bulwer, *Anthropometamorphosis* (London, 1650), pp. 81–91. In the English translation of Lopez there are various woodcuts representing black Africans, but in these images it is difficult to discern any relation to how

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 foulness, 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 positive meanings, 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 swine'.

[13] William Dunbar, *The Poems of William Dunbar* (London, 1970), p. 66. For parallels to Dunbar's portraying blackness through mocking praise, see for example the ballad 'A Peerelesse Paragon', in *The Roxburghe Ballads*, ed. W. M. Chappell (Hertford, 1873–4), II, pp. 301–4; and Richard Brathwait, *Ar't Asleep Husband?* (London, 1640), pp. 319–21.

[14] Bulwer, *Anthropometamorphosis*, p. 86. [15] Jones, *Othello's Countrymen*, p. 123.

[16] See Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'On Saracen enjoyment: some fantasies of race in late medieval France and England', *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 31:1 (2001), p. 116.

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 spooneful 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

[17] Nicholas Ling, *Politeuphuia* (London, 1597), fol. 28v.

[18] Stephen Gosson, *The Ephemerides of Phialo* (London, 1586), fol. 62–62v; Arthur Dent, *The Plaine Mans Path-way to Heaven* (London, 1601/1974), 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 sixteenth 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 its negative connotations seem to have grown stronger. Carolyn Prager, '"If I be Devil": English Renaissance response to the proverbial and ecumenical Ethiopian', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 17:2 (1987), pp. 258, 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*, 54:1 (1997), pp. 29, 42–44.

of blackness. Black Africans were warned not to believe themselves white merely because they had white teeth.[19] Thus for white English people black skin generated a whole range of negative qualities and suspicious attitudes.

Black skin looked exotic and erotic, and it produced mixed pleasures of the senses, where delight combined with horror and desire with distaste. One of the prominent associations, frequently made in connection with black skin and black Africans more generally, was immoderate sexuality and bodiliness. Let us now look at how sexuality was skin deep. The trope of unruly African sexuality already appears in the 1555 translation of Johannes Boemus, *The Fardle of Facions*, but the link to skin was not yet clearly spelled out. Later, in John Pory's translation of Leo Africanus' *A Geographical Historie of Africa*, published in 1600, Africans were described as more prone to sexual transgressions and excesses than any other 'nation' in the world.[20] English writers adopted this idea without questioning it, albeit somewhat slowly. However, even in earlier comments where the connection between black skin and sexuality is weaker, references to African, or black, sexuality often derive directly from judgements and perceptions of skin colour, particularly in the case of women.

For English men and women, looking at or imaging black African men, the connection between sexuality and skin was more obscure. Men's sexuality, of course, was generally contextualised not so much on the basis of their appearance as on their physical prowess, so the surface of the body acquired a different emphasis. This does not mean that male black skin was free of sexual loading – the English sources being examined here reflect male attitudes much more than they do female, and we have very little access to English women's constructions of sexuality in general, let alone the sexuality of black Africans.

It is not difficult to find examples of black women – and their black skin – portrayed as predominantly sexual. I will start from a later example, Richard Brome's mid-seventeenth-century play *The English Moor, or The Mock Marriage*, and then hope to show that to some extent his interpretations can be read backwards into the sixteenth century. When the protagonist of Brome's play

[19] See George Pettie, *A Petite Pallace, of Pettie His Pleasure* (London, 1578), p. 66; Dent, *Plaine Mans Path-way*, p. 44.

[20] Johannes Boemus, *The Fardle of Facions* (London, 1555), sig. E8, F1, F6, F8v; Leo Africanus, *A Geographical Historie of Africa* (London, 1600/1969), pp. 37–8, 284–5. On similar ideas in medieval European culture, see Thomas Hahn, 'The difference the Middle Ages makes: color and race before the modern world', *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 31:1 (2001), pp. 23–5.

paints his white wife's face black, she is automatically interpreted as someone offering sexual favours. Her husband's lustful friends start groping her in corners and cracking jokes about her barbary buttocks.[21] Black skin denoted both access and enticement. In the early seventeenth century, when court performers were fascinated with portraying black characters, the 'curtizan-like' apparel and shocking lechery of court ladies appearing in Ben Jonson's *Masque of Beauty* prompted Dudley Carleton to cry out in moral outrage.[22] Here, too, appearing in a black mask was enough to call forth the sexual connotations of African women. William Dunbar proceeded directly from describing his black woman's outward appearance to her sexual availability: the thick-lipped lady, shining like a barrel of tar in her sumptuous clothes, incited a lusty knight to fight mightily on the battlefield and then end up in her passionate embraces. This love, presented in an overtly physical way, satisfied the knight so deeply that he longed for no other comfort.[23]

Sometimes black skin was imagined as a mask or a veil that hid an original white person, as in John Weever's erotic epigram 'In Byrrham'.[24] Black skin could be compared to paint, and painting a face could be described as 'murdering beauty'.[25] Although early modern Englishmen understood black skin as a real feature, it was conceptualised as a corrupted version of the original skin God intended man to have and which they themselves sported on their bodies. Thus black skin had meaning only in connection with white skin, and white skin, on the other hand, retained its beauty by being compared to dark and black.

Although painted and blackened skin on the stage is not the same thing as real African skin, and satiric poetry cannot be read as direct evidence of everyday behaviour, the attitudes reflected in these examples reveal how close the connection was between perceiving black skin and experiencing sexual desire. In Brome's scene, the men groping the blackened woman are portrayed as believing her to be African, not just painted as such. Their fictitious reactions are not so distant from Carleton's outrage, and Dunbar's desire (although cloaked in layers of courtly Petrarchism, playful distaste and mocking praise) is still intimately connected to and indeed born out of her appearance. They

[21] Richard Brome, *The English Moor, or The Mock-Marriage* (London, 1659), pp. 60–1.

[22] For Carleton's comments see Jones, *Othello's Countrymen*, p. 33; Hall, *Things of Darkness*, p. 130; Mary Floyd-Wilson, 'Temperature, temperance, and racial difference in Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness*', *English Literary Renaissance*, 28:2 (1998), p. 195.

[23] Dunbar, *Poems*, pp. 66–7.

[24] John Weever, *Epigrammes in the Oldest Cut and Newest Fashion* (London, 1599/1911), p. 56.

[25] Brome, *The English Moor*, p. 37.

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).[26] 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 indeed, and it was placed within the realms 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 exalting 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 sinful, 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

[26] Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (London, 1561/1974), pp. 303–4; William Painter, *The Palace of Pleasure* (London, 1566), fol. 29; John Northbrooke, *Spiritus est vicarius Christi* (London, 1579), p. 123; Annibale Romei, *The Courtiers Academie* (London, 1598), p. 6.

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?[27] 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.[28] 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 adjoining 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 Eleazar in *Lust's Dominion* or Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, became pitiless 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,

[27] Hall, *Things of Darkness*, p. 205; Joyce E. Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500–1676* (Cambridge, MA, 1991), pp. 191–3; for discourses on sexual otherness relating to pleasures of the imagination, and more specifically literary pleasures, see Cohen, 'On Saracen enjoyment', pp. 124–5.

[28] Lynda E. Boose, '"The getting of a lawful race": Racial discourse in early modern England and the unrepresentable black woman', in Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, eds., *Women, 'Race', and Writing in the Early Modern Period* (London and New York, 1994), p. 42.

through the experience of inferiority it is supposed to produce, to a cultural judgement that makes black Africans incapable of adjusting to white society.

One might want to see here a white recognition of the impossibility of the cultural niche apportioned to black Africans, but rarely is there any hint of compassion in scenes of black Africans rising above their status: the God-given social hierarchies of English society did not allow for black self-assertiveness or unruliness. The white writers and audiences of these plays clearly could not consider the possibility that a black character might seriously see himself as equal with his white surroundings.[29] Divine order dictated that black Africans could only be in power, legitimately, among their own marginal societies, in Africa.

After all this, it is perhaps somewhat surprising that in non-fictional sources, marriages between Africans and Europeans were not unheard-of, nor even particularly awe-inspiring. The travel writer George Best, although not famous for friendly attitudes towards black Africans, mentions a marriage between an Ethiopian 'blacke as a cole' living in London and an English white woman, and focuses not on the marriage itself but on the question of why their child had black skin.[30] Anthony Copley, on the other hand, published in his jest book an anecdote that played upon the idea of black subjectivity: a blackamoor king was disappointed in his courting of a French white lady when the lady said that she could not love a deformed face such as his. The king concluded that the woman was at fault: her base mind was such a dirty and deformed mirror that his beauty could not be portrayed in it.[31] Examples like these are not, however, very typical.

As the protagonist in one of the best-known Renaissance plays, Shakespeare's *Othello*, is a noble and valorous Moorish knight who has succeeded in securing the love of a beautiful white lady and acquiring a powerful position in the European social system, it could be argued that marriages between Africans and Europeans on stage are a good starting point for examining more positive attitudes towards black Africans. Othello's white wife Desdemona

[29] But see Bartels, 'Othello and Africa', pp. 61–64.

[30] George Best in Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* (1599–1600), III, pp. 51–2. There are, of course, contrary examples as well: in Heywood's play *The Fair Maid of the West*, Bess Bridges, the character embodying white purity who strays from the path of virtue, meets the Moorish king Mullisheg, and their kiss is shown on the stage. The sexual antics of the corrupt Moor, and the loose morals of the lily-white lady allowing herself to be seduced, cause the white male viewers moments of horror, but in the end Bess is saved by a decent marriage. See Jean E. Howard, 'An English lass amid the Moors', in Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, eds., *Women, 'Race', and Writing*, pp. 116–17.

[31] Anthony Copley, *Wits, Fits, and Fancies* (London, 1614), p. 13.

appears as a 'prize' for his 'mental whiteness', his understanding of the codes of white male honour. But Othello's rashness, irrationality, gullibility, jealousy and violence can hardly be taken as evidence of nobleness of character – although this blunt formulation moves out of the early modern mindset into a modern, gendered framework.[32] Even if these characteristics are not presented as being caused by his dark skin, they certainly combine in a typical inner conflict of imagined black success stories. In cases like this, we should think in terms of a juxtaposition: black skin against white soul. Othello is black but noble, just as the bride of the *Song of Songs* is black but beautiful. Black skin by no means excluded other characteristics and qualities; instead, playing with contraries, opposites and paradoxes was the early modern way of discussing dichotomies. Black skin could not be changed into white, and it could not be overlooked; it was not something that could be set aside as having no particular meaning. Othello's good characteristics were surprising and noteworthy exactly because he was black; his blackness set them in high relief. The colour of his skin, then, is actually very meaningful, and not just a coincidence. His 'white' nobility does not show through his black skin, but against it.

If black Africans were usually judged on the basis of their physical attributes alone, it is no surprise that English writers describe them as violent as well. Descriptions of Africa construct the trope of violence by presenting black Africans as a band of robbers or warriors, courageous barbarians. Cannibalism and other terrifying practices are commonly mentioned. The frightening 'look' of Africans was an important part of creating this image: the warlike 'tribe' of Giachas or Agagi, for example, was always described in terms of their 'dreadful and devilish' sight, deformed facial features and glowing white eyes, contrasting with the extreme blackness of their skin.[33]

The idea of unreasonable violence was also associated with Africans living in England or Europe. A very good example of this is a ballad called 'A Lamentable Ballad of the Tragical End of a Gallant Lord and Virtuous Lady', where the black African servant of a noble white family is driven to violence by his master's unjust treatment. He imprisons the whole family except the master, tortures all of them, rapes the lady, then kills the children and their mother in a locked tower of their moated castle, in full sight of all the townspeople. The nobleman dies of horror upon seeing this, and finally the black servant

[32] For Othello's character linking with Renaissance popular conceptions of people of colour, and these conceptions forming the basic vocabulary of colonialist discourses, see Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Delhi, 1989), pp. 49–52.

[33] Leo Africanus, *A Geographical Historie*, p. 31; Bulwer, *Anthropometamorphosis*, p. 70.

also hurls himself down from a tower window and meets his maker.[34] That the murderer is black is not fortuitous. The protagonist of the ballad is a 'heathenish 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.[35] Sin was black, virtue was white; the body was black, the soul was white.[36] 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.[37] On the stage, this tradition can already be found in medieval mystery plays, where Lucifer and his fallen angels turn black as a visible sign of their sin against God.[38] 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 connected 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

[34] 'A Lamentable Ballad of the Tragical End of a Gallant Lord and Virtuous Lady Together with the Untimely 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 Chappell, *The Roxburghe Ballads*, II, pp. 49–55.

[35] See Dorothy Hoogland Verkerk, 'Black servant, black demon: color ideology in the Ashburnham Pentateuch', *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 31:1 (2001), pp. 60–4. 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.

[36] This idea was often presented in the commentaries of the *Song of Songs*, when 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. Baldwin, *The Canticles*, sig. A3v; Brucioli, *A Commentary*, sig. B2v–B3v; Ainsworth, *Solomons Song of Songs*, sig. B4v–C1; see also Paul Edwards, 'The early African presence in the British Isles', in Jagdish S. Gundara and Ian Duffield eds., *Essays on the History of Blacks in Britain* (Aldershot, 1992), p. 14.

[37] See for example Christopher Marlowe/Thomas Dekker, *Lust's Dominion* (London, 1657), sig. B5, C8v, C9v, D11, E4v, E6v, etc.; Bulwer, *Anthropometamorphosis*, p. 108.

[38] Anthony Gerard Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race* (Baton Rouge and London, 1987), pp. 3–4.

that offered a very handy framework for the link between lack of intellect and black skin: physiognomy. This collection of pseudo-scientific categorizing 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 ideology was to interpreting black appearance as inferior. For example, in the physiognomical system, thick lips and large noses, traditionally ascribed to Africans, signified stupidity.[39] 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 deem 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.

[39] *The Gouernaunce of Prynces* (London, 1898), pp. 233–5; Bartholomeus Cocles, *Le compendion et brief enseignement de physiognomie et chiromancie* (Paris, 1550), sig. B4–B4v; Joannes Indagine, *Chiromantia*, (London, 1558), sig. H2–H4v; see also Juliana Schiesari, 'The face of domestication: physiognomy, gender politics, and humanism's others', in Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker, eds., *Women, 'Race', and Writing*, pp. 61–2.

In the English context, three main theories were discussed, and all were found wanting.

The climatic theory supposed that the sun parched the skin of those living in the far south black, but since the skin colour of Europeans living in Africa did not darken in the same way, and Africans living in Europe did not gradually acquire a beautiful white skin, and, furthermore, since Africans were of many shades, this theory was found seriously lacking. It is, however, an interesting interpretation, because it does not assume skin colour to be an absolute. Rather, it sees colour as a continuum, a series of differences.[40] If we think of Renaissance beauty theories, we can actually find a somewhat similar attitude: the blacker the skin, the uglier the person. Neither blackness nor ugliness is absolute, however; instead, there is a continuum of different variations from the norm of whiteness. And, curiously enough, for people of a certain hue, those of the same colour were said to seem the most attractive.[41] Even if these reflections sound more like astonishment and mockery than acknowledging and respecting ethnic difference, they still reveal beauty or ugliness of skin colour as more multifaceted than usual. In fact, climatic theory can be seen as logically leading to a questioning of the simple interplay of skin colour, morals and human value prevalent at the time.

The gaping holes in the climatic theory invited attempts to explain black skin though heredity. George Best wondered why the child of a mixed marriage was black, even when the family lived in England. Could there be a hereditary reason for black skin? Discussions of generation were very different before the age of genes, and the most important element in these early discussions

[40] Mary Floyd-Wilson contends that the somewhat marginal geographical status of England and, in terms of climatic theory, the extreme (even unhealthy) whiteness of its inhabitants compelled English writers to challenge the theory and prefer the binary opposition of white and black. See Floyd-Wilson, 'Temperature, temperance, and racial difference', pp. 185–6. Lynda Boose, also discussing the geographical isolation of England, interestingly notes that of all 'European' countries, England was 'the most unfamiliar with Africans' because of its marginal location on the world map: Boose, '"The getting of a lawful race"', p. 36. As a Finnish/Nordic historian, I am of course well placed to point out the ethnocentricity of Boose's critical perspective, too: even during the Renaissance, Europe did not end at the south coast of the Baltic Sea, and England's isolation was always relative.

[41] Tommaso Buoni, *Problemes of Beautie and All Humane Affections* (London, 1606), p. 26. Other early modern writers also pointed out that ugliness of black skin was relative and culturally variable: where 'we' see whiteness as beauty, Moors, for example, could esteem darker hues – and pygmies did not mind short people. See for example Juan Luis Vives, *The Passions of the Soul* (Lewiston, NY and Lampeter, 1990), p. 113; Anthony Gibson, *A Womans Woorth* (London, 1599), fol. 57–57v; Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (London, 1646), pp. 332–3. Thomas Hahn has found the same idea in medieval sources as well, see Hahn, 'The difference the Middle Ages makes', pp. 18–19.

was the role of the mother and her imagination. If during the moment of conception she happened to be thinking of or seeing something potent or distressing, this could have repercussions for the unborn child. Pregnancy was a time fraught with dangers of this kind. Black women, naturally, were thinking of their black husbands – hence their black children. But even white women married to white men could thus conceive black children, if they fixed their imagination on a vision of a black man at the wrong moment. In this way, black skin could be thought of as a 'mutation', appearing at some point during human history through mere error and the activity of a woman's imagination.[42]

Another theory debated during the Renaissance revolved around the curse of Ham, son of Noah, but this theory too was recognised as problematic, because of the many discrepancies and conflicts in the story.[43] Still, George Best, for example, while explaining the curse, called blackness 'a spectacle of disobedience', an indelible visual stain of sin, meant to be seen by all.[44] No matter how emphatically the curse of Ham was denied, it was still repeated all through the seventeenth century, and whether people believed in the curse or not, the association of blackness with lechery, lust and disobedience stuck. Since the early modern mind was always collecting knowledge by combining it, we can see how the popular image of the black African was formed by piling one association of sin on top of another, resulting in a 'bricolage' of devilish and sinful images. But that is all it was: an amalgam of suspicions and assumptions, not a proper theory – or so early modern natural philosophers thought.

All in all, we could say Renaissance England lacked a theory to explain black skin and, consequently, the cultural niche appropriate for black Africans. This was considered a serious problem, and while various writers called for more

[42] Thomas Lupton, *A Thousand Notable Things* (London, 1579), pp. 156–7; Purchas, *Pilgrimage*, p. 655; Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, pp. 327–8; Bulwer, *Anthropometamorphosis*, p. 253; see also Chaplin, *Subject Matter*, pp. 138–41. In a literary form this motif is presented in the Ethiopian romance of Heliodorus and its later versions, see *Heliodorus, An Æthiopian Historie* (London, 1569), fol. 52v–53; William Lisle, *The Faire Æthiopian* (London, 1631), p. 182.

[43] The problems of the curse of Ham have been multiplied by Benjamin Braude's revealing article on how the geographical notions familiar to us as Noachic theory are fragmentary and inconsistent, and often anachronistically put together. In the Renaissance, there was no clear idea of the global continental division so familiar to us, and the division of lands between Noah's sons was itself a much debated and incoherent fantasy. What we have here is indeed 'a process of unnatural selection', as Braude describes it! Benjamin Braude, 'The sons of Noah and the construction of ethnic and geographical identities in the medieval and early modern periods', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 54:1 (1997), 103–42.

[44] Best in Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations* (1599–1600), III, p. 52.

detailed analyses of the topic, it became an ongoing quest for knowledge.[45] 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.[46] 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, reaffirming 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 viable than the

[45] See for example Hartwell in Lopez, *A Report*, p. 188.

[46] Hall, *Things of Darkness*, p. 42; for a similar situation in early America, see Chaplin, *Subject Matter*, pp. 52, 139, 160.

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'[47] in Renaissance England (as Lynda Boose 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'.[48] 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 interpretative 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 'racism', 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

[47] This formulation comes from Lynda Boose's question on whether skin colour should in fact be focused on as the most important 'racializing' factor in Renaissance England. See Boose, '"The getting of a lawful race"', pp. 35–6.

[48] Joyce Green MacDonald, *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts* (Cambridge, 2002), 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.

Black Africans in Renaissance Europe

edited by

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