UNDERSTANDING RACE IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND: SHAKESPEARE'S DRAMAS

Liliana Tronea-GHIDEL, Assistant, PhD, University of Craiova

Abstract: This paper's main focus is on those factors that were at play during the Renaissance in England and which determined the emergence of race as – according to GayatriSpivak – a necessary strategy to protect and defend its national reputation at the expense of African 'barbarians.' Several assumptions of the term 'race' are considered: relations of kinship, individual worth or behaviour, status of birth, religious confession, geographical residence, and skin colour. Mention is being made to AniaLoomba's three streams of ideas that inform the concept or race in early modern Europe. On the other hand, race is a dream act where significant imagined social relations assume a reality status in the world so that fantasy effects social transformation. According to StathisGourgouris, "one 'becomes' a national subject insofar as one believes oneself to be a witness to this mysterious process or ritual called 'national community,' insofar as one participates in (imagines, constructs, dreams) the fantasy of belonging to a national community". I have also considered critical approaches of other critics and analysts of the Renaissance, such as Kim Hall, Stephen Orgel, YumnaSiddiqi and Martin Butler, who have written about race and race relations in Early Modern Britain.

Keywords: Renaissance, race, race relations, national community

"Greek and Roman literatures, Christian religious thought, as well as medieval writings, were influenced in their views of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic difference. These views had been shaped by various histories of contact and conflict, the most important of which were the Greek and Roman interactions with the people they conquered, the Crusades, as well as the interactions between Jews, Muslims, and Christians within Europe, especially Iberia." ~AniaLoomba

To start with, we should not be surprised, as it is known that there were no racial manifestations in ancient Rome or Greece: the presence of dark, kinky-haired Emperors on the throne of Rome is an attested fact. Those 'barbarians' beyond the limits of the Roman Empire were simply discriminated – to use a modern term – on cultural reasons, which had nothing to do with race. When it comes to Elizabethan England, the things get more complicated.

It was the age of the great geographical discoveries, of the expansion of the British Empire, following not only the voyages of discovery of the famous European travellers – Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, and Vespucci, to whom we should add Francis Drake, Frobisher, and Hakluyt, subjects of the British crown and personal envoys of Queen Elizabeth I – allowed for a direct encounter with the Other: the African, or the Moor from the coast of Barbary, or the natives of the newly-discovered islands on the distant shores of the Atlantic Ocean. There is an Indian boy in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Othello is a hero who turns into a victim of jealousy, manipulation and prejudices. In *Titus Andronicus*, Aaron the Moor is as evil as he can be, contaminating everyone with his evil eye. If Othello dies in the end, thus paying for his own mistakes, Aaron is allowed to live and

BDD-V514 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:15 UTC)

repent, which he never consents to. Finally, there is Cleopatra, the ambitious, seductive Egyptian Queen, a victim to her own games.

The Jews had been there long before, having reached England three years after the Battle of Hastings, in 1070. They were officially present on the British soil for more than two centuries. Their unwanted involvement in financial matters, trade and politics triggered a wave of persecutions culminating with King Edward I's decree of 1270, according to which the Jews were considered a threat to the country and were forced to wear a yellow star in order to be easily identified in public. Many Jews were arrested and eventually executed. In 1290 they were banished from England, and returned only in 1655, when Oliver Cromwell allowed it.

The term 'race' was used in a number of different ways in this period. It could refer frequently to relations of kinship ('blood') or more generally to genealogy and lineage. Elsewhere, it might refer to individual worth or behaviour, status of birth (and thus, rights of inheritance), religious confession, geographical residence as well as, on occasion, skin colour. Frequently, populations of distant lands were perceived as either being savage or as more primitive, child-like versions of Europeans. If English writers and statesmen are found to promote their native land in imperial terms (indeed, James I styled himself as the sovereign over the 'Empire of Great Britain'), such claims remained most powerful for their textual persuasiveness rather than the reality of overseas possessions – the 'empire' was made up of conceptual space rather than geographical fact.

In addition to being the product of historical need, race is, therefore, fundamentally an exchange or transaction of power that employs distinct, identifiable personal features as the tools of negotiation. As such, race is not uniquely or, for that matter, most significantly concerned with the particular personal identifying trait or an inveterate practice; rather, race's consequence arises from its transactional function, the establishing of relative merit and power within a social matrix. For this reason, "race" is not the historical possession of post-Enlightenment "scientific" taxonomies and epistemology (as commonly debated); at the same time, the identification of context-specific racial traits is crucial to an accurate appraisal of racial negotiation at distinct periods in history.

Distinguished post-colonial critic AniaLoomba, traces three 'streams' of ideas that go into the making of beliefs and debates about 'otherness' and 'race' in early modern Europe. (Loomba, 6) According to her,

> "The first [stream] is comprised of medieval as well as classical notions about skin colour, religion and community. Greek and Roman literatures, Christian religious thought, as well as medieval writings, were influenced in their views of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic difference. These views had been shaped by various histories of contact and conflict, the most important of which were the Greek and Roman interactions with the people they conquered, the Crusades, as well as the interactions between Jews, Muslims, and Christians within Europe, especiallyIberia."

The second stream of ideas "is comprised of the 'cross-cultural encounters' challenging the older ideas of the first stream. These cross-cultural encounters became, during

BDD-V514 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:15 UTC)

Shakespeare's lifetime, 'more attractive as well as more threatening' for Europeans". The explanation resides in: (a) the overseas trade and colonization of Spain and Portugal; (b) the reality of the fast-expanding Turkish Empire; (c) the perception of the *Other* as generated by the New World and its inhabitants.

Then, there is a third stream, which refers to the 'notions of difference between men and women, rich and poor, nobility and ordinary folk' that are met in every society. "Concepts of gender, class, and national difference have a profound effect on how any culture understands its own boundaries and can be thought as the third stream of ideas, just as important for understanding 'race' as other histories of contact." (Loomba, 6)

She considers that racially marginalized or minority figures seem to have been capable of only essential and ascribed, not theatrical and achieved, selves. Obviously, the category inevitably becomes entwined with other crucial axes of identity and culture.

Inseparable from considerations of gender, race must also be understood as a relation of nation, class, and creed or religious practice. Her central principle is that:

"during the early modern period, gender and sexuality provided a language for expressing and developing ideas about religious, geographic, and ultimately *racial* difference. European, Christian identity is increasingly expressed in terms of masculinity, its superiority and power are described and comprehended as the penetration, rape, or husbanding of an inferior and feminized race. In these accounts, the word 'race' is not always used, and the difference between Europeans and others indicated is not always regarded as immutable or absolute" (Loomba, 31).

Race is a *dream act* where significant imagined social relations assume a reality status in the world so that fantasy effects social transformation.[1]Race as a dream act "is, therefore, among other things, a *projection*: an externalization of an internal process" that seeks the satisfaction of a narcissistic desire for domination and control (Freud 14: 223). To stipulate that colour and language are never absolute racial categories – a point made dramatically clear by the women's desire to turn white – is to admit that race is an act of interpretation, the asserted belief of a cultural or national collective. According to StathisGourgouris, "one 'becomes' a national subject insofar as one *believes* oneself to be a witness to this mysterious process or ritual called 'national community,' insofar as one participates in (imagines, constructs, *dreams*) the fantasy of belonging to a national community". For the dream act, belief is instrumental in affirming the mythic reality of a racial community that consolidates and justifies one's belonging; the dream act posits a derogatory racial construction of the other that simultaneously institutes the interpretive faithin Englishness as a concomitant imagined racial community.

Gourgouris makes the additional claim: "*an imagined community always imagines itself*. In so doing, however, it must occlude this act by instituting itself as an ontological presence that has, somehow or other, always already existed". That is, to assert its eternal presence, an imagined community – like the racial community to which the dominant subject belongs – has to forget the time before its proper emergence and the subsequent infelicitous histories of itself that are inconvenient and embarrassing to recall. Erasure, as we have seen, is

[1]We have been inspired here, first, by the notion of the linguistic performative and speech act theory as developed by J.L. Austin (1962). Second, we have borrowed Benedict Anderson's idea of the nation to imply that race, too, imagines a community, that race operates as a social-imaginary.

BDD-V514 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:15 UTC)

integral to the installation of power and dominance: the elimination or curtailment of citizen and legal rights, whether in the Jacobean unification controversy or the Romanization of barbarians; the eradication of personal identities as in the masque's requisite surrender of blackness as objectionable; or the distortion of history at the hands of cultural legislators by the rewriting of the traditions of blackness, language, and beauty. At the same time, race from the English perspective also requires forgetting, the erasure of a national history of color and, more importantly, linguistic barbarism, a strategy that underwrites the notion of moral superiority and justifies cultural projection. Thus we can conclude from the indispensable thesis of Ernest Renan's "What is a Nation?": "Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation". In the end, race is a self-validating dream act that institutes social dominance through multiple acts of denial and displacement.

When African characters appeared on the English Renaissance stage, their colour was, admittedly, a striking visual feature. Aaron, Mully, Zanche, Eleazar: for these exemplary types, blackness constituted an indelible and mostly negative part of the African's identity in the period's dramatic literature; unfavourable descriptions of Aaron as "black ill-favoured fly" and "a coal-black Moor" are typical.[2]The offstage world of exploration, nascent colonial expansion, and burgeoning international trade supplied historical and material contexts in which cross-cultural encounter resulted in a similar colour consciousness. Winthrop Jordan's landmark study *White over Black* concludes confidently that the "most arresting characteristic of the newly discovered African was his colour. Whether probing the intersections with gender, sexuality, and religion or arguing the impact of proto-colonial, colonial, and imperial pressures on the formation of cross-national identities, studies on race in the Renaissance have relied on colour as a rudimentary aspect of the cultural politics of difference.

Differences between various religions, languages, skin colours, and family arrangements were fascinating to European royalty, colonists, merchants, intellectuals, writers, readers, and playgoers, as is evident from the hundreds of books, pamphlets, sermons, and performances of the early modern period which focused upon these issues. The question of difference had previously been central to the literature generated by the Crusades and by the encounters between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Europe. In Shakespeare's day, as Europeans searched for new markets and colonies abroad, they became culturally more open, and yet in many ways more insular. They began to bring in foreign slaves, and to trade with outsiders, but also to expel those they considered 'foreign' from within their own nations. They became increasingly aware of the power, wealth, and learning of other peoples, of the precise histories and geographies of worlds beyond Europe, and yet this awareness often only intensified expressions of European and Christian superiority. The debates about religious, cultural, and bodily difference generated during this period were profoundly to shape the development of racial thinking over the next 400 years.

Kim Hall points out that, by repeating the notion that by 1605 the "conceit of blackness in a court masque was by no means a new invention," critics have effectively

[2]All citations from *Titus Andronicus* follow the Arden edition. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Shakespeare follow *The Riverside Shakespeare*. The famous Peacham drawing, a contemporaneous stage illustration, unique in English theater history, confirms the visual impact of color in its conflated scene from *Titus Andronicus*.

BDD-V514 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:15 UTC)

nullified the racial significance of colour in the by subsuming it within theatre history (Hall, 1995: 128). Stephen Orgel launches the counter-charge that our tendency to perceive race via slavery and imperialism has distorted our ability to understand blackness in this Renaissance masque (Orgel, 2002: 195).[3]His adamant objection is ubiquitous; he identifies blackness and skin color in *The Merchant of Venice* as more related to "xenophobia, something the English understood well, than about racism" (2002: 198). Similarly, in his reading of Elizabeth's expulsion order against "Negroes and blackamoors" in 1601, Orgel separates the commodification of blacks as owned property from the fact of their blackness to admit xenophobia but not racism (2002: 200). As a result, he will concede, the spectacle of Queen Anne and her ladies "as blacks, that is, as marketable commodities and rich possessions, is surely not irrelevant to the age's construction of women generally"; but with that limited admission, Orgel dismisses race from the analysis (2002: 201). While granting Orgel's argument that the masque uses blackness to represent antithetical court values, YumnaSiddiqi contends that given the momentous "contact of Renaissance England with Africa and Africans," masques "represent not only the workings of absolutist ideology within the court circle, but also its negotiation of racial alterity".[4]

Four of Shakespeare's plays deal with non-white characters: *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Tempest*, while in *The Merchant of Venice* we have non-Christian characters. Aaron and Othello are North-African Moors, Cleopatra is Egyptian – though her belonging to the African race is only superficially hinted at; Caliban's race is not very well defined, readers understanding him as a savage from the recently discovered islands and other territories, perhaps an Indian, while Shylock is a money-lending Jew of Venice. There are a few other characters who contribute to the general picture of Shakespeare's perception of a racial Other: Othello's mother (only mentioned in relation to the handkerchief); Shylock's daughter Jessica and his friend Tubal, but also Portia's African suitor, the Prince of Morocco, and the Moor woman (*The Merchant of Venice*); Aaron and Tamora's black baby (*Titus Andronicus*); and Caliban's mother (who, according to Caliban, was from Algiers, that is of North African origin). Thus, we have five female *Others* – Othello's mother, Jessica, Cleopatra, Sycorax, and Launcelot's Moor, and seven males – Othello, Aaron, Shylock, Caliban, the Prince of Morocco, and Aaron's baby.

Thus far we have encountered a number of opposites: Whites vs. Blackamoors, Europeans vs. Jews, Europeans vs. Turks, Europeans vs. savages; or, Christians vs. Muslims, Gentiles vs. Jews, or, to simplify things, Christian vs. Pagans whatever their faith. These are instances when non-white and non-Christian characters are marginalized to the extent that they become victims of prejudice and even racism.

George Best's famous quote from 1578 on the alleged encounter between an African and a white woman – an early example of miscegenation – illustrates the curiosity Europeans had about foreign peoples, especially West Africans. The English interpreted Africans in

[3]"We inevitably see Blackamoors through the history of black slavery and of modern racism," Orgel contends, "but in 1605 the English view of blacks was more complex, and the language of racism was principally applied to the Irish, where it obviously had nothing to do with skin color" (2002: 195).

[4]In this period of expanding global networks, William Over suggests that making Africans familiar is an important market objective: "Jonson constructs an interculturaldiscourse wherein the African figures are fashioned as familiar, commensurate with a seventeenth-century European self-conception – an effect thatreduces the threat from alien identities and supports England's nascent quest for global markets" (27).

BDD-V514 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:15 UTC)

many different ways in the first century of contact with them, casting them as the other based on their different religion, nation, and societal structure. However, the blackness of the African was what fascinated them. Blackness was the feature that was mentioned first in traveller's accounts. Africans were both appreciated and feared for their blackness; ultimately Africans became defined by their blackness. Creating categories of humanity based on the colour of one's skin was not done before the 17th century. English definitions of the term race were rooted in a concept of lineage, of individuals derived from a common source. When this notion of common origin was applied to colours of skin, it paved the way for racism.[5]

We should be aware that the change of understanding race in Early Modern Britain was a lengthy process, which did not occur quickly, automatically, or completely. The reasons for this change are complex, and they depend upon an integrated set of conditions. Therefore, George Best's quote may be seen as a useful framework for examining the conditions that allowed for change.

To be more precise, the status of Africans in the 16th century was not very well-defined: they were often assimilated with different 'others', such as the Arabs (Moors, Egyptians, Barbarians), Turks and Asians, to which the newly-discovered Americans were added. This unspecified status changed in the century to come. Even if the competing Portuguese, Dutch, and Spanish traders had been frequently trading with and in Africans during the seventeenth century, England saw its first sub-Saharan Africans as mid-century.

Commenting on the white-black relationship in the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, Karl Westhauser argues that – ever since the blacks made their appearance on the social stage – we have witnessed a form of 'multicultural ideology'. In support of his demonstration, the analyst refers to the traditional annual parades organized for the inauguration of the new Lord Mayor of London. These celebrations presented conflicting understandings of race. Conventionally, maps presented diversity by situating the four continents as the four corners of the world – a convenient solution for a printed, rectangular page. However, during the pageants organized, both Africa and Asia were presented as equal – a surprising approach at the time of the official beginnings of the slave trade in England – and the Africans in the pageant were not shown in a servile position, or as paying tribute to the Europeans. Moreover, the pageants included direct references to geographic features or important persons in Africa and Asia, which means a more intimate understanding from the pageant creators and the audience of the African and Asian countries.

Bibliography

BEST, George. *Discourse* (1578), in *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, ed. Richard Hakluyt (New York: AMS, 1965)
GURGOURIS, Stathis. *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization and the Institution of Modern Greece*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996)

[5]The first work to look at for an examination of race in Britain is Peter Fryer's, *Black People in the British Empire: An Introduction* (London: Pluto Press, 1988).The best scholarship in the field of race construction is Jordan Winthrop's *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550 – 1812* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1968). Karl Westhauser has an excellent article in response to Winthrop which focuses on the English origins, ""Revisiting the Jordan Thesis: 'White over Black'

BDD-V514 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:15 UTC)

HALL, Kim. *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995)
LOOMBA, Ania. *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
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.

BDD-V514 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 03:00:15 UTC)