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Racial Discourse in Elizabethan England

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Abstract

This essay examines seventeenth century Western European perception of race and its influence on an individual's innate character within the context of two plays by famed playwright William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus* and *The Merchant of Venice*. I explore the ways in which racial minority characters are treated by Europeans in each text, how these individuals view themselves, and finally the many facets of this complex social construct that these various interactions and self-images reveal. In addition to the plays' text, I also consider scholarly research to aid in the analysis. Because Shakespeare constructs these particular characters to challenge the oppressive traditions of Elizabethan society, this essay argues that *Titus Andronicus* and *The Merchant of Venice* illustrate the pervasive bigotry of early modern Europe and the stark implications of this institutionalized prejudice.

Key Terms:

- Christian
- Elizabethan
- Shakespeare
- Moors
- Multicultural
- Intolerance
- Jews

Throughout recorded human history, the categorization of people into separate social strata based on subjective criteria has given rise to cultural tensions that have juggled between moments of global chaos and callously instituted inequality. The early modern period in Western Europe was no exception, and as colonialism and international trade emerged as the unprecedented leaders of profit generation, differences between fair-toned, ubiquitously Christian Europeans and the numerous cultures they encountered on their business ventures became a central issue in defining the boundaries of social and cultural identity. Like much of the world's written expression, the famed literary works of playwright William Shakespeare act as well-preserved portals to the nature of domestic and foreign multicultural relations in the late sixteenth century. English perception of, and consequent interaction with, groups unlike themselves are revealed through Shakespeare's intricate construction of plot, extensively individuated characters, and the dynamic delivery of arguably some of the most famous lines of verse in literary history. The two groups of racial others most likely to be familiar to Elizabethan audiences would have been the members of the Jewish religion and peoples of African descent, commonly termed "Moors." While both Moors and Jews were considered to be of less moral quality than Christians, the characterization and manifestation of English intolerance for these particular groups were based in pre-existing interactions unique to each. Therefore, the two communities were treated differently from one another. As Shakespeare demonstrated in the Moorish characters Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* and the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*, the English imparted well-known contemporary prejudices and stereotypes on those of African descent based solely on their dark complexion, though the

treatment was further separated based on one's specific origin in Africa. Similarly, the domineering presence of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* reinforces the historical oppression of the Jews through their storied turbulent relationship with Christians. How these three racially different characters perceive themselves, that which makes them "the Other," and their status in the dominant society reveal the varying internal psychologies of Europe's marginalized communities, thereby addressing a scarcely discussed facet of the racial landscape of Shakespeare's England and the rest of sixteenth century Western Europe.

Unlike the twenty-first century understanding of race to be a fixed mark of human biology and natural evolution, blackness as illustrated by Shakespeare is one of the many qualities, physical or otherwise, that isolates and acutely degrades those who possess it. Therefore, these individuals are identified to be of a different race than the majority. In addition to African Moors, racially "Othered" groups in Elizabethan England included peasants, Muslims, citizens of foreign nations, and women. According to author and literary critic Ania Loomba in her book *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, race was thus utilized as an instrument to wield power over a variety of minority groups, and it remains "a highly malleable category which historically has been deployed to reinforce existing social hierarchies and create new ones" (3). Loomba goes on to define early modern discernment of race as a "distinct social group whose physical difference corresponds to inner qualities" (27). The characteristic fluidity of Elizabethan perception of race bears direct influence on the particular way blackness is Othered in this time period. Because so many different criteria were considered grounds for racial segregation, the

significance of blackness on personhood is highly contested and varies upon several conditions. Loomba claims that historically, “blackness was a symbol for a variety of differences...[it] represents danger, becoming a way of signifying what lies outside familiar or approved social, political, religious, and sexual structures” (36). Elizabethans often debated, for instance, whether or not a person’s blackness was merely a physical misfortune or indicative of spiritual impurity and moral depravity. Stereotypes gradually arose from these warring opinions, as “the stages of the early modern period were rife with images of black people as lewd, unprincipled, and evil, ugly, and repulsive” (36). Further research reveals that the darker-toned people of sub-Saharan African lineage were most often painted in this way, whilst intertwining the “long tradition that equated blackness with lechery” into the caricature as well (49). North African Moors, however, were generalized to be noble, cultured, and economically savvy as a result of English attempts at cooperative trade with the Islamic nations of the region, namely Morocco. Yet, their involvement in the medieval religious Crusades earned members of this group dual portrayal as aggressive and threatening. Thus, the lighter Moor’s ethnic background served as an “amalgam of both religious and color difference” (47). It is in this contemporary context that Shakespeare carefully allocates traits to his black characters in the military tragedy *Titus Andronicus* and the social comedy *The Merchant of Venice*.

Completed in 1593, *Titus Andronicus* is one of Shakespeare’s earliest plays and centers around the military general Titus in the later period of ancient Rome who seeks revenge for the grave transgressions various characters in the play commit against him and his family. The play’s only black character Aaron is the formerly

enslaved lover of Tamora, the Queen of the Goths. He single-handedly orchestrates the revenge plot, as he relates in his confession of intricate scheming in the final act of the play, “murders, rapes, and massacres./ Acts of black night, abominable deeds,/ Complots of mischief, treason, villainies” (5.1.64-66). When Titus’s son Lucius asks “Art thou sorry for these heinous deeds?”, Aaron revels in his deceit and apparently unfounded malice, retorting, “I have done a thousand dreadful things/ As willingly as one would kill a fly,/ And nothing grieves me heartily indeed/ But that I cannot do ten thousand more” (5.1.125, 144-146). He also fathers a racially-mixed child with Tamora, much to the horror and disgust of her sons Chiron and Demetrius, as they lament upon seeing the ebony-hued newborn, “damned [Tamora’s] loathed choice!/ Accursed the offspring of so foul a fiend!” (4.2.82-83). Ruthless, irreligious, and sexually unapologetic, Aaron is largely drawn to be a static, innately evil figure who possesses absolute contempt for mankind. In this way, he represents quite a few of the traditional stereotypes of African blackness. Conversely, his use of nobility’s standard blank verse, high diction, and eloquent speech indicate that the Moor is extensively educated. Thus, this facet of his character contradicts the generalizations and perceptions of blackness as animalistic and barbaric held by Shakespeare’s audience and countrymen. Aaron’s verse and word usage are as rich and aesthetic as any lines delivered by the nobility in *Titus Andronicus*, and in fact, his skin color and low birth are initially the only qualities that identify the Moor as “Other.” He is seldom addressed by the Romans, with the exception of Bassianus and Lavinia who discover him in a compromising tryst with Tamora during the noble hunt. They assert their nonchalant prejudice against Aaron’s skin tone as a mark of his low social status and moral quality by berating

the new Empress of Rome, “your swarthy Cimmerian/ Doth make your honor of his body’s hue,/ Spotted, detested, and abominable” (2.3.72-74). Soon after this exchange, Aaron passively observes Chiron and Demetrius murder Bassianus and carry Lavinia further into the forest where they rape and mutilate her.

An important point in surveying the dominant culture’s view of blackness is its conviction that the Moor’s skin color is irreversible and stains all with which it comes into intimate contact. Interestingly enough, Aaron’s blackness never positively affects any perceived good he may do. When Aaron proposes that Titus cut off his hand to save the lives of his sons Quintus and Marcus, the general praises him, “O gentle Aaron!/ Did ever raven sing so like a lark” (3.1.159-160). Unsuspecting that it is the former slave who framed Quintus and Marcus for the murder of Bassianus, Titus is grateful for the possibility of his sons’ acquittal and expresses surprise that an Other could act with such kindness. As Aaron’s true intentions are revealed, however, his malevolent behavior polarizes the other characters against him, as they once again cite his dark skin color to be the breeder of a particular poison; in this case, it begets his devilish nature. In her essay “The Living Dramatist,” literary critic Wole Soyinka writes that the characterization of Aaron “reduces the representative of that race to unprecedented depths of savagery and inhuman perversion” (87). Titus himself conveys this belief whilst commending his brother Marcus for killing a “black, ill-favored fly,/ Like to the Empress’ Moor” by stating that Marcus “hast done a charitable deed...between us we can kill a fly/ That comes in likeness of a coalblack Moor” (3.2.67-68, 78-79). Because his blackness cannot be removed from his person, the evil that resides within him is immutable as well.

Shakespeare’s interpretation of Elizabethan concepts of blackness depicts them as flowing directly from the European tradition of typecasting the darker-toned Moor of the early modern period.

The Prince of Morocco makes his debut in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* (1597) as the first of Portia’s suitors to arrive for a game, the prize of which is her royal hand in marriage. Reminiscent of the Christian rendering of the Turkish Muslims during the Crusades approximately three hundred years earlier, the Prince is described as “a tawny Moor all in white” in the stage directions at the beginning of Act 2, Scene 1. He also carries a Turkish scimitar, or sword, in preparation for whatever his task might be. By associating the Prince of Morocco with Islam and giving him the external appearance of the North African Muslims so feared in early modern Europe, Shakespeare aligns this minor character with the second contemporary view of blackness. Once again, the character of the Moor is well-educated and speaks in highly poetic verse, as the Prince litters his lines with complex metaphors and classic allusions to convey the confidence he has in his strength and valor. He boasts of his abilities, “Where Phoebus’ fire scare thaws the icicles,/ And let us make incision for your love/ To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine” (2.1.5-7). His twofold differences of complexion and religion are not lost on Portia who is depicted as the model Christian woman. As such, she is noble, intelligent, and adheres to social and domestic standards, including those concerning interracial relations. In response to his request to “Mislike me not for my complexion,” Portia calmly retorts, “In terms of choice I am not solely led/ By nice direction of a maiden’s eyes” (2.1.1, 13-14). Though her response indicates that she personally does not equate his human value with outward appearance, it does imply that the

norms of her society do not find him attractive because of his color. Once the Prince chooses the wrong casket and loses the game, however, she is less diplomatic and expresses her disdain for his otherness more blatantly, “A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go./ Let all of his complexion choose me so” (2.7.78-79). Though the Prince of Morocco is every bit as noble and well-born as she, the heiress seems to agree with a scandalized view of racial-mixing, as the idea of blackness infiltrating the purity of whiteness is enough to repulse her. Thus, Shakespeare employs the characters in *The Merchant of Venice* to treat North African blackness with more outwardly graceful tolerance than the darker Moors in response to the former’s economic benefit to the Europeans, all the while harboring much of the same bigoted sentiments about both groups. Though not addressed, the Prince of Morocco’s religion also categorizes him as the Other, emphasizing and adding depth to the theme of religious difference in the play.

Religious tensions between the followers of Mosaic law and those of Jesus Christ are an inextricable founding point of the Christianity practiced by the nobility in *The Merchant of Venice*. The genesis of the friction is historically rooted in the physical life of the Christian Savior. According to the New Testament of the Christian Bible, one of the main ministering strategies Jesus employed to spread his message was to actively denounce the unforgiving nature of his fellow Jewish rabbis and the stringency with which they interpreted God’s Word to the Jewish community. Ultimately, Christ was brutally tortured and publicly executed for his disobedience and failure to preach Judaism in a way acceptable to the Pharisees. Thus, Christian hatred for those of the Jewish faith and their subsequent oppression of the Jews finds its origin here, and in the course of

Shylock’s sharp conversations with Christian merchants Antonio and Bassanio, the men refer to these biblical issues more than once. By Shakespeare’s time in early modern Europe, the status of Jewish-Christian relations was acutely tense, and it was common throughout the continent’s western region to oppress practicing members of the Jewish faith. Loomba elaborates on specific mandates and anti-Semitic practices: “Jews were required to wear a cap distinguishing them from others, to pay higher taxes, and to be confined to the ghetto” (142). Like the skin color prejudices of the day, stereotypes and exaggerations of Jews as inflexible and avaricious were created to strengthen the social segregation and intolerance against Mosaic dogma, thereby providing the basis for Shakespeare’s characterization of this Othered individual. Loomba concurs with this claim: “It is true that Jewish characters such as Shylock and Barabas [in playwright Christopher Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*] embody negative traits shared by the society at large, such as the greed for money” (143). Indeed, Shylock’s representation is the patchwork of Shakespeare weaving his audience’s views and his own literary license to create the complex villain of Venice.

It is out of the early modern perception and treatment of Jews that the character of Shylock is created, and indeed, the anti-Semitic views of the period define his thoughts, actions, and relationships with all whom he comes into contact. The Christians in *The Merchant of Venice* cite his religion as the greatest reason for their cruel treatment of the Jew, as Shylock recounts the physically violent and psychologically jarring abuse he receives from the merchant Antonio, the play’s main character, “You call me misbeliever, cut-throat, dog,/ And spit upon my Jewish gabardine/...And foot me as you spurn a stranger

cur” (1.3.107-108,114). As a wealthy moneylender to the bustling merchant trade, Shylock is also despised for being a usurer, or charging interest on his clients’ loans, as usury was avidly condemned by Christian doctrine, yet accepted and widely practiced by Jews. When Antonio must borrow money from his sworn enemy at the end of Act One, he expresses his disdain for Shylock’s profession, “I neither lend nor borrow/ By taking nor by giving of excess” (1.3.56-57). Shakespeare continues to individuate the Jew as a stark and serious man who alienates virtually everyone with his personality, including his daughter Jessica and his peasant servant Lancelot. This austerity is conveyed through Shylock’s pattern of speech, as it lacks the ornate literary devices of the wealthy Christians in the play, and he orates in straightforward fashion instead.

As with Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* and the Prince of Morocco, Shylock’s perception of his difference and its effects on his person greatly impact the course of the plot because his actions stem directly from the nature of those personal insights. His fervent insistence that Antonio give him a pound of flesh, for instance, is an act of revenge that he exacts for the prolonged suffering he has endured at the hands of Antonio and the other Christians. Though the voices of early modern racial others have effectively been stifled in the historical record, their opinions are a subject of great interest because they are crucial evidence in compiling a complete body of research concerning England’s cultural issues at the time of Shakespeare’s writing. How the playwright constructs these characters to react to the marginalization illustrates the concrete fixedness of sixteenth century European standards, helps answer the question of the internal qualities’ dependence on the external, and articulates the

inconsistencies and hypocrisies of Elizabethan society.

Though the judgment of the Moor’s character by others in *Titus Andronicus* is easily seen to flow from the traditions of Shakespeare’s culture, Aaron’s psyche is first subtly interjected in the playtext before the villain eventually conveys his innermost beliefs about himself and the society in which he lives upon his capture and impending execution in Act 5, Scene 1. Much like the Romans in *Titus Andronicus*, Aaron sees his hardened malice and decidedly inhumane appetite for discord and destruction as a direct result of his dark skin color. He quietly congratulates himself for convincing Titus to cut off his hand in Act 3, Scene 1, “how this villainy/ Doth fat me with the very thoughts of it!/ Let fools do good and fair men call for grace;/ Aaron will have his soul black like his face” (3.1.205-208). However, this is not a source of shame for the Moor, as he is quite proud of not only his physical difference, but also the evil that he imparts on the other characters. Here Aaron speaks highly of his skin tone in comparison to the fair skin of the Romans and the Goths and details its benefits, “Coal black is better than another hue/ In that it scorns to bear another hue;/...Fie, treacherous hue [of the Romans and Goths], that will betray with blushing” (4.2.103-104, 121). He does not wish to exist as member of the socially accepted majority, and he does his best throughout the play to alienate himself from their ranks.

Having written *The Merchant of Venice* further into his now wildly successful career, Shakespeare’s inclusion of the Prince of Morocco offers another view as felt by a social Other. In his first of two scenes, the Prince immediately addresses the traditional perception of his skin color by telling Portia, “Mislike me not for my

complexion/...And let us make incisions for your love/ To prove whose blood is reddest, his or mine” (2.1.1, 6-7). Here the Islamic royal clearly states that he does feel that his blackness has any affect whatsoever, good or bad, on his physical attributes or his ethical principles. He all but ignores Portia’s subtle suggestion that he would not be accepted as her husband by European conventions, instead choosing to say “Even for that I thank you” in response to her willingness to overlook his race (2.1.23). He does think, however, that his personality depends on the wealth his social status affords him. He is depicted as powerful and arrogant because he feels that his martial capabilities and high station render him so. Furthermore, the Prince sees himself as equal to the fair-skinned Italian heiress, as indicated by his use of the informal pronoun “thee” when speaking to Portia. The Prince’s philosophy is further evidenced by his initial warning to Portia of imparting any cultural prejudices on him, for his beliefs, traits, and actions are not ill-made products of his complexion. His intent to marry Portia is accompanied by the assumption that the hypothetical couple would produce a child of mixed-race, an event that would be sure to irreversibly stain her honor in the eyes of white, Christian society. Because he does not define himself within the confines of prejudice, the Prince refuses to give credence to the issue and simply ignores it altogether. Ultimately, the Prince of Morocco accepts his blackness with pride, but he does not see any sense in separating groups of people based on race.

As a much more important character in *The Merchant of Venice* than the Prince, Shylock’s perception of himself owns an integral role in the development of the play. The most complex and harshly treated of Shakespeare’s three Othred characters, the Jewish moneylender’s distinct

personality is woven entirely from the social fabric of late sixteenth century Venice. His austere interpretation of justice that machines the plot is completely Jewish in root. He views these traits as a source of ethnic pride that tangibly connect him to his religious ancestors, stating that if he were to forgive Antonio, “Cursed be my tribe” (1.3.46). Though marginalized at every opportunity, Shylock does not feel any less important because of his spiritual ideology than the Christians. In his famous speech in Act 3, Scene 1, Shylock points out the faulty foundations on which much of the Christians’ bigotry lies, “Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions...If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in [the seeking of revenge]...The villainy you teach me I will execute” (3.1.49-51, 56-57, 60). In literary critic John R. Cooper’s essay “Shylock’s Humanity”, he writes, “[Shylock] shows a bitterness against Christians, in part at least for the humiliation he has suffered” (119). Indeed, he hates them for treating him as if his external facets exclusively dictate his internal quality and worth.

All three of the Othred characters wholly embrace that which makes them be seen and treated as different. There are, however, conflicting opinions among them about Otherness determining temperament. The most socially relevant, however, is how each character discerns the unkind racial majority and thus views himself in interactions with them. The Prince of Morocco alone sees the potential for cultural harmony if the Europeans cease to equate personal nature with physical appearance. Conversely, Aaron and Shylock both loathe those who actively marginalize them, and the revenge each social pariah exacts serves to form the central events in their respective plays, ultimately undermining the validity of fair-skinned, Christian superiority as an

intrinsic right. Outside of Shakespeare's playtext, their beliefs provide much needed insight on the perception of Elizabethan society by its outcasts, adding depth and clarity to the early modern mosaic of racism.

The early history of defining Otherness as radically different created exaggerated myths and negative stereotypes to depreciate the inherent worth of those who looked and behaved differently from western European norms. Attempts to explain differences of skin color, theological beliefs, economic status, and a host of additional arbitrary elements were marked by elementary symbolism in the form of artistic, written, and spoken caricature of minority groups that highlighted their features as not only alien to the white Christian upper-class, but also subordinate and detrimental to their society. These travel narratives, paintings, and oral stories provided gilded credibility to European claims, and they therefore framed supremacist thought in Elizabethan England. In *Titus Andronicus* and *The Merchant of Venice*, William Shakespeare constructs his social Others to possess a varying combination of prevalent typecasts. Simultaneously, he gives each unique characteristics as a result of their social subjugation and perceptions of themselves against a white-washed and religiously hypocritical background. Aaron is the conniving, soulless African, the Prince of Morocco is noble but also a religious and social threat, and Shylock serves as the absolute opposition to the Christian morals of charity and forgiveness that Elizabethans seem to think they exclusively possess. Their ensuing personalities allow Shakespeare to represent emerging early modern racial diversity as a staple of European social structure. In the larger scope of the known world, these complex illustrations by the famous Bard accurately depict the global

community moving toward such an increase in multicultural and interracial intermingling and trade that their presence would drive the events of the next four hundred years, permanently affecting relations amongst peoples on every scale.

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