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Different Differences: Locating Moorishness in Early Modern English Culture¹

A STRIKING BUT not generally noted feature of the African characters who turn up in Elizabethan and Jacobean public drama is how many of them are either from the sultanate of Morocco and Fez or from North Africa more generally. All of the black characters in Peele's *Battle of Alcazar* and the anonymous *Captain Thomas Stukely* are Moroccan. The black characters in Heywood's *Fair Maid of the West* are Fessian. The African kings in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* are from Morocco, Fez, Algiers and Egypt. The Moor Eleazar in *Lust's Dominion* by Dekker is the crown prince of Fez. The invaders in *All's Lost by Lust* by Rowley are North African Muslims. In *The Tempest*, Caliban's mother Sycorax has been exiled from Algiers; and in *The Merchant of Venice* one of Portia's suitors is the Prince of Morocco. In fact, with the exception of Greene's *Orlando Furioso*, in which the vaguely identified "Emperor of Africa" may have been from anywhere and may not even have had black skin, it is hard to find an African character on the English Renaissance stage who is not principally described as a Moor or explicitly connected to North Africa in some way.

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Such stage Moors were probably painted coal-black, as is the Moor Aaron in the famous Peacham sketch of a sixteenth-century performance of *Titus Andronicus*.² The oddity of this representation was noted in 1968 by Winthrop Jordan in *White Over Black*, his landmark study of early modern representations of blackness:

In Shakespeare's day, the Moors, including Othello, were commonly portrayed as pitchy black and the terms 'Moor' and 'Negro' used almost interchangeably. With curious inconsistency, however, Englishmen recognized that Africans south of the Sahara were not at all the same people as the much more familiar Moors.³

It is important to note, with Jordan, that there is no reason to believe that Londoners of the late Elizabethan period were *necessarily* ignorant of the fact that Africans are not uniformly black. Several writers, including the English travel writer Richard Eden and the converted Moor Leo Africanus, had commented upon this very fact.⁴ Moreover, the London populace had observed a group

²The Peacham sketch is reproduced in *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974) plate 8. Some scholars, starting with Eldred Jones, have argued that the English stage was peopled with nefarious black Moors and noble white or tawny Moors. This distinction seems to be more a product of modern assumptions than early modern evidence, however. As George Hunter and Eliot Tokson have pointed out, the distinction relies on a few instances in which the colour of a Moor is either not identified, or identified as "tawny." "If one Moor is described as black and another is not described by colour at all," writes Tokson, "it hardly seems safe to conclude that the second appears as a white man." Both Tokson and Hunter discuss the shifting meanings of the term "tawny," which appears to have been used somewhat interchangeably with the terms "sooty," "swarthy," "swart" and "black" in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. See Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (New York: Oxford UP, 1965); Hunter, "Elizabethans and Foreigners," *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition: Studies in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1978) 29n8; Hunter, "Othello and Colour Prejudice," *Dramatic Identities and Cultural Tradition* 32n2; and Tokson, *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550-1688* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982) 39-40.

³Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1968) 5.

⁴Jordan, *White Over Black* 5-6.

of Moors first-hand when an embassy from Morocco arrived in London in August 1600 and stayed for almost five months. During celebrations to mark the anniversary of Elizabeth's coronation on 17 November a special platform was constructed which, with characteristic Elizabethan symbolic economy, allowed the ambassadors to observe the spectacle as well as to become part of it.⁵ A portrait of Abd al-Ouahed, the chief ambassador, painted while he was in England, depicts him not as a "pitchy black" stage Moor, but as an olive complexioned Mediterranean.⁶ Finally, there was a regular trade between England and Morocco throughout this period, which meant that there moved through London a constant stream of factors, travellers and seamen who were acquainted with actual Moroccan men and women. Why, then, did Renaissance theatre troupes represent as "pitchy black" people whose skin colour was known to be much lighter?

This question has not generally been asked by modern commentators on Renaissance drama. Scholars such as Karen Newman, Patricia Parker, Jean Howard and Kim Hall have assumed that, given the limited knowledge of world geography in the early modern period, it was unlikely that the English could distinguish the various regions of the African continent, or even differentiate Africa, the New World and Asia. Representations of Africans on the stage have generally been contextualized by examining representations of various African and New World peoples in early modern travel literature.⁷

⁵Jack D'Amico, *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama* (Tampa: U of South Florida P, 1991) 36.

⁶This portrait is reproduced in D'Amico, *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama* 5 and in Bernard Harris, "A Portrait of a Moor," *Shakespeare Survey* 11 (1958): 89–97.

⁷Karen Newman, "'And Wash the Ethiop White': Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*," *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (New York: Methuen, 1987) 141–62; Patricia Parker, "Fantasies of 'Race' and 'Gender': Africa, *Othello*, and Bringing to Light," *Women, "Race", and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (New York: Routledge, 1994) 84–100; Jean E. Howard, "An English Lass Amid the Moors: Gender, Race, Sexuality and National Identity in Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the West*," *Women, "Race", and Writing*, ed. Hendricks and Parker 101–17; Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1995).

Nonetheless, there is much evidence to support Jordan's assertion that the early modern English did differentiate North Africa from the rest of the continent. That so many stage Africans should have been North African speaks to some familiarity with that region. So does the fact that, under Elizabeth, the English state established official diplomatic relations with Morocco centuries before it would with any other African power. Equally significant, by the mid-sixteenth century, when trade to the Gulf of Guinea was conducted in a trip-by-trip, hit-and-run fashion, English merchants had established a stable trade infrastructure in Morocco. Here resident English factors managed a complex system of credit and debt exchange with Moroccan merchants, in virtually identical fashion to those who operated in European states.⁸

This may have been because the sultanate of Morocco and Fez was virtually a European state. For centuries Fez had been a crossroads of Christian and Islamic culture, the launching point of the Islamic conquest of Spain in the eighth century and the site of Spanish and Portuguese invasion in the fifteenth and sixteenth. Though much of Africa was "discovered" during the "Age of Discovery," North Africa was not, for it was already quite well known. The original edition of *The Principall Navigations* (1589), Richard Hakluyt's great hymn to the English explorers, contained very little material on North Africa, presumably because Hakluyt's interests lay particularly in the imperial expansion of England.⁹ At a time when Sir Walter Raleigh was attempting to establish an English colony at Roanoke, Virginia, the idea of planting a similar colony in North Africa, which was entirely under the dominion of either the Ottoman or the Moroccan sultan, would have been as bizarre as proposing an English colony in France. North Africa in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries simply did not belong to that part of the world which Europeans might colonize. It was part of the

⁸T.S. Willan, *Studies in Elizabethan Foreign Trade* (Manchester: U of Manchester P, 1959) 101, 104–6.

⁹P.E.H. Hair, "Morocco, the Saharan Coast, and the Neighbouring Atlantic Islands," *The Hakluyt Handbook* 1 (London: Hakluyt Society Publications, 1974) 192. The second edition of *The Principall Navigations* of 1598–1600 contained a considerably expanded collection of documents relating to commerce and diplomacy between England and North Africa, especially Morocco.

world which Europeans either attempted to conquer or to ally themselves with.

In short, the fact that the early modern English did not distinguish between Africans from north and south of the Sahara on the stage should not necessarily be accepted as evidence of a homogenizing view of the African continent. Furthermore, it should not be assumed that characteristics attributed to Moors on the Renaissance stage are evidence of a racist attitude to Africans, or colonialist designs on Africa. The white/black oppositions which permeate the plays of the period are best explained not in the context of "racism," an ideological system which exploits somatic difference to systematically denigrate the "racial" other, but rather in terms of colour symbolism. The prejudices of Elizabethans were specifically against blackness—not necessarily against dark-skinned people. That stage Moors, despite accurate knowledge of the skin colour of North Africans, were presented as "pitchy black"—as had been the demons of medieval popular drama—allowed dramatists the opportunity to play between visual and textual metaphors. It is questionable whether this play can be accurately characterized as evidence of systematized "racial" difference.

In this essay I propose to contextualize representations of Moorishness in Elizabethan and Jacobean public drama not, as is the current fashion, by looking at the diverse fantasia and exotica described in the travelogues of the period, but by considering contemporary representations of Moors in diplomatic writing, and representations of blackness in medieval popular drama. The result is a less sensationalist view of early modern understandings of Moorishness, but one which is further removed from modern racism.

During the second half of her reign Queen Elizabeth sent four embassies to Morocco and received two in return. These embassies varied greatly in their effectiveness. The first English embassy to Marrakech was a tremendous success, laying the foundations for later diplomatic relations. The second, Elizabeth's sole attempt to establish a resident ambassador in Marrakech, was ineffective, largely owing to the incompetence of the ambassador.¹⁰

¹⁰The ambassador in question was Henry Roberts, who acted as the representative of the queen in Morocco from 1585 to 1588. He apparently owed his appointment

The third and fourth embassies were both failures from the English perspective, as the English ambassadors found themselves skilfully manipulated by the sultan.¹¹ Both of these ambassadors returned to England tremendously anti-Moroccan. A comparison of the reports and correspondence of the first and third ambassadors, then, allows for a sampling of representations of Moroccans from the perspective of an ambassador whose mission had gone extremely well, and from another who was frustrated and bitter at having been made a pawn in the diplomatic games of the Moroccans.

Elizabeth's first ambassador to Marrakech was Edmund Hogan, a member of the London Mercer's Guild, a founding member of the Spanish Company, and according to a list found among the state papers, one of "the wisest and best merchants in London."¹² Not a typical Elizabethan ambassador; but then there was nothing typical about his embassy either.¹³ The embassy was apparently sent in reaction to a report submitted by Hogan himself to the queen's Privy Council, which suggested that Moulay Abd al-Malik, the Moroccan sultan, would be willing to trade saltpetre, an item essential to the manufacture of gunpowder, in exchange for iron shot. At the time of this report, probably 1575 or 1576, England was extremely short of saltpetre and tensions with Spain were rising. Hogan's report further suggested that Morocco could serve as an entrepôt to an overland trade with the Levant, allowing English merchants access to Mediterranean markets without hazarding

to the patronage of the Earl of Leicester rather than to any diplomatic acumen of his own. See Willan, *Studies* 225–33.

¹¹These embassies were sent in 1589 and 1590 in an attempt to persuade the sultan to provide financial aid for the Portuguese pretender Don Antonio, whose cause Elizabeth had championed as part of her campaign against Philip II of Spain. Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur, who was engaged in negotiations with Philip II at the time, promised to aid Don Antonio but was actually more interested in having representatives of the Queen competing for favour with the Spanish ambassador than fulfilling any such promises.

¹²Willan, *Studies* 148.

¹³Gary Bell provides a good overview of typical Elizabethan diplomacy in "Elizabethan Diplomacy: The Subtle Revolution," *Politics, Religion and Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Malcolm R. Thorp and Arthur J. Slavin (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publications, 1994) 305–19.

the pirate-infested waters of the Mediterranean Sea or losing profits to Italian middlemen.¹⁴

In May 1577 Hogan left for Morocco. Four months later he was back in England, his mission an absolute success. He had secured the saltpetre trade, improved the terms of the regular English commerce with Morocco, established in principle the overland trade to the Levant, and had even secured a promise of passive Moroccan support for the English should they attack Spain.¹⁵ Sultan Abd al-Malik wrote to Queen Elizabeth that he was well pleased with Hogan, and requested that England receive a Moroccan embassy in the near future.¹⁶

Hogan's correspondence with the queen from Morocco and his final report on the embassy were written by a merchant eager to encourage an Anglo-Moroccan political alliance as a means of promoting his own commercial interests. Such an alliance must have seemed exceedingly unlikely at the time, given the recent political and commercial treaties signed between England and Portugal. In 1577 Portugal was preparing for a major invasion of Morocco, and Elizabeth had to decide whether to honour the treaties signed with Portugal, which prohibited the sale of military supplies to Morocco, or to strengthen ties with a Muslim sultan who might well prove to be a willing ally against Philip II of Spain, the maternal uncle of the Portuguese king.¹⁷ Hogan was astute enough to see the stakes of the game, and his reports reflect a desire to depict the Moroccan sultan not only as an acceptable political ally, but even an honourable ally from a religious-cultural perspective.

According to Hogan, Moroccan court life was enlivened by bucolic English pastimes such as morris dancing, ducking with spaniels, and bull-baiting, as well as finer entertainments such as court masques. The sultan, who surrounded himself with Christian and Moorish counsellors, was able to converse with Hogan in Spanish, but had Hogan's speeches translated into Arabic "[so] that the

¹⁴Henry de Castries, ed., *Les Sources Inédites de L'Histoire du Maroc* 1 (Paris: Ernest Leroux Luzac, 1918) 199–205.

¹⁵See Hogan's letter to the Queen and his final report in de Castries, ed., *Les Sources Inédites* 1: 225–27 and 239–49.

¹⁶De Castries, ed., *Les Sources Inédites* 1: 236–38.

¹⁷E.W. Bovill, *The Battle of Alcazar* (London: Batchworth Press, 1952) 43–53.

Moore might understand," thus drawing a subtle distinction between al-Malik and his Moorish subjects. Most incredibly, Hogan asserted that al-Malik was known to his subjects as "the christian king," that he was "a vearie earnest Protestant," and that he recognized that the English practised "Godes trew religioun."¹⁸

It is exceedingly unlikely that Hogan's clumsy attempts to sanitize the Moroccan sultan fooled anyone, least of all Queen Elizabeth. Al-Malik was a Muslim, not a closet Protestant. But what is interesting is *how* Hogan sought to sanitize al-Malik. When, a century after Hogan's embassy, Aphra Behn wanted to make the West African prince Oroonoko more palatable to the English reading public, she portrayed him as a white man with black skin:

His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat: His Mouth the finest shaped that could be seen; far from those great turn'd Lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes. The whole Proportion and air of his face was so nobly and exactly form'd, that bating his colour, there could be nothing in nature more beautiful, agreeable and handsome.¹⁹

Hogan, by contrast, sought to make al-Malik acceptable to his readers not by obscuring the sultan's somatic characteristics, but by obscuring his cultural, and especially his religious, differences. In the opinion of the merchant-ambassador, then, the greatest differences between the English queen and the Moroccan sultan were differences of religion.

In curious agreement with Hogan's attempts to Anglicize al-Malik are the writings of a later ambassador, John de Cardenas, who was sent to Morocco in 1589. In Cardenas' correspondence and reports, al-Malik's successor, Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur, is depicted as a despotic tyrant, a deceitful heathen and a Christ-cursing

¹⁸Quotations are drawn from Hogan's letter from Marrakech to Queen Elizabeth, dated 11 June 1577, and his final report as printed in the 1589 edition of Hakluyt's *Principall Navigations*. Both documents may be found in de Castries, ed., *Les Sources Inédites* 1: 225–27 and 239–49.

¹⁹Quoted in Newman, "And Wash the Ethiop White" 154.

infidel. But this radical othering of al-Mansur is simply a negative version of Hogan's un-othering of al-Malik. Where Hogan asserted al-Malik's political legitimacy, styling him "the christian king," Cardenas denied al-Mansur's, calling him a usurper and a tyrant. Hogan had differentiated al-Malik from his Moorish subjects; Cardenas did not refer to the sultan by any title or name other than "the Moore." Hogan described al-Malik as "a vearie earnest Protestant"; Cardenas included al-Mansur among "the sworne ennemyes of Christ." Hogan viewed al-Malik as a favourable political and commercial ally for England; Cardenas accounted all relations between England and Morocco "[of] more dishonour to her Maljesltie and the state then benefitt to themselves."²⁰

Although Hogan sought to reduce al-Malik's difference and Cardenas sought to amplify al-Mansur's, both employed the same discourses of political legitimacy and religious truth. Neither Hogan's desire to sanitize nor Cardenas' to demonize led either to employ discourses of blackness, or to attempt any sort of "racist" characterization of either sultan. Nor are Hogan and Cardenas peculiar in this regard; discourses of blackness are conspicuously absent from the commercial and diplomatic documents generally. While there regularly occur protests against English trade with "infidels," especially against the trade in military supplies, there are no attempts in the state papers to represent Moroccans as monstrous or anti-Christian simply because of their darker skin, or to draw a link between this physical trait and putative moral or spiritual traits.²¹

Very different were the representations of Moorishness being made on the English stage at precisely this time. In the Elizabethan and Jacobean public drama blackness—not simply darkness—was an integral part of Moorishness; so much so that in this

²⁰Cardenas is quoted from his letter from Safi to Sir Francis Walsingham, dated 8 October 1589. The letter is printed in de Castries, ed., *Les Sources Inédites* 1: 530–40.

²¹See, for example: "The request of the merchants trading Barbary," probably dating from 1583, in which a number of anonymous merchants requested that Elizabeth take steps to stop another English merchant from trading arms to "infidells" (de Castries, ed., *Les Sources Inédites* 1: 418–21); or Henry Roberts' report to James I, probably dating from 1603, in which Roberts suggests that King James invade Morocco for "the universall good of all Christendome" (de Castries, ed., *Les Sources Inédites* 2: 222–28).

literature the terms Moor, Blackamoor, Ethiopie and Negro are virtually interchangeable. The blackness of the Moorish characters in the drama was so important as to be embedded into play texts themselves, with both Moorish and European characters calling attention to the blackness of Moors as their defining characteristic. In almost all instances, this blackness was used to identify Moors as physical and spiritual outsiders.

But it was hardly a Renaissance innovation to create visual metaphors by having actors in blackface. Demons and sinners in late medieval iconography and popular drama were often represented so. For example, in the Judgment Day play of the York Corpus Christi cycle one of the damned moans that he is exiled

In hell to dwell with fiends black
where never shall be redemption.²²

Likewise, in the Townley Fall of Lucifer play the rebel angels undergo a physical change which reveals the extent of their sins, prompting one to exclaim:

Alas, alas, and wail-woe!
Lucifer, why fell thou so?
We, that were angels so fair
And sat so high above the air
Now are we waxen black as any coil,
And ugly tattered as a foil.²³

Human sinners may also have had their skin darkened in popular drama; certainly in medieval art it is common enough to depict the tormentors of Christ with dark faces, or, as in one Oxonian illumination of the Crucifixion, to depict Christ and the penitent thief with white features while the second thief has dark skin.²⁴

²²J.S. Purvis, ed., *The York Cycle of Mystery Plays: A Complete Version* (London: SPCK, 1957) 376.

²³Quoted in Anthony Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987) 4.

²⁴George Hunter and Anthony Barthelemy provide overviews of these traditions

In these examples there is no suggestion that Lucifer, the fallen angels, or the tormentors of Christ were Africans; their physical blackness is a manifestation of spiritual blackness. The blackness of actual Africans was something of a grand coincidence to this tradition of colour symbolism.²⁵ Nonetheless, there was knowledge that black-skinned people existed, and the coincidence of their existence was exploited in the construction of metaphors. As early as the third century the devil was described as “the king of Ethiopia”; in the fourteenth St. Brigitta accounted the devil “an ethiop”; and in the sixteenth Reginald Scott asserted that “a damned soul may and doth take the shape of a black Moor.”²⁶ Even these metaphors, which exploit the blackness of Africans by allying it with the blackness of devils, are not primarily about Africans, but about blackness. The conflation of the black beings of hell and the black beings of Africa is a form of symbolic shorthand rather than a literal identification of Africans with demons, and Africa with hell. An illustration of this point can be found by returning to popular drama for a moment. Performance areas and paths for processions were sometimes cleared in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries by having actors in black makeup, often with fireworks attached to their bodies, run through the crowds.²⁷ While these characters are usually termed “blackamoors” or “Moors” in descriptions of the pageants, they bear a greater resemblance to the devils in a play such as Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* than to stage Moors such as Othello. There most certainly was a difference.

Dramatists writing in the late sixteenth century inherited a well-established tradition which linked blackness with evil, and a related tradition which exploited the black skin of Africans in creating visual and textual metaphors. Nonetheless English Renaissance playwrights, possessed of an endless fascination for disjunc-

of colour symbolism. See Hunter, “*Othello* and Colour Prejudice” 30–43; Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race* 1–17. The Oxonian illumination of the crucifixion is described in Hunter, “*Othello* and Colour Prejudice” 36.

²⁵As Hunter has noted, the association of blackness with evil is not limited to European cultures, but is found throughout the world, including some African cultures. See “*Othello* and Colour Prejudice” 33.

²⁶Cited in Hunter, “*Othello* and Colour Prejudice” 34.

²⁷Eldred Jones, “The Physical Representation of African Characters on the English Stage during the 16th and 17th Centuries,” *Theatre Notebook* 17 (1962): 17.

ture between appearance and reality, did not generally attempt to draw a simple equation between blackamoors and bogey-men. Some of the earliest representations of Africans in the late Elizabethan public drama are not freighted with any moral baggage whatsoever. The Moors who appear in Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* and Greene's *Alphonsus* are merely exotic trimmings to the main action; similarly, the main function of the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice* is to demonstrate the extent of Portia's fame. In such plays the primary association of the blackness of the Moors is not with evil, but with the exotic. They follow in the tradition not of the popular drama, but of the elite court masque.

Nonetheless, visual metaphors of blackness were too rich to be passed by. Peele's *Battle of Alcazar*, first staged in 1589, the year of Cardenas' embassy to Sultan Ahmad al Mansur, is the earliest expression of what became the dominant trend in representations of Moors on the stage: a simultaneous endorsement and rejection of the medieval metaphors which linked black skin to a black soul. This trend, which would achieve its most complex expression in *Othello*, was expressed in *The Battle of Alcazar* in crude but effective fashion. The two major Moorish characters in the play serve as moral extremes, standards of virtue and vice against which European characters are measured. Muly Mahamet is a villainous pretender to the Moroccan throne who tempts the king of Portugal into participating in his black schemes, thus verifying stereotypical associations of physical blackness and iniquity. Abdelmelec, the rightful king of Morocco, is a perfect expression of Renaissance ideals of kingly virtue and so contradicts any easy equation of black looks with a black soul, even as he repels the invasion of the Christian king of Portugal.

Of the two Moors, Peele's Muly Mahamet has attracted more modern critical attention than the virtuous King Abdelmelec. Muly Mahamet, who is introduced in the company of devils, always has a whiff of brimstone about him, and so has been granted paternity to later nefarious Moors created by Shakespeare, Dekker and others. The noble, virtuous Abdelmelec, on the other hand, is inexplicable in the modern critical tradition which seeks to name Othello as the first nobly virtuous Moor on the English stage. Generally the solution to this quandary has been simply to ignore the existence of Abdelmelec, as in Virginia Mason Vaughan's recent "contextual

history” of Othello, in which Peele’s description of the usurper Muly Mahamet as “Black in his look, and bloody in his deeds” (l. 16) is quoted while the description of Abdelmelec five lines earlier, “This prince, / this brave Barbarian Lord” (ll. 11–12), is quietly passed over.²⁸

The villainy of Muly Mahamet in the action of Peele’s play never quite measures up to the bombastic rhetoric used to characterize him in the Presenter’s prologue and commentaries.²⁹ The first play of the mimetic drama to stage a genuinely diabolical Moor is Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*. In this play the Moor Aaron revels in his physical and spiritual blackness, declaring at one point:

Let fools do good, and fair men call for grace,
Aaron will have his soul black like his face. (3.1.204–5)³⁰

But Aaron’s villainy is of a curious sort. For the most part he acts as a devilish source of evil: he delights not in sinning, but in facilitating and expanding the capacity of the European characters for sin. An excellent example of his *modus operandi* is his arrangement of the rape of Lavinia by Chiron and Demetrius. Aaron concocts a plot whereby Lavinia will be lured into the woods, and instructs the Goths as follows:

There ... strike, brave boys, and take your turns;
There serve your lust shadowed from heaven’s eye,
And revel in Lavinia’s treasury. (2.1.129–31)

²⁸Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Othello: A Contextual History* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1994) 59. Quotations from *The Battle of Alcazar* are from volume 2 of *The Life and Works of George Peele*, ed. John Yoklavich (New Haven: Yale UP, 1961). Also interesting in this regard is Karen Newman’s assertion that before *Othello* “the only role blacks played on stage was that of a villain of low status.” Peele’s *Battle of Alcazar* is one play which refutes this point; Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* is another. See “‘And Wash the Ethiop White’” 157.

²⁹D’Amico provides an interesting discussion of the limitations of Muly Mahamet’s villainy. He points out that while Muly Mahamet is in many ways a perfect villain, in at least one scene he displays notable valour and nobility of spirit. See *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama* 45–46.

³⁰All quotations from *Titus Andronicus* are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

At no point does Aaron express a desire to personally “revel in Lavinia’s treasury.” Likewise, while he seduces the Queen of the Goths, he does so to corrupt her and make her another of his instruments of evil. He himself does not betray the slightest trace of actual lust.

Aaron does not embody the overheated sexuality which early modern travel-writers ascribed to Africans from south of the Sahara, and which many modern commentators have counted among Aaron’s chief characteristics.³¹ In fact, Aaron seems scarcely human, whether measured against the putative characteristics of Africans or Europeans. He bears a rather closer resemblance to the Vices of the Tudor morality plays: his mission is to corrupt others, not to personally perform evil actions. And like the Vices with their wooden daggers, Aaron is marked with an emblem which made him recognizable as an embodiment of evil: his black skin.

But *Titus Andronicus* is not a morality play. The dramatic space of Shakespeare’s text is not a metaphysical ‘anywhere’ in which Everyman confronts embodiments of virtues and vices: it is late Imperial Rome. And while Aaron devilishly corrupts, perverts and subverts the entire Roman power structure, in the end he is rendered recognizably human when he submits himself to the justice of the state in order to save his infant son. With the birth of his son, Aaron ceases to associate blackness with evil, rhetorically demanding “is black so base a hue?” (4.2.71), and scorning whiteness as weakness, since it allows itself to be manipulated (4.2.97–103). Not only does this call into question the too-easy association of whiteness and virtue, it also reminds the audience that Aaron has been only a facilitator of evil deeds performed by others.

The curious ending of *Titus Andronicus*, which forces the audience to re-evaluate its understanding of both the nature of evil and the nature of Moors, is often marked as one of the “master

³¹David Willbern’s essay, “Rape and Revenge in *Titus Andronicus*,” *English Literary Renaissance* 8 (1978): 159–82, is a particularly interesting example of the intellectual contortions modern critics have gone through to demonstrate Aaron’s lustfulness. Willbern notes that Aaron apparently feels no sexual temptations (166), but nonetheless argues that he is part of “a tradition which haunts us still that black men are abnormally lustful” (167). Willbern finds evidence of this in Aaron’s supposed transference of sexuality into vengeance, and in Aaron’s use of the allegedly “very sexual metaphors” “coin” “beget” and “piece” (165).

touches" with which Shakespeare graced an otherwise standard depiction of Moors as devils incarnate.³² But *The Battle of Alcazar*, written at least two years before *Titus Andronicus*, in some ways did more to subvert automatic associations of evil with Africans by placing the virtuous Abdelmelec opposite the villainous Muly Mahamet. Far from being an atypical rehabilitation of the image of Africans on the English stage, Shakespeare's Aaron is the most authentically diabolical Moor in all of Renaissance drama. Though other stage Moors shared Aaron's resemblance to the Vices of the Moralities—for example, Eleazar corrupting the Spanish court in *Lust's Dominion*, and Abdella facilitating the sins of Mountferrat in *The Knight of Malta*—these Moors at least have some sort of motive to account for their behaviour. Eleazar is the crown prince of Fez, wrongfully deprived of his kingdom by the Spanish, and Abdella hopes to win the love of Mountferrat by aiding him in devising and carrying out various plots. Ultimately these motives are insufficient to account for the extent of the crimes of Eleazar and Abdella, or for the glee with which they carry them out, but these Moors do have genuine motivations. Aaron, on the other hand, does not. Like Iago he vaguely refers to crimes he must avenge, but his malice remains inexplicable and therefore carries a hint of the supernatural.³³

Plays such as *The Battle of Alcazar*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Lust's Dominion* and *The Knight of Malta* depend on the automatic association of blackness with evil to make their visual metaphors work, but do not fully endorse the view that Africans are demons. The counterpoising of Abdelmelec against Muly Mahamet; the paternal instincts of Aaron; Eleazar's calls for rightful vengeance; the hopeful love of Abdella: all of these are strategies which playwrights used to render Moorishness a human, rather than diabolical, char-

³²See, for example, the discussion of *Titus Andronicus* in Jones, *Othello's Countrymen*.

³³The similarity between the Moorish villains of the Elizabethan public drama and the Vices of the Tudor Moralities has been noted previously by Anthony Barthelemy. But whereas Barthelemy argues that late Elizabethan drama gave new power to the association of blackness and evil by bringing it onto the mimetic stage, I believe that the representations of blackness made at this time ultimately undercut any such easy associations between skin colour and virtue. See Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race* 72–76.

acteristic. This pattern persists in those few plays and entertainments which made more positive representations of Moors. *The Triumphs of Truth*, a Lord Mayor's show written by Middleton, is a case in point. As one of the eponymous triumphs, the black-faced "King of the Moors" arrives in London to profess his love of Christ, and chides the assembled crowds for judging him by his appearance:

I being a Moor, then, in opinion's lightness,
As far from sanctity as my face from whiteness,
But I forgive the judgments of th'unwise,
Whose censures ever quicken in their eyes,
Only begot of outward form and show.³⁴

Such Moors were of necessity painted "pitchy black." It is the very blackness of the King of the Moors which gives this passage what little potency it has to engender reflection among its white, Christian audience. *Othello* is essentially written in the same vein. Here Shakespeare has performed a remarkable sleight of hand: in his black skin Othello bears the emblem of evil, while the Vice-like Iago has the appearance of Everyman. Here the disjuncture between appearance and essence is complete. What was only hinted at in earlier plays is plainly expressed: that evil is not exotic, and that it does not necessarily wear a recognizable livery.

But were such stage Moors intended to represent flesh-and-blood Africans? The stylized behaviour which links the nefarious Moors to the Tudor Vices would seem to suggest not, as does the self-conscious staging of physical blackness and spiritual whiteness of Moors like Middleton's King of the Moors. Renaissance stagings of Moorishness seem to suggest a merging of the older metaphorical exploitation of black-skinned Africans with a new sensitivity to disjuncture between appearance and reality. Hence the confusion in a play like *Lust's Dominion*: the behaviour of the

³⁴*The Works of Thomas Middleton*, ed., A.H. Bullen (London: John C. Nimmo, 1886) 7: 248. Middleton's King of the Moors demonstrates Karen Newman's error in asserting that the possibility that "beneath black skin" there might be "a hidden whiteness" was "unimaginable to early modern man." Newman, "'And Wash the Ethiop White'" 142.

Moor Eleazar is explicable neither if Eleazar's motivations are to be considered fully human, nor if he is considered a cypher for Satan. He is an awkward Richard III.³⁵ Moreover, the relationship between appearance and reality is further problematized by the audience's knowledge that Eleazar's "blackness" only went as deep as a smearing of greasepaint, beneath which lay an English actor's pale skin.³⁶ A further layer of complexity is created by the knowledge—which Dekker and other dramatists, as well as some audience members, certainly had access to—of the actual skin colour of Fessians, which was of course much lighter than the Moor Eleazar's pitchy tones.

Playwrights such as Dekker, Peele and Shakespeare found representations of coal-black Moors to be potent dramatic devices, capable of simultaneously engaging and undermining the prejudices of their audience. In the self-aware, created world of the English stage the blackness of Moorish characters made symbolic sense. But in the utilitarian writings of English diplomats the symbolic value of blackness was largely irrelevant. In this context generalizations about the villainy of all black-skinned people did not count for much, especially as it was known that the people in question were not black-skinned. In such writings other strategies of representation were engaged, the most important tapping into discourses of religious truth and political legitimacy.

Were early modern English representations of Moors racist? It would appear not—at least not in the sense of modern racism, one of the key features of which is its central role in the history of modern thought. The discourses of blackness implicit in representations of Africans on the Renaissance stage were concerned primarily with colour symbolism. Significantly, in the trade and diplomatic documents there is no support for the transfer of colour prejudices into representations of actual Moroccan sultans and merchants. This should not be surprising, for prior to the institu-

³⁵Richard III being the best realized fusion of the Tudor Vice with the human villain of the mimetic stage. In Shakespeare's play Richard himself draws attention to his similarity to, and differentiation from, the traditional Vices, stating that he is "like" (but not actually) the Vice Iniquity. See *Richard III* 3.1.82–83.

³⁶A point made explicit in *Lust's Dominion*, in which two Spanish characters paint themselves with "the oil of hell" (5.2.171) in order to disguise themselves as Moors. I owe this insight to my discussions with Christina Luckyj.

tionalization of slavery in English culture the English lacked a motive for the systematic denigration of Africans in the manner of racism.³⁷ It is true that many of the prejudices and associations attached to Africans via colour symbolism would eventually be recycled, re-valued and re-asserted in the perpetually shifting configurations of modern racism. Nonetheless, it is important to avoid exaggerating the importance of colour symbolism in early modern English culture simply because it resonates with modern ideas of race. Of far greater import in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was religious prejudice. Thus, while blackness was a defining feature of Moorishness in the visual metaphors presented and manipulated on the public stage, Islam appears to have been the defining feature of flesh-and-blood Moors. This is neatly captured by the various meanings of the phrase “become a Moor.” In *Lust’s Dominion*, as in *The White Devil* by Webster and *The City Nightcap* by Davenport, European characters “become Moors” by

³⁷Although John Hawkins made three slaving expeditions in the late sixteenth century, the English at this time were not regular participants in the slave trade. The English acquired a stake in the slave trade only with the establishment of English sugar plantations in the Caribbean in the second half of the seventeenth century. Some scholars have considered Queen Elizabeth’s proclamation of January 1601, “licensing Casper van Senden to deport Negroes,” evidence of institutionalized racism in Elizabethan England. But the proclamation is a red herring, as its real intent was not to rid England of Africans but to compensate van Senden, without incurring expense to the crown, for his efforts in liberating and returning to England eighty-nine English subjects imprisoned by the Spanish (presumably van Senden intended to sell “infidels” deported from England on the slave markets of the Christian Mediterranean, and so recoup his expenses). Moreover, while the “Negroes and blackamoors” whom van Senden was licensed to deport were identified by their skin colour, the stated reasons for their removal from England were: (1) to provide further opportunities for the employment of English men and women (in this the proclamation is similar to other proclamations and legislation of the period expelling foreigners or prohibiting them from practising their trades in England); and (2) because “most of them are infidels having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel.” The proclamation is primarily evidence of xenophobia and religious intolerance rather than racism. At any rate, the proclamation was never enforced and the number of African servants employed by the English economic elite continued to expand throughout the seventeenth century. The late Tudor and Stuart vogue for black servants is discussed in Hall, *Things of Darkness* 211–53. Elizabeth’s proclamation is reprinted in Paul L. Hughes and James F. Larkin, ed., *Tudor Royal Proclamations* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1969) 3: 221–22.

covering themselves with black makeup. In the accounts of merchants, diplomats and travellers, however, the phrase is a euphemism for conversion to Islam, and particularly describes European Christians who converted to Islam in North Africa.

None of this is meant to suggest that diplomatic and dramatic writing were fundamentally disparate activities. The diplomat-merchant Edmund Hogan and the playwright George Peele wrote in distinct discursive arenas, but both were products of and participants in the same culture, the culture of late sixteenth-century London. While it would be problematic and perhaps simplistic to draw any direct connection between Hogan's depiction of Sultan Abd al-Malik as "the christian king" in 1576 and Peele's representation of the same man as a virtuous Moor in 1589, both representations were conceived and inscribed in a common cultural milieu, and their similarities are obvious. The different characteristics of these representations—the contrasting nobility and blackness of the sultan in Peele's play and his contrasting Islamic environment and essential Protestantism in Hogan's correspondence and reports—were the result of the very different discursive conditions and roles of the authors.

The association of Moors with blackness, blackness with Satan, and therefore Moors with Satan, which pre-dates regular English diplomatic and commercial contact with actual Moors, continued to be influential in the early modern period. Nonetheless, these associations were given a peculiarly Renaissance inflection by late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century dramatists. Earlier representations of black people in English iconography and popular drama had established physical blackness as a manifestation of spiritual blackness. Renaissance dramatists, more sensitive to disjuncture between appearance and reality, viewed this stereotype as an opportunity to make a different statement. Through mimetic/historic referents such as Aaron's paternal love and Eleazar's hatred of the Spaniards who had usurped his kingdom, Renaissance playwrights forced their white, Christian audience to recognize that black people are people, not devils; that appearance and essence do not always coincide. This established, playwrights could then attempt to turn the condemning gaze of the audience inward, to recognize that spiritual "blackness" is not a quality limited to Africans. The Moor Eleazar is able to prosper in his crimes first of all

because he was forcibly brought into Spain and secondly because of the sinful propensities of the Spanish court. Essentially the same could be said for the Moor Aaron at the Roman court. Plays such as *Lust's Dominion* and *Titus Andronicus*, whatever they may or may not imply about the diabolical propensities of Africans, primarily express the sinful nature of all humanity, Christian Europeans and Moorish Africans included.

Neither the automatic association of blackness and evil in late medieval iconography and popular drama, nor the more complex explorations of physical and spiritual blackness performed by Renaissance dramatists, influenced the representations of Moors made in the commercial and diplomatic documents contained in the state papers. Nonetheless, these documents from time to time reveal a similar appreciation for disjuncture between appearance and reality. In the topsy-turvy world of post-Reformation Europe, where members of rival Christian confessions accused each other of being Antichrist, ideological olive-branches were occasionally offered to Muslims. Judging by appearances, Catholics were more similar to Protestants than either were to Muslims. But in her letters to the Moroccan and Ottoman sultans, Queen Elizabeth asserted that this was not so. She alleged that behind a façade of reverence for Christ, Catholics were actually idolaters, worshippers of golden images, allies of Satan. In reality, Elizabeth proposed, Muslims and Protestants, both of whom abhor idolatry, have more in common than Catholics and Protestants.³⁸ This sentiment is not so far removed from Edmund Hogan's description of Sultan Abd al-Malik as "a vearie earnest Protestant." The question we are left with is whether this representation of Islam would have been more or less believable in the context of early modern English culture than the "inner whiteness" of Middleton's *King of the Moors*.

³⁸See, for example, Elizabeth's letter to Sultan Ahmad al-Mansur of 14 June 1599, in which she stated that the Moroccans, Dutch and English are "joyned ... in lyke profession of relygion and in the same condition of having the Spanyard our comon ennemie." See de Castries, ed., *Les Sources Inédites* 2: 37–38.