

# **Reading What is There: Africans in Early Modern England**

Lisa Kelechi Ezie

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***To Michael Ezie (1954-2004)***

Dad – my writing seminar papers for “Shakespeare in Love” were the last work of mine you ever read. You sent me money for Starbucks and read my thoughts on *Othello* with glowing praise. Four years later I am still writing about the same things, because of a love of Shakespeare I inherited from you. Thank you for your unconditional love and support - m’furu gi n’ayna. Love love, Kelechi.

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*The following abbreviations have been used in the text:*

*FD* Friends of Devon's Archive

*GL Ms* Guildhall Manuscripts

*HCA* High Court of Admiralty Records, from National Archives in Kew.

*LMA* London Metropolitan Archives

## Introduction

The study of Africans in Early Modern England was catalyzed in the 1960s by two influential works, Winthrop Jordan's *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro 1550-1812*, and famous literary critic G.K. Hunter's published lecture "Othello and Colour Prejudice."<sup>1</sup> Both works operate under the presumption, clearly articulated by Hunter, that Africans and the Elizabethan English had very little contact.<sup>2</sup> Jordan writes extensively of contact between English and Africans on colonial voyages to Africa, which he calls the "early period of contact with African heathenism."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, all of his conclusions are based on the fantastic stories of popular travel literature, rather than accounts of voyages pieced together by ship records, or private journals such as Henry Neville's *Isle of Pines*.<sup>4</sup> As a result, Jordan leaves us with the impression that all Elizabethans, apart from merchants and explorers, derived all of their knowledge of Africans from literature. His book documents English-African contact

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Floyd Wilson, "Moors, Race, and the Study of English Renaissance Literature: A Brief Retrospective," *Literature Compass* 3.5 (2006): 1045.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro: 1555-1812* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> Henry Neville, *The Isle of Pines ; or, A late discovery of a fourth island in Terra Australis, Incognita. Being a true relation of certain English persons, who in the dayes of Queen Elizabeth, making a voyage to the East India, were cast away, and wracked upon the island near to the coast of Terra Australis, Incognita, and all drowned, except one man and four women, whereof one was a Negro*, (London : Printed by S.G. for Allen Banks and Charles Harper at the Flower-Deluce near Cripplegate Church, 1668). This book approaches an honest firsthand account, or as much 'honesty' as we can hope for from a non-legal document. It is not written in the style of the typical travelogue, as it recounts only one journey, in full detail. The author also recounts his sexual relationship with a black woman, who is one of three wives he acquires while stranded on an island. He and the black woman have twelve children.

from the late fifteenth to early seventeenth century, without mentioning a single African inhabitant, or even visitor, of England.<sup>5</sup>

Although historians no longer contend that Africans and Elizabethans did not meet on English soil, this paradigm shift has not been reflected in a refocusing of research or analytical efforts with regard to the subject or the time period. Emerging literary critics and historicists continue to look to the same secondary texts in order to reach the same conclusions. In the 1987 *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Martin Orkin, displaying some familiarity with Peter Fryer's groundbreaking research on the black presence in Early Modern England, introduces the paper "Othello and the 'Plain Face' of Racism" with a brief mention of the presence of Africans in England, dating at least as far back as 1555.<sup>6</sup> He later describes the English people's perception of Africans: "...Elizabethans saw Africans as barbarous, treacherous, libidinous, and jealous."<sup>7</sup> Orkin's conclusions, as he says, are based entirely on Eldred Jone's *Othello's Countrymen*, a summary of Elizabethan drama published in 1965.

Ten years later, writing for *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Virginia Mason and Alden T. Vaughan provide a thorough review of the treatment of Africans in travelogues from the Elizabethan period, only to reach the conclusion below:

This scattered evidence from the early Elizabethan era suggests that English contempt for dark skinned people had a long pedigree. When added to the pejorative printed references to Africans in the last two decades of the reign and to the proliferation of Africans in England, mostly as slaves, it bolsters the argument that after

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<sup>5</sup> See Jordan, *White Over Black*, "First Impressions," 3-40.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Orkin, "Othello and the 'Plain Face' of Racism," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38.2 (Summer 1987), 167.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

centuries of relative isolation English men and women were jolted by sudden exposure, in print and person, to people's remarkably different than themselves.<sup>8</sup>

The scattered evidence to which Virginia Mason and Alden Vaughan refer is the various descriptions of Africans found in travelogues. Travelogues were narratives of voyages to exotic locales like Africa, Polynesia, or the West Indies, that were excerpted and printed by different publishers. The stories and ideas published within different books were often quite repetitive, as they could be cobbled together from pieces of the same narratives. Firsthand accounts were also injected with material from classical authors like Ptolemy.<sup>9</sup> We know very little about how these books were used, who in the period had access to them, or whether they were read for edifying fact or lurid entertainment, like a modern-day tabloid.

The material within the books was often quite contradictory, particularly when attempting to ascertain the English mind's image of Africa and its people. In Richard Eden's translation of *Decades of the New World, or West India*, he describes Africans as "idolaters and savages who do not profess and religion, or any knowledge of God, than by the law of nature."<sup>10</sup> Within the same book however, is an account of Thomas Windham's voyage to the ancient kingdom of Benin, in which he admires the great respect the people held for their king, which he witnesses at a luxurious welcome banquet: "...And here to speak of the great reverence they give to their king, being such that if we could give as much to our Savior Christ, we should remove from our

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<sup>8</sup> Alden T. Vaughan; Virginia Mason Vaughan, "Before Othello: Elizabethan Representations of Sub-Saharan Africans," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54 (1997): 29.

<sup>9</sup> Carole Levin, *The Reign of Elizabeth I* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 117.

<sup>10</sup> Levin, *Reign of Elizabeth*, 117.

heads many plagues which we daily deserve for our contempt and impiety.”<sup>11</sup> Windham also records being impressed by the King’s fluent Portuguese.<sup>12</sup>

These uncertainties do not complicate the Vaughan’s analysis at all. The Vaughans instead assume that the negative and quite often fantastic images of Africans presented in these documents directly determined English people’s feelings toward Africans with whom they lived and interacted<sup>13</sup>. The footnote for the excerpted passage above further highlights the flaws in the analysis, as the Vaughans cite Winthrop Jordan’s “brief but impressive” evidence in aiding them in their conclusion.<sup>14</sup>

The examples above demonstrate the lack of progress made in ‘Black’ studies of Early Modern England over the past three to four decades. Despite the wealth of historical research accomplished in recent years, catalyzed largely by Peter Fryer’s archive-based work *Staying Power: The History of Black People In Britain*, many historians and literary critics have remained wedded to modes of analysis that do not incorporate new findings.<sup>15</sup>

The ideas that the English were ‘jolted’ into frightening contact with alarmingly dark Africans, or that Elizabethans must have interpreted all Africans as libidinous heathens, depend on the problematic presumptions that, first - Africans were an unfamiliar sight to the Elizabethan English; and second, stereotypical representations of the black in literature would have been directly transferrable to and untroubled by daily interactions with African visitors or assimilated

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 118.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Unlike Jordan or Winthrop, the Vaughans are aware of the African presence in England. They generalize that most of these people were slaves.

<sup>14</sup> Vaughan and Mason Vaughan, “Before Othello,” 29.

<sup>15</sup> Here I refer to Peter Fryer’s *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1984). This groundbreaking work on the archival presence of Africans in Early Modern England is cited by the Vaughans, but again, it does not seem to trouble their analysis.



subjects. We know for a fact that the former is untrue, and the latter implies a rather reductive view of the human's ability to interpret stereotypes.

Those specializing in literary critique or history are not the only ones that have failed to adequately consider archival evidence of a black presence in Early Modern England. Social historians have been equally negligent in this area. Steven Rappaport and Jeremy Boulton, to name only a few, do not factor a black presence into their studies at all. Laura Yungblut's book *Strangers Settled Here Among Us* has been quite helpful to this paper in deciphering the status of strangers, immigrants, and foreigners in Elizabethan culture. Despite the book's focus on English xenophobia, however, Yungblut's entirely ignores the presence of Africans. This is a bizarre choice, because as most are now aware, their presence was at least noteworthy enough for Elizabeth I to issue an edict requesting their deportation from the country.<sup>16</sup>

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The following paper is divided into two parts. The first section will focus on uncovering archival evidence of the black presence in order to refute the idea that Africans were not actually a physical presence in England, but imprinted on the English psyche through the symbolically potent canvas of black skin. We know the latter is not the case, because parish records from London, as well as court papers and private letters are full of references to black subjects.

In my own perusal of the parish records of St. George the Martyr in London, I happened upon three burials of black subjects within my first hour of searching: "Philip a Blackmore," buried February 12, 1618, "Peter Morisco A Blackamore" buried June 13 1618, and "John P

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<sup>16</sup> Imtiaz Habib provides a thorough list of studies that have been negligent in this arena, in his new book *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500-1677: Imprints of the Invisible*, (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008), 7. He notes that her only two mentions of 'blackmores' are relegated to footnotes.

Daniell, a mullatow,” buried April 10, 1620. St. George the Martyr is one of many London parishes in which the registers have not been published.

Miranda Kaufmann, a researcher at Christ’s Church College of Oxford, has discovered over three hundred previously unpublished references to Africans living in England between 1500 and 1640 over the past two years. A significant number of these records come from parish registers, but household records, tax returns and legal papers were important sources as well.<sup>17</sup> Apart from Imtaiz Habib’s publication *Black Lives in the English Archives 1500-1677*, published only January of this year, in which Habib presents 448 mentions of black people, and a few research projects like the Friends of Devon, or Guildhall Library Manuscripts’ Black and Asian project; the majority of parish records and legal documents have never been searched for Africans. I believe we have only scratched the surface, and with creative interdisciplinary investigations, the African presence in Elizabethan need no longer be relegated to the status of the mysterious, enigmatic, or invisible.

This section will explore the questions: how were Elizabethan Africans, many of them baptized Christians sponsored by white Godparents, perceived by and incorporated into English society at large? What kind of jobs did they hold? What kind of societal structures abetted or aided their social integration?

This section will also trace the use of the word ‘black’ or the myriad of other terms denoting African heritage, in the archival records. How were Africans marked as such in the

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<sup>17</sup> I owe thanks to Miranda Kaufmann for sharing with me the results of her published and unpublished work, as well as pointing me in the right direction in my own search of various archives.

records? How can we apply this knowledge to our linguistic analysis of Early Modern English texts?

The second section of this paper will attempt to incorporate the unearthed archival evidence into our analysis of Early Modern English literature, with a focus on Shakespearean Drama and seventeenth century sonnets and lyric poetry, and the avoidance of reading blackness as racial in texts, particularly in the case of women.

As Maria de Garza observes, the true scandal of the sonnets is not Shakespeare's longing for a boy, but his for longing for a black mistress.<sup>18</sup> There is a long tradition of literary analysis that ignores the references to blackness in Elizabethan texts, choosing instead to read a 'black' mistress as a reference to hair or eyes, or a completely metaphorical abstraction. The Arden edition of *The Merchant of Venice* suggests that the reference to the 'Negro' whom Launcelot Gobbo impregnates is only introduced into the text so that Gobbo might later pun the words "Moor" and "more."<sup>19</sup> Such an interpretation demonstrates the extremes some critics and editors have gone to dissociate the word 'black', or even terms as singularly used as 'Negro,' with a real African presence. The latter portion of this paper will explore how the factual evidence of a real African presence in Elizabethan England might change our readings of the texts alluded to above.

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<sup>18</sup> Maria de Grazia, "The Scandal of the Sonnets," *Shakespeare Survey*, 45 (1994), 48.

<sup>19</sup> For more discussion of this passage, See Kim Hall, "Reading What Isn't There," *Stanford Humanities Review*, 3 (Winter 1991), 29.

## Chapter One: The First Africans In the British Isles

Before delving into the earliest records of Africans in the British Isles, it must be acknowledged that Africans were present both on the Isles and in other parts of Europe before the English occupied Britannia. The Byzantine Empire, which existed from roughly 300 CE to 1200 CE, consisted of three major regions - the Balkans, Asia Minor, and North Africa. Thus, under Byzantine rule, although pieces of the empire were periodically lost and regained through war, parts of the continents we now call Europe and Africa were united as one empire for centuries at a time.

The Roman imperial army, which occupied the southern portion of the British Isles in 200 CE, had a black regiment called the division of Moors - *numerus Maurorum Aureilanonum*.<sup>20</sup> The regiment, originating in North Africa and stationed near modern-day Carlisle, is listed in *Notitia Dignitatum*, an official register.<sup>21</sup> Its existence is also recorded in a stone inscription.<sup>22</sup> There is at least one black soldier who served under Libyan-born Roman emperor Septimus Severus (146 CE – 211 CE), whose specific presence was recorded in the book *Historiae Augustae*.<sup>23</sup> According to the author of *Historiae Augustae*, Emperor Septimus and the black soldier - *aethiops quidam e numero military* - had a notorious exchange in which

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<sup>20</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Fryer *Staying Power*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Edwards, "The Early African Presence in the British Isles," in *Essays on the History of Blacks In Britain*, ed. Jagdish Gundara and Ian Duffield (Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 1992), 9.

<sup>23</sup> Severus was definitely African, but is not generally conceived of as black. Many scholars in Africans in Early Modern Europe do believe that he was. See "Septimus Severus, A Black Roman Emperor," at <<http://www.blackhistory4schools.co.uk/tudors/>>.

the soldier delivered a garland to Severus, who interpreted the gift as an omen of imminent defeat.<sup>24</sup>

There is also evidence of a black presence in Ireland and Scotland much earlier than the start of the Triangular Trade. A story in the ancient Irish Annals tells of a Viking raid in the ninth century, in which “blue men” were captured by Vikings from the coast of Morocco, and transported to Ireland.<sup>25</sup> Today, Morocco and the region of North Africa are populated by people of Arab descent. This Arabic presence has led to the almost unquestioned tendency of discussing North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa as completely separate entities, or referring to Sub-Saharan Africa as ‘black’ Africa. While this may make sense in contemporary sociological discussions, it is incorrect to project a perception of Africa’s current ethnic appearance onto the ancient past. The Arab invasions into North Africa, which marked the start of the people of the Arabic peninsula’s migration to and population of Africa, did not begin until seventh century CE.<sup>26</sup> Before this time North Africa was populated by the people possessing the same phenotypically black appearance that we ascribe to sub-Saharan or ‘black’ Africans, whose complexions range from the very dark to the relatively light.

The discussion of the tenuous activity of distinguishing Arabic “Moors” from blackmoors, or blackamores, or tawnymoors, negars, (or the numerous other names for dark skinned peoples in the historical record), will continue throughout this paper. For now, it will suffice to say that the separation between the two was much less definitive for the English than

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<sup>24</sup> Edwards, “The Early African Presence in the British Isles,” 10.

<sup>25</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, 2.

<sup>26</sup> St. Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There* vol. II (Los Angeles: University of California, 1990), 86.

countries in the Iberian peninsula, who had experienced a much larger ethnically Arabic and ethnically African presence for much longer.

In any case, it is almost certain that the blue men from Morocco represent very dark skinned people of African origin, because there is documentary evidence from much later suggesting that the term or concept of “blue” men was not imaginary, but an adjective used to describe real people. An English accounting book from 1468 records a payment made to “Richard Fyrthing, a blewmane.”<sup>27</sup>

Ireland has a rich folkloric heritage that describes its pre-Christian inhabitants in detail. These legends feature fierce African sea-pirates called Formorians, who arrived in Ireland in the first century BCE. They are said to have had black skin and curly hair.<sup>28</sup> Ancient Welsh folklore has similarly striking mentions of African inhabitants. Welsh historian Geoffrey of Monmouth completed his *History of the King of Britain* in 1136. Included in his text, compiled from ancient Welsh chronicles, is the story of Gormund the African. Gormund purportedly sailed from Africa to Ireland with a massive fleet of 160,000 Africans and conquered the island.<sup>29</sup> Most historians disregard the story as completely fictional, but its inclusion of early African inhabitants of the British Isles makes it relevant nonetheless - even if the idea of an ancient European culture being conquered by Africans is unappealing. Its existence suggests that Africans were present pre-Christianity, even simply as inspiration for the legend.

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<sup>27</sup> Edwards, “Early African Presence,” 15.

<sup>28</sup> Ahmed Ali and Ibrahim Ali, *The Black Celts: An Ancient African civilization in Ireland and Britain* (Cardiff: Punite Books, 1992), 20.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

Apart from the suggestions in Irish and Welsh folklore, most other signs of an early African presence in Britannia are archaeological in nature. Artifacts like the wooden spoon carved in the shape of an African person's head, excavated from a Roman site under Southwark Bridge in London, are helpful in establishing if not the definitive presence of Africans on British soil, a familiarity with African peoples established either through commerce, exploration, or trade.<sup>30</sup>

Much of the other archaeological evidence thought to date the presence of Africans in the British Isles to Late Antiquity or earlier is dependent on scientific analysis of skeletons. This research depends on studying the limb proportions of skeletons and other physical traits, and much of it is not current. In *Staying Power: the History of Black Peoples in Britain*, historian Peter Fryer briefly cites sources of this nature, produced in the 1960s.<sup>31</sup> This kind of research depends on the presumption that it is valid to link the concept of "race" to biological traits such as skeletal structure; as such, such evidence will not be used in this discussion.

The next written and pictorial evidence of a black presence in the British Isles comes from the early sixteenth century in Scotland. The *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland* record that several Africans worked in the court of King James IV. One such person was a drummer and choreographer in the court. Records show that this man was a favorite

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<sup>30</sup> Edwards, "Early African Presence," 10.

<sup>31</sup> See *The Romano-British Cemetery at Trentholme Drive, York* (Ministry of Public Buildings and Works Archaeological Reports no. 5, HMSO, 1968). 157: "Several of the Trentholme men show limb proportions close to those of negroid people..." The author of this paper would like to avoid biological discussions of race, while comfortably dealing with written description of differences in complexion and country of origin. Discussions of race will be purely semantic in nature.

performer of the king, and therefore enjoyed such benefits as gifts of clothing, payments for doctor visits, and financial support for his wife and child.<sup>32</sup>

On December 11, 1504, the same source records the Christening of a black woman – “the more lass was cristinit.” Gifts of taffeta and other fabrics for gowns were given to “Blak Elene” and “Blak Margaret,” ladies in waiting of the Queen. In 1513, King James gave a New Year’s present of seven pounds to “twa blak ladies” who were also members of the court.<sup>33</sup> While some of the monetary or fabric exchanges are described as gifts, other records simply state that a member of the court was “paid.” A record from 1527 states that “Helene, the blak moir” was “paid” 40 shillings.<sup>34</sup> This suggests that these African members of the court were not slaves but paid laborers.

Apart from Richard Fyrthing, the “blueman,” the generally undisputed date for the first record of an African living in England is 1507. In the accounts of the Treasurer of the Chamber of King Henry VII, who paid all court performers their wages, we find that King Henry employed a black trumpeter named John Blanke, who was paid 8 shillings a day for his services.<sup>35</sup>

On New Year’s Day 1511, Catharine of Aragon, wife of Henry VIII, gave birth to a son. In keeping with tradition, King Henry held a Tournament at Westminster to celebrate the occasion, and commissioned the tournament roll to memorialize the event. The Westminster

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<sup>32</sup> *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland III*, 108, 115, 132, 206, 330, 377, 388, 183. Taken from Peter Fryer *Staying Power*, 2.

<sup>33</sup> *ALHTS IV*, 232, 404, 434, 324, 436. Taken from *Staying Power*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> *ALHTS V*, 328, *Ibid*.

<sup>35</sup> British National Archives, “John Blanke, Black Trumpeter.”  
<[http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/early\\_times/blanke.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/early_times/blanke.htm)>



Tournament roll, now one of the prized treasures of the College of Arms in London, is a sixty foot long parchment pictorial manuscript depicting the event.<sup>36</sup>

On the parchment, a black trumpeter mounted on a grey horse rides alongside five other trumpeters. The black figure wears a brown and yellow turban, while the other trumpeters go bareheaded.<sup>37</sup> Peter Fryer theorizes that the lone black trumpeter depicted on the Westminster Tournament roll is the same John Blanke who worked for King Henry VII in 1507, as does Sydney Anglo, a historian of the Westminster tournaments.<sup>38</sup>

Troubling the date of 1507 as ‘first contact’ is the work of Imtiaz Habib, who has recently brought to our attention letters indicating that Catherine of Aragon traveled from Spain to England with black people among her retinue.<sup>39</sup> A letter from Queen Isabella of Spain to De Pueblo, the English ambassador to Spain, lists “two slaves to attend on the maids of honor” among the list of attendants.<sup>40</sup> Their black identity is confirmed by a letter from Sir Thomas More to his Oxford tutor, describing the Spanish escort “You would have burst out laughing if you’d seen them, they looked so ridiculous, tattered, barefoot, pygmie Ethiopians...”<sup>41</sup> Habib notes that More’s observation of the “tattered” clothing may in fact refer to trailing black lacework, a North African specialty in which most African slaves from Spain were expert.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Nigel File and Chris Power. *Black Settlers in Britain 1555-1958*. (London, Heinemann Educational Books, 1981, 6.)

<sup>38</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, 5. Also see Sydney Anglo, *The Great Tournament Roll of Westminster* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968).

<sup>39</sup> Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the Archives*, 22.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 24.

Additionally, the figure More calls ‘pygmie’ may actually have been small child. Children were often servant companions to English aristocracy.<sup>42</sup>

Habib interprets the contemptuous tone of More’s letter as a typically English reaction to blackness. As an Oxford educated Englishman, More would have sophisticated enough knowledge of trade and commerce to know that of the 150,000 Africans located in the Iberian peninsula at the start of the sixteenth century, many were imported as slaves, and most functioned in serving positions of some sort.<sup>43</sup> Habib is clearly correct that many English harbored racist sentiments. It seems strange nonetheless that More would mock the idea of Africans stationed in a serving position. It seems likely instead that More would expect to find Africans in serving positions, as opposed to jobs indicative of some sort of upward social mobility. In this light, More’s mockery of Catherine’s retinue, if we consider that a Queen’s attendants symbolically reflected her wealth and status, may be a deeper revelation of nationalist, anti-Spanish sentiments.

The next black figure with early connections to the monarchy is Jacques Francis, a black diver employed under Henry VII. Francis was a slave to Piero Paolo Corsi, a Venetian living in England who was hired to recover goods from the sunken ship *Mary Rose*.<sup>44</sup> The warship sunk in 1545, minutes after preparing to advance against the French. Unfortunately for the English navy, it was loaded with the most advanced technology of the time, including a new heavy canon

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<sup>42</sup> See Chapter Two of this essay for discussion of children servants.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 22.

<sup>44</sup> Gustav Ungerer. “Recovering a Black African’s Voice in an English Lawsuit: Jacques Francis and the Salvage Operations of the *Mary Rose* and the *Sancta Maria* and *Sanctus Edwards*, 1545-ca 1550, in *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, ed. John Pitcher and Susan Cerasano (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003) 255.

worth 1700 pounds, making the lost contents extremely valuable.<sup>45</sup> The English Admiralty, under the instruction of Henry VII, hired Corsi to salvage the weapons on the ship.

In the midst of the salvaging work, for which Corsi used his team of expert divers lead by John Francis, another Venetian Domencio Errizo, sued Corsi for his work salvaging the *Sancta Maria* and *Sanctus Edwards*. Corsi, being low on funds at the time, had appropriated some of the goods to himself. John Francis became the key witness in this case.

Due to Francis' importance to the case, we have access to patches of his biographical data, delivered from his own mouth. According to his testimony, Francis originated from Arguin Island, off the coast of Mauretania. He stated that he had known Corsi for only two years prior to the events in question, suggesting that Corsi purchased Francis from a local Italian slaver after being commissioned to work for England in 1546.<sup>46</sup>

Ungerer argues that the case of Jacques Francis deserves special attention because apart from the fact that it gives us a firsthand biographical sketch of an African from Early Modern Europe, it marks the first time a black person testified in English Court.<sup>47</sup> However, to say that Francis's court testimony is exceptional because of his blackness, as opposed to his status as a slave, is to presume that England had the same institutionalized racial practices as its Iberian counterparts - and the proceedings of the case show that this presumption is likely incorrect. British officials received Francis' testimony as valid and ignored all suggestions from Erizzo's camp that Francis' word was illegitimate, indicating that, at the time of the trial England did not have the kind of pervasive racism and antipathy toward Africans worthy of codification in the

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<sup>45</sup> Ungerer, "Recovering a Black African's Voice," 257.

<sup>46</sup> Ungerer, 261.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 258.

legal system. This may be because the black population of England was much smaller than that of Italy, Portugal or Spain. Furthermore, black slaves were not a crucial part of the workforce, as they were in the Iberian Peninsula. Sales of slaves in England at this time were very small scale, usually consisting of private transactions, in contrast to the huge slave markets of Spain or Italy.<sup>48</sup>

The conditions in which slaves in England lived were quite different from the organized labor that took place on large scale plantation economies in Iberian countries, or in Iberian colonial conquests like the Azores. Slaves seemed to have worked alongside servants and other free people. Furthermore, enslavement was not a condition extended only to black people. The Vagrancy Act of 1547 included enslavement as possible punishment for vagabonds, or “masterless people.”<sup>49</sup>

The case of Doctor Hector Nunez, a Portuguese physician who became a denizen of Britain and eventually joined the English intelligence service, provides us with a cross-section of the ambiguous interactions between slaves, servants, masters, and strangers.<sup>50</sup> This wealthy man purchased an “Ethiopian” from an English mariner in 1587.<sup>51</sup> In the parish registry of St. Olave’s in London, we find the marriage and burial records of several people who occupied his home. In 1577, Tussyne de Valloyse “stranger,” and a widow named Morgan, also called a “stranger,” were married. The parish record states that this couple lived in the home of Dr. Nunez. In 1586, the parish records the burial of John Shymmings, noting that he lived in Dr. Hector’s house, and describing him as “a servant with Jerome Bardol.” In 1587, Mary “a

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 262.

<sup>49</sup> Habib, *Black Lives in the Archives*, 55.

<sup>50</sup> Ungerer, “Recovering A Black African’s Voice,” 264.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 262.

blackmore from Dcõr Hector's" was buried. Grace "a nigro out of Dcõr Hector's," was buried by the parish in July of 1590.<sup>52</sup>

We can glean from the record at Olave's Hart that in addition to his mysterious 'Ethiopian' slave, Nunez had servants, some of which were black. Either Grace or Mary could be the same Ethiopian purchased in 1587, although unlikely in Mary's case because she died that same year. We have no further information on the identity of the Ethiopian, but it puts the tally of black residents in the Nunez house at between two and three people.

It seems that John Shymmings, Jerome Bardol, and the married couple Tussyne de Valloyse and widow Morgan, the 'strangers,' were not black, or they would have been identified as black as Mary was, who appears on record only a year after Shymmings. Valloyse and Morgan were likely immigrants from other parts of Europe, like Nunez himself, who emigrated to London to escape Catholic persecution of Jews in Spain and Portugal.<sup>53</sup>

The life of Nunez also provides further context for the intricacies of the case of Jacques Francis. In 1587, he went to court to complain about his purchase of the Ethiopian slave who "utterly refuseth to tarry and serve." Nunez asked the court to either force the slave to work, or recover his money from the mariner who sold the African to him. This interesting case, documented in the Court of Requests records, suggests that no English law compelled Africans to labor under bondage. Otherwise, Nunez would not have resorted to filing a complaint.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> *The Register of St. Olave, Hart Street, London: 1563-1700*, A.W. Bannerman ed., (London: Rosworth and Co., 1916.)

<sup>53</sup> Habib, *Black Lives in the Archives*, 113.

<sup>54</sup> Rosalyn Knutson, "A Caliban in St. Mildred's Poultry," in *Shakespeare and Cultural Traditions*, ed. Tetsuo Kishi, Roger Pringle, and Stanley Wells (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994) 116.

The gap between the legal climate of the Iberian peninsula and England is clear in the Jacques Francis case. Those who testified against Francis' master Corsi on behalf of Erizzo argued that the testimony of Jacque Francis should not be admitted as evidence, because Francis was "born in Guinea where they are not cristynd... and no credit should be geven unto his sayings."<sup>55</sup> Apparently, these witnesses thought that by bringing Francis' possible Islamic background to the court's attention and lavishing the term infidel upon him, or laboring upon the obvious fact of his blackness by calling him calling him "a morisco" and a "Blacke More," they would persuade the High Court of Admiralty to reject Francis' statements. Like Nunez, these men had obviously assumed that England had an institutionally racist system that would subjugate the testimony or freedom of black subjects for its own convenience and profit. They must have been surprised to find their efforts disregarded, when Francis was admitted as a legal witness.

The admission of Francis' testimony into court does not mean that the English were not racist or xenophobic. It instead suggests that the position of the African in Tudor society was not fixed, but in flux. This is a subtlety that Gustav Ungerer, whose work constitutes the only major study of this case, misses. Ungerer speculates that the sight of a black African witness "dressed up in European clothes in Southampton" must have been a rare spectacle. But the evidence of Westminster scroll, created some forty years prior to the case, suggests otherwise. And if black people were rare numerically, we still have no reason to believe they would be seen about England wearing anything but climate-appropriate European clothing! In fairness to Ungerer,

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<sup>55</sup> Ungerer, "Recovering an African's Voice,"263. Taken from HCA 13/93/278.

John Blanke, the presumed black trumpeter of the scrolls, does wear a turban. The rest of his garb is identical to that of his white fellow musicians.

Regardless, the weight Ungerer places on the presence of an articulate African in court may be misplaced – it is certainly misplaced here. This essay is concerned not with how surprising Francis’s presence in court was, but how *unsurprising* it may have been. The case of Jacques Francis forces us to examine how a population of people like Francis grew in number, developing skills and expertise impressive enough to be hired by the King of England, at the same time that the English people enjoyed a popular theatre and print culture inundated with derisive stereotypes of Africans.

After the case of diver Jacques Francis, the next well documented appearance of Africans in England is 1555.<sup>56</sup> During this year, John Lok brought a group of between five and twenty African men to London. These men came from a region called Shama, located on the coast of modern day Ghana.<sup>57</sup> A contemporary account of the event written the same year states “they brought with them certyne blacke slaues, whereof sum were taule stronge men and coulde well agree with meates and drynkes.”<sup>58</sup> In this account, the author describes the Ghanaians as slaves, stating that they were kidnapped from their homeland.

According to an account written twenty-three years later, at least three of the men from the group were taken back to their home on a ship belonging to merchant William Towerson. There, they received a warm welcome from their friends and relatives, and purportedly

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<sup>56</sup> Even post *Staying Power*, or Paul Edwards’ paper “the early African Presence in the British Isles” from a 1981 conference, many scholars like Martin Orkin still cite 1555 as the first date of African arrival to England.

<sup>57</sup> Fryer *Staying Power*, 5.

<sup>58</sup> William Powell. *The Decades of the Newe Worlde or West India* (ed. Richard Eden: 1555), fol. 359v.

convinced them it was safe to board the ships on which they had voyaged home in order to trade with the Englishmen. The Englishmen wished to trade brass and copper cookware from Europe for African gold.<sup>59</sup> If this transaction went as proposed, it was likely exceptional, because many more Africans continued to arrive in England with varying degrees of freedom, either through kidnapping or coercion of a sort, after 1555.

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<sup>59</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, 5.



## Chapter Two: The African in English Society

In *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*, Kim Hall writes that Africans in Elizabethan England existed mainly in the realm of the anecdote, drawn from scattered mentions in parochial records or household accounts.<sup>60</sup> She makes note of the account books of the Sackville family, who carried on a one hundred year tradition of naming at least one black servant “John Morocco.”<sup>61</sup> These anecdotes however, are more plentiful than scholars of the period have been aware, until now. Combined with the proper contextual history, they allow us to reconstruct the stories of Africans who were both integral to and marginalized by English Society. These Africans made their livings as domestic servants, performers, skilled laborers with varying levels of independence, and also slaves.

The Africans found in the historical record of Early Modern England are rarely of high social status or wealth. This unsurprising fact is largely the result of the circumstance of their arrival onto English soil. Many Elizabethan Africans were kidnapped and brought to England against their will, or purchased as slaves in Portugal or Italy, and brought to England by their Iberian masters. Such was the lot of Jacques Francis, and the servants of Portuguese physician Hector Nunez. Clearly such an entry into society was unfavorable for developing a lucrative trade of one’s own. Yet Africans were doubly disadvantaged upon their arrival, in that the structure of English society, specifically London, the port city that was home to the majority of

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<sup>60</sup> Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 11.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

documented Africans, was sufficiently prohibitive for immigrants of all kinds. Even Englishmen from outside the city of London were challenged by the city's complex definition of citizenship.

To become a citizen of London, a man had to complete an apprenticeship and become a member of the company, or guild, of his new trade - swearing an oath before a master craftsman in his specific field. Many of these men were admitted into the companies as journeymen, but some set up their own businesses shortly after admittance. Within hours or days of this initial ceremony, the new admittant would head to Guildhall and be sworn in as a 'freeman,' the colloquial term for citizen. While nine out of ten freemen in sixteenth century England gained their status through an apprenticeship, the remaining contingent of freemen earned their citizenship by paying a fee or inheriting the status through birthright.<sup>62</sup>

Of the companies in which the freeman worked, the four most lucrative, Clothworkers, Drapers, Merchant-Tailors, and Grocers, were called the 'Great Companies.' The minor companies, still very important, included Brewers, Bakers, Butchers and Carpenters. Although access to a company trade may seem exclusive, seventy-five percent of adult males in mid-sixteenth century London were in fact freeman.<sup>63</sup> Steve Rappaport describes citizenship as "the most important criterion upon which was based the distribution of urban privileges in the sixteenth century."<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, of all the entitlements citizenship conferred, the right to engage independently in economic activity was the most important "urban privilege" of all.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Steve Rappaport, *Worlds Within Worlds: structures of life in sixteenth-century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 24.

<sup>63</sup> Rappaport, *Worlds Within Worlds*, 27.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 29.

This system was most advantageous to white Englishmen native to London, who, if not born into citizenship, had a higher chance of fostering the kind of social connections that would aid them later. Immigrants would have to work very hard to infiltrate the system, and again, the terms of one's immigration could make it all the more difficult. Black men brought to London as servants or slaves, the number of which increased greatly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, had the dual task of overcoming this low status and overcoming racial discrimination.

There is ample documentation of people brought to England specifically for the purpose of being slaves. In 1651, the benefactors of the Guinea Company (originally established by King James I as the Company of Adventures of London Traders) made this request of their chief benefactor John Pope: "Wee pray you buy for us 15 or 20 lusty Negers of about 15 years of age, bring them home with you to London."<sup>66</sup> These victims, and others who arrived in England on similar terms, formed a pool of forced laborers from which the aristocracy objectified and used as gifts. In 1662 the Earl of Sandwiche gave his daughter 'a little Turke and a Negro' as gifts, among a parrot and other extravagances.<sup>67</sup> A rhymed thank you note from George Herbert to Sir Francis Bacon read: "A Diamond to me you sent/ And I to you a Blackamore present."<sup>68</sup> Here Herbert puns on the word present, as it operates as the verb "to give" and the noun meaning "a gift" – a gift of a black person.

Samuel Pepys recounted an extremely vulgar anecdote on the same subject three years later. Apparently, a black boy owned by a Sir Robert Viner died of consumption. Viner dried the corpse in an oven and placed it in a box to be on display. Pepys lists the corpse among the

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<sup>66</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, 24.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Kim Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 120.

expensive items in Viner's inventory.<sup>69</sup> This grotesque story demonstrates the extent to which black servants were prized as much for their labor as for their function as exotic curio objects to be put on display and direct signifiers of wealth.

The expansive nature of this trend is confirmed by visual representations from the era, in the form of paintings and jewels. The wearing of clack cameos became a popular fad in aristocratic circles. These brooches featured the face or image of an African. A 1576 goldsmith inventory list describes "a broache of gold like a More's head... a broach with very fair Agott like a Blackmore enameled all in white... a jewell with an Agott having a woman cut on it like a more."<sup>70</sup> The Drake jewel, given to Elizabeth I as a gift between 1586 and 1587, is essentially a bejeweled cameo, with a black stone carved to represent the face of an African. The Gresley jewel, which Elizabeth I gave to Sir Thomas Gresley and wife Catherine Walsingham in honor of their marriage, was a cameo-locket. On the outside was the black face of an African. It opened to reveal miniatures of Gresley and Walsingham.<sup>71</sup>

The trope of the black groom or personal valet was used repeatedly in paintings of the period. Kim F. Hall's *Things of Darkness* contains a chapter that features at list fifteen portraits of its kind. A man or woman of wealth and status would be seated or standing beside a black servant, almost always depicted as a child with very dark skin. The servants would be attending various tasks as clasping a bracelet onto his or her mistress. Stylistic patterns however, dictated that the two subjects of the painting's eyes never met, and the black servant is typically placed in

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<sup>69</sup> *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* seen in Peter Fryer, *Staying Power*, 212.

<sup>70</sup> *Princely Magnificence*, taken from Hall *Things of Darkness*, 215.

<sup>71</sup> Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 220.

the background.<sup>72</sup> Whether or not black servants actually sat for these paintings, or were fictional renderings inserted later, the portraits are a mirror of the period's social trends. Fryer writes that aristocracy from the era would dress their black slaves or servants in very fine garments or livery. The Calendar of State Papers record that in 1628, Sir James Bagg of Plymouth demanded that his "negrowe" having just arrived from Africa, be "handsomely clothed."<sup>73</sup> Like jewels or the black cameos, black people became representational objects that enabled owners or employers to flaunt their wealth.<sup>74</sup>

These portraits demonstrate a preference for child or child-like attendants that is corroborated by personal ads in newspapers. Hue and Cry calls were placed to locate runaway slaves. London saw a proliferation of these ads approaching the start of the eighteenth century. Many of these ads solicit help locating black children. A "Negroe boy about nine years of age" wearing a gray suit is sought in a 1659 posting. A 1686 Hue and Cry records an intriguing case of an aided escape – a mysterious person on horseback took Lady Broughton of Marchwiell's 14 year old black boy. The next year another 'Negroe boy' was reported missing. In 1690, a man offers reward money for the return of his eight year old 'Guinea boy' who has 'strayed away,' according to the owner. One assumes his departure was purposeful, this is not stated.<sup>75</sup>

Many black people held normal jobs within the domestic sphere, the requirements of which extended beyond being petite enough to function as diminutive, non-threatening, live accessories. Samuel Pepys employed a black cook. He wrote of her in his diary - "she dresses

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<sup>72</sup> Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 226.

<sup>73</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, 25.

<sup>74</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, 25.fc

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

our meat very well, and we [are] mightily pleased with her.”<sup>76</sup> Lady Anne Clifford employed a black laundry woman named Grace, who was hired between the years of 1613 and 1624.<sup>77</sup>

It also was fairly commonplace for English merchants to have servants. Habib mentions that these figures were less likely to have published dairies, or household accounts and tax records scrutinized by the government. Instead, mention of their servants can be found in parish registers. Powerful merchant Alderman Paul Baning, as well as lesser known merchants Thomas Barber and Goodman Wilkenson each had one or more African servants buried in their neighborhood parish.<sup>78</sup>

At least a few black people in the period seem to be independently employed, or at least be skilled in a particular trade. The Southwark parish St. Olave Tooley Street documents a complete nuclear family of black people, headed by a skilled laborer named Reasonbell. The parish identifies him to be a silk-weaver in the baptismal and burial records of his children. The baptismal records for February 19 1586 state “Edward the sonne of Reasonbell [sic] blackman silkweaver.”<sup>79</sup> Two other children of the Reasonabell family were buried only three days apart, October 13 and October 16, in 1592.<sup>80</sup>

How did Reasonabell become a weaver? He may have learned the trade from being a servant to a silk-weaver. Other freeman were documented to have black servants, as were foreign craftsmen who set up such in London. In fact these foreigners, who were neither English

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Habib, *Black Lives in the Archives*, 91.

<sup>79</sup> See GLRO MS R62 in Knutson, “A Caliban in St. Mildred’s Poultry.”

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

nor freemen, received a great deal of scrutiny for what were perceived as ostentatious displays of wealth.

In 1595 fifteen yeoman weavers wrote a petition to the French Church of London, complaining that the French had ungratefully overstepped the bounds of the hospitality they were extended as ‘strangers’ of the city. The petition complains: “they will exceed and keep more looms and servants than any freeman would dare to do.”<sup>81</sup> In addition, the petition complained that these weavers would teach their fellow countrymen silk weaving, although they were of different trades, thereby bypassing the apprenticeship-freeman route and cutting into the business of the Englishmen that patiently waited to become citizens, which rarely occurred before the age of twenty six. Lastly, the French silk weavers in question purportedly bucked the system by allowing women to work at the trade, who then married men of the trade and became fully indoctrinated in the business. This was an intolerable blow to the complainants, who wrote scathingly that the practice “[brought] that which should be our living to the maintenance of those who never *deserved* it.”<sup>82</sup>

Right away, this petition gives evidence of a contingent of immigrant Europeans who owned more servants or slaves than was perhaps average for the native population of England – even if the yeomen’s perceptions were inflated by anger. A number of the parish records do reference black people living with immigrants, although the capacity is not always specified. We would of course think of Dr. Nunez in this regard, but other examples exist, such as the 1594 St. Stephen of Coleman Street burial of “Katherin the negar” who was said rather mysteriously to be

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<sup>81</sup> Rappaport, *Worlds Within Worlds*, 57

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

“dwelling of the prince of Portingal [Portugal].”<sup>83</sup> The ‘Prince of Portingal’ was none other than Dom Antonio, the Portuguese’s alleged heir to the Spanish Throne. Queen Elizabeth apparently protected his anonymity in London, as he was an advantageous bargaining chip in dealings with Spain.<sup>84</sup>

We should take care not to conflate the experiences of white European women and black men or women into one indistinct haze of discrimination. The yeoman weavers’ vehemence toward skilled female laborers and the phrasing of the complaint petition – ‘our livelihood is begin given to people who never *deserved* it’ - suggests that there were pockets of the population considered unworthy of receiving what Rappaport has called the most important urban privilege, the right or ability to function as an economically independent being.<sup>85</sup> It is reasonable to assume that black men who learned a skilled trade, being doubly estranged as non-English and non-white, would have encountered the same kind of vehemence.

Reasonabell was one such skilled black man. He may have been fully independent, or employed by a freeman or a foreign tradesman – we do not know for sure. The register does not list a white employer in relation to the Reasonabell family, but this omission may just be in keeping with the trend within parish records, which proscribed that white employers or Christian sponsors were listed beside black people. Since the the entries deal with the Reasonabell children, who have no employers, their father takes the place of the white employer or sponsor. Unlike the American slave system in which familial ties were broken and the master made ultimate patriarch, under the un-codified structure of British slavery or indentured servitude,

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<sup>83</sup> GL Ms 4448. Katherin may or may not have been a servant; for further discussion of this entry see Chapter Four.

<sup>84</sup> Habib, *Black Lives in the Archives*, 84.

<sup>85</sup> Cite again, same quote as before



Reasonabell as husband, father, and working man was considered the ruler of his household, servant or no.

It is unlikely that Reasonabell was himself a freeman, because the first black man to appear on the freeman scrolls appears not in London but in York, in 1687. This man appears on record as "John Moore – blacke" and apparently paid the York Chamber of commerce two different sums of money in order to become part of the freemen of York.<sup>86</sup>

We may not know the exact terms of Reasonabell's status as a weaver, but there are a few other entries from St. Botolph's Aldgate that indicate the presence of skilled black laborers. A 1596 entry marks the burial of a black man named Frauncis, "servant to Peter Miller a beare brewer," in 1596. Frauncis died of scurvy.<sup>87</sup> Peter Miller was in fact, a Dutch merchant, listed as such in the Privy Council's record of strangers.<sup>88</sup> Perhaps he was one such foreigner that raised the ire of the yeoman weavers, by teaching a black man his brewing trade.

St. Botolph's Aldgate's records also hold a fascinating parish entry about a black woman possibly born into a trade. The entry gives us a rare opportunity to hear a black woman from the period's own voice. The registry writes that "Mary Fillis, a black more, being about twenty years owld and dwelling with Millicent Porter, a seamster, was baptized."<sup>89</sup>

According to the clerk's book, Phyllis is twenty years old, but has only lived in England for the past eight or nine years. Apparently, for this entire time she had not been baptized, but

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<sup>86</sup> Surtees Society, *Register of the Freemen of the City of York from the City Records*, vol. I, no. 96 (1897) and vol. II, no. 102 (1900), taken from The National Archives online <[http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/early\\_times/settlers.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/early_times/settlers.htm)>.

<sup>87</sup> GL MS 9223.

<sup>88</sup> Habib, *Black Lives in the Archives*, 87.

<sup>89</sup> GL Ms 9223

recently became interested in Christianity. Phyllis underwent what seems to have been a grueling examination process, that consisting of several interviews. The clerk writes that Mary Phyllis responded ‘very Chrystan like’ - and was approved for baptism.<sup>90</sup> She reported to the parish that her father was Fillis of Morisco “a black-more being as she said both a basket maker and a shovel maker in that contrie.”<sup>91</sup> The entries do not specify the locale of ‘that contrie.’ Morisco is not a location, but the Spanish term for a Muslim or Moorish person.<sup>92</sup> This is a clue that perhaps before emigrating to England, Mary Phyllis and her Father Fillis lived in Spain.

### *Royal Émigrés*

Not all Africans that traveled who England were disenfranchised, disembodied prisoners stolen from their ancestral homes. After 1555, as England’s trade with Africa began to grow, kings and royalty would visit England and expect to be treated as such. Of note here is a 1611 entry into the parish record of St. Mildred Poultry, London, which reads:

Dedjerj Jacquoah about ye age of 20 years, the sonne of Caddi-biah, King of the river Cetras or Cestus in the countrey of Guinny, who was sent out of the countrey by his father in an English ship called the Abiggal of London, belonging to John Davies of the Parish, to be baptized.<sup>93</sup>

This is not the only instance of African royalty visiting England. Between 1591 and 1592 a man recorded as Don Antonio, was tried in the High Court of Admiralty for illegally bringing

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<sup>90</sup> GL Ms 9223.

<sup>91</sup> GL Ms 9234/6

<sup>92</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, “Morisco adj. and n.”

<[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00315811?single=1&query\\_type=word&queryword=morisco&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00315811?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=morisco&first=1&max_to_show=10)>

<sup>93</sup> Knutson, “Caliban in St. Mildred’s Poultry,” 111. Taken GL, MS 4429/1.

subjects into the kingdom. Don Antonio may well be Dom Antonio, the exiled Portuguese prince living comfortably in Windsor House near other exiles like the Queen Elizabeth's physician Doctor Rodrigo Lopez; spellings of names were frequently inconsistent in both parochial and government documents.<sup>94</sup> In any case, this man, whose foreign status is marked clearly by his name, brought four young African men with him to England. Don Antonio was interrogated by four Englishmen who asked if the you men were "transported with the goodwill and leave of their parents and friends and the leave of the King of sayde country."<sup>95</sup> As the case unfolds, we find that the Africans were not just any young boys but "cheife young negros, sonnes to the cheife justice of sayde country."<sup>96</sup>

The man being arraigned seems just as confused as his countrymen Doctor Nunez about the place of black people in English Society. He assumed that he could bring kidnapped black people into the kingdom without notice, because of the centrality of slavery to Portuguese life.

The response from the High Court of Admiralty shows us that Africans in England were not received in the same institutionally racist manner as in Portugal, and that even in England, not all Africans received the same treatment as one another. These teens brought by Don Antonio were the children of important government officials with whom England likely wanted to preserve a trade relationship, yet and still they were still kidnapped and treated like slaves until they reached the courts, where their status as independent entities of high social standing was established. The need for legal legislation to remove them from Antonio shows that to some extent, their dark skin denoted servant status until proven otherwise. From the opposite

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<sup>94</sup> Habib, *Black Lives in the Archives*, 84.

<sup>95</sup> High Court of Admiralty: Instance and Prize Courts: Files of Libels, Allegations, Decrees, Sentences and Miscellaneous Documents HCA 24/59. National Archives, Kew Gardens: London.

<sup>96</sup> HCA 24/59 , HCA 24/45, HCA 24/46

perspective, we may be surprised to learn that at half a century after England became involved in the African trade, of which slaves were a central ‘good,’ the High Court of Admiralty arraigned a man for having forcibly transported people from Africa to England. The contradictory nature of these occurrences shows us that the social status of blacks in England was in flux.

African royalty from Morocco had frequent contact with the English monarchy as well. Gustav Ungerer writes that the history of congress between England and Morocco began in Andalusia, where English ex-patriates relocated to trade black and Maghreb domestic servants and slaves.<sup>97</sup> 1589 marked the beginning of political negotiations between Moroccan sultan Ahmad al-Mansur and Elizabeth I.

Moroccan Marzuq Rais traveled to England as an ambassador of the sultan, to personally negotiate and league of amity between the two countries.<sup>98</sup> Elizabethan scholar Nabil Matar writes that any contemporary examination of the period in question should take care not to conflate “Muslims, Moors, Berbers and Arabs with sub-Saharan black Africans, as did the Elizabethans, because English relations with black Africa were one of power, dominion, and slavery, whereas relations with the Muslims of North Africa...were relations based on anxious equality”.<sup>99</sup>

What Matar misses is that stepping inside the English psyche may be key to understanding the social interactions of the time. The fact that Arabs and ‘black Africans’ were conflated for the English is if anything a clue that our more complicated method of racial

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<sup>97</sup> Gustav Ungerer. “Portia and the Prince of Morocco”, 90.

<sup>98</sup> Ungerer, Portia and the Prince of Morocco, 89.

<sup>99</sup> Nabil Matar, “Turks, Moors, and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery (New York: Columbia Press, 1999), 7-8; as cited in Ungerer “Portia and the Prince of Morocco.

categorizations should not be retroactively projected onto the past. If Matar speaks of attempts to determine the geographical origin of an African figure, than yes, we must be very cautious. But beyond the specifics of geographic origin, the fact that Elizabethans did not consistently differentiate between Arabic or black Africans, or between light and dark complexions (see *Titus Andronicus* in which Aaron the Moor is described in the text as both ‘tawny’ and ‘black’) suggests that contrary to Matar’s caution, there was no such thing as ‘black Africa’ for the white Elizabethan.<sup>100</sup> Gustav Ungerer politely dissents from what he calls Matar’s ‘cogent’ argument, stating that Britons did view Muslim Moroccans as possible political conquests.<sup>101</sup>

Furthermore, despite Matar’s insinuation that the tortures and exploitation of slavery and ambiguously-negotiated domestic service were reserved for ‘black’ Africans only, the historical record shows that the English enslaved Southeast Asians and even Native Americans. Peter, an “Indian servant” to a beer brewer, was buried in St. Botolph’s Aldgate in 1618.<sup>102</sup> On Valentine’s day of 1682, an “Indian slave boy” was buried in St. Olave’s Hart Street.<sup>103</sup>

The St. Olave’s Hart Street parish register holds an intriguing passage from almost a hundred years prior that detailed the burial of an Inuit man and his baby who were “seized” from their home on Baffin Island by Martin Frobisher on a voyage to discover the Northwest Passage.<sup>104</sup> It is unclear whether the Inuit man, Kalicho, and the baby boy, Nutaaq, were brought to England to be slaves or to be put on display because they died of pneumonia within days of their arrival. In light of their sad story as well as brief mentions of other non-African slaves, it

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<sup>100</sup> Emily Bartels, “Too Many Blackmoors: Deportation, Discrimination, and Elizabeth I,” *Selections in English Literature* 46, (Spring 2006), 308.

<sup>101</sup> Ungerer, “Portia and the Prince of Morocco,” 91.

<sup>102</sup> GL Ms 9222/1

<sup>103</sup> GL Ms 28869

<sup>104</sup> GL Ms 28867

seems that in Tudor England, any non-white peoples were in danger of being marked as Other and exploited in various ways.

Dedjerj Jacquoah represents one of a few exceptions to this exploitation. He traveled to England alone with parental consent, in search of instruction of some sort, be it religious or academic. Rosalyn Knutson theorizes that Jacquoah's father may have sent him to England to be baptized in order to gain a kind of universal citizenship by becoming a member of the Christian church.<sup>105</sup> The legitimacy conferred by baptism would have likely aided his father in trade.

Their home near the river "Cestus," actually called Cess, was known as the Grain or Pepper coast. The history of a ship named Abigail, printed in the parish records, as well as High Admiralty Court Case files after the ship was attacked by pirates, reveal that between 1608 and 1611, the ship's cargo included silks, hats, linen, and broad cloth. Herein may lie the link between the ship Abigail and the man John Davies, who acted as godfather to Dedjerj at his Christening. Davies was a haberdasher and merchant that might have sent these goods to be traded for rice, pepper, and ivory. Perhaps through such a tenuous connection emerged Caddibiah's plan to send his son Dedjerj to St. Mildred's Poultry, to immerse him in English life that he may be more efficient in trade.<sup>106</sup>

A very interesting case in Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations* reports an encounter between William Towerson and a local man who boarded Towerson's ship on his first trip to Benin between 1555-1556. Apparently this Beni man demanded to know why Towerson had not yet

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<sup>105</sup> Knutson, "A Caliban in St. Mildred's Poultry," 116.

<sup>106</sup> Knutson, 116. John Lok himself, and Hakluyt, recounting the tales of Dutchman Bosman and Frenchman Jean Barbot write of trips to the Cess region. Apparently the area was known for its exceptionally abundant agricultural goods, particularly rice, and a pepper unique to the region called the *Guinea* pepper.

returned their men who they “last year tooke away.”<sup>107</sup> Towerson replied that the men were being kept until they could learn English well enough to aid in trade.<sup>108</sup> Knutson expresses doubts about Towerson’s good intentions, as do I, because his probable lie alludes to a very real practice. It also supports a trend suggesting that African kings and men of importance often sought to trade on their own turf, letting the English come to them instead of traveling overseas. Perhaps if these men of means had sailed to England they could have formed a kind of merchant class that, even if marginalized or resented, had social mobility from wealth. This was not the case however – the closest we approach independently wealthy African émigrés arise are through anecdotes of persons like Caddi-biah’s son Derjerj.

### *Life in the Court*

As already referenced in the previous chapter, one of the earliest appearances of black people in the British Isles were members of the royal court. We know from the Westminster scrolls that there was at least one black member of the court of Henry VII. His court, like that of his predecessors Edward IV and Richard III, served the primary function of catering to the daily needs of the monarch and his family, with the extravagance and luxury suited to a man of his position. Presentation was extremely important in this hierarchical society.<sup>109</sup> Another more subtle duty of the court was to ensconce the royal family in a protective bubble, shielding them from figures deemed unworthy, or dangerous.<sup>110</sup> Each employee of the court was representative

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> D’Arcy Jonathan Dacre Boulton, “Henry VII and Henry VII” eds M. Gosman, A. Macdonald, and A. Vanderjagt, *Princes and Princely Culture 1540-1560* (Brill: The Netherlands, 2005) 173.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

of the monarchy itself, and the core of the court were those who ran the Household – the domestics who served Henry VII on a daily basis.

The most important part of the Household was termed the Chamber. The Chamber was divided into several parts which had various official functions, such as the Office of the Kings' Physicians and Surgeon, who saw to the king's health, and the Wardrobe chambers. Highlighting the importance of pomp and circumstances, three of these offices within the Chamber were related to ceremonies: the Minstrel Office, the Trumpeter's Office, and the Office of Arms.<sup>111</sup>

Scotland was also host to a number of black court performers at the same time John Blanke worked for Henry VII. As previously noted, there were several black women, presumably domestic staff with Household duties that were on the payroll as well. In the Scotland, however, blackness often figured into revelries symbolically if not literally. Even if the number of African dancers or workers employed was relatively low compared to the number of whites, early sixteenth century Scotland had a distinct fascination with blackness, particularly black femininity, and it figured directly into pieces conceived for court celebrations. Black women were often posited as the romantic or sexual focus of court pieces, and the 'blak lady' became almost a stock figure in works of this genre. In performances of these works, which often took the form of masque balls, white monarchical and members of the aristocracy would adorn themselves in blackface. In 1605, Queen Anne commissioned Ben Jonson to write a piece that would require her and her ladies to costume themselves as 'blackamoors.' Thus Jonson's *Masque of Blackness* was born.<sup>112</sup> Jonson was influenced by a Florentine court masque herald in

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 180.

<sup>112</sup> Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 128



honor of the marriage of Francesco de' Medici and Bianca Cappello, locating Queen Anne's desire to don blackface in celebration within European tradition.<sup>113</sup>

There may have been real black players in these events in addition to painted ones. In 1507, James I presided over the Tournament of the Black Knight and the Black Lady. Louise Fradenburg interprets the tournaments as an extension of the Household - an event of tremendous allegorical importance in which the king exercised his metaphorical power to claim and control the sovereignty of the land, albeit on a stage.<sup>114</sup> In this particular tournament, King James himself took on the alias of the Black Knight and jousted, in disguise, to win the honor of the Queen of the tournaments, the Black Lady. Little is known about the identity of this black lady. Extensive documentation of her costume and integration into the performance has been preserved, however, in the Household treasurer's accounts.<sup>115</sup> This mysterious black woman appeared in a damasked gown bordered in gold, with trim of green and yellow taffeta. She also wore black leather gloves and sleeves. The itemized lists also note a "chair triumphale," on which she may have ridden to the elegant banquet that followed the tournament.<sup>116</sup>

Doubt remains as to whether the black lady was actually black or an English woman in blackface. If we are inclined to believe she was a black woman, she may be the female subject of Dunbar's poem "Ane Blak More." Dunbar, of course, could have been writing about a tournament featuring a white woman in blackface, or an African woman, at a fictional tournament. However, since the Accounts Books tell us that a tournament did exist, and record

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid. Louise Olga Fradenburg, *City, Marriage, Tournament* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 254.

<sup>114</sup> Fradenburg, *City, Marriage, Tournament*, 254.

<sup>115</sup> Edwards, "The Early African Presence in the British Isles," 19.

<sup>116</sup> Edwards, "Early African Presence," 19.

well a costume for a black lady that did not list among its items burnt cork paint for blacking up, a wig, or mock -“Ethiopian” garb - the style of the clothes was traditionally Scottish - I am inclined to believe an African woman was present.

In the 1570’s, Elizabeth I was depicted on a painted panel at a court scene, in the midst of black musicians. The piece is called “Queen Elizabeth and her Court at Kenilworth Castle.” While the castle in question is not a true depiction of Kenilworth, the panel likely reflects a realistic representation of her court’s racial makeup, because of several references to black performers found in the historical record. The household record for Elizabeth I, between 1574 and 1577, includes records of purchases toward the care of the domestic staff. One item in the book is “a Gasken coat for a littel blak a More of white tapheta cut.” Another individual, a female dwarf named Thomasen, has been identified as black by some scholars.<sup>117</sup>

In 1618, a black woman named Anne Vause was buried at St. Botolph’s Aldgate. The register states that she was wife to “Anthonie Vause, Trompetter, of the said countrey.”<sup>118</sup> “Countrey,” in this context, may be a reference to Anne’s racial identifier of black-more. It could also indicate that the couple has migrated to England from elsewhere in Europe, or even from the same location in Africa. Of interest here is Anthonie Vause’s profession of Trompetter. Perhaps he was a musician for the court of King James I, in the tradition of John Blanke.

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<sup>117</sup> Habib, *Black Lives in the Archives*. See page 7 as well as “Index of Records of Black People,” Item 139.

<sup>118</sup> GL Ms 9222/1.

### **Chapter Three: Interracial Liaisons**

In “Washing the Ethiopian white: conceptualizing black skin in Renaissance England,” Anu Korhonen offers a veritable catalogue of the most disturbing and stereotyped portrayals of Africans in the literary texts and travelogues of Renaissance England. As implied by its title, Korhonen’s piece speaks uniquely about the symbolic significance of black skin for the English, and not the actual encounters between black and white subjects. Korhonen sets out to answer the question “what did people actually see when they encountered ‘darker skinned individuals; either real people or textual and visual representations of black Africans?,” by using conceptions of beauty and deformity.<sup>119</sup> Her paper is a very useful tool for deciphering the racially coded

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<sup>119</sup> Anu Korhonen, “Washing the Ethiopian White: conceptualizing black skin in Renaissance England,” in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, ed. T.F. Earle, and K.J. P. Lowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 94.

language of numerous texts, however, its lack of anecdotal evidence from the historical record leaves the conclusion one dimensional.

Treatments like Korhonen's fail to consider the apparent divide between the conceptualizing of blackness in literature and the integration of Africans into English society - because for all that the English may have found black skin to be bizarre or repulsive, there remains a proliferation of black children fathered by white men in Elizabethan England, particularly in Devon. If sexual activity between disparate groups is any measure of social integration, then these phenomena deserve special attention.

The evidence of sexual relationships between English men and African women range from the ambiguous to the explicitly clear. 'Katherin the negar', buried in 1594 at St. Stephen of Coleman Street, ranks among the more ambiguous of these references. Her burial entry states that she was 'dwelling' with the Prince of Portugal, whom we know to be Dom Antonio, exiled claimant to the Spanish throne.<sup>120</sup> Dwelling meant veritably the same thing as it does today - to reside. However the term did not seem to connote a position of service, because other records detail the deaths or christening of Africans by naming the African's profession, if a servant or slave, the African's employer or master, the employer or master's profession, and where both parties lived.

The case of Domingo, a black man from Guinea, displays this common structure clearly. He was buried in 1598, at St. Botolph's Aldgate.<sup>121</sup> The memorandum book says he was a servant to Sir William White, dwelling in the 'abbeyplace.' Francis who died of scurvy was

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<sup>120</sup> GL Ms 4448.

<sup>121</sup> GL Ms 9222/1)

also buried in Botolph's Aldgate. The memorandum book gives special mention of Francis employer Peter Miller in what amounts to a plug for Miller's business: "...Peter Miller a beare brewer dwelling at the signe of the hartes home in EastSmithfield. He had the best cloth and beares."<sup>122</sup> To summarize then, the term 'servant' was written beside an African's name in the parish register, but their dwelling place was an extra bit of information often found in the longer parish memorandum book. Thus, based on the absence of the word servant besides Katherin's name, it is quite possible she was not one.

If Katherin did not live with Dom Antonio as his servant, then it is plausible that their cohabitation was due to a sexual relationship of some sort, because there were a plethora of other African women whose children were fathered by foreign Europeans. At Devon parish St. Andrews Plymouth, a boy named Fortunatus was baptized in 1594. The baby belonged to a 'Negro' servant of Thomas Kegwins, and the record states that the "supposed" father was "a Portugall."<sup>123</sup> The very same year at St. Andrews Plymouth, a baby named Mary was baptized. This child was the daughter of a black servant named Mary, and the "supposed" father a Dutchman named John Kinge.<sup>124</sup> At the end of the entry the abbreviation *illeg.*, appears, short for illegitimate. This apparently due to speculation about the actual identity of the father, and the mother's status as an unmarried woman.

In 1606 at St. Benet Fink, London, a baby named John was baptized. His mother is listed in the parish register as merely a "Blackamore woman." The "supposed" father is listed as John

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<sup>122</sup> GL Ms 9234/6

<sup>123</sup> FD St. Andrew's Plymouth 12/24/1594.

<sup>124</sup> FD St. Andrew's Plymouth 11/17/1594.

Edwardes, a border at the residence of William Conrados.<sup>125</sup> John Edwards is an English name, but Edwardes' status as a border suggests he was not a resident of the London area. Conrados name, however, would seem to be Spanish in origin. Perhaps he was one of the many Portuguese, French or Spanish merchants or tradesmen who set up shop in London? Of even greater interest to this parish entry is that the baby was named John after the presumed father John Edwardes, suggesting that the father and mother may have had some sort of sustained romantic relationship either prior to or concurrent with the time of their child's birth.

There are a few other parish records in which the child's status as an illegitimate seems to be of less import than the fact of their racially mixed background. A short entry from 1586 at St. Botolph Bishopgate announces the baptism of a girl named Elizabeth who is described as "a negro child, born white, the mother a negro."<sup>126</sup> At St. George the Martyr in London, there was a 1628 burial of "John P Daniells, a Mulletow."<sup>127</sup> The remainder of the published records of mixed race children seem to be preoccupied with the illegitimacy of the children's conception, rather than the implicit act of interracial sex. As such, we have no idea how taboo interracial sexual relations actually were, if at all. Todd Gray, chairmain of the *Friends of Devon* project that has collected and published evidence of over eighty Africans living in Devon in the late sixteenth to seventeenth century, wonders why the births of these African women were illegitimate; the subtext to this query of course being that Gray wonders if it is because the women and children are black.<sup>128</sup> It seems unlikely however, that residents of Devon devised a

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<sup>125</sup> GL Ms 4097

<sup>126</sup>GL Ms 4515/1

<sup>127</sup> LMA X092/030.

<sup>128</sup> Todd Gray, Introduction to Friend's of Devon Archive Black History Project report, entitled "History of Devon's Archives: preliminary report of the Black History Project. <<http://www.foda.org.uk/main/projects/blackhistory.htm>>

new definition of illegitimacy to apply to their African residents. If the babies were born to married couples, the records would reflect that. Alan Hayes writes in *Sex and Elizabethan England* that the number of illegitimate births in the period seems to have peaked between 1590 and 1610.<sup>129</sup>

In 1593 at St. Andrews Plymouth, a black serving woman named Cristian gave birth to a daughter. The father, again qualified as “supposed,” was English man named Cuthbert Holman.<sup>130</sup> The baby was buried the following year – the death entry only mentions Cristian, indicating the father was no longer connected with the baby over the course of the year, either by his physical absence or because the burden of illegitimate parenthood fell on the woman.<sup>131</sup>

In 1603 at St. Andrews another illegitimate child was born, the record of the event using choice language to describe the child’s mother. Instead of the standard abbreviation *illeg.*, the record states “baptism of Richard, son of Mary a neger, base, the refuted father Rog Hoggett”.<sup>132</sup> The same term is applied to a girl named Rebecca from Haterleigh, who is described as the “base daughter of Mary, a negro.”<sup>133</sup> It is more than safe to assume that the fathers of both Rebecca and Richard were white Englishmen, because if they were not, the records would say so. As we have seen, a large number of ingenious terms denoting blackness existed in the Tudor vernacular. Furthermore, parish bookkeepers kept careful note of strangers’ origins, informing us that the mixed race children Fortunatus and Mary were fathered by a Portuguese man and a Dutchman. Lest one think their nationality was mentioned purely because of the curiosity of such a union,

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<sup>129</sup> Alan Hayes, *Sex In Elizabethan England* (Thrupp: Sutton Publishing, 1997), 9.

<sup>130</sup> FD, St. Andrews Plymouth, 2/ 5 /1593.

<sup>131</sup> FD, St. Andrews Plymouth, 14/4/1694.

<sup>132</sup> FD, St. Andrews Plymouth, 1603.

<sup>133</sup> FD, St. Andrew’s Plymouth, 10/8/1606.

London parishes show that lone strangers were marked by their foreign status as well. The burial records of St. George the Martyr show that “Joane Eaton, a Duch” was buried in 1610.<sup>134</sup> Based on these trends in the record, the omission of a racial or ethnic marker can consistently be interpreted as a sign of English heritage.

Under this method of decoding the records, it seems there were at least two interracial marriages in the early seventeenth century, both of which were unions of black men and white women. Christmas Eve 1617 at St. Benet Fink of London, James Curre “a Moore Christian” married Margaret Person, a maid.”<sup>135</sup> Previous to this point I have only been interpreted the word ‘moor’ to denote African heritage (or some sort of dark phenotype) when accompanied by the term black, dark, or tawny, and even then we have seen those terms applied to Southeast Asians and Inuits! Since the record says Moor and not black, James Curre may be a Turkish or Arabic convert. Paul Peache, a blackmoor, did marry one Rosamond Key at St. Katherine Cree in 1672.<sup>136</sup> We have evidence that the race of both people being married was entered into the parish records – Littleham, Exmouth parish records the marriage of John Mayo of Southampton and Isabell Bell as a union between “two Asiatic Blacks.”<sup>137</sup> Key is not identified as a blackamoor, neger, negar, morelas, or stranger of any sort, so she was presumably a white English woman.

This proliferation of interracial sexual relations resulting in births, particularly in Devon, provides little explanation of how the encounters began. Englishman John Edwardes was a border who fathered a child with a 'blackmore' woman, but frustratingly, she remains unnamed.

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<sup>134</sup> LMA, X092/030, St. George the Martyr: Burials, April 10 1620.

<sup>135</sup> GL MS 9155

<sup>136</sup> GL MS 7890/1

<sup>137</sup> FD, Littleham, Exmouth. No date provided.



<sup>138</sup>Perhaps this woman was a servant at the boarding house? Whatever the nature of these relationships, neither the relationships nor the resulting progeny seem to have prompted exclusion from regular community life. The records show that these illegitimate, mixed race children were baptized and buried just like any other members of society. Of course, this does not mean they were not ostracized in any sense, only that converting all English subjects into Anglican Christians was a higher priority than exclusion due to racial discrimination.

Indeed, in another illustration of the African's integration into English society, Samuel Pepys writes candidly about his affair with a black shop girl Nan, in his diary. Pepys, a book collector and government official educated at Cambridge, wrote of a number of marital transgressions in his diary.<sup>139</sup> On April 13, 1666, Pepys wrote "Thence called upon an old woman in Pannier Ally to agree for ruling of some paper for me and she will do it pretty cheap. Here I find her have a very comely black mayde to her servant, which I liked very well."<sup>140</sup> Two days later, Pepys writes "[I went] out by coach to the old woman in Pannyer Alley for my ruled papers, and they are done, and I am much more taken with her black maid Nan."<sup>141</sup> We do not yet know whether the interest is mutual. On April 17 he wrote: "...called at my paper ruler's and there found black Nan, which pleases me mightily, and having saluted her again and again away home and to bed." Pepys writes later of going to the paper ruler's house just to see Nan "abroad to my ruler of books, having God forgive me! A mind to see Nan there."<sup>142</sup> On May 2, he went to the ruler's shop again and "staid a great while with Nan, idling away the afternoon with

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<sup>138</sup> GL Ms 4097.

<sup>139</sup> St. Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There*, 287.

<sup>140</sup> Henry B. Wheatly ed., *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (London: G. Bell and Sons LTD, 1924), V: 252.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

pleasure.”<sup>143</sup> In the last entry about Nan, dated July 25, Pepys writes “I did this afternoon call at my own that ruled my paper... and there did kiss Nan.”<sup>144</sup>

The extent of Pepys relationship with Nan is unclear. He is not explicit about the nature of their relations, as he occasionally was, writing of “bedding the wench,” or “fondling” the numerous women with who he had affairs.<sup>145</sup> What he does write of Nan is revelatory, however, in its straightforward simplicity. None of the entries give the sense that Nan’s presence, or Pepys interest in her, is anything out of the ordinary. Pepys speaks of Nan in the same term that he speaks of other women. On the same day as one of his visits to Nan, he writes of being quite “taken” with his wife’s pretty friends.<sup>146</sup> Pepys does note Nan’s racial difference in the first two entries, calling her “black Nan.” But the word ‘black’ seems to be little more than a descriptive identifier, rather than a focal point of any sort. From that point on Pepys simply refers to her as Nan.

There are other records that suggest more illicit interactions between black and white Londoners. Tudor London had a thriving underbelly of prostitution. Henry VII closed licensed brothels in Southwark in 1546, but this did not help the matter. Prostitution in London grew exponentially in late sixteenth and seventeenth century.<sup>147</sup> There are records of black prostitutes, although no record of offspring from these encounters. In an interesting legal dispute we learn of one such African prostitute who had particularly loyal clientele.

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 352.

<sup>145</sup> St. Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There*, 287.

<sup>146</sup> Henry B. Wheatly, *Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 255/

<sup>147</sup> Helen Ostovich, Elizabeth Sauer and Melissa Smith. *Reading Early Modern Women an Anthology of Text in Manuscript and Print* (London: Routledge, 2004) 42.

Mary Hall Spinster accused her neighbors John and Jane Bankes for using their home as a “bawdie house.”<sup>148</sup> Spinster’s accusations were corroborated by an unnamed informant, who was herself a prostitute of the house. Spinster reported her accomplice’s findings, stating,

There is one Anne Cobbie a tawnie Moore that is often at the said Bankes house and this informant saith she hath heard divers men report that they had father give her a peece to lye with her than an other five shillings because of her softe skinne.<sup>149</sup>

Other more tenuous references to black prostitutes include the cryptic and somewhat famous message sent from Denis Edwards to the Earl of Hertford’s secretary in 1599: “Pray enquire after and secure my negress, she is surely at the Swan, a Dane’s beershop, Turbull Street, Clerkenwell.”<sup>150</sup> In addition to the fact that the Clerkenwell neighborhood was home to the most notorious brothels in London, and beer shops locales where sexual liaisons were frequently organized; there are several layers of suggestion in this message, beginning with the very fact that it is a request. Edwards asks the Earl’s secretary to ‘*enquire after*’ this mysterious woman. Why does he use a request rather than a directive? If this woman were a servant or a slave, Edwards could have easily asked the Earl’s secretary, albeit politely, to promptly send the woman to him. Instead he asks him to ‘*enquire after*’ her – a vague request that may have entailed finding out her exact whereabouts, finding if she is amenable to accepting a visit. Edwards then asks for the secretary to ‘*secure her*’ which seems to mean that the secretary is set up a rendezvous between the two parties.

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<sup>148</sup> Helen Ostovich, *Reading Early Modern Women an Anthology* ,41.

<sup>149</sup> Helen Ostovich, *Reading Early Modern Women an Anthology*, 41.

<sup>150</sup> *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series*. Edward VI, Mary, Elizabeth, and James I, 1598-1601.

In any case, it is the rare servant or slave that one must write to enquire after and solicit a meeting with. Rarer still is the servant or slave that may choose to spend her time at a tavern. This was clearly an independent woman, and prostitution is perhaps the only professions that would have given her such independence and demanded the discretion that Edwards exhibits uses in contacting her. There is also the interesting term ‘my negress.’ Negress is an antiquated term for a black woman, but it would seem that if this woman was providing any useful service (that could be specified in a letter), then Edwards might write “my cook” or “my laundrymaid.” ‘Negress’ was not a position in the household, unless we are to read a sordid subtext behind it, as Edward knew the Earl’s secretary would.

Imtiaz Habib brings to our attention two Bridewell court records that tell a much more explicit tale of black women’s entrapment in the field of sex work. The prostitute and probable victim in question is identified as black by her name, Barbary Moore. Habib notes that she is somewhat exceptional in having two racial markers in her name, but Barbary is likely a pun on ‘Barbara,’ alluding to the Barbary coast of Africa. Furthermore, Barbary hailed from Chick Lane in Tower Ward, a neighborhood with many black residents, such as those found in the records of nearby St. Olave’s Hart Street.<sup>151</sup> Alise Morise, the wife of a fish merchant, arranged for a meeting between Barbary and Richard Evertt, and supervised the sexual activity in the room “[Alice] suffers them to lue both together in one bedd having but one rome and did sitt upp in the rome all night having a candell lighted all night whilst the sayd Everrett had the use of the body of the sayd Barbary.”<sup>152</sup> Morise was taken to court and punished, although we can only wonder

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<sup>151</sup> Habib, *Black Lives in the Archives*, 107.

<sup>152</sup> Habib found this information in the Bridewell Court records: BCB Books, IV folio 61v, GL.

whether her orchestration of the event or her voyeurism impressed the judges more. Robert Everett and Barbary Moore were punished by the court as well.

Barbary's status as a prostitute seems vastly different from that of the Turnbull beer shop 'negress.' We can imagine that the anonymous woman in Clerkenwell possessed at least some agency, merely from the fact that she was 'enquired after.' That Morise personally supervised the sexual activity between Everett and Barbary Moore "all night," as the record states, suggests that Moore was forced into this act of prostitution.

This possibility casts an ominous light on all of the servant-master relationships we have seen, as well as the interracial liaisons ending with 'illegitimate' children. How many of these relationships were resultant of an employer's abuse of his power over a domestic servant? How many black women's bodies were exploited for the financial gain of people like Alice Morise?

## Chapter Four: Partial Deportation

Whereas the Queen's majesty, tendering the good and welfare of her own natural subjects, greatly distressed in these hard times of dearth, and is highly discontented to understand the great number of Negroes and blackmoors which (as she is informed) are carried into this realm since the troubles between her highness and the King of Spain; who are fostered and power here, to the great annoyance of her own liege of people that which covet the relief which these people consume.... hath given a special commandment that the said kind of people shall be with all speed avoided and discharged out of this her majesty's realm; to that end and purpose hath appointed Casper van Senden, merchant of Lubeck, for their speedy transportation, a man that hath somewhat deserved of this realm in respect that by his own labor and charge he hath relieved and brought from Spain divers of our English nation who otherwise would have perished there (January 1601).<sup>153</sup>

The edict above has been cited by most scholars of race in Elizabethan drama, and scholars of Elizabethan social history alike. Many presume that the edict sprang from a distaste for dark skin that Winthrop Jordan characterizes as a powerfully instinctive reaction of the English.<sup>154</sup> Michael Neill writes that the edicts have been categorically interpreted as the "visible signature of the imperial metropolis's nervous writing about its marginalized other."<sup>155</sup> While the rhetoric of the edict raises several questions about xenophobic anxieties toward African Elizabethan's; the documents have a very clear impetus that has been largely overlooked.

Thanks to the illuminating research of Miranda Kaufmann, we know that much of this impetus was economic gain. A 1596 open letter that drafted to the Mayor of London reads:

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<sup>153</sup> P.L. Hughes and J.F. Larkin ed., *Tudor Royal Proclamations III: 1588-1603* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969) 221.

<sup>154</sup> Winthrop Jordan has been severely criticized for his characterization of color prejudice as a natural or inevitable reaction. See Floyd-Wilson, "Moors, Race, and the Study of Renaissance Literature," 1045.

<sup>155</sup> Imtiaz Habib, *Shakespeare and Race: Postcolonial Praxis in the Early Modern Period* (Lanham MD and New York: Univ. Press of America, 2000), 92.

Casper van Senden a merchant of Lubeck did by his labor travel and procure 89 of her Majesty's subjects that were detained prisoners in Spaine and Portugall to be released, and brought them hither into this Realme at his own cost and charges, for which his expences and declaration of his honest minde towards those prisoners, he only desireth to have lycense to take up so many Blackamoors here in this Realme and to transport them into Spaine and Portugall.<sup>156</sup>

These words did not come from 'Queen Elizabeth' but from the Crown, an entity that included her advisors and the Privy Council. According the above 1596 letter, it was economic and convenient for the Crown to hire van Senden to free English prisoners and return them home, in exchange for black English subjects. By 1600, Senden recovered 200 English prisoners from Portugal, but incurred debt, after which he commissioned Robert Cecil to protect him from creditors for three months.<sup>157</sup> Van Senden also sought the protection of Thomas Sherley, who was one of the period's many projectors, described as "enterprising proto-capitalists who sought to turn new manufacturing, or agrarian, techniques to profit, and who sought alliance with the government to protect their investments, preferably through the newly structured device of the grant of monopoly rights."<sup>158</sup> As such Sherley had several other projects at work.

Casper van Senden is not the only merchant that the Crown hired to help retrieve English subjects from Spain by exchanging black bodies for white ones. Another open letter, also dated 1596, gave Edward Banes license to "take of those blackmoors that in this last voyage of Sir Thomas Baskerville [to Spain] were brought into this realm the number of ten, to be transported

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<sup>156</sup> Miranda Kaufmann, "Caspar Van Senden, Sir Thomas Sherley and the 'Blackamoor' project," (Oxford: Institute of Historical Research, 2007) 2.

<sup>157</sup> Kaufmann, "van Senden and 'Blackamoor' Project," 3.

<sup>158</sup> F. Heal and C. Holmes, 'The economic patronage of William Cecil', in *Patronage, Culture and Power: the Early Cecils 1558-1612*, ed. P. Croft (2002), pp. 199-229, at p. 199, as reproduced in Kaufmann, 2.

to him outside of the realm.”<sup>159</sup> The letter alludes to John Hawkins and Sir Francis Drake’s voyage to the raid Spanish ships in San Juan Puerto Rico. <sup>160</sup>

The mission failed and Hawkins died; not however, before Drake raided nearby town Rio de la Hacha, taking “many Negroes” prisoner. These Africans, effectively prisoners of war, comprise the ten ‘blackmores’ in the letter. Emily Bartels postulates that the Crown was eager to return these black prisoners, who may have been slaves in Spain originally, in the hopes of ensuring that English prisoners of Spain would be well-treated.<sup>161</sup>

Casper van Senden never did seem to receive full compensation for his services England. Firstly, we can see by the mere existence of the 1601 edict that five years after the 1596 proposal, he has not been repaid. The proclamation even alludes to his outstanding debt, writing solicitously that he is “somewhat deserved of this realm in respect that by his own labor and charge he hath relieved and brought from Spain divers of our English.”<sup>162</sup>

Evidently, these words did little to persuade English masters to release their servants or slaves. Their unwillingness seems to be the ultimate failure of what Kaufmann terms the “Blackamoor Project.”<sup>163</sup> Van Senden wrote a petition to the Queen, asking for complete freedom to “take up and carry away into Spain and Portugall any Blackamoors found within your majesty’s reign in England.”<sup>164</sup> Kaufmann has brought to our attention letters from Robert Cecil to Thomas Sherley, stating his own doubts about the van Senden’s request: “your honour thought

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<sup>159</sup> Acts of the Privy Council, XXVI, 1596-7, pp 16, 20, 21

<sup>160</sup> Emily Bartels, “Too Many Blackmoors: Deportation, Discrimination, and Elizabeth I,” 309.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Hughes, *Tudor Royal Proclamation*, 221.

<sup>163</sup> Kaufmann, “van Senden and the ‘Blackamoor Project’,” 4-5

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.



it not meet to have those kind taken from their masters compulsorily.”<sup>165</sup> She also helpfully alerts us to the fact that Cecil was himself included in the category of ‘master,’ as evidenced by the burial of his black servant Fortunatus at St Clement Danes, London in 1602.<sup>166</sup>

One of the most interesting aspects of the van Senden case is the language the Crown uses in the 1601 proclamation. As we have seen, the document clearly suggests that van Senden is owed some sort of debt. Considering that the English, particularly émigrés from Spain or Portugal, did enslave Africans - it seems that anyone could easily read the request for black bodies as a request for reimbursement of sorts. The commoditization of Africans, while it may have appeared more often in the ambiguous master-servant relationship than master-slave, was thoroughly ingrained in Elizabethan culture.

Yet, instead of writing plainly of this relatively straight forward exchange the proclamation is muddled by strawman assertions that Africans are unfit Christians, and using up England’s resources. A section of the first paragraph of the proclamation states that Africans use up resources “coveted” by the Queen’s “liege” people, and that being “infidels,” “most of them have no understanding of Christ and his gospels.”<sup>167</sup>

A Jordanesque reading would conflate these feelings of xenophobia and anti-Christian sentiment with the commoditization outlined above – arguing that Africans were expendable as objects because they were disliked. This kind of reading is too simple for our analysis, however, as it ignores several conceptual inconsistencies.

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> P.L. Hughes, *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, 221.

The records of various parishes show that high numbers of Africans were baptized, as do the burial records. Each burial record verifies the subject's Christianity either in the report of their Christian name, or their master or employer that often times served as a Christian sponsor. Although anonymous persons were buried as well, attempts were made to determine their status as Christians. Such is the case with the African laid to rest in White Chapel parish "without any company or ceremony, because we were not sure whether he was a Christian."<sup>168</sup> This man may have only been so lucky as to have received the benefit of the doubt because of his proximity to John Davies, who had several African servants and slaves.

As for the coveted resources being consumed by the black subjects, Emily Bartels astutely observes that the number of 'blackamoors' the Crown proposes to transport, ten in the case of Edward Banes, or even eighty nine if van Senden is to have an even exchange, would hardly have alleviated any sort of deficit in resources or job opportunities."<sup>169</sup>

More than anything, the double speak in the documents reveals England's own self-consciousness about its direct involvement with the African slave trade. The first words of the proclamation 'the Queen is discontented with the numbers of blackmoors are *carried* into this realm,' may be its most honest. The black people in question *are carried* into England – they have not emigrated of their own free will. We have seen in the cases of Dom Antonio and the African Princes, or Dr. Nunez and his slave who 'would not work,' that the English Court was hesitant, if not unwilling, to enforce slavery of Africans on its soil through legislation. This uncertainty was carried into the eighteenth century, when England would pride itself on the

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<sup>168</sup> Knutson, "A Caliban in St. Mildred's Poultry," 110-14, 116-23.

<sup>169</sup> Bartels, "Too Many Blackamoors," 313.

complete abolition of slavery in the country, while continuing the brutal chattel slavery practiced in the British West-Indies.

The inconsistent language of the edicts displays an unwillingness to speak plainly about the fact that many of the black subjects working as slaves or servants may have arrived in England through all manner of sordid exchanges. Apart from being kidnapped from their ancestral homes, they may have been kidnapped from their real masters in Spain and Portugal. The van Senden project sought to evade these muddy legalities by while alluding to the very real enslavement of black people in England, particularly by Iberian merchants, while evoking xenophobic notions to rationalize the edicts. The ambiguous social status of Elizabethan Africans, who we have seen marginalized and largely incorporated into society, suggests that this kind of double speak was understood by all.

## **Part Two: Literature from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries**

In an essay on race in English renaissance literature, Mary Floyd-Wilson concludes “historicizing race depends, of course, on solid archival research, but as astute readers of fiction

and culture, literary scholars have interpreted and dismantled inherited myths and imaginatively reconstructed foundations of earlier systems of knowledge and distinction.”<sup>170</sup> Floyd-Wilson’s statement highlights the difficulties in attempting to use both social history and literary studies to better understand the race in Tudor England. It has generally not been done.<sup>171</sup> She concludes that placing our conceptions of race in a proper historical context depends on archival studies, and then suggests that literary scholars, being ‘astute’ readers, have done well to interpret literary text without using archival research as a lens, and using their imagination instead.<sup>172</sup>

The use of the imagination, however, has determined that literary critics have mainly concerned themselves with the study of race while ignoring the presence of Africans. Race, however, is a concept, while Africans are a group of diverse people. The tendency in literary studies of Early Modern England has been to proceed without the presence of Africans in Tudor England being considered, because ‘race’ and ‘blackness’ have been conceived of as purely symbolic tropes.

The work of historians like Peter Fryer, Paul Edwards, Gustav Ungerer, and Imtiaz Habib has established proof of a very present, relatively sizeable African community in Elizabethan England. Unfortunately, their work has not significantly impacted recent literary criticism. On the rare occasion that blackness is interpreted as a physical description, and not a metaphorical trope, scholars of Elizabethan drama and poetry have insistently read it as descriptor of hair and

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<sup>170</sup> Mary Floyd-Wilson. “Moors, Race, and the Study of English Renaissance Literature. Blackwell Publishing 2006. *Literature Compass* 3/5 2006, 1049.

<sup>171</sup> Rosalyn Knutson, “A Caliban in St. Mildred Poultry”, 111.

<sup>172</sup> Rosalyn Knutson’s “A Caliban in St. Mildred Poultry” is exceptional in that she presents her research on African prince Dederj Jacquoah, with several interconnected histories of how he came to be there, and England’s commercial connection to his region of origin in West Africa. Ironically, Knutson’s the essay contains very little discussion of literature, which is Knutson’s usual focus.

eyes, adamantly avoiding reading it as a signifier of racial difference. The result has been to allow narrow, conceptually stifled interpretations of some works, while ignoring some works that are more explicit in their reference to black people completely. Representations of black women have been most profoundly affected by this schema of interpretation, for reasons we will explore in this chapter.

The following portion of the essay will examine some widely studied and lesser known Elizabethan texts featuring representations of African women. It will reexamine, or perhaps rediscover these texts; with a perspective informed and instructed by archival evidence of the African women who lived in English when the texts were conceived.

In Jonathan Crewe's study of anterior forms of Renaissance poetry, he challenges himself and his colleagues to stop "genteelly speaking of Shakespeare's Dark Lady of the Sonnets, and bring ourselves to call them the Black Woman sonnets."<sup>173</sup> His challenge is leveled against a tradition of criticism made distinctly uncomfortable by the acknowledging the presence of black people within classic Renaissance texts. The following section of my paper concerns itself not so much with the source of this evasion of black representation; but with the fact that it has produced readings that are no longer valid in the wake of the research of the past twenty five years.

### *The Image of the Black Woman in Shakespearean Drama*

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<sup>173</sup> Jonathan Crewe, *Trials of Authorship: Anterior Forms and Poetic Reconstruction from Wyatt to Shakespeare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) 120.

If we presume that literature and historical fact intersect or inform each other in any way, then the representations of black women in Early Modern English text are puzzling in their incongruity. Although there is ample evidence of black women existence in the archival record, the black female presence in literary texts has been quite marginalized. This elision occurs most frequently when the possibility of interracial intercourse or procreation arises; and is magnified by comparing the literary representations of black men and black women, which are vastly different.

The texts under consideration were written by English writers, directed toward an English audience. Therefore, with the exception of the *Masque of Blackness*' all-black cast, which features "daughters of Niger" searching for a magical sun to bleach them white, the texts feature interactions between Europeans and Africans.<sup>174</sup>

Much of this interracial interaction occurs in the form of sexual relationships, primarily between black men and when women. In "The Getting of A Lawful Race: racial discourse in early modern England and the unrepresentable black woman," Lynda Boose observes that while the figure of the black man is denigrated in a number of texts, the union of a black male and a white female and is celebrated as highly erotic and romantic. Boose counts *Othello* as one such text, for despite its tragic ending, Othello is the definitive romantic lead of the piece. She refers also to the *Merchant of Venice*, in which Prince of Morocco vies for Portia's hand in marriage among suitors from various foreign European countries. In Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania* the

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<sup>174</sup> Kim Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 131. This 'all-black cast' was portrayed Queen Anne and her ladies in waiting in blackface.

romance between white Pamphiliha and the black king of Tartaria's is central.<sup>175</sup> Boose rigorously explores what she calls the "conspicuous absence of any comparable literary tradition for a black woman- white man narration."<sup>176</sup> Her reference to a 'comparable' literary tradition does not extensively consider love poetry featuring African women into account. Some of the representations in seventeenth century poetry fall into nto the same confusing patterns that Boose deconstructs. However, some, as will be discussed in the last section of this chapter, sidestep them completely.

The figure of the African woman faces erasure from early modern English literature both internally and externally. The internal erasure comes from the Elizabethan writers who either posit women who would otherwise be read as black as racially ambiguous, or avoid depicting black female-white male unions at all costs. The second, external erasure occurs when modern readers avoid reading black women in texts, even when it requires ignoring blatant textual clues, or ignore texts that speak somewhat favorably of black women. The latter vein of poetry is oft interpreted as an aberration of a sort - so jarringly out of place as to be negligible. As we will see, the frequency of its occurrence suggests that it is far from negligible.

To support her observation about the evasion of black woman-white man unions, Lynda Boose points again to *Othello* and the *Merchant of Venice*, but also *Titus Andronicus* to demonstrate all three black or Moorish characters are fully disclosed as such. She then compares these depictions to Cleopatra, whose race is ambiguously constructed. What the text does tell us

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<sup>175</sup> Lynda E. Boose "The Getting of A Lawful Race: racial discourse in early modern England and the unrepresentable black woman," in *Reading Early Modern Women an Anthology of Text In Manuscript and Print*, ed. Helen Ostovich, Elizabeth Sauer and Melissa Smith (London: Routledge, 2004), 42.

<sup>176</sup> Anthony Martin "The Voice of An African Woman: George Herbert's Aethiopissa" in *Other Voices other Views*, ed. Helen Ostovich, Mary V. Silcox, and Graham Roebuck (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999) 253.

is that her skin is perceived to be different than that of the Romans, because at the start of the play Philo, a Roman at the Egyptian court invites fellow Roman Demetrius to observe the object of their general's affection: "now turn/the office and devotion of their view/upon a *tawny* front" (I.i.4-6).<sup>177</sup> Boose compares this description of Cleopatra's skin to the repeated allusions to Othello's blackness, and the resultant cultural or even genetic differences highlighted when Othello speaks of himself "haply for I am black/ and have not those sweet parts of conversation/that chamberers have (III.iii.279-280);" or when others speak of him: "even now, very now, an old black ram/is tuppung your white ewe (I.i.90-91)".

A comparison between the *Merchant of Venice*'s Prince of Morocco and Cleopatra is even more fruitful. Othello and Aaron the Moor both come from unidentified locales in Africa. Both the Prince of Morocco, and Cleopatra however, come from North Africa - the Prince obviously from Morocco, and Cleopatra from Egypt. The stage directions before his first entrance say: "Enter Morocco, a tawny moor" (II.ii.). Again, the term tawny is used too inconsistently to determine whether it implies a racial difference from 'black moor' in the English perception, but its use here forces us to ask - if Othello is a just a moor, Aaron the Moor is both tawny and black at once, and the Prince of Morocco is a tawny moor, then what kind of moor is Cleopatra?<sup>178</sup> In the context of Shakespeare's plays, the word 'moor' can be at least

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<sup>177</sup> Joyce Green Macdonald, *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 45. All further citations of Shakespeare's plays come from *The Unabridged William Shakespeare*, ed. William George Clark and William Aldis Wright (Philadelphia: Running Press, 1989).

<sup>178</sup> See *Decades of the New World or West India 1577*. In William Powell's account he describes the Nile Valley region called Senega by the Portuguese: "On one side of the river, the people are of a high nature and black, on the other side of the river they are of browne and tawny color and are of lowe nature (f. 356) The writer specifies tawny and brown are adjectives for various complexions within the realm of blackness, with his use of the word 'color'. The people on one side of the river are black *and* have black (very dark) skin, the people on the other side have are black but have lighter skin.



consistently read as indicative of African heritage. Yet it does not appear once in the entire text of *Antony and Cleopatra*.

The word tawny without the word ‘moor’ to follow may have signified a racial categorization other than black or African. In George Best’s *Discourse*, he distinguishes between Africans and Native Americans “the Ethiopians are so cole blacke , and their hair like wooll curled short, in the East Indies and the Ilands Moluccae the people are not blacke, but tauney and white, with longe haire uncurled as wee have.”<sup>179</sup> So what are we to make of the fact that Cleopatra’s racial categorization, which by Boose’s count is alluded to only twice in the entire play, is not Moorish, or black, but tawny?

Cleopatra’s African-ness, despite her status as Queen of Egypt, remains strangely cloaked within the language of the play. Boose feels that the strongest reference to her ambiguous but definitively ‘other’ racial category arises when Antony laments leaving his fiancé Octavia without consummating their new marriage, only to return to a seemingly disloyal Cleopatra - “Have I left my pillow unprest in Rome/forgone the getting of a *lawful race*/and by a gem of a woman to be abus’d/by one that looks of feeders? (III.iii.127-129).” Lawful in this sense means quite literally, children conceived under the sanctity of marriage – not bastards. Boose however, points us to another reading of the term, in which *lawful race* refers to children produced without the stain of miscegenation.<sup>180</sup> Plutarch, Shakespeare’s source for the play, wrote that Cleopatra bore Antony several sons, and yet none of them are portrayed on stage.

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<sup>179</sup> Boose, “Getting of a Lawful Race,” 43.

<sup>180</sup> Ania Loomba also believes this to have two specific interpretations; see her book *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 23.

There may be archival evidence that one other famous African Queen, vaguely suggested to be black, was interpreted as such by contemporary English people.<sup>181</sup> A 1688 baptismal record from Holy Trinity Minories in London reads “baptism of Elizabeth Dido, a *more* formerly called Dido.”<sup>182</sup> The name Dido is most likely a literary allusion to the protagonist of the Christopher Marlow play *Dido Queen of Carthage*. It recounts the classic tale of Dido and Aeneas. Greek and Roman lore upholds that Queen Dido founded Carthage in what is modern day Tunisia. There is at least one other black Dido in the historical record, who is more famous than the woman baptized at Holy Trinity.<sup>183</sup> The black daughter of Sir John Lindsay Captain of the Royal Navy, was christened Dido Elizabeth Belle in 1761. She was raised in Kentwood, Hampstead, where she resided with great-uncle William Murray.<sup>184</sup>

Like Cleopatra’s mixed race children, Shakespeare’s only explicitly black female character, the mysterious pregnant woman in *The Merchant of Venice*, never appears on stage. In the fifth act of the play, Launcelot Gobbo mocks Jessica’s religious conversion, telling her that if Lorenzo proceeds to convert Jews to Christianity, he will raise the price of pork (III.v.17-20). Lorenzo comes to Jessica’s defense by countering Gobbo with an accusation far more reprehensible than converting a Jew: “I shall answer that [Jessica’s conversion] better to the commonwealth, than you can the getting up of a Negro’s belly. The Moor is with child by you Launcelot” (III.v.31-33).

Lorenzo says that Launcelot will have difficulty explaining his actions to the commonwealth, or the Christian community. Is this because of sexual intercourse out of

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<sup>181</sup> Boose, “Getting of a Lawful Race,” 47.

<sup>182</sup> GL Ms 9328. The italics are my own, to highlight yet another spelling variation of moor.

<sup>183</sup> Fryer, *Staying Power*, 24.

<sup>184</sup> Gretchen Gerzina, *Black England Life Before Emancipation*, (London: John Murray, 1995), 88.

wedlock? Is it because of his intercourse with a black woman? Or does Lorenzo juxtapose the ‘Negro’ woman’s supposed Islamic background to Jessica’s Jewish faith, and find his own involvement with Jessica to be the more innocent transgression?

Kim Hall and Judith A. Lopez both find this moment significant in its omission of the black woman’s physical presence.<sup>185</sup> Indeed, her spectral presence offstage has still rankled some critics and editors so thoroughly that they have focused instead on Gobbo’s wordplay - “It is much that the *Moor* should be *more* than reason (II.v.34).” They postulate that Gobbo’s use of the word ‘more’ which is a reference to her large, visible pregnancy, means that the woman herself is nothing *more* than an opportunity to play on words.<sup>186</sup>

Boose presents the theory of parthenogenesis to explain why the figure of the black woman is elided so frequently. According to Boose, black male-white female unions are acceptable because they satisfy the notions of white patriarchy, assuaging deep fears of gender dominance. The progeny are black, and so mirror the father’s image, and not the mother. Samuel Purchas attributes dark skin of the offspring to “blacknesse of the Parents sperme or seed”<sup>187</sup> Black women, however, disrupt the order of things

... a white woman who bears a son that replicates the father actually fills the deepest patriarchal fantasy of male parthenogenesis (which the Aristotelian model of conception helped support), in which women were imagined primary receptacles for male seed... As evident in much of the literature as well as the behavior of historical figures like

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<sup>185</sup> Kim Hall, “Reading What Isn’t There,” 29. See also Judith A. Lopez, “Black and White and Read All Over” in *Shakespeare Studies* 26, ed Leeds Barroll, (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998) ,56.

<sup>186</sup> Kim Hall “Reading What Isn’t There,” 29. She notes that the Arden edition says of this passage says: Perhaps it was only introduced as an opportunity to play on the words more/Moor.”Also see Burton Raffel ed. *Merchant of Venice* (New Haven: Yale University, 2006) for an example of such frightened editing.

<sup>187</sup> Samuel Purchas, *Purchas His Pilgrimage..* (London: 1613) VI: 14.545-6, as seen in Lynda Boose, “The Getting of Lawful Race.

Henry VII, the paternal fantasy of perfect self-replication was rudely disturbed by the production of daughters, whose arrival suggested the mother's outrageous substitution of herself.<sup>188</sup>

Thus, black women are unrepresentable because they destabilize the white male fantasy of parthenogenesis. If children of interracial unions appear to be black like their mothers, then the gender dominance of the patriarchy would be turned on its head. Boose points out that in the singular moment that Cleopatra self-identifies as black, telling Antony "Think on me/that am with Phoebus amorous pinches black," her blackness is reduced to a climatological explanation, rendering it non-transferable to offspring, and thereby harmless.<sup>189</sup>

I do not suggest that the modern reader is invested in the elision of black female representations of, although this may be true in some cases. Perhaps instead, the elision of the black woman is so complete that in reading we carry out this erasure a second time, by failing to cipher through the ambiguities and inconsistencies of language that we are given. Apart from the elision of black female-white male union, and ambiguous racial marking, these ambiguities and inconsistencies of language also manifest themselves in the symbolic treatment of blackness, which is quite gendered.

Furthermore, many representations of black man were quite derogatory. Associations with the color black and evil are ancient. At their inception, however, such metaphors were incidental, unrelated to black people.<sup>190</sup> Naming a brown-skinned people black is an exercise in

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<sup>188</sup> Boose, "The Getting of Lawful Race," 45.

<sup>189</sup> Boose, "The getting of a Lawful Race," 48.

<sup>190</sup> Naming a brown-skinned people 'black' is a symbolic rather than literal in itself.

metaphor also, so it is logical that these metaphors were not connected at birth. St. Clair Drake points to the use of white in the Koran, noting that it was actually a symbol of mourning and death. He points also to Biblical associations with whiteness and leprosy - indicating that the hierarchy of color and positive, or negative association typical of the European thought was not necessarily applicable to all cultures everywhere.<sup>191</sup>

There is ongoing debate about when negative associations with the color black and sin became transferrable to dark skinned peoples. Drake postulates that the popular English Renaissance proverb equivalent ‘to wash an Ethiop white is to labor in vain,’ took on religious connotations because of Old Testament, which states that a sinner can be washed clean by Christ’s blood even if “though your skin be scarlet.”<sup>192</sup> The phrase “to was an Ethiop white is to labor in vain” is conceptually identical to the adage ‘can a leopard change his spots?,’ which is also from the Bible.<sup>193</sup> Both of these sayings express that some things are identical or impossible – there is nothing inherently negative about the leopard or the Ethiop within. However, by the time human beings were used interchangeably with animals as metaphorical props, it is safe to presume that significant negative associations with blackness had already taken root.

By the Renaissance, negative connotations of blackness were a sturdy fixture in Anglican lexicon. Early Modern English thought relied heavily on the idea of a principal of natural order, which dictated that one’s outward appearance was reflection of one’s soul. In this system of interpretation, a dark complexion would be indicative, symbolically, of an evil temperament.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> For whiteness and leprosy, see St. Clair Drake, *Black Peoples Here and There Vol. II* (Los Angeles: University of California Center for Afro-American Studies, 1990), 307 n. 5.

<sup>192</sup> Drake, *Black Folk Here and There*, 53. Also see Anu Korhonen, “Washing the Ethiopian White,” 94-113.

<sup>193</sup> Anu Korhonen, “Washing the Ethiopian White,” 96

<sup>194</sup> Anu Korhonen, “Washing the Ethiopian White,” 96.

Anu Korhonen writes that “individual bodies characterized by black skin were interpreted by this schema.”<sup>195</sup> While it seems doubtful that the English believed they were enslaving, employing, demons to run their households, or better still, procreating with agents of the devil; such symbolic associations fueled a host of literary tropes about devilish Blackmoors. In Thomas Dekker’s *Lust’s Dominion*, Eleazar the Moor is called a devil upwards of twenty times, variations on the term including ‘black devil,’ and ‘Black Prince of Devils.’<sup>196</sup>

If possessing dark skin was an indication of inner corruption, then we would expect texts to feature both black men and women shedding their dark skin in symbolic searches for religious purity and piety. Herein lies the representational incongruity. As Kim Hall observes, “the proverbial whitewashed Ethiop and the emblems depicting him usually refer to males, the figurative representation of this trope in poetry and drama is almost always gendered female.”<sup>197</sup> Unlike the daughters of Niger searching for the magical bleaching sun, ‘washing’ the black man white almost never occurs in Early Modern English drama. Whitening is a priority ascribed exclusively to the black female.<sup>198</sup>

### *The Black Woman in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century Poetry*

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Gail Daileader, *Racism, Misogyny, and the ‘Othello’ Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 27.

<sup>197</sup> Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 66-67.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

Jonathan Crewe writes in *Trials of Authorship* that calling Shakespeare's sonnets 127-135 'The Black Woman Sonnets' instead of the 'Dark Lady Sonnets' would force us to work through our own discomfort and avoidance of black femininity in these texts, but also allow them to be counted among representations of African women in Renaissance writing.<sup>199</sup> He cautions, however, that the representation would be "fraught with possibilities of misconstruction, as well as of offense to and appropriation of black women."<sup>200</sup> Crewe needn't worry, for although the possibilities for interpretative meaning are indeed numerous, a close reading of the cycle yields that it is perhaps one of the least harmfully denigrating representations of black women among the texts in question. They also represent one of the few black-female white-male unions consummated in full view, rather than offstage.

These 'Black Woman,' or 'Dark Lady' sonnets served as a model for a canon of seventeenth century poems that offer explicit renderings of black women. No effort is made to lighten the subjects or cloak them in linguistic racial ambiguity. According to Marvin Hunt, to do so would have been to eliminate her racial difference, which was celebrated in these texts as a source of desire.<sup>201</sup>

Sonnet 127 is the first to address the mysterious dark woman. It begins by inverting the Elizabethan conceit of constructing whiteness as emblematic of beauty, in opposition to blackness "In the old age black was not counted fair, or if it were, it bore not beauty's name." Herein lies obvious punning of the words black and fair. 'Black was not counted fair' constructs

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<sup>199</sup> See Crewe, *Trials of Authorship*, 183. Note that these are the sonnets that contain apostrophe, several later sonnets are likely alluding to her.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Marvin Hunt, "Be Dark but Not Too Dark: Shakespeare's Dark Lady as a Sign of Color," ed. James Schiffer, *Shakespeare's Sonnets Critical Essays* (New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 1999) 369-389.

dark and light as opposites - black is literally not fair. The other meaning of 'black was not counted fair' is that blackness was not viewed as beautiful. It is this second meaning of this double entendre on which some critiques exclusively rely in their interpretation of this sonnet and others. In this way they justify reading 'black' as a general term for anyone who is not beautiful, be they brown eyed and blond-haired, or fair-haired with dark skin. Any racial connotation outside the realm of the European is removed.

Sonnet 127 continues, "But now black is beauty's successive heir, and beauty slandered with a bastard shame." These third and fourth lines signal that now black is not only privately 'counted fair,' but even bears the title of beautiful, forcing the old beauty back into the depths where blackness once resided.

In the Arden edition of *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, the footnotes for line three of the poem, "But now is black beauty's successive heir" define 'black' as blackness of complexion.<sup>202</sup> The annotation for line nine, "therefore my mistress' eyes are raven black" states: "in order to be in tune with the times, the speaker has selected a black-eyed mistress."<sup>203</sup> If the annotation for line nine is made under consideration of the notes that have preceded it, which state that 'black' refers to blackness of complexion, then the speaker has chosen a mistress who has not only black eyes but black skin. It is unclear whether or not the Arden means to leave us with this impression, but the shift from black complexion to black eyes in the notation is confusing. In order for it to make sense, one would have to have forgotten or ignored the lines and annotations from the earlier part of the poem.

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<sup>202</sup> Katherine Duncan Jones ed., *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (London: Arden, 1997) 127. All further references to Shakespeare's sonnets come from this edition.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.



If Sonnet 127 is ambiguous in its description of a black woman, then Sonnet 130 is even clearer in comparison. Shakespeare writes of the woman's hair - "black wires grow on her head." Her breasts, he says, are "dun," which means brown. Critics now attribute the word dun a grayish or dull connotation. The Arden notes for example, define dun as a "dull gray-brown."<sup>204</sup> However, the word did not acquire this connotation of dinginess until at least one hundred years after Sonnet 130 was written.

In Chaucer's 1215 translation of *Roman de la Rose*, he wrote in praise of the heroine's pale complexion "she was not broune ne dunne of hue."<sup>205</sup> To interpret 'dun' as not even a brown that is dull, but a gray that is brownish, is to rob the adjective of its human qualities, eliminating the possibility that any number of brown skinned women around London may have captured the focus of Shakespeare's imagination.

Finally, lest we think that the lady's skin is an odd, artificial shade of slate that does not occur in the human form, Shakespeare leaves us with lines five and six: "I have seen roses damasked red and white, but no such roses see I in her cheeks." This line shakes us free of reading 'dun' as general non-whiteness, indicating that not only is this mistress brown, she possess enough melanin that when she blushes, the speaker cannot see the blood rush to her face, as happens with skin pale enough to be translucent.

As alluded to before, many critiques and editors, the ambiguous editing of the Arden not excluded, use the fact that Shakespeare contrasts her qualities with those of a pale skinned person, 'if snow be white, why then her breasts be dun,' to place the entire poem in the realm of

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<sup>204</sup>Katherine Duncan Jones, *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, 132.

<sup>205</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, "dun." < <http://www.oed.com> >

hyperbole; because skin is not literally white, then he is not speaking of someone who is literally brown.

This is a painfully narrow interpretation for two reasons. First, black and white - although hyperbolic in the sense that no one's skin manifests as the complete absence of light or the combination of all light in the visible spectrum - were the prevalent terms for describing the racial categories in England during the writing of this piece. Secondly, Shakespeare does not compare her black color to the snow, but her breasts of dun. Being that black people do not have *actually* have black skin, but complexions of various shades of brown, this seems to be, rather than grand hyperbole, a choice to present a realistic description of a human, and contrast it with a measurement of beauty that is inapplicable to her, and perhaps unrealistic in an even broader sense.

Anthony Martin agrees that this description is realistic, writing of Sonnet 130 "her color is significant, not in a figurative sense, but as the representation of an insistently and inescapably physical being... it is within this vein of realism ... with its consequent debasement of the mistress rather than the more courtly mode of, say, "If shadows be a picture's excellence [Poole]."<sup>206</sup> This is where Martin's analysis and the one offered here reach a definitive split.

Martin asserts that Shakespeare's focus on the realities of mistress 130's physical attributes, rather than use of 'euphemistic' similes and metaphors for blackness means that Shakespeare is debasing her before the audience of readers. This is only true if we take for granted that blackness of complexion, hair, and eyes are universally ugly attributes that ought to be concealed. The style to which Martin alludes reveals a narrative self-consciousness - through

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<sup>206</sup> Martin, "The voice of an African Woman," 260.

euphemistic speech the speaker explains how he can possibly find a black mistress attractive. In avoiding this style Shakespeare does not debase, the woman in the sonnets; he merely uses realism to describe her.

The quality Shakespeare does debase, however is fairness. In his time, English women attempted to meet the coveted standard of paleness by applying white cosmetic powders to their faces, including a toxic mixture called ceruse, which contained lead.<sup>207</sup> Sonnet 127 comments on this artificial manufacturing of beauty:

“But now is black *beauty*’s successive heir  
and *beauty* slandered with a bastard shame:  
For since each hand hath put on nature’s power,  
Fairing the foul with art’s false borrowed face,  
*Beauty* has no name, no holy bower’  
But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace.”<sup>208</sup>

‘Beauty,’ which in the context is fairness of complexion, has degraded whatever intrinsic value it had by putting on “nature’s power” - which is the power to create us as fair or dark beings, and attempted to make itself fairer.” The lines suggest further that beauty is a natural condition conferred at birth, because beauty slanders herself with a ‘bastard shame.’ ‘Black beauty’ is the new heir, and ‘beauty,’ or fairness, is misplaced from the throne, like a king’s illegitimate son.

“Fairing the foul” also alludes to an inversion of the natural. strange if left unexplored. The hands that do the fairing are artificial appendages that are ‘put on.’ Thus their grasp of

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<sup>207</sup> Liza Picard, *Elizabethan London*, (London: Phoenix Publishing, 2003), 163.

<sup>208</sup> The italics are my own.

nature's power is bizarre and unnatural. But if fairness was the old standard of beauty, then why does the line read "fairing the foul," instead of 'making the already fair fairer'?" Apparently, *beauty* is corrupted and foul before the poem's start.

Line one of the sonnet states "In the old age black was not *counted* fair," rather than 'black was *not* fair.' Therefore, the poem's praise of blackness represents a change in perception, rather than a shift in immutable ideals of beauty. In this sense, the speaker rejects the legitimacy of fairness as a standard of beauty, the same tactic later employed by Eldred Revett in his ode "One Enamoured on a Black-moor."<sup>209</sup>

Cosmetically induced, unnatural fairness is also a subject of John Collop's "On an Ethiopian Beauty M.S." Within, Collop mocks those women who would paint black spots - beauty marks - upon their cheeks, in order to make their skin appear whiter by contrast: "Black specks for beauty spots white faces need/How fair are you whose face is black indeed?"<sup>210</sup> Abraham Wright also alludes to the practice in "To A Black Gentlewoman A.H." - "Their very beauties are foild of with specks/Of the dark colour. Whilst thus to her mate/ Each seems more faire. Now they but personate what you are really."<sup>211</sup> These lines cleverly invert the beauty hierarchy of white over black. Beauty marks were of course not beautiful in themselves, but used instead for their ability to accentuate paleness. These writers pointedly overlook this fact, and uphold the beauty marks as attractive merely due to their show of color.

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<sup>209</sup> Eldred Revett, "One Enamoured on a Black-moor," in *Anthology of Interracial Literature*, 103.

<sup>210</sup> Collop, "On an Ethiopian Beauty M.S.," From *Things of Darkness* Appendix, 279.

<sup>211</sup> Abraham Wright, "To A Black Gentlewoman, Mistress A.H." from Abraham Wright, *Parnassus Biceps; or Severall Choice Pieces of Poetry* (London, 1656), *Things of Darkness*, Appendix, 280.

Ben Jonson also makes comment, although less racialized, on the beauty practices that often involved artifice of a kind:

“Which lady sleeps with her own face a’ nights?  
Which puts her teeth off, with her clothes, in court?  
Or which her hair, or which her complexion?  
And in which box she puts it?”<sup>212</sup>

In light of this documented questioning of the cosmetic traffic in fairness, perhaps Shakespeare’s focus on a black mistress, and the choice describe her physicality in truthful detail rather than compare her blackness to the night sky or the earth (as other seventeenth century sonneteers were wont to do), is also a celebration of what is natural over what has been unnaturally altered. Wright idealizes ‘naturally’ attained beauty over that which requires augmentation in “To A Black Gentlewoman,” stating “they but personate what you are *really*.”<sup>213</sup> This does not suggest that black women from the period did not have their own cosmetic practices, although we have no documentation of what they were. We can infer however, that these practices did not largely incorporate painting the face white or applying beauty marks.<sup>214</sup>

Shakespeare cements his rejection of the fair for the dark in the couplet of Sonnet 130, declaring “and yet by heaven I think my love as rare, as any she belied with false compare.” Again we find the emphasis on his own perception of beauty, rather than acknowledging a fixed

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<sup>212</sup> Ben Jonson, *Sejanus* (I.ii.); reproduced in Liza Picard, *Elizabethan London*.

<sup>213</sup> The italics are my own.

<sup>214</sup> Black women may have tried to lighten their skin to obtain the European standard of beauty, as many women still do - we do not know. I merely suggest that ceruse would not have been a viable method, as it was a thick white paint, not a bleaching agent that chemically altered the complexion.,

standard, in the phrase “and yet by heaven *I think* my love is rare,” which he has selected over a phrase like ‘my love *is* rare.’

The editor of the Arden compares the couplet to Touchstone’s “wooing of the honestly ugly Audrey” in *As You Like It*.<sup>215</sup> Again, this interpretation requires accepting first that blackness is universally ugly, and second that all praise of a black physicality is actually ironic. The interpretation also requires ignoring the speaker’s repeated assertion of his personal preference for darkness. The speaker does not say ‘my mistress is black and therefore ugly, but I honestly love her anyway.’ Instead, the speaker offers a realistic description of her black physicality, stating that although her voice, grace of movement, and scent are more like that of a regular woman than a goddess, he finds her exquisite. In this manner, the expression of love is rather feminist. It rejects the presumption that a woman should be loved only as much as she represents the paragon of pious, quiet, light-footed, rose-scented, chaste perfection.

To return to the annotation of the Arden, Touchstone is a poor choice for an of comparison, when one considers the existence of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. What of Berowne, whose love Rosaline is actually referred to in the text not as ‘ugly’ - although many in the text do perceive her to be - but black? Black skin is constructed as undesirable through the language for many in the play.

Dumaine writes in a sonnet to Katherine that her beauty is so great, it would make Jove “swear Juno but and Ethiop were” (IV.iii.118). In other words, Jove would denounce his wife Juno’s beauty upon seeing Katherine. Dumaine reads his sonnet to Berowne, who, ironically, spends a good portion of the play extolling his black mistress’ virtues and defending her from

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<sup>215</sup> Duncan Jones, *Sonnets*, 130.

other character's barbs about her dark complexion.<sup>216</sup> As in sonnet 127, Berowne plays upon the use of the word 'fair' for beautiful when describing his dark mistress, as well as a interesting reversal of the magical sun that bleaches the Niger princesses in Jonson's *Masque of Blackness*: "My eyes are then no eyes, nor I Berowne: Oh but for my love, *day would turn into night* (IV.iii.233 )." The King mocks Berowne's praise of Rosaline, exclaiming with shock and disgust "By heaven, thy love is as black as ebony (IV.iii.248). To this, Berowne responds "Is ebony like her? Oh wood divine! A wife of such wood were felicity!...No face is fair that is not so full of black" (IV.iii.249-254).

Whether Rosaline is meant to be racially black instead of brunette or dark eyed, is unclear. Earlier in the text Berowne soliloquizes his own marvel at falling for the least attractive of the Princess of Frances's ladies in waiting: "And, among three, to love the worst of all; a whitely wanton with two pitch-balls stuck in her face for eyes"(III.i.207-209). Having pupils the color of tar may explain why Berowne refers to her face as "full of black," as is in containing black on it but not black itself. But is the King referring only to eyes when he says: "your love *is* as black as ebony"? Rosaline evidently represents another case of inconsistent linguistic coloring, like Cleopatra and Aaron the Moor.

In any case, Berowne who grapples with love for a mistress rejected as ugly by the majority, before finding his own appreciation of her unique beauty; is a more apt comparison to the speaker of the sonnets than Touchstone. There is no doubt that the speaker is conscious of inverting conventional beauty ideals in his praise of his mistress. However, this praise is more

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<sup>216</sup> Note that I call Rosaline a black for convenience, not because I am convinced she is meant to be ethnically African in origin. Like Cleopatra, Her racial categorization is ambiguously constructed.

than a purely intellectual exercise in anti-Petrarchism. The poems give us a realistic rendering of black woman with whom he has a complex, at times turbulent relationship.<sup>217</sup>

In a modern context, a figure with brown skin and black hair with “wiry,” kinky, curly, woolly or whichever contemporary appropriation one prefers, would be read as black almost without hesitation. Instead, scholars of Shakespeare have staked their entire careers on proving that Shakespeare’s ‘Dark Lady’ was a white European, selecting historical figures like Mary Fitton, the dark lady of Shaw’s play - only to have their theories overturned when portraits of pale-skinned would-be-mistresses surface.<sup>218</sup>

To focus solely on the racialized description of the woman is to say nothing of the use of the term ‘black beauty’ as it appears in the text. It is not used to modify any of the woman’s parts, such as eyes or hair. Based on the archival record, the use of the term ‘black,’ or ‘blackmoor’ to describe someone of African descent is contemporaneous with the conception of these sonnets, which were published in quarto in 1609.<sup>219</sup>

There is little reason to believe that a brown haired white person would have been called a ‘black beauty.’ The term black was reserved for Africans and sometimes Asians and Indians, although a geographic modifier would follow in the latter case, such as in the marriage of John

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<sup>217</sup> See sonnets 131 to 134 for evidence of the speaker’s feelings that the black mistress has betrayed him.

<sup>218</sup> Marvin Hunt, 371. Tells the anecdote of a man laid off from editing the Riverside Shakespeare after his claims that Emilia Lanier was the Dark Lady were proved false. Apparently, he mistook the descriptor ‘very brave in youth’ for ‘very brown in youth.’ Not to speak of the fact that he failed to make any connection between Shakespeare and the young woman, apart from their English citizenship.

<sup>219</sup> Katherine Duncan Clarke, “Publishing History,” *Shakespeare’s Sonnets*, 29.



Mayo and Isabell Bell, at Littleham in Exmouth, who are described in the register as “Two Asiatic Blacks.”<sup>220</sup> European ‘strangers’ would be indentified by their country of origin.

In my perusal of London parish records, I have yet to see a burial or baptismal note reading: ‘John Smith, brunette.’ English people’s hair color, whether dark or fair, was not recorded. There is no evidence of racially polarizing language being used to divide brown or black haired English people from blonde. The fact the English prized blonde hair and fair skin as the pinnacle of beauty, and even saw women with these attributes as more valuable, desired partners because of these qualities, does not suggest that an entire canon of poetry was be founded upon exploiting the quasi-racial difference in the hair and eye color of English people.

On the contrary, the quality of fairness, while specially prized for the English national identity, was extended to all Europeans. In *Discourse*, Samuel Purchas prays for a day when the differences between all races – “the black moor, the tawny moor, the ashen libyan and the fair European” would be washed away by the lord.<sup>221</sup> The term ‘fair European’ includes all white peoples, even those Italians, Spanish, and Portuguese with typically darker hair and skin. He does not differentiate these peoples from the typically lighter skinned English or Scandinavian people. There is no separate category amongst white people. Furthermore, judging from the already existent categories for ‘black moors,’ ‘tawny moors,’ and ‘ashen Libyans,’ Purchas would not call this separate category of Europeans black.

For those as yet unconvinced that the syntax of these plays and poems, as well as sentiments in other tracts from the period allow us to presume the woman in the sonnet’s racial

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<sup>220</sup> FD, Littleham Exmouth, No date given.

<sup>221</sup> Samuel Purchas, *Purchas his Pilgrimage* (1613), taken from Lynda Boose “The Getting of A Lawful Race,” 43.

identity there remains still a canon of seventeenth century sonnets and lyric poems even more explicit than Shakespeare's in their allusion to, or apostrophe of black women.

George Herbert's "Aethiopissa/ A Negro Courts Cestus a man of a different color" is among them. It is the most familiar and accessible of poems of this genre. In light of the extreme reticence to conceive of the woman in the sonnets as black, one wonders whether "Aethiopissa" has been circulated more widely because the woman depicted is not the benefactor of any love or adulation from a white man. Instead, she is the victim of unrequited love, begging for her white paramour to give her the time of day. Their interracial union is never consummated, and the washing white trope is embedded in the text. 'Aethiopissa' enacts the verbal equivalent of a metaphysical bleaching, begging that the color of her skin should be overlooked or ignored "What if my face be black?...If earth be black who shall despise the ground?... Lo, Greif's prophetic hue my cheek imbues!"<sup>222</sup>

John Collop, the most prolific in the set of sonneteers under discussion, praises a black woman with words unconcerned by her beauty's departure from 'convention' in "On an Ethiopian Beauty."<sup>223</sup> Collop begins the poem like Shakespeare's sonnet 127 by comparing blackness and fairness. Yet unlike Shakespeare, he does not acknowledge a beauty hierarchy that until recently placed fairness at the top. In Collop's piece, black is not the new 'heir' of beauty, it exceeds it completely. Black is not the new fair – Collop questions whether fairness is special at all: "Black specks for beauty spots white faces need,/ How fair are you whose face is black

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<sup>222</sup>George Herbert "Aethiopissa ambit Cestum diversi coloris Virum" in *An Anthology of Interracial Literature Black-White Contacts in the Old World and the New*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

<sup>223</sup> See also Heather Dubrow, *Echoes of Desire: Elizabethan Petrarchism and its counterdiscourses*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995) 166.

indeed?”<sup>224</sup> He also boldly overturns the overwhelming religious association of blackness with death, sin, and evil, by instead establishing its divinity: “When worth is dead, all do put their blacks on/ As if they would revive the worth that’s gone./ Surely in black Divinity doth dwell/By the black garb onely we Divines can tell./ Devils ne’re take this shape, but shapes of light/ Devils which hurt mankind appear in white.”<sup>225</sup>

Abraham Wright also uses religious themes in “To A Black Gentlewoman: Mistress A.H.”<sup>226</sup> The piece seems to have been dedicated to an actual person, because he writes the mistress’s initials, rather than choosing a literary allusion as his mistress’ name, like Dido. If it was indeed directed toward a specific woman, she may have appreciated Wright’s discretion, for the poem begins with religious rhetoric like Collop’s, and then becomes highly eroticized. The first line reads “Grieve not (faire maid) cause you are black; so’s she/That’s spouse to him that died upon the tree.”<sup>227</sup>

This is a reference to the Song of Solomon of the Old Testament, a passage about erotic love that has been allegorized by those uncomfortable with its presence in the Bible as a story about the human soul’s connection to Christ. The female speaker in the text famously asks who invites the gaze of her lover saying ‘I am black but comely,’ or ‘I am black and comely.’<sup>228</sup> All of the major Renaissance translations use the former meaning, in which blackness and comeliness are contradictions. Ancient Hebrew translations tend to use the latter, in which comeliness is a

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<sup>224</sup> Collop, “On an Ethiopian Beauty.”

<sup>225</sup> Collop, “On an Ethiopian Beauty.”

<sup>226</sup> Abraham Wright “To A Black Gentlewoman: Mistress A.H.,” printed in the Appendix of Hall, *Things of Darkness*

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Anthony Martin, “The ‘Voice’ of an African Woman, 265.” Sujata Iyengar, *Shades of Difference: Mythologies of Skin Color in Early Modern England*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2005) 44-55.

condition of blackness. In any case, under the allegorical representation of the text, the black bride becomes the bride of Christ, hence Wright's allusion to the text. It is unlikely that Wright would have known of older translations in which the bride's blackness was a mark of beauty, so his use of the text is in restorative in a sense.

As his poem progresses, the lines become increasingly frank in their sexual nature "Your two black spears are like two Globes beset/ With Ebony, or ring'd about with Jet."<sup>229</sup> Here ebony clearly describes skin, complicating our the description of Rosaline as 'black as ebony.' Revett, in an unsubtle reference to sexual intercourse, also describes his mistress as ebony: "The treasures lock't up we would get/Within the *Ebon Cabinet*;/ and he that *Ravishes must pick*/Open the quaint *Italian Trick*."<sup>230</sup>

Abraham Wright's "On a Black Gentlewoman" is particularly distinctive because of the mixture of religious symbolism and even a later reference to Black Magic, with a frank description of his mistress' breasts. Although he uses simile in comparing them to wood, this is for the sake of a color comparison – nothing particularly transcendent or fantastic. Perhaps Wright learned this mixture of realism and metaphor from Shakespeare's work.

Rather than examine every sonnet in this dark lady canon, offered above are excerpts of poems with styles, or tropes reminiscent of those demonstrated in Shakespeare's sonnets. The tradition is evidenced in the work of George Herbert's brother Sir Edward Herbert of Cherbury,

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<sup>229</sup> Abraham Wright, "On A Black Gentlewoman."

<sup>230</sup> Revett, One Enamour'd on a Black- moor," *Anthology of Interracial Literature* 103. The italics are present in the original. The 'Italian' lock to the mistress 'ebony cabinet' is one of many references to the black figure's possible colonial past with the poem. Revett writes that he finds "in the lines of either breast...the rich countries of the East," and describes her bosom further as a "spicy Nest," a possible reference to the Active spice trade with Africa, India, and the West Indies.

Walton Poole, Richard Lovelace, Richard Crashaw, as well as more well known writers such like Gascoigne, Drayton, Carew, Herrick, and Suckling.<sup>231</sup>

While not all of these poems praised the black woman's beauty unequivocally - such as the more denigrating pieces "Aethiopissa" or Rainolds' "A Black-Maid Wooing A Fair Boy," – many did. What then do we make of the existence of a small body of literature celebrating interracial sexual contact between African women and white men? It contrasts starkly with their treatment in Tudor drama, and certainly does not support Lynda Boose's parthenogenesis explanation for the elision of black women from dramas.

There may be some connections not readily apparent to the casual reader which help contextualize the creation of the dark lady sub-genre in English literature. Many of the men contributing to the genre - Revett, Cleveland, Herbert, Collop and Gascoigne to name a few, were educated at Cambridge. Some of them were even in the same class. George Herbert's first poem was published in a collection by a colleague who matriculated from his own college at Cambridge, Trinity.<sup>232</sup> Does this mean that these men published these works only to be circulated amongst their colleagues and peers? No, but it does indicate that they received relatively the same academic training, and were intellectually engaged with each other, and likely many of the same texts.<sup>233</sup>

George Herbert's "Aethiopissa" was originally composed in Latin, a language familiar to all of these writers, as recipients of a classical education. In addition to Latin, these poets' Cambridge education would have likely familiarized them with modern romance languages such

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<sup>231</sup> Dubrow, *Echoes of Desire*, 166.

<sup>232</sup> Martin, "Voice of African Woman, 260.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid*, 261.

as French, Spanish, and Italian. One wonders if they would be influenced by the similar sonneteering trends occurring in the Mediterranean countries and Iberian Peninsula.

Popular Italian poet Giambattista Marino published “Bella Schiava,” or ‘beautiful slave’, in 1614. Marino uses the familiar plays on day and night, adding in imagery of his complete ‘enslavement’ to his love for the slave “A slave to her, my slave, come I, heart twined about with tawny cords...nor white be hands that would this heart unbind...I find the light of day and on its fair face Night.”<sup>234</sup> Poet Luis Vaz de Camões catalyzed an Andalusian tradition of praising the *hermana morena* as beautiful, writing “her brown skin so apt for love would have aroused the envy even of the snow.”<sup>235</sup>

Finally, the tradition of love poetry itself may lend itself to a more intimate representation of black women than the literary form of drama and plays. The sonnet craze reached England relatively late, initiated within the isle by Sir Philip Sidney’s *Astrophil and Stella*, which was circulated in manuscript and printed collections beginning in the 1590s. Before the first Newman edition in 1591, the composition of the *Astrophil and Stella* poems, the pieces were circulated only amongst Sidney’s friends, relatives and clients.<sup>236</sup> Arthur Marotti theorizes that Sidney wrote for a “coterie” audience that was familiar with the poets “social, economic, and political circumstances.”<sup>237</sup> In a time when love poetry was used to “metaphorize rivalry with social, economic, and political competitors,” According to Marotti, Sidney composed ‘meta-poems,’ in

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<sup>234</sup> Giambattista Marino, “Bella Schiava,” in *Anthology of Interracial Literature*, 97.

<sup>235</sup> St. Clair Drake, *Black Folk Here and There*, 201.

<sup>236</sup> Arthur Marotti, “Love is Not Love:” Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences and Social Order, *ELH* 49 (1982), 396.

<sup>237</sup> Marotti, “Love is Not Love,” 399.

which the relationship between the author and the audience is more important than the relationship between the author and the object of love addressed in the poem.<sup>238</sup>

This concept of a ‘coterie audience’ and ‘meta-poems’ may help explain the proliferation of love poetry with black female subjects at a time when the figure of the black woman was absent or suppressed in drama. If Revett, Collop, and Herbert wrote not only for their colleagues, but a wider circle of friends, family, and patrons, as was the case, then they addressed a homogenous audience of the same social class and status, who would have had the same set of exposures.

The aristocratic background of the authors and their audiences meant that they would have had more intimate knowledge of Africans, from hiring them as house help, or through investing in African trading companies. Indeed, Kim Hall names both lyric poetry and travel as aristocratic interests – interests that were entwined in subtle ways. Firstly, England was different than other European countries in that the aristocracy was deeply involved in colonial ventures and expeditions, even while maintaining a very defined class split between the gentry and the merchant.<sup>239</sup> Kim Hall echoes Marotti’s thoughts on *Astrophil and Stella*, noting that beginning even with Petrarch himself, the “supposedly insulated language of the love lyric is shot through with references to foreign difference and economic wealth.”<sup>240</sup>

Fairly direct connections between sonneteers and colonial ventures are not hard to find. Thomas Wyatt, one of the first English sonneteers, was great-grandfather to Sir Francis Wyatt, who served twice as governor of Virginia. Francis Wyatt copied a translation of a Spanish poem

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 398.

<sup>239</sup> Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 65.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 65.

“La Bella Mora” into his commonplace book,<sup>241</sup> which has the caption “A Spaniard Taking A Moore Prisoner, falls in love with her. Out of Spanish.”<sup>242</sup>

George Herbert is connected to the Virginia Company, which, according to a letter sent from Sir John Rolfe to Sir Edwin Sandy, a friend of Herbert’s, imported twenty African slaves to the state of Virginia in 1620, the same year that Herbert wrote ‘Aethiopissa’. Herbert’s stepfather, and relative William Pembroke, a leading figure in the company, were involved as well.<sup>243</sup> Herbert, as mentioned in Chapter Two, was responsible for composing the rhyming thank-you note to Sir Francis Bacon “My Lord, a Diamond to mee you sent/ And I to you a blackmore present;” perhaps evidence of his own relationship to the economic use of black bodies.<sup>244</sup>

Thus while Africans worked in very visible locations like the Court, pubs, and haberdasheries, it seems that being of a certain class would allow one more intimate contact with Africans. The poorer classes of the English were unlikely to own slaves, or indulge in the status symbol of acquiring a young black servant. If love poetry was as much about addressing the changing social, political, and economic climate, then African women, commodified as objects of love, could become important symbols of colonial power. These Cambridge educated writers occupied a space that was negotiating its relationship with a growing black presence in their lives and homes, driving the need to explore that relationship through poetry. The audience that frequented Shakespeare’s plays was less wealthy and literate, and more disconnected from the

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<sup>241</sup> This is the term Hall uses to describe the book, which I take to mean private journal or diary.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid, 66-67.

<sup>243</sup> Martin, “Voice of an African Woman,” 254.

<sup>244</sup> George Herbert, “To the Right Honorable Lord Chancellor,” Kim Hall *Things of Darkness*, “Appendix,” 273.



economic process by which Africans were being relocated to England. Perhaps this is why black women are a popular subject for poetry, and not for plays.

I hesitate to read all poems addressing black women in the same vein as I would the “La Bella Schiava” or “La Bella Mora.” These pieces contain explicit, disturbing depictions of the power dynamics between master and enslaved colonial subject. It would be an oversimplification of all the themes and tropes we have discussed to extend this master-slave dynamic to a piece like Wright’s “To a Black Gentlewoman: Mistress A.H.,” which - other than its black subject - is a traditional piece espousing courtly love, dedicated to a specific woman. However, the fact that lyric poetry and colonial venture being two forms of entertainment and signs of status enjoyed by a certain class of people, may help us understand why a seemingly radical departure from poetic convention was celebrated to such an extent.

## Conclusion

This essay has sought to reexamine common misconceptions about Africans in Elizabethan England by beginning with a perspective informed first and foremost by archival evidence. Since the study of Africans in Early Modern England has hitherto been a study of race, scholars have based their work on conceptions of race from our modern world, and a limited selection of Early Modern literary texts. As such, beginning anew has required abandoning widely held assumptions like the myth that the African presence in Elizabethan England was rare or negligible; or that all Africans in Elizabethan England were slaves.

Numerous parish records, court cases, and household accounts showing Africans that were baptized as Christian, known by name in their respective communities, and on payrolls for various households or employers, have shown both of these assumptions to be unfounded. The stories of diver Jacques Francis, Don Antonio and the African Princes, or even seemingly independent weaver Reasonbell - who was head of his nuclear family - demonstrate that Africans appeared in England in an array of different social conditions. Enslavement of black people, or racial discrimination, was exacted by the individual, rather than institutionalized in English law and legislation.

Additionally, we can conclude that Elizabethan Africans imprinted themselves on the literary imagination of sixteenth and seventeenth century writers through their physical presence, in addition to the metaphoric potential of their racial difference. Numerous poems from the period were dedicated to 'black gentlewomen,' 'black-moor maids,' and 'Ethiopian beauties,' – some addresses even bore the woman's initials. The historical record reveals imprints of interracial contact that might have easily served as inspiration for these romantic, and at times

erotic poems. Various examples range from the extra martial dalliance of Samuel Pepys and black shop-girl Nan, the numerous mixed-race children in Devonshire, to notorious ‘tawny moor’ prostitute Ann Cobbie and her faithful white clientele.<sup>245</sup>

These poems espoused traditional conventions of courtly love, yet they also located their symbolic schema in the language of colonialism, and constructed the black woman’s beauty in opposition to the pale standard of beauty prized by the English. In “One Enamoured on a Black-moor,” Eldred Revett continually evokes images of England’s trade with Africa and India, calling his lover’s bosom a “spicy nest” upon which he finds the “rich countries of the East.”<sup>246</sup> Before Shakespeare embarks on a sonnet cycle dedicated to a black mistress, he first decries the white standard of Elizabethan beauty and establishes the dark in its place: “In the old age black was not counted fair,/Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name;/But now is black beauty's successive heir,/And beauty slandered with a bastard shame.”<sup>247</sup>

The poems contradict Martin Orkin’s assertion that the English saw Africans solely as “barbarous, treacherous, libidinous, and jealous.”<sup>248</sup> However, their rhetoric demonstrates that Africans were perceived as distinctly foreign, and somewhat exotic.

Apart from these general findings, this essay may have raised more questions than it has answered. There are still many unresolved issues. It is as yet unclear why representations of black women, particularly black female-white male unions, were avoided in dramatic text but celebrated in poems. Parthenogenesis alone cannot explain this incongruity. I have suggested in the previous chapter that the authors of the lyric

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<sup>245</sup> See Chapter Three: Interracial Liaisons, for discussion of these references.

<sup>246</sup> Revett, “One Enamour’d on a Black-moor,” *Anthology of Interracial Literature* 103.

<sup>247</sup> Sonnet 127.

<sup>248</sup> Martin Orkin, “Othello and the ‘Plain Face’ of Racism,” 167.

poems under discussion, and their intended audiences, had a greater familiarity with African peoples than the intended audiences of dramatic performances; but further exploration of this issue is needed.

As for the foundational work of this essay – finding Africans in the archives – much more needs to be done before further conclusions can be reached. Again, I believe that Imtiaz Habib's *Black Lives in the Archives*, published only in January of this year, will soon be lauded for the amazing achievement that it is. However, in no disrespect to Habib's work, I also believe that one scholar cannot complete the gargantuan task of combing through the archives alone. His book and this essay will be most powerful if they establish the need for organization. Social historians of Early Modern England and literary scholars of the period need to dedicate their time and resources to the huge undertaking of scouring the archives in search of records of Africans. I believe we can have a much more detailed account of the Elizabethan Africans presented in this essay, and the hundreds of others on record, if the time and effort of many is devoted to recovering the information that is existent, but unpublished.

Of course, any of these efforts must be fueled by must be an interest in establishing a more accurate account of the social make-up of Early Modern England. Both parts of this essay have demonstrated alternative interpretative possibilities that arise if we accept that Africans were present in the period, and look for them in earnest instead of ignoring textual or linguistic clues. Continued work in this field will definitely require time and resources. More importantly, it will require that we open our minds to reading what is already there.

I pledge my Honor that I have not violated the Honor Code, in writing this paper; this paper represents my own work written in accordance to the guidelines of Princeton University.

*Kelechi Ezie*