

“Making the Beast with two Backs” – Interracial Relationships in Early Modern England

Miranda Kaufmann*

Independent scholar

Abstract

Shakespeare's tragedy of Othello and Desdemona has long attracted critics to consider the issues of interracial relationships and miscegenation in early modern England. More recently, other black characters have been found in Renaissance literature and an African presence in 16th and 17th century England has been demonstrated from archival sources. This article gives an overview of these developments and their implications for the study of interracial relationships in early modern literature. Evidence from the archives is brought to bear on different aspects of relationships both between black men and white women and between black women and white men. This new information about interracial marriages, as well as sexual intercourse or “fornication”, prostitution and the resulting mixed race children must be incorporated into the discussion of interracial relationships in Renaissance literature.

Shakespeare's Othello and Desdemona have long dominated our impression of interracial couples in Renaissance English literature. At the beginning of the play, theirs is a loving marriage, which Othello invokes with the words: “Come my dear love,/The purchase made, the fruits are to ensue;/ That profit's yet to come 'twixt me and you.” (2.3.8–10) But it is Iago's speech announcing the news of their marriage, full of phrases intended to provoke Desdemona's father Brabantio, that has resonated through the centuries, shaping future criticism: “Making the beast with two backs”; “an old black ram/Is tugging your white ewe”; “the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor.” (1.1. 112–3; 85/8; 123) Theirs, however, was not the only interracial relationship in early modern England: real or imagined.

In this article, I will give an overview of how literary scholars have engaged with this subject, and the new evidence of actual interracial relationships that historians are beginning to uncover. I will then go on to highlight some of the key points where the literary impression of interracial relationships can be productively contrasted with real experiences newly gleaned from the archival record.

As Mary Floyd-Wilson outlined in this journal in 2006, scholars have paid increasing attention to “literary representations of blackness” in early modern literature since the late 1960s.¹ (1044) An investigation that began with Othello has gone much further to unearth a whole host of black characters, termed by Eldred Jones “Othello's Countrymen”, many of whom have interracial encounters. In Shakespeare, we have Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, The Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice* and Caliban (whose mother Sycorax is Algerian) from *The Tempest*. Cleopatra, that “most consistently whitewashed of dark heroines”, (Daileader, 7, 28), described as “gipsy”, “tawny” and “with Phoebus's amorous pinches black” (1.1. 6, 10; 1.5.30), has also been claimed as a black woman, which gives Antony and Cleopatra a claim to rival Othello and Desdemona as Shakespeare's premier interracial couple. Black characters also appear in the works of Webster, Massinger, Dekker, Fletcher and others. In total, Eldred Jones listed 43 masques, plays or Pageants including black characters between 1510 and 1637, (Jones, 145–9) while Elliot Tokson has identified some 44 black characters in 29 plays written between

1588 and 1689. (Tokson, 139–141). While the true identity of Shakespeare's Dark Lady will probably never be known, it has been suggested that his sonnets to her be renamed the "Black woman sonnets" – and indeed a whole series of 17th century poems, such as Eldred Revett's *One Enamour'd on a Black-Moor* were clearly addressed to African women.² (Hall, 116–122, 269–290).

The criticism includes much discussion on the subject of interracial relationships and feared or actual miscegenation. For years, Othello's "blackness" was minimized by critics in order to avoid confronting the interracial love at the centre of the play. In 1774, William Kendrick asserted that Othello "was not a black, and at worst only of a tawny colour", because "a young lady of Desdemona's delicacy of sentiment could never have fallen in love with a Negro." (qtd. in Pechter, 173) This became the standard 19th-century approach to the play. Edmund Kean (1787–1833) played Othello in tawny makeup, unlike Richard Burbage's blackface in 1604. Charles Lamb explained in 1811 that those of a tawny complexion were "by many shades less unworthy of a white woman's fancy." (qtd in Cowhig, 16) Thus, when the African-American actor Ira Aldridge took on the part at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden in 1833, the critics venomously rejected his performance. (Cowhig, 17–21) It was to be almost another hundred years before a black actor was deemed successful in the part. Paul Robeson's performance of Othello at the Savoy Theatre in 1930, which he reprised many times over the next 30 years, was a breakthrough. Herbert Farjeon wrote an article in 1933 entitled "Othello was a Black Man", and in 1943, John Dover Wilson concluded that "a Negro Othello is essential to the full understanding of the play." (Cowhig, 22). In 1967, G.K Hunter pronounced:

Shakespeare intended his hero to be a black man...I ignore the many treatises devoted to proving that he was of tawny or sunburnt colour. These are, however, very worthy of study, as documents of prejudice. (Hunter, 9)

Critics still disagree on the subject of Othello's intended ethnicity. (Neill, 115–116) The term "Moor" is ambiguous, as it was used in the 16th century to describe both lighter-skinned North Africans and darker-skinned sub-Saharan Africans. In the wake of 9/11, casting Othello as a North African Muslim takes on a new significance. Nonetheless, Othello is not described by Shakespeare as "tawny" – a word used of Cleopatra and the Prince of Morocco – which was used as a qualifier when referring to lighter skin. Instead, his "sooty bosom" would indicate that he had dark skin, like the African servant named Anthony, who Sir Arthur Throckmorton described as "the Moore... of Guinea" when he took him into his household in 1589.³

Since the 1960s, the impact of Marxist, feminist and post-colonial criticism has complicated the discussion. Ania Loomba has made the case for adding "racial difference" to gender and class as "a theoretical and analytical category" (Loomba, 1). Kim. F. Hall and others have examined how the language of "blackness" is applied to women, not because they are of African origin, but because they are sexually active. Most recently, Daileader has discussed this in the context of the adage that "all cows are black at night" (15), a concept that is "played out" in Virginia Mason Vaughan's examination of the bed-trick. This was a dramatic device, increasingly popular from 1598 onwards, where a "black" body is substituted for a "white" one in order to dupe a suitor. For example, in Richard Brome's *The Novella* (1632), Pantaloni finds the black maid, Jacconetta in the bed where he had arranged to meet her mistress, Victoria. Mason Vaughan characterizes the bed-trick as a "temporary flirtation with miscegenation" where "as long as the man does not see the woman he is copulating with, her color does not matter" (*Performing Blackness*, 74–92, 75, 85). There has also been much discussion of the absent black woman – that is to say that most of the interracial relationships in literature seem to follow the Othello-Desdemona pattern of black male – white female. Daileader asks "Where is Othello's sister?"

(13). This absence is demonstrated in Shakespeare's allusion to Launcelot Gobbo's "negro" mistress in *The Merchant of Venice*, who never appears on stage. (3. 5. 31–43). Toni Morrison's 2012 play *Desdemona* makes a point of giving voice to Barbary, a near-forgotten African woman she has reclaimed from Shakespeare's text (Morrison & Traoré; Erickson). Daileader attributes the absence in part to a lack of African women in early modern London. (15) However, the archival record shows that about half of the black population of 16th century Britain was female, which must lead us to seek an alternative explanation.

The travel literature of the time, such as the voyage accounts collected by Richard Hakluyt and Leo Africanus's *Description of Africa*, have been mined by scholars such as Virginia Mason Vaughan and Emily Bartels to provide historical context (Bartels, 1992, 2008; Vaughan, 1994; Vaughan & Vaughan, 1997). Robert Gainsh's account of his 1555 voyage to Guinea describing the "people of Libya called Garamantes, whose women are common: for they contract no matrimonie, neither have respect to chastity" (Hakluyt, VI: 168) can be placed alongside the oft-quoted passage from Leo Africanus stating that there is "no nation under heaven more prone to Venerie" than the Negroes, and that "They spend all their daies in lewd practices... They have great swarmes of harlots among them; whereupon a man may easily conjecture their manner of living," (I: 180) to build upon the stereotype of the "lascivious Moor." However, this material largely emanates from Anglo–African encounters outside of England.

Little has been done to place these discussions in the context of the emerging evidence of Africans living in early modern England itself since Charles Gildon wrote in 1694: "Experience tells us there's nothing more common than matches of this kind, where the whites and the blacks cohabit". (qtd in Pechter, 213). As Floyd-Wilson pointed out "historicizing race depends... on solid archival research" (1049). Kim Hall, in *Things of Darkness* (1995), admitted she was "more interested in discerning the ways in which the Africanist presence is embedded in language than with proving the nature of the black presence in England" (Hall, 14). Daileader is scornful of Nabil Matar's attempts to cite examples of 17th century interracial marriages as evidence that attitudes to miscegenation were "not so severe as *Othello* would indicate". (Daileader, 45; Matar 1998, 1999, 2005). However, the evidence of these marriages show that her scorn is misplaced. They also go some way towards puncturing the stereotype of the "lascivious Moor".

Despite such suspicions of the historical approach, much of the evidence of the lives of Africans in early modern England has actually been unearthed by literary scholars rather than by historians. While G. K Hunter stated in 1967 that Elizabethans "had little or no continuous contact with 'Moors,'" (140), others were proving him wrong. In 1961, W.E. Miller published some extracts from a Tudor subsidy return showing four Africans living in London in 1599 in order to show that some 5 years before the first performance of *Othello*, Shakespeare would have had the opportunity to encounter Africans. (Miller, 138) In 1965, Eldred Jones argued that the playwrights were not writing black characters in a vacuum, but rather

Elizabethans' knowledge of the continent and peoples of Africa has been underestimated by modern critics... Elizabethans also had plenty of opportunity to see Moors and Negroes in England. (viii)

In 1991, Rosalyn Knutson gave a paper to the International Shakespeare Association World Congress entitled "A Caliban in St. Mildred's Poultry", which said less about *The Tempest* and more about the baptism of an African prince in St. Mildred Poultry in 1611. (110–126) She pioneered the use of baptism and burial, as well as legal records to provide historical context for the literature. Following her lead, Gustav Ungerer has also used legal records and household documents to reveal more details of the lives of Africans in Elizabethan England (Ungerer, 2005, 2008, 2008). Imtiaz Habib's book *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677* (2008) was the first monograph to devote itself entirely to the subject of Africans in Britain in the 16th and 17th

centuries. Habib also came to the subject via Shakespeare, as becomes clear from the title of his previous book, *Shakespeare and Race* (2000). He lists 362 records of black people from 1500–1640. However, 114 of these refer either to East Indians and Native Americans, or (the majority) to those he describes as “of fluctuating ethnic clarity”: that is to individuals with names such as “Ales Moore”, for whom there is no explicit evidence of a foreign identity. (*Black Lives*, 326) He makes no allowance for the fact that there is sometimes more than one record for each person: the remaining 248 records yield 177 individuals. He himself admits his data is “inherently correctible” but has been included:

in order to compensate for the over-conservative, mutually reinforcing, multilayered assumptions of traditional early modern history that have made black people in Tudor and Stuart England absent by default. (*Black Lives*, 17)

Historians have also begun to challenge such traditional assumptions. Peter Fryer listed evidence of a total of 22 Africans present in England and nine in Scotland up to 1640 in 1984. (2–13) The *Black and Asian Studies Association* (BASA), founded in 1991, encouraged local archives to search out and make available references to Black and Asian people in their collections. Slowly, a growing number of references, particularly in parish registers, to Africans present in Britain in the 16th and 17th centuries began to emerge. Some 84 of these references were published in a 2003 article by Marika Sherwood for *History Today*. (40–42) This figure was added to by Sherwood in a list published in the BASA Newsletter in 2004. This material has begun to find its way into mainstream history, in the work of authors such as Carole Levin and Alison Sim.⁴ I have surveyed a wide range of early modern archival documents and found evidence of over 360 African individuals living across Britain between 1500 and 1640. (Kaufmann, “Africans in Britain”) I have also shown that the oft-cited so-called deportation of Africans by Elizabeth I in 1596–1601 was in fact a unsuccessful money making bid by a foreign merchant and a bankrupt courtier. (Kaufmann, “Caspar Van Senden”, 366–371) Onyeka’s recent work identifies some further examples and makes the case that the position of Africans in Tudor England was far better than usually thought. (Onyeka, *Blackamoors*)

It is vital that this new archival evidence is read in the context of the wider patterns of social behaviour in early modern English society. Habib admits that his project is “not interested in early modern social history per se... except in those points and aspects where that history includes or connects to... black people.” (*Black Lives*, 17) This can lead to a mistaken emphasis. For example, commenting on the account of a Moroccan woman named Mary Phillis’s baptism in 1597 Intiaz Habib wrote

The racial agenda that writes the interested fiction of these details is noticeable... when in ritually asking ‘the Congregation’ to join him in the conversion ceremony, he asks for divine dispensation ‘to grant her the one thing which by nature she could not have.’ (*Black Lives*, 92)

However, a quick glance at the Book of Common Prayer (1559) shows that the minister, far from making a racial slur, in suggesting that an African could not “by nature” be baptised, was in fact merely following the order of service, in which all individuals undergoing baptism were reminded that their sinful nature made them unworthy of redemption and it was only Christ’s love that saved them:

DERELY beloved, forasmuche as al men be conceived and borne in synne, and that our saviour Christ saith, none can entre into the kingdom of God (except he be regenerate, and borne a new of water and the holy gost) I besече you to cal upon God the father, through our lord Jesus Christ, that of his

bounteous mercy, he wil graunt to these children, *that thing which by nature thei can not have*, that they may be baptized with water and the holy Ghost, and received into Christes holy church; and be made lively membres of the same. (ed. Cummings, 141)

In the remainder of this article, I will discuss evidence of interracial marriages, as well as the relationships and encounters that occurred beyond the bounds of matrimony, and the children that were born as a result. I will also discuss Lucy Negro, a classic case of confusion of a literary for a historical figure, and show that evidence for actual African prostitutes is scarce, while there is in fact more evidence of African men visiting English prostitutes. Ultimately, I will argue that it is vital that the new historical understanding of the African presence in early modern England be incorporated into the discussion of interracial relationships in Renaissance literature.

Interracial Marriage in Early Modern England

Interracial marriage didn't only happen in Venice. George Best's anecdotal report that: "I myself have seene an Ethiopian as blacke as cole brought to England who taking a faire English woman to wife, begat a sonne in all respects as blacke as the father", (Hakluyt, VII, 262) can now be affirmed by the archival record.⁵ Both James IV's black drummer and John Blanke, Henry VIII's black trumpeter are known to have married, most likely local women.⁶ The parish registers yield some more concrete examples: In December 1613 at St Nicholas, Deptford, "Samuel Munsur a blackamoure & Jane Johnson" were married. In October 1616, George, a "blackamoor" married Marie Smith in Staplehurst, Kent. In December 1617, the marriage of "James Cures being a Moores Christian and Margaret Person, a maid" was recorded at Holy Trinity the Less, London.⁷ John Accomy, sometime servant to the Cappell family, married twice: the widow Peronell May in 1603, then Temperance Swain in 1614. (Steggle). These grooms, like their brides, would all have been baptised Christians, a prerequisite for marriage. This is emphasised by the description of James Cures as a "Moores Christian", and there is also a record of Samuel Mansur's baptism a few weeks before his marriage.⁸ Neither was the reverse unheard of: in 1600 "Joane Marya a Black Moore" of the parish of St Philip and St Jacob, Bristol was described as "nowe the wyffe of Thomas Smythe Byllysmaker".⁹ Had a sermon been preached on their wedding day, the text might have been Numbers 12:1, which in the King James Bible told that Moses had married an Ethiopian woman.¹⁰ There are also records of four marriages between Africans in the early 17th century, though they are beyond the scope of this article.¹¹ The parish registers show that Africans in England were more uxorious than the "lascivious Moor" stereotype allows.

Some of these marriages resulted in legitimate offspring. George a "blackamore" and Marie Smith, who had married in Staplehurst, Kent in 1616 had two children. Their baptisms were recorded in the register of All Saints church: "George ye sonne of George a blackmore" on 13 February 1620 and "Elizabeth the daughter of George the Blackamore" on 19 May 1622.¹² Matthew Steggle has recently detailed the five children born to John Accomy and his second wife Temperance Swain in Hertford around 1620. (Steggle). Further examples of African men with legitimate families are Reasonabel Blackman, Emmanuel Mauri and Anthony Ffageamy. Reasonabel Blackman, the silkweaver of Southwark, had three children. Edward was baptised in the church of St. Olave Tooley Street in February 1587 and his siblings Edmund and Jane were buried there in October 1592.¹³ "Emmanuelius Mauri als. Emmanuel the Moore" had two children in Truro. His daughter Maria was buried at St. Mary's, Truro in August 1611, and his son Richard was baptised there in October 1612.¹⁵ As with many parish registers in this period, the mothers of these children are left unidentified. In the context of the marriages cited above, and the relative size of the English and African populations in Southwark and Truro

at the time, it seems likely that their mothers were Englishwomen. In March 1620, Michael Ffageamy, the son of Anthony Ffageamy, described as “Mauri”, and his wife “Sphillidis”, was baptized at St Martin in the Fields, Westminster.¹⁴ These examples of lawful interracial families go some way towards counteracting the assumption that all mixed race children in this period must have been illegitimate and undermining the insistence of some scholars that a deep fear of miscegenation permeated early modern society. (Newman, 146; Habib, “Hel’s Perfect Character”, 280; Daileader, 8)

Interracial Fornication and Illegitimate Children

Of course, not all interracial relationships in early modern England were conducted within the bounds of marriage. Fornication was punished in the church courts, and illegitimate children had their “baseborn” status clearly stated at baptism. Were the stereotype of the “lascivious Moor” to be believed, we should expect to find ample material here. However, the more prosaic evidence of the parish registers and church courts tell a different tale. Africans were not unusually libidinous. Fornication was extremely common in early modern England and regularly punished in the church courts, with some 60–90 cases of sexual incontinence detected annually during the 1590s in the archdeaconry of North Wiltshire alone (Ingram, 238) Neither was it unusual for children to be born outside wedlock. Some 4% of all children were born illegitimate in the late 16th and early 17th century (Adair, 50). The following examples should be read in this context.

Both African men and women appear in church court cases relating to fornication. In February 1593 Joanna Bennett of Grays Thurrock, Essex, was brought before the Church court at West Ham and charged with “having carnall knowledge and abusing her body with a certain blackmore now dwelling in the town”. In December 1593, in Aldingbourne, West Sussex, Agnes Musby was presented and cited “for fornicacyon w[i]th Paull a blakemore”. In Stepney in April 1632, “Grace, a blackamoore” was presented by churchwardens for living incontinently with Walter Church. The penalties proscribed in these cases were of the normal levels of severity, and there is no indication that the courts condemned the inter-racial rather than the moral aspect of the offence.¹⁶

This evidence of interracial fornication resulting in illegitimate children supports the argument that the reference to a bastard-bearing blackmoor in Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* must be a topical allusion, as the identity of Gobbo’s mistress is of no consequence to the play. (Prager, 50–52) The reference is made in the following exchange:

LORENZO: I shall answer that better to the commonwealth than you can the getting up of the Negro’s belly; the Moor is with child by you, Launcelot.

LAUNCELOT: It is much that the Moor should be more than reason; but if she be less than an honest woman she is indeed more than I took her for.

LORENZO: How every fool can play upon the word! (3.5.31–43)

It has previously been suggested that the “Negro” is only introduced so that Shakespeare can make a witty pun on “Moor” and “more”. (Russell Brown, 99n) Recently, Duncan Salkeld has taken “more than reason” to be an allusion to a member of the family of Reasonabel Blackman, a silkweaver working in 1590s Southwark. (Habib & Salkeld, 20) However, the archival record suggests that the situation was common enough to provide Shakespeare with more than one example to allude to. In March 1606, “Marey a negroe” told the Bridewell Court that “one John Edwards...had the use of her body twice & she is with child by

him.”¹⁷ Mary was just one of 30 African women known to have borne illegitimate children in England between 1578 and 1640.¹⁸

Habib’s analysis of records of black women bearing illegitimate children concludes that their masters were sexually exploiting them, and that other men were recorded as fathers in order to save their master’s reputations. (*Black Lives*, 200) Ian Mortimer exaggerated this argument in his television series *The Time Traveller’s Guide to Elizabethan England*, where he claimed that the parish registers “suggest that rich men are lending out their black female servants to friends and neighbours for sexual novelty and experimentation.”¹⁹ These cases need to be seen in the wider context of English social history. As Adair points out the following: “by some standards, all sexual relationships in this period (and perhaps all periods) were essentially exploitative”. Not all masters had sexual relationships with their servants, however. In fact, the majority of servants’ illegitimate children were begotten by fellow servants. (Adair, 87–88) This was the case in St. Keverne, Cornwall, when “Constance the base child of a blackmore ye reputed father John the servant of John Langford” was baptised in January 1605.²⁰ The only clear-cut known case of a stereotypical exploitation of a black woman by her employer, or rather her employer’s son, was the case of Anthony Harwoode, buried in 1612, in Hayes parish, Bromley, “the Bastarde sonne of Leonard Harwoode, the younger, being the reputed father, begotten of the body of ... a Blacke a Moore, in the house of his father Leonard Harwood”.²¹ Such an experience could equally have happened to an English servant girl. The parish authorities would be unlikely to allow these men to get away with relinquishing the financial responsibility for their children, because in the absence of a known father, the parish was accountable for the maintenance of the child. To this end, midwives were enjoined to do their best to extract this information during the throes of labour. (McFarlane, 73–4).

There is evidence of men being punished by the courts for impregnating black women. In Poole in 1609–10, the town authorities received £1 15s from Francis Kent:

for releasing him of his punishment, inflicted on him att the quarter sessions, the which he was adjudged unto for begetting a bastard on the Blackmore Elizabeth Ferdinando which was given towards the reparacon of the Church.²²

There are other examples of similar cases.²³ These men were pursued and held to account for their misdemeanours, just as other men were in the many cases involving Englishwomen.

The theories propounded by Lynda Boose and Elizabeth Spiller in their recent explorations into medical theory can also be tested by the archival record. Boose argued that black women are unrepresented in literature because the fact that a black woman would give birth to a black child contradicted early modern medical theory, and challenged the “patriarchal fantasy of male parthenogenesis”, that is the idea that the child reproduced the father’s, not the mother’s characteristics (Boose, 45). In 1586, the baptism of “Elizabeth, a negro child, born white, the mother a negro” was recorded at St. Botolph Bishopsgate.²⁴ The clerk seems to find the fact that the child was born white surprising, or at least noteworthy, and almost to reinforce her parentage, despite her colour, he describes her as “a negro child”. Despite the fact that this child has been born white, as Boose might argue the father would have wanted, the clerk is keen to note the fact that the mother is African, and label the “negro child”. Conversely, when a “child found in summerset yard” was baptised at St Mary Le Strand, Westminster in July 1626, it was noted that “the father [was] supposed to bee a blackmore”.²⁵ Somerset yard was a large stable yard to the west of Somerset House, which is situated between the Strand and the Thames, built by Protector Somerset but by 1626 in royal hands, and in the process of being remodelled by Inigo Jones for Henrietta Maria. Whether the child was connected to a member of the Royal court, or was merely left in a public place, it is impossible to know. The presumption that the father

rather than the mother was black seems to be based on the early modern medical theory, which credited the male seed with determining a child's physical characteristics.²⁶

Examples of illegitimate children being fathered by African men support those critics who have identified a paternal instinct in Shakespeare's Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, or Caliban's thwarted desire to have "peopled... This isle with Calibans". (1.2. 347–351) They also call into question Daileader's assertion that "Early Modern audiences could be counted on to react in disgust" to Caliban's paternal ambitions. (Daileader, 46) Katheren Pedro, "daughter of don Pedro a basterd Neger" was baptised at St. Andrew's Plymouth in 1596.²⁷ Commenting on this case, Habib suggests that Katheren's mother must have been black, given "the historical implausibility of a bonded black man... having the social empowerment and sexual agency to have an illicit sexual relationship with a white woman". (Habib, *Black Lives*, 202) The example of the "Ethiop" Gylman Ivey and Anna Spencer, unknown to Habib, contradicts him. Ivey and Spencer had two children together in Dyrham, Gloucestershire: a girl named Elizabeth, baptized in October 1578, and a boy named Richard who was baptized in February 1581 but was buried in June 1583.²⁸ Their relationship, which lasted for at least 3 years, may be one of the stable consensual unions, evinced by a string of illegitimate children, which have been identified as a feature of early modern society by social historians. (Adair, 72, 75) Even outside of marriage then, we see this African man being decidedly less lascivious than the stereotype.

The Myth of Lucy Negro and African Prostitutes

Both historians and literary critics have suggested that many of the African women in early modern London worked as prostitutes.²⁹ The most cited example is a woman named as Lucy Negro, "tentatively identified" the dark lady of Shakespeare's sonnets by G.B. Harrison in 1933. (310) His suggestion was repeated by Edgar I. Fripp in 1938, by Hyder Rollins in his 1944 edition of the Sonnets and by Anthony Burgess in 1972. (Schoenbaum, 231–2) Burgess went on to feature Lucy Negro as Shakespeare's mistress in his 1964 novel, *Nothing Like the Sun*. (158–162) The idea that the Dark Lady was of African origin also makes a cameo appearance in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). In Chapter 11: The Miseducation of Irie Jones, Irie asks her teacher Mrs. Roody if the "dark lady" is "black". Mrs. Rooney replies:

No dear, she's dark. She's not black in the modern sense. There weren't any... well, Afro-Carri-bee-yans in England at that time, dear. That's a more modern phenomenon, as I'm sure you know. But this was the 1600s. I mean I can't be sure, but it does seem terribly unlikely, unless she was a slave of some kind, and he's unlikely to have written a series of sonnets to a lord and then a slave, is he? (Smith, 226–7)

A miseducation indeed: Smith cleverly skewers exactly the sort of traditional assumptions that provoked Habib. (17) But who was this Lucy Negro that Harrison had based his surmises on? His reference is to the script of the *Gesta Grayorum*, performed as part of the Gray's Inn Revels in 1594, where amongst those brought to pay homage to the Prince of Purpoole is

Lucy Negro, Abbess de Clerkenwell, holdeth the Nunnery of Clerkenwell, with the Lands and Privileges thereunto belonging, of the Prince of Purpoole by Night-Service in Cauda ie: in the tail, and to find a Choir of Nuns, with burning Lamps to chaunt Placebo to the Gentlemen of the Prince's Privy-Chamber, on the Day of his Excellency's Coronation. (ed. Helmes & Bland, 17)

Placebo means "I shall be pleasing" as well as being the first word of the Vespers for the Dead, "Placebo Domino". (ed. Helmes & Bland, 94 n25) There had been a nunnery in Clerkenwell

before the Dissolution of the monasteries, but now the reputation of the area was such that this “Lucy Negro” is not an abbess, but a bawd. She is also merely a character in a play. There is no indication in the script that a real woman of this name existed, yet scholars persist in citing it as if one did. Fryer states that the abbess of Clerkenwell was “played by a woman named Lucy Negro”, (9) as does Sherwood. (41) Edward Scobie claimed that Lucy Negro was “in fact black and an African” in 1972. Imtiaz Habib also takes her to be a real woman, calling the “dismissal of Lucy Negro’s blackness hasty and unwarranted”. (Habib, *Shakespeare and Race*, 31).

Although the play does not provide straightforward evidence of a real woman named Lucy Negro, it does appear to make a topical allusion to an individual that the audience would have recognized. Another example of this can be found in Barnabe Barnes’s *The Devil’s Charter* (1607) in which Henrico Baglioni, a “braggartly” soldier serving Caesar Borgia, mentions “Negra Lucia” amongst many other women, including one “That in Turnuliball doth keep an ale-house”. (3.5. 107–119) The play being set in Rome, Barnes seems to have Italianized “Turnbull” by adding two extra syllables. Turnbull Street (now Turnmill Street in Clerkenwell) was “the most disreputable street in London, a haunt of thieves and loose women”. (Sugden, 533) In Shakespeare’s *Henry IV, Part II*, Falstaff comments on Justice Shallow that he “hath done nothing but prate to me of the wildness of his youth, and the feats he hath done about Turnbull Street”. (3.1.291–2) The street was so notorious that it was used as a synonym for licentiousness. In 1625, Ellen Tilbury accused her neighbour of being a whore, and went on to say: “Turnbull Street is a more fit place for thee”. (Gowing, 30)

Scholars have identified two early modern brothel keepers who had the nickname “Black Luce”. One was Lucy Baynham, “the infamous Black Luce of Clerkenwell (Mrs Baynam)” who ran a brothel there in the late 1570s. (Archer, 213; Salkeld, 5) The other was Lucy Morgan, committed to the Bridewell for the crime of keeping a bawdy house in 1600. (Hotson, 252)³⁰ The author of the *Gesta Grayorum* in creating the character of “Lucy Negro” may have been thinking of one of these women. However, there is no evidence that either Lucy Baynham or Lucy Morgan were of African origin. As Hotson puts it: “Black Luce was of course no more an Ethiop than the Black Prince or Black Tom Wentworth”. (244) Therefore, the idea of Lucy Negro as an African prostitute has no basis in historical fact.

What other evidence is there of African women working as prostitutes in early modern England? Much has been made of a letter, mentioned by Harrison in 1933, (311) written in May 1599 by Denis Edwards of Southampton to Thomas Lankford, the Earl of Hertford’s secretary:

I wrotte to you as conserninge my negroe where or in what plase she was or whether you have taken penes to socer her, or noe. If you have not I praye make inquiries for her for she is sartenlye dwellinge in tornebole stryete att the sine of the Swan att one Danes house who selethe beare it is harde by Clarkenwell.³¹

Her address in a Dane’s (or Mr. Danes?) beer shop in the notorious “tornebole” (Turnbull) street has been enough for most to assume she was a prostitute. Habib has even mistakenly identified her with the fictional character of Lucy Negro. (*Black Lives*, 107) However, Edwards’s relationship to his “negroe” is not made explicit. He seems concerned with her wellbeing, and asks his friend to “socer” [succour] her. When he asks “what plase” she was in, could he mean to enquire whether she had found a “place”, that is domestic employment? He cannot be asking where she is, because he already knows that she is certainly dwelling in Turnbull Street. When he asks Lankford to “make enquiries”, perhaps he means that he would like him to try to find her a job as a domestic servant?

The case of Anne Cobbie is less ambiguous. In 1626, Mary Hall, spinster, testified against John Bankes and his wife Jane for keeping a bawdy house, in the parish of St Clement Danes, Westminster, and reported

There is one Anne Cobbie a tawnie Moore that is often at the said Bankes his house and this informant saith she hath heard her and divers men report that they had rather give her a peece to lye with her than an other v shillings because of her soft skinne. (Ostovitch and Sauer, 41)

One of seven women so defamed, Anne seems to have been popular with her clients (A “piece” was a gold coin, worth 22 shillings at this time.) She is the only one whose attractions are described in this way. As a “tawnie Moore”, she may have had a lighter, North African, complexion. She is often at the house, but does not live there, though no other address is given for her as it is for some of the others. These two cases comprise the only explicit evidence of African prostitutes operating in early modern England, and one remains ambiguous.

There is more evidence of African men appearing as customers in London’s bawdy houses in the 1570s than of African women working as prostitutes. This indicates that they had a disposable income. In her evidence to the Bridewell court in January 1578, Elizabeth Kirkham testified that “dyvers and many blackamores” patronized her fellow prostitute, Rose Brown. (Salkeld, 4) Other Africans visiting prostitutes in Elizabethan London are named in the Bridewell records. In May 1577, “Peter Peringoe, a blackamore” confessed that “he had thuse of the body of one Margery Williams”, while in December of the same year, “Jane Thompson a harlott ... consented to comitt whoredome wth one Anthonye a blackamore”, and they were “taken a bedd together the dore locked to them” (Griffiths, 74, n. 25) The fact that these men had the pecuniary wherewithal to finance these activities challenges the assumption that African men in Shakespeare’s London were paid little or nothing for their labours.

The fact that African men could afford to visit prostitutes is not so surprising in the context of the emerging research about Africans in early modern England. Slavery was not recognized under English law. (Kaufmann, “Slavery and English Common Law”, 200–3) Africans were paid wages for their labour, and some became financially independent, like Reasonabel Blackman the silkweaver. African women also gained some level of independence. Helenor Myou was robbed of a set of “bandes, a pillober and other goods” in 1612.³² Owning these items suggests a certain level of prosperity. In May 1625, a black woman named Cattelena died in Almondsbury, a small village to the north of Bristol, leaving a variety of goods recorded in a probate inventory, worth a total of £6 9s 6d. The most valuable item was a cow (worth £3 10s). She also owned: bed and bedding (10s), two pewter pots, candlesticks, a tin bottle, a dozen spoons, three earthen dishes and 24 trenchers, a tablecloth, wearing apparel (£2), a coffer and two little boxes.³³ It is possible that these women were left enough money and goods by former employers to allow them to set out on their own. For example, when Maria Groce, widow of Lawrence Groce, a Southampton merchant, made her will in 1612, she wrote: “I give unto my servant Joane the blackmore a flockbed, two blancketts a coverlet two paire of sheets and three pounds in money”.³⁴ These goods bear a striking similarity to those owned by Cattelena of Almondsbury at her death. Thus, both African men and women in Shakespeare’s England were more independent than hitherto believed.

Conclusion

The new evidence of actual interracial relationships in early modern England that is emerging from the archives must be incorporated into future discussion of their literary counterparts. This

is already beginning to happen- in the work of scholars such as Kelechie Ezie, Duncan Salkeld and Matthew Steggle. In a forthcoming essay, Steggle makes the point that our knowledge of the African presence in Shakespeare's England must lead to the conclusion that "Othello's early audiences... were not necessarily entirely white". This means that our new understanding of the historical context may affect not only our discussions of the language of early modern plays, but also our understanding of their performance, and audience. Even though we do not know of any Africans attending the plays, audience members may well have met Africans on the streets of London. Steggle goes so far as to question whether the Aaron of the Peacham drawing might actually be a picture of a black actor at work. Further research is required before a historian could hazard a guess at answering that, but, as archives are increasingly digitized, it has never been easier to trace the lives of Africans in early modern England. What is known already is certainly enough to require us to reframe some of the questions we ask of early modern literature, and to see Othello and Desdemona, and other literary interracial couples in the context of James Curren and Margaret Person, Joane Marya and Thomas Smyth, and the many other real interracial couples that lived rather less dramatic lives in early modern England.

Short Biography

Dr. Miranda Kaufmann studied History at Christ Church, Oxford, where she completed her doctoral thesis on "Africans in Britain, 1500–1640" in 2011. She has published articles in *Notes and Queries*, *Historical Research*, *The Oxford Companion to Black British History* and the *Encyclopaedia of Blacks in European History and Culture*. She has also carried out research for English Heritage into connections between their properties and the history of Slavery and Abolition and sourced quotations for Susan Doran's *The Tudor Chronicles* (Quercus, 2008). She is fascinated by how history is communicated to the public. As a freelance historian and journalist, she has worked for *The Sunday Times*, the BBC, the National Trust, and the Rugby Football Foundation and been published in the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and *History Today*. Recent projects include the *Influential Black Londoners* exhibition at the National Trust's Sutton House in Hackney, an entry for John Blanke (fl.1507–1512) for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, and articles for *BBC History Magazine* on Africans in Tudor and Stuart Britain and the city of Cartagena de Indias. Her first book, *Black Tudors*, will be published by Oneworld in autumn 2016.

Notes

*Correspondence: Independent scholar, 13 Heath Mansions, The Mount, London NW3 6SN. Email: mirandackaufmann@gmail.com

¹ McCullough (1962); Johnson (1971); Barthelemy (1987); D'Amico (1991); Mangum (2002); Bovilsky (2008).

² Other examples include the following: John Collop, "On an Ethiopian Beauty, M.S." (1656); Walton Poole, "To a Black Gentlewoman: Mistress A.H." (1656); Abraham Wright, "To A Black Gentlewoman, Mistress A.H." (1656); Edward Herbert, "Sonnet of Black Beauty" (1665). These and related poems are all printed in Hall, 269–290.

³ CCA U85/38/14

⁴ Levin, 104–120; Sim, 35–42.

⁵ This passage is often cited, but usually in a discussion of theories about skin colour, rather than as evidence of an instance of interracial marriage in England. See Jordan, 15; Fryer, 143; Hall, 11–12; Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, 47; Boose, 44; and Newman, 78–80.

⁶ *ALHTS*, III, 377, 388; TNA, E 101/417/6, ms. 50. Kaufmann, "John Blanke (fl.1507–12)".

- ⁷ LMA P78/NIC/001; CKS, P347/1/1, f. 108; GL MS 9155
- ⁸ LMA P78/NIC/001
- ⁹ BRO, FCP/St P+J/R/1(a)2 She died of the plague in December 1603: BRO FCP/St P+J/R/1 (a) 4. Her husband manufactured “byllys” or bills, a type of weapon. The spelling “byllys” is used by Margaret Paston in 1465: “the tenauntes havynge rusty polexis and byllys”: *Paston letters*, Ed. Davis, 312.
- ¹⁰ Although the Hebrew refers to a “Cushite” woman, so she may have been from N. Arabia, 16th–17th century English readers would have taken it to mean Africa, as the Latin text was “Aethiopiassa”, translated as “Ethiopian woman” in the King James’s Bible. Although King James’ translation was not published until 1611, 11 years after Joane Marye’s wedding, the translation as “Ethiopian” had been used as early as Wycliffe’s version (c.1382–1395). See also Iyengar, 24.
- ¹¹ *The Marriage Registers of St. Dunstan’s, Stepney*, ed. T. Colyer-Fergusson, I: 70, 72, 78. These “three marriages between Negroes” were noted by the East London History Group in 1982, but without further elucidation or comment: Drake, 173. A 1618 burial record at St. Botolph’s Aldgate refers to “Anne Vause, a black-more, wife to Anthonie Vause, Trompeter, of the said countrey”: GL MS 9222/1
- ¹² CKS, P347/1/1, f.115
- ¹³ LMA X097/233
- ¹⁴ WRO, St Martin’s in the Fields Parish Registers, vol. 2.
- ¹⁵ CRO FP236/1/1
- ¹⁶ Essex RO, D/AEA 16, f. 162v; West Sussex Record Office, Ep.I/17/8, f. 139r; GL MS 9065E/1 f. 81
- ¹⁷ BCB, V, 94v.
- ¹⁸ Kaufmann, “Africans in Britain”, 246–255.
- ¹⁹ Ian Mortimer. *The Time Travellers Guide to Elizabethan England. Episode 3: Brave New World*, BBC2, 14 June 2013, 9 pm.
- ²⁰ CRO P99/1/1
- ²¹ Bromley Archives, Hayes Parish Records, P180/1/1 1539–1742
- ²² Dorset RO, Mayors Accounts (town and County of Poole) 1609–10, MA 10, transcript, 15.
- ²³ See: BCB, IV, f. 344; BCB, V, f. 7v, 94v; GL MS 4097; Halliday, *Habeas Corpus: from England to Empire*, 150–1; WRO, StMartin’s in the Fields Parish Registers, vol. 2.
- ²⁴ GL MS 4515/1
- ²⁵ WRO, St Mary Le Strand Parish Registers, vol. 1
- ²⁶ Galen wrote: “the female semen is exceedingly weak and unable to advance to that state of motion in which it could impress an artistic form upon the fetus”. Galen, II: 633. Samuel Purchas reported that some, including Herodotus, attributed dark skin to the “blacknesse of the Parents sperme or seed”: Purchas, 545.
- ²⁷ PWDRO 358/6 MF2. It is not entirely clear from the entry whether “basterd Neger” is meant to describe Katheren or Don Pedro.
- ²⁸ BRO FCP/Dy/R/1(a)1
- ²⁹ See Fryer, 8; Sherwood, 41; Scobie, 8; Habib *Shakespeare and Race*, 30–31.
- ³⁰ Hotson discusses a poem of 1656, “On Luce Morgan, a Common Whore”, which begins: “here lies black luce, that pick-hatch drab”. He identifies the subject of the poem as the Lucy Morgan who appeared before the Bridewell Court in 1598, and said that “she lyeth at the house of Edward Tilsley and kepted the saime at Picket hatch Att the upper end of Aldersgate London.” This appears to be the woman referred to in the poem, as they have the same Pick-hatch address. (249–252)
- ³¹ TNA, SP 12/270/119
- ³² LMA, MJ/SBR/1, ff. 479, 498.
- ³³ BRO, FC1/1620–1632/19
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