

Emblems of Darkness: *Othello* (1604) and the *Masque of Blackness* (1605)

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Critical response to *Othello*'s blackness—or moorishness—has centered in many ways the discussion about the play. The “visual signifier of his Otherness” —in Virginia M. Vaughan's words—has been considered from two apparently opposed perspectives. On the one hand, some prefer to underplay the colour references in order to present *Othello*'s tragedy in terms of the essentials of human condition;¹ for them, his blackness needs a symbolic reconstruction in order to be assimilated to the “universal” aspects presented in *Othello*'s *ethos*. On the other hand, neohistoricist and postcolonial readings have assimilated the presence of blackness to a problematized view of racial relations and consider *Othello* as the epitome of Shakespeare's deconstruction of Elizabethan stereotypes about race. This type of interpretation is justified by the compromise of the critic with a political agenda and anatemizes all other positions as racist.

Both approaches, in spite of their apparent opposition, focus the question of blackness in the play from perspectives on race historically constructed and elaborated precisely after its first productions. “Symbolic” readings which have focused on the “universal” aspects of *Othello*'s *ethos* have left aside any specific framing relevant to the hypothetical original audience/s—the variety of London playgoers or the privileged elite at court.

Neohistoricist and postcolonial readings view the problem of race in terms defined after the American experience of slavery and racism, and so tend to manipulate certain aspects in *Othello* to present it as “a tragedy of race” (Lomba, 1989, 61). The problem is, again, that they ignore the premises of reception of a potential original audience which did not necessarily have a familiar perception of black people as slaves because England was too far from the trade routes of black slaves (Jordan, 3-4). Besides, in spite of their value as “exotic” elements in some noble households, the dominant ideological and religious discourses in reformed England presented blackness as a sign of moral condemnation. In words of the presbyterian Thomas Cartwright, writing in 1569, “England was to pure an air for slaves to breath in”. Finally, the concept of European, currently used to describe the potential audience on which the expectations of the racial topic of blackness would work, is simply unacceptable. If we attempt to define the beliefs, social rules and attitudes towards darkness in Europe at the time, we can, at least, find two different perceptions of the matter: the catholic and the reformist.² To insist on the concept of

¹ On the main schools of *Othello*'s criticism see A. Gerald (1957); Karen Newman exemplifies the critical intent of the “symbolic school” on M. R. Ridley's edition of the play (1958, rpt. 1979). For an updated presentation of the critical positions on this question see Virginia M. Vaughan (1994) esp. 51-71.

² Rodríguez Mateos' study of the Blackmen Brotherhood in Seville during the 16th and 17th centuries shows how everyday contact between black and white people within the family household created the necessary conditions to articulate the black other in the social network—at least symbolically. Catholic societies stressed the doctrine of Christ's mystical body as part of a complex answer to the Reformist emphasis on the doctrine of Predestination: “una metáfora que constituye una síntesis ideológica del papel de los hombres en el seno de la Iglesia: todos constituyen miembros de un mismo cuerpo cuya cabeza es Cristo, por lo que han de mantener con Él la misma relación que los distintos miembros del cuerpo mantienen con la cabeza ... bajo esta teoría subyace un profundo mensaje de contestación social, una rebeldía simbólica a la rígida estructura estamental” (572). This view can hardly be included under the same label—eurocentrism—with the English experience of the racial question.

“eurocentrism” modelled after the particular experience of the reformed countries seems an attempt to oversimplify European history of ideas in order to elaborate a “myth of origins” for racism, which curiously enough is made to coincide with the appearance of the myth of the Renaissance —white— man.

In the next pages I will focus on several textual and intertextual connections of Othello’s colour with other historical discourses on blackness. I would like to argue that Othello’s colour is essential in the construction of the *mythos* of the play but as part of a mask that a white actor would carry on stage and, in that sense, a symbolic attribute more than a realistic trait of racial characterization. I would like to suggest a series of discursive frames where Shakespeare’s potential audience could place those ostensive signs made from the stage about Othello’s colour. In order to do so I will proceed on the cotextual frames for the appearance of the word “black” in other Shakesporean works apart from *Othello*. Then I will check if these textual usages can be related to Jonson’s *Masque of Blackness*.¹ And, finally, I will consider some concrete aspects in Othello’s actions and characterization under the light of current symbolic codes present in early Seventeenth Century England.

The most common use of black in Shakespeare’s plays and sonnets is not associated to race but operates within two different semantic frames: either as a moral evaluation or as the natural attribute of an object or phenomenon. In *As You Like it*, Rosalind comments on a letter: “Ethiop words blacker in their effect than in their countenance” (4, 3, 35) and Hamlet identifies his mother as “O, bossom black as death” (3, 3, 67).

But in those texts where this colour receives a more developed treatment for poetic or dramatic reasons, the referential frame is organized after the premise “black is beautiful and desirable”. In *Titus Andronicus*, Aaron, a dark character, uses the modifier to present his son’s merits in terms of a proverbial saying;

Ye whitelimed walls, ye alehouse painted sighs,
Coal black is better than another hue
In that it scorns to bear another hue;
For all the water in the ocean
Can never turn the swan’s black legs to white,
although she lave them hourly in the flood. (4, 2, 97-102).

In *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Rosaline’s “blackness” is also used as an argument in favour of the quality of her beauty as Berowne says: “(...) Where is a book, / That I may swear beauty doth beauty lack/ If that she learn not of her eye to look?/ No face is fair that is not full so black (4, 3, 248-51). His main argument is that beauty “(...) mourns that painting and usurping hair/ Should ravish doters with a false aspect, / And therefore is she borne to make black fair” (255-7) He then reformulates the proverbial saying: “to wash white an Ethiop” in order to stress blackness as a natural hue against the forged beauty of all other women’s faces:

King: And Ethiops of their sweet complexion crack.
Dumain: Dark needs no candles now, for dark is light.
Berowne: Your mistresses dare never come in rain,
For fear their colours should be wash’d away. (264-7)

According to Lily in *Campaspe* (1581), this was a fashionable topic to commend ladies as it presented a ground for paradoxical argumentation and witticism (David, 104).

¹ Although this connection has already been presented by Karen Newman (1991) it is quite surprising however that Jonson’s masque is read as “a preeminent example of the black and white opposition in the period (...) It is only necessary that the twelve nymphs, negro’s, be revealed —that we see them— for the antimasque to have taken place” (75). To use the term “antimasque” for this play —it only appeared used as such in the *Masque of Queens* (1609) — is to force a dubious binary structure on the text. Even the relation between the masques of *Blackness* (1605) and *Beauty* (1608) is not one of opposed terms but of a paradoxical relation of inclusion associated with the spiritual progression between states.

The same rhetorical device appears in some sonnets addressed to the “Black Lady”. In *S.127*, the reason offered by the poetic “I” to praise his mistress’ blackness is “For since each hand hath put on nature’s power, / Fairing the foul with Art’s false borrow’d face, / Sweet Beauty hath no name, no holy bower, / But is profan’d if not lives in disgrace”. Blackness can be considered beautiful because it shows Nature’s designs as opposed to beauty forged by art or human will. But at the same time this love for the action of nature seems to imply that natural passions are also at stake and so this love may prove “mad in pursuit, and in possession so” (*S.129*). Curiously enough, Desdemona and Iago engage in one of this witty dialogues while waiting for the Moor at Cyprus: “Desd: What would thou write of me, if thou shouldst praise me?” After Iago accepts her challenge, she presents him with the paradox: “What if she be black and witty?”. Iago’s answer takes the conceit into bawdiness, something Desdemona’s “worse and worse” (II, i, 117-134) evaluates in a negative sense as part of a courtly game of wit.

I think there are proofs enough in Shakespeare’s idiom not to dismiss the symbolic implications of blackness in *Othello*. I would argue that emblematic coinages such as Alciatus’ emblem of “Impossibility” played an essential role for the establishment of a wide set of references which articulated the diverse meanings of “blackness” available to a Jacobean London audience; particularly, that at the court. The proximity between the performances of *Othello* and the *Masque of Blackness* allows us to vindicate this level of reading.

Blackness was presented on Twelfth Night 1605, two months after the King’s company performed *Othello* before James I. The fact that the motif of blackness for the masque was “Her Majesty’s will” —as Jonson says in the introduction— indicates that this was a fashionable courtly topic. Although Jonson’s entertainment was restricted to Whitehall while Shakespeare’s *Othello* could also be shown at the Globe, we can argue the existence of an emblematic subtext in the elaboration of both the masque and the tragedy; the potential audience for the complete subtext would be certainly restricted, but parts of it were echoed in more popular registers of discourse — proverbs and sayings mainly but also sermons— and could be accessible to larger sections of the audience.

The plot of the masque is organized on the motif of turning the impossible into real: Niger, the father of 12 nymphs, presents his daughters’ “firm Hue” and claims that “in their black the perfect’st beauty grows”. Then he laments the pernicious influence of “some styled poets” who, by telling Phaëton’s myth, had presented blackness as the degrading result of human pride: Phaëton’s *superbia* brought down the chariot of fire and scorched the Aethiopians. Because of this, Niger’s daughters see themselves now “black, with black despair” and desire to become fair. Finally, their tears has moved him to search for a motif which could bring them patience, as in his argument he has rejected any possibility to change Nature’s action: “To frustrate which strange error, oft I sought, / Tho’ most in vain, against a settled thought / As women’s are, till they confirmed at length / By miracle, what I, with so much strength / Of argument resisted ...” (Morley, 39-40)

At this point, Oceanus tells him where he is: “This land ... is Albion the fair, / So called of Neptune’s son, who ruleth here”. Immediately afterwards Aethiop —the Moon— appears to present the possibility of performing the impossible, directing his attention towards the figure who holds such a power: James as a personified Britannia “whose beams shine day and night, and are of force/ To blanch an Ethiop, and revive a corpse./ His light sciential is, and, past mere nature, / can salve the rude defects of every creature” (Morley, 42). The transformation undertaken is not presented in the masque, but it is concluded that after a year following “the rites prescribed” Niger’s daughters will appear back at court to show their bettering (Morley, 44).

In the play, Jonson makes use of Alciatus’ emblem in order to vehicle an absolutist statement about the king’s powers, who could alone act above natural laws. Stating his uniqueness was also a way to emphasize that all under him were subjected to those laws. The reference to the “rites” links the end of the play and the forthcoming *Masque of Beauty* —shown at court three years later— with several discursive instances where the appearance of blackness may be linked to the presentation of spiritual transformation, either by the action of an almighty human being —the king— or as the result of alchemical action. The transformation from “nigredo” or “nigridity”

into “albification” was the the first step in the alchemic process which ended in the Philosophers’ stone. The calcination of the initial elements left a black substance which could be figured as “death, mortification, or scenes of death and killing” (Roberts, 105). In this substance nevertheless lay the seed of the whole process towards albification, or whitening. The need of “perfect blackness” at this stage was represented by means of a black crow with a white head, and it could also be hinted in sayings such as: “Black best sets forth white “ or “Every white has its black”. The figure of a black man could also be used to present this alchemical stage, as it appears, for instance, in the illustrations of Nicola D’Antonio degli Agli’s manuscript, *Nozze* (1480), an esoteric description of the alchemical elements and operations under the form of a wedding. In the procession “two black pages represent nigredo which will become white. The white seeds which are being thrown by the page on the camel precede the red seed which are still invisible at this stage of the alchemical process” (Klossowsky, 59). The description of the chariot of the Horned Moon with Diana’s attributes in the *Masque of Beauty* is very similar to the iconography of the chariot of “Luna”, one of the seven planetarian gods symbolizing the essential metals in *Nozze* and the image itself of the cleansing waters which wash the nigredo in the alchemic process (Klossowsky, 63). This cleansing function might be another representation of the absolute king persona, another shape for the royal actor.

A look to Alciatus’ emblem and its different versions shows how the potential racial issues at stake in the use of blackness were less clearly defined than others related to the ideology of absolute power and the possibility of individual human will to act on the social system which, in many ways was still regarded, as a stable—natural— creation.

Under the motto “Impossibile”, Alciatus’ original (1531) shows two white men who try to wash white a naked black man who sits on a square block. They stand in front of an ornamental fountain. The commentary states the impossibility to turn Nature’s action and attributes: “No one can light up the darkness of black night” (Daly et al, 1985, 59). In the pictorial development, the presence of the fountain and the block where the black man sits makes clear the sort of interpretation demanded. The fountain was a symbol of the control of human art on one of the most popular cleansing elements—water— and the square block an iconographic attribute of Nature as opposed to the sphere where changing Fortune normally stood.

The moral interpretation of the emblem was expanded in the German and French versions (1536, 1542). Human action is useless against certain natural manifestations and so wise men must be patient and avoid acts of useless pride: “There are a thousand things for which there is no remedy. No matter how hard you try, you will not be master of them. Therefore if you seek to be above reproach, do not try to make a Moor white ...” (Daly & Cuttler, 1985, 59). Apart from the transformation of the “Aethiop” in Alciatus’ emblem into a “Moor” —an oscillation which is also reflected in the different ways Othello is mentioned throughout the play— the final remark makes a direct reference to the original source of the emblem and, consequently, to its moral reading: “An inveterate vice remains”. The topic is drawn from Jeremiah 13, 23 —“Can the Aethiopian change his skin/ or the leopard his spots?”— and it uses the image of Ethiops and the spotted skin of leopards as two epitomes of the workings of Nature or “God’s will and ordinance”.

Another related topic appears in the commentary of the German version: “Similarly, take note that natural vice and what time has aged can never be eradicated no matter what art one uses”. In this case “age” is another example of the workings of nature and the impossibility to change its course. It is surprising that very little reference has been made to Othello’s age,¹ and how this element could link him to a whole tradition of old husbands, a type traditionally associated to jealousy: “(Jealousy) is most evident in old men, that are cold and dry by nature, and married *succi plenis*, to young wanton wives; with old doting Janivere in Chaucer, they began to mistrust

¹ Virginia M. Vaughan has considered the similarity between Othello’s military attitudes and the models presented in treatises and regulations published during the 16th and 17th centuries in England. One of those features is to be “a patriarchal figure” (40).

all is not well: 'She was young and he was old / And therefore he feared to cuckold'. And how should it be otherwise? Old age is a disease of itself, loathsome, full of suspicion and fear; when it is at best, unable, unfit for such matters ... Many men are suspicious of their wives ... but old folks above the rest" (Jackson, 3, 266-7).

The English version of the emblem —*Aethiopem Lavare* in Whitney's *Emblemes* (1586) — provides the clearest connection with the dramatic use of the motif both in *Blackness* and *Othello*. The pictorial treatment duplicates Alciatus' but the commentary emphasizes how vain human powers prove against Nature:

(...) nature is of power,
 Doe what thou canste, to keepe his former hue
 Though with a forke, wee Nature Thruste awaie
 Shee turnes againe, if wee withdrawe our hande;
 And though wee ofte to conquer her assaie,
 Yet all in vaine, shee turnes if still wee stande:
 Then evermore, in what thou doest assaie,
 Let reason rule, and doe the thinges thou maie. (Daly, 1985)

The moral message was not only restricted to the emblem. Something similar appears in the proverb "Above God there is no Lord, above Black there is no colour; and above salt there is found no savour" (Smith & Wilson, 65). Blackness —more often than not— implies the expression of the absolute; consequently, its negation presented a paradoxical situation which might be dramatically exploited with very different purposes.

Since the presence of black people was not the only experiential frame for the interpretation of a character painted black when the plays were first produced, we may question Othello's blackness as a racial reference that both Shakespeare and his audience could be troubled with. A reading of blackness in the period leads us rather to think in a set of significative frames where a dark character as the center of a tragedy could be seen as an attempt to challenge other aspects of knowledge and cultural preconceptions instead of simply racial issues.

Is Othello "the white in the Black?" Or, at least, is Shakespeare trying to puzzle his audience's view about the actions of human will on Nature's creative work? Is he dramatically exploiting the relations between black and white offered in alchemic interpretations, in the *doxa* of the proverbial expressions, and in the more intellectual coding of the emblems? Queen Anne's interest in blackness can hardly be read in terms of a royal concern for racial attitudes; it looks more like the choice of a fashionable topic which could convey a deep moral —or political— message under the exciting shape of an entertainment including dances, transformation scenes and songs. Jonson's concern in *Blackness* is to show the uniqueness of the new monarch, while *Othello* presents a problematized perspective on several cultural assumptions. Shakespeare's final turn of wit is to place a black mask —a common practice in actual masques— on the face of his hero and then to make him perform in front of his audience an apparent reversal of natural truth, the mask becoming true visage.

In this sense we may recall the intellectual place where Desdemona sees Othello's visage: in his mind, not in his nature; in that part of him that could be made up by the effects of language, that is, a form of human art: rhetoric. It is the same position adopted by the poetic "I" in *S.131* where he confesses "thy black is fairest in my judgement's place". There is an obvious contradiction between Othello's self evaluation of his linguistic abilities — "Rude am I in my speech/ and little blest with the set phrase of peace" (1, 3, 81-2)— and his forthcoming words; or the sort of narrative he engages Desdemona with —a travel story told according to the pathetic conventions of romance. Also, Othello's rigorous control of the time given to "love and wordly matters", presents a strong contrast to the timeless images prevalent in lovers' discourse, particularly young lovers.

Othello's nature, characterized by age and geographical origin as much as by race, seems to be "assaied" by Othello's will to leave his "exotic-foreign" nature, to become, by artificial —

rhetorical— means, a natural subject of the Venetian state. If Othello plays during the opening acts “the white in the black” for the puzzlement of his audience, he ends acting according to the *doxa* on darkness. His audience could certainly recall the Turk with whom he identifies at the end of the play as a natural prototype of jealousy: “Many terrible examples we have in this kind, amongst the Turks specially, many jealous outrages” (Jackson, 3, 260). His sexual contention, his rhetorical ability —recorded as a need for the foreigner in Hernando de Soto’s emblem *Utilis Eloquentia Profugis* (1599)— seem to point out the possibility of reversing the impossible, in this case his nature as a foreigner. Shakespeare’s dramatic strategies seem to appeal in the first two acts to another proverbial saying: “The devil is not so black as he is painted;” a question set on appearances and an invitation to check what these appearances might hide.

But Iago triggers the mechanism for Nature to come through, and he makes a point precisely to challenge the explicit comments of the Duke or Ludovico about “Othello’s fairness” in order to stress the Moor’s inevitable dependance on his “true” nature. The relevance of this mechanism in Iago’s plot becomes obvious in the exchange in act 4, 1, when Ludovico, after seeing Othello hit Desdemona, wonders (and I find no reason to doubt about Ludovico’s sympathetic attitude towards Othello):

Is this the noble Moor, whom our full Senate
Thought all in all sufficient? This the noble nature,
Whom passion could not shake? whose solid virtue
The shot of accident, nor dart of chance,
Could neither graze, nor pierce. (270-4).

Ludovico’s questions are answered by Iago in his habitual cryptic form. He rejects Ludovico’s suggestion of madness to explain Othello’s behaviour —“Are his wits safe? is he not light of brain?” — asserting: “He’s that he is; I may not breathe my censure, / what he might be; if, as he might, he is not, / I would to heaven he were!” (275-8). His initial statement identifies his behaviour not with madness but with his nature, and the same is emphasized in the second sentence with a hypothetical construction which provides a metalinguistic comment. If we expand the truism “what he might be, he is not” in relation to Othello’s nature, we realize that Iago is presenting Ludovico’s image of the Moor as “deceived” because it contradicts the laws of Nature. His final assertion diverts the clear accusation previously uttered by means of a lie: his wish that everything he is saying might prove false.

The succession of events seems to prove Iago’s position and also the truth of the emblem but Shakespeare’s use of suicide allows a reconsideration about the final message of the play. Through the image of his divided self Othello is able to die a Venetian by killing his dark nature —age, jealousy, alienation and colour. In this way the final act of human will can contradict the emblem and present the potential of the individual to rise upon his own destiny by means of self-punishment. This in Othello, as in Oedipus, means to acknowledge the act of transgression and thus the validity of the law. Consequently, the hero is able in his final action to identify with an idealized —socially sanctioned— self model.

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