

Seminar 44: "Shakespeare without Africans: Staging Blackness in the Early Modern Theater"

Seminar Leader: Ian Smith

ABSTRACTS

Bianca F.-C. Calabresi

Fairleigh Dickinson University

Title: "Atramentous impressions": inking and blushing in *Othello*

By the beginning of the seventeenth century, the phrase "black as ink" becomes not merely a descriptive but an explanatory tool in emerging discussions of skin color. Particularly when "common Inke" or iron gall is used, the fluid seems to nascent "natural philosophers" to embody directly what they argue might be a physiological cause of racial difference in its present and original forms. This paper re-examines Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello* in light of these theories, charting the presence of early modern discourses in both plays of a "condition . . . in the blood" through which "Moors might possibly become Negroes, receiving Atramentous impressions" (Thomas Browne: 337). In drama, such incipient theories often appear alongside residual, often proverbial, invocations of blushing as a sign of differential skin color. This paper looks, however more particularly, at the associations of "mummy" with printing ink in *Othello* and, through its allusion to the "Moresque style," in its Italian source text. I argue that the prevalence of inked plates "alla moresca" in early modern ornament and embroidery guides suggest that the Moor's handkerchief would already have been imagined as colored black in Cinthio's novella. Moreover, *Othello*'s stage property consolidates the play's multiple references to pitch, sulfur, and other "advenient and artificial ways of denigration," thus making salient the emerging discourse of the production of blackness and whiteness from the same raw materials acted upon differently in the blood. Material explanations for the blackness of ink function much as do the interaction of sanguinity and paper in this period: they construct an imagined, and ultimately alterior, somatic interior based upon changing understandings of the physical interactions of paper and writing fluid. *Othello* reveals the uncertainty at the heart of these explanations, resorting in its final scene to sanguineous rubrication, or writing in blood, to resolve the undetermined production of skin color on its stage.

Meghan Daly Costa

Northwestern University

Title: “Washing the Ethiop White and Cheating the Subtle Jew”: Staging Racial Transformation in Richard Brome’s *The English Moore* (1637)

First performed two decades before England reopened its doors to Jewish immigration in 1656, Richard Brome’s *The English Moor* (1637) puts a mercenary spin on the intermarriage threat (real or imagined) by staging an enforced union between a Christian woman and a Jewish usurer. When Quicksands’s Christian debtors protest his arranged intermarriage by attempting to cuckold him on his wedding night, Quicksands preempts their designs by disguising the “fair” Millicent with blackface paint. Building on Virginia Mason Vaughan’s contention that the “*application of black make-up proves not nearly so important as the moment of its removal [on the early modern stage],*” this essay argues that the Jew of Mark-Lane darkens Millicent *only* so that he can later whitewash her in front of an English audience—thus performing the ‘impossible’ and proving himself fit for assimilation. Although Quicksands leverages the “washing the Ethiop white” trope to advance his own bid for English inclusion, the London community ultimately puts the “Jew of Mark-Lane” in his proverbial place by reclaiming “whitewashing” as a process of European male privilege.

Susan Michele Dunn-Hensley

Wheaton College

Title: Performing Beauty and Race in *The Masque of Blackness*

Western beauty standards permeate global media. The monolithic images that these standards promote can redefine cultural beliefs about attractiveness, rewriting cultural and racial diversity as unattractive even monstrous. In response to these powerful cultural beauty narratives, women around the world have increasingly embraced Western fashion, skin whitening products, and cosmetic surgeries (perhaps most disturbing the double eyelid procedures). In this essay, I will examine early modern constructions of beauty, considering ways in which power inscribes cultural constructions of beauty. In particular, I will examine Ben Jonson’s *The Masque of Blackness*, considering the subversive nature of Queen Anne’s use of blackface but also exploring the ways in which power dynamics and racial theories can be written onto the female body. Ultimately, I will consider early modern representations of race in terms of color, culture, and sexuality.

Kalissa Hendrickson

Arizona State University

Title: Performing Race Through Commodities in Early Modern Civic Pageantry

My paper, “Performing Race Through Commodities in Early Modern Civic Pageantry,” will explore how early seventeenth-century Lord Mayor’s Shows coupled the performance of race with the presence of imperial commodities. Lord Mayor’s Shows, annual spectacles funded at great expense by the prominent merchant companies of London, publically celebrated the yearly election of a new Lord Mayor in a series of lavish pageants. Much is unknown regarding performance practices in these pageants; the age, sex, race, and professional status of actors in these shows is still a subject of scholarly debate. Yet, in their display of pro-mercantilist rhetoric, these shows often paired racial figures with actual commodities from the lands/races they were representing. For example, in Squire’s *The Tryumphs of Peace* (1620) the figure representing “Africa” is described as “a blackmoore” who has “in her hand the branch of a Nut-megg-tree”, and in Middleton’s *The Triumph of Honor and Virtue* (1622) “a black personage representing *India*” is displayed alongside “all manner of spice-plants and trees bearing odour”. And though the skin color of the “company of Indians” is not specifically mentioned in Middleton’s *The Triumphs of Honor and Industry* (1617) the fact that they are described as “growing spices” and “making up bags of pepper” reveals they were not meant to be understood as “Indians” from the Americas (who were more commonly “performed” through the presence of feathers and/or tobacco). This paper argues that imperial commodities in Lord Mayor’s Shows not only displayed the wealth of the world, but, in the absence of black performers, also served to communicate and perform race for London spectators.

Brenda Henry-Offor

SUNY, Empire State College

Title: Savage Beings: The Black Body on the Renaissance Stage

In this essay I examine Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello* to understand the playwright’s staged performances of blackness. In the two plays characters of color are portrayed as slaves, sexual beings, exotic and frightening. White male characters embodied the ideas put forth in the two plays, complicating the perceived notions of the audiences thus, making it difficult for present day readers to gather a clear understanding of what and how Renaissance audiences received the plays. My task is to elucidate how and what Renaissance audiences gathered from these performances.

Naomi Conn Liebler

Montclair State University

Title: "What she fear'd to look on"—Othello's Old Black Ram

When Brabantio speaks his astonishment that Desdemona, "A maiden, never bold," should "fall in love with what she fear'd to look on!" (1.3.94-98), the assumption often made is that it's Othello's black face, his "sooty bosom" (1.2.70) that must frighten her. Yet Brabantio cites Desdemona's "years" second only to her "nature" among the factors that should have sent her fleeing from, not drawn her to, her father's favorite dinner guest. The play notes the hero's age nearly as often as his race among the qualities that mark him out as other. The art historian Philip Sohm writes, "Unlike race and gender, with age we eventually become the 'other'... [but] unlike racists and sexists, every ageist turns into the object he fears. ... Age turns us against ourselves" (*The Artist Grows Old* 19). While Othello's performance of race remain the inescapable centerpiece of his play, in a slight departure from but (to my mind) still related sense of the seminar's direction, I want to explore age as an equally strong reason for the character's articulated sense of his congenital and experiential alienation. The play repeatedly reminds us that if Othello is "other," it is not only because of his race; "the young affects / In [him are] defunct" (1.3.263-64), and that he is not just a black ram, but worse, an old one (1.1.88). Othello's age stands as a kind of Foucauldian "subjugated knowledge" that we persist in misrecognizing. For many moderns, racism may be sufficiently heinous to be understood as the source of Othello's isolation, but for Shakespeare's audiences, gerontophobia was an equally potent form of social bias.