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Title: Masks of Whiteness

Abstract:

Blackface, as we have come to recognize, is an early modern performance phenomenon. Dramatists have left the record of this theatrical practice in several plays where white characters disguise themselves as racially black, as in *Lust's Dominion*, *The Devil's Law-Case*, *The Parliament of Love*, and *The English Moor*, as if to suggest that whiteness recognizes the social profitability of blackness in certain circumstances. Yet beyond examining blackness as performed disguise, this paper foregrounds *whiteness* itself as a constructed theatrical mask. While the deployment of blackface stages the tactical use of racial difference, Shakespeare simultaneously calls attention to the performativity of whiteness. In this paper, I wish to examine whiteness as its own form of performance disguise to foreground Shakespeare's insistence on calling our attention to whiteness as a form of masquerade.

SAA Paper Abstract
Whiteness and the Comic
Lydia Valentine, Shakespeare's Globe

White Spectatorship and the Racialisation of Metatheatre in Richard Brome's *The English Moor* (1637)

This paper will explore the racial function of self-conscious theatricality in Richard Brome's *The English Moor*. In doing so, this paper seeks to highlight the important role that disguises, reveals and masques within the world of the play perform in defining on- and off-stage racial communities. Critical conversations on early modern drama and metatheatre have not sufficiently considered how this dramatic mode shapes and is shaped by race. Yet Quicksands' Masque of Moors affords privileged white spectators the opportunity to participate in and judge the racialised performances that unfold before them, typically at the expense of the performers and the marginalised communities that they represent. In 'Racist Humor and Shakespearean Comedy', Patricia Akhimie notes that 'shared laughter [...] consolidates and maintains bonds between group members', and white spectators form a privileged racial community by naming and making comedy out of social and racial difference. Therefore, this paper will examine the sense of white collectivity which emerges through this comic trope.

Laughing All the Way to the Playhouse: Affect, Humor, and Racialization in Richard Brome's *The English Moor*

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Abstract | SAA Seminar, Denver 2026: Whiteness and the Comic

This paper explores the affective impact of Richard Brome's comedy *The English Moor*, specifically in the context of the play's earliest performances in the late 1630s. I draw on humor and affect theories to understand how laughter binds individuals together in a theatrical public watching this play in the indoor Caroline playhouse, where affective transmission elicits communal laughter in response to racial impersonation. I follow Sara Ahmed's description of affect as "sticky" (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 2004), attaching to bodies and minds, generating scripts that produce collective orientations, and, in this case, coalescing the early modern theatrical public within structures of feeling that positively racialize whiteness and negatively racialize blackness.

While many depictions of race in early modern drama leverage negative feelings of fear, anxiety, or unease in encounters with racial alterity onstage, *The English Moor* plays on pleasurable affects such as laughter, delight, and surprise in racial impersonations intended to be humorous. The comic pleasure of watching this play brings its (ostensibly) elite, white, Protestant, English audience together in both belonging and marginalization. Spectators are invited to communally laugh at racial impersonation, particularly at the subplot involving Millicent's blacked-up disguise. This blackface subplot plays on cultural anxieties and rehearses racial exclusion by reinforcing the intended audience's normative whiteness in opposition to blackness imagined as threatening to white English domestic and social structures.

Furthermore, the indoor playhouse heightens affective transmission: spectators and players occupy close proximity, while technical affordances such as candlelight, cosmetics, costumes, and properties create strong visual, olfactory, and textural effects. "Sticky" affective habits not only govern audiences' encounters with fictional characters in the playhouse but also encourage them to psychosomatically apply exclusionary habits of feeling to real subjects outside the playhouse. Thus, Brome's play participates in the decades-long project of affective racemaking by Elizabethan, Jacobean, and Caroline drama and demonstrates how racecraft operates not only as a representational system but also as a felt and contagious facet of theatrical experience that persists across genre, ultimately revealing how communal, affective pleasure in comedy could function as a powerful technology of early modern racial formation.

Swaggering Imposters: Whiteness and the Character of Racecraft from Shakespeare's *Henry the Fourth, Part 2* to Robert Chamberlain's *The Swaggering Damsel*

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What is the racializing function of the stock comedic character in early modern drama? In this essay, I look to the swaggerer type, with Shakespeare's Pistol and Chamberlain's titular damsel, Sabina, as bookends, to develop a theory of character-as-form that organizes and coordinates literary with social knowledge. I argue that the stock character serves as a resource for early modern racecraft, that powerful framework Karen Fields and Barbara Fields provide for attending to that which subtends racism, its underlying imaginative and "mental terrain"; racecraft thus foregrounds, as Urvashi Chakravarty explains, "how the crafting of race as a fiction is constructed and operates, and to what ends." Thinking with this concept to study how the professional stage contributes to racecraft, I suggest the swaggerer illuminates how character, as form rather than any particular dramatic person, is an element of the imaginative, fictive structures of racialization, gesturing toward what we might describe as an early modern narratology of racecraft. More specifically, I explore how the swaggerer type dramatizes the social condition of being an imposter—the type's consistent trait across its various theatrical iterations—whether through the cowardly braggart boasting their martial prowess, the presumptuous upstart living beyond their station, or the prodigal wastrel consuming their inheritance. Through the type's various impersonations, the swaggerer becomes defined by their lack of discipline and self-control, thereby travestyng the responsible management of propertied wealth. Seen this way, the swaggerer comically expresses that anxiety constitutive of whiteness amid England's socioeconomic reordering. Situated in the context of protocapitalist development in England, facilitated through the European colonization of the Americas and the transatlantic slave trade, the swaggerer enacts what Arthur L. Little describes as "white racial assemblaging," the concatenation of affects, beliefs, and ideas, of gestures, symbols, and vocabularies that compose whiteness, but through its negation—that limn the emergent boundaries of whiteness, but through its counterfeiting.