MOORS IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

Othello, the Moor

The subject of race in Othello has been explored by critics for many centuries. Shakespeare dubs him the 'Moor of Venice' but the evolving meaning of the term 'moor', has led to much debate about the ethnic background of Othello. The OED demonstrates the shift in meaning that occurred with this term:

> 'Originally: a native or inhabitant of ancient Mauretania, a region of North Africa corresponding to parts of present-day Morocco and Algeria. Later usually: a member of a Muslim people of mixed Berber and Arab descent inhabiting north-western Africa (now mainly present-day Mauritania), who in the 8th cent. conquered Spain.'[1]

The dictionary expands to acknowledge that in the middle ages and as late as the 17th century, 'The Moors were widely supposed to be mostly black or very dark skinned, although the existence of 'white Moors' was recognized, as in A. Borde's c.1549 *Fyrst Book Introd. Knowledge* where he states 'Barbary…the inhabytours be Called the Mores: ther be whyte mores and black moors.'[2] Later in 1555, a frequently cited source in the examination of Othello's race, Peter Martyr of Angleria's *The decades of the newe worlde or west India conteyning the nauigations and conquests of the Spanyards* talks about 'Ethopes…which we nowe caule Moores, Moorens and Negros.'[3] To add to the debate, 'moor' was also a term used to refer to a Muslim as seen in Cesare Frederici's *Voyage and Trauile*: he claims that 'wheras I speak of Moores I mean Mahomets sect.'[4]

Norman Sanders has explored the question of Othello's racial identity, noting the variety of references to Othello's race made throughout the play. He notes the passage when the Duke assures Brabantio that his 'son-in-law is far more fair than black' (I.ii.286),[5] the moment when Iago raises a glass to the 'black Othello' (II.iii.27), Branbantio's outrage that his daughter would cleave to a 'sooty bosom' (I.ii.70), and Emeila's censure of Othello as a 'blacker devil' (V.ii.132). Sanders also notes Othello's own references to his race when he says 'for I am black' (III.iii.265) and refers to Desdemona's besmirched honour as 'now begrimed and black/As mine own face' (III.iii.388).[6] Based on this textual evidence, Sanders concludes that there is evidence to support both ethnicities, Arab and African, commonly associated with the figure of the moor. Sanders acknowledges that Shakespeare often uses the word 'black' in a derogatory sense to mean 'brunette' or simply dark skinned, however he suggests that of the 56 uses of the term in the play, only seven have this meaning.[7] While the question of Othello's racial identity has received much critical attention, ultimately we must acknowledge that the textual evidence is inconclusive and that notions of race within the play are used for dramatic and poetic purposes, generating antitheses between notions of black and white, rather than constructing a stable racial identity for the eponymous hero.

Figure 1. A portrait believed to be of Leo Africanus c.1520. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington

Europe's Relationships with Africa and the Middle East

E. A. J. Honigman, using Edward Said's *Orientalism* as a starting point, defines the early modern approach to race in the following terms, in which Westerners saw 'Europeans as rational, virtuous, mature and 'normal', and the Orientals as irrational, depraved, childlike, 'different.'[8]

Venice, as featured in the play, was famous for its absorption of foreigners due to its location on the Mediterranean frontier. However as Europe's furthest outpost, it had to defend the rest of the continent from being overrun by its enemies, hence the crucial strategic importance of Cyprus and the edgy fear experienced by all the characters in *Othello* of being invaded by the Turks. Andrew Hadfield notes that, were Othello portrayed as a Muslim moor, he would have

been reminiscent to a contemporary audience of the Turks that were considered so dangerous in the play until they were happily disposed of by the storm.[9]

Leo Africanus (also known as John Leo), who has been considered to be a potential influence on Shakespeare for the character of Othello, was a scholarly North African Arab who travelled widely before being captured by Venetian pirates in the Mediterranean. He converted to Christianity and produced *The History and Descriptions of Africa in 1526* which attempted to provide a balanced picture of the various peoples of Africa. He spoke of the Africans in a positive light with his report that,

> 'Those Arabians that inhabit in Barbarie or upon the coast of the Mediterranean sea, are greatly addicted unto the studie of good artes and sciences: and those things which concerne their law and religion are esteemed by them in the first place. Moreoever they have beene heretofore studious of the Mathematiques, of Philpsophie, and of Astrologie…The inhabitants of cities doe most religiously observe and reverence those things which appertaine into their religion…They keep their covenant most faithfully, insomuchthat they had rather die than breake promise…So desirous they are of riches and honour that, that therein no other people can goe beyonde. They travell in a manner over the whole world to exercise traffique. For they are continually to be seene in Aegypt, in Aethieopia, in Arabia, Persia, India and Turkie: and whithersoever they goe, they are most honourably esteemed of: for none of them posess any arte, unless hee hath attained unto great exactness and perfection therein…Those which we before named white, or tawney Moores, are steadfast in friendship: as likewise they indifferently and favourably esteeme of other nations: and wholly indevour themselves in this one thing, namely that they may leade a pleasant and jocund life.'[10]

However, in the interests of producing a balanced account, Africanus also wrote of 'What vices the foresaid Aficans are subject unto', and pondered whether 'the vices of the Africans do surpasse their vertues and good parts.' He claimed:

> 'those which we named the inhabitants of the cities of Barbarie are somewhat needue and covetous, being also very proud and high-minded, and wonderfully addicted unto wrath; in so much that (according to the proverb) they will deeply engrav/ne in marble any injurie be it never so small, and will in no wise blot it out of their remembrance. So rustical are they and void of good manners, that scarcely can any stranger obtaine their familiaritie and friendship. Their wits are but meane, and they are so credulous, that they will believe matters impossible which are told them…They observe no certain order of living nor of laws. Abounding exceedingly with choler, they speake always with angrie and lowd voice…By nature they are vile and base people, being no better accounted if by their governours then if they were dogs…Their minds are perpetually possessed with vexation and strife, so that they will seldome or never shew themselves tractable to any man…they are so greedily addicted unto filthie lucre, that they never could attaine unto any kind of civilitie or good behaviour.'[11]

Moors in Early Modern England

Norman Sanders traces the origins of English knowledge of Africa back to *Mandeville's Travels* which examined the physical characteristics of and geographical locations of the varying degrees of blackness possible in the human race. Later works such as Richard Eden's 1555 *Decades* made the first distinctions between African people, labelling them as 'Moors, Moorens, or Negroes'. By 1601, the African population in England was sufficient enough for Elizabeth to be 'discontented at the great numbers of Negars and blackamoors which are crept into the realm.'[12] However, according to Emma Smith, though the black people were perceived as sufficiently numerous in the late sixteenth century England to be a threat, the anxious perceptions of the number of immigrants frequently grossly exceed actual demography. Smith cites an open letter to the Lord Mayer and Alderman of London, from Queen Eizabeth, 1596:

> Her Majesty understanding that there are of late divers blackmoors brought into this realm, of which kind of people there are already here too many, considering how God hath blessed this land with great increase of people of our own nation as any country in the world, whereof many for want of service and means to set them on work fall to idleness and great extremity. Her Majesty's

> pleasure therefore is that those kind of people should be sent forth of this land, for that purpose there is direction given to this bearer Edward Banes to take of those blackmoors that in this last voyage under Thomas Baskervile were brought into this realm the number of ten, to be transported by him out of the realm.[13]

A bill of similar aims was requested by Captain Casper van Senden in the hope that he may obtain a licence to deport 'Blackmoors…into Spain and Portugal' and was subsequently approved. It read:

> Her Majesty…considerith…that those people may be well spared in this realm, being so populous and numbers of able persons the subjects of the land and Christian people that perish for want of service, whereby through their labour they might be maintained. [You] are therefore required…to aid and assist him to take up such blackmoors as he shall find within this realm, with the consent of their masters, who we doubt not, considering her Majesty's good pleasure to have those kind of people sent out of the land… and that their shall do charitably and like Christians rather to be served by their own countrymen than with those kind of people, will yield those in their possession to him.[14]

From the document we can begin to see the identification of black people as servants and slaves with terminology such as 'those in their possession.' However, the reaction to black people in positions of nobility also survive from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. The Moroccan Ambassador, Abd ed-Quahed ben Messaoud, and sixteen other member of the embassy visited London between 1600 and 1601, a time when Shakespeare's acting company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, were performing at court. Ernst Honnigmann fancifully mused whether 'the ambassador's intense and Aristocratic face' whose age at 42 was appropriate, 'haunted Shakespeare's imagination and inspired the writing of his tragedy?'[15]

The Elizabethans were fascinated by the Ambassador's visits and were just as enthralled by travellers' accounts of foreign peoples, especially as Virginia Mason Vaughn suggests, 'the tales monstrous creatures, heathen customs, sexual orgies, and cannibalism. All were associated with blackness in the Elizabethan mind, a colour that, in turn, suggested negation, dirt, sin and death.'[16] Ancient and Medieval law stated that black meant demonic; Thomas Wright's *The Passion of the Minde* reiterates this idea when he associates black complexions with sexuality:

The redde is wise,
The browne is trustie,
The pale peevish,
The backe is lustie.[17]

In a bid to explain the existence of such a difference skin colour, Renaissance commentators produced an explanation that relied on scriptural tradition and myth. Hakluyt's Voyages is the most prominent. He cites the story of Noah and his three sons 'Sem, Cham and Japhet'. During their time on the ark, Noah declared that they should use 'continencie, and abstaine form carnall copulation with their wives' so that they were worthy of the deliverance awarded to them by God. A Haluyt suggests,

> the wicked sonne Cham disobeyed, and being perswaded that the first childe borne after the flood (by right and Lawe of nature) should inherite and posesse all the dominions of the earth, hee contrary to is father's commandment while they were yet in the Arke, used company with his wife, and craftily went about thereby to dis-inherite the off-spring of his other two brethren.[18]

The curse bestowed on him for this act was that 'all his posteritie after him should bee so blacke and loathsome, that it might remaine a spectacle of disobedience to all the worlde. And of this blacke and cursed Chus [the son that Cham conceived] came all these blacke Moores which are in Africa.'[19]

Emma Smith discusses the performance history of *Othello*, looking closely at the host of associations that the audience would have brought with them to the play's first performances about a black character. She notes that 'Blackness was formerly associated with the devil and with wickedness: Reginald Scot, in his *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584) opined that 'a damned soul may and doth take the shape of a black moor', and in Samuel Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, known to have been read by Shakespeare…a woman is tempted by a demon in the shape of a 'black man standing at the door and beckoning her to come away.' Thomas Heywood, in a play about travelling and English Imperialism called *The Fair Maid of the West II* (1630),

described ' a Moor of all that bears man's shape likest the devil.' Emelia refers to the same tradition when she calls Othello 'the blacker devil' (V.ii.140) when she discovers that he has murdered Desdemona.

Islam

Shakespeare departed drastically from his primary source for *Othello*, Giraldi Cinthio's *Gli Hecatommithi*, when he introduced the Cypriot-Turkish conflict into the plot of *Othello*. In *Othello*, the island of Cyprus is threatened by a Turkish fleet. By having the Venetian state send Othello to the island to protect Christian interests from the forces of Islam, Walter Cohen believes that Shakespeare 'project[ed] his protagonist into one of the defining struggles of he age, particularly in the Mediterranean.'[21] For Cohen this creative move generated a plot that which both undermined and validated racist stereotypes.

As noted above by Hadfield, *Othello* would have been reminiscent for contemporary audiences of the Turkish armies that were threatening to invade in the world of the play. Fynes Moryson, one of the first English travel writers, travelled Europe, Africa and the Near East in the late 16th and early 17th century. He is especially harsh about the Turks, calling them military machines that die for the 'Law of Mahomet' as can be seen in his 1617 *An Itinerary Containing His Ten Yeeres Travell*. He viciously ascertains that,

Certaine positions of religion and the due conferring of rewards and punishments make the Turkes bold adventure their persons and carefully perform all duties in Warr. By blinde religion they are taught, that they mount to heaven without any impediment, who dye fighting for their country and the Law of Mahomet. And that Stoicall Fate or destiny governes all humane affairs, so as if the tyme of death be not come, a man is no less safe in the campe then in a castle, if it be come, he can be preserved in neither of them, and this makes them like beasts to rush upon all daungers even without Armes to defend offend, and to fill their ditches with their dead Carkases, thincking to overcome by number alone, without military art.

Moryson's account may have been written a decade or so after Shakespeare penned *Othello*, but it is evidence of the racism which dominated early modern attitudes to people from Africa and the Middle East.

Figure 2. Abd ed-Quahed ben Messaoud, the Moorish Ambassador to Queen Elizabeth, 1600 – 1: English School, early Seventeenth Century. Used with kind permission of The University of Birmingham Research and Cultural Collections. © University of Birmingham
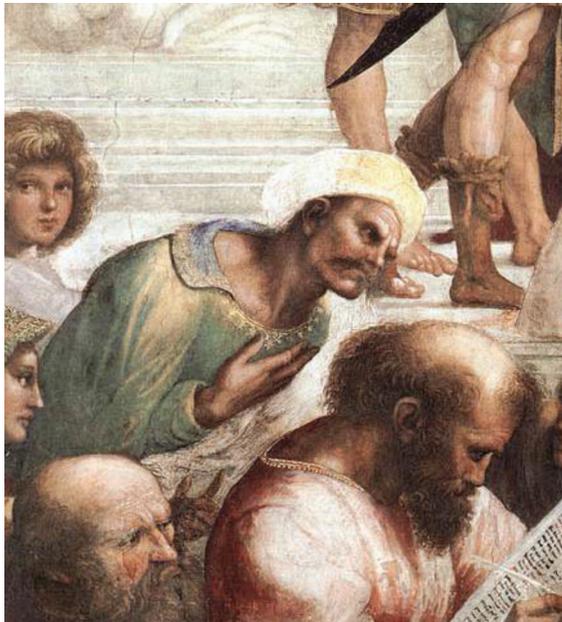

Figure 3. A close up of Averroes the Moor as he is depicted in Raphael's *The School of Athens*, 1509. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. This credit line represents the 'Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum' (a non-departmental public body established by the National Heritage Act 1983).

1. 'Moor, n.2' OED online, Oxford University Press www.oed.com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/view/ Entry/121965?rskey=MMe1AM&result=2#eid36004739 [Accessed 23rd July, 2014].

2. OED Online, Oxford University Press, quot. *a*1549 www.oed.com.ezproxy01.rhul.ac.uk/view/ Entry/121965?rskey=MMe1AM&result=2#eid36004739 [Accessed 23rd July 2014]

3. Peter Martyr of Angleria, *The Decades of the newe worlde or west India conteyning the nauigations and conguestes of the Spanyardes*, trans. by Richard Eden, 1st Edition, 1555 (Vol. 1) p.355

4. Cesare Frederici *Voyage and Traueile*, trans. by Thomas Hickock, 1st edition, 1588 (p.23)

5. It is worth noting that this specific quotation is proverbial and may not represent a direct comment on Othello's complexion.

6. All references taken from: William Shakespeare, *Othello* ed. Norman Sanders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)

7. Norman Sanders, (ed.) 'Introduction' in *Othello* by William Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) pp.1–51 (p.12–13)

8. Ernst Honnigmann (ed.), *Othello* (Walton on Thames: Nelson, 1997, p.28

9. Andrew Hadfield, *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on William Shakespeare's Othello* (London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2003) p.11

10. Leo Africanus, *The History and Desciption of Africa* (1600), trans. by John Pory, reprinted in Andrew Hadfield, ed., Amazons, Savages and Machiavels: Travel and Colonial Writing in English, 1550–1630: An Anthology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.148–51

11. Ibid., p.148–51

12. E Jones, *Othello's Countrymen* quoted by Norman Sanders, 'Introduction' in Othello by William Shakespeare, (p.11)

13. An open letter from Queen Elizabeth to the Lord Mayor and Alderman of London, 1596, quoted by Emma Smith, 'Race and *Othello*' in *William Shakespeare: Othello*, (Devon: Northcote House Publishers Ltd., 2005) pp.28–49 (p.32)

14. Captain Casper van Senden's request to Queen Elizabeth to deport black people to Spain and Portugal, quoted by Emma Smith, 'Race and *Othello*' in *William Shakespeare: Othello*', p.32

15. Ernst Honnigmann, p.4

16. Virginia Mason Vaughn, 'Racial Discourse: Black and White' in *Othello: a Contextual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp.51–71 (p.52)

17. Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde* (London: Printed by Valentine Simmes for Walter Burre, 1604) p.43

18. Richard Hakluyt, *The Principle Navigations Voyages Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation* (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1904), vol. VII, pp.263–4

19. Ibid. p.264

20. Smith, p.34

21. Walter Cohen, 'Othello' in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus (New York: W.W. Nortan & Company, 1997) pp.2091–9 (p.2091)

22. Fynes Moryson, *An Itinerary Containing His Ten Yeeres Travell* (1617). Reprinted in Andew Hadfield, ed., *Amazons, Savages and Machiavels: Travel and Colonial Writing in English, 1550–1630: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) pp.169–70