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GENERAL EDITORS: PETER HOLLAND AND STANLEY WELLS

Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism

ANIA LOOMBA

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There are three broad 'streams' of ideas that go into the making of beliefs and debates about 'otherness' or 'race' in early modern Europe, and the vocabularies available to Shakespeare. The first is comprised of medieval as well as classical notions about skin colour, religion, and community. Greek and Roman literatures, Christian religious thought, as well as medieval writings, were influential in their views of cultural, ethnic, and linguistic difference. These views had been shaped by various histories of contact and conflict, the most important of which were the Greek and Roman interactions with the people they conquered, the Crusades, as well as the interactions between Jews, Muslims, and Christians within Europe, especially Iberia.

These older ideas percolated down to early modern times, but never in any pure form. They were constantly channelled through newer notions of otherness thrown up by more recent cross-cultural encounters, which we can think of as a second stream of ideas. During Shakespeare's lifetime, contact with outsiders became more attractive as well as more threatening for Europeans. First Spain and Portugal, and then various other nations, realized the potential of overseas trade and colonization. The fast-expanding Turkish Empire recharged older memories of the Muslim enemy of the Crusades, but it also provided a model for Europe's own imperial ambitions. The New World and its inhabitants generated a very different set of ideas about 'others' as either innocent or wild savages in a world of uncivilized plenty, ripe for European plucking. The newer contact with Africa made this picture even more complex, playing upon medieval notions of blackness but aligning them with the newer colonial promise of wealth and slaves. These histories of contact shaped the fate of those peoples within or nearer home who were never considered insiders—such as the Irish, the Jews, or the Moors—and vice versa.

Finally, in every society there also exist notions of difference between men and women, rich and poor, nobility and ordinary folk. Concepts of gender, class, and national difference have a profound effect on how any culture understands its own boundaries and can be thought of as a third stream of ideas, just as important for understanding 'race' as other histories of contact. Take, for example, the concept of the 'blue blood' of the nobility. This phrase is a translation of the Spanish *sangre azul*, which was claimed by several aristocratic families

who declared they had never been contaminated by Moorish or Jewish blood, and hence had fair skins through which their blue blood could be seen. Thus blue blood is closely related to the idea of racial purity or *limpezia de sangre* which developed as the Inquisition sought to identify 'pure' Christians as opposed to those who had been 'contaminated' by mixing with Jews and Moors, or 'New Christians' who were converted Moors and Jews. All over Europe, the nobility were often understood as a 'race' distinct from ordinary folk, and colonial relations drew heavily upon pre-existing notions of class difference, although they also restructured the relationships between classes within Europe. In analogous ways gender difference was equally crucial to the development of race as a concept. Racial difference was imagined in terms of an inversion or distortion of 'normal' gender roles and sexual behaviour—Jewish men were said to menstruate, Muslim men to be sodomites, Egyptian women to stand up while urinating, and witches and Amazons to be kin to cannibals. Patriarchal domination and gender inequality provided a model for establishing (and were themselves reinforced by) racial hierarchies and colonial domination.

In practice, it is impossible to separate these three streams of ideas and histories as they mingle together to create ideologies of 'difference' in early modern England. In this book, we will locate how such mingling works in some of Shakespeare's plays, as well as in the culture at large. It is beyond the scope of this volume to consider every kind of difference, or every group who was considered alien or foreign. Nor is it possible to examine every Shakespearian play in equal detail. But by taking representative texts and histories, we can trace how vocabularies of race draw upon a whole range of ideas about skin colour, location, religion, rank, and gender, and also how they leaven older tropes with recent images and ideas, and learned ideas with popular beliefs. In this way, I hope to convey a sense of the historical, geographical, and social 'layering' of racial ideas and languages; we can then decide the extent to which Shakespeare drew upon, contributed to, or departed from them.

Insiders and Outsiders

Shakespeare's theatre, itself called 'The Globe', was enormously influential in forming English public opinion about the world.

According to the Swiss visitor Thomas Platter, 'the English pass their time, learning at the play what is happening abroad... since for the most part the English do not much use to travel, but prefer to learn of foreign matters and take their pleasures at home'.[7] By 1600, eighteen to twenty thousand visits were made each week to London playhouses. The bulk of these visitors got their images of foreign people from the stage, rather than from books or from real-life interactions. Thus the theatre deeply shaped English imagining of outsiders.

Our relationship to Shakespeare's theatre is analogous to that theatre's relationship to the outsiders it portrays. We find in Shakespeare's plays both the seeds of many of our own assumptions and institutions, as well as enormous differences between our own world and Shakespeare's. Similarly, the plays locate both an alienness and a disturbing familiarity in the many 'outsiders' they insistently portray. Indians, gypsies, Jews, Ethiopians, Moroccans, Turks, Moors, 'savages', the 'wild Irish', the 'uncivil Tartars', as well as non-English Europeans, were repeatedly conjured up on public as well as private stages. Sometimes such outsiders occupied the centre-stage, as in Shakespeare's *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, or Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*. At other times, they played smaller roles, like Aaron in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* or Portia's suitor the 'tawny Moor' Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*. Some were just shadowy presences that were evoked but never appeared on stage such as the 'lovely boy stol'n from an Indian king' over whom Titania and Oberon fight in *A Midsummer's Night's Dream* or the pregnant black Moor mentioned by Lancelot in *The Merchant of Venice*. Others are only figures of speech in Shakespearian drama, conjured up to establish a point of view: in *Much Ado About Nothing*, for example, Claudio affirms his decision to marry Leonato's niece whom he has not seen by declaring, 'I'll hold my mind, were she an Ethiope' (5.4.38).

For many years influential critics regarded such figures as mere footnotes to a theatre that was seen as predominantly European in its focus and interest. But, in fact, they help us scrutinize the very boundary between European and non-European, and see how it is constructed at a time when Europe's interactions with other worlds were becoming increasingly complicated. *The Notable History of*

Saracens (1575) compares its descriptions of the Muslims to the images reflected back by a mirror:

Here as in a mirror is set down, how, when and by whom, this pestilent generation was first set abroad, what success in their affairs ever since they have had, and if we will not by others harms take warning, what courtesy is to be looked for at their hands, when and wheresoever they can spy any occasion or opportunity to put in practice their bloody tyranny.[8]

The mirror image is a telling one: the past misdeeds of the Muslims are intended to warn Christians about the threat they pose again to Europe, and yet if they are set down 'as in a mirror' they also reflect the self-image of the Christians.

The work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan (as well as other twentieth-century theorists) suggested that there is an intricate symbiosis between that which is demarcated as the 'self' and that which is excluded as deviant, strange, or 'other'. In his influential book *Orientalism*, Edward Said used such insights to analyse European attitudes to outside cultures. Europe's self-definition as the most superior civilization of the world depended in part upon the construction of an 'Orient' as different from itself, as an irrational, backward, lazy, sensuous, and deviant region.[9] The Orient was represented as Europe's 'other', and the difference between the two was crucial to sustaining Europe's image of itself. Such perspectives have revitalized the study of Shakespearian and other early modern representations of 'race' and 'outsideness'. According to Liah Greenfeld, sixteenth-century England was the first country in Europe to become a nation in the modern sense: 'a whole new class of people emerged whose main preoccupation was to do research and write—chronicles, treatises, poems, novels and plays—in English about England ... Everything English became an object of attention and nourished a new feeling of national pride.'[10] Recent criticism has persuasively demonstrated that 'everything English' could only be defined by establishing what lay outside.

Suggesting that 'Self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange or hostile', Stephen Greenblatt has shown how Renaissance aristocratic and upper classes fashioned their identities at least partly against the images of the newly discovered 'natives' of the New World.[11] Kim Hall has traced depictions of blackness in English poetry, plays, masques, paintings, jewellery,

and travel writings that reveal a growing obsession with defining a white English self.[12] Descriptions of African or Turkish 'tribades' or women who had sex with other women, Valerie Traub suggests, fed into condemnations of same-gender eroticism in England.[13] Bringing the notion of 'other' closer home, Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley argue that the development of 'Englishness' depended on the negation of 'Irishness' which was described as incivility, filth, and backwardness.[14] And James Shapiro identifies a similar dialectic in the relationship between early modern English culture and Jews.[15] Thus, although in numerical terms there were few Turks, or Africans, or Jews in England, representations of them are crucial for understanding the culture as a whole and its changing relationship with the rest of the world. Of course, the English differentiated themselves not only from the New World 'savages' or dark-skinned Africans, but also from Iberian Catholics. New and wider contact with Asia, Africa, and America helped to consolidate a pan-European, Christian identity but, at the same time, it also fuelled intense rivalry between different European countries for economic and colonial advantage in these foreign lands.

At the height of Britain's overseas empire, Rudyard Kipling suggested that it could not be understood in isolation from its colonies: 'What do they know of England, who only England know?' In Shakespeare's time, England had not yet become an imperial power, but it too cannot be understood without looking at what lay beyond its real and imagined margins. Having said this, we should be careful not to read descriptions of the 'other' as *only* a way of defining the 'self', because that would collapse all studies of difference back onto the dominant culture. In this period, descriptions of outsiders helped to shape actual interactions with them, to institute patterns of diplomacy, trade, colonization, and enslavement. Over time, they helped Christian Europe to achieve its historical dominance over other peoples. Images of blackness, for example, did more than produce ideologies of whiteness—they also helped legitimize actual exploitation of black peoples and nations. Finally, while these images obviously reshaped and even distorted reality, they were not complete fabrications but created in response to a certain historical dynamic. Often we do not have access to the view from the other side, to the impressions and assessments of these so-called 'others' of Europe.

Often we do not know how to read them or care to do so. But at the very least the idea of the mirror image should not be taken so literally that we see only Europe in European descriptions of other people.

Colonialism and European Nationhood

In an influential book, Benedict Anderson suggested that modern nations were born with the passing of an older religious and feudal order, which relied on bonds that stretched across national frontiers.[16] European nobility intermarried regardless of their national or linguistic affiliations. The monarch of one country could also become the sovereign of another, as happened in 1603 when Elizabeth I died, and James VI of Scotland became the monarch (James I) of England, or earlier in 1580 when Philip II of Spain also became king of Portugal. This social arrangement also depended upon a pan-national religious community. Earlier, the Crusades had attempted to cement such an inter-national Christian community across Europe. Fucher of Chartres had written about the mix of languages and nations in the armies of the First Crusade, which included

French, Flemings, Frisians, Gauls, Allogroges, Lotharingians, Allemani, Bavarians, Normans, English, Scots, Aquitainians, Italians, Dacians, Apulians, Iberians, Bretons, Greeks and Armenians…If any Breton or Teuton wished to question me, I could neither understand nor answer. But we who were diverse in languages, nevertheless seemed to be brothers in the love of God and very close to being of one mind.[17]

According to Anderson, nation formation involves breaks with such an order and the creation of a different sort of 'imagined community' in which people across different classes are united within a more bounded geographical space, and identify with the same language. Although Anderson discusses post-eighteenth-century events, several recent writers have traced the emergence of a similar dynamic in Elizabethan England. Until 1534, when King Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church, the religious head of England (the Pope) was not English at all. In the period between 1500 and 1650, concepts such as 'country', 'commonwealth', 'empire', and 'nation' changed their meaning and became synonymous, all of them meaning 'the sovereign people of England'.[18]