

## Shakespeare's Boy Actors and the Ideal of White Femininity

Virginia Mason Vaughan  
Clark University

---

Throughout its lengthy stage history, Shakespeare's *Othello* startled and sometimes outraged audiences by its juxtaposition of a black (occasionally bronze) Moor with the fair-skinned Desdemona. In performances from the seventeenth-century to the early twentieth, adult actors crafted Shakespeare's Moor through exotic language, face blackening, and prosthetics—wigs, props, and costumes. Early modern race studies often focus on the ways such “blackface” representations of Othello from Shakespeare's era to nineteenth-century minstrel shows created, circulated and solidified racist assumptions.<sup>1</sup> As Judith Butler argued in her study of gender, “repeated stylizations of the body . . . congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being;”<sup>2</sup> in the case of *Othello*, repeated performances naturalized the stereotype of the black, jealous, murderous Moor.

More recently Shakespeareans have begun to explore the ways “whiteness,” particularly feminine whiteness, also contributed to early modern conceptions of racial difference and white supremacy.<sup>3</sup> Like the actor who used face paint and prosthetics to perform Othello, boy actors relied on language, wigs, costumes, and, perhaps, make-up to portray the ideal of white feminine beauty. This essay examines how the boy actor embodied feminine whiteness on Shakespeare's stage and in the works of his

contemporaries at a time when boy actors impersonated nearly all female characters. I conclude with a close examination of *Love's Labours Lost* to demonstrate how these techniques were embedded in a particular play.

In the words of Aileen Ribeiro, the ideal European woman's complexion should be a "confection of white, pink and red: a whitened skin, tinged with pink on the cheeks, and red lips."<sup>4</sup> If the lady has light colored hair, whether blonde or auburn, she comes even closer to perfection.<sup>5</sup> Or, as Gostanzo explains in George Chapman's comedy, *All Fools*, a desirable wife's looks signal her worth:

Her hair pure amber,  
Her forehead mother of pearl, her fair eyes  
Two wealthy diamonds, her lips mines of rubies.  
Her teeth are orient pearl, her neck pure ivory.  
(1.1. 253-56)<sup>6</sup>

When boy actors appeared on stage wearing white gloves, blonde wigs and white face paint, their representations were often eroticized, idealizing ultra-white skin, like ivory, as an object of desire. In her study of whiteness in *Titus Andronicus*, Francesca Royster demonstrates how Tamora, the sexualized Queen of the Goths, "is represented as hyperwhite," a hue that dramatically contrasts with the black complexion of her lover Aaron, the Moor.<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare's *Venus* says it best: the lover delights in seeing "his true-love in her naked bed, / Teaching the sheets a whiter hue than white" (*Venus and Adonis*, 397-8).<sup>8</sup>

\*\*\*\*

The ideal of feminine whiteness emanated from Elizabeth I's court, where her role as the Virgin Queen was itself something of a performance. Elizabeth I likely began to use heavy white make-up after her recovery from smallpox in 1562, and throughout the rest of her reign royal portraits displayed her hyperwhite face and hands. The Queen seems to have used a white paste made from lead and vinegar called ceruse; while its effect on the skin was deleterious, it did provide good coverage. Elizabeth's resort to cosmetics may also have legitimized face painting for other women. By the end of the sixteenth century, even ladies of the middling sort used paints, often called fucus, made from a variety

of ingredients, including “alum, musk, civet, ambergris, mercury, white lead, quicksilver, egg whites and shells, crumbs of bread, almonds, milk, rosewater, storax, lemon juice, lilies, roses and other flowers, turpentine, cinnamon, cloves, aloe, labdanum, poppy seed oil, ground jawbones of a hog or lamb, benzoin (resin from an aromatic tree), rosemary, honey, mustard seed, vinegar, rhubarb, myrrh, frankincense, camphor, sulphur, pearl, gold and silver.”<sup>9</sup> Ben Jonson satirized this list of ingredients in *The Devil Is An Ass*, when Wittipol, disguised as a Spanish lady, explains what Spanish women use to enhance their complexions:

They have  
 Water of gourds of radish, the white beans,  
 Flower of glass, of thistles, rosemarine,  
 Raw honey, mustard-seed, and bread dough-baked,  
 The crumbs o' bread, goats milk, and white of eggs,  
 Camphor, and lily roots, the fat of swans,  
 Marrow of veal, white pigeons, and pine-kernals,  
 The seeds of nettles, purslane, and hare's gall.<sup>10</sup>

They sometimes even use turpentine and snake fat to make “an admirable varnish for the face” (4.4.18-36).

The widespread application of such concoctions, in turn, inspired a host of anti-cosmetic diatribes. Thomas Tuke, the best known and most bellicose anti-cosmetic campaigner, wrote in his *Treatise Against Paint[i]ng and Tincturing of Men and Women* that the ceruse women used was, “without doubt, brought in use by the divell, the capitall enemy of nature.”<sup>11</sup> The poet John Donne argued the contrary: “That women ought to Paint” and men should “be constant in something, and love her who shewes her great *Love* to thee, in taking this paines to seeme *Lovely* to thee.”<sup>12</sup> Donne's tongue-in-cheek argument suggests that it doesn't matter if a woman's fair-skinned complexion is acquired through artificial means, so long as she **seems** lovely in an attempt to please her man.

Still, a lady's whiteness was best if it was natural, her character more virtuous if she did not paint. Shakespeare plays with this assumption in *Twelfth Night* when Olivia unveils her face to Cesario (Viola in disguise) and asks, “Is't not well done?” Viola replies, “Excellently done, if God did all” (1.5.216-18). Given the widespread use of cosmetics among early modern English women, Viola has reason to be suspicious, but she admits that Olivia's face

is the perfect blend of white and red so prized by early modern English ladies.

Petruccio's joking treatment of the middle-aged Vincentio also suggests a skeptical approach to female beauty. Petruccio asks Kate:

Hast thou beheld a fresher gentlewoman?  
Such war of white and red within her cheeks!  
What stars do spangle heaven with such beauty  
As those two eyes become that heavenly face?

(*Taming of the Shrew*, 4.6.30-33)

This scene's absurdity underscores Petruccio's characteristic disdain for convention, in this case, the English gentlewoman's ideal white and red complexion.

On the other hand, Shakespeare's works repeatedly praise those very attributes. In three cases, the woman's complexion is associated with her unusual virtue. When Lucrece is fearful for her husband's safety, the narrator explains: "Oh, how her fear did make her color rise! / First red as roses that on lawn we lay / Then white as lawn, the roses took away" (*Rape of Lucrece*, 257-9). Unable to seduce Imogen outright, Iachimo admires Imogen's sleeping face—"whiter than the sheets," her lips "Rubies unparagoned" (*Cymbeline*, 2.2.15-17). The pander Bolt advertises Marina's charms in *Pericles*: "For flesh and blood, sir, white and red, you shall see a rose" (4.6.30-1), yet she is so virtuous that his customers retreat in shame.

A heroine's hands also signaled her beauty, and often they, too, were figured white, an effect boy actors could convey with white gloves. Shakespeare's narrator describes Lucrece as she lay sleeping: "Her lily hand, her rosy cheek lies under" (*Lucrece*, 386), while Biron addresses the woman he thinks is Rosaline as "White-handed mistress" (*Love's Labor's Lost*, 5.2.231). Feste tells us that his mistress Olivia "has a white hand" (*Twelfth Night*, 2.3.26). When Lorenzo receives a letter from his beloved Jessica, he exclaims, "I know the hand, in faith, 'tis a fair hand, / And whiter than the paper it writ on / Is the fair hand that writ" (*Merchant of Venice*, 2.4.12-14). Pandarus observes that the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen of Troy, "has a marvelous white hand" (*Troilus and Cressida*, 1.2.125). Marina's fingers are "long, small, white as milk" (*Pericles*, 4.0.22). Such hands are even more delicate if they are translucent so that one can see the blue veins beneath. Thus,

Cleopatra offers the Messenger “My bluest veins to kiss, a hand that kings / Have lipped and trembled kissing” (2.5.29-30). White hands that are not tanned or calloused with work suggest delicacy and gentility; they are the hands of a lady.<sup>13</sup> As David Sterling Brown explains, “As an appendage of white self-fashioning, the white hand carves out a lady’s social place and directs her way of being in the world.”<sup>14</sup>

While many of Shakespeare’s younger female characters are not specifically identified as “white”, they are repeatedly described as “fair.” Shakespeare’s Words.com counts 766 uses of “fair” in the canon. The *OED* cites two common ways “fair” was used as an adjective: The first is simply, “Beautiful”: “beautiful to the eye, of pleasing form or appearance.” It is also the opposite of “foul”—as the witches of *Macbeth* know so well. The adjective is used “almost exclusively of women.” Secondly, “fair” describes complexions and hair that are “light as opposed to dark,” beautiful as opposed to foul. “Fair” also suggests virtue. *OED* cites the Duke’s line from Shakespeare’s *Othello*—he “is far more fair than black” (1.3.287)—to illustrate the point.<sup>15</sup>

Shakespeare frequently uses the word “fair” to suggest a female character’s attractiveness. Witness Hermia, Helena, Hippolyta, Hero, Beatrice, Portia, Rosalind, Olivia, Cressida, Desdemona, Ophelia, Cordelia, Thaisa—all are addressed or described as “fair.” This way of greeting a young woman may simply be a conventional form of flattery. But, given the northern European standard of beauty cited above, it seems fair to say that “fair” hair and complexion are also in play. Note that, with the possible exception of Hippolyta, this is a list of young women, roles that would have been performed by boy actors. Older ladies—Mistress Quickly, Volumina, Cymbeline’s Queen, Paulina—who were likely impersonated by adult male actors—are not generally said to be “fair.” Lady Macbeth might be the exception because she is referred to as a “fair and noble hostess” (1.6.8), but the phrase is ambiguous and may be more about her hospitality than her beauty or the color of her skin.

Fairness, like whiteness, is disdained if it’s artificial. Head over heels in love with the “fair” Silvia, Valentine praises Sylvia’s exquisite beauty, but her servant Speed is not so enchanted. He responds that Silvia’s beauty is painted and her favor “out of count.” Valentine

asks, “How painted? How out of count?” “Marry,” replies Speed, “so painted to make her fair that no man counts of her beauty” (*Two Gentleman of Verona*, 2.1.48-64). In contrast to John Donne, Speed thinks that if she is painted, her beauty won’t be recognized. Of course, if the boy actor who impersonated Sylvia used white face paint, Speed’s comment would seem even more humorous.

Shakespeare also exploits the equation of fairness with virtue, blackness with evil. In a misanthropic rant, Timon of Athens underscores the opposition: “Black white, foul fair, wrong right, / Base noble, old young, coward valiant” (4.3.29-30) A lady’s fairness can be highlighted by opposition to something or someone dark, often with racial implications. For example, when Proteus switches his affections from Julia to Silvia, he reflects, “And Silvia—witness heaven that made her fair— / Shows Julia but a swarthy Ethiop” (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 2.6.25-6). Comparing Cressida with Helen of Troy, Pandarus explains that because Cressida is his niece, he cannot say she is as fair as Helen, but if she were not kin, “she would be as fair on Friday as Helen is on Sunday. But what care I? I care not an she were a blackamoor” (*Troilus and Cressida*, 1.1.70-74). Similarly, the speaker of Sonnet 144 claims two loves, one of comfort, the other of despair: “The better angel is a man right fair; / The worser spirit a woman colored ill” (lines 3-4). “Fair” is the standard of beauty, “color” is “ill.” These lines reinforce the racial binary of fair and foul, light and dark, white and black, to establish whiteness as the desirable default position.

Early modern discussions of cosmetics and female complexions frequently consider the meaning of a woman’s blushes. What causes the rosy cheeks? Is it the flush of youth? Or is it a psychological marker?<sup>16</sup> Indeed, such treatises often make a connection between a woman’s blush and her mental state.<sup>17</sup> Pale skin could denote fear and trembling, yet colored by a blush, a woman’s red and white could be read in contradictory ways.

Thomas Wright’s influential treatise, *The Passions of the Minde*, explains how blushes betray guilt:

[Those] that have committed a fault, & . . . imagine they are thought to have committed it; presently if they be . . . of an honest behaviour, and yet not much grounded in virtue, they blush, because nature being afraid, lest in the face the fault should be discovered, sendeth the purest blood to be a

defence and succor, the which effect, commonly, is iudged to  
 procede from a good and vertuous nature, because no man  
 can but allow, that it is good to bee ashamed of a fault.<sup>18</sup>

As I have argued elsewhere, black villains like Shakespeare's Aaron and *Lust Dominion's* Eleazar associated their evil nature with dark skin, proudly proclaiming that they had no shame and could not blush.<sup>19</sup> Yet a blush does not necessarily indicate guilt—it could also signal a modest woman's reaction to a salacious advance or slander, or simply embarrassment.

Shakespeare highlights the difficulty of reading a woman's blushes in 4.1 of *Much Ado About Nothing*.<sup>20</sup> When Claudio denounces Hero before the company assembled for what they thought was to be a wedding, he points to her face: "She knows the heat of a luxurious bed. / Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty" (40-41). But after Claudio leaves, the Friar interprets Hero's blushes differently:

By noting of this lady I have marked  
 A thousand blushing apparitions  
 To start into her face: a thousand innocent shames  
 In angel whiteness beat away those blushes; . . .  
 Trust me not . . .  
 If this sweet lady be not guiltless here  
 Under some biting error.

(4.1.156-68)

To the Friar, Hero's blush is not a sign of guiltiness, but the reaction of an innocent woman to public humiliation.

Blushing could thus be read as a sign of a woman's shamefastness, defined in the *OED* as "modesty, sobriety of behaviour, decency, propriety, bashfulness, shyness."<sup>21</sup> Shakespeare's narrator offers just such an explanation of Lucrece's response to the sudden arrival of Collatine. The war of red and white to be seen in her face is a struggle between beauty and virtue:

When Virtue bragged, Beauty would blush for shame;  
 When Beauty boasted blushes, in despite  
 Virtue would stain that o'er with silver white.  
 But Beauty, in that white entitled  
 From Venus' doves, doth challenge that fair field.  
 Then Virtue claims from Beauty Beauty's red,

Which Virtue gave the golden age to gild  
 Their silver cheeks, and called it then their shield,  
     Teaching them thus to use it in the fight.  
 When shame assailed the red should fence the white.  
 This heraldry in Lucrece' face was seen,  
 Argued by Beauty's red and Virtue's white. (2.52-65)

Lucrece's blush signals the shamefastness that should protect her innocence and "fence the white." Her face's war of red and white proves her virtue. Unfortunately, that war enhances the beauty that so attracts the rapist Collatine.

As this passage from *The Rape of Lucrece* attests, whiteness and fairness are repeatedly associated with virtue. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, both Bianca and Katharine are said to be "fair and virtuous" (2.1.43 and 91). *Measure for Measure's* Duke Vincentio tells the chaste novice Isabella that "the hand that hath made you fair hath made you good. . . grace, being the soul of your complexion, shall keep the body of it ever fair" (3.1.178-81). When a fair woman lacks virtue, her betrayal of male expectations is especially devastating. *Titus Andronicus's* Tamora is monstrous despite her hyperwhite hue. Othello is tormented by the thought that Desdemona, whose skin is whiter than snow "And smooth as monumental alabaster" (5.2.45), could be unfaithful.

\*\*\*\*

As these examples from Shakespeare's texts demonstrate, language was key to the dramatist's representation of white feminine beauty. But how did Shakespeare's boy actors physically embody the connection between appearance and behavior? It remains an open question as to whether boy actors used face paint to impersonate women. It does seem likely that the older actors who portrayed "women of a certain age" needed some cosmetic assistance. Ben Jonson satirizes the use of face paint in several plays, mocking vain older women who dress inappropriately and employ make-up to appear young and attractive. *Epicoene's* opening scene mocks such women. Clerimont scorns Lady Haughty's "piec'd beauty." She won't appear in public, he says, until "she has painted and perfum'd and wash'd and scour'd" (1.1.80-84).<sup>22</sup> Truewit counters that women should "practice any art to mend breath, cleanse teeth, repair eyebrows, paint, and profess it" (1.1.103-4).



From this short interchange, it seems highly likely that in addition to wearing exaggerated costumes, the actors who impersonated Lady Haughty and the Collegiate Ladies also wore face paint. *Volpone's* Lady Politic Wouldbe takes pains with her appearance, which includes her make-up. In 3.4 she complains that, "This fucus was too coarse, too; it's no matter."<sup>23</sup> Like Lady Haughty, she must have worn recognizably white make-up.

But what about younger female characters? Thomas Dekker exploits the moralists' view of cosmetic usage in Thomas Dekker's *The Honest Whore*. Face paint, sometimes referred to as "complexion," enables Bellafront to be what she is named, a beautiful façade. As the sixth scene begins, her servant Roger enters

*with a stool, cushion, looking-glass and chafing-dish. Those being set down, pulls out of his pocket a vial with white colour in it; and two boxes [of cosmetics], one with white, another red painting. He places all things in order and a candle by them, singing with the ends of old ballads as he does it. At last BELLAFRONT (as ROGER rubs his cheeks with the colours) whistles within.*

Bellafront interrupts Roger as he fools around with her make-up. She asks for her looking glass and her "boxes of complexion," and he replies: "Here's your two complexions." Then, as he looks in the mirror, Roger sees the mess that he has made of his face with her make-up. Why is it that what "makes her face glisten most damnably," looks so terrible on him; "there's knavery in daubing!" Bellafront, in turn, sits down and "*with her bodkin curls her hair, [and] colours her lips.*"<sup>24</sup> As a professional courtesan, Bellafront may not have the natural red and white of a young girl, but with the help of cosmetics she can imitate the sexual allure of white female beauty.

Thomas Dekker's satiric comedy, *Westward Ho*, performed by the Children of St. Paul's ca. 1604, also suggests that boy actors sometimes did use face paint. The comedy begins with a bawd, Mistress Birdlime and a Tailor. Working on behalf of an Earl, she tries to seduce the wife of the Italian merchant Justiniano by offering her a new gown. If the husband finds her with his wife, Birdlime has a cover: she has brought three or four kinds of "complexion," which she will pretend to sell to the lady. When Justiniano discovers Birdlime, he calls her a bawd and exclaims, "Do not I know these tricks, / That which thou makest a colour

for thy sinne, / Hath been thy first vndoing? Painting, painting.” Mistress Birdlime offers him a catalog of her “complexions”: “Here is the burned powder of a Hogs jaw-bone, to be laid with the Oil of white Poppy, an excellent *Fucus* to kill Morpheus, weed out Freckles, and a most excellent ground-work for painting. Here is Ginimony likewise burnt, and pulverized, to be mingled with the juice of Lemons, sublimate Mercury, and two spoonfuls of the flowers of Brimstone, a most excellent receipt to cure the flushing in the face.” As she later tells Mistress Justiniano, “A woman when there be roses in her cheeks, Cherries on her lips, Civet in her breath, Ivory in her teeth, Lilies in her hand, and Licorice in her heart, why she’s like a play. If new, very good company, very good company, but if stale, like old *Jeronimo*, go by, go by. Therefore as I said before, strike.”<sup>25</sup>

Like Lady Haughty, Mistress Birdlime and Mistress Justiniano are “mature” women, and face paint may have helped young boys to represent older women. On the other hand, boy actors who had not yet attained a beard may have been sufficiently “fair” to impersonate young women without cosmetics. In *King John*, Austria addresses the young Prince Arthur as “fair boy” (2.1.30), suggesting the boy actor has light skin. Similarly, Orlando has no problem addressing the page Ganymede as “my fair Rosalind”. He also describes the page to his brother Oliver: “The boy is fair, / Of female favor, and bestows himself / Like a ripe sister” (4.3.89-91). The boy’s friend Celia, however, is “brownier than her brother” (4.3.84-7). Similarly, Maria says that Cesario [Viola] is “a fair young man” (*Twelfth Night*, 1.5.93). Whether or not they required cosmetic assistance, the boy actors who played these roles must have appeared light-skinned to the audience.

Rosalind and Viola, originally performed by boy actors, are female characters who pretend to be male. Perhaps the default male position made their impersonations more natural. On the other hand, in texts such as *Titus Andronicus* which underscore a female character’s hyperwhiteness, the boy actors may have required white face paint. *Lingua, Or The combat of the Tongue and the Five Senses*, a five-act comedy performed at Trinity College, Cambridge, written by Tomas Tomkis and published in London in 1607, hints that cosmetics were used. The clue lies not in a dramatic performance per se, but rather, in the description of what

a boy actor would require to impersonate a woman, including face paint, costumes and prosthetics. Tactus, who represents Touch in the battle of the five senses, is supposed to bring an object on stage that will demonstrate his superiority to the other four senses. He apologizes that he is unable to do so because it took too long to prepare the boy actor he intended to introduce:

Five houres agoe I set a douzen maides to attire a boy like a nice Gentlewoman: but there is such doing with their loking-glasses, pinning, unpinning, setting, unsetting formings and conformings, painting blew vaines, and cheeks, such stirre with Stickes and Combes, Cascanets, dressings, Purles, Falles, Squares, Buskes, Bodies, Sarffes, necklaces, Carcanets, Rebatoes, Borders, Tires, Fannes, Palizadoes, Fillets, Croslets, Pendulets, Amulets, Annulets, Bracelets, and so many lets, that yet shée is scarce drest to the girdle: and now there's such calling for Fardlingales, Kirtlets, Busk-points . . . a Ship is sooner rigd by farre then a Gentlewoman made ready.<sup>26</sup>

Here the author Tomkis satirizes women's fashionable attire, but the passage also suggests that clothing, headdresses, and jewelry were far more important for the boy's impersonation of a gentlewoman than face paint. Yet the mention of blue veins and cheeks (presumably red rather than blue) suggests that some make-up was used, at least in this collegiate setting.

But however intriguing the issue of stage make-up might be, its use may have been irrelevant. If Shakespeare can bring the moonlight into Capulet's garden simply through poetry, why can't his characters' assertions that a lady is fair establish her whiteness, especially if a rosy-cheeked pre-pubescent boy impersonates that lady? The boy actors who pretend to be fair young women **perform** whiteness as a prerequisite for beauty. The assertion that a character is "fair", whether or not the actor is light-skinned, suggests the arbitrariness of skin color as a defining category. It is an attribute imposed by others, not essential. In *Love's Labours Lost*, Shakespeare underscores that arbitrariness through the male courtiers' obsession with their ladies' beauty.

\*\*\*\*

According to Shakespeare's Words.com, the adjective "fair" is used 52 times in *Love's Labour's Lost*, more than in any other work in the canon. Yet, when one thinks about it, the repetition of "fair

this” and “fair that” is, of course, entirely appropriate in a play that depends for its humor on stale Petrarchan tropes. Indeed, in *Love's Labour's Lost* Shakespeare interrogates more clearly than in any other work the early modern northern European construct of feminine beauty and its power to transform the male lover into slavish subjection. The dramatist may have been influenced by Sir Philip Sidney's sonnet sequence, *Astrophil and Stella*, which circulated in manuscript during the 1580s and in printed texts beginning in 1591. In Sidney's sonnet 7, the male lover Astrophil describes Stella's eyes, which like Rosaline's, are black:

When nature made her chief work, Stella's eyes  
 In colour black why wrapped she beams so bright?  
 Would she in beamy black, like painter wise,  
 Frame daintiest lustre, mixed of shades of light . . .  
 Or would she her miraculous power show,  
 That, whereas black seems beauty's contrary,  
 She even in black doth make all beauties flow?

In sonnet 2, Astrophil compares himself to a “slave-born-Muscovite” and later admits he has become enslaved to Stella's black eyes (sonnet 47). Similarly, in *Love's Labour's Lost* Shakespeare highlights Rosaline's “black” beauty, plays on contrasts between black and white, and has his courtly lovers disguise themselves as Muscovites.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the comedy demonstrates how the descriptor “black” serves as a catch-all for any deviation from the white ideal of beauty.

When the King first meets the Princess, he addresses her twice as “Fair Princess,” once as “fair madam,” and refers to her “fair self.” After the King and his attendants exit, Boyet observes that the King is smitten, for “all his senses were locked in his eye,” as he looked on “the fairest of the fair” (2.1.240-1). The most important signifier of her “fair” beauty is her white skin. In his love sonnet to her, the King compares her to the moon: “Nor shines the silver moon one half so bright / Through the transparent bosom of the deep / As doth thy face, through tears of mine, give light” (4.3.26-8). During the masque of Muscovites, the King, mistaking Rosaline for the Princess, again addresses her as “bright Moon” (5.2.205), a trope that the disguised Rosaline reiterates by claiming to change like the moon. The unnamed Princess is thus figured throughout as having the white, translucent complexion so prized in early modern cosmetic discourse.

From the French Princess's first appearance in act 2, the text emphasizes that her fair complexion is natural. Boyet flatters her: "Nature was in making graces dear / When she did starve the general world beside / And prodigally gave them all to you" (2.1.10-12). The Princess replies quite modestly that her beauty "Needs not the painted flourish of your praise. / Beauty is bought by judgment of the eye" (2.1.14-15). Later in a conversation with the Forester, the Princess reiterates her distaste for flattery: "Nay, never paint me now / Where fair is not, praise cannot mend the brow" (4.1.16-17). The Princess's comparison of flattery to cosmetic enhancement indicates that she will also reject the courtiers' habit of rhetorical embellishment. Of course, if the boy actor who portrays the Princess wears white face paint, her appearance contradicts her words.

Shakespeare also emphasizes feminine appearance in the Armado-Jaquenetta subplot. Smitten with love for a country wench, Don Armado declares that his beloved "is most immaculate white and red" (1.2.82). Moth's rejoinder to this description of Jaquenetta's complexion echoes early modern anti-cosmetic discourse about blushing, as well as the observer's inability to determine its cause:

If she be made of white and red,  
Her faults will ne'er be known,  
For blushing cheeks by faults are bred,  
And fears by pale white shown.  
Then if she fear or be to blame,  
By this you shall not know  
For still her cheeks possess the same  
Which native she doth owe. (1.2.89-96)

Jaquenetta's rosy cheeks may or may not be natural, but in either case one cannot tell what her moral status really is.

Rosaline, in contrast to the Princess's moon-like whiteness, is a hybrid, both fair and black. Biron bemoans his attraction to the "worst" of the four ladies. She is "A whitely wanton with a velvet brow, / With two pitch-balls stuck in her face for eyes" (3.1.182-3). While Rosaline's complexion is fair, her eyes are pitch-black, signaling her wantonness. She is "one that will do the deed / Though Argus were her eunuch and her guard" (3.1.184-5). When Boyet teases Rosaline about her ability to strike a deer with

her bow and arrow, he claims “she is hit lower,” a double entendre suggesting sexual experience (4.1.117). Here darkness indicates lightness of character, while the pure-white Princess’s virtue is never questioned.

The distinction between dark and light, black and white, also serves as a focal point for competition in 4.3 between the four courtiers. After they catch each other reciting the sonnets they have written to their ladies and admit that they are in love, the men contest whose love is the fairest. Biron proclaims that for his love, “day would turn to night! / Of all complexions the culled sovereignty / Do meet as at a fair in her fair cheek” (4.3.227-9). The king demurs: “By heaven, thy love is black as ebony!” (4.3.241). Rosaline does not meet his standard of beauty. Biron insists, “No face is fair that is not full so black” (4.3.247). But, says the king, “Black is the badge of hell / The hue of dungeons and the school of night” (4.3.248-9). Biron answers that at least his lady’s beauty is not painted:

Oh, if in black my lady’s brows be decked,  
 It mourns that painting and usurping hair  
 Should ravish doters with a false aspect,  
 And therefore is she born to make black fair.  
 Her favor turns the fashion of the days,  
 For native blood is counted painting now:  
 And therefore red, that would avoid dispraise,  
 Paints itself black, to imitate her brow. (4.3.252-9)

Dumaine is not convinced—after all, chimney sweeps are black. Longaville chimes in, “And since her time are colliers counted bright.” The king adds a racist trope, “And Ethiops of their sweet complexion crack,” while Dumaine continues, “Dark needs no candles now, for dark is light” (4.3.260-3). Biron retorts, “Your mistresses dare never come in rain, / For fear their colours should be washed away” (4.3.264-5). The absurdity reaches its climax when Longaville compares Rosaline’s complexion to the leather in his shoe. Both Biron and Dumaine declare their ladies (unlike the Dark Lady of sonnet 130) are too dainty to walk upon mere mortal ground. The biggest loser in this contest might be Petrarch, for the men’s false comparisons show just how ludicrous conventional Petrarchan tropes can be.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, if the boy actors who impersonated the Princess and her ladies did wear white make-



Like Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*, *Love's Labour's Lost* concludes with the male lover's frustration. When the messenger Marcadé announces the death of the Princess's father, the play's tone shifts. The Princess and her ladies delay the lovers' suits for a year and assign them tasks in the interim. The comedy ends with two songs, Winter and Spring, both removed from the stylized world of the court and set in the everyday realities of cold and hunger where "greasy Joan doth keel the pot." Unlike the Princess, Greasy Joan, hovering over the fire, is likely to be a bit sooty, certainly not white.

The early modern obsession with whiteness as the mark of feminine beauty is deeply embedded in the language of *Love's Labour's Lost*. Shakespeare plays with the opposition of black and white, fair and foul throughout the play, perhaps indicating its arbitrariness. At the same time, power lies in whiteness. The Princess, perhaps a surrogate for Queen Elizabeth—who saw a court performance of the play—is figured as fair and white like the moon. Like the female figures worshipped in the age's popular sonnets, her beauty can enslave the male suitor. Rosaline is both black and fair: she may have black eyes and eyebrows, but her hands and face are white. She, too, has the power to enslave. The boy actors of *Love's Labour's Lost*, who also portrayed Shakespeare's other "fair" heroines, enacted white skin as the normative measure of attractiveness and virtue against which others could be judged. Their male suitors' enslavement also suggests whiteness as a locus of control and power. Whether or not their roles were performed in whiteface, the boy actors' performances contributed significantly to the solidification of "whiteness" as the desirable norm, "blackness" as its undesirable opposite, in early modern English discourse. The presumed superiority of women's white complexions, reiterated again and again in Shakespeare and in so many other early modern English plays, should be recognized as an important component in the early modern naturalization of white superiority.

### Notes

1. Among the many important studies of color, particularly blackness, in early modern England and Europe, see Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Sujata Iyengar, *Shades of Difference: Mythologies of Skin Color in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Performing Blackness on Early Modern Stages*,



1500-1800 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Noémie Ndiaye, *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022); and Ayanna Thompson, *Blackface* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

2. I borrow this observation from Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), xvi.

3. While Kim F. Hall's study of darkness sheds light as well on the ways "whiteness" became idealized and normalized, the most recent and pertinent study of whiteness in Shakespeare is Arthur L. Little, Jr.'s collection, *White People in Shakespeare* (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2023). For an examination of "whiteness" in non-dramatic texts, particularly *The Faerie Queene*, see Urvasi Chakravarty, "Slavery and White Womanhood in Early Modern England," *Renaissance Quarterly* 75 (2022): 1144-79.

4. Aileen Ribeiro, *Facing Beauty: Painted Women & Cosmetic Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 81.

5. See Evelyn Gajowski, "'Staging the Blazon': Black and White and Red all Over," in Little, ed., *White People in Shakespeare*, 45-63, for a discussion of the traditional Petrarchan "blazon," the catalogue of a fair woman's facial features, including alabaster skin and rosy cheeks.

6. George Chapman, *All Fools*, ed. Charles Edelman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018). Cited by act, scene and line number.

7. Francesca Royster, "White-limed Walls: Whiteness and Gothic Extremism in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51.4 (2000): 432-55, 432.

8. Quotations from the works of William Shakespeare are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Stephen Greenblatt *et al.*, eds. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016) and cited by act, line and scene numbers within the text.

9. Farah Karim-Cooper, *Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 55.

10. Ben Jonson, *The Devil is an Ass*, ed. Peter Happe (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1994).

11. Thomas Tuke, *A Treatise Against Paint[i]ng and Tincturing of Men and Women* (London, 1616), Sig. B3r.

12. John Donne, *Iuvenilia, or Certaine Paradoxes and Problemes* (London, 1633), Sig. B3r. For detailed discussions of the use of cosmetics in early modern England, see Karim-Cooper, *Cosmetics*, and Kimberly Poitevin, "Inventing Whiteness: Cosmetics, Race and Women in Early Modern England," *Journal of Early Modern Cultural Studies* 11 (2011): 59-89. For face-painting's effects on the early modern construction of blackness, see Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender*, 87-89.

13. See Farah Karim-Cooper, *The Hand on the Shakespearean Stage: Gesture, Touch, and the Spectacle of Dismemberment* (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2016), 55-61, and Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 209-10, for discussion of the signification of "white hands."

14. David Sterling Brown, "'Shake Thou to Look on': Shakespearean White Hands" in Little, ed., *White People in Shakespeare*, 105-119, 106.

15. "fair, adj. and n.1", *OED Online*. March 2023. *Oxford University Press*. <https://www-oed-com.cscs.ohionet.org/view/Entry/67704?rkey=c93y9P&result=28&isAdvanced=false> (accessed March 08, 2023).

16. See Sujata Iyengar, *Shades of Difference: Mythologies of Skin Color in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), chap. 4.

17. See Iyengar, *Shades of Difference*, 103.

18. Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde in Generall* (London, 1604), 30.

19. See Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, 8, and Iyengar, *Shades of Difference*, 103-22.

20. See Iyengar, *Shades of Difference*, 123-30, for a detailed reading of this scene.

21. “shamefastness, n.”, *OED Online*. March 2023. *Oxford University Press*. <https://www-oed-com.csc.ohionet.org/view/Entry/177415?redirectedFrom=shamefastness> (accessed March 08, 2023).

22. Ben Jonson, *Epicoene, or, The Silent Woman*, ed. I. A. Beaurline (Lincoln Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1966). Cited by act, scene and line numbers.

23. Ben Jonson, *Volpone*, ed. Alvin B. Kernan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973). Cited by act, scene and line number. 3.4.37.

24. Thomas Dekker, *The Honest Whore*, ed. Nick de Somogyi (London: Nick Hern Books, 1998), 31-2.

25. Quotations are slightly modernized from Thomas Dekker, *Westward Ho* (London, 1607) [EEBO], signatures A4v and D1r.

26. Thomas Tomkis, *Lingua, Or the Combat of the Tongue, And the Five Senses for Superiority* (London, 1607). Sig. I2v.

27. Quotations are taken from *Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

28. Shakespeare’s sonnet 130 is also well known for anti-Petrarchan rhetoric that reverses the early modern English obsession with white skin yet, in the process, conflates dark skin with “blackness.”

29. See John Michael Archer, “Slave-Born Musovites: Racial Difference and the Geography of Servitude in *Astrophil and Stella* and *Love’s Labor’s Lost*,” in *Playing the Globe: Genre and Geography in English Renaissance Drama*, ed. John Gillies and Virginia Mason Vaughan (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998), 154-75.