## Abstract

The frequent appearance of black characters on the early modern English stage has led critics to theorize blackness as a marker of alterity that consolidates early modern England's emerging national identity. However, by examining the "play of language" in plays like *Othello* and *The Tempest,* this paper discusses how such representations give expression to repressed impulses which threaten the stability of English identity based on complexion.

# Light and Delight: The Return of the Repressed in *Othello, Titus Andronicus,* and *The Tempest*

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Black characters appear in roughly fifty-seven early modern dramatic works.[1] It seems that the frequent appearance of black characters on the early modern stage reveals the use of blackness as a marker of alterity that consolidates a unified group identity. However, the frequency with which these characters appear also suggests that early modern playgoers had a fascination with blackness. The sexual freedom embodied by black characters on the stage may not have been deemed acceptable or even legal social behavior in early modern England; nevertheless, this freedom provided, perhaps, an outlet for the vicarious enjoyment of otherwise forbidden desires. Thus, through black characters early modern England's repressed impulses are given expression.

In that sense, plays are like dreams which contain manifest content that disguises repressed content.[2] Erich Fromm makes such a comparison stating that literary works, "in order to be understood, must be read as if we listened to a dream," and Freud makes a similar comparison between dreaming, day-dreaming, and creative writing.[3] If a play's plot can be thought of as the manifest content in that to some degree it conforms to the logic of conscious thought, then underneath that content lies latent meanings that inhere in what David Willbern calls "the play of language."[4] Willbern explains that when one suspends the constraints of character and plot and looks at the language of the plays, relevant and at times unusually resonant meanings come into play. According to this model, the meanings that emerge from "the play of language" correspond to the repressed content of the play and the unconscious of the culture that produces the play. In this paper, I will apply this approach to William Shakespeare's *Othello* and show how the repressed content in "the play of language" threatens the stability of English identity based on complexion.

*Othello* begins with Iago and Roderigo informing Brabantio that his daughter has married Othello. Brabantio then confronts Othello:

> Damn'd as thou art, thou has enchanted her,
> For I'll refer me to all things of sense,
> (If she in chains of magic were not bound)
> Whether a maid, so tender, fair, and happy,

So opposite to marriage, that she shunn'd
The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,
Would ever have (to incur a general mock)
Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
Of such a thing as thou? to fear, not to delight (1.2.63–71).[5]

According to an analysis of character and plot, the line, "Of such a thing as thou? to fear, not to delight," registers Brabantio's disapproval of Othello as a match for his daughter; Othello is, in Brabantio's words, a sooty bosom," not a person but "a thing," in contrast to "The wealthy curled darlings of our nation," and his marriage to Desdemona will bring "a general mock" upon Brabantio and Desdemona. In short, Othello is a soldier and so his role in Venetian society is "not to delight," but to inspire fear. Further, implicit in Brabantio's speech is the idea that Othello's blackness, his "sooty bosom," ought to incite fear in proper Venetian ladies. Brabantio's confrontation with Othello indicates that he is not concerned with his daughter's "delight," but rather with the public implications of such a marriage.

I would like to focus on line 71 which states that Othello should inspire "fear" not "delight" in proper Venetian ladies. The word "delight" points to Desdemona's delight in Othello and Othello's presumed reciprocal delight in Desdemona. The word "delight," however, can also be thought of in its component parts as "de-light," "de-" as in the negating prefix of "decode," "defrost," or "deconstruct" and the word "light" referring to both complexion and that which makes sight possible; "de-light," then, might mean to take away light or to darken. Of course, Brabantio does not say, "to fear, not to darken." Reading "delight" as "de-light" requires an examination of "the play of language" and thus reveals a larger network of linguistic play that pervades *Othello.* The images of lightness and darkness have already been presented earlier in the play when, for example, Iago explains his plot to "Rouse [Brabantio], make after him, poison *his delight* . . . . though that his joy by joy, / Yet throw such changes of vexation upon't / As *it may lose some color*" (my emphasis, 1.1.68-73). As with the later use of the word, "de-light" emerges in the context of darkness; to "poison [Brabantio's] delight" is to disturb his sleep, which is associated with night, darkness, and the closing-out of light. Likewise, this passage refers to complexion, the loss of "some color" here doubling both as the loss of color that may occur in Brabantio's face when he hears the news of his daughter's elopement as well as the loss of whiteness that could be incurred by the offspring of Desdemona and Othello; thus, the loss of "some color" refers to turning pale at the prospect of darker complected, "de-lighted" grandchildren. When Brabantio comes to believe that Desdemona has married Othello, or, in Iago's bestial imagery, that "an old black ram / is tupping your white ewe," he shouts "Light I say, light!" (1.1.88-89; I.i.144). The image of black/white coitus prompts Brabantio's call for a "light" that opposes the darkness and the "de-light" Othello and Desdemona share. In the first scene of *Othello,* these lines establish the connection between "de-light" and a change in complexion.

The word "delight" continues the light-dark motif and carries with it three meanings: "to delight" suggests to love, to enjoy sexually, and to darken. In one word the idea of sexuality and blackness are combined. Brabantio's phrase "not to

de-light," then, expresses both his denial of his daughter's sexual attraction to Othello as well as his desire that his grandchildren not be darker than himself. That is, Brabantio fears that Othello will complicate his notion of "our nation" being made up of "wealthy curled [white] darlings." This "nation," I believe, refers to the fictional Italy on stage as well as the emergent English nation which had recently attempted the deportation of "blackamores" from the realm.[6] The phrase "not to delight" registers the desire to maintain the stability of identities based on complexion in that "de-light" or darkening implies the mutability of complexion. Thus, Othello is both a figure "to delight," in that he has come to embody a forbidden sexuality, and "to fear," in that his coupling with Desdemona threatens any conception of national identity based on a common complexion.

This is precisely what makes *Othello* so fascinating. On one level the play makes the rather glib point that Thomas Rymer gleans from the play, that "This may be a caution to all Maidens of Quality how, without their Parents consent, they run away with Blackamoors."[7] On another level, the play undermines precisely this point. The use of the word "delight," which in "the play of language" in *Othello* conflates pleasure with darkness, suggests that enjoyment inheres in suspending considerations of caution and consent. While Rymer's reading of the play is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, it does play up the black-and-white imagery that contextualizes my reading of the word "delight," a reading barred when considering only the manifest content of character and plot. Indeed, when Othello kills Desdemona and describes the act as "put[ting] out the light" (5.2.7), "de-lighting" her, the plot effectively closes-off the "delight" of sexual relations between Othello and Desdemona and the potential materialization of Brabantio's "de-lighted" grandchildren. Thus, "de-light" takes on yet another meaning, Desdemona's death, which assuages anxiety in that it prevents the return of the repressed content that challenges the stability of early modern England's unified national identity based on notions of shared complexion.

Although Othello's "put[ting] out the light" prevents the emergence of the repressed, the potentially "de-lighted" children of Othello and Desdemona persist in the "play of language," most notably in the play's repetition of the word "monster." The words "monster" and "monstrous" are repeated numerous times in the play[8] and gain significance because the early modern period inherited from classical and medieval texts the belief that Africa was populated with an unusual number of monsters and monstrosities.[9] A 1556 summary of Pliny's *Natural History,* for example, lists among the inhabitants of Africa people who have "neither nose nor nostril," others who "are without tongues, . . . a people called Arimaspi, that hath but one eye in their foreheads," some people whose "heads are almost like the heads of dogs," and others who "have no heads, but have their mouth and their eyes in their breasts." John Mandville, whose *Travels* was widely read in the early modern period, begins his discussion of monsters in Egypt and reserves the most extensive catalogue of monsters for his description of "Prestre John's land," which was believed to be in Africa.[10] By following Pliny's precedent, numerous other travel narratives reinforced the association of Africa with monsters. In 1555, John Lok lists the "anthropophagi" and other monsters among the inhabitants of Africa, and in 1621, Peter Heylyn

claims that Africa is populated "if at all, with such strange people, as hardly deserved to be called men."[11] Indeed, Othello confirms these ideas when he recounts his own "travel's history" with its "Anthropophagi and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders" (1.3.139; 1.3.144–145).

Karen Newman and Patricia Parker have both addressed the monster images in *Othello*. These critics read the monster-motif of the play as referring to female sexuality, Othello's role as simultaneously insider and outsider, and the play's portrayal of miscegenation.[12] While all these aspects are at work within the play, I am interested in another aspect of the repetition of "monster" in *Othello*, one that can only be fully explored by addressing the role this repetition plays in "the play of language," unconstrained by the logic of the manifest content of the play. Along with *Othello*'s repetition of "monster" and "monstrous" is the repetition of the word "conception" and other words related to pregnancy.[13] Indeed, *Othello* features numerous occasions in which the "monster" and "conception" images are juxtaposed. Iago speaks of his plot as "this monstrous birth" (1.3.405); at the level of the manifest content, this phrase can only refer to Iago's villainous plan; within "the play of language," however, "this monstrous birth," preceded as it is by Iago's claim to Brabantio, "You'll have your nephews neigh to you" (1.1.111), suggests that the phrase is part of a larger network of meanings in the play, namely the repressed "de-lighted" children that destabilize the relationship between group identity and complexion in that they will have as much in common with the so-called "monsters" of Africa as they will with the "curled darling of our nation." The use of the word "monstrous" refers not only to the association of Africa with monsters, but also to the idea of the "monster" as defying categorization. Furthermore, the use of the word "monster" in this context exposes early modern England's anxiety about the blurring of such categories as "black" and "white."

Similar to Iago's phrase, "this monstrous birth," Emilia's description of jealousy is as "a monster, / Begot upon itself, born upon itself" (3.4.161–162); locally, these lines provide a metaphor for jealousy, but when considered in light of "the play of language," the lines work with Iago's "monstrous birth" pointing to the potential children of Othello and Desdemona. Likewise, Othello claims that there is "some monster in [Iago's] thought" (3.3.107); the logic of the plot demands that this line describe dangerous information that Iago withholds; unconstrained by such logic, however, the lines can be paraphrased as Iago's "monstrous conception" and therefore add to the repetitive structure in *Othello*'s "play of language." Similarly, Iago's phrase, "grosser issues" (3.3.219), can be read on the manifest level as speaking untactfully of larger or obscene matters but on the latent level as referring to monstrous or repugnant ("gross") offspring ("issues"). Thus, the word "monstrous" and its close proximity to words associated with pregnancy and birth, coupled with the opening scene of the play, in which Iago tells Brabantio, "you'll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for germans" (1.1.112–113), reflect upon the anxiety about the potential birth of "de-lighted" or hybrid children who are neither fully "black" nor fully "white" or ,conversely, who are both "black" and "white." Such children are described as "monstrous" because they undermine the stability of an identity tied to

complexion. Further, blackness itself is a repressed aspect of English nationhood; evidence indicates that some black people lived in England as early as the third century.[14] It is also quite clear that "blackamoores" lived in England during Shakespeare's lifetime, yet Elizabeth I refers to blackamoores as "those kinde of people" in contrast with "people of our own nation." In that sense, "the play of language" that is evident in the use of the words "de-light" and "monster" in *Othello* signals the emergence of blackness as a repressed aspect of English nationhood and corresponds to the play's plot which deals with the marriage of the "fair" Desdemona and the "black" Othello as well as with concerns about such unions that were in circulation during the early modern period.

The offspring of such a marriage was an important issue in early modern England as is apparent in a passage from George Best's *Discourse* in which "an Ethiopian as blacke as cole brought into England, who taking a faire English woman to wife, begat a sonne in all respects as blacke as the father was, although England were his native countrey, and an English woman his mother."[15] Here the fear of a "de-lighted" or hybrid child is manifest in the way that the very existence of this couple's son defies the whiteness of "England . . . . his native countrey." Is this child, in Elizabeth's own words, a "blackamoore" or a person "of our own nation?" That is, while monsters were thought of as contrary to the natural order, hybridity challenges the English conception of nationhood based on complexion as part of the natural order. For that reason, Brabantio's "de-lighted" grandchildren appear in *Othello* as repressed content in "the play of language" and are described as "monstrous" because of the challenge they pose to early modern England's nascent national identity.

However, "de-lighted" children do appear in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus,* in which Tamora gives birth to a "dismal, black, and sorrowful issue" (4.2.66). As with hybridity in *Othello,* the presence of this child undermines notions of nationhood based on complexion. Aaron's adamant protection of his son, for example, makes him in one sense a more sympathetic character than the Romans who sacrifice Tamora's eldest son and Titus who kills his own son (1.1.124-129; 1.1.209-291). In part, then, the contrast in the way in which the characters of *Titus Andronicus* treat offspring undermines the projection that forms the representation of Aaron as hyperbolically villainous. Moreover, when Chiron and Demetrius threaten to kill the child, Aaron points out to them that "He is your brother, lords, sensible fed / Of that self blood that first gave life to you" (4.2.122-123). The child, despite his complexion, thus confounds notions of insider and outsider. Even more threatening to stable notions of complexion is Muliteus's child; Aaron explains to Demetrius and Chiron that although Muliteus is "my countryman," "His Child is like to [his wife], fair as you are" (4.2.152; 154). Aaron plans to exchange these two hybrid children so that Muliteus' child will "be received for the Emperor's heir" (4.2.158). The exchangeability of these two children, as well as the fact that one could become Emperor of Rome, passing as "white," undermines the practice of identifying insiders and outsiders by complexion. That is, if a child's black parentage cannot be detected, then whiteness ceases to be a guarantee of English identity. Muliteus' child never appears in the play, however. Although the hybrid children of *Titus Andronicus*

and early modern English culture, Muliteus' child is repressed, emerging in the play only as a threatening potential, a possible but ultimately abandoned direction of the plot. Indeed, Aaron's hyperbolic villainy may serve as a way of distracting from such a potential threat to Englishness.

Of special interest to this conference, I suspect, is a similar phenomenon occurring in *The Tempest* which has as its pre-history the fact that Alonso has married his daughter to the King of Tunis (2.1.70–71), thereby introducing, albeit only in passing, the idea of European/African marriage and the potential birth of children that are neither black nor white. The issue is continued in the figure of Caliban, who is described as "this thing of darkness" (5.1.275) and is said to be the son of Sycorax who comes from Algiers (1.2.265). Recall that the rift between Caliban and Prospero is the result of Caliban's attempt to copulate with Miranda in the hopes of populating "This isle with Calibans" (1.2.351). These "Calibans," of course, would be part "Mirandas" and so be, like the potential offspring of Othello and Desdemona, neither fully black nor fully white. Significantly, both Alonso's daughter's marriage to an African and Caliban's attempts at copulating with Miranda occur before the play begins and are only mentioned in passing. Thus, *The Tempest,* like *Othello,* introduces the possibility of children that would be classifiable as neither white nor black, or in Elizabeth I's terms neither "people of our own nation" nor "those kind of people." This emerges in "the play of language" in the repeated references to Caliban as unclassifiable and therefore a "monster." The words "monster" and "monstrous" are repeated a full forty-nine times in the play and, given the events occurring prior to the action of the play, are connected to a repressed anxiety about hybridity.[16]

The repression of hybridity in *Titus Andronicus,* as well as its reemergence in "the play of language" in *Othello* and *The Tempest,* reveals early modern England's cultural anxiety about the birth of children whose very existence challenges the maintenance of a national identity based on complexion. Indeed, preventing the birth of such children may have been one of the underlying causes of Elizabeth's calls for the expulsion of "blackamoores." That is, in addition to introducing blackness as a marker of difference and scape-goating "blackamoores" for the lack of employment and resources in England, removing "blackamoores" from the realm diminishes the possible birth of hybrid children who challenge categories like "black" and "white" and, more importantly, categories like English and "those kinde of people" as opposed to "people of our own nation." Thus, if early modern plays can be thought of as the dream-life of the culture that produced them, then "the play of language" of plays like *Othello,* wherein lies some of the repressed material of early modern culture, reveals that nationhood based on complexion is and always was a delusion, a dream, albeit a dream which has been acted upon as if it were real, thus shaping subsequent notions of Englishness and alterity.

## Notes

1. While Elliot Tokson lists only one dramatic pageant featuring a black character, Anthony Barthelemy finds a minimum of nineteen early modern pageants that feature black characters. Furthermore, although Tokson includes Ben Jonson's

*The Queene's Masque, The First of Blackness,* performed in 1605, Anthony Barthelemy claims that there were at least six previous masques that featured black characters. To these six masques, one might add Thomas Campion's *The Squires Masque* which features a character representing Africa and Jonson's *A Masque of the Metamorphosed Gypsies* which features Egyptian characters and points to the use of black-face, explaining "Know that what dyed our faces was an ointment" (line 1387). Tokson further overlooks two plays by Shakespeare that feature black characters; in *The Tempest,* for example, Caliban, whom Prospero describes as "this thing of darkness," is said to be the son of Sycorax who comes to the island "from Argier," or Algiers in Africa (5.1.275; 1.2.265). Similarly, in *Antony and Cleopatra,* Cleopatra describes herself as "with Phoebus' amorous pinches black" (1.5.28). Adding to Tokson's twenty-nine dramatic texts, then, eighteen pageants, eight court masques, and two Shakespearean plays, one comes to the total fifty-seven early modern dramatic texts featuring black characters. The total runs significantly higher if one takes into account Eldred Jones's list of plays that feature African characters, some of whom are not specifically designated as black (*Othellos' Countrymen* 145–149). Elliot H. Tokson, *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama 1550-1688* (Boston: G.K. Hall and Co., 1982), 42.

Anthony G. Barhelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), 19.

2. The comparison is made again in Freud's *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (99; 206; 375–377).

3. Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairy Tales, and Myths* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1951), 249; Sigmund Freud, "The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming (1908)," *Character and Culture* (New York; Collier Books, 1963), 34–43.

4. David Willbern, *Poetic Will: Shakespeare and the Play of Language* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 2–6; 25; 42–7.

5. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Shakespeare's works refer to *The Riverside Shakespeare.*

6. Twice in 1596 and again in 1601, Queen Elizabeth I and the Privy Council issued decrees calling for the expulsion of "blackamorores" from England. The 1596 decree states,

> "Her Majestie understanding that there are lately divers blackamoores brought into this realme, of which kinds of people there are already to manie, considering howe God hath blassed this land with great increase of people of our own nation as anie countrie in the world, whereof manie for want of service and meanes to sett them on worck fall to idleness and to great extremytie . . . [T]hose kinde of people should be sent forth of the lande, and for that purpose there ys direction given to thie bearer Edwarde Banes to take of those blackmoores that in the last voyage under Sir Thomas Baskerville were brought into this

realme the nomber of tenn, to be transported by him out of the realme."

Peter Fryer, *Staying Power, the History of Black People in Britain* (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1984), 10.

7. Thomas Rymer, "A Short View of Tragedy," *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century, Vol. II, 1650 – 1685,* ed J. E. Spingarn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1908), 221.

8. See *Othello,* 1.3.405, 3.3.377, 3.3.427, 3.4.161-162, 4.1.62, 4.1.64, 1.2.190.

9. Tokson, 80–81. See also, Elfred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 2–11.

10. Jones, 5–9; John Mandeville, *Mandeville's Travels,* trans. Jean D'Outremeuse. Ed. P. Hamelius (London, New York, and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1919), 30; 187–200.

11. Tokson, 9.

12. Karen Newman, "'And Wash the Ethiop White'": Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello," Shakespeare Reproduced, the Text in History and Ideology,* eds. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), 141–162. Patricia Parker, "Fantasises of 'Race' and 'Gender': Africa, Othello, and Bringing to Light," *Women, Race, and Writing in the Early Modern Period,* Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker eds. (London and New York: Routlegde, 1994), 84–100.

13. See *Othello,* 1.1.91, 1.1.112, 1.2.99, 1.3.369–370, 1.3.405, 2.1.235–236, 3.4.161–162, 4.2.95.

14. Fryer, 1–4.

15. George Best, "George Best's *Discourse" The Principal Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries of the English Nation,* volume VII, ed. Richard Hakluyt (New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1965), 262.

16. See *The Tempest,* 2.1.314, 2.2.30, 2.1.65, 2.1.90, 2.1.98, 2.2.145, 2.2.146, 2.2.151, 2.2.155, 2.2.158-159, 2.2.165, 2.2.179, 2.2.188, 3.2.3; 3.2.4, 3.2.11, 3.2.12, 3.2.16, 3.2.18, 3.2.25, 3.2.28, 3.2.29, 3.2.32, 3.2.36-37, 3.2.69, 3.2.80, 3.2.106, 3.2.119, 3.2.134, 3.2.150, 3.3.31, 3.2.95, 4.1.195, 4.1.199, 3.2.201, 4.1.203, 4.1.210, 4.1.212, 4.1.225, 4.1.235, 4.1.245, 4.1.250, 5.1.258.

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