Introduction

On 1 February 1749, two young African men, a prince and his companion, attended Covent Garden to see a performance of Thomas Southerne's *Oroonoko*, whose protagonist is an African prince tricked into slavery by a ship's captain. What is remarkable is that they had themselves been tricked and sold into slavery by a ship's captain while on their way to England for education. Such abductions were not unknown, but their plight had caused a furore; a ransom had been paid for them by the British government and they had been presented to the king himself. Their appearance at the theatre and the sensation this caused among the audience, who greeted them with a burst of applause, was a rare and instantaneous fusion of life and art. For the audience, it combined the theatrical experience of Southerne's highly popular play with the theatrical spectacle of the two real-life abductees, 'doubl[ing] the tears which were shed for *Oroonoko* and *Imoinda*'. For the young men, the pathos of this theatrical reflection of their own experience was almost too much – one had to leave before the play's end; one remained, weeping the whole time.[1] It is an episode which evokes all those ramifications (and occasional contradictions) of Britain's involvement with slavery and slavetrading on which its international commerce and prosperity was built; a trade which, at the time of the young men's capture, was reaching unprecedented proportions. The cultural context within which slavery was opposed or accepted, justified or reconciled (with varying degrees of success) with the prevailing ideas of the age, was one that was, at bottom, largely defined by what could be described as an early form of globalisation – if not in the totalising modern sense of the term, at least in the sense of the economic subordination of the Americas, the Caribbean and parts of Africa to European powers, particularly Britain.[2]

While this particular episode is a heightened instance of the relationships (and disjunctions) between art and reality, it nonetheless points to some of the ways in which the development of dramatic performance and

theatrical fashion drew on and re-presented underlying material realities. Unlike other cultural forms, theatrical performance was accessible to lettered and unlettered alike; the stage was able both to reflect and inflect prevailing cultural assumptions in a continuous, semi-subterranean process of change and development. It was a process that, eventually, led to the enslaved African prince Oroonoko being pushed off the English stage by another, but far more degraded, figure: the American slave grotesque, Jim Crow. Just as economic history demonstrates the increasing complexity of Britain's dependence on the nexus of slavery, commerce and international trade in slave-produced commodities, so any exploration of its cultural history will also spread out beyond its own seas. And, in many ways, it will follow those trade winds that first carried it to America, Africa, the Caribbean. For even the history that produced and then discarded Oroonoko is only part of a larger, more complex history of the development of the black stereotype during the nineteenth century. It was a stereotype that crossed continents; it was the obverse of the international black-led struggle against the continuation of slavery in North America after it had largely been abolished elsewhere.

The underlying purpose of this book is to chart some of that process of development during a period of rapid and formative social change; to trace how racial assumptions in Britain evolved from a certain flexibility at the end of the eighteenth century to a greater rigidity, elaboration and entrenchment by the second half of the nineteenth. This, in turn, paved the way for the more highly developed racial consciousness of the classic period of imperialism. My primary concern is with the early Victorian period up until the late 1850s, but it is not possible to understand this without locating it in a much earlier historical context; for example, the thread of Southerne's *Oroonoko*, first staged in 1695, can be traced through almost the subsequent century and a half. Although much work has been done on investigating and analysing the development and propagation of scientific racism towards the end of the nineteenth century, much less has been done on how racial attitudes were more widely popularised, especially during its first half.[3] While in contemporary society pseudo-scientific, semi-racist ideas can filter down from intellectual or political elites to become, in simplified form, general currency through the agency of the tabloid press and the mass media, transmission of such ideas before the advent of universal education and mass literacy was more indirect and less pervasive.[4]

The theatre, however, was one venue open to large, cross-class sectors of the population. Jim Davis and Victor Emeljanow have analysed the mixed nature of the nineteenth-century theatregoing public, showing it as one of

1 **The Victorian audience as seen by Phiz** 'Pantomime night', *Illustrated London News*
(8 January 1848), courtesy of Senate House Library, University of London

the most attractive features of the cultural life of the period.[5] Moreover, both the opportunism with which the theatre, always greedy for new matter, seized its raw materials and the haste with which it breathed them into dramatic life render the underlying attitudes and images conveyed that much more transparent; they are only scantily disguised. The theatre, then, provides an unparalleled archive, primarily through the agency of the Lord Chamberlain (in his capacity as dramatic licenser and censor), of the surviving materials of popular culture; an archive that runs unbroken throughout the period.[6] There is an overwhelming volume of source material, both printed and manuscript, only a selection of which (though I hope a substantial and representative one) is analysed here.

The popular theatre of the nineteenth century, whose remit embraced, however fancifully, the lives and concerns of the humble as well as the great, depended on stereotype. It depended on the instant recognisability of the scheming villain, the wicked landlord, the brave hero, the doughty heroine, the innocent child, the good old man, the loving aged mother. And black-skinned characters featured in it to an unexpected degree, from minor walk-on parts to major roles. But to what effect were the recognisability and dramatic impact of black-skinned characters put? How did the dramatic functions they fulfilled reinforce, extend or possibly challenge accepted 'common sense' racial assumptions? At the start of the period under discussion, the black character evoked fear or pathos. Often a figure of vengeance, he became less terrifying as the threat of rebellion that he posed receded, though as he did so, the figure of the mulatto female avenger briefly appeared in the mid-nineteenth century – and exposed another way in which racial theorising crossed the Atlantic. There was also a tradition of the comical black servant who, ultimately, became the progenitor of the most degraded black image. For it was the stereotypes spawned by 'nigger minstrel' comedy that came to dominate, even in vehicles – like the *Uncle Tom* plays – that might, at first sight, seem antithetical to them.

This book attempts to map out a terrain that has, hitherto, remained largely untrodden. Even less has it been explored to show not just this stereotypical feature or that, existing as it were discretely, but the connecting links between one stage and the next; the ongoing change and degradation of the image of the black character. Because it traces, as closely as possible, a process which happened over time, this study is largely chronological; but because it attempts to examine the history of an idea, as filtered through popular culture, it is also thematic and analytical.

My approach is primarily empirical, based on extensive readings of largely forgotten plays to discover how black-skinned characters (initially Africans, latterly African Caribbeans and African Americans) were represented; what kinds of functions they fulfilled in the drama; what their roles were; the type of language they used; the sort of language that was used of them; what was depicted of their relationships with other characters; in short, what the plays in which they figured might indicate about how blacks were perceived culturally. Because this material is so unknown today, I have used extensive quotations from it to illustrate my argument. And, where possible, I have also attempted to contextualise the readings of the plays with reference to contemporary reviews and comment, to gain, if only crudely and obliquely, some conception of how these images might have been received. As much of the dramatic material on which the research is based was performed at the minor theatres, comparatively little of it appears to have been extensively reviewed, but so pervasive, if largely overlooked, is the black presence on the English stage that every chapter contains leads to related areas that could fruitfully have been investigated, but which would have bulked this book out to even more inordinate length.

While the basic subject matter of *Racism on the Victorian Stage* is the theatrical discourse on race of the first half of the nineteenth century, it is based on an understanding of racism that sees this discourse as fashioned and altered by material social, economic and political circumstances. Racism is a phenomenon that, as A. Sivanandan has so forcefully shown, 'does not stay still; it changes shape, size, contours, purpose, function – with changes in the economy, the social structure, the system and . . . the challenges, the resistances to that system'.[7] This is as true for the nineteenth century, a period of fundamental social and political upheaval, as it is for today.

What became obvious was that slavery was the major material and structural influence on the ways that blacks were depicted. It was slavery, both its imposition and the decades-long struggle against it, that shaped the image of the black as presented for popular consumption. Slavery was an oft-repeated theme of nineteenth-century commentary and a frequent, almost constant, refrain in plays and entertainments of all descriptions. Such allusions could range from the almost reflexive yoking of Englishness, liberty and slavery in numerous nautical melodramas, to slavery's incorporation as a major dramatic theme. This is the case, for example, with the abolitionist dramas of the late eighteenth century, such subsequent works as George Colman's *The Africans* (1809), Thomas Morton's *The Slave*

(1816), Douglas Jerrold's *Descart, the French Buccaneer* (1828), or, later still, the *Uncle Tom* plays of the 1850s.

No amount of such cultural mediation, however, could alleviate the brutalities of the slave system for those who were its victims or fully expose its true nature to those in whose name it was carried on, though it may well have served both to keep the issue in the public consciousness and to pacify that consciousness. Slavery's destruction was a work of untiring persistence at a multitude of levels, from the ladies' committees for abolition to the impassioned, valiant resistance of the enslaved themselves. 'I would rather die upon yonder gallows than live in slavery'[8] were the last words of Samuel Sharpe, condemned to death in May 1832 for his central role in the major slave rebellion that erupted in Jamaica from 1831 to 1832. In London, one week later, a parliamentary select committee was appointed to 'consider . . . Measures . . . expedient to adopt for the purpose of effecting the extinction of slavery throughout the British Dominions'.[9] Slavery was no longer officially tenable.

Sharpe does not figure directly in my story here, but the actions that he, and thousands like him, took in their battles for freedom form an oblique and, even today, largely hidden context against which that story has to be set. Theirs was an experience of capture, enslavement and resistance that, initially, was sentimentalised and, ultimately, subjected to the grossest contempt. To understand the ways in which this was carried out, it is necessary to begin much earlier than the nineteenth-century heyday of popular theatre. For those representations of the black figure cannot be understood without some analysis of eighteenth-century drama. And it is not possible to look at that without casting backwards to two of the seminal texts of black dramatic representation, Shakespeare's *Othello* and Southerne's *Oroonoko*. They, in turn, demand a brief contextual resumé, which is where this book will begin, for the historical memory which is retained in this most evanescent and changeable of genres is phenomenally long.

CHAPTER I

From vengeance to sentiment

From Oroonoko to Gambia, from Zanga to Hassan, from Karfa to Couri,
from Muley to Black Sam, through all the manifestations of Pompey and
Quashee, the black figure on the early nineteenth-century English stage
embodied the processes of a racism continually reinventing itself culturally.
Theatre then was much like television now. Before mass education and
mass literacy, and in a period of explosive urban and industrial growth, it
was *the* popular medium, drawing its audiences from all but the very
poorest, with many going night after night. Bills were long, lasting from
around six until midnight or maybe later, and varied, changing every few
days. The appetite for new material was insatiable, much of it cobbled
together from a variety of elements. There were old favourites and pastiches
of them, stuff pirated from rival theatres, versions of French plays, reports
of British victories past and present, circus, spectacle and pantomime,
dumbshow, performing elephants, lions, dogs . . . And in all this melee,
the black character (inevitably a white actor in heavy makeup) fawned or
thundered, was, by turns, terrible, contemptible, grotesque. In this he
expressed not just that well-known psychological projection, the 'Other',
but an ingrained, dynamic relationship to the development of racism in the
nineteenth century.

While the raw material for these representations came from the accretion
of folkloric prejudices built up over centuries, the crucible in which the
elements were initially combined was largely fashioned from much earlier
literary sources. Traces of these continued to inhere in nineteenth-century
dramatic entertainment long after their initial expression. The earliest
dramatic representations of the black character tended to focus on the
figure of the evil Moor, a stereotype reversed by *Othello* but largely
validated by *Titus Andronicus*, though the *direct* influence of both these
plays on the future development of the black image was, on the whole,
slight. More important was Thomas Southerne's *Oroonoko* (1695) which
continued to be performed, in bowdlerised versions, up to and including

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the first quarter of the nineteenth century, and was also widely used as a
source for subsequent representations.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Some of the earliest representations of the black – apart from blackfaced
devils in the mystery plays – are to be found in late sixteenth- and
seventeenth-century masques and Guild pageants featuring 'Moors',
whether as happy, carefree slaves or brilliant, gaudy exotics. In their stage
presence during this period, in plays such as George Peele's *The Battle
of Alcazar* (1589), Thomas Dekker's *Lust's Dominion* (1600), William
Rowley's *All's Lost by Lust* (1619) and Aphra Behn's *Abdelazer* (1677),
they were given over almost wholly to monstrous evil and driven by
overwhelming lust.[1] Lust was not only a mortal sin in itself but also a
threat to the foundations of Christian civilised society. Outside the moral
framework altogether, these black figures are linked explicitly to the devil,
their black skins standing in for their evil natures. Of these purely evil
creatures, the most complex is Aaron, in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*
(1594). But this character, too, was rendered even more one-dimensionally
evil in Edward Ravenscroft's 1686 reworking of the play, which took away
Aaron's love for his child and his reflections on the nature of blackness, to
render him a greater monster. The evil Moor, in addition to his other sins
against God, is almost always a murderer of the most shocking sort. Muly
Mahamet (*The Battle of Alcazar*) commits parricide and fratricide; Eleazar
(*Lust's Dominion*) commits regicide; to say that Aaron (*Titus Andronicus*)
encompasses the murder of the emperor's brother Bassanius, two of Titus's
sons and two of his paramour Tamora's, gives only a pale impression of his
capacity for evil. (That the figure of Aaron was drastically reworked in the
mid-nineteenth century by the black tragedian Ira Aldridge adds yet
another layer of complexity to the multifarious ways in which the black
character was developed.)

Othello should also be considered here, for he is both of his era and
outside it, and his shadow stretches far over the coming centuries. '[O]f all
the plays in English dramatic history, no other play until the twentieth
century offered a black hero of Othello's stature'.[2] Certainly many of the
elements of the stereotype are there, but configured in a way that is the
antithesis of the stereotype. The grossness of lechery springs from Iago's
lips, not from Othello's dignified avowals of love; a princely warrior, his
service is to the state, not to its destruction; he is not the conventional
Moorish villain but the villain's dupe. It is not until the very last that

Othello, outmanoeuvred by the machinations of Iago, falls into the dom-
inant stereotype of the murderous black, tormented by sexual insecurity
into the evil act of killing Desdemona. Barthelemy, in a highly persuasive
discussion of the play, locates it in the theatre of its time to argue that
despite 'his best efforts to the contrary, Othello cannot escape the role fated
to Moors on the stage, and as he moves to free himself of the confines of the
role, he moves inexorably closer to it . . . Iago wishes to ensnare Othello in
the confines of the stereotype that Othello struggles so desperately to
escape.'[3]

Elsewhere he comments that '[i]n spite of the remarkable endurance of
Othello, its ability to influence positively the portrayal of Africans on the
stage is . . . almost negligible',[4] a statement which this study bears out.
Nonetheless, the towering stature of the play, the continued frequency of
its performance throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth
centuries, meant that it was a rich if generalised source of themes and ideas
for later dramatic portrayals, a standard and, perhaps as frequently, a target.

But, Othello apart, the generality of those sixteenth- and seventeenth-
century representations, with their emphatic portrayals of the villainous
and terrifying Moor, can be seen as deriving from the ever present fear of
Moorish rule over Europe. For the Moors were a power to be reckoned
with, their empire stretching, at its height, from China to India, into the
Middle East, across much of Africa and north 'from Portugal's Atlantic
coast, through the Iberian peninsula, over the Pyrenees, into France's
Rhone Valley and . . . along the Biscay coast'.[5]

Moorish sovereignty over Spain – which had brought art and science,
learning and libraries, as well as Islam – was not brought to its end until
1492, with the fall of Granada and the mass expulsions that eventually
followed. But, before that, the long and bloody struggle of Christendom
against 'Mohammedanism' had already set a cultural context for the per-
ception of 'Moors' (the definition of who counted as a Moor was extremely
flexible). Not surprisingly, the stage Moor was the dark embodiment of
every anti-Christian quality that could be imagined.

However, there is another significance to 1492 which also bears directly
on this narrative. For it was the Columbian voyages from that year on that
inaugurated Europe's involvement in postmedieval chattel slavery and led
to the full-blown horrors of the Atlantic slave trade and industrial-scale
slave production. Slave-grown sugar from the West Indies was first shipped
to Spain in 1515; 'three years later . . . [came] the first cargo of captives from
Africa to be shipped [directly] to the West Indies'.[6] By the eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries, this trade had become so enormous and significant

that the overriding factor which defined the context within which the black stage character operated was not his adherence to another god or gods but his (sometimes her) status, actual or potential, as a slave.

The disjunction between the earlier and later representations stems, in my view, not solely from the obvious differences in historical period, but from the different nature of the challenge which the black posed to white society. This was no longer derived from the threat of conquest but from the integration of slavery into the economic foundations of society and the reflection of cultural values that it threw up. Black-skinned slaves were the engine of the economic development of European slavetrading and slave-owning societies,[7] yet glaringly gave the lie to those societies' professed Christian belief systems and to the concept of a common humanity in which those beliefs were held to be rooted.

In Christ all men are free, and to Christ all men are to be brought. But slaves were commodities, bought and sold, their value to be extracted at the lowest cost and for the greatest profit. Yet were they not also – somewhere – made in God's image? The ongoing attempt to reconcile these two irreconcilables lies at the heart of much of the creation of racial stereotypes. One could, of course, do as the early Spanish conquistadors did to the American Indians – read out a proclamation in Spanish, calling on them to accept the true God and, when they did not, declare them heathens, *sub-homines*, whom it was the moral duty of their conquerors to enslave and set to work. (The moral duty of doing God's work and making His creation even more bounteous was, too, of great assistance in justifying the seizure and exploitation of the lands in which the *sub-homines* dwelt.) Or one could claim scriptural authority for the enslavement of dark-skinned peoples on the grounds that they were cursed as the descendants of Ham and doomed to be the servants of servants. And was not slavery – at least the enslavement of captives in war – justified by ancient authority, from Aristotle onwards? Another way of resolving the contradiction was to emphasise the rightness of submission to earthly authority. All humankind are slaves to sin in the eyes of God; only his service is perfect freedom: it is the afterlife, not the earthly one, that matters. In any case, were Africans not better off as slaves under European direction than left in their original benighted state? Furthermore, the profitability of slave labour was its own justification – that it was of such utility proved its rationality. But, whatever the particular current of thought, always fundamental to blacks' servile status was the perception of their innate inferiority, its patterning continually reworked according to contemporary notions.[8]