CHAPTER 1

Surveying 'race' in Shakespeare

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Like a number of Shakespearians intrigued by the question of race and the works of William Shakespeare, my first critical engagement with the matter of race in early modern English literature occurred when, as an undergraduate, I read *Othello*, in particular Gerald Eades Bentley's 1958 introduction to the play. Bentley's commentary is striking in its near total inattention to Othello's skin colour: Bentley's only comment about the matter is to state, 'Othello is a man of action whose achievement was immediately obvious to an Elizabethan audience, in spite of his exotic colour and background, because of his position as the commanding general for the greatest commercial power of the preceding century.'[1] When so much has been made of Othello's hue, Bentley's lack of commentary on the place of colour and race in the play seemed singularly odd. Yet it was not until much later that I considered Bentley's omission to be an astute stratagem to redirect the reader's attention and gaze away from Othello's colour and to his stature as a warrior, and to the complex moral dimension that status entails in Shakespeare's tragedy.

Since then, I have taught Shakespeare's canon, written about a number of his texts, and, over the course, I have developed something of a deep interest in the concept of race in Shakespeare, Renaissance English literature and culture. This interest, however, is not solely linked to what I consider the obvious markers of race – *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Titus Andronicus* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Rather, my interest concerns the epistemology of race in the period. Thus when asked to write the introductory essay to this volume, I pondered what such an introduction might convey to its reader in keeping with the aim of the volume, namely to highlight the on-going relevance of the essays published in the volume for the study of Shakespeare and his canon. My introduction, thus, will follow a familiar format in that it offers an overview of the contents of the volume either newly published or reprinted in the order of their composition. My own reflections at the

end of this introduction are less an essay and more a personal commentary on the matter of Shakespeare and race.

With the advent of post-colonial theory, race studies and cultural studies, it is quite easy to believe that practitioners of these techniques are the first to interrogate 'Shakespeare and race' as an epistemological query; yet what this volume demonstrates is that, in fact, we are only the inheritors of an intellectual, critical and political tradition. The publication of *Shakespeare and Race* acknowledges the continuing importance of the intellectual labours of a generation of scholars increasingly ignored or dismissed in the rush to 'racialize' Shakespeare's canon and/or Elizabethan England, and also reminds us of the work yet to be done. With reference to this last point, I must own that I consider myself culpable. I too have frequently overlooked the work of an 'older' generation of Shakespeare scholarship on race. Now I have begun to redress this oversight.

STILL SIGNIFICANT AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

In 1958 *Shakespeare Survey* published an essay entitled 'A Portrait of a Moor' by Bernard Harris, which draws attention to the acquisition by the Shakespeare Institute of a portrait of Morocco's Ambassador to Elizabeth's court in 1600. As Harris notes, the 'portrait . . . is of considerable interest to students of history, of art and of the theatre' (p. 23). For the historian (literary and social), the painting serves to put to rest a long-standing debate as to whether there was a viable presence of Moors and Africans in Elizabethan England. For Harris, the painting provides visual, and thus irrefutable evidence, or 'ocular proof'. Harris uses this portrait as a starting-point for a more detailed account of the complex 'commercial and diplomatic' 'relations between England and Barbary' (p. 23). This ambassadorial portrait reveals a geo-political complexity that can, as Harris argues, 'assist a producer of *The Merchant of Venice* when he comes to the stage direction, "Enter Morochus, a tawny Moore all in white"' (p. 23).

In his efforts to link the English social history behind and alongside the 1600 painting of the Ambassador from Morocco, Harris charts the relations between these two geographic spaces: the role of the Barbary Company (led by the Earls of Leicester and Warwick) in fostering an alliance; the merchant adventurers Richard, George, Arnold and Jasper Tomson; and the correspondence and financial details surrounding the visit of Morocco's ambassador to England. As Harris shows, the Moorish

embassy created some havoc, politically and financially, for Elizabeth's subjects. For example, John Stow writes:

> Notwithstanding all this kindness shown them together with their dyet and all other provisions for sixe moneths space wholly at the Queenes charges, yet such was their inveterate hate unto our Christian religion and estate as they could not endure to give any manner of alms, charitie, or relief, either in money or broken meat, unto any English poore. (p. 32)

In the writings of the day, the Moors were described as subtle, 'stubborn', 'bestial' and intolerant. This imagery and commentary, Harris argues, suggest that 'To Elizabethan Londoners the appearance and conduct of the Moors was a spectacle and an outrage, emphasizing the nature of the deep difference between themselves and their visitors, between their Queen and this "erring Barbarian" ' (p. 35). Thus, Harris concludes, 'When Shakespeare chose, for this audience, to present a Moor as his hero, he was not perhaps confused in his racial knowledge, simply more aware than his contemporaries of the complex pattern made by white and black' (p. 35).

Despite this final comment, and his earlier allusion to *The Merchant of Venice*, Harris largely ignores Shakespeare's plays. It is left to the readers of 'A Portrait of a Moor' intuitively to make the interpretative links with Shakespeare's drama. Even so, Harris effectively sketches a historical landscape that makes sense of both *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice* as textually formed and framed by the changing racial landscape of Early Modern England. As Harris himself notes, 'To recount the story of the embassy in some detail is to take us nearer to Shakespeare's England, perhaps even, in a sense, to Shakespeare's Moor' (p. 24). I would add that the portrait of the ambassador from Morocco and Harris' essay serve to remind us of the political forces that frame a society's 'racial imagination' just as effectively as the literary ones.

G. K. Hunter's 'Elizabethans and Foreigners' similarly maps the 'impact of foreigners on' Elizabethan society (p. 37). Yet Hunter's account is strikingly different from 'A Portrait of a Moor' in two ways. First, Hunter is much more intrigued by the impact of this contact in terms of Elizabethan literature, and second, he is much less interested in the actual presence of these foreigners in Elizabethan society than in the 'framework of assumptions concerning foreigners' (p. 37) who enter England during the sixteenth century. As a result, 'Elizabethans and Foreigners' becomes a model for a literary analysis that bridges the presumed divide between 'social' and 'literary' history; in essence, Hunter's essay cogently demonstrates the importance of links between

context and interpretation. Hunter begins by asking a crucial question: 'What was the framework of assumptions concerning foreigners' in Elizabethan England? Drawing upon a wide range of texts – travel accounts, romances, plays, and poetry – Hunter reminds us that the Elizabethan (and by extension Shakespeare's) vision of foreignness had a complex and evolving material and philosophical history.

Beginning in the middle ages, the English engagement with 'foreigners' often functioned on two levels: spiritual and material. In the early travel narratives, Mandeville's *Travels* for example, places such as Jerusalem, Africa and India were frequently idealized in terms of their spiritual significance as sites of biblical history and theological relevance. As new knowledge about the world, acquired through voyages to Africa, India and the Americas, supplanted old, the Elizabethan imagination had to be refitted. In essence, the 'framework of assumptions' about foreigners had to be expanded. What is significant, however, is that the impact of these voyages on the literary imagination in the sixteenth century may be less dramatic than we have come to believe. As Hunter argues, 'we should beware of supposing that a pattern of races emerged readily from the Europe that Christendom had become, a pattern capable of supplying moral discriminations rich and complex enough for literary use' (p. 45).

What apparently occurred, according to Hunter, was the emergence of 'material for caricature,' not 'for character' (p. 45). Within Elizabethan culture and literature, the foreigner serves to inaugurate a 'process of *vulgarization*' (p. 47) based upon the intimate knowledge of the foreigner. Thus, in Hunter's view, the more deeply racialized stereotypes and characterizations are those most familiar to the English – Dutch, German, Italian, Irish and Spanish nationals. And importantly, the Elizabethan's 'awareness of foreigners was closely conditioned by a traditional religious outlook on the world' (p. 51). This 'religious outlook', of course, situated Jews and followers of Islam as the antithesis to all Christians. Even so, the Elizabethan imagination could sustain the racialization of the Italian as a deeply held belief alongside the traditional racializing of the Jew and the emerging racialization of the American Indian.

Despite their dates, these two essays easily reflect the type of scholarship typical of New Historicism. Both 'A Portrait of a Moor' and 'Elizabethans and Foreigners' offer 'thick descriptions' of Elizabethan culture and society that have come to mark the type of inter-textual analyses generated by New Historicists. Even more significant is the way

these two essays cogently adumbrate a Renaissance English discourse of race without recourse to contemporary (i.e. twentieth-century) theoretical discussions. In other words, both Harris and Hunter manage to convey the relationship between cultural interaction and the emergence of racial ideologies as acts of history. For both Harris and Hunter, though in differing ways, the literary text encapsulates the assumptions, expectations and representations that define the Elizabethan notion of race and, as a consequence, provides the idea with its historical and thus empirical meaning. Only in their subtle avoidance of the more vexing issue dancing liminally on the periphery of their analyses – is Shakespeare 'racist'? – do these essays appear 'dated'. That is, neither author directly engages the implications of his findings for questions about authorial subjectivity and its texts.

In quite different ways, Barbara Everett's '"Spanish" Othello: the Making of Shakespeare's Moor' and Wole Soyinka's 'Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist' entertain the problematic that Harris and Hunter astutely avoid: is there a link between the politics of Shakespeare and race studies and the politics of race inherent in his canon? The argument of Everett's '"Spanish" Othello' is that '"Moorishness" was a condition that had a meaning, for Shakespeare and his audiences, once casually familiar though long lost to us' (p. 66). Everett bases her argument not on Venice and/or Shakespeare's source, Cinthio, as one might expect but rather on the Spanish genealogy behind three of Shakespeare's characters in *Othello*. Everett traces the Spanish context for the names of Iago, Roderigo and by extension the Moor. According to her, Shakespeare's audience would most likely have recognized that the anglicized version of Iago was James, that St James was the patron saint of Spain, and hence have been aware of the general history of St James as 'Santiago Matamoros, St James the Moor-killer' (p. 67). Thus, Everett contends, 'Every time the name "Iago" drops with helpless unconsciousness from the Moor's lips, Shakespeare's audience remembered what we have long forgotten: that Santiago's great role in Spain was as enemy to the invading Moor, who was figurehead there of the Muslim kingdom' (p. 68).

Everett acknowledges that there are limits to this type of reading, but the 'imaginative resonance possessed by mere names' often reflects 'certain harsh facts in the world outside the plays' (p. 68). Like Harris and Hunter, Everett draws upon social and political events of the day to frame her interpretation; she cites Elizabeth's proclamation expelling 'negars and blackamoors' from England, papal commentary on Moors

and Jews, and Spanish history. What is significant in Everett's essay, however, is her observation on Othello's colour:

> If Shakespeare himself had been asked what colour his Moor was, I think he would have answered that few actors in his experience would permit a shade dark enough to hide the play of expression. Othello is, in short, the colour the fiction dictates. And it is in order to make this point that I have hoped to suggest that the Moor may be quite as much 'Spanish' as 'African'. (pp. 72–3)

This suggestion is intended as a 'challenge [to] our perhaps too simple "African" sense of Othello' (pp. 78–9). Ultimately, Everett concludes that Othello's links to the Moorish figure Rogero in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* may provide a better sense of Othello's racial and social identity than any other source, especially a source that dwells on his colour (as Cinthio's text does). In the end, for Everett, Othello 'is almost any "colour" one pleases, so long as it permits his easier isolation and destruction by his enemies and by himself' (p. 72).

Wole Soyinka's 'Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist' also explores the 'ethnicity' of Shakespeare and his characters through the politics of culture. In what might be viewed as a precursor to post-colonialist readings of Shakespeare's drama, Soyinka balances his deep admiration for what he terms 'the paradox of timelessness and history' that infuses Shakespeare's poetics and the politics of race and culture that surround this most complex Elizabethan writer and dramatist. In 'Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist,' Soyinka elegantly and imaginatively demonstrates the fluidity of racial identity in a world shaped by colonialism and its politics. In the Arab world, William Shakespeare has nearly the same acclaim that he possesses in Europe. In fact, as Soyinka states, 'the Arab world was not content to adopt or "reclaim" Shakespeare's works' but to claim him as one of their own (p. 84). That is, Arab writers and dramatists have argued that Shakespeare 'was in fact an Arab. His real name, cleansed of its anglicized corruption, was Shayk al-Subair, which everyone knows of course is as dune-bred an Arabic name as any English poet can hope for' (p. 84). As a consequence, the translations and adaptations of Shakespeare's plays by Arab writers and dramatists serve only to 'return' Shakespeare's canon to its rightful language.

Soyinka's ironic piece about the Arabization of Shakespeare only partially conceals his astute yet ambivalent reading of the politics of the Shakespeare industry and its implications for post-colonial societies. Soyinka begins with a comment on his own experience at an RSC production:

> Some years ago, I watched a production of *Antony and Cleopatra* at the Aldwych, by the Royal Shakespeare Company – and winced throughout the entire night. We all have our prejudices of course, but some of these prejudices are the result of experience. Perhaps the RSC knew that it had a problem in persuading even an English audience to accept any interpretation of Cleopatra by an English actress – so the actress sent up the whole thing. . . . (pp. 85–6)

His reaction, as Soyinka posits, is balanced by 'the near-unanimous opinion of the Arabic critics themselves on the translations and adaptations of their "compatriot" Shayk al-Subair's masterpieces in that they were, in the main, the work of "scald rhymers" who "ballad him out of tune"' (p. 86).

Soyinka notes that, among Arab writers,

> it is claimed – as one of the reasons for endowing Shakespeare with Arab paternity – that only an Arab could have understood or depicted a Jew so 'convincingly' as in *The Merchant of Venice*. Similarly, the focus is sometimes placed on *Othello* – the Moor's dignity even in folly has been held up as convincing proof that no European could have fleshed out this specific psychology of a jealousy complicated by racial insecurity but a man from beneath the skin – an Arab at the very least. (p. 87)

To substantiate this argument, Soyinka writes, one need only look closely at Shakespeare's works where his use of non-English locales further distances him from any English roots. In the end, Soyinka observes, 'one acknowledges with gratitude the subjective relation of other poets and dramatists to the phenomenon of Shakespeare, for even the most esoteric of their claims lead one, invariably, to the productive source itself, and to the gratification of celebrating dramatic poetry anew' (p. 99).

In his ironic discussion of the uses to which post-colonial Africa and Arab nations put Shakespeare, Soyinka only hints at a traditional notion of race in relation to Shakespeare's works. As a novelist and dramatist, Soyinka clearly is less interested in the politics of race in Shakespeare's poetry than he is in the poetry of politics. His 'Shakespeare and the Living Dramatist' thus distances itself from the other essays in this volume. Yet Soyinka's discussion serves as an important segue to those concerned with 'race', nation and Shakespeare. As Soyinka highlights, importing Shakespeare requires a 'naturalization' and assimilation of his characters, themes and poetics. And, as Soyinka contends, Shakespeare's use of 'foreign' locales makes this naturalization process quite simple. As Shakespeare's 'racial identity' disappears, what is left is the power and the 'timelessness' of his poetic voice.

Balz Engler's 'Shakespeare in the Trenches' engages the competing 'racial' claims that two nations, England and Germany, make on the person and canon of William Shakespeare and his poetic voice. Engler's essay looks at a particular moment in Shakespearian history, the tercentenary of Shakespeare's death, April 1916, a time when England and Germany were at war. Both nations prepared celebrations in honour of Shakespeare but, as Engler illustrates, these celebrations were strikingly different yet had the same political and ideological purpose. In England, the celebration was an elaborate week-long patriotic affair. Productions, publications, even a 'Shakespeare prayer', were devised to recognize not only Shakespeare's 'genius' but more importantly his significance as a 'patriot.'

The German celebration, while much more subdued, was no less firm in its claim to Shakespeare – though some Germans questioned the propriety of the continued performance of his plays. Despite this minority voice, and although he was born an Englishman, Shakespeare's 'opinions, as expressed in his plays, were in accordance with the German position in the war', according to Rudolf Brotanek (p. 103). In fact, Shakespeare became an ideological object fought over by both nations; in a prologue to a German production of *Twelfth Night*, Feste delivered a 'message from Shakespeare' whereby Shakespeare declares himself a fugitive who seeks and finds a 'second home' in Germany. As Engler notes, 'In Germany the claim that Shakespeare was *unser*, ours, presented a problem, of course' (p. 105). German response to this dilemma was to remind the German people that Germany 'had naturalized Shakespeare in a long effort of appropriation. . . . As such Shakespeare could come to be considered one of the three greatest German authors, along with Goethe and Schiller' (p. 106). Ultimately, Engler's essay reminds us that 'Shakespeare' is always a contextual matter: 'the context in which we perceive Shakespeare and his works, *how we use them*, [is what] determines their meaning' (p. 107).

This dictum might very well be the motto of 'the Shakespeare industry' and is the central concern in Michael Dobson's essay, 'Bowdler and Britannia: Shakespeare and the National Libido.' Since the late seventeenth century, editions of Shakespeare's plays and poetry have spawned what has become trivialized as 'the Bard Biz', especially in the publishing industry. For Dobson, the Bowdler edition reflects the complex intersection of the veneration of William Shakespeare and 'the construction of modern sexuality and the construction of English national identity' (p. 112). In a cogent reading, Dobson brings to light

the policing of Shakespeare's text as part of the deployment of Shakespeare as national poet and his works as moral exempla. For example, George Granville's production of *The Merchant of Venice* in 1701 included an appearance by Shakespeare, or at least his ghost, on stage. Informed by the ghost of John Dryden of the tendency to present homoeroticism on the stage, Shakespeare's ghost 'promises to do what he can to remedy the situation, offering his play (now properly "*Adorn'd and rescu'd by a faultless hand*") as a contribution to the internal discipline which is the proper and unique function of literature' (p. 114).

Productions and editions of Shakespeare's plays were purged of potential or real eroticism and, as Dobson argues, became part of a national trend to 'discipline and promote British manhood' (p. 116). Furthermore, as an icon of English masculinity Shakespeare himself had to be represented as 'disciplined'. That is, for Shakespeare to function as a national icon 'his body [must be] left out of the picture entirely' (p. 117). Or, if his body remains it is a decidedly heterosexual one (the insistence that the sonnets are addressed solely to a woman for example). What is at stake, Dobson contends, is the nation's own identity, and that identity perforce must be masculine, British, and a virile heterosexual. The mandate for 'the lopping away of his [Shakespeare's] particular textual and sexual lapses' permits eighteenth-century editors and producers of Shakespearian plays to link Shakespeare's 'transcendence' of both his 'own body' and his 'corpus' (p. 121) to his stature as patriot *par excellence*. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the 1769 Stratford Jubilee.

As Dobson notes, this celebration 'did not seem to require the performance or even the quotation of any of Shakespeare's plays' (p. 121). One reviewer observed, in the *Middlesex Journal*: 'It has been generally believed, that the institution of the Stratford jubilee was only a matter of taste and amusement; but the more sagacious see a great political view carried on at the bottom of it' (p. 121). In citing this review, Dobson points out that Shakespeare is not only to be idealized as an example of British ingenuity and productivity but also as an aid to populating 'the Midlands in the cause of England's industrial future' (p. 121). With the 1769 Stratford Jubilee Shakespeare's role as national icon of masculinity and creativity is solidified. In essence, as Dobson playfully puns, what the Stratford Jubilee bore witness to was 'Shakespeare's triumphant installation as Britain's national Willy'.

One of the more complicated and fraught issues facing scholars interested in the matter of race in Shakespeare's works emerges in relation to Shakespeare's dramatic representations of Jews. Two essays

reprinted in this volume, James Shapiro's 'Shakespur and the Jewbill' and Laurence Lerner's 'Wilhelm S and Shylock', direct our attention to the contentious place Jews hold in the national discourse and the racial imagination of modern England. In 'Shakespur and the Jewbill', James Shapiro examines the role Shakespeare performs in the debates surrounding the Jewish Naturalization Act of 1753, also referred to as 'the Jew Bill'. Shapiro's historical overview of the genesis of the bill, the political controversies that emerged around the bill, and the use to which Shakespeare was put offers us a profound insight into one of the vexing questions facing Shakespearian studies – the place of anti-Semitism or racism in Shakespeare's canon.

In his insightful discussion, Shapiro reminds us that eighteenth-century English attitudes towards Jews should be viewed in terms of the modern notions of race and racism. Centred on the question, 'What is an Englishman?' debates over the Naturalization Act resound with familiar cultural stereotypes, analogies and pronouncements. Central to all of these tactics is a long-standing notion that Jews were fundamentally, immutably distinct from the English – no matter that the Jew was born in England, as were his ancestors. Rooted in the broader discourse of racism and anti-Semitism sweeping European societies, English discourse about Jews linked itself to this modern ideology even as it drew upon its own literary past, in this instance, Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, to create a peculiarly English perspective *vis-à-vis* English Jews. The production of this play during the height of the debates over the Naturalization Act became a vivid reminder of a prevailing negative mythology about Jews: 'the threat of Jews circumcising Englishmen, taking Christian servants, and racially contaminating the English nation' (p. 128). This production became an integral part of the propaganda campaign to protect England and its Englishness, in essence a 'racialized nationalism' (p. 135).

Laurence Lerner's 'Wilhelm S and Shylock' offers a contrasting view in his analysis of the uses to which Shylock and Shakespeare have been put in the name of 'racialized nationalism'. Lerner's method in the essay is quite similar to Soyinka's: Lerner refers to Shakespeare as 'Wilhelm S', locates Shakespeare's talents/genius in a 'Nordic profundity', and establishes Shakespeare's connection with Nazi Germany. Lerner begins his discussion by noting that what 'led Nazi Germany to congratulate S for his understanding of racial psychology was *The Merchant of Venice*' (p. 140). This reading of Shakespeare's play, despite its obvious ironic (almost tongue-in-cheek) style, raises a number of