# Introduction: the marginal English

DESDEMONA: . . . my noble Moor
Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness
As jealous creatures are . . .
EMILIA: Is he not jealous?
DESDEMONA: Who, he? I think the sun where he was born
Drew all such humours from him.

(*Othello*, 3. 4. 24–9)[1]

Where would Desdemona get such a notion? Why does she believe that the African sun would draw out the body's humors and heated passions? Has love blinded her to the Elizabethan commonplace that hot climates create fiery temperaments?[2] For the most part critics of *Othello* ignore Desdemona's appraisal of the Moor's humoral complexion. And if they do acknowledge her assertion, her grasp of early modern climate theory is summarily dismissed. We are reassured that we know better: obviously Othello is jealous, and his jealousy substantiates the Renaissance stereotype of violently heated Africans.[3]

But do we know better? Desdemona may know more than we thought. Her statement is supported by a long line of classical, medieval, and early modern texts wherein climatic explanations of color and disposition were grounded in humoralism. Regionally inflected humoralism, reductively construed as "climate theory" by modern scholars, proves to be the dominant mode of ethnic distinctions in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.[4] Desdemona actually appeals to two widely held early modern beliefs concerning somatic differences. First, she implies that humoral theory is the foundational knowledge for comprehending a person's disposition (if Othello lacks humors, then he must not be jealous).[5] Here, she is most certainly correct. Second, she suggests that humoral theory is also the foundational knowledge for making ethnological distinctions (Othello's lack of humors is what distinguishes him from people of cooler climates). This, too, would have been accepted as an accurate claim, though it is less known to modern readers.[6]

Desdemona does in fact know what she is talking about. Her surprising conclusion that the heat of the African sun would dry and cool the body's humors

is a commonplace in classical, medieval, and early modern writings on regional identities. From Pseudo-Aristotle to Albertus Magnus to Jean Bodin, writers have maintained the notion, as we find it articulated here in the sixteenth-century encyclopedia *Batman uppon Bartholome*, that the heat in Africa "burneth and wasteth humours," making the bodies cool and dry. Conversely, the cold air in the north "breedeth humours of the bodye . . . [the] vapours and spirites be smitten inward, [and] it maketh them hotter within . . ."[7] Competing with this theory of complexions was a less popular explanation derived from Hippocrates' unflattering portrait of the northern Scythians in *Airs, Waters, Places*, which maintained that cold air generated cold, moist bodies.[8] Rather than one explanation simply invalidating the other, these contradictory theories of complexion were brought together in a wide range of early modern texts to produce a "scientific" ethnology that proves, at turns, both deterministic and ideologically malleable.[9]

As the quotation from *Batman uppon Bartholome* indicates, regionally framed humoralism – what I term "geohumoralism" – applies not only to Moors but to people of all climates. Derived from the classical texts of Aristotle, Galen, Vitruvius, Pliny, and others, geohumoralism, in its inception, aimed to comprehend (and estrange) the northern and southern climatic extremes that bordered the Mediterranean. The same classical tripartite scheme that constructed ancient Greece and Rome as the civilized middle between the barbaric lands north and south also determined the logic of geohumoralism. Thus, humoral temperance, like civility, was held to be attainable only in a temperate clime.[10]

Despite Europe's contact with the New World, the classification of people and nations during this period still conformed to the ancient tripartite divisions of climatic regions – northern, southern, and temperate zones.[11] Even when latitudinal specifications shifted with the author's native bias, the basic paradigm of a temperate middle zone and its extreme boundaries was consistently invoked in the early modern period. Ideally *moderate* complexions, in both appearance and temperament, belonged to those inhabitants of the middle, temperate region. Classical geohumoral discourse had depended on a Mediterranean-centered world and relied on a logic of inversion to characterize the north and the south.[12] As the barbaric outsiders to the *polis* or *oikumene*, white northerners and black southerners, or Scythians and Ethiopians, were paired together in intemperance but opposed in particular qualities. Yet extreme climates were also recognized for the exceptional influence they had on their inhabitants: the Scythians garnered praise for their physical strength and martial prowess, while the Ethiopians were associated with natural wisdom and spirituality. Early modern geohumoralism retains the tripartite structure and rhetoric of inversion established by Herodotus and other ancient writers, but the strengths and weaknesses of the Ethiopians and Scythians are now projected onto early modern Africans and northern Europeans.

To understand how Desdemona's invocation of this knowledge has any bearing on the ethnological tensions in *Othello*, we will need to consider the general status of geohumoralism in early modern England, which is a subject I take up in part I of the book, "Climatic culture: the transmissions and transmutations of ethnographic knowledge." While scholars have recognized the continued predominance of the Herodotan schema in early modern ethnography, they have overlooked the significance of Britain's decentered position in this paradigm.[13] Rather than setting up a correspondence between England and the Mediterranean, sixteenth-century ethnography suggested, remarkably, identification between Britons and Africans.[14] The logic of inversion fixed the white northerner and the black southerner in an interdependent relationship: if the southerner is hot and dry, then the northerner must be cold and moist; if the southerner is weak and wise, the northerner must be strong and witless.

Though its appearance in England predates the early modern period, geohumoralism gained in popularity in the sixteenth century. Geohumoral theory is outlined, for example, in the English prose writings of William Harrison, Baptist Goodall, Peter Heylyn, Fynes Moryson, Thomas Nashe, John Norden, Thomas Proctor, William Slatyer, Thomas Walkington, Thomas Wright, and in the popular English translations of texts by Juan Huarte, Levinus Lemnius, Pierre Charron, Louis Le Roy, and Jean Bodin.[15] Bodin's political writing and historiography were, in particular, highly influential in England. It is his thesis in *The Six Bookes of a Commonweale* (1606) that all effective rulers must know the "diversitie of mens humors, and the meanes how to discover the nature and disposition of the people" in order to "accommodat the estate to the humor of the citisens; and the lawes and ordinances to the nature of the place, persons, and time."[16] Just as a physician applies remedies that contravene the distempers of his patient, sovereign powers can institute laws that amend the particular imbalances of their country's population.

Ranging between both popular and elite sources – from the period's drama to medical texts to historiography – *English Ethnicity* intervenes in the current literary scholarship on race to disembed and recover the complex basis of Desdemona's knowledge.[17] As we shall see, early modern geohumoralism contradicts many of the racial stereotypes concerning the behavior and capacities of non-English "others" that began to emerge in the early modern period. Part of the argument I take up in chapter 6, "Othello's Jealousy," is that the spectacular representation of the Moor's passions in Shakespeare's play rearranges the older geohumoral knowledge and that this rearrangement accommodates the ongoing construction of modern racial categories. But more centrally, it is my argument in that chapter and throughout *English Ethnicity* that geohumoralism is fundamental to early modern English conceptions of how their own, more northern, bodies and minds were shaped and influenced by external forces. The environment – whether that meant the air, temperature, diet, and terrain, or the

effects of education, rhetoric, or fashion – necessarily produced and destabilized early modern English selves.[18]

As the statement from *Batman uppon Bartholome* makes clear, Desdemona's assertion about the interaction between Africa's heat and Othello's temperament would necessarily invoke for an early modern audience the homologous tenet that the cold air in northern regions generates a body's humors. The Moor's violent metamorphosis not only does the essential cultural work of exploding a conventional (though now obscure) perception of Africans – as naturally cold and fixed in their humors – but it also, by implication, helps to revalue the northerner's natural temperament. In other words, I aim in my discussion of *Othello*, as in all my readings of early modern texts, to make plain what is at stake, ethnologically, for the English.

To comprehend the English people's understanding of ethnicity – their own and others' – we must begin with the recognition that they conceived of themselves and their island as "northern." England's northern climate and the English people's northern status colored their perspective on everything from fashion to medicine to politics.[19] This is not to say simply that chilly weather compelled the English to wear wool, but that a fundamental sense of displacement – derived from the British Isles' marginalized status in a set of classical texts that were revered and considered authoritative – gave rise to the notions that their bodies were intemperate, their culture borrowed and belated, and their nature barbarous.[20] The English prove to be entangled in a web of geographical determinism as they grappled with their own subscription to classically derived medical theories and natural philosophy. In both imaginative and non-imaginative literature, late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English writers struggle to stabilize and rehabilitate their northern identity.

The native English investment in geohumoralism can be exemplified briefly by referring to William Harrison's characterization of the "Generall Constitution of the Bodies of the Britons" in *The Description of Britaine* (1587). Initially Harrison exalts the Britons for their northern traits: they are "white in color, strong of bodie, and full of bloud, as people inhabiting neere the north, and farre from the equinoctiall line, where the soile is not so fruitful, and therefore the people not so feeble." His tone changes however when he concedes that the northern complexion is renowned more for its deficiencies:

> And for that we dwell northward, we are commonlie taken by the forren historiographers, to be men of great strength and little policie, much courage and small shift, bicause of the weake abode of the sunne with us, whereby our braines are not made hot and warmed . . . affirming further, that the people inhabiting in the north parts are white of colour, blockish, uncivill, fierce and warlike, which qualities increase, as they come nearer the pole.[21]

Harrison helps us see, I propose, that to be white and British in the early modern period was not a badge of superiority but cast one instead on the margins as

uncivil, slow-witted, and more bodily determined than those people living in more temperate zones.[22] Though I believe we can trace, in different spheres (economic, religious, colonial, for example), various strands of thought that enabled the eventual construction of race in the seventeenth century, my primary interest in *English Ethnicity* is how, given its unflattering implications, the period's dominant somatic discourses may have instilled in the English a desire to reassess and reconceptualize notions of regional influence and ethnological inheritance.[23] As we shall see, it works to the English people's advantage to challenge and revise a body of knowledge that depicts them as impressible, barbaric, and inversely defined by the traits and temperament of dark peoples on the other side of the world.

## Forgetting Africa

Recognizing that geohumoralism was not simply a theory that explained the appearance and behavior of "others" is the first step toward reframing its historical significance. Much in the same way that Shakespearean scholars have dismissed Desdemona's knowledge, early modern scholars in general have written off the viability of "climate theory" by misconstruing it as nothing more than an erroneous explanation of blackness.[24] In a narrative initiated by Winthrop Jordan in his important study *White Over Black*, the argument goes that when English travelers encountered the blackness of West Africans, they were unable to accommodate what they saw with their prevailing physiological theories.[25] Jordan asserts that Englishmen viewed "blackness in human beings [as] a peculiar and important point of difference" which set the African "radically *apart* from Englishmen."[26] Further citing as evidence the Elizabethan travel writers' puzzlement over the existence of lighter-skinned Indians in parallel latitudes, Jordan and others have concluded that the Renaissance writers' skepticism toward climatic explanations of blackness can be attributed to the rise of Baconian empiricism.[27] The inherent peculiarity of black skin, it seems, produced a scientific skepticism regarding classical natural philosophy, which then led to the distinctly unscientific conclusion that dark complexions were a phenomenon that fell outside the bounds of nature.[28]

We should recognize, however, that this narrative suppresses vital contradictions and ideological struggles. It glosses over the inherent difficulty in transforming a widely accepted conception of blackness-as-natural into something inexplicable and unnatural, and it obscures the English desire to reconceive the northerner's pale, intemperate, and marginalized complexion as civilized and temperate. There is no question that black skin *becomes* a scientific problem during this period, and once conceived as a mystery, it is the fundamentally nonscientific "Curse of Ham" which then emerges as an explanation of its origins and significance. But to attribute this conceptual shift either to bewilderment

or empiricism is to underestimate the complexity, endurance, and cultural significance of geohumoral theories of complexion. We need to acknowledge that the racial stereotypes that facilitated the Atlantic slave trade were incompatible with geohumoral tenets. Thus, England's nascent expansionist ideology helped to disrupt the accepted paradigms of scientific knowledge. Seeking to reorganize early modern ethnology along newly nationalist lines, racialist thinking estranged both blackness and whiteness (and their attendant associations) from their dominant, and far-from peculiar, homologies.[29]

Crucial to this process of estrangement was the forgetting of Africa's ancient and venerable associations. Classical writers such as Diodorus, for example, had viewed the Ethiopians as wise and extremely pious "first begotten of the earth," and this perspective lingered on in the abiding cultural belief that the African climate had given rise to their favored status.[30] During the Italian Renaissance there had been, we should note, explicit connections made between external blackness and Egyptian wisdom.[31] Hence the "revival of Platonism and Neoplatonism," as Karl Dannenfeldt has observed, "enhanced the role of Egypt as the original land of theologians and philosophers."[32] As I shall demonstrate in chapter 3, "An inside story of race: melancholy and ethnology," early modern geohumoralism associated the blackness produced by hot climates with prophecy and genial melancholy. Despite their reputed savagery, West Africans were not initially perceived as different in kind, but in terms of the more familiar Moors, Ethiopians, and Egyptians.[33] In *The Second Voyage to Guinea* (1554) for example, Robert Gainsh links the West Africans to North Africa and Ethiopia: "the people which now inhabite" the western coast, as well as in "the midle parts of Africa, as Libya the inner, and Nubia, with divers other great & large regions about the same, were in old time called Æthiopes and Nigritæ, which we now call Moores, Moorens, or Negroes, a people of beastly living . . ."[34] The implication is that the "old time" Ethiopians have degenerated into beastly "Negroes." Indeed, it was this residual sense of Africa as an ancient civilization that gave shape to the English writers' ambivalent construction of blackness as both noble and monstrous, civil and barbaric. Thus Othello can be both an "old black ram" and a noble Moor. And as the Atlantic slave trade gained momentum, Europeans began to deny Africa its place in classical history, and they accomplished this in part by establishing a fixed boundary between North and West Africa.[35]

I think we would do well to unsettle Jordan's thesis that blackness set Africans "radically *apart* from Englishmen." As I have begun to suggest, the tripartite structure of geohumoralism not only estranged northern whiteness and southern blackness but it also tended to intertwine the two as inversions of the other. We can see this plainly in William Harrison's portrait of his own countrymen, wherein he characterizes the bodies of the Britons by describing their dark southern counterparts. Unlike the Britons, the people living near the equator

are warmed by the sun and possess the "contrarie gifts" of "blacknesse, wisdome, civilitie, weakenesse, and cowardise." Indeed, it is the Britons' inverse, or "contrarie," relationship with the Africans that compels Harrison to reinterpret the southerner's natural traits as corrupted qualities, declaring that these "gifts of theirs doo often degenerate into meere subtiltie, instabilitie, unfaithfulnesse, & crueltie."[36] Harrison's portrait of the early Britons illustrates how the classical tripartite structure is translated into an English binary of the northern self and the southern Other. Yet we must not confuse this binary relationship with the familiar racial hierarchy of "white over black." In modern racial binaries, the white "self" derives an assumed sense of stability and superiority from fixed, hierarchical categories of difference. For Harrison and his fellow countrymen, Britain's northern location excluded its inhabitants from the superiority of temperance and moderation and positioned them as "other" to the normative middle. Moreover, the strange intimacy implied by the repeated pairing of northerners and southerners in geohumoral discourse makes objectifying and demonizing the darker "other" a deeply ambiguous impulse in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Since blackness reflected the northerner's intemperance, its representation not only elicited fear and condemnation but also the Englishman's desire to appropriate and incorporate the properties of a southern complexion. As I discuss in chapter 3, England's late sixteenth-century vogue of melancholia serves as a prime example of the northern nation's ambivalence toward a temperament recognized by many to be indigenous to the south; while some northerners aimed to cultivate the inward blackness of melancholy, others condemned its appearance in England as a foreign affectation or infection.

In making his argument that blackness struck English travelers as both novel and inexplicable, Jordan turns again to Hakluyt's report of Robert Gainsh's account of the second voyage to Guinea (1554), which stands as one of the earliest records of England's involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. Gainsh provides a description of black slaves that employs the rhetoric of inversion that we saw in Harrison, but to highly different ends:

> [The English voyagers] brought with them certaine blacke slaves, whereof some were tall and strong men, and could wel agree with our meates and drinkes. The colde and moyst aire doth somewhat offend them. Yet doubtlesse men that are borne in hot Regions may better abide colde, then men that are borne in colde Regions may abide heate, forasmuch as vehement heate resolveth the radicall moysture of mens bodies, as colde constraineth and preserveth the same.[37]

It is not my intention to minimize the odious nature of this writer's intentions in assessing the value of the "black slaves," but I do want to suggest that this appeal to geohumoralism indicates not only a surprising familiarity with dark complexions but also some anxiety about the northern body's vulnerabilities. Interest in how northern "meates and drinkes" may "offend" the African's complexion

echoes the advice manuals of the period, which dwell on the Englishman's notorious susceptibility to the effects of travel.[38] Certainly, the author's reflexive consideration of northern bodies is overshadowed by what appears to be a crude estimation of the slaves' prospective value as laborers, but this too is framed by the inverted logic of geohumoralism: the "tall and strong men" receive greater scrutiny not simply for the intrinsic value of strength and height but also for the compatibility between "tall and strong men" and English "meates and drinkes." Geohumoral tenets held that northerners were physically hearty and well-nourished by their equally hearty native diets; southern air, meat, and drinks, on the other hand, were noted for producing weak, but wise inhabitants. Ironically, the English observer presumes that those black slaves who reflect the Englishman's alleged body type will prove to be the more adaptable and worthy investments. In short, this encounter should not be read as an awakening of empiricism or scientific curiosity but as a reshuffling of old knowledge under new pressures.

Where geohumoralism and empiricism seem to collide most dramatically for modern scholars and early modern skeptics is when faced with the facts that blackness remained black in colder climates and could be transmitted from parent to child. The most frequently cited text in historical accounts of early modern racialism in England, George Best's *A True Discourse* (1578), raises these very points to assert that blackness should not be ascribed to environmental forces:

> I my selfe have seene an Ethiopian as blacke as a 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: whereby it seemeth this blacknes proceedeth rather of some natural infection of that man, which was so strong, that neither the nature of the Clime, neither the good complexion of the mother concurring, coulde any thing alter, and therefore, wee cannot impute it to the nature of the Clime . . . And the most probable cause to my judgement is, that this blacknesse proceedeth of some naturall infection of the first inhabitants of that Countrey, and so all the whole progenie of them descended, are still polluted with the same blot of infection.[39]

Though scholars have long focused on the incipient racism of Best's argument, which appears fairly obvious, they have neglected to appreciate his immediate motives for identifying blackness as a "natural infection."[40] Best, we should understand, is contributing to a genre of promotional tracts aimed at persuading the English that they would not be ineluctably altered by moving to and residing in a foreign climate. However troubling their native environment was perceived to be, travel, it was understood, exacerbated the English people's imperfections.[41] In 1585, for example, the Barbary Company attempted to reassure English representatives bound for Morocco that the country's air "is as holsome as can be, and yourself not altered neither in favor nor person,

but helthful and in as good likinge as you were at your departure." But at least one ambassador, Henry Roberts, was purported to be "undon by the unaturall clyment in that countrie."[42] Addressing the "Merchants of London," Best argues aggressively that Africa is an "earthly Paradise" where English travelers can easily "abide the heat."[43] Observing that the cold air in England threatens "injury" (which is why the English natives must wear "so many clothes"), Best maintains that Africa is more temperate than England.[44] Thus, Best embraces the basic principles of geohumoralism, conceding that a "certeine agreement of nature . . . [exists] betweene the place and the thing bred in that place," but he also recognizes that the English people's fears of their own vulnerability may be assuaged by interpreting blackness as anomalous and peculiar.[45]

Though it works to Best's advantage to cast blackness as an infection, and thereby as a phenomenon unrelated to the effects of the environment, many of Best's contemporaries had little trouble reconciling the transmission of traits with geohumoral influences.[46] Reaching more audiences than Best's *Discourse*, for example, was Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1594), wherein the pairing of Aaron the Moor and Tamora the Goth produce a dark-skinned baby while in Rome. Significantly, the play makes clear that the child's blackness was not presumed to be an inevitability. As Aaron is heard to explain, if the "bull and cow are both milk-white / They never do beget a coal-black calf" (5. 1. 31–2), but when one parent is white and the other black, Nature might give the baby his father's or his "mother's look" (line 29). In fact, Aaron's own "countryman" Muliteus and his light-skinned wife have also had a baby in Rome, and "[h]is child is like to her, fair as [the Goths] are" (4. 2. 152–4). Aaron's skin color or "seal" may be stamped in the baby's face (line 69) but if Tamora's "seed" had been dominant, the child would have resembled his mother. Climate determines the color and temperament of general populations, but the transmission of traits also depends on the parents.[47]

These are the conclusions of Spanish physician Juan Huarte in his treatise on humoralism and education, *The Examination of Men's Wits* (1594).[48] What Best had identified as a "natural infection," Huarte terms a "rooted quality." Though a people's shared humoral complexion is shaped by their native environment, these circumstances still allow for certain traits – or rooted qualities – to pass from parent to child. It remains indisputable, Huarte observes, that over very long periods of time people become "conformable to the countrey where they inhabited, to the meats which they fed upon, to the waters which they dranke, & to the aire which they breathed." But once the environment has produced certain ingrained characteristics, generations of descendants are able to maintain and transmit these same traits even when residing outside their ancestral region (p. 195). Notably, it is the dark skin and admirable wisdom of the Egyptians that stands as Huarte's most powerful example:

though 200 yeares have passed . . . sithens the first Aegyptians came out of Aegypt into Spaine, yet their posterite have not forlorne that their delicacie of wit and promptnesse, nor yet that rosted colour which their auncestors brought with them from Aegypt.

Just as the Moors may "communicate the colour of their elders, by means of their seed, though they be out of Aethiopia," so does "the force of mans seed . . . receiveth thereinto any well rooted qualitie" (p. 199). Moreover, Huarte explains, blackness is not the only quality that may prove "well rooted":

in the engendering of a creature, two seedes should concurre; which being mingled, the mightier should make the forming and the other serve for nourishment. And this is seen evidently so to be: for if a blackamore beget a white woman with child, & a white man a *negro* woman, of both these unions, wil be borne a creature, partaking of either qualitie. (p. 316)[49]

We must keep in mind, I submit, that in rejecting the possibility that blackness is a consequence of the kind of geohumoral effects that Huarte describes, George Best not only reframed the African's complexion as a scientific mystery, but he also swept away an inherited knowledge that had long identified blackness with wisdom and constancy. Notoriously, Best displaced geohumoralism with a unique exegesis of Genesis, so as to attribute black skin to the "Curse of Ham."[50]

As historian Benjamin Braude has demonstrated, the curse of Ham – as an explanation of blackness – had not yet become a dominant cultural belief at the time of George Best's writing.[51] A quick survey of the editorial changes to Peter Heylyn's geographical survey, *Microcosmos*, attests to its growing popularity during the seventeenth century: the 1621 edition makes no mention of the curse; in 1627, the text introduces the explanation as a "foolish tale," but by 1666, it tentatively endorses the legend.[52] What the Hametic curse provides for western critics today, and provided for European authors in the past, is a simplification of the meaning of blackness: blackness signifies sin and servitude. As Jordan has observed, "it is suggestive that the first Christian utilizations of this theme came during the sixteenth century – the first great century of overseas exploration," as well as the first century of England's involvement in the Atlantic slave trade.[53] It is also important to recognize that its emergence during this period worked in tandem with ideological erasures taking place in more "scientific" discourses. As natural philosophy shifted the focus away from theories of color variation to the mystery of blackness, religious discourse responded with a scriptural explanation of that mystery. Dislodged from the realm of natural "science" and its association with humoralism, blackness was reinvented as a sign of inferiority to justify a growing slave economy.

It was only during the early modern period that writers began to trace Ham's lineage strictly to Africa.[54] Indeed, as late as 1548, the links between Noah's sons and particular regions were tentative enough for John Bale to trace the ancestral line of "Albion," King of Britain, to Ham in his 1548 catalogue of