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Virginia Mason Vaughan
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PERFORMING BLACKNESS ON ENGLISH STAGES, 1500–1800

Performing Blackness on English Stages, 1500–1800 examines early modern English actors' impersonations of black Africans. Those blackface performances established dynamic theatrical conventions that were repeated from play to play, plot to plot, congealing over time and contributing to English audiences' construction of racial difference. Vaughan discusses non-canonical plays, grouping of scenes, and characters that highlight the most important conventions – appearance, linguistic tropes, speech patterns, plot situations, the use of asides and soliloquies, and other dramatic techniques – that shaped the ways black characters were “read” by white English audiences. In plays attended by thousands of English men and women from the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth, including *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, and *Oroonoko*, blackface was a polyphonic signifier that disseminated distorted and contradictory, yet compelling, images of black Africans during the period in which England became increasingly involved in the African slave trade.

VIRGINIA MASON VAUGHAN is Professor of English at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, where she has served as Head of the English Department and Director of the Higgins School of Humanities. She has published three books on Shakespeare's *Othello*: the Garland annotated bibliography (with Margaret Lael Mikesell, 1990), an anthology, *Othello: New Perspectives* (with Kent Cartwright, 1991), and a monograph, *Othello: A Contextual History* (Cambridge, 1994). She also co-edited *Playing the Globe: Genre and Geography in English Renaissance Drama* with John Gillies (1998). With her husband, historian Alden T. Vaughan, she authored *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1992), and edited the Arden edition of *The Tempest* (Third Series, 1999).

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*For Alden and the kids,
the warp and woof of my life*

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Preface

Scholarship is not crafted, I tell my students, by faceless, nameless people: every work of literary criticism issues from individuals with histories that influence their work. It seems appropriate, then, to explain a little of my personal history to the prospective reader, for I am sure that it has helped to shape this book.

It is probably clear from the text that I write from the perspective of a white American female. I grew up in the 1960s in an aura of middle-class white privilege, and the biggest crises of my adolescence were occasioned by differences with my southern mother over a few superficial social contacts with students of color in my church youth group and in my high school. My early convictions about racial inequality were intense, but to this day I cannot be certain whether they emanated from a genuine sense of injustice, adolescent rebellion against parental authority, or both. Whatever their origin, the convictions remain, as do the problems of racism in the society in which I live and work.

My efforts to understand those problems lurk behind much of my published work. In the cultural history of Caliban I wrote with Alden T. Vaughan, as in my work on Shakespeare's *Othello* and several other essays I have written about early modern English culture, I have tried to understand more fully how our color-conscious world came into being and how white privilege became so deeply entrenched. Discrimination based on gender, language, class, or sexual preference is also unjust, but my experiences as an American have made me particularly aware of racial discrimination based largely on shades of skin pigmentation. The black–white color divide is the underlying context of this book.

An extended discussion of the origins of English racism is beyond the purview of this book. My emphasis instead is on performance, on what audiences saw when they attended stage plays that featured black Moors. This study is but one piece in the puzzle as to how early sixteenth-century inchoate notions about black Africans developed into rigid conceptions of

racial difference and a global system of racial slavery by the late seventeenth century. The performances I describe here were a contributing factor to the formation of English racial attitudes, overlapping and colluding with a host of social and economic pressures that shaped the growth of England's slave economy. At the same time, the theatre was a crucial reflection of this process. It was open to a broad cross section of London's burgeoning population; its performances were attended by thousands of people, many of whom could not read or write; and those performances, for the most part, were reinforced through frequent repetition. On London's stages, blackness was "acted out" in ways that profoundly affected images of blacks in English culture. The performances of plays that have come down to us in theatrical scripts circulated in a visual medium quite different from other written texts such as sermons and pamphlets, but they were nevertheless extremely influential. If we want to understand the formation of racial attitudes in this period, the blackface performances that took place on London's stages are certainly an important window.

As my concluding chapter attests, I recognize that the dynamics of blackface performance remain highly controversial. Yet I believe that we must not be afraid to examine the theatrical impersonations that helped to shape English racial views and the ramifications of white actors wearing blackface. I hope all would agree that in our discussion of race there is room for men and women who seek the goal of equal opportunity and share a vision of a color-blind future to differ on their interpretation of the past.

It is customary to conclude a preface with the pronouncement that any mistakes in the book are the author's own, but in this instance, I would like to add that my views – the product of many years of reading and thinking about racial issues in early modern England and its European neighbors – are not set in stone. I offer them as a contribution to what I hope will be a continuing dialogue.

Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Shakespeare's plays are taken from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, et al. (New York, 1997) and are cited by act, scene, and line numbers within the text. Quotations from the Bible are from the *Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969). I have retained the spelling as I have found it in my primary texts, although I do substitute "the" for the early modern thorn and make other minor adjustments for the reader's convenience.

Acknowledgments

No book is written in a vacuum, and one incurs many debts along the way. In 2001 I was the lucky recipient of a Mellon Fellowship to the Folger Shakespeare Library, which enabled me to start this project. Without that precious time to read and think, this book would never have been born. As always, I am deeply indebted to the Folger Library staff, particularly Gail Kern Paster, Georgianna Ziegler, Richard Kuhta, Barbara Mowat, Rachel Doggett, Betsy Walsh, and all of the Reading Room staff.

As the project progressed, my ideas were tested by perceptive and critical audiences who graciously listened to my preliminary findings and shared their responses. I owe special thanks to hosts Kathleen Lynch of the Folger Institute, Rachana Sachdev of Susquehanna University, James Hirsh of Georgia State University, and Ralph Alan Cohen of the Blackfriars Theatre in Staunton, Virginia, as well as to the Departmental Colloquium at Clark University, the Columbia University Shakespeare Seminar, and the 2003 Northeast British Studies Conference. In addition, my thinking has been shaped by many ideas gleaned from conversations over tea and coffee with friends at the Folger, at my academic home of Clark University, and, perhaps most importantly, over the dinner table with Alden Vaughan.

The biggest debt is to those who have actually read portions of the manuscript. Linda McJannet and Fern Johnson provided perceptive readings of the first three chapters; James Bulman and John Ford read an entire draft and provided valuable criticism. Alden Vaughan critiqued early and late versions, a labor of love for which I will always be grateful. Outside readers from Cambridge University Press were also helpful, as were suggestions from my editor, Sarah Stanton. I am sure the final product is infinitely better as a result, and I feel incredibly fortunate to have good friends (including a husband) who are careful readers and astute critics.

My work on this project was expedited in countless ways by the support I received from Clark University. The Reference Staff at Clark's Robert Hutchings Goddard Library have assisted with interlibrary loan requests

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In the final stages of my work, I began the quest for appropriate illustrative material. Specific acknowledgments are included in the list of illustrations, but I would like to pay particular thanks to Luke Dennis of the Harvard Theatre Collection as well as to the Photography Department at the Folger Library.

The greatest debt is to Alden and the “kids,” the family to whom this book is dedicated.