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978-1-107-00735-2 - Reading and the History of Race in the Renaissance

Elizabeth Spiller

Excerpt

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*Introduction: print culture, the humoral reader, and  
the racialized body*

He that goeth in the Sonne, shalbe Sonne burnt, although he thinke  
not of it. So they that will read this, or such like Bookes, shall in the  
ende, bee as the Bookes are.

Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1560)<sup>1</sup>

Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow  
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburnt brain.

Philip Sidney, "Astrophil and Stella" (c. 1581)<sup>2</sup>

This is a book about early modern book history and race. Thus far, book history and critical race studies have been two very different scholarly activities. Scholarship in the history of the book has given us a rich account of the materiality of early modern texts. The concept of the "sociology of the text" has encouraged us to follow the material life-cycle of texts through the process that began with the making of ink and paper and ended with the printing, sale, and binding of volumes that readers then annotated with their own pens and ink, often beginning a new process of production and consumption. While this approach has produced an exciting and influential body of scholarship, book history has had less to say about the history of human identity that such texts record and create. In particular, book history has not focused on cultural categories such as race primarily because scholarship has assumed a divide between the form of books (their material state, which is part of book history) and their content (which is generally not).

Yet, it is not simply books that had a material existence and history. Readers also had their own physical existence. This point has not been sufficiently understood or emphasized. Reading was something that early modern readers knew to happen in and to the body. In a pre-Cartesian world, reading was an embodied act: it was not prior or extrinsic to subject formation but instead was an important aspect of day-to-day lived experience. Thus, reading was not understood to be a limitedly mental activity that primarily concerned the mind and soul; it was not a

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mechanical process involving what Hobbes would later call the “strings” of the human machine or a chemical reaction produced by neurons.<sup>3</sup> Rather, reading was closely tied to the body: it involved not just the eyes and the ventricles of the brain, but the blood, vital spirits, and humors of the body. The act of reading could change what you thought; it could also change who you were, physically as well as emotionally. At a time when more readers were learning about the world and its human boundaries through their experiences as readers, racial identity was often a text-based practice. As I will suggest throughout this book, one place where histories of race and histories of books intersect is thus in the bodies of readers.

As scholars have made clear, the history of race in the early modern period involves overlapping and often competing concepts of religion, nation, and ethnicity. The Inquisition, New World voyages and settlements, the breakdown of Galenic humoralism, European interactions with the Ottoman and Marmeluk empires, renewed contact with Ethiopia, the rise of a “scientific” racialism, and the development of plantations and the slave trade: these historic events profoundly informed changing European attitudes toward race and identity. In ways that neither traditional book history nor critical race studies have fully recognized, the invention of the printing press was a key event in the early modern history of race.

Between the late fourteenth century and the mid-seventeenth century, the meaning of race changed from expressing relationships of kinship and genealogy to emphasizing differences of skin color and physical appearance. Summarizing the complexities of these multiple understandings of identity and ethnicity, Ania Loomba identifies this as a period of transition in which multiple definitions of ethnicity, or *ethnos* more generally, narrow down to produce what becomes a comparatively monolithic modern definition of race: she thus argues that the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries constituted “the last period in history where ethnic identities could be understood as fluid, or, as the first moment of the emergence of modern notions of race.”<sup>4</sup> Focusing on printed romances from the Fall of Constantinople to early articulations of phenotype racialism in the seventeenth century, *Reading and the History of Race in the Renaissance* traces some of the ways in which print culture, and the reading practices it encouraged, contributed to that shift.

In coming to understand the competing philosophical, theological, economic, and ideological traditions of the early modern period that contribute in different ways to produce what became a modern version of race, scholars such as Margo Hendricks, Patricia Parker, Peter Erickson, Kim

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Hall, and Mary Floyd-Wilson have been right to argue that we cannot just retrofit our contemporary conceptions of race onto early modern understandings of it. Race, as both a term and a concept, does not always extend comfortably from early modern to post-modern understandings of identity and ethnicity.<sup>5</sup> Recent scholarship has gone a long way to avoid anachronistic understandings of the content of race and its precursors, but another central goal of this book is to suggest that during this period it is not just the content of race that changed, but also the practices of reading that both created and allow us to understand that content. As important as our need to historicize the history and pre-history to race, we also have to be careful not to problematize just race, as if race were merely a type of content that can be classified as this and not that. We also have to address the practices through which we say we know what constitutes race, what race is and means.

One of the most important of those practices for us as critics is that of reading: our ability to apprehend early modern assumptions about race and its precursors is achieved almost entirely through written texts and documents. In many respects, though our assumptions about reading are as anachronistic and as potentially problematic as are those about race. In much the same way that race is constructed and not a natural phenomenon, neither is reading. If pre-Cartesian readers understood reading to be a distinctively corporeal act, this means that they did not just read about bodies and the world in which those bodies existed. In fact, they read about bodies *in and through their own bodies*. Changes in early modern assumptions about the body changed the act of reading; conversely, the act of reading also fundamentally shaped early modern experiences of identity and the body. We have been able to recover different components of the pre-racial quality to early modern thinking about identity. For instance, Geraldine Heng suggests that race is a discursive practice; Mary Floyd-Wilson has argued that regional humoralism constituted the dominant mode for making ethnic distinctions; Gary Taylor has problematized the historic moment at which it became possible for European men to understand themselves as white.<sup>6</sup> Such acts of critical recovery, though, have been achieved only through our own acts of reading in our tacitly mechanized, racialized bodies. Rather than relying upon reading as a seemingly transparent tool for understanding the past, I hope to show how reading was often the material process through which early modern forms of ethnic and racial identity were created.

Literary discussions of the history of racial identity in the early modern period have understandably gravitated toward thinking about

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how race functions on stage, particularly in the works of Shakespeare. Scholarship on the cultural history of race in early modern culture, at least in English, has focused overwhelmingly on dramatic works.<sup>7</sup> More significantly, scholars have also approached the subject from a theoretical perspective that might be loosely described as “performances of identity” or even “performances of race.” This emphasis on understanding both the representation and the historical practice of race in dramatic terms began with G. K. Hunter’s provocative “Othello and Colour Prejudice,” which was given as a lecture to the British Academy in 1967.<sup>8</sup> Rejecting the claims of Coleridge, and others, who had insisted that Othello was in some way not black, Hunter argued that Othello’s color was both real and significant to our understanding of the play.<sup>9</sup> Hunter’s essay was, as Andrew Hadfield has noted, “the first serious attempt to understand Elizabethan attitudes toward race.”<sup>10</sup> Although scholars have challenged several of Hunter’s claims, his essay has been constitutive of the field of critical race studies that has emerged in Renaissance scholarship because he claimed race as a valid object of study by arguing that race was central to both performance and audience reception.<sup>11</sup> For Hunter, it was only possible to move toward a historical understanding of race by way of performance.

Subsequent scholarship has continued this initial emphasis on understanding the history of early modern representations of race through histrionic mimesis. For some critics, race has provided a way to reassess the mimetic assumptions of early modern culture.<sup>12</sup> Dymna Callaghan thus regards Shakespeare’s representations of race as integrally connected to larger cultural concerns about the nature of mimesis. Speaking both of theater and of representation more generally, Callaghan argues that “many of Shakespeare’s contemporaries did not share our faith in representation ... [and] feared the encroachments mimetic representation made upon the real.”<sup>13</sup> Blackface and boy actors meant that historically both Othello and Desdemona were played by light-skinned males, by “white men,” a performance fact that means that, on stage, “there are, indeed, no authentic ‘others’ – raced or gendered – of any kind, only their representation.”<sup>14</sup> The absence of Africans and all women from the Renaissance stage works as both a kind of pre-condition that makes drama itself possible (“all representation is predicated upon the absence of the thing represented”) and a cultural marker that both groups were understood to be incapable of mimesis.<sup>15</sup> In this context, the performance of race on the early modern stage provides a limit case for understanding early modern attitudes toward mimesis.

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Other critics have taken performance models from the stage and used them as critical tools for understanding early modern experiences and practices of racial and ethnic identity in terms of various forms of lived imitation. From this critical perspective, the most powerful and culturally significant “performances of race” may well not have appeared on stage at all. In her landmark *Mimesis and Empire*, Barbara Fuchs, for example, draws on the work of Homi Bhabha and Michael Taussig to articulate a model for explaining identity and difference in terms of “cultural mimesis.” From this critical perspective, identity and difference can be best understood by putting more pressure on the notion of identity, rather than just difference. For Fuchs, “identity” is inherently a mimetic one, a “sameness” that includes lived experiences that are achieved through the aesthetic practices of “identification, mimicry, and reproduction.”<sup>16</sup> Fuchs focuses almost exclusively on non-dramatic texts (romances, religious texts, epics, and historical documents), but, in a way that recognizes the heuristic power of these theoretical models for understanding identity, she nonetheless frames her work with two examples of public performances and uses a performative model of identity to chart the non-dramatic texts that are at the center of her work. The history of difference as it impacted European notions of *imperium* thus involves understanding lived encounters that involve both performance (embodied simulation) and reception (the audiences, both political and cultural, to those simulations). Fuchs’ project stands in some ways in sharp contrast to Callaghan’s: whereas Callaghan emphasizes the way in which representations of race, and mimesis in general, are achieved out of a fundamental absence (Othello and Desdemona played by “white” men), Fuchs stresses the inherent fragility of the boundary between imitator and imitated (in festivals staged in Peru, Indians play the parts of Moors, while the Spanish play themselves).<sup>17</sup>

Drama has provided both the primary subject and the dominant theoretical model for early modern studies as a whole and critical work on race in the early modern era has consequently focused largely on drama. Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* arguably set many of the terms for this dramatic inflection to the histories of cultural identity that have dominated Renaissance studies. Jacob Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* had provided a history of how the interconnected rise of the modern state and individual was achieved through various forms of art. In modifying the critical tradition that came through Burckhardt and his successors, Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* replaced Burckhardt’s “Renaissance Man” with a more fluid, contingent,

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and contestational model of the early modern “self.” Although Greenblatt borrowed his theoretical language from structural anthropology (and thus, for instance, exchanged Burckhardt’s view of both man and state as a “work of art” with Clifford Geertz’s idea of the “cultural artifact”), his overall model distinguished itself from earlier scholarship primarily by pursuing an understanding of identity not just as an art, but as an ongoing cultural performance and practice.<sup>18</sup>

It may seem counter-intuitive to include Greenblatt, let alone Burckhardt, as a frame to an account of the history of early modern racial studies. Burckhardt’s *Civilization* and Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* are centrally stories, albeit substantially different ones, about the “rise of the individual.” They, and the critical trajectory that connects their work, share an interest in pursuing the singular, and thus construct a certain kind of individual as at once exceptional and universal. In that respect, such versions of the Renaissance run directly counter to the kinds of questions that have been at the heart of recent scholarship on race and ethnicity, but these kinds of arguments about individual identity are nonetheless not innocent from implied claims about racial identity. Writing in 1860, Burckhardt saw Renaissance Man emerging against the backdrop of a medieval collectivity in which “man was only conscious of himself as a member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation – only through some general category.”<sup>19</sup> With Greenblatt’s early modern self, that structure is less teleological but is still achieved in ways that are inherently contestational: “self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as alien, strange, or hostile. This threatening Other ... must be discovered in order to be attacked and destroyed.”<sup>20</sup> Greenblatt’s comments closely followed upon and echoed Edward Said’s depiction of the West’s engagement with the East as a form of theatrical spectacle. For Said, the theater provided a foundational metaphor for the display and spectacle of cross-cultural encounters: “The idea of representation is a theatrical one: the Orient is the stage on which the whole East is confined.”<sup>21</sup>

This emphasis on identity as a form of performance, both individual and collective, has intensified in recent scholarship on race and ethnicity, which has benefitted from the theoretical models of performativity that structure both post-colonial studies and feminist theory. Surveying “ethnographic” (Richard Schechner, Michael Taussig), “radical constructivist” (Judith Butler), and “oppositional” (Homi Bhabha) models of performativity, Susan Stanford Friedman notes that these approaches all articulate versions of a shared understanding that “the production of identity – individual and collective – involves performative imitation

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at the borders of difference.”<sup>22</sup> These ways of thinking about identity in terms of performance and performativity have done little to correct a critical tendency to bring conversations about authenticity that are part of our own moment back to early modern literature and culture. In what is perhaps the best phenomenological and cognitive, rather than ideological, argument for performance-based models, Mary Crane notes that such models contain a persistent anti-theatrical strand, a feeling that theatricality and performance depend on the “deceptive, hollow, and illusory nature of the theatrical, even as it conjures the real into being.”<sup>23</sup> Crane thus instead draws on cognitive studies which suggest that knowledge and experience emerge not through mental representation of an “already existing and stable external reality” but through a lived enactment in which “our embodied brains and our material environment reciprocally create that reality and give it meaning.” Because theatrical performance “involves both a physical reality of embodied enactment and a secondary level of representation that emerges from it,” Crane suggests that the theater provides a particularly powerful instance, both more intense and more self-conscious, of our lived experiences in which we *create* representations to understand the world.<sup>24</sup> More generally, a performative approach to thinking about early modern racial identity – whether along the lines implied by Taussig or Bhabha or Crane – is valuable because it enriches our critical ability to think about the nature of the encounters (what Friedman describes as the difference in-between rather than the difference between) that make up the cultural history of race.

Our knowledge of both identity and difference, though, did not simply emerge out of encounters, either actual or embodied. Indeed, it is arguable that the notion of encounter, which figures so centrally in performative models of racial identity, may involve an anachronistic notion of embodiment and thus implicitly posit the skin as a boundary between self and other in ways that are a by-product of the rethinking of the body that racial discourse itself helped produce. Such models may to this extent limit our ability to understand what “encounters” may have meant or what may have happened when the body in question was in some sense experienced in epistemologically different terms. Certainly, identity is not always a performance, and thus dramatic and histrionic models for understanding race cannot answer some questions.

Let us instead imagine a contemporary production of *The Merchant of Venice*. Let us also, for the sake of speculation, imagine that Shakespeare himself played the part of the Prince of Morocco, entering under the stage direction “a tawny Moor, all in white,” and taking the part to

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plead that Portia “mislike me not for my complexion, / The shadowed livery of the burnished sun” (2.1.1–2).<sup>25</sup> From a material and performative point of view, Shakespeare the actor is made tawny by the use of burnt cork or perhaps tallow;<sup>26</sup> the character he plays is imagined to have been “burnished” by the sun in ways that may reflect traditional geohumoral medical thinking about how the sun brought the burned-away residue of black bile to the surface of the skin. Certainly, the burnishing of Morocco is as iconic as the King of Sparta’s shield, with its image of “a black Ethiop reaching at the sun,” in *Pericles* (2.2.20): the “blackening” of an actor within the theater seems to mimic cultural understandings of the “blackening” of human skin. In this context, the scene with Portia, which has been prefaced by a wholesale dismissal of other possible suitors on ethnic, national, and geographic grounds, thus becomes a quintessential image of an encounter with otherness.

Yet, Shakespeare’s experience of otherness did not begin with cork; it did not even begin with lived encounters that gave shape to characters such as Morocco, Othello, Caliban, or Cleopatra. Rather, Shakespeare began as a reader. Like most early modern writers, his understanding of otherness began primarily on the page, and probably began through his common grammar school experiences in Stratford-upon-Avon, rather than as a practicing playwright living in the comparatively cosmopolitan mercantile, political, and court environments in and around London. That is, to understand early modern experiences of the creation of racial difference we should also focus on Shakespeare, the reader, rather than on just Shakespeare, the playwright-actor, or Morocco, the dramatic character.

Shakespeare’s depiction (both in the play text and perhaps on stage) of the Prince of Morocco is likely to have emerged out of his reading of texts such as Richard Eden’s translation of Peter Martyr’s *Decades of the New Worlde or West India* (1555), which included an influential essay, “Of the colour of Indians,” the first published use of the term “tawny” to refer to human complexion in the way in which Shakespeare uses it in this play.<sup>27</sup> Shakespeare’s reading then becomes interesting precisely to the extent that it provides more than just a sourcebook of exotic details and useful plot devices, a set of contents that Shakespeare is imagined to borrow and reshape into characters such as the Prince of Morocco. That kind of account implicitly assumes some kind of exceptionalist transcendence in which Shakespeare changes what he reads, not the reverse, and it is through his ability to do that that he is in turn able to change us when we read. I would instead suggest that we need to see how reading,



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that of Shakespeare and others, developed over the preceding four generations of print culture into an increasingly dominant cultural practice that became a key component of social and intellectual identity. Resisting the temptations of limited biographical understandings of Shakespeare's works, Robert S. Miola argues that "Shakespeare created much of his art from his reading."<sup>28</sup> Here, I would simply note that we should at the same time also try to avoid seeing too sharp an opposition between reading and lived experience. For early modern readers, in particular, reading itself was a lived experience in ways that arose out of their understanding of the nature of the body and of how reading happened both *within and to* that body.

When we consider Shakespeare's depiction of the tawny Morocco as a consequence in some way of his reading, then, it might be useful to think about Thomas Wilson's evocative comments, cited in my epigraph, about the physical effects of reading. Wilson provides a way to recognize that the "burnishing" of the Prince of Morocco may come not so much from the sun or theatrical make-up, but rather from the transformative power of reading. In his *Arte of Rhetorique*, Wilson warned his own readers: "He that goeth in the Sonne, shalbe Sonne burnt, although he thinke not of it. So they that will read this, or such like Bookes, shall in the ende bee as the Bookes are." For a culture that remembered that "Ethiope" was etymologically linked to "burnt skin" and wanted to find explanations for the cause and meaning of differences in skin color, sunburn was a powerful cultural trope for concerns about identity and its apparent instability.<sup>29</sup> In making an analogy between reading books and becoming sunburnt, Wilson expresses the widespread perception that reading was a powerful and often dangerous activity. Reading was something you did, but it was also something that happened to you. It changed what you felt, how you thought, and who you were. Reading marked you. What Wilson and other early modern readers suggest, contemporary scholars working on cognition and the history of reading confirm: reading changes who we are, producing new forms of identity in ways that cross from the intellectual and the emotional to the corporeal.

With this approach to reading as a lived experience in mind, *Reading and the History of Race in the Renaissance* turns from questions about the performance of race to think about what Margo Hendricks has called "the epistemology of race" and does so by looking at how early modern understandings of racial identity in part emerged out of, and were expressed by way of, text-based reading practices.<sup>30</sup> This project focuses primarily on English and European printed romances from the late fifteenth through

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mid-seventeenth centuries. As I will suggest, Renaissance romance was strongly influenced by printing technologies, which enabled the production and circulation of texts and images (a rapid succession of continuations, translations, adaptations, epitomes, illustrated sequences and painting cycles derived from those texts) in ways that were consistent with both the narrative form and the ideological assumptions of the genre. Romance also provides a particularly good genre as a kind of case study for thinking about how reading contributed to early modern identity practices: as both contemporary readers and subsequent scholars have noted, romance promoted intense forms of reading. These forms of reading, as we shall see, emerge out of a generic interest in articulating identity as a social category, genealogical in nature and visual in form, in ways that were consistent with historic concerns about the meaning of identity within visual culture.

The beginning points for this study are, in the largest sense, the aftermath of the Fall of Constantinople and the invention of the printing press. These iconic moments have traditionally been understood to mark the end of the medieval period and beginning of the Renaissance.<sup>31</sup> The Fall of Constantinople and the invention of the printing press were also, as I will suggest, determining events in both the literary history of romance and the cultural history of race. My endpoint is the mid-seventeenth century, a moment when the fluidity to identity that Loomba points to has largely been replaced by a much more fixed, more recognizably modern, model of identity and when the romances that swept through Europe and England had largely ended. As a genre, romance relies on very different models of identity than drama and thus offers an overlooked literary form for understanding the historic emergence of our own assumptions about race and identity. Within printed romance, in particular, identity emerges within the conventions of reading, as a form of looking, perceiving, and identifying, rather than within those of dramatic performance, of personation and impersonation.

From a narrative and textual perspective (this includes narrative structures, ideological and social assumptions, textual production and dissemination), early modern romance was inherently compatible with and flourished within the visual and technological cultures of print. Indeed, early modern romance seems to pursue nostalgic forms of genealogy while also construing identity in ways that anticipate the advent of phenotype racialism. The advent of print culture provided a powerful and perhaps surprising catalyst for the genre of romance from the late fifteenth through mid-sixteenth centuries. In her important study of