

## CHAPTER I

*Did the Concept of Race Exist for Shakespeare  
 and His Contemporaries?*

*An Introduction*

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If there's a book you really want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it.

– Toni Morrison<sup>1</sup>

When I was in university over thirty years ago, the answer to the question – did the concept of race exist during Shakespeare's lifetime – was an emphatic no. This answer was delivered in both explicit and implicit ways. Explicitly I was told that "Moor" did not mean "black," "African," and most especially it did not mean "sub-Saharan African." My Shakespeare professor said that I was being anachronistic when I attempted to link Shakespeare's inclusion of Moors, like Aaron, Othello, and the Prince of Morocco, with the burgeoning transatlantic slave trade of the seventeenth century; he said, to look at race in early modern texts is to misapply modern concepts to them.

At the same time, the editions of Shakespeare's plays I was reading routinely fell silent at certain moments. Claudio's rejoinder in *Much Ado about Nothing* that he is so repentant over Hero's death that he will do anything to marry her cousin, even "hold my mind were she an Ethiop" (5.4.38), receives no gloss in the Arden Second Series edition published in 1981.<sup>2</sup> Romeo's remark that Juliet's beauty "hangs upon the cheek of night / As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear" (1.5.44–45), is not explained by the editor of the 1980 Arden edition. Instead, the editor notes the similarity of the phrase to one used by Christopher Marlowe in *Hero and Leander*: "Rich jewels in the darke are soonest spide."<sup>3</sup> The implicit message of these and other observances was that race did not exist in Shakespeare's cultural and creative imagination. That there was no difference between Marlowe's "dark" and Shakespeare's "Ethiop" – that Shakespeare's employment of "Ethiop" was not a reflection of a growing awareness of Africans.

I'll provide one last editorial example, although I can't claim to have been in university when this was first published in 1997. Cleopatra's status

as an Egyptian queen, and what exactly Shakespeare and his audiences would have imagined Egyptians to look like physically, have led to some interesting editorial maneuvering. The first lines of the play, after all, announce that Antony is so besotted with Cleopatra that his “goodly eyes,” which should be focused on war, “now bend, now turn, / The office and devotion of their view / Upon a tawny front” (I.I.4–6). While the note in the first edition of the Norton Shakespeare explains, “A face or forehead of dark complexion (referring to Cleopatra; see the Introduction),” the introduction waffles on how this “tawny front” actually appears: “*Antony and Cleopatra* also renders problematic the object of desire. Presumably that object is Cleopatra . . . It is unclear what they literally see in Cleopatra.”<sup>4</sup> If race is not a part of one’s interpretative lens, then it may be unclear why, how, and in what material ways Cleopatra appears. As many early modern race scholars have gone on to note, Cleopatra’s assumed tawnyness has ebbed and waned over the 400 plus years of the play’s editing and staging, more an indication of the time of the publication or production than of Shakespeare’s own historical moment.<sup>5</sup> The New Variorum edition of *Antony and Cleopatra*, a volume devoted to showing editorial trends, demonstrates the vicissitudes succinctly:

**Tawny]** COTGRAVE (1611, Tanné): “Also, duskie, swart.” WHITE (ed. 1883): “Cleopatra was a Greek, the daughter of Ptolemy, and was probably fair, although not with Teutonic fairness.” WILSON (ed. 1950, pp. xi f.) reflects the consensus: “Shakespeare had thought of her as an African beauty.”<sup>6</sup>

In other words, as early as 1611 (i.e., during Shakespeare’s lifetime) tawny was understood to mean dusky and swarthy in complexion, but by the late nineteenth century the idea that Antony would love a dark-skinned African was an impossibility: Cleopatra had to be Greek and fair, but not quite all the way white, not Germanic white. While the New Variorum editor assumes that John Dover Wilson’s 1950 proclamation that Shakespeare imagined Cleopatra to be an “African beauty” is now the “consensus” among modern editors, by 1997 her appearance is “unclear.” No consensus then, I guess.

If you ask today in the 2020s if the concept of race existed for Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the answer is an emphatic yes. Yes, the concept of race existed. Yes, racialized epistemologies existed and were employed and deployed. And, yes, Shakespeare himself engages in both the

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Figure 1.1 Despite prior scholarly claims that there were few to no blacks in early modern England, archival evidence shows the contrary, including this engraving of a black trumpeter which first appeared in print in a 1518 almanac and was reprinted regularly for almost seventy years.

symbolic and materialistic elements that comprise race-making. Yes, Shakespeare and race are coeval; they grew up as contemporaries. So, what has changed from 1990, the year I started university, to today, 2020, when I write this introduction? The history has not changed (although some new archival materials have been unearthed – see Figure 1.1), but the ways that scholars are trained to search the archives, read the texts, and analyze their significances has. While the critics writing in the 1980s and 1990s were trained primarily as new critics, post-structuralists, and Marxists, with a smattering of feminists among them, the scholars working and writing today have benefited from the birth, growth, and influence of African American studies, critical race theory, post-colonial studies, queer studies, and more recently critical white studies. My work is informed by a deep dive into both African American studies and post-colonial studies when I was in university. When I took the required

Shakespeare course in my final year of university, I had an analytical toolkit that was completely different, foreign, and unfamiliar to my well-esteemed professor.<sup>7</sup> I saw race and race-making; he saw anachronisms.

The book that you are holding and reading, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, would have been nearly impossible to create – and, sadly, even impossible to conceive – when I was in university, because it requires scholars who know not only Shakespeare’s works, the historical and cultural milieu of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries in England and Europe, and the archives that hold the historical documents from these time periods, but also the history of imperialism, alternative archives that reveal more about the various lives of people of color in the early modern world, and the history of Shakespeare’s employment in various theatrical, educational, and political moments in history – from the seventeenth century to the twenty-first century. Post-colonial studies, African American studies, critical race studies, and queer studies allow scholars to employ new methodologies for Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

What you are holding is the book that I would have wanted to read when I was in university. It opens up the man, the author, and his works to a much larger and more dynamic portrait of the universe in which he played and thrived. This book introduces readers to the various ways Shakespeare and race can be read, performed, and analyzed together, moving readers from the early modern period in which Shakespeare created to the present moment in which Shakespeare’s works are studied, performed, and appropriated. The collection provides an historical overview, offering insights into the extant historical materials that document early modern constructions of race and racial difference. Moving well beyond *Othello*, it invites readers to ponder the specifics of racialized discourses, rhetoric, and performances in all of Shakespeare’s plays, including the comedies and histories. Challenging the usefulness of the generic category of “Other” through the book’s disaggregated chapters on Moors, Turks, and Jews, it presents an intersectional approach with other chapters that focus on the concepts of sexuality, lineage, nationality, and globalization. And finally, the collection invites the reader to grapple with the unique role performance plays in constructions of race by Shakespeare (and in Shakespearean performances), bringing the reader into the current moment with actors and directors who work with Shakespeare onstage. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race* is the first book that frames Shakespeare studies and early modern race studies for a non-specialist, student audience.

### Imperial History

One of the major changes in perspective from the 1990s to today is an understanding that the world in which Shakespeare was living, observing, and creating was an imperial one: one in which European countries, including England, were not only exploring parts of the world that were new to them, but also creating exploitative systems that worked to diversify and bolster their economies at the expense of others. The literary theory New Historicism, which was developed in the 1980s, sought to understand Shakespeare not as a singular author but as a product of the historical, cultural, and material environs around him. Undergirded by Marxism, New Historicists were the first scholars to put pressure on the imperial conditions of Shakespeare's world. The fact that his theatre was called the Globe, for instance, serves as a reminder that while Shakespeare never traveled outside of England (as far as we know), the larger world was a part of his creative consciousness.<sup>8</sup> New Historicists explicitly argued that an imperial background informed Shakespeare's life and work.

Nonetheless, New Historicists were loath to take up the concept of race, racialized epistemologies, and/or the notion of race-making as central elements in this newly expanding imperial world. In fact, like my well-esteemed Shakespeare professor at university, New Historicists routinely claimed that an examination of race in the early modern period was anachronistic. To be fair to the New Historicists, scholars at the forefront of post-colonial studies and critical race studies were arguing that race was a modern concept developed primarily during the Enlightenment.<sup>9</sup> There was an odd chicken-and-egg phenomenon occurring, however, in which the scholars at the forefront of post-colonial studies and critical race studies were taught by early modernists who did not see race in Shakespeare's works (remember the there's-nothing-to-be-glossed-here notes); they, in turn, created new fields of study that argued that race was a modern phenomenon; and these new fields, consequently, influenced another generation of early modern and Shakespeare scholars, who continued to believe that race-making was a modern occurrence.<sup>10</sup>

There were a few scholarly voices who helped to open the door for early modern race studies. The Sierra Leonean scholar Eldred Jones, for example, published *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* in 1965.<sup>11</sup> His book made it clear that early modern drama not only included references to Africa and Africans symbolically, but also included African characters materially, reflecting a burgeoning interest in the world outside of Europe. Then in 1969 Elliot H. Tokson published an

article in *Modern Language Quarterly* called “The Image of the Negro in Four Seventeenth-Century Love Poems,” in which he argued that “even though these four poems might well be the results of witty assaults on conventional love poetry and not reflect the poets’ own racial views at all, they do contribute to the Negro’s image as it was being shaped during this century.”<sup>12</sup> Again, the argument relies on the idea that concepts of racial difference were being shaped in the seventeenth century. Tokson expanded on this argument in his 1982 monograph, *The Popular Image of the Black Man in English Drama, 1550–1688*.<sup>13</sup> One final example comes from the Trinidadian scholar Errol Hill, whose 1986 book *Shakespeare in Sable: A History of Black Shakespearean Actors*, was the first examination of performances of Shakespeare by actors of color.<sup>14</sup> As post-colonial theorists would later pun, the empire was writing back with race fully in the center of their frames of analysis.<sup>15</sup> For scholars like Jones, Tokson, and Hill, the concept of race and the process of race-making were evident in Shakespeare’s time – one only had to look at the texts differently. As Tokson wrote in 1969, “Against a background of racial confrontation, these four poems . . . add to the texture of conceptions that divided the races then, and still to some degree keep them apart today.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, there were early scholarly voices that explicitly linked the past to the present with regards to notions of race.

As Geraldine Heng painstakingly details in her brilliant book *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, beginning in the eleventh century Europeans engaged in religious crusades which brought them in contact with various other nations and peoples, and she analyzes how Jews, Muslims, Africans, Native Americans, Mongols, Romani, and others were racialized in the process. Around Shakespeare’s lifetime, the European world experienced increased and sustained encounters with an expanding world, including the arrival of the first large group of Africans in Portugal in 1444, the first voyage to the Americas by Christopher Columbus in 1492, and the first influx of Africans into England in 1554.<sup>17</sup>

At this exact moment, England’s first freestanding, commercial, secular theatres were being built in London, and on those stages the globe and its people were being constructed, embodied, and enacted. One scholar tabulates that between 1579 and 1642 there were at least fifty plays with racialized figures, and another counts at least seventy productions with black characters.<sup>18</sup> It is important to realize not only that the early modern theatre was reflecting back English ideas about race, but also that these plays were creating new concepts, stereotypes, and visions for race. On the early modern stage, race-making is partially constructed rhetorically –

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through, for example, rhetorical patterns, rhetorical “errors,” figures of speech, metaphors, colloquialisms, and/or idioms – and partially constructed materially – through, for example, costumes, prosthetics, wigs, moustaches, physical gesture, vocal timbre, and/or accent.<sup>19</sup> In this way, early modern English theatre in general, and Shakespeare’s plays in particular, provide a treasure trove of evidence of the ways race was being constructed in the period. Not in a singular, stable, and consistent way, but rather in multiple, erratic, and contradictory ways.

### What Is Race?

So, what exactly is race? Let me begin by saying that race is *not* a biological, scientific, or genetic reality. Race is a fiction. I’ll repeat: race is not a real thing. Nor is race a stable category that refers solely to skin color, somatic aspects, or phenotypes (think, for example, of all the stories of racial passing; how can one pass if race is tied solely to skin color?). The idea that race is a stable, identifiable biological trait comes from pseudo-scientific arguments that were created in the Enlightenment. These late seventeenth-century arguments were subsequently adopted and weaponized throughout much of the world to create disparities based on these pseudo-scientific notions of essential differences. Again, race is a fiction, but as Ann Stoler argues, race-making is a systemic reality and “a critical feature of racial discourse may be its ‘polyvalent mobility.’”<sup>20</sup> In other words, the process of race-making is flexible so that it can be mobilized at different historical moments to create structural and material inequalities. Focusing on the systemic nature of race-making, Stoler claims, “The point is that these racial discourses were both new and renewed, well-worn and innovative, protective of the past and geared to limiting the entitlements of specific populations in the future.”<sup>21</sup> Race-making, then, relies on both a fictional idea of a homogeneous social past and a fantastical idea of an aspirational future in which privileges will be limited to the non-raced. As Geraldine Heng explains, “race has no singular or stable referent” because “race is a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content.”<sup>22</sup>

The assumption that underlies this collection, then, is that race is neither a reality, nor a stable content – it is not skin, genes, nor invisible essential qualities. Rather, race is constructed by a social process that one might call race-making or “racecraft,” to use a term coined by Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields.<sup>23</sup> Race does not exist, but racism does. “Racism is first and foremost a social practice, which means that it is an

action or a rationale for action, or both.”<sup>24</sup> Racism produces race as a concept. Racism produces race to ensure an uneven distribution of goods, wealth, power, rights, etc. As Fields and Fields observe, “Racism and those other forms of inequality are rarely tackled together because they rarely come into view together. Indeed, the most consequential of the illusions racecraft underwrites is concealing the affiliation between racism and inequality in general.”<sup>25</sup> Race-making, or what Fields and Fields call racecraft, is the underlying imaginative horizon, belief system, or individual and collective mental landscape that seeks to divide humans along unequal lines. They argue

Distinct from *race* and *racism*, *racecraft* does not refer to groups or to ideas about groups’ traits . . . It refers instead to mental terrain and to pervasive belief. . . [R]acecraft originates not in nature but in human action and imagination; it can exist no other way. The action and imagining are collective yet individual, day-to-day yet historical, and consequential even when nested in mundane routine.<sup>26</sup>

So, what does this mean for Shakespeare and his early modern world? It means that we can look to Shakespeare’s works for examples of both racism and racecraft. This is not to malign Shakespeare as an individual – his individual, personal beliefs are not the goal of this type of analysis. Instead, this collection examines Shakespeare’s plays and poems for moments when racecraft is visible, the moments when the “mental terrain” and “pervasive belief” of differences are visible, the moments when inequalities are being constructed, the moments when exclusions based on those constructed inequalities are being performed. Sometimes these moments announce themselves readily – Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus*, for example, presents a highly visible moment of Shakespeare’s racecraft – but sometimes these moments are more subtle – what underpins the Dromios’ distinct difference from the Antiphili in *The Comedy of Errors*? And potentially more unsettling is the fact that Shakespeare’s racecraft is unstable, inconsistent, erratic, unbalanced, mercurial, and seemingly capricious. In the past some scholars have argued that the malleability and inconsistency of racialized discourses in the early modern period are evidence that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were not engaged in a racialized epistemology. In their formulation, inconsistency is a negative indicator of racecraft. Let me be clear, critical race theory has slain this dragon. Constructions of race are inconsistent and opportunistic; that is one of the hallmarks of race-making and racecraft.



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It is also important to observe that whiteness is neither a biological reality nor a stable genetic identity either. Like race in general, whiteness is constructed in different ways at different historical moments. Shakespeare's works, in fact, provide fascinating snapshots of the ways that both whiteness and Englishness are created and recreated at different moments. Sometimes gender is a defining feature, sometimes class, sometimes religion, sometimes regional accent, and sometimes other factors are called into service to create the fantasy that whiteness or Englishness are real, stable, biological, and essential. Nonetheless, the work is all race-making and racecraft in the service of racism, whose aim is to create justifiable systemic, structural, and material inequalities. The essays in this collection are good at maintaining an intersectional lens so that we can see the ways that class, gender, sexuality, physical ability, etc. are instrumentalized at different times in the service of racecraft.

### The Evidence and the Archives

As I have indicated, this volume demonstrates the ways that we read differently when detecting racializing epistemologies, race-making, and racecraft are a part of one's analytical toolkit. For the most part, the archives that the scholars in this collection consult have been known to scholars of previous generations; it is just that the tools available for the analyses of these sources are now different. There are a few crucial, new archival sources that I would like to highlight, however. First, Imtiaz Habib's 2008 book, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677*, provides an invaluable database for the documentary evidence pertaining to the presence of blacks – African, American, and Indian – in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England.<sup>27</sup> In the past, it was common to be told that Shakespeare would not have seen, let alone known, any black people when he was living and writing in Stratford-upon-Avon and London. Writing in 1978, for instance, G.K. Hunter argued, "The Elizabethans also had a powerful sense of the economic threat posed by the foreign groups they had daily contact with – Flemings or Frenchmen – but they had little or no continued contact with 'Moors,' and no sense of economic threat from them."<sup>28</sup> Habib's book challenges the certainty of these assertions. Finding 448 separate archival records for black individuals in early modern England, Habib argues:

the substantial archival evidence of black people in England between 1501 and 1676 ... contributes significant, irreversible, and hitherto unavailable materialities to current understandings of racial discourse in

sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. These records mark the empirical intimacy of the English construction of the racial other, and of the national-imperial drive that is its most immediate occasion.”<sup>29</sup>

Moreover, Habib created a map for a cover of an academic journal that shows the proximity of specific black figures from the Tudor and Stuart periods to the freestanding early modern theatres on the South Bank of London.<sup>30</sup> Shakespeare may well have seen or known blacks in London.

Second, Nabil Matar’s work translating early modern Arabic texts about their interactions with the English has opened an entirely new archive to Shakespeare scholars. While Queen Elizabeth I’s interactions with the Moroccan ambassador, for example, were relatively well known to scholars, the Moroccan view of Elizabeth and England was not. Framing England in a global context, Matar’s work palpably demonstrates that there are always (at least) two sides to every economic, diplomatic, and religious encounter in the early modern world.<sup>31</sup> The early modern Islamic texts that he has translated into English provide a new archive for Shakespeare scholars.

And finally, historians continue to identify earlier instances of slavery in the Mediterranean and the transatlantic.<sup>32</sup> While it was once argued that (1) the English did not participate in the slave trade until after Shakespeare’s death and (2) there were no enslaved Africans in England, the new archival information about the number of blacks in early modern England coupled with the new historical data about the widespread use of slavery in premodern Europe allows one to read Shakespeare’s texts in a different way. The English may not have been trading during Shakespeare’s lifetime, but he clearly would have had knowledge about the burgeoning market for forced, unpaid human labor and the burgeoning system of race-making that attended it.

As will become clear the further one reads into this collection, there is still a lot of scholarly detective work to be undertaken. If one accepts the premise that race-making and racecraft are ways of thinking and structuring the world to create inequalities, then the archives have to be read in new ways – ones that address the erasures and inherent inequalities of the archives themselves. It should not be a surprise, for instance, that performance archives are particularly challenging when looking for actors of color, especially women of color. Archives, and what they preserve, value, erase, write over, and leave scant traces of, are racecraft.<sup>33</sup> As we collectively learn to discern and analyze racecraft in new ways, I am hopeful that in thirty years this collection will seem as outdated as the way I was first taught Shakespeare.