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Liliana Tronea-Ghidel

***UNDERSTANDING THE OTHER
IN ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND: SHAKESPEARE'S
DRAMAS***



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Referenți științifici:

Profesor Univ. Dr. Codruța Mirela Stănișoară, Universitatea din Craiova,
Facultatea de Litere

Profesor Univ. Dr. Emil Sîrbulescu, Departamentul de Studii anglo-americane și
germane, Universitatea din Craiova, Facultatea de Litere

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The bibliography of Shakespearean criticism is huge: almost half a century ago, distinguished Polish Shakespearean scholar Ian Kott could find no other reference element than the Warsaw telephone directory! One may just wonder about the dimensions of a present-day bibliography. Nevertheless, I was not discouraged and consciously embarked upon this mission of approaching the race relations in some of Shakespeare's plays, as seen and felt at the beginning of the twenty-first century, when people seem to have become more conscious than ever of differences dictated by race, gender, religion...

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

NOTE: all the illustrations, maps and charts belong to the public domain. Online resources have been mentioned whenever necessary.

Fig. 1: Title Page from Gerard Mercator, *Historia Mundi* or Mercators Atlas, English ed. (London, 1635). Online Resource: <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/library/specialcollections/treasures/?treasure_id=115> Retrieved: March 2011

Fig. 2: Shakespeare's Europe (according to Ortelius).

Fig. 3: Title page of *The XV Bookes of P. Ouidius Naso: Entituled, Metamorphosis. Translated out of Latin into English meeter by Arthvr Golding*. It was first printed in 1567 and was reprinted five times by 1603. This title page is from the 1593 edition printed by John Danter. Online resource: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ovid_Golding_translation_1593.jpg> Retrieved June 2010.

Fig. 4: Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud, Moorish Ambassador to the Court of Queen Elizabeth I. Online resource: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Moorish_Ambassador_to_Elizabeth_I.jpg>

Fig. 5: Title Page from Thomas Osborne, *Collection of Voyages and Travels* (London, 1745). Online resource: <http://www.unz.org/Pub/Osborne_Thomas-1745> Retrieved: Oct. 2010.

Fig. 6: Title page from Abraham Ortelius, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (Antwerp, 1574). Online resource: <www.raremaps.com/maps/medium/23755.jpg> Retrieved: Oct. 2010.

Fig. 7: Title-page to Peter Heylyn, *Cosmographie*, (London, Henry Seile, 1652). Online resource: <http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database/search_object_details.aspx?partid=1&objectid=3065052> Retrieved: Jan. 2011.

Fig. 8: Title Page from Gerard Mercator, *Atlas sive Cosmographicae*, second edition (Amsterdam, 1607). Online resource: <http://www.raremaps.com/gallery/detail/33659bp/Title_Page_Atlas_Sive_Cosmographicae_Meditationes_De_Fabrica_Mundi_et/Mercator.html> Retrieved March 2011.

Fig. 9: Early modern London ca. 1600. Online resource: <<http://iron.lmc.gatech.edu/classes/djakacki3/jakackiwiki11/index.php/File:Londoncity.jpg>> Retrieved June 2010.

Fig. 10: The 1596 Open Letter addressed by Queen Elizabeth I to the Lord Mayor of London. Online resource: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/blackhistory/early_times/docs/privy_council.htm> Retrieved June 2010.

Fig. 11: Leo, Africanus. *A geographical historie of Africa, written in Arabicke and Italian*. Title page of the 1600 English edition. Online resource: <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:LeoAfricanus-JohnPory-GeoHistorieAfrica-1600.jpg>> Retrieved: March 2010.

Fig. 12: Costume design by Inigo Jones for ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness*. Online resource: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Inigo_Jones,_design_for_Masque_of_Blackness_1605.jpg> Retrieved: April 2011.

Fig. 13: Marginal Illustration from the Chronicles of Offa (British Library, Cotton Nero D. I.), folio 183v, Jews being persecuted. Illustration by Matthew Paris. Online resource: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Yellow_badge> Retrieved: June 2012.

Fig. 14: Aaron, Son of Devil – anti-Semitic caricature of an English Jew appearing on an Essex county document dated 1277. Online resource: <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Aaron,SonOfDevil.jpg>> Retrieved June 2012.

Fig.15: Drawing found on an Exchequer Roll of 1233, listing the taxes paid by the Norwich Jews during the reign of Henry III. Online resource: <<http://www.thehistoryblog.com/archives/11720>> Retrieved: June 2012.

Fig. 16: *Venetia*. Facsimile of a hand-colored, copper engraving, 33.9 x 9 cm. From volume 1 of George Braun and Frans Hogenberg, *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (Cologne: Peter von Brachel, ca. 1623). Online resource: <<http://anthrocivitas.net/forum/showthread.php?t=9043>> Retrieved: March 2011.

FOREWORD

Argument

QUEEN Elizabeth I may have had her own reasons to order the expulsion of all the Africans, whom she called them “Negers and Blackamoors”, from her reign, and to personally instrument the execution of Doctor Lopez, a Marrano Jew and her personal physician. The Blackamoors were more than physically visible: as the term comprised all dark-skinned intruders in the realm – mostly Moors, that is northern Africans of present day Maghreb, Egyptians, sometimes Turks and even Indians, but also sub-Saharan slaves brought to England against their will by the flourishing slave traders of the time – their increasing numbers might have triggered the anxiety of the Queen.

As for the Jews, they were officially inexistent in the realm. Having been expelled by royal edict more than two centuries before, the Jews were almost invisible presences in the London of Queen Elizabeth I. This general situation will explain why, in Shakespeare’s plays, there are more Blackamoors than Jews, though the personality of Shylock, the Jew of Venice, almost surpasses that of Othello, the Moor of Venice. What connects the two is, the “maiden city of Venice”, to which Shakespeare transferred the anxieties and racial – or, to quote American scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah, should we say “racialist”? – feelings and obsessions of his contemporaries.

Regarding the Blackamoors, Queen Elizabeth I first took action in 1596, in an open letter to the Lord Mayor of London, and then, five years later, she insisted that she was

“highly discontented to understand the great numbers of *negars and Blackamoors* which...are crept into this realm since the troubles between Her Highness and the King of Spain who are fostered and relieved [i.e. fed] her to the great annoyance of *her own liege people*, that want the relief [i.e. food], which those people consume, as also for that the most of them are infidels, having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel.”

There have been numerous interpretations of the Queen’s proclamation, but there are a few details worth mentioning. Elizabeth, who was known to have encouraged the legal and not so legal activities of her sea captains as long as they brought any profit to the Crown, was carefully avoiding the slavery

chapter: the blackamoors were there neither as slaves nor as ‘insiders’. The same sea captains were fully responsible for the presence of Africans on the English shores, but the Queen was diplomatically blaming her rival, the King of Spain, for the presence of ‘Negars’ in the streets of London. These *others* had not been brought in; they had been “creeping” into the realm. Spain did not want them, and England decided to expel them all. The Queen was clever enough to give the shortage of food and shelter as the reason of preferring “her own liege people” to the African intruders who could not aspire to acquire the status of “English”. The assertion of *Otherness* is at its best. To the Queen and her loyal subjects, the ‘Negars and Blackamoors’ – she does not call them African – were different others, infidels who did not understand the Scriptures, and also slaves of the rival Spanish Empire. It all accounts for the political, cultural, and racial dimensions of Elizabeth’s actions against the coloured people in her realm.

The Jews had been there long before, having reached England three years after the Battle of Hastings, in 1070. They were officially present on the British soil for more than two centuries. Their unwanted involvement in financial matters, trade and politics triggered a wave of persecutions culminating with King Edward I’s decree of 1270, according to which the Jews were considered a threat to the country and were forced to wear a yellow star in order to be easily identified in public. Many Jews were arrested and eventually executed. In 1290 they were banished from England, and returned only in 1655, when Oliver Cromwell allowed it.

During the Dark Ages the Jews were considered heretics, and were held responsible for all the evils, such as the Black Death. During the Elizabethan Age, there were few Jews left in England: they were mostly money-lenders and peddlers, and, in order to survive, were forced to openly confess to the Christian Protestant faith. The Elizabethans associated the Jews with the witches, and they were similarly believed to worship the devil. Their anti-Semitism was, somewhat, inherited, and the theatre-goer expected a Jewish character custom-tailored according to the generally accepted stereotype. And this is what they received: Shakespeare’s Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* is also a money-lender, and his unusual terms set in the lending contract – the infamous pound of his own flesh the protagonist was supposed to provide in case of incapacity to return the 3000 ducats – was meant to horrify the audience who were well aware of the circumcision practice among the Jews. Marlowe’s Barabas, the protagonist of *The Jew of Malta*, is equally cruel, selfish, and greedy.

Intention

It is my intention – consciously using the contextual approach and the tools of the comparatist – to analyze the presence of “the Other” in such plays as: *Titus Andronicus*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest*. My dissertation sets out to analyse the Elizabethans’ perception of England and of the world at large, in the age of discoveries and expansion of the British Empire. As already mentioned, my approach is both comparatist and contextual. It is (1) contextual as far as it tackles such matters as the Elizabethans’ perception of their own country, of the ever-expanding British Empire, of the whole world. It is meant to be an insight into Shakespeare’s and his audience’s discovery of themselves and of the Other – be he/she the Moor or the Jew, the Indian or the native of an unnamed island in the Atlantic (or the Mediterranean). My approach is (2) comparatist, as I have been trying to observe and apply (whenever suitable) the ten principles of comparative literature so clearly formulated by Canadian scholar Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek in his seminal study, *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998). I have also made recourse to the works of such authoritative theoreticians of literature and race, as well as Shakespearean scholars, such as: Edward Said, Ania Loomba, Tzvetan Todorov, Andrew Hadfield, Harold Bloom, Isaac Asimov, Marjorie Garber, Stanley Wells, John Gillies, Virginia Vaughan, and many others.

Unavoidably, my journey of discovery has led me from the green fields of Albion – once the abode of the Roman conquerors who might have brought with them Jews and black Africans – to “the maiden city of Venice”, to Cyprus and Egypt, to the coasts of Barbary, and to distant Atlantic islands inhabited by Caliban and his like. It is my hope that such an endeavour has now reached its purposeful conclusion, leading to a new understanding of the English Renaissance, and to a different dimension of the racial relations in Early Modern England.

Limitations of my approach

First of all, my dissertation should not be understood as a study of race and racial relations in Early Modern England, as seen from a selected number of Shakespearean plays. Though I have considered such pertinent studies as Ania Loomba’s *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism* (2002), or Catherine M.S. Alexander and Stanley Wells’ *Shakespeare and Race* (2000), I did refer to other prominent resources, only to finally offer the image of a multicultural environment of the British Renaissance, and the writers’ contribution to widening the cultural horizon of their fellow citizens. Then, my dissertation is not an incursion into Shakespearean – therefore, Renaissance – geography,

even if it sends the reader to the world as it was known by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. It might remind one of the “poetic geographies” once formulated by Giambattista Vico and recently developed upon by John Gillies in his *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference* (1994), but the direction followed is different.

Last but not least, it has not been my intention to cover the whole Shakespearean canon, and search for clues where they do not exist. As a matter of fact, I had to stick to the main idea – *understanding the other in Shakespeare’s dramas*. Therefore, I have only selected a number of plays which I considered most suitable to my purpose. The plays are not treated according to the genre they belong to – history, comedy, tragedy, and romance – but according to their relevance to my general purpose.

Research Questions

The research hypotheses found at the basis of the current dissertation have been formulated in accordance to the following questions:

- *How far do the three ‘streams’ of ideas that go into the making of beliefs and debates about ‘otherness’ and ‘race’ in early modern Europe (as formulated by Ania Loomba) – fit into the picture of the Elizabethans’ approach to the Other?*
- *Does such an approach find its way into Shakespeare’s dramas? If so, to what extent?*
- *What is the extent of Shakespeare’s understanding of the Other?*
- *Are there instances in Shakespeare’s plays which might justify a nation-wide adverse attitude towards the blacks and the Jews?*
- *Last but not least, was Shakespeare a racist?*

At this stage, it is sufficient to mention that, in her *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism* (2002), Ania Loomba offers a comprehensive case study of the interpretations of race in Shakespeare’s time, and distinguishes three “streams of ideas” which helped define “the making of beliefs and debates about ‘otherness’ and ‘race’ in early modern Europe (Loomba, 6). As regards *the first stream of ideas*, the author has in mind “medieval as well as classical notions about skin colour, religion and community.” This is challenged by the “cross-cultural encounters” which are part of *the second stream of ideas*. These encounters turned into a challenge to the Europeans, and Ania Loomba finds a three-fold explanation in:

- (1) the expansion of the colonial empires of England's rivals, Spain and Portugal;
- (2) the menacing expansion of the Turkish Empire which threatened the stability of the Western World; and
- (3) the discovery of the New World and its 'savage' people, which informed the Elizabethans' perception of the *Other*.

We have thus come to Ania Loomba's *third stream of ideas* which she considers for the understanding of the concept of 'race'; human societies encounter opposing notions, such as men vs. women (gender distinction), the wealthy vs. the needy (social distinction), nobles vs. commoners (class distinction). Here, I should add white vs. non-white (race distinction), or Christian vs. non-Christian (religious distinction), and the list may continue. But here is Ania Loomba again: "Concepts of gender, class, and national difference have a profound effect on how any culture understands its own boundaries and can be thought as the third stream of ideas, just as important for understanding 'race' as other histories of contact."

As regards Shakespeare's plays, *otherness* is encountered in each and every one of them. Some of the characters of four Shakespearean plays are obviously, visibly non-white: Aaron the Moor of *Titus Andronicus*, Othello of *Othello*, the Moor of *Venice*, and Caliban of *The Tempest*. Shylock, of *The Merchant of Venice*, is not only non-Christian but also a Jew. Three of them (Aaron, Othello and Cleopatra) belong to the African continent, while Caliban's race is still debatable. There are a few others who fit into the picture:

- Jews: Jessica (Shylock's daughter) and Tubal (Shylock's friend);
- Africans: Othello's mother – not a physical presence, only remembered in connexion with the handkerchief; Sycorax, Caliban's mother, presumably from Algiers, that is Northern Africa; Lancelot's Moor woman (in *The Merchant of Venice*); Aaron's and Tamora's black-skinned baby (in *Titus Andronicus*); the Prince of Morocco (one of the suitors in *The Merchant of Venice*).

There we have a wide range of characters who fit into the general framework of "otherness", twelve in all: men and women, Jews and Africans, Moors and savages. A close reading of a selection of plays will hopefully provide the answers to the questions above.

Method and Corpus

In terms of structure, my dissertation is preceded by an Introduction containing the theoretical considerations necessary for the critical discourse, followed by two distinct, but closely connected, main parts, each subdivided into four more theoretical, general chapters (Part One), and four more chapters (Part Two), which represent the analytical dimension of my thesis, and cover a selection of four Shakespearean dramas: *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Tempest*. Each of the plays analyzed offers a different dimension of the reception of race in Early Modern England. The *Conclusion* rounds up the analysis and is followed by a number of *Illustrations* which I consider as revealing to certain aspects referred to in the main corpus of my work. One mention is necessary: all the illustrations belong to the public domain – internet resources, dutifully mentioned. The *Bibliography* lists the different editions of Shakespeare’s plays resorted to as Primary Sources, while the secondary resources – alphabetically ordered, mention the print or web versions of the critical studies used.

Introduction: *Theoretical Considerations* sets the theoretical framework for the whole discussion of the plays selected. I start from the assumption that – whatever the genre, and before attaining a certain degree of universality – literary works fit into an unavoidable historical context from which they should not be readily separated. More than often they ask questions about history and about the processes by which historical knowledge and understanding are shaped. Recently an increased emphasis has been placed on the precise historical contextualization of literature. We shall therefore refer to the English Renaissance and explore the strategic and historical contexts which inform the writings of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, with a particular reference to racial relations during the Renaissance, and the way they are reflected in the literature of the time. The “Decalogue of Comparative Literature” formulated by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek will be applied, with an insistence on the interdisciplinarity of my approach. Last but not least, I will deal with the theories of race as formulated by Ania Loomba, Anthony Appiah, and Tzvetan Todorov.

Part One: *The Others – On Blacks and Jews in Pre-Modern England* establishes the contextual framework which informs the Elizabethans’ perception of the Other during the unprecedented expansion of the British Empire, when the English and Europeans alike were avidly searching for new markets, crossing the seas and the oceans of the world. This well-orchestrated campaign of discovery and conquest had full support of the British Crown, Queen Elizabeth I employing soldiers and navigators, and financing their