Race in the seventeenth century: a comparison between the portrayal of the African in Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the degree of

Master in Taal- en Letterkunde: Nederlands-Engels

Bert Van Troos

Under the guidance of

Prof. Dr. Elizabeth Walters
Acknowledgements

Foremost I would like to express my gratitude to my advisor Prof. Dr. Elizabeth Walters, whose continuous support, motivation, feedback and guidance has aided me in completing and improving my dissertation. I also want to thank my family and friends for their everlasting interest and enthusiasm. Finally I want to express my deepest appreciation for the work of Chinua Achebe and Lawrence Parker, which aroused my interest in the concept of race.
Race in the seventeenth century: a comparison between the portrayal of the African in Shakespeare’s *Othello* and Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*

During the sixteenth century European nations such as Portugal and Spain began expanding overseas, Portugal for instance was the first nation who embarked on expeditions to Africa and proved African soil to be accessible for European traders, while Spain mainly focused on America. English voyagers first set foot on African soil long after 1550, nearly a century later than the Portuguese. At first the English voyagers had no specific interest in a permanent settlement; their sole purpose was to trade with the natives. These activities were severely complicated by the warm climate, diseases and the Portuguese forts along the coast. It was only at the beginning of the seventeenth century that the British started showing interest in founding an empire and realized that overseas expeditions could bring wealth, glory and adventurous stories.\(^1\)

The first permanent British settlement was located at Coramantien in 1631. The English did not participate in the slave trade until the mid of the seventeenth century, therefore they encountered the Africans in a non-slavery context and actually perceived them as another sort of man due to ancient literature, the literary tradition that favored whiteness and the ethnocentrism of early travelers, hence the seventeenth century is an essential age in the development of the English attitude towards the African population.\(^2\)

In the first part of this dissertation the reader will be confronted with an attempt at reconstructing the ambiguous attitudes/relations between the British and African population by analyzing seventeenth and sixteenth century travel literature. By focusing on concepts such as complexion, savagery, bestiality, religion and sexuality, I shall argue that even before the introduction of slavery, the English valued the African population as less civilized and perceived their own society as superior. Subsequently will be debated how slavery strengthened this degrading perception. The second part shall consist of a close reading of two works, namely Shakespeare’s early seventeenth century *Othello* and Aphra Behn’s late seventeenth century *Oroonoko*. This analysis will be focused on the representation of Africans, by discussing the racial prejudices and the concept of miscegenation in *Othello*, while in *Oroonoko* I will focus on the ambiguousness of the narrator and main character and also elaborate on the topic of miscegenation. Within these discussions the reader shall

\(^1\) W. JORDAN (1968), *White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro*, Kingsport Press, Tennessee, p. 3

\(^2\) Ibid. (p. 4)
encounter concepts such as race, religion, sexuality and savagery, which can be traced back to the earlier travel literature discussed in the first part of this dissertation. In the third section both works will be compared to specify that there is no evolution in the representation of the African population and culture. Thus they seem to be an argument in favor of the African’s exclusion from society.
Table of contents:

Chapter one: The seventeenth century context ................................................................. 6
  1.1 The African before slavery ......................................................................................... 6
    The First encounter ................................................................................................. 6
    Religion .................................................................................................................. 13
    Savagery ............................................................................................................... 17
  1.2 The African during slavery ...................................................................................... 21
    The beginning ....................................................................................................... 21
    Bondage in English society and the legal position of slaves .................................. 23
    The Concept of slavery ...................................................................................... 24
  1.3 The Moor ................................................................................................................ 27
  1.4 The Negro .............................................................................................................. 30
  1.5 The concept of race in the early seventeenth century .......................................... 31

Chapter two: the textual analyses of Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* and Shakespeare’s *Othello* .......... 34
  2.1 Shakespeare’s *Othello* .......................................................................................... 34
    The racial stereotypes and miscegenation in *Othello* ......................................... 38
  2.2 Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* ....................................................................................... 46
    The ambiguous narrator and main character ..................................................... 47
    Miscegenation ...................................................................................................... 55

Chapter three: a comparison between *Oroonoko* and *Othello* .................................. 58

Chapter four: conclusion ............................................................................................. 69

Bibliography .............................................................................................................. 71
Chapter one: The seventeenth century context

1.1 The African before slavery

The First encounter

In 1555 John Locke returned from his voyage to Guinea, accompanied by ‘certaine black slaves, whereof some were tall and strong men, and could wel agree with our meates and drinkes.’ The importation of Africans was still an unusual practice, but it aroused much curiosity and interest about these ‘new worlds’ and their population. The Portuguese had already established permanent settlements along the African coast in 1480. They had claimed around 2000 miles of African coastland and John II of Portugal proclaimed himself Lord of Guinea. This Portuguese presence complicated English expeditions to West Africa for years to come. Therefore the African coastline was perceived as an area of little commercial importance, until the travels of William Hawkins in the 1530s, which lead to one of the first permanent English settlements on the Barbary Coast in 1550. After this construction, it only was a matter of time until the first English explorers went deeper into the South of Africa and trespassed Portuguese territory.

Although the majority of the English population had never seen a black man before, they were familiar with his existence through popular travel literature. Therefore many already had an abstract image of what a black person would look like. These abstract assumptions were highly influenced by descriptions such as the narrative poem written by Robert Baker, in which he reconstructs his first two yourneys: ‘And entering in a river, we see a number of blacke soules, Whose likeliness seem’d men to be, but all was blacke as coles. Their captaine comes to me as naked as my naile, Not having witte of honestie to cover once his taile.’ Within this statement we can already encounter two characteristics that had a major impact upon early traveler’s perception of Africans, namely their skin color and their nakedness. Even before the first contact between the English and Africans, the Englishmen already had an abstract idea of what a black person might look like, due to these poems and fictions. More influential was the work of John Mandeville, who in his Travels took the reader on a magical ride to exotic, unknown destinations. Mandeville mixed fact and fiction and in his

---

3 LOCKE J. (1555), The second voyage of John Lok, in in HAKLUYT R. (1904), The principal navigations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation, Glasgow, 12 vols, p. 176
6 BAKER R. (1562), The first voyage of Robert Baker to Guinie, in HAKLUYT R. (1904), The principal navigations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation, Glasgow, 12 vols, p. 132
romanticizing encouraged the reader to go out and explore himself. The reader was to believe that no other country could compete with Africa’s nature and its ‘wonders’. Due to his enthusiastic writing style readers were unable to distinguish between fact and fiction. Thus Africa became a place of ‘wonders.’ But even before the rise of travel literature, people could already find information about the black population in both the Bible and classical sources.  

Ever since the ancient Greek stories from the seventh or eight century before Christ, Africa had been subjected to the most imaginative types of myths and stories. The Greek population had already encountered blacks during their dealings with Egypt, which had a great impact on Greek writers, as for instance Herodotus and Homer. Around the fourth century before Christ Greeks even had contact with the black population of West Africa. They often visited Africa and some Africans found their way up to Greece, often travelling to Italy, or even farther north. Although these ancient texts were widespread, people presumably were first introduced to the mysteries of Africa by reading the Bible.

The theme of blackness can for instance be found in the Song of Solomon: ‘I am black but comely… Look not upon me because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me.’ In the book of Jeremiah a more explicit reference can be found: ‘Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?’ Many travelers turned to these passages when trying to explain why the African population was black. They assumed that the sun had scorched the African’s skin or in some way had blackened the population’s blood. In the beginning theorists believed in the concept of geohumoralism, they perceived race as something mutable, as something changeable dependent on the location where you live. This assumption lead to the common belief that a person living in Africa for a long period would turn black and a black person living in a cold country would eventually become white. In 1578 one of the Elizabethan travelers George Best published his book *A true discourse of the late voyages of discoverie, for the finding of a passage to Cathaya, by the Northweast, under the conduct of Martin Frobisher* (modernized spelling) in which he defied public opinion by claiming that skin color was not location dependent. As Best pointed out, there were other

---

9 The Song of Solomon, in The Old Testament, I, p. 5-6
10 Jeremiah, 13:23
equally hot regions in the world, where the population was not black. Subsequently he argued that Africans brought to England did not change color at all: ‘I myselfe have seen an Ethiopian as blacke as a cole brought into England, who taking an English wife, begat a sonne in all respects as blacke as the father was, […] wereby it seemeth that blackness 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, could any thing alter, therefore we cannot impute if to the nature of the clime.’¹² Best claimed blackness to be a lineal infection. He was right when placing blackness within biological factors, but he was unable to suggest that black and white population stemmed from different biological factors, since the Bible suggested that all people were related to Adam and Eve and therefore shared a common origin.¹³

In order to explain the black complexion and remain between the Biblical boundaries Best turned to the curse of Ham, which deals with the origins of man, who was believed to originate from Noah’s three sons. After the flood Noah divided the world between his three sons, Ham was forefather of the southern, while Shem and Japeth were those of the middle and northern peoples. According to this story Ham had willingly looked upon his father Noah’s nakedness, who was lying drunk in his tent. Noah’s other two sons, Shem and Japeth, had not looked upon their father and even covered him with a blanket. When Noah awoke, he was filled with rage and cursed Canaan, Ham’s son, claiming that he would be ‘a servant of servants.’¹⁴ Best claims that Ham’s crime was not seeing his father naked, but rather his copulation with his wife on the ark. According to Best, Ham’s punishment was that he would father a black son, named Canaan. Eventually Canaan was assigned to Africa and therefore became the ancestor of the black population in Africa. This assumption however lacked scriptural evidence, since nothing was written in the Bible about skin color and often Canaan

---

¹² BEST G. (1578), book A true discourse of the late voyages of discoverie, for the finding of a passage to Cathaya, by the Northwest, under the conduct of Martin Frobisher, in HAKLUYT R. (1904), The principal navigations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation, Glasgow, 12 vols, vii.
¹⁴ JORDAN W. (1968), White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, Kingsport Press, Tennessee, p. 17
was connected to Asia rather than Africa.\textsuperscript{15} In earlier writings, such as John Mandeville’s \textit{Travels}, Ham was the father of the Great Kahn and therefore was assigned to Mongolia, while Shem was the progenitor of Africans and Japeth of the European population. From the beginning of the fifteenth century this division of the world was altered and proves how previous documents, even the Bible, were debated and changed in order to be conforming to reality.\textsuperscript{16}

The Bible was written and published in the fourteenth and seventeenth century under the guidance of Gutenberg and Martin Luther. They had the idea of constructing a fixed, widely available biblical text which represented the direct words of God. Thus Gutenberg was not only responsible for a widely available Biblical text, but also published the direct, uninterpreted word of God.\textsuperscript{17} The previous biblical texts remained in circulation for a long time, which resulted in various biblical texts and stories which could encompass different and often contradictory meanings. The Bible also remained inaccessible for a large part of the population, who often, due to their illiteracy, or lack of money were introduced to the Biblical stories orally. This oral tradition could be easily manipulated in order to respond to the political needs of the moment.\textsuperscript{18}

By printing Gutenberg did not only fix the words on the page, he also helped giving meaning to them: the rise of a printed version of the Bible coincides with the European invention of Africa and America and eventually helped in giving a meaning to the curse of Ham. When the Bible was printed during the fourteenth century concepts such as Africa and America did not really exist, or marked another geographical area, than it does today. They were for instance perceived as different regions of one homogenous area. Before the seventeenth century people were unaware that the world was divided into three and more continents.\textsuperscript{19} It was only during the discoveries of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth century that the world was


\textsuperscript{17} BRAUDE B. (1997), \textit{The sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identitites in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods}, in \textit{The William and Mary Quarterly}, Third Series, Vol. 54, No. 1, p. 107


\textsuperscript{19} BRAUDE B. (1997), \textit{The sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identitites in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods}, in \textit{The William and Mary Quarterly}, Third Series, Vol. 54, No. 1, p. 109
expanding and logical explanations had to be created. By appointing Ham to Africa travelers were able to give a biblical explanation for the black skin of the African population. Eventually this curse would function as one of the major justifications for slavery, because all Africans descended from the cursed son of Ham. Therefore being black was perceived as sinful.\footnote{Ibid. (p. 109)}

By the end of the sixteenth century, the English population could not only read about black people, they could also encounter them in their own streets, in the form of imported blacks. The slaves John Locke brought with him in 1555 were only the first of many, as time passed increasingly more Africans were forced to accompany merchants to England. Initially these Africans were transported to England in order to be taught the English language and assist English trading ventures in Africa.\footnote{WALVIN J. (1973), \textit{Black and White: The Negro and English Society}, Penguin Press, London, p. 7} As early as 1569 Africans were being employed as servants, as for instance by Lord Derby who was claimed to have a black servant.\footnote{DAVIES C. (1966), \textit{Slavery and the protector Somerset: the Vagrancy act of 1547}, in \textit{Economic history review}, xix, 548n} Due to their exoticness and curiosity-arousing nature blacks were ‘employed’ in British households of high social standing. After Elizabeth’s approval of the British engagement in the slave trade, Africans became progressively common in England. Near the end of the seventeenth century people of a humbler class also started putting blacks to work.\footnote{WALVIN J. (1973), \textit{Black and White: The Negro and English Society}, Penguin Press, London, p. 8}

Most Africans are believed to have lived in London, some of them even acquired independence and were able to construct their own house. During Elizabethan reign the black population started to settle in England, either as servants or independent persons. This immigration stirred the local population and the queen herself, claiming that London was overcrowded and this resulted in the famine from which they all suffered. In a letter Elizabeth noted ‘that there are of late divers blackamores brought into this realm, of which kind of people there are already here to manie considering howe God hath blessed this land with great increase of people from our nation as anie countrie in the world’.\footnote{WALVIN J. (1973), \textit{Black and White: The Negro and English Society}, Penguin Press, London, p. 8} The queen therefore

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
thought it best ‘that those kinde of people should be sente forth of the land.’ This removal however did not gain much support, because the Africans had become too well established in different social levels. Some of them were living independently, while others were considered property of English masters and therefore gained protection from their master’s wealth and rank.

In the early seventeenth century black slavery had become common in England. Blacks were predominantly used as servants and were reduced to mere commodities. They had become ‘collectibles’ which proved that you were from a higher social class. By 1680 Blacks had become so common in London that a lady of fashion was almost obliged to ‘hath two necessary implements about her; a blackamore and her dog.’

Besides the immigration and the real life contact we should also pay specific attention to the imagery in English literature, which preceded the first contact with the Africans and also contributed to the degradation of the black population. In English literature the dichotomy between white and black was filled with meaning. These colors conveyed a severe emotional impact. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* before the sixteenth century black meant ‘deeply stained with dirt; soiled, dirty, foul… Having dark or deadly purposes, malignant, etc.’ Due to its opposite meaning ‘White and black connoted purity and filthiness, virginity and sin, virtue and baseness, beauty and ugliness, benefice and evil, God and the devil.’

Whiteness and purity became increasingly important after the accession of the Queen, because

---

25 Ibid. (p. 8)

26 Ibid. (p. 8)

27 Ibid. (p. 8)


30 Ibid. (p. 7)
they symbolized the Queen’s beauty. When combined with red, perfect human beauty was created, especially feminine beauty. People admired the Queens’ white skin and rouged cheeks and projected a certain image of beauty upon the Queen which she willingly supported.\textsuperscript{31} In literature this was also present for instance in \textit{Twelft Night}, where Shakespeare claims that the lily and the rose make a compelling combination: ‘Tis beauty truly blent, whose red and white Nature’s own sweet and cunning hand had laid upon.\textsuperscript{32} In early medieval miracle plays blackness was even associated with evil, since the souls of the damned were represented by black actors. The influence of this tradition can be noticed in mystery plays, such as in the play of the fall in the Towneley, York, Coventry and Chester cycles, where Lucifer and his fellow rebels are punished with a black skin because they had sinned:

‘Alas Alas and wele-wo!

Lucifer, whi fell thou so?

We, that were angels so fare,

And sat so hie aboue the ayere

Now ar we waxen blak as any coyll,

And vgly, tatyrd as a foyll.’ \textsuperscript{33}

Into this world, where fairness, virginity and whiteness reigned, the black African was introduced. Suddenly this world which culturally favoured white over black was confronted with a new black community. The contrast between the black and white symbolism and sudden implementation of blacks in British society made the impact of Africa on England so instantaneous and deep.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{31} JORDAN W. (1968), \textit{White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro}, Kingsport Press, Tennessee, p. 8


\textsuperscript{33} BARTHELEMY A. (1987), \textit{Black face maligned race: the representation of Blacks in English drama from Shakespeare to Southerne}, Louisiana, Louisiana State University Press, p. 4

Religion

During the first encounters, one of the main differences between the settlers and the African population was religion. The Englishmen were already acquainted with the concept of heathenism before they interacted with the African population; therefore they were not puzzled by the African’s ‘defective religious condition.’ Moreover the heathenism actually helped them to intensify their own Christianity, since Heathenism was perceived as the negation of Christian life and settlers wanted to stress the difference between them and the Africans. However, it was also their Christian duty to convert non-Christians. But in doing this, one of the major and most common distinctions between the English settlers and the African would be eradicated.

Eventually the English settlers resolved in doing nothing. Up to the eighteenth century, the English settlers had absolutely no interest in converting the supposed heathenish Africans. The impulse to expand Christianity amongst the African population seems to have have less prominent than for instance in the Catholic Portuguese. One cannot argue that English settlers were indifferent to the obligation of their Christian duty, because they had previously attempted to convert the native population in America, this action, however, lead to meager results. Once arrived in Africa the English settlers showed no similar intentions, until the end of the eighteenth century. Apparently the Englishmen made a distinction between the heathenism of the native Indians and that of the Africans. The cause of this evaluation is still uncertain.

During medieval times, as the Christian communities were continuously confronted with the threat of Islam, people disapproved of enslave fellow Christians. However, people who supported another religion could be subjected to slavery. ‘religious adherence and religious imagery usually had the last word in justifications of enslavement, which is why the pagans of

35 JORDAN W. (1968), White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, Kingsport Press, Tennessee, p. 21


37 Ibid. (p. 21)
Lithuania, the Bogomil heretics of Bosnia, captives from the Caucasus, captives of Andalusia, and the Jews had been all seen as potential slaves in Christian Europe of the later medieval period.\textsuperscript{38} Hence it was no surprise that slavers were in no hurry to convert the African population. At the same time the possibility of conversion was also presented as a justification for slavery. For example in 1680 Morgan Godwyn claimed that ‘in regard religion would be apt to create a conscience in their slaves, it might be convenient, in order to make them truer slaves.’\textsuperscript{39}

Eventually the English Parliament received claims which supported the belief that slaves were included in God’s plan and should be baptized. Although in favor of baptism and conversion, these ‘reformers’ still wanted to maintain the master-slave relationships and therefore renounced the traditional view that Christians could not be enslaved, thus they abolished the slaves’ hope of achieving freedom through baptism.\textsuperscript{40} It is important to note ‘that the English did nothing to hinder the practice of slavery, and instead developed both blunt and ingenious ways to render conversion, monogenesis and even cross-race sexual contact compatible with the slave trade.’\textsuperscript{41} In order to reconcile conversion and slavery, colonial laws were created which reversed earlier assumptions. In English law for instance parentage was perceived as primary, but in 1662 in Virginia, a law was produced which claimed that children who were the product of copulation between a black woman and a white man, should receive the slave condition of the mother. By this measure English rulers were able to maintain a large slave population and avoided mixed children laying claims on white property.\textsuperscript{42}

In England and elsewhere there was a long established tradition in which religion and skin color was intertwined. Jew and Saracens for instance were described as being literally and metaphorically black. During the early modern period the tendency to describe religious

\textsuperscript{39} GODWYN M. (1680), \textit{The negro’s and Indians advocate, suing for their admission into the church, or, a persuasive to the instructing and baptizing of the negro’s and Indians in our plantations}, in LOOMBA A. & BURTON J. (2007), \textit{Race in early modern England: a documentary companion}, New York, Palgrave Macmillian, p. 11

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid. (p. 12)

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid. (p. 11)
difference in bodily terms gained increasingly more support. In Richard Daborne’s *A Christian turn’d Turk* for instance one character asks: ‘Doth religion move anything in the shapes of men? Another character replies: ‘Altogether! What’s the reason else that the Turk and the Jew is troubled (for the most part) with gouty legs and fiery nose? To express their heartburning. Whereas the Puritan is a man of upright calf and clean nostril.’ A comparable attitude is expressed in Sebastian Münster’s *The Messias of the Christians and the Jewes*, which was reprinted in London during the seventeenth century and helped in maintaining the belief that ‘Jews have a peculiar color of face, different from the form and figure of other men […] black and uncomely, and not white as other men.’ Therefore it is essential to point out that religion, which is always perceived as an exclusively cultural system, during the medieval times was intertwined with biological notions such as skin color. For example the title of Thomas Calvert’s *The blessed Jew of Marocco: or, a Blackamoor turned white* explicitly links religion and skin color through the act of conversion. According to many theorists the question of religious conversion formed an interesting domain in which ideologically marked connections between inner essence and bodily traits were formed. Although some people believed that an individual’s race could change depending on the climate they were located in, others held that the African could neither change his skin color nor his religion. Thus Just as the African could not change the color of his/her skin, he could not change his/her religion. Thomas Palmer’s *Two hundred Poosées* (1565) portrayed the story of two white men who were trying to wash a black man white. Unable to fulfill their task they blamed the ‘heart of heretics,’ which is stubborn and black. It was also during this period that Ham’s descendants, who were first assigned to Asia, now were located in Africa by Best and Jobson in order to justify the enslavement of Africans. In these works black skin is evoked to mark the inability of conversion, which in its turn fixes black skin as something indelible.

---

43 Ibid. (p. 13)  
47 Ibid. (p. 13)  
48 Ibid. (p. 13)
Besides the connection between religion and skin color, religion was also intertwined with sexuality. In European texts that date from the medieval to the early modern period, the Islam was usually portrayed as a religion that tolerated sensuality and sexuality. Even before the seventeenth century there was a long-standing tradition of anti-islamic thought which evaluated the religion of Mohamed as a belief founded on fraud and lust.\textsuperscript{49} Christian writers criticized Islam for promising sensual pleasure in the afterlife and in addition condemned the sexual freedom Muslims were granted in their daily life. The Islamic conventions and regulations which conducted concubinage, marriage and divorce were misunderstood by early travelers and misrepresented in their works. According to Lea Africanus Muslim law ‘looseth the bridle to the flesh, which is a thing acceptable to the greatest part of men.’\textsuperscript{50} These travelers assumed that the hesitation Muslims carried to convert to Christianity was a direct consequence of the greater sexual freedom allowed under Islamic law. This conventional association provoked that the phrase ‘to turn Turk’ also implied a sexual meaning.\textsuperscript{51}

The Old Testament explicitly mentions that all men originate from the same act of creation and therefore are one. This idea is supported by the New Testament, where it is mentioned that all nations are of one blood. So according to Christianity Englishmen and Africans shared a common background and of course had many characteristics in common. Thus Christianity was responsible for the creation of a paradox: on the one hand Christianity caused the distinction between heathens and Christians and on the other hand it stressed the similarities between Africans and Englishman by stating that mankind is one.\textsuperscript{52} However, many settlers, from an ethnocentric point of view, disapproved of the African religious practices and condemned them to a different social category. The English were accustomed to heathenism, but they were completely unacquainted with people who did not have any type of religion at


\textsuperscript{50} AFRICANS L. (1527), \textit{History and description of Africa}, translated by PORY J. (1600), Hakluyt Society, London, p. 381


\textsuperscript{52} JORDAN W. (1968), \textit{White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro}, Kingsport Press, Tennessee, p. 22
all. By sticking to their Christian roots the English were able to mark a clear distinction between them and the African population. But religion can not be perceived as the sole major dissimilarity between them, it was part of a whole network of differences that were valued from an ethnocentric perspective. ‘Heathenism was treated not so much as a specifically religious defect but as one manifestation of a general refusal to measure up to proper standards, as a failure to be English, to be civilised’ Being a Christian was not just a choice, it was perceived as something inherent in mankind itself and in its society. Christianity was interconnected to all the other characteristics a man or woman possessed, as one of the earliest English travelers accounted when he described the Africans as ‘a people of beastly living, without a God, lawe, religion, or common wealth.’ English travelers did not isolate heathenism, it was considered as one of the elements that marked the African ‘condition.’ Often this heathenism was linked to barbarity and blackness.

Savagery

Savagery, or not being civilized, was a crucial notion, which set Englishmen apart from Africans. The African culture had different traditions concerning clothing, farming, warfare, government, morals, etc. Early travelers had an enormous interest in the details of ‘savage’ life. The readers of their travels were informed about what the African population looked like, what they ate, etc. But their attention was especially aroused when mostly fictional stories of


54 Ibid. (p. 24)

55 TOWERSON W. (1556), Second voyage to guinea, volume 7, p. 167, in HAKLUYT R. (1904), The principal navigations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation, Glasgow, 12 vols,

mutilation, polygamy, infanticide and ritual murder were introduced to them. The Englishmen ‘analyzed’ the African lifestyle from a clear ethnocentric point of view. Every aspect of African life was compared to the English equivalent, which was perceived as normative. Due to this comparison differences were emphasized and often condemned, while similarities and any conformity to the British standard were applauded. African clothing and personal etiquette for instance were perceived as absurd, while social structures of African societies, which included kings, counselors, gentlemen, were perceived as analogous to their own.

Some Englishmen were so revolted by the African’s ‘deviant’ behavior that they turned to a powerful metaphor. By focusing on the details of African life and claiming their own lifestyle to be normative, the Englishmen systematically placed the Africans among the beasts. Although they clearly knew that Africans were human, they nevertheless described them as ‘bestial’, ‘brutish’ or ‘beastly.’ The atmosphere in which they encountered the Africans seemed to strengthen this observation; since slave traders in Africa treated Africans the same way as the English population treated animals. The Guinea Company for instance instructed Bartholomew Haward ‘to buy and put aboard you so many negers as yo’r ship can carry for what shalbe wanting to supply with Cattel, as also to furnish you with victuals and provisions for the said negers and Cattel’

Moreover Africa was filled with all animals people had never before imagined and if Africans could be likened to beasts then probably some kind of animal could be likened to Africans. Unfortunately the parts of Africa where the slave trade was concentrated, was the natural environment of that animal which resembles mankind the most, namely the ‘orang-outan.’ Although acquainted with apes, it was the first time that the Englishmen encountered apes

57 Ibid. (p. 25)

58 Ibid. (p. 25)

59 Ibid. (p. 28)

without a tail that could walk like men. This coincidence lead to some peculiar speculations, which were rooted in western culture since ancient times. Medieval bestiaries were already filled with images of strange creatures that seemed to resemble men.

All these medieval reports and traditions still carried some legitimacy during the seventeenth century and heavily influenced travelers from that period as for instance Edward Topsell, who was highly influenced by the work of Konrad von Gesner, one of the first major naturalists who linked apes to an increased appetite for sexual contact. This idea has shaped Topsell’s perception of apes, since he claims apes to be ‘so venerous that they will ravish their women. A baboon which had been brought to the French king […] above all loved the company of women, and young maidens; his genital member was greater than might match the quantity of his other parts. […] men that have low and flat nostrils, are libidinous as Apes that attempt women, and having thicke lippes the upper hanging over the neather, they are deemed fooles, like the lips of Asses and Apes.’ Due to this and other explicit comparisons people started to associate the beastlike men with the manlike beasts of Africa. Some travelers even suggested that Africans directly originated from the apes, while others declared Africans to be the offspring of copulation between Africans and some unknown beast. The sixteenth century theorist Jean Bodin for instance remarked ‘that promiscuous coition of men and animals took place, wherefore the regions of Africa produce for us so many monsters’ The notion that Africans stemmed directly from beasts, did not receive much approval, but still there was a common belief that sometimes there occurred a beastly copulation between Africans and apes. Although these presumptions lacked factual evidence, they remained active for a long period. By inventing a link between apes and Africans Englishmen were able to venture their beliefs that Africans were wild, lascivious and primitive.

62 JORDAN W. (1968), White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, Kingsport Press, Tennessee, p. 29
63 TOPSELL E. (1607), The historie of foure-footed beastes and serpents and insects collected out of the writings of Conradus Gesner and other authors. London, 2-20
64 GROSART A. (1883-1885), The complete works of Thomas Nashe, London, g vols, vol I, p. 160
65 JORDAN W. (1968), White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, Kingsport Press, Tennessee, p. 32
It was not surprising that this connection between Africans and apes was so often regarded as sexual. To compare Africans to apes was to stress the animal within them and in Elizabethan society the terms ‘beastly’ and ‘bestial’ carried clear sexual connotations. But even before the first encounters between Englishmen and Africans in the West Africa, there was a widespread belief that black people were lustful and lecherous. In the beginning of the sixteenth century Leo Africanus provided the most influential description of life in lands such as ‘Barbary’, ‘Libia’ and ‘Land of Negroes.’ According to Leo’s account of ‘Land of Negroes’ ‘there is no nation under heaven more prone to Venery.’ When talking about the inhabitants of Libya ‘they live a brutish kind of life destitute of any religion, any lawes or any good form of living […] the Negroes likewise leade a beastly kind of life, being utterly destitute of the use of reason, of dexteritie of wit, and of all arts. Yea they so behave themselves as if they had continually lived in a forrest among wild beasts. They have great swarms of harlots among them; whereupon a man may easily conjecture their manner of living.’ Next to this work, people also believed Africans to possess an unusually large penis, a myth that aroused much sexual excitement, but also great resentment.

Eventually this myth was supported by seventeenth century travel writing. Richard Jobson in his *Golden Trade* recounted that Africans were ‘furnisht with such members as are after a sort burthensome unto them; it was the custom in that tribe not to have intercourse during pregnancy so as not to destroy what is conceived’ Generally the great size of the African’s penis was explained by means of the curse of Ham. ‘Undoubtedly, these people originally sprung from the race of Canaan, the sonne of Ham, who discovered his fathers Noahs secrets, for which Noah awakening cursed Canaan as our holy scripture testifieth […] the curse as by scholemen hath been disputed, extended to his ensuing race, in laying hold upon the same place, where the originall cause began, wereof these people are witness.’ Another aspect that supported this black sexuality was the Africans nakedness. The English travelers were able to publicly observe parts of the human body that they normally did not see even in the privacy of

---


69 Ibid. (p. 65-67)
their own home. Many commented on this aspect of African life and saw it as another proof of their deviant sexual nature. For example in 1555 Towerson argued that ‘the men and women go so alike, that one cannot know a man from a woman but by their breasts, which in the most part be very foule and long, hanging downe low like the udder of a goate.’

The early literary works and traditions established an abstract notion of black people as a deviation from the norm. White was perceived as normative, while black was the color of sin and dirt. In their descriptions white travelers described the African population from an ethnocentric point of view and strengthened society’s conception of blacks as inferior human beings. Travelers perceived blacks as uncivilized, lecherous and sometimes even cursed. The degradation of the Africans in Great Britain was also clearly marked by the introduction of slavery.

1.2 The African during slavery

The beginning

In 1562 John Hawkins, the son of the previously mentioned William Hawkins, was the first to embark on a British slave voyage between West Africa and the West Indies. He had already traveled to the Canary Islands and during his stay was informed about the ‘Negros were very good merchandise in Hispaniola, and that store of Negros might easily bee had upon the coast of Guinea.’ He traveled to Siera Leone in 1562, ‘where he stayed some good time and got into possession partly by the sworde and partly by other means to a number of 300 Negros.’ Eventually he sold his ‘cargo’ at the coast of Hispaniola and gathered an enormous profit. This voyage functioned as a prototype for many of the future slave voyages to Africa.

Even before Hawkins, slaves were already being introduced in Europe by the Spanish in 1444. The Portuguese had opened up the way to West Africa and established permanent

---

70 TOWERSON W. (1555), First voyage to guinea, volume 6, p. 187, in HAKLUYT R. (1904), The principal navigations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation, Glasgow, 12 vols

71 HAWKINS J. (1562-1563), First voyage of John Hawkins, in HAKLUYT R. (1904), The principal navigations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation, vol x, 7-8

72 Ibid. (vol x, 7-8)

settlements and a trade system. The Spanish initially enslaved the native peoples of America and the Caribbean Islands, but it soon became apparent that the natives were inadequate to perform their tasks. A large group of people, stronger than the natives was needed; therefore the Spaniards diverted their attention to West Africa. Initially Spain favored importing black slaves who were Christians, but soon the market demand outgrew the supply that consequently increasingly more ‘bozal’ slaves were shipped.\textsuperscript{74} By the mid sixteenth century approximately 10,000 black slaves were annually imported by the Spanish Indies; however some theorists believe this figure to be in the hundreds, rather than in the thousands. When John Hawkins sold his slaves in 1562-1563, he was participating in a lucrative trade system that had been established a long time ago, but was unknown to the British governments. The idea that Africans could be reduced to a mere commodity and could be traded, was completely alien to the English population, not out of humanitarian reasons, but because there was yet no economic need to value the Africans as such.\textsuperscript{75} As a consequence the sixteenth century slave missions were unorganized, sudden enterprises that often lacked governmental funding, unless in those situations where profit was guaranteed.

The Atlantic empire was monopolized by Spain and Portugal and therefore the Atlantic trade was in their hands.\textsuperscript{76} The English government was confronted with the increasing wealth of the Iberians. Although they started participating in the slave trade, they did not gain as much wealth as Portugal and Spain, out of absence of New World colonies. By the turn of the century black labor reached incredible demands by Iberian colonists. Diplomatic struggles in West Indies and West Africa were caused by the need to claim the fruitful land and black laborers. The early Iberian settlers began losing ground to the new arrivals. Spain’s empire was crumbling and consequently it lost control of the West Indies. The English, French, Danes and Dutch could easily infiltrate the Spanish shattered defenses and claimed the newly available islands. Especially the English began to spread from one West Indian island to

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid. (p. 32)

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid. (p. 33)

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid. (p. 34)

After the Restoration in 1660 political attention was again directed the fruitful lands of Africa. The Royal African Company was erected, supported by royal investments, this company became one of the most powerful slave trading enterprises in the world. The King publicly supported the slave trade when he issued the royal charter in 1663, which gave the Company ‘the whole, entire and only trade for the buying and selling bartering and exchanging of for or with any negroes, slaves, goods, wares, merchandises whatsoever.’\footnote{PARRY J. and SHERLOCK P. (1968), \textit{A short history of the West Indies}, London, Macmillian in DONNAN E. (1930), \textit{Documents illustrative of the Slave Trade, vol. I}, I} This system would completely alter the English economy, traumatize the Africans and fill the West Indies with an alien people.

**Bondage in English society and the legal position of slaves**

It is difficult arguing about notions such as bondage and freedom in English society because theories about personal freedom ran both ahead of and behind actual social reality. Both common and statute law tended to be more than a century out of phase when concerning notions such as servitude and actual practice. Moreover, ideas and practices kept changing promptly and there were yet no initiatives to abridge the gap between legislation and practice.\footnote{JORDAN W. (1968), \textit{White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro}, Kingsport Press, Tennessee, p. 49} Nevertheless we are able to determine important trains of thought amidst these uncertain times.

Out of lack of the proper methods, Englishmen were unable to discover what happened to their social institutions. They were however not wrong when assuming that villinage or ‘bondage’ had disappeared in English society. As William Harrison, the archpriest of England, proclaimed: ‘As for slaves and bondmen we have none, naie such is the privilege of our countrie by the especiall grace of God, and bountie of our princes, that if anie come hither from other realms, so soone as they set foot on land they become so free of condition as their
masters, whereby all note of servile bondage is utterly removed from them.' Still in the mid of the sixteenth century some observers noted that several English men and women were bond. These however were few in number and their everyday life was not influenced by their social status. During the middle ages the villein was dependent on the will of a feudal lord, but did not lose all his social and legal rights. In the thirteenth and fourteenth century the feudal system had decayed and we might argue that in the second half of the sixteenth century it had disappeared completely and every Englishmen had acquired the status of personal freedom. Theorists appointed Christianity and common law as the most important catalysts for this change. The legislation however, as previously mentioned, often was not in line with the actual practices and outdated. Lord Coke’s first book *Istitutes of the Laws of England* was based on outdated sources as for instance the work of the thirteenth century jurist Bracton, who wrote during a time that the English law had not yet diverged from the Roman law and had described villenage during a period that it still existed. Four hundred years later theorists were still quoting Bracton about concepts such as bondage, without even considering whether it was in line with reality or not. Even Cowell’s widely available legal dictionary *Interpreter* contained the word ‘villein’ and relied upon Bracton’s research to define it. Thus, although extinct, the concept of villenage lay fossilized in British legislation. One cannot claim this concept to be the sole cause of slavery. But after the establishment of black slavery, English lawyers were able to perceive slavery as a new version of bondage.

**The Concept of slavery**

In the beginning of the seventeenth century the term slave was surrounded by vagueness. When Hamlet declaims ‘O what a rogue and peasant slave am I’, the term seems to obtain certain flexibility. When Peter Heylyn defines it as ‘that ignominious word slave; whereby we

---


82 Ibid. (p. 50)

use to call ignoble fellowes and the more base sort of people,’ the term seems to have lost its reference to a specific social status. Based on these quotations slavery can be perceived as a not very high form of servitude. During this period both the terms slave and servant were widely used. The term servant however was more generally used and although a slave could become a servant, a servant could never become a slave. Thus there was a clear distinction between the two social terms.

As we can argue out of the accounts of Henry Swinburne, the slave lost his complete freedom: ‘Of all men which be destitute of libertie or freedome, the slave is in greatest subjection, for a slave is that person which is in servitude or bondage to an other, even against nature even his children, moreover [...] are infected with the Leprosie of his father’s bondage.’ In his writings Swinburne defined the condition of a servant/villeine as completely different from the slave. A villeine was ‘one that is ascrited or assigned to a ground or farme, for the perpetual tillng or manuring thereof. Howsoever he may seem like a slave but his bondage is not so great.’ While a servant had to serve for a particular period, the slave maintained his low social status for the rest of his life. Slavery was perceived as a perpetual notion, which was also hereditary.

Most Englishmen connected the loss of complete freedom with the loss of total humanity. By losing his or her freedom the slave became a beast, an unworthy human. In early accounts written during the rise of slavery the slaves were often compared to beasts. This analogy proved how strongly freedom was valued and shaped the manner in which Englishmen contemplated about slavery. Certain assumptions about the origin of slavery paralleled this analogy. Lawyers and theorists began to consider whether slavery was possible before the fall of man, because it violated natural law, which guaranteed a man’s freedom. Their conclusions lead to the prevalent belief that slavery was related to sin.


85 JORDAN W. (1968), White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, Kingsport Press, Tennessee, p. 52

86 SWINBURNE H. (1590), A Brieue treatise of Testaments and Last Willes, London, p. 43

87 SWINBURNE H. (1590), A Brieue treatise of Testaments and Last Willes, London, p. 43

88 JORDAN W. (1968), White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, Kingsport Press, Tennessee, p. 54
All this was again encapsulated in the Curse of Ham. When the reverent Jeremy Taylor defines the origin of slavery he claims ‘that brought servitude of slavery into the world: God had consigned a sad example that for ever children should be afraid to dishonour their parents, and discover their nakedness, or reveal their turpitude, their follies and dishonours’ 89 Even the jurist Sir Edward Coke perceived the curse to be a legitimate explanation.

‘This is assured, that bondage or servitude was first inflicted for dishonouring of parents; for Cham the father of Canaan […] seeing the nakedness of his father Noah, and shewing it in derision to his Brethren, was therefore punished in his son Canaan with Bondage.’ 90

In his work Coke also granted his audience with another, less theological explanation. According to the jurist in the beginning of times

‘all Things were common to all,’ but after the rise of private property, there ‘arose battles.’ It was common that ‘he that was taken in battle should remain Bond to his taker for ever, and he to do with him, all that should come to him, his Will and Pleasure, as with his Beast, or any other Cattle, to give or to sell or to kill.’ 91

Once captured, the prisoner lost his complete freedom and his humanity. He was no longer in control of his own life and was forever indebted to his capturer. Thus captivity was one of the major distinctions between slaves and servants.

This aspect of slavery generated important ramifications. In warfare the enemy was perceived as another type of people, therefore captives were seen as ‘strangers.’ Until the emergence of nationalism in Europe, religion determined whether one was a stranger or not. Therefore international conflicts were often reduced to an endless struggle between Christians and Turks. 92 Slavery thus depended upon the continuous hostility between Christians on the one hand and pagans on the other. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the English at home

---

89 TAYLOR J. (1850-1854), The whole works of the right reverend Jeremy Taylor, London, 10 vols, X, 452
90 ARBER E. (1910), Travels and works of Captain Edward Stokes, Edinburgh, 2 vols, II, 853
92 Ibid. (p. 56)
were informed about the conditions of Englishmen and other Christians living in captivity. Which provoked that people began to distinguish between Christian and non-Christian servants. The reverend William Gauge declared ‘such servants as being strangers were bondslaves, over whom masters had a more absolute power than others.’ According to another reverend, Henry Smith, ‘he which counteth his servant a slave, is in error: for there is difference betwenee believing servants and infidel servants.’ It was clear that sharing a religion altered the master-servant relationship. Although there was not yet a clear definition of who and what a slave was, Englishmen did share a concept on which Africans qualified in every possible way, ‘as slavery was inseparable from the evil in men; it was god’s punishment upon Ham’s prurient disobedience. Enslavement was captivity, the loser’s lot in a contest of power. Slaves were infidels or heathens.’

Blacks came to be perceived as the ‘lost people,’ as creatures who lived beyond the boarders of civilization and had no hope for salvation at all. Every aspect of their being was influenced by their blackness, their ‘otherness.’ Since the origin of their skin color was connected to sin, because their forefather Ham was cursed by his father Noah, blackness was perceived as an outward manifestation of their sinfulness. Therefore Blacks were unable to separate the biological reality of their skin color from its alleged spiritual meaning. Thus blackness was condemned to a symbolical role, which highly influenced the meaning of the word ‘Moor.’

1.3 The Moor
Moor is difficult to define. Like Turk, Saracen, Oriental and Indian it was used during the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth century and carried different meanings for different people. Some of these varieties could be specific or general, but one connotation all these

---

94 SMITH H. (1607), *The Sermons of Master Henry Smith, Gathered Into One Volume: Printed According to His Corrected Copies in His Life Time, Whereunto is Added Gods Arrow Against Atheists*, Felix Kyngston, Talbot, p. 40
96 BARTHELEMY A. (1987), *Black face maligned race: the representation of Blacks in English drama from Shakespeare to Southerne*, Louisiana, Louisiana State University Press, p. 6
words had in common was foreigner. This is illustrated when we look upon the first definition of the word Moor in the Oxford English Dictionary:

‘in ancient history, a native of Mauritania, a region of Northern Africa, corresponding to parts of Morocco and Algeria. In later times one belonging to the people of mixed Berber and Arab race, Mohammedan in religion, who constitute the bulk of the population of North-Western Africa, and who in the 8th century conquered Spain. In the Middle Ages, and as late as the seventeenth century, the Moors were commonly supposed to be mostly black or very swarthy (though the existence of white Moors was recognized), and hence the word was often used for Negro; cf: BLACKAMOOR.’

According to the OED the word Moor was first used with the meaning Negro in 1390 by Gower in his Conffessio Amantis. The second meaning concerned religion and implied another ethnic group, namely a Mohammedan, especially an inhabitant of India. Evidence of this use can be found in the Travels of John Mandeville. When considering these two layers of meanings, Moor can mean several things, namely Black Christian, Black Muslim or non-Black Muslim. The only certainty one had after reading the word Moor, was that it did not involve a European Christian.

Most theorists believe Moor to be derived from the Greek maupos, a noun used to identify the inhabitants of Mauretania, now Morocco and Algeria. It was also used as a synonym for black during late antiquity and the middle ages. The Greek maupos was quickly transformed to maorus in Latin, again a proper noun which determined a specific ethnic group and like its predecessor also meant black. However, the principal meaning of Moor was still inhabitant of Mauritania. The appearance of these two meanings lead to confusion about the color of the population in the North African region: ‘The ethnic term Maurus has been semantically influenced by the Greek words ‘maupos’ and ‘amaupos’ meaning ‘dark,’ and the latin adjective morus which designates the blackberry. In medieval France as in Rome maorus is synonym with niger. The gallo-roman term maorus like the French moreau is used as a

---

97 BARTHELEMY A. (1987), Black face maligned race: the representation of Blacks in English drama from Shakespeare to Southerne, Louisiana, Louisiana State University Press, p. 7

98 Ibid. (p. 7)

99 Ibid. (p. 7)

100 Ibid. (p. 7)
nickname and alludes more to the black color of the hair than a dark complexion since the inhabitants of the African shores of the Mediterranean have roughly the same complexion as the Italians from Camparia and Latium. It was therefore not possible to mistake a negro and a Mauretanian. That confusion, however, becomes general in the early centuries of the Middle Ages. In France, the adjective more is then used in many cases synonymously with the word noir. In the fourteenth century this confusion reached England due to John Mandeville, who, in his *Travels*, described the Moors as black people and claimed Mauretania to be a part of Ethiope.

While Mandeville was being read in Britain, Spain was struggling to fight back the invaders from the Iberian Peninsula. From the 8th till the fifteenth century onwards Spain was dominated by the Islamic Mauritians. The Spanish relied on the Greek maupos when they called the Muslim invaders ‘moros,’ which was used to refer to all Muslims and meant unbaptized, pagan. Not long after this meaning was established, maorus began functioning as a synonym for Negro.

In the middle ages the European attitudes towards the Islam were characterized by ethnocentricity and fear. Europeans were ignorant for the Islam’s origins and rituals and perceived their own Christian faith as superior. They showed great fear for the Islamic military, by the end of the twelfth century Europe had already engaged in three unsuccessful crusades against the Muslims of the Middle East. Lead by this prevalent attitude the European Christians portrayed their non-Christian counterparts (Moors, Saracens and later Turks) in a stereotypical fashion, comparing them with the devil, whose most important characteristic was his blackness. In the fourteenth century poem Rouland and Vernagu for instance a Saracen is described as being black: ‘He loked lotheliche, & was swart as pich, of him men might adrede.’ There were also numerous romances in which a black Saracen was washed white by means of baptism. As previously mentioned, blackness was believed to be a sign of sin. Therefore the black Saracens were sinners, who by means of baptism could be ‘cleansed.’

---


102 Ibid. (p. 10)

103 Ibid. (p. 11)

As previously explained, when the word Moor started circulating as a term to depict Muslims, those Muslims were already being misrepresented as being black. Perhaps the blackness of the Muslims was only metaphorically used to symbolize ‘their inner spiritual darkness.’ But if one considers the classical antecedents of the word, it appears that Moor provided a more economical way of rendering the blackness these Islamic enemies. Eventually it occurred that Moors were thought of as black during the early Renaissance. Suddenly there was a consolidation of both sign and sinner. Moor became the word to describe all black people. In the minds of the Europeans there seemed little difference between Muslim, non-Muslim, the only relevant distinctions were amidst Christian, non-Christian and white and black. When in 1527 John Pory translated Leo Africans’ *The History and description of Africa*, he introduced the word Moor to the English audience, when he described the African population: ‘Moreover this part of the worlde is inhabited especially by five pricipall nations, to wit, by the people called by the people called Cafrior Cafates, that is to say outlaws, or lawlesse, by the Abassins, the Egyptians, the Arabians, and the Africans or Moores, and Negros or blacke Moores.’ As a result ‘he endowed these peoples with the common heritage contained in the word Moor. They no longer simply shared a land mass; they shared the traditional prejudices and characterizations belonging to Moor.’ Besides Moor, Africans were also called Negros.

### 1.4 The Negro

According to the *Oxford Dictionary* the term Negro was first recorded in English language in the mid of the sixteenth century. It was adopted from Spanish and Portuguese and remained in currency throughout the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. The Spanish and Portuguese initially used the term Negro as an adjective for black. The first use however of the term as a noun to denote blacks brings us back to after 1441, when the Portuguese reached the area south of the river Senegal. Here they encountered Africans, who were darker than the Africans they had encountered in the North. The travelers immediately created a distinction, after having named the population north of the river moors, they resolved in defining the southern Africans as Negros or Azenegues.
It is important to understand that the Portuguese were confronted with the ‘Negroes’ during a period that slavery was already well established in the Iberian Peninsula. During the religious wars against the Moors, it was common to enslave all your captives. Hence in the beginning of the fifteenth century the Portuguese had already captured thousands of Moors, whom they transported to Portugal as slaves. This action appeared to be very lucrative and once confronted with the ‘Negros’, they started enslaving them.\(^{109}\) ‘It was in this infamous, iniquitous and inhuman slave traffic that the term ‘Negro’ was foisted as a noun, as a designation, as a name, upon those who were unfortunate enough to be caught in the clutches of the slave traders.’\(^{110}\) In 1453 Azurara completed his *Chronicle of the discovery and conquest of Guinea*, in which he described the African enslavement by using the term ‘Negroes’: ‘But when the Negros saw that those in the ship were men, they made haste to flee… but because our men had a better opportunities than before, they captured four of them, and these were the first to be taken by Christians to their own land.’\(^{111}\) From this discourse onwards the term ‘Negro’ developed into a synonym for slaves. It received a clear negative connotation, which included degrading notions such as low class, ugliness, bestiality and inferiority. This connotation was induced by the needs of the slave system. In order to justify why the Africans were enslaved, the Portuguese had to portray them as the ‘other’, the inferior. Eventually the term Negro would find its way into the English language, in the form of the translated nigger, and maintain its negative meaning. Therefore in this paper I have consciously chosen to use the words Africans or blacks, when speaking about the African population.

1.5 The concept of race in the early seventeenth century

Trying to understand the concept of race is very difficult. Its meaning can easily elude our understanding just when we presume we grasp it. Some argue that race depicts biological differences based in physiognomy and skin color. The Nazis’ anti-Semitism however was based on religious difference rather than a darker complexion. ‘Race is thus not a transparent concept but a bundle of contradictions. It is at one and the same time visible and invisible, a


\(^{110}\) MOORE R. (1992), *The name “Negro”: its origin and evil use*, Baltimore, Black classic Press, p. 37

component of biological identity and a trope of cultural or religious difference. It is in other words, a cluster of problems.\textsuperscript{112}

In this paper we shall limit ourselves to the use of the word ‘race’ in Shakespeares’ work, in order to construct a clear idea of its meaning. The word ‘race’ can be found sixteen times in Shakespeare’s work. Each time its use differs from the common associations with religion or skin color. ‘Race’ originates from the Latin ‘radix,’ meaning ‘root’ and Shakespeare uses it to denote a notion of descent that confers social ranking.\textsuperscript{113} In each instance where he uses ‘race,’ the term designates what is called the genealogical idiom of early seventeenth century cognition.\textsuperscript{114} Its European cognates, such as the Italian ‘raza,’ denominate any number of plants, animals or humans that have similar traits due to a common lineage. Florio’s Italian-English dictionary for instance labeled ‘razza’ as ‘a kind a race, a brood, a blood, a stock, a name, a pedigree.’\textsuperscript{115} Race and its cognates especially appeared in the discourse of horse pedigree. Topsell in his \textit{Historie of Four-Footed beasts and Snakes} describes ‘mares appointed for race,’\textsuperscript{116} hence applied for procreation. Shakespeare often uses the term with this particular meaning: in \textit{Macbeth} Duncan’s horses are ‘the minions of their race.’\textsuperscript{117} As this example proves, Shakespeare did not employ the term in order to imply skin color, the one possible exception can be found in \textit{The Tempest}, where Mirande refers to Caliban’s ‘vile race.’\textsuperscript{118} It is however argued that this sequence refers less to Caliban’s skin color than to his breeding.


\textsuperscript{113} Ibid. (p. 202)


\textsuperscript{115} FLORIO J. (1598), \textit{A worlde of words, or most copious and exacte dictionarie in Italian and English}, printed by HATFIELD, London

\textsuperscript{116} TOPSELL E. (1607), \textit{The historie of foure-footed beastes and serpents and insects collected out of the writings of Conradus Gesner and other authors}, published by SHAWBRIDGE G., London, p. 234


According to Miranda, Caliban’s vile race manifests itself in his aspiration to produce children by raping her, a desire that is clearly situated within the domain of mixture and adulteration. In the seventeenth century adultery and disproportionate desire were connected to the concept of race. ‘Adultery was conceived to be quite literally a kind of adulteration- the pollution or corruption of the divinely ordained bond of marriage, and thus in the profoundest sense a violation of the natural order of things. Its unnaturalness was traditionally expressed in the monstrous qualities attributed to its illicit offspring, the anomalous creatures stigmatized as bastards. […]- monstrous because he represents the offspring of an unnatural union, one that violates what are proposed as among the most essential of all boundaries.’

When Anthony accuses Cleopatra of blocking him from ‘getting of a lawful race’ with his Roman wife, he denotes that illegitimate union engenders adulterated offspring: the family he has formed with his Roman wife is lawful, while the children he has conceived with his Egyptian mistress are bastards. Here race indicates the possibility of mixture. This presumption is in line with early pre modern meanings of race. Sebastian de Covarrubias’ Spanish dictionary for instance explains ‘race’ as ‘the breed of thoroughbred horses, which are branded with an iron so that they can be known.’ But this vision is complicated with an additional meaning assigned to ‘race,’ namely ‘Race in lineages is understood pejoratively, as having some Moorish or Jewish Race.’ Thus race is defined as an adulteration of blood.

After exploring the English seventeenth century perception of blackness and analyzing important concepts such as ‘Moor,’ ‘Negro’ and ‘race,’ I know shall begin my interpretation of Othello and Oroonoko. This context is necessary in order to establish an understanding of the seventeenth century’s racial concepts and therefore is vital if one wants to determine whether the texts support the previously mentioned racial perception or not.

Chapter two: the textual analyses of Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* and Shakespeare’s *Othello*

2.1 Shakespeare’s *Othello*

Written in the beginning of the seventeenth century and set in both Venice and Cyprus, Shakespeare’s *Othello* draws on early modern conceptions of Ottoman aggression and connects them to a larger framework of moral, sexual, religious and racial uncertainty. In choosing a Moor as his main character, Shakespeare delivers a context to abstract seventeenth century notions such as sexuality and race. He confronts the public with the current racial prejudices by portraying a Moor, who in contrast with his earlier representation of the Moor Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, is not stereotypically evil.\(^{123}\) Nevertheless, as the play develops, society’s derogative remarks appear to be given credibility, as even Othello himself associates his skin color with deep-rooted distinctions that separate himself from white mankind and seem to justify his exclusion from society.\(^{124}\)

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, while the Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and English ships sailed out to discover the new world, large parts of Europe were being colonized by the Ottoman Turks. The European population began to feel threatened and even the English were uneasy and afraid of the Turkish power.\(^{125}\) One might presume that the English population felt at a safe distance of any Islamic threat, but a surprisingly large amount of British authors refers to the Ottoman threat with a sense of immediacy.\(^{126}\) There even were series of common prayers for delivery from Turkish attack which were spread by the English ecclesiastical authorities. For instance, during the Turkish attack on Malta in 1565, it was accepted in England to ask God in your prayer to ‘repress the rage and violence of infidels who by all tyranny and cruelty labour utterly to root out not only true religion, but also the very name and memory of Christ our only saviour, and all Christianity; and if they should prevail against the isle of Malta, it is uncertain what further peril might follow to the rest of Christendom.’\(^{127}\) Despite this demand for divine intervention, the Ottoman armies advanced until a truce was established in 1568. However, not respecting the terms of the truce, the

\(^{123}\) BARTELS E. (1990), *Making more of the Moor: Aaron, Othello, and Renaissance refashionings of race*, in: *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 41, No. 4, p. 442


\(^{126}\) Ibid. (p. 146)

\(^{127}\) ANONYMOUS (1565), *A form to be used in common prayer*, reprinted in: KEANE W. (1847), *Liturigical Services of Queen Elizabeth: Liturgies and occasional forms of prayer set forth in the reign of Queen Elizabeth*, p. 519
Turks assaulted Hungary, which resulted in a further continuation of the war when *Othello* was written and performed in London.\textsuperscript{128} This context significantly highlighted the racial structures of the play.

During the period that the English were developing their trade in slaves, they were continuously confronted with British subjects, including men, women and children, who had been captured by the Turkish, who enslaved them. This situation led English authors to construct demonizing portrayals of ‘the Turk,’ not out of cultural oppression, but from the anxiety of being conquered and converted. Due to the numerous Anglo-Islamic contacts, the English fascination with the Muslim culture, especially the Islam’s power to convert Christians into Turks, greatly increased.\textsuperscript{129} This provoked a flood of texts that dealt with North African and Levantian societies, which in its turn strengthened the English population’s fear. *Othello* thrived on the English perception of the Turkish might. Much of its suspense and exoticism is drawn from the English engagement in the Mediterranean world and its encounters with the Turkish.\textsuperscript{130} By writing a play in which the union between a Black Moorish general and a white Venetian lady stands central, Shakespeare clearly anticipated on the previously explained tension. This relationship nevertheless is what makes *Othello* so controversial and grants it abundant emotional power. In other words, the impact of *Othello* largely depends on the hero’s black skin, the visual proof of his otherness.

Elizabehants were enthralled by the traveler’s accounts of distant life, especially tales about monstrousness, cannibalism, sexual orgies and heathen customs seemed to arouse their attention. All there notions were associated with blackness, a color, that in turn was linked to dirt, negation, sin and death. And as the accounts expanded, blackness was connected to new signs of otherness, namely savagery, nakedness and primitivism.\textsuperscript{131} Shakespeare was fully aware of these presumed aspects of blackness when he started writing *Othello*, since he had read John Pory’s translation of Leo Africanus’ *Travels*.\textsuperscript{132}
As part of the growing interest in racial concepts in *Othello*, critics have consistently argued about the potential associations of blackness in seventeenth century British culture. According to many early theorists Shakespeare constructed a black hero in line with the prejudice of the traveler’s accounts, while others claim it to be a story about the fall of an individual man, rather than a racial stereotype.\(^{133}\) For instance Eldrid Jones thought that ‘in the end Othello emerges, not as another manifestation of a type, but as a distinct individual who typified by his fall, not the weakness of Moors, but the weaknesses of human nature.’\(^{134}\) Two years later G.K. Hunter discussed a similar theme in his lecture about *Othello and Color prejudice*. He claimed that in the beginning the portrayal of Othello actually contradicts the racial seventeenth century stereotype, but as the play develops, Iago succeeds in ‘making the deeds of Othello at last fit in with the prejudice that his face at first excited.’\(^{135}\) In the following year Winthrop Jordan wrote that Shakespeare did not necessarily condemn miscegenation, but that he exploited the theme of black/white sexuality to confront his society with their beliefs, especially ‘the notion that Negroes were peculiarly sexual men.’\(^{136}\)

More modern critics such as Anthony Barthelemy his book *Black face maligned race* declared that the dramatist questioned society’s racial stereotypes, but ‘however successful Shakespeare’s manipulation of the stereotype may be, Othello remains identifiable as a version of that type.’\(^{137}\) For example near the ending Venetian hegemony remains, for ‘Shakespeare’s black moor never possesses the power or desire to subvert civic and natural order.’\(^{138}\) D’Amico was less harsh about Shakespeare in his analysis of the Moor in English Renaissance drama. In *Othello* he suggests, ‘Shakespeare explored the tragical consequences of a cultural frame of reference that made the alien Moor something other than human.

Working with the dual image of the noble, tawny Moor and the dark-complexioned devil,


\(^{134}\) JONES E. (1965), *Othello’s countrymen*, Oxford University Press, New York, p. 87


\(^{138}\) Ibid. (p. 160)
Shakespeare revealed how a man could be destroyed when he accepts a perspective that deprives him of his humanity […] Othello is debased by a role that he adopts.¹³⁹

All these critics agree on one specific point, namely that the stereotype is present, embedded in Shakespeare’s text. Their opinions differ in how this stereotype is employed and these different approaches to race in Othello prove how difficult it is to determine how a given cultural object might have functioned as a member of a commencing discourse of racism. We must avoid imposing our own postcolonial, post-slavery associations of blackness with degradation upon a culture in which the structures, that we hold responsible for the construction of racism, were only in process of becoming established.¹⁴⁰ The term racism itself originates from the 1930s, but the concept is of course much older. By utilizing recent definitions of racism, one is able to argue that Shakespeare’s England was not quite racist, since, according to Frederickson, racism prevails when differences that ‘might otherwise be considered ethnocultural are regarded as innate, indelible and unchangeable.’¹⁴¹ Subsequently this is combined with attempts at taking control of the marginalized group. ‘Racism, Frederickson argues, therefore, is more than theorizing about human differences or thinking badly of a group over which one has no control. It either directly sustains or proposes to establish a racial order, a permanent group hierarchy that is believed to reflect the laws of nature or the decrees of God.’¹⁴² Such a situation is not constructed in Othello; we are confronted with an account of a man, characterized by ethnocultural differences imposed upon him by Venetian society, but instead of being dominated, he appears to be accepted because he has embraced the religion and attitude of the dominant group. Hence I will not discuss whether Othello is racist or not, since in the beginning of the play Othello is depicted as an honorable general, and despite Iago’s accusations there is no established racial order. Rather I will argue that within the play we can find racial stereotypes and also mark an evolution in which Othello’s skin color becomes associated, even by himself, with ingrained distinctions that cause his submission or exclusion. Thus the play can be perceived as an amalgam where different stereotypes that would dominate future culture are blended.¹⁴³ It is

---

¹³⁹ D’AMICO (1991), The Moor in English Renaissance drama, University of South Carolina Press, South Carolina
¹⁴² Ibid. (p. 6)
difficult to motivate whether *Othello* is racist or not, but the play clearly contains racial stereotypes and in its development confirms society’s perception of Africans as primitive human beings.

**The racial stereotypes and miscegenation in Othello**

*Othello’s* hero undoubtedly comes from a different world, whose culture has influenced his inner self. As a successful general he is integrated in the Venetian society and is portrayed as one of its indispensible members, since he appears to be the only military leader who can defend the Venetians from the lascivious Turks. Although the Venetian society clearly needs his assistance in this time of crisis, this is still not enough to efface his racial difference and perceive him as someone equal; as Roderigo depicts him as ‘an extravagant and wheeling stranger from here and everywhere.’

Shakespeare alludes to several current racial stereotypes related to blacks via the characters of the play such as increased sexuality and bestiality. Hence Othello is described by the Venetian citizens from a predominantly condescending view. Previous critics such as Martin Orkin have argued ‘that there is racist sentiment within the play, but that it is to an important degree confined to Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio.’ This statement is indeed trustworthy, but one must not forget that Brabantio, as a respected senator, is part of the Venetian power structure and therefore representative of higher society’s perception of Othello and one might also argue even Othello himself sometimes supports society’s racial prejudices, moreover, Emilia can also be perceived as a racially prejudiced character. In the beginning of the play Roderigo refers to Othello’s ‘thick lips,’ while Iago shouts in the streets, underneath Brabantio’s window, that ‘even now,

---


now, very now, an old black ram is topping your white ewe. Arise, arise! Awake the snorting citizens with the bell, or else the devil will make a grandsire of you.’

By calling Othello ‘an old black ram’ Iago clearly supports the common association between blackness and bestiality. He also claims that Othello might corrupt Desdemona’s innocence, by portraying her as a ‘white ewe’ and him as a ‘black ram.’ His sole purpose is to agitate Brabantio and he achieves this by using verbal images of the senator’s daughter copulating with a beastly figure. Consequently Iago’s statement confirms the Moor’s presumed sexual nature. He believes Othello to have seduced Emilia by means of trickery and witchcraft. Hunter argues that ‘the sexual fear and disgust that lie behind so much racial prejudice are exposed for our derisive expectations to fasten upon them. And we are at this point to agree with these valuations, for no alternative view is revealed.’ When looking deeper into both Roderigo and Iago’s motives for demonizing Othello, their hate seems partly justified, the first being a rival for Desdemona’s love and the latter believes to have been overlooked for promotion, while Brabantio’s hatred seems to have a merely racial character. When he is awoken from his sleep by Roderigo he declares: ‘I have charged thee not to haunt about my doors: in honest plainness thou hast heard me say my daughter is not for thee:’ But when he hears that his daughter has fallen in love with a Moor, he immediately starts searching for her and calls out to Roderigo: ‘call up my brother. O, would you have had her!’ Although previously declared unfit for his daughter, Brabantio prefers Roderigo as the potential husband of his daughter over the Moor Othello. This preference seems to be solely based on Othello’s exotic background and color.

We can find the same racial motivation behind his explanation of his daughter’s love for Othello:


150 HUNTER G. (1967), Othello and color prejudice, Oxford University Press, London, p. 49


152 Ibid. (p. 2090)
‘O thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter? Damned as thou art, thou hast enchanted her, for I’ll refer me to all things of sense—if she in chains of magic were not bound—Whether a maid so tender […] would ever have -t’incur a general mock- run from her guardage to the sooty bosom of such a thing as thou: to fear, not to delight.’

The only reasonable explanation appears to be witchcraft; he must have enchanted his daughter. Brabantio claims that Othello is to be feared an not to be loved, he is a figure unsuitable for the love of a white woman. Othello immediately claims these accusations to be untrue and argues that his stories have seduced Desdemona in falling in love with him. This statement is confirmed by his wife and convinces the senate of the mutual nature of their love. Nevertheless the impression is created that magic is indeed part of Othello’s culture, which reminds of his non-European background. Besides his racial difference and his supposed interest in magic, Othello’s occupation also adds to his exoticism. In the accounts of his travels he talks ‘of the cannibals that each other eat, the Anthropofagi, and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders.’ Despite similar reports of white travelers during that era, Othello’s stories strengthen his own exotic background.

Othello’s first gift to Desdemona was a handkerchief, which is eventually placed by Iago in Cassio’s room, supposedly proving his affair with Desdemona. According to Cedric Watts the history of the handkerchief shares the exotic context of his travelogues, located ‘between history and legend, the factual and the mythical.’ Although we are unaware of how the handkerchief was made, its context and the description of the fabric undoubtedly refer to a pagan culture. According to Othello ‘there’s magic in the web of it: a sibyl […] in her prophetic fury sewed the work: the worms were hallowed that breed the silk, and it was dyed in mummy which the skilful conserved of Maidens’ hearts.’ When he describes the context the handkerchief becomes almost a mythical object with its own history and symbolical meaning:

153 Ibid. (p. 2092)
154 Ibid. (p. 2096)
'That handkerchief did an Egyptian to my mother give: she was a charmer, and could almost read the thoughts of people: she told her, while she kept it, 'twould make her amiable and subdue my father entirely to her love, but if she lost it or made a gift of it, my father’s eye should hold her loathed and his spirits should hunt after new fancies.'

According to Othello the handkerchief carries a curse with it, a magical meaning, as ‘to lose’t or give’t away were such perdition as nothing else could match.'

As the play develops, the Moor’s behavior begins supporting Iago’s racial prejudices. When Iago tries to persuade Othello of Desdemona’s infidelity, he argues that in her refusal of men of a similar complexion she has committed unnatural actions: ‘Not to affect many proposed matches of her own clime, complexion and degree, whereto we see in all things nature tends-Foh, one may smell in such a will most rank, foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural.’

Othello does not refute this statement, which implies he agrees with Iago’s opinion.

At the play’s climax, after Othello has strangled his wife to death, Emilia’s insults may vent the anger and perhaps the racial prejudices of the audience. When Othello says that Desdemona’s last words are lies, Emilia bursts out in anger: ‘O, the more angel she, and you the blacker devil! Thou dost belie her, and thou art a devil. […] O gull, o dolt, as ignorant as dirt! […] The Moor hath killed my mistress! Murder, murder!’ Like in the previously analyzed travel literature, blackness, the devil and dirt are all associated with one another. Regardless of these accusations, Othello does not fit his racial stereotype. Unlike the Moor Aaron in the previous Shakespearian play Titus Andronicus, he is not a remorseless villain. In contrast these characteristics are represented in the play by Iago, while Othello is constantly praised by other characters, such as Desdemona, who, as a white woman, is not withheld to declare their love in public, because she ‘saw Othello’s visage in his mind and to his honours


158 Ibid. (p. 2128)

159 Ibid. (p. 2122)


and his valiant parts did I my soul and fortunes consecrate.' \(^{162}\) In Cyprus Montano asserts ‘pray heavens he be, for I have served hem, and the man commands like a full soldier.’ \(^{163}\) Even Iago accounts in the middle of his outrage that ‘The Moor – Howbeit that I endure him not – is of a constant, loving, noble nature, and I dare think he’ll prove to Desdemona a most dear husband.’ \(^{164}\) Lodovico conveys how high the Venetian court initially perceived their general: ‘Is this the noble Moor whom our full senate call all-in-all sufficient? Is this the nature whom passion could not shake? Whose solid virtue the shot of accident nor dart of chance could neither gaze nor pierce?’ \(^{165}\) During the introduction of the play Othello is a respected man, due to his military power, courage and noble character. His initial behavior confirms this judgment, however as the play develops and Othello is deceived into killing his wife, the Senate is proved wrong. \(^{166}\)

Iago and Roderigo’s racial remarks appear to be true as Othello eventually kills Desdemona out of mere jealousy. According to Desdemona Othello ‘is true of mind and made of no such baseness as jealous creatures are.’ He cannot be jealous because ‘the sun where he was born drew all such humours from him.’ \(^{167}\) The reader can conduct from the Othello’s evolution that Desdemona’s statement is untrue, since Othello has a very jealous nature, which is in line with racial stereotypes. According to Renaissance belief the sun did not reduce passions such as jealousy; it did in fact augment them. Moors were generally marked as extremely jealous, as can be seen in the work of Leo Africanus: ‘for by reason of jealouse you may see them daily one to be the death and destruction of another, and that in such saugae and brutish manner, that on this case they will show no compassion at all.’ \(^{168}\) By killing Desdemona and claiming he wants to tear her to pieces Othello confirms the audience’s expectations. Leo Africanus also iterates that Moors ‘wits are but meane, and they are so credulous, that they

\(^{162}\) Ibid. (p. 2098)  
\(^{163}\) Ibid. (p. 2102)  
\(^{165}\) Ibid. (p. 2137)  
\(^{168}\) AFRICANUS L. (1527), _History and description of Africa_, translated by PORY J. (1600), Hakluyt Society, London, p. 154
will believe matters impossible, which are told them.’ Iago echoes this concept in his opening soliloquy: ‘The Moor is of a free and open nature, that thinks men honest that but seem to be so, and will as tenderly be led by th’nose as asses are.’ Othello turns out to be easily deceived by Iago. If he would have been more critical, he would have known that Desdemona and Cassio could not have had any sexual contact during the period after his marriage.

 Amidst the characteristics associated with the Moor, one seems to be the most crucial, namely uncontrollable sexuality. During the first act Roderigo, when standing underneath Brabantio’s window, describes Othello as a ‘lascivious Moor’ in order to convince the senator of the gravity of the situation. Iago’s portrayal tends to establish the same effect by claiming to Brabantio ‘you’ll have your daughter covered with a barbary horse.’ In his depiction Iago refers to the Moors sexual nature and his humongous reproductive organ. Iago continuously underscores Othello’s sexuality by means of metaphors as for instance the previously mentioned ‘an old black ram,’ who ‘is tupping your white ewe’ Desdemona is also represented as a beast in this scene; she is however only compared to a ewe to connote virtue. A few verses further, when Iago warns Brabantio that ‘his daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs,’ Desdemona has transformed into a beast due to her intercourse with the Moor. ‘Tupped or covered by such a thickly lipped animal, Desdemona, too becomes (in Iago’s mind and mouth) a beast.’ And if Othello’s sexual behavior is perceived as part of his inner self, then Desdemona emerges as a threatening figure, since her ‘unnatural’ choice can be valued as being more monstrous than Othello himself. According to Karen Newman ‘femininity is not opposed to blackness and monstrosity, as white is to black,

---


171 Ibid. p. (2089)

172 Ibid. p. (2088)

173 Ibid. p. (2089)

174 Ibid. p. (2089)

175 Ibid. p. (2089)

but identified with the monstrous, an identification that makes miscegenation doubly fearful.

Before he leaves the senate, Brabantio delineates two other stereotypes about Moors. He manages to depict Othello’s blackness as a threat to Venetian society: ‘for if such actions may have passage free, bond-slaves and pagans shall our statesmen be.’ Although the threat of miscegenation carries both social and religious implications, it is not thus perceived by the Venetian senate who believes the Moor to be ‘far more fair than black.’ Moreover the certainty that the Moor is a coarse, libidinous individual is overthrown. He demonstrates a controlled sexuality that prevents a fast consummation of his marriage.

Furthermore Othello is of royal descent and a Christian convert. Although the court seems unmoved by the relationship between Othello and Desdemona, miscegenation remains an imminent threat in the eyes of Brabantio. His fear is strengthened by Iago’s description of the result of Othello and Desdemona’s marriage, by maintaining the horse metaphor he warns Brabantio for his descendants: ‘you’ll have your nephews neigh to you, you’ll have coursers for cousins and jennets for germans.’ As Loomba asserts, ‘Iago, Brabantio and Roderigo do not worry that Othello wil assimilate unnoticed, but the he will produce, with a white woman, spectacular evidence of miscegenation.’ The discomfort with miscegenation can be traced back to the travel literature of Shakespeare’s time. George Best in his Discourse mentioned ‘I myselfe have seen an Ethiopian as blacke as a cole brought into England, who taking an English wife, begat a sonne in all respects as blacke as the father was, […] whereby it seemeth that blackness.

---


179 Ibid. (2099)


proceedeth rather of some natural infection of that man,’ As the quotation suggests, blackness was observed as a physical defect, as a contamination. Ironically Othello is the one who feels defiled by his white wife’s adultery. When he converses with Iago he says: ‘I think my wife be honest, and think she is not: I think that thou art not. I’ll have some proof My name that was as fresh as Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black as mine own face.’ Here Othello elaborates on the question of honesty and expands it to an inquiry of the relation between skin color, reputation and moral decency. A demand for correspondence between a ‘fair’ inside and a ‘fair’ outside begins pushing Othello to a misguided self-image that blackens his name and nature to agree with his skin color. Desdemona’s purity is needed in order to maintain his own.

At the end of the play the supposed danger of miscegenation is abolished due to the death of the couple, ‘the destruction of love and lives of Othello and Desdemona lays bare the barbarity of a culture whose ruling preconceptions about race and sexuality deny the human right of such a love to exist and flourish.’ One might question whether Othello and Desdemona are responsible for their own demise or their death is caused by the oppressive power of Venetian society. Nevertheless, whatever it might have symbolized in the beginning of the play, Othello’s black skin at the end is associated with bestiality, magic, jealousy and hypersexuality. This association is the result of both society’s projections upon his exotic nature and Othello’s actions of killing Desdemona and committing suicide. These connections are explicitly present in the play and construct Othello’s alien position in Venetian society. Othello tries to invalidate the set of stereotypes by committing suicide, but as Marcus argues ‘that action against the infidel ‘Turk’ he has become completes his exile by relieving the dominant culture of the disturbing difference that his presence has represented.’ When Othello is dead society is no longer confronted with his exotic presence and the supposed dangers with which it is intertwined.

183 BEST G. (1578), book A true discourse of the late voyages of discoverie, for the finding of a passage to Cathaya, by the Northwest, under the conduct of Martin Frobisher, in HAKLUYT R. (1904), The principal navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation, Glasgow, 12 vols, vii.


2.2 Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*

In 1688 Oroonoko was published during the time that the British were already fully engaged in the slave trade. Since in 1660 the Royal African Company was constructed, which diverted the English traders’ attention to Africa, and under the guidance of the Stuarts became the leading organization of the English slave trade. Set in this period, Aphra Behn’s book serves as a recount of the British colonial system. The story is about the life of the prince Oroonoko and his love Imoinda, who both lived in Coramantien, a slave-trading station in the Gold Coast, now modern day Ghana.

As being both a prince and a respected general, Oroonoko was a person of high social standing. During one of his last battles, his life was saved by a general and when he decided to pay tribute to the fallen general’s family, he met Imoinda, with whom he immediately fell in love. The king however, had heard of Imoinda’s beauty and soon claimed her his wife in his harem to be. Struck by grief the prince fled back to his army and engaged in another war. It came to the king’s attention that the love between Imoinda and Oroonoko had already been consummated and therefore he enslaved her and put her on a transport towards Suriname. In order to ascertain that Oroonoko would not revenge this action, the king spread the rumor that Imoinda had died. Struck by grief the prince defeats his enemies and returns to court. Here he meets a captain who tricks him and his men into slavery and they get shipped to Suriname, where he meets the narrator, presumably Aphra Behn herself, and Imoinda. Reunited with his wife Oroonoko struggles with his status of a slave and eventually starts a rebellion for which he gets punished by the white slave owners. After his punishment he flees with his wife, but gets trapped in a cave. Before he gets killed himself, he kills his wife to prevent her from being ‘ravished’ by the slave owners.

Before Aphra Behn first published *Oroonoko*, she had already established her reputation as a rebellious female author. Although she lacked a classical education, she was able to read and write several languages and this allowed her to live by her female pen. For at least twenty years she had provided the English Restoration theatre with heroic dramas, comedies of wit, operas, masques, pastorals and a single tragedy. She was often perceived as a social rebel, who criticized the legal institution of marriage and the suppressed position of women in British society. For this characteristic she has been hailed by female critics for years. In 1929, Virginia Woolf in *A room of One’s own* declared Behn to be England’s first professional

---

woman writers and claimed that ‘All Women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds.’ Other critics praise Behn for her political and sexual activity, because if one looks deeper into her poetry, it offers one of the most powerful critiques of the male dominant society of the late seventeenth century. These critics have the tendency however, to reduce the racial ambiguities in Oroonoko, when claiming the book to be an anti-slavery account, in line with Behn’s previous work. According to Rita Kramer for instance Oroonoko functions as proof of Behn’s opposition to the institution of slavery. But in her essay she focuses on Behn’s life and poetry rather than the novel itself. In her essay The Romance of Empire: Oroonoko and the trade in slaves Laura Brown declares the novel to be ‘a crucial literary text in the sentimental, antislavery tradition that grew steadily throughout the eighteenth century.’ Other critics such as Alta Jablow and Dorothy Hammond however read the text as an argument in favor of the slavery system. According to my perception this is indeed the case, due to several important elements, such as the ambiguous narrator and main character.

The ambiguous narrator and main character

The narrator in this novel is a white female who befriended Oroonoko when she had met him in Suriname. This woman is very conscious of the world she is living in. For example, in the beginning of the story she tells the reader that she is a member of an important colonial family, the daughter of the man who would have been Lieutenant Governor of Surinam, if he had not died. Later on however she mentions that being a woman has granted her with a low position on the social ladder. Nevertheless her female pen is in control of what we are reading; this is explicitly mentioned on the first page of the novel: ‘and though I shall omit, for Brevity’s sake, a thousand little accidents of his life, which, however pleasant to us, where History is scarce, and adventures very rare; yet might prove tedious and heavy to my reader.’ Thus the narrator has tremendous power and its position in the novel is very

189 WOOLF V. (2005), A room of one’s own, Houghton Millin trade & Reference Publishers, California, p. 56
192 HAMMAND D. & JABLOW A. (1992), The Africa that never was: four centuries of British writing about Africa, New York, waveland Pr inc
ambiguous. Sometimes she participates in the imperial culture and at other times she disapproves of the actions performed by her fellow colonists.\textsuperscript{194}

In the beginning she appears rather objective when confronted with the native population of Coramantien. In contrast to early explorers, she does not connect a higher sexual appetite to their nakedness, but she does support the prevalent view that these natives were primitive, had a ‘simple nature […]’ and though they are all thus naked, if one lives for ever among ‘em, there is not to be seen an indecent action, or Glance […] And these people represented to me an absolute idea of the first state of innocence, before Man knew how to sin: and ‘tis most evident and plain, that simple nature is the most harmless, inoffensive and virtuous nature.\textsuperscript{195} By associating Africans with simpleness and innocence she devalues African culture and, like the early travel literature, demonstrates her perception of the European population and its culture as superior. She de-Africanizes Oroonoko, by praising his good ‘European’ characteristics and specifying the non-African nature of his mental and physical attractiveness. For instance when she describes the ‘Europeanness’ of his outer appearance and the sources of his knowledge, but on these topics shall be elaborated later in the text. Oroonoko ‘functions in the story as an embodiment of just those values affirmed by European societies under the influence of Christianity and the European tradition.’\textsuperscript{196} These characteristics are not mastered during the entirety of the story. Near the end, as he forms a threat to the narrator, he is depicted as a savage.

When the narrator first introduces us to Oroonoko, he is described as if he were a blackened European, who in his appearance did not resemble the common African at all.

‘His face was not of that brown, rusty black which most of that nation are, but a perfect ebony, or polished jett. His eyes were the most awful that could be seen, and very piercing; the white of ‘em being like snow, as were his teeth. His nose was rising and Roman, instead of African and flat. His mouth, the fines shap’d that cou’d be


\textsuperscript{195} 195 BEHN A. (1688), \textit{Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave}, edited by GALLAGHER C. (2000), St martin’s press, New York, p. 39

\textsuperscript{196} LINK F. (1968), \textit{Aphra Behn}, Twayne, New York, p. 140
seen: far from those great turn’d lips, which are so natural to the rest of the Negroes.’

In a previous passage she explained that Oroonoko had acquired this greatness of soul due to his contacts with Europeans. ‘Some part of it may attribute to the care of a Frenchman of wit and learning, who […] took a great pleasure to teach him morals, language and science, […] Another reason was, he lov’d when he came from War, to see all the English Gentlemen that traded thither; and did not only learn their language, but that of the Spaniards also, with whom he traded afterwards for slaves […] He had nothing of barbarity in his Nature, but in all points address’d himself as if his education has been in some European court.’

Even when she explains Oroonoko’s love for women, she creates a distinction between Oroonoko and his fellow Africans, since she connects his love to the European notion of monogamy, a concept which, according to the narrator, is so difficult to find in Africa: ‘And as he knew no Vice, his flame aimed at nothing but honour, if such a distinction may be made in love; and especially in that country, where Men take to themselves as many as they can maintain; and where the only crime and sin is, to turn her off, to abandon her to want, shame and misery.’ Thus the narrator clearly describes Oroonoko from an ethnocentric point of view, similar to that of early seventeenth century travelers’ accounts. She perceives the European civilization and culture as normative and superior and applauds any resemblance between it and her main character.

It is important to note is the use of the word ‘Negroes’ in the passage where she describes Oroonoko’s appearance. The narrator uses it as a synonym for slaves, ‘Those then whom we make use of to work in our plantations of sugar, are Negros, Black-slaves altogether; which are transported thither in this manner.’ while she had previously defined Oroonoko as a Moor. It soon becomes clear that the narrator elevates him above the common Africans, her novel seems to criticize his enslavement, but not that of his fellow Africans. Furthermore the

---

197 BEHN A. (1688), Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave, edited by GALLAGHER C. (2000), St martin’s press, New York, p. 43-44

198 BEHN A. (1688), Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave, edited by GALLAGHER C. (2000), St martin’s press, New York, p. 43

199 BEHN A. (1688), Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave, edited by GALLAGHER C. (2000), St martin’s press, New York, p. 46

200 BEHN A. (1688), Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave, edited by GALLAGHER C. (2000), St martin’s press, New York, p. 41
narrator seems to accept the slavery system and her hero’s active participation in it. As a prince and general in Coramantien, Oroonoko himself owns countless slaves whom he sells to the Europeans. When he first meets Imoinda, he gives her 150 slaves as a gift; because she is a relative of the general that had saved his life in battle. ‘So that having made his first compliments, and presented her an hundred and fifty slaves in fetters, he told her with his eyes, that he was not insensible of her charms.’ When Oroonoko becomes a slave and meets those he himself had sold to Europeans, he does not become the object of vengeance. Instead all slaves seem to recognize and admire his greatness: ‘But he no sooner came to the houses of the slaves, […] but they all came forth to behold him, and found he was that prince who had, at several times, sold most of ‘em to these Parts; and form a veneration they pay to great men […] they all vast themselves at his feet.’ This is very paradoxical, since one would expect he would be hated by his fellow slaves. It appears as if the narrator, who has complete control over the story, spares Oroonoko from such a faith. Or, in absolving the slave owner from a well deserved punishment, since he did rob his slaves of their freedom, she might be naturalizing the condition of slavery.

Although Aphra Behn has written a story about slavery, there are hardly any sequences in which she depicts slave labor. There are plenty of references to slaves who work on the land, but the reader is never confronted with a lengthy description of the slaves’ hard work and treatment. It is again striking to notice, that even as a slave, Oroonoko is hardly limited by the social system. Because, when he arrives at the slavery plantation in Surinam, ‘he was receiv’d more like a governor, than a slave. Notwithstanding, as the custom was, they assigned him his portion of land, his house, and his business, up in the plantation. But as it was more for form, than any design, to put him to his task, he endur’d no more of the slave but the name, and remain’d some days in the house, receiving all visits that were made him, without stirring to that part of the plantation where the Negroes were.’ Again the narrator spares Oroonoko from the hideous consequences of the slave status. This is emphasized by her use of the word

---


204 BEHN A. (1688), *Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave*, edited by GALLAGHER C. (2000), St martin’s press, New York, p. 69
Negro, which as previously mentioned, functions as a synonym for slaves and does not befit Oroonoko, because he is a Moor.

Besides the description of her hero, the narrator is also ambiguous in her representation of the relationship between her and the main character of her novel. Before his transportation to Surinam, Oroonoko almost always act graciously. Coramantien is the only place where he can perform his noble deeds, without endangering the power of the narrator. He does ignore the king’s will, in consummating his marriage with Imoinda, but does not receive punishment. He seems to win every battle he is involved in. However once in Surinam, all his noble qualities become useless. He is unable to free himself from slavery, or avenge himself on his enslavers even though he tries. If he had succeeded in his ambitions, his actions would have threatened the colonial order in which the narrator is embedded. The social distinction between master or female mistress and slave remains fixed throughout the beginning of the story. But once Oroonoko begins demanding his freedom, he rebels against his subordinate position as a slave and endangers the power of the narrator, she then resolves in portraying him as volatile and distances herself from him.  

When Imoinda is pregnant, Oroonoko starts demanding his freedom from Trefry, a friendly slaveowner, because he wants to avoid his child growing up as a slave. Of course Trefry will not grant him his freedom, because in doing so he would jeopardize the colonist domination. In the following passage the narrator excludes herself from the colonists by means of an ambiguous ‘they,’ thus denying her own complicity in Oroonoko’s situation: ‘They fed him from day to day with promises, and delay’d him till the Lord-Governor should come; so that he began to suspect them of Falshood, and they would delay him till the time of his wife’s Delivery, and make a slave of that too; for all the breed is their to whom the parents belong.’ The narrator shows a growing discomfort with Oroonoko’s tendency to question his social position as a commodity. In the following passage she acknowledges Oroonoko’s request for freedom, since he is not a normal slave, but a royal one and he promises not to harm her, or his captors.

---


206 BEHN A. (1688), Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave, edited by GALLAGHER C. (2000), St martin’s press, New York, p. 73-74
‘However, he assur’d me, that whatsoever resolutions he should take, he would act nothing upon the white-people; and as for myself, and those upon whose plantation where he was, he would sooner forfeit his eternal liberty, and life itself, than lift his hand against his greatest enemy on that place: he besought me to suffer no fears upon his account, for he cou’d do nothing that honour shou’d not dictate.’

Nevertheless, directly after this meeting the narrator explicitly shows her unease with Oroonoko’s will to be free, by advising the colonists to limit his movements and even spy on him.

‘After this I neither thought it convenient to trust him much out of our view, nor did the country, who fear’d him; but with one accord it was advis’d to treat him fairly, and oblige him to remain within such a compass, and that he shou’d be permitted, as seldom as cou’d be, to go up to the plantations of the Negroes; or, if he did, to be accompany’d by some that should be rather in appearance Attendants than spys.’

This passage again proves that the narrator’s power is drawn from the colonial system. Once this system is threatened, the narrator takes any possible measure to save it and ensure its further existence. However, since Oroonoko is a royal slave, he is granted more liberty than the other, common slaves. A possible explanation for this ambiguous situation is that Oroonoko believes himself to be better than the other slaves, and by granting him privileges, he is easier contained.

At this moment in the novel, after the narrator has portrayed Oroonoko’s difference, but before he commences the slave rebellion, which will cast him to radical alterity, a surprising textual shift occurs. The narrator, some of her female friends and Oroonoko experience a series of entertaining adventures. The shift appears to function as a method to curb Oroonoko’s growing discomfort with his slave position. The adventures take place in an harmonious environment, where relations of property are non-existent. Each adventure takes Oroonoko and the ladies away from the plantation, to an undomesticated terrain. ‘By leaving behind the site of the racially determined master-slave binary, they are able to participate in the nonracialized and abstractly gendered world of the gallant knights and courtly ladies-the


same landscape that Oroonoko once inhabited in Coramantien.209 Through these adventures Oroonoko is able to regain his higher social status as a prince. This is however for a short period, because after this passage the narrator immediately revises his social position, by again granting him the role of the slave.

‘So that obliging him to love us very well, we had all the liberty of speech with him, especially myself, whom he called Great Mistress; and indeed my word wou’d go a great way with him. […] and told him, I took it ill he should we would break our words with him, and not permit both him and Clemence to return to his own kingdom, […] He made me some answers that shew’d a doubt in him, which made me ask, what advantage it would be to doubt? It would give us but fear of him, and possibly compel us to treat him so as I should be very loth to behold; that is, it might occasion his confinement. Perhaps this was not so luckily spoke of me, for I perceiv’d he resented that word, which I strove to soften in vain.210

The narrator greatly appreciates Oroonoko’s name for her, namely ‘great mistress.’ This symbolizes the explicit distinction in their relationship and also implies that she has great power over him. This power however highly depends on Oroonoko’s belief in the colonial order; the slightest moment of disbelief might threaten the plantation economy and the narrator. This is explicitly mentioned in the passage when the narrator ‘has fear of him’ and threatens to imprison him.211 This passage includes the only scene in which the narrator and Oroonoko encounter each other in the flesh. Thus it is determined by the racial and even sexual power a colonial woman has over that of an African slave.

When the narrator hears of the slave rebellion, she flees. She appears to be frightened, not by the large amount of slaves, but by Oroonoko himself:

‘You must know that when the news was brought on Monday morning, that Caesar had betaken himself to the woods, and carry’d with him all the Negroes. We were possess’d with extream fear, which no perswasions cou’d dissipate, that he wou’d

---


210 BEHN A. (1688), Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave, edited by GALLAGHER C. (2000), St martin’s press, New York, p. 74-75

secure himself till night, and then would come down and cut all our throats. This apprehension made all the females of us fly down the River, to be secured; and while we were away, they acted this cruelty; for I suppose I had authority and interest enough there, had I suspected any such thing, to have prevented it;\textsuperscript{212}

In this passage the narrator grants the reader with an explanation why she was unable to prevent Oroonoko from being punished after he was captured by the colonists. She feared he would avenge himself upon her and fled. Due to her absence he is whipped and chili pepper is rubbed into his wounds. The narrator is holding on to the conflicting narratives of the royal slave and that of the plantation system in which she is engaged. She creates increasingly more ambiguous narrative plots that only expose her allegiance to the colonists.\textsuperscript{213} Especially in the last sentence of this passage, she attempts to purify her of Oroonoko’s punishment, claiming she did not know better than to flee. By consciously leaving the scenery and not intervening when Oroonoko is punished, she avoids having to criticize and stand up against the colonial system. Near the end of the novel, when Oroonoko is killed and dismembered, the narrator again removes herself from the scene and hence denies her responsibility for Oroonoko’s tragic fate: ‘that I was persuadéd to leave the place for some time; (being myself but sickly, and very apt to fall into fits of dangerous illness upon any extraordinary Melancholy) the servants, and Trefry, and the chirurgeons, promis’d all to take what possible care they cou’d of the life of Caesar [Oroonoko]; and I, taking a boat, went with other company to Colonel Martin’s,’\textsuperscript{214}

Despite his will to be free, Oroonoko sometimes expresses opinions and performs actions that actually confirm the dichotomy between master and slave. He upholds the distinction between free human beings and those who are believed to have a nature of natural servitude. Before he hears that Imoinda is still alive, Trefry, tells him about Clemence, a beautiful female slave who despises the admiration of her fellow slaves and the owner. Oroonoko responds that Trefry should force his power onto the woman: ‘I do not wonder that Clemence shou’d refuse slaves, being as you say so beautiful, but wonder how she escapes those who can entertain her

\textsuperscript{212} BEHN A. (1688), \textit{Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave}, edited by GALLAGHER C. (2000), St martin’s press, New York, p. 92


as you can do; or why being your slave, you do not oblige her to yield.' Hence Oroonoko does not feel any empathy with the other slaves. He even urges Trefry to use violence in order make the female slave bow to his wishes.

After he discovers Clemence to be Imoinda, he took her for his wife and soon she conceived with child. This development again stirred Oroonoko’s will to live freely with his wife. But in his negotiations with Trefry he completely disregards the freedom of his fellow Africans, claiming he was ‘treating with Trefy for his and Clemence’s Liberty; and offer’d either Gold, or a vast quantity of slaves, which shou’d be paid before they let him go, provided he cou’d have any security that he shou’d go when his ransom was paid.’ In line with the narrator, Oroonoko perceives himself to be of greater value when compared to other Africans. Even after he had convinced them to start a rebellion, but failed he perceives them as subordinates: ‘As for the rashness and inconsiderateness of his action he wou’d confess the governor is in the right; and that he was asham’d of what he had done, in endeavoring to those free, who were by nature slaves, poor wretched rogues, fit to be us’d as Christians tools; Dogs, treacherous and cowardly, fit for such masters; and they only wanted to be whipt into the knowledge of Christian gods to be the vilest of all creeping things; […] he told Byam, he had rather dye than live upon the same earth with such dogs.’ Here again the distinction is created between the ‘vile’ common slaves and the royal slave Oroonoko, only this time it is invoked by Oroonoko himself, not the narrator.

Miscegenation

When describing the relationship between Oroonoko and the female narrator, one must also keep in mind the topic of miscegenation. According to Brown, who focused on the category of gender, Oroonoko’s radical alterity is curbed by the conventional roles of the heroic romance. Within the genre of the chivalric romance the narrator functions as the prize for the male adventures. ‘This narrative must have its women: it generates female figures at every turn. Not only is the protagonist represented as especially fond of the company of women, but

---


female figures—either Imoinda or the narrator and her surrogates—appear as incentives or witnesses for almost all of Oroonoko’s exploits. However, Brown fails to indicate that the ‘desirable woman’ is often the narrator and not Imoinda. For instance, after Oroonoko has killed a tiger, he lays down the cub at the narrator’s feet. And when he goes hunting for another, more dangerous, tiger he flirtatiously asks the women what they will give in return: ‘What trophies and garlands ladies will you make me, if I bring you home the heart of this ravenous beast, that eats up all your lambs and pigs? We all promis’d he shou’d be rewarded at all our hands.’ Since in the beginning of the novel a courtly romance is constructed wherein Imoinda is described as the sole receiver of Oroonoko’s love, these flirts with other women and especially the narrator diminish Oroonoko’s love for her. Outside of Coramantien, Imoinda does function as the desirable woman. But as Andrade argues, she merely functions as a surrogate for the narrator. In her story Behn has constructed a peculiar love triangle in which race and gender are intertwined.

The new world relationships between white women and black men in the seventeenth century were based upon strict power relationships. In the story the narrator portrays Oroonoko as an ideal Reformation courtier, and since he calls her ‘his great mistress’, he might form an object of her sexual desire. Especially since amorous relationships between white women and black men, although taboo, were not uncommon in seventeenth century colonies. Above all Oroonoko appears to be the most gallant and desirable man in the novel. He is brave, strong and even prefers the company of women above that of men. ‘However, these conversations fail’d not altogether so well to divert him, that he lik’d the company of us women much above that of men.’ Throughout the novel the reader is able to sense a clear, unexpressed tension between the narrator and the main character. Her desire however has to remain unexpressed,

---


because it would threaten the power relations within the colony and the plantation system.\textsuperscript{223} The narrator may never articulate her feelings for Oroonoko, because she has to carry the burden of safeguarding racial purity. Unlike their male counterparts these women, as reproducers of the race, were forbidden to have any relationships with black men. ‘Negro concubinage was an integral part of island life, tightly interwoven into the social fabric. […] racial slavery consisted of unsheathed dominion by relatively small numbers of white men over enormous numbers of Negroes, and it was in these colonies that Negro men were most stringently barred from sexual relations with white women. Sexually as in every other way, Negroes were utterly subordinated. White men extended their dominion over their Negroes to the bed, where the sex act itself served as ritualistic re-enactment of the daily pattern of social dominance.’\textsuperscript{224} The novel stays within the boarders of colonial sexuality. By not expressing her feelings explicitly, the narrator avoids granting power to Oroonoko that could threaten the sexual and political laws of the plantation. In contrast the narrator does not comment on Oroonoko’s response to Trefry that he should force his power upon his beautiful slave and make her yield.

Within this novel, filled with racial tensions, the figure of Imoinda obtains special meaning. She seems to function as a synecdoche for the narrator, since her marriage functions as a mirror of the unexpressed romance between Oroonoko and the narrator.\textsuperscript{225} Within the text we can find numerous examples of how these two women occupy the same position in relation to Oroonoko. The narrator first enters into the novel immediately after Oroonoko is reunited with Imoinda. Identification also takes place when the narrator fears that Oroonoko will cut her throat, but eventually Imoinda dies from such a faith. Thus she is metonymically identified with her.\textsuperscript{226} By creating the figure of Imoinda the narrator is able to contain the sexual threat that Oroonoko imposes on her and participate in sexual relations that otherwise would be forbidden. One might even argue that both characters seem to complete each

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{224} JORDAN W. (1968), \textit{White over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro}, Kingsport Press, Tennessee, p. 140
  \item \textsuperscript{225} ANDRADE S. (1994), \textit{White skin, black masks : colonialism and the sexual politics of Oroonoko}, in: \textit{Cultural Critique}, no. 27, p. 203
  \item \textsuperscript{226} HOUSTON B. (1986), \textit{Usurpation and Dismemberment: Oedipal Tyranny in Oroonoko}, in \textit{Literature and Psychology}, Vol. XXXII, No. 1, p. 34
\end{itemize}
Throughout the story Imoinda is mainly defined through her body. She appears to be communicating by means of a body language: ‘from the powerful language of eye contact between her and Oroonoko, to her dance before the king and the stumble that betrays her preference for Oroonoko, to her submission to his dismembering knife, she is confined largely to physical movement or stasis.’ In contrast the relationship between the narrator and Oroonoko is clearly verbalized. There are many instances in which the communication between Oroonoko and the disembodied voice of the narrator appears to be very flirtatious, as for instance in this previously mentioned fragment: ‘we had all the liberty of speech with him, especially myself, whom he called Great Mistress; and indeed my word wou’d go a great way with him.’ This might be the reason why Thomas Southerne in his adaptation of Oroonoko transformed Imoinda in a European raised in Africa. In doing this Southerne consciously removed the perceived threat of black sexuality, since cross-race relationships were condemned by seventeenth century travel literature and were believed to damage the colonial system.

Chapter three: a comparison between Oroonoko and Othello

In between the composition of Othello and Behn’s Oroonoko we mark a period of eighty years. During this span of time the British population was confronted with the English Civil War and its aftermath, events that influenced Aphra Behn’s portrayal of her royal slave. The most crucial development at this time however, was England’s increasing participation in the slave trade and the creation of its overseas empire. This historical event informed and encouraged the author’s adaptation of Shakespeare’s royal siege into a royal slave. In 1693 Thomas Rymer, an English historiographer, describes his feeling of contempt when being confronted with a white heroine who lets herself be seduced into a marriage with an African, and for the playwright who aspires his audience to sympathize with the black character. While


in the nineteenth century Samuel Taylor Coleridge was completely unable to accept an interracial marriage, let alone support the fiction of the noble Moor,\footnote{GILLIES J. (1994), *Shakespeare and the geography of difference*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 33} Gilles suggests that ‘The gap between Coleridge’s ‘veritable Negro’ and Shakespeare’s moor is partly explained by the institutionalization of plantation slavery in the New World in the course of the seventeenth century, a phenomenon which (as Winthrop Jordan has argued) required a sharp distinction between ‘Negroes’ and other types of ‘savage’ (such as the Amerindian), and a hierarchisation of difference defining the ‘Negro’ as the lowest of low.’\footnote{Ibid. (p. 33)}

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries slavery became an established system in England’s colonies and strengthened society’s prejudices towards blacks. Once the slave trade became operational, the colonizers had to clarify why they enslaved the blacks and not the natives. This resulted in the creation of a distinction between the degraded African and the less low ‘savage.’ This partly explains the evolution in Rymer and Coleridge’s perception, while the first only harbors a feeling of contempt when confronted with miscegenation, the latter defines it as unacceptable and even defies the existence of a noble Moor.

This statement has lead many critics to believe that in some way Elizabethans were less sensitive to race than theorists during the Restoration period.\footnote{Ibid. (p. 33)} This of course is untrue, since the Elizabethan theatre helped instigating the belief that blacks were sexually polluting. It is however believed that there is a difference in the way otherness was presented by Elizabethan and Restoration drama. One might consider the existence of a discontinuity between the two period’s constructions of the exotic.

‘The difference between *Othello* and *Oroonoko* bespeaks a major paradigm shift in the discursive construction of otherness between the beginning and end of the seventeenth century: Shakespeare’s Renaissance imagination of otherness is still heavily indebted to the ancient poetic geography. Behn’s Restoration idea of the other, however, is essentially modern and can readily be grasped in terms of Post-Renaissance forms of race, slavery, the noble savage, [etc]’\footnote{Ibid. (p. 28}
The major difference between the two periods would be that the representation of the Moor in *Othello* was not racially specific, due to ‘the promiscuous or ‘pandemic’ quality of Othello’s exoticism, the way in which his Africanness is constantly being telescoped into other notorious forms of exoticism: Turkish, Egyptian and Indian.’ Thus *Othello* has proved particularly intractable to approaches via the post-Elizabethan category of the ‘Negro’ whose otherness has none of the exoticism of the Elizabethan ‘moor,’ none of his theatrically vital mix of danger and allure.’

Although there are differences between the Elizabethan and Restoration dramas’ conceptions of Africans, by emphasizing on the discontinuity, these critics seem to overlook the remarkable elements of continuity between *Oroonoko* and *Othello*. To imply that Shakespeare’s portrayal of Othello is not racially specific would be to ignore the primary distinguishing characteristic in Othello’s identity, namely his skin color. As mentioned previously, this is the one characteristic that sets him apart from the Venetian population. When Iago tells Brabantio that ‘an old black ram is tapping your white ewe,’ Jordan argues “this was not merely the language of a ‘dirty mind:’ it was the integrated imagery of blackness and whiteness, of Africa, of the sexuality of beasts and the bestiality of sex. […] The drama would have seemed odd indeed if audiences had felt no response to this cross-inversion and to the deeply turbulent meaning of black over white.” This statement highlights how Othello’s blackness overarches ‘the pandemic quality’ of his exoticism and navigates *Othello* into a racially specific channel of reference that also involves ‘other notorious forms of exoticism.’ It is in this same channel that Behn constructs her story of *Oroonoko*.

Behn’s story takes place in Coramantien, a place filled with a dynamic amalgam of cultural, ethnic and racial concepts and influences. Oroonoko appears to be modeled on West-African civilization, which in contrast to North-African civilization, was perceived as less

---

235 Ibid. (p. 32)
236 Ibid. (p. 32-33)
239 Ibid. (p. 33)
His engagements as a general in the war and slave-trader immediately mark him as West-African, while physically and culturally he resembles a European aristocrat who, by coincidence it seems, is black. Oroonoko has many traits in common with Othello, which strengthens the belief that Othello functioned as an inspiration for the construction of Behn’s royal Moor. Especially in the beginning of the play we can find explicit references to Othello. When Othello talks about his experiences and the stories he told Imoinda, he declares:

‘Rude am I in my speech, and little bless’d with the soft phrase of peace; For since these arms of mine had seven years’ pith, till now some nine moons wasted, they have us’d their dearest action in the tented field: And little of this great world can I speak more than pertains to feats of broil and battle.’

Of Oroonoko we read: ‘as soon as he could bear a bow in his hand, and a quiver at his back, he was sent into the field to be train’d up by one of the oldest Generals of the war; where, from his natural inclination to arms, and the occasions given him, [...] he became at the age of seventeen, one of the most expert Captains, and bravest soldiers that ever saw the field of Mars.

From these statements we can derive that Othello and Oroonoko are characterized by a natural born talent that allows them to excel on the battlefield. Both have spent a great amount of time fighting the enemy, training for war and gaining glory, but this has excluded them from society and thus they were unable to participate in everyday life and remained ‘uncivilized.’ And like Othello, who claims he can describe ‘little of his world, more than pertain to feats of broil and battle,’ Behn also announces that Oroonoko never knew true love or could converse with women before meeting Imoinda. The author wonders ‘where twas [oroonoko] got that real greatness of soul, those refined notions of true honour; [...] and that softness that was

240 It is important to note that in this paper the words ‘primitive’ and ‘primitivism’ are used within their twentieth century context and therefore function as terms that include concepts as ‘uncivilised, naïve, unsophisticated and undeveloped.’ In the seventeenth century these terms meant ‘primary’ or ‘original’ and did not imply the previous mentioned connotations.


capable of the highest passions of love and gallantry, whose objects were almost continually fighting men, or those mangled or dead, who heard no sounds but those of war and groans.\textsuperscript{244}

Eventually the reader learns that, as mentioned in the previous chapter, via the contact with Europeans Oroonoko was able to obtain a form of civilization. It seems that his ‘greatness of soul’ is solely indebted to European rather than African knowledge. ‘It may well be said that all Europe has gone into the making of Oroonoko.’\textsuperscript{245} And this is the major similarity between Oroonoko and Othello. Although more deeply rooted in his own culture’s religion, beliefs and attitudes, Oroonoko, like Othello, symbolizes the best of his kind, the best possible evolution of the Europianized African. In their failure to support this evolution on their own, these characters symbolize the complexity of even the most ‘developed’ Africans and seem to justify their own exclusion from society and subordination.\textsuperscript{246} Behn also had additional works about Africans at her disposal which were in line with a similar perception of African culture, namely George Warren’s \textit{An impartial description of Surinam} and Richard Ligon’s \textit{A True and exact History of the Island of Barbados}. Although these works carried sympathy within them for the Africans, they nevertheless supported the perception of Africans as inferior people.

This perception is apparent in both \textit{Othello} and \textit{Oroonoko}. Behn deploys her condescending approach most explicit in the scenes depicted in Suriname, where we might perceive the hinge in the novel, namely the moment when Oroonoko’s suspiciousness seems to arouse a fear within the narrator. ‘I took it ill he should think we would break our words with him, and not permit both him and Clemence to return to his own kingdom, […] He made me some answers that shew’d a doubt in him, which made me ask, what advantage it would be to doubt? It would give us but fear of him, and possibly compel us to treat him so as I should be very loth to behold; that is, it might occasion his confinement.’\textsuperscript{247}

\textsuperscript{244} BEHN A. (1688), \textit{Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave}, edited by GALLAGHER C. (2000), St martin’s press, New York, p. 42


\textsuperscript{246} Ibid. (p. 130)

\textsuperscript{247} BEHN A. (1688), \textit{Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave}, edited by GALLAGHER C. (2000), St martin’s press, New York, p. 74-75
This moment is a turning point which for the first time explicitly reveals the narrator’s preferred construction of Oroonoko. Cartelli contends ‘The operative assumption is that the royal slave should only think thoughts that would ‘benefit’ him. To do otherwise […] would mark him as primitive or unreasonable and require a confinement that would be to the royal slave what enforced labor is to the common slave.’ This construction is disturbed when Oroonoko refuses to mend his thoughts to what he is ‘allowed’ to think. By contemplating about his own and Imoinda’s freedom he shows a great independence which the narrator perceives as threatening. Othello has already proven his strong will in the beginning of the play by marrying Desdemona. In choosing a white wife he explicitly ignored the Englishmen’s conception of miscegenation and therefore becomes a victim of Iago’s racial insults. By calling Othello ‘an old black ram’ who is ‘tupping’ Desdemona, comparing him to a ‘Barbary horse’ and claiming he and Desdemona are now making ‘the beast with two backs,’ Iago tries to convince Brabantio of the irrationality of his daughter’s behavior; since marrying a Moor was a taboo. Brabantio is easily persuaded by Iago’s arguments and accuses Othello of witchcraft in front of the senate. His plan backfires when Othello eloquently defends himself and wins over the sympathy of the senators by explaining that by means of his stories he gained access to Desdemona’s love. In his speech Othello maintains a certain level of dignity and in succeeds in protecting his honor. Thus he defies the racial stereotypes of the seventeenth century. This positive perception, however, is eradicated at the very moment he has killed Desdemona out of mere suspicion. Although able to sustain a perception of grandeur for a brief moment, Othello is eventually unmasked as the primitive African Iago claims him to be.

Another aspect of the ‘primitive African’ was that he could easily be deceived. As previously mentioned, Leo Africanus claimed that Moors’ ‘wits are but meane, and they are so credulous, that they will believe matters impossible, which are told them.’ This belief is quite literally incorporated in Oroonoko when the narrator claims that her ‘word would go a

---


250 Ibid. (p. 2089)

251 Ibid. (p. 2089)

great way with him.' The narrator is not the only character that profits from Oroonoko’s credulous nature, the captain with whom Oroonoko traded slaves makes use of Oroonoko’s trust to capture him and trick him into slavery. By ‘entertaining the Prince every day with gloves and maps, and mathematical discourses and instruments; eating, drinking, hunting and living with him with so much familiarity, that it was not to be doubted, but he had gain’d very greatly upon the heart of this gallant young man.’ Once the captain becomes Oroonoko’s friend he invites him and his entourage to a special banquet on his ship. At the moment all Africans are ‘very merry,’ The captain ‘gave the word, and seiz’d upon all his guests; […] and all in one instant, in several places of the ship were lash’d fast in irons, and betray’d to slavery.’ That a character who has gained so much from European civilization now gets betrayed by the captain, who granted him with a large amount of knowledge, is very ironic. After his betrayal the reader might assume that Oroonoko would no longer trust the captain and the European civilization he once so adored. But the opposite seems to occur, at first Oroonoko and his delegation refuse to eat anything and rather prefer starving to death than ending up as slaves. This causes panic among the captain and his crew who are afraid of losing their valuable cargo. As a response the captain negotiates with Oroonoko:

‘he therefore ordered one to go from him to Oroonoko, and to assure him he was afflicted for having rashly done such an unhospitable a deed, and which cou’d not now be remedied, since they were far from shore; but since he resented it in so high a nature, he assur’d he wou’d revoke his resolution, and set both him and his friends a-shore on the next land they shou’d touch at.’

In this statement the captain reduces the harm he has done to Oroonoko and his friends, claiming enslaving them was only an ‘unhospitable deed.’ At this moment in the text It is also difficult to believe the captain will keep his word, since he has already once betrayed Oroonoko. And finally one might ponder why he does not immediately set them free.

---


254 Ibid. (p. 63)

255 Ibid. (p. 63)

256 BEHN A. (1688), *Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave*, edited by GALLAGHER C. (2000), St martin’s press, New York, p. 64
Although far removed from the shore, the captain is still able to release his ‘cargo’ on the ship itself and thus support his promise of giving them back their freedom.

Oroonoko refuses the captain’s solution, but after the captain personally brings him the proposal, he accepts it and convinces his brethren to start eating. Once arrived at the shore of Suriname Oroonoko and his friends are sold as slaves. Thus he is betrayed for the second time. The third betrayal takes place when Oroonoko is negotiating with Byam and Trefry about ending his self initiated slave rebellion. Aware of the previous betrayals, he demanded ‘what he desir’d, and that it shou’d be ratify’d by their hands in writing, because he had perceiv’d that was the common way of contract between man and man, amongst the whites.’

Despite the contract ‘arriv’d at the place […] they laid hands on Caesar [Oroonoko] and Tucsan, […] and surprising them, bound them to two several stakes, and whipt them in a most deplorable and inhumane manner, rending the very flesh from their bones.’

Even when Oroonoko is aware of the European conventions and tries to act in accordance with them, he is not able to do so due to the involvement of the white men who continuously betray him and desperately maintain his position as an inferior human being. Thus Oroonoko can never be part of the European civilization despite his openness to it.

Iago echoes Africanus’ opinion in his opening soliloquy: ‘The Moor is of a free and open nature, that thinks men honest that but seem to be so, and will as tenderly be led by th’ nose as asses are.’ Also, in comparing Othello to a beast Iago supports the connection between Africans and bestiality. Even before enacting his plan to deceive Othello, he knows it will work since ‘the Moor is of a free and open nature,’ he is ‘untouched’ by civilization and is unaware of some people’s devious intentions.

Despite his conviction that his wife is having an adulterous relationship, Othello demands from Iago ‘ocular proof’ before confronting Desdemona with his suspicion. After he has stressed his noble nature and intent Iago declares that ‘such a handkerchief - I am sure it was

257 Ibid. (p. 91)
258 Ibid. (p. 91)
260 Ibid. (p.2101)
261 Ibid. (p.2124)
your wife’s - did I today see cassio wipe his beard with.’

Othello immediately answers: ‘now do I see ‘tis true. Look here, Iago, all my fond love thus do I blow to heaven. ‘Tis gone. Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow hell! Yield up, love thy crown and hearted throne to tyrannous hate!’

Othello’s reaction is quite contradictory, since he first declared not to judge his wife before he had ocular proof, but after Iago’s testimony he immediately wants to send his love to heaven. This again marks his primitive and easy to manipulate nature. Later that evening Othello asks Desdemona to give him her handkerchief, but she tells him she does not have it and quickly changes the subject by persisting on her plea to forgive Cassio. This aggravates Othello even more and then he storms out. After Othello’s jealousy has reached his peak in an attack of epilepsy, Iago tells him of a meeting he has planned with Cassio. He advises Othello to conceal himself nearby and observe Cassio’s reaction as Iago confronts him with his suspicion. Othello is unable to hide himself within earshot and therefore has to analyze Cassio’s gestures. Iago is aware of this restriction and asks Cassio about Bianca in order to make him laugh and produce gestures. Othello, still overcome with jealousy, believes Cassio’s gestures are confirming his suspicions: ‘Now he tells how she plucked him to my chamber. O, I see that nose of yours, but not that dog I shall throw it to.’

His distrust is even more strengthened when he sees Bianca, a prostitute, handing over the handkerchief to Cassio. After having observed this, Othello decides to kill his wife. The primitivism which has led him to this decision is highlighted when he describes to Iago how he wants to kill her: ‘hang her! […] I will chop her into messes.’

Oroonoko and Othello have many things in common, both have an exotic background, are excellent warriors, are marked by a naïve nature and end up killing their wives. Apart from their similarities, they differ on certain specific characteristics, from which religion is the most important. While Oroonoko sticks to his African religion, Othello has converted to Christianity. As previously mentioned being a Muslim in the eyes of Christians during the seventeenth century carried a sexual connotation. Early travelers misinterpreted the Islamic conventions concerning relationships and therefore spread the idea that sexuality and sensuality were far more accepted in Islamic than Christian thought. From this point of view

262 Ibid. (p. 2126)
263 Ibid. (p.2126)
264 Ibid. (p. 2134)
265 Ibid. (p. 2134)
Othello’s conversion might be perceived as a restriction on the sexual nature that seventeenth century writers believed to be inherent in Moors and according to Vitkus ‘the transformation of Othello the ‘Moor of Venice,’ from a virtuous lover and Christian soldier to an enraged murderer may be read in the context of early modern conversion, or turning, with particular attention to the sense of conversion as a sensual, sexual transgression.’ \(^{266}\) Iago’s description of Othello supports this sexual view, claiming Othello is ‘an old black ram’ \(^{267}\) or ‘a barbary horse’ \(^{268}\) who should not have a white Venetian woman as his wife. In the beginning of the play Othello is able to suppress his supposed sexual and primitive nature and even corrects those who offend the Christian conventions. When he sees that Cassio has killed Montano he cries out: ‘Are we turned Turks, and to ourselves do that which heaven hath forbid the Ottomites? For Christian shame, put by this barbarous browl!’ \(^{269}\) In this statement he disapproves of his friends’ behavior and argues that as Christians they should remain calm at all times. By saying this Othello marks himself as the better Christian who is not lead by his emotions and instead maintains control over himself and others at any given situation. Thus Othello has obtained the ambiguous status of a Christian Moor. He is, as Iago puts it ‘an erring Barbarian’ \(^{270}\) who has left his natural course and chose a path that led him to the environment of Venice. As a noble Moor Othello has a paradoxical identity. He is purified by means of baptism and has been turned to whiteness. But as the play develops Othello turns Turk, he is unmasked as the sexual and lust driven creature that early travelers believed him to be, when he strangled his wife in his bed with his bare hands. \(^{271}\)

In contrast to Othello’s Christian identity Oroonoko refuses to convert to Christianity. As the narrator explains: ‘But of all discourses Caesar [Oroonoko] liked that the worst, and wou’d never be reconcil’d to our notions of the trinity, of which he ever made a jest; it was a riddle he said, wou’d turn his brain to conceive, and one cou’d not make him understand what faith


\(^{267}\) Ibid. (p. 2088)

\(^{268}\) Ibid. (p. 2089)

\(^{269}\) Ibid. (p. 2111)

\(^{270}\) Ibid. (p. 2100)

was. In contrast to Othello Oroonoko is neither a Christian, nor a Muslim. In the story Oroonoko’s faith is never specified. All the reader knows is that in everyday life Oroonoko always is guided by his sense of honor. When he is held captive at the captain’s ship and starts negotiating with him, the captain swears in the name of a great god, ‘which if he should violate, he would expect eternal torment in the world to come.’ To which Oroonoko immediately answers: ‘Is that all the obligation he has to be just to his oath? […] Let him know I swear by my honour, which to violate, wou’d not only render me contemptible and despised by all brave and honest Men, and so give myself perpetual pain, but it wou’d be eternally offending and diseasing all Mankind, harming, betraying, circumventing and outraging all Men.’ In this passage Oroonoko explicitly criticizes Christianity for not enacting punishments in everyday life. Instead he favors his own ‘system’ of honor, which prevents him from acting immoral. Near the end of the novel Oroonoko is nevertheless exposed as a primitive human being who kills his own wife. By not giving the reader hardly any information about Oroonoko’s religion or conception of religion, Behn emphasizes the non-Christian nature of her main character. Although Oroonoko has never been a Muslim like Othello, he nevertheless shares the same faith. He also seems to turn Turk when he attempts to illustrate why he plans to kill Imoinda: ‘he consider’d, if he shou’d do this deed, and dye, either in attempt, or after it, he left his lovely Imoinda a Prey, or at best a slave, to the irrag’d multitude; […] Perhaps, said he, she may be first ravish’d by every brute; exposed first to their nasty lusts, and then a shameful death.’ Although one might argue that killing his wife in order to save her from a horrible future is indeed a noble deed. It is nevertheless striking that the reason why he kills his wife is a sexual one. Of course in killing her, Oroonoko prevents her from becoming a slave again, but the thought of other men ‘ravishing’ Imoinda appears to be crucial in his decision. Similar to Othello one might interpret that Oroonoko appears to murder his wife out of jealousy and possessiveness. Once dead she can never be loved by anyone else. Although the killing of Imoinda is more justified than that of Desdemona, both share a sexual connotation. Eventually a seventeenth century reader, after

272 BEHN A. (1688), Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave, edited by GALLAGHER C. (2000), St martin’s press, New York, p. 74

273 BEHN A. (1688), Oroonoko; or, The Royal Slave, edited by GALLAGHER C. (2000), St martin’s press, New York, p. 64

274 Ibid. (p. 65)

275 Ibid. (p. 94)
reading these two works, might have concluded that neither converting to Christianity nor living in accordance to an honor system emerges as a possible solution to suppress the Moor’s sexual nature.

Chapter four: conclusion
Long before the seventeenth century Englishmen were already acquainted with people of a darker complexion due to ancient Greek literature, the Bible and widespread fictional works such as John Mandeville’s *Travels*. These abstract renderings of and myths about Africa’s exotic environment and its population had already produced a severe impact on the English society before their real life encounters with Africans. The Africans were perceived as a new group of people who aroused much interest. Due to a literary tradition which favored whiteness and fairness above blackness, being white was perceived as normative. This notion was strengthened by the ethnocentric reports of African life in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, where aspects of African lifestyle similar to the European conception were applauded, while every difference was perceived with abhorrence and eventually condemned. Especially notions such as nakedness, bestiality, savagery and religion helped early travelers in establishing a view of Africans as primitive human beings.

Near the end of the sixteenth century one was able to encounter Africans on the streets of London and other major British cities. These blacks soon became a consistent part of English lifestyle and initially obtained some kind of personal freedom, soon, however, they were reduced to mere commodities due to the English participation in the Atlantic slave trade at the end of the seventeenth century. Driven by economical needs the British Empire embarked on several slave trade missions and thus helped in strengthening the widespread belief that Africans were primitive, since the loss of complete freedom was associated with the loss of humanity. Pre-existing prejudices were underscored in order to justify the enslavement and ‘the English did nothing to hinder the practice of slavery, and instead developed both blunt and ingenious ways to render conversion, monogenesis and even cross-race sexual contact compatible with the slave trade.’

There was no need to objectively examine and interpret African lifestyle, rather most observations started from an ethnocentric view and as consequence perverted African society.

During this period both *Othello* and *Oroonoko* were written and although both stories portray a ‘noble Moor,’ we can find the well established cultural prejudices concerning nakedness, bestiality, increased sexuality and ethnocentrism. Despite these elements previous critics have argued that both works portray a more nuanced view on blackness and that in fact *Othello* portrays the fall of a man caused by the weakness of human kind, while *Oroonoko* is a novel that can be placed in the anti-slavery tradition. In my analysis I have emphasized the opposite.

In my opinion both *Oroonoko* and *Othello* confirm the seventeenth century stereotypes. In comparing the two works one can argue that Oroonoko and Othello express the inferiority believed to be inherent in African nature. Both support the perception of the African as a naïve, jealous, easily deceived human being that can only obtain wisdom and culture by engaging in Western civilization. The only major aspect on which they do differ is religion, but this aspect of Oroonoko’s identity appears to be reduced to a mere non-Christian nature. Although there is a period of eighty years between the composition of *Othello* and *Oroonoko*, there appears to be no remarkable evolution in the representation of the blacks and their culture. Similar to Shakespeare Behn confronts her reader with a Europeanized African who symbolizes the best of his kind. She engages in the same racial prejudices apparent in seventeenth century travel literature and in the fall of their heroes both *Oroonoko* and *Othello* seem to function as an argument in favor of the African’s exclusion from society.
Bibliography


ANONYMOUS (1565), *A form to be used in common prayer*, reprinted in: KEANE W. (1847), *Liturgical Services of Queen Elizabeth: Liturgies and occasional forms of prayer set forth in the reign of Queen Elizabeth*

ARBER E. (1910), *Travels and works of Captain Edward Stokes*, Edinburgh, 2 vols, II, 853


D’AMICO (1991), *The Moor in English Renaissance drama*, University of South Carolina Press, South Carolina


DAVIES C. (1966), *Slavery and the protector Somerse; the Vagrancy act of 1547*, in *Economic history review*, xix, 548n


GOUGE W. (1595), *The Estate of Christians, living under the subjection of the Turke*, London


FLORIO J. (1598), *A worlde of words, or most copious and exacte dictionarie in Italian and English*, printed by HATFIELD A., London


GODWYN M. (1680), *The negro’s and Indians advocate, suing for their admission into the church, or, a persuasive to the instructing and baptizing of the negro’s and Indians in our plantations*, in LOOMBA A. & BURTON J. (2007), *Race in early modern England: a documentary companion*, New York, Palgrave Macmillian

GROSART A. (1883-1885), *The complete works of Thomas Nashe*, Lond.&c., London, 6 vols

HAMMAND D. & JABLOW A. (1992), *The Africa that never was: four centuries of British writing about Africa*, New York, waveland Pr inc


HAWKINS J. (1562-1563), *First voyage of John Hawkins*, in HAKLUYT R. (1904), *The principal navigations, Voiages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, vol x, 7-8


LINK F. (1968), *Aphra Behn*, Twayne, New York


MOORE R. (1992), *The name “Negro”: its origin and evil use*, Baltimore, Black classic Press


SWINBURNE H. (1590), *A Briefe treatise of Testaments and Last Willes*, London


SMITH H. (1607), *The Sermons of Master Henry Smith, Gathered Into One Volume: Printed According to His Corrected Copies in His Life Time, Whereunto is Added Gods Arrow Against Atheists*, Felix Kyngston, Talbot


TAYLOR J. (1850-1854), *The whole works of the right reverend Jeremy Taylor*, London, 10 vols, X, 452
TOPSELL E. (1607), *The historie of foure-footed beastes and serpents and insects collected out of the writings of Conradus Gesner and other authors*, published by SHAWBRIDGE G., London.


