

‘[A] maid called Barbary’:

Othello, Moorish Maidservants, and the Black Presence in Early Modern England

Scholarly discussions of race in *Othello* have almost exclusively focused on the eponymous character.¹ Often forgotten is another Moorish character the play evokes, even if she does not make an appearance on the stage: Barbary, the maidservant Desdemona remembers in the Folio version and with whose tragic story she identifies to process her own experience of rejection and grief.² Barbary is an example of those women about whom Kim F. Hall wondered: why, ‘[w]hile feminists are increasingly uncovering the voices and presence of white Englishwomen,’ do ‘women of color [...] [even though] clearly a presence in [...] sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, [...] remain “invisible women” existing at the margins of English culture and current critical practice [?]’.³ Barbary’s near absence from the critical

¹ For a survey of the criticism, see Michael Neill (ed.), *Othello* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 113-30. In using the category ‘race,’ I agree with critics who see it as applicable to the early modern period. See Peter Erickson, ‘Invisibility Speaks: Servants and Portraits in Early Modern Visual Culture’, *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, 9.1 (2009), 23-61; p. 26; Erickson, ‘Representations of Blacks and Blackness in the Renaissance’, *Criticism*, 35.4 (1993), pp. 499-527; Erickson, ‘The Moment of Race in Renaissance Studies’, *Shakespeare Studies*, 26 (1998), pp. 27-36; Erickson, ‘The Representation of Race in Renaissance Art’, *The Upstart Crow*, 18 (1998), pp. 2-9; Erickson, “‘God for Harry, England and Saint George’”: British National Identity and the Emergence of White Self-Fashioning’, in *Early Modern Visual Culture*, ed. by Peter Erickson and Clark Hulse (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 315-45; p. 315. For studies that trace the development of race consciousness in the period, see Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Cornell University Press, 1995); Dympna Callaghan, ‘Othello was a White Man’, in *Shakespeare without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 75-96; George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987). For a survey of the scholarly literature on race in *Othello*, see Imtiaz Habib, ‘*Othello*: The State of the Art’, in Robert C. Evans (ed.), *Othello: A Critical Reader* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 84-7. For early modern perceptions of Africans, see Neil (ed.), *Othello*, p. 123; Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, ‘Before Othello: Elizabethan Representations of Sub-Saharan Africans’, *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 54.1 (1997), pp. 19-44. On the slipperiness of the term ‘Moor’ in this period, see Jack D’Amico, *The Moor in English Renaissance Drama* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1991); Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Performing Blackness on English Stages, 1500-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 25; Emily C. Bartels, ‘Imperialist Beginnings: Richard Hakluyt and the Construction of Africa’, *Criticism*, 34.4 (1992), 517-538; p. 523; Michael Neill “‘Mulattos,” “Blacks,” and “Indian Moors”’: Othello and Early Modern Constructions of Human Difference’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 49.4 (1998), 361-374; pp. 364-365).

² Ambereen Dadabhoy totally dismisses Barbary, writing that ‘Othello is the only figure who represents non-European identity’ in the play. See ‘Two Faced: The Problem of Othello’s Visage,’ in Lena Cowen Orlin (ed.), *Othello: The State of Play* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 121-147; p. 123. There has been some discussion of the absent black woman, the female counterpart of Othello. See Celia R. Daileader, *Racism, Misogyny, and the “Othello” Myth: Inter-racial Couples from Shakespeare to Spike Lee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.13; Kim F. Hall, ‘Reading What Isn’t There: “Black” Studies in Early Modern England’, *Studies in Early Modern Philosophy*, 3 (1993), pp. 23-33. There has been some discussion of Barbary in the scholarly literature. For example, Salkeld suggests that she may not have been entirely fictional, referencing the prosecution of Barbary Moore, alias Browne, on 10 February 1598/9 for fornication (Imtiaz Habib and Duncan Salkeld, ‘The Reasonables of Boroughside, Southwark: an Elizabethan black family near the Rose Theatre’, *Shakespeare*, 11.2 (2015), 135-156; p. 148. Barbary was famously given a voice in Toni Morrison’s reimagining of the play, *Desdemona* (London: Oberon, 2012).

³ Cited in Betty S. Travitsky and Adele F. Seeff, *Attending to Women in Early Modern England* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994), p. 284.

response to the play is paralleled by the excision of her story in the early decades of the twentieth century when Act 4, scene 3 was routinely cut from performances.⁴ This article seeks to fill this gap by arguing that, Barbary, a figure with no counterpart in Shakespeare's principal source, Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi* (1565), is crucial to the play's engagement with race and gender. Through Barbary, *Othello* challenges stereotyped racist and sexist representations of Moorish female servants on the early modern stage, often characterised by contempt for their alleged lustfulness, treachery, and unfaithfulness to (often) white mistresses.⁵ *Othello*'s depiction of Barbary also subverts contemporary visual and theatrical portrayals of Moorish maidservants that reduce them to figures of Otherness whose black skin serves as a racial background against which the whiteness of their mistresses' skin, and so those mistresses' privilege, status, and virtue, shine.⁶ By contrast, Desdemona and Barbary find a bond that transcends both the racial and status divides, a depiction that acts as a counterbalance to offset the racism of the characters who pass comment on Othello himself

Barbary, furthermore, in both her African origins, suggested by her name, and in her position as a domestic servant, speaks to the experiences of many members of the early modern audience, not least black female servants among them.⁷ Scholars researching the black presence in early modern England are increasingly alerting us to the importance of taking black people into account when writing about early modern theatre.⁸ It is time to revise statements such as:

⁴ Colleen Ruth Rosenfeld, 'Shakespeare's Nobody,' in Orlin (ed.), *Othello: The State of Play*, 257-79; p. 258.

⁵ For associations between blackness and lustfulness, see Karen Newman, "'And Wash the Ethiop White': Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*", in *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's Othello*, ed. by Anthony Barthelemy (New York: G. K. Hall, 1994); Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁶ Vaughan traces the way blackened skin operated in medieval and early modern culture as a signifier of otherness (*Performing Blackness*, p. 3). While not considering the tradition I am exploring here, Carol Chillington Rutter draws attention to the way twentieth-century performances of *Antony and Cleopatra* cast an often white-washed Cleopatra against black Charmian and Iris, a practice that I see as carrying this tradition over into modern performance. See *Shakespeare in Performance: Anthony and Cleopatra* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), p. 17.

⁷ Barbary, or Mauretania, the region in North Africa, was associated with Arab-Berber people (Nabil Matar, *Britain and Barbary, 1589–1689* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), p. 3, 5). For the interest in Barbary in this period, see Emily Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor: From Alcazar to Othello* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania press, 2008), pp. 21-44. For black servants, see Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London: Pluto, 2018), chs. 1 and 2. Vaughan has highlighted a shift in stage representations of black people in the late seventeenth century motivated, she argues, by personal experience of black people (*Performing Blackness*, p. 167).

⁸ Matthew Steggle, 'Othello, The Moor of London: Shakespeare's Black Britons', in Robert C. Evans (ed.), *Othello: A Critical Reader* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 103-24. Kaufmann has identified over 360 African individuals living across Britain between 1500 and 1640. See 'Africans in Britain: 1500-1640', Oxford DPhil thesis (2011). Imtiaz Habib earlier listed 362 records of black people between 1500 and 1640 in *Shakespeare and Race: Postcolonial Praxis in the Early Modern Period* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1999). My article

‘Recipients of the negative image [of Africans] were mixed in gender as well as socio-economic class’ to include ‘race’ as well.⁹ Attending to the *potential* black presence in the early modern playhouse complicates such statements made within the context of an analysis of *Othello* as: ‘Dramatists manipulated the [...] spectacle [of blackness] to evoke a range of responses, including ethnocentric contempt and ambivalent curiosity or revulsion.’¹⁰ Identification, sympathy, and recognition, it seems, cannot be imagined as potential responses to the ‘spectacle’ of blackness on the early modern stage. The implicit assumption here, as Matthew Steggle points out, is that ‘this was ‘a play produced by an all-white theatre for an all-white audience.’¹¹ This assumption erases the experiences of playgoers who were not white, a segment of the early modern audience that is not entirely impossible to imagine. A black family, the Resonables, lived between 1579 and 1592 in Boroughside, Southwark and St. Olave, Tooley Street, which lay on the south bank of the Thames, a precinct immediately adjacent to Southwark with its rich theatrical connections, including Phillip Henslowe’s Rose playhouse which opened in 1587 and Shakespeare’s own residence nearby. The Resonables shared a neighbourhood with 26 actors of the Rose and, later, the Globe. Previously, they had lived in St. Bride’s parish in Farringdon Ward Without which boasted two theatres, the Bel Savage Inn on the parish’s north side and the first Blackfriars theatre to its south.¹² It is not entirely inconceivable that a member of this family might have enjoyed the nearby theatres. *Othello*, and particularly its representation of Barbary, would have spoken differently to such an audience member with his or her personal experience of being a black person in early modern England than it did to their white counterparts. Barbary’s African roots trope her as an Other who, thus, speaks to fellow black playgoers. However, she is also troped as familiar. As a serving maid, Barbary taps into the experiences of many audience members who were

is not the first to attempt to read the play in light of the experiences of black people in early modern England. Habib, for example, contextualised it within the experiences of black military men. See ‘*Othello*, Sir Peter Negro, and the Blacks of Early Modern England: Colonial Inscription and Postcolonial Excavation’, *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 9.1 (1998), pp. 15-30. My interest, unlike Habib’s, lies in the black people who led more ordinary lives and to whom Barbary would have been of particular interest.

⁹ Vaughan and Vaughan, ‘Before Othello’, p. 43. See Lois Potter, “‘All’s One’”: Cinthio, *Othello*, and *A Yorkshire Tragedy*’, in Orlin (ed.), *Othello: The State of Play*, 46-62; p. 60.

¹⁰ Vaughan and Vaughan, ‘Before Othello’, p. 29. See also Jean E. Howard, ‘An English Lass Amid the Moors: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and National Identity in Heywood’s *The Fair Maid of the West*’, in *Women, “Race,” and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. by Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 101-17. A notable exception is Matthew Steggle who argues that black people ‘might, in theory at least, have been present at an early performance of [*Othello*]’ (‘*Othello*, The Moor of London’, p. 104).

¹¹ Steggle, ‘*Othello*: The Moor of London,’ pp. 105-6. Steggle does not consider Barbary. Interestingly, while the myth of an all-male early modern professional theatre has been exploded, the notion of its being an all-white institution persists. For women’s contribution to the early modern professional playhouse, see Natasha Korda, *Labors Lost: Women’s Work and the Early Modern English Stage* (Philadelphia: University Press, 2011).

¹² Habib and Salkeld, ‘The Resonables of Boroughside, Southwark,’ p. 135, 139, 138.

employed as domestic servants and who, like her, experienced the common ordeal of seduction and rejection. By evoking her as experiencing a dilemma only too familiar to white female servants, the play undermines contemporary constructions of race as an indelible marker of Otherness and challenges perceptions of Moors as ‘exotic Others,’ ‘associate[d] [with] barbarian culture, physical monstrosity, moral shortcomings, and, in some instances, divine wrath,’ against whom the self (English, White, Christian, Protestant) is defined by way of contrast.¹³ Instead, Barbary is offered as a figure with whom the self is encouraged to identify and with whose experience of rejection, grief, and tragic death it could sympathise, as proven by Desdemona who models this response for the audience.¹⁴

Using archival sources, the pioneering and groundbreaking work of Imtiaz Habib has demonstrated that black people were ‘a pervasive, repetitive, and accelerating presence in Elizabethan London’.¹⁵ ‘Black Tudors,’ Africans in Tudor England, as later scholars building on Habib’s work have shown, ‘were not only present, but played an active part in some of the best-known stories of the age.’¹⁶ Scholars cite such relatively well-known Africans as John Blanke the trumpeter depicted in the Westminster Tournament Roll of 1511, Jacques Francis, one of the salvage operators employed to recover the ordinance from the wreck of the *Mary Rose* in 1546, Thomasen, a black maid in Elizabeth I’s court (1574-7), and the Moroccan ambassador to Elizabeth I, Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed Anoun, often

¹³ Richard Helgerson calls this ‘nation formation.’ See *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Vaughan and Vaughan, ‘Before Othello’, p. 19, 29. See also Jean E. Howard, ‘An English Lass amid the Moors’, p. 102. Vaughan (*Performing Blackness*) writes that ‘the “black-faced devils” of the homiletic tradition had become amalgamated with the figure of the black Moor of Africa in a conventional symbol of the qualities—barbarism, ignorance, impudence, and falsehood—in opposition to white Englishness and true religion’ (p. 71). Critics have long recognised the way the play challenges contemporary stereotypes about Moors. See, for example, G. K. Hunter, ‘Elizabethans and Foreigners’, *Shakespeare Survey* 17 (1964), 37–52; p. 51; Martin Orkin, ‘Othello and the “plain face” of Racism’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 38.2 (1987), pp. 166–188; Lynn Enterline, ‘Eloquent Barbarians: Othello and the Critical Potential of Passionate Character’, in Orlin, *Othello and the State of Play*, 149-75; p. 152; Dadabhoy, ‘Two Faced’, p. 140. The way Barbary, too, contests dramatic and pictorial traditions of representing black women, however, has not been recognised.

¹⁴ Critics have observed the way Desdemona models excessive emotional investment for the audience when she falls in love with the hero Othello portrays in his life story. See Laurie Maguire, ‘Othello, Theatre Boundaries, and Audience Cognition’, in Orlin, *The State of Play*, pp. 17-43.

¹⁵ Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500-1677: The Imprints of the Invisible* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 116.

¹⁶ Miranda Kaufmann, *Black Tudors: The Untold Story* (London: Oneworld, 2017), p. 262. Scholars often cite Elizabeth I’s decrees in 1596 and 1601 expelling black people from England as evidence of their increased numbers in the period. See, for example, Habib, *Black Lives*, p. 112. Kaufmann has recently argued that Elizabeth’s government never intended to expel the black population. See ‘Caspar van Senden, Sir Thomas Sherley and the “Blackamoor” Project’, *Historical Research*, 81.212 (2008), pp. 366–371.

credited with being Shakespeare's inspiration for Othello.¹⁷ Research, however, is increasingly revealing that the black presence in the period was not restricted to those few who made it to such prestigious positions.¹⁸ As Miranda Kaufmann shows, '[t]he Africans found at court and in noble and gentry households were, in fact, a tiny minority. We have more evidence of Africans living in merchant households.'¹⁹ African men and women who led more ordinary lives, as Peter Fryer and Imtiaz Habib have also shown, were a common sight in early modern England.²⁰ Far from being merely 'human menageries,' in G. K. Hunter's memorable phrase, status markers, and decorative objects in the houses of the high and mighty as early research suggested, Africans often performed functional roles as porters, gardeners, musicians, cooks, or laundresses.²¹ Examples include Edward Swarthy alias Nigro who worked as a porter in the 1590s at Whitecross Manor in Lydney, Gloucestershire, Grace Robinson, a blackamoor, who worked as a laundress for the Lady Anne Clifford between 1613 and 1624, and 'John Morockoe, a blackamoor' employed by the third earl of Dorset, in his Kitchen and Scullery at Knole in 1620s. Africans were also employed as domestic servants, carrying out duties comparable to those performed by their white counterparts. Among their ranks were Suzanna Peiris, 'a blackamoore servant to John Despinois, a hat-bandmaker' who was buried at St. Botolph Aldgate in 1593, Symon Valencia 'a black moore' who was recorded as being 'servant to Stephen Drifyeld a nedellmaker' at his burial in the same year, Augustina Patra, a black maidservant, who, interestingly, belonged to the household of the daughter of Henry Carey, patron of Shakespeare's theatre company between 1594 and 1596, and, interesting for my purposes, 'Barbaree,' servant to a Master Smith, who was buried in St. Peter, Paul's Wharf in 1623.²² Recent research has also uncovered the case of twelve-year-old 'Polonia blackmor maid,' about whose illness her mistress consulted Simon Forman on 5 May 1597. Forman concluded that the girl was suffering from 'Moch pane syd[e] stom[ach]' and was 'Lyk to vomit' and had, like *Othello's* Barbary, a 'fa[i]nt harte, full of melancoly & cold humors mixed

¹⁷ E. A. J. Honigmann, Introduction to the third Arden Series edition (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1997), pp. 2-4, 14-7; Habib, *Black Lives*, p. 2.

¹⁸ For Africans in English and Scottish courts between 1500 and 1640, see Kaufmann, 'Africans in Britain', p. 160.

¹⁹ Kaufmann, 'Africans in Britain', p. 160.

²⁰ Fryer, *Staying Power*, p. 8.

²¹ G.K. Hunter, 'Othello and Colour Prejudice', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 53 (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 139-63; p. 145. See also Paul Griffiths, *Lost Londons: Change, Crime, and Control in the Capital City, 1550-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 74; Kaufmann, 'Africans in Britain', pp. 162-3. For black servants as decorative objects, see Habib, *Black Lives*, p. 68.

²² Kaufmann, 'Africans in Britain', pp. 176-180; Steggle, 'Othello: The Moor of London', p. 117, 121; Habib and Duncan, *The Reasonables of Boroughside, Southwark*, p. 150; Habib, *Black Lives*, p. 3.

with collar [i.e. choler]'.²³ Some black people pursued trades such as needle-making or silkweaving, and even lived on their own as independent single men and women.²⁴ Examples include Lambert Waterson, a Moroccan trader who lived in London and was described in 1568 as 'denizen, barbaryen, tenaunte of Gabriell Levesy, grocer,' Resonable Blackman, mentioned above, an independent craftsman, and the various African women explored by Kaufmann who seem to have been prosperous enough to possess property to leave in their wills to family and friends.²⁵

The Africans in whom I am interested are those who, like Barbary, were employed in domestic service and who, like many servants in this period, might have frequented the playhouse and seen the original production of *Othello* at the Globe.²⁶ Attending to this demographic of early modern society and entertaining the *possibility* that Africans might have formed part of the early modern playgoing population allows us to approach the question of the original reception of the play from a fresh perspective and opens up the play to new questions. '[O]ur new understanding of the historical context,' as Kaufmann writes commenting on our increased awareness of the black presence in the period, 'may affect not only our discussions of the language of early modern plays, but also our understanding of their performance, and audience.'²⁷ If we at least accept the possibility that an African maidservant could have attended the original production of *Othello*, fresh questions about the play and its reception emerge. What would the tragic story of an abandoned African maidservant mean to an African maidservant in the audience? How does attention to this other African character complicate our understanding of *Othello*'s portrayal of race? How does the fact that Barbary's story is only accessible to the audience through the fond memory of her white mistress engage with contemporary dramatic and pictorial conventions for representing relationships between white mistresses and Moorish maidservants? In a society where 60 per cent of the population aged

²³ Cited in Gustav Ungerer, 'The Presence of Africans in Elizabethan England and the Performance of *Titus Andronicus* at Burley-on-the-Hill, 1595/96', *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England*, 21 (2008), 19-55; p. 24.

²⁴ Kaufmann, 'Africans in Britain', p. 201.

²⁵ Kaufmann, 'Africans in Britain', pp. 209-12; Habib and Duncan, 'The Resonables of Boroughside, Southwark', p. 136.

²⁶ For servants as playgoers, see Andrew Gurr, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, 3rd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 57, 66, 77, 79, 233, 238, 250, 272; Bernard Capp, 'Playgoers, Players and Cross-Dressing in Early Modern London: The Bridewell Evidence', *The Seventeenth Century* 18.2 (2003), pp. 159-71.

²⁷ Kaufmann, "'Making the Beast with two Backs'" – Interracial Relationships in Early Modern England', *Literature Compass* 12/1 (2015), 22-37; p. 32.

fifteen to twenty-four was employed in domestic service, how does the figure of a black domestic servant signify?²⁸ These are the questions that concern me in this article.

In Act 4, scene 3 of the Folio version, known as the ‘willow scene’ in a reference to Barbary’s song, Shakespeare both borrows from and subverts conventions of representing mistresses and maidservants in domestic spaces. While the relationship between Desdemona and Emilia in this scene conforms to dramatic convention, it is by introducing Barbary that Shakespeare challenges it. Early modern drama offers many examples of this convention at work. The elements constituting them are often the same: the mistress is often younger, less experienced, bashful and thus scandalised by her maidservant’s more worldly and sexually uninhibited worldview. The two women are usually depicted sharing a private conversation that takes place while they engage in some domestic activity and occupy settings that, in Eamon Grennan’s words, function as ‘protected enclosure[s] where the women may, for a few minutes free of a world that puts checks upon their voices, speak (or sing) their minds and hearts.’²⁹ In *Much Ado about Nothing*, for example, Hero, preparing for her upcoming (fateful) wedding, engages in a private conversation with her maidservant, Margaret, in which, rightly as it turns out, she voices her apprehensions about the impending wedding night: ‘God giue me ioy to weare it’, she sighs, indicating the wedding gown, ‘for my heart is exceeding heauy.’³⁰ The maidservant responds with the sexually explicit remark: ‘T’will be heauier soone by the weight of a man’, a statement that enrages and embarrasses the bashful mistress who scolds: ‘Fie vpon thee, art not ashamed?’ (3.4.1517-9). The exchange is specifically designed and placed to stress Hero’s chastity (crucially important as she will shortly be accused by her fiancé of infidelity) and Margaret’s sexual laxity (useful traits as Don John will soon realise for his plot to slander Hero) and perhaps, given her inferior status, greater freedom to pursue romantic and/or sexual

²⁸ Ann Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 3; Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost: Further Explored* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2001), pp. 13–16; Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 45, 51.

²⁹ Eamon Grennan, ‘The Women’s Voices in *Othello*: Speech, Song, Silence’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 38.3 (1987), 275-292; p. 282. As has been amply discussed in the literature, this scene differs between the texts of the First Quarto (1622) and that of the First Folio (1623). See Scott McMillin, ‘The Mystery of the Early *Othello* Texts,’ in *Othello: New Critical Essays*, ed. by Philip C. Kolin (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 401-24; E. A. J. Honigmann, *The Texts of Othello and Shakespearian Revision* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 10–12, 39–40; Neill (ed.), *Othello*, pp. 405–33; Scott McMillin (ed.), *The First Quarto of Othello* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Denise A. Walen, ‘Unpinning Desdemona’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 58.4 (2007), 487-508; p. 489.

³⁰ Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, in Stanley Wells, et. al. (eds.), *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 3.4.1510-6. All references to Shakespeare’s plays are taken from this edition and are cited parenthetically after quotations.

adventures.³¹ This pattern of pitting a chaste mistress against a sexually uninhibited serving woman is repeated in John Ford's *'Tis a Pity She's a Whore* (1630s). The serving woman here is specifically described as being older than her mistress in a move that registers contemporary anxieties about older, experienced women corrupting younger maidens.³² Annabella's 'old' guardian, suggestively named 'Putana' (whore), encourages her mistress to embark on an incestuous relationship.³³ She dismisses her mistress's hesitation with the remark: 'fear nothing, sweetheart, what though he be your brother? Your brother's a man I hope, and I say still, if a young wench feel the fit upon her, let her take anybody, father or brother, all is one' (2.1.46-9). Putana's uninhibited nature has already been on display in 1.2 when, observing her mistress's suitors, she warns Annabella against marrying a soldier on the grounds that his sexual performance will not be adequate: 'I do not like him, and be for nothing but for being a soldier: one amongst twenty of your skirmishing captains but have some privy maim or other that mars their standing upright' (79-82). Though she gives the opposite advice, Zanthia in Fletcher, Massinger, and Field's *The Knight of Malta* (1616-9) is true to type as she approves her mistress's choice to marry a soldier because, she says, he will be 'a perpetuall guard upon her honour', a service that she will want to 'reward' with 'her own Exchequer/ Which he finds ever open.'³⁴ Checked by her scandalised mistress ('be more modest', 'Thou talkst of nothing'), Zanthia retorts: 'Why, we may speak of that we are glad to taste of', adding: 'Of nothing Madam? You have found it something', 'nothing' and 'something' clearly sexually suggestive (3.2.55-9). Virginia Mason Vaughan's comment on John Marston's *Sophonisba* (1604-6) applies here: the serving woman's 'frank sexuality is crucial in the construction of [her mistress] as the chaste heroine.'³⁵

The convention became so familiar that some dramatists counted on their audience recognising its elements, only to deliver a twist. Thomas Middleton's *The Changeling* (1622), for example, offers the familiar formula: Beatrice-Joanna and her waiting woman, Diaphanta, occupy the

³¹ I am grateful to this journal's reader for suggesting this reading to me.

³² For this trope, see the gossips pamphlets by Samuel Rowlands, such as *Tis Merry when Gossips Meet* (1602) and *A Crew of Kind Gossips All Met to be Merry Complayning of their Husbands* (1613).

³³ Putana is described as 'old' in 4.3.175, 226, 231; 5.6.124. All quotations are from Derek Roper's edition (London: Methuen, 1975). For 'Putana' meaning 'whore,' see John Florio, *Queen Anna's New World of Words or Dictionarie of the Italian and English tongues* (London, 1611), sig. Mm2v.

³⁴ Fletcher, Massinger, and Field, *The Knight of Malta*, 3.2.46, 52-5. All quotations are from the edition by George Walton Williams in *The Dramatic Works in The Beaumont and Fletcher Canon*, vol. viii (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

³⁵ Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, p. 86.

private space of a closet in Act 4, scene 1. The twist is that the mistress is not the conventional chaste maiden, but one who has lost her virginity and is casting about for a virgin to replace her in the marital bed on her wedding night. Middleton introduces another twist: the maidservant, unlike her analogues, is a virgin, a fact that qualifies her for the position of her mistress's replacement.³⁶ Despite these twists, the play preserves the tradition of representing maidservants as lustful, a choice that sits rather awkwardly with the fact of Diaphanta's virginity. Finding her mistress in Alsemero's closet and learning that she 'c[a]me hither [...] / To look my lord', Diaphanta reveals her lustfulness by stating in an aside: 'Would I had such a cause to look him, too!' (4.1.56-8). It is not surprising then that Diaphanta offers herself as the proxy virgin that Beatrice-Joanna seeks: 'Madam, what say you to me, and stray no further? / I've a good mind, in troth, to earn your money' (4.1.76, 93-4), eagerly anticipating the wedding night as her reading her mistress's remark regarding the weighty 'business' on which they are about to embark in a sexual sense shows: 'I shall carry't well, because I love the burden' (4.1.124-5). Similarly, in John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612), Vittoria is far from being the mistress of the tradition whose virtue shines against her waiting woman's lustfulness. She is the 'white' version of her waiting woman, Zanche, who serves as an embodiment of the stereotype of the promiscuous serving woman, lusting after two men, Flamineo and the Duke of Florence, disguised as a Moor, and sharing with the latter a highly suggestive dream in which he 'lay down by [her]'.³⁷

In the willow scene, Shakespeare offers a version of this pattern. Desdemona, a chaste woman bewildered by her husband's outbursts of rage, shares a private conversation with her waiting woman, Emilia, in the intimate space of the bedchamber while the latter performs domestic tasks, undressing her mistress, fetching sheets, and laying them on the bed (4.3.2677, 83-4). Carol Chillington Rutter has read this scene against contemporary discourses on 'gossips,' female friends, inserting it within a tradition of representations of such friendships that encapsulates Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, Titania's Indian votress, and the witches in *Macbeth*. Rutter argues that 'these gossips inhabit bodies that constantly exceed the texts they occupy in scenes that celebrate dangerous female intimacy and alliance even as, by suggesting

³⁶ Thomas Middleton, *The Changeling*, ed. by Douglas Bruster in Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino, *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 4.1.95-121. All references to the play are from this edition and will be cited in parenthesis in the text.

³⁷ John Webster, *The White Devil*, ed. by John Russell Brown (London: Methuen, 1960), 5.3.231.

insubordination, they demystify male authority.’³⁸ I also wish to draw attention to the way the encounter between Desdemona and Emilia in this scene conforms to the pattern I am tracing here. Much as in the scenes discussed above, Desdemona’s scandalised enquiry as to whether ‘there be women do abuse their husbands/ In such grosse kinde?’ is answered by the more experienced and worldly Emilia in the positive: ‘There be some such, no question’ (2722-3). Emilia adds that she herself is willing to ‘doe such a deed’, dismissing her mistress’s shocked disbelief (‘Introth I thinke thou wouldst not’) with the emphatic: ‘Introth I thinke I should’ (2728, 2732).³⁹ Desdemona’s innocence and readiness to forgive her husband’s cruelty (‘my loue doth so approue him,/ That euen his stubbornness, his checks, his frownes/ [...] haue grace and fauour in them’ (2680-1)) are counterbalanced by Emilia who recognises her society’s double standards for what they are (2745-64).

At the heart of this scene, as with its analogues, lies a misogynistic tendency to pit women against each other. All three mistress-maidservant relationships examined above suggest the fragility of female bonds, especially when forged across status lines, and feature some form of betrayal. Margaret, intentionally or not, ends up being party to a plot that discredits her mistress (4.1). Diaphanta, in her eagerness to enjoy the wedding night with her mistress’s husband, stays in his bedchamber beyond the set time previously agreed on with her mistress (‘About midnight you must not fail to steal forth gently,/ That I may use thy place’ (4.1.126-7)) and thus sends her mistress into a panic that only subsides when Beatrice-Joanna allows her servant-lover to set Diaphanta’s chamber on fire and thus force her exit from the marital chamber, eventually killing her (5.1). Similarly, Webster’s Zanche offers to betray her mistress to the disguised Moor in a bid to win his love, promising to ‘rob Vittoria’ and so ‘In coin and jewels [...] make good unto [Francisco’s] use/ An hundred thousand crowns’ (5.3.252, 257-9). She, furthermore, betrays her mistress by ‘revel[ing] a secret’ that seals Vittoria’s fate (5.3.243). Emilia, too, despite her fierce loyalty in the final scene, contributes to her mistress’s demise. The handkerchief she hands over to Iago in Act 3, scene 3 is arguably the only piece of ‘evidence’ that Othello will ever accrue. Desdemona, too, withdraws from the temporary bond she shared

³⁸ Carol Chillington Rutter, *Enter the Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare’s Stage* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 158.

³⁹ It is perhaps this tradition that stands behind some editors’ decision to reassign Desdemona’s line ‘This Lodovico is a proper man’ (4.3.34) to Emilia. Honigmann, following M. R. Ridley, explains his decision in these terms: ‘For Desdemona to praise Lodovico at this point seems out of character’ (*Othello*, p. 291, n. 34-5); Ridley had earlier mused: ‘One is tempted to wonder whether there has been a misattribution of speeches, so that this line as well as the next should be Emilia’s’ (*Othello* (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 166, n. 35).

with Emilia when discussing women's lot in a patriarchal society, recoiling, as Emilia exits, from their encounter, and seeking divine assistance so as 'Not to picke bad from bad, but by bad mend' (4.3.2766). 'Emilia's "gossip,"' as Rutter observes about Trevor Nunn's 1989 *Othello* 'was [thus] discredited as "bad,"' and when Emilia (Zoe Wanamaker) 'exited, she and Desdemona [Imogen Stubbs] were as far apart as ever.'⁴⁰ Against this context, both external and internal to the play, the movement in the willow scene towards Barbary gains special importance.

While the differences between the Folio and Quarto versions of this scene have long been observed, the way the longer Folio version allows an important comparison with the scenes discussed above and works to challenge contemporary perceptions and representations of relationships between mistresses and serving women has not been remarked upon.⁴¹ Absent from the Quarto, Desdemona's relationship with Barbary in the Folio stands in stark contrast to the trope of pitting mistress against maidservant. Facing rejection and experiencing grief over lost love, Desdemona turns to a memory of this maidservant to process her own feelings, remembering a song that 'express her fortune' (4.3.2690). Instead of being contrasted with Barbary in terms of her chastity and thus superior virtue, Desdemona is depicted as identifying with this woman, sharing with her in Grennan's memorable phrase, a 'sisterhood of grief,' and forming with her, to borrow Niamh J. O'Leary's phrase, 'a virtual female community.'⁴² Rendered, through her 'unpinning,' in Rutter's words, 'smaller,' 'vulnerable,' 'perhaps sacrificial,' experiencing excessive grief and anticipating (?) her imminent death ('If I die before thee,' she instructs Emilia, 'prethee shrowd me/ In one of these same sheets' (4.3.2685-6)), Desdemona is reminded of another woman whose rejection-induced grief proved fatal.⁴³

⁴⁰ Rutter, *Enter the Body*, p. 173.

⁴¹ Critics have noticed the thematic differences between the two versions, remarking on the way the Folio presents Desdemona and Emilia as complex characters and depicts Emilia as an insightful woman (Walen, 'Unpinning Desdemona', p. 487); Carol Chillington Rutter, 'Unpinning Desdemona (Again) or "Who would be toll'd with Wenches in a shew?"', *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 28.1 (2010), pp. 111-132. E.A.J. Honigmann has long wondered whether the song was cut because the boy actor who played Desdemona left the company or lost his singing voice at this point ('Texts of *Othello*', pp. 10-12, 39-40).

⁴² Grennan, 'The Women's Voices in *Othello*: Speech, Song, Silence', p. 279. Niamh J. O'Leary distinguishes between 'actual' and 'virtual' female communities, referring to 'women com[ing] together and self-identify[ing] as like-minded group members' and as 'imagined or *virtual*, often invoked by a single woman in a moment of need', respectively. O'Leary does not consider the way her useful categories apply to *Othello*'s women. See 'Virtual and Actual Female Alliance in *The Maid's Tragedy* and *The Tamer Tamed*', in *The Politics of Female Alliance in Early Modern England*, ed. by Christina Luckyj and Niamh O'Leary (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 68-85; p. 68

⁴³ Rutter, 'Unpinning Desdemona,' p. 117.

‘My mother had a maid cald Barbary,/ She was in loue, and he she lou’d, prou’d mad,/ And did forsake her’, she introduces Barbary, illuminating their shared experience of suffering that resulted from a lover’s rejection (4.3.2687-9). Her designation of Barbary’s lover as ‘mad’ links the two women as it directly echoes Iago’s anticipation earlier in the same Act that her own lover, Othello, ‘shall goe mad’ when he mistakenly takes Cassio’s smiles when Bianca is mentioned as triggered by a memory of Desdemona (4.1.2226). More strikingly, Desdemona *embodies* this absent woman on stage, stepping for a minute into her body, substituting her voice for the absent maid’s, performing her bodily gestures and restaging the scene of female grief and abandonment that she had presumably witnessed as a child: ‘I haue much to do/ But to go hang my head all at one side/ And sing it like poore Barbary’ (4.3.2692-4). She embodies the ‘poore Soule [Barbary/ the song speaker] [who] sat sighing, by a Sicamour tree,’ ‘Her hand on her bosome her head on her knee’ (4.3.2700, 2702). Desdemona thus identifies with the serving woman in a way that inverts the power dynamics between mistresses and maidservants in the scenes discussed above, insisting instead on the commonality of their experiences. In those scenes, mistresses often put the transgressive maidservants in their place, thus reasserting their power and superiority: Desdemona’s own dismissal of Emilia at the end of this scene with her ‘Good night, good night’ (4.3.2765), simultaneously putting an end to the dangerous conversation and reasserting her control over access to her person and claims on her time and space, is a case in point. But Desdemona’s treatment of Barbary as an example to be followed and a source of instruction to be heeded also subverts contemporary theorization on the mistress-servant relationship. In early modern household manuals, mistresses operate as models for their servants, their conduct being an example to be followed. This was exactly why preachers often expressed a concern that a wife who failed in her duty to obey her husband also served as a negative model for her servants. William Gouge, to cite one example, thundered that a wife’s disobedience had disastrous consequences for all bonds of duty within the household: disobedient wives ‘thwart Gods ordinance, peruert the order of nature, deface the image of Christ, ouerthrow the ground of all dutie, hinder the good of the family.’⁴⁴

In his depiction of Desdemona’s relationship with Barbary, Shakespeare does not only subvert the power dynamics that theoretically structured mistress-servant relationships. He also, as critics have noted, changes the genders in his probable source of the song where the singer is

⁴⁴ William Gouge, *Of domesticall duties* (London, 1622), sig. Str.

gendered male and the false lover, female. By making this change, he stresses the topic of women's mistreatment by men and highlights the shared experience of female grief and 'sympathy' that, in Carol Thomas Neely's words, 'stretches from Emilia and Desdemona to include Barbary and the protagonist of the song—all victims of male perfidy.'⁴⁵ In pairing Desdemona and Barbary, then, Shakespeare subverts the pattern of pitting mistress against maidservant and prepares the way for Emilia's identification with her mistress later on and her willingness to die defending her. Just as Desdemona physically reproduces Barbary's bodily gestures while she remembers her song, Emilia re-plays Desdemona's final moments, singing 'Willow' as she dies (5.2.3150-2) and 'evoking,' as Grennan observes, 'Desdemona, Barbary, and the infinite line of women undone by love and men.'⁴⁶ Desdemona's identification with Barbary gains further importance when we consider the way it challenges another early modern convention: dramatic and pictorial representations of white mistresses and their African maidservants.

In contemporary visual culture, representations of maidservants and mistresses often had racialised dimensions.⁴⁷ As Peter Erickson writes, in early modern visual culture, 'black and white are relational.'⁴⁸ Portraits of white patrons featuring a black servant or attendant as Erickson points out elsewhere, depict 'the servant appeal[ing] to us to see him or her as a person, a potential subject. As a clearly identified social subordinate and implied racial inferior, [however,] the servant is typecast in the role of object [...] appurtenance, status symbol, exotic touch.'⁴⁹ This became an established visual convention dubbed by Erickson: 'the motif of the black servant.'⁵⁰ The black attendant in these portraits often 'operates as a literal extension and physical appendage of the white subject'.⁵¹ Kim F. Hall, following Michelle Cliff, describes this strategy as a process of 'objectification' whereby 'people are dehumanized, made

⁴⁵ Colleen Ruth Rosenfeld discusses the original version: 'Shakespeare's Nobody', in Orlin, *Othello: The State of Play*, p. 266; Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare's Plays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p.123.

⁴⁶ Grennan, 'The Women's Voices in *Othello*: Speech, Song, Silence', p. 291.

⁴⁷ Peter Erickson alerts us to the time lag involved in representations of black figures in British art when compared to Continental art. See 'Representations of Blacks', p. 516.

⁴⁸ Erickson, 'Representations of Blacks', p. 521, 505.

⁴⁹ Erickson, 'Representations of Race in Renaissance Art', 2-9; pp. 4-5; Erickson, 'Invisibility Speaks', p. 24. See also Kim F. Hall, 'Object into Object? Some Thoughts on the Presence of Black Women in Early Modern Culture', in *Early Modern Visual Culture*, ed. by Erickson and Hulse (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 346-79; p. 348.

⁵⁰ Erickson, "'God for Harry'", p. 324.

⁵¹ Erickson, 'Invisibility Speaks,' p. 34.

ghostlike, given the status of Other'.⁵² In contemporary paintings, white mistresses are pitted against African maidservants, the positioning of the latter designed to emphasise the whiteness of the mistress's skin and so her privilege, power, and superiority. She is, in Habib's words, 'the white woman's negative index.'⁵³ Nor was this strategy a novelty in this period. An English proverb that could be traced back to the early fifteenth century decides that 'Black best sets forth white.'⁵⁴ Peter Paul Rubens's *Venus Before the Mirror* (1616), based on Titian's *Venus with a Mirror*, is a case in point. Venus's white body which dominates the painting, and thus pushes the black servant to the margin, is a stark contrast to her attendant's, a black figure that Rubens added to the original version.⁵⁵ 'Her presence,' as Erickson observes, 'sets up a black-white juxtaposition.'⁵⁶ The black attendant's gaze 'makes us focus our attention on Venus's face,' thus rendering the servant literally marginal and visibly subordinate.⁵⁷ Rubens's *Diana and Callisto* (1637-8) repeats this motif as Diana and her black female servant form a similar pair contrasted by skin colour as well as posture: Diana's, authoritative; the servant's, submissive. The black woman's inferior status is indicated by the cap which contains her hair in contrast to the other women in the painting whose hair runs free, and her servile role is captured in her diligent protection of her mistress against the menacing dog lurking in the margin. The same technique can be seen in Titian's *Diana and Actaeon* (1556-9) where Diana's white body is contrasted by the blackness of that of her female servant. Both women are depicted in a similar position to stress the black/white binary that frames their portrayal. This is a process that Erickson calls 'white self-fashioning,' and Vaughan describes as 'contribut[ing] to the construction of a normative English female "fairness"' that 'coded her as an object of desire.'⁵⁸ This pictorial strategy works simultaneously to emphasise the mistress's whiteness and the black servant's racial difference and, by extension (by implication?), her inferiority. These images, while not necessarily accessible to all members of the early modern audience, are, nonetheless, suggestive and helpful in understanding cultural tropes at work in artistic representations of white mistresses and African maidservants.

⁵² Hall, 'Object into Object?', p. 346.

⁵³ Imtiaz Habib, "Hel's perfect character"; or The Blackamoor Maid in Early modern English drama: The postcolonial cultural history of a dramatic type', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 11.3 (2000), 277-304; p. 284.

⁵⁴ Qtd in Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, p. 6.

⁵⁵ Erickson, 'Representations of Blacks', p. 510.

⁵⁶ Erickson, 'Representations of Blacks', p. 510.

⁵⁷ Qtd in Hall, 'Object into Object?', p. 355.

⁵⁸ Erickson, 'Representations of Race in Renaissance Art', p. 322; Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, p. 59, 65.

The theatre too participated in this tradition, offering a parallel to the pictorial pattern explored above.⁵⁹ ‘In the theatrical realm,’ Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan observe, ‘Africans seem initially to have been introduced for their visual power. They were literally spectacular, [and] audiences could instantly see the difference between the black character’s real or contrived skin color and the other actors’ lighter hue.’⁶⁰ Habib has argued that the treatment of the Moorish woman on the early modern stage is different from that of her male counterpart, identifying her as a ‘dramatic type,’ a figure who is ‘demoniz[ed],’ whose sexuality is ‘bestially coded,’ and whose ‘only cultural visibility [...] is in her brutalized dramatic reproduction as the treacherous and lascivious blackamoor maid.’⁶¹ Early modern drama often maps the binary of chastity/lustfulness onto the categories of white and black embodied by mistresses and maidservants, respectively.⁶² The ‘[female] Moor,’ as Vaughan observes about *Sophonisba*, ‘deflects anxieties about female desire onto herself, accentuating her mistress’s white virtue.’⁶³ Shakespeare has already employed this binary in *The Merchant of Venice* where Jessica’s chastity ensured through her surrendering her virginity only within the confines of marriage is contrasted with the Moorish maidservant seduced, made pregnant and then abandoned by Gobbo (3.5.1759-64).⁶⁴ As Vaughan writes: ‘The black servant [Gobbo impregnates] epitomizes English concerns about amalgamation and opens a space for Jessica, the Jew’s daughter, to slip inside the Christian polity.’⁶⁵ Such a pair also appears in Webster’s *The White Devil* where Zanche, a Moorish maidservant, is identified by her dark skin in stark contrast to her mistress’s whiteness. Where Vittoria is ‘fair’ (I.2.6, 37; 2.2.50; 4.2.10), and her ‘cheek’ is ‘red and white’ (3.2.52), Zanche is described as a ‘devil’ (customarily imagined as black) (5.1.89, 156), a ‘foul nest’ (5.1.232), and condemned as ‘infernal’ (5.3.216). *The Knight of Malta* offers another such pair where Zanthia, a treacherous Moorish maidservant, is specifically depicted as the polar opposite to her mistress’s whiteness and chastity, traits that

⁵⁹ Erickson, ‘Invisibility Speaks’, p. 33.

⁶⁰ Vaughan and Vaughan, ‘Before Othello’, p. 29. Vaughan (*Performing Blackness*, ch 2) surveys black characters on the early modern stage. Matar (*Britain and Barbary, 1589–1689*, ch. 1) argues for a shift in the dramatic representation of moors over this period from dangerous figures into dull natives or noble savages (p. 10).

⁶¹ Habib, “‘Hel’s perfect character’”, p. 280.

⁶² For the association between blackness and lustfulness, see Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, pp. 43-50; Hall, *Things of Darkness*, p. 97.

⁶³ Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, p. 87. Similarly, Lynda E. Boose has argued that the ‘depiction [of the lascivious black servant] literalizes the patriarchal fear of the darkness of female sexuality’. See “‘The Begetting of a Lawful Race’: Racial Discourse in Early Modern England and the Unrepresentable Black Woman”, in Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (eds.), *Women, ‘Race,’ and Writing in the Early Modern Period* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 35- 54; p. 47.

⁶⁴ Some critics have suggested that ‘more than reason’ is a reference to the family of Resonabel Blackman, mentioned above. See Habib and Salkeld, ‘The Resonables of Boroughside, Southwark’.

⁶⁵ Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, p. 76.

in the world of the play go hand in hand. Oriana is chaste. Her ‘faire hands,’ in the words of one character, reflect her chastity: ‘As white as this I see your Innocence,/ As spotlesse, and as pure’ (2.5.68-70). By contrast, the lustful Zanthia offers herself to her lover, Mountferrat, and is puzzled by his rejection: ‘Am I not here/ As lovely in my blacke to entertaine thee,/ As high, and full of heat, to meet thy pleasures?’ (2.3.11-3). Her lustfulness is, thus, inevitably (resultantly?) linked with her blackness. Zanthia’s blackness is at the centre of her characterisation, and she is referred to by different characters as a ‘black cloud’, a ‘black swan’, a ‘black pudding’, and ‘my little labour in vain’, the latter a reference to the common early modern proverbial expression: ‘it is impossible to wash an Ethiop (or blackamoor) white’ (1.1.164, 190; 1.2.61-2).⁶⁶ She is consistently described as a ‘devil’ and ‘hels perfect character’ (2.3.18; 4.1.65, 82).⁶⁷ By contrast, Oriana, her mistress, is described in terms of her whiteness: her hands are ‘faire’, she is a ‘faire Jewell’ and her very name and soul are described as being ‘white’ (4.2.174; 2.5.118). The contrast in skin colour between mistress and maidservant is shown to be an index into their characters: just as Oriana’s ‘faire hands’ represent her chastity, Zanthia’s blackness is seen as an externalisation of her character, her ‘black shape’ presaging her ‘blacker actions’ (4.1.63). In fact, black and white operate independently in the play, acquiring negative and positive attributes, respectively. Thus ‘destruction’ is ‘black’ while ‘vertue’ is ‘white’ (2.5.117, 180). It is a commonplace of the scholarly literature that ‘black’ and ‘white’ operate in a similar way in the rhetoric of the racially motivated characters in *Othello*. Thus Desdemona’s purity is manifested in ‘that whiter skin of hers than snow/ And smooth as monumentall Alabaster’ (5.2.2901-2) in contrast to Othello who is an ‘old blacke Ram’, ‘the blacker diuell’ who has a ‘sooty bosome’ and ‘thicklips’, and Desdemona’s ‘filthy bargaine’ (1.1.88; 5.2.3036; 1.2.257; 1.166; 5.2.3061).

Desdemona’s identification with ‘poor’ Barbary subverts this pattern of pitting white against black since, apart from the ethnic origins suggested by her name, Barbary’s skin colour is not discussed at all whether on its own terms or in relation to Desdemona’s whiteness. It also subverts the tradition of pitting white mistress against Moorish serving woman, insisting, instead, on the two women’s shared experience of abandonment and grief. *Othello* constructs a community of women betrayed in love and united by solidarity and empathy, undermining

⁶⁶ Morris Palmer Tilley (ed.), *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1950), E186, 190.

⁶⁷ Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, p. 19.

the tradition that depicts racial difference as a barrier to identification between mistress and maidservant or, indeed, as an index of social and moral inferiority. Desdemona's empathetic response to Barbary models this reaction to the audience who are thus encouraged to adopt a similar attitude to her plight, and it is to the audience that the final section of this article turns.

Stories of audiences' excessive emotional investment and identification form an important part of *Othello's* reception history, more so than any other Shakespearean play.⁶⁸ One such example appears in Samuel Pepys's diary where he describes seeing *The Moor of Venice* at the Cockpit Theatre on 11 October 1660. Pepys's attention is caught by the emotional response that a 'very pretty lady' displays: she 'call[s] out' in distress 'to see Desdemona smothered.'⁶⁹ Perhaps the most extreme example appears in Stendhal's report of an 1822 performance in Baltimore when an American soldier shot at the actor playing Othello.⁷⁰ Such documented responses seem to have often revolved around the central couple: audiences pity the innocent Desdemona or, swayed by racism, are angered when they witness a black man murdering a white woman. In this final section, I want to suggest that, through the inclusion of Barbary, the play encourages another avenue for audience identification. Barbary, simultaneously exotic and familiar, speaks to the experiences of domestic servants in early modern England, often victims of sexual abuse and abandonment at the same time that she makes visible the experiences of *black* servants whose plight in service might have been made even more acute by their status as Other.

The identity of Barbary's lover remains anonymous, and there is no indication in the snippets of information that Desdemona remembers about the maidservant as to whether the man who seduced and abandoned her was a fellow servant or household master. Her tragic story, however, resonates with many similar stories experienced by servants in this period who were abandoned by their lovers and often left to face destitution and worse. 'The most common profile of a bastard-bearer,' as David Cressy explains, 'was a single woman in her twenties, employed away from home as a domestic maid or servant in husbandry, who succumbed to the

⁶⁸ Maguire, 'Othello, Theatre Boundaries, and Audience Cognition', in Orlin, *Othello: The State of Play*, p. 27. See also Edward Pechter, *Othello and Interpretive Traditions* (University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 1999), ch. 1.

⁶⁹ Gamini Salgado, *Eyewitnesses of Shakespeare: First Hand Accounts of Performances, 1590-1890* (London: Sussex University Press, 1975), p. 49.

⁷⁰ Cited in Orlin, *Othello: The State of Play*, p. 1.

pressures or promises of her master or fellow servants.⁷¹ The sexual abuse of maidservants by their masters was a sad reality for many in this period.⁷² Keith Wrightson has estimated that some 14-23 per cent of women who had illegitimate children in seventeenth-century Essex or Lancashire named their master as the father.⁷³ This abuse was enabled by the nature of the maidservant's tasks (making and warming beds, for example), by the architectural realities of the early modern house (no corridors, rooms opened into each other, servants not allowed to lock the rooms in which they slept), the vulnerable position of servants, and the absence of privacy (in short supply even to employers).⁷⁴ Since servants formed a sizeable portion of the early modern playgoing population, it would not be surprising if servants watching the original performance identified with Barbary and, like Desdemona, empathised with her suffering and pitied her tragic death. Such identification pushes her racial difference to the background and renders it a less important aspect of her character than her status as a servant with a recognisable plight and a familiar story often told by the kitchen fire or even experienced first-hand. Through Barbary, then, *Othello* challenges early modern prevalent notions of race as a marker of Otherness and irreconcilable difference. Barbary's race is less relevant to at least some members of the audience than is her vulnerable position in service and experience of rejection and betrayal.

While Barbary's story could thus have spoken to a large portion of its early modern audience employed in service, it is possible that it also spoke even more directly to a smaller demographic: black female domestic servants. The experience of the black female servant who was seduced and abandoned was, as Kaufmann has shown, 'common.' She cites the case of 'Marey a negroe' who, in March 1606, informed the Bridewell Court that 'one John Edwards [...] had the use of her body twice & she is with child by him.' Mary, Kaufmann adds, 'was just one of 30 African women known to have borne illegitimate children in England between

⁷¹ David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 74.

⁷² See Tim Meldrum, 'London Domestic Servants from Depositional Evidence, 1660-1750: Servant-Employer Sexuality in the Patriarchal Household', in Tim Hitchcock, Peter King, Pamela Sharpe (eds.), *Chronicling Poverty* (London Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), pp. 47-69; Laura Gowing, 'The Haunting of Susan Lay: Servants and Mistresses in Seventeenth-Century England', *Gender and History*, 14.2 (2002), pp. 183-201; *Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe*, ed. by Joaneath Spicer (Baltimore: Walters Art Museum, 2012), p. 26.

⁷³ Keith Wrightson, 'The Nadir of English Illegitimacy in the Seventeenth Century', in Peter Laslett, K. Oosterveen and R. Smith (eds.), *Bastardy and Comparative History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 187. See also Bernard Capp, *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 144-49.

⁷⁴ Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 60; Amanda Flather, 'Gender, Space, and Place', *Home Cultures*, 8.2 (2011), 171-88; p. 181.

1578 and 1640.⁷⁵ Habib, commenting on this same population, speculates that these women were sexually abused by their masters.⁷⁶ If black female servants, as I am speculating here, found the playhouse as enticing as their white fellows did, then it is not completely inconceivable that the original performance of *Othello* might have been experienced by African servants. Such audience members would have responded to Barbary's tragic history in a more personal way. They would have seen a story similar to ones they experienced or knew about: a story that involved living as a black person in a white society, seduction, and abandonment. They would also have observed a refreshing departure from the theatrical tradition that involved characters who looked like themselves. This is because, in its sympathetic treatment of the plight of a Moorish maidservant, *Othello* validates the experiences of black servants and refuses to participate in the mockery of these experiences as is usual in contemporary dramatic representations.⁷⁷ We need only think of *The Merchant of Venice* for an example where the 'negro' impregnated by Gobbo is evoked and dismissed in the same breath. Her plight of seduction and resultant pregnancy (a situation that is likely to earn her a whipping and land her in Bridewell) is treated as a joke by the clown, Gobbo, and potentially by the play since, as some critics have suggested, she might have been solely introduced for the sake of the pun on Moor/more.⁷⁸ The joke here, as Habib and Salkeld write, is 'at her expense,' for '[Will] Kemp's [the actor playing Gobbo] lines slander the woman as "less than honest" and cheap while exculpating him: "if she be less than an honest woman, she is indeed more than I took her for"' (3.5.37-8).⁷⁹ Carolyn Prager has suggested that this conversation evokes '[a]nti-African sentiment in the last decade of the sixteenth century' and 'alludes to [...] English hostility to London's growing number of blacks.'⁸⁰ Nor is she the only example of such treatment in the drama. In *Sophonisba*, Zanthia faces a similar fate as she is sentenced to die by the man who had bribed her earlier to betray her mistress. Unsurprisingly, having completed her task, Zanthia is dismissed in terms that equate her with refuse, with the 'dung, excrement, or compost' used to fertilize the soil: 'When plants must flourish,' Syphax informs her, 'their manure must rot' (4.1.88).⁸¹ The metaphor, of course, literalizes the common association between female servants and the lower body strata. Those black female servants' plights are

⁷⁵ Kaufmann, "Making the Beast with two Backs", pp. 27-8.

⁷⁶ Habib, *Black Lives*, p. 200.

⁷⁷ For a survey of the representations of black figures in the drama and in the contemporary travel literature, see Vaughan and Vaughan, 'Before Othello'.

⁷⁸ John Russell Brown (ed.), *The Merchant of Venice* (London: Methuen, 1955), p. 99.

⁷⁹ Habib and Salkeld, 'The Reasonables of Boroughside, Southwark', p. 154.

⁸⁰ Carolyn Prager, 'The Negro Allusion in *The Merchant of Venice*', *American Notes and Queries*, (1976), 50-52; p. 50.

⁸¹ *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 'manure', n. 1a.

dismissed as unworthy of sympathy or, indeed, stage time. Their stories are soon forgotten as they are dropped from the plots without comment.

Against this context, then, *Othello*'s treatment of Barbary's story must have stood out for a black female servant playgoer as an instance of a respectful, empathetic, and serious engagement with the experience of someone like herself. Seen from the perspective of this particular playgoer, *Othello*'s representation of race is far more nuanced and complicated than a focus on Othello alone would allow. Critics are still debating whether the play is 'racist' or 'anti-racist' ('I think this play is racist, and I think it is not,' writes Vaughan), basing their views on its depiction of Othello. Including Barbary in this discussion and contemplating the potential black presence in the early modern playhouse significantly changes the terms of this debate.⁸² Whereas Othello's association with Barbary (the geographical region) evokes, at least in Iago's rhetoric, the 'Barbarian' (1.3.640), setting him apart from 'civilised' Venice, Barbary's African roots do not mark her as inferior or hinder her white mistress's sympathy and identification. Unlike Othello, a man in a position of power, a 'wheeling Stranger,/ Of here, and euery where' and thus far removed from the experiences of the majority of the play's original audience (1.1.138-9), Barbary, as a maidservant, occupies a more relatable position. The grounds on which a white playgoer identified with Barbary might have been different from those of a black playgoer, but, through encouraging audience identification with her, the play challenges constructions of Africans as beings utterly different to the self. No analysis of *Othello*'s representation of race is complete without taking Barbary into account.

⁸² Vaughan, *Othello: A Contextual History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 69.

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