

Moorish Maidservants and Early Modern Erasure of Black Suffering

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Moorish maidservants on the early modern stage are almost invariably depicted as evil, lustful, and promiscuous. Critics have long observed this pattern, Imtiaz Habib identifying it as a ‘dramatic type’ involving 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.’¹ This representation, of course, stems from medieval and early modern associations of Blackness with lustfulness, associations that applied to African men and women alike.² The recurrent depiction of African maidservants as lustful,

however, gains particular significance when considered in light of contemporary social realities. In this blog post I would like to look into what lies behind this particular representation, what cultural work is being performed by those stage figures, and how they compare to what we now know about the lived realities of Moorish female servants in early modern England.

Thanks to the pioneering work of Imtiaz Habib and later scholars, we now know that Black people were ‘a pervasive, repetitive, and accelerating presence in Elizabethan London’.³ Scholars cite such relatively well-known Africans as John Blanke the trumpeter depicted in the Westminster Tournament Roll of 1511, 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 credited with being Shakespeare’s inspiration for Othello.⁴ The Black presence in the period, however, was not restricted to those few individuals, as Africans were often employed in humbler positions as porters, gardeners, and musicians as well as domestic servants.⁵



Moorish Ambassador to Elizabeth I, Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed Anoun, accessed here: [Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud - Wikipedia](#)



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John Blanke, Trumpeter (1511), accessed here: [The National Archives | Exhibitions & Learning online | Black presence | Early times](#)

One of the most dangerous aspects of domestic service for women in the period was sexual abuse by male members of the household, and African female servants were often victims of such abuse. The experience of the Black female servant who was seduced then abandoned was, as Miranda 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 1578 and 1640.’⁶ Habib, commenting on this same population, speculates that these women were sexually abused by their masters.⁷ How do dramatic representations compare to the lived realities of African women in domestic service?

Flying in the face of social reality, the Zanthias and Zanches of early modern drama are often the *agents* of sexual transgression, not its innocent victims. They are depicted as eagerly seeking sexual gratification with no regard to the dire consequences for their (often white, virtuous) mistresses. In John Marston’s *Sophonisba* (1604-6), for example, Zanthia, often considered the first Moorish maidservant to appear in the drama, stands in stark contrast to her mistress’s chastity, as she embarks on a sexual relationship with Syphax that culminates in her betrayal of her mistress to please him. Breaking her promise to ‘[b]e true’ to her mistress and conceal her hiding place from Syphax, Zanthia leads him to the place, promising to ‘be private

to [him] / As to [her] life' (3.1.170, 3.2.201-2). Zanthia's sexual availability was earlier registered in her suggestive permission to Syphax: 'You may do much' as she accepts his bribe to betray her mistress and in Syphax's admission that he 'use[s] this Zanthia, / [...] as our dogs drink dangerous Nile, / Only for thirst' (3.1.66, 3.2.202-4). Similarly, in John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612), Zanche, though reflecting rather than contrasting her mistress's moral character, is depicted lusting after two men, Flamineo and the disguised Duke. Her sexual forwardness is directly linked with her skin colour: 'I ne'er loved my complexion till now, / 'Cause I may boldly say without a blush / I love you' (5.1.203-4). She proceeds to share with the disguised Duke a highly suggestive dream in which he 'lay down by [her]' (5.3.231). Zanche's association with lust and transgressive sexuality has already been suggested through her facilitation in Act 1, scene 2 of her mistress's adultery. She literally provides the carpet on which the lovers will lie, as a stage direction specifies: '*Zanche brings out a carpet, spreads it and lays on it two fair cushions*'. She furthermore acts as commentator, a quasi-chorus figure, directing the audience's gaze to the lovers' unfolding sexual encounter: 'See now they close' (1.2.198). Fletcher, Massinger, and Field's *The Knight of Malta* (1616-9) stages another Moorish maidservant in the same vein. Standing in stark contrast to her virtuous mistress, Zanthia's skin colour codes her lustfulness. Offering herself to her lover, Mountferrat, and puzzled by his rejection, Zanthia asks: '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). Stage representations, then, construct the Moorish maidservant as an eager participant in sexual liaisons centred on the man's 'pleasure,' a white male's fantasy of Black sexual availability. In fact, she is often the pursuer and the spurned lover. This depiction stands in stark contrast to the lived realities of many Moorish female servants in the period. What can we make of the discrepancy?

The examples examined above suggest that early modern drama was involved in erasing the suffering of African female servants that often took the form of sexual abuse behind closed doors. 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).⁸ A maidservant would have found fending off a master who showed interest a very difficult and frightening experience indeed. But portrayals of African maidservants on the early modern stage do not reflect these realities. By depicting African maidservants as lustful,

promiscuous, and eager participants in sexual relationships with often socially and racially privileged characters who hold power over them, early modern drama glosses over the suffering endured by Moorish female servants in early modern homes who often found themselves preyed upon by lecherous masters and dismissed from service and thus turned homeless and destitute if they fell pregnant or if their mistresses discovered the liaisons. To centre this narrative is, of course, not to dismiss the possibility that some maidservants could have been willing participants in those relationships. However, we need to acknowledge the social, racial and gender imbalance at work in the master-maidservant relationship and interrogate the notion of consent in this context. It is time we identified the early modern erasure of the Moorish maidservant's suffering and approached their dramatic depictions in light of recent research on the Black presence in the period and the lived realities of Black people in early modern England.

Title Image: *Katharina aged 20* by Albrecht Dürer (1521), accessed here: [Albrecht Duerer's "Katharina" \(1521\) – Black Central Europe](#). Katharina was a Moorish maidservant Dürer met on his visit to the Netherlands in 1520-21. On Katharina, see Diane Wolfthal, 'Household Help: Early Modern Portraits of Female Servants,' *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 8 (2013), 5-52.

¹ 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. 280.

² For a fascinating exploration of those associations and their consequences, both early modern and modern, for Black men wrongfully accused of rape, see Benjamin Hilb, 'In Defense of Caliban: *The Tempest* and the Myth of the Black Rapist', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 71:3-4 (2020), pp. 143–170, <https://doi.org/10.1093/sq/quab028>.

³ Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500-1677: The Imprints of the Invisible* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p. 116.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Habib, *Black Lives*, p. 200; Kaufmann, 'Africans in Britain: 1500-1640'. Oxford DPhil Thesis, 2011, p. 201. G.K. Hunter, 'Othello and Colour Prejudice', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 53 (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 139-63; p. 145; 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.

⁶ Kaufmann, "'Making the Beast with two Backs" – Interracial Relationships in Early Modern England', *Literature Compass* 12/1 (2015), 22–37; pp. 27-8.

⁷ Habib, *Black Lives*, p. 200.

⁸ 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.