Race Relations in Shakespeare

In the old age black was not counted fair,
Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name;
But now is black beauty's successive heir,
And beauty slander'd with a bastard shame;....

Sonnet 127

Because his society generally preferred a fair to a dark skin, Shakespeare feels it necessary to justify his love for the Dark Lady in his sonnets. Skin colour is, objectively speaking, something neutral, but it has been given a value in conceptions of beauty. This kind of value is, probably, common to all ages and all communities: Ovid wrote,

> Nominibus mollire licet mala: fusca vocetur,
> Nigrior Illyrica cui pice sanguis erit:....
> (With names you can soften shortcomings; let her be called swarthy whose blood is blacker than Illyrian pitch;....)[1]

Aesthetic considerations of this kind have been confused with racial problems but I am virtually isolating racial problems for the purpose of this article. Racial problems first become important in Western literature in the age of Shakespeare, and this is historically logical. The Greeks and the Romans betrayed cultural prejudice, but not racial or colour prejudice,[2] though it is commonly thought that the Ancients considered the "barbarians" in the same way imperial-minded Europeans looked upon Asians and Africans.[3] The age of Shakespeare was the age when the impact of the "voyages of discovery" of, say, Columbus, Vespucci and Vasco da Gama was conspicuous; the age of Drake, Frobisher and Hakluyt; the age when the trade in slaves, guns and sugar between Western Europe, West Africa and the West Indies was thriving; and the age when the British East India Company was founded. Eldred Jones notes that "there were so many Negroes in London by 1601 that Elizabeth had cause to be 'discontented at the great number of Negars and blackmoors which are crept into the realm since the troubles between her Highness and the King of Spain', and for her to appoint a certain Caspar Van Zenden, merchant of Lubeck to transport them out of the country."[4] Thus Shakespeare is responding to the actual pressures of his age when he contemplates people alien to him racially.

His presentation of Shylock is a classic, and much-discussed, instance in this respect. Marlowe had surrendered to anti-semitism when he made Barabas in *The Jew of Malta* little more than a caricature of the conventional Jewish

1. Ovid, *Artis Amatoriae*, Book 2, 11.657-58. Translation—J. H. Mozley, *Ovid: The Art of Love and Other Poems* (London and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Heinemann and Harvard University Press, 1962 ed.), p. 111.
2. See M. I. Finley, "Race Prejudice in the Ancient World": *The Listener*, 1 February 1968 pp. 146-7.
3. e.g., Arthur Ravenscroft writes sensibly but falls into this error in his "Editorial: Mr Powell's Problem": *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (July 1969), No. 7, p. vi.
4. Eldred Jones, *Othello's Countrymen: The African in English Renaissance Drama* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 12-3.

evil usurer. Anti-semitism was no less strong when Shakespeare wrote *The Merchant of Venice*: it was at this time that Roderigo Lopez, a Portuguese Jewish doctor, had been tried and publicly executed for an alleged attempt to assassinate the Queen. No doubt Shakespeare was aware of prejudices against the Jews: Shylock is time and again referred to as dog, wild beast and devil. But the question is whether Shakespeare himself followed the general contemporary view of the Jew. Here one can be guided by these pregnant words of Claude Lanzmann:

> a novel is a microcosm: if the only coward in it is a Jew, the only Jew a coward, an inclusive if not a universal relation is established between these two terms.[5]

Lanzmann's paradigm applies to all forms of literature, not only to the novel, and to all the evils with which the Jews are traditionally associated, not only cowardice. It has an even wider relevance with which we are not concerned. In Shakespeare's play, the only inhumanly acquisitive person is a Jew, Shylock; the only important Jew is an inhumanly acquisitive person. He is a contrast to Antonio who is Christian and unworldly, though a fellow trader. Thus, in a way, Shakespeare follows the traditionally prejudiced view of the Jew and betrays "the taint of racism". But this is far from all that there is to Shylock, as shown by this scene in a street in Venice:

Solanio. How now, Shylock? What news among the merchants?

Shylock. You knew, none so well, none so well as you, of my daughter's flight.

Salerio. That's certain; I, for my part, knew the tailor that made the wings she flew withal.

Solanio. And Shylock, for his own part, knew the bird was fledge; and then it is the complexion of them all to leave the dam.

Shylock. She is damn'd for it.

Salerio. That's certain, if the devil may be her judge.

Shylock. My own flesh and blood to rebel!

Solanio. Out upon it, old carrion! Rebels it at these years?

Shylock. I say my daughter is my flesh and my blood.

Salerio. There is more difference between thy flesh and hers than between jet and ivory; more between your bloods than there is between red wine and Rhenish. But tell us, do you hear whether Antonio have had any loss at sea or no?

Shylock. There I have another bad match: a bankrupt, a prodigal, who dare scarce show his head on the Rialto; a beggar, that was us'd to come so smug upon the mart. Let him look to his bond. He was wont to call me usurer; let him look to his bond. He was wont to lend money for a Christian courtesy; let him look to his bond.

5. Quoted from Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance* (trans. Richard Howard, London: Penguin, 1968 ed.), p. 387.

Salerio. Why I am sure, if he forfeit, thou wilt not take his flesh. What's that good for?

Shylock. To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgrac'd me and hind'red me half a million; laugh'd at my losses, mock'd at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies. And what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions, fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufference be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute; and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

(Act III Scene 1.)

Shylock genuinely feels for his daughter and suffers because of her elopement. The prejudices against the Jews which he experiences in the course of his life in society, are real and are borne out by the behaviour of the Christians in the play. These prejudices, quite credibly, anger him and make him hard. The concluding lines suggest that revenge is an understandable human tendency, common to both Christians and Jews. Thus Shakespeare so presents Shylock that he has a convincing human quality which rises above the convention which stereotyped the Jews as monsters of greed.

When we turn to Shakespeare's treatment of relations between "white" people and "coloured" people, we must consider his presentation of the Indian boy in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice* and, above all, Othello. These are the only "coloured" people in Shakespeare when we use the term, "coloured", in its modern sense in the field of race relations.

In *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* (1595-6), Titania's changeling is "a lovely boy, stolen from an Indian king" (II. 1.). He is the cause of the quarrel between the King and the Queen of the fairies, but he never comes on stage. He is hardly interesting in his own right. But perhaps it is worth while attending to these lines from Theseus' famous set piece on "The lunatic, the lover, and the poet";

The lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
(V. 1.)

Helen, a Greek woman, is both fair and beautiful, whereas Shakespeare conceived the complexion of an Egyptian, even in *Antony and Cleopatra*, as both swarthy and ugly. Here Shakespeare is using the common notion that dark is

to fair as ugliness is to beauty. His point is that a person in love will overlook the physical defects of his lady and that he will even be attracted to a dark complexion from which people in their right mind would recoil.

The authorship and date of *Titus Andronicus* are matters on which there is much doubt and disagreement among scholars, but the consensus is that it is an early play (c. 1593) by Shakespeare. Aaron is, certainly, far more important to my theme than the Indian boy in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*. Shakespeare calls him a Moor and he is constantly referred to as such by the other characters in the play. But Aaron refers to his hair as a "fleece" of "woolly" curly hair (II.3.), while he describes his baby as "thick-lipped" (IV. 2.). These terms are particularly significant because that kind of hair and that kind of lips are a racial characteristic of negroes, not Moors. In medieval times and as late as the 17th century, "white Moors" were known, but it was commonly believed that Moors were mostly black or very swarthy; indeed, the word "Moor" was often used for "negro". These contemporary tendencies work with the imprecision of the conventional cursory Westerner's view of "coloured" people, an awareness of which made Joseph Conrad show Heyst telling Lena in *Victory*, "One Chinaman looks very much like another"[6] obviously, realistically speaking, one "coloured" man is no more like another than one "white" man is like another when regarded in the same way. Shakespeare has succumbed to the conventional influences so that he unconsciously portrays Aaron, not in terms of a Moor, but in terms of a composite figure of a "coloured" man.

The conventionality of Shakespeare's presentation of Aaron is prominent. *Titus Andronicus* is a melodrama and Aaron is its villain. Shakespeare is being quite conventional when he makes a black man the stage villain; the black complexion was regarded in his time as symbolic of, and an explanation of, villainy. When Saturninus, Emperor of Rome, takes the Queen of the Goths, Tamora, as his Empress, Aaron declares his intentions to the audience:

> Then, Aaron, arm thy heart and fit thy thoughts
> To mount aloft with thy imperial mistress,
> And mount her pitch whom thou in triumph long
> Hast prisoner held, fett'red in amorous chains,
> And faster bound to Aaron's charming eyes
> Than is Promethus tied to Caucasus.
> Away with slavish weeds and servile thoughts!
> I will be bright and shine in pearl and gold,
> To wait upon this new-made emperess.
> To wait, said I? To wanton with this queen,
> This goddess, this Semiramis, this nymph,
> This siren that will charm Rome's Saturnine,
> And see his shipwreck and his commonweal's.
> (II. 1.)

This is a conventional manifesto of a melodramatic villain. The metaphorical richness is one of the qualities of the poetry here that implies that Aaron is clever and that he enjoys his villainy, two traits which he shares with characters such as Marlowe's Barabas. His villainy is not sufficiently motivated. It is his

6. Joseph Conrad, *Victory* (London: Methuen, 1954 ed.), p. 145.

villainy, rather than his liaison with Tamora, that is central to the play. He is quick-witted, heartless and meets with success: he contrives the murder of Bassianus and implicates Quintus and Martius in it; he contrives the rape and mutilation of Lavinia. He finally over-reaches himself and goes unrepentantly to his death. His end enacts the simple moral that villainy does not pay.

Still, Aaron is not completely the stock Elizabethan Machiavel. He is "an irreligious Moor" (V. 3.) at a time when wicked Moors were supposed to be religious. He has one important redeeming quality, his affection for his child by Tamora. To the Nurse, his child is "A joyless, dismal, black, and sorrowful issue!", but to Aaron the child is "a beauteous blossom" (IV. 2.). He sacrifices his own safety, his very life, for the sake of the child. Still, he does not become a fully human evil-doer like Iago.

In his treatment of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-7), we saw how Shakespeare's understanding and humanity were much in advance of average views of the Jew. The same kind of advance is registered in his treatment of the "coloured" person in this play, the Prince of Morocco. The Prince is much less prominent in his play than Aaron was in his, but he is a fully human character. As one of Portia's suitors, he seems to me more interesting than Bassanio. He is not a mere outlandish figure as in a fair-ground pageant. The stage-directions in the Quarto describe him as "a tawny Moor all in white". The white costume suggests symbolically his inner worth, and an Elizabethan audience would easily gather this point as it was accustomed to this kind of simple symbolic presentation. Moreover, the fact that his complexion is "tawny" suggests that his character would not be as bad as those whose complexion is black. His opening words to Portia are:

> Mislike me not for my complexion,
> The shadowed livery of the burnish'd sun,
> To whom I am a neighbour, and near bred.
> (II.1.)

He is self-conscious about his colour and aware of prejudice against it, as Othello is going to be. But he is confident and proud and aware of his worth:

> I tell thee, lady, this aspect of mine
> Hath fear'd the valiant; by my love, I swear
> The best-regarded virgins of our clime
> Have lov'd it too.
> (II. 1.)

Yet he concludes his opening speech thus:

> I would not change this hue,
> Except to steal your thoughts, my gentle queen.
> (II. 1.)

This is a compliment to Portia from a courtly personage, but underlying it is a sense of inferiority common among "coloured" races in their dealings with dominant "white" races. Portia assures him that were it not for the fact that her choice is "hedg'd" by the terms of her father's will,

> Yourself, renowned Prince, then stood as fair
> As any comer I have look'd on yet
> For my affection.
> (II. 1.)

In the presence of the Prince of Morocco, she speaks with a polished hypocrisy which is a characteristic of sophisticated social intercourse as found at both Belmont and Venice. Portia adopts this manner to him partly because he is a man of high station and a man of means, though she belongs to a "ruling race" which generally speaking, despises his. Indeed, she had openly displayed to her maid (and to the audience) her conventional racialist aversion to men of his "hue" before she met the Prince:

> If he have the condition of a saint and the complexion of a devil,
> I had rather he should shrive me than wive me.
> (I. 2.)

Thus, Shakespeare ironically shows up Portia's manners in this regard for what they are. Our impression of her kind of dissimulation is confirmed by her words when the Prince leaves after choosing the wrong casket:

> A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go.
> Let all of his complexion choose me so.
> (II. 7)

Shakespeare's handling of race relations develops interestingly. In *The Merchant of Venice*, he clearly departs from conventional portrayals of "coloured" people and shows an awareness of the complexities of "coloured"—"white" relations. His development reaches its zenith in *Othello* (1604-5). The Prince of Morocco is, in a way, a sketch for the character of Othello: he is "coloured" but estimable; he selects the golden casket because of his simple idealism. Love between members of "coloured" and "white" races was a minor theme in *Titus Andronicus* (the Aaron-Tamora relationship), but in *Othello* it is central and handled with incomparably greater skill and insight. Even in Shakespeare's portrayal of Othello, there is an element of conventionality. In the opening scene of the play, Roderigo slightingly and significantly refers to Othello's "thick-lips"; though Shakespeare calls Othello a Moor and he is constantly referred to as such by the other characters, thick lips are (as I indicated earlier) a racial characteristic of negroes, not Moors. Thus, as in the case of Aaron, Shakespeare unconsciously portrays Othello, not in terms of a Moor, but in terms of a composite figure of a "coloured" man. But in other respects Shakespeare has advanced tremendously and Othello is presented with almost complete realism. This is indicated by the very fact that Othello is black but essentially different in character from Aaron; he is not just "tawny" like the Prince of Morocco, but still a hero, and a hero of full tragic proportions, too. It is a "white" man, Iago, who is in line with Aaron in point of character. Shakespeare has realised that the value of a human being is not determined by the colour of his skin or his race.

Othello is different from the other members of Venetian society in the play in physique and cultural background. They respect him as a successful general whom they cannot do without; at the same time, they look down on him as a social inferior because he is a "coloured" alien belonging to a race with little power. Even before he enters the stage, he is referred to slightingly: Iago calls him his "Moorship" and, as we have noticed, Roderigo mentions "the thick-lips" (I. 1.). Iago informs Brabantio that his daighter, Desdemona, has eloped with Othello:

> Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
> Is tupping your white ewe.
> (I. 1.)

Iago wants to excite Brabantio's revulsion from the match and he also reveals his own recoil in the process. The image from stock-breeding reduces the love of Othello and Desdemona to a coarse physical tie. It derives a part of its emotional force not only from the age difference between Othello and Desdemona but also from the racial difference. Iago and Roderigo are not the best representatives of Venetian society, but their attitudes to "coloured" people reflect, at least, average opinion. Brabantio is a respected counsellor of the Duke of Venice and we realize soon that his view of "coloured" people is no better. Prejudices against "coloured" people pervade Venetian society.

The tragedy of Othello's marriage to Desdemona is Shakespeare's central preoccupation in the play. The fact that the marriage is inter-racial, gives rise to problems which turn out to be important. Othello has to run away with Desdemona, a "white" Venetian, because of her father's opposition to their marriage. Brabantio's rage, when he discovers the elopement, reveals both the causes of his anger and of his opposition:

> O thou foul thief, where hast thou stow'd my daughter?
> Damn'd as thou art, thou has 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, fair, and happy,
> So opposite to marriage that she shunn'd,
> The wealthy curled darlings of our nation,
> Would ever have, to incur a general mock,
> Run from her guardage to the sooty bosom
> Of such a thing as thou—to fear, not to delight.
> (I. 2.)

Brabantio recoils from Othello's colour; he feels acutely the general's social inferiority and the social stigma of a mixed marriage. Clearly, he is a conservative "white" Venetian. He puts his case to the Duke of Venice in these terms:

> She is abus'd, stol'n from me, and corrupted,
> By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks;
> For nature so preposteriously to err,
> Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,
> Sans witchcraft could not.
> (I. 3.)

He considers the relationship unnatural, refers to the supernatural and other peculiar means which were conventionally supposed to be open to 'coloured' people. Thus, racial elements in society, external to Othello, affect his status and the course and position of his relationship with Desdemona.

Before he enters the stage, Othello is spoken of with conventional contempt and prejudice, and he is the subject of Iago's machinations. This contrasts with and accents Othello's nobility of character which is expressed in his stance and speech as soon as he comes on stage. His colour not only emphasises his alienness in Venetian society. It serves to stress his nobility, for (as I have indicated) this was not a quality of character usually associated with a man of his race; Shakespeare's audience would be, generally speaking, jolted. Still

Othello is not an idealized black man; he has certain serious weaknesses he is undone not so much by Iago's villainy as by these weaknesses of his. T. S. Eliot has observed Othello's "attitude of self-dramatization" and "*bovarysme*". F. R. Leavis has perceived "Othello's self-idealization, his promptness to jealousy and his blindness".[7] Othello is also too conscious of himself as a "coloured" alien in Venice. Iago's insinuations are persuasive partly because he bases them explicitly on his position as a "native" of Venice:

> I know our country disposition well:
> In Venice they do let God see the pranks
> They dare not show their husbands; their best conscience
> Is not to leave't undone, but keep't unknown.
>
> (III. 3.)

Othello, as an alien, respects the words of a "native", especially one whom he considers "honest". His kind of awareness of his race and colour makes him more vulnerable:

> Othello. I do not think but Desdemona's honest.
> Iago. Long live she so! and long live you to think so!
>
> Othello. And yet, how nature erring from itself—
> Iago. Ay, there's the point: as—to be bold with you—
> 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 disproportion, thoughts unnatural.
> But pardon me—I do not in position
> Distinctly speak of her; though I may fear
> Her will, recoiling to her better judgment,
> May fall to match you with her country forms.
> And happily repent.
>
> (III. 3.)

Iago so plays upon the differences between Othello and Desdemona, in "clime, complexion, and degree", that he grows far more conscious of them than of the feelings that brought them together. This mentality, in turn, reveals the inadequacies of those feelings, leads to a distorted view of them and to a greater credulity. He is no longer the masterful military captain:

> . . Haply for I am black
> And have not those soft parts of conversation
> That chamberers have, . .
>
> (III. 3.)

His loss of confidence is thus related to his colour and social position. The moment when Othello is almost convinced that his wife has been unfaithful, is revealing:

> . . Her name, that was as fresh
> As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd and black
> As mine own face.
>
> (III. 3.)

7. T. S. Eliot, "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca": *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963 ed.), pp.129-31. F. R. Leavis, "Diabolic Intellect and the Noble Hero": *The Common Pursuit* (London: Penguin, 1962 ed.), p. 146.

He links his wife's supposed deterioration with his own colour. When Emilia opens his eyes, he has already strangled Desdemona.

The problems that arise because Othello is a "coloured" alien in "white" Venetian society to which Desdemona belongs, play an important secondary role in Othello's tragedy. Leavis under-estimates their importance when he says that Othello's colour is to be taken merely as "emphasizing the disparity of the match".[8] But G. M. Matthews topples over on the other side when he elaborates a thesis that "the racial contrast between Othello and his associates" is "the core of the play".[9]

What inferences can we draw from Shakespeare's plays as to his own views on race relations? The answer is, I think none at all. To deduce Shakespeare's own opinions from the utterances of his characters is a dubious procedure. Words from *The Merchant of Venice* can be quoted to show that Shakespeare's view of the Jew is conventional; words can also be quoted from the same play to show that Shakespeare's view of the Jew is unconventional; Shylock can be played as villain and also as hero. Similarly, in *Othello*, it is Shakespeare's characters who enact the problems of a "coloured" alien in "white" society. Typically, Shakespeare not only treats his characters with an all-sided sympathy but also identifies himself with all of them. This is the way Shakespeare's genius works, and this does not seem to me a limitation on the value of his plays. We experience the problems of race relations as dramatized by him and are compelled to think afresh about this important aspect of the life of our time.

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8. Leavis, op. cit., p. 142.

9. G.M. Matthews," Othello and the Dignity of Man": Arnold Kettle (ed.), *Shakespeare in a Changing World* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1964), p. 124.

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