

'This alters not thy beauty': Face-paint, Gender and Race in Richard Brome's *The English Moor*

In the last ten years critics writing about blackness on the renaissance stage have done so paying less attention to the wider social discourse of cosmetics in the renaissance period than to discourses of race. While race and staged blackness are inextricable, the relationship that such materializations had to the cultural stigma of cosmeticized bodies is one that begs deeper consideration. Brome's curious work, *The English Moor* (1637), is a Caroline play that appears in the main to carry on an early modern preoccupation with black faces on the renaissance stage, particularly as, to make the distinction Dympha Callaghan makes between 'exhibition' and 'mimesis' in renaissance representations of blackness, the black faces in *The English Moor* are painted. As Callaghan says, 'racial difference on its most visible theatrical surface requires makeup'.¹ Racial categories during the early modern period were more often than not distinguishable through external features, colour being the most predominant. Discussions of Brome's play have indeed centred upon the blackface as a racial signifier. However, intended here is a discussion of the play's dramatisation of blackness and its signifying function within a wider cultural discourse of cosmetics. It would be useful to unpack the play's preoccupation with paintedness and gender before taking into account its then secondary relation to race.

The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries saw a proliferation of a cosmetics discourse in the form of anti-cosmetic literature as well as recipe manuals instructing women how to dye their hair, perfume and beautify their bodies. By the mid-seventeenth century, however, the recipe manuals and defences of cosmetics had begun to dominate the discourse, suggesting that beautification had not only demonstrated its commercial viability, but also its aesthetic appeal. The arguments against cosmetics nevertheless continued to loom. The cultural preoccupation with altering the body afforded playwrights the opportunity to construct a theatrical device that operated on stage in a variety of complex ways well into the 1600s.

The anti-cosmetic argument (much of which is drawn from the early church fathers, as well as from classical sources, such as Juvenal) was rooted mainly in a social anxiety about female mutability and sexuality, and was urgently compounded by the increasing visibility of women in the public sphere. The religious argument expressed disdain for the appropriation of divine materials. Re-creating the body was blasphemous:

This adulteration and changing of God's handiwork by painting women's hair to make it seem fair and yellow, or of their cheeks to make them look ruddy, or of their forehead to hide the wrinkles and to make them look smooth, is of the devil's invention and never of God's teaching. Therefore I must exhort all women to beware of counterfeiting, adulterating, or changing the fashion and form of God's work, either by yellow colour, black or red powder, or by any other medicine corrupting or changing the natural lineaments of favour of man or woman.²

Women too were, as Frances Dolan has quoted John Bulwer as saying, 'taking the pencil' into their own hands and usurping the privilege of the male artist;³ but even worse, for religious commentators, women were usurping God's creative power. Edgeworth asks, 'I pray you what arrogance and presumption is it for man or woman to set to the pencil or tool to make it better?'.⁴

English attitudes to race did indeed infiltrate the anti-cosmetics discourse, as there was a sense that painting with concoctions made of foreign ingredients or using foreign recipes would somehow permeate their identities, rendering them less English, and ironically less white, than before. John Bulwer, a seventeenth-century physician, demonstrates that this notion was still a concern in the 1650s, when he says: 'our English Ladies, who seeme to have borrowed some of their Cosmeticall conceits from Barbarous Nations, are seldome known to be contented with a Face of Gods making; for they are either adding, detracting, or altering continually, having many Fucusses in readiness of the same purpose'.⁵ What Bulwer fears is ethnic mutability of the female body, a concern which extends beyond the subjective body and becomes centred upon the body of the nation. Thus, the relationship between the naturally pale English complexion and the ideal of beauty was an intimate one. The normative standard of beauty was not peculiar to England. Nevertheless, in England and Europe, it had a particular relationship to racial superiority that was fundamentally linked to religion; the black/ white binary stemmed from the popular biblical oppositions between evil and good. Virginia Mason Vaughan reminds us that in religious plays from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries 'Lucifer's fall from grace was commonly signalled by a blackened face'.⁶ Ania Loomba observes that 'the devil, the Saracens, and other enemies of Christianity were represented as black; so were Jews, allies of the feared Mongol emperors, or the Turks'.⁷ With such powerful cultural associations as these, black paint on the renaissance stage then serves not only as a reminder of the increasing autonomy individuals had over their appearance, but also as

a threatening signal of the pervasiveness and infectiousness of foreigners, their culture, religion, and sexual behaviour.

Cultural assumptions about what constituted true beauty were undermined by the donning of face paint. True beauty for neo-Platonists like Marsilio Ficino begins in the soul. Idealized traits like virtue and modesty shine luminously through a woman's eyes and paint a natural beauty upon her cheeks. All women were expected to project this natural beauty which was achievable with a virtuous mind. The pressure to be beautiful in a world in which beauty was one of the key agents through which love and/or marriage could be secured was severe. The beauty standard in early modern England was, as we all know, a racially privileging standard: fair skin (fair meaning white, a glistening glow or shine), rosy cheeks, dark eyes, and coral lips.⁸ Poets had been painting this portrait for a while, using outlandish, but suitably florid enough imagery to analogise women into a position that rendered the perfect beauty impossible to attain. Women went to great lengths in early modern England to beautify themselves. The reasons were likely acceptance and marriage on the one hand, and creative autonomy and sexual power on the other (perhaps it was pleasing to attempt to create beauty, to paint; after all, artistic production was an activity from which women were more often than not excluded). During the seventeenth century, however, cosmeticized ladies were stigmatized. To be painted was to be proud, false, deceitful, bewitching, whorish. A painted face was packed full of lies. As Martyn Cognet writes in 1586, painting precedes 'from the Diuel a lyar, and deceiuer'.⁹ Famously and fantastically painted ladies like Mary Queen of Scots and Queen Elizabeth I haunted the imagination of English subjects well into the seventeenth centuries as painting became associated with political self-fashioning and deception. Painted ladies were likened to witches, as they were imagined to sit in their chambers with pots of ingredients concocting dangerous ointments and powders that would have the power not only to transform their bodies, but also to entrap and bewitch men. Painted boy actors fared no better in the anti-theatrical tracts as it was feared that the materials with which they constructed their impersonations of women could literally permeate their bodies and truly effeminise them. Yet painted faces were also deemed beautiful by some, erotic, attractive, dangerously, but pleurably so. Plays like Thomas Middleton's *The Second Maiden's Tragedy* (1611), in which an artist is commissioned to paint a dead Lady for the Tyrant's erotic pleasure, demonstrates the alluring fantasy, the Pygmalion fantasy, that served as a poignant reminder of the power of art to compel one either to love—or

to lust, in the tyrant's case. This fantasy is a theme related to paintedness that Shakespeare has been known to draw upon, for example in Bassanio's apostrophe to Portia's painted counterfeit in *The Merchant of Venice*: 'Here in her hairs / The painter plays the spider, and hath woven / A golden mesh t'untrap the hearts of men / Faster than gnats in cobwebs' (3.2.120–3); or in Paulina's admonition to Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* not to kiss the statue of Hermione: 'The ruddiness upon her lip is wet. / You'll mar it if you kiss it, stain your own / With oily painting' (5.3.81–3).¹⁰ Thus, if, as Jean Howard remarks, 'ideology is enacted through all the theatre's practices', then the painted face in the theatre, black or white, staged a complex negotiation between multiple and conflicting significations related to sexual politics, gender, and art, as well as to race.¹¹

Blackface on the stage by the 1630s was nothing new, but was still powerfully resonant with a cultural ideology that was not only tied to race and gender, but also to cosmetics. Beauty and its relationship to sexuality are at the centre of the drama in many representations. But ideas about what was beautiful were evolving as commentators began to recognise the pervasiveness of painted faces in the social sphere, at court and on stage. Critics like Kim F. Hall have observed that if one looks closely enough at the spectrum of writings that are about blackness in the period, a counter-racist discourse emerges.¹² Plays like *Love's Labour's Lost*, for example, or Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, specifically 127 and 130, introduce a competing narrative through which it can be argued that whiteness or 'fairness' is not the only visual stimulus to love and/ or sexual desire:

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 slandered with a bastard shame:
For since each hand hath put on nature's power,
Fairing the foul with art's false borrowed face,
Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower,
But is profaned, if not lives in disgrace. (Sonnet 127, 1–8)¹³

Hall points out that there are a variety of poems that offer defences of blackness and actually promote it as another form of beauty. One of the underlying premises in Biron's defence of black beauty in *Love's Labour's Lost* was that 'cosmetic tincture was an art that was linked to false colours'; as Sonnet 127

suggests, 'the lack of authenticity in a painted face gave rise to the notion that beauty no longer has value, particularly white beauty'.¹⁴ Biron says:

O, if in black my lady's brows be decked,
It mourns that painting and usurping hair
Should ravish doters with a false aspect,
And therefore is she born to make black fair. (4.3.254–7)

Equally, Quicksands, the groom who deploys the black paints in *The English Moor*, defends blackness on the same grounds: 'Is not an Ethiopie's face his workmanship / As well as the fair'st Ladies? nay, more too. / Then hers, that daubs and makes adulterate beauty?' (3. 1, pp. 37–8).¹⁵ Aaron the Moor contends in *Titus Andronicus* that blackness cannot be inscribed upon, nor can it be washed off. Effectively, what you see is what you get. This discourse is inevitably complicated by the impersonation of blackness in staged representations. The irony of Aaron's comment, spoken by a white actor in black face, would not go unmissed in its own time. Regardless of the counter-discourse then, this irony would substantiate the claim that whiteness is superior to blackness.

Undeniably, in the early modern period, blackness had an ambiguity—blackness was discernible, at once material and metaphorical—and attitudes toward it were complex and fluid. In the third book of his artists' manual, Giovanni Lomazzo sets out the uses for colours and pigments as well as their significations:

In diuerse places of the olde testament, *blacke* is taken for a token of vnhappinesse ... wherefore some thinke that blacknesse is a signe of madnesse and folly ... Virgil AEN[eid]. 3 writeth that in great tempests which bring heauinesse and threaten death, they vsed to sacrifice a blacke lambe ... The *Danish* woemen after the destruction of their country, arrayed themselues all in *Black*... . *Pythagor* was wonte to saie, that blacke appertained to the nature of euill... *Aletto and the three Furies of hell were represented in blacke*. Aletto and the three Furies of hell were represented in blacke, according to Virgill AENEid. 7.¹⁶

Stemming from its biblical associations with the devil, and classical associations with hell, blackness was a symbol of damnation, sinfulness and by extension, debauchery. In *The English Moor* Millicent draws upon these age-old stereotypes as she finds herself being transformed by Quicksands' box of black painting: 'Would you blot out/ Heavens workmanship?' (3.1, p. 38). Because

of the colour of the paint, Millicent is wary of its associations with hell, but what is often overlooked in critical commentary about this scene is that this line echoes the anti-cosmetic notion that claims God's handiwork has been defiled by the corrosive agent of paint. Similarly Philip Massinger's *The Bashful Lover* (1636) stages a scene in which a quack physician is attacked by the Duke he is attempting to paint with cosmetics:

What a Mock-man property in they intent
 Wouldst thou have made me? a mere Pathick to
 Thy devilish art, had I given suffrage to it. (5.1, p. 76)¹⁷

In a play written at roughly the same time as Brome's, Massinger represents makeup as the device that bedevils and associates it with lechery, as is clear from the Duke's continued tirade: 'Or plaister up these furrows in my face,/ As if I were a painted Bawd or Whore?' (5.1, p. 76). What Brome's play does is knit together these popular devices, painted faces and racial impersonation, to confuse the issue. What is it people are actually afraid of? What is Millicent's main concern?

Because blackness was aligned with the exotic, the Other, painted blackness was able to literalize anxieties about the mutability of identity and the very loss of Englishness itself. Matthew Steggle's study of the play rightly observes that race is conflated with cosmetics and that the imagery surrounding the scenes in which Millicent is being painted gestures toward the east and the play's concern with international trade.¹⁸ But what Steggle does not take into account fully is the relationship colour has to sexuality, even though he cites Efstathiou-Lavabre's observation that 'what gives the scene [where Quicksands paints his wife] a particular frisson is the audience's growing awareness that Quicksands is sexually excited by the act of defacement he is committing'.¹⁹ 'Would you make/ An Negro of me?' (3.1, p. 38), asks Millicent. But this is a question which implies more than just the interdependency of identity and material ingredients within the early modern imagination; it demonstrates the belief that material properties had the power to change the essence of things and people. Would the black paint have the power to transform Millicent's essential nature as it superficially alters her complexion? It is the paint *and* the blackness that creates a double tension in this scene. Yet blackness, like femininity, was potentially and simply an effect of a greater cause for concern: material ingredients—paints—and their transforming power.

We know that often artist's pigments provided the raw materials for cosmetic paints, as Lomazzo's artistry tract tells us. To create a white fucus (base foundation), women often used ceruse, which was a blend of white lead and vinegar. The same concoction is used to create the glowing pallor of portrait sitters. Thus, the very agent of cosmetic whitening had an aesthetic utility already. But this blend was poisonous and the use of other mineral ingredients such as mercury sublimate added yet another stigma to the cosmeticised lady. She then became a poisonous trap—a fear of female sexual contamination literalized. But curiously, and perhaps the reason for Shakespeare's comment, 'now is black beauty's successive heir' (Sonnet 127), the materials likely used to paint faces black were not poisonous. They were literally harmless. Lomazzo says to make black pigment or colour, burn ivory, or use 'the shells of *almonds* burnt, *ballblacke*, *Lampe-blacke*, and blacke made of a kind of rubbish called blacke earth'.²⁰ Dymrna Callaghan traces the use of blackface to village theatricals in which 'blackface consisted of soot while performances at court and in the theatre used charred cork mixed with a little oil, "the oil of hell", as it is referred to in *Lust's Dominion*'.²¹ Quicksands, playing the cosmetician, knows that the paint is harmless physically: 'Be fearless love; this alters not thy beauty /... Take pleasure in the scent first; smell to't fearlessly, / And taste my care in that, how comfortable / 'Tis to the nostril, and no foe to feature' (3.1, p. 38).

In her study of blackness on the early modern stage, Virginia Mason Vaughan pauses briefly to consider the implications of using black makeup: 'whatever ingredients were used, the application of black pigment must have been messy and on occasion the paint must have rubbed off from one actor to another'.²² But as practitioners at Shakespeare's Globe on Bankside have found, an egg glaze seals the pigment and may, therefore, allow actors to kiss one another without any transference of paint. Egg glazes are found in contemporary recipes for cosmetics, and we know actors in court revels have used egg glazes to 'trym' their 'vizardes' to create a shimmering glow that could be easily captured in a candlelit hall.²³ The question that Vaughan does not raise is how a boy actor, who would be painted white to play female part, would then be painted black? Is the actor painted white already? Later on in the play when 'the disguised and blackened Phillis is told to leave the stage "and let instant tryall be made/ To take the blackness off"', 'she reenters approximately thirty lines later, whitefaced, much to her lover's chagrin'.²⁴ The issue becomes even more complicated when we pause to consider what business was happening backstage during those thirty odd lines. Common methods for removing makeup in the seventeenth century included using linen cloths dipped in

distilled water or in almond oil, or using an exfoliating mixture of milk and breadcrumbs to scrub off not only makeup but dead skin, leaving a brighter, whiter complexion. However, the latter method was certainly not practical in the theatres where timing was of the essence. Very likely, makeup was removed backstage with cloths and water, and burnt cork, or soot would have come off quite easily using this method. To reappear on stage in white face, the actor playing Phillis would have to have had some help backstage; either tiremen/tirewomen or fellow actors could assist, one with removal, the other with application. Makeup was a standard theatrical tool and face-painting scenes were common theatrical devices. The tiring house had to have been equipped with the various materials necessary for the application (brushes, boxes, paints, sealants) and for the speedy removal of makeup (cloths, distilled water, oils).

The rhetoric of the masque in which Phillis is brought in decked with jewels and in blackface serves to reinforce the play's fundamental conclusion that blackness is ultimately not preferable to white because the two colours are distinctive categories of sexual morality. The ingredients that comprise beauty are chastity, modesty and virtue, characteristics exemplified by Millicent and whiteness. Whiteness was a cultural signifier of chastity: thus, Phillis's actual face does not produce the desired response from Nathaniel Baneless. Because he is a philanderer, a colour-blind one at that, having admitted to being with women of all colours and race, he demonstrates the cultural association of blackness with sexual lasciviousness once he realises he has been deceived by her cosmeticized face, and that she is, after all, not black: 'The devil looks ten times worse with a white face,/ Give it me black again' (5.3, p. 82). His words reinforce the view that the white/black binary in this play is linked more intimately to female sexuality than to race. Baneless is addicted to Phillis's blackness because, according to early modern chromatic symbolism, it means she is sexually promiscuous—like Shakespeare's dark lady, who is at once desirable and sexually barbarous. Unlike the message in *Titus Andronicus*, *Loves Labour's Lost* and Sonnet 127, *The English Moor* designates blackness too as an unreliable register of truth or beauty; in this play, blackness is still 'arts false borrowed face', and thus dramatizes more fiercely a cultural misogyny that is linked ever with beauty and sexuality. The by-product of the play is the concern with race or the exotic, and concepts of race are produced by the relationship that blackness has to sexual lasciviousness. Cultural racism is thus rooted in misogyny. A woman who has lost her moral reputation has her honour blackened. As Desdemona's face is metaphorically blackened by Othello's harsh judgement, we realise that not just race but also female sexuality is at the centre of Shakespeare's play. There is very little doubt

that *The English Moor* registers the religious anxiety and ethnocentric fear of the Moorish presence in Europe in the early modern period, even though, as Steggle has pointed out, “Real” blackness ... seems unrepresentable in the world of *The English Moor*.²⁵ Such fears can be exorcised through a theatrical episode in which a woman, forced to impersonate blackness, emerges triumphantly at the end of the play in whiteface, escaping containment and subjectivity, magically privileging one race above another, but more emphatically privileging female chastity over sexual promiscuity. The theatrical device of cosmetic disguise brings to light the contemporary fixation upon the painted female body and thus engages primarily with the cultural discourse of cosmetics and its primary function: to manage the sexual behaviour and appearance of women.

FARAH KARIM-COOPER

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- 1 Dympna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage* (London and New York, 2000), 77–8.
 - 2 Roger Edgeworth, Sermon, in Paul A. Welsby (ed.), *Sermons and Society* (Harmondsworth, 1970), 50.
 - 3 See Frances E. Dolan, ‘Taking the pencil out of God’s hand: art, nature, and the face-painting debate in early modern England’, *PMLA* 108 (1993)..
 - 4 Edgeworth, Sermon, 50.
 - 5 John Bulwer, *Anthropometamorphosis: or Man Transform’d* (London, 1653), 260.
 - 6 Virginia Mason-Vaughan, ‘Everyday Exotics’, *Around the Globe* 33 (Summer 2006), 34.
 - 7 Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism* (Oxford, 2002), 36.
 - 8 Agnolo Firenzuola’s 1548 treatise on beauty marks out these features as essential to female beauty: See Konrad Eisenbichler and Jacqueline Murray (eds and trans.) *On the Beauty of Women* (Philadelphia, 1992).
 - 9 Martyn Cognet, *Politique Discourses vpon Troth and Lying* (London, 1586), 183.
 - 10 All Shakespeare quotations from the plays come from Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, and Katharine Eisamn Maus (eds), *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York, 1997).
 - 11 Jean E. Howard, ‘Cross-Dressing, Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England’, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39.4 (1988), 439.

- 12 See Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*, (Cornell, 1995), 240.
- 13 Katherine Duncan-Jones (ed.), *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, The Arden Shakespeare (Nashville, 1997).
- 14 Farah Karim-Cooper, *Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama* (Edinburgh, 2006), 143.
- 15 All references to *The English Moor* come from the 1658 edition.
- 16 Giovanni Lomazzo, *A Tracte containing the Artes of Curious Paintinge, Carvinge & buildinge*, trans. Richard Haydocke (London, 1598), 113. This curious comment in the first part of this quotation deserves further investigation—as a precedent for Anne of Denmark's bold appearance in black paint in Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness*.
- 17 All references to Philip Massinger's *The Bashful Lover* are from the 1655 edition.
- 18 Matthew Steggle, *Richard Brome: Place and Politics on the Caroline Stage* (Manchester, 2004), 123–30.
- 19 Ibid, 127.
- 20 Lomazzo, *The Curious Artes of Paintinge*, 99.
- 21 Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women*, 78.
- 22 Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Performing Blackness on English Stages, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 2005), 13.
- 23 See Peter Cunningham (ed.), *Extracts from the Accounts of the Revels at Court, in the Reigns of Queen Elizabeth I and King James I* (London, 1842), 84.
- 24 Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, 14.
- 25 Steggle, *Richard Brome*, 129.

Facing Places in Richard Brome's *The Weeding of Covent Garden*

Much like its namesake square, Richard Brome's play *The Weeding of Covent Garden* deliberately essays into speculative territory, undertaking an imaginative exercise in urban planning on a very public stage. Although Brome's title suggests that Covent Garden was a site not only familiar to audiences, but indeed so long-established and overgrown as to require weeding, this area of London was actually a massive construction project just starting to take shape in 1632–3, when the play itself was likely plotted and performed.¹ With a design commissioned from Inigo Jones, then at the height of his fame as Surveyor of the King's Works, the fourth Earl of Bedford set out to transform a largely undeveloped patch of land, used as pasturage since the times of