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'The Best-regarded Virgins of Our Clime': Unseen Black Women, Race, and the Construction of White Femininity in *The Merchant of Venice*

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ABSTRACT

Using the tools of premodern critical race studies and whiteness studies, this article brings to critical visibility the Black women Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* evokes in passing, only to leave them on the margins of the text. Unseen and unheard, those women's alleged preferences in romantic partners are reported second-hand by the Prince of Morocco. It has become something of a critical and theatrical tradition to interpret this moment as revealing his alleged lustfulness, thus indulging in a sensational (and Orientalist) reading of him and them. I challenge this reading, proposing, instead, that the Prince's evocation of his countrywomen should be inserted within the play's (and early modern England's) larger investment in the construction of white femininity and the attendant fashioning of an emerging national white identity. The Moroccan virgins, I argue, are one strategy the Prince adopts to signal his proximity to patriarchal whiteness by announcing to his audience both on- and offstage his subscription to the gendered, white values which elevate white women at the expense of Black women. A white man's fantasy of a Black man, the Prince of Morocco deploys Black women as a tool to elevate white femininity and to announce his assimilability into Portia's white world.

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This article seeks to bring to critical visibility the Black women Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* evokes in passing, only to leave offstage, on the margins of the text, and outside of its dramatic and social world. Unseen and unheard, those absented women's alleged preferences in romantic partners are reported second-hand by the Prince of Morocco as he prepares to make his choice of casket.¹ The nameless, offstage Black women of the Prince's

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¹I am echoing Kim F. Hall's description of the Moor impregnated by Gobbo as 'unheard, unnamed, and unseen' ('Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?', 89).

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land have remained largely invisible in the critical literature as well. Kim F. Hall has observed that '[w]hile feminists are increasingly uncovering the voices and presence of white Englishwomen', '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'.² *The Merchant of Venice's* Moroccan women are a case in point. When discussed in the literature at all, their function tends to be, problematically, reduced to that of revealing the Prince's supposed promiscuity through their readily assumed sexual availability which critical literature, colluding with the attitudes of the play's white characters, takes for granted.

It is important to note at the outset that the virgins the Prince mentions, being Moroccan, are not necessarily somatically 'Black'. Moors, as inhabitants of North Africa, were referred to in the period, were sometimes, though not universally, understood to range in skin colour from light-skinned to Black. In George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (1588), virtuous Muslims are described as light-skinned (that is, white adjacent) while wicked ones are, tellingly, assigned blackness. The term 'clime' in 'the best-regarded virgins of our clime' certainly connects the women to the same racial principles of proximity to the sun that the Prince uses to describe his own dark complexion, implying that they are somatically and racially Black. However, early modern perceptions of racial difference were often the stuff of fantasy, subscribing to a generalised idea of 'Otherness' attached to non-Christian, non-white, and non-European peoples, what Ambereen Dadabhoy and Nedda Mehdizadeh call 'white projections of racial difference'.³ In the early modern period, religion was often racialised and imagined as physically embodied. As Ambereen Dadabhoy notes, '[r]epresentations of Islam and Muslims often [had a] color-coded dimension, particularly on the English stage', adding:

if we are looking for Muslims in Shakespeare's work, we can definitely (maybe) find them in his 'Moors.' Somatic, physical, and epidermalized difference is often yoked to religious difference in the period. Even if the characters are not represented as brown and dark-skinned African men (and in my view both the Prince of Morocco and Othello are) [and women], the works offer enough evidence to demonstrate the spiritual blackening of Muslims.⁴

Daniel J. Vitkus locates associations between Muslim identity and Blackness in early modern stereotypes about Black Africans: "The alleged sexual excesses of the Muslims or Turks were linked to those of the Moors or Black Africans, who are frequently described in the Western tradition as a people naturally

²Cited in Travitsky and Seeff, *Attending to Women*, 284. I also note the presence of another Black woman in the play, the Moor impregnated by Gobbo and mentioned in passing in 3.5. I would like to refer the reader to my chapter on this character which is forthcoming from Bloomsbury in the edited volume *Shakespeare and Early Modern Misogyny*.

³Dadabhoy and Mehdizadeh, *Anti-racist Shakespeare*, 9.

⁴Dadabhoy, *Shakespeare through Islamic Worlds*, 17.

given to promiscuity'. Additionally, he writes, 'the black or dark skin of Moors and other Muslim people of color was compared by fair-skinned Europeans with the color of the devils, burnt black by the flames of hell. The stage Moor of early modern Europe was an actor in blackface'. As such,

Whether imagined as a black-skinned African Moor, or as a robed and turbaned Turk, the physical, external difference of the Islamic Other was often read as a sign of demonic darkness and barbaric ignorance. This point may be linked to one more aspect of Western stereotyping—the representation of Saracens, Moors, and Turks as embodiments of evil, [...] [associated with] black magic, occult power, and the worship of devils or idols.⁵

As he pleads with Portia to look past his 'complexion' and not judge him unworthy of her hand based on his perceived racial difference, the Prince makes reference to the 'best-regarded virgins of our clime' who, he proceeds to inform her, have 'loved' his skin colour.⁶ Granted no soliloquies, the Prince's motives remain inaccessible and unclear, but it is possible to read this information as an attempt to either stress the culturally constructed nature, thus randomness, of sexual preference, or to encourage Portia to adopt a similar view to the Moroccan women's, taking a leaf out of their book, as it were. It has, however, become something of an established critical and theatrical tradition to interpret this brief comment as revealing the Prince's alleged lustfulness, some even identifying him as an embodiment of the ubiquitous, then and now, stereotype of the Black rapist weaponised, for example, in *The Tempest's* Caliban and featured in countless contemporary plays on Islam.⁷ In fact, this moment, as Boika Sokolova asserts, is often staged as one of 'sexual bragging', accompanied 'by the now usual stage business of male leering and rude gestures', and delivered with 'self-congratulatory vanity'.⁸ The critical literature often mirrors and shapes such staging choices. Arthur Little Jr., for example, writes that the Prince 'seems parodically to indict himself when he suggests to Portia that he has had sex with the "best-regarded virgins" of his clime', adding later on that the Prince's 'aggressive claim to the virgins of his clime borders on rape'.⁹ Citing Little Jr. with approval, Gustav Ungerer has read the Prince of Morocco's statement as 'an unwitting self-description as a violator of women'.¹⁰ In a gloss on 'scimitar', the play's editor M. M. Mahood even supplies a stage direction and scripts a reaction to the action she imagines happening here: 'Morocco perhaps draws and flourishes it [the scimitar], to the alarm of Portia's attendants'.¹¹

⁵Vitkus, 'Early Modern Orientalism', 224–5.

⁶Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2.1.10–11. Further quotations are cited parenthetically in the text.

⁷See Little Jr., *Shakespeare Jungle Fever*; Hilb, 'In Defense of Caliban'.

⁸Sokolova, 'Reading Morocco', 98–9. Sokolova is, to my knowledge, the only scholar who has offered this reading, but she does not develop it.

⁹Little Jr., *Shakespeare Jungle Fever*, 63, 71.

¹⁰Ungerer, 'Portia and the Prince of Morocco', 113.

¹¹Mahood, ed. *The Merchant of Venice*, 2.1.24. The edition was printed three times, most recently in 2018.

Independently from the text, the Prince is, thus, framed as a source of fear and potential (sexual) violence to Portia and her household. More recently, Murat Ögütçü has suggested that ‘the Prince of Morocco’s swaggering courting of Portia is as exaggerated as, possibly, the size and the provenance of his scimitar’, further adding that the Prince uses his sexually suggestive, ‘phallic scimitar’ to ‘impress Portia [...] by insinuating [his] strength as a lover’.¹² Ian Smith, building on the foundational work of Toni Morrison, has taught us to be alert to the way readers and spectators of early modern drama have historically been positioned as white, a fact which explains the perception of Shakespeare’s work as ‘universal’ and as embodying the essence of what it is to be human.¹³ Taking a lead from Morrison and Smith, this article challenges the dominant critical and theatrical reading of the scenes involving the Prince of Morocco and his relationship to the Moroccan women he evokes. I propose, instead, that the Prince of Morocco’s evocation of his countrywomen should be inserted within the play’s (as well as early modern England’s) larger investment in the construction of white femininity and the attendant fashioning of an emerging national white identity. A white man’s fantasy of a Black man, the Prince brings up the Black virgins of his country at a moment when he is attempting to position himself as white, ingratiating himself within the white world of Portia at the expense of those invisibilised women. The nameless Moroccan virgins, mentioned and forgotten in the same breath, I argue, are one strategy the Prince adopts to signal his proximity to patriarchal whiteness by announcing to his white audience both on- and offstage his subscription to the gendered, white values which elevate white women at the expense of Black women, a move which, of course, fails.

The first section below examines the strategies the Prince of Morocco employs to position himself as white adjacent, specifically the theory he chooses to explain (away) his Blackness, his deliberate choice of attire, and his rhetorical recreation of contemporary emblematic and pictorial motifs relating to whitewashing Black skin. The following section turns to the Prince’s reference to Moroccan women, reading it within the context of his other attempts to ‘act white’ and discussing it in relation to contemporary (European) understanding of the conjunction between virginity, chastity, and whiteness.¹⁴ The final movement of the article reads Portia’s response to the Prince’s unsuccessful courtship alongside early modern constructions of African patriarchy as ineffective in policing Black female bodies and, as such, inferior to white European patriarchy exemplified by her own deceased father.

¹²Ögütçü, ‘Of Scimitars and Shakespeare’.

¹³Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, xiv; Smith, *Black Shakespeare*, 7; Hendricks, ‘I Saw Them in My Visage’, 191–97.

¹⁴I borrow the phrase ‘act white’ from Karim-Cooper (*The Great White Bard*, 133) where she uses it in relation to Othello.

'Mislike Me Not': Appealing to Whiteness

Recent critical work on the Prince of Morocco, notably by Hassana Moosa, has stressed the way the Prince 'attempts to mitigate his difference by illustrating his racial and religious sameness' to the white, Christian audience he addresses before he makes his choice of casket.¹⁵ Moosa has insightfully identified 'two strategies [he employs] to counteract his identity as a "stranger" and the effect he expects this might have on his desirability': his reference to the biological nature of blood which argues for human sameness and his use of Christian imagery and vocabulary to downplay his religious difference.¹⁶ Building on Moosa's work, I want to draw attention to other strategies the Prince employs to signal his proximity to whiteness. These include the reference to the Black virgins of his land, among many others.

In his first audience with Portia in Act 2, scene 1, the Prince immediately draws attention to his skin colour, revealing not only an awareness of European anti-Black prejudice, but also betraying his internalisation of this prejudice.¹⁷ In the period, 'complexion', of course, referred to the body's humoral makeup as well as to its physical appearance, including skin colour.¹⁸ The Prince, though, clearly has the latter in mind. His 'complexion', he has come to believe, needs explaining away, excusing, apologising for, a belief shared by another of Shakespeare's somatically Black characters, Othello, whose similar subscription to negative perceptions of his Blackness is preyed on by Iago.¹⁹ As Hall writes, 'the Prince of Morocco must draw attention away from his dark skin in order to be considered a suitor', shrewdly capturing the sense of contradiction between being 'Black' and being a 'suitor' to the white Portia. The Prince's opening plea, 'Mislike me not for my complexion', hopes to accomplish what Othello successfully does: getting a white, privileged woman to see 'his visage in his mind', bypassing his skin colour completely.²⁰ Critics have correctly identified a link between the Prince's plea and the Biblical Song of Songs' Black bride: 'I am blacke, O daughters of Jerusalem, but comelie' (Geneva 1:4–5). I would like to underline additionally the way the Prince adopts a strategy which constructs his Blackness as not inherent, fixed, or unchangeable. Significantly, this was exactly the strategy Bishop Joseph Hall employed in his 1609 explication of this verse, 'remov[ing]', as Kim F. Hall notes, 'any taint of "natural" blackness from the woman': 'Looke not therefore disdainfully upon me, because I am blackish, & dark of hew: for, *this colour is not so much naturall to me; as caused by that continual heate of afflictions wherewith I have bene*

¹⁵Moosa, 'Marking Muslims', 121.

¹⁶Ibid., 124–5. Of course, as Moosa notes, blood was racialised in the period. See also Britton, 'Red Blood on White Saints', 66; Martínez, Nirenberg, and Torres, eds., *Race and Blood in the Iberian World*.

¹⁷bell hooks defines 'internalized racism' as 'people of color/black people [...] see[ing] the world through the lens of white supremacy' (*Black Looks*, 1). See also Karim-Cooper, *The Great White Bard*, 129.

¹⁸See Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*.

¹⁹Karim-Cooper, 'Emotions, Gesture, and Race', 71–2.

²⁰The quote is from *Othello*, ed. by Honigmann, 1.3.253.

usually scorched' (emphasis mine).²¹ When Shakespeare was writing the play, various explanations for the 'causes' of Blackness were proposed perhaps triggered by increased contact with Black people and people of colour both in England and on global shores.²² However, the Prince deliberately chooses to insert his Blackness within a discourse on the origins of Black skin which was increasingly debunked in the period: 'my complexion,' he explains, is 'The shadowed livery of the burnished sun, / To whom I am a neighbour and near bred' (2.1.2–3).

Many early modern observers found the Prince's chosen theory problematic, pointing out that neither did the skin colour of white Europeans residing in Africa turn Black nor did that of Africans living in Europe become white. In his *A True Discourse of the Late Voyage of Discoverie* of 1578 (reprinted in Hakluyt, 1600), George Best, an English voyager, replaced the climatological explanation with what he described as 'an infection', in effect rendering Blackness a disease.²³ Another theory circulating in the period explained Blackness in terms of the role of the maternal imagination, revealing male anxieties about female sexuality and minds. Women who thought of, or saw, a Black man at the critical moment of conception, so the theory goes, could conceive a Black child. Yet another contemporary attempt to explain the 'problem of Blackness' revolved around the curse of Ham, the disobedient son of Noah. Copulating with his wife in direct challenge to his father's orders, Noah's punishment took the form (literally) of a Black son, Chus, who settled in Africa and fathered Black Moors.²⁴ While none of these theories was ever accepted completely, the 'whole point of explaining black skin', as Anu Korhonen asserts, 'was to fix whiteness as the origin and the norm'.²⁵ All those explanations, as Hall had earlier observed, 'share the assumption that blackness is an aberration and whiteness the original'.²⁶ Tellingly, there were no theories to explain whiteness.²⁷ 'Blackness' in all those theories, to borrow Sujata Iyengar's words, 'is not essential, although it is inherited; it is an "accident," a "dusky" cover for the Africans' natural whiteness'.²⁸ Even if we remain sceptical about the cultural impact of 'learned' rejections of the climatological theory, it remains a fact that other explanations for Blackness were in circulation. The Prince of Morocco

²¹Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 97.

²²Hall (ibid., 95) writes: 'The causes of blackness were a great mystery that, although discussed by the ancients (Ptolemy, among others), seems not to have been of any real importance until the later fifteenth century and the opening of trade'. On the Black presence in early modern England, see Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives*; Kauffmann, *Black Tudors*.

²³Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 11. See also Purchas *His Pilgrimage* (1613): 'if Blackness 'proceed[s] from the direct beames of the Sunne [...] why then shoulde all the West Indies which stretch from the one Tropike to the other, haue no other people? [...] why should Africa yeeld white people in Melinde?' (Qtd. in Boose, 'The Begetting of a Lawful Race', 42–3).

²⁴Ibid., 44.

²⁵Korhonen, 'Washing the Ethiopian White', 109–110.

²⁶Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 13.

²⁷On the construction of whiteness as a universal standard against which non-white people are judged, see Dyer, *White*.

²⁸Iyengar, *Shades of Difference*, 10.

deliberately chooses this theory as his first strategy to signal both the possibility that his colour could potentially change when he is not subject to the heat of the sun and to suggest that his 'complexion' is skin deep.

The Prince's rhetorical whitewashing of his skin colour is made literally visible in his choice of attire. Critical readings have often pointed out that the 'all-white' garment in which the Prince is clad should be understood as the loose-fitting, white *thob* worn by Muslims partially visible, for example, in the painting of the Moroccan ambassador to Elizabeth I's court, Abd el-Ouahed ben Messaoud ben Mohammed Anoun, who spent six months in England in 1600.²⁹ Exploring ways in which Islam and Muslim characters were materialised on the early modern stage, Matthew Dimmock notes the importance of the colour green in Islamic cultures.³⁰ However, Dimmock accepts the stage direction instructing the Prince to enter the stage in 2.1 'all in white' as participating in a theatrical and print tradition which imagined Muslims as wearers of white. Contemporary plays as well as earlier material (from Henry VIII's masques and mummeries to the masque of the 'Six Turkes Magistrates' before Philip and Mary), explored by Dimmock, certainly suggest that Muslims, particularly those who, like the Prince of Morocco, originated in the Maghreb or North Africa (known as the Barbary Coast in the period) were often associated with the colour green.³¹ In William Percy's *Mahomet and His Heaven* (1601), the only surviving play to put the Prophet of Islam on stage, for example, the Prophet is costumed in green: 'The false Prophet in greene, and greene his Turbant [turban]'.³² In the same play, Sergius, the heretic monk in the Christian mythology of Islam, is described as wearing a 'greene gown, [and a] greene cornered cap'. Finally, the play's 'Dervis' is a 'Mahometaine Fryar with gown greene of cullour and hooode of the same'.³³ Nor was this sartorial choice unique to this play or associated with specifically sacred Muslim figures. In Philip Massinger's *The Renegado* (1630), set in Tunis, North Africa, the green colour marks a cultural boundary between Muslim and Christian, performing the function of inclusion and exclusion. Gazet, a clownish servant, cautions his Italian master Vitelli to 'Take you heed sir / What colours you wear', for he has just witnessed the nearly fatal consequences of failing to do so:

Not two hours since, there landed
An English pirate's whore with a green apron;
And, as she walked the streets, one of their Muftis
[...] with a razor

²⁹Moosa, 'Marking Muslims', 131; Vaughan, *Performing Blackness on English Stages*, 60–61.

³⁰Dimmock, 'Materialising Islam', 118. I agree with critics who assert that the Prince of Morocco would have been received by the original audience as a Muslim. See Hall, 'Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?', 97; Burton, *Traffic and Turning*, 207; Moosa, 'Marking Muslims', 120–141; Dadabhoy, *Shakespeare Through Islamic Worlds*, esp. ch.3.

³¹Dimmock, 'Materialising Islam', 126.

³²On the connection between turbans and Islam, see *ibid.*

³³All quotations are from William Percy's *Mahomet and His Heaven* Dimmock, ed. by Matthew Dimmock.

Cuts it off, petticoat, smock and all, and leaves her
As naked as my nail.³⁴

Remembering that his own 'codpiece [is] of that forbidden colour', Gazet feels lucky to have escaped a similar fate (1.1.56–7). I am not suggesting, of course, that the Prince of Morocco was costumed in green, as the stage direction clearly indicates otherwise. I am, however, arguing that the whiteness of the Prince's garment would not have been as inevitable as the critical reception of the play has led us to believe.³⁵ The Prince's choice of white, I suggest, should be read alongside his willingness to change his skin colour to white to please Portia: 'I would not change this hue / Except to steal your thoughts, my gentle queen'.³⁶ This strategy, which frames fabric and material culture as a synecdoche for (racial) identity, is of a piece with the contemporary performance culture which employed black cloth, in addition to paint and oil, to simulate Blackness, as the white actor playing the Prince would have done.³⁷ An act of metaphorical whitewashing, it aims at downplaying his difference and highlighting his sameness.

Crucially, before he makes his exit having (inevitably) chosen the wrong casket, the Prince describes his failed endeavour as 'labour lost' (2.7.74).³⁸ The contemporary phrase 'Labour in vain' denoted a foolish attempt to accomplish things deemed impossible and was often used in conjunction with the specific activity of 'washing an Ethiop (or blackamoor) white'.³⁹ In fact, the single word 'Impossible' appears as the motto of the emblem on this subject in Alciati's *Emblematum liber* (1531).⁴⁰ Tracing this popular proverb back to its Greek origins and examining its continued popularity up till the twentieth century, Jean Michel Massing discusses its appearance in a wide range of visual material, including emblems and paintings.⁴¹ In some, the Black man

³⁴Quotations are from Massinger, *The Renegado, or The Gentleman of Venice*, 1.1.49–54.

³⁵In modern productions, as Sokolova ('Reading Morocco') shows, the Prince and his followers appear in a variety of colours.

³⁶Notably, the best he can hope for is to 'steal' the white woman's love. Her love, that is, cannot be won lawfully. This anticipates Brabantio's insistence that Othello surely must have used witchcraft to win Desdemona's love and Iago's framing of the union as a theft by the Black man. On the myth of meritocracy in relation to Black people and people of colour, see Akhimie, *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference*.

³⁷See Jones, *Othello's Countrymen*, 30; Karim-Cooper, 'The Materials of Race', 23–27; Smith, *Black Shakespeare*, 142.

³⁸I use 'inevitably' in agreement with David Sterling Brown who writes: 'heterosexual interracial desire is, for the Black man, a game to lose because the "casket test" outcome is rigged, if not by Portia, then by Shakespeare himself' (*Shakespeare's White Others*, 155). See also Eldred Jones's observation that it is 'dramatically necessary that [the Prince] should choose wrongly' (*Othello's Countrymen*, 69–70).

³⁹Tilley (ed.), *A Dictionary of the Proverbs*, 190, E186. See Vaughan, *Performing Blackness on English Stages*, 6–7; Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 66–9.

⁴⁰Jean Michel Massing reproduces this emblem in 'From Greek Proverb to Soap Advert', 185.

⁴¹Massing discusses a nineteenth-century soap advert which attests to the continued popularity of this proverb. It shows delighted Black people marvelling at the whitening of their skin colour as a result of applying the cleansing product being advertised ('From Greek Proverb to Soap Advert', 181). During the research and writing of this project, an eerily similar advert for a shower gel appeared, featuring a Black woman afflicted with cracked skin turning white and enjoying smooth skin, thanks to the product being advertised. See Emer Moreau, 'Sanex shower gel ad banned over racial stereotype'. 20 August, 2025. Available on this link: Sanex shower gel ad banned over racial stereotype – BBC News (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn92znxz8zzo>) (accessed: 25 August, 2025).

sits on the edge of a well or a water fountain (as in Geoffrey Whitney's 1586 *A Choice of Emblemes*). In a later (French) development, the Black figure stands over a bucket while a white figure aggressively forces his head down to wash him white. I want to focus on one pictorial rendition of the proverb for its relevance to the way the Prince of Morocco announces his willingness to 'turn white' to make himself appealing to Portia.

Massing observes that early modern European visual culture increasingly featured images of privileged white women in the company of a Black page who adopts 'an attitude suggestive of extreme admiration and often offers his mistress roses'.⁴² Some images combine this tradition with another, that of washing the Ethiopian white. Examples include a painting by Pierre Gobert (1662–1744) which features a white woman holding the head of a young Black page as she prepares to wash him with a wet cloth she had just dipped in the nearby fountain.⁴³ As Massing concludes, the painting seems to conflate the notion that 'black best sets forth white' in its explicit contrasting of the page's Blackness and the lady's whiteness with the proverbial 'washing the Ethiop white'.⁴⁴ I want to focus on a painting which introduces a twist to both motifs.

Attributed to the Venetian Andrea Celesti (1637–1711), the painting entitled 'Washing a Black Man's Face' depicts a young white woman in a white flowing dress engaged in washing a Black man, using a water basin to wet the cloth before she applies it to his face. While the images discussed above, however, featured a water fountain next to which the subjects stand, here the man holds the basin himself, positioning it at a convenient angle for the white woman.⁴⁵ The image captures a white fantasy of Black submission, emphasising the Black man's unquestioning subscription to white assessment of his skin colour as suggested by his willingness to undergo the act of washing, himself facilitating the action. The Prince of Morocco's offer to change his skin colour, addressed to a white, privileged woman, recreates this image, activating the white cultural fantasy it embodies while, disturbingly, visually casting this royal figure as a lowly servant as if royal status, dignity, and power could not co-exist in a Black body.⁴⁶ And like this painting's combination of two racist motifs, the stage at this moment conflates the two: the proverbial whitewashing and the Black servant offering his devotion to a white woman. The Prince's reference to the proverb at the end of the scene, then, functions as a caption for his entire endeavour throughout: washing himself white. His evocation of the Moroccan virgins in the same breath as he volunteers to whiten his skin should be

⁴²Massing, 'From Greek Proverb to Soap Advert', 190. See also the paintings discussed by Hall (*Things of Darkness*, 242–44), which depict the Black attendant as offering flowers or fruit to the white subject.

⁴³This and a similar painting are reproduced in Massing, 'From Greek Proverb to Soap Advert', 194, 195.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 190–192. The painting is reproduced on p. 194.

⁴⁵The painting is reproduced in *ibid.*, 197.

⁴⁶On 'the juxtaposition of the concept of black African with the notions of freedom, power, status, wealth and civilisation' in the period, see Lowe, 'The Stereotyping of Black Africans', 43.

inserted within this context of internalised racism and subscription to white values elevating white skin over Black.⁴⁷

'The Best-regarded Virgins of Our Clime': Uplifting Whiteness

The Prince's reference to the Black virgins of his land 'lov[ing]' his skin colour constitutes a striking departure from strategies employed by Black characters, male and female, in early modern drama similarly placed in a position where they feel the need to defend their perceived racial difference. A popular strategy involves the Black character taking pride in their skin colour because, they point out to their white audience, unlike white skin, Black skin allegedly does not betray a person's emotional state. In John Webster's *The White Devil*, for example, the Black maidservant Zanche weaponises this stereotype to her advantage, declaring to a Moorish character (in reality, the white Francisco in blackface): 'I ne'er lov'd my complexion till now, / Cause I may boldly say without a blush, / I love you' (5.1.215–6). Her dark 'complexion' allows her to adopt a traditionally masculine role, taking initiative in wooing and articulating her sexual desires, without betraying the shame that should attend such unfeminine behaviour. Similarly, Aaron in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* defends his as well as his son's Blackness against white aggressors by evoking the same trope: 'Coal-black is better than another hue / In that it scorns to bear another hue' (4.2.101–2). The Prince of Morocco's strategy of using Black women's attraction to his skin colour to defend his Blackness and make himself appealing to Portia, then, is unique.

Read within the context of his other attempts to 'act white', the reference to the desiring, yet rejected, Black virgins is significant. Instead of betraying a supposedly lustful, sexually aggressive Black masculinity and, by implication, promiscuous Black femininity as both the play's critics and Portia (as I show below) assume, the reference to the virgins is deliberately made to signal the Prince's subscription to a white European worldview in which Black women are devalued as objects of desire and white women elevated. As bell hooks observed, 'one of the quickest ways to demonstrate one's kinship within a white supremacist order is by sharing racist assumptions'.⁴⁸ The 'racist assumptions' and white values the Prince is eager to demonstrate he shares with Portia are those that were becoming increasingly important within the context of the burgeoning slave trade and colonial ambition: those relating to pitting Black women against white, only to find the former inferior, unattractive, undesirable, and unworthy of love or serious commitment.⁴⁹ As Matthieu A. Chapman

⁴⁷Curiously, while Othello's internalisation of anti-Black racism has received attention in the critical literature, the Prince's has not.

⁴⁸bell hooks, *Black Looks*, 10.

⁴⁹Early modern drama teems with analogues: men rejecting Black women or women they perceive as Black in preference for white women. See, for example, Lysander in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* who rejects the 'dark' Hermione: 'Away, you Ethiop!'; 'Out, tawny Tartar' (3.2.257, 263).

reminds us, '[f]or hundreds of years, at least since the crusades, the English held a widespread belief that fairness or whiteness was equivalent with beauty, modesty, and good, and blackness was equivalent with ugliness, promiscuity, and evil'.⁵⁰ In fact, 'a white and shimmering complexion in particular', as Farah Karim-Cooper's work has shown, was 'positioned as an ideal and as an essential component in the construction of womanhood' itself.⁵¹ The implication is that Black women and women of colour were excluded from the category of 'womanhood' altogether.⁵²

In evoking the Black virgins who, he implies, he has rejected, preferring instead to join the ranks of all the 'princes' coming 'From the four corners of the earth' to 'view fair Portia', the Prince rhetorically places the Black women on the margins of the scene (2.7.39, 44). The devaluation and dehumanisation of the Black women are evident in his treatment of them as a collective mass, an undifferentiated group of Black female bodies lumped together and labelled 'Black virgins'. Contrasting with the (apparently) unparalleled and highly individualised Portia, the singular 'saint' to whose 'shrine' suitors make pilgrimages, the Moroccan women lack all distinction or individuality, not to mention names. Hall describes the Black attendant often featured in contemporary portraits of white women as 'a liminal figure who inhabits edges, corners, and shadows and thus never fully "participates" in the painting'. Hovering on the periphery, those figures become silent props whose function is that of stressing, by way of contrast, the woman's whiteness, thus her desirability. 'In many such portraits', Hall asserts, 'black people literally become shadow, the key effect of chiaroscuro'.⁵³ The white woman is 'beautiful because', as Hall puts it, 'she [the Black woman] is black'.⁵⁴ This is a process that Peter Erickson calls 'white self-fashioning', and Virginia Mason Vaughan describes as 'contribut[ing] to the construction of a normative English female "fairness"' that 'coded her as an object of desire'.⁵⁵ In the context of examining the representation of Cleopatra in Elizabeth Cary's *The Tragedy of Mariam* (1613), Joyce Green MacDonald has suggested that the Egyptian queen, 'the absent presence', who is only referenced in the play and never actually appears on stage, functions as an off-stage foil to the play's 'fair' Mariam, 'allowing her to shine all the more steadily'. 'Cary's Cleopatra', MacDonald observes, 'shadows her heroine, in much the same

⁵⁰Chapman, 'The Appearance of Blacks', 78. Hall writes: The '*topos* that black women are unattractive and repulsive' was 'increasingly common' in the period ('I Would Rather Wish', 192). Miles Grier asserts that 'black women are still rarely depicted in the US or England as [...] objects of desire'. See 'Are Shakespeare's Plays Racially Progressive?', 246.

⁵¹Karim-Cooper, 'The Materials of Race', 18.

⁵²The fact that the opposite of 'Blackness' is not only 'whiteness', but 'beauty' in Ben Jonson's two masques for the Jacobean court is revealing. On these masques, see Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 128–41. On the exclusion of Brown and Black women from the category of womanhood, see Hamad, *White Tears / Brown Scars*.

⁵³Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 227, 238; Habib, 'Hel's perfect character', 284; Vaughan, *Performing Blackness on English Stages*, 6.

⁵⁴Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 251.

⁵⁵Erickson, 'God for Harry', 322; Erickson, 'Representations of Blacks', 510; Vaughan, *Performing Blackness on English Stages*, 59, 65.

fashion as the casting of black actresses as Iras has been used to highlight the presence of white English Cleopatras in productions of Shakespeare's play'.⁵⁶ The Moroccan women evoked by the Prince, I contend, function in the same capacity, turning the stage into a tableau of a familiar pictorial and dramatic motif which consigns women of colour to the margin, the background, the 'unrepresentable' in Lynda E. Boose's words.⁵⁷ Though he describes the Moroccan women he has rejected and left behind as 'the best-regarded' in his land, suggesting they are viewed with respect and admiration, the racial dynamics of the scene replicate those found in the paintings, casting the spurned women as inferior to Portia, both socially and aesthetically.⁵⁸ Like the marginal and marginalised Black women of the visual tradition, they are no rivals to Portia.

The Merchant of Venice repeatedly revisits this pitting of white women against Black, insisting on the superiority of the former and the inferiority of the latter in terms of desirability and worth. Portia's attractiveness as a marriage partner owes at least as much to her whiteness as to her wealth. Bassanio introduces the two elements concurrently: 'In Belmont is a lady richly left, / And she is fair and fairer than that word, / Of wondrous virtues. Sometimes from her eyes / I did receive fair speechless messages' (1.1.161–4). In her foundational work on premodern race, Hall has taught us to recognise 'the racialized nature of the language of fairness and beauty as well as of the importance of the language of fairness in constructions of female subjectivity' in the literary productions of the period by both men and women. 'The language of dark and light', she reveals, 'is part of a white supremacist ideology and persists as a common way of marking people of the African diaspora as inferior'. Hall has urged scholars to notice 'the competition that discourses of fairness introduce between women'.⁵⁹ The stress which the Prince of Morocco lays on Portia's whiteness (the 'saint[ed]', 'fair' Portia), drawing on associations between divinity and whiteness, necessarily constructs her as superior to her Moroccan counterparts in this racialised discourse of beauty.⁶⁰ His journey, spatially embodying his rejection of them, announces her as the winner in this competition. Praise of Portia's (white) beauty often pits her against other women who, like the Moroccan virgins, are evoked only to be found lacking by comparison. Describing Portia, Jessica exclaims: 'if two gods should play some heavenly match / And on the wager lay two earthly women, / And

⁵⁶MacDonald, 'Sex, race, and empire in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*', 62–64. I am grateful to this journal's anonymous reader for bringing this source to my attention.

⁵⁷Boose, 'The begetting of a lawful race', 35–54.

⁵⁸OED, 'regarded', adj.

⁵⁹Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 266, 177.

⁶⁰Vaughan (*Performing Blackness on English Stages*, 59) argues that 'the stage figure of the Moroccan king [which encompasses the Prince of Morocco], whether his face was darkened by brownish (tawny) face paint or perhaps a darker shade, contributed to the construction of a normative English female "fairness"'. I believe that the play, more importantly, constructs English female whiteness in opposition to the Black femininity it keeps offstage and outside the play's geographical boundaries.

Portia one, there must be something else / Pawned with the other, for the poor rude world / Hath not her fellow' (3.5.72–6). In other words, Jessica can only describe Portia in contrast to other women, here imagined as 'earthly', lowly and inferior, in contrast to her heavenly attributes, emblematised by the 'blessing' she brings her husband (68).

Unsurprisingly, the lead casket receives the same kind of misogynoir directed at Black women, becoming a material representative of their Black bodies and, like them, performing the role of debased foil which highlights the superior worth and beauty of the white Portia.⁶¹ Arragon feels insulted by the offensive message of the lead casket: 'Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath', instructing the 'base' metal: 'You shall look fairer e're I give or hazard' (2.9.19–21). To make demands of this nature, he suggests disgustedly, the metal should shed its blackness and 'look fairer' first. That is, wash itself white. Black metal, like Black women (the parallel is stressed through the verb 'choose': whoever 'chooses' the correct metal, chooses the woman), is unworthy of his labour or (romantic) interest. His mocking response constructs the identity of those (objects and women) who deserve 'giv[ing] and hazard[ing]' as white, offering a wider context for reading the Moroccan women. It is, therefore, not surprising that Portia's portrait should be discovered within the lead casket given the contemporary notion that Black sets forth white beauty. Within the context of a discussion of the early modern fad for wearing Black cameos as decorative objects, Hall has argued that 'the image of a white embedded in darkness [...] is a typical colonialist gesture in Elizabethan England that works to define and preserve the value of whiteness'.⁶² The lead casket works in a similar way to establish the superiority of Portia's whiteness to the Blackness of the lead casket which synecdochally represents the Black women rejected by the Prince of Morocco as less desirable or worthy of his love. The Prince will, of course, in his attempt to 'act white', echo Arragon upon encountering the lead casket, scolding the presumptuous metal by mocking its demand: "'Must give'", for what? For lead? Hazard for lead?'. 'Men that hazard all', he instructs the casket, 'Do it in hope of fair advantages. / A golden mind stoops not to shows of dross; / I'll then nor give nor hazard aught for lead' (2.7.17–21). His use of 'fair' and 'golden' is clearly racially loaded.

While Portia's racist attitude towards the Prince of Morocco has received ample critical attention, her clear disdain for the Moroccan virgins ('I am not solely led / By nice direction of a maiden's eyes' (2.1.13–4)) and her mockery of his description of them as 'virgins' ('Let *all* of his complexion choose me

⁶¹Black feminist Moya Bailey coined the term 'misogynoir' to describe the particular form of misogyny Black women face, stressing the fact that the inextricable entanglement of sexism and racism in the lives of women of colour and Black women renders their experiences of oppression distinct from those of white women. See her *Misogynoir Transformed*.

⁶²Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 217–8. On the construction of the sexuality of non-white people as excessive, see Sanchez, 'Was Sexuality Racialized for Shakespeare?', 123–38; Karim-Cooper, *The Great White Bard*, 67.

so' (2.7.78–9, emphasis mine)) have not. I suggest that her dismissiveness of 'all [those] of his complexion' should be read as including Moroccan women as well as men. In Shakespeare's England, chastity itself was coloured white. Chastity and whiteness, as Arthur Little, Jr. asserts, 'are culturally inseparable'.⁶³ In fact, The Prince himself, having asserted the co-existence of Blackness and virginity in 2.1, will retract this earlier statement when he appears on stage again in 2.7. Redefining virginity as synonymous with *whiteness* for Portia's benefit, he now refers to the 'virgin hue' of the silver casket (2.7.22). Colluding with Portia, many critics have, like the Prince, disregarded his earlier insistence on the Moroccan women's 'virginity', inserting them, instead, within early modern stereotypical discourses portraying Black women as libidinous, promiscuous, and sexually available. Such views were in circulation in the Sixteenth century and would have been available to Shakespeare's audience.⁶⁴ Early modern Europe, as Hall has demonstrated, was 'obsess[ed] with African difference and sexuality', negatively judging both against European norms and practices. This is nowhere more evident than in the influential work of scholar and traveller Al Hassan Ibn Mohammed Al Wezaz, Al Fasi, a converted Moor, better known as Johannes Leo Africanus. Leo's *A Geographical Historie of Africa* (translated into English by John Pory in 1600, the same year as the last volume of Hakluyt's *Principal Navigations*) became 'the single most authoritative travel guide on Africa for the next three centuries'.⁶⁵ In this work, African sexuality appears as unruly, uncontrollable, and deviant. The Prince of Morocco's claim of the existence of African virgins, viewed through Leo Africanus's lens, would have been heard by Shakespeare's audience as an oxymoron and treated as laughable. The 'principal and notorious vices' of Africa, Leo Africanus asserted, related to the licentiousness and promiscuity of women who, he stressed, led lives free from patriarchal supervision. Specifically referring to the people of 'Barbarie', that is, the Prince of Morocco's people, among others, he condemns African fathers as ineffective patriarchal figures whose failure to police their daughters' sexuality not only disrupts the patriarchal system but also, in Hall's words, 'causes troubles in the state as well: no "nobles or gentlemen" can find virgins to wed and thereby guarantee themselves the continuation of an untainted aristocratic bloodline'. According to Leo Africanus, African.

young men may goe a wooing to divers maides, till such time as they have sped of a wife. Yea, the father of the maide most friendly welcommeth her suiter: so that I thinke scarce any noble or gentleman among them can chuse a virgine for his

⁶³Little Jr., *Shakespeare Jungle Fever*, 45.

⁶⁴Those views have a long history. In the Old Norse saga *Morkinskinna* (1220), a woman's black legs are read as a sign that she 'must be some kind of a whore.' See Elliott-Newton, 'Making Whiteness', 84. On medieval race-making, see Heng, *The Invention of Race*; Cord Whitaker, *Black Metaphors*.

⁶⁵Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 29.

spouse: albeit, so soone as any woman is married, she is quite forsaken of all her suiters; who then seeke out other new paramours for their liking.⁶⁶

African women, according to Leo Africanus, were afflicted with another sexual vice, one which I believe is hinted at in Portia's responses to her Moroccan suitor (discussed below): homosexuality.⁶⁷ Singling out Fez, a city in the north of Morocco, Leo Africanus informs his readers that it teems with

women [called] *Sahacat*, which in Latin signifieth *Fricatrices*, because they have a damnable custome to commit unlawfull Venerie among themselves, which I cannot expresse in any modester termes. If faire women come unto them at any time, these abominable witches will burne in lust towards them no otherwise then lustie yoonkers doe towards yoong maides, and will in the divels behalfe demaunde for a rewarde, that they may lie with them: and so by this meanes it often falleth out, that thinking thereby to fulfill the divels command they lie with the witches.⁶⁸

Crucial here is not only the Moroccan women's alleged sexually transgressive behaviour, but also the threat they pose to 'fair' women. This coding of Black femininity as promiscuous and sexually available implicitly suggests that virginity, chastity, and Blackness cannot co-exist, an oxymoron of sorts. This coding is at work in Portia's subtle mockery of the Prince of Morocco's claim about Black female virginity as well as in critics' and theatre directors' reading of the Black virgins as the Prince's former sexual conquests.

I contend that Portia's response to the Prince's evocation of the Black virgins suggests that she feels affronted and personally threatened by the idea that Blackness and virginity can co-exist and by its wider implication for an emerging white national identity dependent on the exclusive association of sexual purity with white femininity.⁶⁹ Joyce Green MacDonald had the notion of Black women as objects of romantic desire, not merely lust, in mind when she wrote that it 'would too deeply unsettle the conventions of Black women's sexual abjection that enabled notions of white women's fairness and moral superiority'.⁷⁰ I suggest that the notion of virginal Blackness functions in this exact way. Smith has alerted us to the way certain theatrical moments 'create [...] a racialised audience'.⁷¹ 'Racist humor', as Patricia Akhimie has concluded, 'produces social difference by teaching audiences how to hold themselves as a group apart and position themselves above another group'. Furthermore, 'racist humor builds community, bringing some people together at the expense of others', 'facilitating social cooperation, social bonding, and group

⁶⁶Ibid., 33–4.

⁶⁷As Melissa E. Sanchez writes, 'In the realm of sexuality in particular, travel writing habitually associated sodomy with dark-skinned bodies and with such foreign locales as Spain, Italy, Russia, Turkey, North Africa, India, Persia, East Asia and the Americas' (*Shakespeare and Queer Theory*, 90).

⁶⁸Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 36.

⁶⁹Ibid., 9.

⁷⁰MacDonald, 'Actresses of Color', 220.

⁷¹Smith, 'Barbarian Errors', 176.

formation'.⁷² Portia's mockery of the extremely (to her) preposterous idea of Black virginity, designed to trigger laughter in the white racialised audience, performs exactly this function.⁷³

Within the context of discussing the violence visited on the bodies of Black pregnant women in medieval and early modern texts, this play's Moor included, Dyese Elliott-Newton has suggested that 'Black women provide comic relief', asserting that what is being 'relieved' is white anxiety'.⁷⁴ This framework clearly applies to Portia at this point in the play. Her method of dealing with the anxiety the Prince of Morocco's claim about virginity existing in non-white female bodies consists of rendering this claim a joke, assembling the audience into a group united through its perceived racial superiority to the Prince and the women of his clime. Though hardly disguised, her mocking remarks have gone curiously unnoticed by critics. In stark contrast to the Moroccan fathers Leo Africanus condemns for an alleged failure of patriarchal government and control of female sexuality, Portia constructs her own white father as an efficient patriarch who continues to exert patriarchal control from beyond the grave. She even seems to echo the Prince's words, only to mock his outrageous claim: 'In terms of choice', she informs him, 'I am not solely led / By nice direction of a maiden's eyes' (2.1.13–4). Despite her apparent chafing at being 'scanted' and 'hedged' by her father (17–8), Portia's choice of adjective, 'nice', to describe the 'direction of maiden's eyes' suffuses the maids' agency with negative meanings.⁷⁵ Some of the associations of this adjective available to Shakespeare's audience related to 'conduct or behaviour characterized by or encouraging wantonness or lasciviousness and denoted a person who was wanton, dissolute, lascivious, foolish, silly, simple, or ignorant'.⁷⁶ The 'eyes' in Portia's phrase could also bawdily denote 'vagina', further stressing the promiscuity of the 'maids', suggesting that they are led by their sexual inclinations when it comes to making marital choices.⁷⁷ There is even a possible dig at the Prince's association of himself and of the virgins of his land with the sun in Portia's choice of 'solely': unlike the Moroccan virgins who, so travel narratives claimed, lived close to 'sol' and recognised no patriarchal authority, Portia remains dutiful and obedient to a father who, the play confirms, knows best. After all, her own preferred suitor, Bassanio, wins. Echoing Leo Africanus's account, then, Portia pointedly frames white femininity, in contrast to Black, as controlled and contained by wise patriarchs

⁷²Akhimie, 'Racist Humor and Shakespearean Comedy', 50–51. Akhimie is quoting Pérez, 'Racism Without Hatred?', 958. On racial laughter, see also Karim-Cooper, *The Great White Bard*, 246–54.

⁷³On the disturbing implications of audience laughter at Black pain, see Karim-Cooper, 'Emotions, Gesture, and Race', 70; Brown, *Shakespeare's White Others*, 172.

⁷⁴Elliott-Newton, 'Making Whiteness', 91–2.

⁷⁵'Hedge' contributes to Portia's construction of her chaste, enclosed body as it speaks to the *hortus conclusus* (the enclosed garden) with which the Virgin Mary was associated in medieval and early modern visual and literary culture. See McAvoy, *The Enclosed Garden*, 39–40.

⁷⁶OED, 'nice', adj., 1a, 2a, 2b.

⁷⁷For 'eye' as 'vagina', see Williams, *Shakespeare's Sexual Language*, 118.

who will not abandon their duties to guard their daughters' chastity even when claimed by death itself.⁷⁸

Portia's comment which brings the scene to a close has received much critical interest. 'A gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go. / Let all of his complexion choose me so' clearly suggests relief at seeing the unwanted Prince depart after his unsuccessful attempt while also reinforcing Portia's racist attitude (2.7.78–9). However, she does not reject the Prince as an individual. Rather her rejection is aimed at his entire people: 'all [those] of his complexion'. 'In other words,' as David Sterling Brown has explained, 'let no Black man be successful in this game that involves the white woman's body.'⁷⁹ I believe that, placed within the wider context I have explored above, Portia's comment which does not, in fact, single out the *men*, but '*all* [those] of his complexion', is a final parting dig aimed at the women as much as the men of his clime. Portia styles herself as a potential object of desire, just like the 'fair' women seduced by the monstrous Moroccan women of Fez, for *both* men and women, all of those who inhabit Morocco and share the Prince's 'complexion'. The comment reminds the audience of the alleged monstrosity of Black sexuality, undermining the Prince's earlier coupling of Blackness and virginity, and framing Blackness itself as a threat to white womanhood, perhaps even validating the need for the kind of successful patriarchal surveillance practised by her own father.⁸⁰

The fantasy of a Black man rejecting his countrywomen in the same breath as he rejects his Blackness in an attempt to ingratiate himself with a white woman exemplifies Toni Morrison's important analysis of the uses to which African peoples have historically been put in literature.

Though written with the American context in mind, Morrison's words are perfectly applicable to the use the play makes of the Prince of Morocco and the absented North African women he evokes: 'Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful'.⁸¹ The play's unseen Black women are doubly victimised. The intersection of gender and race in their identities renders them victims of white supremacist patriarchy. As women, they experience the violence patriarchy visits on female bodies, defining them in terms of their physical contact with men and labelling them 'virgins' or 'whores' accordingly. As Black women, they experience the violence white supremacy visits on raced bodies, rendering the mere suggestion that they

⁷⁸Jessica's whiteness, trumping her Jewishness, similarly codes her as an object of patriarchal surveillance as her father's instructions that she 'Lock up my doors', 'Clamber not you up to the casements', 'Nor thrust your head into the public street' demonstrate (2.5.28, 30–1).

⁷⁹Brown, *Shakespeare's White Others*, 155.

⁸⁰The wisdom of Portia's father is, of course, confirmed by Nerissa, who reminds her mistress: 'Your father was ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspirations. Therefore the lottery that he hath devised in these three chests [...] will no doubt never be chosen by any rightly but one who you shall rightly love' (1.2.26–31).

⁸¹Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*, 52.

are ‘virgins’ preposterous to the white-privileged Portia.⁸² Evoked by a white actor in blackface embodying a white man’s idea of a Black man, those Moroccan women are props, ‘vehicle[s]’ in Morrison’s words, employed to uplift whiteness in ways which resonate with the shadowy, nameless, often fragmented Black figures who inhabit the periphery of contemporary visual culture.⁸³ Phyllis Rackin has noted that we have been ‘taught to read [Shakespeare’s plays] from the subject position of a man, and a misogynist man at that’.⁸⁴ As Morrison and Smith have shown, this misogynist man whose subject position we, as scholars, readers, spectators, and educators of Shakespeare, have been taught to adopt is also a *white* man. Attending to the experiences of Black women and women of colour who inhabit the margins of early modern drama and bearing in mind the material and ideological constructedness of Black masculinity on the early modern stage is a good place to start disrupting this teaching and exposing the power relationships shaping dramatic representation.

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⁸²On the way multiply marginalised women experience multiple forms of discrimination, see Sheymaa Ali Nurein and Humera Iqbal, ‘Identifying a space for young Black Muslim women in contemporary Britain’. This study, of course, employs an intersectional lens, as defined by Crenshaw (‘Mapping the Margins’, 1991).

⁸³Hugh Quarshie asks rhetorically with reference to *Othello*: ‘should [I] accept that a play written over 400 years ago by a white Englishman for another white Englishman in blackface make-up is an authoritative and credible profile of a genuine black man?’ (Qtd. in Akhimie (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Race*, 182). On blackface, see Ayanna Thompson, *Blackface*.

⁸⁴Rackin, ‘Misogyny is Everywhere’, 47.

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