The Riddle of Blackness in England's National Family Romance

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In *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, published in 1646, Sir Thomas Browne describes the cause of blackness as "a Riddle" (466). Early modern England's increased contact with Africa and Africans led writers of the period to answer this "Riddle" with a wide variety of theories concerning the origin of blackness. The proliferation of explanations of blackness in the late sixteenth and early to mid-seventeenth centuries, like the Elizabethan decrees to expel black people, reveals early modern England's preoccupation with blackness as a marker of difference. Further, as with Oedipus' answer to the riddle posed him by the Sphinx, England's attempts to answer Browne's "Riddle" of blackness reveal much about England itself. According to early modern writers like George Best (1578), Sir Thomas Herbert (1634), and Sir Thomas Browne (1645), blackness is variously the result of cannibalism (Browne 468), bestiality (Herbert in Jordan 30-31), a genetic disease (Best 262-64; Browne 467), a chemical compound in the blood (Browne 477-78), something in the air, water, or land (Browne 462; 466), or perhaps the power of the mother's imagination during conception or pregnancy (Browne 466-67). The two most popular theories of blackness, however, were the Climate theory and the Biblical theory.

The Climate theory states that the sun's intensity brings about variations in skin color. As George Best explains it, "Others againe imagine the middle Zone to be extreme hot, because the people of Africa, especially Ethiopians, are so cole blacke, and their hair like wooll curled short, which blacknesse and curled haire they suppose to come onely by the parching heat of the Sunne" (261). The theory is not Best's own invention, nor does it originate in England. Rather, this theory came to England via classical texts like Pliny's *Natural History*, which states "that the

Ethiopians are burnt by the heat of the heavenly body near them, and are born with a scorched appearance, with curly beard and hair" (2:80), and Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*, which explains that Ethiopians "since they have the sun over their heads and are burned by it, have black skins and thick, wooly hair" (123). Thus, the popularity of the Climate theory is in part a result of Renaissance England's renewed interest in classical texts.

Despite repeated attempts at debunking it (Best 261-62; Sandys 213; Browne 460-70), the Climate theory persisted throughout the early modern period as a credible way of explaining blackness and seems to have especially appealed to poets and dramatists. Elezeur, the black Moor of Thomas Dekker's *Lust's Dominion*, declares, "Look well on Elezeur; value me/ Not by my sunburnt cheek" (3.2.205-06). Similarly, in John Webster's *The White Devil*, the popular proverb about the impossibility of black people washing themselves white is described as "the sunburnt proverb" (5.3.263). In William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, the Prince of Morocco explains, "Mislike me not for my complexion,/ The shadowed livery of the burnish'd sun,/ To whom I am a neighbor and near bred" (2.1.1-3.). Likewise, Shakespeare's Cleopatra explains, "Think on me,/ That am with Phoebus' amorous pinches black" (1.5.27-28).

Cleopatra's allusion to Phoebus further provides an example of the way in which the Climate theory was often incorporated into a mythic narrative of blackness, linked particularly with the story of Phoebus's son, Phaeton, a story which, like the Climate theory itself, reached England via classical texts, primarily Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Phaeton, the son of Phoebus and the nymph Clymene, feeling the need to prove his parentage, makes a pilgrimage from his native Ethiopia to Phoebus's palace. Phoebus confirms his parentage and promises to grant any wish his son might require of him. Phaeton, much to his father's dismay, wishes to ride the chariot of the sun for one day. After much deliberation, Phoebus concedes and instructs him about the proper path to take. Phaeton loses control, burning the heavens and the Earth. Then, writes Ovid in Arthur Golding's 1567 English translation, "Aethiopians at that time (as men for truth uphold)/ (The bloud by force of that same heate drawne to the outer part/ And there adust from that time forth) became so black and swart" (2.299-301).

The story of Phaeton serves as a mythic rendering of the Climate theory giving narrative force to this theory of blackness. William Basse retells the story in his *Urania, or The Woman in the Moon*:

For ere Apollo's sonne his father's chayre,
 To leade the Light, on day did undertake,
 The Aethiopians then were white and fayre,
 Though by the worlds combustion since made black
 When wanton Phaeton overthrew the Sun,
 Which dredfull mischiefe had not yet been done.
 (qtd. in Hall 63)¹

And in Ben Jonson's *Masque of Blackness*, performed in 1605, Niger alludes to the myth, explaining,

As one of Phæton, that fired the world,
 And that before his heedless flames were hurled
 About the globe, the Ethiops were as fair
 As other dames, now black with black despair.
 (136-39)

Although the Climate theory and its mythic rendering persisted throughout the early modern period, it was seriously called into question as early as 1589 when George Best published his *Discourse* which sought "to prove all partes of the World habitable" (250), that is, to encourage further exploration, commerce, and colonization of distant lands. Best asks, "if the Ethiopians blacknesse came by the heat of the Sunne, why should not those Americans and Indians also be as blacke as they, seeing the Sunne is equally distant from them both, they abiding in one Parallel?" (261). Best further notes that a black man in England, "begat a sonne in all respects as blacke as the father was, although England were his native countrey, and an English woman his mother" (262).

Best thus refutes the Climate theory and puts in its place the other popular early modern theory of blackness, the Biblical theory. Best explains that the cause of blackness "manifestly and plainly appeareth by holy Scripture" (263); he then retells the story of the flood after which "there remained no moe men alive but Noe and his three sonnes, Sem, Cham, and Japhet . . . who all three being white, and their wives also, by course of nature should have begotten and brought forth white children" (263).

Best explains that blackness appears in the world as a curse brought about by the "wicked Spirite" who caused the fall of Adam and, during the flood, causes one of Noah's three sons "to [so] transgresse and disobey his fathers commaundement, that after him all his posteritie should bee accursed" (263). In this

explanation of blackness, then, dark complexions are closely associated with the Devil and sin. Blackness, explains Best, functions as "a spectacle of disobedience to all the worlde" (264).

The specific nature of the disobedience is of some importance. Best explains that Noah

straitely commaunded his sonnes and their wives, that they should with reverence and feare beholde the justice and mighty power of God, and that during the time of the flood while they remained in the Arke, they should use continencie, and abstaine from carnall copulation with their wives . . . Which good instructions and exhortations notwithstanding his wicked sonne Cham disobeyed, and being perswaded that the first childe borne after the flood (by right and lawe of nature) should inherite and possesse all the dominions of the earth, hee contrary to his fathers commandement while they were yet in the Arke, used company with his wife, and craftily went about thereby to dis-inherite the off-spring of his other two brethren: for the which wicked and detestable fact, as an example for contempt of Almightye God, and disobedience of parents, God would a sonne should bee borne whose name was Chus, who not onely it selfe, but all his posteritie after him should bee so blacke and lothsome, that it might remaine a spectacle of disobedience to all the worlde. And of this blacke and cursed Chus came all these blacke Moores which are in Africa, for after the water was vanished from the earth, and that the land was dry, Sem chose that part of the land to inhabite in, which nowe is called Asia, and Japhet had that which now is called Europa, wherein wee dwell, and Africa remained for Cham and his blacke sonne Chus. (263-64)

This rendering of the Noah story has been important to critics trying to understand the early modern conception of blackness. Elliot Tokson notes that while the Climate theory keeps black people in the "family of Adam," the story of Noah situates black people as "men of a substandard type" (12-13). Karen Newman explains that Best's version of the Noah story reveals "the stock prejudices against blacks in Elizabethan and Jacobean culture: the link between blackness and the devil, the myth of black sexuality, the problem of black subjection to authority, here displaced onto obedience owed to the father and to God" (147). Jack D'Amico further notes the way in which "sexual transgression and a crafty desire to disinherit his brothers are combined" to explain the origin of blackness (65).

Although this seems to have been a popular explanation of blackness in the early modern period, the details of this story are not in the Bible. William Tyndale's 1537 translation of the Bible, for example, states that after the flood, while Noah is drunk and naked, Ham (Cham) sees "his father's privities" (24). Ham then tells his brothers who cover their father but avert their eyes so as not to see their father's nakedness. When Noah awakens "and wist what his youngest son had done unto him, he said: cursed be Canaan, and a servant of all servants be he to his brethren" (24). Contrary to the Bible, Best's "Biblical" explanation of blackness claims that the transgression is one of the son's sexual activity and occurs during the flood and that the consequence of the transgression is blackness rather than the servitude that the Tyndale Bible actually indicates.

Best's version of the Noah story seems to have come not from the Bible directly but from Jewish Biblical commentary, namely The Talmud and The Zohar. The Talmud, for example, suggests that, from the post-flood command to multiply, "we deduce that cohabitation had been forbidden" and that for violating this taboo during the flood, "Ham was smitten in his skin," a line that is footnoted as meaning "black-skinned" (Freedman 745). The Zohar further describes Ham as "the notorious world-darkener" (Sperling 247). This explanation of blackness seems to have been popular in early modern England, as can be ascertained from extensive discussions both pro and con by George Best in 1578 (263-64), John Bodin in 1583 (334-64), George Sandys in 1610 (213), Johann Boemus in 1611 (Tokson 13), Richard Jobson in 1623 (71), Thomas Browne in 1646 (470-75), Peter Heyleyn in 1666 (Tokson 13), and John Josselyn as late as 1674 (129-30).

Throughout the early modern period, then, the Climate theory and the Biblical theory of blackness existed side by side. Despite their differences, the narratives of these theories, the myth of Phaeton and the story of Noah and his sons, are remarkably similar. Both assert an original whiteness for all humans and both posit blackness as the result of disorder—Phaeton's loss of control of the chariot of the sun and Cham's willful defiance of the prohibition against coition.

More importantly, both the story of Phaeton and the story of Noah and his sons inscribe blackness into a narrative of family relations, and in that sense England's answers to the "Riddle" of blackness are profoundly Oedipal. Phaeton, after all, wishes to take his father's place, an aspect of the narrative that Basse emphasizes as rebellion against the father, stating "wanton Phaeton *overthrew* the Sun." As Phaeton loses control he is struck

down by Jupiter, a father-figure taking the punitive Oedipal role. Just as there is a doubling of fathers, Phoebus and Jupiter, so there is a doubling of mothers; while Clymene is Phaeton's biological mother, the Earth is described as a mother-figure (2.348) ravaged by Phaeton's inability to manage his father's chariot, which Basse describes as "dredfull mischiefe." Like Oedipus, then, Phaeton takes the place of the father in relation to a mother-figure and is punished for doing so. Furthermore, just as Oedipus loses his sight, a symbolic castration, so with Phaeton, "the glistening light his eyesight from him tooke" (Ovid 2.231). In addition to blindness and death, the blackness of Phaeton's fellow Ethiopians is also the result of his Oedipal transgression.

Closely related to the Oedipal situation is a phenomenon Sigmund Freud calls the "family romance," a child's imaginative recasting of his or her filial relations for a variety of reasons, from denigrating one or both parents to circumventing incest prohibitions ("Family Romances"). One of the most common manifestations of the family romance is the child's imagining that he or she is really the child of someone of a higher social station. There seems to be a trace of this in Phaeton's concern with proving that his father is not Merops, his mother's husband, but Phoebus, a god.

Further, England's adopting this story as an explanation of blackness bears a trace of England's own family romance by which it rewrites "the family of man" to create a positive sense of group-identity. First, the Climate theory as it is narrated in the Phaeton story supposes an original whiteness which situates white people as "true" humans and "blackamoors" as aberrations. All other complexions, according to this theory, are deviations from the original whiteness that the English have retained. Second, the story of Phaeton and the Climate theory in general tie race to place in a way that gives the English a more coherent sense of their emergent national identity in that the theory naturalizes England's borders and clearly defines non-white people as outsiders regardless of where they currently live or where they were born. This theory thus attempts to solve the problem blackness poses to England's need for continuity through the formation of a unified national identity that excludes "blackamoors."²

Family romance is more pronounced in the early modern rewriting of the story of Noah, whose children were thought to be the forefathers of the post-flood population and therefore the ancestors of all contemporary cultures. In Best's rewriting of the story, blackness is the result of Cham's rebellion against the laws of the father, specifically the law concerning sexual inter-

course. As with the story of Phaeton, this bears traces of an Oedipal situation. Adding to the list of transgressions committed by Ham (Cham), The Talmud, which early modern writers seem to have consulted in rewriting the Noah story, suggests that rather than simply seeing his father naked, Ham probably castrated his father and may have sexually abused him (477). Such a configuration recasts the Oedipal situation in an unusual way. Generally, castration is thought to be a threat emanating from the father while the son has an ambivalent attitude toward castration, fearing it as an affront to masculine identity and a threat for desiring the mother while also desiring it as a prerequisite to a sexual relationship with the father (Freud, "The Dissolution" 175-76). In the story of Noah, however, Ham, associated with blackness, comes to embody all of the repressed impulses of the Oedipal situation; he defies the father's law against sexual activity to disinherit his brothers' children, instigates a sexual relationship with the father, and castrates the father. Thus, Cham is assigned the Oedipal roles of rival, seducer, and castrating oppressor.

In this family romance, then, one can see evidence of transference, the unconscious assignment to others of feelings and attitudes that were originally associated with important figures of the past, namely one's parents and siblings. On an individual level, the story invites early modern readers to think of "blackamoors" in terms of threatening parental figures and sibling rivals; these figures from the past have been split into "good" and "bad" objects in the unconscious. Cham embodies the "bad" father when he takes on the role of the castrating Oedipal father. He further invites a transference of sibling rivalry in his attempt "to dis-inherit the off-spring of his other two brethren." Insofar as he seeks to withhold wealth from his brothers, Cham seems similar to the "bad" mother who withholds the breast from the child.

Blackness, then, becomes the locus of negative transference. The Biblical theory of blackness, which seems to have been widely accepted in early modern England, assigns to "blackamoors" the negative attitudes rooted in the Oedipal situation. Further, the Biblical family romance, like the story of Phaeton, appeals to England's emergent national identity. Insofar as black people are assigned the negative aspects of the family romance, the positive aspects are reserved for England itself, its queen/mother and her "good" subject/children.

Furthermore, as with the story of Phaeton, this story posits that blackness is a deviation from God's intentions. In the use

of blackness as a curse for defiance of the father and God, the story makes blackness a sign of sacrilege and whiteness, by implication, the sign of piety. Thus, as England came in contact with African cultures, it was not posed with the problem of cultural relativism; any deviation from English culture could be interpreted as an extension of Cham's deviation from Judeo-Christian traditions.

More importantly, this family romance endows England with certain rights. Virginia Mason Vaughan suggests that the two curses ascribed to Ham, servitude and blackness, combine in England's imagination to naturalize the idea of the African slave trade (53-54). This idea, however, would more properly be described as providing a foundation for the future slave trade since Elizabeth publicly opposed slavery and since the English involvement in the slave trade appears to have been relatively small until 1713 (Shyllon 3; 320).

What the conflation of blackness and servitude does do, however, is disenfranchise Africans of their right to land. That is, if Cham's descendants are to be servants, they need masters. Although Best's version of the story attributes the desire to "disinherit" to Cham, the whole of Best's discourse is meant "to prove all partes of the World habitable," that is, colonizable. The idea that Africans have no right to land suggests that Africa could be colonized and that no "blackamoore" had a right to stand in England's way.

The point is emphasized in Sir Walter Raleigh's rendering of the Noah story. Raleigh writes that as a result of his transgressions, Cham was "disinherited, and lost the preeminency of his birth" (249). While Kim Hall claims that Raleigh retells the Noah story "as an orderly exercise in patriarchal authority" that conceals the greed for land (54-55), Raleigh's emphasis on Noah's imposition of authority presupposes a disorderly struggle for land. Cham loses "the preeminency of his birth" because of "his disobedience and the contempt of his father, whose nakedness he derided" (249); that is, Cham is punished for challenging "patriarchal authority" and threatening to bring about disorder. Further, Raleigh's emphasis on inheritance and birthright, following an argument that Japhet (thought to be the forefather of Europeans) is the eldest of Noah's sons, plays up issues of primogeniture in a way that ultimately undermines any African's claim to Africa. Since Japhet is the eldest, his ancestors, according to primogeniture, are the rightful inheritors of all the land granted to Noah's family. Thus, the greed for land is not concealed in Raleigh's narrative; rather, Raleigh's own greed for

land seems to shape his version of the Noah story. Both Best and Raleigh rewrite the Noah story as a family romance that inspires a negative transference toward black people, a positive sense of national identity for England, and a tacit claim that England has a right to distant lands.

Tokson suggests that although the Biblical theory was popular, it seems to have had no impact on "literary men" (43). While one can find few if any direct references to Cham's transgression in the poetry and drama of the period, the specific way in which Best and Raleigh rewrite the Noah story finds its way indirectly into dramatic representations of "blackamoors."

For example, George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar*, performed in the late 1580s, is the earliest extant play to feature a black character of central importance. The play is based on events occurring in 1578 in North Africa that seem to have been intriguing to the English imagination; Samuel Chew notes that the events inspired numerous pamphlets, at least one ballad, and at least two plays popular enough to be published (524-29). Moreover, the following characteristics of *The Battle of Alcazar* have led several critics to believe that the play must have enjoyed a good deal of popularity in Elizabethan England (Braummüller 66-68; D'Amico 81-84; Jones, *Othello's Countrymen* 40-41): the play dramatizes a battle between good and evil; appeals to early modern England's taste for the exotic; deals with conflicts between Spain and Portugal and issues of succession that were on the minds of the English during Elizabeth's reign; depicts the rise of el-Mansour (Muly Mahamet Seth)—England's ally in trade; has a decidedly anti-Catholic tone; involves a good deal of blood and battle; and features one of England's own, the chivalrous but misguided Thomas Stuckeley. That the lead villain was played by the popular actor Edward Alleyn further suggests that this play was fairly successful.

Because people of the twentieth century may be unfamiliar with this story, however, I will briefly summarize the events. The North African King, Muly Mahamet Xequé, has decreed that his sons should succeed him one after the other beginning with the eldest. The eldest son, Abdallas, succeeds his father but tries to undo his father's decree by placing his own son, Muly Mahamet, on the throne. Peele's play takes up the narrative at this point, and so the emphasis is not on Abdallas but on his son. Muly Mahamet battles against his uncles and their forces and loses the throne to them. Mahamet then persuades the King of Portugal, Sebastian, and an English traveller, Thomas Stuckeley, to help him depose his uncle. The attempt proves

unsuccessful and despite their misguided trust of Muly Mahamet, Sebastian and Stuckeley become the stuff of legend.³

To make Muly Mahamet seem more villainous, Peele embellishes the historical account. In Peele's version of the events, Muly Mahamet surreptitiously kills his brothers and one of his uncles in an attempt to retain the throne. Tokson argues that while *The Battle of Alcazar* introduces the first black villain, Muly Mahamet, it also presents Abdemelec and Muly Mahamet Seth, the rightful successors to the throne, as noble black Moors (132). But Tokson is probably mistaken in assuming that all of the Moors in the play are black (39).⁴ Although the play features many African characters, only Muly Mahamet is described as "the Moor" and "the Negro," his identity as black established through repeated references before even the first scene of the play (1.6; 1.7; 1.15; 1.16; 1.29; 1.32; 1.40; 1.47), inducing us to forget, at least at the level of language, if not stage presentation, the ethnicity of the other African characters. Even in the List of Characters, only Muly Mahamet is "the Moor," while the ethnicity of other African characters is carefully circumscribed in relation to him; Abdemelec, for example, is not "a Moor" but "uncle to the Moor" and Muly Mahamet Seth (the names can get confusing in this play) is not "another uncle to the Moor" but "brother to Abdemelec." Likewise, Muly Mahamet's brothers, who, one would guess, are as black as he is, are described as "poore lambes" (1.24), an image of innocent whiteness in contrast with Muly Mahamet's villainous blackness.

Peele had good reason to emphasize Muly Mahamet's blackness; Peele's main source, John Polemon's *The Second Part of the Book of Battailles*, describes Muly Mahamet as "of colour so blacke, that he was accompted of many for a Negro or black Moore" (quoted in Barthelemy 77). Conversely, Abdemelec, whom Tokson lists as a positive image of a *black* man, is described by Polemon as having "a *white* face, but intermixed with red" (my emphasis, quoted in Barthelemy 77). Despite Abdemelec and his brothers being African, the play's source and the black and white imagery throughout the play suggest that Muly Mahamet was acted in blackface while Abdemelec most likely was not.

As with Best's rewriting of the Noah story, Peele presents a family in which blackness and transgression of the law of the father are intimately connected. Just as black skin functions as "a spectacle of disobedience to all the worlde" in the Noah story, so, after his death in *The Battle of Alcazar*, Muly Mahamet's black skin is to "be parted from his flesh" and displayed "So to deter and fear the lookers-on/ From any such foul fact or bad attempt"

and so "That all the world may learn by him" (5.1251; 253; 249). *The Battle of Alcazar* is also similar to Best's version of the Noah story in that both stories feature characters associated with blackness who violate the law in the hopes of providing inheritance for their sons. Just as Cham "being perswaded that the first childe borne after the flood . . . should inherite and possesse all the dominions of the earth, . . . contrary to his father's commandement. . . craftily went about thereby to dis-inherite the off-spring of his other two brethren" (Best 264), so Abdemelec explains that Abdallas "labours to invest his son in all,/ To disanull the lawe our father made/ And dis-inherite us his brethren" (1.1.78-80). In both narratives, characters associated with blackness transgress the laws of their own fathers to gain inheritance for their sons. Thus, in their use of blackness as a sign of transgression and punishment, as well as in their plots dealing with inheritance and family relations, *The Battle of Alcazar* and Best's rewriting of the story of Noah are profoundly similar.

Moreover, both stories deal with Oedipal material—the defiance of the father's law and sibling rivalry. As family romances, each narrative facilitates negative transference toward "blackamoors" by rewriting Oedipal material in a way that splits family figures into "good"/white and "bad"/black. Portraying black characters as rebellious and emasculating facilitates a negative transference whose source is each individual's unconscious memories of traumatic family life. Splitting of this kind, however, also results in idealization (Klein in Mitchell 182), here reserved for Queen Elizabeth I, who, by portraying herself as protector of her subjects in the decrees to expel "blackamoors," facilitates a positive transference from her subjects toward herself. This idealizing, positive transference is facilitated further by her portrayal as a virgin; that is, if she "belongs" to no one, then, in this limited sense, she treats all of her subject/children equally; the idea that the leader ought to treat his or her followers equally is, according to Freud, one of the demands groups make of their leaders to assuage anxieties about rivalry between members, anxieties that have their roots in individual sibling rivalry and competition for the mother's attention (*Group Psychology* 94; 124-25). Thus, the representation of black people becomes a means to tap into the individual's unconscious attitudes to form a more coherent group identity for England.

The Battle of Alcazar, however, is not an isolated instance of the use of Oedipal material to portray black characters in the service of an emergent national identity. The association of lawlessness, castration, and displacement with blackness occurs

throughout the early modern period, often producing highly Oedipal configurations.

One could easily fill up many pages recounting the villainous and criminal activities attributed to black characters of the early modern stage. For the sake of brevity, I will briefly discuss only a few. Elezeur, the black Moor of Thomas Dekker's *Lust's Dominion*, assassinates the Spanish King, spreads rumors that Spain's prince is a bastard, takes the Spanish crown for himself, and wrongfully imprisons the Queen and numerous other characters. Similarly, Anthony Barthelemy concludes that the black Moor, Mulymumen, of William Rowley's *All's Lost by Lust*, "becomes a metaphor for the topsy-turvy world that results from sinful lust and rebellion against one's lawful king," that he is "the symbolic representative of evil in the play" (117). Even a complex black character like Shakespeare's Othello ultimately transgresses the law, killing his wife and ordering the murder of Cassio.

In addition to the association between transgression and blackness, early modern dramatists, revealing a trace of the Talmud's interpretation of Cham's transgression, frequently associated blackness with castration. The stage directions to the first scene of *Antony and Cleopatra*, for example, explain that Cleopatra enters "with eunuchs fanning her" and in a later scene, Cleopatra and her eunuch, Mardian, discuss the pros and cons of castration (1.5.9-18). Although Mardian is by no means a lead character, he appears on stage intermittently throughout the play, establishing a clear association between Egypt and emasculation.

Furthermore, in spite of the erotic relationship between the play's two title characters, Antony is often referred to as figuratively castrated. As Caesar puts it, Antony "is not more manlike/ Than Cleopatra; nor the queen of Ptolemy/ More womanly than he" (1.4.5-7). Antony admits as much, explaining to Cleopatra, "You did know/ How much you were my conqueror, and that / My sword, made weak by my affection, would/ Obey it on all cause" (3.11.65-69); here, the sword, Antony's phallic symbol, is "made weak" in contrast to Cleopatra who takes up the position of "conqueror." In addition to the eunuch's literal castration and Antony's figurative castration, many Roman characters express anxiety about castration and emasculation as a result of their contact with Egypt; Canidius says, "we are women's men" (3.7.69) and Enobarbus implores, "Transform us not to women" (4.2.36); although I have taken these lines out of their contexts, they contribute to the overall network of associations

between blackness and emasculation in the play. These lines reveal a guilt and fear of retribution for transgressing the laws of patriarchal Rome, and in that sense the play is a social manifestation of an Oedipal crisis, Octavius Caesar representing an authoritarian father-figure, Antony the transgressing son who has "Foreborne the getting of a lawful race" (3.13.107), and Cleopatra the desired but fallen mother-figure.

In Thomas Heywood's *The Fair Maid of The West*, as in *Antony and Cleopatra*, an encounter in Africa is closely associated with the danger of castration. When confronted by an English sailor, Mullisheg, the King of Fez, tells his henchman, "And see him gelded to attend on us./ He shall be our chief eunuch" (5.2.92-93). The threat is likewise levelled at Clem, an English servant-boy who objects to Mullisheg's amorous advances towards Bess, the fair English maid of the play's title (5.2.178-85). In this scene, Mullisheg, like Cham, is both seducer and castrator while the English Bess, short for Elizabeth, is the pure mother-figure associated in this sense with Elizabeth I, England's queen/mother (5.1.87-102). Again, Africa becomes the space where Oedipal anxieties are enacted while England comes to represent an almost pre-Oedipal paradise in which the queen/mother belongs entirely to the subject/children.

Similarly, several critics have noticed something decidedly Oedipal in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. C. L. Barber, for example, finds sexual energy embedded in the family ties of the play and sees the story as a fantasy dealing with the separation of sex and violence from the family structure (190-92), and Norman Holland finds within the elements of the play—a struggle for power, human sacrifice, cannibalistic meals, dismemberment, and rape—traces of what Freud calls "the primal crime" in which an alliance of brothers liberate themselves from an oppressive father and feast on his flesh, a configuration which Freud relates to the formation of the Oedipus complex (Holland 275-76; Freud, *Totem and Taboo* 141-43).⁵ Within these variations on Oedipal material there is always a threat of castration, which in *Titus Andronicus* is carried out symbolically by Aaron, the black Moor, when he cuts Titus' hand off (2.1.150-192). Aaron associates this symbolic castration with his own blackness stating immediately after the act that he "will have his soul black like his face" (3.1.205). J. C. Flügel finds images of castration occurring throughout *Titus Andronicus*, especially in the scene in which Tamora's sons, following Aaron's instructions, cut off Lavinia's hands and cut out her tongue, images that relate to the loss of the phallus the child imagines the mother once had. Aaron, like

Cham and Mullisheg, is portrayed as castrating and shares further affinities with these characters in that he is also a seducer having special access to the sexual mother-figure of the play, Tamora, who bears Aaron's black child. In that sense, he embodies what is intolerable for the male child in the Oedipal situation; he has an exclusive relation to the mother, fathers a child who could instigate a sibling rivalry for the mother's attention, and threatens castration. Again, Oedipal material is reworked to inspire a negative transference toward black characters.

Related to this Oedipal material is the portrayal of "blackamoors" as displacing or disenfranchising white people. Cham seeks "to dis-inherit the off-spring of his other two brethren." Muly Mahamet likewise tries to usurp his "white" uncles who have a rightful claim to the throne. Similarly, Elezeer of *Lust's Dominion* and Mulymumen of *All's Lost by Lust* usurp the Spanish crown; Mullisheg tries to seduce Bess and thereby displace her love, Spencer; Egypt displaces Rome in Antony's allegiance just as Cleopatra displaces Octavia in Antony's affection; Aaron displaces Saturninus by having a sexual relationship with Tamora and fathering her child. In addition to these dramatic representations of "blackamoors" displacing white people, the stated motive for Elizabeth's call for the expulsion of "blackamoors" from England was that "blackamoors" take up jobs leaving the English to "perishe for want of service, whereby through their labor they might be mayntained" (quoted in Cowhig 6). Such characterizations are Oedipal in that they allude to sibling rivalries for access to the parents' affection, and protection (Freud, *Introductory Lectures* 333-34). Unlike a sibling rivalry, however, the allusions above always portray "blackamoors" as taking what is not rightfully theirs. Thus, black characters are always made to embody what is perceived to be unjust or aggressive aspects of the Oedipal situation.

This consistent representation of black characters as embodying the negative aspects of the Oedipal situation facilitates negative transference. In the process, positive transference is reserved for the construction of England's group identity. In England's family romance, Queen Elizabeth I is not the "bad" mother who withholds the breast or has some exclusive relationship with someone else; rather, by emphasizing her virginity she fulfills Freud's theory that the leaders of groups must appear to treat each of their subjects equally (*Group Psychology* 94, 124-25); in her refusal to publicly grant an exclusive sexual relationship to any one person, Elizabeth "belongs" to all her subjects and facilitates a positive transference in which she plays

the role of the "good" pre-Oedipal mother, the mother as virgin. As a result, the subject/children of England come to perceive themselves as siblings without rivalry; the rivalry, rather, is transferred toward "Blackamoors . . . who [in the words of Elizabeth's decree] are fostered and relieved here [in England] to the great annoyance of [the Queen's] own liege people that want the relief which those people consume" (quoted in Jones, *The Elizabethan Image* 20). Underlying early modern England's attempts to answer the "Riddle" of blackness, then, is the mechanism, transference, whereby attitudes originally associated with the family are assigned to others. In that sense, the attempts to answer this "Riddle" are highly revealing about England's sense of self.

Notes

¹For a discussion of this poem, see Hall 62-122, but especially 62-71; and Jordan 11-12.

²The need for continuity, one of the requirements for group formation and stability described in Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, is discussed in great detail in another chapter of the larger project from which this essay is taken.

³I am here summarizing slightly more detailed accounts to be found in D'Amico (81-83) and Chew (525). All references to *The Battle of Alcazar* are based on the version edited by Charles Tyler Prouty.

⁴Tokson argues against Jones, who believes that Muly Mahamet was portrayed as black and Abdemelec was portrayed as white (*Othello's Countrymen* 49). Barthelemy also suggests that Muly Mahamet was portrayed as black in contrast to the rest of the characters in the play (77).

⁵In addition to the Oedipal interpretations of *Titus Andronicus* discussed in this paper, see also David Willbern's "Rape and Revenge in *Titus Andronicus*."

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