The Tolerance and Persecution of Africans in Early Modern England and Scotland

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THE MOST SUSTAINED ATROCITY in modern human history—the transatlantic slave trade—perversely originated in the period that also saw one of the greatest flowerings of human intellect and imagination: the Renaissance. Colonial expansion, coupled with the nascent slave trade, meant that Renaissance Britons encountered more dark-skinned persons—abroad, at home, and in literature—than ever before. But in this period, the adjective “black” does not necessarily correspond to what we now understand as racial difference or African origin. As late as the 1660s and 1670s, England’s first newspaper, the London Gazette, uses “black” to describe the physical appearance of both dark-haired Britons whom we would now call “white” (such as Scots or Yorkshiremen) and dark-skinned runaway African slaves.

The word “race” in the early modern era can allude to distinctions of tribe, nationality, rank, gender, and personality as well as to physical distinctions between groups of people with origins in diverse geographical areas (the casual way we use the word today). Even limiting ourselves to Shakespeare’s work, we find (among many other instances) “the happy race of kings” in Richard III (5.3.35), and Angelo giving his “sensual race the rein” in Measure for Measure (2.4.164). Adding Spenser gives us the “bounteous race/ Of woman kind” (Faerie Queene 2.5.52). By the end of the period, “race” also evokes the belief that people with different skin tones belong to different species, like cats and dogs—a hypothesis we now know to be false but that predominated, in various forms, from the late seventeenth century until the early twentieth.

To add to the confusion, descriptions that employ neither the ambiguous terms “black” nor “race” nonetheless read as racially coded now. Each phrase of the description of the renegade clergyman James Cropper, sought in several counties, corresponds to early modern stereotypes about African features: “of low stature, of a swarthy complexion, and short frizzled hair, thick Lipped,” yet Cropper was not a “Negro” or “Blackmore.” Finally, the term “Moor,” which may have etymological links both to Mauretania (now part of Morocco) and the Greek mauros, meaning “black,” could include North and South Africans, Asians, or Native Americans. (Sometimes writers distinguish between martial, Muslim “Moors,” primitive, pagan “blackamoors,” and civilized, Christian “Ethiopians,” but more often they use the terms indiscriminately.)
By the eighteenth century, however, the volatile meanings of both "race" and "black" skin have condensed. Black Africans are thought to belong to a different species or race from light-skinned Europeans—a species destined by birth for hard, manual labor in England's American colonies.

Attitudes towards blackness depended to a certain extent on beliefs about the causes and significance of skin color; those who believed black skin was a natural variation were inclined to be more tolerant than those who believed it was a sign of God's curse. Although tanning from the sun was the most common early modern explanation for dark skin, the age of exploration led many voyagers to question this theory. The sailor George Best argues in 1578 that the three sons of Noah, Shem, Cham and Japheth, who were believed to have colonized Asia, Africa, and Europe respectively after the flood, were white, and should have sired white children, but Cham disobeyed his father by having intercourse with his wife in the Ark. His punishment was to beget a black son, Chus, "who not only is himself, but all his posterity after him should bee ... blacke and lothsome ... and of this blacke and cursed Chus came all these blacke Moores which are in Africa."4

Best's associations are familiar to modern racism—blackness as pollution, sexual sin, and divine chastisement. But Best's account, linking dark skin and a divine curse, is in fact unusual for his time and place. Recent scholars have noted that the link between blackness and Cham's curse appears neither in the Hebrew Bible nor in the Midrashic commentary, and rarely in early modern commentaries. Physician Sir Thomas Browne's essay "Of the Blackness of Negroes" (1646), the most sustained early modern discussion of skin-color, categorically rebuts both the sun-tan explanation and the story of Cham's curse. Blackness, opines Browne, is an inherited shadow formed over the embryo by the natural process of birth. In contrast to Best, Browne very sensibly observes that there is no reason to consider black skin a "curse": "if we seriously consult the definitions of beauty, and exactly perpend what wise men determine thereof, we shall not apprehend a curse, or any deformity therein."5 Folk wisdom upheld Browne's contention that blackness was hereditary rather than environmental in origin; in fact, the common adage "to wash an Ethiopian" figured black skin as a figure for phenomena that could not be changed. Geoffrey Whitney's Choice of emblems (1586), to that effect, presents two devoted white attendants using sponges, rags, and a pitcher of water in their futile attempt to wash off a black man's blackness.6

Although Browne explains blackness as an inherited trait, at no point does he claim that human beings belong to different species or races, or that black people did not descend from Adam, an opinion that began to take root by the end of the seventeenth century among theologians in Europe and planters in Bermuda. Plantation owners would argue that, since black people could not be derived from Adam and were therefore not made in God's image, "miserable Negros [were] borne to perpetual slavery that way and thayer seed."7 Back in England, Margaret Cavendish revised her Observations on Natural Philosophy (1668) to argue that "Blackmoors [are] a kind or race of men different from the White, derived not from Adam but from another source. [If] there were no differences in their productions, then would not onely all men be exactly like, but all Beasts also; that is, there would be no difference between a Horse and a Cow, a Cow and a Lyon, a Snake and an Oyster."8 But Browne emphatically asserts the opposite: "Negroes" are "the seed of Adam," just like all the inhabitants of the world.9 Even Best, crass as he is, grants Africans a common descent from Adam and a common humanity with Englishmen.

Best's belief that black Africans, although "cursed," were descended from Adam, and Cavendish's later assertion that they were not, correspond to Britain's gradual involvement in the slave trade, to a growing black presence in Britain, and to increasing intolerance. The black presence in Britain is ancient. An African regiment was stationed near Hadrian's Wall on the border of Roman Britain. In the 1440s, the Portuguese began the international slave trade. They seem initially to have wished to "save" the Africans they met by converting them to Christianity; one of the 235 captive brought to Portugal in 1444 became a Franciscan friar. Some Portuguese captives ended up in the court of James IV of Scotland, such as the "More lasses," Ellen and Margaret, who attended the Queen, and several black musicians, including "Pete the Moor," or "Peter Moryen," an African musician who received a livery in 1503 and was granted freedom of movement forever. These Africans seem to have been treated as courtiers, rather than as slaves.10

King James VI of Scotland, England's future James I, seems to have shared his grandfather's interest in Africans. His new bride, Anne of Denmark, was welcomed to Edinburgh in 1590 by an elaborate entertainment prominently featuring young men wearing masks, make-up, and sleeves to make themselves look like "Moors." A unique Danish account insists that "an absolutely real and native blackamoor" led the procession. It is tempting to imagine that the Danish account is accurate and that the young black man at the Queen's coronation was the one who would perform at the banquet to celebrate the birth of Prince Henry four years later. Ministers had captured a lion to pull a banquet-table on a huge chariot. In an incident that might have inspired the fears of Shakespeare's amateur actors, the "rude mechanics" of A Midsummer Night's Dream, the pageant's designers suddenly worried that the lion might affright the ladies. Instead of the lion, they employed an African man, dressed in gorgeous robes, to pull the chariot with concealed wheels along a golden chain—an incident that highlights the shady overlap between tolerance (this man, like his possible ancestor Peter Moryen, seems to have
been a courtier, not a slave) and intolerance (we cannot know how much choice he had in the matter, and the substitution of an African for a lion clearly identifies Africans with bestiality and savagery).\textsuperscript{13}

The first clearly documented African visit to England features similar ambiguities. In 1505, five men traveled from Ghana to England. A contemporary account refers to them as both “blacke slaves” and as “five blacke Moorees”; William Towson’s narrative admits that the men had been carried away “perforce” but reassures one of their indigent companions that the men will return as soon as their English is adequate: “he demaundedy why we had not brought againe their men, which the last yeere we tooke away . . . we made him answere, that they were in England well used, and were there kept till they could speake the language, and then they should be brought againe to be a helpe to Englishmen in this Countrie.”\textsuperscript{14} Upon their return to Ghana “with much joy” on the part of their relatives, they did indeed act as intermediaries between their countrymen, convincing them that it was safe to trade metal with the English ships.\textsuperscript{15} Like many visitors to Britain, these African men hated the wintry weather (“the cold and moyste aire doth somewhat offend them”); unlike most visitors, however, they enjoyed the cuisine (“could wel agree with our meates and drinks”).\textsuperscript{14}

What might the English have made of these intelligent and adventurous men? Browne, typically, argues that although to an English eye a dark complexion was less attractive than a fair one, standards of beauty varied from nation to nation and one particular complexion, nose, or hair-type was not necessarily superior to another. In contrast, Duarte Lopes praises the inhabitants of Congo for their complexions varying from “blaccke” to “wilde Olive,” “blacke, and some also red” hair colors, “blacke, and of the colour of the sea” eyes, and bone-structure, but categorizes “the Negroes of Nubia and Guinea” for their “very deformed . . . thicke” lips. He connects their appearance with their “savage and beastly” customs, including cannibalism.\textsuperscript{15}

Strange myths about Africa and Africans abounded, adding to the mixture of fascination, horror, and awe that early modern Britons seem to have felt towards black people, beliefs fueled by both classical learning and medieval and early modern travelers’ tales. Pliny described a continent peopled by dwarfs, cannibals or Anthropophagi, and Blemmyae, “men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders”\textsuperscript{16}. Pomponius Mela catalogued people who use “singes [songs] in steede of speche,” people with “no tongue at all: some have their lippes growing together, saving that they have little rounde pipeholes in their Nosettes at which they sucke in drinke,” and a race of hisrute women who bore children “without the companie of men.”\textsuperscript{17} Sir John Mandeville described the people of Ethiopia as gigantic monopods; their single foot, he writes, was large enough to provide them with shade from the sun when they went to sleep.\textsuperscript{18} Matthew Drexserus located another matriarchy in Ethiopia, which “in times past . . . was governed by Queenes only.”\textsuperscript{19}

The career of the converted Muslim linguist, diplomat, and intellectual known as Leo Africanus (al-Hasan ibn Muhammad al-Wazarin al-Fasi) illustrates both European tolerance and intolerance. This author of one of the most influential accounts of the African continent was born in Granada just after the Spanish reconquest. He grew up in Fez, educated at a series of madrasahs. His family held an influential position in the Sultan’s court, and the young Leo visited Constantinople, Arabia, Southern Africa, and Egypt on diplomatic missions. On his return from Constantinople in 1518, Leo was captured by the Knights of St. John, who regularly engaged in piracy on the high seas. They took him to the current pope, Leo X, who was so impressed by Leo’s facility for languages and his diplomatic skills that on January 6, 1519, he baptized him himself, giving him his own name: Johannes Leo de Medicci. Fluent in Arabic, Hebrew, Spanish, and Italian, Leo compiled an Arab-Hebrew-Latin dictionary and in 1520 published his influential Cosmographia Aethiopica. Leo’s death is a mystery. Unsubstantiated legends have him reconverting to Islam in Tunis, shipwrecked as he tried to escape from the sack of Rome in 1527, or dying in Christian piety.

Leo’s account was the first description of Africa by an African to circulate around Europe. John Porss’s faulty English translation, The History and Description of Africa (1600), was itself based on a bad Latin translation, but nonetheless captured the imagination of many seventeenth-century readers. Shakespeare’s Othello shares many of the characteristics attributed to Leo by the men of Barbary, including credulity, bravery, and excessive jealousy. Leo himself, a so-called “white” Moor, appears to share the common European prejudices against black skin that we saw earlier, calling Numidia “the basest part of all Africa,” with inhabitants “of a blacke colour, and destinate of all learning.” Elsewhere he equates black skin with “savage and brutish” personalities; when he praises a prince “who is blakke in colour,” he explains as if in mitigation, “but most beautifull in minde and conditions,” as if the one might contradict the other. In contrast, “the most noble and worthy region of all Africa,” Leo’s own Mediterranean coast, is inhabited by “browne or tawny” Moors with “wholesome lawes and constitutions.”\textsuperscript{20}

Leo, the Islamic convert to Christianity, subscribed to a common belief that black Africans were sun-worshiping heathens, waiting benightedly for the blessed light of European Christianity to break upon them. Thomas Middleton’s city pageant, The Triumphs of Truth (1631), combines commercial and religious imperatives. It features a Moorish King converted from sun-worship to Christianity by the piety of the worshipful company of Grocers, not coincidentally the pageant’s sponsors. But Ethiopia and Ethiopians were thought to be a notable and worthy exception to the
rule of African paganism. Many Patristic commentators describe the bride in the Biblical Song of Songs as Ethiopian, and identify black skin as a sign of especial grace, singling out Moses' Ethiopian wife; the Queen of Sheba, "who came from the uttermost parts of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon" (Matt. 12:42); and Ebed'melech, the Ethiopian eunuch who rescues the prophet Jeremiah from prison (Jer. 38–39), as particularly devout converts.

Not only individual Ethiopians but also the kingdom itself had a special connection with Christianity. The (lost) fourteenth-century treatise of Giovanni da Carignano named Ethiopia as a Christian empire ruled by the devout Prester or "Presbyter" John. Francisco Alvares, a priest sent in 1520 on a Portuguese mission to Prester John's kingdom, further disseminated extravagant claims for the ruler's piety. Alvares wrote that the Prester's refusal to marry a non-Christian and to practice polygamy infuriated the surrounding Muslim Kings into launching a yearly attack upon his realm; he donated a splendid pavilion to the Portuguese ambassadors on condition that they said Mass every day; his monks and nuns took Lent so seriously that they wore hairshirts and sat neck-deep in a huge tank of water for penance.21

Some of these myths contained grains of truth. When Pliny described the "dwarfs" of Africa, he identified them as "pygmii," or pygmies, possibly the Mbutsi or Babutti people of the Congo. When Mela discussed the "dumbe people which use singes in stede of speche," he might have been referring to tone languages such as Dschang in Western Cameroon. There was a historical Prester John during Alvares' embassy: the Christian Lebna Dengel, who ascended the throne of his father Na'od in 1508, when he was only twelve years old. After his accession, the neighboring Muslims did indeed begin to invade Ethiopia annually. Dresserus' supposed Ethiopian matriarchy might come from the fact that Lebna Dengel's mother, Queen Na'o Mogasa, and his step-grandmother, Eleni, acted as regents until the boy was of age.

The accounts of Leo and others refer repeatedly to "Negro slaves." Domestic slaves had long suffered both in England and in Africa. What distinguishes the international trade in Africans from earlier kinds of forced labor is its scale, its duration, and its horror. John Hawkins was the first British trader in African slaves, kidnapping "by the sworde and . . . by other meanes" more than 300 Africans from the Guinea coast in 1562.22 Queen Elizabeth supposedly cried that "the Vengeance of Heaven" would punish slave-traders, but she lent Hawkins money and a ship, promoted him to treasurer of the navy, and allowed him to add the figure of a shackled black man to his coat-of-arms.23 In 1564 Hawkins made another foray, "burning and spoiling [the] townes" along the coast.24

Hawkins appears to have felt no misgivings about his endeavors, and one experiences a certain grim satisfaction in reciting the litany of catastrophes that beset his "Third Trouble-

some Voyage" in 1567. Abandoned by the Portuguese whom they had hired to guide them, ambushed with poisoned arrows by the Jalois of Senegal, sunk by hippopotami, betrayed by the kings of Castros and Sierra Leone, and so short of food that they could hardly steer their course, Hawkins and his sailors finally lost four of their ships to the Spanish, in the ultimate blow to national pride.

Despite the failure of Hawkins's enterprise, enough Africans lived in Britain by the end of the sixteenth century to cause Elizabeth some consternation. On July 11, 1596, the queen wrote a now infamous "open letter to the Lord Maiour of London" complaining that "there are of late divers blackmoorets brought into this realtime, of which kinde of people there are already here to mane." Such people, she continues, take work away from native-born Englishmen and impoverish them—"a nativest complaint all too familiar to a modern ear." She urges the bearer to deport the ten "blackmoors" recently brought to London by Sir Thomas Baskerville.25 On the eighteenth, the Queen issued a warrant to the Lord Mayor and other public servants requiring them to help Lubeck merchant Casper van Senden to transport eighty-nine black people to Spain and Portugal in exchange for eighty-nine Englishmen whom Van Senden had liberated.

Elizabeth makes three nationalist appeals to her Londoners to convince them to hand over their slaves: fealty, or the duty of a subject to the monarch; hospitality, or the duty of a host to a foreign guest who had freed the Englishmen out of charity; piety, or the duty of one Christian to another to prefer Christian servants to heathen. But evidently all citizens did not cooperate. Just three years later, the queen was obliged not only to restate her religious prejudice more strongly (castigating black "infilderes" for taking food from the mouths of Christians) but also to menace reluctant masters with royal wrath: "if they shall eftsoons willfully and obstinately refuse, we pray you to certify their names to us, to the end her majesty may take such further course therein as it shall seem best to her princely wisdom."26

I refer to these immigrants as "slaves," rather than "servants," but the legal status of Africans in Britain before 1750 was unclear. As we saw, the five black men who visited England in 1555 were kidnapped, like slaves, but ultimately returned home, where they capitalized on their new linguistic skills, like tradesmen. A famous legal decision in 1599 (the same year that Hawkins published the account of his third slaving voyage) freed a "Slave from Russia" because "England was too pure an Air for Slaves to breath[e] in."27

"Slavery" to an early modern ear evokes white, rather than black, captivity—in particular, the specter of capture and forced labor by the great Islamic empire of the Ottoman Turks, and to English domestic slavery or "villeinage" (never technically outlawed in Britain), in which workers were tied to their masters' lands, without the right to hire out their own labor. Chronicles indicate that Africans in late sixteenth-century London might
have engaged in the fields of entertainment, trade, interpreting, or sex work; parish records in London show servants, musicians, and sailors. Some scholars even identify the so-called "Dark Lady" of Shakespeare's Sonnets with the "Lucy Negro" named in the Gray's Inn Christmas Revels of 1594 as the "Abebs de Clerkenwell," or London Madam. And just as African servants might be snatched up in exchange for English prisoners during the 1590s, so Irish Catholics (especially under Oliver Cromwell) might be seized and taken to Bermuda to work on the new English plantations there.

The first decades of King James's English reign combined a fascination for Africans with the beginnings of sustained persecution. Londoners of all ranks were entertained by exotic displays presenting "Moors" and strangers of all nationalities and skin tones, including Jonson's Masque of Blackness, written in response to Queen Anne's desire for herself and her ladies to appear blacked up as the "Daughters of Niger." Other performances included the masque of Solomon and Sheba; "A Mask of the Knights of India and China," Middleton's Triumphs of Truth, Anthony Munday's civic pageant for the fishmongers, Cynarcardia (1616), and Shakespeare's Othello (1608). Masques displayed fantastic strangers for the delectation of visiting dignitaries, such as the Spanish ambassador who attended Blackness and gallantly kissed the queen's blackened hand, or "the Virginian woman Pocahuntas" who was "well placed at the mask" near the King a week before she died at Gravesend.

These are also the decades in which English slave-trading begins in earnest. Founded in 1618, the Guinea Company was trading in slaves by 1651. But the first reference to the sale of dark-skinned workers in England comes from a voice for tolerance—in the petition of a merchant who objects strenuously to the trade, and who refuses to accept payment for human beings. William Bragge writes to Thomas Smith and the "East and Sommers Island (Bermuda) Company" in 1621 requesting reimbursement for various items his deceased brother had brought back to England from the West Indies. The cargo included hogs, plantains, potatoes, sugar cane, brass vessels, twenty dogs and "a great many" cats (he requests 55 each for the dogs, but agrees to "let the Cats go").

Bragge's claim from the Sommers Islands company also lists "Item more for Thirteen Negroes or Indian People six women seven men and boys, the price of them also not to bee vallowed." The casual conflation of "negroes or Indian people" reflects not only confused terminology but possibly a mixed group of people. Smith, a one-time chairman of the Bermuda Company, may have been involved in setting up the first English plantations there—plantations staffed by Africans (slaves, under Bermuda law), Irish servants (some of whom had been kidnapped and indentured for life; like the Africans) and "Indian" (both East- and West-) laborers.

Bragge offers two reasons for his inability to price these people. First, the tobacco they helped to grow in Bermuda has increased in price fivefold. Second, they are potential converts to Christianity: "the Lord Jesu hath suffered death awell for them as for all you, and therefore will I not reckon for in time the Lord may call them to be true Christians." Bragge concludes emphatically: "I most humbly beseech my heauntely god, I may not receive rewards either of gold or silver for such as are created after [th]e image similitude and likeness of god." Similarly, merchant Richard Jobson expresses a natural horror of slavery and a fellow-feeling with the captive African women he encounters on his search for gold and for the "grace blacke Merchant, called Bucktor Sanc:" in sub-Saharan Africa:

I made answer, We were a people, who did not deal in any such commodities, neither did wee buy or sell one another, or any that had our owne shapes; [Bucktor Sanc] seemed to marvells much at it, and told so, it was the only merchandize, they carried downe into the country . . . and that they were sole there to white men, who earnestly desired them, especially such young women, as hee had brought for us: we answered, They were another kind of people different from us, but for our part, if they had no other commodities, we would returne againe.

Jobson distinguishes between the "white . . . kind of people" who, he claims, will not trade human flesh (the English) and those who "earnestly desire" it (the Spanish and Portuguese). Either Jobson was engaging in wishful thinking, or was genuinely ignorant of Hawkins's depredations forty years before.

Bragge and Jobson were pleading for a lost cause. In 1662 the Royal Adventurers' Company explicitly stated in their charter that English plantations in America required "a constant supply of Negro-servants." This company was superseded by the Royal African Company from 1672–98, it imported an "annual average of 1000 slaves" between 1680 and 1686. A 1677 court found "by special Verdict" that "Negroes being usually bought and sold among merchants, so Merchandis, and also being Infallable, there might be a Property in them sufficient to maintain Traver [recoverable property]."

In 1701 Chief Justice Holt challenged this decision when he determined that Africans could not be considered traver in England, because "the Laws of England take no notice of a Negro." Moreover, he opined, "as soon as a Negro comes into England, he becomes free . . . one may be a villain in England but not a slave"—that is to say, one could be tied to the land or to a particular landowner, but not bought and sold like a chattel. Similarly, the King's Bench found in the same year that "a Negro cannot be demanded as a Chattel; for he is no other than a slavish Servant." The jury was also confused as to "Whether the [Negro's]
Baptism was a Manumission," but "the Court gave not Opinion." 87 Not until the Talbot and Hardwicke decisions in 1729 and 1749 did it finally become clear that neither arriving in England nor converting to Christianity guaranteed liberation. The American colonies were less squeamish. In contrast, colonial law specified in the 1660s that "negroes ... are saleable as chattels." Keen to refute the popular belief that baptism conferred freedom upon slaves, New England lawmakers in 1664 legislated against "settling at Liberty Any Negro or Indian Servant who shall turn Christian after he shall have been bought by Any Person." 38

Thus, while in 1690 a black African working in a household might have rights similar to other servants (to hire out her own labor; to convert to Christianity; to attend church services; to marry), by the 1660s, such a person could be sold against her will for hard labor in the American colonies. In 1687, for example, Dinah Black appealed to the Bristol courts for rescue from her mistress, Dorothy Smith, who was trying to sell her for field work in America (she was rescued from the very boards of the ship by white sympathizers, but we do not know the outcome of her legal case). And in 1699, the master and mistress of Katherine Auker punished her for converting to Christianity by throwing her out, "torturing" her, having her "arrested and imprisoned," and preventing her from seeking other employment. A British court granted her the right to hire out her own labor in England, but only while her master was absent from England and visiting his plantation in Barbados—either because it did not know what to make of the situation or because Katherine held the position, as servant in England but as slave in Barbados. 39 The grudging tolerance of Africans in Britain had become contingent upon their slave status— which left them open to outright persecution.

8 Margaret Cavendish, Observations upon Experimental Philosophy (London, 1687), 56.
9 Browne, Volume 3, 343.
10 Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland, ed. Sir James Balfour Paul (Edinburgh, 1900), Volume 4, 401 (London, 1648), and Edwards, pp. 9–11.
13 Townson, 232.
14 Lok, 1385–1386.
19 Quoted in John Perry, trans., The History and Description of Africa, by Leo Africanus (London, 1600), 214.
24 John Sparke, the younger, "The voyage made by M. John Hawkins ... in ... 1564," Hakluyt, Volume 9, 241.
30 Calendar Colonial, 138.