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## A "black, black, black man": Aaron's Represented Blackness on Stage and Screen

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1.

"What can we do next season? We're not really ready for Lear . . ."

"Oh god, no."

"I suppose Othello's relatively easy to cast . . ."

"Would you hire a black actor?"

"Of course. If we couldn't find anyone willing, I guess I could do him."

"Are you insane? Iago's a better part. Besides, you'd sweat the make-up off before you walked on stage."

Years ago, judgement green-hued, I would commit entire Shakespearean dialogues, speeches, and scenes to memory, usually in hopes of actually performing them on stage when opportunity presented itself, which it thankfully did and has continued to do; those line rehearsals led me down theatrical paths to a real Benedick, Hamlet, Macbeth, Petruccio, and many others, mostly for the Palm Beach Shakespeare Festival for the past thirteen years. There are a few parts learned long ago that have eluded my stage efforts until now, but the one that at times grieved me most is ironically the part I now think I was foolish enough to entertain as a possibility in the first place: Othello. Why a then twenty-year-old white student of Shakespeare, as an actor and a future scholar, would stagger around bellowing "O, now for ever / Farewell

the tranquil mind” and want to black up to play Othello — especially more than Iago — is a mystery to me now. With centuries of precedent established by the white gods of Shakespearean drama (Garrick, Kean, Irving, Olivier, Gielgud, Scofield and others) I would love to consider it an oddly charming sense of dramatic hubris, but with my present sensibilities I’m afraid sheer stupidity sums it up quite nicely. I don’t regret the initial desire, though. *Othello* is a tragedy that many of us find important enough to teach, study, and appreciate as audiences and scholars; if actors stop wanting to play star (if controversial) parts like Othello, something would be terribly wrong.

My thoughts on white actors playing black roles are not without prompting, nor is this paper’s focus on *Titus Andronicus*’ evil Moor. First, my wife and I recently shared the brief exchange that opens my paper, wrestling with possible show titles for future production; PBSF is now considering three Shakespearean dramas for its 2004 season, one of which is *Titus Andronicus*. Tim Blake Nelson’s adaptation of *Othello, O*, finally saw theatrical and video release (the Columbine tragedy had actually delayed its distribution until 2001), and Julie Taymor’s film *Titus* has garnered international attention since its release in 2000 and is now, like *O*, widely available on VHS and DVD. On a larger scale, and much like movements in the academic world, the theatre has seen a number of considerable shifts in the past twenty years concerning what audiences will or will not accept on stage, particularly regarding race. “Color-blind casting” is now the norm in most repertory companies around the world, including major bastions of Shakespearean drama (the Royal Shakespeare Company, the National Theatre of Great Britain, the New York Shakespeare Festival, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, and others). Peter Holland’s study of a decade of British theatre, *English Shakespeares*, notes repeatedly the wide acceptance of the practice on his side of the Atlantic, and Errol Hill’s *Shakespeare in Sable* not only documents the history of the black Shakespearean performer in America, but reveals as well how far ahead American theatres were than English in adopting color-blind casting policies, especially Joe Papp’s NYSF. Celia Daileader’s recent study on the casting of black male actors at the RSC, though mostly concerned with what she calls “Othellophilia” in its less than flattering critical aspects, nevertheless documents the major (white) roles black performers now take on there with some regularity. One of her essay’s many points of interest for me addresses Hugh Quarshie, a black actor who, in spite of a considerably successful classical career, has heretofore adamantly resisted playing Othello; he finds the part, and the play, far too racist, and feels that any black actor who plays the part risks contributing to and perpetuating that racism. He has even published his thoughts on the matter for the International Shakespeare Association, having delivered them as an inaugural lecture for a symposium on race and class in the Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> He has, however, played Aaron, both as his debut on stage at the RSC and for the BBC Shakespeare Plays. I have learned that Quarshie expressed interest in

playing the part again for Taymor's 2000 film adaptation, though the privilege went to another (black) actor. I'm not sure if I find Quarshie's opinions and dramatic practices hypocritical, but they certainly give me pause, for Aaron is a character in which Wole Soyinka sees Shakespeare "reducing [a] representative of that race to unprecedented depths of savagery and inhuman perversion" (87); few would disagree with Soyinka's assessment of Aaron's cruelty and corruption, and those who do (as we'll see below) offer the weakest support imaginable while arguing for a nobility in Aaron that might nearly eradicate any evildoing he acts or instigates.

There are obvious explanations for Quarshie's contradictory attitude toward Shakespeare's most notorious Moors — I will not address *The Merchant of Venice's* Prince of Morocco or Cleopatra — that he is by far not the only actor or scholar to hold.<sup>2</sup> Many actors will play just about anything to jump-start their career, especially at the RSC; Quarshie playfully remarks that one must pass through "puberty, adolescence and the Royal Shakespeare Company before reaching maturity as an actor" (1). Aaron is also a deliciously wicked villain, pulled from that stock of character that few actors can resist playing. Richard David nicely hit the nail's head spot on when in 1957 he remarked of Anthony Quayle's Moor, "Aaron is a nice fat part for anyone" (128). In terms of comparable attractiveness to actors, moreover, Aaron is so evil that most notions of complex human psychology are sacrificed to that stock villainy, paternal instincts notwithstanding (more on that later): Othello, by comparison, is all the more human, at times admirable, and, as such, is much more problematic a murderer to play, rendering Aaron the "safer" of the two for actors to attempt. There are other problems, though, that cancel out these possible excuses, especially given *Titus'* literal explosion in popularity after groundbreaking stage productions (in 1955 and 1987) and its first world-wide film release.<sup>3</sup> Why is it customary for some critics not to question white actors playing Othello now, even while looking back on earlier white Othellos and remarking on their racist characterizations, without instigating the same investigations for *Titus* and white Aarons?<sup>4</sup> Laurence Olivier is now roundly (and rightly, I believe) dragged over the coals for his 1964 Othello, but how many people know that a young Derek Jacobi played Aaron two years later? Jacobi was Olivier's Cassio; can we make an educated guess as to who Jacobi looked to for Moorish inspiration (or, given Jacobi's youthful flamboyance and melodramatics, how far "over the top" he went)? On another side of this multi-faceted issue, why do other critics now complain about Aarons who are conspicuously light-skinned, but accept Ben Kingsley (RSC 1985) or Anthony Hopkins (BBC 1981) as Othello? These ruminations lead to my ultimate question: is it at all possible that the real, unbridled, indisputably racist creation in the canon has actually delighted audiences with his literal and metaphorical black villainy under the protective screen of a Vice figure who we like to see "in action," as long as he's ultimately punished?<sup>5</sup>

I think that's exactly what has happened throughout the history of Aaron's stage life, though answering the questions above has not necessarily proven easy. Indeed, I cannot even begin to address here what might be another, equally fascinating concern worthy of a much larger study: can a character be possessed of such an evil nature that he actually *transcends* the racial stereotypes with which he is endowed? (In Aaron's case, I think not). One argument, however, will be prevalent throughout: in spite of Aaron's Vice-like, inhuman qualities that often turn him into what I like to call a cartoon villain, he nevertheless embodies monstrously racist fears and concerns. Aaron is, to the utter horror of most of those around him, a subtle, sly villain, a man who boldly admits to being as black as he is demonic and as demonic as he is black; for Shakespeare, in this particular tragedy, there is no difference between the two. In fact, audiences and critics want him black — some as black as possible. As such, I will suggest that for our stages and screens he is a far greater example of racist characterization than Othello, more so now than ever, and that actors, directors, and theatre critics all encourage that characterization. Indeed, actors who play him while relishing the Moorish equivalent of moustache-twirling villainy do greater damage to the ideals they uphold in not playing Othello by choosing this almost one dimensional concentration of black evil<sup>6</sup>; off the boards on the producing end of things, directors for the twentieth-century stage and screen make choices to accentuate Aaron's demonic blackness; and theatre reviewers are angered when Aarons aren't "black enough." The great irony is that the "racial" tragedy that has remained on the stage constantly for four centuries, perpetuating miscegenational and other racist fears, is no longer the same stage vehicle for those fears it once was. The play that has seen virtually no performance history, however, and is now enjoying its own renaissance, could be taking the former's place as a "racist" drama, and few people are doing anything to question or stop it.

*"Here comes Brabanzio and the valiant Moor"*

Anthony Martin's study of African characters on the Elizabethan stage reminds us that the first role to be represented as an actual African in the period was Muly Mahamet in George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar*, which "naturally . . . shows the predominant influence of Marlowe on drama at this time"; Martin notes that "Mahamet is a typically Marlovian over-reacher, with marked elements of Tamburlaine" (41). Remark- ing on the play's relative lack of critical or stage attention, Martin links Peele's play to *Lust's Dominion*<sup>7</sup> and Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, works whose "use of racial stereotype is impermissible in the realities of the modern world" (50). By comparison, of course, Shakespeare's place in the canon is far more secure; "the plays he wrote within the same cul- tural and historical nexus are not only more complex," but (as we almost blindly accept now, I would add) more worthy of theatrical and

scholarly attention than the work of many of his contemporaries (50). The subtle, perhaps unintended suggestion here is that Shakespeare had no "impermissible" racial stereotypes in his work, and if he did, those plays would have suffered the same neglect *Lust's Dominion* does now. It seems too obvious that Aaron would belong to that same family of "impermissible" roles, though few critics have the same sense of discomfort while discussing Aaron's characteristics that they do when addressing Othello, and audiences seemingly never do.<sup>8</sup>

I cannot catalogue here the centuries of debate regarding racism in *Othello*, be it from Coleridge's notorious "white-washing" of Othello to Bradley's barely concealed racist fears to more recent arguments addressing the Other, racial fetishizing, early modern colonialism and much else.<sup>9</sup> I also wish to avoid a "revisionist reading" that might "rehabilitate the tragedy by co-opting it to the anti-racist cause" (Neill 393). But I do want to review a few points about the man's blackness before I address Aaron so that we might more clearly investigate the latter's strange and eventful stage life, and I ask a moment's indulgence of those readers more familiar with *Othello* and its recent attendant scholarship.

Othello is Other. He says, despite the logical gymnastics of critics or actors who would argue otherwise, that he is black. There are sooty-bosomed, thick-lipped references scattered throughout the play, and there are so many images of toads, goats, monkeys, rams, ewes, and aspics' tongues invoked that the animal savagery clearly suggested by the contexts in which they're introduced is inescapable. Michael Neill has brilliantly argued for the centuries of dramatic and artistic fetishizing of the adulterous, hideous bed in the play, and Arthur Little has more recently suggested that "the scene of sexual intercourse between [Othello and Desdemona]" establishes "the sexual site and sight of the play's racial anxieties," associated as it is "with other horrifying scenes of sexuality, especially bestiality and homosexuality" (306). Interestingly, both Neill and Little reveal how much *audiences'* reactions to *Othello* — as opposed to the characterization of the role itself — were and are racist. What I'm concerned with here, though, for the purposes of this argument, is not what the more obviously racist Iago, Roderigo, Brabantio, or voyeuristically terrified audiences do or say in response to the black Othello: I'm interested in what he says about himself and what a more representative selection of the play's characters says about him, because that's exactly what most actors look to as they begin their embodiment of this or any role.

Othello's first entrance belies the play's — Iago's and Roderigo's, to be precise — early presentation of Moorish and animal lust. He is, as Emily Bartels reminds us, "a regal, eloquent, and accomplished general hastening to answer the Senate's call and not preoccupied with, in Iago's crude phrase, 'the beast with two backs'" (448): Bartels persuasively argues as well that although Iago's "stereotypical vision suggests its cultural currency, the fact that he uses indirect means to discredit Othello

at court suggests that the terms of the stereotype are not acceptable within the dominant setting" (448). Brabantio's spluttering and constantly changing attacks in the Senate reveal their own discrepancies, prompting the Duke (whose own daughter, he says, would have been entranced by Othello's tale) to essentially dismiss the "gentle signor": "Good Brabantio, / Take up this mangled matter at the best" (1.3.171-72).<sup>10</sup> Othello is called "valiant," "brave," "worthy," "noble," a soldier whom "passion could not shake, whose solid virtue / The shot of accident nor dart of chance / Could neither graze nor pierce" (4.1.268-70). Secure in his role in Venetian affairs, he doubts his own worth and race only after Iago begins preying on his mind; it takes him, within the play's notorious time scheme, moments to move from the confidence of "For she had eyes and chose me" (3.3.193) to the defeated "Haply for I am black, / . . . She's gone" (267, 271). Shakespeare, of course, tempers our responses to Othello's societal standing and characteristic valiance with early modern racial markers that are incongruous with his reputable nobility. Every accusation of unnatural lust (hurled at both Othello and Desdemona), Iago's decision to attack Othello in a racially-perceived weak spot,<sup>11</sup> and above all the vengeful, brutal nature of Desdemona's murder — of these elements lead us back to an early modern perception of the "blacker devil," the "gull," the "dolt, / As ignorant as dirt." But such accusations are few, Othello's terrifying crime singular, his response to it suicidal, and few would doubt now that the play's real "devil" is, ironically, a white one.<sup>12</sup> Not so for Aaron.

*"A coal-black Moor"*

Unlike Othello's initial entrance as a respected and necessary figure in Venetian warfare, Aaron enters Rome as a prisoner with the Goths captured by Titus. His racial difference was immediately noticeable on the sixteenth century stage, as Henry Peacham's now famous drawing first made clear,<sup>13</sup> and modern directors often rely on racial markers, be they skin color, elaborate costumes, or even the extent to which he is shackled and guarded, to achieve similar alienating effects. Aaron's first Elizabethan stage appearance would have been all the more startling because audiences were not warned of it (1.1 of *Othello* prepares viewers for a Moor's entrance). Aaron's silence throughout 1.1 is remarkable, as every named character but him speaks in the scene (even unnamed Tribunes have voice). When he finally speaks alone in 2.1, he reveals unequivocally his intents to "wanton" (21) with Tamora, to "mount aloft with [his] imperial mistress, / And mount her pitch" (13-14), and to witness her "charm Rome's Saturnine, / And see his shipwrack and his commonweal's" (23-24). Finally launched into action, Aaron speaks and is spoken to only in association with evil and blackness. He advises Demetrius and Chiron where to find those "unfrequented plots . . . / Fitted for rape and villainy" (116-17) where they may "revel in Lavinia's treasury" (131), and hatches his plot to frame Quintus and Martius for

the murder of Bassianus. Lavinia and Bassianus berate Tamora in 2.3, telling the queen "your swarthy Cimmerian / Doth make your honour of his body's hue, / Spotted, detested, and abominable" (72-73); they later mock Tamora's "barbarous Moor" (78) and "her raven-coloured love" (83). Titus marvels "Did ever raven sing so like a lark?" (3.1.158) as Aaron delivers a non-existent truce offer that will cost Titus his hand, and the remaining Andronici in 3.2 are "not brought so low" (75) that they cannot take pleasure from killing a "black ill-favored fly" (66) "That comes in likeness of a coal-black Moor" (77). Lucius later calls Aaron an "incarnate devil" (5.1.40), a "barbarous, beastly villain" (97), and a "ravenous tiger" (5.3.5).<sup>14</sup> Tamora's child by Aaron is no less hated by Goth and Roman for his race and color. The Nurse calls the infant boy "A devil" (4.2.64) and describes him "as loathsome as a toad" (67); the baby's half-brothers want to "broach the tadpole" on their swords (85), and curse "the offspring of so foul a fiend" (79). When the child is brought before Lucius and the Goths after Aaron is taken in flight, he is "the base fruit of [Tamora's] lust" (5.1.43), a "growing image of [Aaron's] fiendlike face" (45), and a "fruit of bastardy" (48). It is Tamora herself who sends the Nurse and baby to Aaron, begging that her own child be "christen[ed]" with Aaron's "dagger's point" (4.2.70).

What does Aaron have to say for himself in the face of these and many other slanders? His first task in Rome is to play out the "very excellent piece of villainy" (2.3.7) that will send two of Titus' sons to their deaths, and he successfully does so after turning away from the sexual advances of Tamora: "No madam . . . / Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand, / Blood and revenge are hammering in my head" (37-39). He can barely conceal his pleasure while duping Titus out of a hand — "O, how this villainy / Doth fat me with the very thoughts of it!" (3.1.201-02) — laughing in an aside, "Let fools do good, and fair men call for grace; / Aaron will have his soul black like his face" (203-04). His cataloguing of former crimes in 5.1 beggars description, including as it does

murders, rapes, and massacres,  
 Acts of black night, abominable deeds,  
 Complots of mischief, treason, villainies,  
 Ruthless to hear, yet piteously performed.

(63-66)<sup>15</sup>

When Lucius stays Aaron's hanging to administer a more protracted death later, Aaron taunts him:

If there be devils, would I were a devil,  
 To live and burn in everlasting fire,  
 So I might have your company in hell,  
 But to torment you with my bitter tongue.

(147-50),



which curiously suggests that for all of the demonic descriptions afforded him (by himself as much as others), Aaron implicitly doubts the very existence of hell and its devils. His final words on stage are, "If one good deed in all my life I did, / I do repent it from my very soul" (5.3.188-89).

*"Sweet blowse, you are a beauteous blossom, sure"*

I seem to be in a minority in thinking that there's nothing especially touching about Aaron's fierce protection of his child. Nearly every production review cited below mentions the "moving" and "noble" qualities audiences find in it. Critical introductions to the play suggest that his "spirited defense" of the child serves to "project his humanity as a father in a memorable fashion" (Waith 64), a "sudden revelation of the schemer's humanity" (Bate *Titus* 50). Jeanette White argues that "Shakespeare evidently was very much interested in presenting Aaron as a character endowed with humanity, despite the racial categorizations that the play trades upon" (361). Aaron's major scene with the child (4.2) is also, as I discuss in my conclusion, an iconographic scene favored by painters and photographers. Frankly, I find most people's fascination with and sympathy for it almost as disturbing as Aaron's crimes.<sup>16</sup> Aaron speaks to the child affectionately, and threatens with his scimitar's point anyone who would harm the boy. He murders one woman on stage to insure the infant's safety, and orders that the midwife be sent to him for a presumably similar fate. I am not impressed by the Moor's cooing to the baby, however, and feel that Aaron looks at the child as some sort of bartering tool. He constantly invokes the boy's royal blood and the support, pity, or protection it might secure. We should not forget that Aaron's first speech in play has him announcing his intentions to "shine in pearl and gold" (2.1.19), which might be taken as literally in regards to clothing and accessories as it might metaphorically in regards to his changing status as political prisoner. Aaron wants to bring the child up "To be a warrior, and command a camp" (4.2.179-80). Why has this been, and why does it continue to be, impressive or touching to editors and audiences? Are we so moved by a murderer who takes parenting seriously that we momentarily forget the dead body that he's squealing and gloating over? Various ages and cultural milieus place different emphases on the honor of military prowess, and there is certainly enough horrifying human precedent for Aaron's extracurricular activities, but what sort of learned behavior have audiences expected to pass down to the boy under Aaron's tutelage? Aaron is never concerned with honor or military conquest in the play, so how exactly will his son "command a camp"? I'm also wary to accept any kind of "Aaron's never had his own family before, he's always been an outsider, and now has one of his own kind to love" arguments that seek to explain the shocking spectacle of a man that is by choice a rapist, murderer, grave robber, and arsonist turning into a paternal wellspring

of love; do we really believe, after all, that Aaron would have responded in kind to the birth of a daughter?<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, theatre critics are especially vulnerable to this heartstring plucking, as we'll see below, and a few readers fall into its trap, too (as Aaron would probably like them to). This sympathy can lead to overall reconsiderations of Aaron's character, one of which I'd like to address here.

Edward T. Washington is at great pains to redeem Aaron — and, we assume, Shakespeare's creation of him — at all costs. At times he ignores aspects of the Moor's behavior to the point of hilarity in a desperate attempt to achieve his goal: to show the "several ways in which *Titus Andronicus* allows us to see the redeeming qualities in its otherwise evil black characters" (472). He suggests immediately that "it is black Aaron and his child who signal new hope for this tragic world, thereby undermining the play's representation of blacks as stereotypical dramatic emblems of evil,"<sup>18</sup> arguing that his role as "black infidel is rendered ambiguous by his relative merits" (461). What are those merits, we might ask? Washington is pleased to point out that of the play's fourteen stage murders, "we see only one carried out by Aaron"; indeed, "Aaron's single murder of the nurse actually *saves* a life, that of his newborn son," and although Aaron "threatens the life of the midwife," we are never told she is actually killed (462). I'm sure this is welcome news for the Nurse and all of Aaron's other victims in this play. Finding the tragedy's true force of evil in the Romans (a point easily argued, though Washington misses many chances to actually prove it) Washington feels that "Aaron's critique of Roman religious mores [5.1.74-85] could help Lucius to comprehend the problems that stem from his murder of Alarbus, but Lucius hears only the ravings of a pagan fiend" (471). Why shouldn't Lucius perceive Aaron's pronouncements as fiendishly pagan, and why would he accept spiritual advice from a man who's about ready to admit his role in orchestrating the "trimming" of Lavinia and Titus? Aaron begins that speech by arrogantly admitting that he believes in no god, challenging, "What if I do not? (5.1.73). Washington believes that Aaron's constant references to his own black skin in "negative epithets of darkness" are not employed to denote "inherent deficiencies in racial blacks" so much as to merely "acknowledge his skin to be the same color as the hue conventionally associated with depravity and evil" (470-71). Washington inexplicably thinks that "Aaron's achievements derive from his witty ability to adapt to new and often dangerous situations with peoples and values that are antithetical to his presumed static spheres of racial otherness: blackness, deviltry, beastliness, prurience, and treachery" (478). "Witty"? "Achievements"? Does Washington see in Aaron some Wildean Jack the Ripper? Aaron's "adaptations" to his new situation in Rome are all, by any standards, devilish, beastly, prurient, and treacherous; Aaron himself says they are. They are also, by his (and Shakespeare's) own boasts, "black." Tellingly, Washington does not cite any of Aaron's catalogued horrors from 5.1, and conveniently ignores Aaron's instructions to

Demetrius and Chiron for Lavinia's rape and his soliloquy at 2.1 and his machinations for Titus' sons and the chopping off of Titus' hand and his squealing like a pig at the dying Nurse and . . . Actually, Washington ignores everything Aaron does that might be construed as remotely unpleasant.

I'm not sure what Washington hopes to accomplish with his argument, which is baffling in light of his work on *Othello* (esp. "Hollowness") and the fact that he is himself black. If he seeks to justify Aaron's monstrous behavior, he fails utterly by virtue of not bringing any of it into question. If Aaron's blackness and a defense of it are at the root of Washington's discussion, the article's shameless selective reading of the play only serves to accentuate what *isn't* introduced for consideration. "Aaron's black, but he's really not that bad," Washington seems to say. Shakespeare and Aaron, however, definitely say otherwise, and Washington's white-washing of Aaron's crimes belies stage and film representations of Aaron and critical responses to them.

## 2.

The fact is that Shakespeare did write *Othello* after *Titus* and that once *Othello* entered the repertory the image of the Moor of Venice could not be erased from the English theatrical imagination . . . every post-*Othello* production of *Titus* comes with the knowledge of the later play in which Shakespeare redistributed the characteristics of Aaron, giving his racial identity to the noble but gullible Moor and his villainy to the demi-devil with a black heart in a white skin.

Jonathan Bate introduces this point by asking, "is an identification with Shakespeare's later Moor necessarily a bad thing?" when thinking of Aaron (*Titus* 58). It is very much a "bad thing." I hope that I have shown, without overstating the obvious, how completely and utterly Aaron is despised for his race and actions and how inextricably linked those two elements are in his character. It seems clear, too, that if *Othello* is not sympathetic at all times, we recognize that the play's infamous green-eyed monster has been roused by a "Spartan dog, / More fell than anguish, hunger, or the sea" (5.2.371-72). Indeed, in the present theatrical world, one which sees most of Shakespeare's canon performed regularly, I find *Othello's* jealousy-as-racial issues rendered largely null and void in the faces of the Leontes and Fords who get more stage time than *Othellos*. Not everyone, however, has found the distinction so easy.<sup>19</sup>

I return now to Mr. Quarshie, whose remarks on *Othello* instigated my research. Quarshie argues, and I feel it worthy of full citation,

firstly, that in adapting and elaborating Cinthio's story about a jealous, uxoricidal Moor, Shakespeare was endorsing a racist convention; secondly, that performance conventions and conven-

tional interpretations have further reinforced racist views; and, thirdly, that, while it may never be possible to avoid the conclusion that Othello behaves as he does because he is black, a non-racist interpretation may nevertheless be possible, but only with careful editing of the text and a radical re-reading of key passages.

(3)

As Fluellen says to Pistol, I say to Quarshie: "I do partly understand your meaning." As an actor, director, and scholar, I'm not sure how "radical" a re-reading would be necessary, but I'd certainly support "careful editing." What I question more deeply, though, is an odd paradox suggested in Quarshie's own career that in turn reflects on the choices any actor who plays Aaron must make: if *Othello* and its hero are racist, how can Aaron be played without seeming more so? Being a black actor, for Quarshie, "entitles" and "indeed obliges [him] to respond to Othello, the character, as a representation of blackness in the theatre" (3). This he does, with panache, instruction, and a shrewd combination of theatrical and scholarly knowledge. What he never addresses are his experiences with Aaron on stage and screen; *Titus'* Moor is mentioned only twice in Quarshie's lecture, and the actor doesn't even admit — the correct word here, I think — to ever playing him. I cannot retroactively demand that Quarshie fill in what I find to be large gaps in his argument, so I turn to more recent productions of *Titus*, beginning with Quarshie's experiences in the role.<sup>20</sup>

Quarshie's first Aaron suffered the dramatic indignity of being introduced via a heavily cut double-bill of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Titus* in a production by John Barton in 1981. Critics dismissed the entire concept, noting that *Titus* "suffered most, the victim of production and acting that mocked it beyond reason," sporting a "total neglect of the dramatic potency of Titus, Aaron, and Tamora" (Evans 187). Jane Howell's 1985 production for the BBC Shakespeare Plays gave the actor a chance to play the part from the full text, producing acting results that are rather telling. Daileader has noted critics' obsessions with Quarshie's various performance attributes, especially his body (180-84). The actor's handsome looks are often noted, as is his tendency to smile, either charmingly or menacingly; often, the smiles "flash," and are described by critics repeatedly in phrases that perhaps unintentionally but implicitly remind readers of Quarshie's dark skin.<sup>21</sup> There's a slight problem, though, that arises when one watches Quarshie as Aaron: he does smile. A lot. In every scene that he's in. So much so that I can't help but think that he's contributing to the same kinds of racist characterizations he finds in *Othello*, particularly when he discusses historically exaggerated black physical attributes.<sup>22</sup> Throughout the BBC *Titus*, Quarshie looks at and speaks directly to the camera — us — as the intimate nature of BBC studio work undoubtedly encourages most actors who have asides to do. From an actor's standpoint, the Vice-like quali-

ties of the character immediately suggest some levels of gloating, and there are many opportunities for conspiratorial winks and nods to the camera/audience, which Quarshie delivers again and again. But if Quarshie is not exactly being racist himself (which I highly doubt), I do find strong racist *urges* in his portrayal that has Aaron smiling and even laughing in passive agreement as other characters insult him offhandedly. When Titus, overjoyed, says, "O gentle Aaron! / Did ever raven sing so like a lark" when Aaron comes for Titus' hand (3.1.157-58), Quarshie laughs heartily and nods his head as if to say, "Yes, I can't believe it either!" Quarshie's Aaron, then, confirms for Titus and his family that even ravens know they don't usually sing like larks. For 2.3, as Aaron prepares to entrap Quintus and Martius, Quarshie walks around a large tree trunk, notices the camera/us, pointedly "recognizes" us, and moves to the camera to speak, all smiling. Quarshie can certainly smile and smile and be a villain, and quite a charming smile it is. I'm not suggesting that black actors not smile, or that all smiling villains are racist in their characterizations. Though it may be an inescapable physical reality, Quarshie's brilliantly white teeth only accentuate his skin's blackness. By employing excessive grins and leers, in *this* play's context, I feel that Quarshie is enacting a racist perception of black villainy, or that he's allowing Shakespeare's characterization of Aaron not only to remain racist, but get a little help from him as an actor to emphasize the fact as well. I specify "black" villainy here, because Aaron is conspicuously different than that handful of villains often named as his dramatic descendants in the Shakespearean canon (Richard III, Iago, Edmond, Don John) in one respect: his blackness. What those characters do might be "darkly" evil, but their acts are not *caused* by blackness, as Shakespeare repeatedly suggests that Aaron's are. White correctly surmises that Aaron, in fact, "chooses to wield the only authority that his blackness gives him: the power of villainy" (352). What becomes perhaps most troublesome is the glaring fact that Howell's *Titus* — the entire BBC series, in fact — is not cast "color blind." Quarshie, who by 1985 had already become a major player at the RSC, is the only black actor in the production (apart from the three black infants who were hired to play his son), and his blackness is repeatedly emphasized not only by the flashing, charming smiles so appreciated by critics, but also through directorial choices that include him being stripped to the waist in three scenes and have him wearing white, elaborately brocaded doublets in others. No other performer loses his or her shirt, even Alarbus as he's being led off to sacrifice.<sup>23</sup> This is admittedly a tricky issue on which to challenge Quarshie, but I cannot ignore the fact that the entire series was produced to put "definitive" interpretations of Shakespeare's work on video to be seen over and over in libraries across the world. There are repeated stamps of "authority" surrounding the series, from directors to producers to the actors themselves, and we should remember that Quarshie chose in these contexts to commit his interpretation to film. We should also remember that the very series that has Quarshie

mugging for the camera at every opportunity while relishing his status as a "barbarous Moor" also has Anthony Hopkins in blackface — rolling his eyes, drooling, and chewing more scenery than his afro wig has hairs — as Othello.<sup>24</sup>

What about other Aarons and the responses accorded them from audiences and critics? *Titus'* stage history, of course, is one of woeful neglect, but whenever it gets trotted out, Aaron emerges as one of the play's major points of interest for everyone.<sup>25</sup> The English Comedians' reworking of *Titus* for performance and publication in Germany (1620) altered Aaron's role considerably, changing his name in an astonishing display of creativity to Morian and removing most of his speeches' classical allusions in favor of "smutty tales about how he finds his way into the Queen's bedroom and incredible claims to earth-shattering prowess in battle" (Williams 42). The pit that incriminates Quintus and Martius was also excised, eliminating some of the "baffled admiration for Aaron's cleverness" (42). The play was apparently a favorite vehicle for the English actor James Quin, who performed the role of Aaron in a variety of popular theatres of his day; in fact, two benefit performances were given for Quin in March and April of 1724, which marked the last time *Titus* would see the English stage for a century and a quarter (Mertz 157). George Hayes played Aaron in 1923 at the Old Vic, enabling the theatre company to be the first to present all of Shakespeare's canon (with *Troilus* performed that same season, the Vic had done it all in ten years). Hayes was the production's undeniable high point:

the honours of the evening went to Mr. Hayes . . . . I believe the venom, the cruelty and wickedness he put into the part, his rendering of the horrible lines, his inhuman laughter and yet, at a certain moment, the sudden great tenderness he showed for the safety of his infant son, made the whole performance one of exceptional brilliance.

(Westwood 40)

In 1951 Kenneth Tynan cut the role of Aaron entirely for a slashed, thirty minute *Titus* presented during a season of Grand Guignol in London, and Anthony Quayle played the Moor for Peter Brook's groundbreaking production in 1955.<sup>26</sup> The only black actor associated with the role until the late twentieth century was Ira Aldridge, who played the role first in 1857. Hill discusses Aldridge's career (19-27), but does not concentrate on the extensive revisions Aldridge brought to the play and the part. Dessen records how Aldridge (and his collaborator C.A. Somerset) cut the rape and mutilation of Lavinia, the decapitations, and nearly all of the stage violence (*Perf.* 11-12). Aldridge also insured that Aaron's relationship with Tamora — changed to a Scythian queen — was "legitimate," her sons dutiful children, and his revenge just (he sought vengeance for the sacrifice of Alarbus and the attempt on his

son's life). Dessen rightly notes that this adaptation can be considered in a stage history of *Titus* "only with some strain" (12); curiously, Aldridge never "adapted" *Othello*, the play and role with which he was most associated. Aldridge's need to change everything about Aaron for audience approval is telling indeed.

As we move from one influential production (Brook's) to another (Deborah Warner's), we see little notable *Titus* or Aaron activity, though black actors now find themselves playing the part. In 1980 at Stratford, Ontario, Roger Warren found Errol Slue's Aaron "superb," much more so than in Trevor Nunn's 1972 production at the RSC, for which "an atmosphere of dolce vita decadence" invoked for Aaron's scenes "was not enough" (156). Peter Thomson felt that Nunn's Aaron — played by imported American black actor Calvin Lockhart — was "disappointing": "The physical presence was there, but without vocal backing, so that he wasted more Shakespearean opportunities than most of the company got within reach of" (148-49). Lockhart was, nevertheless, received by some critics as "a grinning villain motivated by hardly anything but a maliciously antic spirit of pure evil" (Mertz 169). In America, black actors had already begun assuming the role: Roscoe Lee Browne presented a "near burlesque fiend" in 1956, and Moses Gunn won many accolades for his Aaron in 1967 (Dessen *Shakespeare in Performance* 14, 28).

What I find most intriguing — startling, in fact — are the critical responses to stage Aarons alongside reactions to Othellos, particularly when the race of the actor playing those parts is brought into question. It begins with Deborah Warner's 1987 RSC production of *Titus*, which is now widely considered to be one of the most important, imaginative, and course-changing productions of Shakespeare in the 1980's. Warner had one major problem: her Aaron was too white.

Stanley Wells, discussing the "revelatory production," thought "it seemed perverse to give the role of Aaron to an actor who looks Greek instead of the raven-black Moor of the text" ("Performance" 180). Wells does not even name the actor: Peter Polycarpou. Also surprising is Dessen's 1988 account of the performance for *Shakespeare Quarterly*, which doesn't mention Aaron once. This might be explained by the fact that Dessen confined this review (sandwiched between others) to just over three pages. But his book-length study of the play in performance published the following year devotes an entire chapter of nearly twenty pages to Warner's production, in which Aaron appears twice, only in regards to stage directions and cuts in the text placed "before Aaron's entrance" (*Shakespeare in Performance* 55). Again, Polycarpou is not mentioned by name in either account. Considering the popularity of Aaron as a stage character throughout the play's spotty history, ignoring him in such a detailed performance account seems negligible at best. Further investigation reveals that critics don't just want black Aarons: they want them *really* black.

For the production's first run at the RSC's Swan Theatre, Dan Jones wrote that "Polycarpou has a credibly Moorish profile, but is not quite

black enough for the part"; Jones also reported that "Heads, hands, and tongue are lopped off with almost Islamic zeal," a comment I'm afraid I don't have the energy to attack right now. Giles Gordon noted that this Aaron always looked "jolly," which I'll assume means that some more Aaronic smiling was to be had.<sup>27</sup> When the show moved to The Pit in London the following year, Sheridan Morley felt that Polycarpou lacked "the Moorish majesty of Anthony Quayle . . . thirty years ago" (yet another critic who cites a decades-old blackfaced performance as definitive). Francis King noted the obvious issues at work for many audiences: "The all-important role of the diabolic Moor, Aaron — to whose 'blackness' both of complexion and of nature the text contains many references — is puzzlingly taken by an actor, Peter Polycarpou, who is at most tawny in color." Martin Hoyle went so far as to invoke Quarshie himself, though not as his Aarons of years past:

One major cavil: after giving us black medieval Scots nobility at the cost of credibility, the RSC now casts a self-advertised black character ("coal-black," "thick-lipped") as no darker than a Camden Town Greek.<sup>28</sup>

This snide remark refers directly to Quarshie's performance as Banquo for the RSC in 1986, and somehow manages without a trace of shame to suggest that if the RSC is going to piss off reviewers with black actors as white characters, the company better keep the black ones black. The most damning comment of all, however, came from Warner herself: she regretfully complained in 1993 that Aaron should have been played by "a black, black, black man" (Goy-Blanquet 43).<sup>29</sup>

Two years earlier, however, white white white Ben Kingsley played Othello at the RSC. Nobody had similar problems with his lack of blackness. Kingsley, as a white-robed Eastern potentate, was "more the Indian mystic than the Moorish man of action"; this produced only a slight "stumbling block" of credibility. One critic, remembering Olivier's "bravura display of negritude," found Kingsley "not the usual coffee-stained clubman but a poised, dignified Moor with scimitar." One reviewer sought a happy middle ground between this perceived Moor/potentate costuming and makeup conflict, praising and suggesting that Kingsley's "uncanny Eastern-ness — and this is the most genuinely ethnic stage Othello since Olivier who was stage Negroid rather than convincingly African — is achieved without make up in a costume of Arab head dress, Indian dhoti and Moorish accoutrements." Kingsley wore no darkening makeup, and wore his hair long and streaked with grey. His exposed chest proudly displayed tufts of white hair, which only served to highlight his hair and skin. Yet one admirer deemed Kingsley "unusually Moorish."<sup>30</sup> What's going on here? Had the English theatrical reality of the 1980's actually reached a point where critics believed that white Othellos were still fine, but Aarons definitely needed to be (I can't resist) triple-black? What does that say about both



those parts and the people who are watching them? There can't be a *simple* answer to these questions and dichotomies, but one *brief* response might serve to open critical debate in future arenas. If Othello is honorable, powerful, and unfortunately duped by a diabolically intelligent villain, predominantly white audiences will more than likely pity the Moorish general and even subconsciously identify with his overwhelming feelings of jealousy, in spite of Othello's race and whether or not the actor is black *or* white. It seems unlikely, though, that those audiences would want to identify or sympathize with Aaron at all, and the Shakespearean racial barrier that serves to reinforce their distaste for and alienation from him is made doubly strong in the visual accentuation of a "real" black actor. On stage, it seems, Othello can be white, or almost white, because many audiences are prepared to acknowledge Iago's role in instigating Othello's crime. We offer no such mercy to Aaron, who arrives in full force as a monster himself, in no need of encouragement, and our responses to him are rendered less problematic if he is unquestionably Other.<sup>31</sup>

How is Aaron being performed on the stage after Warner? In a 1997 production of *Titus* by the National Theatre of Craiova, with "his bulbous face caked in blue paint, Ilie Gheorghe's Aaron the Moor acts the resident ringmaster" of the play's displayed horrors, a middle-aged man with a flabby body and a blue face, who pops out of trapdoors like a pantomime villain." Costumed with "a ponytail of hair pouring from the front of his loincloth," he is "netted and pierced with a dozen spears, like the White Queen's ball of knitting. Why does he not appear at the end to take his bow? Because he waits for us on the stairs outside, snarling yet."<sup>32</sup> In 1995, the celebrated actor Antony Sher returned to his native South Africa to star as Titus in a production for The Market Theatre in Johannesburg, later bringing the production to the National Theatre of Great Britain. Set in an Afrikaner-controlled modern Africa, the production had many opportunities to explore many racial issues, which saw varying degrees of critical success.<sup>33</sup> The cast was multi-racial, with all of the leading Roman characters played by white performers; the leading Goths were played by "coloured actors," but "among the leading roles only Aaron the Moor is played by and as a black African with accent to match." It is surprising that, after viewing a production so set and cast, that a critic should remark that "although race is an element in Shakespeare's play, it is hardly the key theme," only to later write that this Aaron is "less an incorrigible black villain than a man driven to blood and revenge by an amoral society." This production clearly highlighted race as much as politics, even costuming Sher as "the spitting image of that crashing Boer, white supremacist Eugene Terre Blanche."<sup>34</sup> As Aaron, Sella Maake ka Ncube berated the Nurse (here played by a black actress) for essentially "condemning her own color"; when the baby was brought on stage, it was "wrapped in black dustbin liners." Played by "coloured actors," the Goths were brought into focus as modern stereotyped racial Other as well, most

notably in a created scene break in which Tamora shoplifted a dress. Typically, reviewers went for Aaron's baby as an emotional qualifier of audience sympathies for Ncube's Moor:

His constant mobility and engaging smile embody the confusion we feel about this character who embraces wickedness, defends his blackness and is so tender towards his child. At the end, the text drives him back into stereotype and paints him with the blame for all the horrors we have witnessed. But those contradictory moments, with the babe in his arms, stay fixed in the mind.<sup>35</sup>

Stage pictures can indeed be powerful, and often reveal or comment upon textual ambiguities and problems, but, as I've suggested above, I find it highly suspect that audiences still need a black man to be driven *out* of stereotype to be a protective father.

Most recently, Shakespeare Behind Bars, "the only all-male, full-drag Shakespeare company in the U.S. prison system," produced *Titus* in spring 2001 for its annual production. Color-blind casted, it nevertheless had a black prisoner, Sammie Byron, stand in as Aaron (he'd played Othello the year before). Helen Zelon's description of Byron's Aaron grimly looks back to an earlier style of reviewing Shakespearean black actors:<sup>36</sup>

Byron's measured tone offstage counters the raw power of his physical mass. In Act 2 . . . he strains at his shackles. Schwarzenegger-sized biceps mountain down his brown arms as his hands, twin mallets the size of Porterhouse steaks, clench and unfold. Unrepentant, he listens to the charges laid against him, opal-green eyes flashing, and then the anger erupts in a torrent of invective. He brags of rapes, arsons, graves he's robbed, corpses defiled.

(34)<sup>37</sup>

The Aaron that most students of the play are likely to see for many years to come, however, is Harry Lennix's for Taymor's film. He enters Rome chained by the neck, last in a procession that includes the Goths and Titus' war spoils; he is the only prisoner forced to walk. He wears long flowing robes with a hood, sports wide metal wristbands, and has facial tattoos. He is very isolated, wandering around Saturninus' coronation celebration without speaking to anyone, only to leave and walk the parapets alone, scheming. He does speak to the camera throughout, though there is nowhere near the amount of sly, seductive smiling that Quarshie's interpretation bears. Camera cuts bring Aaron's blackness and its association with the film's greatest evils into sharper focus, effects not as easily achieved on stage. When, for example, the Andronici joke about the "coal-black" fly that Taymor has young Lucius kill

(nice change, that) in 3.2, Taymor cuts from the dinner table, eliminates lines 78-85, and goes immediately to a shot of Aaron leaning over a pool table. “Coal-black moor” is still ringing in our ears, and as he aims for a shot, we are reminded that Aaron is sinking people one by one as easily as he is the pool balls (it is this pool cue that he will later use to impale the Nurse). Earlier, as he’s hanging Titus’ severed hand from his car’s rear-view mirror (it’s in a zip-loc bag), he compares his soul’s blackness to his face’s. As he speaks, we see the side of Lennix’s face as well as its reflection in the rear-view mirror: a black face and its metaphorical soul’s shadow, a severed hand dangling between them.

Taymor’s general *mis en scène* is problematic for our assessing her “representation of blackness” on screen. The film is decidedly modern-dress, full of post-modern architecture, automobiles, tanks, and weaponry. Like Howell’s BBC period production, though, Aaron remains the only black performer in the cast. The point is all the more salient when one considers how many recent Shakespearean films have adopted the same color-blind casting principles as many theatre companies across the world, especially if the setting of the film is more “modern.” The film’s depiction of Aaron’s arrest and near-hanging, in this context, emerges as a modern-day lynching. Aaron climbs atop a ladder, where he ultimately pulls the noose over his own neck with bound hands; the noose itself looms over his head visibly throughout his entire speech at 5.1.124. His mouth is bloodied from previous repeated punches by Lucius, so his teeth are outlined with dripping red spit (a grotesque harbinger of the play’s/film’s climactic cannibalism). As he talks of desecrating graves, the camera pans around his head, framed by noose and sky, while the hordes of Goths and Lucius stand at the base of the ladder, horrified. Lucius (Angus MacFayden) looks like he’s gazing on the devil himself; in this film, he *is*. The fact that Lucius had wanted to hang both Aaron and his baby side by side is topped by Lucius’ suggestion to “First hang the child, that [Aaron] may see it sprawl” (5.1.51), but is affected even more by our twenty-first-century sensibilities and historical knowledge. I cannot help but think of that grim and nearly unbearable history of lynching photography in America, *Without Sanctuary*, in which the stories of mostly black men, women, and younger children being tortured and hanged are related.<sup>38</sup> When asked why she didn’t cut Aaron’s speeches that “now give us problems, that seem racist to us,” Taymor replied that “Aaron doesn’t say anything racist: the others say racist things against him” (Johnson-Haddad 35), completely ignoring the possibility that Shakespeare and the characterization of Aaron might be the culprits. She further challenges,

Aaron is not PC, but compare him to the big black guy in *The Green Mile*— you want to die at *The Green Mile*, to die of shame and embarrassment. The NAACP should have gotten up there and objected — to have a black man at this point who’s playing

a dumb Jesus Christ and saying those lines made me ill.

(36)

I wonder if the NAACP prefers black Christs or black Lucifers?

*What Price Aaron?*

In Bate's recent Arden edition of *Titus*, there are two pictures of Aaron: "A nineteenth-century" one and "A twentieth-century" one. The plates are on facing pages, equally sized (56-57). The nineteenth-century Aaron is, not surprisingly, the familiar frontispiece of Ira Aldridge with scimitar. The twentieth-century Aaron is Anthony Quayle, in a famous photo by Angus McBean, heavily blackened, babe in arms, earrings the size of grape bunches. Both include Aaron's son; Aldridge's is on the ground near his feet, and Quayle's is cradled in his arms. Aldridge stands in front of marble columns, draped in dark robes; Quayle wears a startlingly white shirt, and emerges from nearly impenetrable shadows. Were it not for backlighting, the viewer would be hard pressed to make out Quayle's face in the black background. Aldridge's title as *the* nineteenth-century Aaron would hardly tolerate challenge. Does a forty-five-year-old photograph of a man in heavy blackface, though, truly represent the "twentieth century" of Aarons? To a certain extent, yes. Bate has written a great deal on *Titus'* stage history, and he knows of Aarons past. He often cites Dessen's "valuable" history of the play, which includes only one photograph of Aaron (played by the black actor Bruce Young in Santa Cruz). Like Dessen, Bate discusses Warner's production at length in two separate studies without mentioning Polycarpou at all. The Quayle photo seems a logical, almost necessary, addition in this context. The photo's familiarity in performance history, its subject being a famous Shakespearean actor of his generation, and the role of the production itself as the one that gave the play new life, all grant it an authority difficult to challenge. There is, however, one final arrow in the photo's quiver: it's hard not to notice how *black* Quayle looks. Blacker, in fact, than Aldridge.<sup>39</sup>

I'm not suggesting that *Titus* be reshelved and never performed. I would, quixotic as I may be, like to see more consistency, though, in our responses to admittedly difficult dramatic problems. I've shown how theatre critics respond to shades of Aaron's skin color, and how scholars attempt to whitewash Aaron's behavior. The play's concerns with "Otherness" get a fair amount of scholarly treatment, but those concerns, the racism of Aaron's blackness most conspicuously, evaporate under the heat of stage lighting. *The Merchant of Venice* is often protested by audiences who find the play anti-Semitic; I am unaware of a single voice raised outside of South Africa in opposition to a production of *Titus*.<sup>40</sup> Even productions of *Richard III* get more protests from Yorkist apologists and revisionists than *Titus* might get from those concerned with its "representation of blackness." If we're going to put actors of all races in all roles on all stages and screens, we might more than ever need to be

aware of a play's racial discourse, especially if the role is "a nice fat part" and the play relatively "new" to our stages and screens. I feel we should be acutely aware of the fact that as actors, directors, audiences, readers, and scholars, we accept Aaron as he is perhaps because we expect him to be what he is by virtue of his race: "black as hell and dark as night," as the playwright wrote in Sonnet 147. Summarizing, though, the pantheon of Shakespeare's villains, would we feel comfortable saying out loud "Richard's evil because he's deformed, Iago because he's been passed over for promotion, Edmond and Don John because they're bastards, and Aaron because he's black and that's what black people are"? I don't think so.

As I set out at the beginning of this paper, I suggested that, for actors, Aaron might be at first glance the "safer" of Shakespeare's two most fleshed-out Moorish roles to play. I don't know yet if I will be directing or performing in *Titus* in a season or two. I know this, though: over the course of my study, Othello has begun to look more attractive not only in spite of, but because of his character's complicated nature and all of its attendant racial concerns. I'd be extremely hesitant blacking up like Olivier or Hopkins, but if a black actor and his understudy ever fall ill at the same time (a coincidence I would have nothing to do with), I already have the now-obligatory shaved head and earrings. And if any director is foolhardy enough to throw me in, I still know those lines . . . .

*An unexpected theatrical postscript: while this essay was being prepared for publication, PBSF secured financial backing for a production of Othello next summer, starring Paul Prescott as Iago. I will be playing Desdemona's husband.*

## Notes:

1. 21 September 1998, University of Alabama.
2. See Kaul for many studies of *Othello* by black writers, scholars, and actors. At the most extreme ends of the volume's theatrical interpretations of *Othello* we find actor Earle Hyman's belief that the play "is not about jealousy or racism" (24) and director Shelia Rose Bland's idea to produce the play "as a minstrel show" and "treat the entire production as a white male fraternity initiation skit" (29).
3. The RSC will produce its first main stage production of *Titus* since 1955 for its 2003/04 season.
4. Michael Coveney, for example, reviewed black actor Ray Fearon's 1999 Othello on the RSC's main stage — the first black actor since Paul Robeson in 1959 — in light of another great white predecessor: "Not since Laurence Olivier, blacked up and politically incorrect, has the British stage had a great Othello, despite the Moorish incursions of Paul Scofield and Ben Kingsley" (*Daily Mail* Apr 22). Apparently, a "politically incorrect" Othello is still a "great" touchstone for the part.

5. I realize that my use of the terms "racist," "race," and "racism" throughout this essay will ring many an alarum bell. I have chosen to follow Kim Hall's thesis regarding the debate of "racial" discourse in early modern literature. See Hall, especially 254-68. We all know what "racist" means for modern readers and audiences, whether or not Shakespeare knew the word or the concept of racism.
6. Quarshie's arguments for not playing Othello are rare among black performers, as evidenced by the scores of black actors who have played the part; he stresses that his "is the point of view of one black actor" (3). However, his position on the play widened the chronological gap between black Othellos on the main stage of the RSC, which saw white performers continue the often caricatured tradition of performing the role.
7. First published in 1657, the tragedy is most likely Dekker's reworking of an earlier play, which he called *The Spanish Moor's Tragedy*. See Martin (47-48) for a brief discussion of the drama.
8. Very interesting exceptions are the responses afforded productions of *Titus* in South Africa throughout the twentieth century, which see both government censorship imposed on the scenes involving Aaron and Tamora's sexual relationship and rumored banning of productions altogether (the Immorality Act, which outlawed inter-racial sex, was not repealed until 1985). Though the consummation of Othello's marriage has long been debated, Tamora's delivery of Aaron's child during the course of the drama rules out any question as to the nature of their dalliances. See Quince (esp. 33-36) for an extremely engaging history of Shakespeare on stage in South Africa during Apartheid.
9. For brief summaries of critical histories see especially Little and Neill; Pechter provides a wonderfully thorough, larger study of "Interpretive Traditions" regarding *Othello*.
10. Excluding *Titus*, for which I refer to Waith's edition, all references to Shakespeare are to the modern-spelling edition of the Oxford *Complete Works*.
11. Leo Africanus records the extremity of sexual jealousy prominent among African peoples. See Hall 30-38 for a summary of Leo's cultural travelogue and history.
12. I am afraid that for space's sake I have not done *Othello's* racial and dramatic complexities justice; nor do I wish to be seen courting sympathy for a murderer. Furthermore, it is only fair to note that scholars find racial slurs in the very lines I've just cited, especially Ogude (159). I hope I make clear in this paper's performance contexts, though, that *our* responses to Othello's character change as *he* does and are often conflicted, responses that are wholly different from those afforded Aaron.
13. See Waith 20-27 for a thorough account of the drawing's history and importance.
14. Lucius uses these words exactly to describe Tamora as he orders her burial (or the denial of it, as it were).
15. Aaron's speeches in this scene have often been compared to those of

Vice figures in the period, especially Marlowe's Barabas in *The Jew of Malta*.

16. See Kolin for the baby as text, in which he suggests that "The child wrapped in the Nurse's arms is like the books wrapped in Lucius' arms in [Act Four] scene one and the bundle of weapons and verses in [Act Four] scene two, an embedded text to be read by the characters on stage and the audience watching them" (7). He later points out the more-than-coincidence fact that Shakespeare links Lucius' books to Aaron's child. Tamora's midwife is Cornelia, who bears the same name of the honored Roman mother famed for her teaching to whom Titus directly likens Lavinia at 4.1.12: "While Aaron's Cornelia enscrolls a villainous text of lust for us to behold, the sober-suited Cornelia . . . schooled her noble sons on the kind of sacred texts that the Andronici pressed into revengeful service" (7).

17. Bate suggests that Aaron's behavior "makes us reassess our judgments on the action—but it terms of consistency of characterization it would perhaps have been better to set up much earlier in the play the idea of Aaron as a member of an oppressed minority wreaking his revenge on the established powers" (99). Bate also cites Ravenscroft-penned lines for Aaron that introduce this theme of revenge-by-outsider, arguing that they have "an exact counterpart in [Edmond's] touching recognition that "Edmond was beloved" [*Lear*. 5.3.215]. It introduces the possibility that the villainy is a cry for attention, that it stems from a desire to be loved" (99).

18. Scholarly suggestions like Washington's (if they can be called that) ignore directorial influence; Francesca Royster does as much when she emotionally suggests "But other offspring survive too" after reminding us of Lucius' rare survival as a Shakespearean tragic protagonist's offspring (455). Jane Howell's 1985 BBC production killed Aaron's baby, who was displayed in a tiny black coffin during Marcus' and Lucius' final speeches. Such a directorial choice cannot "signal new hope" for Lucius' Rome. Other directors have chosen to do likewise with the baby.

19. For a comprehensive stage history of *Othello*, see Hankey. *The Winter's Tale* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* are performed with great regularity at festivals both in America and England. My own Shakespeare festival, for example, has produced both *Winter's Tale* and *Merry Wives*; no *Othello* yet. Why would our audience members, then, assume that *Othello's* jealousy is strictly based on early modern racist conventions?

20. I should point out, though, that he recorded *Othello* for BBC radio in 2000, a production now available on CD. And though it is unsubstantiated hearsay, while at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon in the fall of 2002 I heard quite a few rumors that not only was Antony Sher voicing desire to play Iago, but that Quarshie was "considering" finally playing *Othello* with him as well.

21. Daileader's study also reveals undeniable patterns in critical response to black actors at the RSC; Ray Fearon, who might be considered Quarshie's "successor," finds his body, virility, and teeth praised as

much as Quarshie's ever were (189-91,196). When he broke the forty-year gap between black Othellos on the RSC main stage, critics were generally in awe of his performance (although he was universally wrist-slapped for being too young for the part at 31) and his body. "Fearon looked splendid, his magnificent physique singling him out from his fellow-soldiers and contrasting strikingly with the corpulence of Iago . . . with his shining shaven head and glinting ear-ring" (Smallwood 256). Many critics, in fact, felt it necessary to point out that Fearon had shaved his head, grown a beard, and wore an earring; many more referred to his astonishing body, from his "strong physical presence" to his "shaven-headed, bearded muscular shape" to a much discussed shirtless entrance. When roused in 2.3, it is Fearon's "rippling pecs and six-pack stomach as much as his verbal threats that command attention"; one reviewer found Fearon "most impressive, tellingly, when he [was] stripped to the waist." (Robert Butler, Apr. 25, *Independent on Sunday*; Michael Coveney, Apr. 22, *Daily Mail*; Nicholas de Jongh, Apr. 22, *Evening Standard*; Charles Spenser, Apr. 23, *Daily Telegraph*; Dominic Cavendish, Apr. 28, *Time Out*; Paul Taylor, Apr. 23, *Independent*. Quoted in *Theatre Record*, cited under Butler below).

22. Quarshie talks of the negro memorabilia (he coins the term "Negrobilia") he collected throughout his life, often to "baffle" friends with an affected "ironic detachment" (3). He invokes "nigger-minstrel money boxes" that have prominent white lips and cites racist literatures and characters from the early twentieth century. As I travel through the deep American south in 2003, I can still see for sale in "antique" galleries old advertisements that depict blacks with huge, extra-white teeth, faces contorted in grotesque, ignorant grins, more than reminiscent of Griffith's depictions of American blacks in *Birth of a Nation*.

23. Taymor's film has Alarbus' bare chest slit by Titus' knife. As with many stage Aarons, Quarshie is stripped to the waist both for his entrance in chains and later when he is led before the Goths and Lucius (Quarshie is blindfolded and grinning for the latter). Daileader is to blame for this minor smiling obsession I now have, and it may be more than a coincidence that the picture she includes of Quarshie as Aaron at the RSC shows him smiling away to the balconies (181).

24. There has been much comment on Jonathan Miller's decision to cast Hopkins after British Equity balked at the possibility of James Earl Jones playing Othello. See Willis (14) for a brief overview.

25. For major stage histories, see especially Dessen (*Shakespeare in Performance*), Mertz, and Bate (*Titus*, "Staging").

26. See Dessen (*Shakespeare in Performance* 14-23) for an in-depth description of the production.

27. Dan Jones, *Sunday Telegraph*, 17 May 1987; Giles Gordon, *London Daily News*, 13 May 1987. Quoted in *Theatre Record*, cited under Jones below.

28. *Punch* July 22; *Sunday Telegraph* July 10; *Financial Times* July 6. Quoted in *Theatre Record*, cited under Morley below.



29. Joyce MacDonald saw Polycarpou's casting differently: "This choice in a production otherwise committed to following the text opens interesting possibilities for discussion of how Warner's race as well as her sex may have worked to produce her vision of *Titus*" (201 n8). MacDonald offered this, though, just before Warner made her laments regarding Polycarpou's color known. Goy-Blanquet notes that no critics "questioned [Warner's] most redemptive improvement on the text: the fact that Aaron's black baby ended the play safely in Marcus' arms" (44). Queried on Warner's decision to save the baby, Brian Cox, her *Titus*, offered, "Because she is a woman, perhaps?" Goy-Blanquet points out that "none of the critics were tactless enough to stress the feminine quality of mercy," most choosing instead to concentrate on Warner's youth, "possibly because women and children still belong to the same category of incomplete adults" (44-45).

30. Jack Tinker, *Daily Mail*, Sept. 25 1985; Michael Billington, *Guardian*, Sept. 26 1985; Michael Coveney, *Financial Times*, Sept. 25 1985; Michael Ratcliffe, *Observer*, Sept. 29 1985. Quoted in *Theatre Record*, cited under Tinker below.

31. Unique exceptions include, of course, the rare productions mounted for predominately black audiences, particularly in South Africa. See Quince and Sher and Doran for black audience response to Aaron.

32. James Christopher, *Observer*, 25 May 1997; Nick Curtis, *Evening Standard*, 21 May 1997; Alastair Macaulay, *Financial Times*, 23 May 1997; Jeremy Kingston, *The Times*, 22 May 1997. Quoted in *Theatre Record*, cited under Christopher below. Kingston is clearly not a fan of the play, asking "What is one to do with this ludicrously bad play, short of forgetting about it for most of one's life and sitting through it as seldom as possible?"

33. *Titus* has been employed for strong political commentary elsewhere, seeing more than a few productions in eastern Europe. Stribrny describes a 1992 production in Croatia performed as Serbian and Croatian armies were battling over parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina that emphasized the sacrifice of youth in war. *Titus* was a comparatively younger man, and his sons were turned into brothers, Lavinia his sister; costumes were modern and the production echoed the films *A Clockwork Orange* and *Mad Max* (142). Daniel Mesguich's 1989 production in Paris concentrated on the notion that "The play pinpoints the moment when a civilization begins to fall apart, when the law itself has become a dead letter" (Goy-Blanquet 51). Going against many of the play's earlier costume designs, Mesguich felt that "It would be absurd to dress the protagonists as barbarians in animal skins: they are decadent, not primitive" (51).

34. For all of his previous difficulty accepting a less than black Aaron, when told by director Gregory Doran that Sher would be playing *Titus* Stanley Wells remarked, "Of course, he'd have made a superb Aaron, in days gone by" (Sher and Doran 87). I don't wish to suggest any tones of lament for present-day theatrical casting practices in Wells' comment,

but I wonder at the logic of a white man being a "superb" black man.

35. Alastair Macaulay, *Financial Times*, 25 July 1995; Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 14 July 1995; Nick Curtis, *Evening Standard*, 19 July 1995; Jane Edwardes, *Time Out*, 19 July 1995; Michael Coveney, *Observer*, 16 July 1995; Jeffrey Wainwright, *Independent*, 17 July 1995. Quoted in *Theatre Record*, cited under Macaulay below.

36. My favorite example of blatant racist reviewing is Ronald Bryden describing Olivier's Othello: "It could have been caricature, an embarrassment. Instead, after the second performance, a well-known Negro actor rose in the stalls braving. For obviously it was done with love; with the main purpose of substituting for the dead grandeur of the Moorish empire one modern audiences could respond to: the grandeur of Africa. . . . During the temptation, he began to pace, turning his head sharply like a lion listening. The climax was his farewell to his occupation: bellowing the words as pure, wounded outcry, he hurled back his head until the ululating tongue showed pink against the roof of his mouth like a trumpeting elephant's" (Wells *Theatre* 270).

37. Zelon's account is of considerable interest. Byron discusses his experiences playing Othello, "resonating with the murder that put him into Luckett on a life sentence" (34); Hal Cobb, who played Titus, is in prison for murdering his wife. One hates to enjoy what might be one of the most horrifying cases of experimental Method acting, but Shakespeare Behind Bars founder Curt L. Tofteland's project is considered by all prison officials associated with it to be a life-changing experience for prisoners who join it.

38. The history, cited under Allen below, is sadly not without incidents involving new-born black babies (14).

39. Kennedy's definitive visual history of Shakespeare in performance, *Looking at Shakespeare*, has just seen its second, updated edition to press. McBean's photo of Quayle posed as Aaron is offered as one of his "classic theatre photographs" (22), and another of the final banquet scene in performance has Quayle so black it's difficult to make out his face. A photo of Polycarpou tied to a stake is simply labeled "a white Aaron" (338).

40. See Oz for discussions of *Merchant* productions in Israel and England. Willis also notes that the BBC's *Merchant* — directed by one, and starring another, Jewish artist — prompted picketers outside BBC headquarters

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