

Race and early modern performance culture

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Theater was the mass media of early modern Europe. It was hugely influential to European thought and culture because, unlike other literary genres or media of the time, the theater was affordable and accessible for most people across class, gender, and literacy divides. The theater was (and still is) a space where people come together as a community, where people learn and feel together, and where judgment is passed collectively. Theater and performance culture influenced and reflected European thought in many ways: it simultaneously sustained and put pressure on dominant and incipient ideas about gender, sexuality, religion, politics, and -- most significantly for my work -- race.

Early modern performance culture included elite and commercial spaces like public and court theaters, but also non-elite performance spaces like street theater, block parties, and processions. In all of these performance spaces, characters of color were almost exclusively portrayed by white actors.

Techniques of racial impersonation, and emergent forms of racial thinking embedded in those techniques, circulated fluidly through the whole ecosystem of live performance and that maximized their reach. And, as we know, when something is repeated over and over again in mass media, people end up believing it.

Once you read enough of those plays, you begin to see how early modern European playwrights and performers show their hands. Meaning that you start seeing how they made decisions, contradicted themselves, and adopted racial scripts that set the stage for race in the modern world.

Here is one of my favorite examples. In the mid 1620s, Spanish playwright Andrés de Claramonte wrote a play called *El Negro, The Valiant Black Man in Flanders*, which is now available in English, in multiple translations. The play's protagonist, Juan, is an ambitious young Afro-Spaniard. He was born in slavery and he dreams of becoming a hero. He enlists in the army and leaves for the front in the Low Countries, Flanders. In the army, he encounters deep-seated racism, but he fights his way to the top. On the front, he accomplishes great deeds. Notably, he captures William of Orange, earning Spaniards one of their greatest military victories. The Duke of Alba is impressed by his valor and he takes Juan under his protection. He takes him to Madrid to meet the king, who thanks Juan personally for his service, gives him a competent pension, and promotes him to "maestre de campo."

Back at home. Juan is greeted as a hero, and he marries the white Doña Juana, who was his enslaver at the beginning of the play. I often teach this Spanish comedy in conversation with its tragic English analog, *Othello*.

Juan's story is a success story. It would have spectators believe that early modern Spanish society was a racial meritocracy. That is to say, a society where black subjects who are worthy, who possess inner qualities usually associated with white people and whiteness, could free themselves and build a good life. A meritocracy. And that is a lie. Of course, slavery-based societies have never functioned that way. It's a lie that obfuscates the brutality of enslavement in early modern Iberian cultures.

But interestingly, the play tells on itself. It reveals the narrative as false, untrustworthy. At the very beginning of Act 3, we have a scene in which the heroic Juan and his own black servant are waiting in the royal antechamber to be introduced to the King of Spain. And during that time, white courtiers mock them and speculate on what Juan's price tag might be. This moment puts whiteness on display, and it reminds spectators that Juan, as a black man, is and will always be vulnerable to enslavement no matter what his achievements are. And no matter what Spanish society likes to believe about itself.

This is, in my opinion, a powerful example of performance culture's ability to do harmful race-work, all while showing its own hand. Such moments are not rare in early modern drama, and they are precious resources for those of us who want to analyze white supremacy in the moment of its historical inception. By studying how racial scripts were adopted, toyed with, and embedded into European social consciousness, we can better understand how narratives about race and racial difference are sewn into the fabric of our media and our politics today.