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The Representation of "Otherness" in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*

Supervisor
Ch. Prof. Laura Tosi

Assistant supervisor
Dott.ssa Rachele Bassan

Graduand
Ilaria Lizzini
Matriculation Number 859746

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"Black [...]. I must be black.
I must feel black to the inner part of my soul"[1]

Laurence Olivier

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[1] Laurence, Olivier. *On Acting*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1986, p. 155.

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Introduction

A sort of medieval inheritance, which is rooted in early modern audiences, influences how people conceived the chromatic binarism between white/good and black/evil. In Elizabethan England, black and white colours designed the moral difference between salvation and damnation: "saved souls were figured white and damned souls black" (Vaughan 15). This conceptualisation influenced Elizabethan drama, where black characters were performed in blackface – and/or with black clothes – and white characters indicated saved souls. Blackness assumed an exotic connotation – and was not associated with damnation – when it became the feature which designated plausible kings from Africa.

During the Jacobean period, "blackened faces took on multiple meanings" (Vaughan 15), though the spiritual chromatic association of black with damnation and white with salvation remained entrenched in the common opinion. A black body stage shows the complexity of how "white appropriations of blackness can be paradoxical combinations of love and theft" but also a way of appreciating a culture which represents a form of "Otherness" – the symbol of a changing asset in society in which drama acquired a crucial role (Vaughan 17). Therefore, a question which arises is: is the "black presence" considered as devil on stage as well as in real life?

To try to provide a possible answer to this question, this dissertation explores the meaning of blackness in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello* in order to try to prove that darkness is not strictly represented only by black characters. In the following chapters, we aim at supporting the idea that it is the action, and not the colour, the element which renders the soul black (cf. 1.1.5). The analysis of both white and black characters, in both plays, will help to define the representation of blackness in early modern England showing that, according to a changing historical and sociological period, black characters assume different meanings. We will see, thus, a morally black Titus, a possible morally white Othello, and a morally black Iago, according to what their souls convey to the audience.

The methodology that we will use is the analysis of the characters' actions and words, starting by what the historiographical and sociological background to early modern society shows.

This dissertation begins with an overview on the historiographical and sociological background to early modern England. In *Blackness: A Brief Introduction* the complexity of terminology and symbolisms that are associated with blackness and black individuals is explored. Then the context for performances is analysed in order to provide a background where *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello* were first staged.

Chapter two *Blackness in Titus Andronicus* analyses how blackness affects the characters in the play. We try to provide a different viewpoint on Titus, Tamora, and Aaron, the white characters who demonstrate to have a dark soul, and the black-skinned character who is capable of some humanity.

In chapter three *Blackness in Othello,* we analyse the figure of Othello, whose complexity starts from his supposed black skin, his alleged exotic or Arabic origins, and his debatable white soul, as he commits a crime. Then we move to the figure of Iago, the white infernal creature, who subverts the medieval stereotypes that associate white colour with salvation and black colour with damnation.

This dissertation explores how the complexity of blackness and darkness is rather a human aspect, which is connected with one's own actions and thoughts, rather than with his or her visual characterisation.

1   Blackness: A Brief Introduction

1.1   The Meaning of Blackness

> "I have never been able to find a pigment that would stay on my face"
>
> Mr. John Coleman[2]

1.1.1   Historical Background

The uncertainty about the number of black people in Elizabethan England lead to the crucial question: were people of African descent present in early modern England at all? To answer this question, it is fundamental to go back to the medieval times. During the Middle Ages, namely from 1066 to 1485, England has been assumed to be ethnically white (Nubia 2021). However, thanks to some historiographical sources, it is known that Africans[3] lived in England. For example, in the 1259 *Pipe Roll*, a medieval account record of the English counties of the time, we learn of one Bartholomew, who was an African (he is described as "Ethiopian" and "Saracen" (Nubia 2021) on the run in 13th-century Nottingham. Another reference to the presence of blacks in medieval England is found in the *Chronicon de rebus gestis Ricardi Primi* (*The Chronicle of Richard Devizes Concerning the Deeds of Richard the First, King of England* 1192), where writer Richard Devizes satirically describes London as being populated by Moors, "magicians" and "men from all nations" that "filled every house" (60). The author specifically mentions Garamantes (i.e., Moorish Africans) as one of these many nations. Such elements indicate the presence of black people in medieval England, although mainstream history does not usually focus on such instances because of the long-lasting assumption that medieval England was "mono-ethnically white" (Nubia 2021).

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[2] Cited in Archer, W. (1888), *Masks or Faces? A study in the Psychology of Acting* [digitised edition], London: Longmans, Green and Co., p. 131.
[3] According to Nubia, Africans lived in medieval England because they appear in medieval account records (Nubia 2021).

African people who lived in early modern England were either the descent of groups of Africans living in England in the Middle Ages or arrived there through the slave trade. In particular, the presence of Africans was significant in cities such as London, Northampton, Plymouth, and Bristol, and, in smaller scale, in Worcestershire and Devon; some of the people of African descent were born in England, while others had origins in the Iberian Peninsula (Nubia 32). There were Africans that came from kingdoms in West and North Africa; and people of African descent who came to England through or via the Caribbean and Central America. These last sets of peoples arrived because of connections with English merchant, adventurers, explorers, and travellers.

The presence of a black population in London in the 16th century is certified by different sources, such as both the Queen's warnings of 1596 and 1601 and a number of written accounts which reported the life of black individuals. Firstly, many records relate the continuity of the presence of blacks in England. For instance, payment records of the court of Henry VIII referred regularly to a black trumpeter called John Blanke (Habib 102), whereas in the household records of Elizabeth I one of the several items of expenditure described "a littel blak a More" as part of the domestic staff (qtd. in Habib 2). Similarly, in the archives of London parish churches, mentions of "nigro," "neger," "neygar," "blackamore," "blackamoor," "moor," "barbaree," "barbaryen," "Ethiopian," and "Indian" could be found all through the Tudor and Stuart reigns (Habib 2). For example, in the records of, St. Mary the Virgin in Northeast London, a "Jhon the Blackamore" is said to have been baptized in 1565 and buried in 1566 (Habib 2). Thus, records of black people living in London and in England certify that black people lived there, though the number of blacks cannot be confirmed by statistics or mainstream history documentation (Habib 2).

Secondly, certifying the presence of a black community in London are an open letter and an edict by Elizabeth I, wherein she voiced her disapproval against the blacks living in London:

> In 1596, Queen Elizabeth issued an "open letter" to the Lord Mayor of London, announcing that "there are of late divers blackmoores brought into this realme, of which kinde of people there are allready here to manie," and ordering that they be deported from the country. One week later, she reiterated her "good pleasure to have those kinde of people sent out of the lande" and commissioned the merchant Casper van Senden to "take up" certain "blackamoores here in this realme and to transport them into Spaine and Portugall." Finally, in 1601, she

complained again about the "great numbers of Negars and Blackamoors which (as she is informed) are crept into this realm," defamed them as "infidels, having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel," and, one last time, authorized their deportation. (Bartels 305).

Moreover, ideas on blackness were brought to England by several explorers who related their travels to Africa. Before the period of the slave trade, which led to an increase in the number of African people in England (and especially in London), the first to circumnavigate Africa in the 15th century were explorers seeking new trade routes with the East. Thanks to the written accounts of these and later explorers, many reports about black men circulated in Europe and in England. African culture appeared as having no virtues, but only many vices, to the point that Africans were described as "people of beastly lyvyng, without a God, lawe, religion, or common wealth, and so scorched and vexed with the heate of the sun" (Alden T. Vaughan and V. M. Vaughan 25). Travel narratives also described the differences between skin colours, highlighting Africans' very black skin in comparison, for instance, with Indians' "olive hue" (Alden T. Vaughan and V. M. Vaughan 25). However, among the ideas spreading about Africa and black people, some prejudices prevailed thanks to the contradictory and ambiguous content of these texts. For instance, Andre Thevet, who explored Africa in the late 1500s, provided his own reading of different skin tones:

> Thevet denied that "those of Africa are a like blacke or like in maners and conditions"; rather, in Egypt and Arabia, they are "betwene blacke and white," other Africans are "browne coloured whom we call white Moores, others are cleane blacke: the most parte goe all naked." Very black skin, Thevet argued, "commeth of a superficiall action": extreme heat draws warmth from the heart and other interior parts to the surface, leaving the dark Africans with scorched skin but inwardly cold […]. In addition to a black exterior and cold interior, Thevet concluded, Ethiopia's blistering climate gave "these *Neigers*" curly hair, white teeth, large lips, crooked legs, and made "the women unconstant, with many other vices which wold be to long to reherse." (Alden T. Vaughan and V.M. Vaughan 23).

Whether seen through the eyes of the travellers or through the eyes of the colonizer, black populations inspired both attraction and repulsion to the English eye. Curiosity and marvel accompanied fear and prejudices towards the populations that were considered as the "Other". As Thevet's account well exemplifies, blackness provoked

fascination, curiosity, and even marvel to the English eye. In contrast, the nakedness of Africans was repelling to the heavily clothed British body (Alden T. Vaughan and V.M. Vaughan 23). For example, Thevet himself, describing African people, reckons that people in Guinea and Ethiopia were "pore, ignorant, and brutishe men, . . . Villaines or wicked impes [,] goe all naked" (14. 24-26). Moreover, physician William Cunningham in his 1559 *Cosmographical Glasse* (*The Cosmographical Glasse, containyng the pleasant Principles of Cosmographie, Geographie, Hydrographie, or Navigation*) describes African populations as "blacke, Savage, Monstruous, & Rude" (fol. 5).

At the same time, black people insinuated fear of subtraction of work and contamination. Therefore, the Queen's recommendations on the expulsion of the black people living in her kingdom provoked an increased sentiment of hostility, especially due to the fear of a possible legacy of mulattoes, viewed almost like monsters. According to Royster, "Elizabethans accepted white as a kind of default setting for human skin color, regarding other races as deviations from this norm" (433). The hybrid situation which stemmed from the mixing of black males with white women culminated in the nightmare of contamination in the 18th century when the presence of blacks increased significantly.

In this historical background black Shakespearian characters such as Aaron and Othello were firstly performed.

1.1.2   Terminology

In the attempt to clarify the meaning of blackness as a preliminary step in the analysis of *Othello* and *Titus Andronicus*, a clarification on the terms is crucial here in order to determine whether the question is to be considered purely lexical or whether at the time there were deemed to exist various kinds of blackness. In Elizabethan England, the first discrepancy was between the actual knowledge of the African continent and the terminology early modern people used to refer to it and to its inhabitants. From a geographical standpoint, the knowledge of Africa and its inner territories seemed quite detailed, as the map below demonstrates (see fig. 1).
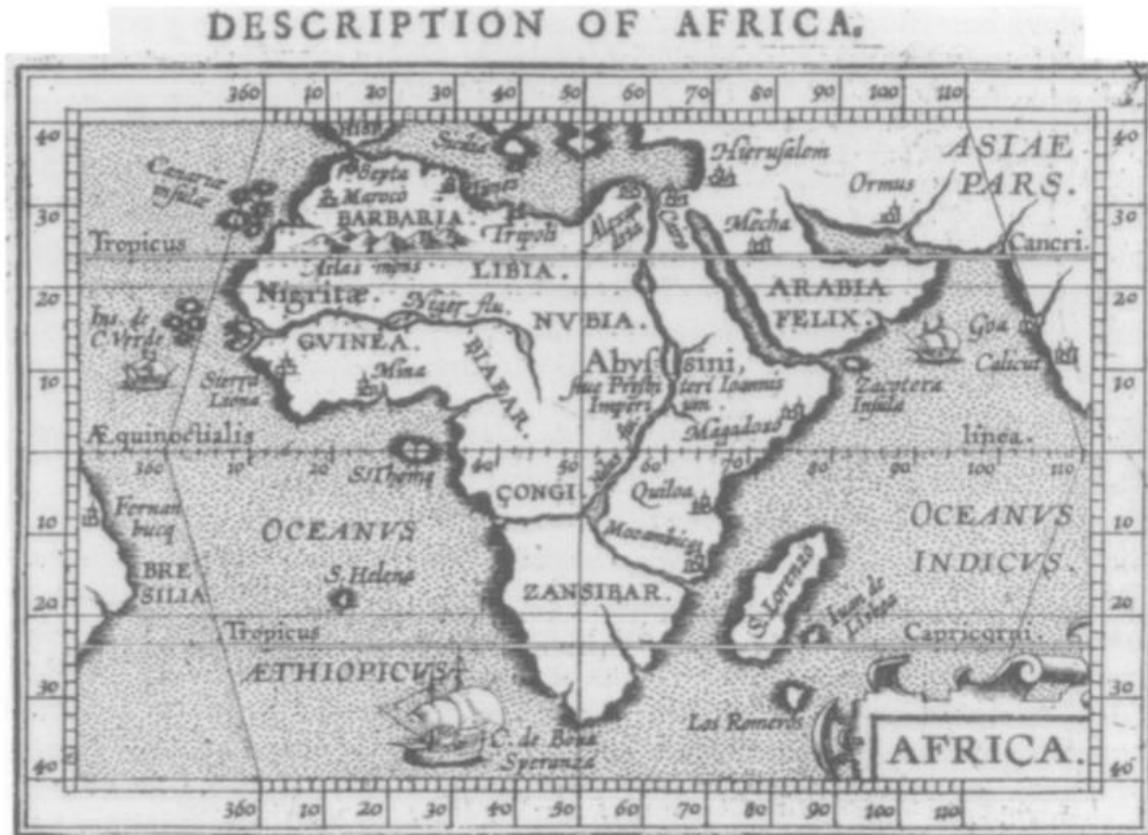
Figure 1. Map from the pocket-sized Abraham Ortelius' His Epitome of the Theater of the Worlde (London, 1603), in Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, 20.

This map, for instance, shows a good geographical knowledge while distinguishing African regions such as Guinea, where England's first involvement in slave trading occurred in the 1550s (Hall 19), Congi, Arabia, and Barbaria, among other territories. A further example of this geographical competence can be found in the translation of Leo Africanus' *The History and Description of Africa* by John Pory, who gifted his translation to Queen Elizabeth herself, described precise geographic locations, delineating a territory which correspond to West Africa, in the present north of Nigeria, a place where "governors and inhabitants whereof are most rich and industrious people, great lovers of justice and equitie, albeit some lead a brutish kinde of life" (Mafe 51). However, in the same text, the distinction of the populations is not as much detailed as the territories are. As a matter of fact, Leo Africanus divided African populations into five groups: the Cafates, the Abissins, the Egyptians, the Arabians, and the Moores.

Nevertheless, the terminology to indicate African people could and was used indiscriminately to refer to the different ethnicities known at the time. In other words, the

same terms were often employed to refer to one people or another, without considering cultural or geographic differences. For instance, the term "moor", as Pory introduced it, could be used to "either to tawny moors, negroes, or black moors" (Mafe 50). The Spaniards applied the term "moor" to Arabs, Berbers, Syrians, and Negroes without regard for their wide either racial or religious differences (Butcher 243). This practice passed into other countries, and Elizabethans even taunted the Spaniards by classing them as Moors (Butcher 243). The term thus indicated a generic alterity, which was quite like that of the Greek term "barbarian". Iconographic sources do not dissolve such lexical doubts. Many studies on Othello, for instance, quote *De gli Habiti antichi et moderni* (1590) by Cesare Vecellio where there is a "*Moro de conditione*" with tunic, turban, and unmistakably black somatic traits. Although this image might let 21st-century readers to think of a stereotypical image of a person of Arab origins, in early modern popular minds this representation could either refer to Arab people or to other African populations indistinctively (Vaughan 5). The one case in which terminology could be more specific is explained by Mafe as follows, "the parallel between "Moore" and "Negro" remains, as long as the former term is used in a specific context, such as "black Moore", in order to exclude various Others" (51). In this case, the reference to a "black Moor" determines one's ethnicity more in detail.

The discourse on terminology deeply shaped the characterisation of Africans in Shakespearian literature. Both Othello and Aaron are called "moors", though with seemingly different meanings. In the case of Othello, the fundamental issue may regard both "the syntax of identity is inscribed in the play's subtitle, 'The Moor of Venice'" (Neill 362) and his role in the play as a "white" (cf. 1.1.3) character. Having mentioned Othello as both "moor" and at the same time "white", the crucial question to answer is whether Othello might be considered as a black figure or is he belonging to a lighter skin complexion? Scholars present different interpretations on Othello's blackness, them some considers the term "moor" to have indicated a generic form of alterity, some others tend to support the view in which Shakespeare's references to Othello as "black" and "thick-lipped" may indicate his origins. Concerning Othello's identity, Hunter claims that the "portrayal of Othello was meant to challenge the audience's assumptions about Africans at the same time that it played out an expected triumph of Christian faith over the black infidel" (Hunter 35), suggesting that Othello was of African origins. Bassi, for instance,

states, "I can't believe but in Othello as a completely black individual […] The Nature's opposition is between White and Black, not between White and Brown. Othello is black due to the tragedy's conflict between white and black, which are metaphysically depicted […]" (109). Some other scholars asserted that Othello is noble and Middle-Eastern. Shakespeare's own designation of Othello as a Moor provides no simple solution to the problem, because neither he nor other Elizabethans made careful distinctions between Moors and Blacks. Some clarification might be found in the passage of the play where the non-identification between the term "moor" and one's place of origin appears, namely when Roderigo, under Iago's influence, dismisses Othello as "an extravagant ad wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere" (*OTH* I.1.134-35). To be a Moor, according to Neill, means to be a "dislocated" and "wandering" "creature", "an erring Barbarian" in the "punning phrase" with which Iago assimilates barbary to the "vagrant condition of barbarism" (362).

On the other hand, Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus* represents a different notion of blackness in the Early Modern context, one that focuses on the association between colours and concepts (cf. 1.1.3). Aaron thus "becomes associated with all that must be expelled, contained, or dominated" (Deroux 86), being thus the personification of the violent passions, one should, instead, dominate.

The issue of terminology pertains to both Shakespeare's plays, then. However, while the characterisation of Aaron offers a stereotypical view based on the literal association between the opposition of black and white, the identity of Othello is more complex and complicated to define.

1.1.3 Symbolisms

Chromatic symbolism in the early modern context is worth exploring, since the colour complex of black and white is widely applied in the literary and visual arts of the time. The association of black and white with the concepts of good and evil has a long tradition. Darkness acquired a strong symbolic value both from a religious and demonological point of view. Within Christianity, the colour concept opposition is rooted in the tradition in which "black was associated to death", white to life, God was generally described as the source of light set against "the blackness of the devil", sin was associated

with the colour black, while "white related to goodness, purity, faith", and all which is considered as "good" in a human being (Bassi 24). The complexity of the opposition of black and white colours is well described by Kim F. Hall, who, writing about Shakespeare's sonnets, explains how

> To understand this color complex, which is undergirded by a fundamental urge for whiteness, it is necessary first to reexamine the logic of the traditional dark/light opposition found in the sonnets. Christianity has long provided the Western world with a symbolic order in which good, purity, and Christianity itself are associated with light and whiteness, while evil, sexuality, and difference are linked with darkness (69).

In a way, the universe itself was apparently divided between black and white. Accordingly, both in the visual arts and in performance, creatures associated with the devil were painted black. Scholars have long associated blackface "not only with damnation, but also with degradation, irrationality, lack of self-knowledge, transgression, and folly" (Hornback 47). Blackface, then, indicated not only an alterity, but also the difference in being "deformed", "dwarfish" or "ugly" (Hornback 47). Although the blackness of early devils was, perhaps, not explicitly linked to race, the "irrationality" associated with black-faced devils was nonetheless to have an enduring influence on notions of blackface (Hornback 48) The stereotypical idea was formed, after the travellers' reports on Africa (cf. 1.1.1) in the association of black figures to the characteristics of beastliness and irrationality, which, in performance, culminated in the creation of black characters, such as Aaron.

Scholars agree that Aaron is an unambiguously black character. This involves his representation as a black figure, with all the characteristics which stereotypically belonged to black colour and black people. Aaron represents the forces of evil, irrationality, bestiality, and malignity. On the contrary, Othello represents an in-between position, which is characterised by a possibly black figure, neither black nor white, who did not acquire negative connotations as an evil character. For this reason, Othello might be a sort of a hybrid character, a figure whose complexity is hard to define. Aaron thus represents a character of damnation, while Othello's blackness remains more, at least, on the surface of mere aesthetics.

Therefore, it can be possibly assumed that the association between blackness and damnation is imbued in early modern English culture, as well as it is possible the

representation of the devil by means of a black-skinned character, such as Aaron, while possible other performances might face the hybrid condition, of not being so black as black characters, or not being so white as white characters.

1.1.4 Performances

During the Elizabethan age, as all roles were performed by white actors, both gesture, costumes, and the overall being on stage were involved in the representation of the various features concerning black characters. The black transformation, which includes the use of several techniques which served to be black visually, thus, affected modifications concerning the body. As regards these techniques to create black make-up, few information is available, as we have only the texts of the plays as records of performances while the parts concerning the non-verbal communication on the way of performing blackness are lacking (Vaughan 4). This means that the way in which specific black roles, such as, in the case of this study, Aaron and Othello, were performed, is now almost unknown.

However, it is possible to refer to some sources which described early modern techniques to make the black pigment and, having those texts in mind, think that black make-up was made through the same devices. Consequently, one possible way of understanding how black characters such as Othello and Aaron were firstly performed on stage is that of referring to the written texts which describe the way black pigment was created and possibly used on the actors' white skin. A second possibility is that of referring to later scholars and studies concerning the way of playing in Elizabethan theatres and adopting their hypotheses for the study on Othello and Aaron's blackface.

The text which will be taken into consideration, is one concerning the art of miniature. Thanks to the descriptions in the *The Arte of Limning* published by Nicholas Hilliard presumably in 1601, we know some of the early modern techniques of making the black pigment. Hilliard described the way black colour was made. In particular, the powder for black pigments was made starting from burnt cherry stones, dare stones, peach stones, or charcoal. He also reported the recipe which aimed at obtaining velvet black, a black powder made from ivory burnt in a bowl with gum: "let it settle a whole afternoon, and pour from it the uppermost, which is but the gum and foulness, good to put among

ink. The rest let dry, and keep it in a paper or box and use it as aforesaid with soft grinding of it again" (Hilliard 91). As recent studies have noticed, "blackface consisted of soot at the level of village theatricals while performances at court and theatre used charred cork mixed with a little oil" (Callaghan 196) and stiff lambskin fur was used to replace black people's hair. It is possible to think that similar techniques were used to create black make-up. According to Jenny Tiramani of the International Globe Centre, a black pigment might be made from tallow, grease mixed with some black powder. The resulting cream could be put on the skin (Vaughan 11).

Other materials for black make-up could include the use of coal and charcoal, as in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*:

> AARON
> Coal-black is better than another hue,
> In that it scorns to bear another hue;
> For all the water in the ocean
> Can never turn the swan's black legs to white,
> Although she lave them hourly in the flood.
> Tell the empress from me, I am of age
> To keep mine own, excuse it how she can.
> (*Titus Andronicus*, IV.2.115-121).

The term "Coal-black" may suggest a connection between the black skin colour and the way it was realized on stage, or, at least, the material to which the skin colour was associated. Whether made with the fruit stones or other materials, just a few hypotheses can be taken into consideration concerning the way in which black make-up could be created.

According to the descriptions in the *Academy of Armory* published by Randle Holme in 1688, masks might be one of the elements of performing black characters, especially in the masques. He related about the use of vizards, which were kind of masks, probably similar to the masks used in the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte* (Vaughan 9). The vizard

> is made convex to cover the Face in all parts, with an out-let for the nose, and 2 holes for the eyes, with a slit for the mouth to let the air and breath come in and out. It is generally made of Leather, and covered with black Velvet. The Devil was the inventer of it, and about Courts none but Whores and Bauds, and the Devil Imps do use them, because they are shamed to show their Faces. (Holme 87)

The vizards seemed the proper means to represent evil, as it was thought that the devil was their creator. However, vizards presented some limitations in performances. They had a restricted use because the actor could not show facial expressions. For this reason, vizards were mainly used in masques for the roles that did not require speaking characters, giving more importance to music and dances. The blackening of the face through vizards probably involved the use of black velvet or linen coverings on the arms. (Vaughan 10). The use of vizards was thus both an efficient and a limited way to perform blackness. Moreover, as they were used in the masques, the roles of Aaron and Othello were excluded from being interpreted with vizards.

As vizards highlighted evil, various were the implications involving the use of black make-up in public theatres. They regarded the attempt at giving a meaning to Aaron's and Othello's blackness by taking into consideration the studies already done on black-make up and the historical background of *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*, namely the late 1590s and the beginning of the 1600s. Aaron belonged to the period of 1590s where the theatre represented blackness as the audience expected it to be. Black characters were the personifications of the stereotypes on black Moors, reinforcing the idea that they were expected to be "cruel and lascivious" (Vaughan 4). Aaron's blackface suggested, by way of analogy, that blackface meant damnation. The implication of black make-up on the actors playing Aaron possibly highlighted his malignity as a black Moor. As *Othello* is concerned, Othello, the Moor, became the victim of his antagonist Iago. As Melchiori introduced the play, Shakespeare created the character of Iago, showing that the incarnation of the evil was white, leaving thus the traditional opposition between the white forces of goodness and the black forces of evil (37). The implications of Othello's blackface did not suggest the same malignity as Aaron's. During the Elizabethan age, the representation of black skin in performances involved the use of black materials in order to become black. Interpretations were connected to the social and political backgrounds which gave meaning to the actors' choices on stage. The representation of Aaron's and Othello's blackness maintained a connection with both the historical and sociological backgrounds even in the aftermath of the early modern period. This is the reason why a brief introduction on the development of blackness is worth here in order to examine deeper how blackness evolved through the decades and how the characters of Othello and Aaron changed according to the ideas on blackness circulating in the centuries succeeding

the Elizabethan age, namely the Restoration, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

During the Restoration black make-up continued to be used in performances (Vaughan 130). From 1660 to 1700, the expansion of England's Atlantic colonies increased the involvement of the country in the triangular slave trade. Colonizers returned to England bringing slaves with them and this brought to an increase in the black presence, especially in London. For this reason, black individuals were no longer considered as outsiders but as "human beings", no matter whether their "status" was that of slavers or not (Vaughan 131). Thus, in Restoration's theatres seeing a black face was no longer a "spectacle of strangeness" (Vaughan 131).

Eighteenth century British economy was supported by an increase in slave trade. In theatres, the actors' blackface, which was represented by black make-up, costumes, and gestures, could evoke "the audience's pity" (Vaughan 9). The nineteenth century was marked by the reach of the British largest empire. This brought actors either to have some limitations concerning the interpretation of black roles or to consider the space of performance as an occasion to experiment new pathways in order to interpret the characters of Othello and Aaron. In other words, in the first place, the actor needed to not convey ethnicity excessively, while in the second case, the actor could explore new modalities concerning the way of playing (Bassi 73-96). However, as regard the white actor's transformation, the devices adopted in the nineteenth century involved the use of black make-up and black clothing, as Leman Thomas Rede wrote in *The Road to the Stage*:

> the performer should cover the face and neck with a thin coat of pomatum, or what is better, though more disagreeable, of lard; then burn a cork to powder, and apply it with a hare's foot, or a cloth, the hands wet with beer which will fix the colouring matter. Wearing black gloves is unnatural for the colour is too intense to represent the skin, and negroes invariably cover themselves with light clothing. […]. A strong colouring of carmine should be laid upon the face after the black, as otherwise the expression of countenance and eye will be destroyed (34).

The black transformation remained pivotal for white actors in the nineteenth century. At the same time, this was the period in which black actors, such as Ira Aldridge, who interpreted the role of Othello in 1825, first performed on English stage. The

nineteenth century was thus a period of both limitations and experimentation, where black actors first appeared on stage.

In the first part of the twentieth century the Western world was permeated by the idea that the concept of race could invade both culture and society. Performances of blackness, then, were affected by social and racial prejudices. Although the theories on races were abolished both in England and in the USA in 1930, and UNESCO declared the racial theories inconsistency in 1950, the political reality did not change rapidly (Bassi 144). However, during the last decades of the twentieth century and throughout the twenty-first century, activists on civil rights and anti-racial movements gradually rose. Thus, from the one hand, the association between "blackness and savagery […] continued to dominate in the theatre" in the twentieth century and white actors remained central in performing black roles (Slights 2022), from the other hand, especially from the second part of the twentieth century onwards, black actors started to play black roles. This means that since the advent of black actors in the theatres, the ethnicity started to be part of the actor himself. Thus, the use of black make-up began for white actors who performed black roles and is no more necessary for black actors acting in black.

1.1.5 Conclusion

The strain between knowing and imagining the "Other" was reflected in the different performances of black characters given between the Elizabethan era and today. Whether by wearing oriental costumes or make-up, or by wearing of a make-up "mask", performing Othello in particular was not a simple matter: disguise posed strong problems of identity at a time when there was a strong ideal of the "unity of the self", from which the "Hyde effect" was only the other side of the coin (Bassi 111-12). Moreover, the perception and definition of ethnicity varied and performance almost always mirrored prejudices towards different ethnic groups. Whether performing blackness represented a field of exploration or whether it was a fixed characterisation, the association which doesn't emerge appropriately is whether there could be a positive or negative connotation associating ethnicities and evil, but rather the black/white colour opposition was used to emphasise white or black actors, to perform good or bad actions, according to the people's common knowledge association with white or with black. Therefore, the sentence which

summarises the absence of prejudices is that "it is the crime, not the colour, which renders the soul black".

2 Blackness in *Titus Andronicus*

2.1 A Reversal: White Characters with Black Meanings

> "Now is a time to storm. Why art thou still?"
>
> Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, III.1.264

2.1.1 Introduction: Date and Authorship

Defining the date of publication and the authorship of *Titus Andronicus* has been a complex matter over time. Shakespeare's authorship of *Titus* represents a debated issue at least until the 19th century. This is the reason why it is worth to provide a brief overview on Shakespeare's authorship of *Titus*, in order to offer a more complete introduction to the play. On the one hand, evidence of the play's early existence is testified by playhouse records of the time, the ones which Robertson calls "external evidence" (58-82), regarding performances of *Titus Andronicus* which took place at the time. On the other hand, as these first performances do not mention the author of the play, the authorship of *Titus* remains unknown, at least until the publication of the study research by Schrörer, who first supported the authorship of Shakespeare's *Titus* in his 1891 essay *Ueber Titus Andronicus* (qtd. in Robertson 56). In other words, until the year of Schrörer's publication no written proofs about the authorship of *Titus* do seem to exist. Proofs of both the date of publication and the authorship of *Titus Andronicus* are provided by Robertson. In his work, he divides them into "external evidence" and "alleged internal evidence" (56-120). Similarly, the first part of this introductory section to *Titus Andronicus* develops a brief overview of recorded performances of *Titus* in the Elizabethan age. Then, the following second part of this section takes into consideration the discourse on the text publication date. This discourse – which takes into consideration internal features of the text itself (92-168) – served to Robertson to finally agree on Shakespeare's authorship of the play.

As far as performances are concerned (cf. 1.2.1.2), there is evidence that *Titus Andronicus* was staged between 1593 and 1594. Thanks to Philip Henslowe's Diary, we know of a 1594 performance of "*Titus & Ondronicus*" by the Earl of Sussex's Men, probably at the Rose Theatre (Hughes 1). Thanks to Henslowe's accounts we know that the show ran through an entire season, from December 1593 to February 1594. Henslowe also referred to a short season of "Andronicous" staged by the Lord Admiral's Men and the Lord Chamberlain's Men in the suburban playhouse at Newington Butts in June 1594. Yet, beside Henslowe's written record, references to *Titus Andronicus* existed before 1594. For example, in 1592 one of the comedies of the repertoire of the Lord Strange's Men which goes under the name of *A Knack to Know a Knave* presents a reference to *Titus* (Maxwell xxvi). Thus, both the recorded performances of *Titus* and the references to it in other plays are several and none of them serves to clearly testify when *Titus* was first performed. However, a manuscript containing both the image known as the Peacham drawing (see fig. 2) and a text below with some lines that refer to *Titus* quoted in philological studies written about this theatrical pièce support the idea that the Peacham drawing was made in 1594 (Berry 5-6). Thus, *Titus Andronicus* is thought to have been first performed the same year as well.

Figure 2. The Peacham drawing of a conflated scene from Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*. Reproduced by permission of the Marquess of Bath, Longleat House, Westminster, Wiltshire, Great Britain.

Like the discourse on the date of the first performance of *Titus*, there is no certainty about the first date of publication of the text of the play. The theory goes that the original text dates to 1588 and 1591 and is the result of the work of several authors, among whom playwright George Peele, who, according to scholars, should have either written Act I or stylistically influenced Shakespeare (Robertson 190). The copyrighter John Danter in 1594 recorded the play in his Stationers' Register as "a booke intituled a Noble Roman Historye of Tytus Andronicus" and "the ballad thereof" (qtd. in Adams vi) without indicating the author. Moreover, the first printed Quarto (Q1), published by John Danter in 1594 as well, indicates only the name of the playing companies, the "Earle of *Darbie*", the "Earle of *Pembrooke*", and the "Earle of *Sussex*" (Adams v), without mentioning the author. The second printed Quarto (Q2) was printed in 1600 by James Roberts. As is the case with Danter's, this edition does not report the author's name but only the companies that performed the play, which correspond to the previously mentioned ones, with the addition of the "Lorde Chamberlaine theyr / Seruants". The third edition (Q3), which also reports the name of the King's Men ("the Kings / Maiesties Seruants"), was printed in 1611 by Edward Allde. Finally, the 1623 Folio includes *Titus Andronicus* among the Tragedies (Melchiori 32), thus anticipating the scientific conclusion on the debate, which ends by confirming Shakespeare's authorship of the play because of its "quality of the style, the verse, the workmanship, the matter from first to last" (Robertson 58).

Therefore, we can assume that *Titus Andronicus* dates to 1594 and is written by Shakespeare.

2.1.2   Sources

The story of *Titus Andronicus* survives in three different versions. They include Shakespeare's play, a ballad – which presumably entered in the Stationers' Register in 1594 – and a prose narrative, which survives only in a mid-eighteenth-century chapbook. According to Maxwell, the prose story described in the chapbook can be considered the source for both Shakespeare's play and the ballad (xxxiv). However, the more recent studies made by Mincoff (131-134), Hunter (171-188) and Jackson and Potter (246-250) seem to agree on the fact that Shakespeare's play comes first, before both the ballad and

the prose story. Furthermore, Bate follows Jackson and Potter's assumption on "the process by which the ballad, enigmatically echoing [or, better, *compressing*] the play, beguiles the prose-writer along a false trail" (250). He claims that the mid-eighteenth-century chapbook cannot be referred to as one of Shakespeare's sources for *Titus Andronicus* (Bate 82). He supports his standpoint through several pieces of evidence which practically challenge previous theories on Shakespeare's sources for *Titus Andronicus* (cf. Bate 82-83). According to Bate, we can assume that Shakespeare's play comes first, that the 1594 ballad is based on the play, and that the prose story exists as an expansion of the ballad (83). Bate then concludes that the play is practically "sourceless" (84), although Shakespeare draws on several narrative and historiographical works.

Both the narrative and the historiographical works from which Shakespeare draws inspiration are plenty and include Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* Seneca's *Thyestes*, Plutarch's *Parallel Lives of the Greeks and Romans*, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, and Bandello's *Novelle*. While Ovid is considered Shakespeare's inspiration for the rape and mutilation of Lavinia, while Seneca represents a significant source for the cannibalistic meal organised by Titus and Bandello provides a significant starting point for the characterisation of the figure of the Moor, Kyd's tragedy is the first example of revenge tragedy, a genre to which *Titus Andronicus* can be ascribed (cf. 2.1.3). The first three narratives will be briefly presented in the following paragraphs in order to provide a clearer picture of their role in the composition of *Titus Andronicus.* The parallelisms with the revenge tragedy by Kyd and its discrepancies with Shakespeare will be analysed later, in the attempt to justify the popularity of revenge tragedies at the time, and the characteristics of Shakespeare's revenge piéce.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* include the tale of Philomela's rape and mutilation. Philomela and Procne are sisters, Pandion's daughters, King of Athens. The Thracian Tereus marries Procne, but desires Philomela, and he rapes her. Afterwards, he cuts her tongue so she cannot tell anyone what he has done. Although unable to speak, Philomela weaves a tapestry depicting Tereus's crime, thus alerting Procne to what her husband has done. Procne decides to take revenge on her husband by killing their son, Itys, and baking him into a pie, which she offers to her husband to eat. When Tereus realises what has happened, he pursues both sisters, but ancient Greek gods turn Procne into a swallow and Philomela into a nightingale to protect them. Similarly, in the play Lavinia is raped by

Chiron and Demetrius, who, afterwards, mutilate her by cutting her tongue and hands. Weber comments about the "brutality" of this gesture saying that

> One would think that nothing could surpass the brutality of the tongueless, handless, and newly widowed woman being mocked by her rapists, but soon Shakespeare confronts us with the image of Titus's severed hand taking the place of his daughter's excised tongue; then, in the course of taking her revenge, Lavinia's bloody stumps mirror the slashed necks of her assailants as she catches their lifeblood in a mixing bowl; finally, in the climax, Titus's ritualized murder of his daughter forms a fitting counterpoint for Tamora's cannibalistic ingestion of her offspring. (699)

Thus, Aaron, Chiron, and Demetrius all use Ovid's tale as an explicit inspiration for the rape and mutilation of Lavinia, as Aaron comment on Lavinia's fate, according to him, shows: "His Philomel must lose her tongue today" (II.2.43). Moreover, Lavinia herself directly quotes Ovid's text to communicate the extent of her suffering: helped by a boy and her father, she conveys that "'tis Ovid's *Metamorphosis*" (IV.1.42) and she was "Ravished and wronged as Philomela was" (IV.1.52) (Weber 698). Marcus refers to Ovid's text twice after the rape. While seeing her sister, he immediately deduces that "sure some Tereus hath deflowered thee" (II.3.26) and that a "Fair Philomela, why she but lost her tongue, / And in a tedious sampler sewed her mind" (II.3.38-39). He then proceeds quoting Ovid's tale by speaking of a "craftier Tereus" (II.3.41) and fingers "That could have better sewed than Philomel" (II.3.43). The tale of Philomela not only inspires the tragedy, but it is also quoted in Act IV Scene 1 where Titus explains to Lucius the motive of Lavinia's suffering stating that: "This is the tragic tale of Philomel, / And treats of Tereus' treason and his rape – / And rape I fear, was root of thy annoy." (IV.1.47-49). Thus, the story of Philomela represents Shakespeare's inspiration for the fate of Lavinia, although *Titus Andronicus* presents several discrepancies when compared to Ovid's tale, as the section on Lavinia's lack of voice will show (cf. 2.1.5.4).

On the other hand, the inspirational narrative work for the final cannibalistic banquet is the tragedy *Thyestes* by Seneca. In Seneca's work, Thyestes and Atreus are brothers. The two men are both designed for the throne, though the gods seem to favour Atreus. Thus, Thyestes tries to take the crown by seducing Atreus's wife. Not only Atreus decides to exile Thyestes from the city of Argo, but he also vows revenge against his brother. Atreus invites Thyestes to have a banquet with him and in doing so, as Titus, after taking back the crown, takes revenge against his brother Thyestes by killing his sons

and tricking Thyestes into eating them for dinner. In the same way, Titus, after taking revenge against Tamora, bakes the flesh and blood of her sons into a bloody pie and offers it to her for dinner. Therefore, both Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Seneca's *Thyestes* are inspirational works for Shakespeare's *Titus*.

The twenty-first of Bandello's *Novelle* is the main inspirational source for the character of Aaron and the sub-plot revolving around him. The story is set in Southern Spain and tells an episode in the life of the wealthy Rinieri Ervizzano and his family. It consists of his wife, his three little children, and some slaves. One day during their vacation, Rinieri gets angry with the Moor-slave, beats him, and decides he must be exiled. The Moor not only does not accept his patron's punishment to go back to Rome, but also vows revenge against him. After waiting for Ervizzano to have left the house, the Moor rapes Rinieri's wife and imprisons their three children. He then kills one of them and promises his patron, on his return home, to return him his wife and his surviving two children if the protagonist cuts off his own nose. Moved by passion and regret, Rinieri decides to cut off his nose to have his family back with him, but in the end, he gets them back already dead. The Moor eventually kills himself as well. In Bandello, the Moor is portrayed according to the stereotype of the black and cruel slave (cf. 1.1.3). Moreover, the Moor's request to his master in the novella is mirrored in the play, when Titus cuts his own hand on Aaron's advice, in the attempt to preserve the lives of his sons. However, both in Shakespeare and in Bandello, the Moor kills either his patron's sons or his wife and sons while laughing for having succeeded in his trick. In Bandello, this laugh is explicitly described, "*il crudel moro del tutto rideva, parendogli aver fatto la più bella cosa del mondo*" (1641), whereas in Shakespeare Aaron ironically alludes to the heads of Titus's sons, "I go, Andronicus, and for thy hand / Look by and by to have thy sons with thee. / [*aside*] Their heads I mean […]" (III.1. 201-203). Thus, Aaron's subplot in *Titus* has several resonances with the Moor-slave's subplot in Bandello's novella.

Finally, the resonances of some names in the play are Roman and, as Kahn notices, "Plutarch's *Parallels Lives of the Greeks and Romans* was a treasury of exemplars" (13). The names for Marcus, Martius, Quintus, Caius, Emilius, Sempronius probably recall the names present in the life of Scipio Africanus in Plutarch (Bate 92). Moreover, both the names for Titus and Lucius recall Plutarch's life of Coriolanus in the extent to which Titus, as Coriolanus, is a candidate for the Roman Empire throne, while Lucius recalls

the life of Coriolanus in his overall behaviour during the last final lines of the play (Melchiori 35). Therefore, the Roman resonances in the play are several, as we will see in the following section about the setting (cf. 2.1.5.1), and echo in several names of the characters present in the play.

2.1.3   Genre: Revenge Tragedy

All critics of *Titus* categorise the play as a revenge tragedy. This genre was popular in Elizabethan England when the play was first written and performed (cf. 2.1.1). However, as pieces of this genre often choose to stage atrocious scenes and, as we will see, on-stage dismemberment and deaths (cf. 2.1.4), it is worth explaining why we can call *Titus* a revenge tragedy, what the elements that characterise the genre are, and why it was so popular in Elizabethan times. In this section, we start by defining how popular the concept of revenge in Elizabethan England was, to establish a connection between society and theatre, then we proceed to explore the elements that characterise revenge tragedies and those which can be found in *Titus*.

The time during which *Titus* was first performed (cf. 2.1.1) was imbued with a general taste for revenge, public punishment, and the sight of bloody deaths. Public executions were popular during Elizabethan times. For instance, we know of a Tyburn Brook, a tributary of the river Westbourne, which gave the name to the Tyburn gallows in London, where hangings, public executions, and martyrdoms took place for over six centuries from the Middle Ages onwards. There, during Elizabeth I's reign 6160 victims were hanged. In 1571 a famous Triple Tree, which was erected in the same place at Tyburn, allowed to have a fixed structure for executions to take place in front of attending people. Written descriptions of the time testify that the structure was used. For instance, an author of several letters of historiographical value, John Chamberlain, in one of his letters to the art collector, diplomat and secretary of state at the time, Sir Dudley Carleton, describes the hanging of four priests on Whitsun eve in 1612 and he notices that a large amount of people, among them "divers ladies and gentlemen" attended to witness the event which took place early between six and seven in the morning (Birch 173, qtd. in Smith 72).

All what is mentioned above is linked to the Elizabethan conception of revenge. To better define it, it is worth taking into consideration Bowers's chronological explanation about the "background of revenge" (3-40). He first points the reader's attention to the idea that bloody revenge was something intrinsic among primitive people and linked to the way they intended justice itself, especially in absence of laws dealing with it (Bowers 3-4). According to this assumption, revenge was seen as "the first manifestation of a consciousness of justice" and "the only possible form in which a wrong could be righted" (Bowers 3). Then, he explains that in Elizabethan England there was a sort of in-between position towards revenge itself. On the one hand, revenge that arose from "malice prepense" was not legal; on the other hand, Elizabethans sided with the avenger if the cause of revenge was a reaction to a kind of injury (Bowers 10). Thus, in Elizabethan England, "taking justice into his own hands" (Bowers 11) was permitted to the extent to which revenge was still "extralegal because there are no laws dealing with it, and the duty to revenge lies with the near relatives of the slain man" (Bowers 4). Bowers illustrates the Elizabethan conception of revenge as they intended it to be at the time, that is, a way to make a personal injury be righted. We can also consider Dunne's standpoint when he argues that revenge in the Elizabethan time "is seen in the transition from private to public mode of justice, with the underlying assumption that revenge and law are polar opposites" (17). He tends to admit the existence of revenge though he considers it not legal even if there is no law dealing with it. Dunne's standpoint in placing "violence and the law at opposite moral poles" has been defined as a modern one, "which ignores the extent to which they might operate in tandem […]" (Hindle 227). However, whether one assumes Bowers's viewpoint or Dunne's, we can agree with both authors when they assert that revenge and public punishment were quite popular in Elizabethan England.

To fully comprehend where the concept of revenge, however, comes from, we have to consider both Bacon's 1625 essay on revenge and the background to Elizabethan society. We briefly summarise Bacon's point first and then we continue by describing the social conditions where the ground for revenge is fertile. In Bacon's viewpoint, revenge puts the "law out of office" but it is perhaps "tolerable" when there is "no law to remedy" (19-20). However, Bacon concludes his essay in a "surprising" way (Bate 25) by asserting that "public revenges are for the most part fortunate […] but in private revenges it is not

so. […] vindictive persons live the life of witches; who, as they are mischievous, so end they infortunate" (Bacon 21). Bacon's standpoint underlines the divergence between justice and revenge, but then he also distinguishes between a private and a public mode of taking justice into one's own hands. There is thus a difference between what Bowers asserts and Bacon's conclusion on revenge. Bowers admits a sort of private revenge, while Bacon considers fortunate only the public forms of revenge. Starting from this standpoint, in the following section we try to define how acceptable we can consider Titus's revenge (cf. 2.1.5.3). For the moment being, we continue by explaining why revenge was so popular and what connects it to the theatre. Thus, having described what revenge is in Elizabethan England and how Elizabethans conceived it, we can continue by explaining the links between public life and life in theatres.

Both historiographical and law studies on Elizabethan society link what happened in real life to plays. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, Hallett C., and Hallett E. notice that revenge tragedy questions the correlation between justice and order in a society which is experiencing a civilisational crisis (119). As a matter of fact, they consider revenge tragedy as a product of societies that "have reached a point of crisis" (Hallett C. and Hallett E. 106). The period of shift in moral values in society is the fertile ground for the literary genre of revenge tragedy to arise (Hallett C. and Hallett E. 113). Several pieces of evidence support Hallett C. and Hallett E.'s standpoint. According to Dunne, it seems that "the treatment of revenge in the early modern theatre tends to replicate, modify and critique legal procedures" (17). In Bowers's viewpoint, Elizabethans attend public executions as they were a form of entertainment as well as they are used to "the sight of blood and would scarcely flinch from it on the stage" (16). Dunne adds that an "early modern audience, be it in the theatre or at Tyburn, would have been capable of entertaining the possibility that justice could be vengeful, and revenge just" (18). Smith argues that "hangings functioned as spectacles not unlike tragedies staged in public theatres", and she continues saying that they "provided entertainment to upper and lower classes" and "both events were generally well attended" (72). Moreover, the first public theatre is said to have been built around 1571; the Triple Tree that we mentioned above had been erected the same year as well. The connection with the theatre is also evident in the way Elizabethans staged the scaffold. Greenblatt notices that there was an implicit presence of it when he writes:

The ratio between the theatre and the world, even at its most stable and unchallenged moments, was never *perfectly* taken for granted, that is, experienced as something wholly natural and self-evident … Similarly, the playwrights themselves frequently called attention in the midst of their plays to alternative theatrical practices. Thus, for example, the denouement of Massinger's *Roman Actor* (like that of Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*) turns upon the staging of a mode of theatre in which princes and nobles take part in plays and in which the killing turns out to be real. It required no major act of imagination for a Renaissance audience to conceive of either of these alternatives to the conventions of the public playhouse: both were fully operative in the period itself, in the form of masques and courtly entertainments, on the one hand, and public maimings and executions on the other. (15)

According to Greenblatt, we can assume that the theatre and the scaffold influence each other both ways: on the one hand, on-stage deaths suggest public executions, on the other hand, they can evoke their theatrical counterparts. Therefore, we can conclude that Elizabethans were "certainly quite familiar with the spectacle of the hanged body and the disembowelled and quartered corpse" (Smith 71). Sir Dudley Carleton, in another letter to John Chamberlain, writes of a hanging taking place in Salisbury at the end of year 1603 and he describes that the "two priests that led the way to the execution were very bloodily handled; for they were cut down alive" (Birch 27). He continues by saying that there "was no greater assembly than I have seen at ordinary executions; nor no man of quality more than the Lord of Arundel and young Somerset" (Birch 27). "Now", he sustains, "all the actors being together on the stage, as use is at the end of the play, the sheriff made a short speech unto them […], and due execution then [was] performed" (Birch 32). As Smith notices, the "metaphoric alliance" between the stage and public executions, which both permeates Carleton's narrative and is also noticed by other scholars, among whom Greenblatt and Smith, is "fundamental in Renaissance England" (74). Thus, revenge, dismemberments, hangings, and public executions were popular during Elizabethan times. And the fact that the play presents the same atrocities in fiction may reflect the general taste for seeing revenge and public executions in everyday life. In other words, all these elements represent the background for the raise of the tragedy of revenge. In the paragraphs that follow, we provide a definition of this genre, and we briefly describe the core characteristics of it and those which are present in *Titus*.

To define revenge tragedy, we take into consideration Bowers's viewpoint and the critical studies connected to it. Then, we provide the structural characteristics of revenge

tragedies, and we proceed by focusing on Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, the pièce that gave birth to revenge plays, before moving to *Titus*. Bowers introduces the tragedy of revenge as a subdivision of the more inclusive and generalised term "tragedy of blood". Within this category, he includes what he calls "revenge tragedy", "villain tragedy", "conqueror tragedy", and "realistic or domestic tragedy" (Bowers 62) and he takes into consideration the definition of revenge tragedy provided by Thorndike, who defines it as a "tragedy whose leading motive is revenge and whose main action deals with the progress of this revenge" (qtd. in Bowers 62). Bowers explains that Thorndike's standpoint is right, but it needs to be contextualised within Elizabethan drama. Once we place ourselves within the context of Elizabethan tragedy, we consider the term revenge as the main motivation behind all the blood and violence that we see in performance (Bowers 63). In revenge tragedies a first bloody deed is the origin of a cyclic process of vengeful actions which cannot be interrupted. Revenge for Tamora means destroying the family of the Andronici. To revenge his beloved Alarbus's death, she accepts to become Saturninus's wife first. Then, she proceeds by destroying Titus's family. Lavinia will be raped and mutilated by Tamora's sons, Bassianus dies by the hands of Chiron and Demetrius. Moreover, Titus's sons will be executed. As a result, she destroys Titus's beloved ones and reveals herself dressed as she was the personification of Revenge. Titus takes revenge for him and for Lavinia by destroying Tamora and her two sons. His violent actions turn him into a revenger and executioner of further bloody acts (cf. 2.1.5.3). However, since his "vow is made" (III.1.280), the circle of vengeful deeds cannot be stopped. According to the cyclic mechanism of revenge, the play is divided into three main parts, as we will explain below. A first part contains Tamora and the Goths' revenge, a second part functions as a pause and then the revenger's part develops, concluding the bloody acts as a circle.

In the first revenge play we see evidence both for a connection between real life and theatre and for the cyclic mechanism of revenge. Thomas Kyd's masterpiece *The Spanish Tragedy* (1592) represents the beginning of this genre. The play presents the typical structure of revenge tragedies (Bowers 46). The play – staging atrocious deaths – well responds to the taste of Elizabethan audiences. A blood-revenge tragedy, where the sacred duty of the father is to avenge the murder of his son, is performed (Bowers 65). According to Hallett C. and Hallett E., Kyd "saw in the revenger the possibility of creating an archetype of the Elizabethan man, an archetype the Elizabethans could themselves

recognize" (119). Moreover – as Smith points out – Kyd "exploits the value of the mutilated body as spectacle by holding Horatio's body up to view either literally or metaphorically several times in the course of the play" and in doing so – Smith continues – the playwright exploits the "voyeuristic interest in the hanged and mutilated corpses […] from the opening scene through promises of torture, mutilation, and death" (76). In Kyd's work, Smith herself sees a "testimony to this ingenious transference of the spectacle of death from the punitive to the dramatic modes" (84). A summary of Kyd's play is provided below as a starting point for further analysis on revenge tragedies and *Titus Andronicus*.

Before the play starts, we know that the Spanish and the Portuguese are enemies, and the Portuguese are defeated in an assault. Significantly, in the battlefield, the Spanish officer Andrea is killed by the Portuguese viceroy's son Balthazar. As the play begins, the ghost of Andrea and the personification of Revenge enter the scene vowing revenge against Andrea's killer. Other two characters enter the scene. They are Horatio, Andrea's best friend, and Lorenzo, nephew of the Spanish king. They capture Balthazar and argue over who caught him. We learn that Horatio defeated Balthazar, and that Lorenzo is lying to obtain the king's esteem. But the king does not know this. Thus, he splits the goods of victory between both of them. Lorenzo takes Balthazar's horse and weapons. The king decides that a marriage between Lorenzo's sister Bel-imperia and Balthazar should restore the peace with Portugal. But Bel-imperia falls in love with Horatio. Balthazar, who falls in love with Bel-imperia, finds a reason to vow revenge against Horatio. Together with Lorenzo they decide to kill him. At this point, the knight marshal of Spain Hieronimo and his wife Isabella find their son Horatio dead, and they fall into madness. In the meantime, suspecting that she has found a new lover, Lorenzo locks Bel-imperia up. However, she manages to write Hieronimo a letter to inform him that Lorenzo and Balthazar are the murderers of Horatio. After other bloody actions, such as the murder of Serberine, a servant, and Isabella's suicide, Hieronimo vows revenge for Bel-imperia and for himself. Along with Bel-imperia, he invites Lorenzo, and Balthazar to perform a play within the play called *Soliman and Perseda*, to entertain the Spanish court. But he changes the prop daggers into real ones, so that Lorenzo and Balthazar kill each other mortally during the performance. What Hieronimo does not mean is that Bel-imperia chooses to stab herself too in front of the Spanish court. Hieronimo decides to tell everyone the

reason behind the murders. Then he bites his own tongue to prevent himself from talking under torture. He kills the Duke of Castille and commits suicide. The play ends with the satisfaction of both the ghost of Andrea and the personification of Revenge who promise to deliver eternal punishment to the guilty parties.

Both Kyd's and Shakespeare's plays deal with the "events which lead to the necessary revenge for murder" and develop according to "the revenger's actions in accordance with his vow." (Bowers 63). As a result, revenge is the "cause of the catastrophe" in both plays and defines the "real dramatic motivation" (Bowers 63) behind the blood and violence that we see on stage.

To sum up, the core elements of a revenge tragedy are several. In the first place, an event which brings to a necessary revenge for blood is needed. In *Titus*, the murder of Tamora's son Alarbus represents the initial bloody event, as we will see later (cf. 2.1.5.3). Then, a series of actions develops according to the revenger's vow. The thirst for revenge is explicit in *Titus* both in Tamora's and in Titus's promises to take their revenge. Tamora vows to "massacre them all" (I.1.455) and Titus makes his vow when he intends to "right your wrongs" (III.1.279) "Till all these mischiefs be returned again" (III.1.274). Revenge is both the cause and the real theatrical motivation behind all the catastrophe that happens in the play, as Bowers explains (63). Because of what we have mentioned, both *Titus* and *The Spanish Tragedy* are revenge tragedies.

However, the plays differ in some respects. In Kyd, the important device of a supernatural creature is introduced, as the ghost of the Spanish officer Andrea opens the play. The revenger Hieronimo hesitates in getting revenge and finds his task a difficult one, madness is used as an important dramatic device characterising the protagonist and his wife Isabella. Hieronimo is moved by grief and revenge is accomplished "terribly, with irony and deceit". The presence of other minor characteristics includes the hanging body of Hieronimo's son Horatio, the letter written in blood from Bel-imperia to Hieronimo, and the reading of a book in a philosophical soliloquy (Bowers 71-73). *Titus* slightly differs from Kyd in several aspects. They include the increased importance of the antagonists' actions before the start of the protagonist's revenge, the number of faults in the revenger's character, the "more logical and ironic" use of the revenger's madness, as the following paragraphs will show, and the inclusion of a villainous black character who is "only loosely connected with the main plot" (Bowers 116). This black character Aaron

will be analysed in the following section, while here we continue focusing on how characters experience revenge and what the characteristics of revenge tragedies and of *Titus* are. To provide an answer to the questions we have mentioned, we will consider how Hallett C. and Hallett E. conceptualised revenge among passions and how Titus himself is possibly led by passions and revenge.

Passions can be divided into primary emotions, among them love, hate, joy, grief, and anger, and mixed ones which include envy, revenge, emulation, and jealousy. Both can run to excess (Hallett C. and Hallett E. 46). Hallett C. and Hallett E., quoting Hobbes, distinguish madness from ordinary passions. This viewpoint goes back to Aristotle who said that some passions can alter our bodily conditions and, in some men, can even produce madness (Hallett C. and Hallett E. 44). For example, Titus defines an uncontrolled passion by saying "How now, has sorrow made thee dote already? / Why, Marcus, no man should be mad but I." (III.2.23-24). One of the mixed passions that we mentioned above, revenge, is "classified as a compound passion, a mixture of several primary emotions", among them, Hallett C. and Hallett E. continue, "grief must be experienced first." (69). According to her, grief originates from the offense that "ingendereth hatred, anger, enuy, or indignation" – all together or independently (69). And "growing out of that combination of affections is the desire for revenge. At least three of these passions – grief, hatred, and anger – are emphasized in revenge tragedy" (Hallett C. and Hallett E. 69). Having seen what arises revenge, we continue by defining the passions that characterise it.

Bowers indicates that anger and hatred represent the first cause for criminal action, although he underlines some differences between them. On the one hand, hatred is a "natural wrath which had endured too long and had turned to unnatural malice" (21). Anger instead "comes from personal wrongs", it "is full of pain", "it can be cured by patience", and it "wishes the victim to recognize the revenger" (Bowers 21). Grief is "identified with the motion of withdrawal" (Hallett C. and Hallett E. 71), according to Hallett C. and Hallett E., it "temporarily clouds the imagination and weakens the reason, rendering the mind more highly susceptible to attacks by the stronger passions" (71). Together with anger they evolve into that "implacable desire for revenge" (Hallett C. and Hallett E. 71). Jealousy is a perturbation of the heart which can lead to inordinate passion (Hallett C. and Hallett E. 60). According to Bowers, it can be "another prime mover of

revenge and murder" (21). Side by side with jealousy is envy which may be "considered one of the most powerful of the passions inducing revenge" (Bowers 22). It was "perhaps the greatest Elizabethan vice" to the point that the "envious man was not hesitant to shed blood even without provocation" (Bowers 22). According to Bowers, there are two additional characteristics - pride and ambition - that "were considered the forerunners of revenge and death" (22).

All the elements that we saw above are somehow present in Titus's supposed madness, to the extent in which he "enters the highest stage of lunacy" and his "mind retains both its ability to handle logic and its ability to recognise evil" (Hallett C. and Hallett E. 82). The scene where Titus's alleged madness reaches its apex is the final banquet when he is "finally capable of committing atrocities" (Hallett C. and Hallett E. 82).

> TITUS
> Hark, wretches, how I mean to martyr you:
> This one hand yet is left to cut your throats,
> Whiles that Lavinia 'tween her stumps doth hold
> The basin that receives your guilty blood.
> You know your mother means to feast with me,
> And calls herself Revenge, and thinks me mad.
> Hark, villains, I will grind your bones to dust,
> And with your blood and it I'll make a paste,
> And of the paste a coffin I will rear,
> And make two pasties of your shameful heads,
> And bid that strumpet, your unhallowed dam,
> Like to the earth swallow her own increase.
> This is the feast that I have bid her to,
> And this the banquet she shall surfeit on.
> (V.2.180-193).

Titus's attempt to portray himself as a mad man occurs when he decides to bake a bloody pie for his royal table companions. However, as we will see (cf. 2.1.5.3), he reveals himself as he is: a bloody revenger, judge, and executioner of his actions. For all the aspects that we saw above, we can conclude that *Titus* is a revenge tragedy, that its protagonist follows the characteristics that critics attribute to bloody revenger heroes, and that, as is the fashion of the time, the play shows how Elizabethan taste was inclined towards the sight of bloody deaths, hangings, and dismemberments.

2.1.4   Structure and Themes

The play is divided into three sequences, according to the typical structure of revenge tragedies (cf. 2.1.3). The first part of the tragedy is composed of the first act – made of a single scene – the second act and the first scene of the third act. This first section is set in the corrupted royal court, where hunting evolves into human hunting, where the rape and mutilation of Lavinia take place and thus are posed the premises of Titus's revenge after the vindictive actions by Tamora at the beginning of the play. Then, the second sequence corresponds to the episode of the fly, which serves as a sort of interlude between the first and the third sequences. Here the murder of the fly metaphorically anticipates the final destruction of the character of Aaron. Remarkably, Aaron's skin is black as well (cf. 1.1.4, 2.2). In the third part, the revenge of the Andronici is developed; the section ends with the final banquet at Titus's house. In this sequence, the setting changes from the Goths' campsite to the court, and Titus's house. Thus, the episode of the fly divides the play into two parts which function as a sort of mirror, so that the first part is about the revenge of Tamora and Aaron whereas the third part corresponds to the revenge of Titus and Lavinia (Melchiori 41). Within this geometrical structure, the main themes of *Titus Andronicus* are developed.

The play's structure serves as the framework for the development of two intermingling and popular themes of the Elizabethan time. Shakespeare, according to Baildon, mingles the theme of "The Wicked Moor" (xvii), developing from the scheming Moor-figure who acts out of villainy and malice, and the second theme concerning the mixing of the "White Lady and Moor" (Baildon xvii), which can be found in the adulterous relationship between the white queen Tamora and the black slave Aaron. However, as Bate notices, the combination of these two popular themes within the framework of a revenge tragedy results in other several themes, including miscegenation, rape, and cannibalism (1). These themes are represented in the play by means of bloody-revenge scenes, dismemberment scenes, murders, rape, adultery, and a cannibalistic banquet (Bate 1). Though the themes of *Titus* may appear as cruel and violent, or even "unstageable" (Bate 58), during the Elizabethan times they were popular with the audiences who first saw the play on stage.

2.1.5   Blackness

The themes of blackness and darkness emerge not only through the visual characterisation of Aaron as a black figure. They are entwined with several other aspects of the play. Roman history is present, although the play portrays the late Roman empire as metaphor of a decaying past, where corruption, wars and the gradual loss of Roman laws and values leave the space for dark deeds to take place; the woods and the forests are seen as a dark environment, where one can lose themselves and evil deeds might take place; Lavinia's deprivation of any possibility to communicate becomes the symbol of the dark deeds she is a victim of. Therefore, the following paragraphs will analyse the setting, the meaning of the forest, the development of revenge plots and Lavinia's lack of voice to emphasise the connection of these aspects to darkness.

2.1.5.1   Setting

The play's setting is the late Roman Empire at the time of the Migration Period. This historical background highlights both the political and ethical issues of a period of decline. In the play, the Barbarian tribes allude to the imminent political collapse of Rome. In addition to the physical invasion of Roman territories, these tribes had also encroached on Roman culture and moral values. They are the representation of disorder and decay in society. The same way, the first reactions to the Moors produced a sense of instability and strangeness in Elizabethan society (cf. 1.1.1). For this reason, the Goths in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* are associated with the Moors, which term, as we saw in the previous chapter, denoted a generic form of alterity during the Elizabethan period (cf. 1.1.2). At the same time, ancient Rome is only an imaginary setting, where the characters do not refer to real people. As Spencer argues:

> The play does not assume a political situation known to Roman history; it is, rather, a summary of Roman politics. It is not so much that any particular set of political institutions is assumed in Titus, but rather that it includes all the political institutions that Rome ever had. The author seems anxious, not to get it all right, but to get it all in. (32).

While choosing to "get it all in", Shakespeare seemingly narrates the whole Roman history, which according to Bate corresponds to the narration of "a whole single action" (17). Shakespeare learned about this time in Roman history from Plutarch and Livy. For instance, Livy's historical *Ab Urbe Condita* narrates two key events of the history of Rome, namely Aeneas' escape from Troy and his subsequent founding of Rome and then the Tarquins' expulsion from Rome. These events are mentioned in the last part of *Titus Andronicus* when a Roman Lord speaks:

> A ROMAN LORD
> Speak, Rome's dear friend, as erst our ancestor,
> When with his solemn tongue he did discourse
> To lovesick Dido's sad-attending ear
> The story of that baleful burning night
> When subtle Greeks surprised King Priam's Troy.
> Tell us what Sinon hath bewitched our ears,
> Or who hath brought the fatal engine in
> That gives our Troy, our Rome, the civil wound.
> (V.3.79-86).

Finding Roman settings in English plays is quite common, since in "English chronicle histories, the founding of Britain was connected to the founding of Rome" (Kahn 3) and "Romanness" was seen as the symbol of civilisation, moral virtues, and values (Kahn 2). However, while the "heroes of three of Shakespeare's Roman plays are renowned exemplars of Roman history" the "fourth (Titus) is [only] modelled on them" (Kahn 13), since the setting of *Titus Andronicus* in a declining Rome has, as we said above, arguably the same historical value as has the setting of *Julius Caesar* (1599), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607) and *Coriolanus* (1609). As a matter of fact, in *Titus*, the parallel with history continues Rome's first decline, which, according to Livy, corresponds to the expulsion of Tarquinius Superbus. The last king of Rome conquered the power without elections and was expelled because of his son's rape of Lucretia. The play recalls these events, both in Saturninus's ascension to the throne and in the rape of Lavinia. Like Tarquinius had done, Saturninus "abuses the electoral process" (Bate 18), asking Titus's approval to "be Rome's emperor" (I.1.209). Like Lucretia, Lavinia is raped. Moreover, Lavinia's name, as mentioned in the introduction, resembles the Roman Lavinia, the daughter of Latinus, King of Latium in Virgil's *Aeneid* – seemingly another reference to the foundation narrative of Rome.

The other references to the history of Rome include Lucius – the only survivor after the fourteen deaths of the play – as the person who will bring change to Rome, in the same way Lucius Brutus brought about political change in ancient Rome, and in the lines "In election for the Roman empery, / Chosen Andronicus, surnamèd Pius" (I.1.22-23), as Titus is referred to as "Pius" like Virgil's Aeneas. Not only are the events of the founding of Rome recalled in the tragedy, but also the "invasion of the civilized Trojan city by the barbarian Greeks is re-enacted on stage as the civilised Roman city is invaded by the barbarian Goths" (Miola 89), who represent Rome's decline. The Goths in the play, however, do not refer to a specific people, but rather to all the enemies of Rome, while the opposition between the Romans and the Goths recalls the opposition shown in the Peacham drawing (cf. 2.1.1), which

> imposes an unconvincing neatness on the materials of the plot and constantly reminds one of the "literary" flavor of the play, especially in view of the other obvious parallels and "opposites". For example, Roman civilization and pagan barbarism are clearly contrasted, as Alan Somers points out: "The essential conflict … is the struggle between Rome and all that this signifies in the European tradition to which we, and Shakespeare, belong, and the barbarism of primitive nature". (Reese 79)

The historical references to the decline of Rome and its ending in the medieval age, stereotypically known as "the age of darkness" (Bate 18), highlight the connection between the play's setting and darkness. Even though Aparicio states that the play cannot be referred to as a Roman play because it does not report real historical characters or events, *Titus Andronicus* stages many "traits of the Roman cultural scene, even when they are anachronistically displayed as the action advances" (Aparicio 70), as we have illustrated in this section.

2.1.5.2   Woods and Forests

As a powerful symbol of the co-existence of punishment, horror, beauty, and pleasure, the forest "is not a comprehensive landscape; rather, it emerges as a habitat for multiple voices, which occupy a transitional space – literally and metaphorically – between the past and the future" (Scott 277). For the reasons we mentioned above, Shakespearian forests and woods are a significant setting intertwined with the themes of

contrast and darkness. As Neill points out, Shakespearian forests "can sometimes function as places of pastoral refuge from the cares and brutal competition of society", even though the same author notices that in many of Shakespeare's plays, woods are regarded as "'desert', unpeopled, but hardly empty: full of deer for hunting, but also a lair for more menacing beasts." (Neill, "In the Shady Wood"). The same picture of wilderness and danger is delineated by Kowalcze-Pawlik, who adds that the forest in Shakespeare is also a "dangerous place at the borders of civilization" (106). In *Titus Andronicus,* the forest is "ruthless", "vast" and "gloomy", highlighting the connection between this obscure environment and darkness (IV.1.53).

However, Elizabethan forests are a common landscape in Elizabethan England. The presence of the forests is testified by several juridical texts. As Barton points out, in his *Treatise* a John Manwood, barrister in Elizabethan times, provides a definition of the word "forest" explaining that the term has both Latinate origin and is a compounded of the two English words *for* and *rest* (5). On the one hand, the English origin of the name alludes to a place where the king's wild beasts can rest, on the other hand, the Latin etymology *foris*, which means "outside", suggests a place which is far and apart from the laws of the kingdom, that is "not only the woodland but also the cultivated and uncultivated land defined predominantly in terms of its exclusionary ownership by the sovereign" (Kowalcze-Pawlik 107). As a matter of fact, during Elizabethan times, even though a forest was either a place of trees, or a wasteland, that is a place like an urban desert or a non-civilised area, a Mr Melville was the officer of the Crown "looking after all the existing woodland in Greater London" (Barton 1). However, the enchanted vision of the forest we mentioned above is questioned by Scott who demonstrates that Manwood's nostalgic attempt of justifying a merry England actually "exposes a landscape that appears to threaten as well as reflect its community" (281). The Elizabethan forests, as Scott points out, become a dark place, as they are in *Titus* later on, despite Manwood's attempt of describing it as a non-lawless place (282).

In the attempt to justify the presence of a law of the forest as a place of pleasure and delight, Manwood tried to challenge the view of the forest as a dark place. In his 1598 *A Treatise of the Lawes of the Forest* he writes:

> A Forest is a certain territory of woody grounds and fruitful pastures, privileged
> for wild beasts and fowls of forest, chase and warren, to rest and abide in, in the

safe protection of the king, for his principle delight and pleasure, which territory of ground, so privileged, is meered and bounded, with unremovable marks, meers, and boundaries, either known by master of record, or else by prescription: And also replenished with wild beasts of venery or chase, and with great coverts of vert, for the succour of the said wild beasts, to have their abode in: for the preservation and continuance of which said place, together with the vert and venison, there are certain particular laws, privileges and officers, belonging to the same, meet for that purpose, that are only proper unto the forest, and not to any other place. (40-41)

Manwood's *Treatise* shows the forest as a "privileged" area, inhabited by wild animals, where there is a certain order controlled by the king. A similar description of the forest in *Titus* is provided by Tamora. At the beginning of the play, she describes the forest initially depicted as a place full of "chequered shadow[s] on the ground", where she and Aaron can sit "Under their sweet shade." (II.3.15-16) and is described by her as a place which is populated by the birds that "chant melody" and the "green leaves" that "quiver with the cooling wind" and where the lovers' "pastimes" can be followed by "golden slumber" (II.2.10-29). However, this is only apparently a positive description of the forest in the play, whether we intend it in terms of desert place or in terms of woodland, or in terms of lively natural environment, populated either by human dwellers or by wild species.

The woods in the play acquire the dark meaning (Harrison 80) that originates from the liminality of the forests in medieval times. The woods are the place where "all is possible" (Saunders 205). For instance, in Middle English Romances *Sir Orfeo* (late 13th century) and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (14th century), the forest is seen as treacherous. *Sir Orfeo* retells the story of Orfeo and Heurodis. In this medieval romance, Orfeo, as king of the English city of Winchester, wanders in the forest alone, searching for his wife in the places where she had been when she was captured. After ten years, he returns to Winchester and after a series of proofs, his people recognise him, and he can finally take his wife back to the city. Despite the happy ending, the garden, and the tree, under which the abduction of Sir Orfeo takes place, together with the noon and the heat of the day, are "signals of particular danger" (Saunders 134). The orchard in the same garden exposes the "horror and violence of an otherworld", which is later in the romance associated with the woods (Saunders 135). In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight,* a Sir Gawain accepts to make a promise with the Green Knight. Green Knight claimed that anyone could have beaten him with an axe, on condition that he could have returned the stroke in a year and a day. After a series of adventures, Sir Gawain returns to Camelot,

where part of the romance is set, and he is finally welcomed by the Knights of the Round Table. What is remarkable in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, is that the forest is a place of "danger", where all the enemies appear, including "giants and wild men" (Saunders 151). Moreover, even the hunt in the forest echoes a treacherous world, "where menace and threat become sport" (Saunders 154):

> Þe wylde watz war of þe wyse with weppen in honde,
> Hef hyly þe here, so hetterly he fnast
> Þat fele ferde for þe freke, lest felle hym þe worre.
> Þe swyn settez hym out on þe segge euen,
> Þat þe burne and þe bor were boþe vpon hepez
> In þe wytest of þe water […].
> (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 1586-91).

The description of the hunt describes a "peculiarly violent nature" (Saunders 153). A similar description of the forest as a dark place, where one can lose himself, appears in *Titus* both in the characterisation of the forest and in Lavinia's story. While Lavinia's sub-plot will be described later (cf. 2.1.5.4), we continue here by explaining the presence of the forest in the play.

The forest in *Titus Andronicus* is the environment where pure villainy takes place. We agree with Deroux's reading, which defines the woods in *Titus* as "the locus for pure evil action, where deeds are concealed, and where Aaron may incite murder and madness to emerge as powerful victor" (98). The forest is the place where "never shines the sun" and "nothing breeds / Unless the nightly owl or fatal raven" (II.3.96-97). The woods are the place where Aaron elaborates his schemes, as they are far from the rumours of the court and provide the perfect setting for evil deeds to take place, as is described in Act I:

> AARON
> The forest walks are wide and spacious,
> And many unfrequented plots there are,
> Fitted by kind for rape and villainy. […]
>
> The Emperor's court is like the house of Fame,
> The palace full of tongues, of eyes, and ears;
> The woods are ruthless, dreadful, deaf, and dull.
> (I.1.614-628).

In this landscape of darkness, the wilderness of the forest is highlighted through the terms "wide" and "spacious", suggesting both a literal and a metaphorical meaning, as we explain below. Aaron describes the forest highlighting how its "unfrequented plots" allow for the human hunt of Lavinia. The woods are defined as "ruthless, dreadful, deaf, and dull" (I.1.628), alluding to the safe distance of this environment from the ears and eyes of those at the Roman court, which makes a forest a place where cruel and shocking deeds can take place. Moreover, the adjective "dull" suggests that the nature of the future "vengeance" acts (I.1.621) anticipated by Aaron will occur in the obscurity of the forest.

This idea of isolation stresses how the terrible deeds that happen here, concealed from human beings and from "heaven's eye" alike, are events of darkness (Scott 285). Here, neither the human eye nor the divine light can see and intervene. Rather, the monstrous acts associated with the forest make it the alternative place to the civilised space of social bonds and the "moral responsibility of consensual institutions" (Scott 285); that is, the forest serves as a refuge from the law, institutions, and society because it can conceal the most nefarious crimes. Thus, the forest is a threatening space, opposing the light to the darkness by being based on a "punitive system of control" (Scott 285) whence one cannot escape.

Titus in Act IV reiterates that "such a place" (IV.1.4) is "by nature made for murders and for rapes" (IV.1.58), thus the kind of place where Lavinia should not have been. The darkness of the place is associated either with the fact that it is a place where one might possibly lose themselves, or with an unhappy, hopeless, dark, and unpleasant situation. In other words, the forest is "wide and spacious" (I.1.614), a place "Fitted by kind for rape and villainy" (I.1.616). Moreover, using the words "hunt" and "hunted", Titus emphasises once more that the woods are, as it is the case in Ovid (cf. 2.1.2), the perfect place "By nature made for murders and for rapes" (IV.1.58):

> TITUS
> Lavinia, wert thou thus surprised, sweet girl,
> Ravished and wronged as Philomela was,
> Forced in the ruthless, vast, and gloomy woods?
> See, see! Ay, such a place there is where we did hunt
> O, had we never, never hunted there!
> Patterned by that the poet here describes,
> By nature made for murders and for rapes.
> (IV.1.51-58).

The woods are thus the "space for the play's action to retire into horror or fantasy: 'double', 'dreadful', 'desert', 'ruthless', 'shadowy', 'indistinguishable' and 'green', this natural expanse secludes lovers and rapists, murderers and fairies" (Scott 280). The forest in *Titus Andronicus* represents a dark space, where evil deeds take place, far from the society and the rumours which might circulate in it. As Scott argues, "the forest is never secure or stable; it is never essential or consistent but rather a map of the desiring or diseased mind" (288). It is the place where "all is possible" (Saunders 205), therefore where a hunting can transforms into a human hunting and Lavinia can be raped. This liminal landscape has been defined as a region "charted by the violence that is ingrained into the law of the forest" (Kowalcze-Pawlik 115). This powerful metaphor of the map associates this landscape with the female body – that becomes a map – providing the "transgressive ground" for the human hunt to take place. (Kowalcze-Pawlik 115). When Aaron finds the "path" (I.1.611), or the map that he intends to follow, he states that "a solemn hunting is in hand" (I.1.612). He alludes at transforming the animal hunt of the court into the human hunt of Lavinia.

2.1.5.3   The Mechanism of Revenge

It is significant that both Titus and Tamora, who we can assume to be white in the play, perform evil deeds. We start by providing evidence for Titus's and Tamora's white skin in the play and we proceed by illustrating the mechanism of revenge as a means of supporting our reversal: white characters who have black meanings. To demonstrate that Titus and Tamora are white skinned characters we start by providing evidence of their ethnicity. On the one hand, Tamora is a Goth, and she also affirms that she is "incorporate in Rome, / A Roman now adopted happily" (1.1.467-468). On the other hand, Titus is a Roman. Both are, thus, white skinned characters. Both perform dark actions. This juxtaposition, which resembles both the cultural, historical, biblical, and literary opposition present in the dark meaning of the forests and the contrast between the Goths and the Romans (cf. 2.1.5.1 and 2.1.5.2), is the primary cause for the mechanism of revenge involving the whole tragedy. This mechanism functions as an "endless chain of retaliations" (Woodbridge 27): the antagonists realise their schemes, and the revengers

respond with a series of vengeful acts which becomes the beginning of another process of revenge. In *Titus*, this mechanism starts with the first scene, as we will see, when the Romans enter the city of Rome with the prisoners, and Alarbus, one of the sons of Tamora, is killed for a vindictive sacrificial rite. The war between two peoples, the Romans and the Goths, ends and revenge starts permeating the play. In the paragraphs which follow, we start by describing the acts of revenge in the play and then we continue by analysing the characters who perform these deeds to provide evidence about the connection between white characters and evil.

As we saw above, the first act of revenge in the play begins when Titus returns to Rome after he has won the battle against the Goths and enters Rome with the captured queen of the Goths, Tamora, and her sons. As the religious duty imposes to give the proudest prisoner of the Goths (I.1.99) in favour of the twenty-five "valiant sons" (I.1.82) who died in the battle, Titus decides to sacrifice the eldest son of the queen Tamora, Alarbus, despite her asking to the "victorious" and "Gracious conqueror" (I.1.107) Titus for mercy.

> TITUS
> Patient yourself, madam, and pardon me.
> These are their brethren whom your Goths beheld
> Alive and dead, and for their brethren slain
> Religiously they ask a sacrifice.
> To this your son is marked, and die he must,
> T' appease their groaning shadows that are gone.
> (I.1.124-129).

Tamora's exclamation: "O cruel, irreligious piety!" (I.1.133) and her son Chiron's comment – "Was never Scythia so barbarous!" (I.1.134) – remain ignored.

From the sacrifice of Alarbus, the escalating cycle of revenge cannot be stopped. Tamora first takes the opportunity to gets her revenge by marrying the new emperor of Rome Saturninus instead of the designated Lavinia, who refuses to marry him. Saturninus gets his revenge against Lavinia's refusal by asking Tamora to be his wife, and Tamora gets her revenge upon Titus because now she is a citizen of Rome and the Empress of the Romans. Demetrius defines her mother's revenge opportunity as follows:

> DEMETRIUS
> The self-same gods that armed the queen of Troy

> With opportunity of sharp revenge
> Upon the Thracian tyrant in his tent
> May favor Tamora, the queen of Goths
> (When Goths were Goths and Tamora was queen)
> To quit the bloody wrongs upon her foes.
> (I.1.139-144).

Then, Tamora vows revenge against the whole house of the Andronici. She makes her vow – promising that she will massacre them all:

> TAMORA
> I'll find a day to massacre them all,
> And raze their faction and their family,
> The cruel father, and his traitorous sons,
> To whom I sued for my dear son's life,
> And make them know what 'tis to let a Queen
> Kneel in the streets and beg for grace in vain.
> (I.1.455-460).

These lines emphasise the moment in Tamora's mind when she decides to get her revenge against the "cruel father" and "his traitorous sons".

Tamora then develops her revenge by encouraging her two sons to let them take "the honey we desire" (II.2.131). She intends to make Lavinia be raped and to kill her beloved one Bassianus, to whom she is promised. Tamora reveals herself to be a "beastly creature" (II.2.182) and a "barbarous" (II.2.118) woman, as Lavinia calls her. Tamora's words and subsequent actions, together with the other terrible events in the play, exemplify the savagery which might confound all laws, undermining human relationships and destructing the foundations of traditional institutions in order "to villainy and vengeance consecrate" (I.1.621). Since Lavinia is characterised as Titus's daughter rather than the beloved one of Bassianus, her rape represents a direct assault not only on Lavinia but on the entire house of the Andronici. For this reason, this revenge act aims to punish both Titus's family and virtue, expressing thus the subversion of the family relationships and values in the Roman royal household. The source for this episode, as we saw (cf. 2.1.2) is Ovid's story on Philomela, which suggests that the violation of the family leads also to the violation of the order of human affairs. After the rape of Lavinia, the whole city of Rome turns into a "wilderness of tigers" (III.1.54), a lawless place where violence is the only means which substitutes the traditional order in Rome (Miola 88).

Then, the play's revenge plot continues as the two other sons of Titus are held responsible for the death of Bassianus and the rape of Lavinia. Despite their innocence, they are sentenced to death by the emperor (II.2.303). As it happens in Bandello (cf. 2.1.2), Aaron deceivingly asks for the hand of one of the surviving Andronici, for the two sons to return home. Titus cuts off his own hand, but only the heads of his decapitated sons will be returned to him, along with his cut hand. The sufferings that Tamora inflicts on the house of the Andronici and the evil deeds she plans with Aaron's support will lead to the final cruelty that Titus will inflict on her.

In *Titus Andronicus* both Aaron's and Tamora's "Otherness" are emphasised in relation to their skin colour. Tamora's whiteness is described as paleness, as Martius underlines: "So pale did shine the moon on Pyramus" (II.2.231). The "barbarians" are, thus both white and black. Within this context, both whiteness and blackness are "racially marked" and therefore it would be "misleading to simplify the play's racial landscape into black and white, with black as the 'other'" (Royster 433). Thus, though with different connotations, both Tamora and Aaron represent "Otherness" with respect to Romans. As a result, Tamora's revenge is arguably comparable with Titus's vengeful actions, as we will show later.

The revenge of the Andronici starts when Titus decides to have a cannibalistic banquet to trick Tamora and her husband. Here Titus performs the revenger, revealing himself as an extraordinary cook of unexpected culinary abilities. He invites the empress Tamora with her husband the emperor Saturninus to his house and organises a final cannibalistic banquet. He bakes the two sons of Tamora, Chiron and Demetrius, into a pie that becomes Tamora's and Saturninus's meal. During the banquet, after Titus has served the bloody meal to his companions, Titus kills Tamora, then he kills his daughter Lavinia in order to put an end to her sufferings, and when Saturninus tries to kill him, they both wound each other mortally. The final catastrophe is completed (cf. 2.1.3) and only Lucius remains alive.

The revenge of Titus closes the play in a circle where the acts of vengeance of the Goths in the first part of the play correspond to the vengeance of the Andronici in the second part of the pièce. This cycle follows the model of revenge tragedies, where the first deed of revenge is the beginning of a series of vengeful deeds, as we mentioned above (cf. 2.1.3). Within this framework, the characters become vengeful because each

reciprocal act of vengeance must be paid back until the final destruction of all the characters. However, a question that may follow is: is there a dramatic reason for the characters' final deaths? Why Titus should have committed a catastrophe after the banquet is served?

One might consider madness – a common element in revenge plays – as the cause for Titus's evil actions (cf. 2.1.3), according to a possible resemblance of Titus to Kyd's character Hieronimo. However, as both Maxwell and Baildon point out, Titus only seems to stand on the verge of madness, and, although he might owe some features to Kyd's Hieronimo (Maxwell xliii), both his supposed insanity and his alleged madness are feigned, since he is both "capable" of thought and "sane" (Baildon xxxv). Thus, Titus is a tragic hero, both worthy of honours and capable of terrible deeds.

Titus's development throughout the play is described by Coppélia Kahn as "the story of Titus's transformation from Roman hero to revenge hero. He accomplishes that by hacking and hewing his way through the tangled matrix of outrages and injures that Tamora spawns" (55), whereas in the second part of the play he becomes a bloody revenger.

In Act I he enters the scene as a loyal soldier, as the "great defender of this Capitol" (I.1.80) whose heroism is rooted in militarism and sacrifice for the Roman empire. His arrival in Rome is announced by the Captain who claims:

> CAPTAIN
> Romans, make way! The good Andronicus,
> Patron of virtue, Rome's best champion,
> Successful in the battles that he fights,
> With honor and with fortune is returned
> From where he circumscribèd with his sword
> And brought to yoke the enemies of Rome.
> (I.1.67-72).

He seems the perfect candidate for the imperial throne, as Marcus notices in his speech indicating "thee in election for the empire" (I.1.186), but he soon turns out to be inadequate for his ambiguous conception of virtue. As Kahn underlines, the deaths of both Alarbus and Mutius "are paralleled: both sons are sacrificed in the name of the fathers, according to a piety that seems not only cruel and irreligious but also a perversion of *virtus*" (49). Titus firstly takes his son Mutius as an enemy and decides to kill him, and

then, when Saturninus takes Tamora as his wife, he accepts that his previous prisoners of war become Roman citizens and members of the imperial family. This is emphasised by Tamora's words, which underline her status as a member of Roman society, as we mentioned above. The situation is explained by Slights, who points out that "The crucial distinctions between friends and enemies of the state, between the prerogatives of the ruler and the responsibilities of his subjects, between familial bonds and personal honour have been dissolved" (22). The same disintegration happens to Titus in relation to both his family and duties as a Roman citizen, as is explained below.

Later in the play, as we mentioned above, Titus transforms himself from a loyal Roman citizen into a violent revenger. The final brutal action of the tragedy transforms Titus from the "Gracious triumpher in the eyes of Rome!" (I.1.173), who fights for the good of the city, his country, and people, into a bloody revenger, who can accomplish treacherous deeds to pursue his vow of revenge. Although both Romans and Goths commit cruel acts, their motives for violence are different. In the first case, the conflict is moved by the professional and public sphere, while in the second case violence is moved by personal and domestic causes. On the one hand, the Romans aim at preserving the integrity of the imperial dynasty and the continuity of the Empire as a whole, on the other hand, Tamora chooses to revenge the sacrifice of her son Alarbus, instead of appealing to justice and the laws. Titus sacrifices Alarbus according to a Roman ritual tradition, where the Roman victims "Religiously […] ask a sacrifice." (I.1.125), Tamora, instead, promises revenge without accepting the Roman institutions. Therefore, drawing from what we said about Bacon's essay on revenge, we can agree with Bate who states that Titus performs his revenge very publicly, positioning himself in the Baconian category of the fortunate "public performance" which brings "political change" (Bate 26). Within this statement, we can consider Titus's revenge as the public revengers cited by him – Augustus, Severus, and Henry IV of France (Bacon 21) – do and believe them as good and successful rulers as Lucius will be in *Titus*. However, if we consider Bowers point of view, we must consider Titus's revenge as an atrocious and terrible deed (cf. 2.1.3). Perhaps, a possible halfway mediation would be possible. Titus's acts are atrocious, as are all the terrible deeds in the play, although the consequences of his acts might have a positive connotation: to try to restore order in society.

Despite his possible positive objective, Titus's actions are culinarily terrible. Transformed into the revenge hero, Titus, costumed as a cook, makes the bloody pie which, in Act V, he serves at the banquet.

> TITUS
> Come, come, be everyone officious
> To make this banquet, which I wish may prove
> More stern and bloody than the Centaurs' feast.
> So. Now bring them in, for I'll play the cook
> And see them ready against their mother comes.
> (V.2.201-205).

After the banquet, Titus informs Tamora that she has eaten "the flesh that she herself hath bred" (V.3.61) and as his final act of revenge he kills her. The bloody meal and the subsequent murders that will follow represent the two vengeful acts of Titus's revenge and emphasise all the atrocity which Titus can demonstrate.

This framework for reversals highlights that rather than considering the black skinned character as the only responsible for evil deeds, darkness depends on the opposition between the white Goths and the white Romans, as Washington notices: "critics of *Titus Andronicus* tend to dismiss the idea that the blacks in this play represent anything other than evil and death, due mainly to the new configuration of Andronici and Goth that heralds a new society at the end" (467). Thus, if Titus is perceived as the glorious Roman warrior at the beginning of the play, he evolves into a bloody revenger and renders himself capable of cruel and bloodthirsty acts driven by vengeance. However, Titus is not the only white character performing evil deeds in the play. As we mentioned at the beginning of this section, Tamora and the Goths are white characters too.

The language that Tamora uses is particularly evocative because it connects her acts of revenge to darkness:

> TAMORA
> There's not a hollow cave or lurking place,
> No vast obscurity or misty vale
> Where bloody murder or detested rape
> Can couch for fear but I will find them out,
> And in their ears tell them my dreadful name,
> Revenge, which makes the foul offender quake.
> (V.2.35-40).

The cave might be interpreted, as Kahn notices, as Tamora's stomach (70), referring either to Titus's pie which contains Tamora's own sons, or to the pie which is now in Tamora's own stomach, but it also alludes to the place where murderers and rapists act. As a matter of fact, the caves, the lurking places, obscurities, and misty vales recall the landscape of the forest, the place of darkness and revenge where Bassianus was found dead, Lavinia was raped and mutilated, and Titus's sons were trapped. Tamora's words, thus, highlight the connection between the "cave" and the "lurking place" with the darkness of the forest where the evildoers first perform their vengeful deeds.

Moreover, as is echoed by Kyd in *The Spanish Tragedy* (cf. 2.1.3), Shakespeare presents Tamora dressed "like a Fury" (Bate 21) when she goes to Titus's house, turning her into the personification of revenge. In addition to that, Shakespeare turns into Rape and Murder Tamora's companions. Revenge was initially represented as is in the medieval conception, the representation of one of the Vices. It was seen as the manifestation of both evil and weakness (Melchiori 30), aiming at raising "inevitable questions about the institutions of the law" (Bate 21). However, as we saw above (cf. 2.1.3), in Shakespeare's play, revenge is present when the order of the laws is revealed as inadequate, as Aaron asks himself in the play: "justice, or revenge?" (I.1.567), and a "kind of wild justice" is chosen (Bacon 19). As Bate explains, "the vehicle of Tamora's revenge against Titus for the death of Alarbus has become the vehicle of Titus's revenge against Tamora for the rape of Lavinia and the deaths of Bassianus, Quintus and Martius." (22).

The themes of darkness and ambiguity are thus strictly connected with the two white characters Tamora and Titus, who, despite their skin colour and their position within Roman society, reveal their dark soul: both reveal their ability to commit crimes, and both feel a strong desire for revenge. This supports the idea that blackness is mainly a moral or spiritual matter (cf. 1.1.3). Although blackness is visually seen in the black character Aaron, it rather refers to the characters' good or evil actions and reactions which are only apparently connected with the characters' skin colour.

2.1.5.4   Unspeakable Words

This section focuses on the contrast between voice and voicelessness and on how this antithesis relates to darkness. The opposition between voice and voicelessness, which this section develops, appears strictly connected with the theme of darkness. The silence to which Lavinia is reduced to connects her voicelessness with the dark deeds that cannot be expressed to others. Considering that one of the inspirational works for *Titus Andronicus* is Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the character of Lavinia and Shakespeare's source can be compared, although there are several differences. Leonard Barkan explains how Shakespeare appropriates Ovid: "what is horrible in Ovid's Tereus story Shakespeare makes twice as horrible in *Titus Andronicus*. Not one rapist but two, not one murdered child but five, not one or two mutilated organs but six, not a one-course meal but a two" (244).

We can agree with Kahn when she considers Lavinia's mutilations as an "afterthought, a corollary to the main crime" and a "surprise" to the audience (57). As Lucius notices, the absence of Lavinia's hands is one of the first signs that the Romans see at the sight of her: "Speak, gentle sister: who hath martyred thee?" (III.1.82). This phrase makes a clear reference to Lavinia's mutilated hands. We can also agree on the fact that the mutilated hands "distract Lavinia's uncle, father, brother, and nephew and keep them from realizing that she has been raped as well." (Kahn 57).

Thus, Lavinia's sub-plot and the crimes committed against her are a more violent version of Philomela's story. While Philomela can wave a tapestry to narrate what has happened to her, Lavinia cannot do the same because she has both her tongue and her hands mutilated. Moreover, Philomela's metamorphosis into a nightingale allows her song to be heard in the darkness, while Lavinia does not have the same possibility of consolation. As a matter of fact, language is denied to Lavinia, as she cannot express what has happened to her neither through her voice nor through her weaving. She can neither reveal the crime committed to her, nor have an alleviation of her sorrows through a metamorphosis. The silencing of Lavinia testifies to Titus's difficulty in interpreting her "martyred signs", which, according to him, are even more complicated to decipher than Philomela's (III.2.36).

Additionally, the voiceless Lavinia is contrasted with Aaron's speech (cf. 2.2) which even serves to support both Tamora's and her sons' vengeful actions. When Aaron incites Chiron and Demetrius to rape Lavinia in the woods, his words – "There speak and strike, brave boys, and take your turns; / There serve your lust, shadowed from heaven's eye, / And revel in Lavinia's treasury." (I.1.629-631) – evoke the "thesaurization that the rape is intended to undo" (Kahn 52). The evil deeds are supported by Aaron's voice, while Lavinia is reduced to complete silence.

The opposition between voice and voicelessness is another aspect which is strictly associated with darkness. The forest becomes the place where Lavinia is abandoned and deprived of the love of her beloved ones (Harrison 82). Even nature seemingly abandons Lavinia. Film director Julie Taymor provides a version of a mutilated Lavinia standing on a stump. Taymor well interprets through images what the theatre does by props. The scene well depicts Lavinia after her rape and mutilation in a semi-deserted nature where nobody seems to see her or be there. According to Escoda, Taymor aims at emphasising the "invisibility" of Lavinia (60) who in the end is abandoned, as we saw, by nature itself. Nature is portrayed as the lifeless place, where "The trees, though summer, yet forlorn and lean" (II.2.94) are covered with "moss and baleful mistletoe" (II.2.95). The only animal admitted species are the "nightly owl or fatal raven" (II.2.96), bringing ominous signs of threaten and death.

2.1.6 Conclusion

Having introduced the play, this section illustrates how several aspects of *Titus Andronicus* emphasise a connection with darkness – despite their indirect visual impact. For example, both the Romans' and the Goths' white skin arguably suggests their moral whiteness. The setting suggests a declining Rome, not only from a historiographical point of view, but also from a social and moral one. Not only does the play depict the Rome at the time of the barbarian invasion, but also Roman value and *virtus* are shown in a state of decline (Kahn 1-26). Titus himself embraces the decaying state of Roman values, as we saw in the previous section. The forest loses its supposed bucolic connotation to become the place where most of the brutality of the play is performed, and Lavinia is raped and mutilated. The mechanism of revenge highlights that not only black characters

perform evil deeds, but rather that blackness refers to morality and ethics. Finally, Lavinia's lack of voice and the silence she is reduced to connect her sub-plot with a state of abandonment and isolation from everyone, nature included. Darkness is thus elevated from a visual form expressed by the colour black to a darkness of the soul. This strictly connects this section with the following chapter, where Aaron will be analysed as the main source of all the evil in the play, although his capacity of human reactions will emerge.

2.2   Aaron

"That bloody mind I think they learned of me"

Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, V.1.101

2.2.1   Introduction

As the play progresses, Aaron becomes Tamora's lover and the father of their new-born son. As a creature of evil (cf. 1.1.3), Aaron manipulates and directs most of the events in the play thanks to his oratory and scheming abilities. He encourages Chiron and Demetrius to rape Lavinia, convinces Titus to cut one of his hands, and supports Tamora in getting her revenge against the Andronici. In this chapter, the black figure in the play is introduced first. Then, both Aaron's characterization and actions will be analysed to define the meaning of Aaron's blackness in relation to the Elizabethan perception of black characters and evil (cf. 1.1).

The most important source for the characterization of Aaron's blackness is the twenty-first of Bandello's *Novelle* (cf. 2.1.2). The influence of the novella is evident both in the characterisation of Aaron and, as we saw, in Aaron's request to Titus in Act III to cut off his hand (cf. 2.1.5.3). Nevertheless, some aspects of Bandello's work differ from Shakespeare's. For example, the Moor in Bandello does not accept the consequences of his actions, whereas Aaron accepts his own punishment in Act V – acknowledging both his paternity and his love for his baby. While Rinieri's Moor-slave decides to jump off the tower and kill himself before being captured, Aaron, in the attempt to save the life of the creature he most loves, faces the atrocious death which the Romans have decided for him.

Although Bandello's *Novelle* is a significant inspirational work for the characterization of Aaron (cf. 2.1.2), Shakespeare's black figure acquires a more complex role. In the next sections the meaning of Aaron's blackness is explored through his name, his characterization and actions, and his demonstration of humanity towards the child.

2.2.2　The Meaning of Aaron's Blackness

Although Aaron's blackness reflects the Renaissance association between the colour black and evil (cf. 1.1.3), a closer analysis of the text will reveal how the character demonstrates both malignity and humanity. According to Braxton, "Aaron is a black character whose color does not become significant until he commits a legal wrong" (227). However, as Vaughan notices, the of meaning of Aaron's blackness is intrinsic within Aaron's skin colour itself (48). Thus, the analysis on Aaron's characterisation and actions is functional to a better comprehension of Aaron's blackness.

2.2.2.1　Aaron's Name

The Shakespearian choice of the name "Aaron" for the Moor could help to shed light on whether the black character's name might have a connection with his malignity. To do this, we start by considering possible meanings of Aaron's name: first, its etymology, its association with historical figures and with botany. We start by explaining the biblical etymology of Aaron and then we move to the Arabic and botanical associations of the name.

The name is of Jewish origin. Aaron is Moses's brother in the book of Exodus. When Moses, in front of God, tells that his brother is a stutterer, God says, "I know that he can speak well […]'" (Exod. 4.14). Aaron becomes then notable for his eloquence, thus, "is appointed by God to be the spokesperson before Pharaoh and to demand the release of the children of Israel from bondage" (Vaughan 43). The figure of Aaron is also present in the Qur'an which text might have been known among learned people in Elizabethan England (Salem 43). Similarly, the Qur'an presents Aaron as a descendant of Abraham, one of Moses's brothers, who was a prophet and an eloquent speaker. The same eloquence is present in Shakespeare's Aaron, as he is well-known for his ability to make long and complex speeches and "express[es] delight in his ability to deceive and manipulate" (Vaughan 43). Thus, the eloquence that characterises Aaron in the Bible and the Qur'an seems to be a characteristic inherited by Shakespeare's character. Also, Aaron's eloquence is a predominant element in the play, as it will be explored later.

The name "Aaron" could also be associated with "Harun", the fifth Abbasid caliph who lived in the seventh-century Abbasid Caliphate. His original name is Harun Al Rashid, the caliph who appears in the well-known literary collection of Middle Eastern folk tales *Arabian Nights*, whose first translation from Arabic into French arrived in Europe at the beginning of the 18th century. However, the name of Harun the caliph is present even in several literary works of early modern time. As a matter of fact, Harun the caliph's name is mentioned both in Caxton's 1481 *Godfrey of Bulloigne*, where a Moor named Aaron is a Saracen, prince of Jerusalem, and in Thomas Newton's 1575 *Notable Historie of the Saracens*, where one Aaron, the high Caliph of Persia and Arabia, invades the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire with his army. Both the literary works that we mentioned were known to Elizabethan audiences, that is the reason why Elizabethans could know of this caliph Harun. Considering this second hypothesis we can arguably conclude that Shakespeare drew from Newton or Caxton. Both works present a noble character, while Shakespeare's Aaron is represented as a cruel slave. However, we can easily associate the similar name sound "Harun" which recalls the character's name sound "Aaron" in *Titus*. Thus, we can assume that because of the similarity of both name sounds, Shakespeare could have been possibly inspired by the name "Harun" whom he could have heard from the literary works circulating in England at the time.

One last way of reading the name would be based on the botanical analogy between Aaron's end in *Titus Andronicus* and *arum maculatum* or Aron, the name of a poisonous plant of the family of Araceae (Griffin 297). Drawing on the first published Quarto of the play (cf. 2.1.1) and on English herbalist John Gerald's *Herball, Generall Historie of Plantes* (1597), Lancashire provides evidence for a similarity between a plant and character Aaron. According to him, a first similarity comes from the association between the spelling of "Aron" in the first Quarto of the text (Q1) and the same spelling, which, according to Lancashire, was found in entries from 1587-1611 English dictionaries. These entries reported "Aron" as "the name of a very common English plant" (qtd. in Lancashire 18). A second similarity between Aaron and the name of a plant comes from Gerald's *Herball*. The plant is described in the *Herball* as belonging to the family of dragon plants, having black spots on it, and a black pistil. As is Herald's description according to Lancashire, the plant is poisonous for human lungs (qtd. in Lancashire 19). Moreover, as is common for a plant, it grows in the open ground. The same way, Aaron

is "fastened in the earth" (V.3.182) at the end of the play. Considering the spelling of character Aaron in Q1 and the possible poisonous characteristics of this plant, a similarity between the two is possible. Moreover, the plant suggests how Aaron is punished. Both seem to grow in the open ground. Because of what we explained, we can assume that Aaron's name choice may be inspired from the name of the plant that we have mentioned (see fig. 3).

Figure 3. Arum; *Giardini&Ambiente*; Gabriella Gallerani, 26 Jan. 2023, www.giardini.biz/piante/piante-spontanee/arum/.

The exploration on the choice of Aaron's name does not suggest a connection between his name and his characterization. However, as we saw above, the name "Aaron" is evocative of his oratory abilities and of his final tragic epilogue. We can continue by analysing his characterisation and connection with darkness.

2.2.2.2   Aaron's Characterisation

References to Aaron's blackness include both allusions to his supposed ethnicity as a Moor, and connections with his wicked deeds. It seems that a connection between Aaron's black skin and his villainy is possible. We start by considering Aaron's ethnicity and then proceed to analyse his actions and their meaning.

Aaron's ethnicity is presented in several studies as linked to African origins (Ndiaye 59). However, Aaron never refers to his ethnicity explicitly, but rather mentions his physical traits and his status as a slave. He tells that Tamora is also his lover. In the same first lines, Aaron, rejecting his own servitude – "away with slavish weeds and servile thoughts" (I.1.517) – suggests that he is a slave who is imprisoned by the Romans, as the Goths are. He also distinguishes himself both for his eloquence and for being an outsider:

> AARON
> And faster bound to Aaron's charming eyes
> Than is Prometheus tied to Caucasus.
> Away with slavish weeds and servile thoughts!
> I will be bright, and shine in pearl and gold
> To wait upon this new-made empress.
> To wait, said I? – to wanton with this queen, […].
> (I.1.515-520).

Aaron's self-description of his looks – "my fleece of woolly hair that now uncurls" (II.2.34) – and of those of his child, who will be referred to as a "thick-lipped slave" (IV.2.177) suggest that Aaron is of African ethnicity. Moreover, the word "slave" denotes the child's social status, assuming that this is Aaron's social condition as well.

Aaron's origins are inferable from the way other characters call him. Titus, Bassianus and Lavinia refer to Aaron as a "barbarous" or as a "Moor", while both Bassianus and Marcus call him "barbarous Moor" (II.2.78) to denote Aaron's status as an outsider and "irreligious Moor" (V.3.120), which refers to Aaron's not believing in the same gods as the Romans do. Although in Elizabethan England the terms "Moor" and "barbarous" referred to a generic form of alterity and the term "irreligious" is possibly a consequence of belonging to such form of alterity (cf. 1.1.2), when they describe Aaron, this terminology acquires a negative connotation.

Moreover, Bassianus calls Aaron a "swart Cimmerian" underlining both his slavery and his blackness. This word "blackness" is used in connection with the land of the Cimmerians, a land near the Black Sea[4], where the sun supposedly never shone – and – for this reason – was thought to be very dark (Bridgman 32) – to the point its own

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[4] For further illustration on the myth and land of the Cimmerians see Arrighetti, Graziano. "Cosmologia Mitica di Omero e Esiodo." *Studi Classici e Orientali*, vol. 15, Pisa, Pisa University Press, 1966, pp. 1-60; Bridgman, Tim. "Who were the Cimmerians?" *Hermathena*, no. 164, 1998, pp. 31-64.

people's skin was black as night. Bassianus's words are significant because this idea of obscurity highlights the connection between Aaron's blackness and his moral darkness. The fact that Bassianus explicitly refers to Aaron's black skin as "detested" and "abominable" shows how Bassianus sees the colour of Aaron's skin:

> BASSIANUS
> Believe me, queen, your swart Cimmerian
> Doth make your honour of his body's hue,
> Spotted, detested, and abominable.
> (II.2.72-74).

Therefore, we can assume that Aaron's ethnicity is African, perhaps Sub-Saharan.

Aaron's "Otherness" with respect to the Romans is visually remarkable. Compared with both the Goths and the Romans, Aaron distinguishes himself because he is represented as black. As the Peacham drawing disposition of the characters depicts, both Aaron's black skin and his position are in contrast with both the Romans and the Goths (cf. 2.1.1). Although he is a slave as are the Goths, Aaron is the outsider *par excellence*. As Ndiaye suggests, his physicality "condenses and makes more visible through blackface the difference of the white barbarians within the Roman community" (59).

Aaron associates his blackness with his evil plans and deeds. This association highlights his villainy according to the Elizabethan symbolic reading of the colour black. Aaron comments his plans when the revenge plot that he has schemed reaches one of its dramatic peaks, namely when Titus decides to cut off his hand. The conscious villainy in Aaron's offer is made explicit by Aaron himself:

> AARON
> […] O, how this villainy
> Doth fat me with the very thoughts of it.
> Let fools do good and fair men call for grace,
> Aaron will have his soul black like his face.
> (III.1.203-206).

In Deroux's words, "What Aaron finds in his search for identity is already dictated by color-concept and physiology: blackness may only mean sadness, madness, and violent, chaotic destruction" (97). According to Deroux, Aaron is thus "the literary representation

of ideas and anxieties regarding blackness" (100). In the play, Aaron's blackness summarises the stereotypical ideas of African bestiality, brutality, and cruelness circulating in Elizabethan England.

Aaron's own reference to his actions connects darkness with villainy:

> AARON
> Acts of black night, abominable deeds,
> Complots of mischief, treason, villainies,
> Ruthful to hear yet piteously performed; […].
> (V.1.64-67).

After listing his schemes and before saying that he regrets not having done "a thousand more" (V.1.124), Aaron describes himself as "a black dog" (V.1.122). The comparison with the black dog is both powerful and functional to our argumentation, as Foley well explains:

> The combination of 'blackness' with the negative connotations of 'dog', noun and verb, seems an eminently apt description of […] an ever-present companion, lurking in the shadows just out of sight, growling, vaguely menacing, always on the alert; sinister and unpredictable, capable of overwhelming you at any moment. (1)

Although they were believed to be among the possible companions of devils and witches, dogs could also be associated with positive connotations, such as companionship, faithfulness, bravery, and intelligence (Foley 4). During medieval and early modern England, familiars of witches often appeared under the form of dog. As is the case with an Elizabeth Francis, living in a 1566 Chelmsford, a black dog was the result of her cat's transformation during some haunted events (Martin 35). In the same year and place, a Joan Waterhouse lived, who is said to have called upon Satan, once in her mother's house. This Satan appeared under the form of a black dog (Martin 76). In 1612, an Old Demdike – known for having a reputation for sorcery – said to have seen the Devil under the appearance of a boy with a brown coat. This boy is said to have transformed himself into a brown dog (Martin 79). However, during the early modern period dogs were also associated with fear, melancholy, and shamelessness (Foley 4). For example, scholar Robert Burton, in his treatise *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), tells many stories of dogs that died for grief or melancholy (qtd. in Foley 5). One of them tells of a

black dog with flaming eyes that is thought to have entered Cardinal Crescent room after the Council of Trento (1552). It made the Cardinal fall into melancholy and death (qtd. in Foley 5). As a result, black dogs were seen as "harbinger[s] of doom" rather than companions (Foley 5). Whether seen as personifications of the devil, or as precursors of grief and death, Shakespeare's use of this simile "black dog" (V.1.122) associates Aaron's black skin with the depravity of his actions, highlighting his inability to blush.

Blushing cannot be visually seen on blackface. Aaron himself defines his blackface as a "Fie, treacherous hue, that will betray with blushing" (IV.2.119). In Act V Scene 1 a Goth asks Aaron: "What, canst thou say all this and never blush?" (V.1.121). Significantly, as we explained above, Aaron responds "Ay, like a black dog, as the saying is" (V.1.122), alluding at the proverbial phrase that compares blushing with black dogs (Bate 291). The association with Aaron's skin colour, his inability to blush and the actions that he performs characterizes him as a "detestable villain" (V.1.94), as Lucius calls him.

Among Aaron's main features there is his ability to manipulate other characters and situations. As Vaughan notices, Aaron's speeches distinguish the character for his oratorical abilities and "promise a particular course of action and highlight his evil plans" (44). The best example of his ability to misrepresent reality is in Act II Scene 2, when he tells the episode of the bag of gold – this may seem, for those who do not know Aaron's plans – a large amount of a fortune to hide under a tree in the woods, but it will then be revealed to be the stratagem that Aaron needs to fulfil his plan.

> AARON
> He that had wit would think that I had none,
> To bury so much gold under a tree
> And never after to inherit it.
> Let him that thinks of me so abjectly
> Know that this gold must coin a stratagem
> Which, cunningly effected, will beget
> A very excellent piece of villainy.
> (II.2.1-7).

Having illustrated the stratagem, he uses his oratory abilities to pursue his desire of malignity. Aaron explains his plans from the beginning and anticipates actions and events of the play. Moreover, he makes Tamora believe in what he says to her, supporting her in vengeance. Aaron finds the "stratagem" (II.2.5) to deceive both the emperor and the

Andronici. An instance of Aaron's persuasive ability is when he writes a letter to the emperor Saturninus. With this letter he intends to convince the emperor of the guiltiness of Titus's sons in Lavinia and Bassianus's sub-plot:

> AARON
> Now question me no more: we are espied.
> Here comes a parcel of our hopeful booty,
> Which dreads not yet their lives' destruction.
> (II.2.48-50).

Thanks to the letter which refers to the woods and to the bag of gold, Aaron brings Saturninus in the same place in the forest that he previously pictured for the crime. Thus, Saturninus, finds both Quintus and Martius where the murder had been committed and the proof that Aaron had left under the tree is found. Quintus and Martius arrive to the cave where Chiron and Demetrius left Bassianus's dead body. So – Saturninus – arguably surprisingly – finds Quintus and Martius in the same place in the forest where the bag of gold is. He can then accuse Titus's sons of committing the murder and punishing them by means of execution. Aaron's plan is fulfilled.

Further evidence of Aaron's wit is when he fosters Roman Senators' insistence of the execution of both Quintus and Martius, despite Titus's demand for the safety of his sons. Moreover, the delivery of a false message to the Andronici is remarkable to emphasise Aaron's oratory abilities. He succeeds in making Titus believe that he could have his beloved ones back. However, Aaron's words explain that Titus would have obtained only the heads of his sons (III.1.203-204). When he delivers both the heads and the hand to the Andronici, Aaron reveals to have organised – together with Tamora – the whole revenge plot.

In addition to that, Aaron's schemes also anticipate future events. From the very beginning of his plan, alluding to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Aaron anticipates what will be the "day of doom", delineating both Bassianus's and Lavinia's destiny and what he has in mind for them:

> AARON
> This is the day of doom for Bassianus,
> His Philomel must lose her tongue today,
> Thy sons make pillage of her chastity
> And wash their hands in Bassianus' blood.

(II.2.42-45).

Although Aaron anticipates his plans from the beginning, his actions will become known to other characters only in Act V when he decides to tell Lucius about his plans and actions:

> AARON
> Indeed, I was their tutor to instruct them.
> That codding spirit had they from their mother,
> As sure a card as ever won the set.
> That bloody mind I think they learned of me,
> As true a dog as ever fought at head.
> (V.1.98-102).

As Aaron's words remain ambiguous to other characters throughout the first four acts, neither Titus nor the Andronici understand Aaron's scheming plans. Only in Act V – after Aaron's confession – Marcus labels him as the "Chief architect and plotter of these woes" (V.3.121). Thus, Aaron's scheming plans permit the Goths to achieve their vengeful purposes, functioning as the criminal pedagogue for Tamora, Chiron, and Demetrius – guiding and instructing them.

Aaron's self-knowledge reveals how he ironically depicts black skin as the perfect "hue" to accomplish his evil plans. Thus, Aaron seems to reject early modern negative connotations of his black skin, rather interpreting blackness as an advantage. To him, black skin serves as an "impenetrable mask" to hide his evil thoughts and emotions (White 351):

> AARON
> You white-limed walls, ye alehouse painted signs!
> Coal-black is better than another hue
> In that it scorns to bear another hue;
> For all the water in the ocean
> Can never turn the swan's black legs to white,
> […].
> (IV.2.100-104).

In Elizabethan times, both evil and the devil are represented as black, thus, one might think that Aaron's dark pigmentation disposes him to evil. As Smith points out, therefore, "by backward association we may suppose a black man a devil" (12). Aaron compares himself with the devil, stating that:

> AARON
> If there be devils, would I were a devil,
> To live and burn in everlasting fire,
> So I might have your company in hell […].
> (V.1.147-150).

Throughout the final scenes of the play Aaron is referred to many times as the devil also by other characters. After knowing the evil deeds Aaron performed, Lucius calls him "the incarnate devil" (V.1.40) and refers to him as "this accursèd devil" (V.3.5). Titus, while narrating to Tamora her vengeful actions, emphasises Aaron's role in the plot, referring to him both as the "Moor" and as the "devil":

> TITUS
> Could not all hell afford you such a devil?
> For well I wot the empress never wags
> But in her company there is a Moor,
> And would you represent our queen aright
> It were convenient you had such a devil.
> (V.2.86-90).

The fact that Aaron is referred to as the devil both by himself and by other characters underlines Aaron's irreligiosity and anticipates that for this reason Aaron's punishment provides a motivation for his negation to have a human burial rite, which would have seemed a "cruel parody" of proper Roman rites (Werth 182).

Other references to Aaron's darkness in the play allude to the intertwined connection between the black colour and evil. Lavinia comments Aaron's blackness, highlighting the adulterous relationship that he has with Tamora: "And let her joy her raven-coloured love." (II.2.83), while Titus names Aaron a "coal-black Moor" (III.2.79) with reference to the black fly (cf. 2.1.4). In the same scene, Marcus kills the "black ill-favoured fly" (III.2.67), comparing Aaron's blackness to the blackness of the fly.

Aaron himself refers to the killing of a fly, defining the number of evil deeds he made: "I have done a thousand dreadful things / As willingly as one would kill a fly" (V.1.141-142). As Bate notices, the killing of a fly, in Act V Scene 1, "is flipped around" so that Aaron "becomes the fly" (116). Aaron's mention in Act V Scene 1 "gives Titus an occasion to express his vindictiveness against Aaron, whereas elsewhere he always identifies Tamora as his chief antagonist" (118). As a matter of fact, Titus does not perceive Aaron as a villain until Aaron reveals his actions. An example is in Act III Scene

1: Titus trusts Aaron when he tells him to cut one of his own hands off. However, in Act V, Aaron is perceived both by himself and by others as a villain.

The episode of the birth of the child is remarkable here, to complete Aaron's characterization. The passage of the illegitimate child of Aaron and Tamora presents a possible human side to Aaron. To prevent the emperor Saturninus from discovering the adulterous relationship, Aaron kills the nurse, the only other person who knows that the child was his and Tamora's. With this criminal act, Aaron defends both Tamora and their child. Aaron's criminal act assumes a slightly different connotation compared with the other fourteen onstage murders performed in the play. This is the first and only time that Aaron commits a murder himself.

Moreover, while Aaron guided the actions of other characters to commit acts of violence and revenge in his own interest, this crime, no more motivated by mere villainy or revenge, reveals Aaron's desire to defend his beloved creatures. Aaron's words reveal that the survival of the child is important:

> AARON
> My mistress is my mistress, this myself,
> The vigour and the picture of my youth.
> This before all the world do I prefer,
> This maugre all the world will I keep safe,
> Or some of you shall smoke for it in Rome.
> (IV.2.109-113).

Significantly, the child's survival is more important than Aaron's love for Tamora and even more important than Aaron himself, as we will show. The baby represents the future and a possible future generation. For this reason, Aaron not only manages to protect his child until the cycle of revenge ends. When Aaron is condemned, he also asks Lucius, the only survival of Titus's sons, to save and protect his child. Aaron promises to confess Lucius the "Acts of black night, abominable deeds, / Complots of mischief, treason, villainies […]" (V.1.64-65) that he made in order to obtain his child's survival: "Unless thou swear to me my child shall live." (V.1.68). Aaron's final act will cause him an atrocious punishment, although it reveals a germ of humanity in Aaron's characterisation.

The interpretation of Ira Aldridge's Aaron (1849) staged for the first time a black man. Performing the centrality of blackness itself, rather than exalting the villainy of the

character, Ira Aldridge nobilitated Aaron to a higher status, bringing the character closer to a "men of royal siege from Senegal" (Bate 54). Moreover, along with the elevation of Aaron, Ira Aldridge created a character that "would not offend Victorian sensibilities" (Bate 54). The result of this combination is well summarised by *The Era* which in 1857 noticed that:

> Aaron is elevated into a noble and lofty character. Tamora, the Queen of Scythia, is a chaste though decidedly strong-minded female, and her connection with the Moor appears to be of a legitimate description…Mr Aldridge's conception of the part of Aaron is excellent – gentle and impassioned by turns; now, burning with jealousy as he doubts the honour of the Queen; anon, fierce with rage as he reflects upon the wrongs which have been done him – the murder of Alarbus and the abduction of his son; and then all tenderness and emotion in the gentle passages with his infant. (Qtd. in Marshall and Stock 172)

Although the character of Aaron as it is depicted in *The Era* may differ from the Aaron which was imagined by Shakespeare, Ira Aldridge potentially conveyed visually a character which combines the stereotypes associated to a black skin and the character's love towards his own child (see fig. 4).

Figure 4. Ira Aldridge. *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. J. O. Halliwell, London and New York, 1851-1853.

This is the reason why critics highlight a possible humanised side in the characterisation of Aaron. According to Bate, Aaron has gone through a "transformation" from a "devilish villain" to a "protective father" and points out that this represents a "great surprise" in the play (161), as Aaron calls him, the baby is a "joyful issue" (IV.2.67). Deroux describes Aaron's human side as a violation of early modern "color-coded characterization" (100). She continues by interpreting this possible change in Aaron characterization, explaining that Aaron's germ of humanity "may suggest a subconscious recognition that notions of blackness are mere constructs" (Deroux 101). Shakespeare seems to humanise Aaron through the "softening influence of helpless childhood on rough and even evil natures" (Baildon xlv). However, speaking about love, the same author stresses the nature of Aaron's love for his offspring, identifying with "his pure malignity, and avowed love of evil for its own sake, is at least mitigated by self-interest" (xliii) and

underlining that "his tenderness to his child […] is in the first place intensely selfish" (xliii), alluding thus to an instinctive and animal love towards his own child, rather than considering it a personal and pure love.

As a matter of fact, Aaron and Tamora's child is born "coal-black" (V.1.32). Aaron and Tamora's child's black skin demonstrates that "blackness predominates over her whiteness, marking his paternity on the child's skin" (Vaughan 46). This colour, black as coal, recalls Aaron's black skin rather than a mulatto skin colour or another shade between white – as Tamora – and black – as Aaron. It seems that the child's skin colour is similar only to Aaron's one. When the nurse presents Aaron his son, she remarks that despite Tamora's white skin, the child is black as his father:

> NURSE
> A joyless, dismal, black, and sorrowful issue.
> Here is the babe, as loathsome as a toad
> Amongst the fair-faced breeders of our clime.
> The empress sends it thee, thy stamp, thy seal,
> And bids thee christen it with thy dagger's point.
> (IV.2.68-72).

Because of his black skin, the child is referred to as the devil by the nurse. Aaron responds highlighting that the child's birth transformed the mother from Roman empress into "the devil's dam" (IV.2.67). Thus, the child is not created with the "stamp" (IV.2.71) of the mother, rather, as he assumes the father's features, he is the image of the devil, like his father. As Vaughan notices "The black pigmentation […] indelibly marks his baby as his own flesh and blood" (47). Thus, Aaron's baby cannot be brought up in Saturninus's court because Saturninus and Tamora could not have had a "coal-black calf" (V.1.32).

Shakespeare's play is not explicit about the nourishment of Aaron's baby. Possibly, after Aaron's death, the child's survival depends on the integrity of the Roman society represented by Lucius (Smith 328). Lucius promises to save, nourish, and educate Aaron's child: "Tell on thy mind; I say thy child shall live." (V.1.69). However, Smith underlines that "his tawny presence further undermines the play's restitution of order and illustrates the Roman state inability to define it" because Aaron's child represents the reiteration of the opposition between the Romans and the barbarians[5] in the initial phases

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[5] The term "barbarian" here indicates a generic alterity (cf. 1.1.2).

of the play (328). By extension, this situation may suggest a metaphorical reference to Elizabethan society and the issue of miscegenation (cf. 1.1.1).

Aaron is punished at the end of the play, thanks to Lucius's return to Rome and Aaron's final admission of his crimes, and his punishment is strictly intertwined with his behaviour. Aaron's belief in "no god" (V.1.71), his behaviour "like bloody villains" (IV.2.17), the adulterous relationship with Tamora: these are all elements that deny him the possibility of a proper burial rite. In front of Lucius, Aaron, in order to save his child's life, confesses the evil actions he previously planned and the deeds he committed, underlining that "nothing grieves me heartily indeed" (V.1.143) and that he would not repent for having caused evil to the house of the Andronici.

After hearing the atrocities Aaron schemed and committed, Lucius decides that not only Aaron did not merit a burial rite, but also that the prefixed death through hanging would not have been appropriate. Thus, he orders to "Bring down the devil, for he must not die / So sweet a death as hanging presently." (V.1.145-146). Thus, Lucius decides for a different kind of death. The death of the "inhuman dog, unhallowed slave!" (V.3.14) is an atrocious one and consists in being planted in the earth, losing the body mobility. The parts of the human body which are left visible are the eyes, ears, and tongue. Significantly, these senses allude to both Aaron's physical description of his charming eyes, and his ability to hear and interpret the action of the other to plan his evil schemes. This punishment leaves the speaking tongue alive, underlining Aaron's ability, as he himself points out, "to torment you with my bitter tongue." (V.1.150). Moreover, according to Werth, Aaron's condition planted in the earth highlights his irreligious status which can be associated to a loss of humanization (182). Aaron himself doubts about the existence of devils – or gods – stating that "If there be devils, would I were a devil" (V.1.147). Lucius confirms the assumption when he asks Aaron: "Who should I swear by? Thou believest no god" (V.1.71). Aaron responds: "What if I do not? – as indeed I do not –" (V.1.73). Aaron, as we said, is an outsider, an "incarnate devil" (V.1.40). This is the reason why Aaron aligns himself with irreligiousness. He does not repent of all the "heinous deeds" (V.1.123) that he did. Rather, he regrets that he "had not done a thousand more" (V.1.124). Therefore, a proper human burial rite is not worth for him. For this reason, his planted body, which is left "breast-deep in earth" (V.3.178), can be associated with a loss of humanisation.

Losing both his mobility and rights (Werth 182), Aaron encounters an atrocious death, which, by meaning of both analogy and antithesis, summarises and brings together all the aspects concerning Aaron's characterisation throughout the play. On the one hand, he is "fastened in the earth" (V.3.182), as a plant. Being planted, Aaron recalls the possible association – explained by Lancashire – between a plant, whose name Aron sounds like Aaron, and the character Aaron. On the other hand, his tongue, which needs to be stopped to not let him to speak (V.1.151), is left free to speak. Aaron's death recalls his ability of language throughout the play.

2.2.3   Conclusion

Aaron is shown as the stereotypical black villain, whose skin colour highlights not only his social status as the outsider, but also the fact that it reflects the meaning of the colour black in early modern England (cf. 1.1.3). As a result, possibly he is associated with the representation of the devil himself. At the same time, his display of humanity with his own child suggests that his character can show a feeling of humanity. However, as it is analysed in this section, Aaron's schemes and dark actions define the character's black soul. In Act III Scene 1 Aaron claims that he has his soul black as is his face (III.1.206). According to this statement, we can conclude that Aaron's black skin is significant. It reflects the meaning of early modern colour binarism (cf. 1.1.3), according to which Aaron's skin must be represented as black.

3   Blackness in *Othello*

3.1   Othello

> "I think this play is racist, and I think it is not"[6]
>
> Virginia Mason Vaughan

3.1.1   Introduction: First Performances and Text

This introduction will start with an overview on the year in which *Othello* was first performed. The first performances of *Othello* took place at King James's court. In 1603 Shakespeare's acting company passed under the patronage of King James I, who supposedly personally invited Shakespeare's company to court to perform *Othello* (Melchiori 474). Moreover, as Wilson and Walker report, *Othello* was presented both at Whitehall and at Hampton Court, as an annual account of the Office of Revels records. A play entitled *The Moor of Venis* was performed in the "Banketinge house att Whit Hall" on the 1st of November 1604 by the King's company (Wilson and Walker xiv). However, *Othello* was seemingly performed in the playhouses as well, since the title page of the published text of 1622 reads "THE Tragoedy of Othello, *The Moore of Venice. As it hath beene diuerse times acted at the Globe, and at the Black-Friers, by his Maiesties Seruants. Written by* William Shakespeare […]" (Honigmann 357). The title page says that the tragedy was performed "at the Globe" and "at the Black-Friers" several times by Shakespeare's acting company.

However, although the first performances took place between 1603 and 1604 (Melchiori 475), *Othello* remained unpublished until 1622, when the first printed version of the text (Q1) appeared, as we said, with the title "THE Tragoedy of Othello. *The Moore of Venice* […]. *LONDON,* Printed by *N.O.* for *Thomas Walkley,* and are to be sold at his shop, at the Eagle and Child, in Brittans Bursse. 1622." (Honigmann 357). In 1623

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[6] Cited in Vaughan, Virginia Mason. *Othello: A Contextual History,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Othello was included in the First Folio edition (F), which presents several different formal aspects from the previous text (Q1). In 1630, editors have conflated the Q1 and the F1 texts, publishing another version of *Othello*'s text (Q2) which presented the same title as Q1, although it was said to have been printed by publisher Richard Hawkins (Melchiori 475). In the following years, other versions of *Othello* were published which eliminated several blasphemous phrases and add the passages which were present in Q2 (Melchiori 475). Another text (Q3) was published in 1655 and it was printed by publisher William Leak. In 1681 one players' Quarto appeared, which was reprinted in 1687 and 1695, while other reprinted versions of the Folio were published both in 1632, 1663, and 1685.

Thus, although performances of *Othello* were registered both at court and at public theatres, starting from the years 1603 and 1604, the text publication appeared several years later.

3.1.2   Sources

In order to better understand the structure and the themes of *Othello*, an overview on the sources of the tragedy may be useful. Scholars agree that the main source for *Othello* is Italian professor and dramatist Giovanni Battista Giraldi's novella. *The Hecatommithi*, published in 1565, is a collection of one hundred novellas which relate to several topics concerning love. The source for *Othello* is supposed to be the seventh tale of the third decade of Cinthio's novellas and it is the one which deals with infidelity. In this tale, Cinthio's narrative presents the story of a valorous Moor, who falls in love with the beautiful Desdemona. After their marriage, the Moor is sent to Cyprus as he is the commander of the Venetian forces. In Cyprus, Othello's Corporal falls in love with Desdemona and the Moor convinces himself of the infidelity of his wife. The proof of the unfaithful relationship between Desdemona and the Corporal will be the handkerchief that the Ensign steals from Desdemona and plants in the Corporal's house. The Iago-character and the Moor plot together in order to kill Desdemona by beating her with a stocking full of sand, then the Iago-figure accuses the Moor of the murder, and the Moor is consequently arrested, tortured, and exiled. Finally, Desdemona's relatives kill the Moor themselves.

Cinthio's novella can be considered as the major source for *Othello*, although Shakespeare modifies both the characterisation of Cinthio's protagonists and the play's setting in Venice and Cyprus (Melchiori 479). Firstly, Shakespeare's effort renders Othello a noble Moor and a valiant officer; also, in *Othello*, Iago and Othello do not kill Desdemona together and Iago is characterised as a devil-like figure (Wilson and Walker xxvii). Furthermore, other differences include Shakespeare's adding of the characters of both Desdemona's father, Brabantio, and Roderigo, and the explicit references to the war between the Muslim Turks and the Christian Venetians.

Several other sources were used by Shakespeare to define both the botanical landscape of the isle of Cyprus and Othello's African background. Shakespeare seemingly used John Pory's translation of Leo Africanus *A Geographical Historie of Africa* (1600) in order to better define the Moor's place of origin, while Philemon Holland's translation of Pliny the Elder's *The Historie of the Natural World* (1601) provided Shakespeare a wide range of notions on botany, zoology and astronomy. Moreover, the political concerns of the city of Venice are described in a rather realistic way thanks to Shakespeare's likely use of books such as Gaspar Contarini's *De Magistratibus et Republica Venetorum* (1543) and *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice* (1599), which described the social and political asset of Venice at the time. Finally, Othello's narrations of travels and fantasy narratives are inspired by John Mandevilles' 1371 *The Book of Marvels and Travels* (Thompson 15-17). Thus, Shakespeare's sources for *Othello* include narrative, geographical, and historical texts.

3.1.3 Genres

Although *Othello* is categorized as a tragedy in the 1623 Folio, a closer analysis of the text highlights that in *Othello* converge different genres. The first is that of the morality plays, a medieval theatrical centred on the conflict between the personifications of human virtues and vices. The form of the morality play was one of the precursors of early modern English theatre; performances usually took place in towns and villages with the main aim of morally educating people. Perhaps the most famous example is *Mankind*, whose protagonist, the farmer Mankind, is caught between Mercy, a preacher and spiritual guidance, and Mischief with his allies Newguise, Nowadays and Nought and Titivillus

leading him astray and making him do pranks. Mankind falls in temptation and is finally saved by Mercy (Hackett 32). The same way, Othello falls in Iago's web in a way that recalls the figure of Mankind, while Iago resembles the personification of Vice or the devil himself.

The second subgenre present in the play is the comic one. In other words, Shakespeare places several "comedic motifs into Othello's web" (Thompson 10). For example, the fact that Brabantio is concerned with the results of cunning produces a comic effect based on the meanings of "cunning" – "a word which implies both run-of-the-mill trickery and devilish witchcraft on a daughter's obedience" (Thompson 10). In Act I Scene 3 Brabantio asks Desdemona: "Do you perceive, in all this noble company, / Where most you owe obedience?" (I.3.179-180). As it happens at the beginning of *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* a father complains about his daughter's unwillingness to marry the man who was ideally predestined to her. Plotlines like these were the "familiar structures" which produced a comic effect (Thompson 11). Although this comic element does not suggest that *Othello* is less tragic than it is, this choice emphasises Shakespeare's skills to transform some familiar structures – as are the "generic comic expectations" – subverting the audience's expectations on the performance (Thompson 11). Shakespeare's aim seems to interrogate the audiences about "how difficult it is to integrate disparate people, personal narratives, culture and cultural narratives" (Thompson 12).

A third subgenre relates to romance narrative, especially the one deriving from the medieval tradition of chivalric romance, where the inclusion of adventures and tales from far flown places highlighted demonstrations of love. The same thing happens in *Othello*, where the "traivalous histor[ies]" (I.3.140) that Desdemona will "Devour up" (I.3.151) with "greedy ear" (I.3.150) serve to strengthen the love between Othello and Desdemona (Thompson 11).

Finally, *Othello* is tragic in structure, tone, and content (Thompson 12). The tragic concerns both the political and the domestic spheres. The political tragedy involves both the "political anxiety" about the Turks, who are invading the military base in Cyprus, and the senators of Venice, who ignore Brabantio's complaints about the need of involving a Moor in order to negotiate the battle against the Turks. On the other hand, the domestic tragedy involves the personal sphere of Othello and Desdemona, who marry secretly for

true love, which love transforms into a tragedy and Othello is the "duped victim […] only to become the villain of one" (Thompson 12).

3.1.4 Setting

Shakespeare's references to the setting of the play suggest that *Othello* moves between two geographical places: Venice and Cyprus. Northern Africa is mentioned in the play as the supposed place where Othello comes from, that is, an unprecise place possibly situated between the Barbarians and the African coast on the Mediterranean Sea (cf. 1.1.2). Venice is the setting for the entire first act of the play. It represents a cosmopolitan city, where there is room both for intercultural and interreligious dialogues. Moreover, Venice was admired by early modern English society for several aspects, including its international trades, its sophisticated political system, and the ideals of liberalisation of hedonism and sexuality (particularly admired by the early modern English eye). The second place is Cyprus, the island in the Mediterranean Sea, where the last four acts of the play take place. Representing the connection between the West and the Eastern Mediterranean religions and cultures, Cyprus was thought to be Venus' birthplace. In the play, Cyprus is the setting for the significant battle between the Turks, who will be destroyed by the storm, and the Venetians, who are the defenders of Christian religion and values.

The source for this religious and commercial war between the Venetians and the Turks is probably King James's treatise *Lepanto*, which he wrote several years after the Battle of Lepanto took place. King James, who was interested in history and politics, narrated about the 7th of October 1571 naval engagement between the allied Christian forces of the Holy League and the Ottoman Turks, which took place during the Ottoman campaign to acquire the Venetian Island of Cyprus. This battle historically marked the first significant victory for the Christian naval forces over the Ottoman fleet. The opposition between Christians and Turks is further summarised in Shakespeare in the characterisation of Othello and Iago, although the category of the Christian or Venetian and the category of the Turk or Moor are subverted. Thus, in *Othello*, Shakespeare reverses a cultural stereotype familiar to early modern audiences.

This geographical movement suggests a sort of dynamism which is strictly connected with the changings in the way the characters relate to each other both in Venice and in Cyprus.

3.1.5 Structure and Themes

The play is built on the model of the five-act tragedy. The two intermingled themes of public and private affairs appear intertwined with themes of race, gender, love, and politics. While the private and the public spheres of life are intermingled as the play develops, the theme of race regards Othello's ethnicity, and the theme of gender can be analysed through Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca and through references to female figures. Both the political and the domestic situations are presented at the opening of the first act.

As previously mentioned, this act is set in Venice, where the institutional order of the city characterises also the role of the figures in the play. Brabantio is the noble father of Desdemona and a Venetian Senator. Desdemona is the wife to Othello and Brabantio's daughter. Othello is the Moor in charge of the Venetian forces in the battle against the Turks. Cassio is the lieutenant figure who is entrusted by Othello with the assignment to follow him in the military campaign to Cyprus and Emilia is Iago's wife. Iago, the antagonist of the play, complains about Othello's choice to be followed by Cassio instead of him and decides to go to Cyprus as well. Roderigo is Desdemona's designated husband by Brabantio and her family, and a military person.

In the second act, the scene moves to Cyprus. In Cyprus the order ensured by the Venetian government is different than the political order of Venice itself. Here, Iago starts to plan his revenge against both Cassio and Othello, by making Cassio lose his position as lieutenant and by convincing Othello that Desdemona has feelings for Cassio. Iago's plans continue in the third act, where he plans to prove Desdemona and Cassio's supposed relationship. He steals Desdemona's handkerchief, which was previously given to her by Othello. In act four, Othello has an epileptic crisis. From this point onwards his broken language becomes a metaphor for the disintegration of both his order and his person. His language reflects his physical loss of control due to epilepsy – eventually he is a Moor. Finally, in act five, though Emilia tries to convince Othello that Desdemona is not guilty,

Othello is so angry that he decides to kill his wife, although he does not want to, and then he kills himself, after others reveal the truth to him.

As far as gender is concerned, the world of *Othello* is a world of men, where the three women present in the play, Emilia, Desdemona, and Bianca are alone. Although they are discredited and referred to as horses or prostitutes, both Desdemona and Emilia prove to be courageous women. Desdemona decides to marry the man she loves, instead of obeying her father Brabantio and marrying Roderigo, while Emilia shows her courage in the final act of the play by speaking against her husband's plotting against both Cassio and Othello.

Race involves the character of Othello, permeating the play with the opposition between the protagonist, Othello, and the antagonist, Iago. Yet, Shakespeare decides to subvert the familiar association between the meaning of the black and white colours presenting a possible good black character and a possible evil white character. Both Othello's ethnicity and role in the play are ambiguous. Othello seems to defy stereotypes.

3.1.6   Othello

3.1.6.1 Othello's Origins

Othello's characterisation is based on several ambiguities which do not allow to determine neither his ethnicity, nor his birthplace. However, this ambiguity serves to Othello's antagonist, Iago, to construct his web and bring the Moor to his final tragedy. Moreover, Othello's ethnical ambiguity is mirrored in the way in which Othello interacts with the Venetian institutions. Although Othello's significant role as the head of Venetian military forces and husband of the aristocratic Desdemona allows him to behave almost as if he was a Venetian himself, his status as a foreigner and an outsider does not permit him to fully comprehend Venetian society (Bassi 16). The ambiguity which characterises Othello reflects Emily Bartels's comment on the word "Moor", which points out that the "Moor" is "first and foremost a figure of uncodified and uncodifiable diversity" (5). This diversity emerges when Othello talks about himself to Desdemona.

When Othello narrates his stories of travelling, wonder, and creatures from Africa to Desdemona, with the purpose to make her fall in love with him, he talks about himself as having been

> […] taken by the insolent foe
> And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence
> And portance in my travailous history;
> Wherein of antres vast and deserts idle,
> Rough quarries, rocks and hills whose heads touch
> heaven.
> (I.3.138-142).

At the time the play, the slave trade was beginning to flourish. Weissbourd writes,

> There were tens of thousands of enslaved black Africans in Spain and Portugal by the turn of the seventeenth century, and the Spanish *comedia* inscribes a relationship between blackness and slavery. Although the relationship between blackness and slavery is far more explicit in these Spanish plays than it is in *Othello*, a similar tension around blackness and service can be seen in English and Spanish texts alike. (530)

A difference between Aaron and Othello is that Aaron is a slave in the play and tries to change his status through his relationship with the empress, while Othello's past is connected with slavery. However, he arrives in the Venetian world as the noble and valiant soldier – paid to fight against the Ottoman Empire, "our noble and / valiant general" (II.2.1-2). For this reason, he is only partially included in Venetian society, as he remains an outsider.

The ethnicity of Othello is complex and complicated to define. The epithet "Moor" attributed to Othello in the subtitle of the play "The Moor of Venice" does not clarify his place of origin. The references to places on the northern coast of Africa do not provide unambiguous information neither about Othello's ethnicity, nor his place of origin. As previously analysed, the "elastic" term Moor indicates a generic form of difference, which, according to Thompson, could "encompass Muslims (i.e., a religious group), Africans (i.e., a geographical group), blacks (i.e., a racial group), atheists (i.e., a non-religious group) and others" (25). Also, Barthelemy, commenting the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of "Moor", concludes that the word "can mean, then, non-black Muslim, black Christian, or black Muslim. The only certainty a reader has when he sees the word is that the person referred to is not a white Christian" (7). Barthelemy's opinion underlines that the term connotates a difference in religion. However, according to Thompson, the term "Moor" alludes to potentially contradictory definitions, which might correspond to contradictory images in early modern audiences' minds (26). These different and possibly contradictory meanings appear in the play, where Othello is

referred to by the other characters, including Desdemona, as "Moor" about fifty times. Although this term indicates Othello's difference within the Venetian society, none of the characters confirms his ethnicity. Thus, the epithet "Moor" does not clarify his ethnicity.

Othello's ethnicity is significant to provide a proper characterisation of the Moor of Venice. For this purpose, it is worth analysing the text of the play, which reports several comments on Othello's physical appearance. References to Othello's skin colour or place of origin appear both in Act I, when the characters are presented, and throughout the whole play. In Act I when Iago and Roderigo talk about Othello, Roderigo calls him "the thicklips" (I.1.65), alluding to the supposed physical feature belonging to black individuals. After a few lines Iago refers to Othello as an "old black ram" (I.1.87), which terms explicit both Othello's skin colour and his supposed characteristic as "lascivious". The term indicated the lustfulness that English society typically associated to people living in hot countries (Butcher 244). This word "lascivious" is repeated in the text by Roderigo when he talks about the "lascivious Moor" (I.1.124) to Brabantio. In addition to that, Desdemona's father speaks of Othello as "the sooty bosom" (I.2.70), comparing Othello's skin colour with the black colour of the soot. Further references throughout the rest of the text are analysed as follows.

The Duke talks to Brabantio of Othello's black skin saying that he is "far more fair than black" (I.3.291). A few lines below, Iago, while talking to Roderigo, discriminates Othello alluding to his ambiguous ethnicity "betwixt an erring Barbarian / and a super-subtle Venetian" (I.3.356-357). Similarly in Act IV Iago refers to the supposed plans of Othello to go to "Mauretania" (IV.2.226), the area corresponding to contemporary Morocco and Algeria (cf. 1.1.2). Although these lines may imply that Othello might be native of the Barbary or Mauretania, also known as the Berber country (cf. 1.1.2), this cannot be believed to be the specific place Othello comes from (Butcher 245). Thus, despite Iago's generic references to Othello's birthplace, his lines support the hypothesis that Othello comes from a generic place situated in the northern coasts of Africa (Butcher 245).

In act two Othello's ethnicity is delineated by Iago when he talks to Cassio in order to offer him a tankard of wine. Iago talks about the "black Othello" (II.3.29) alluding to his dark skin colour. In act three, after Iago suggested the possibility that Desdemona has been unfaithful to him, Othello refers to himself by saying "Haply for I

am black" (III.3.267). Later he compares Desdemona's supposed infidelity with the colour of his skin, speaking of her as black "As mine own face." (III.3.391).

The references to Othello's place of origin are vague and ambiguous. This ambiguity is not clarified in Act III in the episode of the handkerchief. This handkerchief – made by a sybil – is supposed to come from Egypt. Othello's mother got this same handkerchief, which Othello gives to Desdemona. Alluding to Egypt, the text complicates the understanding of Othello's ethnicity. Thus, despite the references either to Barbary, to Mauretania or to Egypt, the text does not explicitly specify where Othello comes from. Moreover, despite the allusions to Othello's physical appearances as being black, he is never depicted – as Aaron is in *Titus Andronicus* (cf. 2.2.2.2) – as "tawny" (*TA* V.1.27), "swart" (*TA* II.2.72), nor "blackamoor" (*TA* IV.2.51). Moreover, according to Butcher, neither Othello's royal lineage nor his past as slave could confirm Othello's black skin or negate it (245) and Othello's statement "I fetch my life and being / From men of royal siege" (I.2.21-22) supports the fact that we cannot exclude that he could be black, although he might be not black, either.

Despite the references to Othello's skin colour as a black individual, neither Othello, nor the other characters refer to it specifically, so that it remains ambiguous both in the text and in the mind of early modern audiences (Thompson 26).

However, the references to Othello's skin colour do not imply a negative characterisation of him as a figure of evil, rather they contribute to the questioning of early modern stereotypes. As Schelling remarks, Othello's "service to the state, his valor, and nobility of character are the essential attributes, not his race or his complexion" (152), although his supposed skin colour may determine the "limitations" placed on him in the Venetian society that he married (Lash 43). For these reasons, the following analysis on Othello's characterisation serves to deeper highlight the extent to which one might consider him as morally white.

3.1.6.2 Othello's Characterisation

In *Othello* Shakespeare subverts the early-modern audience's expectations, forcing them to compare the valiant Othello with a white Christian man in the villain role, through the chromatic contrast between two colours (Melchiori 478). To achieve this, the

initial characterisation of Othello at the beginning of the play had to be discriminating. To this extent, Iago's words on the character of Othello may serve to present him as a devilish creature. Iago associates Othello with the devil:

> IAGO
> Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul,
> Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
> Is tupping your white ewe! Arise, arise,
> Awake the snorting citizens with the bell
> Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you,
> […].
> (I.1.86-90).

Moreover, when talking to Brabantio about Othello and Desdemona's relationship, Iago alludes to Othello discriminating him as both the "devil" and a "Barbary horse" (I.1.108-110). Further evidence on Iago's judgemental thoughts about the Moors appear later when he refers to Othello categorising the Moors as "changeable in their wills" (I.3.347). Then, in act two, Iago continues commenting on Othello suggesting that the Moors lack the qualities of "loveliness", "sympathy" and "manners", which typically belong to the Venetians:

> IAGO
> […] When the blood is
> made dull with the act of sport, there should be,
> again
> to inflame it, and to give satiety a fresh appetite,
> loveliness in favour, sympathy in years,
> manners and
> beauties, all which the Moor is defective in.
> (II.1.224-228).

Later, Iago adds that if Desdemona "had been blest she would never have / loved the Moor." (II.1.250-251). Iago's comments on Othello emphasise the ability of discriminating him using some negative features that early modern audiences usually associated to the Moors (cf. 1.1.1). For example, at the beginning of the play Othello appears as a black figure, while later he could be considered as morally white. Fiedler remarks: "Othello is really black only before we see him; after his first appearance [on the stage], he is archetypally white, though a stranger still, as long as he remains in Venice" (185).

Shakespeare's stage paradox emerges, as the Moor is appreciated for his bravery and military qualities and, as it is mentioned above, Othello is characterised as "noble" and "valiant" (Melchiori 479). This descriptive ambiguity in Othello's characterisation opens the way to an interpretative dualism. On the one hand, actors, who are supposed to perform this role on stage, have to decide whether stressing his positive or negative features. On the other hand, also readers of the play have to make a similar decision on how to characterise him. Thus, we will give a brief overview on both the critical debate on the character and on his representation on stage over the years.

The critical debate on Othello's ethnicity provides the occasion for scholars to discuss on whether Othello might be interpreted.

The debate on Othello's identity begins with Thomas Rymer and Charles Gildon during the English Restoration (1660-1700). Rymer associated Othello with the slaves populating England at the time and working in the humblest conditions. For this reason, Rymer's critique on Othello is about the supposed incompatibility between Othello's dark skin and his role in the play as a valiant commander. Rymer thought that "the Blackamoor must have chang'd his Skin, to look our House of Lords in the Face" (157). On the other hand, Gildon stated that Othello's characterization as a Christian Moor permitted him to be respected by the Venetian society in the play (Bassi 50).

The debate on Othello's identity culminated in the identification of three different personalities in Othello in the Victorian age. The first personality pervading Othello is the "English" one. This personality reflects the moral values flaunted by the Victorian era and the Queen herself. For example, in 1880 Edwin Booth succeeded in the role of Othello because he acted within the strict norms of the Victorian composure. These values counterpose the concept of *manliness* to that of bestiality and made gallantry the *fulcrum* of man's moral action (Bassi 110). The second, or "Oriental" personality is based on the "ideal, imagined and dreamt" perception of the distant exotic world. Othello's orientalised personality represents the more romantic rather than moral idea of a positive incorporation of the colonial identity into the English one. The Orient reflects the English ruling class admiration and desire of a dreamt, brilliant, Indian wealth with the constant need to balance it with the firmness of Christian inner morality. In this sense, the iconic figure of British archaeologist, army officer, diplomat and writer, Lawrence of Arabia,

can be compared with English actors in the guise of Othello, "having to be others without ever losing oneself" (Bassi 113). The third personality has been associated with the populations of black Africa. This personality is characterized by bestiality, immorality, and lust and was associated with the infidels and the non-Christians because they were considered immoral. Having examined the way Othello's identity was perceived during the Victorian times, we can now move to more recent years' interpretations of this character (Bassi 110-113).

More recent studies highlight how Othello's ethnicity continues to be a highly discussed topic. For example, Porter believes that Othello could be staged as a black figure when he first arrives on stage, and then he might change his skin colour, becoming a white character (Porter 7). Wilson and Walker state that Wilson saw the actor Paul Robeson performing the role of Othello, and he thought that a black Othello was fundamental to understand the complexity of the play (x). Quarshie in 1998 asked himself whether it might be considered appropriate for a black actor to interpret the role of Othello (5). Dympna Callaghan states that "Othello was a white man" (192-213), confirming Vaughan's conclusion on the Moor of Venice: the tragedy is on the idea of the white man of "Africanness" rather than on "Africanness" itself (106). Ridley states that the impression that one "unprejudiced reader" might receive from Othello is that he must be a white figure, although some critics may highlight the withstanding "disproportion" between Othello and Desdemona (liii). Consequently, Othello's interpretation must emphasise a difference between the two characters which, according to Ridley, must be represented on stage through the choice of a coal-black Othello and a pale white Desdemona (liii). Thus, the debate on Othello's identity provides us with several possible interpretations of the role of the Moor in *Othello*.

As *Othello* deals with themes connected with ethnicity and alterity, the representation of the main character proves complex and complicated. As the following paragraphs will show, the representation of the character on stage changed over the years, both according to the audiences' sensibilities towards the themes of race and racism and following to the debate around Othello's skin colour. For example, Coleridge criticised the tradition, inaugurated by Richard Burbage himself, to stage a blackamoor Othello (385), Rymer questioned the probability of the play (164). Bradley, instead, supported the idea that Othello could be compared to the colossal aspects of the great characters

depicted by "Michael Angelo" (168). Similarly, – and sometimes explicitly following – what was happening in the scholarly debate, representations of *Othello* interpreted the character in blackface, as Richard Burbage did, or, as nineteenth-century performances show, as an individual with a lighter skin shade.

Richard Burbage (see fig. 5), son of James Burbage, constructor of The Theatre and the first actor performing Othello, portrayed the Moor as a black character. His performance was appreciated by the audience because of how he empathised with the audience interpreting a black man (Vaughan 97). As a matter of fact, Burbage is remembered in his epigraph as "grieved" (Rosenberg 14), which means that the audience could empathise emotionally with the actor.

Figure 5. Based on the portrait of Burbage at the Dulwich Gallery. Reproduced in Shakespeare's England.

During the Restoration and through the 18th century, *Othello* was staged with continuity even though there are no direct records of performances.

In 1745 David Garrick staged a black Othello. His innovative performing style resulted in scenes of extreme *vis interpretativa* and exaggerated violence and passions:

> in the part of Othello, he had wished to paint that passion in all its violence, and that is why he chose an African in whose veins circulated fire instead of blood, and whose true or imaginary character could excuse all boldnesses of expression and all exaggerations of passion. (Hedgcock 341)

For these reasons his performance was perceived negatively by the audience, who did not appreciate his breaking through the boundaries of what was considered pleasant to see (Bassi 56-57).

During the early 19th century, the play was performed both in London and abroad. Many actors played the role of Othello, including Edmund Kean, William Macready, Ira Aldridge, Edwin Forrest, Samuel Phelps, and Edwin Booth. Some examples of performances of *Othello* are provided below to better understand how actors interpreted Othello during the first decades of the 19th century.

In 1833 Edmund Kean's interpretation was believed to be innovative because he chose to represent not a black moor in the role of Othello, but a moor with a lighter complexion. It was as if the character of Othello was a black "washed white" (Korhonen 94). The actor thought that a black skin would have hidden facial expressions. Thus, he did not adopt heavy black make-up and dark clothing to better convey the inner character's emotions.

In 1825 Ira Aldridge was the first black-skinned actor to perform Othello. His performance reinvigorated Rymer's idea about Othello as a black African, whose skin is dark and not "tawny". The circumstance that Ira Aldridge was black rendered the passions and violence realistic. As a result, performances could have made real the audience's eventual stereotypes on black skin (see fig. 6). These mentioned stereotypes remained within fiction with white-skinned actors. Moreover, white-skinned actors needed to use make-up in order to interpret black roles, while Ira Aldridge was already black in his skin colour. Ira Aldridge's performances were perceived so intensely by the audience that they caused reactions of fear, revulsion, and real terror:

> A full-blooded Negro, incarnating the profoundest creations of Shakespearean art, giving *flesh and blood* for the aesthetic judgement of Educated European society … how much nearer can one get to the truth, to the very source of aesthetic satisfaction? … As the spirit is not the body, so the truth of art is not this profoundly raw flesh … But by the very fact that flesh is so powerful – that is genuinely black, so naturally *un-white* does it howl – that savage flesh did its fleshy work. It murdered and crushed the spirit … and in place of the highest enjoyment, this blatant flesh introduced into art, this *natural* black Othello, pardon me, causes only … revulsion. (Marshall and Stock 265-66)

Figure 6. *Ira Aldridge in the role of Othello.* By James Northcote. 1826.

The same variety is present also in the following century, as we will discuss below. During the last decades of the 19th century there were two "styles" of performing Othello (Thompson 72). One style emphasises the black personality of the "grieved Moors" represented by the Italian actor Tommaso Salvini and the "refined guise" as performed by Edwin Booth (Thompson 72). Tommaso Salvini became famous for his interpretation of Othello, which was first performed in Venice in 1856. His characterisation of Othello was based on a real subject he encountered during one of his trips to Gibraltar. The innovation of Salvini's acting method resided in the fact that the actor's inspiration came from actual observation and research, rather than from the way the character had been previously represented (Bassi 121). Salvini's interpretation was an escalation of "rage, passion, and violence" from the first to the final act of the play (Bassi 123). The fact that the actor was "remarkably physical" in his performance was both appreciated and debated (Thompson 73). This physicality was defined by Towse as "primeval savagery" (163) which, according to Henry James, well represented "the rage of an African, but of a nature that remains generous at the end" (175). However, Salvini's "southern voluptuousness" was criticised at the time for its excess of physicality on stage:

> Seizing fiercely Iago by the throat, he crushes the cowering miscreant to the ground, and in the whirlwind of his passion lifts his foot to stamp the heel upon his head, it might even be to kick out his brains. Recalled however to reason, he turns away, and with averted head he stretches out his hand, and penitently, yet with a species of loathing, raises the prostrate wretch from the ground. In this scene, the one profoundly electrical effect of the interpretation is reached. (Ath 498)

Although in the eyes of the British Salvini's interpretation was exaggerated for the passions that he staged, "physicality" was a successful characteristic in performances of *Othello* throughout the nineteenth century (Vaughan 99). It highlighted the colour contrast between Othello and Desdemona, as Clara Morris commented: "Passion choked, his gloating eyes burned with the mere lust of the sooty Moor for that white creature of Venice. It was revolting, and with a shiver I exclaimed aloud, 'Ugh, you splendid brute!'" (88). During the late 19th century, blackness was emphasised through physicality. This possibly confirms both Wilson's and Quarshie's standpoints on the necessity for staging Othello in black, but for selecting a white actor for the role, who has to cover himself with black make-up and clothes (cf. 1.1.4). This bodily feature is relevant also for Othello's 20th century critics.

The debate on Othello's identity did not stop in the 20th century. Physicality continued to be a significant aspect in the performances of the character. Paul Robeson (see fig. 7) performed the first black Othello of the 20th century (1930). Robeson was "huge, especially in the US […]. He was extremely large in stature and had a famously rich, deep voice, which? loomed large onstage" (Thompson 79). His interpretation was appreciated for his natural way of feeling and performing this character (Bassi 149).

In 1964 Laurence Olivier's Othello tried to render and emphasise blackness "creating the illusion of 'thick-lips'" and blackening "his entire body for the role" (Vaughan 100). His biographer Anthony Holden described the process through which Olivier transformed himself into Othello:

> He started by covering his body from head to toe with a coat of dark stain, over which went a layer of greasy black make-up, which he and his dresser then polished vigorously with a chiffon cloth, to achieve a shiny finish … the palms of his hands, the soles of his feet, his specially thickened lips and even his tongue were then dyed with incarnadine; a course of drops added a penetrating sheen o the whites of his eyes; he even varnished his fingernails to give them a pallid blue lustre. This wig was of crinkly, matted curls, flecked with grey at the temples,

and the final touch was a thin, surly-looking moustache. Most backstage anecdotes about this production concern people of either gender walking in on a naked Olivier, of various hues between Brighton white and Caribbean black, because it all had to dry before he could do Othello's pristine white robe. (378)

Having obtained this visual effect, Olivier worked on the bodily rhythms and movements, changing his way of walking, trained himself to develop his muscles and vocally couched his voice to lower his tonality an octave (Vaughan 100). Olivier's Othello was generally appreciated because he combined a coal black make-up with the love of "absorbing himself in the fictional Other" (Vaughan 103).

Figure 7. Paul Robeson in the Savoy Theatre London stage production Othello.

Among the most recent performances of Othello, significant here is the 1997 performance by Patrick Stewart, where the white actor was surrounded by a cast of black actors. The purpose of Patrick Stewart's choice is well explained in an interview he gave.

When the time came that I was old enough and experienced enough to do it, it was the same time that it no longer became acceptable for a white actor to put on blackface and pretend to be African. One of my hopes for this production is that it will continue to say what a conventional production of Othello would say about

racism and prejudice … To replace the black outsider with a white man in a black society will, I hope, encourage a much broader view of the fundamentals of racism. (Lefkowitz 1997)

As far as the scholarly debate is concerned, Porter, Callaghan, and Vaughan's viewpoints, which disagree with the radicality of Wilson and Quarshie, need further consideration. The staging of Othello as a supposedly black figure was intended to represent the tension and paradoxical relationship between early modern stereotypes of blacks and whites. In striking contrast, when Othello appears on stage, he is a valiant commander, who is prefigured to be the head of the Venetian forces. In this way, Porter supports the viewpoint on the supposed changeable characterisation of Othello.

Callaghan underlines the whiteness of Othello with reference to his characterisation and behaviour in the play. Othello's white characterisation has been supported by both his words and his "noble" actions. However, at the end of the play, we have the only actual event which supports Iago's negative description of him: the murder of his beloved wife Desdemona. In other words, Othello becomes the devil he was accused of being when he commits this devilish act. This is the reason why, at the end of the play, Emilia calls him "devil", commenting: "O, the more angel she, And you the blacker devil!" (V.2.129). She reiterates, "thou art a devil." (V.2.131). As a result, Othello remains ambiguous – his actions can be morally white or morally black.

3.1.7 Conclusion

Shakespeare's choice of highlighting the ambiguity of early modern stereotypes of whiteness and blackness is conveyed by the character of Othello. This had led through the centuries to many different interpretations of the character and his ethnicity, both in scholarly works and in performance.

3.2 Iago

> "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know.
>
> From this time forth I never will speak a word."
>
> Shakespeare, *Othello*, V.II.300-301

3.2.1 Introduction

Iago is a young Venetian, a scheming character as Aaron is, and a master of intrigue, who recalls the Vice or devil figure in morality plays (Bassi 17). As Ridley notices, he is undoubtedly a villain, as he is called many times, but a human one (lx). His purpose is to construct the psychological web, thanks to his abilities in persuading others, to poison Othello. As Iago himself explains in the play, he is an ambitious soldier who has served in battle alongside with Othello: "At Rhodes, at Cyprus and on other grounds" (I.1.28). His experience makes him expect Othello to choose him for lieutenancy. He considers war "the only occupation in which he can look for advancement" (Ridley lx). Once Othello chooses Cassio, a less experienced soldier, to be his lieutenant during the Turkish military campaign in Cyprus, he believes that he has been defrauded of military promotion. Thus, he plans a double revenge, against Cassio, for having taken the place which he thought to be his own, and against Othello, because he believes that he has cuckolded him.

However, Iago's revenge plan is apparently not a bloody one. Although several are the deaths towards the end of the play, Iago "intended nothing of the kind" (Ridley lxi) because his scope is not to kill or commit murders, it is, rather, to regain his reputation. He is moved by the sentiments of revenge and pride but he "has not […] an innate love of cruelty for its own sake" (Ridley lxi). He knows that, although he hates Othello, "for necessity of present life / [he] must show out a flag and sign of love" for him (I.1.152-154). Iago aims at damaging both Cassio and Othello in two different ways. He only intends to make Cassio lose his reputation in Cyprus, and to insinuate that Desdemona has cuckolded her beloved husband. The consequences, as he says, are not his responsibility, as the last night in Cyprus is, according to him, "the night / That either makes me or fordoes me quite." (V.1.128-129). At this point, he explains that he doesn't

know what will follow. Iago tempts other characters but does not deem himself responsible for what they do because of his insinuations. As Wilson and Walker notice, it seems that Shakespeare transformed Cinthio's villain "into a tempter of devilish malignity" (xxx). He "renders the temptation virtually irresistible by drastic though imperceptible manipulation of the time-scheme of the original plot" (Wilson and Walker xxx). Iago's abilities to hurt are moved, according to Ridley, by his "love of power" (lxi) and for this reason he makes use of both reason and self-interest "to guide his actions" (lxi), being throughout the play a "superbly skilful and opportunist tactician" and the "master of destiny" (lxi).

Iago uses not only his personal abilities, but also of the context of the play. The play, its imagery, the structure, the setting, and the so-called "double time scheme" (Ridley lxvii) is constructed to some extent to favour Iago's purposes and actions. In the following paragraphs we will analyse Iago's web, and then we will focus on the time and imagery in the play and of the character's name to provide a more complete analysis of Iago's actions.

3.2.2   Iago's Name

The characterisation of Iago begins with Shakespeare's choice of his name in the tragedy. Some of the studies performed on the origin of the name "Iago" suggest that his name contains itself some negative. Moore considers three theories which explain the origin of the Spanish name Santiago. We will explore them below, according to the different contexts that they refer to: an etymological one, a cultural one, and a historical one.

The etymology of the name appears to be linked to ancient historical roots. The English names Jacob and James are two variants deriving from Latin name *Iacobi*. "Iago" is a contraction of the longer name Santiago, which derives itself from the same Latin name *Iacobi*. This name *Iacobi* derives from the Hebrew Ya'aqov, which literally means either "the one who follows God" or "may God protect". It also means "to supplant or undermine". These meanings are associated with the biblical story of Jacob. The name Jacob, son of Isaac, indicates the one who will be deceitful. As a matter of fact, in the biblical story, Jacob, with the support of his mother, tricks his father, to be blessed by

him. Therefore, the etymological origin of the name "Iago" gives a positive and a negative connotation to the name. It indicates a person who is both in God's grace and the one who is deceitful (Moore 162). The same way, in the play, Iago affirms: "I am not what I am" (I.1.64), underlining that this duality is present in his soul, as well as in his name.

The cultural interpretation is linked to the conflict between England and Spain (1585-1604). In the war against the English, the name of Santiago, patron of Spain, had been the Spanish war cry, heard on the battlefield and thus reminding the audience of war and national rivalry (Moore 162).

The name of Santiago also evokes the patron saint of Spain's epithet, *Matamoros*, "the one who kills Moors". Also, the saint was a spiritual reference of the Spanish *Reconquista* (801-1492). The saint was believed to have appeared in 840 to lead the Spanish troops at Clavijo against the Moors – which gained him the epithet of *Matamoros* – an event often illustrated in several paintings in the following centuries (see fig.8).
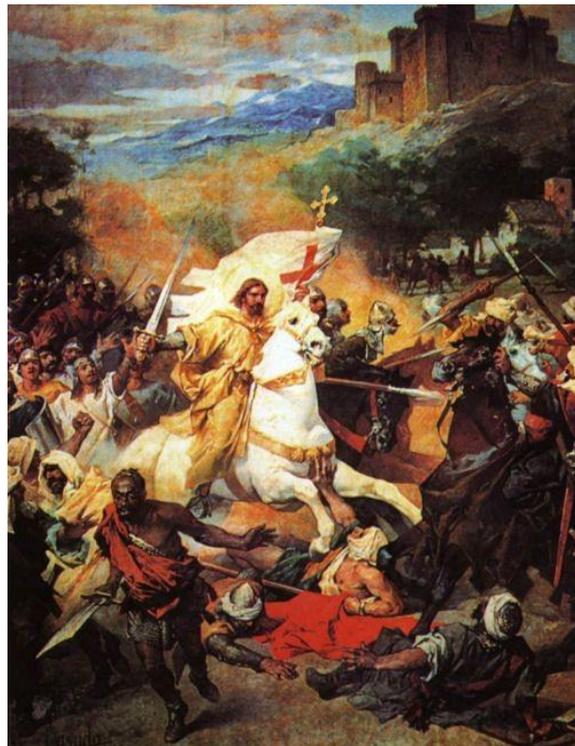
Figure 8. Casado del Alisal, José. *Saint James the Great in the Battle of Clavijo*. 1889, Church of Saint Francis the Great, Madrid.

Shakespeare's Iago will lead the moor-character Othello to his final destruction through a series of tricks and manipulations. Thus, Shakespeare's choice of the name of Iago is highly indicative of Iago's characterisation in the play.

3.2.3 Iago's Blackness

Although Iago is a white Venetian character, we will focus here on his villainy, which shows in the way he directs his victims' actions and thoughts through language. According to Cressler, it is Iago who guides the whole action, revealing himself a tempter and a manipulator (75). Iago defines himself at the end of Act I as the personification of hell and darkness while describing the psychological web that he will create: "Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light." (I.3.402-403). These lines highlight Iago's connection with both hell and night and oppose himself to the rest of the world associated with light. Thus, the characters of Othello and Iago stand at the two opposite sides of subverted stereotypes, black Othello as a valiant Moor, and a white Iago as a monster. The fact that he is depicted as a white character further weakens the stereotypes associated with black skin and white skin, offering the audience two human beings, who behave either according to what they think is good or bad (Smith 178).

A closer analysis on Iago's use of language, rhetorical devices, idioms, and soliloquies can give a clearer picture of Iago's strategy in constructing the plot against his victims. We will start by analysing how Iago manipulates Roderigo, Cassio, and Othello through language and then we will focus on how his soliloquies explain his plans to the audience.

3.2.3.1 Iago's Characterisation

Since the beginning of the play, driven by his wounded pride for not being chosen for lieutenancy, Iago aims at satisfying his desire of revenge against both Cassio and Othello by pursuing a precise scheme which he constructs thanks to his ability of persuading and manipulating the others. Iago claims that his revenge vow is due to Othello's choice of Cassio as lieutenant and of Emilia as Desdemona's mistress. Therefore, he intends to try to change "wife fore wife" (II.1.297) and have Emilia "move

for Cassio to her mistress" (II.3.378). Although, according to Bartels, it is "a legitimate political action" for a general who expected to be chosen for lieutenancy (450), Bradley defines Iago's behaviour as a "motiveless malignity" (197). To achieve his goal, he uses some linguistic devices to manipulate mainly Othello, Cassio, and Roderigo to achieve his own revenge. We start by introducing Iago's manipulation of Roderigo and then we move forward to exploring both Cassio's and Othello's "psychological control" (Bloom 41).

At the beginning of Act I Scene 1 Iago starts plotting by convincing Roderigo that he hates Othello for having promoted the less experienced Cassio as lieutenant instead of him. Iago first defines Cassio as a "Florentine" and "arithmetician" (I.1.19-20), which, as Honigmann explains, are both ways of sneering at him (120). The adjective "Florentine" refers to a supposed comparison between Cassio and the Florentine thinker and writer Machiavelli, who was thought of as a "crafty devil", while the adjective "arithmetician" alludes to Cassio's lack of experience in battlefields (Honigmann 120). Then, Iago continues by further sneering at Cassio as follows:

> IAGO
> A fellow almost damned in a fair wife
> That never set a squadron in the field
> Nor the division of a battle knows
> More than a spinster – unless the bookish theoric,
> Wherein the toged consuls can propose
> As masterly as he. Mere prattle without practice
> Is all his soldiership – but he, sir, had th' election
> And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof
> At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds,
> Christian and heathen, must be be-leed and calmed
> By debitor and creditor. This counter-caster
> He, in good time, must his lieutenant be
> And I, God bless the mark, his Moorship's ancient.
> (I.1.20-32).

The epithets "Florentine" and "counter-caster", and the phrase "Mere prattle without practice" belittle Cassio's ability until Roderigo is convinced that Iago was deserving of the promotion. Iago's use of the antithesis "debitor and creditor" emphasises the contrast between the two positions, lieutenant on the one hand, and "his Moorship's ancient" on the other one, highlighting thus not only the opposition between Iago and Cassio, but also,

as Berry points out, the theme of the contrast between good and evil, which permeates the whole play (3).

Iago realises that the most effective way of persuading Roderigo is to confide in him, by revealing his innermost thoughts, thus he tells Roderigo that: "We cannot all be masters, nor all masters / Cannot be truly followed." (I.1.42-43). Iago has nothing but contempt for the "duteous and knee-crooking knave" (I.1.44) who serves his master for "nought but provender" (I.1.46-47). In contrast with the previous definition of what Iago considers a servant, he defines himself as follows:

> IAGO
> Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago.
> In following him I follow but myself:
> Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty
> But seeming so, for my peculiar end,
> For when my outward action doth demonstrate
> The native act and figure of my heart
> In complement extern, 'tis not long after
> But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
> For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.
> (I.1.56-64).

The contrast between appearance and reality permeates Iago's figure, as throughout the play he spreads his poison through simulation and dissimulation. Line 56 appears extremely effective, as it directly opposes Iago to Othello the Moor. Finally, the phrase "I am not what I am" warns the audience both of not taking Iago's words literally and that he is not moved by "love and duty" but by "[his] peculiar end". The same idea is expressed later when Iago tells: "Yet for necessity of present life / I must show out a flag and sign of love, / Which is indeed but sign." (I.1.153-155). This implies that Iago's actions are moved by opportunity (Adamson 29), as is emphasised in Iago's observation of Cassio's behaviour: "Men *should*[7] be what they seem." (III.3.130).

In pursuing his first purpose, he says: "Honest Iago, / My Desdemona must I leave to thee: / I prithee, let thy wife attend on her / And bring them after in the best advantage." (I.3.295-298). Showing his mastery in dissimulation by manipulating Roderigo through the latter's moral and intellectual shortcomings, Iago proves a man able to adapt to both people and circumstances.

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[7] The choice of italics is mine.

Iago can hold his intellectual inferiors. His treatment of Roderigo reveals further contempt of it (Bloom 23). When he realises that he is converting Roderigo to his senses, he changes the tone of his speech, confirming his ability to adapt to circumstances. Iago insists that Roderigo should forget the idea of drowning himself "for the love of a guinea-hen" (I.3.316) and follow Iago's own suggestion:

> IAGO
> Put money in thy purse, follow thou
> the wars, defeat thy favour with an usurped beard;
> I say, put money in thy purse. It cannot be that
> Desdemona should long continue her love to the
> Moor – put money in thy purse – nor he his to her. It
> was a violent commencement in her, and thou shalt
> see an answerable sequestration – put but money in
> thy purse. These Moors are changeable in their wills
> – fill thy purse with money. The food that to him
> now is as luscious as locusts shall be to him shortly as
> acerb as coloquintida. She must change for youth;
> when she is sated with his body she will find the
> error of her choice: she must have change, she must.
> Therefore, put money in thy purse. If thou wilt
> needs damn thyself, do it a more delicate way than
> drowning – make all the money thou canst. If sanc-
> timony, and a frail vow betwixt an erring Barbarian
> and a super-subtle Venetian, be not too hard for my
> wits and all the tribe of hell, thou shalt enjoy her –
> therefore make money.
> (I.3.340-359).

The repetition of the refrain "put money in thy purse" provides added intensity to the situation and represents Iago's success in persuading Roderigo to confide in him (Bloom 20). As a matter of fact, since he is provoked by Iago's insistence, Roderigo concludes, "I am changed. I'll sell all my land." (I.3.380) – revealing that he has both changed opinion and he is convinced in doing what Iago asks him to do. From this point onwards, Iago assures himself his alleged friendship with Roderigo. In Act I Scene 3, Iago reveals that the nature of his friendship is "for [his] sport and profit" (I.3.385).

After obtaining Roderigo's change of mind, Iago's proceeds with Cassio. He infers: "Cassio's a proper man: let me see now, / To get his place, and to plume up my will / In double knavery." (I.3.391-393). To achieve his double personal revenge, Iago decides to "plume up" his will (I.3.392). Both the fact that Othello holds him well and the fact that Cassio is a "proper man" will help, as Bradley clarifies:

> What fuller satisfaction could it find than the consciousness that he is the master of the General who has undervalued him and of the rival who has been preferred to him; that these worthy people, who are so successful and popular and stupid, are mere puppets in his hands, but living puppets, who at the motion of his finger mist contort themselves in agony, while all the time they believe that he is their one true friend and comforter? (229)

Iago's purpose is to make Cassio lose his reputation, to obtain his position as lieutenant. Iago persuades Roderigo that Cassio is his rival for the favours of Desdemona and should be eliminated. Therefore, he directs Roderigo's thinking by asking and answering his potential questions, as the following speech exemplifies:

> IAGO
> Mark me with what violence she first loved the Moor, but for bragging and telling her fantastical lies – and will she love him still for prating? let not thy discreet heart think it. Her eye must be fed, and what delight shall she have to look on the devil? When the blood is made dull with the act of sport, there should be, again to inflame it, and to give satiety a fresh appetite, loveliness in favour, sympathy in years, manners and beauties, all which the Moor is defective in.
> (II.1.220-228).

Although Roderigo initially doubts Iago's words, he becomes finally convinced that he can trust him, and he concludes that he "will do this, if you can bring it to any opportunity." (II.1.280). Therefore, when Cassio kisses Desdemona's hand, Iago asserts that it represents an act of lechery: "They met so near with their lips that their breaths / embraced together" (II.1.257-258). Thus, though Roderigo initially recognises this act as a gesture of courtesy, he is later convinced by Iago's words.

Having Roderigo on his side, Iago proceeds with his next task of persuasion, which involves Cassio. Iago provokes Cassio first by insinuating that Desdemona is an "alarum to love" (II.3.24) and then saying that Othello has not yet slept with her. He continues by saying that she "is sport for Jove" (II.3.17) – which phrase – as Honigmann explains – alludes to Jupiter – a well-known womanizer in classical legends – to which Iago compares Othello (188). Secondly, Iago invites Cassio to drink some wine, insisting on the necessity for him to accept his invitation because, in Iago's words, "'tis a night of revels, the gallants / desire it." (II.3.40-41). Then, Iago provokes Cassio (Honigmann 192) by singing the song which speaks of King Stephen and pronounces as: "He was a wight

of high renown / And thou art but of low degree, / 'Tis pride that pulls the country down" (II.3.89-91). Using this song, Iago invites Cassio to drink more wine. It is relevant that the words of the song speak of a king who was of high degree, but the drinker is of "low degree" (II.3.90). However, being of high degree is not good in any circumstances, because "pride" can ruin a country (II.3.92). Therefore, one can continue to drink, as Cassio will do. Cassio, as is in Iago's intentions, loses his reputation for being drunk. After Iago has conveniently reported to Othello what might have happened, either speaking against Cassio or by defending him, Othello finally defies Cassio by telling him: "But never more be officer of mine. / Look if my gentle love be not raised up! / I'll make thee an example." (II.3.245-247). These words represent Iago's first success: Cassio has lost his reputation.

Iago must then convince the deposed lieutenant Cassio that "Reputation is an idle and / most false imposition, oft got without merit and lost / without deserving" (II.3.264-266). Iago takes on the role of confidant and adviser, pressing Cassio with questions such as, "What was he that you followed with your sword? / What had he done to you?" (II.3.280-281). Since Cassio proves himself reluctant in answering Iago's questions, Iago changes his technique, revealing one more time his adaptability to circumstances. He advises Cassio to talk to Desdemona since, according to him, the "general's wife is now the general" (II.3.310). Cassio agrees and thanks Iago for having given him sound advice (II.3.321).

Having achieved his revenge against Cassio, in Act III Iago proceeds with his plans regarding Othello. He plans to convince Othello that his Venetian wife, Desdemona, has been unfaithful to him, and follows a precise strategy based on the manipulation of the action using the more or less unknowing Roderigo and Cassio so that Othello becomes suspicious of Desdemona, making the Moor susceptible to further insinuations.

Iago first remarks that there is something amiss in the relationship between Othello and Desdemona, then implies that there may be cause for suspicion: "I cannot think it / That he would steal away so guilty-like / Seeing you coming." (III.3.37-39). He supports this impression through both dissimulation and negation, as the following phrases suggest: "But for a satisfaction of my thought, / no further harm." (III.3.96-97), and: "I did not think he had been acquainted with her." (III.3.99). By doing so, he suggests that the contrary is true.

As a matter of fact, using his reputation as "Honest Iago" (I.3.295), as Othello believes him to be throughout the play, Iago makes to the Moor more and more insinuations relying on various rhetorical devices. For example, Iago creates a supposed-to-be reality which is not the actual one by implying: "Utter my thoughts? Why, say they are vile and false?" (III.3.139). This implication is made even greater when he says, "I am to pray you not to strain my speech / To grosser issues nor to larger reach / Than to suspicion" (III.3.222-224) which have the effect of anticipating what Othello might think of his words and of ensuring that Othello continues to trust him. He gradually leads Othello to a point where a small insinuation on his wife Desdemona is enough to make him reach his final destruction. Iago starts by warning Othello to "defend / From jealousy." (III.3.178) and then he explains why it can destroy its possessors:

> IAGO
> O beware of jealousy!
> It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock
> The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss
> Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger,
> But O, what damned minutes tells he o'er
> Who dotes yet doubts, suspects yet strongly loves!
> (III.3.167-172).

His actions as a "clever manipulator" (Babcock 299) continue further, as Iago understands that Othello has undergone a tremendous change, when he claims that Iago "hast set me on the rack!" (III.3.338). At this point, Iago simulates being sorry for Othello's state of mind and for having activated both passion and anger in him.

The torture of Othello, though, continues until he falls into an attack of epilepsy in the fourth act. Iago becomes Othello's manipulator as he arranges for him to overhear the conversation between Iago himself and Cassio. Othello is brought to believe that the topic of conversation is Desdemona, while they are discussing Bianca. At last, Othello is convinced that his "fair woman, a sweet woman!" (IV.1.176) is unfaithful and his heart is "turned / to stone" (IV.1.179-180). Therefore, Desdemona must "be damned / tonight, for she shall not live." (IV.1.178-179). From this point onwards, the action belongs to Othello, while Iago – after making sure of Othello's intentions and having obtained the lieutenancy – states that:

> IAGO
> It is not honesty in me to speak
> What I have seen and known. You shall observe him,
> And his own courses will denote him so
> That I may save my speech. Do but go after
> And mark how *he*[8] continues.
> (IV.1.277-281).

As it is previously mentioned (cf. 3.2.1), Iago senses that there is the possibility that something may go wrong, as he states that: "This is the night / That either makes me or fordoes me quite." (V.1.129).

Although Iago is doubtful about the epilogue – which he perhaps never intended to be so tragic – his "smooth and convincing manipulation" (Jacobsen 502) is operational since the very beginning of the play. As a matter of fact, through his soliloquies, Iago anticipates his intentions to the audience and reveals both his vengeful plans and his tactic. Iago's soliloquies will reveal to the audience how he gradually constructs his evil plans.

At the end of the first act, Iago pronounces his first soliloquy, affirming, "I hate the Moor" (I.3.385) and vowing revenge both against Cassio and against Othello. Not only does Iago anticipate to the audience his intentions, but he also reveals the strategy he will pursue. He first wonders himself "How? How?" (I.3.393) and then provides the audience with his own answer:

> IAGO
> After some time to abuse Othello's ear
> That he is too familiar with his wife.
> He hath a person and a smooth dispose
> To be suspected, framed to make women false.
> The Moor is of a free and open nature
> That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
> And will as tenderly be led by th'nose
> As asses are.
> (I.3.394-401).

This soliloquy both anticipates Iago's manipulation of Othello to make him believe in Desdemona's infidelity and conveys to the audience Iago's own thoughts about the Moor, whom he compares to "asses". Othello, according to Iago, is "of a free and open nature"

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[8] The choice of italics is mine.

and "thinks men honest". Iago can rely on these characteristics to get Othello on his side and confirm to him that he is an honest man.

Similarly, Iago will manipulate the "great fly" Cassio "With as little a web as this" (II.1.168-169). In Iago's expression, the fly imagery does not bring the focus – as it happens in *Titus Andronicus* (cf. 2.2.2.2) – on the colour of the insect and of the skin of a character. Rather, the metaphor of the web and the fly serves Iago to anticipate to the audience the plot he has in mind. The metaphor used by Iago, according to Honigmann, reflects the Iago-character who "stands aside, like a spider watching a fly. If Cassio still holds Desdemona's hand when Othello enters, this could be a poisonous image in Othello's mind later." (177). As Iago explains in the second soliloquy:

> IAGO
> And nothing can or shall content my soul
> Till I am evened with him, wife for wife …
> Or, failing so, yet that I put the Moor
> At least into a jealousy so strong
> That judgment cannot cure; which thing to do,
> If this poor trash of Venice, whom I trash
> For his quick hunting, stand the putting on,
> I'll have our Michael Cassio on the hip,
> Abuse him to the Moor in the rank garb –
> For I fear Cassio with my night-cap too –
> Make the Moor thank me, love me, and reward me
> For making him egregiously an ass,
> And practicing upon his peace and quiet
> Even to madness. 'Tis here, but yet confused:
> Knavery's plain face is never seen, till used.
> (II.1.296-310).

Iago anticipates that he wants to have Cassio "on the hip" and that he wants Othello to become jealous, in the case his plan to exchange "wife for wife" does not work.

The third soliloquy in Act II explains Iago's plans for Cassio (II.3.57-58). Thanks to Cassio's drunkenness, Iago will be successful in ruining his reputation. In the fourth soliloquy Iago insinuates that he is the villain, and thus cannot be honest as Othello believes him to be. This exemplifies one more time how Iago pictures himself as an astute planner. He confesses that his aim is to "win the Moor" (II.3.338) and to pursue his plan he compares himself both with the villain and with the "Divinity of hell!" (II.3.345).

Significantly, he confirms his nature as a devilish being. The fact that Iago defines himself a devil distinguishes him from Aaron, who is referred to as the devil by others in

Titus Andronicus (cf. 2.2.2.2). Iago speaks of himself and of his characterisation. He concludes that "When devils will the blackest sins put on / they do suggest at first with heavenly shows / As I do now" (II.3.346-348). This phrase confirms Iago's association with the devil and makes the subversion of stereotypes of blackness and evil explicit.

Iago is a master manipulator, but he may be considered a deficient strategist in two respects. In the first place, Othello's jealousy surpasses anything which Iago intended. Possibly, Iago did not mean to kill Othello or Desdemona. Secondly, he underestimates Emilia's loyalty to her mistress. Accustomed to having his wife never questioning his orders, he gives her three more before realising his situation is hopeless: "I charge you, get you home." (V.2.191); "Zounds, hold your peace!" (V.2.217); "Be wise, and get you home." (V.2.221). Iago denies his duplicity even as Emilia reveals the extent of his villainy. His reaction is characteristic of him. "Villainous whore!" (V.2.227) and "Filth, thou liest!" (V.2.229) are Iago's last words to his wife before he stabs her to death.

In the last scene, we can gather that Iago's downfall is precipitated by his own strategical weakness. Unlike Aaron – who both beseeches his son's survival and shows his rhetorical abilities until his death – Iago has nothing to say on the subject at the end of the play. Iago, in contrast with his ability to manipulate others through language, in the end refuses to speak any more: "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. / From this time forth I never will speak word." (V.2.300-301). Iago's choice to not say a word to Othello is significant because it is seemingly in contrast with his behaviour throughout the play. Words are Iago's means to deceive others through poisonous speeches. However, at the end of the play he chooses not to speak. Dachslager explains that there is no need for Iago to answer Othello's question and that an answer could have been in contrast with Iago's nature of an apparently honest man (4). However, he forges his alliance with the devil (Honigmann 330) and repeatedly places the intellect above all other elements. Even in death he refuses to recognise the power of God as he asserts that he may be the devil: "I bleed, sir, but not killed" (V.2.285). And Lodovico's reply "What, not to pray?" (V.2.303) emphasises that Iago has passed as an enemy of God.

Two other key elements in the play functional to the development of Iago's web are space and time. As far as time is concerned, a closer analysis of the play reveals that some actions develop faster than their realistic time would require, and others unfold

slower than their realistic timing would suggest. For this reason, some critics elaborated what they call a double time scheme (Ridley lxvii).

Although Ridley does not agree with Wilson about the theory of the double time scheme in *Othello,* both critics accept that the narrative pace in the play changes accordingly to the events which compose each act (Ridley lxx). The two key elements representing time in *Othello* are the two nights, namely the first night which opens the play in Venice, and the last night in Cyprus, where Desdemona finds her tragic ending. These are the main mentions of a specific time in the play. As a matter of fact, as the play develops, few are the moments in which one may suppose the presence of "intervals" from action (Ridley lxviii). In the first three acts, the expressions of time used by the characters suggest the presence of some pauses, while after Othello's temptation in Act III, time passes rapidly until the end of the play, where the protagonist decides to kill his wife. This "rapidity" of action is seemingly functional to Iago's plot, since it allows rapid changings of mind in the character of Othello, according to his will (Ridley lxix). It does not provide time for Othello either to rationally think or to confront with others of what Iago's poisonous words might mean. Ridley argues that the "rapid continuity of movement" (lxix) is not only functional to increase both tension and suspense in the audience, but also mandatory to let Iago's plot continue. As a matter of fact, according to the critic, if "Iago's plot does not work fast it will not work at all." (Ridley lxix). Thus, time, though apparently a secondary aspect within the analysis of Iago's strategy, is a key element to understand the circumstances in which his scheming abilities are actuated.

Another significant element for Iago's plans is the changing of setting. The arrival in Cyprus marks not only a changing of place, but also of hierarchical order. While in Venice the social and political order is granted by the Venetian aristocracy and the Duke, in Cyprus one could seemingly experiment political freedom. Othello maintains himself loyal to the nobility of Venice relying on his military competence. Iago feels free to make the social order change and gets revenge against both Othello and Cassio. Moreover, since the Turks are taken into a flood, no battles are needed. The military purpose for which they went to Cyprus falls. It seems that the staying in Cyprus is particularly functional for Iago's private affairs to triumph on the public sphere (Ridley lxix). Therefore, the setting in *Othello* reveals favourable to Iago's plot.

Thus, both Iago's scheming abilities and the play's time and setting reveal his evil nature which is strictly connected with the manipulative mastery of language. Compared with Aaron, Iago is a devilish villain who does not make use of bloody violence to get his revenge. However, the similarities between the two villains are several. Both Aaron and Iago distinguish themselves for their rhetorical ability. For Aaron this ability makes him as a character able to pronounce long speeches, manipulating the others, and anticipating events. While Iago uses his "infernal intelligence" (Bloom 139) to tempt and deceive his victims. However, an element confirms both Aaron's and Iago's villainy, as they are both referred to as dogs. As Aaron is called "a dog" in *Titus Andronicus*, even Iago towards the end of the play is insulted by Roderigo who calls him "O damned Iago! O inhuman dog!" (V.1.62), alluding both to Iago's devilish nature by association with a dog. Although with a different characterisation, both Aaron and Iago are villains.

3.2.4 Conclusion

In *Othello* Shakespeare presents a white figure in the role of the villain. Iago is a white Venetian who belongs to Venetian society and, in contrast with the villain character of Aaron in *Titus*, he is not an outsider within the world of the play. By subverting the expectations of early modern audiences, *Othello* tries to dissociate the characters from racial stereotypes – or at least to question the validity of said stereotypes – by presenting a white evil figure opposed to a black tragic hero. According to Smith, Iago acts as the "specifically black villain within Shakespeare's dramaturgic experiment of reverse racial binaries" (178). His evil characteristics are emphasised by his exceptional scheming abilities (Rosenberg 149) and his mastery of language, which bring his victims to their downfall. Iago constructs the poisonous net using rhetorical devices. Some of them include simulation and dissimulation, negation, sentencing and even silence. Moreover, he uses the oppositions between colours, black and white, and between appearances and reality, to reveal himself the leader of the whole action of the play. Iago's characterisation is opposite to that of Othello, even from a visual perspective.

Blackness is thus present in the play both as colour and as a form of alterity (cf. 1.1.1, 1.1.3), even though the theme of ethnicity is developed similarly both in *Othello* and in *Titus Andronicus*. As a matter of fact, both plays present three different forms of

alterity, as one can distinguish three different groups of people in both of them: in *Titus Andronicus*, the Romans, the Goths and Aaron the Moor; in *Othello*, the Venetians, the Turks and Othello the Moor. Apart from the Goths in *Titus Andronicus* and the Turks in *Othello*, who both represent the enemies of a political order that is guaranteed either by the Romans or by the Venetians, a subversion involves other characters in both plays. Both the roles of the moor-figures, Aaron and Othello, and the roles of the white society, represented by the Romans in *Titus Andronicus* and by the Venetians in *Othello,* are subverted. Moreover, the role of the villain belongs to a black character in *Titus Andronicus*, while in *Othello* it belongs to the white character Iago. The characters of Othello and Iago represent the evolution of the dualistic characterisation of Aaron (cf. 2.2.2.2), but they also represent a subversion of Elizabethan and Jacobean social perspective on the binarism of white that equals good and black that equals evil. In early modern society, the thought about colour binarism associated the white colour with good and the black colour with evil (cf. 1.1.3). Consequently, darkness – the opposite of light – represented evil, the devil, and death. Therefore, we can conclude with Braxton's words, which summarise that in early modern society "everything black might not be evil, but anything evil could be represented as black." (210).

Conclusions

This study has shown that the binarism black skin=evil and white skin=good could be subverted in early modern English drama, as both white-skinned characters and black-skinned characters can commit horrible crimes. Also, as explained by Paster, Shakespeare's subversion of stereotypes in the choice of a black good-sided Othello and a white evil Iago deviates from the medieval union between the physical and the psychological elements (76). Characters are no more described on the base of their skin colour; they are rather connoted by their good or evil actions.

The subversion of the chromatic binarism also undermine – and thus bring about a dynamism to – the audiences' expectations. Audiences who expected to see a black character as an evil being, saw, in fact, a black character on the side of good and a white character on the side of evil. The medieval chromatic binarism is, thus, subverted and audiences' expectations can now vary. What one expected to be evil, now may be evil, but may be not as well, and what one expected to be good, now may be good, but may be not as well.

Although we can consider this as our conclusions, several are the future perspectives that this study opens. Throughout this work we talked of how the character of Lavinia is abandoned to herself after her rape and mutilation and we highlighted the presence of black people which were populating Elizabethan and Jacobean England after the beginning of the slave trade. It would prove significant to further explore how these elements could relate to contemporary theatrical treatments of these subjects.

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