

English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama

Mary Floyd-Wilson

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



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Introduction: the marginal English

DESDEMONA: . . . my noble Moor
Is true of mind, and made of no such baseness
As jealous creatures are . . .
EMILIA: Is he not jealous?
DESDEMONA: Who, he? I think the sun where he was born
Drew all such humours from him.

(*Othello*, 3. 4. 24–9)¹

Where would Desdemona get such a notion? Why does she believe that the African sun would draw out the body's humors and heated passions? Has love blinded her to the Elizabethan commonplace that hot climates create fiery temperaments?² For the most part critics of *Othello* ignore Desdemona's appraisal of the Moor's humoral complexion. And if they do acknowledge her assertion, her grasp of early modern climate theory is summarily dismissed. We are reassured that we know better: obviously Othello is jealous, and his jealousy substantiates the Renaissance stereotype of violently heated Africans.³

But do we know better? Desdemona may know more than we thought. Her statement is supported by a long line of classical, medieval, and early modern texts wherein climatic explanations of color and disposition were grounded in humoralism. Regionally inflected humoralism, reductively construed as "climate theory" by modern scholars, proves to be the dominant mode of ethnic distinctions in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.⁴ Desdemona actually appeals to two widely held early modern beliefs concerning somatic differences. First, she implies that humoral theory is the foundational knowledge for comprehending a person's disposition (if Othello lacks humors, then he must not be jealous).⁵ Here, she is most certainly correct. Second, she suggests that humoral theory is also the foundational knowledge for making ethnological distinctions (Othello's lack of humors is what distinguishes him from people of cooler climates). This, too, would have been accepted as an accurate claim, though it is less known to modern readers.⁶

Desdemona does in fact know what she is talking about. Her surprising conclusion that the heat of the African sun would dry and cool the body's humors

is a commonplace in classical, medieval, and early modern writings on regional identities. From Pseudo-Aristotle to Albertus Magnus to Jean Bodin, writers have maintained the notion, as we find it articulated here in the sixteenth-century encyclopedia *Batman uppon Bartholome*, that the heat in Africa “burneth and wasteth humours,” making the bodies cool and dry. Conversely, the cold air in the north “breedeth humours of the bodye . . . [the] vapours and spirites be smitten inward, [and] it maketh them hotter within . . .”⁷ Competing with this theory of complexions was a less popular explanation derived from Hippocrates’ unflattering portrait of the northern Scythians in *Airs, Waters, Places*, which maintained that cold air generated cold, moist bodies.⁸ Rather than one explanation simply invalidating the other, these contradictory theories of complexion were brought together in a wide range of early modern texts to produce a “scientific” ethnology that proves, at turns, both deterministic and ideologically malleable.⁹

As the quotation from *Batman uppon Bartholome* indicates, regionally framed humoralism – what I term “geohumoralism” – applies not only to Moors but to people of all climates. Derived from the classical texts of Aristotle, Galen, Vitruvius, Pliny, and others, geohumoralism, in its inception, aimed to comprehend (and estrange) the northern and southern climatic extremes that bordered the Mediterranean. The same classical tripartite scheme that constructed ancient Greece and Rome as the civilized middle between the barbaric lands north and south also determined the logic of geohumoralism. Thus, humoral temperance, like civility, was held to be attainable only in a temperate clime.¹⁰

Despite Europe’s contact with the New World, the classification of people and nations during this period still conformed to the ancient tripartite divisions of climatic regions – northern, southern, and temperate zones.¹¹ Even when latitudinal specifications shifted with the author’s native bias, the basic paradigm of a temperate middle zone and its extreme boundaries was consistently invoked in the early modern period. Ideally *moderate* complexions, in both appearance and temperament, belonged to those inhabitants of the middle, temperate region. Classical geohumoral discourse had depended on a Mediterranean-centered world and relied on a logic of inversion to characterize the north and the south.¹² As the barbaric outsiders to the *polis* or *oikumene*, white northerners and black southerners, or Scythians and Ethiopians, were paired together in intemperance but opposed in particular qualities. Yet extreme climates were also recognized for the exceptional influence they had on their inhabitants: the Scythians garnered praise for their physical strength and martial prowess, while the Ethiopians were associated with natural wisdom and spirituality. Early modern geohumoralism retains the tripartite structure and rhetoric of inversion established by Herodotus and other ancient writers, but the strengths and weaknesses of the Ethiopians and Scythians are now projected onto early modern Africans and northern Europeans.

To understand how Desdemona's invocation of this knowledge has any bearing on the ethnological tensions in *Othello*, we will need to consider the general status of geohumoralism in early modern England, which is a subject I take up in part I of the book, "Climatic culture: the transmissions and transmutations of ethnographic knowledge." While scholars have recognized the continued predominance of the Herodotan schema in early modern ethnography, they have overlooked the significance of Britain's decentered position in this paradigm.¹³ Rather than setting up a correspondence between England and the Mediterranean, sixteenth-century ethnography suggested, remarkably, identification between Britons and Africans.¹⁴ The logic of inversion fixed the white northerner and the black southerner in an interdependent relationship: if the southerner is hot and dry, then the northerner must be cold and moist; if the southerner is weak and wise, the northerner must be strong and witless.

Though its appearance in England predates the early modern period, geohumoralism gained in popularity in the sixteenth century. Geohumoral theory is outlined, for example, in the English prose writings of William Harrison, Baptist Goodall, Peter Heylyn, Fynes Moryson, Thomas Nashe, John Norden, Thomas Proctor, William Slatyer, Thomas Walkington, Thomas Wright, and in the popular English translations of texts by Juan Huarte, Levinus Lemnius, Pierre Charron, Louis Le Roy, and Jean Bodin.¹⁵ Bodin's political writing and historiography were, in particular, highly influential in England. It is his thesis in *The Six Bookes of a Commonweale* (1606) that all effective rulers must know the "diversitie of mens humors, and the meanes how to discover the nature and disposition of the people" in order to "accommodat the estate to the humor of the citisens; and the lawes and ordinances to the nature of the place, persons, and time."¹⁶ Just as a physician applies remedies that contravene the distempers of his patient, sovereign powers can institute laws that amend the particular imbalances of their country's population.

Ranging between both popular and elite sources – from the period's drama to medical texts to historiography – *English Ethnicity* intervenes in the current literary scholarship on race to disembed and recover the complex basis of Desdemona's knowledge.¹⁷ As we shall see, early modern geohumoralism contradicts many of the racial stereotypes concerning the behavior and capacities of non-English "others" that began to emerge in the early modern period. Part of the argument I take up in chapter 6, "Othello's Jealousy," is that the spectacular representation of the Moor's passions in Shakespeare's play rearranges the older geohumoral knowledge and that this rearrangement accommodates the ongoing construction of modern racial categories. But more centrally, it is my argument in that chapter and throughout *English Ethnicity* that geohumoralism is fundamental to early modern English conceptions of how their own, more northern, bodies and minds were shaped and influenced by external forces. The environment – whether that meant the air, temperature, diet, and terrain, or the

effects of education, rhetoric, or fashion – necessarily produced and destabilized early modern English selves.¹⁸

As the statement from *Batman uppon Bartholome* makes clear, Desdemona's assertion about the interaction between Africa's heat and Othello's temperament would necessarily invoke for an early modern audience the homologous tenet that the cold air in northern regions generates a body's humors. The Moor's violent metamorphosis not only does the essential cultural work of exploding a conventional (though now obscure) perception of Africans – as naturally cold and fixed in their humors – but it also, by implication, helps to revalue the northerner's natural temperament. In other words, I aim in my discussion of *Othello*, as in all my readings of early modern texts, to make plain what is at stake, ethnologically, for the English.

To comprehend the English people's understanding of ethnicity – their own and others' – we must begin with the recognition that they conceived of themselves and their island as "northern." England's northern climate and the English people's northern status colored their perspective on everything from fashion to medicine to politics.¹⁹ This is not to say simply that chilly weather compelled the English to wear wool, but that a fundamental sense of displacement – derived from the British Isles' marginalized status in a set of classical texts that were revered and considered authoritative – gave rise to the notions that their bodies were intemperate, their culture borrowed and belated, and their nature barbarous.²⁰ The English prove to be entangled in a web of geographical determinism as they grappled with their own subscription to classically derived medical theories and natural philosophy. In both imaginative and non-imaginative literature, late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English writers struggle to stabilize and rehabilitate their northern identity.

The native English investment in geohumoralism can be exemplified briefly by referring to William Harrison's characterization of the "Generall Constitution of the Bodies of the Britons" in *The Description of Britaine* (1587). Initially Harrison exalts the Britons for their northern traits: they are "white in color, strong of bodie, and full of bloud, as people inhabiting neere the north, and farrre from the equinoctiall line, where the soile is not so fruitful, and therefore the people not so feeble." His tone changes however when he concedes that the northern complexion is renowned more for its deficiencies:

And for that we dwell northward, we are commonlie taken by the forren historiographers, to be men of great strength and little policie, much courage and small shift, because of the weake abode of the sunne with us, whereby our braines are not made hot and warmed . . . affirming further, that the people inhabiting in the north parts are white of colour, blockish, uncivill, fierce and warlike, which qualities increase, as they come nearer the pole.²¹

Harrison helps us see, I propose, that to be white and British in the early modern period was not a badge of superiority but cast one instead on the margins as

uncivil, slow-witted, and more bodily determined than those people living in more temperate zones.²² Though I believe we can trace, in different spheres (economic, religious, colonial, for example), various strands of thought that enabled the eventual construction of race in the seventeenth century, my primary interest in *English Ethnicity* is how, given its unflattering implications, the period's dominant somatic discourses may have instilled in the English a desire to reassess and reconceptualize notions of regional influence and ethnological inheritance.²³ As we shall see, it works to the English people's advantage to challenge and revise a body of knowledge that depicts them as impressible, barbaric, and inversely defined by the traits and temperament of dark peoples on the other side of the world.

Forgetting Africa

Recognizing that geohumoralism was not simply a theory that explained the appearance and behavior of "others" is the first step toward reframing its historical significance. Much in the same way that Shakespearean scholars have dismissed Desdemona's knowledge, early modern scholars in general have written off the viability of "climate theory" by misconstruing it as nothing more than an erroneous explanation of blackness.²⁴ In a narrative initiated by Winthrop Jordan in his important study *White Over Black*, the argument goes that when English travelers encountered the blackness of West Africans, they were unable to accommodate what they saw with their prevailing physiological theories.²⁵ Jordan asserts that Englishmen viewed "blackness in human beings [as] a peculiar and important point of difference" which set the African "radically apart from Englishmen."²⁶ Further citing as evidence the Elizabethan travel writers' puzzlement over the existence of lighter-skinned Indians in parallel latitudes, Jordan and others have concluded that the Renaissance writers' skepticism toward climatic explanations of blackness can be attributed to the rise of Baconian empiricism.²⁷ The inherent peculiarity of black skin, it seems, produced a scientific skepticism regarding classical natural philosophy, which then led to the distinctly unscientific conclusion that dark complexions were a phenomenon that fell outside the bounds of nature.²⁸

We should recognize, however, that this narrative suppresses vital contradictions and ideological struggles. It glosses over the inherent difficulty in transforming a widely accepted conception of blackness-as-natural into something inexplicable and unnatural, and it obscures the English desire to reconceive the northerner's pale, intemperate, and marginalized complexion as civilized and temperate. There is no question that black skin *becomes* a scientific problem during this period, and once conceived as a mystery, it is the fundamentally non-scientific "Curse of Ham" which then emerges as an explanation of its origins and significance. But to attribute this conceptual shift either to bewilderment

or empiricism is to underestimate the complexity, endurance, and cultural significance of geohumoral theories of complexion. We need to acknowledge that the racial stereotypes that facilitated the Atlantic slave trade were incompatible with geohumoral tenets. Thus, England's nascent expansionist ideology helped to disrupt the accepted paradigms of scientific knowledge. Seeking to reorganize early modern ethnology along newly nationalist lines, racialist thinking estranged both blackness and whiteness (and their attendant associations) from their dominant, and far-from peculiar, homologies.²⁹

Crucial to this process of estrangement was the forgetting of Africa's ancient and venerable associations. Classical writers such as Diodorus, for example, had viewed the Ethiopians as wise and extremely pious "first begotten of the earth," and this perspective lingered on in the abiding cultural belief that the African climate had given rise to their favored status.³⁰ During the Italian Renaissance there had been, we should note, explicit connections made between external blackness and Egyptian wisdom.³¹ Hence the "revival of Platonism and Neoplatonism," as Karl Dannenfeldt has observed, "enhanced the role of Egypt as the original land of theologians and philosophers."³² As I shall demonstrate in chapter 3, "An inside story of race: melancholy and ethnology," early modern geohumoralism associated the blackness produced by hot climates with prophecy and genial melancholy. Despite their reputed savagery, West Africans were not initially perceived as different in kind, but in terms of the more familiar Moors, Ethiopians, and Egyptians.³³ In *The Second Voyage to Guinea* (1554) for example, Robert Gainsh links the West Africans to North Africa and Ethiopia: "the people which now inhabite" the western coast, as well as in "the midle parts of Africa, as Libya the inner, and Nubia, with divers other great & large regions about the same, were in old time called Aethiopes and Nigritæ, which we now call Moores, Moorens, or Negroes, a people of beastly living . . ."³⁴ The implication is that the "old time" Ethiopians have degenerated into beastly "Negroes." Indeed, it was this residual sense of Africa as an ancient civilization that gave shape to the English writers' ambivalent construction of blackness as both noble and monstrous, civil and barbaric. Thus Othello can be both an "old black ram" and a noble Moor. And as the Atlantic slave trade gained momentum, Europeans began to deny Africa its place in classical history, and they accomplished this in part by establishing a fixed boundary between North and West Africa.³⁵

I think we would do well to unsettle Jordan's thesis that blackness set Africans "radically *apart* from Englishmen." As I have begun to suggest, the tripartite structure of geohumoralism not only estranged northern whiteness and southern blackness but it also tended to intertwine the two as inversions of the other. We can see this plainly in William Harrison's portrait of his own countrymen, wherein he characterizes the bodies of the Britons by describing their dark southern counterparts. Unlike the Britons, the people living near the equator

are warmed by the sun and possess the “contrarie gifts” of “blacknesse, wisdom, civilitie, weakenesse, and cowardise.” Indeed, it is the Britons’ inverse, or “contrarie,” relationship with the Africans that compels Harrison to reinterpret the southerner’s natural traits as corrupted qualities, declaring that these “gifts of theirs doo often degenerate into meere subtiltie, instabilitie, unfaithfulness, & crueltie.”³⁶ Harrison’s portrait of the early Britons illustrates how the classical tripartite structure is translated into an English binary of the northern self and the southern Other. Yet we must not confuse this binary relationship with the familiar racial hierarchy of “white over black.” In modern racial binaries, the white “self” derives an assumed sense of stability and superiority from fixed, hierarchical categories of difference. For Harrison and his fellow countrymen, Britain’s northern location excluded its inhabitants from the superiority of temperance and moderation and positioned them as “other” to the normative middle. Moreover, the strange intimacy implied by the repeated pairing of northerners and southerners in geohumoral discourse makes objectifying and demonizing the darker “other” a deeply ambiguous impulse in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Since blackness reflected the northerner’s intemperance, its representation not only elicited fear and condemnation but also the Englishman’s desire to appropriate and incorporate the properties of a southern complexion. As I discuss in chapter 3, England’s late sixteenth-century vogue of melancholia serves as a prime example of the northern nation’s ambivalence toward a temperament recognized by many to be indigenous to the south; while some northerners aimed to cultivate the inward blackness of melancholy, others condemned its appearance in England as a foreign affectation or infection.

In making his argument that blackness struck English travelers as both novel and inexplicable, Jordan turns again to Hakluyt’s report of Robert Gainsh’s account of the second voyage to Guinea (1554), which stands as one of the earliest records of England’s involvement in the Atlantic slave trade. Gainsh provides a description of black slaves that employs the rhetoric of inversion that we saw in Harrison, but to highly different ends:

[The English voyagers] brought with them certaine blacke slaves, whereof some were tall and strong men, and could wel agree with our meates and drinks. The colde and moyst aire doth somewhat offend them. Yet doubtlesse men that are borne in hot Regions may better abide colde, then men that are borne in colde Regions may abide heate, forasmuch as vehement heate resolveth the radicall moysture of mens bodies, as colde constraineth and preserveth the same.³⁷

It is not my intention to minimize the odious nature of this writer’s intentions in assessing the value of the “black slaves,” but I do want to suggest that this appeal to geohumoralism indicates not only a surprising familiarity with dark complexions but also some anxiety about the northern body’s vulnerabilities. Interest in how northern “meates and drinks” may “offend” the African’s complexion

echoes the advice manuals of the period, which dwell on the Englishman's notorious susceptibility to the effects of travel.³⁸ Certainly, the author's reflexive consideration of northern bodies is overshadowed by what appears to be a crude estimation of the slaves' prospective value as laborers, but this too is framed by the inverted logic of geohumoralism: the "tall and strong men" receive greater scrutiny not simply for the intrinsic value of strength and height but also for the compatibility between "tall and strong men" and English "meates and drinks." Geohumoral tenets held that northerners were physically hearty and well-nourished by their equally hearty native diets; southern air, meat, and drinks, on the other hand, were noted for producing weak, but wise inhabitants. Ironically, the English observer presumes that those black slaves who reflect the Englishman's alleged body type will prove to be the more adaptable and worthy investments. In short, this encounter should not be read as an awakening of empiricism or scientific curiosity but as a reshuffling of old knowledge under new pressures.

Where geohumoralism and empiricism seem to collide most dramatically for modern scholars and early modern skeptics is when faced with the facts that blackness remained black in colder climates and could be transmitted from parent to child. The most frequently cited text in historical accounts of early modern racialism in England, George Best's *A True Discourse* (1578), raises these very points to assert that blackness should not be ascribed to environmental forces:

I my selfe have seene an Ethiopian as blacke as a cole brought into England, who taking a faire English woman to wife, begat a sonne in all respects as blacke as the father was, although England were his native cuntry, and an English woman his mother: whereby it seemeth this blacknes proceedeth rather of some natural infection of that man, which was so strong, that neither the nature of the Clime, neither the good complexion of the mother concurring, coulde any thing alter, and therefore, wee cannot impute it to the nature of the Clime . . . And the most probable cause to my judgement is, that this blacknesse proceedeth of some naturall infection of the first inhabitants of that Country, and so all the whole progenie of them descended, are still polluted with the same blot of infection.³⁹

Though scholars have long focused on the incipient racism of Best's argument, which appears fairly obvious, they have neglected to appreciate his immediate motives for identifying blackness as a "natural infection."⁴⁰ Best, we should understand, is contributing to a genre of promotional tracts aimed at persuading the English that they would not be ineluctably altered by moving to and residing in a foreign climate. However troubling their native environment was perceived to be, travel, it was understood, exacerbated the English people's imperfections.⁴¹ In 1585, for example, the Barbary Company attempted to reassure English representatives bound for Morocco that the country's air "is as holsome as can be, and yourself not altered neither in favor nor person,

but helthful and in as good likinge as you were at your departure.” But at least one ambassador, Henry Roberts, was purported to be “undon by the unaturall clyment in that countrie.”⁴² Addressing the “Merchants of London,” Best argues aggressively that Africa is an “earthly Paradise” where English travelers can easily “abide the heat.”⁴³ Observing that the cold air in England threatens “injury” (which is why the English natives must wear “so many clothes”), Best maintains that Africa is more temperate than England.⁴⁴ Thus, Best embraces the basic principles of geohumoralism, conceding that a “certeine agreement of nature . . . [exists] betweene the place and the thing bred in that place,” but he also recognizes that the English people’s fears of their own vulnerability may be assuaged by interpreting blackness as anomalous and peculiar.⁴⁵

Though it works to Best’s advantage to cast blackness as an infection, and thereby as a phenomenon unrelated to the effects of the environment, many of Best’s contemporaries had little trouble reconciling the transmission of traits with geohumoral influences.⁴⁶ Reaching more audiences than Best’s *Discourse*, for example, was Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* (1594), wherein the pairing of Aaron the Moor and Tamora the Goth produce a dark-skinned baby while in Rome. Significantly, the play makes clear that the child’s blackness was not presumed to be an inevitability. As Aaron is heard to explain, if the “bull and cow are both milk-white / They never do beget a coal-black calf” (5. 1. 31–2), but when one parent is white and the other black, Nature might give the baby his father’s or his “mother’s look” (line 29). In fact, Aaron’s own “countryman” Muliteus and his light-skinned wife have also had a baby in Rome, and “[h]is child is like to her, fair as [the Goths] are” (4. 2. 152–4). Aaron’s skin color or “seal” may be stamped in the baby’s face (line 69) but if Tamora’s “seed” had been dominant, the child would have resembled his mother. Climate determines the color and temperament of general populations, but the transmission of traits also depends on the parents.⁴⁷

These are the conclusions of Spanish physician Juan Huarte in his treatise on humoralism and education, *The Examination of Men’s Wits* (1594).⁴⁸ What Best had identified as a “natural infection,” Huarte terms a “rooted quality.” Though a people’s shared humoral complexion is shaped by their native environment, these circumstances still allow for certain traits – or rooted qualities – to pass from parent to child. It remains indisputable, Huarte observes, that over very long periods of time people become “conformable to the country where they inhabited, to the meats which they fed upon, to the waters which they dranke, & to the aire which they breathed.” But once the environment has produced certain ingrained characteristics, generations of descendants are able to maintain and transmit these same traits even when residing outside their ancestral region (p. 195). Notably, it is the dark skin and admirable wisdom of the Egyptians that stands as Huarte’s most powerful example:

though 200 yeares have passed . . . sithens the first Aegyptians came out of Aegypt into Spaine, yet their posterite have not forlorne that their delicacie of wit and promptnesse, nor yet that rosted colour which their auncestors brought with them from Aegypt.

Just as the Moors may “communicate the colour of their elders, by means of their seed, though they be out of Aethiopia,” so does “the force of mans seed . . . receiveth thereinto any well rooted qualitie” (p. 199). Moreover, Huarte explains, blackness is not the only quality that may prove “well rooted”:

in the engendering of a creature, two seedes should concurre; which being mingled, the mightier should make the forming and the other serve for nourishment. And this is seen evidently so to be: for if a blackamore beget a white woman with child, & a white man a *negro* woman, of both these unions, wil be borne a creature, partaking of either qualitie. (p. 316)⁴⁹

We must keep in mind, I submit, that in rejecting the possibility that blackness is a consequence of the kind of geohumoral effects that Huarte describes, George Best not only reframed the African’s complexion as a scientific mystery, but he also swept away an inherited knowledge that had long identified blackness with wisdom and constancy. Notoriously, Best displaced geohumoralism with a unique exegesis of Genesis, so as to attribute black skin to the “Curse of Ham.”⁵⁰

As historian Benjamin Braude has demonstrated, the curse of Ham – as an explanation of blackness – had not yet become a dominant cultural belief at the time of George Best’s writing.⁵¹ A quick survey of the editorial changes to Peter Heylyn’s geographical survey, *Microcosmos*, attests to its growing popularity during the seventeenth century: the 1621 edition makes no mention of the curse; in 1627, the text introduces the explanation as a “foolish tale,” but by 1666, it tentatively endorses the legend.⁵² What the Hametic curse provides for western critics today, and provided for European authors in the past, is a simplification of the meaning of blackness: blackness signifies sin and servitude. As Jordan has observed, “it is suggestive that the first Christian utilizations of this theme came during the sixteenth century – the first great century of overseas exploration,” as well as the first century of England’s involvement in the Atlantic slave trade.⁵³ It is also important to recognize that its emergence during this period worked in tandem with ideological erasures taking place in more “scientific” discourses. As natural philosophy shifted the focus away from theories of color variation to the mystery of blackness, religious discourse responded with a scriptural explanation of that mystery. Dislodged from the realm of natural “science” and its association with humoralism, blackness was reinvented as a sign of inferiority to justify a growing slave economy.

It was only during the early modern period that writers began to trace Ham’s lineage strictly to Africa.⁵⁴ Indeed, as late as 1548, the links between Noah’s sons and particular regions were tentative enough for John Bale to trace the ancestral line of “Albion,” King of Britain, to Ham in his 1548 catalogue of

British authors.⁵⁵ And apparently this genealogy was not as outlandish as it might seem to us: as Denys Hay explains, “There were two quite contrary accounts of the origin of the British” in the medieval text *Historia Britonum*:

One of these represents Brutus, the eponymous founder of the Britains, as descended from Ham; the other as descended from Japheth. The generations are traced back in the first case to Silvius (Brutus’s father), who was the son of Aeneas and descended from Jupiter and Saturn, themselves deriving from Zoroaster the grandson of Ham.⁵⁶

Modern attachments to the myths of racial lineage have made it difficult for us to recognize the global fluidity of sixteenth-century British genealogies. In one version of *A View of the State of Ireland*, for example, Edmund Spenser suggests that the Irish have Carthaginian roots. In a similar vein, the Scots countered England’s Brut mythography with their own claim to an Egyptian ancestry. And the antiquarian John Twynne argued that the Welsh were descendants of the dark-skinned Phoenicians. As Twynne explains it, Britain’s northern climate had lightened the skin of subsequent generations, yet their long-held custom of painting themselves denoted their southern lineage.⁵⁷

There is no question that Best’s *Discourse* provides a dramatic example of how Europe’s growing investment in the Atlantic slave trade was inextricably tied to the early modern construction of race. Moreover, his text is part of a long tradition of negative associations with blackness – particularly in the discourses of religion and aesthetics – associations that would become crucial matter in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century constructions of the racialized “other.”⁵⁸ But these issues, which have been ably demonstrated by others, are not the subject of my study. I am, instead, interested in heeding Emily Bartels’s reminder of

how experimental and disjointed England’s overseas activities were, how fractured its visions and random its advances. The instance of Africa . . . makes us question the predictability and inevitability of the outcome – the long history of oppression that was, when viewed through what preceded, not always in the cards.⁵⁹

In focusing on England’s eventual commitment to the Atlantic slave trade and on those aspects of early modern discourse that subjugated Africans, denigrated blackness, and helped to naturalize a link between color and slavery, we have overlooked an ethnological history that failed to predict the outcome that we now know. *English Ethnicity* resists recapitulating the accession of white over black. It attempts instead to retrieve the counterintuitive notions of ethnicity and “race” that the now-dominant narrative of oppression aimed to erase: the representations of northern “whiteness” and English identity as barbaric, marginalized, and mutable, and the long-neglected perceptions of “blackness” as a sign of wisdom, spirituality, and resolution. Readings that ignore such expressions of ethnic and racial differences risk confirming, rather than historicizing, the normative status of whiteness and Englishness.

Northern perspectives

It is my argument in the first half of this book that in sixteenth-century England humoralism is ethnology. Estranged and marginalized from the middle, temperate climate of the Mediterranean, the English were compelled to interpret their classically derived natural philosophy from a northern perspective. Medical advice in Thomas Cogan's *The Haven of Helthe* (1584), for example, is filtered through the understanding that England has a cold, moist climate. In the preface to *The Passions of the Minde in Generall* (1604) – a handbook on rhetoric and the management of one's emotions – Thomas Wright advises his countrymen to use his book to ameliorate their northern inclinations.⁶⁰ And, as we shall see, English efforts to reconstruct their own ethnic identity as the norm is what helps elevate the sanguine complexion to its ideal – but markedly regionalized – status in the Renaissance.⁶¹

In reading early modern humoral discourse as culturally inscribed with ethnic interests, I am following the model of Gail Kern Paster's work, which has shown that humoral texts are never socially neutral but deeply inflected with narratives of gender and class distinctions. In much the same way, the larger framework of geohumoralism is organized by the hierarchies of gender and class.⁶² The tripartite mapping of northern, southern, and temperate zones establishes correspondences between temperance, masculinity, and good governors. Laborers and effeminate men prosper in the extreme regions. Indeed, much of England's anxiety regarding geohumoralism stemmed from the troubling implications it brought to bear on English constructions of the elite male. When read through the grid of classical gender distinctions, the northerner's fleshiness, fluidity, temperature, and even color could be cast in feminine, or barbaric, or other socially subordinate terms. It mattered, for example, that the ideal somatic type for the male in classical Roman culture was "*inter nigrum et pallidum*" and that a "pale, white skin in a male indicated a lack of manliness."⁶³

Distinct from modern racial thinking, which relies on fixed categories and a fixed hierarchy, early modern ethnology values the good of *temperance* – an elusive, but theoretically achievable, balance of humors. There is a crucial correspondence, I maintain, between the elusiveness of ethnological temperance – the ideally moderate, humorally balanced complexion that the English lacked and coveted – and the precarious balancing act of elite male identity. Paster has illustrated that there was "small sanction within the codes of humoral masculinity for the cold male and even less sanction within humoralism in general for the choleric or sanguine woman."⁶⁴ But, in fact, the contradictions and conflicts in early modern humoralism indicate that none of the four complexions could ensure a stable masculine subject. To embody and express masculinity successfully, the classical ideal male must sustain *crasis* or temperance, a harmonious

mixture of all four qualities, warm, cold, dry, and moist.⁶⁵ Masculinity and social superiority, maintained by temperance, could be undone by the predominance of any one humor. Even within temperate regions, minor “differences of style of life, climate and diet” produced puzzling questions, for example, about the body’s gendered identity, such as whether the “hottest female is colder than the coldest male.”⁶⁶ Once translated to the north and south, however, the conflicts in the discourse were exacerbated. On a local level, English gentlemen would work to distinguish themselves from women and the lower orders as more temperate and self-contained, but on the world stage, they found themselves characterized as excessively pale, moist, soft-fleshed, inconstant, and permeable.⁶⁷ The English, in a geohumoral context, were defined by intemperance.

We would do well to remember that Pico della Mirandola’s famous affirmation of the Renaissance man’s freedom and exceptionality, his ability to fashion himself “in whatever shape [he] shalt prefer,” is premised on a cosmic order which places man “at the world’s center that [he] mayest from thence more easily observe whatever is in the world.”⁶⁸ Thus, before the Renaissance *Englishman* could fashion himself “in whatever shape” he preferred, he first had to counter or accommodate the effects of his placement at the world’s edge. Much of *English Ethnicity* is concerned with revealing and exploring how the English sought to rectify their marginal status, and it is my argument that these efforts took two basic, sometimes contradictory, forms: (1) a discursive rearrangement of the inherited knowledge, which aimed, for example, to locate value in “northernness”; (2) a manipulation of a whole range of environmental influences (from diet to education to fashion) that aimed to alter or remedy “northernness.”

Turning once again to William Harrison’s discussion in *The Description of Britaine* (1587) of the Britons’ natural “constitution,” we find an apt example of what I mean by discursive rearrangement. It is in Harrison’s interest to establish the ultimate virtue and strength of his own people’s complexion and to detach white, northern complexions from their “uncivil” and “blockish” associations. Rather than suggesting that the Britons should change themselves, Harrison chooses, instead, to defend humoral excesses:

by this meanes therefore it commeth to passe, that he whose nature inclineth generallie to phlegme, cannot but be courteous: which joined with strength of bodie, and sinceritie of behavior (qualities universallie granted to remaine so well in our nation, as other inhabitants of the north) I cannot see what may be an hinderance whie I should not rather conclude, that the Britons doo excell such as dwell in the hotter countries, than for want of craft and subtilties to come anie whit behind them.⁶⁹

What proves comic here, of course, is that phlegm carries few, if any, positive qualities in humoral discourse. Though he makes a valiant effort, Harrison’s attempt to invest phlegm – a traditionally weak and effeminate humor – with

“courtesy” and “sinceritie” was one of many failed tactics in the ongoing construction of Englishness.⁷⁰

As I demonstrate in chapter 2, “British Ethnology,” the question of how to remedy, reform, or regenerate their native complexion was a point of controversy for the early modern English. A treatise published in England in 1591 advocated a cathartic method, advising northerners to purge the “grosse humour ingendred in them, by reason of the grossness and coldnes of the aier.”⁷¹ In *The Passions of the Minde in Generall* (1604), Thomas Wright entreated his countrymen to bolster their protean and vulnerable natures by judiciously adopting a kind of “southern” wariness in their carriage. In a similar vein, John Milton urged his nation to temper their northern excesses and “natural political deficiencies” by “import[ing] civil virtues from the ‘best ages’ and those situated in more favorable climates.”⁷² Those following in the footsteps of Roger Ascham’s *The Scholemaster* (1570), however, proved concerned that the Englishman’s impressible nature (and naturally spongy brain!) would lead him to absorb foreign vice indiscriminately.⁷³ In *The English Ape* (1588), for example, William Rankins maintains that his countrymen had been created “perfect” by their climate but their incessant importation of foreign customs and fashions had succeeded in tainting their innately malleable complexions. Travel, education, literature, government, religion, diet, custom, fashion, and the theater were all cited in the early modern period as sources of both remedy and further corruption in the Englishman’s pursuit of a temperance that belied his natural complexion.

We may be compelled to ask at this point why England had become so acutely aware of its northern identity in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Kim F. Hall recently attributed the development of “racialism” during this period to England’s loss of “its traditional insularity” as it moved from “geographic isolation into military and mercantile contest with other countries.”⁷⁴ Yet at the same time that England became more of a presence internationally, the nation’s symbolic ties to the Mediterranean – the perceived center of the world – were severed by its break with Rome. In addition to a realignment of theological and political affiliations, the Reformation compelled England to imagine its identity in terms of detachment and division from the center.⁷⁵ In various ways Elizabethan and Jacobean England continued to understand its historical significance through Rome and Roman values, but the British people’s status as northerners became increasingly important – as a source of both anxiety and pride.

When the Reformation ignited interest in the origins of the English church, it also turned the focus of English historiography northward. Early modern scholars such as William Camden did not simply reject Geoffrey of Monmouth’s fiction that the Britons were descendants of ancient Troy, they looked to Caesar’s *Commentaries on the Gallic War* as the official beginning of Britain’s recorded

history, and this shift in historiography emphasized the northern barbarity of Britain's origins.⁷⁶ Jean Bodin's *Methodus*, the influential guide to historiographic writing in the sixteenth century, classified all northerners – be they Picts, Scots, Celts, Goths, or Britons – as Scythians; they shared a climate, a genealogy, and a set of barbaric traits associated with the classical northern stereotype.

As descendants of Troy, the Britons had claimed a noble lineage, which could be accommodated to the traditional terms of classical ethnography: as Giraldus Cambrensis explained, the “Britons . . . transplanted from the hot and parched regions . . . still retain their brown complexion and that natural warmth of temper from which their confidence is derived . . . from thence arose that courage, that nobleness of mind, that ancient dignity, that acuteness of understanding.”⁷⁷ Thus, the warm Mediterranean climate had implanted the Trojans' innate virtues, which succeeding generations maintained despite Britain's northern environment. By tracing its earliest ancestors to the Mediterranean, England's myth of a Trojan genealogy had circumvented the embarrassments of a northern descent. But as the myth rapidly lost ground, English writers were compelled to acknowledge the implications of their barbaric ancestry.⁷⁸

While faith in the westward and northward translation of empire was eased by the Trojan mythography, the Englishman's autochthonous roots constituted a more estranged relationship with the classical world and humanist studies. The northern appropriation of Mediterranean texts and values also carried the terms of England's displacement from the center of the world. For if the English no longer see themselves as descendants of Troy, it is the classical portraits of northerners, rather than Mediterraneans, who come to represent the English people's ancestral roots. What Camden and his followers found in the classical texts were accounts of northern savagery that proved indistinguishable from the descriptions of barbarians in the south – particularly when it came to sexual mores. In *Forms of Nationhood* Richard Helgerson turned our attention to the Elizabethan writers' efforts to purge or transform the perceived barbarism of their own language and laws, but his analysis also gestures toward the deeper cultural fear that the “English nature [itself was] unalterably resistant to the nurture of civility.”⁷⁹ In facing their northern roots, the English confronted the possibility that they were the barbaric progeny of a dissolute, mingled, and intemperate race.

Without the British myth attesting to England's inherent nobility, William Camden made the argument that the English people's native barbarism had been purged by the Roman conquest. In this context, the English could still lay claim to civility – but not an innate civility. Whereas the Brut mythography had allowed the Britons some identification with the greatness of their conquerors, Camden's narrative tells the story of domestic barbarism extirpated by the triumph of a foreign civilization. Submission to an alien authority supplanted a

glorious ancestry. Camden implies further that, in addition to martial prowess and bodily strength, the need for subjugation and reformation may also be intrinsic to the northerner's natural complexion. At the same time, his account suggests that the English people may be predisposed to embracing foreign cultures. In other words, the historical perspective of Camden's *Britannia*, in which the horizontal transplantation of customs and culture may, or may not, redress the lineal transmission of ignoble traits – this perspective can be construed as a framework to the local controversies over fashion, travel, and diet.⁸⁰ Faced with the uncertain implications of an obscure past, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English writers struggled with the possibility that their countrymen were exceedingly impressionable, a quality that promised either their salvation or their ruin.

Northern "racialism," I contend, emerged in part out of a desire to relocate and secure the generative sources of greatness, and the first impulse toward the construction of an English race manifests itself in the form of philobarbarism. Rather than lamenting the deficiencies of the northern subject, English writers began to embrace the stereotype. We can even detect in Edmund Spenser's condemnation of the Irish-Scythians a grudging admiration of their northern barbarism: "very valiaunt, and hardie, for the most part great indurers of colde, labour, hunger, and all hardnesse, very active and strong of hand, very swift of foot..."⁸¹ To cite a crucial example in the history of racial construction, Richard Verstegan's *A Restitution of Decayed Intelligence* (1605), renowned for its argument that the English are primarily descended from the Saxons, reveals the racialist bias of philobarbarism.

In privileging Tacitus over Caesar as the primary classical source of English genealogy, Verstegan aims to establish two significant points: (1) the English are not the progeny of Caesar's promiscuous and mingled Britons; (2) the heroic qualities of the Germans necessarily repudiate the less flattering tenets of climate theory.⁸² Verstegan emphasizes Tacitus' praise of the Germanic northern tribes for their chastity and ethnic purity. These ancient Germans were never subdued, they remained "unmixed with forrain people" and "that of all barbarous people, they only did content themselves one man with one woman."⁸³ Yet geohumoralism threatens to undermine Verstegan's construction of Germanic virtue :

And as touching the knowledge of the people, what learning or skil is there among men that they [the Germans] exceed not in? It is a meer imaginarie suposal, to think that the temperature of the ayr of any region, doth make the inhabitants more or lesse learned or ingenious. . . . I do confesse that certain nations have certain vertues & vices more apparently proper to them then to others, but this is not to bee understood otherwise to proceed, then of some successive or heritable custome remaning among them, the case concerning learning and scyence beeing far different: for where was there ever more learning and scyence then in Greece, and where is there now in the world more

barbarisme? What moste excellently learned men, & great doctors of the Churche, hath Africa brought forth, as Tertulian, Optatus, Lanctantius, S. Cyprian, and S. Augustyn? And with what learned men is Africa in our tyme acquainted? Contrariwise in the flowrishing dayes of the Romans, how utterly without the knowledge of letters, scyences and artes, were the Germans; and how do the Germans now a dayes flowrish in all learning and cunning.⁸⁴

That Verstegan feels the need to make this impassioned refutation of traditional climate theory reveals the degree to which the temperature of the air was perceived to determine English identity. Shedding the tripartite structure of geohumoral discourse, however, does not prove easy: by insisting that the decline of southern greatness confirms its emergence in the north, Verstegan still relies on the logic of geohumoralism. Yet his text also registers the first stirrings of an English identity that is both “peculiar” and “pure” – hence, racialized. He essentializes the English people’s northern nature by detaching them from the less flattering, and more unsettling, effects of a cold, harsh climate.⁸⁵

It is significant that Verstegan’s historiographical “discovery” of England’s Germanic origins emerged amidst the ethnic tensions of the Jacobean union project. In chapter 7 I consider how Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* is framed by these concerns. Performed around 1610, when Camden first published an English translation of *Britannia* and informed by Camden’s revisionary historiography, *Cymbeline* spins out an ethnological fantasy in which the Scots submit to Anglo-British rule and the English emerge as a race bolstered by their climate but unaffected by Britain’s early history of mingled genealogies and military defeats. The embrace of Posthumus promises a unified Britain and a civilized Scotland, but the rediscovery of Arviragus and Guiderius – who prove to be the Saxon branches – provides the English with a “racially” pure ancestry.

As a rather dubious pastime of “civilization,” the English theatre became a lightning rod for the ethnological concerns that I have outlined here. It is my contention that the prominent dramatists of the period, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and William Shakespeare, were all profoundly engaged not only in the discursive rearrangement of classical geohumoralism – as my arguments regarding both *Othello* and *Cymbeline* should indicate – but also in theatre’s potential for tempering or corrupting the northerner’s humors. The multivalent nature of theatrical power nourished and fed on the English people’s perception of their natural complexion as defective, in need of amelioration, and exceedingly susceptible to all kinds of external influences, from the heat of rhetoric to the chill of their own climate.⁸⁶

As Thomas Wright suggests in *The Passions of the Minde in Generall* (1604), the English people’s proclivity for fashion, aping, and imitation made them not unlike “Stage-players.”⁸⁷ And yet, Wright himself would draw a distinction, I

propose, between the English people's susceptibility to imitation and the subtle southerner's capacity (as he is characterized in Wright's preface) to "dissemble better his owne passions, and use himselfe therein more circumspectly."⁸⁸ At first glance we might mistake both these figures for an empowered Proteus – that sometimes positive icon of Renaissance aspirations that Jonas Barish describes in *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* – but the constitutional difference between the Italian and the northern Englishman marks a crucial boundary between those shape-shifters who are "directing [their] own transformations" and those who are "passively submitting to them."⁸⁹ My fourth chapter, "*Tamburlaine* and the Staging of White Barbarity," takes up the problem of English impressibility as it is censured by the period's anti-theatricalists. Critics of the English playhouses, I argue, express nostalgia for the hearty, tough complexions of their barbaric "Scythian" ancestors, and they identify the theatre, in particular, as a source of their nation's current state of softness and vulnerability. By staging a barbaric Scythian hero, Christopher Marlowe not only taps into the ethnological anxieties of the period, but he also transforms the anti-theatrical ideal – the hardened Scythian soldier – into the epitome of theatricality.

Though we can, as Barish has done, easily discern anti-theatrical prejudices in Ben Jonson's writings, we should also recognize that Jonson took seriously the theatre's power for remedy and humoral reform. In chapter 5 "Temperature and Temperance in Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness*," I suggest that Jonson wrote his first masque for the Jacobean court with dual motives: to fasten his theatrical forces to the King's capacity as governor to temper his unruly citizens and to offer up a mythopoetic remedy to the vulnerabilities associated with northern complexions. Upon King James' accession in 1603, the proposed union with Scotland threatened to remove the English nation further north and further away from the civility of temperance. By foregrounding the subject of "complexion" in relation to the geohumoral component of King James' political theory and the Scottish claim to southern origins, Jonson aims to redress the inherent barbarism of England's northern neighbors. *The Masque of Blackness*, like *Othello*, is on the cusp – between older ethnological values and emergent racial ones. Though we have recognized an incipient racialism in the Ethiopians' quest for a physical metamorphosis from black to white, we have missed how the masque also equates the transmission of ancient wisdom northward – from Ethiopia to Egypt to Britannia – with the incorporation of internal blackness.

It should strike us as more than a coincidence that external "blackness" is severed from the positive effects of the southern climate and reinterpreted as a sign of depravity at the same time that the English people's northern roots are the subject of great scrutiny. Just as the English were coming to terms with their own inherent barbarism, their contact with other "barbarians" increased. We need to reinterpret the Englishmen's encounters in West Africa with the

understanding that their own sense of whiteness and ethnicity was in flux. And we need to recognize how the erasure of Africa from the civilized world, and the reinterpretation of “blackness” as monstrous and unnatural, allowed for the construction of a European race that united a wide range of colors and complexions under an invisible badge of inherited superiority. *English Ethnicity* aims to recover Desdemona’s knowledge, but more than that, this book seeks to understand how and why Desdemona came to be proven wrong.