

Preface

The focus of this book is the perception, transmission and representation of the *Other* in the culture and society of the Sixteenth and early Seventeenth century England, and whether a nascent national English identity could be the background of such representations in Renaissance drama.

The term *Other* is generally used to include individuals considered or imagined *different* by reference to their origins, gender, culture, politics, religion and language. In this essay it refers more properly to any foreigner, outsider, alien or newly arrived to whom past generations compared themselves, excluding or marginalizing the foreigner because of skin colour, costumes and traditions, or to any identity perceived *as such*.

The concept of *otherness* and the theme of *social exclusion* is explored by the author by perusing some of the most representative documents and literary texts written during a long period from the ancient Greek to the Roman era, and from the Middle Ages to the Elizabethan period.

The investigation she conducted with experienced criticism and wide cultural vision concerns an extremely topical and sensitive issue relevant today in the geo-political context of our millennium marked by an increasing and, to many, also a threatening globalization. As we know, society today is being asked to reflect seriously on the phenomenon of migration and social integration, taking important decisions and political actions in domestic as well as in foreign territories. Large population flows affect, modify and continuously reshape the responses of Western countries and geographical areas where economies are more advanced and welfare support more widespread.

Starting from some interesting *case studies* - the *Persae* by Aeschilus, *Medea* and *Troades* by Euripides - this essay offers an extensive analysis of the perception of the *Other* or the Barbarian in past centuries, and of the need of people to define their political and social identity *by difference*. It aims to examine, understand and review behavioural models, prejudices and stereotypes which come to light in the texts of the selected historical age. Interpretation of such texts

according to pre-existing social schemes, traditions and canons is, of course, fundamental.

What emerges from this research is that the modalities and approaches which humanity adopted then to assess the *Other* do not seem significantly changed from that time to this.

Taking into consideration the phenomenon of exclusion and other similar forms of response to the *Other*, Stephen Greenblatt has observed in *The Norton Shakespeare* 1997 edition that communities learned from early times to define *who they are* by comparison with the *Other*, and establish *who they are* by reference to *who (or what) they are not*.

Our need to define ourselves today still pushes us to clarify our cultural identity negatively by setting up models of binary opposition with the *Other*. If in the past we see the typical *je versus autres* model placing together contrasting concepts such as *black* and *white*, *primitive* and *civilized*, *Pagan* and *Christian*, *Barbarian* and *Roman*, *Eastern* and *Western*, *Muslim* and *Christian*, today this model plays out in contemporary responses to refugee migration, as many define their own identity by excluding or marginalizing another's.

This insight into human behaviour opens up numerous paths to interpretation of literary texts and historical documents from an anthropological, political and cultural point of view. Loretta Johnson does this with originality, keen observations and critical sense by investigating and analyzing the issue of the perception and exclusion of the *Other* in two plays by William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus* (1594) and *Othello* (c. 1603-1604). In her historical overview she also examines the most significant, previous dramatic productions of the Elizabethan period, which provide examples of similar treatments. We refer in particular to Thomas Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1589), George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (c. 1589), Christopher Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta* (c. 1589-1590) and Thomas Dekker's *Lust's Dominion* (c. 1600).

In Shakespeare's earliest play, *Titus Andronicus*, the archetypal barbarians - a black Moor and a female Goth - are represented from the beginning as emblematic foreigners, and *as such* considered a threat to the Roman city, Roman family and Roman polity, a virtual source of both pollution and transgression.

Although Shakespeare transforms and switches the social and ethnic hierarchies in the racially and ethnically diverse group he assembles on the stage, and Roman behaviour is frequently less noble and civil than we expected, the portrayals of the strangers appear ambiguous and unstable throughout the play. They leave undetermined the position of the playwright toward social differences, racial prejudices and traditional stereotypes as the two characters add a new, unexpected dimension to the standard binary model of “us and them”.

Written about ten years later, *Othello* conveys a different model of social attitudes towards the foreigner from that in *Titus Andronicus*. Even as Shakespeare explores the *Other* as a black in this tragedy, surprisingly, the foreigner embodies all the qualities which are traditionally attributed to a civilized white man.

The protagonist of the tragedy possesses not only eloquent and rhetorical skills, but he also appears noble, courageous, praiseworthy and, in many circumstances, sensible and wise. The symbolic chromatic signifiers of evil that traditionally represent the black race as wild and frightful are completely subverted in the play by Othello’s physical aspect, his altruism and generosity to his neighbour, and by his total lack of malice. Othello’s character is a surprising and destabilizing counterpoint to the traditional, accepted portrayal of the foreigner. As Loretta Johnson affirms, in this play “the boundaries between barbarian ‘black’ behaviour and civilized ‘white’ values are not merely blurred or opposed. They are ‘crossed over’ in a chiasmic process that equivocates any appropriation of the ‘other’ as a cultural validation for nation-creation”. In Shakespeare’s hands the black Moor becomes indeed a civil, urbane “white” man, and the cultural concept of *black inferior to white* is changed to *black equivalent to white*, or in some cases subverted as *black superior to white*.

By offering a historical and cultural survey this essay also explores some of the most representative travel writings of the English Renaissance including John Leo’s *A Geographical Historie of Africa* (1600), Richard Knolles’ *The Generall Historie of the Turkes* (1603), as well as chronicles, pageantrics, paintings, cartography and maps, in particular Christopher Saxton’s *Atlas of the Counties of England* (c. 1579). These paratextual representations emphasize the function of the royal

court and of the sovereign as the highest representative of political institutions and a rising nation through rich illustration, iconic and symbolic representation.

The circulation of many new printed texts in vernacular languages was another cultural factor contributing to the apparent rise of a national consciousness in Europe. This social and cultural phenomenon revealed the image of a national community in England and led individuals to define themselves *by difference*. Cultural differences based, for many centuries, on communication through *listening and speaking* gradually developed into a cultural cohesion based on interactions through *reading and writing*. In this way, during the Elizabethan period illustrious young writers such as Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Ben Jonson and, above all, William Shakespeare contributed to shaping and critiquing a possible English national identity through drama and literature.

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