

THE ETHIOP'S EAR: RACE, SEXUALITY, AND BAZ LUHRMANN'S
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S ROMEO + JULIET

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Although it hasn't always been the case, it is now commonplace to observe that when we idealize Shakespeare's famous lovers Romeo and Juliet by seeing them as transcending their feuding social world and its limits, we "obscure" the "social function" of their corpses in making possible the union of the houses of Montague and Capulet.¹ We allow their deaths to stand—like the golden statue proposed by their fathers—as a monument symbolizing peace and harmony outside the famous feud that divides Verona. But, in fact, their deaths are in some ways the result or fulfillment of that feud, and we might better understand Romeo and Juliet as citizens of a city that is a "matrix for . . . violence and disorder" and as characters whose lives and identities, like those of all the other inhabitants of Verona, are subsumed and defined by the conflict between the Capulets and Montagues.² That the lovers seem to stand outside their own social world is perhaps an effect of Shakespeare's exquisite poetry; however, they are called into being—interpellated as subjects—in connection to those discourses of darkness and desire that characterize the social world of Verona. This is a thesis I want to develop, but rather than consider Romeo and Juliet as figures defined by a specific history represented in Shakespeare's play itself, I want to examine how they emerge across the histories of the early modern and modern periods. In particular, I want to explore the languages of darkness and desire that inform the play and the ways they become linked, in our own age, to specific racial and sexual discourses that continue to echo in our apprehension of the sixteenth-century text.

Accordingly, in the first part of this essay I examine the racial and sexual politics of Baz Luhrmann's 1996 filmed version of the play, *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, starring Leonardo Di Caprio and Claire Danes. Luhrmann's film does not interpret Shakespeare in a traditional way, representing his play's historical difference from modern concerns; instead, it focuses on seemingly anachronistic, modern social fantasies about race and sex, interpreting the famous "star-crossed" lovers within the social and sexual divisions of our own society.³ Luhrmann does so primarily, it seems, to show some of the ways race and sex (played out so often in our post-colonial cultures as social divisions or feuds perhaps analogous to Shakespeare's more famous familial feud) divide late twentieth-century communities and individuals within those communities. Intriguingly, Luhrmann uses Shakespeare's sixteenth-century play to interpret or "read" his viewers in the modern West.⁴ But, and this is the other point I wish to emphasize, his insights make it easier for us to re-read some of these complexities of color and desire back into *Romeo and Juliet* as an historical artifact. His film, in other words, helps position the play itself within an overlapping history of

homophobia and racism in the West. Correspondingly, I turn in the second half of the essay to Shakespeare's play, to tease out the possible racial and sexual meanings of the famous imagery of lightness and darkness.

My essay, then, is something of a test case for W. B. Worthen's suggestion that performance, even a filmed performance, "reconstitutes the text" of a play so that Shakespeare seems to speak to us not from an historical past but within the present framework of production.⁵ More to the point, it outlines some of the ways Shakespeare's play was produced at the limits of early modern England's representation of racial and sexual difference, around discursive tensions that would be read differently in the future to which we are heir. As Graham L. Hammill brilliantly demonstrates with regard to sexuality, early modern texts acquire meaning in future readings that are not part of their own times and places. Textual discourse transmits sexual meanings not specifically available as such to playwrights and audiences in their own time but that become available, with a difference, in the future. To take one example, readings of a homosexual subtext in Caravaggio do not—cannot—simply represent the painter's or his viewer's understanding in an era in which homosexuality as such does not exist; and yet the homosexual content to be found in his paintings by modern readers is not simply an anachronistic imposition. Caravaggio's paintings become queer, Hammill argues, in the sense that their present meanings not only disrupt dominant understandings of sexuality but dominant understandings of the historical difference between sexualities then and now.⁶ My argument is that Luhrmann's film helps reveal the (history of the) critical reception of *Romeo and Juliet* as a racist, heteronormative one. It reveals the ways the play is related to that history in terms that cannot be divorced from the early modern text itself or the social discourses it represents.

I

For obvious reasons, I focus on Luhrmann's Mercutio, played by the African-American actor Harold Perrineau and represented in the film as a black, gay man. In this and other ways, Luhrmann's film reflects the discontinuities and incoherencies of our own highly politicized racial subjectivities while simultaneously suggesting that those subjectivities are maintained and perpetuated by social fantasies of romantic love and racial harmony. Locating the insular world of Shakespeare's Verona in a modern multicultural, multiethnic setting,⁷ Luhrmann's film asks some disturbing questions: first, what does romantic love of the Romeo-and-Juliet-variety look like when we factor into it the divisions of social and political subjectivity created by the feud in Shakespeare's play; and if these divisions can be represented in our culture by racial, ethnic, and sexual difference, then how does Shakespeare's play reflect on our own notions of social community forged positively through difference?

Perrineau's performance may, of course, be a noteworthy instance of color-blind casting. The actor may have been the best available to play the part or his

reputation and following may have helped secure the film's finances or both. There is, of course, no good reason to think black actors cannot play any role in Shakespeare, even ones that seem specifically to be coded European or white, as when, for instance, a few years back in New York Denzel Washington played the Roman Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Nevertheless, as Barbara Hodgdon observes, *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet's* camera shots often triangulate the black, seemingly worldly wise Mercutio between the naïve Romeo and his Latin rivals in ways that suggest the film's racial constructions are deliberate.⁸

Far from imposing political ideas onto Shakespeare, Luhrmann reflects ideas not far removed from the playwright's own concerns with difference as these are represented in plays as disparate as *Titus Andronicus*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Tempest*.⁹ Although early modern England did not have a clearly developed concept either of race or sexuality (and so we should rightly expect Shakespeare to handle these issues differently from the ways we do), in each of these plays the author imagines a dark-skinned or alien figure whose threat to the integrity of the individual subject or social community is represented as a type of sexual disorder. Factoring racial and sexual difference into *Romeo and Juliet*, Luhrmann depends, then, on a rather Shakespearean idea to comprehend the tragedy that befalls the play's young lovers. In other words, he helps us see Romeo and Juliet as pure, bright, and even "white" young lovers through their tense relationship to the difference imaged in Mercutio's black skin and sexual difference. In doing so, he does subtly shift Shakespeare's emphasis, for whereas the primary sexual disorder in the play might be said to be located in the lovers themselves, we might think—watching Luhrmann's film—that it is located almost exclusively in Mercutio.

Crucially, Mercutio is a border figure in Shakespeare's play. His presence helps mark the liminal space in which Romeo moves from boy to man.¹⁰ He is the most brilliant and attractive of Romeo's friends, and Romeo's fateful love for Juliet disrupts the important male bonding signified by that friendship. When Juliet's cousin, Tybalt, challenges Romeo to a duel, Mercutio defends him and is killed, and, in retaliation, Romeo kills Tybalt. Mercutio's death, then, precipitates the tragic action that leads to Romeo and Juliet's suicides. Although nothing in Shakespeare's text suggests that Mercutio is anything but Italian (perhaps a stand-in for an Englishman, but otherwise not racially distinct from Romeo), Luhrmann discerns his role as a mediator between different worlds of innocence and experience imagined as different worlds of race and sexuality. Hence, it seems that Mercutio is black and gay because the filmmaker wants to emphasize racial, ethnic, and sexual issues. Indeed, Luhrmann seems to use the border figure Mercutio to mark a space between the Montagues and the Capulets as distinct ethnic types.

Romeo's family and many of his friends are stereotypically (as well as literally) coded white through costume and manner.¹¹ Juliet's family, for the most part, seems Latin—although, judging from her understated (and sometimes failed) attempt at an

accent, the blonde Lady Capulet (Diane Venora) seems to hail from the American South. In this context, a black Mercutio might seem to play a salutary role as the example of friendship that transcends race, ethnicity, or culture. Standing at a mythic mid-point in the play, Shakespeare's Mercutio is friend to the Montagues and kinsman to the Prince and County Paris; he is also invited to the Capulets' masked ball. On one hand, then, Mercutio's friendship with Romeo seems to suggest that Romeo himself is not racist, a point also seemingly signified when he marries the Latin Juliet. In this regard, Mercutio's role may implicitly critique the racialized or ethnic war portrayed in the film, rendering in compellingly modern terms the human waste of the feud represented in Shakespeare.

On the other hand, the film rightly suggests that any personal triumph over racism Romeo may experience does not adequately address the racial divide in his culture. Like common sense, religion, and love itself, personal interracial sympathies fail to prevent the impending personal and social devastation that unfolds in the tale. Apparently rejecting the individualist ethic as a solution to the race problem in the modern world, Luhrmann calls into question those sentimental notions about the value of love and human connection in overcoming social boundaries that seem to be fundamental to the reception of *Romeo and Juliet* since at least the eighteenth century. That these notions have become fundamental to modern if not early modern readings of the play makes Luhrmann's film all the more valuable to us, for in calling into question Mercutio's and Romeo's inability to mediate the divisions of the feud it reminds us of the point with which I began: the social tensions underlying the play may not even be settled by the deaths of the lovers at the end.

In fact, Mercutio's role as failed mediator in the conflict between the Capulets and the Montagues reflects any number of cinematic and other discursive representations that presume to mediate the black/white division in contemporary society, exposing the sentimental hypocrisy of a dominant Western cultural imagining that friendship with the black man is the key to erasing white complicity in and guilt over Western racism.¹² Luhrmann's film alludes to a huge, international repertoire of movies, so he knows well that friendship between a black and a white man has become a stereotypical convention of, at least, Hollywood films.¹³ In American cinema this pairing usually seems to symbolize racial harmony, even in an America in which racial disharmony may be more the norm. In other words, the relationship gives the appearance that the race problem has been solved, when, in fact, often very little is being done to improve conditions for African-Americans and other minorities.¹⁴ While it may represent an advance in the history of film, and a positive response to a larger history of racism in Hollywood film, the role of the black friend does not lessen tensions around the racial divide in contemporary culture so much as create new ones. Indeed, introducing race into a film of Shakespeare's play in this particular way means that the black character gets the dubious privilege of dying for his white friend. Mercutio, then, may seem to be sacrificed for some limited ideal of racial harmony.

Nevertheless, his role in the film suggests an idea implicit in Shakespeare's play relevant to modern understanding: in a divided culture such as Verona or our own, the notion of the individual who might bridge profound social gaps is an unattainable fantasy. Read carefully, Shakespeare's play and Luhrmann's film both help us interpret the modern world and its illusions about the impact of individuals on social process, for in neither does Romeo's friendship with Mercutio or his love for Juliet exist outside the pervasive social violence represented. Both relationships reflect that violence, and both end badly. Significantly, the later actions of Shakespeare's protagonists replay the tragedy's celebrated opening scene of male violence and aggression: Juliet, having felt Romeo's "pretty piece of flesh," thrusts herself through with his dagger, putting herself into the place of those imaginary Montague women whom Sampson and Gregory threaten to rape and kill (although not entirely seriously) as the play begins (1.1.29).¹⁵

Luhrmann thus cleverly comments on our social and cultural failings, using Shakespeare's language: at his death, Mercutio curses both the Capulets and the Montagues. In Shakespeare, of course, where Mercutio is not specifically black, the character's curse is that of a man angered by the brutal stupidity of two clans who cannot stop fighting. In the film, where Mercutio seems to function in some ways as a Hollywood stereotype, his curse seems to reject the image of the black man as sacrificial victim and indict the racist hypocrisy of a society that takes solace in that image.

In both works, the murderous effects of the feud are transferred from Mercutio onto Romeo. In Shakespeare's play, Mercutio's death evokes a crisis of masculinity in which Romeo realizes that his love for Juliet has made him effeminate (3.1.112-13). Revenging the death of his friend becomes a sign of Romeo's emerging masculinity, which is intimately connected in the play with violence, in advance of his consummating his marriage with Juliet (whose image in the film fades into the space of the ruined theater stage where Mercutio has just played out his death scene).¹⁶ So, the transfer of violence does not represent Romeo's break from his male buddies but the fulfillment of their example, with all its fatal consequences. In Shakespeare, these moments acknowledge the ways early modern women were understood to threaten masculinity and Romeo's triumph over that threat.

Much the same might be said about Luhrmann, with the proviso that the film's racial framework makes clear to a modern audience that Romeo cannot dissociate himself from the divisions in Verona (imaged explicitly in the terms of racial tensions that he cannot erase) even in his marriage to Juliet. Conflicting or incoherent cultural divisions lead to the formation of incoherent social and personal identities. Revealing this idea in our racially divided culture, Luhrmann's film establishes an intriguing dialectic with Shakespeare's play, reading it, reading us, reading it. If dominant readings of *Romeo and Juliet* have tended to see the lovers as transcending the social malaise of Verona,¹⁷ Luhrmann's film shows that in Shakespeare's play the lovers cannot escape the violence of their culture any more than we can evade the

pressures of race. The film, then, helps clarify some of the ways Shakespeare's play and its subsequent readers and audiences yearn for what they must, finally, deny: the enlightened subject free of social determinants.

But if the death of Mercutio helps mark Romeo's transition from the privileged world of male friendship to the problematic bond he attains with Juliet, that bond is, nevertheless, revealed to be racially pure—indeed, white—in Luhrmann's film. The film seems to represent a specific relationship between sexuality and race that, Richard Dyer suggests, is significant to the formation of white identity in the West. Dyer argues that white identity constitutes itself as racially pure by dissociating itself from sexual desires that are imagined as dark and displaced onto the bodies of dark-skinned others.¹⁸ That this point is pertinent to Shakespeare's play, in which the lovers might be said to signify as white in the absence of any specific black characters, I will argue later. For now, I want to suggest how the issue comes into clearer focus when we consider the sexuality of Perrineau's Mercutio.

It does not overstate the case to say that the film's visuals clearly signal something about Mercutio that is not, characteristic of its treatment in the West, to be spoken. The Capulets' ball is represented as a costumed affair, so Mercutio's performance there in drag may not seem to signify much. But considering the film as a whole, one could certainly make the case that Mercutio is gay. For instance, he taunts Tybalt with sexual jokes. When Tybalt says, "Gentlemen, good e'en. A word with one of you," Mercutio responds with, "And but one word with one of us? Couple it with something: make it a word and a blow" (3.1.37-39). The word "blow" in Shakespeare, of course, refers to a hit with a sword or punch with a fist. It is a provocation to fight. But here (albeit within the parameters of a male violence that functions as desire throughout the play), the word seems specifically sexual. It is telling that Mercutio becomes violent when Tybalt accuses him of "consort[ing]" with Romeo (3.1.44), because Mercutio's relationship with Romeo does seem to be more than friendly. To be sure, Luhrmann himself told the American gay and lesbian news weekly, *The Advocate*: "It's in the text . . . There's no question he is [gay]."¹⁹

In Shakespeare's play, the relationship between Romeo and Mercutio is charged with erotic implication.²⁰ Their jokes and word-play are often sexual in nature, and usually have to do with male sex organs. This was not odd in Shakespeare's time, because as is now clear, friendship in Shakespeare's England was more erotically charged than it is for us. Friendship, it seems, allowed for some kinds of erotic activity between friends in certain instances.²¹ Not all friendships were erotic, of course, but the institution seems to have allowed for the possibility of eroticism between men in ways it does not for us. What is surprising and different about Shakespeare's England is that in most instances it didn't seem to occur to people to be concerned with whether or not men were having close, intimate relations—even erotic ones. So, Mercutio's relationship with Romeo, even if it is full of erotic energy, would be normative in the period.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, men who are erotically interested in other men are usually viewed as a separate category of males. It is precisely this category of difference, along with his race, that marks Luhrmann's Mercutio's seeming historical difference from Shakespeare's character. Luhrmann, of course, doesn't suggest that there is anything perverse about Mercutio's being gay. Rather he seems to be repeating what has become almost a cliché of modern interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet*. The sense that Mercutio has a specific sexual desire for Romeo emerged in the late twentieth century and was given tremendous affirmation in the popular imagination by that other famous film of Shakespeare's play, Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 version. In both Zeffirelli's film and Luhrmann's, Mercutio definitely seems hung up on Romeo, even though—and this is crucial—his physical desire is apparently not returned. In the modern world some men are and some men definitely are not.

Obviously, both films refract their modern audience's understanding of sexuality, for a film has little room for historical contextualization of the type I provided above. Also, ideas about masculinity change, and Romeo's is a highly problematic case for the modern age. A weak and vacillating character in the early part of Shakespeare's play and later a man made seemingly irrational by his love for Juliet, he hardly constitutes an ideal of early modern masculinity. That he grows to manhood in the play is arguable,²² but the fact that masculinity in our time is often (and homophobically) posited around heterosexuality provides a convenient type of cinematic shorthand for both Zeffirelli and Luhrmann, who displace homosexual desire onto Mercutio alone. Add to these cultural assumptions what Barbara Hodgdon refers to as Leonardo Di Caprio's "pale, androgynous beauty" and you can see something of a problem Luhrmann faced in creating a credibly male figure for a modern audience.²³ Mercutio's seeming homosexuality, then, is used to mark by contrast the otherwise questionable sexuality of one of Shakespeare's most famous lovers.

But, in a move that seems extraordinarily problematic, the film equates same-sex desire, viewed almost exclusively as a minority sexual position, with a black character. In other words, Mercutio's sexuality conditions our apprehension of his blackness, and vice versa. Two contested—indeed embattled—minority figures, the black man and the gay man, are coded as one. It seems worth thinking about what this means, because the connection between aberrant sexuality and dark skin has a long and damaging history in the imperial West dating back at least (as I've already suggested) to Shakespeare himself. Sander Gilman, for instance, describes some of the complex ways black sexuality was classed as disease in much modernist writing, and Dyer argues that a characteristic "projection of sexuality onto dark races was a means for whites to represent yet dissociate themselves from their own desires."²⁴ The specific linking of homosexuality to a blackness that threatened white racial purity has an equally clear history in the United States. It was only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that people began to label and identify a separate category of human beings that we call homosexuals, and it

was also at this moment in history that so-called scientific ideas about race were employed to classify non-white peoples as biologically different from—and less well developed than—people descended from Europe. Siobhan Somerville, for instance, argues that the techniques of science were used simultaneously to show that both black people and homosexuals were supposedly more primitive than white heterosexuals. One result of this racist, so-called science was to associate homosexuality with blackness, a point confirmed by Ferguson, who shows how in the early part of the twentieth century sociological theories of minority sexual dysfunction were employed to justify the development of a capitalist ideology that favored white labor and production.²⁵

Representing his Mercutio as black and gay, Luhrmann may appear to participate in an aesthetic tradition Robert Aldrich identifies as “homoerotic Orientalism,” a widespread though minor category of European and American art that explored homoeroticism as an exotic aspect of dark-skinned peoples and cultures located in climes decidedly not European.²⁶ While this tradition tended to be celebratory of same-sex desire, it also helped consolidate an idea that people of color might serve as markers of sexual difference while white love and white people were associated with sexual normativity and even purity.²⁷ The idea is not so far removed from Shakespeare’s evocative imagining of Caliban in *The Tempest*. Not one with the Europeans in the play, native to the island that sometimes seems as if it is in the West Indies, Caliban’s grotesque, fleshly character is naturalized in its association with the exotic island setting of the play.²⁸ In the European Prospero’s imaginary, Caliban is a “thing of darkness,” to be claimed and controlled (5.1.278). His sexual criminality is marked just so precisely as he expresses desire for the virginal, European Miranda. Even though Alonso, the King of Naples, has ruinously—according to some of his nobles—married his own daughter to the presumably dark-skinned (or at least non-white) King of Tunis, Prospero intends Miranda to be sexually matched to a man whose culture and skin color signify what it is that excludes Caliban from consideration. There is no homosexual in *The Tempest*, of course, but the promise of pure, white marital alliance is defined in distinction to dark-skinned others whose sexuality is conceived as perverse. In short, the play reflects a connection between white purity and sexuality that excludes dark (and implicitly perverse) desires.

Perrineau’s Mercutio might be seen within that same racist sexual history, for he is a black man whose sexuality presumably excludes him from the marital and reproductive alliances of Verona Beach. And it does so in a context in which the purest and most compelling desire seems to be valorized as heterosexual and represented as white. For one thing is very odd about Luhrmann’s film. Though Juliet is supposedly Latin, she is played by Claire Danes, an actress clearly marked white in the Hollywood star system. Given that Lady Capulet is a blonde (possibly Southern) woman, Juliet’s racial markings may seem suitably verisimilar:

certainly, it is possible to be Latin and have skin as white as Claire Danes', for race is not reliably marked on the body. But it also seems noteworthy that Juliet is not played by a darker actress, and that the love enshrined in the conclusion's beautifully conceived visuals is marked vividly white by the wedding dress Juliet wears to her death.

Thus, the movie privileges whiteness in at least two ways: one, by safely containing the black man and black desires within a gay body so that they pose no threat to a white woman such as Juliet; two, by containing the gay man within an imaginary, sexually exclusive identity that poses no threat to Romeo either. The film represents Romeo's love for Juliet as the opposite of homosexuality and as the opposite of black or dark desires. Even at the same moment that it shows Romeo beginning to participate in the racist discourses of the feud after the death of Mercutio, the film also shows him beginning to participate in heterosexist ones in which the purity of his different-sex desire for Juliet is revealed in contrast to all others. So, the film literally seems to represent Dyer's argument: the association of dark desires with dark bodies marks out a space of whiteness disassociated from sexuality threatening to whiteness. In the absence of a mystical authority figure like Prospero, who intervenes to eliminate the threat to white female purity, homosexuality serves in Luhrmann's film as a convenient impediment imposed from within and written on the body of its Mercutio/Caliban. Such a reading can only make sense, of course, in the modern world, where both race and sexuality are naturalized as essential features of the body and identity. What is significant about Luhrmann's film is that it demonstrates how both intersect to reinforce an ideology of pure white love in distinction to other, darker ones.

The question that remains unanswered is whether the film reproduces such a reading through Luhrmann's inattention to the intricacies of race and sexuality in Western cultures or whether the director intends to suggest the ironies of that reading. Does Luhrmann critique the trope of the black friend by exposing it as a space of black male (homoerotic) desire disallowed, a space that preserves the fantasy of white racial purity even in a multicultural world? Or does his film simply reproduce that figure as a necessary corollary to its fantasy of white, heterosexual subjectivity? Whatever the case, the racial markings of Luhrmann's film call into serious question the place of *Romeo and Juliet* in a modern multicultural world, for it reminds us, if a bit perversely, that the revered idealization of romantic love at its core may foreshadow some of the racist and homophobic determinants of that world. The film reminds us of what often seems to get left out of both historical and modern readings of *Romeo and Juliet*—the dark and the sexually different—even as it perhaps makes us aware that these readings only press that difference beneath the surface. For the violence and social disorder of the play point toward an undercurrent of desire reflected in a persistent imagery of darkness only seemingly set in contrast to the brightness of the lovers.

II

So, if Romeo brilliantly and famously imagines Juliet on her balcony as the sun rising in the east, he also backtracks slightly to call her a "maid" to the "envious" moon, whose "vestal livery is but sick and green" (2.2.7-8). "Cast it off," he says (2.2.9). While her association with the moon thus signifies her loss of maidenhood, it is not entirely clear that after meeting Romeo, Juliet will ever again stand in the sunlight, much less in place of it. Juliet is a "bright angel," but only against the backdrop of the "glorious" "night" (2.2.26-27) that sets her off. Romeo himself has "night's cloak to hide" him from the eyes of Juliet's kinsmen (2.2.75), and Juliet wears "the mask of night" upon her face (2.2.85). It is the "dark night" that "discover[s]" their "light love" (2.2.106, 105). And love's contract, like the lightning, "cease[s] to be / Ere one can say it lightens" (2.2.119-20). Who Romeo and Juliet are to one another depends upon a difference from the dark forces of the play, but it is a difference that never quite comes into focus. Indeed, as is widely recognized, the lovers are primarily bright, light, or white to each other, in each other's eyes, as when Juliet imagines Romeo as "day in night," or "new snow upon a raven's back" (3.2.17, 19). Romeo shines in such imagining like the stars, but he makes the world to "be in love with night" (3.2.24).

Significantly, the tenor of all these metaphors from the balcony scene and Juliet's bedroom remains little changed from those to be found in the Capulets' "dark" monument, that "palace of dim night" where Romeo finds that "death's pale flag is not advanced" upon the face of Juliet, which remains, even now, "fair." (5.3.105, 107, 96, 102). From first to last, Romeo and Juliet's desire plays out not merely as light but in and as light in darkness. Darkness in the play is not the opposite of the lovers' young desire; it becomes the fruition of that desire.

In this regard, we might re-consider Mercutio's Queen Mab speech as a lyrical interlude made thematically rich by encapsulating many of the play's simultaneous fears and fantasies of violence and desire. If, initially, Mab references pleasant dreams of wished-for benefits, she comes increasingly to be associated with disturbing and unsettling threats, so that pleasure perhaps seems to be disordered. Most interestingly, she causes the soldier to dream of

cutting foreign throats,
Of breaches, ambuscadoes, Spanish blades,
Of healths five fathom deep, and then anon
Drums in his ear, at which he starts and wakes,
And being thus frightened swears a prayer or two
And sleeps again. (1.4.83-88)

The soldier's dream of Mab provides something of a mirror image of Juliet's vision of waking in the tomb, where, in a "rage," she dashes out her own brains "with

some great kinsman's bone" (4.3.53). And it anticipates her actual awakening from a feigned death just long enough to satisfy her desire for Romeo's dagger. Mab is, of course, the benign aspect of the "spirits" Juliet imagines in the tomb (4.3.44). But, and this is the relevant point, both are linked to the imagination of a wild desire—associated with the "horrible conceit of death and night" (4.3.37)—that is never tamed and always present in the play, first to last.

That these images and metaphors do not entirely evade the pressures of race that Luhrmann and others have echoed in their multicultural versions of the play might be inferred from a single moment in which the light/dark imagery of Shakespeare's work acquires an explicitly racist cast, in Romeo's exquisite lines: "O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright! / It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night / As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear" (1.5.45-47). The image of a beautifully bejeweled Ethiop evokes the African or dark desires as the necessary and defining field against which to imagine Romeo's desire for Juliet. If Juliet signifies the bright, rich jewel of love, her recognizably European color is only set off against the black skin of the Ethiop, revealing, perhaps, how even in Shakespeare's time the idealized purity of love could be conceived in a racial dialectic that anticipates the future. As Romeo's evocation of the Ethiop usefully reminds us, the conjunction of lightness with darkness in our culture always has a capacity for racial inscription.

My point is not that these lines justify reading the light/dark imagery of *Romeo and Juliet* as inherently being about race, for such a reading would simply replicate a potentially racist imaginary in the metaphor of the Ethiop, one in which light is associated with whiteness and love while darkness is linked to the alien and different. I want to suggest, however, that future readings of the play that merely reproduce the play's contrasts of lightness and darkness uncritically may, in fact, energize something of the same racist imaginary Romeo does. To be sure, there is as little of what we might recognize as race in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as there is of homosexuality. That is, there are no characters whose identities are marked explicitly in the terms of difference by which we in the modern period negotiate race; certainly, no Othello or Aaron marks the seeming racial difference or whiteness of other characters in the play. But the equivocations introduced by the metaphor of the Ethiop reveal how racially problematic it has become for our own age to read Romeo and Juliet's love in distinction to other desires in the play associated with darkness. As we saw with Luhrmann's film, doing so seems to privilege lightness and purity in terms that cannot be separated from the subsequent development of raced thinking in the West.

In making this point, I follow Toni Morrison, who argues that the overloading of moral discourses with color symbolism in American literature connotes racialized structures of meaning, an idea that seems to hold for many European works as well.²⁹ Certainly, once the moral discourses of color become attached to race within the performance traditions of *Romeo and Juliet*, as they evidently do in productions

such as Baz Luhrmann's among others, it becomes increasingly difficult to disentangle the two and the play becomes increasingly open to racialist inscription. Just as Zeffirelli's and Luhrmann's presentations of a homosexual Mercutio reflect the ways discourses of male friendship in the Renaissance may be co-opted for heteronormative uses in the present, a black Mercutio reveals how images of darkness prepare us for a racially polarized understanding of the play. This Mercutio not only images proscribed desire in association with dark-skinned others, but, more to the point, he clears the way for us to imagine an idealized love between Romeo and Juliet as a brilliant Other to his sexually ambiguous darkness ("a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear"), that is, as whiteness. As such, the appearance of a black, gay Mercutio reveals ways contemporary romantic idealizations of love in the play may always already be silently coded white and normatively heterosexual. Such considerations militate against assimilating the young lovers to an idealizing notion of transcending the social order. Luhrmann's film reminds us that *Romeo and Juliet* (and *Romeo and Juliet*) are easily inscribed into homophobic and racialist ideologies in our own time, because the lovers are represented within formulations of desire in Shakespeare's imaginary Verona that can and will be re-imagined in interpretive and performance history as race and homosexuality.

To be more precise, the particular readings of race and sexuality in *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* alert us to the difficulties both of reading race in and removing it from Shakespeare's play. On the one hand, in evoking the Ethiop Shakespeare himself reminds us explicitly of what would become—in the history of Western imperialism—a persistent contrasting of idealized desire (figured as light or whiteness) with racial others that is potentially (though not inevitably) racist. On the other hand, however, our own willingness to read the young lovers in terms that dissociate them from dark desires may replicate the erasure of sexual and racial Others from our conceptions of love. Idealizing Romeo and Juliet as examples of love transcending dark desires not only abjects desires that are not normatively heterosexual but also (especially given the powerful place of the play in Anglo/American culture) tends to elide darkness, along with, perhaps, dark-skinned peoples, from that idealization. Such readings universalize love in terms that seem inevitably, racially, "white," even as—perhaps because—they obscure the blurring of boundaries between desires and races that might otherwise be read in Shakespeare's play. Indeed, Luhrmann's film forces us to recognize that there is a kind of race in or racialist significance to *Romeo and Juliet*, though perhaps in more interesting ways than Luhrmann imagines, for in Shakespeare's work, distinctions between lightness and darkness play out as tensions of the same, not difference.

Because there is no ethnic, national, or sexual difference to be found in Verona, Romeo and Juliet's subjectivities, or senses of self and identity, are not divided against "aliens" or Others but formulated against the very families and citizens

among whom they have grown up and whose desires are only seemingly figured in contrast to theirs. Their subjectivities, that is, are simultaneously dyadic and dualist, both within and outside the social body of Verona, and therefore both light and dark. Whereas transgressive sexual desires in Luhrmann's film are largely marginalized in a black, gay Mercutio, dark sexual desires in Shakespeare's play (as my discussion of the imagery shows) are found in the lovers themselves, and these desires remain to disturb their final moments, unsettling any sense we have that these unfortunate children achieve a coherent subjectivity that places them outside Verona and its tensions. Indeed, in Verona darkness lies within, and it is necessary to the apprehension of these lovers. But, the crucial point, this unsettling mixture of lightness and darkness is often left out of modern discussions of Shakespeare's play, as it was largely left out of Luhrmann's film.

That this point, too, is not unrelated to race and sexuality, to racialized sexuality, in our own culture becomes manifest if we think about *Romeo and Juliet* as allowing us comfortably to displace our concern with the seemingly more explicit divisions of subjectivity into racial (and sexual) categories that we find in *Antony and Cleopatra* or *Othello*. In these plays, Shakespeare employs a more familiar, dualistic conception of race and desire that points specifically to the social problems energized by transgressive romantic love, whereas in *Romeo and Juliet* he reveals sexual, even perhaps heterosexual, desire (certainly romantic love) as a dark possibility within the social fabric of Verona. It is, I would say, precisely our attempt to disentangle this desire, heterosexuality, from its association with darkness that explains those idealizing readings of *Romeo and Juliet* that replicate, as I've suggested, modern racial and sexual binaries.

Not to spin the point too finely, such idealizing readings almost inevitably conspire with Romeo in seeing the Ethiop as the Other to be excluded and not as the sign of a lack in the lovers' identity and desires. The Ethiop is necessary to Romeo to signify the social transgressions of his love for Juliet as being elsewhere, just as the dark signifies what he otherwise does not wish to articulate in his own idealizations of her. In other words, unlike Luhrmann's Mercutio, the Ethiop does not merely exist in darkness as the Other that clarifies Romeo and Juliet's brilliance. She is, rather, an image of the darkness that Romeo, and perhaps the play, must construct to create the illusion that Juliet and Romeo's love for her is pure. The metaphor signifies, then, the racial dimension always implicit in patterns of light/dark imagery capable of inscripting the Other as a sign of disorder that actually proceeds from within. And it alerts us to the potentially racial and even racist implications of accepting at face value the young lovers' sometime attempt to represent sexual disorder as darkness elsewhere. At the very least, then, *Romeo and Juliet* reveals how thoroughly saturated with one another are our categories of race and sexuality, and how attempts to untangle them lead in multiple false directions.

It is worth pointing out in this regard that while those performances of the play that cast Romeo and Juliet across racial lines seem, intuitively, to be responding to

the kinds of racialist tensions I am identifying in the play, even they may not manage to blur boundaries in a way that suggests an effective escape from the racial trap. Famously, Arthur Laurents re-invented Juliet as a beautiful Puerto Rican girl, Maria, in *West Side Story* (albeit one played on stage and in film by a white actress). In doing so, he certainly can be credited with bringing some version of ethnic otherness into America's collective imagining of the possibilities of heterosexual romance. At the same time, however, this very attempt to imagine heterosexuality across color lines reifies racial boundaries as precise and specifically problematic cultural discourses. As Celia R. Daileader shows, when Michael Attenborough cast Ray Fearon as Romeo in his 1997 Royal Shakespeare Company production, critics applauded the director's liberal ambitions even as they seemed to quantify the bodily difference of the black actor: "Overall, I counted forty-nine explicit responses to the sex appeal of a black actor (what leading actor does not have sex appeal?) in the above-mentioned reviews; this figure by far outnumbered such comments on the white female co-star [Zoe Waites]."³⁰ Although there may be possibilities for imagining race differently that a fuller history of production of *Romeo and Juliet* may evidence, in these examples whiteness (in the body of the actresses who originally played Maria and in the ways Zoe Waites's Juliet seemed to escape the need for discursive elaboration) remains an ideal set over and against the necessarily-to-be-commented-upon body of the dark-skinned Other.

To return to Shakespeare, it seems clear that race does not appear—indeed it cannot appear—in *Romeo and Juliet* in precisely the ways that we know it; still, discourses within the play necessarily become racialized within the context of our present knowing, so that the play signifies differently because of—indeed echoes—our racialized histories of desire. Reading *Romeo and Juliet* after seeing Luhrmann's film, we begin to imagine more carefully what the conflating of racial and sexual threat in Western cultures seeks to protect: an idealized, pure or "white" love imagined as emerging from or set over and against darkness. We might, then, also imagine how we conspire with that synthesis when we seek that idealized, white love in modern reproductions of the play.

III

If *Romeo and Juliet* establishes its lovers' subjectivities outside a specific duality of self and other, it also creates a dyad of internal difference through which the self never comes into clear relief in distinction to what is imagined as its opposite. Luhrmann's film seems to have recognized this subtlety of the play to the extent that it uses modern racial categories to suggest that all the citizens of Verona Beach are implicated in a social struggle from which no one will escape unharmed. Race in the film inscribes social tension, the feud, on the body of all the film's characters. Nevertheless, by literally marginalizing dark desire in Mercutio simultaneous with idealizing Romeo and Juliet as exemplars of love color-coded white, Luhrmann's film tends

to replicate an idealist reception history of the play that places love itself outside a social world conceived in darkness. It may or may not be the case that Luhrmann reveals the ironies of this displacement by emphasizing—in the final moments of his film—media constructions of Romeo and Juliet's love as a force for positive social change within the racial imaginary of Verona Beach; his film, however, helps recall Shakespeare's play to a Western history of the inter-implication of race and sexuality. After Luhrmann, it seems naïve, even racist, to read *Romeo and Juliet* outside that history, for even if we choose to ignore the complicating pressures of race, we still tend to reproduce the play within an idealized history of white heterosexuality. That Shakespeare fails to make race explicit in *Romeo and Juliet* (if, in fact, that is the case), may simply suggest that he, too, intended to idealize love as a moral category in ways that could become—only through history—encoded white. What seems more likely, as Luhrmann reminds us, is that because darkness suffuses the play, any reproduction of its lead characters primarily in terms of a purity encoded as light or whiteness (whether conceived morally or racially) effects a specifically racialized and sexualized construction, possibly for Shakespeare and certainly for us.

Notes

The essay originated as a talk in April 2005 at South Carolina State University, in Orangeburg. I would like to thank both students and faculty at SCSU (especially Dr. Reginald Rampone) for providing me with help and inspiration in thinking about the racial politics of Luhrmann's film. A later version was presented at the 2008 Clemson Shakespeare Festival under the direction of Dr. Elizabeth Rivlin, whose superb editorial work with the essay I also wish to acknowledge.

1. Jonathan Goldberg, "Romeo and Juliet's Open Rs," in *Queering the Renaissance*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 219. Although he does not discuss race in *Romeo and Juliet*, I am indebted throughout to Goldberg's argument that modern readings of the "idealization" of Romeo and Juliet "provide the bedrock of the . . . heterosexual order," 218-35, 219.
2. Naomi Conn Liebler, "'There is no world without Verona's walls': The City in *Romeo and Juliet*," in *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works*, vol. 1, ed. Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 303-18, 305.
3. Luhrmann's film is not the only or the first to re-invest Shakespeare's famous story of love with the discourses of race: the most memorable example is Arthur Laurents, Stephen Sondheim, and Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, though the effect has been hinted at as well in stage productions that cast across racial lines (as, for instance, Michael Attenborough's 1997 Royal Shakespeare Company production starring Ray Fearon as Romeo). It seems necessary, however, to clarify the difficulties of speaking about race in Shakespeare's England, where the word would have initially signified something more akin to our notions of *breed*, *lineage*, or *species*. For a useful, brief survey of the complexities of the concept in early modern England, see Margo Hendricks, "Surveying 'race' in Shakespeare," in *Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Catherine M.S. Alexander and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1-22. In this essay, uses of the word "race" that refer to Shakespeare's texts should be understood as provisional, marking differences in a character's identity that only signify as race from a modern perspective and even then in highly ambiguous ways. Because, however, the essay primarily refers to modern constructions of race as these are translated back onto Shakespeare's plays, I will avoid clumsy generic attempts (such as italics or quotation marks) to demarcate a difference and specify only if appropriate.

4. In "William Shakespeare's *Romeo + Juliet*: Everything's Nice in America?" *Shakespeare Survey* 52 (1999): 88-98, Barbara Hodgdon points out that Lührmann's film "has been watching us," 95.
5. W. B. Worthen, "Drama, Performativity, and Performance," *PMLA* 113.5 (1998):1093-1107, 1097.
6. Hammill argues that "[t]here is no homosexual ego formation before the mid-nineteenth century. Only, this assertion doesn't exactly mean that these poses [that seem to appeal to homosexual desires in Caravaggio] aren't homosexual; it means that the temporality of this 'homosexual appeal' remains unthought... Can't there be poses that appeal to groups not yet formed?" *Sexuality and Form: Caravaggio, Marlowe, and Bacon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 67-68.
 In pursuing the ambiguities of Hammill's queering of history itself, I mean to bypass (as Lührmann does) readings of *Romeo and Juliet* that discover its meaning in its historical specificity and move toward understandings such as Jonathan Goldberg and Madhavi Menon's "homohistory," albeit without resisting entirely—as they do—issues of sexual (and racial) identity. In "Queering History," *PMLA* 120.5 (2005), Goldberg and Menon explore "the project of unhistoricizing sexuality," in order to undertake what I believe to be the important and "difficult task of thinking the relations between a past and present, neither of which is self-identical or identical to the other" (1609, 1610). Nevertheless, Goldberg and Menon reject the concern with "knowable identities" (1613) that is part of my project in this essay. In distinction to their argument, I do not wish to argue that Lührmann's film merely reproduces the conceptual incoherence of both early modern and modern racial and sexual subjectivities, although I will show that it does, in fact, do that.
7. On the setting of Lührmann's film, see Alfredo Michel Modenessi, "(Un)doing the Book: 'Without Verona's Walls': A View from the Receiving End of Baz Lührmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*," in *Spectacular Shakespeare: Critical Theory and Popular Cinema*, ed. Courtney Lehmann and Lisa S. Starks (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), 62-85, esp. 69-71.
8. Hodgdon, 95. The problematic assumptions that lie behind the notion of colorblind casting have been examined from a variety of angles in a recent collection: *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*, ed. Ayanna Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2006); see especially Lisa M. Anderson, "When Race Matters: Reading Race in *Richard III* and *Macbeth*," 89-102, who argues that "[t]o assume that we can watch a theatrical production and ignore the racial identities of the actors on stage is to assume the impossible," 91. Celia R. Daileader likewise argues that supposedly colorblind casting in productions by the Royal Shakespeare Company are anything but. "Casting black actors: beyond Othellophilia," *Shakespeare and Race*, 177-202.
9. Support for this assertion might be found in many places, but in particular Ania Loomba's analysis of *Othello* and the ways "the filtering of sexuality and race through each other's prism profoundly affects each," 1989, rpt. as "Sexuality and Racial Difference," in *Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1945-2000*, ed. Russ McDonald (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 794-816, 797. See also Arthur L. Little, Jr., *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-Visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000) on *Othello* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, and Patricia Parker, "Fantasies of 'Race' and 'Gender': Africa, Othello, and bringing to light," in *Women, "Race," & Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London: Routledge, 1994), 84-100. On *The Tempest* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, see "Commerce and Intercourse": Dramas of Alliance and Trade," chapter 3 in Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 123-176.
10. Noting this liminality, Joseph Porter, in *Shakespeare's Mercutio: His History and Drama* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), writes suggestively about the ways in which Mercutio "has a kind of immanence throughout the second half of the play," 115.

11. Margo Hendricks clarifies some of the ways race is signified through "gesture and costume" in Luhrmann's film. "Gestures of Performance: Rethinking Race in Contemporary Shakespeare," in *Colorblind Shakespeare*, 187-204, 196.
12. Leslie Fiedler long ago demonstrated the enduring sentimentality of the trope in American literature in which a white man befriended a darker-skinned one who, ultimately, loved and forgave him for the racism of the culture at large. For Fiedler this fantasy of interracial homosocial bonding displaced fears about miscegenation by imagining bonds between men that misogynistically excluded women. See "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in, Huck Honey!," 1948; rpt. in *Leslie Fiedler and American Culture*, ed. Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1999), 26-34; and *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Criterion Books, 1960).
13. Famous examples include Mel Gibson and Danny Glover in the *Lethal Weapon* series, dir. Richard Donner (1987, 1989, 1992, 1998), Samuel Jackson and Bruce Willis in *Die Hard: With a Vengeance*, dir. John McTiernan (1995), or Jackson and John Travolta in *Pulp Fiction*, dir. Quentin Tarantino (1994).
14. See Benjamin DeMott, "Put on a Happy Face: Masking the Differences Between Blacks and Whites," 1995; rpt. in *Signs of Life: Readings on Popular Culture for Writers*, 3rd ed., ed. Sonia Maasik and Jack Solomon (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000), 538-48. See also Michael E. Ross, "Black and White Buddies: How Sincere is the Harmony?" *New York Times*, 14 June 1987. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B0DE4D81038F937A25755C0A961948260> Accessed 2 April 2009.
15. References to Shakespeare's plays are to *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, updated 4th ed., ed. David Bevington (New York: Longman, 1997).
16. On the connections between masculinity and violence, see Robert Appelbaum, "'Standing to the Wall': The Pressures of Masculinity in *Romeo and Juliet*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48 (1997): 251-272.
17. In a section on performance history, "Restoration to the Late Twentieth Century" in her introduction to the Oxford edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, Jill Levenson surveys briefly the ways productions of the play up until the twentieth century were impacted by Garrick's eighteenth century text, which "decreased the public dimension of the narrative," "idealized both lovers," and transformed the play into "pathetic drama, the contemporary blend of romantic love and tragedy," 69-96, 76. At the same time, she clarifies how even John Gielgud's influential 1935 production, which restored Shakespeare's complete text, continued to emphasize the ways the lovers were mythologized types of universal love, 85. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). See as well Levinson's *Shakespeare in Performance: Romeo and Juliet* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).
18. Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), 28; the literature outlining the relationship between notions of whiteness and sexuality is, by this point, vast. In addition to Fiedler's and Dyer's groundbreaking works, readers might also consult for a colonial perspective, Ronald Hyam *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990); and for an American take on the subject, Mason Stokes' *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001) and Gregory Tomso, "The Queer History of Leprosy and Same-Sex Love," *American Literary History* 14 (2002): 747-775.
19. "Homeo, homeo," *The Advocate* 720 (11/12/96), 84. Accessed 2 April 2009.
20. See Nicholas F. Radel, "Queer Romeo and Juliet: Teaching Early Modern 'Sexuality' in Shakespeare's

'Heterosexual' Tragedy," in *Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Maurice Hunt (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2000), 91-97.

21. In *The Homoerotics of Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Mario DiGangi writes that "early modern gender ideology integrated orderly homoeroticism into friendship more seamlessly than modern ideological formations, which more crisply distinguish homoeroticism from friendship," 12; see also Alan Bray, "Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England," 1990, rpt. in *Queering the Renaissance*, 40-61.
22. Coppélia Kahn argues that "Romeo and Juliet create and try to preserve new identities as adults apart from the feud, but it blocks their every attempt." "Coming of Age in Verona," 1978; rpt. in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 171-93, 172.
23. Hodgdon, 93.
24. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 110; Dyer, *White*, 28; see as well, Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), who notes that in "nineteenth-century Britain, the prostitute [who was frequently represented as being black] was a racial metaphor for the gender and sexual confusions unleashed by capital," 9.
25. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 34; Ferguson, 13.
26. *Colonialism and Homosexuality* (London: Routledge, 2003), 148. The genealogy of Luhrmann's rehearsal of "homoerotic Orientalism" in the figure of Mercutio is not clear. While the discourse itself has a wide valence and would make sense to Luhrmann and others educated in post-colonial traditions, it is likely that Luhrmann's immediate source for the image of the black, gay drag figure is Jennie Livingston's film *Paris is Burning* (1990).
27. One racially explicit example is a pulp-fiction novel published in the United States in 1931. In Andre Tellier's *Twilight Men: The Story of a Homosexual* (1931; rpt. New York: Lion Books, 1950), the protagonist is introduced to homosexual love by a Frenchman who spent his youth in the West Indies. The novel relies on this fact of geography to explain homosexuality through its association with dark-skinned people, who, in turn, represent an exotic, native primitivism. Considering his desire for the novel's main character, the Frenchman, Jean Mareau, imagines that "[t]he tropics had broken loose again, had got control of the European in him," 85-86. He, then, contrasts the "respectable habitations and centuried venter of Europe" with what he calls the "primordial wisdom of the black race. Wisdom of blood, not brain," 87. And, finally, after their first sexual encounter, Mareau says, "We lie here like pagans, rejoicing in a love that has been since the world began, but which is somehow struck off the white list of loves," 90.
28. Whether or not Shakespeare sees Caliban's supposed deformities as deriving from his nature, Prospero certainly attempts to imagine his condition as inherent. Prospero calls him "A devil, a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick" (4.1.188-89).
29. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 37.
30. Daileader, 196.

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