

Slavery and White Womanhood in Early Modern England

URVASHI CHAKRAVARTY, *University of Toronto*

This article argues that early modern literary and visual texts from Shakespeare's "Comedy of Errors" to Spenser's "Faerie Queene" repeatedly represent and render womanhood as a specifically and singularly white construction; in so doing, they establish the co-constitution of gender and race and their conscription by the contingencies of class. As this formation of white womanhood is in turn mobilized to underwrite the operations of violence and enslavement, white women themselves—and white womanhood as a politically and socially disciplined and disciplining category—emerge as not only the mediators but also the authors of these global and transhistorical processes.

INTRODUCTION

IN BOOK 5 of Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene* (1596), Artegall, the Knight of Justice, is imprisoned, compelled to dress in women's clothes, and coerced into forced (and feminized) labor by the "proud Amazon" Radigund (5.4.29). The text makes clear the ignominy of this fate: "A sordid office for a mind so braue. / So hard it is to be a womans slaue" (5.5.23).¹ This arresting assertion immediately underscores the particular humility of this punishment: not just that Artegall's capture registers the "sordid office" of a state of enslavement, but that it is particularly "hard" to occupy that status as a "womans slaue." The apparent misogyny of this claim—that what makes Artegall's enslavement particularly onerous is that fact that it is rendered to a woman—is clear; I also want to suggest that this articulation of slavery is deeply bound up not only with contemporary contexts of capture and

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¹All references to *The Faerie Queene* are from Spenser, 2013 (ed. A. C. Hamilton; text edited by Hiroshi Yamashita and Toshiyuki Suzuki). Further citations of this work appear parenthetically.

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forced servitude but also with a figure of white womanhood that acts as both agent and authorization for the work of English imperialism and enslavement. For white women, as I will discuss, are not just the authors of this violence; the business of enslavement also relies on the construction of white womanhood in order to underwrite it.

To speak of white womanhood is also to situate it within a long history of feminism and racism. And to point out that even as white women negotiate the conditions of their gendered subjugation, they benefit from—and often weaponize—their access to whiteness is surely to state the obvious. But as I will discuss in this essay, early modern England's relationship to the longer history of slavery marks a moment both when white women were implicated as the authors of that violence and when literary and cultural depictions of slavery began to rely on delineating white womanhood in order to justify those forms of violence. In ways that may seem familiar in light of contemporary uses of white womanhood, early modern cultural negotiations of white womanhood construct white women as the authors of harm, as possessing an agential capacity, and as a weaponized (and weaponizable) cultural and political force. And this strategic formation of white womanhood, I suggest, also exploited the contingencies of class and servitude in early modern England; it is therefore imbricated within, and demands, an intersectional framework of analysis.

It is a truth not quite universally acknowledged that white women today are the main beneficiaries of Global North so-called diversity initiatives, a symptom both of the investment in a putative diversification that continues to erase Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color and of the ways in which white women benefit from and leverage systems of white privilege even as they seem to seek gendered parity. My aim in this essay is to explore the genealogies of this double maneuver: the consolidation of white womanhood as a conceptual framework and operational strategy to shore up systems of enslavement and imperialism, and the recourse to and mobilization of those systems by white women themselves. I begin, therefore, with an anachronism. The months following the election of Donald J. Trump to the presidency of the United States in 2016 saw an outpouring of shock and protest. Perhaps the largest and most coordinated protest event was planned for the day after the inauguration, in January 2017, in the form of a worldwide Women's March. In cities across the world, millions of people marched to protest the misogyny of the new administration's policies and politics. And in the days following this march, pictures of ingenious and timely posters and signs were widely shared and celebrated—including one that turned to *Othello's* Emilia to assert women's right to protest. In the last act of *Othello*, Emilia finally exposes the actions of her duplicitous husband Iago

in defiance of his attempts to silence her: “No, I will speak as liberal as the north. / Let heaven, and men, and devils, let them all, / All, all cry shame against me, yet I’ll speak” (5.2.214–16).² As quoted on signs borne by impassioned marchers, Emilia’s words became a feminist—and anachronistic—rallying cry for those who felt moved to speak out.

Yet Emilia’s “leave to speak” (5.2.190), which has been so frequently recuperated as female resistance to patriarchy—those patriarchal mandates both invoked and flouted in Emilia’s statement that “’Tis proper I obey him, but not now” (5.2.191)—is also delimited by the racial assumptions on which it rests and relies. To “speak as liberal as the north” is a reference to the north wind, but it is also to traffic in ideas about a racialized North and South that reaffirm “a racial hierarchy on a global scale,” in early modern England as today.³ The capacity to speak so “liberal[ly],” in other words, is not a right afforded to all.

Emilia’s “liberal” speech—her capacity to speak and be heard—also stands in stark contrast to Othello’s final instruction to “Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice” (5.2.335–36). What Othello asks for here is a narrative that recounts his story fairly, without “malice”; but it relies on a ventriloquized retelling of his story, over which he has little control. These final words have over the past four hundred years constituted the crux of Othello’s legacy. Ian Smith reminds us that Hamlet similarly asks for a narrative legacy at the end of that play, as he instructs Horatio to “tell my story” (5.2.327).⁴ But whereas Hamlet’s call has come to be adopted toward the end of a universalizing impulse and as part of “the business of literary criticism,” Othello’s instruction to “speak of me as I am” is, curiously, often overlooked.⁵ And yet, Smith points out that speaking of Othello bears multiple registers, signaling not just speaking of Othello himself, but also, “because of Othello’s blackness, speaking about race.”⁶ This in turn has larger disciplinary consequences; per Smith: “the pertinence and urgency of Othello’s request for us to tell his story must be restated as a major disciplinary concern . . . how might literary scholars responsibly tell Othello’s story, or more broadly, speak and write reliably about race?”⁷

Othello’s request to “speak of me as I am” is one, then, that reverberates through the afterlives of Shakespeare’s engagement with the history of race, as well as—as Ian Smith notes—through the state of the field today. But Emilia’s

² All references to *Othello* follow Shakespeare, 2015 (*The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed.). Further citations of this work appear parenthetically.

³ See Young, 127.

⁴ Parenthetical references here follow *Hamlet* in Shakespeare, 2015. See I. Smith, 105.

⁵ I. Smith, 106.

⁶ I. Smith, 112.

⁷ I. Smith, 119.

instance of outspoken speech in *Othello* has more readily been understood and become available as a form of recuperable resistance. I want to suggest, however, that the recasting of Emilia's speech as a feminist rallying cry works to elide her earlier complicity with the forces of patriarchy. When she steals Desdemona's handkerchief in act 3, Emilia recognizes that her mistress will "run mad / When she shall lack it" (3.3.315–16)—but she nonetheless continues her participation in Iago's cruel plan, for "I nothing, but to please his fantasy" (3.3.297). Although this moment has been interpreted and performed in a number of different ways (Is Emilia afraid of her husband? A neglected wife vying for his love? A victim of intimate abuse? An active participant in what she imagines to be a game?), few critics have acknowledged the implications of her complicity, or the racial structure that organizes it.⁸ Whatever the reason, however, Emilia's participation in the handkerchief plot takes place despite a stated acknowledgment of its potentially adverse consequences, and in collusion with a patriarchal imperative the reason for which she admits she does not even understand. It is not until Desdemona dies that Emilia speaks out, and she does so not only to expose, finally, Iago's role in the deception, but also to condemn Othello with her dying words: "Moor, she was chaste. She loved thee, cruel Moor. / So come my soul to bliss as I speak true; / So, speaking as I think, alas, I die" (5.2.243–45). What is striking about Emilia's words here is the sanguine conviction that her (overdue) candor and testimony have earned her redemption ("So come my soul to bliss as I speak true"). But notable, too, is the racial binary that is insistently reaffirmed even with Emilia's dying words, between the "chaste" white woman and the "cruel" Moor.

It is not only the male "Moor" and his voice that Emilia's apparently resistant speech displaces. Before uttering her final words, Emilia ventriloquizes Desdemona's own in the folio text of *Othello*: "What did thy song bode,

⁸ Harry Berger Jr., for instance, names Emilia's "complicity" but "hasten[s] to add that none of this should be construed as reflecting adversely on Emilia's loyalty and devotion to Desdemona, any more than Desdemona's passive-aggressive reactions to Othello reflect adversely on her loyalty and devotion to him. It is just that Emilia's behavior in the play is charted along, and straddles, two different trajectories, one dominated by Desdemona and the other by Iago. In the first she is a faithful attendant, in the second a closemouthed watcher. The relation between these trajectories is textually undetermined and therefore open," adding that "in the context of socioliterary allusion, Emilia occupies a well-stencilled and recognizable position, that of the servant or attendant who innocently or corruptly helps betray her mistress in order to humor her lover": Berger, 246. Berger here gestures to a well-rehearsed critical tradition that both explains Emilia's actions and elides the structural apparatus of which it is part. For an early discussion of Emilia's role in the suggestions of interracial adultery that run through the play, and the significance of her suggested presence on the marital bed along with Othello and Desdemona at the end of the play, see Neill.

lady? / Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swan / And die in music. [*She sings.*] ‘Willow, willow, willow.’” (5.2.240–42). The “willow song” is of course one which Desdemona invokes in act 4 of the play, as she remembers the elegiac love song of her mother’s maidservant Barbary: “My mother had a maid called Barbary: / She was in love, and he she loved proved mad / And did forsake her. She had a song of ‘willow’: / An old thing ’twas, but it expressed her fortune, / And she died singing it” (4.3.25–29). Barbary, whose name “is not individual but generic,” might persuasively be read as a Black maidservant; as an absent figure, she is rendered merely a sympathetic vehicle for Desdemona in this moment, who readily appropriates her song.⁹ But when Emilia in turn sings the willow song in the hour of her death, Barbary is elided altogether. Not only is “the original black voice . . . muffled and displaced by the white maid’s ultimate devotion to Desdemona,” but the originator of the song is erased altogether in Emilia’s reference to “thy song” (5.2.240).¹⁰ This is a small but, I think, significant moment of elision that demonstrates clearly how Emilia’s resistance to patriarchy is underwritten by its own racialized erasures and denotes a form of female solidarity predicated on whiteness. Emilia does not, in this moment, acknowledge the maidservant whose position is akin to her own, even as she co-opts her song.¹¹ Thus, in her last moments, even as she nominally challenges the play’s gender hierarchies, Emilia’s words reveal an undying and unchanged investment in its racial regimes.

Emilia’s speech registers a mode not only of defiance but also of complicity with a racial hierarchy that structures even the resistance she appears to perform. But the contemporary desire to recuperate her words in protest is also striking. For, to return to the Women’s March of January 2017, it was not only images of crowds

⁹ See Erickson, 2014, 165. Erickson, 166, also suggests that Barbary’s “meaning is completely malleable to Desdemona’s needs.”

¹⁰ Erickson, 2014, 167. For a brilliant reading of Desdemona’s theft of Barbary’s song within the larger transhistorical context of white appropriation of Black art and culture, see Justin P. Shaw’s talk “‘A Song of Willow’: Barbary’s Blues and the Theft of Happiness in Early Modern England,” part of the “RaceB4Race: Appropriations Symposium” hosted by the Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, January 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCI-K1ZzVYU>.

¹¹ This erasure also constitutes, I suggest, an elision of the provenance of the song, which is significant precisely because it subverts its creative genealogy, tacitly attributing Barbary’s song to Desdemona. This is a small moment, but I pause on it precisely because it illustrates the quotidian and unremarkable nature of these erasures. In a similar way, as I shall discuss, white feminism often works to elide even as it extracts the work of Black and Women of Color feminism. And white womanhood, as with whiteness more broadly, often evinces a cross-class solidarity, as Emilia demonstrates here; see, for instance, the unsettling statistic that in 2016, 53% of white women voted for Donald Trump, but in 2020 that percentage actually increased, to 55%.

and posters that emerged in the days and weeks that followed. Also in circulation were images of protestors themselves—often white women—chatting with law enforcement officers, sharing a laugh, taking photographs with them. These images underscored the way in which the disciplinary mechanisms of law enforcement, deployed over generations to police Black life, were suspended to serve and even celebrate white women. The ability, then, to ventriloquize Emilia's words, to render her words as protest, safely and effectively, was contingent, for many, on the racial privilege these protestors manifested and mobilized even as they marched against the forces of heteropatriarchy. And even Emilia's words themselves, as I have demonstrated, are implicated in a racial regime of whiteness. That reminder of the racial dynamics of white womanhood—and, as I will discuss, white feminism—was crucially registered in the words of the activist and commentator Angela Peoples's now-famous placard at the march in Washington, DC: "Don't forget," it advised: "White women voted for Trump."¹² In a photograph that quickly went viral on social media and beyond, Peoples and her arresting sign are juxtaposed with the three white women to her left, all of whom are clad in pink so-called pussy hats, one of them taking a picture on her phone.¹³ Of course, the pink hats, which were ubiquitous in marches worldwide, tacitly affirmed not only a biologically essentialist view of womanhood (in the assumption that what characterized women was the body part the hat denoted) but also—as some wearily noted at the time—a presumptively white one.¹⁴

The 2017 Women's March was thus emblematic of a particular notion of womanhood: one which defaults to and is thus tacitly centered on cis, white women; which derives its genealogical touchstones from apparently liberatory but actually contingent forms of female agency; and which, crucially, relies on an unmarked notion of white racial privilege at its center. I begin, somewhat anachronistically, with this moment because of the genealogies it itself derived from an early modern legacy of female resistance; not only was *Othello's* Emilia appropriated for apparently liberatory ends, as I have discussed, but multiple signs also claimed that their bearers "were the granddaughters of the witches you weren't able to burn," tracing their defiance of patriarchy to a presumptively early modern provenance. It is the deliberate creation of these genealogies and their explicit invocation in contemporary contexts that suggest the availability of these ideologies, then as now. What events such as these reflect, I am suggesting, is an investment in the renaissance of white womanhood.

¹² See Peoples.

¹³ The photograph was taken by Kevin Banatte: https://twitter.com/saint_CHuBBZ/status/822940921847279617.

¹⁴ See also Wortham.

White womanhood is in the news, most recently and devastatingly in the numerous instances of white women choosing to weaponize their whiteness against Black people.¹⁵ In recent years, however, we have also seen greater attention paid to the particular and peculiar operations of (what we often understand as) feminism as it underwrites a specifically white movement—a white feminism—in popular culture, and an accompanying attempt to grapple more broadly with the grammar of intersectional feminism.¹⁶ Even as the work of Black and Women of Color feminists—from bell hooks to Audre Lorde to Cherrie Moraga to Barbara Smith—has frequently been elided in genealogies of feminism and women’s liberation in both popular and academic contexts, there has recently been a renewed emphasis on intersectionality as a theoretical remedy to those histories of erasure.¹⁷ Yet in several instances this language of intersectional feminism is mobilized not to engage but rather to evacuate its central focus on race.¹⁸ Disciplinary work on early modern women and gender, meanwhile, continues to sidestep frameworks of race-making.¹⁹ This is in part

¹⁵ In an especially notorious incident in May 2020, for instance, a white dog-walker, Amy Cooper, not only refused to leash her dog when a Black birdwatcher, Christian Cooper, asked her to do so, but also rang the police and accused him of threatening behavior. This case became a flashpoint for the pervasive, dangerous phenomenon of white women reflexively and explicitly exploiting their access to white supremacy. See Sarah Maslin Nir, “White Woman is Fired After Calling Police on Black Man in Central Park,” *New York Times*, updated 16 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/26/nyregion/amy-cooper-dog-central-park.html>.

¹⁶ Intersectionality as a term was only added to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2015; see the *OED Online*, s.v. “intersectionality,” *n*. Recent studies for a wide audience on the operations and implications of white feminism in contemporary contexts and the (often overlooked) legacies of intersectional feminism include Beck; Hamad; Kendall; Schuller; Zakaria. As Kendall puts it with searing clarity, “when it comes right down to it, mainstream white feminism often fails to show up for women of color,” while “white women are taught to think of whiteness as default, of race as something to ignore”: Kendall 2, 5. For a sociological examination of the frameworks of white womanhood, see Frankenberg.

¹⁷ The genealogy of work in Black and Woman of Color feminist thought and praxis is far too extensive to convey here, but foundational texts include the “Combahee River Collective Statement”; Davis; hooks, 2014 and 2015 (originally published in 1984 and 1981, respectively); Collins; Lorde; Moraga and Anzaldúa; Hull, Scott, and Smith.

¹⁸ Intersectionality often becomes, in these instances, a misapplication of “gender plus *x*,” without an attendant attention to the intellectual genealogies and political implications of such framings. Jennifer Nash, however, warns of the affective and political danger of centering intersectionality and the debates around such framings in Black feminism: “the proprietary impulses of black feminism . . . reveal how the defensive affect traps black feminism, hindering its visionary world-making capacities”: Nash, 3.

¹⁹ I do not believe it is generalizing too far to suggest that many publications with a central focus on women and gender fail to consider the racialization of gender at the heart of their enquiry, whereas

due to a persistent reluctance to acknowledge whiteness as racialized at all; whiteness remains an “unmarked property,” easily habitable and tacitly reaffirmed by its very invisibility.²⁰ In speaking of race, then, early modern studies frequently looks to somatic or epidermal markers of visible difference, searching for nonwhite bodies or representations that tacitly become the repositories of race, while at the same time overlooking the race-making embedded in that very methodology. Race becomes, in essence, something imported into formations of gender, rather than co-constitutive of it. This co-constitution—the “interlocking” nature—of race, gender, class, and sexuality lies precisely at the heart of intersectionality as a concept.²¹

To overlook the crucial ways in which women both are constituted by whiteness and mobilize it to their advantage, then, is to participate in the project of rendering whiteness neutral, unmarked, and invisible.²² The current essay therefore makes two central arguments. First, it contends that early modern English texts establish a form of womanhood specifically and explicitly marked (and unmarked) as white. It is not just that white women weaponize whiteness; it is also that womanhood is intrinsically white, and that gender is delimited by race, in early modern England as now. And secondly, this construction of white womanhood in turn underwrites the operations of violence and enslavement, both within and without the scope of white women’s agential capacity, as I have already discussed. As forms of whiteness have been read through the framework of labor and class and as class markers, this essay makes a third, related argument: that the

texts that have examined race and gender together—such as Hall, 1995; Hendricks and Parker; MacDonald—have been received as studies primarily of race rather than of gender. My decision not to name specific works of feminist academic scholarship that do not acknowledge the unmarked yet racialized whiteness at their center is a deliberate one, in order to underscore how widespread this practice is. See also Coles, 56; this article argues for “the complicity of the early modern Englishwomen of white European descent in the production of race” and urges a more cautious approach to the recuperation of women writers as a necessarily liberatory move.

²⁰ In referring to whiteness as an “unmarked property,” per Little, 92, I think also of his query regarding the disciplinary implications: “Is there something of a *working* assumption in early modern studies that the early modern period . . . is a field for the *unmarked*, that is for ‘white’ scholars and those who can so masterfully transform themselves?” Little, 88.

²¹ See Crenshaw, 1989, for the foundational language of intersectionality; see also Crenshaw, 1991. For the articulation of “systems of oppression” as “interlocking,” see the 1977 “Combahee River Collective Statement,” 15.

²² See Dyer, 2–3, on the “invisibility” of whiteness.

classed implications of whiteness are constructed through representations of women as well as men.²³

This essay moves across a range of texts in addressing these issues, from Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Comedy of Errors* to seventeenth-century domestic correspondence to royal portraits to Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, in order to underscore the different genres and contexts in which ideals of white womanhood are constructed, negotiated, and ratified. I have already suggested, in the first part of this essay, that the formation of white womanhood in early modern English literature and the service into which white womanhood—as a specifically racialized construction and ideal—is pressed constructs a genealogy of gendered whiteness. As sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England saw—and oversaw—new developments in enslaving and colonial practices, the central question I seek to address in this essay is this: what role did white womanhood play in the construction of early modern English slavery? In the next section of this essay, I will begin to address this question by turning to a number of texts that begin to limn the boundaries of white womanhood along the vectors of class and civility and to demonstrate the function of white womanhood as an authorizing trope and force in a global context. White womanhood, I am arguing, must be not only constructed but policed as it is mobilized toward operations of enslavement and imperialism.

MAPPING THE BODY OF WHITE WOMANHOOD

Narratives of early modern English slavery, as decades of historiography have demonstrated, are both complicated and contested, the very existence of English slavery subject to both elision and debate: What was the status of enslaved people brought to England? Were there enslaved people in early modern England? And what was the connection of slavery to race?²⁴ Insofar as we

²³ For work that addresses the nexus of whiteness and the working class, see, among others, Allen, 2012a and 2012b (first published in, respectively, 1994 and 1997); Dyer; Lipsitz; Roediger.

²⁴ Although a comprehensive overview of the contested legal status of slavery in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries is beyond the scope of this essay, the presence of slavery in early modern England is the subject of Chakravarty, 2022, which argues that the ideologies of slavery are constructed in the everyday contexts of early modern England. The status of English slavery more broadly, and its relationship both to constructions of race and to the presence of Black people in England, has been the subject of important scholarly enquiry. See, for instance, Guasco, which discusses English encounters with slavery in Mediterranean and Atlantic contexts; and Habib, which traces the presence of Black people in England and their relationship to practices of enslavement. Kauffman, meanwhile, suggests that the contested status of slavery in early modern England means that “Black Tudors” (in the now-famous terminology presented in her recent book title) were not, in fact, enslaved. Other

have excavated and confronted this history, it emerges as a gendered one, and, often, as a story of supposedly great men who either explicitly built their legacy from slavery, like John Hawkins, or whose celebrated reputation must be revised in light of an acknowledgment of their enslaving practices, like Francis Drake. Hawkins and Drake, notorious early modern English enslavers, undertook several slaving voyages together, and Hawkins's resulting fortune as well as its source is attested by the grant of arms awarded to him in 1565, which features an enslaved person bound with cords, a clear and transparent reference to the chattel slavery that earned him this dubious honor (see [fig. 1](#) for the 1571 augmented grant).²⁵ And although Drake is perhaps most celebrated for his role against the Armada, his voyages, and even his piracy, these ventures were also part of his slaving practices: as Jennifer L. Morgan reminds us, it was “during his 1577 circumnavigation” that “Drake captured an enslaved woman named Maria and an unnamed man from a Spanish ship”; when Maria became pregnant, she was abandoned, along with two Black men, on a deserted Indonesian island.²⁶ Morgan reads this incident as exemplary of the way in which the reproductive implications of the Black woman's body are conscripted in service of a colonizing logic, allowing Drake to “[claim] the island for the Crown” and thereby to transform Maria “from the category of sexual object to a commodified place-marker on the map of Drake's colonial ambitions.”²⁷ The enslavement of Maria—and the two men with whom she is abandoned—thus comprise part of the underbelly of Drake's vaulted seafaring adventures, and are intricately enmeshed in the colonial endeavors for which Drake would thereafter be celebrated.

But there is a central figure standing behind both Hawkins and Drake, figuratively as well as financially: the state, writ large, exemplified by Elizabeth I herself, who had invested in Hawkins's voyages and granted him the aforementioned coat of arms, and who had knighted Drake. Drake's unlikely, legendary success against the Spanish Armada is celebrated in the notable Armada portrait

scholars have crucially situated English enslaving practices within a larger network of Spanish and Portuguese racial and colonial endeavors to suggest that English traders operated within European systems of enslavement even before they had fully established their own; for work which unfolds these networks, see, for instance, Ungerer; Weissbourd. See also Chakravarty, 2022, 1–13, 45–88.

²⁵ For a recent examination of Hawkins's voyages and practices as well as a careful and important reading of the grant of arms in light of both race-making and enslaving practices and heraldic signification, see Singh. See also Chakravarty, 2022, 67, for further discussion of Hawkins's grant of arms.

²⁶ See Morgan, 6.

²⁷ Morgan, 7.

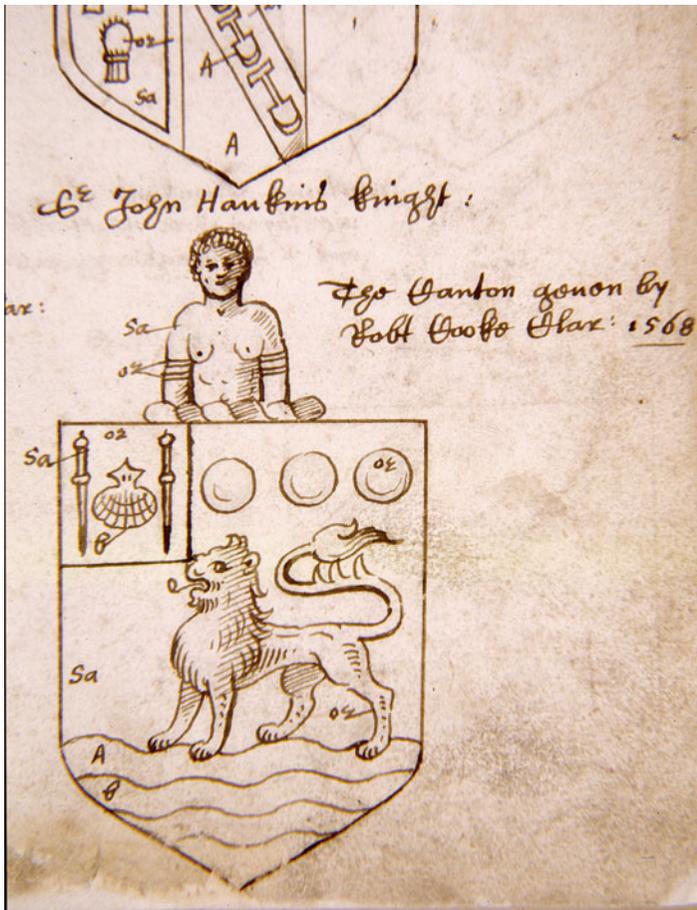


Figure 1. College of Arms MS Misc. Grants 1, fol. 148^v, 1571. Reproduced by permission of the Kings, Herald and Pursuivants of Arms.

of Elizabeth I (fig. 2).²⁸ As the defeat of the Armada is staged in the background, the Queen sits with her hand resting on a globe, her fingers pointing to North America. For many critics, this aspect of the painting gestures to an “imperial claim” over America, particularly Virginia, and signals Elizabethan sovereignty.²⁹ The battle taking place behind Elizabeth both rehearses the English conquest of Spain but also, I propose, stands in for the different positions of England and Spain in the global slaving economy, and, given the complicity

²⁸ Although there are three different versions of this portrait, I refer here to, and figure 2 depicts, the version at Woburn Abbey.

²⁹ Traub, 2000, 79.



Figure 2. Armada Portrait of Elizabeth I, English School, ca. 1588. From the Woburn Abbey Collection.

of English merchants with European slaving practices and Drake's own kidnaping of enslaved people from a Spanish ship, is closely tied to that slaving economy.

But I want also to attend to the "imperial hand" that Elizabeth extends in this portrait.³⁰ The visual lexicon of black and white is present throughout this image: in the contrast between the two scenes of the Armada, irradiated and powerful in the first, dark and defeated in the second; in the representation of Elizabeth's dress; in the juxtaposition of the dark curtain behind Elizabeth with her white head, crowned with pearls; and in the color scheme of the queen's clothing. There is also another pearl here, placed strategically over the queen's pudendum, and set off by a bow. As Elizabeth extends her grasp over North America and indeed the globe, the whiteness of this pearl, and the location and lightness of the bow, visually articulates an affinity between the queen's own virginity and the national expansion into the strategically named territory of Virginia. As critics such as Peter Erickson and Kim

³⁰ See Jowitt, 26.

F. Hall have demonstrated, portraits such as this one powerfully articulate a visual grammar of blackness and whiteness, instructing their viewers in the language and implications of epidermal race.³¹ I want also to attend not only to the object of Elizabeth's (over)reaching hand but also to its composition and its complexion, and the clear contrast between the whiteness of the hand and the darkness of the globe it seeks to grasp, a contrast particularly present in the National Maritime Museum's version of this portrait (fig. 3), which depicts this whiteness "as a specific attribute of Englishness."³² The whiteness of this hand, I want to suggest, also metonymically denotes the workings of whiteness as such, as an operation of both power and property. As Cheryl I. Harris vitally noted nearly thirty years ago, whiteness is mobilized as a property interest.³³ In speaking, then, of the work of whiteness as it is articulated in this portrait, I am referring to a system of power and privilege, one which, in this context, emphasizes how the white hand—indeed, the hyperwhite hand, as registered in the visual lexicon of black and white in the painting—reaching out over the globe symbolizes the mobilization of whiteness in the interest of property, colony, and empire.³⁴ The visual grammar of light and dark in this portrait, that is, not only rehearses—and trains its viewers to learn—the semantic logics of black and white; it also represents, reaffirms, and ratifies the property interest of whiteness as it is simultaneously created and celebrated.

Yet there is the additional and distinct semantic crosscurrent of whiteness at work here, in its operation as a specifically gendering mechanism. For whiteness can also function in a valorizing and feminizing mode, as mobilized to construct not only race but gender, too. The use of white cosmetics to construct a certain ideal of beauty was widespread, and reaffirmed by Elizabeth I herself.³⁵ But as Kim F. Hall has famously argued, "Frequently, 'black' in Renaissance discourses

³¹ See Hall, 1995; Erickson, 2000.

³² See Hall, 1996, 466.

³³ See Harris.

³⁴ In using the term *hyperwhite*, I think of Royster. See also David Sterling Brown's plenary panel address, "White Hands: Gesturing Toward Shakespeare's *Other* 'Race Plays,'" at the 2019 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=szUlxHjUCOg>.

³⁵ Karim-Cooper notes in her study of early modern cosmetics that "the queen's habit of painting her face with red and white is significant, because her face was a symbolic register for the body politic"; yet she "not only came to symbolise but also may have fallen victim to these structured and well-rooted prescriptions [of beauty] when she came to power, which is likely to have been one reason why she was painted with cosmetics": Karim-Cooper, 19, 18. On the cosmetic construction of whiteface, see Poitevin. On the significance of whiteface as "an impersonation, just like blackface," see Callaghan, esp. 84–88 (quotation on 84). On Elizabeth's facial whiteness in portraiture, see Allen-Flanagan.



Figure 3. Elizabeth I, 1533–1603 (The Armada Portrait). © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London.

is opposed not to ‘white’ but to ‘beauty’ or ‘fairness,’ and these terms most often refer to the appearance or moral states of women . . . the terms acquire a special force when they are turned to women and . . . they are most frequently used in relation to women.”³⁶ *Fairness*, that is to say, not only assumes particular resonance in relation to women; it is on and through the figurations of women—white as well as Black—that frameworks of fairness and darkness are mapped, reaffirmed, and consolidated.

The metaphorical mapping of circuits of exchange, colonialism, traffic, and trade onto women’s bodies is famously invoked in Dromio of Syracuse’s anti-blazon of Nell in Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors*. In the following passage, Dromio of Syracuse maps the world onto constituent parts of Nell’s body:

Antipholus of Syracuse: What’s her name?

Dromio of Syracuse: Nell, sir. But her name and three quarters—that’s an ell and three quarters—will not measure her from hip to hip.

³⁶ Hall, 1995, 9.

- Antipholus of Syracuse:* Then she bears some breadth?
Dromio of Syracuse: No longer from head to foot than from hip to hip. She is spherical, like a globe. I could find out countries in her.
- Antipholus of Syracuse:* In what part of her body stands Ireland?
Dromio of Syracuse: Marry, sir, in her buttocks. I found it out by the bogs.
- Antipholus of Syracuse:* Where Scotland?
Dromio of Syracuse: I found it by the barrenness, hard in the palm of the hand.
- Antipholus of Syracuse:* Where France?
Dromio of Syracuse: In her forehead, armed and reverted, making war against her hair.
- Antipholus of Syracuse:* Where England?
Dromio of Syracuse: I looked for the chalky cliffs, but I could find no whiteness in them. But I guess it stood in her chin, by the salt rheum that ran between France and it.
- Antipholus of Syracuse:* Where Spain?
Dromio of Syracuse: Faith, I saw it not, but I felt it hot in her breath.
- Antipholus of Syracuse:* Where America, the Indies?
Dromio of Syracuse: O sir, upon her nose, all o'er embellished with rubies, carbuncles, sapphires, declining their rich aspect to the hot breath of Spain, who sent whole armadas of carracks to be ballast at her nose. (3.2.109–38)³⁷

This infamous account of Nell's "spherical" body reconstitutes her as a "globe" on which Dromio of Syracuse not only situates but "find[s] out countries" (3.2.115–16). That is to say, Nell's body becomes a map, and the very act of charting it yokes together possession of the female body and imperial tropes of discovery in a familiar rhetorical and conceptual association, invoked perhaps most famously in Walter Raleigh's pronouncement that "*Guiana* is a Countrey that hath yet her Maydenhead."³⁸ As I will later suggest, this mapping of Nell's body also evokes another atomization and itemization of the female body, to quite different effect, in book 6 of *The Faerie Queene*. Bernadette Andrea importantly notes, furthermore, that Dromio of Syracuse "draw[s] on the new geographical knowledge, which was harnessed to the Western European drive for empire" as he links the parts of Nell's body "each with a European country roughly running from north to south."³⁹ The description of Nell becomes not only a parodic mockery of blazons of female beauty but also an affirmation of the legibility and fixability of global

³⁷ All references to *The Comedy of Errors* follow Shakespeare, 2015 (*The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed.) and are cited parenthetically.

³⁸ Raleigh, 96, who continues, "It hath neuer been entred by any armie of strength, and neuer conquered or possessed by anie Christian Prince."

³⁹ See Andrea, 93.

travel and traffic. It is not just that territories like (the so-called) Guiana can be analogized to women waiting to be possessed; European women themselves become the metonymic sites of global exploration, discovery, and conquest. Thus, when Antipholus of Syracuse asks, “Where America, the Indies?” (3.2.134)—conflating two different, vast sites of imperial possibility and wealth—Dromio of Syracuse flip-pantly reads Nell’s pimples and blemishes as “rubies, carbuncles, sapphires” (3.2.136).⁴⁰ The imperial trophies of “America, the Indies” are also pursued by Spain, Dromio’s description suggests, gesturing to the battle for European supremacy in which England and Spain would continue to engage.⁴¹ But the fact that these riches are analogized to blemishes and pustules renders these treasures of “America, the Indies” not only fixable but abundant, common, unexceptional, just as their location, both on the body of Nell and the land it evokes, is implicitly, incipiently devalued.

Meanwhile, a crucial moment in this exchange centers on the location of England. When Antipholus of Syracuse queries, “Where England?” (3.2.127), Dromio of Syracuse responds wryly, “I looked for the chalky cliffs, but I could find no whiteness in them” (3.2.128–29). Although the “chalky cliffs,” in this instance, refer to the white cliffs of Dover and here should be located in Nell’s teeth, what disqualifies them is their lack of “whiteness.” Dromio eventually “guess[es]” that England “stood in her chin, by the salt rheum that ran between France and it” (3.2.129–30), speculatively locating England by where it is not: France.

The fact that England can only reluctantly be found in Nell’s form is significant and gestures in two different directions. Nell, it seems, is not quite white enough to stand in for the immediately recognizable landmark of the white cliffs of Dover, which themselves signify a natural and naturalized geological whiteness, a whiteness that is literally foundational to England. This is the exceptional whiteness—and Englishness—that Nell cannot embody. But the second implication here is that England does not itself need to be mapped—and where it is charted, it must only be in the context of an adequate whiteness. Nell’s body, that is, offers a parodic version of the treasures of America and the Indies, but it is not white enough to stand in readily for England itself, which is exceptionalized beyond cartographical legibility.⁴² Yet her body is white enough

⁴⁰ See Kent Cartwright’s editorial gloss in Shakespeare, 2016, 223.

⁴¹ Kent Cartwright notes that “the term *armadas* recalls Philip II’s war fleet sent against England in 1588,” while “*carracks* were large ships of burden, fitted for war but also used for trading by the Portuguese and Spanish in the East Indies, i.e. galleons.” Shakespeare, 2016, 223.

⁴² In private correspondence with Coles, she has conveyed her compelling reading of Nell as, potentially, a Black servant; see also Andrea, 92–93. While I am persuaded by this reading, my aim here is to demonstrate how, even glossing the figure of Nell within the framework of fairness, Nell’s contingent access to whiteness underscores the strategic force of class as a mechanism of the construction of whiteness.

to register a limned boundary of whiteness, and indeed the very boundedness of whiteness. That is to say, Nell's body is not only a "globe" but also a canvas on which is charted the creation of boundaries of whiteness, forged in relation not just to gender but also to class. And Nell's sexual availability, it is suggested, only further compromises her potential for whiteness. That is, if whiteness is constructed through negotiated figurations of women, those depictions are also always subject to the contingencies of status.

The role of status in constructing whiteness is one that remains part of the still somewhat understudied nexus of race and class in early modern studies, despite recent work by Patricia Akhimie, which has brilliantly demonstrated how central the classed considerations of conduct are to forms of early modern race-making, and a long history of intersectionality—within and without early modern studies—that stresses the centrality of class positionality and praxis to its enquiry.⁴³ I therefore turn next to a seventeenth-century domestic incident which evinces an attempt to both create and police the boundaries of whiteness in concert with class. In 1668, Mary Helsby wrote a letter to her husband about her management of her household, emphasizing in particular the misbehavior of her maid and her manservant and the different forms of discipline to which she subsequently subjected them:

Doll Janion tother night was again out uery late with a young man from Helsby, & for her disobedience I whipt her well ouer my lapp, but onely with my hande, & tho 19 she cried like a childe, & did often call out Madam I begg pardon, o do pardon me, Madam odo, odo, odo, she hath been uery good euer since, I am much afraid the wench will come to naughte, ffor she hath lately growne quite like a woman & is plumpe & white, but uery silly enough to take up by turns with 2 or 3 youthes of no great good & much belowe her euery waie. I fear me she will in this wise giue me as much trouble as I hear she hath giuen to her mother, she hath so often offended I haue at last tried not vainly to shame & amende her into better behaiour, as gentle wordes & warneings all went for nothing. I sent worde to her to come to my closett & after talking to her awhile bade her prepare herselfe for her discipline with the rodd, but she begged so on her knees that I promisd its remission, & twould haue hurt her pittifully she hath so fine a skinn, John got behinde some tapestrie & heard my sermon to her & then went belowe & for mischeife sent up Joe the new seruant, which I found listening & he had pept through the key-hole. He is a tall lath of a ladd of 17 or 18, & I gaue him a quiet firme lessone on his disorderlie conduct & then whipt him also till he cryed like a babe. I was secretly much insensed, but me thinkes by his present behaiour, that he must

⁴³ See Akhimie. See also Feerick for another important recent study of race, blood, and status.

need a cushion in stead of a saddel for some time & that I shall be putt to no more trouble with neither such as Mrs Rutter telleth me she hath been put unto by some of her maides & youthes. But she sheweth so much of her passion, that it is no great maruell & hath not *the* arte & controul enough to giue them reasonable knowledge of their faults, but hastily strippeth them with her owne hands. Methinkes my seruants do loue me much more than any mistresse is loued here aboutes.⁴⁴

Throughout this passage, Helsby describes her sense of herself as a quasi-parent in relation to her servant, with a clear pastoral charge. Doll Janion, Helsby says, has caused her mother “much trouble,” and as a result Helsby must attempt to “amende her into better behaiour.” The timing of these attempts is particularly important, for Janion has been associating with “2 or 3 youthes” who are, Helsby asserts, completely unsuitable for her. What is striking, however, is how Helsby describes this particular moment of Janion’s own development; for, she states, she “hath lately growne quite like a woman & is plumpe & white.” At nineteen, Janion is coming into a new stage of womanhood, one specifically marked in the register of whiteness.

Doll Janion’s whiteness and her incipient growth to be “quite like a woman” are therefore yoked together. Janion, that is to say, is becoming not just a woman, but a specifically white one, and must accordingly be disciplined into white womanhood’s codes of conduct and behavior. This discipline takes the form of a whipping, but “onely wth [her mistress’s] hande”; for Helsby’s reluctance to use the “rodd” for this punishment is due in part to the fact that “twould haue hurt [Janion] pittifully she hath so fine a skinn.” The word “fine” here might well suggest that Janion’s “skinn” is delicate, but also signals its quality which, paired with her description as “white,” suggests that Helsby does not wish to mar Janion’s “perfect, pure” white skin.⁴⁵ Helsby appears to have far fewer qualms about her punishment of the manservant Joe; she “whipt him also till he cryed like a babe,” to the extent that, Helsby suggests somewhat chillingly, “he must need a cushion in stead of a saddel for some time.” What is striking here is both the reluctance to mar Janion’s “fine” white skin and that what necessitates Janion’s punishment is her association with “youths of no great good” who are, significantly, “much belowe her euery waie.” Whereas the sexually available figure of Nell is depicted as an unstable site for the location of English whiteness, Doll Janion is depicted as a work in progress, a repository of white womanhood whose potential must

⁴⁴ Folger Shakespeare Library, MS X.d.493 (7).

⁴⁵ See the *OED Online*, s.v. “fine,” *adj.*, *adv.*, and *n.* 2, A.I.1.a. See also 3.a.: “Of good or excellent quality; superior, select.” See also Othello’s chilling reasoning as he debates how to murder Desdemona: “Yet I’ll not shed her blood, / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow” (5.2.3–4).

be disciplined into compliance. And that compliance seems to center on upholding both status distinctions—and therefore punishing Janion for her association with “youths” who are below her station—and, it is implied, (the appearance of) Janion’s chastity.

Helsby’s willingness to mark Joe’s skin but not Janion’s is striking; as Patricia Akhimie has argued, disciplinary marks on skin serve as somatic markers of the racialized capacity for cultivation.⁴⁶ Helsby’s reluctance to mark Janion’s “fine” skin, then, underscores the maid’s very capacity for whiteness, as well as a larger mandate to protect it. It is, perhaps, unsurprising that Helsby believes that “my seruants do loue me much more than any mistresse is loued here aboutes,” as she actively upholds the disciplinary structures that forge and reaffirm white womanhood.⁴⁷

This delineation and disciplining of whiteness lies at the heart of the weaponization of white womanhood in service of strategies of imperial violence and enslavement, as I will discuss in the next and final section of this essay. I will turn to the role of white women—as figures and ideological formations—as they were used to underpin the logics of colonial expansion and enslavement, with particular attention to Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. At the same time, I want to remain attentive to the stakes of considering the culpability of white womanhood in discourses and justifications of slavery and settler colonialism. My aim here is not to gloss over or excuse the very real operations of patriarchy, nor to hold women accountable for the actions of white patriarchy, to which they are, after all, also subject. Rather, my argument is twofold. First, I want to underscore the complicity of white womanhood in the operations of colonialism and enslavement, to unfold how whiteness interacts and intersects with gender and emerges as an organizing logic and interest. But secondly, and perhaps more importantly, I suggest that a particular articulation of white womanhood becomes central in authorizing and legitimating these very operations. That is, early modern writers conscript the formation of white womanhood into the service of imperial claims and the work of chattel slavery.

FORMATIONS OF WOMANHOOD AND STRATEGIES OF WHITENESS IN *THE FAERIE QUEENE*

What, then, is the role of white womanhood in the construction of early modern slavery? To explore this question, I turn to Spenser, whose role in English

⁴⁶ See Akhimie.

⁴⁷ There is of course a long—and strategic—tradition of registering the service relationship as one of intimacy, affection, and even, to borrow Helsby’s language, “love.” For a discussion of these dynamics in Shakespeare, see Schalkwyk.

colonial projects is both well established and documented and extensively discussed.⁴⁸ Although it is *A View of the Present State of Ireland* that has been the subject of greatest critical scrutiny for its representation of colonial violence, *The Faerie Queene* must also be viewed in light of its imbrication in the very contemporary projects (as I have suggested) of chattel slavery.⁴⁹ Book 6 of *The Faerie Queene* depicts perhaps most explicitly the trade in enslaved persons, but in this third and final section of this essay I want also to explore the constitution of slavery by and through both gender and whiteness by attending to the Radigund episode in book 5. I argue that in its representation of a female enslaver, this episode reflects on the creation of non-white and white womanhood alike through the coarticulation of race, gender, and sexuality, and depicts the dangers of failing to secure the boundaries of whiteness. Although the Radigund episode invokes the specter of early modern Turkish and North African captivity, it does so, I argue, in order ultimately to authorize a gendered and racialized subjection that anticipates the logics of Atlantic slavery. Thus, I suggest that as we excavate the histories of early modern servitude and slavery, we must think about not only the construction but also the complicity of white womanhood with the English national projects of slavery, imperialism, and white supremacy.

When the reader first hears of the “proud Amazon” (5.4.29) Radigund, we learn that it is unrequited love that fuels her “hatred.” The “Knights” she “subdue[s]” (5.4.31) are subject to a very particular form of punishment:

First she doth them of warlike armes despoile,
And cloth in womens weedes: And then with threat
Doth them compell to worke, to earne their meat,
To spin, to card, to sew, to wash, to wring;
Ne doth she giue them other thing to eat,
But bread and water, or like feeble thing,
Them to disable from reuenge aduenturing. (5.4.31)

The punishment to which the knights are subject is of course a specifically gendered one: they must wear women’s clothes, they engage in the gendered labor of spinning and washing, and they are weakened—“disabled”—by being denied sustenance. Should anyone protest “through stout disdain of manly mind” (5.4.32), the penalty is death. Drawing on the work of Ann Jones and

⁴⁸ There is a long critical history that examines the Irish colonial contexts and implications of Spenser’s work, including Hadfield; Maley; McCabe.

⁴⁹ For a recent examination of the role of race in Spenser’s work, see Britton and Coles. See also Chakravarty, 2021, on race-making and white futurity in *A View of the Present State of Ireland* in the same volume.

Peter Stallybrass, Jeffrey Griswold compellingly argues in his reading of consent in book 5 that the wearing of women's clothing constitutes an attempt to "condition" the men to their new roles, and their new clothing remakes their character.⁵⁰ But it also, I propose, threatens a racial degeneration.

For the representation of the Amazon queen Radigund as suggestively foreign and generically Eastern, Turkish, or North African is both striking and significant. As numerous critics have argued, the early modern Amazon embodies both a kind of racial and gender instability. Kathryn Schwarz, referring to their "quality of uncertainty," observes that Amazons are "variously imagined as Asian, African, American, and Northern European, as black and white, as divinely, monstrously, and parthenogenetically conceived."⁵¹ Early modern commentators strove to situate these confounding and fascinating figures cartographically; thus, Walter Raleigh, in *The discoverie of the large, rich, and bewtifull empire of Guiana* (1596), suggests that these "like" "cruell and bloodthirsty" "women are verie ancient as well in *Africa* as in *Asia*."⁵² Amazons are therefore suggestively foreign, located elsewhere, constructed as monstrous—and, notably yet crucially in terms of their racialization, difficult to secure in terms of their gender. Sydnee Wagner, drawing on Hortense Spillers's theory of "ungendering," observes that "within a white nationalist paradigm, the gendering of people of color is inherently non-normative," and as scholars such as C. Riley Snorton have vitally argued, the construction of gender is a racialized endeavor.⁵³ Wagner's insightful argument reminds us of the coimbrication of gender—and, I will suggest, sexuality—in the construction of race. It is thus worth pausing on the way Radigund is described in preparation for her battle with Artegall:

And on her legs she painted buskins wore,
 Basted with bends of gold on euery side,
 And mailes betweene, and laced close afore:
 Vppon her thigh her Cemitare was tide,
 With an embrodered belt of mickell pride;
 And on her shoulder hung her shield, bedeckt
 Vppon the bosse with stones, that shined wide. (5.5.3)

Radigund here is represented in the terms of elaborate ornamentation, and of both scopic and material sumptuousness. The fact that she bears a "Cemitare,"

⁵⁰ See Griswold, 224. Griswold suggests, however, that "in fact, the female vestments do not function as they should. Radigund uses female clothing to fashion the knight into a woman, but it fails to transform him fully."

⁵¹ See Schwarz, 13.

⁵² Raleigh, 23–24.

⁵³ See Wagner, 146. See also Snorton.

so often associated with Ottoman or “Moorish” figures, suggestively portrays her within quite specifically identifiable racial and religious terms: as Islamic, “Moorish,” and, in its phallic register, not-quite-woman, the nonnormative gendering intersecting with Radigund’s Islamic and Ottoman associations to cement a specific construction of racialized womanhood. Kim F. Hall reminds us, however, that when Ottoman figures are shown bearing scimitars, those depictions can gesture in two different directions: the scimitar can either operate as a phallic symbol, and evoke the threat of penetration and conversion, or, conversely, it can signal castration.⁵⁴ Thus, as Valerie Traub notes, following Louis Montrose and Kathryn Schwarz, early modern Amazons could be seen as “a repository of male castration anxiety” due to their “agency and hostility to men.”⁵⁵ But the association with castration is also invoked with regard to the imagined figure of the Amazon herself, who, as John Florio notes, “in Greek signifies, without a dug, or teat or pap-less.”⁵⁶ Raleigh, however, disagrees: “that they cut of the right dug of the brest I do not finde to be true.”⁵⁷ Even the very confusion around the removal of the breast registers a fascination with determining and trying to secure the racially unfixable and uncertain body according to the legibility of the gender of the Amazon.

The racial indeterminacy of the Amazon is therefore constituted in part by gender trouble—that is, by the gendered indeterminacy of her body. And the root of the Radigund problem, I argue, lies in the fact that Arteggall mistakes that body—Radigund’s body—for one of a white woman. After “disarm[ing]” Radigund of her shield, “He to her lept with deadly dreadfull looke, / And her sunshynie helmet soone vnaced, / Thinking at once both head and helmet to haue raced” (5.5.11). The term *raced* here denotes, of course, *erased*, but suggestively gestures toward the race-making in progress at this moment:

But when as he discouered had her face,
 He saw his senses straunge astonishment,
 A miracle of natures goodly grace,
 In her faire visage void of ornament,
 But bath’d in bloud and sweat together ment;
 Which in the rudenesse of that euill plight,
 Bewrayd the signes of feature excellent:

⁵⁴ Hall, 2007, 176–77.

⁵⁵ Traub, 2002, 66. Traub notes that there is less of a sense of “erotic separatism” in representations of early modern Amazons than might be assumed, as indeed proves to be the case with Radigund and her comrades.

⁵⁶ See John Florio, *Queen Anna’s New World of Words* (London, 1611), in Looma and Burton, 283.

⁵⁷ Raleigh, 24.

Like as the Moone in foggie winters night,
Doth seeme to be her selfe, though darkned be her light. (5.5.12)

This passage is often read to suggest that Artegall is struck by Radigund's beauty, by her face that is "a miracle of natures goodly grace." But it is, or it is taken to be, I suggest, a particular kind of beauty: a "faire," implicitly white female beauty. What Artegall sees—or thinks he sees—is a "faire visage voided of ornament," in contrast to the quite ornamented spectacle Radigund earlier seemed to present, one he explicitly assumes and deems "faire." The last two lines of this passage, however, suggest his error: although Radigund's face appears like the moon on a cloudy night, "darkned" by blood and sweat, which cannot quite conceal the "feature[s] excellent" that lie beneath, Radigund is precisely not a "faire" woman. For as Radigund appears "bath'd in bloud," we recall Walter Raleigh's description of the "cruell and bloodthirsty" Amazon women.⁵⁸

Indeed, the next lines underscore Artegall's mistake:

At sight thereof his cruell minded hart
Empierced was with pittifull regard,
That his sharpe sword he threw from him apart,
Cursing his hand that had that visage mard. (5.5.13)

Artegall throws away his sharp sword because of the regret he feels at marring Radigund's image—but the fairness he attributes to Radigund is, as we have seen, wrongly indexed as whiteness even as the marring he laments in fact accurately reveals Radigund's lack of fairness. Ironically, it is because Artegall's heart is "empierced" that he discards his sword; yet the word "empierced" reminds us that Radigund carries a scimitar, that this scimitar denotes the threat of both sexual penetration and religious and racial conversion, and that in the poem's economy of racial construction Radigund is merely confused for fair.

Although scholars such as Melissa Sanchez have importantly explored the contingencies of consent and subjection in this episode, I suggest that what Artegall pays for with his subjection to Radigund is his failure to identify and properly secure the borders of whiteness.⁵⁹ It may be the case that "He wilfull lost, that he before attayned," but it is nonetheless now his lot "To be her thrall, and seruice her afford" (5.5.17). Because of his inability to police properly the boundaries of whiteness,

Amongst them all she placed him most low,
And in his hand a distaffe to him gaue,

⁵⁸ Raleigh, 24. Indeed, this etymology appears to be incorrect, although widely received.

⁵⁹ See Sanchez, 2011, esp. 57–86.

That he thereon should spin both flax and tow;
 A sordid office for a mind so braue.
 So hard it is to be a womans slaue. (5.5.23)

As the last line of this passage asks us to unpack the condition of being “a woman’s slave,” it immediately evokes a sense of Petrarchan subjection as well as a form of gendered humility. The labor and even the bondage depicted here, Maureen Quilligan suggests, may ultimately be actually appropriate for women, but in “plac[ing] him most low,” Radigund also subjects Artegall to a demotion of status, recalling the centrality of class to race-making.⁶⁰ This demotion will later be corrected by Britomart, but the very correctability of this “sordid” state suggests, as I will discuss, a racialized (capacity for) recuperability. For Artegall’s servitude is, like that of his fellow knights, explicitly gendered:

In stead whereof she made him to be dight
 In womans weedes, that is to manhood shame,
 And put before his lap a napron white,
 In stead of Curiets and bases fit for fight. (5.5.20)

Instead of his knight’s armor, Artegall is dressed in “womans weedes,” with a “napron white” to underscore his servility. Although “dight” means “dressed,” the term also carries sexual resonances, a register also implicit in Radigund’s scimitar and its potential to either castrate or convert.⁶¹ And in a suggestively queer dynamic that also racializes the Amazonian women, both Radigund and Clarinda fall in love with an Artegall dressed in these “womans weedes.”⁶² But Artegall’s servitude also explicitly recalls sixteenth- and seventeenth-century captivity narratives and so-called Turk plays, which often speak to the danger of sexual domination and violence. Repeatedly, these texts discuss the danger for the renegade Englishmen of “turning Turk” or even being circumcised or castrated, while captured English people were—in these narratives of kidnap and piracy—in constant danger of sexual violence.⁶³ As early as the mid- to late

⁶⁰ See Quilligan, 26, who suggests that “what Britomart assists Artegall in achieving when she frees him from this slavery (‘so hard it is to be a woman’s slave’) is not merely the reorganization of the polis, which repeals from women their unlawful sovereignty, but, as I think we are allowed to imagine, a regendering of this labor force. It is right for women to be enslaved in rational, comely rows.”

⁶¹ See Griswold, 225, on the sexual implications of “dight.”

⁶² On the early modern racialization of female same-sex eroticism, see, for instance, Traub, 2002.

⁶³ For the “sodomitical” forms of violence to which Christian captives were represented as vulnerable, see LaFleur, 68–69.

sixteenth century, English men and women were being captured and pressed into servitude as galley slaves and traded in the marketplace by French, Spanish, Turkish, and North African captors—and one of the ways of signaling servitude was through the change in clothing. As Michael Guasco reminds us, “the stripping and reclothing of new bondmen was . . . a way to break the man and make the slave,” and in Richard Hakluyt’s account of John Fox in the late sixteenth century, for instance, some Christian captives are represented as nearly naked, “onely a short linen paire of breeches to cover their privities,” in an analogue, perhaps, to the “napron white” that Artegall must wear.⁶⁴

This white apron also suggestively gestures toward the danger of racial degeneration surrounding Artegall, both as it signals his debasement and as its whiteness substitutes for its wearer’s absolute claim to his former “manly hew.” The narrator in canto 6 expresses sympathy for Artegall’s predicament—“For neuer yet was wight so well aware, / But he at first or last was trapt in womens snare” (5.6.1)—but when Britomart receives the “sight, / Of men disguiz’d in womanishe attire” (5.7.37) she registers it as “lothly vncouth” (5.7.37) and “her owne Loue” as “no lesse deformed” by this “disguize” (5.7.38). As she asks him, “Could ought on earth so wondrous change haue wrought, / As to haue robde you of that manly hew?” (5.7.40), we understand this “hew”—particularly in light of Francesca Royster’s work on the racialized and epidermal affordances of *hue*—to resonate in the terms of whiteness, a whiteness thankfully only temporarily “robde.”⁶⁵

For Britomart is able to restore Artegall to his former status: she “causd him those vncomely weedes vndight; / And in their steede for other rayment sought” (5.7.41), the word “vndight” reversing the sexual register of Radigund’s enslavement of Artegall and simultaneously foreclosing its potential for racial and religious conversion. And when Britomart “him anew had clad, / She was reuiu’d, and ioyd much in his semblance glad” (5.7.41). What we see here, that is, is not only a restoration of Artegall’s former attire—a setting to rights of both his status and his gender—but also a reaffirmation of his racial status. If Artegall’s bound position recalls the dangerous vulnerability of Christian captives, as I have noted, Michael Guasco argues that even when they were captured in the contexts of Mediterranean slavery, English men were seen as possessing a

⁶⁴ See Guasco, 131–32. Artegall’s “napron,” which registers his servitude to Radigund, also recalls his resonance with the figure of Hercules, who, when enslaved by Omphale, is also compelled to convey his subjugation sartorially. See Wilson-Okamura, 18, which argues that Artegall recalls both the “mythic template” of “Hercules unmanned by the Asian queen Omphale, reduced to performing women’s chores and wearing a dress” as well as the mediation of this figure through the “historical template [of] Mark Anthony serving Cleopatra in Egypt,” suggesting that the Radigund episode invokes this layered and palimpsestic literary provenance.

⁶⁵ See Royster.

kind of innate liberty.⁶⁶ As Britomart frets about Artegall's "blotted honour"—the term *blotted*, as I've suggested elsewhere, signaling the threat of somatic markings—the narrator assures the reader there is no slight to Artegall's honor, and just to make sure, Artegall recovers his prior "semblance glad." What we see here, then, in the rescue and redemption of these captured knights by Britomart is, I argue, an English ability to pass in and out of slavery, even its most demeaning kinds, without being permanently marked by that bondage. Early modern English captivity narratives, taken broadly, are at the very same time asserting on the one hand the violence of the bondage to which English men and women are being subject—and on the other their ability not to be "blotted" by that bondage. It is this recuperability that contributes to the formation of an English racial whiteness.⁶⁷

Moreover, once the knights have been liberated, Britomart "afterwards remained . . . her late woundes to heale" (5.7.42). But she also implements far-reaching changes during this time:

During which space she there as Princess rained,
And changing all that forme of common weale,
The liberty of women did repeale,
Which they had long vsurpt; and them restoring
To mens subiection, did true Iustice deale:
That all they as a Goddesse her adoring,
Her wisdomedid admire, and hearkned to her loring.

For all those Knights, which long in captiue shade
Had shrowded bene, she did from thraldome free;
And magistrates of all that city made,
And gawe to them great liuing and large fee:
And that thy should for euer faithfull bee,
Made them swear fealty to *Artegall*. (5.7.42–43)

The "women" whose "liberty" Britomart "did repeale" are, as I have already suggested, constructed as explicitly racialized. In other words, it is not just that Britomart "restor[es]" these women to "mens subjection"—the word "restoring" (5.7.42) deliberately constructing an authorizing provenance—but that she subjugates these women, who have already been framed explicitly as non-white women, to white men. As if to drive the point home, the narrator reminds us that "those Knights" whom Britomart "did from thraldome free" had been

⁶⁶ Guasco, esp. 41–79.

⁶⁷ See also Chakravarty, 2022, 45–88.

“shrowded” in “captiue shade” but are now “free” from that allegorically darkened state to “great liuing and large fee,” in return for fealty to Artegall.

I wish to underscore this moment in order to suggest the significance of this “repeale” of women’s liberty—a “repeale” that is, I have argued, racialized as well as gendered. For thirty years before the printing of these verses, Elizabeth I had been requesting licenses to redeem English men kidnapped and held captive as galley slaves. But Elizabeth had also been engaging in and helping to finance the trade in enslaved African people, by investing in the slaving voyages of John Hawkins and others, while her infamous “Edicts of Expulsion,” as Emily Weissbourd has demonstrated, attest to an involvement in the Spanish trade in enslaved Black subjects.⁶⁸ I emphasize this history not only to place this moment within the history of English involvement in chattel slavery but also to underscore how the demarcation of whiteness, and the construction of white womanhood in particular, is instrumental to these logics. The figure of Radigund, I have argued, points in two directions: on the one hand, she is foreign and monstrous, and it is Artegall’s mistaken recognition of her “fairness” that leads to his own punishment and imprisonment. And so, this episode warns about the dangers of misrecognizing—or failing to secure properly—the borders not only of gender but also and inevitably of race, even as it invokes the threat of Mediterranean, Ottoman, and North African captivity. On the other hand, however, I suggest that Artegall’s submission, once he espies Radigund’s fair beauty, not only adheres to the trope of gendered subjection which Petrarchan conventions dictate but also suggestively portends the legibility—the thinkability, the acceptability, even the desirability—of a female enslaver who is actually and properly fair. I want to underscore that my aim is not simply to point to the slaving endeavors and investments of a singular white woman, Elizabeth I, but to suggest that the construction of white womanhood is implicated in, and indeed complicit with, these national projects of slavery, imperialism, and supremacy. After all, as Kim F. Hall and Gustav Ungerer remind us, English women—not to mention European women—as well as men held enslaved Black people.⁶⁹ And in book 6, which contains the poem’s most explicit invocation of slavery, I argue that we also see in the figure of the “faire Pastorella” a form of exceptionalized white womanhood.

I want to end, therefore, by thinking about the operations of slavery and whiteness in book 6 at greater length, attending both to the kidnap of Pastorella in cantos 10–11 and to the description of Serena’s encounter with the “saluage nation” in canto 8. Not unlike the brigands who will appear later in book 6, the “saluage nation” “liue / Of stealth and spoile, and making

⁶⁸ See Weissbourd.

⁶⁹ See Hall, 1995; Ungerer.

nightly rode / Into their neighbours borders” (6.8.35) and refuse either to steward the land they plunder or to engage in profitable mercantilism:

ne did giue
 Them selues to any trade, as for to driue
 The painefull plough, or cattell for to breed,
 Or by aduentrous marchandize to thriue;
 But on the labours of poore men to feed,
 And serue their owne necessities with others need. (6.8.35)

The “saluage nation,” in other words, is purely extractive, refusing to labor honestly in ways that might be legible or profitable to an English economy: through agriculture or by mercantile “aduentur[ing].” These “saluage” traits, as Melissa Sanchez notes, link them “with the barbarity of the Irish and New World inhabitants.”⁷⁰ Most strikingly, these men “vsde one most accursed order, / To eate the flesh of men” (6.8.36), their cannibalism affirming their barbarity as well as their fitness for enslavement.⁷¹ And this cannibalistic impulse is tellingly directed toward the hyperwhite body of Serena, the description of which might recall the parodic blazon of Nell’s body in *The Comedy of Errors* discussed earlier—but to very different effect:

Her yuorie necke, her alabaster brest,
 Her paps, which like white silken pillowes were,
 For loue in soft delight thereon to rest;
 Her tender sides, her bellie white and clere. (6.8.42)

As Melissa Sanchez notes, Serena’s body parts—her “necke,” “brest,” “paps,” “sides,” “bellie”—are described only in terms of their whiteness, and her violation (and near escape from the threat of rape, ritual sacrifice, and cannibalism) serves as a mandate to civility which “discipline[s] White women in order to reproduce a fantasy of Whiteness as naturally superior to and dominant over its others.”⁷² Serena, like Mary Helsby’s servant Doll Janion, might need to be disciplined into white womanhood’s codes of conduct, but I would suggest that the consistent and coherent whiteness of her body—unlike Nell’s—also indexes the way in which white women were becoming not

⁷⁰ See Sanchez, 2021, 273.

⁷¹ See Welch on the resonances of cannibalism in the text. Welch, 176, notes that “in 1503, Queen Isabella of Spain decreed that the New World natives were to remain free from slavery, only excepting those who were cannibals. Reports of cannibals in the region promptly multiplied.”

⁷² Sanchez, 2021, 276.

just the agents of but also the imprimatur for the operations of English slavery.⁷³

And so I turn, finally, to the Pastorella episode at the end of book 6. As opposed to the parodic blazon of Nell and the atomized articulation of Serena, “fayrest *Pastorella*” (6.9.9) is not only “full fayre of face” but also

perfectly well shapt in euery lim,
Which she did more augment with modest grace,
And comely carriage of her count'nance trim,
That all the rest like lesser lamps did dim. (6.9.9)

Pastorella, then, whose name invokes the pastoral, is not only intimately associated with a presumptively green and pleasant land but also represents a coherent and exemplary whiteness as she is repeatedly—indeed insistently—described as “faire.” No longer atomized like the wanton Nell or the erring Serena, Pastorella is white and “well shapt in euery lim,” full of “grace,” a model of white womanhood.

The emphasis on Pastorella’s “fairness” also insistently rehearses a whiteness repeatedly contrasted to the allegorical darkness of the Brigants’ “little Island,” a place described as barren, dark, and unpopulated:

For vnderneath the ground their way was made,
Through hollow caues, that no man mote discover
For the thicke shrubs, which did them alwaies shade
From view of liuing wight, and couered ouer:
But darknesse dred and daily night did houer
Through all the inner parts, wherein they dwelt. (6.10.42)

As opposed to the green space Pastorella inhabits and embodies, the Brigants’ home is subterranean, literally and allegorically “hollow,” marked by “darknesse dred and daily night,” and likened by the captured Pastorella to “hell, / Where with such damned fiends she should be darknesse dwell” (6.10.43).⁷⁴

⁷³ The Variorum notes that one critic “cites ‘the white beauty of naked Serena, surrounded by black savages’ as an example of the effects of chiaroscuro.” The editor, however, disagrees that the men of the “sauvage nation” are Black, asserting their connection with “some British or Celtic tribe.” See Spenser, 1938, 234. The reading of the “salvage men” as potentially Black, however, affirms the legibility as well as the transportability of racializing tropes, and reflects the black-white visual lexicon examined in Hall, 1995 and 1996, and elsewhere.

⁷⁴ On the Brigants’ potentially Irish association, due in part to the “identification of the Brigants’ cave as an Irish phenomenon, a souterrain,” see Herron, 304. The Brigants might also invoke “the incursions so frequently made by the Scottish and English borderers upon the property of each other”; while Greenlaw reminds us that “Irish outlaws did not sell their victims into slavery”: Spenser, 1938, 256–57.

And these “fiends” engage explicitly in an economy of chattel slavery, kidnaping Pastorella and her compatriots “For slaues to sell them, for no small reward, / To merchants, which them kept in bondage hard, / Or sold againe” (6.10.43).⁷⁵ As they traffick with “merchants” seeking “bondslaues,” the Brigants resemble not just the “salvage men” but those who engaged in circuits of kidnap and capture in the Mediterranean world. And indeed, like some European women in early modern so-called Turk plays, Pastorella is depicted as exceptional: the Captain of the Brigants falls in love with Pastorella and refuses to sell her as a “bondslaue” (6.11.10), even when the “marchants” refuse to purchase any captives without her. Yet Pastorella is not, in fact, an unwitting savior of her captured comrades; rather, when the Captain’s colleagues attack him for his economic betrayal, the resulting battle results in the death of many of her fellow “captiues,” who are killed “Least they should ioyne against the weaker side, / Or rise against the remnant at their will” (6.11.18). Pastorella, however, is both protected by and thus—however inadvertently—allied with her attacker:

But *Pastorella*, wofull wretched Else,
 Was by the Captaine all this while defended,
 Who minding more her safety then himself,
 His target alwayes ouer her pretended;
 By meanes whereof, that mote not be amended,
 He at the length was slaine, and layd on ground,
 Yet holding fast twixt both his armes extended
 Fayre *Pastorell*, who with the selfe same wound
 Launcht through the arme, fell down with him in dreerie swound. (6.11.19)

What is striking about this passage is the suggestion of a corporeal conjoining of Pastorella and the Captain; the wound that kills the Captain both strikes and saves Pastorella. And although his love for Pastorella arguably redeems the Captain, it is not redemptive for her fellow captives. The figure of Pastorella, in other words, simultaneously underscores the violence of the Brigants, provides a form of redemption for their Captain, and is exceptionalized through the deaths of so many of her countrymen, which are in turn arguably justified by her very survival. The figure of Pastorella, I therefore suggest, does not present an uncomplicated condemnation of the operations of slavery writ large; rather, it underscores the way in which white womanhood can be constructed through slavery, and how the violence of imperial extraction is authorized for

⁷⁵ For an important recent discussion of slavery and allegory in this episode, see Addis. See also Mazzola; Ashley Sarpong’s forthcoming article “Cultivation and the Borders of Savagery in Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene*” (*Viator*, forthcoming 2024).

some, but not others. For when Calidore rescues Pastorella, who survives many of her comrades, he also undertakes a form of violent (yet now implicitly sanctioned) extraction. Having slain most of the Brigants—who are compared to (implicitly black) “flies in whottest sommers day” (6.11.48), while Calidore is “Like as a Lion mongst an heard of dere” (6.11.49)—Calidore then proceeds to revive Pastorella.⁷⁶

This doen, into those theeuish dens he went,
 And thence did all the spoyles and threasures take,
 Which they from many long had robd and rent,
 But fortune now the victors meed did make;
 Of which the best he did his loue betake;
 And also all those flockes, which they before
 Had reft from *Meliboe* and from his make,
 He did them all to *Coridon* restore.
 So droue them all away, and his loue with him bore. (6.11.51)

What Calidore achieves here is a kind of restitution, returning to Coridon the “flockes” that had been “reft” from the now deceased Meliboe. But this restitution also accompanies a more explicit kind of theft: the taking of “spoyles and threasure” which the Brigants had themselves stolen and kept in their “theeuish dens,” but which “fortune now the victors meed did make.” What justifies this theft, it seems, is both “the victors meed” as well as the fact that Pastorella is figured as the pinnacle of those “threasures”: “Of which the best he did his loue betake.” What is therefore at work here, I suggest, is the logic of imperialism and supremacy, bolstered by the alibi of protecting, redeeming, and rescuing white womanhood.

The figure of Pastorella, I have suggested, is used to authorize the work of imperial extraction; the white womanhood she symbolizes is mobilized to forge the operations of slavery and imperial violence, and in so doing comes to underwrite them. I want to end, therefore, by gesturing very briefly to the afterlives of these logics of whiteness, gender, and slavery, and in particular to the ways in which white womanhood becomes complicit in these national projects of imperialism, slavery, and supremacy. In *They Were Her Property: White Women as Slave Owners in the American South*, Stephanie Jones-Rogers traces a history of female enslaving—in a later and quite different context—as a function of property.⁷⁷ In so doing, Jones-Rogers reveals and refuses the elisions that have obscured the role of white women as full participants in the violence of

⁷⁶ We might also think of the racialized implications of the fly in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* act 3, scene 2. See also Brown.

⁷⁷ See Jones-Rogers.

slavery. And although Jones-Rogers's book explores the nineteenth-century American operations of female enslaving, the seeds of white womanhood's crucial role in the construction and authorization of slavery, I have been suggesting, were planted much earlier, in the literary and cultural contexts of early modern England. As we think through the formations of early modern slavery, we must attend not only to the construction of racialized gender but also, as it pertains to white womanhood, to its full complicity in the property interest and the violence of white supremacy. And we must also confront its devastating afterlives.

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