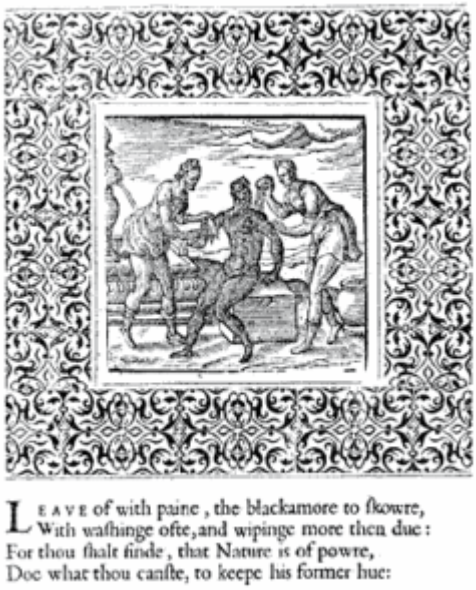
In Search of Slavery's English Roots

What are we to conclude from a list of burials at one London parish during the first half of 1588 in which three of the twenty-four interments are of "Mary, a blackamore from Doctor Hector's," "Isabell, a blackamore," and "a man blackamore [who] laye in the streete"? These entries suggest that people of African origins or descent, although very much a minority, were not unusual in sixteenth-century London. And they compel us to rethink the story of Atlantic slavery.

A seemingly simple list of burials can tell us a great deal. The wording of the entries suggests that these three "blackamores" were poor, although whether they were apprentices, servants, or slaves is impossible to say. And the absence of full names for any of them, in contrast to all but two other

Londoners on the list, suggests also that they were not baptized, which may mean that British Africans were in a distinct theological as well as social minority.

Elizabethan plays generally confirm what the London burial list hints at. Several plays from the 1580s conflate exotic black Moors with the devilish plotters of medieval religious drama (where Lucifer and his damned progeny were signified by blackened faces), while others, including Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine,* depict black Moors as beasts of burden. In early seventeenth-century plays, black characters frequently appear as maids and servingmen. Like Mary and Isabel, they receive no surname and are described in cast lists simply as "a blackamoor" or "Moor," "servant to . . . " Plays like *The White Devil* (John Webster), *Sophonisba* (John Marston), *Monsieur Thomas* (John Fletcher), and *The Knight of Malta* (Fletcher and Nathan Field) seem to mirror in art the social status of blacks in the culture at large. But how do Shakespeare's complex representations of Moors in *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello* complicate this picture?



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Evidence like plays and parish lists are small pieces of the larger puzzle of the early history of American slavery and its roots in England before Jamestown was settled. Although historians have long recognized that English explorers and merchants visited the West African coast in the second half of the sixteenth century and that scores, perhaps hundreds of people of sub-Saharan origin or descent lived in Renaissance England, no consensus has emerged on the significance of those African-English encounters. Tudor and early Stuart England's perceptions and treatment of "Blackamores" are as hotly contested topics among Renaissance scholars as are, among Americanists, the history of slavery and prejudice in the early British colonies.

The evidence for answering these questions lies primarily in the host of published and manuscript writings in English repositories, most notably the British Library in London, the Public Record Office in Kew, and the Bodleian Library in Oxford. But except for the new British Library and the Bodleian, no single collection of early English books and manuscripts in the world matches that of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. And because most writings about the first two centuries of English exploration and colonization in America were penned or published in England, the Folger's remarkable collection is invaluable—and for many American researchers, very convenient—for most aspects of early colonial history, including the history of slavery and racism.

Predictably, the Folger Library holds the standard works that reveal, here and there, early English perceptions and treatment of West Africans: the compendia of exploration narratives by Richard Eden, the younger Richard Hakluyt, and Samuel Purchas; original editions of narratives by George Best, George Sandys, Captain John Smith (King James's own copy of the *Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles*), and innumerable others; the records of Parliament, the Crown, and other political institutions; and an incomparable assortment of early English dramas, with their many depictions of Africans. Among the library's less heralded holdings are scores of volumes of community and parish records—including the revealing London list of burials mentioned above—major and minor manuscript collections (on paper or microfilm), and a substantial number of prints, paintings, maps, and other visual records, especially from the Renaissance but also before and after that era.

The tenure of Louis B. Wright from 1948 to 1968 as director of the Folger was a godsend for American historians. Before his appointment, Wright had published several books on colonial America, most notably *First Gentlemen of Virginia* (San Marino, Calif., 1940) and editions of William Byrd's diary and Robert Carter's letters, as well as *Middle-class Culture in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill, 1935) and several other works on Tudor-Stuart England. Wright had also helped to transform the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino from a magnificent private collection into a major research institution. He worked the same magic at the Folger Library, with a caring eye on the American side of Shakespeare's world. The Folger now has a substantial array of modern monographs, reference works, and document collections on early America to enhance its magnificent rare book holdings.

The Folger's collections have proved invaluable to a project we have undertaken on Africanism in early modern England and English America. After Winthrop Jordan's discussion of English impressions of black Africans in *White over Black* (Chapel Hill, 1968), several literary scholars have examined more closely the black presence in Renaissance and Restoration drama. Our project differs from Jordan's broad overview and more recent closely focused studies by integrating literary and historical methods, concerns, and sources into a systematic examination of English images of black Africans from the late fifteenth century to the beginning of the eighteenth.

We have barely begun to tap the Folger “vault.” Not surprisingly, much of the evidence—like the parish records and early Renaissance dramas—is difficult to interpret. The remaining parish records may reveal that our preliminary sample was not representative of London, or that it was representative of the metropolis but not the hinterland; other dramas may undercut our preliminary findings on early English representations of Moors. The work ahead, like the Folger Library’s resources, is challenging, but those resources are the ideal starting point for our investigation. And beyond the Folger lie many other English and American libraries and archives, with their own hidden riches, and stories to tell.

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