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Muscovites and “Black-amours”: Alien Love Traders in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*

Ladan Niayesh

- 1 Along with *The Tempest*, *Love’s Labour’s Lost* is in its own peculiar way the Shakespearean play that comes closest to recalling the classical unities of time and place, which — let us not forget — were far from being the norm on the early modern English stage. The entire action appears to take place in an indeterminate, outdoor yet enclosed, space vaguely corresponding to Navarre’s court and its surrounding park. The duration of the action is equally unspecified, but it probably takes no longer than the few hours or the day needed for “the packet” from France (II.i.161)¹ to arrive and settle the dispute over Aquitaine. In view of this, it appears as paradoxical for this play as for the island play of *The Tempest* to see it include so many references to the world at large and such an acute awareness of the international conflicts, commercial networks and early colonial endeavours which characterised that period of early globalisation. Such references include, not just the historical figures of Henri IV of France and Navarre and his courtiers, or the Spanish Armada reflected in the braggart Spaniard’s name, but also mentions of sun-worshipping Indians from either the East or the West Indies (IV.iii.213), Blackamoor musicians (V.ii.157 sd) and Muscovites in the masque scene (V.ii.158-264), as well as a large number of *exotica* in the young men’s courtly expressions of love. One such example is the “Ethiop” to whom Dumaine compares the goddess Juno considered inferior to Katherine in beauty (“Thou for whom Jove would swear / Juno but an Ethiop were”, IV.iii.109-110), or the precious “ebony” imported from the Indian subcontinent and Africa which is associated to Rosaline in the same scene (“Is ebony like her? O word divine!”, IV.iii.239). But why should we have this paradoxical experience of a simultaneous closing and opening of the world at the heart of the play’s action and preoccupations? And what exactly do those alien figures and *exotica* contribute to the play’s love symbolism and the overall reflexion on the boundaries of the self and the other which is entailed by it? Such are the questions that this paper wishes to address.

- 2 It is worth noticing that right from the start, there is a contradiction between Navarre's project of "a little academe" (i.i.13) and the scope of the ambition which goes with it, purporting to triumph both in space and time. The king's calling his companions "brave conquerors" setting out to overcome "the huge army of the world's desires" (i.i. 8 and 10) conjures up to some extent the image of European *conquistadores* sailing out to submit vast regions and peoples in the New World to earn material riches and eternal fame. But just as the sudden enlarging of the *conquistadores*' world was also accompanied by fears of losing one's life or worse, one's soul, 'going native' in a hostile environment or at the savages' contact, Navarre's articles reveal a deep anxiety at the heart of his metaphorical project of self-conquest. A clean diet, religious discipline and above all chastity are thus immediately imposed by the leader as ways of ensuring that his troops remain steadfast and unpolluted in their identities and moral resolves.
- 3 In these circumstances, the contact zones established in several characters' names and backgrounds function as a sort of Freudian "return of the repressed", dooming Navarre's protectionist approach to identity and integrity right from the start. Berowne's name, for example, sounds rather close to "Brown", as if it had already gone half-way to meet his dark lady whose name, Rosaline (starting in "rose"), sounds like a mockery of her own skin colour. As for the King's other companion and unofficial jester, Armado, his early presentation as "A knight / From tawny Spain" (i.i.170-171) beset by "the black oppressing humour" (i.i.222) recalls not just the caricature of a melancholy lover, but also the prospect of mixed blood, given the Morisco and Jewish backgrounds of Catholic Spain. Though repressed generally, such dark reminders do emerge in the text from time to time, as when Costard, receiving Armado's "remuneration", praises him as "my incony Jew!" (iii.i.118), or later when he gets his name wrong, calling him "Dun Adramadio" (iv.iii.190) — "dun" being defined in the *OED* as "a dull or dingy brown" or "a dull greyish brown", suggesting once more the prospect of an ethnic blend. Already standing as it does on a threshold between two countries, France and Spain, Navarre thus also becomes a linguistic laboratory for mixtures of colours, as a possible, subliminal prelude to a mixture of bloods. The choice of "Blackamoor" musicians to introduce the masque of the Muscovites in v.ii, playing on a bilingual pun (English "black" and French "amour"), further yokes together the temptation of love and the fear of miscegenation. Wavering between the two options, the quasi-'Brown' character of Berowne praises and defends his dark lady's skin colour in iv.iii, but cannot help being in denial in his contacts with her, obsessively wanting her "white" against all odds, as when he addresses his letter "To the snow-white hand of the most beauteous Lady Rosaline" (iv.ii.117-118) or when he recalls her as "A whitely wanton with a velvet brow" (iii.i.173) even in monologue, alone with his own judgement.
- 4 H. R. Woudhuysen comments in his introduction to the Arden edition of the play on the "introverted and self-referential" world of *Love's Labour's Lost*, in which over a third of lines rhyme and where "characters regularly pick up others' rhymes and often complete them",² as if the play's poetry was following the design of Navarre's "curious-knotted garden" (i.i.233), constantly folding back on itself. Although I fully agree with this, I also feel the play offers a creative tension between clinging to closed systems and the urge to open them up. For all its knotted design, even Navarre's enclosed garden is not immune to the wide-ranging temptation of new cartography, applied to it by the travelling Spanish knight as he locates the exact site of the act of flesh in it: "It

standeth north-north-east and by east from the west corner of thy curious-knotted garden” (i.i.232-233). Reducing the domain of application of cartography does not eliminate the directions of the compass, but just crams them together. Likewise, further in the play, the small measures or steps in a dance requested by the fake Muscovites get telescoped with travellers’ miles which the Ladies invite them to measure (v.ii.184-194). This linguistic metamorphosis shows once more how powerless the enclosed, courtly world of Navarre is in its attempts to artificially keep out the world at large waiting at its door as the Princess of France and her train do. For all the protectionist provisions in Navarre’s decree, his fictional world keeps expanding just as the real world of Shakespeare and his contemporaries did in that age of Great Travels. And if neither protectionism nor denial prove efficient in dealing with that ever-widening world, other strategies have to be worked out.

- 5 Chief among those strategies is trade, both within the fictional world of Navarre and the historical one of the early modern period. In the real world, the end of the sixteenth century witnessed the birth of the major English companies engaged in trade with faraway lands, such as the Levant Company (founded in 1581), the Barbary Company (1585) and the East India Company (1600). The oldest of those companies was the Muscovy Company, chartered in 1555 and engaged in trade with the Russia of Ivan the Terrible (reg. 1533-1584). The company chiefly exported English woollens of diverse qualities, from the cheap and coarse russets and kerseys mentioned in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* in Berowne’s modest “russet yeas and honest kersey noes” (v.ii.413), to the luxury scarlets and purples possibly recalled in the name “Prince of Purpoole”, the fictional ruler of the Grey’s Inn’s revels *Gesta Greyorum* (1594), one of the alleged sources for the Muscovy material in Shakespeare’s play. Historically, trade negotiations with Russia were complicated over several decades by Ivan the Terrible’s repeated demands for an English wife as part of the bargain in granting trading privileges to the English Merchants. Ivan first asked for the hand of Elizabeth I herself and then for that of her lady-in-waiting, Mary Hastings, sending to England several embassies to that effect between 1567 and 1583. The “Russian romance”, as Daryl Palmer mockingly calls it,³ only ended with the Tsar’s death which, we may surmise, came to the besieged ladies as much as a relief as the departure of the “frozen Muscovites” (v.ii.265) in Shakespeare’s play.
- 6 The superimposition of commercial trade and love trade in Elizabethan England’s relations with Muscovy, as they are remembered in the masque of the Muscovites in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, warns us as to how much the courtly, idealising discourse of love in the play is shot through by a far less dignified discourse of traffic with the Other and possession of that Other. “Price you yourselves. What buys your company?”, Navarre anxiously asks the ladies from under his Muscovite’s disguise (v.ii.224), while he and his courtiers have already sent in rich love tokens to the ladies in a bid to “buy” themselves brides. Their gifts include the miniature of a lady framed in diamonds for the Princess (v.ii.3), gloves for Katherine (v.ii.49), pearls for Maria (v.ii.53) and an unspecified favour for Rosaline. The framed lady of the miniature, itself a *mise-en-abyme* of the commodification of women in the process of wooing them with gifts, announces what William C. Carroll calls “the miscognition of the women as property”⁴ as the nobles court their own precious tokens while mistaking the ladies’ actual identities.

- 7 The gross caricature of the Muscovites’ wooing actually makes explicit a misconception that has been there throughout in Navarre and his courtiers’ approach to their partners. Commenting on the precious nature of “fairness” in Petrarchan poetry, Kim Hall notes the pun which connects fairness in the double sense of beauty and whiteness with the commodification of women in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*: “Of all complexions the culled sovereignty / Do meet as at a fair in her fair cheek”, says Berowne in his praise of Rosaline’s skin colour (iv.iii.225-226).⁵ Here, Rosaline’s face becomes a “fair” in the sense of a market — and a slave market to boot — where one can “cull” or select the fairest complexion among those from all over the world which are on offer.
- 8 Throughout the play, as John Archer notes, “chattel slavery is subsumed in the language of courtship, in the desire to possess women on the one hand and the offer to serve them on the other.”⁶ The praising/pricing of women is systematic on the part of their suitors who at times sound more like bidders at an auction, as in the above-quoted “Price you yourselves. What buys your company?” or in the opening words of the Muscovites’ episode advertising the ladies as the expensive cloth of which their visors are made, “rich taffeta”, made “richer” and “richest” before being packed into a “parcel” in preparation for the bidders’ arrival:

MOTH. All hail, the **richest** beauties on the earth!
 BOYET. Beauties no **richer** than **rich** taffeta.
 MOTH. A holy **parcel** of the fairest dames
 That ever turned their — backs — to mortal views. (v.ii.158-162; my emphasis)

- 9 The specter of slavery looms large behind the love poetry of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. Archer sees it “concealed in the court of Navarre’s fascination with blackness, beauty, and the gentler servitude of erotic courtship.”⁷ “Dumaine was at my service”, jokes Maria after the Muscovites’ departure (v.ii.276); “And Longaville was for my service born”, adds Katherine (284). The etymological connection between “Slav” and “Slave”, the long-standing Tatar yoke on Russia, as well as Ivan the Terrible’s own absolutist regime had long associated Russia and slavery in the minds of Shakespeare’s contemporaries, an association which was also repeatedly recalled in former ambassador Giles Fletcher’s *Of the Russe Common Wealth* (1591), the chief authority on Russian matters at the time.⁸ Slippery etymology may have added a touch of black colour to this general picture, with the Nogai Horde (a confederation of Tatar tribes submitted by Ivan’s troops) referred to in Elizabethan texts as “Nagar” Tatars (e.g. in the plot of the lost play of *Tamar Cam* in Edward Alleyn’s papers)⁹ and then gradually as “Negro Tartars”, as they appear in *Gesta Greyorum*, the above-mentioned Inns of Court entertainment which helps contextualise the Muscovite material of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*.
- 10 Thus belonging both to the Old World of Russia and the New World of sun-worshippers in Berowne’s “Who sees the heavenly Rosaline...” speech (iv.iii.212-218), the “Blackamoors” and “savage m[e]n of Ind” offer us the picture of a globalised world governed by the economy of trade in luxury goods and slaves, a world in which East meets West, not just in the word “Ind” applied both to the East and West Indies, but in the same mechanisms of appropriation ruling everywhere. The “rude and savage man of Ind” who in Berowne’s speech “bows ... his vassal head” “at the first opening of the gorgeous east” (iv.iii.213-215) is no different from his nearly “brown” equivalent Berowne asking the ladies under his Muscovite’s disguise to “Vouchsafe to show the

sunshine of your face, / That we, like savages, may worship it” (v.ii.201-202). John Gillies, in his classical study on *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference*, argued that the exotic “is an action rather than a phenomenon, a kind of relation rather than a kind of character.”¹⁰ This appears to be the chief function of the references to aliens and alienness in the context of the courtly wooing in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*. Recalling such sinister specters as those of the triangular trade which had already started in the Atlantic and the enslavement of human beings that was inseparable from commercial, privateering and settlement enterprises throughout the world, the aliens of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* point to whatever goes so very wrong in such unbalanced, un‘fair’ bargains. Resting on such shaky foundations, the love traders of Shakespeare’s play may well travel metaphorically to the world’s ends, either by way of the East of Muscovy or the West of sun-worshipping New World Indians, but they still fail in reaching “a world-without-end bargain” (v.ii.763) with their partners, one which would be equal enough to be accepted by both parties and remain valid through time.

- 11 As the ladies make clear in their exchanges with their suitors in the masque scene, they “cannot be bought” in the Muscovite fashion: “Then cannot we be bought”, says Rosaline disguised as the Princess (v.ii.226). There is no denying the transactional pattern which rules, not just the proto-globalised early modern world, but human interaction altogether and the plot of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* from beginning to end, that is from the “dowry for a queen” which Aquitaine is (II.i.8) to the show of the “Nine Worthies” which foregrounds “worth” and valuation even in the trade of honour. Yet what the French Princess and her ladies offer at the end is a sounder, more balanced form of trade and exchange, one in which neither of the parties is to try to cheat the other, commodify the other, or “frame” the other as in the lady’s portrait earlier offered by Navarre. Accounts will be kept and compared in the “reckoning” promised at the year’s end (“the annual reckoning”, v.ii.772). Such reckoning is a necessity before any deal can be struck in a definitive manner.
- 12 Ultimately, despite Navarre’s original project of an enclosed and overcontrolled world, one in which the Other — Muscovite, Indian or Woman — is either not admitted or commodified and denied humanity and equality, what triumphs in the play is infinite — or at least unfinished — expansion and lack of closure. “You that way, we this way” is the last line of the play (v.ii.896). It certainly implies separation, but it also suggests in its very structure the balance that was so cruelly missing in the love exchanges throughout. For better or worse, the line also points to new directions which still need to be explored and new trades which need to be sought before Navarre’s world can reach a final — and finally satisfactory — form.

NOTES

1. All quotes from the play refer to the New Cambridge edition of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, ed. William C. Carroll, Cambridge, CUP, 2009.

2. William Shakespeare, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, ed. H. R. Woudhuysen, London, Thomson Learning, 1998, p. 49.
 3. Daryl W. Palmer, *Writing Russia in the Age of Shakespeare*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2004, p. 72.
 4. Carroll, “Introduction”, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
 5. Kim Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 90.
 6. John Michael Archer, *Old Worlds: Egypt, Southwest Asia, India, and Russia in Early Modern English Writing*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001, p. 129.
 7. *Ibid.*, p. 124-125.
 8. For more details on this, see Richard Hellie, *Slavery in Russia, 1450-1725*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982.
 9. The plot is reproduced on the “Lost Plays Database”: http://www.lostplays.org/index.php/Tamar_Cham,_Parts_1_and_2 (accessed on February 13, 2015).
 10. John Gillies, *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference*, Cambridge, CUP, 1994, p. 99.
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ABSTRACTS

Noting the contradiction between the self-enclosed world of Navarre’s “little academe” and the play’s constant reminders of a proto-globalized, ethnically and racially mixed world around it, this article reflects on what alien figures and exotica contribute to the love symbolism of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and the play’s overall reflection on identity and difference. Present everywhere like a return of the repressed, obsessions with and anxieties about the commodification of love weave a transactional pattern into the play, forcing the lovers to seek the terms for a “fair” trade by drawing lessons from the counter-example of the masque of the Muscovites.

Partant de la contradiction entre la volonté d’enfermement qui caractérise la « petite académie » de Navarre et les rappels constants du monde proto-globalisé, ethniquement et racialement mêlé qui l’environne, cet article se concentre sur ce que les références étrangères et exotiques apportent au symbolisme amoureux de *Peines d’amour perdues* et à sa réflexion générale sur l’identité et la différence. Partout présentes tel un retour du refoulé, l’obsession et l’angoisse de la marchandisation de l’amour tissent un réseau dense de métaphores commerciales dans la pièce, forçant les amants à chercher des modalités équitables au « commerce de l’amour », en tirant les leçons du contre-exemple du masque des Moscovites.

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Keywords: Muscovite, black, Tartar, slave trade, *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Petrarchism, identity, *Gesta Greyorum*

Mots-clés: Moscovite, Russie, Tatar, commerce d’esclaves, noir, étranger, *Peines d’amour perdues*, identité, *Gesta Greyorum*

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