

In *The History of the Kings of Britain*, written in 1136, Geoffrey of Monmouth begins his work with a description of Britain as “the best of islands . . . [which] provides unfailing plenty everything that is suited to the use of human beings.” In the paragraphs that follow, Geoffrey paints a pastoral picture of Britain complete with “every kind of mineral,” “broad fields and hillsides,” “forest glades,” “pasture-lands,” “windswept mountains,” “meadows green with grass,” “open woodlands. . . with every kind of game,” “beauty-spots where clear springs flow into shining streams,” and “lakes and rivers full of fish.” Among his description of Britain’s many resources is a strong sense of its superiority as a provider, sustainer, comforter, and creator, which he further emphasizes by anthropomorphizing the land. He mentions flowers “which offer their honey to the flitting bees,” “streams which ripple gently and murmur an assurance of deep sleep to those lying on their banks,” and “three noble rivers. . . [which] stretch out as though they were three arms.” Geoffrey’s notions of a personified Britain, as well as Britain as “the best of islands,” continue to be prevalent themes even hundreds of years after his work. In much of early modern literature and drama, especially in the works of Sir Walter Raleigh, William Shakespeare, and Ben Jonson, the practice of describing an anthropomorphized and gendered land in relation to Britain (and more specifically, England) is a common theme. However, although they may use similar imagery to describe the abstract country or land, underlying these authors’ works is an attempt to define what it means to be identified with England, or in other words, what it means to be “English” in a period of expanding world presence. These authors’ descriptions of the country itself (whether it is England or another country) provide the backbone for their critiques and/or representations of England’s relation to foreign “others,” as well their view of England’s place in the larger world picture.

It is appropriate to begin a conversation regarding England's expanding presence with a brief discussion of postcolonial theory, namely Homi K. Bhabha's ideas on hybridity and "the Other." Although the early modern period is not postcolonial or even colonial, it is important to notice the origins of binary oppositions that continue through the postcolonial period, as well as to be cognizant of the lens through which we (as potential postcolonial readers) view early modern texts. In his work, "The Commitment to Theory," Bhabha argues that the binary oppositional structure of western thought is too reductive because it implies that national culture is unitary. According to The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, Bhabha "proposes that nationalities, ethnicities, and identities are dialogic, indeterminate, and characterized by 'hybridity' . . . which he defines as 'what is new, neither the one nor the other' ." This is important for the purposes of my argument because I intend to show that during the early modern period, the English were attempting to fashion a unitary national identity (I would argue, a specifically male one), and one of the ways in which they did this was by placing themselves in opposition to what Bhabha calls "the Other." Furthermore, since the descriptions of foreigners, foreign lands, and English lands are all written by Englishmen, the sense of resistance and conflict that Bhabha's "hybridity" assumes are either misrepresented or erased. Although, again, Bhabha is referring specifically to postcolonial containment practices of "the Other," early modern texts which attempt to describe both foreigners in England and those in other lands essentially practice the same means of containment. For example, Bhabha argues that "this [is a] strategy of containment where the Other text is forever the exegetical horizon of difference, never the actual agent of articulation. . . The Other loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse." We will see these concepts at work in each of the subsequent texts I am discussing, and it is important to keep them in mind.

That said, I want to move on to Sir Walter Raleigh's work, "The discovery of the large, rich, and beautiful Empire of Guiana, with a relation of the great and golden city of Manoa (which the Spaniards call El Dorado)." In this work, Raleigh gives a description of Guiana which is strikingly similar to Monmouth's description of Britain. He writes:

I never saw a more beautiful country nor more lively prospects, hills so raised here and there over the valleys, the river winding into divers branches, the plains adjoining without bush or stubble, all fair green grass, the ground of hard sand easy to march on either for horse or foot, the deer crossing in every path, the birds toward the evening singing on every tree with a thousand several tunes. . .

This passage seems to echo Monmouth's idea of a land full of resources, and since Monmouth was writing to give the English a sense of pride in their nationality (thus linking land and identity), one would assume that Raleigh's purpose is the same. In this way, he describes Guiana almost like another England. Although he is not writing specifically about England as Monmouth did, he nonetheless is attempting to define England by inspiring the English to take over the "lively prospects" of Guiana. In other words, beneath his description of the seemingly perfect foreign land, there is a sense of English superiority and entitlement, evident in his description of "hard sand easy to march on either for horse or foot." The word "march" here takes on the connotation of an army moving in, and seems a disruption to the pastoral depiction that he otherwise paints. Furthermore, he personifies Guiana in a way that Monmouth does not personify Britain: Raleigh makes Guiana a woman, specifically a virgin. He says that "Guiana is a country that hath yet her maidenhead, never sacked, turned, nor wrought. . . It hath never been entered by any army of strength, and never conquered or possessed by any Christian prince. . . For whatsoever prince shall possess it, shall be greatest. . ." In this description, we can see clearly the

binary oppositions that Bhabha alludes to in his work—possessor/virgin, strong/weak, Christian/non-Christian, greatest/least—and how the English are meant to identify with the more “positive” of the binaries. Furthermore, this quote illuminates the English attitude that completely attempts to dispossess the Other by taking away its agency, an attitude that Raleigh seems to think completely justified. As Neil Whitehead in his work “Monstrosity and Marvel” argues, “in ideological terms Raleigh therefore substitutes the feminine land metonymically for the masculine Amerindians, in order that the intent to possess can be represented as a naturalized relationship of the English male’s mastery of the female land of Guiana.” Whitehead makes this point because according to Raleigh’s description, Guiana “hath never been entered by *any army of strength*. . . [nor] conquered or possessed by *any Christian prince*.” This is significant because it is ambiguous whether any army *at all* has entered Guiana, or whether it has been possessed by a non-Christian prince. In other words, in appealing to the English monarchy to colonize Guiana, he is both claiming a colonialist entitlement to the country, and providing a national description of England as masculine, Christian, and strong, with the potential to be “greatest” among other nations and peoples.

This “great[ness]” of England is already assumed in John of Gaunt’s speech in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*. He calls England “royal throne of kings,” “other Eden, demi-paradise,” “little world,” “precious stone set in the silver sea,” “blessed plot,” “nurse,” and “teeming womb of royal kings.” He describes England in the same way that Monmouth describes Britain—as a creator, provider, and sustainer, and the same way that Raleigh describes Guiana—as a female full of resources. However, Gaunt describes a female who has *created* royal males rather than being possessed by them, and this is significant because it implies that England is the original “mother country,” thus signifying its superiority. Furthermore, he also invokes

Raleigh's sense of the English as masculine by calling them a "happy breed of men," and "royal kings" known for their "true chivalry." He also invokes their Christianity by comparing them to "blessed Mary's son," and strength by noting that they are "renowned for their deeds." In this way he depicts England as having already achieved superiority and greatness in relation to others, especially due to its self-protecting qualities, as he calls it a "fortress built by nature for herself / Against infection and the hand of war." The infection that he speaks of is presumably an invasion of a foreign other, whether it be the people themselves or some type of disease that they carry with them. However, unlike Raleigh's appeal to expand England's borders, Gaunt's speech concludes with the lament that England is being destroyed from within. He says, "That England that was wont to conquer others / Hath made a shameful conquest of itself." Therefore, as Clayton G. MacKenzie points out in "Paradise and Paradise Lost in Richard II," Gaunt's sense of English identity in terms of his description of the land switches from an "other Eden, demi-paradise" (invoking a biblical allusion) to "a central mythology of an English transgression and of a paradise lost." For, since Gaunt likens "fallen" England to a "tenement or pelting farm," he is basically calling it worthless, and therefore the English identity worthless as well. Furthermore, like in Raleigh's work, underlying this pastoral description of England as a garden is the frequent mention of war. In fact, Gaunt even calls England "this seat of Mars." In a sense then, he is placing the English in a position of entitlement, both of England that was basically made for them, and of any other lands that they should be "wont," or accustomed, to conquer.

This is an interesting concept when comparing Gaunt's speech with Mowbray's speech when he is banished earlier in the play. Mowbray calls his banishment a "deep. . . maim" as he is "cast forth in the common air." Mowbray's idea of everything outside of England being "common," or public, echoes Gaunt's sense of England as a "tenement," or privately-owned

(presumably by the king) country. With these descriptions, England then becomes something identified specifically with the King because he is its “owner,” and in her work Shakespeare’s Drama of Exile, Jane Kingsley-Smith argues that Richard II “proves himself to be an enemy of corporate identity. He leases off England’s land, levies exorbitant taxes, breaks English laws and thus alienates himself from the kingdom.” Therefore, she argues, as Richard II banishes Bolingbroke and Mowbray, he is ultimately “banishing” himself. Mowbray thus equates leaving the land with what Kingsley-Smith says “depriv[es] him of origins, language and a name.” Mowbray laments that “the language I have learnt these forty years, / My native English, now I must forgo. . . / What is thy sentence then but speechless death, / Which robs my tongue from breathing native breath?” However, we must remember that the reason he is banished in the first place is because of Bolingbroke’s accusation of his treachery, a plotting against the King. If we equate his “native English” with his supposed treachery, then it seems as if Shakespeare is complicating the whole idea of English identity. Furthermore, we can see Bhabha’s idea of “hybridity” at work because since England has now become a “tenement,” leased out to various owners, thus dividing the country and alienating the King and his people. All this leads to a loss of a national, unified identity that Gaunt nonetheless laments in his speech about England. For Clayton MacKenzie, this signals precisely the paradise/paradise lost idea that he argues “in Shakespeare’s vision, asserts an essentially English identity.”

Like Gaunt’s lament of the loss of “demi-paradise” England, and therefore of the English identity, Niger in Ben Jonson’s “Masque of Blackness” laments the loss of his daughters’ innocence, which he equates in a sense with African identity. Although Niger is not referring to England, the descriptions in his speech resonate with Raleigh’s and Shakespeare’s in that he equates his daughters with the land itself (thus feminizing it), then proceeds to describe their

beauty, and ultimately laments their loss of innocence. He calls them “the first formed dames of earth,” with “sparkling and refulgent eyes,” who “in their black the perfect’st beauty grows,” “since Death herself. . . can never alter their most faithful hue,” and says that “their beauties conquer in great beauty’s war; / And more, how near divinity they be, / That stand from passion or decay so free.” Niger’s speech is important because if we compare it literally to Raleigh’s description, we can see how Niger’s daughters then represent the foreign virgins who are ultimately possessed by the English. Furthermore, there is a subversive aspect here wherein Jonson may be positioning himself in regards to English identity in that Niger’s praise of black beauty is surprisingly long, and as we must note, the daughters’ transformation from black to white (as King James supposedly had the power to “blanch an Ethiop”) never actually occurs until “The Masque of Beauty,” which was performed three years after “Blackness.” Also, the black women were played and danced by actual courtly women in blackface, including the Queen herself, and their participation thus added to the subversive aspect of the masque. However, as Bhabha would argue, the black “Other” here is ultimately represented by white English men and women, and therefore completely loses its ability to represent itself.

Along with the loss of agency, another important element of “The Masque of Blackness” to consider is the exile theme that Kingsley-Smith emphasizes from *Richard II* (and, as we will see later, *The Tempest*). Although she does not specifically mention Jonson’s work in her book, I believe there is still an element of the exile theme in “The Masque of Blackness.” Like the banishment of Mowbray and Bolingbroke in Shakespeare’s work, Jonson “banishes” the African women; however, in the masque it is a “reverse banishment” in that they are in a sense “exiled” from Africa rather than from England. Unlike Mowbray’s sense that he is losing his “native breath” by being exiled, the daughters willingly walk away from their native country and “indent

the land (Britain) with those pure traces / . . . flow[ing] with in their native graces” before the English men. Like in Raleigh’s description of Guiana, then, the women become objects to be watched by English men, presumably to be integrated into English culture. Furthermore, as William Over argues in “Familiarizing the Colonized in Ben Jonson’s Masques,” “Jonson’s allegory of African travelers who seek perfection by becoming white may express a need to view European physicality and culture as superior.” He argues this from the point of view that the English were threatened by the alien presence in England, and therefore needed to “familiarize” the African figures. Furthermore, he argues, “African women are ‘healed’ through a skin color change. . . the catharsis brings the promise of European identity when the travelers arrive in the land of the colonizer.” Over’s quote is important because it shows that once the women become “English” upon their arrival to England, they seem to be fully integrated into the culture, thus bringing their “exile” from Africa full-circle. However, Over assumes that English identity is consistent with having white skin and the desire to become “English,” and in that case, what do we make of the fact that the women do not ever become “white” in this particular masque? In this way, Ben Jonson does not fully work out his position on England’s relation to foreign “Others” in this work. On one hand, there is a definite sense of what it means to be “English”—male, superior, possessor. However, on the other hand, there are also ambiguities within the seemingly subversive actions that take place in the masque, and these ambiguities are not quite worked out at least until “The Masque of Beauty.”

Like the ambiguities that surface in “The Masque of Blackness,” Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* also complicates the idea of identity, especially given the fact that it is set on an island somewhere, presumably off the coast of Italy. However, we will assume that the characters in the play are meant to stand for the English, as Meredith Skura posits in “Discourse and the

Individual: The Case for Colonialism in ‘The Tempest’,” “despite the lack of contemporary testimony, our obvious reason for feeling that the play ‘is’ colonialist. . . is, of course, the literal resemblance between its plot and certain events and attitudes in English colonial history:

Europeans arrive in the New World and assume they can appropriate what properly belongs to the New World Other, who is then ‘erased’.” Therefore, according to this quote, the character of Caliban echoes Bhabha’s idea of “The Other,” in that although he can speak and attempt to assert himself, he ultimately loses his agency. Shakespeare also equates him with the actual land of the island. Caliban tells Prospero and Miranda, “This island’s mine by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou tak’st from me. When thou cam’st first, / . . . then I loved thee, / And showed thee all the qualities o’th’isle, / The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile.” Caliban describes the island full of food and resources, echoing Raleigh and Monmouth, and he also equates it with his mother, Sycorax. This is significant because there is no mention of what the island was like before Sycorax arrived there, and until Prospero’s arrival, it was considered *her island*, therefore feminized. Although Caliban vehemently claims it as his, he does so “by [his] mother.” Caliban is further associated with the land, as Prospero even calls him “earth” and asserts that “this island— / Save for the son that she did litter here, / A freckled whelp, hag-born—[was] not honoured with / A human shape.” As Julia Reinhard Lupton argues in her work “Creature Caliban,” “Caliban. . . takes shape beneath the arc of wonder that moves throughout the play between ‘creatures’ and ‘mankind,’ between animate beings in general and their realization in the form of humanity.” Lupton’s idea of “the arc of wonder” is important because it also shows the link between the unpopulated island and magic, which was also a popular convention of the early modern period. Furthermore, his mother, Sycorax had magical powers. In this way, Caliban is conflated with his mother, and with the land, and this characterization is consistent with

Raleigh's and Jonson's descriptions of the Other to be possessed by the English male. However, this Other is complicated because he, in turn, attempts to "violate the honour" of Miranda, the actual female virgin. Furthermore, Shakespeare does not seem to be advocating the colonial agenda as Raleigh is, rather he seems to echo Niger's lament for the loss of identity in "The Masque of Blackness" and Gaunt's lament for the "paradise lost" in *Richard II*. As Jane Kingsley-Smith notes, "Prospero. . . imaginatively dismisses worlds that lie beyond his native place, remaining closed to their imperial or national possibilities and yearning only for his lost origins." This is especially important considering the time span elapsed between Raleigh's text, intended to promote the colonization of foreign lands, and Shakespeare's text which may provide a critique of colonization. Furthermore, as Paul Brown argues in "This Thing of Darkness I Acknowledge Mine," Shakespeare is ambiguous regarding England's expanding national presence and its relation to foreign Others. Brown concludes, "*The Tempest*, then, declares no all-embracing triumph for colonialism. Rather it serves as a limit text in which the characteristic operations of colonialist discourse may be discerned—as an instrument of exploitation, a register of beleaguerment and a site of radical ambivalence."

While these texts each differ significantly in their descriptions of lands, both foreign and English, and each author in their responses to England's expanding world presence, they all offer a sense of what it means to be identified with England. Furthermore, they do so by describing a feminized land and England's place in relation to that land, as well as in relation to what Bhabha calls "The Other." These similarities are nonetheless important, but not as significant as their differences which ultimately reveal their author's views of England's place in the larger world picture.