

MORE LADIES AND THEIR HORSEKEEPERS IN SHAKESPEARE

IN a recent note in these pages I tried to show that Shakespeare, like many of his fellow dramatists, drew upon the stereotype that I called 'The Lady and Her Horsekeeper'—the

popular idea that some upper-class ladies were sexually attracted to lower-class men, such as stable grooms, because they were supposed to be more primitive, animalistic, and virile than men of the upper classes.¹ My evidence was limited to the speeches in which Tarquin threatens Lucrece (*The Rape of Lucrece*, 515–18, 670–2, 1632–7, 1643–5), and Boulth threatens Marina (*Pericles*, IV.vi.190–1), and Beatrice attacks Margaret (*Much Ado about Nothing*, III.iv.44–51), and Antigonus defends Hermione (*The Winter's Tale*, II.i.133–9), and Malvolio finds a promising precedent in the marriage of the Lady of the Strachy to the yeoman of the wardrobe (*Twelfth Night*, II.v.39–40).² I later realized that there are three other examples of Shakespeare's use of this idea that are actually more significant because they are located, not in a few specific speeches, but in an important situation of the play, although in two of these situations Shakespeare, by evoking this stereotype, seems to be setting up an expectation in the audience that he then proceeds to dispel.

Probably the most obvious example is Titania's relationship to Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Many commentators have observed that this is an extreme version of 'The Beauty and the Beast' (which is itself a version of 'The Lady and Her Horsekeeper'), since she is the fairy queen and therefore the most delicate and ethereal person in the play, while he is not only one of the workers but is debased still further when he is given the head of an ass, and therefore is the coarsest and most bestial person in it. But neither of them follows the stereotype. She is attracted to him, not because of her perception of his brutish sexuality, but because of her reaction to the magical 'juice' applied by Puck; in fact, she does not even perceive this brutishness, since, under the influence of the magic, she

tells Bottom that 'Mine ear is much enamored of thy note [his ass's bray] / So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape' [his ass's head], and that he is 'beautiful' (III.i.138–9, 148). And he is interested, not in having sex with her, but in having her fairies feed and scratch him, and then in taking a nap (IV.i.5–39). I have seen productions of the play that suggest or even show some very erotic activity here,³ but there is no warrant for this in the text. The possibility is raised at first, I think, to add a titillating frisson to their encounter, but then it is cancelled out by the comic treatment of the situation. Indeed they cannot really make love because that would undercut the reconciliation of Titania and Oberon in the resolution.

My other examples are much more serious. One of them is the relationship of Tamora, the newly crowned queen, to Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus*. Aaron is not a manual labourer, of course, but he is connected to the stereotype because, again in the popular mind, 'coloured' men were equated with lower-class men as virile sexual objects. In fact, the stereotype sometimes combines class and race: in the early chapters of *The Arabian Nights* we are told the stories of three lovely queens, the wives of Shah Zaman, Shahryar, and the Prince of the Black Islands, who commit adultery with hideous black slaves. And in *Titus Andronicus*, similarly, Tamora's adultery with a 'coloured' man is supposed to be a sign of her shameless lust, which is emphasized in II.iii.10–29 when she eagerly invites Aaron to engage in their sexual 'pastimes' and he coldly puts her off.⁴ (The point is driven home a few lines later when Bassianus comes upon them and accuses her of 'foul desire'.) This is the only one of my examples that is clearly meant to be taken straight, as a demonstration and confirmation of the idea underlying 'The Lady and Her Horsekeeper'.

¹ 'The Lady and Her Horsekeeper and Shakespeare', *N&Q*, ccl (2005), 208–13.

² Another brief reference, which I failed to notice, appears in 2 *Henry VI*, III.ii.211–14, where the Duke of Suffolk says to the Earl of Warwick, 'If ever lady wrong'd her lord so much, / Thy mother took into her blameful bed / Some stern [i.e. rough] untutor'd churl; and noble stock / Was graft with crab-tree slip', which implies that she found the churl a better sexual partner than her noble husband. Quotations of Shakespeare follow *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston, 1974).

³ See, for example, Glenn Loney, *Peter Brook's Production of William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream for the Royal Shakespeare Company* (Chicago, 1974) and the 1999 movie directed by Michael Hoffman.

⁴ Compare the similar exchanges in the anonymous *Lust's Dominion, or The Lascivious Queen*, I.i, between Eugenia, the titular queen, and Eleazer the Moor, and in John Mason's *The Turk*, III.iv and IV.i, between Timoclea, another queen, and Mulleases, the titular Turk. In both these plays the queen's sexual invitation is much more detailed and explicit than Tamora's.

Race also is crucial in connecting this stereotype to the relationship of Desdemona to Othello at the outset of their play. In the opening scene, when Iago and Roderigo inform Brabantio of his daughter's marriage, they stress Othello's race, animality, and especially his sexuality. They say that 'an old black ram / Is tugging your white ewe', that Desdemona is 'cover'd with a Barbary horse',⁵ that they are 'making the beast with two backs', and that she sought 'the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor'. These remarks are aimed at Brabantio, to be sure, and are intended to arouse his anger, but they are also aimed at the audience and help to shape our initial impression that the marriage of Desdemona and Othello is another version of 'The Lady and Her Horsekeeper'. And this impression is enhanced by Brabantio's reaction in the following scenes, since he too assumes the stereotype. He tells Othello that Desdemona 'shunn'd / The wealthy curled darlings of our nation' to run 'to the sooty bosom / Of such a thing as thou—to fear, not to delight!' (I.ii.68–71), and tells the Duke that she married 'what she fear'd to look on' (I.iii.98). He attributes this to Othello's use of 'charms', 'drugs', 'spells', 'magic', or 'witchcraft' (I.i.171; I.ii.63–5, 73–9; I.iii.61–4), which are the serious counterparts of Puck's magical 'juice', but I think we are meant to notice that those 'curled darlings' sound rather effeminate, when compared with Othello, and to suspect that what she was supposed to 'fear' in him was not only his blackness and gross features but also his libidinal energy. This debased view of their relationship is corrected, however, during the trial in I.iii, when they explain and defend the marriage, and we realize that we (and Brabantio) were completely mistaken. It turns out that Desdemona was attracted to Othello, not by his magic or his sexuality, but by his heroic adventures, and did not see his

⁵ Stallions ('stone-horses') were symbols of unbridled lust, which apparently rubbed off on the men who handled them, which is why ladies were attracted to stable grooms or horsekeepers. The idea survives in our own day: in both Robinson Jeffers's *Roan Stallion* and D. H. Lawrence's *St. Mawr* a horse comes to represent true masculinity, and in *St. Mawr* the horse's two grooms, Phoenix and Morgan Lewis, both arouse the sexual interest of their upper-class employers, Lady Carrington and her mother, Mrs Witt.

blackness or gross features because she 'saw Othello's visage in his mind' (252), which is the serious counterpart of Titania's seeing that Bottom's ass-head was 'beautiful'; and Othello then asserts that 'the young affects' of sexual 'heat' are 'In me defunct' and that his purpose is 'to be free and bounteous to her mind' (263–5), just as she saw him in his mind, so what we really have here is, as the sonnet puts it, a 'marriage of true minds'. Therefore the stereotype is decisively rejected.⁶ Sex is a significant element in their marriage, as we are shown by their behaviour in III.iii after the delayed consummation, but it is certainly not the main cause of it, which means that Shakespeare must have deliberately misled us about this at the beginning so that the truth, when it is finally established near the end of Act I, will seem even more surprising and satisfying.

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⁶ The idea briefly reappears much later when Iago suggests to Othello that Desdemona's choice of a black husband shows 'a will [i.e. sexual drive] most rank' (III.iii.232), but we now know that this is false and is simply part of his strategy to make Othello suspect her.