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Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage

Lara Bovilsky

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Like our own, early modern beliefs about race depended on metaphorical, selective, and contradictory understandings of how membership in groups is determined. Although race took distinctive forms in the past, the fallacies that underlie early modern racial experience generally are precisely-and surprisingly-the same as those in contemporary culture.

Exploring the similar underpinnings of early modern and contemporary ideas of difference, Barbarous Play examines English Renaissance understandings of race as depicted in drama. Reading plays by Shakespeare, Marlowe, Webster, and Middleton, Bovilsky offers case studies of how racial meanings are generated by narratives of boundary crossing-especially miscegenation, religious conversion, class transgression, and moral and physical degeneracy. In the process, she reveals deep parallels between the period's conceptions of race and gender.

Barbarous Play contests the widely held view that race and racism depend on modern science for their existence and argues that understanding just what is false and figurative in past depictions of race, such as those found in Othello, The Merchant of Venice, The White Devil, and The Changeling, can clarify the illogic of present-day racism.

Lara Bovilsky is assistant professor of English at the University of Oregon.

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