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*Black Males and White Masculinity
in Four Renaissance Tragedies of Blood*

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Abstract:

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The aim of this study is to look at how the black North African man is represented in relation to white men in four Renaissance tragedies of blood: Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, the multi-authored *Lust's Dominion*, William Rowley's *All's Lost by Lust*, and Thomas Rawlins' *The Rebellion*. While previous studies have traced the most common racist tropes in 16th and 17th century literature, such as the demonization trope and the animality trope (e.g. Hall), and the historical presence of modern stereotypes of the black man (Jones, Barthelemy, Tokson), they have not looked at Renaissance discourses of white masculinity and their relationship to the construction of the black man. Therefore, the present study focuses on the articulation of *the black man* as a gendered concept, and specifically its racialized difference in relation to localized white masculinity.

I argue that black masculinity is not its own discourse that is separate from white masculinity, but rather is fashioned using the same strategies that enabled white masculine self-fashioning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, i.e. through the manipulation of discourses to enhance the self and discredit male enemies or rivals. I specifically look at four discourses that were important to the social perception and thus construction of white masculinity in the Renaissance: relationships to women and the feminine, honour, sociality (humour), and ambition. What emerges as an overall feature in all four tragedies of blood is that there is not a polar distinction between black and white masculinity.

My approach builds on Michel Foucault and the idea that discourses structure society and relationships of power. It is also indebted to Reinhardt Koselleck's theory that concepts have a history, i.e. a contemporary polemic edge in Renaissance even as other meanings looked to the past, and others to the future. I argue that the difference in English tragedies of blood between the black men and the white men in the relationship to honour is temporal; that the distinction in vice and humour is a matter of attitude; and that black men have a blurred rather than distinct relationship to femininity. Racialization occurs through the discourse on blackness but also through everyday Renaissance discourses in historically contingent ways.

Key words: Renaissance, tragedies of blood, blackness, whiteness, masculinity, race, discourse, Foucault, Koselleck, honour, ambition, sarcasm