Article

The Global Consequences of Mistranslation: The Adoption of the "Black but …" Formulation in Europe, 1440–1650

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Abstract: This article investigates the genesis of a linguistic model occasioned by a mistranslation that was taken up in the Renaissance, and had an enduring global impact. I call this model the "black but…" formulation, and it is to be found in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries throughout written texts and reported speech, in historical as well as literary works. It was modeled grammatically and ideologically on the statement "I am black but beautiful" often attributed to the Queen of Sheba in 1:5 of the "Song of Songs", and had a detrimental effect on how members of the early African forced diaspora were viewed by Renaissance Europeans. I argue that the newly adversarial nature of the phrase was adopted as a linguistic and cultural formulation, and introduced into Western European cultures a whole way of approaching and perceiving blackness or looking at black African people.

Keywords: Black; linguistic formulation; Renaissance; slave; "Song of Songs"

This article investigates the genesis and adoption in Renaissance Europe of a linguistic model that was to have an enduring global impact. The adoption of this model, first in Latin, and then in the major European vernacular languages, had a detrimental effect on how sub-Saharan Africans were viewed in the period 1440–1650, enshrining negative expectations about what black skin signified.[1] In the article,

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[1] From the 1440s onwards, Europeans captured or purchased people from West Africa, and brought them to Europe as slaves [1]. For further information, see the collected volume by Earle and Lowe. My usual disclaimer applies: I am using the phrases "black" and "white," and "black Africans" and "white Europeans," as constructs. For a sense of the wide range of ways in which black Africans were categorised after they arrived in Europe, see [2].

I examine what I am calling the "black but…" formulation, which is to be found in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries throughout written texts and reported speech, historical as well as literary works. It must have been modelled grammatically and ideologically on a statement often attributed to the Queen of Sheba in 1:5 of the Biblical book called the Song of Songs, the Song of Solomon or the Canticle of Canticles (also known by its Latin name as the Cantica Canticorum) in the Old Testament of the Bible.[2] The Song of Songs is a collection of intense love lyrics between a man and a woman, resembling those found in ancient Egyptian collections. The propriety of including the Song of Songs in the Bible was questioned from the start (and there has been more fuss in the last century) but it has been accepted as canonical by both Jews and Christians. There have also been many different theories about how the Song of Songs should be interpreted: is it allegorical (the Lord's love for Israel or Christ's love for his Church), dramatic (the shepherd's courtship of the Shulammite maid), literal-historical (a celebration of human love or a repertoire for weddings), cultic or ritualistic or finally parabolic or typological in terms of certain topics of Israelite theology ([4], p. 209)?

The relevant statement was translated from Hebrew into Latin as "Nigra sum sed formosa" (I am black *but* beautiful [my italics])[3] whereas, in fact, this is a mistranslation from the Hebrew, and the translation should read: "Nigra sum et formosa" (I am black *and* beautiful [my italics]).[4] The relevant Hebrew word here is ו (*vav*), which has a slightly larger range than "and," but effectively in this context does just mean "and." So one word has been changed here, with the result that the whole meaning of the phrase has been utterly altered; instead of the descriptive or factual "I am black and beautiful," the Queen of Sheba is made to justify or explain her beauty, as though a black skin were in itself a barrier to beauty. What I am going to argue is that not only has the whole meaning of this phrase been changed, but that the newly adversarial nature of the phrase was adopted as a linguistic and cultural formulation. This act of mistranslation introduced into Western Europe cultures a conveniently fixed, but pejorative way of approaching and perceiving blackness, and of looking at black people, which effectively enshrined an acceptance of low expectations in relation to the attributes and capabilities of sub-Saharan Africans.

In order to understand the context, it is necessary to investigate in a very summary fashion the critical area of biblical translation up to the advent of printing in the fifteenth century, focusing on translations of this particular verse from the Song of Songs. The Hebrew Bible has the neutral word ו which is best translated here by "and." The Septuagint, which is often abbreviated by the Roman numerals LXX, is the Greek translation of the Old Testament; the translation of the Song of Songs is usually assumed to have been completed by 100 BC, probably in Alexandria. It is generally agreed by Old Testament scholars that the translation aimed to be as literal as possible, prioritising the sacrality of the original over fluency or clear understanding ([7], p. 20). The Septuagint has the Greek word καὶ (meaning "and" in both classical and patristic Greek, with a larger range in classical Greek) in 1:5 ([8],

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[2]   On pre-Renaissance interpretations of blackness in relation to the Song of Songs, see [3], pp. 16–22.

[3]   ([5], 9, p. 180): "nigra sum sed formonsa [*sic*]."

[4]   For another mistranslation in the Song of Songs relating to skin colour, see [6], p. 20. Braude suggests that in the same verse the Hebrew word שחור (*shahor*), meaning "black and burnt," had been incorrectly interpreted by ancient Greek, Latin and vernacular translators to be a permanent rather than a temporary black skin; he posits that this might have been "an innocent scribal error."

2, p. 261). I should like to stress again that the semantic range of both ן and καὶ is larger than "and," and both could in certain cases mean other things, but they could not mean "but." So the straightforward meaning of this verse in the Hebrew Bible and the Greek Septuagint is clear: "I am black and beautiful."

However, the Vulgate, that is the Latin translation of the Bible made by Jerome in the fourth century AD, instituted the use of the Latin word *sed* meaning "but" into the Song of Songs, 1:5. Jerome translated the Song of Songs over a few days in 398 AD. There had been previous Latin translations of the Bible (known collectively as the Vetus Latina), taken from the Greek Septuagint rather than from the Hebrew original, but they had been "piecemeal, inelegant and sometimes unreliable" ([9], p. 790). Jerome spent twenty years overall on his version, which was finished in 405 AD. For his translation of the Old Testament, he went back to the original Hebrew and Aramaic, and his proclaimed purpose was to render the sense of a passage rather than to provide a literal rendition of the words. Assuming that Jerome's knowledge of Hebrew was sufficiently good for him not to have mistaken the range of the word ן, for him there must have been an opposition between "black" and "beautiful," so he rendered the phrase: "I am black but beautiful," and the "black but …" formulation entered the Western European repertoire.

There is one additional point I should like to make here. Before Jerome made his new translation direct from the Hebrew, he had also revised the translation of the Song of Songs of the Vetus Latina, on the basis of the Greek text. This Latin translation survives in complete form in only one manuscript, although according to Peter Dronke "it was also widely known through quotations and through its use in the liturgical office and mass of the Virgin Mary" ([9], p. 236). In this earlier translation, Jerome rendered the relevant part of Song of Songs 1:5 into Latin as "Fusca sum et formosa" ("I am *dark and beautiful*" [my italics]), a far cry from his later translation, both in implicit and explicit meanings ([10], p. 19). Given that Jerome must have made a conscious decision to change the meaning of the verse in two ways—in terms of general aspect or skin colour from "dark" to "black," and in terms of sense from "and" to "but"—and given that it is certain he was aware of the choice in front of him, it may be that there is an opportunity here to hypothesise and maybe even to reconstruct why and how he moved from one translation to the other.[5] However, it is notoriously difficult to translate the myriad meanings associated with the vocabulary of colour between one period and another, and Jerome may not have intended "black" to indicate a black skin rather than a dark one. Whatever his intention, these two changes were to be momentous in their consequences for Africans in Renaissance Europe and globally.

Although this is a gross and rushed simplification of the extremely complicated and nuanced history of early biblical translation, for the purposes of this article and my argument it seems clear that it was Jerome in the fourth century who set up the opposition or contrast between blackness and beauty, and that the reasons for its existence should therefore be sought in his attitudes and surroundings.

It would be difficult to overestimate the influence of the Vulgate, which in the course of the Middle Ages became the only Latin translation of the Bible to be used. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with the advent of printing, the Vulgate's canonical status, and belief in the "truth" of its message,

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5   This sort of opportunity is relatively rare, but unfortunately it lies outside the scope of my research. Compare [11], p. 148: "Colour terminology is another example of how complex it is to ascertain referential and associative meanings and then to convey these into another language."

became ever more fixed. This Latin translation of the Bible (known as the Gutenberg Bible after its place of publication) was the first book to be printed in Europe, in late 1455 or early 1456. So the fact that it contained the words "Nigra sum sed formosa" (I am black but beautiful) meant that the adversarial opposition of the two words "black" and "beautiful" was sanctioned and further enshrined. Perhaps even more damagingly for sub-Saharan Africans in Renaissance Europe, the waves of European vernacular biblical translations unleashed by print all followed Jerome's Vulgate and perpetuated the mistranslation.

Simultaneously, many of these vernacular translations were seen to codify previously fluid languages and to become the carriers and transmitters of those languages. For example, although there had been a whole swathe of previous German translations of the Bible, starting with one issued by Johann Mentelin at Strasbourg before 27 June 1466, it was Martin Luther's translation that set the mould ([12], p. 46). Not only did it follow the Vulgate in its rendition of the Song of Songs 1:5: "Ich bin Schwarz, aber gar lieblich," but it also became one of the foundational texts of the German language, and consequently its grammatical constructions and linguistic turns acquired classic status ([13], p. 669). The same set of circumstances can be traced in England.[6] There were several translations of the Vulgate into English before the King James Version of 1611, which is still considered by many Protestants to be the standard version. One of the most famous was by the translator and Catholic martyr, William Tyndale, but he was killed before he had translated the Song of Songs. The King James Version was translated by six teams of Protestant scholars but it has not been possible to find out who exactly of the team translated any particular passage. The group that translated the Song of Songs was based in Cambridge, and consisted of Edmund Lively, Dr. John Richardson, Dr. Laurence Chaderton, Francis Dillingham,Thomas Harrison, Dr. Roger Andrewes, Dr. Robert Spalding and Dr. Andrew Byng ([16,17]). The relevant passage reads precisely: "I am black but comely" (comely is a slightly old-fashioned word meaning "pleasant to look at"), but the translators (of the King James version) have also added a resumé of the main points of the chapter at the top, which reads: "1. The church's love unto Christ. 5. She confesseth her deformity." The twinning of the concepts of blackness and deformity was normal in some circles, but this biblical instance seems not to have been noticed by scholars interested in attitudes towards sub-Saharan Africans.[7] The team of translators was specifically directed to rely upon five earlier English translations whenever there was disagreement, one of which was Tyndale's. The King James Version is hailed as a landmark composition in the English language, and was extraordinarily influential. Its effect on the language can be observed in a multitude of other texts. For example, the English translation of Song of Songs, 1:5 resurfaces in an obviously related but upside-down form in the English translation by Paul Isaiah of Sebastian Münster's work, *The Messiah of the Christians and the Jewes*, of 1655. In "A Disputation of a Christian with an Obstinate Jew," the Christian says: "For you Jewes have a peculiar colour of face, different from the form and figure of other men; ... for you are black and uncomely, and not white as other men" ([19], pp. 1–2).[8]

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[6] Although further investigation has been lacking, it has been noticed that the four major Renaissance English translations of the Bible all translated ו as "but" ([14], p. 50; [15], p. 111).

[7] For the perceived link between blackness and deformity in Renaissance England, see [18], pp. 94–95.

[8] I should like to thank Eva Johanna Holmberg for this reference.

The history of the translation of the Vulgate into the vernaculars of Southern Europe, and their printing, is obviously relevant here. The Vulgate was translated into Italian and appeared in print very early on, so (for example) there are several printed editions of the whole Bible in Italian from the 1470s.[9] Almost immediately, printed Latin translations of individual books, accompanied by Italian commentaries, also appeared.[10] And while a complete translation of the Bible into Spanish did not appear in print until 1569 (even though there had been prior printed translations of the Old Testament in Spanish),[11] individual books of the Bible, including the Song of Songs, were printed in Latin, and commented on in Spanish, in the later fifteenth century ([23], p. 127; [24]) However, it is worth noting that there was no translation of the whole Bible—or of a testament—into Portuguese in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries, although at least one individual book, Ecclesiastes, is now known to have been translated, so in the case of Portuguese, the linguistic model must have come directly from the Latin Vulgate.[12]

In my second section, I should like to turn to fifteenth and sixteenth-century non-biblical usages of this formulation in historical and literary works. Although I shall concentrate on vernacular examples, the oppositional phrasing that contrasted black skin to positive qualities appeared in many Renaissance Latin texts, both manuscript and printed. A good example is provided by the pen portrait in 1608 of the Congolese ambassador to Pope Paul V which appears in the manuscript diary of Giovanni Paolo Mucanzio, one of two papal masters of ceremonies. Ne-Vunda's description opens with a statement about his skin colour ("black of face and skin"), which is then contrasted to a long list of excellent qualities ("*but* noble and seemly in appearance, and of sober habits and of great shrewdness and ability in negotiating ... pious, devout and most committed to the Catholic faith." [my italics])[13] The "black but ... formulation" worked by insisting that it was noteworthy or exceptional, although not impossible, for a black African to be in possession of these character traits.

The greatest concentration of black Africans in fifteenth and sixteenth-century Europe was in Portugal, and the "black but ..." formulation appears very frequently in Portuguese. Many of these non-biblical usages cluster around notions of civilised and noble behaviour, effectively forcing a consideration of how black Africans in the Renaissance could be "gentlemen." Black could be juxtaposed successfully with many other normally "white" qualities. Peter Russell has analysed the descriptions in two Portuguese chronicles by Rui de Pina (*c.* 1450–1522) and João de Barros (1496–1570) of the 1488 visit by the Wolof prince of Senegambia known in Portuguese as "Bemoim" (elsewhere identified as Jelen, the *bumi* of Jolof) to King João II in Lisbon; they provide an excellent example of how a contradictory response to powerful and important sub-Saharan Africans could be couched in terms of the "black but …" formulation ([28], p. 198; [29]). Pina was present at Bemoim's visit; Barros had various sources for it. Pina praised Bemoim's impressive appearance and, rather

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[9] This includes those translated in 1471 and 1477 by Niccolò Mallermi. In [20], the editor Marino de Venezia has glossed the relevant verse: "Son negra quanto a lerrore: ma formosa et bella quanto a la verita" (sig. Bi r). See also [21], p. 93.

[10] Song of Songs 1:5 appears in Latin in [22], sig. Av.r with Italian commentary (Av.r-v). See also [21], p. 101.

[11] Wilson, 127.

[12] Tom Earle discovered a printed copy of Damião de Góis' translation of the book of Ecclesiastes into Portuguese ([25], p. 43).

[13] "Nigra facie et carne sed aspectu nobilis et decorus ac moribus gravis et magnae prudentiae ac dexteritatis in negotiando et … pius devotus et Catholicas religionis zelantissimus" ([26], p. 649. On Ne-Vunda [27], pp. 120–3).

surprisingly—as he had to speak through an interpreter—his oratory, which was considered one of the most fundamental Renaissance skills, thereby signalling that the black African prince had passed the test of entry to the Renaissance "club." In fact, therefore, either Bemoim's speech had been written by a Portuguese secretary or Pina was imagining a speech that never happened, a sort of symbolic speech that Bemoim would have given had he been able. As part of Pina's remit was to glorify João's deeds, especially his African deeds, it was necessary for him to invent a sophisticated and cultivated African prince who would in his very person reflect João's glory. But Pina revealed his inner struggle to categorise Bemoim when he wrote that "he did not seem a black barbarian *but* a Greek prince brought up in Athens," [my italics][14] and I believe the word "but" here is crucial, marking the contrast between [bad] black barbarian and [good] Greek prince, between blackness and nobility. For Pina, the colour of Bemoim's skin confusingly marked him as a barbarian while his oratorical skill induced classical comparisons. João de Barros reworded this sentiment and toned it down somewhat, but the message was similar.[15]

There are many other examples. The fifteenth-century Portuguese chronicler, Gomes Eanes de Zurara, writing of some "Moors" captured in "Guinea" by Antam Gonçalvez in 1441, declared "for though they were black, yet had they souls like the others."[16] Francisco Álvares, in his book of his journey to Ethiopia in 1520, *The Prester John of the Indies*, wrote of someone he met, Frey Mazqual: "Inspite of his blackness he was a gentleman," ("frei Mazqual … o qual em sua pretidão era gentil-homem") which is an opposition (black versus gentlemanly or black versus noble) that is quite common ([34], 1, p. 65; [35], 1, p. 13; [18], pp. 104–5). Álvares proceeded to elucidate *why* he believed this man was a gentleman, on the grounds of European behaviour, manner of speaking and manner of self-presentation: "he came up to us like a well born man, well educated and courteous. This gentleman had a very good led horse and a [handsome] mule on which he came, and four men on foot," that is, he spoke and acted in a gentlemanly fashion, and he owned the mounts and was surrounded by the servants that identified someone as a gentleman in Europe ([34], 1, p. 65). This list effectively meant that, according to Álvares, the "damage" caused by being black could be mitigated by the acquisition of the attributes of European civilisation, provided by a European education and observance of the conventions of European status indicators. The famous North African Muslim traveller and writer, al-Hasan al-Wazzan, renamed Leo Africanus after he was enslaved by pirates, given to Pope Leo X and "converted" to Christianity, wrote a description of Africa in the 1520s, which was translated into English by John Pory and published in London in 1600 ([36,37]). Here too one can find the "black but …" formulation effectively used in conjunction with the notion of being "noble" or a gentleman. Pory's translation of the passage on the town of Cabra in the kingdom of Timbuktu on the Niger read: "I my selfe am acquainted with Abu Bacr, sirnamed Pargama, the kings brother, who is blacke in colour, *but* most beautifull in minde and conditions" [my italics] ([38], 3, p. 826). This kind of statement can be read as a compliment about someone who has confounded normal expectations by overcoming the supposed disadvantage of being black. Black skin, according to this view, did not

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[14] "Non pareciam de negro bárbaro, mas de príncipe grego criado en Athenas" ([30], p. 92).

[15] Barros remarked that Bemoim appeared not as a "principe barbaro … mas como podia ser hum dos senhores da Europa" ([31], fols. 30v–31v).

[16] "Ca pero negros fossem assy tijnham almas come os outros" ([32], 1, p. 55; [33], 7, p. 78).

exclude other qualities and characteristics, but possession of a black skin certainly made them more worthy of comment ([18], p. 105).

This comment-worthiness was multiplied many times if the person in question were a slave, and therefore of lowly status. So in the anonymous Spanish poem *Coplas de como una dama ruega a un negro que cante en manera de requiebro* (*Verses of How a Lady Begs a Black Slave to Sing to Her*) of *c*. 1520, the slave Jorge remains "proper" even when the talk turns to sex, forcing the lady finally to comment that "*though* bay in colour, you have white manners" [my italics].[17] The word used is *moh ńo* (black-faced, bay horse) and a recent editor of the poem, Jeremy Lawrance, believes that the lady, even though she wants to have sex with her slave, "cannot bring herself to call Jorge black" ([39], p. 92). Here it is clear that there are accepted white standards of behaviour, and that when black people attain or even (as here) surpass them, white Europeans often approach the topic through the "black but …" formulation.

Interestingly, some texts carried this further by analysing the degrees of gentlemanly behaviour displayed by certain sub-Saharan Africans. In the sixteenth-century work in heroic verse by Jerónimo Corte-Real, detailing the death of the sea-captain Manuel de Sousa de Sepúlveda in 1552, entitled *Naufragio e Lastimoso Sucesso da Perdiçam de Manoel de Sousa de Sepulveda, & Dona Lianor de Sá sua Molher & Filhos, Vindo da India para este Reyno na Nao Chamada o Galião Grande S. Ioão* (translated into English as *The Tragic History of the Sea*), published in Lisbon in 1594, the author described the *bano* of Luranga in Natal as being from "a truly noble family. They are the best-natured and most gentlemanly blacks ['negroes'] in all this land" [40].[18] This Portuguese author appears far more open than many other Europeans, but even he felt the need to stress the gentlemanly aspects of these particular Africans because their behaviour was considered so unusual.

It is thus not surprising to find the "black but …" formulation—a formulation starting from a negative set of assumptions about black skin and what it signified—being employed in a less supportive fashion. The sixteenth-century Franciscan lay brother from Sicily known as Benedetto il Moro (*c*. 1524–89), who was created the first black saint in Europe in 1807, was also boxed in by these oppositional terms ([43], p. 299). For instance, in a life of him written in 1623 by a fellow Franciscan Antonino di Randaczo, the "black but …" formulation was repeatedly used against Benedetto. In one paragraph, Randaczo managed three different permutations and I shall mention two of them here. In the first Randaczo wrote: "although they [Benedetto and his parents] were black, they were well-fed and of good habits ("di buoni costumi"), good Christians and fearful of God." This formulation "although he was/they were black" ("benchè fosse/fossero negri") is to be found everywhere in late fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth-century Italian sources. A few lines further on, Benedetto's father Christofaro is described in almost the same terms as the African prince Bemoim: "he was not thought of as a black slave *but* as any respectable and virtuous person" [my italics] ([44], p. 125).[19] The concern with status makes itself felt again. All these examples show that the writer/hagiographer believed that being black was in general an impediment to a whole range of good behaviours and esteem indicators, and that to be black *and* to earn the respect of white Europeans was an enormously

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[17] "Aunque de color mohíno / la plática tienes blanca" ([39], pp. 75 and 92).

[18] Translated into English in [41], p. 283; also see [42] pp. 229–45.

[19] "[N]on era reputato come scavo negro ma come qualsivoglia persona respetata et virtuosa."

difficult task only attainable by an exceptional few. Randaczo's biography is a very informative text, which not only details the many indignities and insults Benedetto was forced to endure on account of being black, but also displays clearly the prejudices of the author.

Finally I should like to consider for a while the notion of black Africans and beauty/ugliness. In literary texts, the "black but ..." formulation can also be found being applied to notions of beauty, that is, in a very close manner to the original Vulgate translation ([45], pp. 1–14). So, for example, Gomes Eanes de Zurara could comment on a fourteen-year-old black girl: "she had well formed limbs, and even reasonable presence, given that she was from Guinea." ([32], 2, p. 259).[20] Of course, the sexual overtones of this remark cannot be discounted, especially from a writer who at other points is not neutral in his descriptions of Africans. But the reason I originally became interested in the "black but ..." formulation is because of the apparent contradiction in fifteenth and sixteenth-century documents and texts between writers who decried and disparaged sub-Saharan Africans as "ugly" and those who described them as "beautiful." I feel I should stress that many Africans were singled out on account of their beauty—their physical attraction was noticed and commented upon, certainly in Italy, the country I work on and know best. A typical example here would be the 1487 description of a black slave in Filippo di Matteo Strozzi's Neapolitan record book: "a little black male slave, about 11 years old, who is as beautiful as it is possible to say."[21] Once again, the possible sexual overtones of this remark cannot be excluded. But appreciative comments were made about black men and women, and boys and girls, in an absolutely freestanding manner, outside the negative straightjacket of the "black but …" formulation. On the other hand, much more common are references of the following, and now very familiar, sort. D. Teodósio, the Duke of Bragança in the mid sixteenth-century, had a black jester and musician called Jácome Feio. *Feio* means ugly, and this type of depreciative nickname was very common for Africans in Renaissance Europe. Jácome was described as "black *but* very witty," [my italics] as though it were unlikely that he would or could be witty if he were black ([47], p. 195, number 540). [22]

The aim of this article has been to show how a particular linguistic formulation invented by Jerome in the fourth century for his new translation of the Song of Songs 1:5 "I am black but beautiful" led in Renaissance Europe to a conceptual framework in which there was a formulaic antagonism between blackness and positive qualities. The formulation led to an acceptance of low expectations in relation to black people, which translated globally into a recipe for misery. The commencement of the slave trade from West Africa which brought tens of thousands of enslaved sub-Saharan Africans to Europe in a forced diaspora from the 1440s onwards coincided with the advent of the printing press, the Vulgate becoming pre-eminent among printed editions of the Bible, and the many new vernacular translations of the Bible which codified European languages in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. So at a moment when enslaved sub-Saharan Africans were arriving in large numbers in Europe for the first time, Jerome's formulation on blackness seemed to offer the literate a clear

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[20] The Portuguese reads: "na qual havia assaz boa postura de membros e, ainda, presença razoável para guiné [que era]," [33], 2, p. 495. On Zurara, see [46], pp. 261–5.

[21] Florence, Archivio di stato, Carte Strozziane, serie V, 47, Ricordanze verde HH, fol. 76r: "uno schiavotto nero d'anni 11 nel circha, lo quale èbellissimo quanto si possa dire". I should like to thank Amanda Lillie for this reference.

[22] "Este charamela era negro, mas muito discreto." See also [48], p. 188.

linguistic model for simultaneously adverting to the disadvantages of being black, and for allowing the possibility that a favoured few black Africans could, rather surprisingly, have positive attributes. I hope I have shown some of the myriad ways in which white writers across Western Europe fixed upon this formulation and tinkered with it, but left clear its essential elements. A solitary act of mistranslation centuries before multiplied in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries into a linguistic commonplace that made normal an antagonism between blackness and the accepted goals of European society (such as nobility or beauty), raising the stakes for any black African seeking acceptance or integration. And at a stroke, the lives of the vast majority of early diasporic enslaved sub-Saharan Africans were made much more complicated and difficult.

Acknowledgements

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