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Transnational connections in early modern theatre

Edited by M. A. Katritzky and Pavel Drábek

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sin venganza (*Punishment without Revenge*) in Spanish at the Globe in 2014, becoming the first company to present there a play by a non-English writer. In 2016, they toured in Spain with *Trabajos de amor perdidos* (*Love's Labour's Lost*), directed by Rodrigo Arribas and Tim Hoare and produced in association with the Globe. Arribas notes in his interview the company's interest in 'internationalizing' the *comedia*, as Spain's national patrimony (Arribas 2016).

12 On the recent history of performance for *El perro*, see Wheeler (2007).

4

The African ambassador's travels: Playing black in late seventeenth-century France and Spain

Noémie Ndiaye[1]

Between 1662 and 1682, African ambassadors were popular in Parisian theatres. Indeed, as a theatergram of design,[2] African ambassadors can be found in several extant plays from that period: *Le Mort vivant* by Edmé Boursault (1662) – which is the main focus of this chapter; *L'Ambassadeur d'Affrique* by Norman lawyer and dramatist Nicolas Du Perche (1666); *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, Molière's Turkish variation on the African ambassador, first published in 1670, which would acquire a more lasting fame than Boursault's original, and finally Bel-Isle's *Le Mariage de la reine de Monomotapa* (1682).

The theatergram can be described as follows: a young man loves a young woman. To marry her, he must overcome the opposition of his love interest's father, who favours a rival for the wrong reasons. The problem is not original, but the solution is, and it comes in two flavours. In the earlier two plays of this corpus, the lover uses blackface (*barbouillage*) to disguise his crafty servant as *l'ambassadeur d'Affrique*, a black comedic tyrant with rough manners. This powerful African claims the young woman's hand and scares away the hero's rivals. In the latter two plays of the corpus, however, the lover uses *oriental costume* (not blackface) to disguise himself as the ambassador of Turkey, or of the early modern African kingdom of Monomotapa (which stretched across present day Mozambique and Zimbabwe). Excited to have his daughter marry up, the ambitious father agrees to the marriage, the wedding is performed in disguise, and it is unclear whether the father ever learns the truth about his son-in-law's identity. In both versions, the theatergram of the African ambassador removes obstacles to the lovers' marriage.

That theatergram, itself relatively narrow in scope, mobilised the performance technique of blackface, which had long been used all across Europe. From medieval drama including French *mystères*, Spanish *autos* and English cycle plays where the devil was performed with soot, to the elaborate cosmetics used in most seventeenth-century European commercial theatres to represent

sub-Saharan Africans, via the black veils and visors used to represent Moorish characters in commedia dell'arte *scenarii* and Tudor court entertainments alike, not to mention Harlequin's intriguing black mask – blackface covered a wide array of material practices and already had a long transnational history by 1662.[3] In early modern France, it had been used to represent Moors, Ethiopians and Mozambicans in the theatre of Rouen, Normandy, in the first two decades of the seventeenth century, before becoming a popular feature of court ballets in Paris (Biet 2006; Wikström 2010; Chalaye 1998). Here, I focus on one specific historical articulation of blackface, as I bring to the fore the cultural work effected by the theatergram of the African ambassador in late seventeenth-century France.

The genealogic connections between the four plays of my corpus have already been studied, so my goal is not to unearth further evidence of this theatergram's existence, but rather to unpack the significance of this theatergram's transnational inception.[4] That transnational inception had old roots, since the motif of the African ambassador had circulated in visual culture across Western Europe at least since the fifteenth century (Lowe 2012), and even earlier if, as I am inclined to do, we read as an ambassador the figure of the black magus Baltasar, which, Paul Kaplan notes, appeared in European representations of the Nativity in the early 1400s (Kaplan 2013: 22). In *Le Mort vivant*, that transnational genealogy is vividly foregrounded. Indeed, when Edmé Boursault first introduces the African ambassador to the French stage with *Le Mort vivant*, performed by *les comédiens du roi* at l'Hôtel de Bourgogne in 1662, he does so in a *comédie à l'espagnole*, set in Seville. This is far from incidental. Reading the racial discourse that Boursault's play develops through the theatergram of the African ambassador in the light of the play's transnational dimension, I argue that *Le Mort vivant* captures a moment of transition in the history of racial thinking in France: a moment when, in the context of the intensification of colour-based slavery in the French Caribbean, ethnic difference and skin colour became racialised. Focusing on the transnational dimension of the play, I show how the play's engagement with Spanishness, in the context of Louis XIV's marriage to Maria Theresa of Spain, complicates its position on race. Boursault's play, which constitutes the main focus of my chapter, evidences a conflicted relation to racial hybridity, and an anxious interrogation of French identity in the 1660s, as it embraces and celebrates Spanish cultural influence while simultaneously constructing Spanishness as Africanised.

Racial twists: France, race and the Caribbean

The word *race* entered the French language at the end of the fifteenth century, as a technical term from animal husbandry describing animals

possessing superior qualities for the purposes of hunting or waging war. By extension, the term referred to the various royal dynasties of France, which were perceived as sharing those military qualities (Boulle 2007: 63). In the mid-sixteenth century, *race* started referring to good aristocratic pedigree. As the term always does, it served to naturalise pre-existing (or, in the early modern period, nascent) power relations between social groups, but the criterion separating those social groups had little to do with ethnicity in the sixteenth century. Indeed, the term was popularised during the crisis of the French aristocracy, when the old aristocracy – *la noblesse d'épée*, the military elite, whose noble origins were medieval – felt threatened in its prerogatives by the emergence of an educated, wealthy and ambitious bourgeois class (*la noblesse de robe*). Members of that bourgeois class could buy aristocratic status by purchasing the expensive administrative offices offered for sale by an increasingly domineering crown. In reaction, a discourse developed that endowed the old nobility with supposedly hereditary superior qualities – physical, moral and intellectual, transmitted through blood, and thus non-vendible. This discourse emphasised the need to preserve those superior qualities by policing marriages – at the very time when many impoverished aristocrats of old and great pedigree married into wealthy new aristocratic families. A revealing detail: the children born from such marriages were called *métis* – a term that is still commonly used today to refer to people of mixed heritage (Aubert 2004: 449). Those aristocratic children were seen as social hybrids, and thus, in sixteenth-century French, as *racial* hybrids. Boulle and Aubert explain that the racial terminology and racial thinking coined in sixteenth-century France in an attempt to preserve the privileges of the old aristocracy, were lifted and applied to ethnic differences in the late seventeenth century in an attempt to preserve the privileges of the white colonisers as a group.

Indeed, in the late seventeenth century, many perceived the slavery-based colonial order to be under attack in the French Caribbean, which included, chiefly, Martinique, Guadeloupe, Saint-Martin, Saint-Barthélemy and Sainte-Lucie, as well as Sainte-Croix, Grenada and Saint-Christophe (St Kitts) – over which France would lose its dominion in the eighteenth century – and, last but not least in terms of economic importance at the turn of the century, Saint-Domingue. The attack came in the form of free people of colour: mostly concubines manumitted by their masters, and, even more often, mulatto children raised by their white fathers, according to the custom of each island. In Martinique, for instance, white fathers could keep their mulatto children if they paid a fine to the Church and to the master of the enslaved mother; those children became free as they reached legal majority. This custom probably has its roots in the toleration of interracial unions that had characterised the first decades of French colonisation, given the low number of white women in the

French Caribbean. In Martinique, for instance, between 1664 and 1686, as the number of slaves boomed from 2,700 to 11,100, the number of free people of colour boomed too (Curtin 1969: 78). As Guillaume Aubert explains, this number had to be curbed if colour-based slavery was to remain the foundation of the highly profitable social order in the colonies. Because most mulatto children were born out of wedlock, curbing their number required a policing of both formal and informal unions, and that kind of policing drew on sixteenth-century racial thinking.

That policing took two main forms: first, encouraging the formation of mono-racial families through legal and fiscal means. For instance, in 1665, the governor-general of the French Islands, Alexandre De Prouville, Marquis de Tracy, used fiscal incentives to encourage the formation of white families overseas: he exempted from poll tax all white people born on the islands and all white girls and women, regardless of their birthplace. Twenty years later, the *Code Noir* legally forbade masters from tearing apart black families by selling separately slaves who were officially married and had young children. Although the 1685 *Code Noir* is well known for internal contradictions informed by its attempt at reconciling diverse interests and ideologies, it seems that it was in part informed by the metropolitan and colonial authorities' desire to ensure that 'Negroes and Negresses be made to marry between themselves as much as possible' (a letter from Louis XIV to *l'Intendant* Bégon; cited in Aubert 2004: 465). The second way of policing interracial unions consisted in taking legal measures preventing stray white men from increasing the number of free people of colour in the colonies by manumitting their children and concubines. For instance, in 1680, an edict declared that, in Guadeloupe, mulatto children would from now onwards follow the status of their slave mother all their life. Five years later, the *Code Noir* stipulated that if a married master fathered a child on a slave, the concubine and the mulatto child would both remain in perpetual servitude and out of the father's control, being confiscated for the benefit of *l'Hôpital Général*, an institution dedicated to confinement, correction and forced labour, to be found in every important city in the country as per a royal edict of 1662. Such a policing of unions soon extended to all mixed black and white unions in the French colonies as it was implemented not solely in the Caribbean, but also on Réunion Island (east of Madagascar) in 1674, and in the trading posts of *La Compagnie du Sénégal* along the West African coast in 1688. In the French colonial context, those twenty years saw the transfer of racial thinking from rank-based difference to ethnicity-based difference. This historical context is crucial for understanding the theatergram of the African ambassador, because 'African Ambassador' plays stage this transfer of racial thinking from rank difference onto ethnic difference. Indeed, a

close reading of Edmé Boursault's play reveals that this transfer was at work in collective thinking as early as in the 1660s.

With the theatergram of the African ambassador, Boursault reintroduced the practice of blackface onto the French public stage after a quasi total forty-year hiatus that remains unexplained to this day. While we know from playscripts that *barbouillage*, blackface, was used to represent Africans in French theatre as early as 1601 (in *Les Chastes et loyales amours de Théagène et Chariclée* by Alexandre Hardy), and as late as 1618 (in *La Perséene, ou la délivrance d'Andromède* by Jean Boissin de Gallardon), it almost disappeared from the public stage in the 1620s, and became a quasi-exclusive feature of court ballets featuring *Mores galants* stock characters. Although there were many aristocrats familiar with the court ballet performance tradition in Boursault's audiences, most spectators at l'Hôtel de Bourgogne were bourgeois; for them, blackface must have been a fascinating visual novelty in 1662. It is likely then that the ambassador's striking makeup thoroughly informed the audience's perception of this character, and that the physical blackness of this character was very much on spectators' minds.

The ambassador himself confirms, in an indirect stage direction, that *barbouillage* is part of his costume. Indeed, in an attempt to reject his courting, Stéphanie declares:

> STÉPHANIE
> Et j'en fais trop d'état pour oser jamais croire
> Que d'un honteux amour vous souilliez votre gloire.
> Songez, Seigneur, songez que mon rang est trop bas,
> Il vous faut...
> GUSMAN Mon enfant, je ne l'ignore pas;
> Je sais ce qu'il me faut, mais quoique je le sache
> Pour vous faire m'aimer je me fais une tache;
> Mais beauté printanière apprenez qu'il m'est doux,
> D'être noir comme un Diable, et d'être aimé de vous.
> (Boursault, *Le Mort vivant*, 2.2.517–24)

> (STÉPHANIE
> I care too much about your high rank to ever believe
> That you would stain your glory with such a shameful love:
> Consider my base rank, my Lord.
> No, what you need is –
> GUSMAN Little one, I know all of this,
> And I know what I need, but even so,
> For your love, I will stain myself.
> O springly beauty, know that it is sweet to be
> Black as a devil and be loved by you.)

Stéphanie argues that their marriage would be unequal, which is true in more than one sense; indeed, while Stéphanie's rank is too low for her to marry an African ambassador, the audience knows that, as a servant, the rank of the African ambassador impersonator, Gusman, is too low for him to marry Stéphanie. Gusman is playing on words here, as he turns what Stéphanie calls the social 'stain' attached to a misalliance with a commoner ('you would stain your glory') into the cosmetic stain that he is wearing on his face, in order to look as 'black as a devil' ('I will stain myself'). With a pun that calls attention to the material performance technique of blackface, Gusman links the ideas of misalliance, shame and physical blackness. In other words, Gusman is colouring the French notion of race. Similarly, rank and ethnicity overlap when Stéphanie declares:

> Un hymen entre nous a si peu d'apparence,
> Que je n'ose, Seigneur, en former l'espérance;
> Vous pouvez donc prétendre en me faisant la cour,
> D'attirer des respects, et non pas de l'amour.
> Vous m'aimez? Vous, Seigneur? Moi qui suis...
> (Boursault, *Le Mort vivant*, 2.3.549–53)

> (A marriage between us is so unseemly
> That I dare not hope for it, my Lord;
> Thus, by courting me, you may
> Earn respect, but not love. Love me?
> You, my Lord? While I am –)

In keeping with his unmannerly habits, the ambassador interrupts her, and yet, one can only wonder how Stéphanie would have finished her sentence: 'While I am – below your rank'? Or 'While I am – too white for you'? Both simultaneously. Here again, the play conflates the two meanings of the word *race* in the spectators' minds.

Not only do characters like Stéphanie and Gusman describe this interracial marriage in 'shameful' terms: the plot itself indicts it. First, the role of the African ambassador is played by a servant, and not by the lover Fabrice himself, which implies that this interracial marriage proposal was never meant to be successful – as opposed to later versions of the theatergram in the 'African ambassador' corpus. Second, the verbal roughness with which the ambassador courts Stéphanie evokes, in comedic mode, the supposed sexual violence of black men towards white women that early modern Europeans loved to fantasise about, a sexual violence that disqualifies the African ambassador from marrying Stéphanie. Third, Fabrice invents the character of the African ambassador to prevent Stéphanie from marrying either Ferdinand (whom she believes to be her father at the beginning of the play) or Lazarille (who is her natural brother, as she will discover by the end of the play). The ambassador

might be too far away from Stéphanie race-wise (that is, in both rank and ethnicity), but Fabrice's rivals are much too close to her blood-wise. By balancing the possibility of an interracial marriage with the possibility of an incestuous marriage, and establishing a symmetry between them, the play presents a marriage with Fabrice (a white Spanish bourgeois to whom Stéphanie is not related by blood) as the central point, the happy middle ground between two extremes that are both undesirable, shameful and unnatural. Weaving together notions of blood, misalliance, skin colour and shame, the theatergram of the African ambassador reflects and contributes to the development of a racial discourse about black Africans in France in the 1660s.

The play hints at its own inscription within a transatlantic reshaping of racial thinking by alluding to the Caribbean. Indeed, when Stéphanie's adoptive father Ferdinand tells the story of how he came to be entrusted with the baby girl, we learn that Stéphanie was born from an adulterous affair, and that when she met Ferdinand, Stéphanie's mother was on her way to 'Gadaloupe':

> Une dame à cheval qu'avait un homme en croupe
> Passa par cette ville, allant à Gadaloupe.
> (Boursault, *Le Mort vivant*, 1.3.115–6)

> (A Lady, riding a horse behind a man
> came to this city on her way to Gadaloupe.)

The play is set in Seville, so Ferdinand is most probably alluding to the city of Guadalupe in the region of Extremadura – a city whose monastery was famous for its cult of a Black Madonna, and which gave its name to the island of Guadeloupe (Columbus himself named the island after this Madonna). This is just a detail, just a touch of Spanish *couleur locale*, but that *couleur locale*, via the strong historical ties that exist between the Spanish city and the island, evokes a Caribbean territory that had passed into French control, and had already been abundantly constructed as a place where black slavery flourished in texts such as Jean-Baptiste du Tertre's *Histoire Générale des isles de St Christophe, de la Guadeloupe, et de la Martinique* (1654), which were widely circulated in the metropole. Guadeloupe was also perceived, as previously noted, as a place where illegitimate interracial births were endemic. The presence of Guadeloupe in the background of the plot discreetly signals the influence of the Caribbean on the anti-miscegenation politics of Boursault's play.

To understand where exactly this theatergram fits on the vertical historical axis of race relations in the Francophone world, however, we have to place Boursault's play on the horizontal axis of transnational movements in seventeenth-century Europe, for the transnational inception of the 'African ambassador' theatergram is integral to its meaning.

The king's race: Royal marriages, theatre and hybridity

At first sight, Boursault's play looks like the adaptation of a Spanish *comedia*: it belongs to the popular mid-seventeenth-century genre of the *comédie à l'espagnole*. Numbers confirm the popularity of this genre in France: 'Among the 103 comedies written between 1636 and 1660, 40 plays are derived from a Spanish source; among them, 32 are plays called "*à l'espagnole*", inspired from *comedias*' (Hofer y Tuñon 2012: 133). The action of the play is set in Seville, the characters have Spanish names, the first half of the play focuses on one central *héros ridicule*, the ambassador, in the tradition of the *comedia de figurón*, and this ridiculous hero is performed by the *gracioso* Gusman. Most strikingly, the play adopts the tripartite structure of Spanish *comedias*, going further in this respect than most *comédies à l'espagnole*, which usually stick to the five-act structure typical of seventeenth-century French dramaturgy. The play clearly seeks to convey a strong exotic effect: it presents itself as a Franco-Spanish hybrid, on the very stage where the Spanish actors who had arrived in France in July 1660, following the marriage of Louis XIV to Maria Theresa of Spain, performed on a regular basis.

The few scholars who have tried to identify the source of Boursault's play, such as Victor Fournel (1863) and René-Michel Piette (1971), have followed an alternative transnational thread. They believe the original source to be the Italian Sforza d'Oddi's *I morti vivi* (1578), which Lope de Vega adapted in *Los muertos vivos* (1599–1602), and which Le Sieur D'Ouville in turn had adapted for the French stage in 1646. This seductive genealogy disregards the fact that, despite their similar titles, Boursault's plot has nothing to do with those plays. Whatever tenuous thematic continuities might exist between Boursault's play and d'Oddi's, they don't involve the African ambassador. The African ambassador is a Franco-Spanish hybrid creation, not an Italian theatergram. In a sense, genealogical inquiries such as Fournel's and Piette's, by privileging models based on linear descent rather than hybridity, replicate in the textual domain the anti-miscegenation politics deployed in *Le Mort vivant* and in the African ambassador corpus.

Indeed, a Spanish acting company, initially led by Sebastían García de Prado, came to Paris upon Louis XIV's commission following his marriage, and was maintained by the French crown until leaving the country in spring 1673 (Fournier 1864: 24; Rennert 1909: 340; Esses 1992: I, 38). The *comedia* from which Boursault derived his play has never been identified. While various sources allude briefly to the presence of the Spanish performers in the capital, and their performances both at l'Hôtel de Bourgogne and in the Queen's apartments, one is hard pressed to establish a list of plays they performed; the Mahelot manuscript – the invaluable notebook of the scenic designers working at l'Hôtel de Bourgogne from 1629 onwards – does not cover the

period 1660–71, and the *Mercure Galant* periodical does not reference any play performed by the Spanish actors in Paris, from its earliest issue in 1672 to their departure. Moreover, the fact that Boursault drew heavily on recent French plays – such as Scarron's *comédie à l'espagnole Don Japhet d'Arménie*, itself adapted from *El Marques de Cigarral* by Solerzano – suggests that there may not have been a specific Spanish source to begin with; Boursault may simply have aimed for an overall Spanish effect. Nevertheless, it is likely that desiring to give a good sample of their repertoire to French audiences, the Spanish actors performed some of the major *comedias* of a national repertoire that included numerous *negros* characters performed in blackface. This blackface repertoire might have included, to name but a few, influential plays such as Lope de Vega's *El santo negro Rosambuco de la ciudad de Palermo* (c. 1607), which had been imitated by several Spanish dramatists, Andrés de Claramonte's *El valiente negro en Flandes*, printed in 1638 (written 1621–25), which was so popular that it was eventually given a sequel and was performed as far as New Spain, and Diego Jiménez de Enciso's *La comedia famosa de Juan Latino*, printed in 1652 (written in the early 1620s).[5] Indeed, I would suggest that it is no coincidence that blackface was revived on the French public stage just when the Spanish actors arrived in Paris, and disappeared again shortly after their departure.

Not only did those Spanish actors probably inspire Boursault with the theatergram of the African ambassador, they also ensured the subsequent transnational circulation of this motif. Indeed, in 1682, the year the *comédiens du roi* revived Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* to celebrate the birth of the Duke of Burgundy's heir, and when *Le Mariage de la reine de Monomotapa* was published in Leiden in the Netherlands, the 'African ambassador' crossed the Pyrenees. Pablo Polope, who had since 1674 worked in Simon Aguado's acting company, adapted Molière's *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* into a *sainete*, a one-act farce, based on the account of one of the Spanish actors who had spent time at the French court in the 1660s – possibly Simon Aguado himself (Rennert 1907: 468). The goal was to entertain Marie Louise d'Orléans – granddaughter of both Louis XIII of France and Charles I of England – who had married Charles II of Spain in 1679. In other words, it was Maria Theresa of Spain's nostalgic desire to see Spanish plays performed by Spanish actors far away from home that had enabled Boursault's *Le Mort vivant*, and it was Marie Louise d'Orléans' love for French theatrical culture that inspired the anonymous *El labrador gentilhombre*.[6] In *El labrador gentilhombre*, which was performed at Buen Retiro, Boursault's African ambassador becomes *la gran princesa de Marruecos*, the great princess of Morocco, in keeping with the local theatrical traditions of sexual and racial crossdressing. Not surprisingly, this farce, itself a result of intense Franco-Spanish cross-pollination, would go to great lengths to emphasise the cultural porosity between Spain and France, in the context of a royal marriage that was the latest in a long series, for if Louis

XIII and Louis XIV had Spanish queen consorts, most seventeenth-century Spanish kings (Philip II, Philip IV and Charles II) had French queen consorts.

Boursault's play may have borrowed blackface from the Spanish actors, but it did so on French terms. Indeed, the play occasionally resorts to what I call the diabolical hermeneutics of blackface; that is, moments when specific cues, drawing on the tradition of blackface in medieval theatre, superimpose the image of the devil onto the image of a black African character in the minds of the spectators – cues such the above-quoted couplet 'O springly beauty, know that it is sweet to be | black as a devil and to be loved by you' (Boursault, *Le Mort vivant*, 2.2.523–4). Such diabolical hermeneutics of blackface, extremely popular in seventeenth-century England too, characterises several of the extant plays written for the public stage in Rouen, Normandy, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, before blackface became an exclusive feature of court ballets in the 1620s – such as Nicolas Chrétien des Croix's *Les Portugaiz infortunez* (1608) or the anonymous *Tragédie françoize d'un more cruel envers son seigneur nommé Riviery, gentilhomme espagnol, sa demoiselle et ses enfants* (1613). By contrast, in Spain, the diabolical hermeneutics of blackface can be found in a few *autos* from the *Códice de Autos viejos*, compiled between 1550 and 1575, but its presence in *farsas* and in seventeenth-century *comedia nueva* is purely vestigial. In other words, by relying on the diabolical hermeneutics of blackface, Boursault's play moves away from contemporary Spanish theatre, and reconnects with an older French performance tradition.

The Frenchification of blackface in Boursault's play goes further. Indeed, in Spanish *comedias*, as in English Caroline plays, when a white character decides to disguise himself (or, more often, *her*self) as an African and to use blackface to that end, they typically gain agency because blackness makes them socially invisible. For instance, in the previously mentioned *El valiente negro en Flandes*, written by Andrés de Claramonte in the early 1620s, Leonor disguises herself as a black male page in order to join the front in the Low Countries, and she finds the perfidious captain who abandoned her. In *La negra por el honor* by Agustín Moreto y Cavana (published in 1668, just between *L'Ambassadeur d'Affrique* and *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*), another Leonor disguises herself as her own black male servant to escape recognition by her would-be rapist. She escapes, finds help and sues the serial rapist. Finally, in *El negro de cuerpo blanco y esclavo de su honra*, published in 1756 but written probably in the 1660s, Cesar disguises himself as a black slave in order to spy on his own wife in his own house, when he discovers that the king wants to cuckold him. Late seventeenth-century Spanish white characters of both genders play black when they need to save their sexual honour by remaining in the shadows. This strategy works because, in Spanish theatrical culture, being black meant belonging to an invisible lower social class.

But not in France, where the culture of court ballets had, since the 1620s, accustomed aristocratic audiences to the highly popular roles of the *Mores galants*, performed in blackface, who usually claimed to come straight from Africa, as ambassadors, in order to dance and pay homage to the French king and the beautiful French ladies in the audience.[7] Boursault is appropriating that tradition, which was specific to French seventeenth-century court culture, for the commercial public stage. In 'African ambassador' plays, when late seventeenth-century French white characters play black in order to get the wife they want, the strategy works because being an African ambassador means belonging to a hyper-visible aristocratic social class. Thus, Boursault's African ambassador combines older French theatrical traditions for representing Africans, traditions that come from public theatre in Rouen (the diabolical hermeneutics of blackface) and from court theatre in Paris (the *Mores galants*). Those performance traditions had, until then, remained discrete: by fusing them for the first time, Boursault's play hybridises high culture and low culture to reflect on the history of blackface in French theatrical culture.

Hybridity is a key word for understanding Boursault's dramaturgy. *Le Mort vivant* belongs to a genre that is hybrid in itself (the *comédie à l'espagnole*); it is set in the land that was perceived by many Europeans as the land of hybridity *par excellence*, and more specifically in the Andalusian city of Seville, which was synonymous with Spanish Africanness because of its Moorish past and its important black demographics throughout the seventeenth century. Additionally, the play is performed on a multicultural stage that hosts both French and Spanish actors, and hybridises French performance traditions for representing Africans that catered to audiences of different social groups. Thus focusing on the transnational inception of the 'African ambassador' theatergram brings to the fore the contradictions of *Le Mort vivant*'s ideological position on racial hybridity. Boursault's play indicts interracial marriages as unseemly, and thus denigrates the idea of racial hybridity, both in the rank-based and ethnicity-based senses of the term *racial*. Yet, the play itself is one of the most racially hybrid theatrical objects of the period: it hybridises performance traditions that differ in nationality (French vs. Spanish), and in social rank (court ballet culture vs. popular theatrical culture). On the one hand, Boursault's play denigrates rank and national hybridity, and on the other hand, it visibly performs it.

Granted, nationality and ethnicity are not synonymous, but in the Spanish case those concepts had started merging under the effect of the Black Legend – that massive international propaganda operation that blackened Spain's reputation by emphasising the Spanish brutality towards natives in American colonies, and denigrating the ethnic mixture that resulted from centuries of Moorish presence on the Peninsula. Barbara Fuchs cites a representative example of the French perception of Spanish difference as

racialised: the French *Coppie of the Anti-Spaniard* 'urges the nations of Europe to rally around France "and with one breath to go and abate the pride and insolencie of these Negroes", invoking European racial solidarity against an African, black Spain' (Fuchs 2007: 96). Given the enduring popularity of the Black Legend in seventeenth-century France, the idea of Spanish difference implied some degree of ethnic difference for Boursault's audience. After all, when he tries to convince Gusman to play the part of the African ambassador, Fabrice insists on the eerie physical resemblance between his servant and the real African ambassador. He states:

> Vous avez chacun les mêmes traits
> Les plus fins confondraient vos portraits.
> (Boursault, *Le Mort vivant*, 1.7.317–8)
>
> (You have the exact same features,
> and even the most discerning observers would confound your portraits.)

Similarly, the *roupille* that is part of Guzman's African disguise – a 'cassocke' in early modern English (Cotgrave 1611) – referred at the time, and as early as 1625, to 'a coat that Spaniards would wrap around themselves to sleep at night', derived from the Spanish word *ropilla* (Littré 1872). If we are to take this stage direction seriously, Gusman's African costume was likely to be read as Spanish by a Parisian audience. Costume marks the slippage between Africanness and Spanishness in *Le Mort vivant*. In the context of the recent marriage of the King of France and a Habsburg princess – a replica of Louis XIII's marriage to Anne of Austria – this slippage between Spanishness and Africanness had implications for the racial purity of the French royal blood, and, synecdochically, for French blood itself. Indeed, the hybridisation of royal French blood with Africanised Spanish blood correlated with the ongoing hybridisation of French blood with African blood in the Caribbean in the 1660s, and both processes resonate in Boursault's play. The tension that exists between what Boursault's play says and what it does evidences a deeply conflicted relation to racial hybridity that was pervasive in 1660s France.

Conclusion

Later African ambassador plays seem much less conflicted than Boursault's *Le Mort vivant* on the notion of racial hybridity. When he turned his 'African ambassador' into a Turk in *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, Molière dropped blackface altogether, and Bel-Isle followed Molière's lead in *Le Mariage de la reine de Monomotapa*. The latter play is a pastiche that weaves elements of *Tartuffe* into a simplified version of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*; perceiving the continuity between the African ambassador in blackface and Molière's Turkish ambassadors, Bel-Isle re-Africanised the character of the ambassador, making

him, simultaneously, a sultan wearing a large Ottoman turban, and the ruler of the early modern African kingdom of Monomotapa. The metatheatrical allusions to makeup that systematically accompany blackface on the early modern stage in Europe are nowhere to be found in the last two plays of this corpus. Our African ambassador was whitewashed, and this whitewashing contributed to the general disappearance of blackface from the French stage in the late 1670s. In the late African ambassador plays, not only are unreasonable fathers ferociously mocked – if not beaten on stage – for letting Muslim strangers into their households; the blackness of the original African ambassador itself is erased. Not only do the lovers constantly remind the audience that their racial difference is purely performative, a mere costume that they will take off eventually, in order to make their interracial marriage more palatable; the racial costume that they use no longer evokes black Africa but the Ottoman East.[8] This increasing reluctance to stage interracial marriages between blacks and whites is indicative of a gradual but effective hardening of racial thinking in late seventeenth-century public opinion, both reflected in and influenced by the stage.

Notes

1 My deep gratitude goes to the editors of this volume, M. A. Katritzky and Pavel Drábek, for their precious suggestions and comments; this chapter has been enriched in many ways by their intellectual generosity. Unless otherwise specified, all translations from French into English are mine.

2 I am using the term coined by Louise G. Clubb (1986). This concept has been central to the work of the TWB research collaborative for the past fifteen years, and it is thoroughly defined and discussed by Robert Henke and Eric Nicholson (2008, 2014).

3 For thorough reviews of the history of blackface, see Chalaye (1998), Vaughan (2005) and Hornback (2018).

4 See Goulbourne (2003), who reads *L'Ambassadeur d'Affrique* as a rewriting of *Le Mort vivant*; and Irvine (2004), who also connects the four plays.

5 For more comprehensive studies of blackface plays in the Spanish drama of the Siglo de Oro, see Fra-Molinero (1995) and Beusterien (2006).

6 These are not the only cases where the taste of foreign queen consorts influenced the circulation of racial representations across European borders (Ndiaye 2016). For more examples of transnational queen consorts' cultural influence at large, see Britland (2006), Gough (2005) and Cole (Chapter 10 in this volume).

7 Among the most representative works in this tradition, we find *Le ballet du naufrage heureux* by Claude de l'Estoile (1626), *Grand bal de la douairière de Billebahaut* by René Bordier (1626), and *Le ballet de la marine* by Colletet (1635).

8 For a thorough account of the way many French concerns with colour-based slavery and with French Atlantic colonies were transferred onto the image of the oriental East, see Dobie (2010).