

**WILLIAM WYCHERLEY'S *THE GENTLEMAN DANCING-MASTER* (1672):
THE FIRST BLACK TEACHER ON THE EARLY MODERN STAGE?**

Criticism on William Wycherley's *The Gentleman Dancing-Master* (1672) has, to my knowledge, not noticed Don Diego's 'Little Blackamoor' (otherwise named in the play text as either Pedro or Sanchez),¹ who is instructed by his master to 'teach' the foolish Monsieur de Paris to move like a Spaniard. Such a lack of discussion seems surprising, since the 'Little Blackamoor' appears to be the first black character to teach on the English stage.

Don Diego, a merchant engaged in English/Spanish trade, has recently returned to England from Spain with at least two black servants, Pedro and Sanchez, accompanying him. There was a large black slave population in Spain and Portugal and, as Imtiaz Habib has evidenced in his research, it was a 'social commonplace' for 'wealthy Iberian merchants' to bring black servants with them when coming to either settle or trade in England.² It is therefore likely that Don Diego purchased Pedro and Sanchez in Spain. It was also common for black servants from Africa to be renamed with European names when entering the service of Europeans (especially if baptised). The servant that teaches Monsieur de Paris may be a child since he is described as a 'Little Blackamoor'. If so, he could have been born in Spain and given a Spanish name at birth or transported to Spain from an African country as a child to be eventually bought and renamed by Don Diego.

Don Diego entrusts his 'Little Blackamoor' to teach Monsieur de Paris, a

¹ *The Gentleman Dancing-Master*, III. i. 276. William Wycherley, *The Country Wife and Other Plays*, ed. by Peter Dixon (New York, 1996). All quotations taken from this edition.

² Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500-1677: Imprints of the Invisible* (Burlington, 2008), 137.

young Englishman who has spent some years in France and returned with many French affectations, ‘to walk with the *verdadero gesto, gracia, and gravedad* of a true Castilian’ (*The Gentleman Dancing Master*, IV. i. 141-3) - in other words the ‘authentic bearing, grace, and gravity of a genuine Spanish gentleman.’ Monsieur de Paris later describes Pedro/Sanchez to Gerrard, an Englishman pretending to be a dancing master, as ‘a little brother dancing-master of yours — walking-master, I should have said, for he teaches me to walk and make legs by the by’ (*The Gentleman Dancing Master*, IV. i. 322-4). Dancing masters, like the ‘Little Blackamoor’, taught deportment as well as dancing itself, as a 1749 edition of *The Female Spectator* attests: ‘if by a little Negligence ... the Boy should not put off his hat, nor make Legs very gracefully, a Dancing Master will cure that Defect.’³ It is not surprising that Don Diego gives his ‘Little Blackamoor’ such a task when Africans and those of African heritage were stereotyped to be skilful dancers in early modern Europe.⁴ Samuel Pepys records in his diary entry for 27 March 1661 how he and his friends ‘made Mingo, Sir W. Batten’s black, and Jack, Sir W. Pen’s, dance, and it was strange how the first did dance with a great deal of seeming skill.’⁵ As Habib notes, ‘Even if Pepys is unaware [of the stereotype], the two servants’ dancing skills are typical of the convivial reputations of Africans in early modern Europe.’⁶

The ‘Little Blackamoor’ appears to successfully teach Monsieur de Paris how

³ *The Female Spectator* (Dublin, 1747), III, quoted in Jennifer Thorp, “‘Borrowed Grandeur and Affected Grace’: Perceptions of the Dancing-Master in Early Eighteenth-Century England”, *Music in Art*, xxxvi. i-ii (2011), 11.

⁴ Kate Lower, ‘The Stereotyping of Black Africans in Renaissance Europe’, in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, ed. by T. F. Earle and K. J. P. Lowe (New York, 2005), 35-41.

⁵ Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: transcribed from the shorthand manuscript in the Pepysian Library Magdalene College Cambridge by the Rev. Mynors Bright; with Lord Braybrooke’s notes; edited with additions by Henry B. Wheatley* (London, 1900), I, 366.

⁶ Habib, 180.

to change his outward appearance and behaviour, as Gerrard comments: ‘But, Monsieur, what strange metamorphosis is this? You look like a Spaniard, and talk like an Englishman again’ (*The Gentleman Dancing Master*, IV. i. 327-8). That Don Diego, an Englishman with Spanish affectations, entrusted a black servant, possibly not born in Spain, with teaching Monsieur de Paris, an Englishman with French affectations, to behave like a Spaniard, raises interesting questions about the understanding of national identities in this period. Dominic Glynn has written that France was the ‘dominant cultural force’ in ‘the latter half of the seventeenth century’ in England, and that ‘for all the examples of French culture on display in London (from restaurants to tailors), there was disdain that was brimming under the surface’.⁷ In the second half of the seventeenth century it appears as though, to an outward extent at least, people believed it possible to ‘put on’ and ‘take off’ a foreign manner or habit at will. It is apt therefore that a black servant should teach Monsieur de Paris to behave like a Spaniard, given that he was either born in Spain or had to learn Spanish behaviours and accoutrements after being transported to the country.

The ‘Little Blackamoor’ has several speech entries in which he gives detailed instruction to Monsieur de Paris on various Spanish poses, behaviours, and even laughter:

What, a Spaniard, and laugh aloud! No, if you laugh - thus [*laughs silently*]; only so. Now, your salutation in the street as you pass by your acquaintance, look you - thus. If to a woman, thus, putting your hat upon your heart. If to a man, thus, with a nod, so.

Monsieur imitating the Blackamoor
(*The Gentleman Dancing Master*, IV. i. 196-200)

He is, to my knowledge, the first black character on the stage to explicitly teach a subject that would have been recognisable to a contemporary audience. He is unlike other male characters in various Restoration plays - including Gerrard in the main

⁷ Dominic Glynn, “‘Franglais Fops’ and Mocking the French in English Restoration Theater”, *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes and Reviews*, xxxi. i (2018), 18-20.

plot of this play - that pretend to teach as a guise to gain romantic and/or sexual access to female characters. The 'Little Blackamoor' actually teaches Monsieur de Paris, taking his professional task seriously. I have so far been unable to find any examples of real-life black teachers in England in the early modern period.⁸ The earliest example of a black teacher in Britain I have come across is Tom Jenkins, who came to Britain from modern-day Liberia or Sierra Leone to be educated, and began teaching in 1814.⁹ The 'Little Blackamoor' in this 1672 play is primarily a servant, but he is put explicitly into the position of teacher for a brief and interesting period of stage-time. If anyone knows of other instances of a black teacher on the early modern stage, or instances of black teachers in England in the early modern period, I would be very interested to hear from you.

The 'Little Blackamoor', or Pedro/Sanchez, is a fascinating minor character who raises questions about representations of slavery and service in early modern English drama, the meaning of national identity, and black characters in Restoration drama. He is worthy of further study and I hope that this brief note can begin to draw attention to him.

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⁸ Habib's study makes no reference to the existence of black teachers in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. This is also the case in more recent scholarship such as Miranda Kaufmann's *Black Tudors* (London, 2017) and Onyeka Nubia's *England's Other Countrymen: Black Tudor Society* (London, 2019).

⁹ Phaedra Casey and Tim Pilgrim, 'The incredible tale of Tom Jenkin's, Britain's "first black teacher"' <<https://www.brunel.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/articles/The-incredible-tale-of-Tom-Jenkins-Britains-first-black-teacher>> [accessed 11 October 2021]