

Of Abyssinian Princes and Cannibal Queens: linguistic and visual representations of 'Africanness' on the British stage, 1850s-60s

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Several scholars (Meer 2005, Waters 2007, Davis 2011, Lewis 2016) have illustrated how minstrel shows and performances such as Charles Mathews's *Trip to America* were key to shaping, both linguistically and visually, representations of Black characters on the 19th-century British stage. The unprecedented success of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and its stage versions further enhanced the 'minstrelisation' of the Black character, whose grotesque comicity and use of 'dialect' or corrupt English would become widespread features of theatrical portraits in the second half of the century (Waters 2007, Gould 2011, Morosetti 2021). However, less explored has been the survival on the Victorian stage of a parallel mode of representation – that of the noble, fairer-skinned, Standard-English-speaking 'Ethiopian' of pre-Victorian invention – which, although marginalised by the progressive affirmation of the 'minstrelised' model, nonetheless never disappeared. My keynote will explore the political implications of these representational choices focusing on three playwrights in particular, William Brough, Francis Burnand and Edward Fitzball, whose work between the 1850s-60s displays a deliberate juxtaposition between the dialect-speaking model of the 'American' Black and standard-speaking 'African' characters. The latter inherit an idealised and unspecific image of 'Africa', but I will also argue that their survival on the stage both responds to a topical interest in the anglo-African conflicts of the second half of the century, and reflects the progressive classification of the Black in theories of scientific racism.

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