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Staging Reparative Potentiality: Reading Race and Gender in Early Modern & Adapted Drama

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“The Beast With Two Backs:” The Racialized Early Modern Drama and Reparative Power of Its Adaptation

Brett Iarrobino - Clark University, Class of 2021 | Sponsored by Professor Justin Shaw, PhD



Amendatory Imaginations: Centering Marginalized Characters in *Desdemona*

Morrison’s *Desdemona* is less interested in how the titular character is implicated by interracial romance and more invested in problematizing its racial dynamics. In an imagined afterlife that takes place after the play’s conclusion, Othello himself is given the posthumous chance to reconstitute his marriage:

“It’s clear now. You never loved me. You fancied the idea of me, the exotic warrior who kills for the State, who will die for the State” (Morrison 50).

A stinging abrogation, Morrison’s *Othello* confirms all that we have become suspicious of in our reading of Shakespeare’s *Desdemona*, a white woman appetized by a peculiar suitor, one who was glamorized by tales of war and brutality and offered opportunities for protection and insurgency against her own struggles with patriarchy.

My literary research puts Shakespeare in conversation with contemporary Black dramatists and scholars, namely Toni Morrison and Rokia Traoré, and their responsive play *Desdemona*. By centering the authorship of non-White storytellers, while drawing on early modern critical race theory, I denote Shakespeare’s dramas and their historical staging practices as complicit in upholding structures of marginalization while simultaneously drawing attention to his inspiration of contemporary drama.

Fig. 4:
Charles West
Cope’s
*Othello,
Desdemona,
and
Brabantio*
(1872).



Original Sin: Denoting Anti-Blackness in *Othello*

Racist and anti-Black language in *Othello* is predominantly structured around Desdemona, whose interracial relationship with the titular protagonist becomes the site of controversy in Shakespeare’s Venice. Consider Iago’s indictment of Desdemona’s romantic allegiance to Othello when the news is first broken in Act I:

“Your heart is burst, you have lost half your soul, / Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tuppung your white ewe” (I.i.86-88).

This metaphor for animalistic qualities and relationships, equating Othello to a ram and Desdemona a ewe, not only marks the first clearly racialized instance of dehumanization attributed to the character Othello, but also marks what is perhaps an early effort to bring down Desdemona as the collateral damage of mixed-race romance.



Fig. 1-3: (L-R) Authors Toni Morrison and William Shakespeare, and composer Rokia Traoré.

Synthesizing Narratives: Disappearing and Reappearing Black Women of Shakespeare and Morrison’s Dramas

Most prominently, Morrison’s retelling charts a course for the visibility and dimensionalizing of Black women that were once relegated to the margins of Shakespeare’s play. In Act IV of *Othello*, the character is briefly mentioned by Desdemona, who recalls her childhood spent with her mother’s maid while conversing with Emilia:

“My mother had a maid called Barbary, / She was in love, and he she loved proved mad / And did forsake her” (IV.iii.24-6).

Whereas Shakespeare alludes to “Barbary” as an early presence of racial otherness in Desdemona’s upbringing, one that operates as a sort of radicalizing catalyst, and explains her desire for interracial partnership later in life, Morrison’s Sa’ran (her more aptly-named answer to “Barbary”) is given the opportunity to take to the stage herself, where she is freed from potential tragedy as a mad, lonely lover, and instead is given the agency to denounce any emotional or experiential connections to be traced between her and Desdemona:

“I was your slave...I am black-skinned. You are white-skinned...So you don’t know me. Have never known me.” (Morrison 45-6).

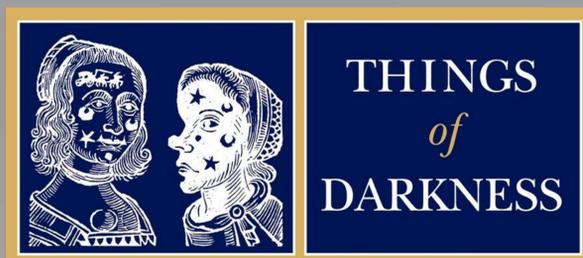


Fig. 6: Cover art for Kim Hall’s *Things of Darkness* (1995).

An Early Modern Critical Race Framework

Recognizing the racialization at work in Shakespeare’s writing is made possible by early modern critical race theorists, including Kim Hall and Miles Grier. Hall’s *Things of Darkness* crucially decodes the colors black and white for the period, specifically along race and gender lines:

“Frequently, ‘black’ in Renaissance discourses is opposed not to ‘white’ but to ‘beauty’ or ‘fairness,’ and these terms most often refer to the appearance or moral states of women...the terms acquire a special force...and that they are most frequently used in relation to women” (Hall 9).



Fig. 5: Production still of *Desdemona*’s world premiere at Vienna’s Akzent Theatre (2011).