

2021 SAA: Seminar 36

Shakespeare and Intersectionality in Performance and Adaptation

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“Not an occupation for a Jewish Girl”: Jewishness and Girlhood in Howard Jacobson’s *Shylock is My Name*

Katharine Cleland

This paper will explore Howard Jacobson’s portrayal of Jewish girlhood in his 2016 adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice: Shylock is My Name*. Jacobson’s adaptation is the second installment in the Hogarth Shakespeare series, which commissions award-winning, bestselling contemporary novelists to write adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays. While these adaptations are not public in the same sense as theatrical performances, they are high-profile works of literary fiction. The super star authorial line-up is clearly intended to attract a popular audience of readers.

In his own adaptation, Jacobson turns *The Merchant of Venice*’s subplot involving Shylock and Jessica into his novel’s central conflict. The novel’s protagonist, Simon Strulovitch, is an affluent Jewish art dealer living in Northern England who befriends Shylock after meeting him in a cemetery. Jacobson’s Shylock continues to mourn the death of his wife, Leah, as well as the loss of his daughter to a Christian husband. After inviting Shylock to be his house guest, Strulovitch’s own daughter, Beatrice, runs away to Venice with her Christian boyfriend. In contrast to Jessica, the sixteen-year-old Beatrice’s girlhood is one of her defining characteristics. In this way, Jacobson’s novel participates in a fascination with girlhood in Shakespeare adaptations. In my paper, I will argue that Jacobson denies an impetus to universalize girlhood in Shakespeare adaptations when Beatrice returns to her home in the end, privileging her Jewish identity in a way that Jessica does not. Through an examination of the complicated interplay between class, gender, and religious identity in *Shylock is My Name*, my paper will thus respond to Ariane M. Balizet’s recent call for more attention to girlhood and intersectionality in Shakespeare studies. The paper will also consider how Jacobson’s novel might inform scholarship on Shakespeare’s Jessica, which has long been interested in the relationship between Jessica’s female body and her Jewish identity.

“Blackness as Frame in Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet*”

Benjamin Hilb

One of the primary tenets of Afro-pessimism is that the traumatic inflictions of the transatlantic slave trade relegated the black lives lived in its extreme and ongoing breach to a condition of social death. According to Calvin Warren, racialized blackness has been made to function in western discourse, in the most extreme measure, as a negative category signaling non-existence or nothingness in order to instantiate positive existence, namely human being, which thus implicitly and often explicitly designates whiteness. My essay will examine the function of blackness and a subversive intersectional dynamic in Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 blockbuster adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, which features a black, cross-dressing Mercutio played by Harold Perrineau. As in Shakespeare’s play, blackness in the film is made to function as a backdrop or frame, but not only of white beauty. Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet* continues and augments the rhetorical, racialized manipulation of blackness present in Shakespeare’s play by making it function, through image and sound, as the frame of romantic love itself, exhibiting love as a privileged category of

whiteness. However, integrating the work of Fred Moten, I will argue that the power of black sound, which in the film is allied to queerness and femaleness, exceeds its functional frame and acts not only *for* romantic love, but also as the radical force *of* love.

Intersectional *Hamlet*: Race, Justice, and Young Latinx Shakespeares

Jesus Montaña

The focus of my article is the graphic novel, *I Am Alfonso Jones*, by Tony Medina and illustrated by Stacey Robinson and John Jennings. Much like *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds and Brandon Kiely and *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, the subjects of *I Am Alfonso Jones* are police brutality and violence against Black and Brown people. What makes *I Am Alfonso Jones* important is the way the graphic novel utilizes *Hamlet* to complicate the nature of the problem as well as offers viable peaceful and just resolutions to it. The plot revolves around the death of Alfonso Jones, an Afro-Latinx youth, who is gunned down by a police officer, striking him in the ear, thus reminding us of the means by which Claudius killed King Hamlet. Alfonso Jones wakes up soon thereafter in the afterlife. From the vantage point of a ghost, Alfonso Jones sees his high school follow through on their plans to stage a hip-hop rendition of *Hamlet*, even as the presumptive Hamlet (Alfonso Jones) has been killed. At the same time his family and friends take to the streets, with the moniker “I Am Alfonso Jones”, seeking justice even as they grieve his death.

At play in my article are two important notions: 1, an Intersectional *Hamlet* inextricably links social justice projects with the critical insights into the human will usually associated with the play. In other words, Intersectional *Hamlet* is politicized to offer cogent answers to the troubles perplexing our world. In this, Intersectional *Hamlet* is concerned with revenge and violence, not in an abstract sense, but as real-world problems that impede peace and justice. 2, we consider the Black Lives Matter movement a public arts movement. By twinning the arts with social justice movement, Intersectional *Hamlet* allows a deeper exploration into the role of the arts in modern America. From this lens, the arts, along with beauty and delight, also fund resistance and challenges to oppressive systems.

***The Merchant of Venice* and *Noblemen*: Performance, Pedagogy, and Adaptation**

Taarini Mookherjee

Vandana Kataria’s debut film *Noblemen* (2019), set in an elite all-boys boarding school in India, explores issues of rampant bullying, homophobia, and abuse against the backdrop of a planned Founder’s Day performance of *The Merchant of Venice*. Unlike many other Shakespearean plays-within-films, this movie does not lend itself to an easy analogy between the Shakespearean characters and the teenage actors. Instead, the movie traces a cycle of repeated and incessant abuse, within the frame of an-eye-for-an-eye justice introduced in an early classroom discussion of *The Merchant of Venice*. The movie zooms in on several outsider figures—Murli, the drama teacher with no background in education; Pia, the daughter of a teacher and the only female student; Shay, the literature-loving adolescent coming to terms with his sexuality—and, like Portia in the Shakespeare play, we are left questioning: “Which is the merchant here? And which the Jew?”

Instead of attempting a definitive answer to these questions, this paper will explore the role of Shakespeare in this film in terms of performance, pedagogy, and adaptation. Ultimately, *The Merchant of Venice* is a text that is being taught, performed, and adapted in this environment of simultaneous privilege and exploitation. While the only scene of theatrical performance in the film suggests a fairly

straightforward and normative approach to the play, the rest of the film, in delving into the ways in which the characters conceive of this play and its relationship to their everyday lives, motivations, and aspirations, pushes back against this approach. The paper will argue that *The Merchant of Venice* functions as an intertext not simply for viewers of the film, but for its primary protagonists as they ignore, grapple with, adapt, recite, and willfully misinterpret lines from the text.

“And he slaughtered you”: Domestic Violence and Women’s Intersectional Coalitions in Toni Morrison and Rokia Traoré’s *Desdemona*

Sara Morrison

Gendered domestic violence characterizes each of the intimate relationships in *Othello*. In Shakespeare’s play, Desdemona’s relationships with other characters, particularly women, both those in the play and in its histories, are circumscribed by her perception of her alliances with them. And in Toni Morrison and Rokia Traoré’s *Desdemona*, the eponymous character’s sense of those alliances is challenged by the freedoms of the afterlife, a space out of time. Relatively untethered by the various power structures that shape interpersonal interaction, Morrison and Traoré’s characters are free to unveil their realities to Desdemona, whose social privilege blinds her to their integrated, intersectional identities. Desdemona naively assumes that all women are potential allies, ignoring the importance of “heterogenous commonality” in any coalition that truly values individual particularities (Carasthathis 945). While gender binds together the women in the broadest terms, their ongoing traumatic experiences at the hands of their intimate partners might conceivably open an opportunity for them to come together as a coalition for effective collective resistance. But, recognizing affinities with others can tend to privilege or reveal sameness. In the case of *Othello*’s women, their affinities are gender and domestic trauma. Had they recognized this single-axis issue and joined together, their productive collective action would have needed also to foreground their differences in order to examine the multi-axis causes and consequences of domestic violence and the consequent strategies necessary to resist gendered abuse and to respond to trauma.

Liberating Shakespeare?: Intersectionality, Performance, and the Semiotics of Embodiment in Phyllida Lloyd’s Shakespeare Trilogy

Jane Wanninger

As Phyllida’s Lloyd’s 2012 production of *Julius Caesar* begins, uniformed guards walk a line of women dressed in gray sweatsuits into a black box theater designed to look like a basketball court surrounded by audience members, and behind them, a high fence. A guard calls places, and the women, who reflect an array of races, ages, and body types, disperse. The audience’s attention is drawn to a young Black actress, Jade Anouka, who introduces herself as Sade and explains that she is in prison for manslaughter, having retaliated against her domestic abuser. In the brief introduction Sade offers for the play to follow, she identifies the inspiration she has found in Shakespeare: “I’ve always found it hard to speak up; I used to be very shy. But working on these Shakespeare plays has really helped me to find my voice, and I know it’s the same for some of the other girls in here.” The play begins, and Anouka’s Sade becomes Mark Antony; Lloyd’s rendering of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* functions as a play-within-a-play in which Caesar is being acted by female prisoners whose own stories and experiences, as well as the institutional structures of the penal system, frame and reshape Shakespeare’s work. The production, first performed at London’s Donmar Warehouse in 2012 and filmed in 2016, was the first in what would become Lloyd’s critically lauded Shakespeare

Trilogy, followed by *Henry IV* in 2014 and *The Tempest*, in 2016. In this paper, I explore the dynamics of cross-race and cross-gender casting in the Shakespeare Trilogy, considering both in the context of the performance's paratextual prison narrative in an attempt to map the disruptive semiotics of race, gender, and class in this adaptation, one in constant dialogue with conventional notions of Shakespearean performative aesthetics. The insistent intersectionality highlighted in these actresses' simultaneous embodiment of prison inmates and Shakespearean characters illuminates new threads of meaning in the plays themselves, and in doing so reveals the ways in which Shakespeare might be mobilized in new ways to speak to the structures of inequality embedded in the history of his works.

Feast of Crispian: Military Veterans, Shakespeare, and Performative Care

Hana Worthen

Centering on the intersectional therapeutic and theatrical activism of the Feast of Crispian (FoC), this paper examines how this Milwaukee nonprofit organization triangulates Shakespeare's texts, performance, and the public space of theatre as therapeutic, social, and political instruments to assist military veterans in their work with embodied traumas of war, while rendering the internalized structure of military power — the technologies of self/subjectivization prompting the soldiers to bind themselves to "unit cohesion" identity/consciousness — tangible, and so vulnerable to subversion.

Insofar as the FoC's intersectional embodied approach to Shakespeare's texts relies on the depictions of war effects that evoke, articulate, and afford an address to the veterans' somatic, psychological, and moral injuries, it also relies on a military structure, *Henry V's* "band of brothers," known today as "unit cohesion." In the contemporary remaking of civilians into soldiers, unit cohesion is a powerful tool of military enculturation, inciting the soldiers' vital and committed attachments to one another, to the unit, and to the mission, while desensitizing them to the conduct of violence, and of compassion, toward themselves and the designated enemy as well. In furtherance of veterans' individual healing and social reintegration, then, FoC's engagement with Shakespeare fashions an emotionally supportive "unit," a relationally familiar yet intersectional environment through which somatic and psychotherapeutic, affective and cognitive, processing of trauma can take place.

In critical collaboration with FoC, this paper thinks through the tension between FoC's intersectional approach to Shakespeare and the *WASP empathy* enfolded in the company's discourse on veterans' social *reintegration*. Moving beyond that "regime of the sensible" (Jacques Rancière), I suggest that by harnessing the intersectional inequalities upon which the military recruitment depend, the FoC's embodied approach to Shakespeare, the materialization of its intersectionalities in public performance, and the retooling of the unit cohesion's functionality for civil ends demilitarizes the unit's warfare affordances, transvalues its necropolitical objectives, and along with it generates an *intersectional empathy* "grounded not in affinity (*feeling for* another insofar as we can imagine *being* that other) but on a *feeling for* another that entails an encounter with something irreducible and different, often inaccessible" (Jill Bennett).

"To dream myself into existence": Centering the Black Woman in *Harlem Duet*

Rebecca Hixon

Unlike some adaptations of *Othello*, Djanet Sears's goal in *Harlem Duet* (1997) is not to recuperate the play or even *Othello*, but to explore Shakespeare's tale from a black woman's perspective. *Harlem Duet* constitutes Sears's way of imagining Shakespeare's *Othello* anew by telling

the story of the black woman Othello loved first: Billie. Her play rehearses the recursive nature of *Othello* and the repetitive nature of racial trauma through its portrayal of Billie in three separate timelines. As Billie struggles to come to terms with the loss of the man she loved and the racial and sexual tensions that surround his leaving, *Harlem Duet* demonstrates the specificity and continuity of Billie's intersectional gendered, racial, sexual, and class experience as a black woman throughout history.

Shakespeare's *Othello* articulates a complex interplay of race, gender, class, and sexuality, but its place in the popular imagination as *the* representation of an interracial relationship—a position that has historically erased black women from such narratives—has complicated its relationship to intersectionality. *Harlem Duet* critiques this erasure in Shakespeare's oeuvre and *Othello*, exemplifying Joyce Green MacDonald's recent claim that adaptation is “the flexible tool for excavating black women from their repressed places in Shakespeare.”¹ While *Othello* should always be read through an intersectional lens, I argue that the effectiveness of such approaches increases when paired with critical contemporary adaptations. In *Harlem Duet*, Billie must contend with Othello's claims that white women are “easier—before and after sex,”² with how black women's labor has shaped black versus white feminism, and with her own uneasy positionality as the Sybil (one of the disembodied black women) of Shakespeare's text. Sears' play urges an intersectional analysis of Shakespeare's text by reorienting readers of *Othello* towards the play and the gaps and silences of its performance history.

¹ Joyce Green MacDonald, *Shakespearean Adaptation, Race and Memory in the New World*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, pp. 11.

² Sears, *Harlem Duet*, pp. 54.