

Not Your Father's Shakespeare: An Analysis of Diversity and Multiculturalism in Shakespeare's Canon

Shakespeare's literary praises come from his poetic superiority and ability to write a world into existence. His work has survived centuries in communities all over the globe. Why is that? "All of this could be claimed as evidence of Shakespeare's universality, of the ease with which his plays (ostensibly) leap all historical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries" (Nellhaus, 1). Shakespeare's writings have stood the test of time for many reasons but the main reason is that they depict human experiences. **This analysis will explore the literary inclusion of diverse characters in Shakespeare's canon with an emphasis on people of African descent.**

From a historical standpoint, between the inception of *Titus Andronicus* and *Othello*, there was an overwhelming Moorish presence in London. The first evidence of the distinction between African peoples in England is present in Richard Eden's *Decades* written in 1555. It is the first time African peoples are labeled Moors, Moorens, and Negros. By 1601, there was such a significant number of Negars and blacamoors in England that the Queen was upset by it ("Moors", 2). This is important to understand because the Queen's opinion affected the Elizabethan perception of blackness; a combination of all things sinful and evil. "Reginald Scot in his text *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584) argued that 'a damned soul may and doth take the shape of a black moor'" ("Moors", 3) and yet Shakespeare still created Moorish characters of significance inclusive of Aaron the Moor and Othello. Although Aaron is depicted in a negative light, Othello is revered as a tragic hero.

The most popular Moorish presence in Shakespeare's works is none other than Othello in *Othello*. This grandiose tragedy is an exploration of humanity and a wonderful example of how

Shakespeare uses diversity in his works through an Elizabethan lense. Although there are many articles that debate Othello's intelligence, thus making him "barbaric", scholars such as T.S.Elliot have described Othello "as a case of *bovarysme*, or "the human will to see things as they are not" " (Gerard, 17) which suggests that Shakespeare depicted him in a way that makes Othello no less than a human. What's interesting about Othello, is that in many accounts, scholars like to argue whether or not he was actually black. Typical. A black man with that much power and prowess couldn't possibly be a full negro, right? Wrong. "In the original tale, there is only one allusion to Othello's blackness. In the play, his black skin and thick lips are mentioned time and again. As it is obviously impossible to retain the romantic view that Othello is not a real Negro, we can safely assume that the blackness of the Moor, though it did not strike the Italian writer, appealed to the imagination of Shakespeare, who found it significant in a way that Cinthio, probably, could not even conceive" (Gerard, 12).

It is a known fact that Shakespeare is held to high esteem for many reasons. Should one of them be diversity? "Indeed, in Othello, Shakespeare explores the "horrid" potential of the normative humor so prevalent in the period" (Hornback, 2) by using blackface as a theatrical element of the show. Ah blackface, the beloved problematic element of western theatre. Yes, even though Othello was written about a Moor, ironically, Moors did not have the civic ability to perform. Consequently, our beloved *Othello*, in its purest form, unfortunately, originated as an act of minstrelsy. We see the story as a tragedy now, but some scholars suggest that when Richard Burbage took the stage, it was more of a comedy. "Given the wealth of evidence of associations between blackface, natural fools, and Moors, I am suggesting that Burbage in blackface as Othello, especially, as we shall see, in light of Shakespeare's deployment of other

emblems of natural folly, would have been quite as likely to call to mind the now-lost natural fool tradition of comic abuse on the Renaissance stage as the now more familiar association with evil. In addition, other obvious emblems of natural folly, such as the Moor's standard stage apparel, would have reinforced associations between Othello and the abject, scapegoated natural fool" (Hornback, 11). During the Renaissance, depictions of Moors onstage were common and viewed as a spectacle because of how much of an 'other' Moors were considered to be. In that regard, is it safe to assume that Shakespeare didn't affect diversity in theatre at all? Was he simply trying to make money by exploiting the 'other' in Renaissance society?

The above are valid questions that every theatre practitioner of color should aim to answer while studying and performing western theatre. While they are rational questions, they stray away from the original claim of the paper. This paper is not meant to argue the moral values that surround Shakespeare's inclusion of Moorish presence in his works by any means. However, this discussion is meant to highlight the inclusion of Moorish presence in his works at all, especially as a protagonist in one of his most critically acclaimed tragedies to date. *Othello*, at its root is not a play about a tragic Moor, but rather a play depicting the eternal human battle between good and evil through the lives of Othello and Iago (Gerard, 12). As stated before, the element of Shakespeare's plays that makes them universal is the fact that they are unapologetically human. The experiences depicted in each play and sonnet are experiences that most if not all human beings can subscribe to. This is not to excuse any of the racial, religious or gender insensitivity that is present in some of his works. However, to that one should consider the following: is that insensitivity not reflective of life? The same racial, gender and religious

tensions are still alive and well today. If they weren't, these texts would not have any reason to be continually performed in current society.

Again, this analysis does not negate the fact that Shakespeare's inclusion of Moorish peoples could've been birthed out of sheer fascination and possibly even fetishization of the black body. In fact, this unhealthy adoration may be why William was one of the only Elizabethan writers that included people of color in different roles across his cannon. "Leo Africanus (also known as John Leo), who has been considered to be a potential influence on Shakespeare for the character of Othello, was a scholarly North African Arab who traveled widely before being captured by Venetian pirates in the Mediterranean. He converted to Christianity and produced *The History and Descriptions of Africa in 1526* which attempted to provide a balanced picture of the various peoples of Africa. He spoke of the Africans in a positive light..." ("Moors", 2). Regardless of the psychological reasoning behind why Shakespeare did what he did, the fact remains that he wrote narratives that included African peoples as important additions to the plot during a time when the Moor was criticized, chided and condemned.

Finally, one cannot dismiss the impact of the written word, especially in regards to Elizabethan texts in Western theatre. History is recorded through writing. Those who are not included in the records are essentially erased. They are not a part of "his" "story". By including a Moorish presence in his works, Shakespeare didn't allow the black body to be written out of theatre history. Whether or not that was his main goal is debatable. Nevertheless, it must be noted that Shakespeare's works depict a large range of lifestyles that are different from his own. Furthermore, by including Judaism, Islam, and Christianity in *Merchant of Venice*, it shows that

all three religious practices existed at the same time in the same place. By including an array of sexual orientations in *Twelfth Night*, he communicated the existence of the LGBTQ community during Elizabethan times. Finally, through works such as *The Merchant of Venice*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Othello*, Shakespeare made it very clear that the Moors existed, the Moors were relevant, and they were more than what society privileged them to be, even if society didn't receive his works in that way.

Shakespeare wasn't perfect. Nor is this analysis meant to deem him the 'God of Western Theatre' or the originator of literary diversity. It is meant to give credit where it's due and acknowledge that his literary diversity is, in fact, a justification for the constant performance, analysis, and praise of his work, even in 2018. It isn't far-fetched to say if Shakespeare hadn't diversified his texts, people of color would have no place in the classical theatre because there would be no record of their necessity to the craft.

Works Cited

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