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**Intersectional Shakespeare:
Rewriting, Casting and Staging *Othello*
and *The Tempest*, 2015-2025**

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Abstract

This thesis investigates how contemporary theatrical Shakespearean adaptation functions as a site of socio-political negotiation, unsettling the historically white, patriarchal foundations of Shakespearean performance tradition through an intersectional lens. In an era marked by online scrutiny and anxieties regarding casting and representational fidelity, this research asks how inclusive performance can be realised under this cultural pressure. To answer this, I employ an intersectional framework, paying attention to the overlapping structures of race and gender. I develop analytical strategies to theorise the ways Shakespeare's plays are given new form: through diverse bodies in nontraditional casting, radical textual rewritings, and new spatial configurations by subversive relocation of fictional settings and site-specific performance.

Focusing primarily on the last decade (2015-2025), this study centres on adaptations of *Othello* and *The Tempest*, plays inherently engaged with the 'race-making' processes of the early modern period. Combining performance analysis with close reading, I interrogate adaptive methods across a variety of sources. These range from high-profile productions at the Royal Shakespeare Company and Shakespeare's Globe, which leverage nontraditional casting or fictional settings for broad audiences, to localised site-specific productions. They also include radical revisions, such as Fengar Gael's *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, which excavate Shakespeare's unseen, marginalised black female characters. This study seeks to uncover the new meanings generated by these choices and their interaction with audience reception.

The thesis makes a three-fold original contribution to the field: it expands the definition of 'adaptation' to include casting and spatiality as core textual interventions; it provides an intersectional synthesis of scholarship that previously treated performance and written adaptation in isolation; and it introduces new terminology to address the persistent and underacknowledged gap between creative intention and audience reception. Ultimately, this research reveals how these interventions destabilise historical power structures while orienting Shakespeare's works toward more inclusive future possibilities.

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Chapter One

Introduction

When Francesca Amewudah-Rivers, a black actor, was cast in the role of Juliet for Jamie Lloyd's production of *Romeo and Juliet* in 2024, she became the target of a wave of racist abuse online that claimed she was unsuitable for the role.¹ The intolerant vitriol provoked by the racially diverse casting decision, which rendered the character black, exemplifies neatly Farah Karim-Cooper's argument that 'the insertion of Black *characters*, Black histories and culture into Shakespeare's texts [...] disrupts the universalist paradigm and interferes with the very notion that Shakespeare is, in Arthur L. Little Jr's words, "white property"'.² This means that the controversy can be understood as revealing more about the anxieties generated by the perceived threat to the historically entrenched racial hierarchies that have long governed assumptions of ownership and authority within the Shakespearean canon than it does opinions on Amewudah-Rivers. This backlash was not an isolated incident but rather symptomatic of a wider and increasingly visible pattern of hostility that emerges when Shakespearean roles are reallocated in ways that challenge those institutionalised racial hierarchies.

Preceding the Lloyd production, the launch of the Globe's 2022 production of *Julius Caesar* was advertised with a black woman posed in a royally red robe on the poster. The material provoked hostile reactions: Karim-Cooper notes that 'attacks were levied

¹ Nicole Ocran, "Racist Abuse Against Black Romeo & Juliet Actors Proves How Little Progress We've Really Made", *Cosmopolitan*, 11 April 2024
<<https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/reports/a41593869/francesca-amewudah-rivers-backlash/>> [accessed 3 February 2026].

² Farah Karim-Cooper, 'The Imperatives of Race Consciousness in 21st-Century Shakespearean Performance', in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Race*, ed. by Patricia Akhimie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 86-96 (p. 91). Original emphasis.

against the theatre for being “woke”, and that one ‘audience member wearing a t-shirt with the phrase ‘All Lives Matter’ printed boldly tried to make himself prominent [...]; the Globe continued to be bombarded via email and social media with racist threats for several days afterward.’³ This took place the same year that the Royal Shakespeare Company publicly condemned the backlash they had received following their production of *Much Ado About Nothing* that featured a predominantly black cast in its self-proclaimed afro-futurist reimagining. Such official denouncements have become almost a regular feature, following the RSC’s defence of their casting choices in their 2020 *Romeo and Juliet* and several subsequent statements, revealing persistent resistance to diversifying Shakespeare.

Certain roles, such as Hamlet, King Lear and Prospero, do not warrant parallel levels of outrage when they are cast non-traditionally, with black actors and/or women, due to the apparent elasticity that has come to be associated with the characters. A history of famed reinterpretations has led the roles to be seen as ideas or vessels for artistic reimaginings. Sarah Bernhardt’s performance as Hamlet in 1899 represents one of the earliest instances of nontraditional casting to reach the mainstream. Although eighteenth century actresses such as Charlotte Charke and Sarah Siddons had previously inhabited the roles, it was Bernhardt’s interpretation that codified the ‘female Hamlet’ as a high-art prestige choice rather than a theatrical novelty.⁴ Her portrayal was initially met with critical scepticism in England, yet it ultimately contributed to the character’s enduring reputation as mutable and interpretively expansive.⁵ This opened the way for contemporary actors such as Cush Jumbo, Maxine Peake and Paapa Essiedu to take on a role historically reserved for white men, as demonstrated by reviewer Michael Billington’s statement, after seeing Peake’s androgynous portrayal of the Danish Prince, that ‘character [...] matters more than gender’, highlighting how the performance itself gave prominence to the essence of the

³ Karim-Cooper, ‘The Imperatives of Race Consciousness’, p. 90.

⁴ Tony Howard, *Women as Hamlet: Performance and Interpretation in Theatre, Film and Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵ See Howard’s *Women as Hamlet* for a detailed survey of critical reception to female Hamlets.

role over the actor's gender.⁶ Actors who fall outside expectations of white, male casting who take these roles, then, are no longer understood as the disruption to culturally encoded ideas of racial and gendered ownership that they once were in Bernhardt's day, or even in the twentieth century. Contemporary challenges, however - such as Amewudah-Rivers's Juliet, where black female embodiment was read as incompatible with canonical ideals of white beauty, or the predominantly black cast of *Much Ado About Nothing* which reimagines the ensemble as a whole - continue to prompt outrage, exposing the ongoing apprehension over who 'belongs' in Shakespearean performance and how the canon is culturally policed.

Prior to this increase in vocalised public scrutiny on notions of authenticity and visual fidelity that has become palpable in the last few years, 'colourblind casting' within studies of Shakespeare had already received considerable critical attention. As Ayanna Thompson notes, the 'initial idea behind colorblind casting was that neither the race nor the ethnicity of an actor should prevent her or him from playing a role as long as she or he was the best actor available'.⁷ I emphasise her use of the word 'initial' because it has proven more complicated. This angle does not acknowledge that 'the onus of being "blind" to race is completely on the audience', making key the issue that intention remains separate from reception.⁸ The former exclusionary practices in Shakespearean performance, from the 'numerous social and cultural factors that prevented women participating as performers on the public commercial stages of England' to the enduring dominance of white, able-bodied performers within canonical roles, exert an ongoing influence on onstage representation and render such attempts to treat identity or race (and gender) with detachment as particularly fraught.⁹ The aforementioned reactions to

⁶ Michael Billington, 'Hamlet review – Maxine Peake Stresses Character with a Caustic, Spry Prince', *The Guardian*, 17 September 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/sep/17/hamlet-review-maxine-peake-caustic-prince>> [accessed 6 January 2026].

⁷ Ayanna Thompson, 'Practicing a Theory/Theorizing a Practice: An Introduction to Shakespearean Colorblind Casting', in *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*, ed. by Ayanna Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1-26 (p. 16).

⁸ Thompson, 'Practicing a Theory/Theorizing a Practice', p. 16.

⁹ E. M. Parry, Peter Crockett and Melinda Gough, 'Architectures of Gender', in *Engendering the Stage in the Age of Shakespeare and Beyond*, ed. by Peter Crockett and Melinda Gough (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2025), pp. 59-68 (p. 67).

various castings evidence what Thompson identifies as the inescapability of race within theatrical representation, proposing that ‘the specter of racism will not let race be forgotten or erased’, even, or especially, within practices that claim neutrality.¹⁰ The tension between intention and reception begs the question posed by Thompson: whether ‘being “blind” to race and ethnicity is even desirable.’¹¹ Offering her personal perspective, she adds, ‘my race informs the way I experience the world in so many complex ways that I do not want it whited out or e-raced by others.’¹² Building on Thompson’s observations, Carla Della Gatta claims that new approaches and terminology are thus needed because ‘colour blind casting’ is unsuitable ‘for a phenomenon that extends beyond colour of skin.’¹³ As Della Gatta highlights, race is a construct that is embedded in the structures of society and culture so audiences bring ingrained assumptions and expectations with them into the theatre, shaping how performances are received regardless of the intentions behind casting decisions. In light of this, Karim-Cooper argues that a more ‘race conscious’ approach is necessary, which she suggests ‘asks us to be more intentional in the way directors and artists think about bodies on stage.’¹⁴ This is a demand that aligns with the calls made in the petition responding to the racially-charged resistance to Amewudah-Rivers’s *Juliet*. The petition, directed at Jamie Lloyd’s theatre company, urged the evidenced implementation of systems to support Amewudah-Rivers. Both instances underscore that race-conscious approaches are necessary to address the persistent structural and cultural inequities shaping casting and audience reception in Shakespearean performance. A central question that this thesis asks is, in a time when the social and political stakes of adaptive decisions are so high and the choices around casting and staging entail profound ramifications, how an inclusive Shakespeare production can be performed today under such pressures.

¹⁰ Thompson, ‘Practicing a Theory/Theorizing a Practice’, p. 16.

¹¹ Thompson, ‘Practicing a Theory/Theorizing a Practice’, p. 24.

¹² Thompson, ‘Practicing a Theory/Theorizing a Practice’, p. 24.

¹³ Carla Della Gatta, ‘Casting Shakespeare Today’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Race*, ed. by Patricia Akhimie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 477-489 (p. 477).

¹⁴ Farah Karim-Cooper, ‘The Imperatives of Race Consciousness’, p. 88.

In order to address the structural inequalities and socio-cultural meaning attached to identity, as a race-conscious approach requires, this thesis adopts an intersectional lens. A term introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, intersectionality offers an analytical framework for examining how different markers of identity - such as race, gender, ability, class and sexuality - intersect when shaping experiences of privilege and oppression. Crenshaw cautions that when multiple axes of identity are not considered together, marginalising forces are reinforced; for example, 'the failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color'.¹⁵ An intersectional approach is therefore fundamental to answer how Shakespeare's plays are adapted and staged today, in ways that do not corroborate the racism and sexism embedded in historical theatrical conventions which inform the reactions to casting choices, from the white female Sarah Bernhardt to the black female Francesca Amewudah-Rivers.

This thesis uses an intersectional framework to analyse how contemporary adaptation, as a medium, becomes a device for unsettling Shakespeare, examining performance choices - including casting strategies, rewriting and the use of space and spatial languages - to explore how these interventions reconfigure early modern theatre for contemporary contexts, paying attention to how they negotiate ideas of race and gender. This thesis addresses the following research questions: first, how are Shakespeare's plays reconfigured in newer socio-political and cultural contexts, and what methods do directors, casting leads, actors and writers employ to create intersectional representation or to offer an intersectional reading of Shakespeare's plays? Second, what new meanings are generated from these adaptive decisions, such as casting, relocating or textual revisions, and how do the adaptive choices interact with audience reception to form the perception of contemporary Shakespeare performances? To investigate these issues, I examine adaptive techniques across a range of sources, including radical textual rewritings of Shakespeare's plays which give a voice to underrepresented identities, and less overtly radical contemporary theatrical

¹⁵ Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43.6 (1991), 1241-1299 (p. 1252).

productions where Shakespeare's script still stands while distinctive innovative techniques are used. My discussion of the latter category focuses on casting practices as a mode of adaptation in performance, as well as the use of space through fictional setting, set designs and venue selection.

While so far I have used casting to demonstrate how race and gender shape audience expectations and reception, it represents only one strategy through which Shakespeare can be adapted with attention to race and gender. Casting remains a highly visible and contested site of intervention, but it is necessarily constrained by the entrenched histories and conventions of Shakespearean theatre. Textual rewritings, as highlighted by Joyce Green MacDonald's work on intersectional written adaptations, can 'say what has been omitted or ignored'.¹⁶ MacDonald claims that 'writing black women's stories into reworked Shakespeares is a way of writing them into a history that has worked to efface or misvalue them, their works, and their lives', in a way that I will argue casting may not be able to fully afford.¹⁷ The innovative or subversive use of location, with regards to both the fictional setting of a performance and the physical venue it takes place in, offers a further mode of adaptation that moves the whole play, restructuring the spatial and social contexts in which Shakespeare is performed and received. I interrogate a breadth of interventionist strategies that vary in their disruption to structure and form to illustrate how Shakespearean works can be reimaged in ways that challenge historical hierarchies and assumptions about race and gender. Casting, textual rewriting and spatial relocation each offer distinct modes of intervention, enabling Shakespeare's works to take on new forms, possibilities, and, potentially, meaning.

I combine performance analysis with close reading which centres on gender, race and their intersections, exploring how radical rewritings and contemporary productions deploy these identity markers to inform their staging, interpretation and reception. The

¹⁶ Joyce Green MacDonald, *Shakespearean Adaptation, Race and Memory in the New World* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 6.

¹⁷ MacDonald, p. 4.

scope of the research precludes a detailed examination of disability, class, sexuality or other intersecting axes of identity; while these remain significant in discussions of inclusive Shakespeare, they fall beyond the parameters of the current analysis. *Othello* and *The Tempest* are the Shakespearean plays that I choose to focus on because both of these plays, in regard to both the plot and the scholarly debates they continue to be a part of, engage explicitly and substantially with the construction of race and otherness. Each play has a longer performance history informed by colonial and racialised hierarchies that I detail shortly in this introduction; however, their importance for this study in particular lies in how they participate in the processes of race-making, producing meanings of difference through language, embodiment and power relations - a concept that I will analyse more comprehensively in a few pages' time.¹⁸ Their focus on these processes acts as a generative entry point for the analysis of gender and how it intersects with race. The case studies demonstrate how contemporary performance can both interrogate and expand these canonical texts in ways that foreground inclusivity and intersectional representation, speaking back to the past and its influence while orienting these works toward present and future possibilities.

To situate this study within contemporary debates and practices, the sources examined are drawn primarily from the last ten years (2015-2025), capturing a period in which questions of inclusivity, identity and adaptation have taken on heightened cultural and political urgency, particularly within Shakespearean performance and its reception. The intense scrutiny characteristic of this period is a part of a broader cultural pattern; backlash is not confined to representational choices in Shakespeare as the high-profile response to the casting of Halle Bailey, a black actor, as Ariel in Disney's live action remake of the culturally iconic film *The Little Mermaid* has shown. The decision

¹⁸ For a short gloss on race-making before I unpack the idea later on, here is Ania Loomba's insight into the socialisation of race: 'What we call race does not indicate natural or biological divisions so much as social divisions which are characterized as if they were natural or biological. [...] To say that race is socially constructed is not to imply that it is a delusion; 'false' as they may be, ideas about race have nevertheless had very real effects on people's lives.' Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 4.

attracted global complaints for not mirroring the original cartoon character's race.¹⁹ Whilst this example shows desire for traditionalism and authenticity to original conceptions, other instances of virtual dispute seek progression, inclusivity and corrective social justice, although these motivations notably sometimes overlap. The recent allocation of white actor Jacob Elordi in the role of the racially-ambiguous Heathcliff in Emerald Fennell's upcoming release *Wuthering Heights*, for instance, has led to accusations of whitewashing the story.²⁰ Similarly, widespread media debate arose around Netflix's recent series *Cleopatra* (2023), starring Adele James, a black woman, in the title role; the streaming service faced backlash for 'blackfishing' and Egyptian lawyers attempted to sue the company for allegedly trying to 'erase the Egyptian identity', while newsfeeds were filled with discussion of Cleopatra's skin colour and opinion pieces on who should play the part.²¹ Returning to Shakespeare, the critical and public backlash to Michelle Terry's portrayal of Richard III - as a white able-bodied woman - in 2024 also illustrates the nuance of such responses. The Disabled Artists Alliance argued that the casting sets a precedent for other companies to 'erase disabled identity from historical work', thereby curtailing opportunities for disability-specific representation, even as the production expands nontraditional casting by placing a woman in a traditionally male role.²² While the grounds for critique differ, these audience reactions reflect assumptions about how characters should look and be embodied, placing pressure on conformity to traditional ideals of suitability, even when the production seeks to reinterpret or update the text. I note that the shift to digital platforms has amplified responses that once appeared in reviews or discussion boards, with social media magnifying controversial opinions and giving them outsized influence over public perception and the reception of performances. The visibility of these

¹⁹ Dani Di Placido, 'Disney's "Little Mermaid" Backlash Has Reached Insane Heights', *Forbes*, 14 September 2022 <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2022/09/14/disneys-little-mermaid-backlash-has-reached-insane-heights/>> [accessed 27 January 2026].

²⁰ Dani Di Placido, 'Jacob Elordi's "Wuthering Heights" Casting Controversy, Explained', *Forbes*, 30 January 2026 <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2026/01/30/jacob-elordis-wuthering-heights-casting-controversy-explained/>> [accessed 3 February 2026].

²¹ David Gritten, 'Egyptians Complain Over Netflix Depiction of Cleopatra as Black', *BBC News*, 19 April 2023 <www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-65322821> [accessed 24 May 2023].

²² Georgia Luckhurst, 'Shakespeare's Globe Under Pressure to Recast Non-Disabled Richard III', *The Stage*, 7 February 2024 <<https://www.thestage.co.uk/news/shakespeares-globe-under-pressure-to-recast-non-disabled-richard-iii>> [accessed 6 January 2026].

reactions, whether proportionate or not, moulds the landscape of adaptive decisions and the pressures on creatives. These ideologies reflect a larger culture war that extends beyond the stage and other forms of media. Movements such as Black Lives Matter following George Floyd's murder, the #MeToo revelations in the entertainment industry and the Rhodes Must Fall campaign in South Africa that influenced the toppling of statues in Britain illustrate how collective attention can demand both ethical and structural change. In theatre and adaptation, comparable pressures manifest as intensified public interrogation of representational choices, where casting and rewriting are increasingly read as political and cultural statements. Adaptive decisions, then, carry a heavy weight in the present moment which I choose to focus on.

The dramaturgical and theatrical strategies examined in this thesis - such as nontraditional casting, use of space, cultural relocation and radical rewriting - are by no means new and have a substantial performance history (as demonstrated, for example, by the Federal Theatre Project's 1936 production, popularly known as 'Voodoo Macbeth', directed by Orson Welles).²³ This study offers a new synthesis of these established practices by centralising and reassessing them through a specific intersectional lens that brings into analytical focus the simultaneous negotiation of race and gender across multiple adaptive strategies, illuminating dimensions of contemporary Shakespeare performance and written theatrical adaptation that have received limited analytical attention. As scholars such as Jami Rogers have shown in *British Black and Asian Shakespeareans*, Shakespeare's works have long been a vehicle for rearticulation and resistance; however, this thesis builds on that body of work by examining how revisionist methods operate within the particular socio-political conditions of the last decade. It makes other original contributions to the field of research by identifying adaptive modes such as casting and the use of space, widening what constitutes adaptation. By analysing these performance techniques alongside more familiar forms of adaptation, including rewriting, the thesis takes a multidimensional approach, blending studies that have previously been treated

²³ The production had a cast of only black actors, made race a central theme and transported the play's action to an island that resembled Haiti.

separately - with scholars such as Karim-Cooper focusing on casting and MacDonald on rewritings - to consider their combined effects on race and gender in contemporary Shakespeare performance. These findings reveal relationships that existing scholarship has not fully addressed, prompting me to introduce the conceptual terms 'seeing' and 'unseeing' as a new framework for casting discourse and the theorisation of performance space. The terms provide conceptual tools for understanding the often overlooked interplay between adaptation strategies and audience reception - a relationship that the cited casting controversies reveal to be crucial, especially in exposing the persistent gap between intention and reception.

This introduction has been structured to first frame the study within ongoing scholarly and public debates before outlining my intervention. The next part considers why revisiting Shakespeare offers a productive framework for examining contemporary negotiations of race, gender and intersectionality, connecting historical performance traditions and cultural symbolism with present-day interpretive and representational concerns. I then demonstrate why adaptation functions as a site of negotiation for the tensions I have established that surface in contemporary Shakespeare productions, of fidelity to the original text and the imperatives of inclusivity and representational equity. This is followed by a brief and necessarily selective overview of the history of Shakespearean adaptations, highlighting representative examples from Shakespeare's own time through major historical and critical movements, including postcolonial and feminist, and culminating in an account of what they look like in the present day. After this, I return to the rationale given for my choice of plays: *Othello* and *The Tempest*, explaining the significance of each and providing a swift insight into their relevant performance history, before exploring intersectional theory and its uptake in Shakespeare studies and current critical debates. The final section attends to my methodology, justifying my approach which blends close reading and an intersectional lens with performance studies and adaptation theory, as well as the selection criteria for my revisions and productions, before supplying a guide of my thesis through its chapter summaries.

Troubling Shakespeare's Legacy

Intersectionality, as a framework grounded in modern understandings of identity, can appear to sit somewhat uneasily alongside analyses of Shakespeare's plays. Yet, in much the same way that *Othello* and *The Tempest* expose race and gender as things that are produced (an idea that I will return to later in the introduction), Shakespeare's own iconic status within the literary canon can be understood as a demonstration of cultural and racial framing. Shakespeare's designation as a 'universal' and 'timeless' touchstone of human experience is a reputation founded on critical opinion, exemplified by figures such as Harold Bloom, whose work presents Shakespeare's contribution to literary characterisation as exceptional. Bloom famously claims that 'Shakespeare, by inventing what has become the most accepted mode for representing character and personality in language, thereby invented the human'.²⁴ Bloom's claims and others of a similar kind, characterised by effusive admiration of Shakespeare, together with the authority with which they are made, have helped shape the consensus that has positioned Shakespeare and his work at the forefront of the Western literary canon. As John Guillory argues, the literary canon does not exist as a fixed list but is continually reshaped through the judgements of critics, scholars and educational systems, with its contents reflecting the cultural capital of those who control curricular and critical authority.²⁵ Shakespeare is a figure who has stood the test of time in his relevance to literary study and wider cultural discourse; however, such claims of general appeal to the human condition, advanced within this tradition of textual criticism by Bloom and his peers, are complicated in performance because it inevitably involves a degree of reinterpretation. These claims become especially 'tested when actors of color are involved' as Thompson argues.²⁶ This tension is powerfully illustrated in actor Hugh Quarshie's anecdotal essay 'Second Thoughts About Othello', which confronts the racialised assumptions embedded within Shakespearean performance and criticism. Quarshie's reflections are discussed

²⁴ Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999), p. 714

²⁵ John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

²⁶ Thompson, 'Practicing a Theory/Theorizing a Practice', p. 13.

later when I justify my selection of plays, where they are applied to my analysis of *Othello* and its racial dynamics.

When analysing Shakespeare, feminist and race scholars inherit a paradox, whereby investigating Shakespeare on the one hand inadvertently seems to uphold his canonical iconography, yet on the other, leaving the works uncriticised allows authority that enshrines whiteness, patriarchy and colonial legacies to go unchallenged. There is then value, instead, in turning away from the white, male-dominated systems and directing attention towards black and women writers or those engaging with issues of intersectionality, class, disability, sexuality and other marginalised perspectives. Indeed, as Traub observes, within early modern studies, ‘a significant number of feminists have made it a point of principle to work on women writers or non-Shakespearean texts in order to render Shakespeare less central as the defining feature of “the Renaissance”, while a number of first-generation feminist Shakespeareans have gone on to investigate other topics.’²⁷ I suggest, however, that this conflict is resolved when attention is drawn to historical, institutional and cultural forces that Shakespeare’s status as the benchmark of literary value and historical importance is contingent upon. Focusing on this external framing allows for a fertile investigation into how Shakespeare’s plays - and the ways they are staged today - prompt considerations of the current moment, for example by illuminating the practices and forces of marginalisation that have persisted from the plays’ time of creation to the present day.

Emphasising that this status is externally constructed, as opposed to being solely an intrinsic measure of literary excellence, these critical challenges reveal how Shakespeare’s canonical authority has historically reinforced whiteness, patriarchy and Eurocentric norms, even as the plays themselves offer spaces for varied readings. They also highlight the need for adaptations that reinstate excluded perspectives and marginalised voices. Karim-Cooper acknowledges the inarguable but somewhat unquantifiable appeal of Shakespeare in her scholarship without attempting to dissect

²⁷ Valerie Traub, ‘Introduction—Feminist Shakespeare Studies: Cross Currents, Border Crossings, Conflicts, and Contradictions’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment: Gender, Sexuality, and Race*, ed. by Valerie Traub (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 1-36 (p. 2).

it; instead, she refocuses the lens on the forces that elevated his position above other writers:

Over the centuries many have tried to decode the magic of Shakespeare; unearthing what makes him unique. Is it his originality? No - well, not when it comes to his plots [...]. Characterisation? Very likely. Language? Definitely. Morality? Hardly. His views on love? Sort of. His views on death? Perhaps. His advocacy of human rights? Feminist critics of *The Taming of the Shrew* would say 'not always!' His ability to capture humanity in all of its ugliness, beauty, complexity and diversity? Indeed. His capacity to demonstrate that freedom is available to us in all sorts of guises? As a person who has been free all her life, I'd agree. But freedom was not available to everyone in Shakespeare's day. The truth is, we may never pin down the *why* behind Shakespeare's resonance. So instead, perhaps it is better to look at *how* he has been fashioned through the lens of English exceptionalism and the effects of this fashioning even now.²⁸

Karim-Cooper's 2025 study traces Shakespeare's image, reputation and reception through time, from his fame in his own time to the twenty-first century. She focuses closely on paintings, statues, language used in reference to Shakespeare and who produces this discourse to uncover what she terms 'the making of the great white Bard'.²⁹ Over centuries, curricula, theatres and literary critics have reinforced the idea of his literary excellence which, I add, indirectly links intellectual authority and cultural value to European cultural norms, whiteness and masculinity. The plays themselves often centre around male authority; patriarchal family models; rigid class systems; gendered power dynamics in which women are frequently silenced, controlled or objectified; and colonial and racial othering. I do not suggest that these representations imply advocacy; rather, when combined with Shakespeare's mythologised status and prestige, the plays implicitly support an image of literary and cultural authority that mirrors, and reinforces, the values of white patriarchal society. It is worth pointing out

²⁸ Farah Karim-Cooper, *The Great White Bard* (New York: Viking, 2023), p. 21.

²⁹ Karim-Cooper, *The Great White Bard*, p. 13.

that the canon operates in two frames: it is a body of texts that have reached acclaim, and it is a set of interpretive approaches through which these texts are taught and performed. In this sense, certain readings, scholarly frameworks and, even, theatrical conventions become canonical in their own right, shaping how Shakespeare is circulated further. To understand how the plays reinforce particular social hierarchies, one must also recognise the interpretive processes that sustain them. The playtexts themselves are open to a diverse range of interpretations, and the audience responses to performances are influenced further by distinct cultural and social positions, making visible the partiality of Shakespeare's perspective and revealing the inadequacy of assertions of universality.

Adaptation, Re-Reading and Shakespeare's Afterlives

Appropriative and adaptive theatre makers succumb to the same contradiction that I explore in this thesis, whereby scholarship itself continues to privilege or problematise Shakespeare's works. Radically adapting Shakespeare can confront his works and subvert his authority, yet even these adaptations risk reinforcing the cultural centrality of Shakespeare's plays. Meanwhile, creating entirely new works may evade Shakespeare's shadow but forfeits the opportunity to directly challenge and rethink the power structures reflected in his plays. This tension, however, is precisely what makes adaptative and appropriative theatre productive.

Deborah Cartmell's approach to adaptation in the context of screen studies is a sophisticated starting point for understanding how adaptations precisely engage with and change Shakespeare's works. She initially draws upon Geoffrey Wagner's three defining categories: transposition, commentary and analogue.³⁰ Whilst relatively unchanged, transpositional adaptations place their source text in a different form or genre, or they can also change the cultural, geographic or temporal context. Julie Sanders cites Baz Luhrmann's 1996 *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* film as a useful

³⁰ Deborah Cartmell, 'Introduction', in *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, ed. by Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Wheelan (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 23-28 (p. 24).

example: ‘updating Shakespeare’s early modern Veronese tragedy to a contemporary North American setting, Luhrmann retains the playtext’s sense of urban gang feuding but accords it a troublingly immediate and topical resonance.’³¹ Commentary encompasses adaptations that comment on the source text, usually politically, and often through alteration of or addition to the original. Sanders adds, ‘film versions of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, for example, which bring the Algerian witch Sycorax visibly onscreen, comment by means of this action on her absence from the play.’³² This is a choice that takes a standpoint on the representational limits of the original text, making visible what Shakespeare’s text leaves unseen. The third category describes adaptations that possess a loose or symbolic relationship to their source, where there may be no overt acknowledgement of it. Examples of this include 2023 romantic comedy film *Anyone but You* that loosely reimagines Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* or the 1999 teen rom-com *10 Things I Hate About You* that has a parallel story to Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*. Here, Shakespeare’s Katherine becomes Kat Stratford and subtle references, such as naming the high school *Padua*, nod to the original setting. Cartmell, however, ultimately argues that adaptation is too limitless and fluid for such rigid classification, especially considering many adaptations straddle multiple categories simultaneously. Sanders builds on Cartmell, setting *appropriation* apart from *adaptation* to emphasise its more profound uprooting nature. This distinction is crucial for my investigation since I focus on both adaptations and appropriations along a continuum from conservative to radical, investigating the different strategies each employs and their impacts. Sanders takes the view that appropriation ‘effects a more decisive journey away from the informing text into a wholly new cultural product and domain, often through the actions of interpolation and critique’.³³ To keep Shakespeare in mind, Aimé Césaire’s *Une Tempête* (1969) is an encapsulating example. Written in French but explicitly conceptualised for a ‘black theatre’, this Francophone Caribbean appropriation reflects Césaire’s distinct geopolitical positioning as a Martinican playwright. The play rewrites the text of *The*

³¹ Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 25.

³² Sanders, p. 40.

³³ Sanders, p. 48.

Tempest, repositioning Prospero explicitly as a colonial overlord, and Ariel and Caliban as his slaves, whose treatment reflects racial hierarchies. Ariel is depicted as a servant of dual heritage, reflecting both African and European lineage, while stage directions reference Caliban as a 'black slave' (in English translations).³⁴

By negotiating between adaptation and innovation, theatre makers can interrogate the governing and troubling structures of authority ingrained in the works, illuminate or uncover the cultural assumptions that they uphold and use the canonical text as a site for creative reinvention and productive reflection. I conceptualise contemporary stagings of Shakespeare as spaces that hold potential for probing both past and present, mediating temporal gaps to reveal how historical power dynamics, social norms and cultural conventions continue to reverberate. This thesis examines contemporary adaptation, then, as a means of destabilising Shakespeare, analysing performance strategies - such as casting, rewriting and spatial design - to show how they reframe early modern theatre through contemporary socio-political concerns.

The notion that critical re-visiting, which can potentially lead to reimagining, can serve as a tool for navigating, magnifying or undoing dissonance between historical texts and contemporary concerns is well established. Adrienne Rich's influential essay 'When We Dead Awaken', makes a case for a re-vision - the act of critical re-reading and creative re-imagining as a means of understanding and unsettling dominant structures. She argues:

Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction-is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. [...] A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our

³⁴ Aimé Césaire, *A Tempest*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985).

language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see-and therefore live-afresh. [...] We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.³⁵

Writing in the early 1970s and the context of second-wave feminism, Rich examines the position of women and the ways in which literary texts have constrained female subjectivity and sexuality. Her concept of re-vision, however, extends beyond gendered critique, offering a model through which to approach value systems and hierarchies that contribute to other oppressions such as racial and colonial. She emphasises that the value of taking a historical and literary grounding point can inspire reformism in the present or future, whilst still challenging the dominant narratives embedded in that source. Rich's approach is primarily creative, with re-visioning involving active reimagining of texts, within which a critical engagement with the structures of power is inherent. Her perspective, although voiced over 50 years ago, remains important to adaptation theory and in gender and race studies, but as the terrain has shifted, her framework requires updating. Although theatre was not strictly Rich's focus, the evolution of how theatre is seen, circulated and reported greatly informs how re-visioning operates today. She wrote before theatre performances were archivable on the internet. Digital advances have meant that theatrical productions are less ephemeral than they once were. Platforms such as National Theatre Live, Digital Theatre Plus, Globe player and YouTube, as well as social media services, extend the lifespan of performances. Their prolonged accessibility means that they remain relevant and a part of discourses for longer. Even if performances are not watched in totality, images of actors and sets are seen across the internet and in the media contributing to their continued visibility and interpretive engagement. Rich's historicist approach was primarily aimed at revisiting texts but now a holistic account that bears in mind the legacy built from iterations and adaptations of other adaptations and interpretations is needed.

³⁵ Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English*, 34 (1972), 18-30 (p. 18).

Marvin Carlson's concept of 'ghosting' similarly provides a useful lens for thinking about the added element of reinterpretation. In *The Haunted Stage*, he argues that theatre invites audiences to use 'the memory of previous encounters to understand and interpret encounters with new and somewhat different material'.³⁶ Adaptations, in this view, are temporally layered or 'haunted' by all which came before them and exist as a result of the accumulated influence of earlier readings. Carlson's theory was also developed in a time when theatre was much more localised and the lingering ghosts of past performances have proved far more persistent than he anticipated. Audiences may perceive multiple iterations of a production asynchronously; in the current media environment, some might see trailers or images online before seeing the production in person, if at all. Before the rise of digital media, experiencing *Hamlet* required either seeing a live performance, reading the text, consulting reviews or watching film adaptations, which made some interpretations more visible. Yet detailed knowledge of different stagings was largely limited to scholars, theatre professionals or particularly engaged spectators; the 'ghosts' of past performances were still relatively concentrated. Today, with streaming, social media, reviews and memes, anyone can encounter several interpretations of *Hamlet* without ever actively engaging with the play. People, therefore, may invoke images of David Tennant, Cush Jumbo, Riz Ahmed or other actors, layering these representations in their minds alongside, or even in place of, direct experience of the text. In this landscape, then, Rich's act of re-vision must contend not only with the original text but also with its afterlives and their varied effects or contributions to systems of power - a condition particularly evident in the countless, coexisting interpretations and performances of Shakespeare's plays. Each iteration - through casting, staging, design, performance style and directorial choices - forges its own distinct identity, conveying particular values and perspectives. This holistic perspective, which I argue is necessary, must examine the strategies by which these material and aesthetic choices shape audience perception. The performance traditions or trends that emerge in these overlapping productions have their own power in

³⁶ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 6.

upholding cultural codes, such as the ability to normalise certain bodies as particular characters while marginalising others.

While performance histories demonstrate how staging, casting and interpretive choices help to craft audience reception, I save the analysis of such for the third and fourth chapters of my thesis where a greater level of depth is possible. Here, a brief discussion of illustrative examples of the written afterlives of Shakespeare's plays, with particular attention to issues of race and gender, informs an understanding of how adaptive choices in performances have reinforced or challenged prevailing cultural and social hierarchies. Adaptations and appropriations of Shakespeare's plays have existed for almost as long as the plays themselves. His works were reshaped by his contemporaries as well as his successors, an example of the former being his collaborator John Fletcher who created *The Woman's Prize*, a sequel to Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, but with a reversal of gendered power dynamics. Following Shakespeare's death, his plays continued to be adapted and one common motivation for this was to ensure his plays remained palatable given evolving audience tastes. For example, in the seventeenth century, poet laureate Nahum Tate altered the ending of *King Lear* where Cordelia dies, and replaced it with her marriage to Edgar, for audiences who were more inclined to a happy ending. In the eighteenth century, English actor and playwright David Garrick removed the grave diggers and bloodshed from *Hamlet*. In his own words, he 'rescued that noble play from all the rubbish of the fifth act'.³⁷ He also adapted *Romeo and Juliet* in many ways, accentuating Romeo's heroism, reducing Juliet's lines, increasing her age and stripping the play of its bawdy jokes to align with the moral attitudes of his time.³⁸

In the twentieth century, the rise of postcolonial criticism prompted a number of revisions of Shakespeare, seeing the publication of George Lamming's *The Pleasures of*

³⁷ David Garrick wrote to Sir William Young 'I have ventured to produce Hamlet, with alterations. It was the most imprudent thing I ever did in all my life; but I had sworn I would not leave the stage till I had rescued that noble play from all the rubbish of the fifth act. I have brought it forth without the grave-digger's trick, Osrick, & the fencing match.' - *Letters of David Garrick*, ed. by David M. Little and George M. Kahrl, 3 vols (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), III, p. 845-6.

³⁸ Anne Russell, 'Romeo and Juliet through the Ages', *Shakespeare Unlimited*, podcast, hosted by Rebecca Sheir, 8 October 2014 <<https://www.folger.edu/podcasts/shakespeare-unlimited/romeo-juliet/>> [accessed 27 January 2026].

Exile (1960), Aimé Césaire's aforementioned play *Une Tempête* (1969) and Roberto Fernandez Retamar's essay 'Caliban' (1972), all of which respond to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* from postcolonial perspectives. These works sought to 'write back' to the literary canon that is perceived as symbolic of the colonial centre.³⁹ Postcolonial theory starting in the 1960s, with its eye on the relationship between the colonised and the imperial centre, tended to prioritise men's experiences, often overlooking women's political agency which was still conceived in terms of motherhood - a phenomenon termed 'double colonization' by Kirsten Holst-Petersen and Anna Rutherford, reflecting the combined colonial and patriarchal subjugation women faced.⁴⁰ The responses to *The Tempest* listed above, preoccupied with man's relationship to the imperial, are no exception; Jyotsna G. Singh exposes this ideological bargain, noting that while Césaire's play 'enacts a breakdown of colonial hierarchy', it simultaneously 'leaves intact the system of kinship between men.'⁴¹ While some postcolonial theory engages with questions of gender, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism' (1985) and Robert J. C. Young's *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Culture, Theory and Race* (1995), on the whole, as Reina Lewis and Sara Mills note, 'the dynamism that feminism provided for the early development of critical studies in colonialism, imperialism, race and power has often been overlooked', highlighting that, despite their theoretical significance, women's contributions were largely marginalised in the early postcolonial movement.⁴² This pattern shows that foundational postcolonial

³⁹ The phrase 'write back' originates from Chinua Achebe's seminal novel *Things Fall Apart*, and was later used by Salman Rushdie in his 1982 essay 'The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance', before it was popularised by postcolonial theory in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin's *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* (originally published 1989). The authors of *The Empire Writes Back* argue that 'writing back' takes the form of both a literary practice and a way for formerly colonised people to redefine their existence in response to the negative othering informing Western narratives and literature.

⁴⁰ The term 'double colonization' in postcolonial feminist theory is associated with the 1985 anthology *Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-Colonial Women's Writing*, edited by Kirsten Holst-Petersen and Anna Rutherford.

⁴¹ Jyotsna G. Singh, 'Caliban versus Miranda: Race and Gender Conflicts in Postcolonial Rewritings of The Tempest', in *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture: Emerging Subjects*, ed. by Valerie Traub, M. Lindsay Kaplan and Dymna Callaghan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 191-209 (p. 203).

⁴² Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, 'Introduction', in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1-21 (p. 1).

theory, while attentive to colonial power and resistance, tended to reproduce gender hierarchies.

In the later twentieth century in the United States, feminist theory was a key driver of a wave of Shakespearean adaptations, reflecting second-wave feminist concerns and poet Adrienne Rich's call for re-vision. Feminist writers recognised Shakespeare's work as an emblem of patriarchy and the Western canon, making his plays a pivotal space for revision; female characters gained voice, a story and autonomy in these adaptations. As Marianne Novy summarises, 'using fiction as a form of criticism, they let characters escape plots that doom them to an oppressive marriage or to death; [...] they demythologize myths about male heroism and also about female martyrdom, and they imagine stories for figures who are silent or demonized in Shakespeare's version.'⁴³ Renowned feminist theatre adaptations of this order include *Lear's Daughters* (1987) by Women's Theatre Group and Elaine Feinstein and *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* (1993) by Paula Vogel, alongside novelisations including Marina Warner's *Indigo* (1992) and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991). These pieces of literature, as part of this body of feminist Shakespearean adaptations, present antipatriarchal versions of Shakespeare that highlight his father-daughter relationships, depictions of tragic heroines and the rape and death of his female characters. Ann Rosalind Jones argues that these revisions do more than adapt: they create an 'oppositional' response to Shakespeare where 'the ideological message and force of the reigning code is pulled out of its dominant frame of reference and subversively inserted into "an alternative frame of reference."⁴⁴

However, the revisions listed operate primarily within a gender-focused framework rather than an intersectional one, reflecting the historical priorities and limitations of second-wave feminism in the United States. Critics of the movement have observed that it was 'white led, marginalizes the activism and world views of women of color, focuses

⁴³ Marianne Novy, *Transforming Shakespeare: Contemporary Women's Re-Visions in Literature and Performance* (New York: Palgrave: 1999), p. 1.

⁴⁴ Ann Rosalind Jones, *The Currency of Eros: Women's Love Lyric in Europe 1540-1620* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 5-6.

mainly on the United States, and treats sexism as the ultimate oppression.’⁴⁵ Gender was theorised in isolation of race and often class, resulting in feminist interventions that centred patriarchy while leaving colonial and racial power structures typically unexamined. Postcolonial, black and third world feminist movements developed as a reaction to these exclusions, articulating, as Crenshaw did, that ‘although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices.’⁴⁶ In the late 1990s and early twenty-first century, adaptations began to emerge that explicitly aligned women’s oppression under patriarchy with the colony’s subordination to imperial authority. Frequently cited examples include Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona* (2012) and Djanet Sears’s *Harlem Duet* (1997), both discussed further in chapter two, which reimagine *Othello* by centring black female figures hidden or absent in Shakespeare’s original. These revisions, however, are notable exceptions and tracing all of these theatrical movements side by side nonetheless exposes an area in which gender, race and colonial power are primarily developed in exclusion of each other. The convergence of these structures remains underdeveloped in both adaptation and scholarship. This dimension, while theoretically grounded, becomes materially visible in contemporary performance contexts, particularly in casting debates, where questions of who is ‘fit’ for a role expose how representation and embodiment are informed by intersecting structures of patriarchy and racial hierarchy.

Intersectionality as a Theoretical Intervention

Morrison’s *Desdemona* and Sears’s *Harlem Duet* exemplify what intersectional Shakespeare scholarship also seeks to uncover: the marginalised people in Shakespeare’s plays and performance history. This section situates the uptake of intersectional approaches within Shakespeare studies, demonstrating how analyses of race, gender and power have informed my own research and directed the questions I ask of contemporary adaptation and performance. Several voices have been especially

⁴⁵ Becky Thompson, ‘Multiracial Feminism: Recasting the Chronology of Second Wave Feminism’, *Feminist Studies*, 28.2 (2002), 336-360 (p. 337).

⁴⁶ Crenshaw, p. 1242.

formative in guiding my investigation, through their work attending not only to the plays themselves but also their afterlives in adaptations and even to the discernible influence of Shakespeare's representational logics on cultural texts not explicitly positioned as relating to Shakespeare. Prominent among them is Ayanna Thompson's work *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (2011), Joyce Green MacDonald's *Shakespearean Adaptation, Race and Memory in the New World* (2020) and Vanessa Corredera's *Reanimating Shakespeare's Othello in Post-Racial America* (2023), all of which have been influential to my approach.

MacDonald's investigation traces how 'black people, and black women in particular, are necessary to the productions of notions of white value and virtue— indeed, of value and virtue as white properties'.⁴⁷ An example of this that she notes is Romeo's declaration that Juliet 'hangs upon the cheek of night / Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear (1.5.44 - 45)'. The antithetical nature of this simile positions blackness as aestheticised only insofar as it serves to intensify the value and radiance of whiteness. It is instrumental rather than autonomous. For MacDonald, 'the blackness of night, of that imaginary Ethiop's ear, is the foil that makes Juliet's beauty visible and comprehensible.'⁴⁸ MacDonald's insight has informed my research because it models a way of analysing how black characters do not exist as simply peripheral details but how they operate as structural supports for the production of white value within Shakespearean representations. This understanding enables my analysis to move beyond ideas of representation alone and toward a more thorough examination of how racial difference is mobilised to organise hierarchies of beauty and normativity.

The erasure of black women in Shakespeare's plays provides the impetus for my research, guiding an analysis of how contemporary performances and texts recuperate, reimagine or make visible the social and symbolic roles that black women were denied in the original works. This absence, as MacDonald observes, is compounded by black women's absence in historical records. She describes black women's 'reduction to mere

⁴⁷ MacDonald, p. 2.

⁴⁸ MacDonald, p. 47.

“flesh,” their flickering survival as only the occasions for stories of their subjection, sedimented over the already ancillary status to which they were reduced in a Renaissance racial imaginary’, highlighting how their erasure in both text and archive shapes representations of race and gender.⁴⁹ MacDonald’s mission is to locate these missing women in reiterations of Shakespeare. She examines several types of revisionary adaptations that foreground black women, including Gayl Jones’s 1999 novel *Mosquito*, Mira Nair’s 1992 film *Mississippi Masala*, Derek Walcott’s book *A Branch of the Blue Nile*, Sears’s *Harlem Duet* and Gary Harwick’s 2003 film *Deliver Us from Eva*. Considering that the absence of black women is both textual and historical, my research broadens the focus from textual analysis to include theatrical performances. While MacDonald primarily focuses on films, novels and plays, an analysis that includes performance accounts is important because real-life enactments, such as casting practices and stage conventions, both reflect and shape the textual representations of black women. An examination of both textual and performative dimensions together, through an intersectional lens, allows for a fuller understanding of how systems of power feed into one another and the ways in which these dynamics might be contested across mediums. In theatre, the audience and actors together ensure that Shakespeare’s text is realised through actual, living bodies in space. Theatre insists on the visibility and materiality of those bodies - racialised, gendered, aged - and places them before spectators who consume the social meanings that they carry, consciously or not. Every Shakespearean performance, then, becomes a negotiation over which bodies are permitted to inhabit which roles and how those embodied presences reshape the plays’ significance for the cultural moment in which they appear.

Vanessa Corredera, on the other hand, analyses the more visible dimensions of Shakespeare’s works which perpetuate antiblack stereotypes in *Reanimating Shakespeare’s Othello in Post-Racial America*, another study that provided a foundation for my research. Her attention to how representations of race operate within adaptations resonates with Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality, showing that the marginalisation of black characters cannot be understood through race alone. With a

⁴⁹ MacDonald, p. 3.

focus on *Othello*, she takes a cultural approach to her task of revealing the pervasiveness of controlling images in 'post-racial' reinterpretations; she interrogates versions of Shakespeare's play in book covers, comic books, plays, podcasts, television, arguing that their representational choices reproduce historical racial imaginaries and reinforce systems of white supremacy. Corredera's investigation is grounded in the contextual background of her chosen reinterpretations, all of which are from what she categorises as 'post-racial America'.⁵⁰ She defines this period, from 2008 to 2016, as an important moment in American history and culture beginning with President Barack Obama's significant election win which seemed to suggest that America had begun to value people on merit as opposed to race, signalling a shift towards racial equality but ending with Donald Trump's 2016 election win. In Corredera's words, the period therefore invites 'profound engagement with both the USA's past and its future'.⁵¹ By pinpointing this cultural moment, she selects an insightful historical backdrop to the adaptations that do not always achieve what they set out to do with their 'colourblind approach' and instead, result in anti-black stereotyping, mirroring the failed dream of post-racial America. Building on Corredera's methodology, my work extends the analysis to the contemporary moment, characterised by heightened awareness of racial and gender inequities and widespread social activism. I examine how Shakespeare's texts intersect with ongoing conversations about systemic injustice, exploring how adaptations and performances today negotiate these cultural parameters. Like Corredera, I make context a core line of inquiry, but my temporal focus is brought into the present.

Central to the study of Shakespeare and race is the analysis of performance semiotics – a field significantly advanced by Ayanna Thompson and her work *Passing Strange*, described by the author as the 'first book to offer a sustained examination of a type of contemporary-Shakespearean-cultural-race studies'.⁵² Thompson draws attention to under-explored debates about the significance of race in casting, examining both

⁵⁰ Vanessa Corredera, *Reanimating Shakespeare's Othello in Post-Racial America* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), p. 6.

⁵¹ Corredera, p. 6.

⁵² Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race and Contemporary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 13.

attempts to replicate original practice and how contemporary theatre companies diverge from it. Her analysis implicitly raises questions that her study does not address, including how casting choices impact audiences' perception of the characters and plot; how casting functions as a means of adaptation itself; and how modes of casting alter the context of Shakespeare's plays. Thompson's close reading of original practices and the layered histories of casting illuminates how productions both inherit and challenge past conventions, directly informing my approach to analysing contemporary productions.

These three investigations demonstrate the value of an intersectional perspective in the field of Shakespearean adaptation. MacDonald stresses how race and gender overlap to structure representation and erasure, while Corredera highlights how contemporary echoes of Shakespeare's play reproduce racial hierarchies that intersect with cultural assumptions about gender and power. Thompson, meanwhile, demonstrates that these hierarchies are not only textual but also enacted in performance through casting. Both their work and mine are indebted to the foundational scholarship in early modern drama and race studies. Notable works that paved the way in examining how early modern drama and what has become known as critical race studies might fit together include Eldred Jones's *Othello's Countrymen* (1965), which surveys the depiction of Africans across Renaissance drama; Anthony Barthelemy's *Black Face, Maligned Race* (1987), focusing on stereotypical representation of black people on the English stage such as the 'villainous Moor'; Ania Loomba's *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (1989), which introduces gender into early modern race studies to understand how authority is constructed in the period; and Kim Hall's *Things of Darkness* (1995), examining race and gender across poems, prose, travel narratives and drama. United in their exploration of the representation of race on the early modern stage, these texts proved seminal to Shakespeare studies and influenced the trajectory of subsequent scholarship.

Since the publication of these foundational texts, twenty-first century scholars have revisited their ideas and findings in light of new archival discoveries and updated historical perspectives. For instance, evidence has been uncovered that black people

resided in sixteenth and seventeenth century London, as documented by Imtiaz Habib.⁵³ Additionally, a renewed understanding of England's imperial and commercial networks has triggered a critical return to the social and racial contexts of Shakespeare's plays.⁵⁴ Karim-Cooper emphasises that 'early modern England has been white-washed by historians and literary critics for centuries in their assumption that there were only white people residing permanently in London.'⁵⁵ Her argument highlights that understanding marginalisation in Shakespeare's work necessitates attention not only to the written texts but also to performance practices and social context. In sum, this body of scholarship demonstrates that an intersectional framework allows me to move beyond simply noting who is absent or present on stage; it enables a detailed analysis of how historical legacies, performance conventions and social context converge to shape meaning, audience reception and the ongoing cultural relevance of Shakespeare.

Primary Texts

I focus on *Othello* and *The Tempest* because both plays centrally engage with constructions of race, gender and colonial power, making them particularly suited to an intersectional analysis of adaptation and performance. While many Shakespeare plays touch on aspects of gender or social hierarchy, these two foreground the process of race-making through the portrayals of their racialised characters in the text: Othello, a black Venetian general navigating white patriarchal society, and Caliban, the colonised subject in *The Tempest*, whose very existence is framed through discourses of otherness and subjugation.

⁵³ Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500-1677: Imprints of the Invisible* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008).

⁵⁴ Ayanna Thompson, 'Did the Concept of Race Exist for Shakespeare and His Contemporaries?', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, ed. by Ayanna Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 1-16.

⁵⁵ Farah Karim-Cooper, 'The Materials of Race: Staging the Black and White Binary in the Early Modern Theatre', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, ed. by Ayanna Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 17-29 (p. 22).

As Thompson sets out, contemporary scholarship corroborates the theory that race operated as a socially and culturally constructed category in early modern England:

If you ask today in the 2020s if the concept of race existed for Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the answer is an emphatic yes. Yes, the concept of race existed. Yes, racialized epistemologies existed and were employed and deployed. And, yes, Shakespeare himself engages in both the symbolic and materialistic elements that comprise race-making. Yes, Shakespeare and race are coeval; they grew up as contemporaries.⁵⁶

By rejecting the charge of anachronism, Thompson creates the critical conditions for understanding race in Shakespeare not as a static taxonomy but as an active practice of race-making or 'racecraft', as coined by Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, the process by which social hierarchies and power relations are codified, and maintained, through cultural practices, narratives and representations. As Fields and Fields explain:

Distinct from race and racism, racecraft does not refer to groups or to ideas about groups' traits ... It refers instead to mental terrain and to pervasive belief... [R]acecraft originates not in nature but in human action and imagination; it can exist no other way. The action and imagining are collective yet individual, day-to-day yet historical, and consequential even when nested in mundane routine.⁵⁷

I draw on this definition of racecraft to examine how Shakespeare's plays function as sites of racial meaning-making, particularly in moments where certain powers and exclusions are staged as common sense, that is, as natural, inevitable or beyond contestation rather than historically produced. In *Othello* and *The Tempest*, such instances - described by Thompson as 'the moments when inequalities are being constructed, the moments when exclusions based on those constructed inequalities are

⁵⁶ Thompson, 'Did the Concept of Race Exist for Shakespeare and His Contemporaries?', p. 2.

⁵⁷ Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2014), p. 18-19.

being performed' - become especially visible, as the mechanisms of racecraft are enacted in ways that the following analysis examines in detail.

Othello

The surface narrative of *Othello* follows the breakdown of the relationship between Othello, the black general of the Venetian army, and Desdemona, his newlywed white wife. Desdemona is the daughter of Brabantio, a Venetian senator who disapproves of their interracial marriage. Iago, who resents Othello for promoting Cassio - his Florentine second-in-command - over him, schemes to bring about Othello's downfall by leading him to believe that his wife is having an affair with Cassio. Eventually, this deception leads to Othello's psychological collapse, resulting in his murder of Desdemona and his own tragic suicide. The play's dramatic interactions, I propose, reveal how some characters' actions can be understood as unconscious enactments of racecraft. Racial meaning is produced through ordinary speech, emotional responses and institutional authority as demonstrated by Brabantio's assumptions about Othello's use of witchcraft and his framing of Othello's foreignness as unnatural and dangerous to construct Othello as Other. Iago exploits Venetian social stereotypes about black men, portraying Othello as jealous and having an excessive sexual appetite. He also uses the language of animals to convey such imagery, telling Brabantio that 'an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe' (1.1.88-89).⁵⁸ The racial hierarchies that are imposed upon Othello are absorbed into his own sense of self. As Loomba argues, Iago's machinations are effective because the racial 'hierarchies are not external' to Othello but internalised, articulating the way the play both relies upon and naturalises these socially constituted prejudices.⁵⁹ Gendered generalisations similarly underpin Desdemona's character: she is depicted as obedient, modest and repeatedly called 'virtuous' (II.3.332), mirroring the ideals of femininity prescribed by early modern patriarchal culture. Additionally, any transgressions, real or perceived, such as infidelity, are framed as destabilising social

⁵⁸ All references to William Shakespeare's plays are to *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd edn, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2016). That includes both references made to *Othello* and *The Tempest*. Hereafter, act, scene, and line numbers will be cited parenthetically in the text.

⁵⁹ Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, p. 91.

order. These racialised and gendered expectations are also mutually reinforcing, as Loomba argues persuasively:

Othello is predisposed to believing his pronouncements about the inherent duplicity of women, and the necessary fragility of an “unnatural” relationship between a young, white, well-born woman and an older black soldier. [...] Othello is a victim of racial beliefs precisely because he becomes an agent of a misogynist one.⁶⁰

A reading attentive to race, gender, age and intersectionality thus reveals that the play’s consequences - Othello’s misjudgements, Brabantio’s denunciations, Iago’s motivations and Desdemona’s vulnerability - emerge from the circulation of racialised and gendered stereotypes, producing tangible consequences. This reading does not presume a conscious authorial interest in the formation of race or gender on Shakespeare’s part, nor does it rest on claims about his personal beliefs; instead, it illuminates how racial and gendered hierarchies are produced through the very ways characters act and are represented.

Scholars have long debated the represented biases and problematic models identified within the play. Earlier critics such as A.C. Bradley and Bloom tended to subordinate race to questions of jealousy, psychology and character, treating *Othello* primarily as an inward, universal tragedy rather than one shaped by racialised systems of power.⁶¹ On the other hand, contemporary scholarship generally recognises the text as being deeply engaged with race, viewing Shakespeare’s portrayal of Othello and Desdemona’s relationship as being unavoidably entwined with early modern constructions of racial and gendered identity. Some critics propose that it is the construction of race that is *Othello*’s focus, or that it displays racism without endorsement. Ian Smith, for example, argues that the play is certainly about race, but that it critiques white Venetian society

⁶⁰ Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, p. 91.

⁶¹ A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1904); Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999).

and exposes white early modern spectators' racial assumptions in the way it shows how, through Othello's initial absence, blackness is a screen onto which white anxieties are projected.⁶² Conversely, Quarshie argues that by adapting and elaborating Cinthio's story 'about a jealous uxoricidal Moor, Shakespeare was endorsing a racist convention'.⁶³ In *Othello*, Quarshie further contends, 'Shakespeare suggests that Othello behaves the way he does because he is black. And to suggest that a person's behaviour is racially determined is, by definition, racist.'⁶⁴ Quarshie concludes his 1999 essay 'Second Thoughts About Othello' with the idea that 'of all parts in the canon, perhaps Othello is the one which should most definitely not be played by a black actor'.⁶⁵ This way, they would not 'encourage the white way, or rather wrong way, of looking at black men' and seemingly affirming the racial stereotypes Shakespeare presents, yet later performed the role himself in 2015, under adaptive circumstances he felt effectively challenged said stereotypes, as I discuss in Chapter Three.⁶⁶

This critical disagreement signals a wider issue that I suggest cannot be resolved through textual analysis alone: the extent to which *Othello*'s racial politics are transformed through performance. A historicist, performance-based approach, such as those adopted by Dympna Callaghan and Ben Okri, reveals how early modern staging conventions influenced original reception of the play and its subsequent legacy.⁶⁷ Callaghan's assertion that 'Othello was a white man' emphasises that the play's effect on contemporary audiences is complicated precisely because, in the early modern period, the role was performed according to stage conventions that made a black character dependent on white actors' representation.⁶⁸ As a result, casting and performance

⁶² Ian Smith, *Black Shakespeare: Reading and Misreading Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

⁶³ Hugh Quarshie, *Second Thoughts About Othello* (Chipping Campden: Clouds Hill Printers, 1999), p. 3.

⁶⁴ Quarshie, p. 7.

⁶⁵ Quarshie, p. 5.

⁶⁶ Quarshie, p. 5.

⁶⁷ Dympna Callaghan, "'Othello Was a White Man" Properties of Race on Shakespeare's Stage', in *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 75-96; Ben Okri, 'Leaping Out of Shakespeare's Terror: Five Meditations on Othello', in *A Way of Being Free* (London: Head of Zeus, 2014), pp. 27-30. This essay was first published in 1989.

⁶⁸ Callaghan, "'Othello Was a White Man" Properties of Race on Shakespeare's Stage'.

choices play a decisive role in determining how contemporary and historical audiences interpret and respond to what Thompson phrases, 'a uniquely pressured text with a uniquely pressured performance and cultural history.'⁶⁹

For Thompson, Paul Robeson's 1930s performance of Othello, which marked the first time many audiences saw the character portrayed by a black actor, heralded a new stage moment: 'many proclaimed that seeing an actual black man play the role of the [sic] Othello made it feel as if they were [to quote John Dover Wilson] "seeing the tragedy for the first time . . . because the fact that he was a true Negro seemed to floodlight the whole drama".'⁷⁰ The race of the performer, while significant, is not the sole determinant of meaning; the performer's choice of acting style - gesture, voice and emotional intensity - plays an equally crucial role in informing perception of the character and drama as a whole, as Italian actor Tommaso Salvini illustrated in his animalistic, physicality-led interpretation in 1910. Theatre critic John Ranken Tows described his Othello as a 'wild beast' growling at his prey, inarticulate and 'reduced to primeval savagery', descriptions that reflect the performance's embodiment of racist European stereotypes of Otherness.⁷¹ By the 1980s, the role of Othello had become reserved for black male performers as it is predominantly today, but whether the role is uplifting or oppressive for its occupants remains debated. I offer a more detailed account of the performance history of the role in Chapter Three, but this brief overview highlights how the character has been variously embodied and received.

A similarly wide-ranging variability in performance is true for Desdemona's role. Peggy Ashcroft, who played opposite Robeson (1930), 'was adamant that Desdemona is not only a strong character but also a proto-feminist'.⁷² By contrast, Charlotte Vandenhoff's mid-nineteenth century performances of Desdemona emphasised the character's 'meekness', as was typical for renderings of the role at the time according to Thompson,

⁶⁹ Thompson, *Passing Strange*, p. 170.

⁷⁰ Ayanna Thompson, 'Introduction', in *Othello: Revised Edition*, ed. by E. A. J. Honigmann (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016), pp. 1-114 (p. 65).

⁷¹ Thompson, 'Introduction', in *Othello: Revised Edition*, p. 74.

⁷² Thompson, 'Introduction', in *Othello: Revised Edition*, p. 94.

painting her as 'willing to die at her husband's hands'.⁷³ Joanna Vanderham's performance of Desdemona (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2013) at age 23 sharpened attention to the character's age, much younger than her counterpart played by Hugh Quarshie at 60. Desdemona's depicted naivety rerouted what could otherwise be interpreted as submissiveness, highlighting the generational and relational differences between herself and Othello. The shifting performances of Desdemona, whilst highlighting interpretive flexibility, also demonstrate that (her) femininity is reinterpreted across historical and production contexts which brings to light the constructed and social nature of gender. In Judith Butler's terms, gender is performative and realised from a set of repeated, embodied acts within social norms that supply the illusion of an interior essence tied to biology. Butler writes that 'as performance which is performative, gender is an "act," broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority.'⁷⁴ Theatre both enacts and exposes this process, showing that gendered behaviour on stage is a repetition of social norms and a site for their interrogation. The concept of performativity is one I return to throughout my analyses, as it provides a critical lens for understanding how both actors and productions reconstruct gendered identities. Many of the productions that I analyse, in pursuit of their revisionist aims, strategically mobilise the theatrical artifice of performance - making visible the constructed and performed nature of gender and race - to unsettle racialised and gendered norms entrenched in Shakespeare's plays. Consequently, the interplay between theatrical, gendered, and racial performativity recurs as a central analytical thread as I map how these productions harness the conditions of embodied performance to reconfigure the interpretive possibilities of the Shakespearean canon.

Regardless of performance choices made in portrayals of Desdemona, it is arguable that for the play to exist, it must feature a black male body against a white woman as, in the words of Celia Daileader, the racist rhetoric hinges upon this pairing 'in such a way as to render the former a vehicle for misogynist configurations of a woman's sexual

⁷³ Thompson, 'Introduction', in *Othello: Revised Edition*, p. 91-92.

⁷⁴ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, 40.4 (1988), 519-531 (p. 528).

besmirching or “blackening”, with all the voyeuristic (and potentially racist) titillation such a spectacle provides.’⁷⁵ I ask how this might be staged in a time of evolved and evolving social and aesthetic concerns, following the rise of #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements. My study analyses contemporary reconfigurations and stagings of this play to understand how directors, actors, writers and audiences negotiate these longstanding tensions between agency and victimhood; stereotype and subversion; tradition and reinvention, to produce new meanings for the text in twenty-first century performance.

The Tempest

The Tempest raises different concerns in its depiction of colonial ideology, miscegenation and gender, particularly in how female and racialised bodies are positioned within structures of authority and servitude. At the same time, it prompts consideration of the same questions *Othello* raises, of how these bodies can be represented onstage in ways that challenge or reinforce historical stereotypes and power imbalances. Like *Othello*, parts of *The Tempest* put race and otherness on display as constructed concepts, showing how early modern audiences were presented with moments that marked certain bodies as racialised and subordinate. Prospero’s slave, Caliban, for example, is framed as animalistic and uncivilised, named ‘a strange fish’ (II.2.118), a ‘beast’ (IV.1.155) and ‘poisonous’ (I.2.383) while his mother is described as a ‘foul witch’ (I.2.308). *The Tempest* is one of Shakespeare’s later plays, categorised generally as a ‘late romance’, along with *The Winter’s Tale*, *Cymbeline* and *Pericles*, ‘all of which focus on father/daughter relationships, sea voyages, and family losses and reunions’.⁷⁶ *The Tempest* tells the story of Prospero, the exiled Duke of Milan, stranded on a remote island with his daughter, Miranda. On the island, he enslaves Ariel, a spirit, and Caliban, the son of the island’s former ruler. Using magic, Prospero orchestrates a

⁷⁵ Ceila R. Daileader, ‘Casting Black Actors: Beyond Othellophilia’, in *Shakespeare and Race*, ed. by Catherine M. S. Alexander and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 177-202 (p. 178).

⁷⁶ Lisa Hopkins, *Screen Adaptations: Shakespeare’s The Tempest: The Relationship Between Text and Film* (London: Methuen Drama, 2020), p. 20.

vengeful storm to shipwreck his usurping brother and other nobles on the island. Ferdinand washes ashore and falls mutually in love with Miranda, a romance that Prospero manipulates to secure political reconciliation. Social order is ultimately restored which notably ends with Ariel's freedom and the future of Caliban, the overtly racialised figure, remains unresolved as the play offers no clear indication that he will be liberated.

Postcolonial and race scholars have examined Caliban as an important locus for interrogating the play's relationship with colonial power, arguing that his physical 'deformities' and linguistic otherness serve as markers through which early modern audiences were encouraged to interpret him as naturally subjugated. Reading Prospero as a conscious agent of European imperialism is now a common critical interpretation: his command of the island, his imposition of language and his self-authorised governance all exemplify the principles of colonial dominion. Octavio Mannoni highlights how colonists use racialised hierarchies to rationalise their colonialism, arguing that some Europeans draw 'a hard-and-fast demarcation line between the civilized and the non-civilized, and on the basis of some vague notion of racial inequality they conclude that the non-civilized are non-civilizable'.⁷⁷ Mannoni's insight shows how Caliban's character functions as a literary embodiment of this logic, demonstrating the perceived natural inferiority of colonised peoples and serving as a justification for colonial rule. Césaire, alternatively, as noted by Loomba, reads the play as one that conveyed 'the miseries of colonial oppression.'⁷⁸ Caliban's race therefore becomes central to readings of *The Tempest's* colonial discourse with critics focusing on how his embodiment of perceived inferiority both holds a mirror up to European colonial preconceptions, as Mannoni shows, and conveys the experience of oppression, as Césaire emphasises, serving as a figure through whom the play critiques oppression.

⁷⁷ Octavio Mannoni, *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, trans. Pamela Powesland (London: Methuen & Co, 1956), p. 19. First published in French in 1950.

⁷⁸ Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, p. 5.

Similarly, Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan draw attention to the ways Caliban's racialisation is linguistically and symbolically reinforced in the text:

When in *The Tempest's* final moments Prospero addresses Caliban as "this thing of darkness," Shakespeare's word choice likely applies to his hue as well as his character. If we accept Prospero's charge that Caliban's father was the devil, who in Christian iconography was always black, Caliban is doubly cursed.

Unsurprisingly, from the second half of the twentieth century to the present, Caliban has frequently been portrayed onstage and in non-dramatic appropriations as a black man.⁷⁹

Vaughan and Vaughan not only show that racialisation is textually encoded through Shakespeare's language; they illuminate that this textual construction directly informs performative possibilities because actors and directors draw on these cues to render Caliban's onstage embodiment. How Caliban is portrayed in performance is open to interpretation, but these textual markers guide choices about his appearance, movement, sound and demeanour, each of which shapes how audiences perceive him. I trace and examine these interpretative stakes further in Chapter Three.

The colonial allegory identified does not end with Prospero and Caliban's relationship. The relationship between women and the land holds particular importance because their alignment reveals how colonial power relies on gendered foundations as well as native subjects. Susan Bennett highlights that Prospero's dominion is asserted through the control of not only Caliban but also of Miranda:

The action of *The Tempest* is, of course, to demonstrate unquestioningly Prospero's right to dominion over the geographical territory in the face of two classes of transgression (the indigene and the shipwrecked insurgents from his

⁷⁹ Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, 'The Tempest and Early Modern Conceptions of Race', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 139-157 (p. 148).

own Milan) and to establish and ratify his authority through his subjugation of both slave and daughter. [...] Miranda, then, is as much a colonial territory as the island she has been brought up on, and her reproductive body ensures for her father the re-production of his own power back in Milan.⁸⁰

Bennett's framing of Miranda as a subjugable 'colonial territory' clarifies the extent of Prospero's control, and, by extension, the control exerted by the white patriarchal imperialism he represents. I draw on Bennett's interpretation then to demonstrate how patriarchal and colonial power are entwined and manifested in the figure of Prospero. Bennett's words emphasise that Miranda is both a tool of imperial consolidation being used by Prospero and a reproducer of that control in her interactions with Caliban. Her capacity to exercise limited control does not negate her subjection but demonstrates how power is dispersed through subordinate agents. She unknowingly upholds Prospero's authority by ratifying his power through her marriage to Ferdinand and, more directly and actively, by participating in Caliban's marginalisation, recycling the language of moral and cultural superiority ('I pitied thee...') that reinforces that hierarchy, as well as condemning him as an 'abhorred slave' (I.2.350). In this way, Miranda and Caliban's marginalisations are interconnected and arguably dependent on each other. Laura Donaldson suggests that the 'crucial question raised by the coupling of Miranda with Caliban [...] is why these two victims of colonialist prosperity cannot "see" each other, and it is here that the analogies posited within either complex begin to decompose and destabilize any attempt to imbue them with noncontradictory meanings.'⁸¹ Donaldson is right to draw attention to the complex experiences of each character, bearing in mind their differing privilege, but her insight can be extended through the viewpoint of intersectionality. Their lives are governed by overlapping axes of race, gender and social status. A similar dynamic can be observed in *Othello*, where Desdemona's racial and gendered privilege as a white Venetian woman forms her relationship with Othello. While she loves him, her inability to fully comprehend the

⁸⁰ Susan Bennett, *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 126-127.

⁸¹ Laura Donaldson, *Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender, and Empire-Building* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 16.

weight of Othello's racialised outsider status, compounded by her reliance on patriarchal norms of marriage and obedience, mirrors the way Miranda's privilege mediates her engagement with Caliban.

Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how entangled systems of oppression operate within Shakespeare's plays, even when, or perhaps especially when, certain groups - such as black women - are absent from the stage. Bringing these texts into dialogue highlights the absence of black women in Shakespeare's plays, in spite of references made to them. Othello's mother influences the plot of *Othello* by gifting her son the handkerchief loaded with magical and cultural significance that comes to symbolise infidelity. Desdemona's mother's maid, who is also Desdemona's former caregiver, Barbary, can be presumed to be a black woman based on the associations her name evokes, as a synonym for the coast of North Africa. Barbary's willow song of mourning that Desdemona recalls is sung at a pivotal moment as she prepares for her own tragic fate. In *The Tempest*, Caliban's mother, Sycorax, is an impactful figure: she is portrayed as a demonised Other; blamed by Prospero for Caliban's alleged immorality and is the former ruler of the island, and Prospero uses the reminder that he freed Ariel from her command to manipulate enduring loyalty. All three of these black women across both plays are stationed in the plays' margins, never seen on stage but their names echoed throughout, both in the dialogue and the consequences of the action. Their peripheral visibility speaks to how the narratives are constructed within a society shaped by intersecting hierarchies of race and gender. Giving centrality to these hidden presences facilitates a means to examine these structures and how contemporary productions and revisions navigate the inequalities encoded in the text. When addressing the absence of black women or countering the negative elision, they confront exclusionary structures, implicitly or explicitly, that exist beyond Shakespeare. Efforts to diversify Shakespeare can therefore be interpreted as part of a wider imperative to expand inclusivity across contemporary theatre. In this thesis, I examine the strategies recent productions and revisions have used to confront these exclusions.

Methodology

To examine how the principles of race and gender marginalisation are reconfigured on the contemporary stage and in written theatrical adaptations, this thesis combines close textual reading with performance analysis. Some of the performances that I analyse I have seen firsthand, alongside others accessed as recordings, located on theatrical streaming websites or supplied to me personally by the director. The plays and productions were chosen for their innovative casting, staging or interpretive strategies that engage with issues of race and/or gender. I draw on critical reviews, director and actor interviews, marketing materials, social media reactions and theatre programmes as well as scholarly criticism to provide context of the creative decisions that were made in the primary sources and to build a picture of their reception. This study analyses thirteen adaptations of Shakespeare's plays: five written theatrical revisions and eight performances, including one virtual performance within a game. Most of these are anglophone (British or American), while three are non-English language productions (two German and one Bangla). The focus on anglophone productions reflects both practical considerations of access and the study's emphasis on English-language performance traditions, which shape how race, gender and colonial dynamics are interpreted. Including the non-English productions allows for comparative insight into how these themes are approached in different linguistic and cultural contexts, and how that intersects with established British norms. The majority of these were published or performed between 2015 and 2025, offering a focus on contemporary theatrical strategies and the ways in which recent theatre reconfigures Shakespeare within ongoing debates about race and gender. A small number of earlier productions are also included to provide historical context, illustrate influential revisionist choices or for their innovative approach to racial, gendered or colonial themes.

My research is informed by a combination of intersectional, postcolonial, critical race and feminist theory, which together provide an incisive lens for interrogating questions of identity and representation in Shakespearean theatre. Intersectionality, drawing on the work of scholars such as Crenshaw, allows for a nuanced reading of the interlocking

social categories and their unique marginalisations. Postcolonial theory makes the representation of racialised bodies, colonial ideology and the legacies of empire central, guiding my analysis of how these structures are unsettled in both the text and on stage. Feminist approaches examine gendered power relations, including the portrayal and autonomy of female characters, the operation of patriarchal authority, and their intersection with racial structures of power. When this focus on gender is paired with an interrogation of how race operates as a socially constructed and institutionally reinforced category, it enables the dual focus that an intersectional lens requires. I also introduce reception theory, which highlights the relationship between representation in performance and reception in spectatorship. This ensures a necessary focus on how audiences, past and present, interpret these performances and their role in the creation of meaning, which is key to grasping the performance's influence.

Chapter Summaries

The thesis is designed to guide the reader through an examination of how different forms of engagement with Shakespeare today potentially unsettle the entrenched structures of power that regulate ideas of race and gender seen in Shakespeare's plays and their performance. I provide a broad outline of the chapters here and their overarching structure, with fuller discussion of each to follow. The chapters are organised in terms of theatrical form, beginning with analysis of radical textual rewritings which recover the perspectives of black women and use them to lead a revision of Shakespeare's narratives. I start with what is, in theory, the most interventionist form because it offers the greatest potential to unsettle Shakespeare's plays and alter the representations of race and gender. By departing furthest from Shakespeare's original, these rewritings, which by definition need only reference elements of the source text, can most clearly reimagine the circumstances of the play or extend the possibilities of representation. With this creative distance, however, comes both freedom and constraint: by straying far from Shakespeare's text, these rewritings are less able to rely on the authority and attention that the original commands. Being the most subversive can paradoxically render a work the least so in practical terms, as

its radicalism restricts both visibility and impact. Additionally, a radical feminist and antiracist revision of Shakespeare's text may only, or mainly, draw spectators or readers who are already vested in such an agenda, as opposed to a 'conventional' Shakespeare audience, if such a thing exists, limiting the rewriting's immediate cultural visibility.

The next chapters, then, consider the impact of performances of Shakespeare's text, where the authority of the original is arguably more present, but can be challenged or highlighted through the innovative strategies used to frame the play in alternative ways. The third chapter focuses specifically on nontraditional casting practices as one of these strategies and how the changed race and gender of certain characters can introduce new meaning, recontextualise or draw attention to particular themes. The fourth chapter turns to investigate how space can be manipulated in productions to reframe Shakespeare's play. I analyse productions that translate the play into an entirely different setting and/or culture, one where the play, and the authority it symbolises, is renegotiated into a different national formation or unconventional (and potentially subversive) space, as well as ones which move the play out of the theatre space into somewhere that restructures the relationship between the drama and the audience.

In **Chapter Two**, I group together four radical theatrical revisions of Shakespeare based on their intersectional reading of the source texts, *Othello* and *The Tempest*. I introduce four strategies used in two critically acclaimed intersectional adaptations, heralded as 'corrective': Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* (2011) and Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1997). Their analysis is preceded by a brief investigation of Keith Hamilton Cobb's play *American Moor* (first performed in 2013) which focuses on how racial identity shapes a black actor's engagement with *Othello* and the theatre establishment. By contrasting Cobb's selective focus with these adaptations, I demonstrate how engagement with multiple, overlapping oppressions - such as more explicit attention to gender along with race - produces a more expansive critique of Shakespearean texts and the structures they mirror. I take the techniques identified in these revisions, exemplary in unsettling compounded racial and gendered dynamics and map them in two newer, lesser-known works, Fengar Gael's *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara* (2018) and Asli Kışlal's *How to Kill*

an Othello (2012), establishing both continuity and evolution in the interventionist strategies of contemporary playwrights. I argue that while these plays share a commitment to political intervention and audience education, their goal is undercut by their limited reach - a constraint that echoes the very inequalities they aim to confront.

Chapter Three analyses nontraditional casting as an adaptive mode. I define this practice as casting decisions that result in a performer whose identity markers (race and gender) do not correspond to those of Shakespeare's written character, rather than who his character was written to be performed by. I demonstrate that nontraditional casting, while allowing Shakespeare's script to remain, can allow new insights into the plays; it can implicitly criticise traditional casting and it can alter how an audience receives the dramatic action, motivations, relationships and themes. I introduce the terminology of 'seeing' and 'unseeing' to distinguish whether these casting choices are acknowledged within the world of the play and made a point of or whether they are deliberately unacknowledged, inviting the audience to see past them. I ask how different intended or received levels of visibility of casting choices prompt different audience responses and that question informs my reading of four contemporary productions: Iqbal Khan's *Othello* for the Royal Shakespeare Company (2015), Gemma Bodinetz's *Othello* for Everyman (2018), Phyllida Lloyd's *The Tempest* for Donmar Warehouse (2016) and Elizabeth Freestone's *The Tempest* for the Royal Shakespeare Company (2023), all of which use what I categorise as nontraditional casting strategies. I conclude that while nontraditional casting is inherently political and can open up subversive readings of Shakespeare, its progressive potential depends on the production as a whole - including performance, direction and audience reception - to ensure that antiracist and feminist intentions are communicated effectively, rather than being limited to the visibility of the cast alone.

Building on the conclusion that casting choices must be supported by the whole production and embedded in its creation, **Chapter Four** determines how theatrical space - including staging, set design and venue - when relocated to something unexpected or subversive, can destabilise and adapt Shakespeare's plays and what

effect this has on spectators. I argue that relocated settings and venues invite new, potentially very specific perspectives on the established plays, but it is how these disrupted spaces redefine the relationship between performers and audiences that has a more profound effect. By categorising these spatial strategies as either 'dislocating' - deliberately resisting the direction implied by the text - or 'stabilising' - maintaining the essence distilled from the original - I am able to map how the setting of the performance dictates the extent to which a play's traditional meanings are dismantled or preserved. I analyse Frantic Assembly's *Othello* which is set in a British pub, directed by Scott Graham (2008; restaged 2023); Ola Ince's *Othello* for Shakespeare's Globe (2024), which is reimagined in the context of the Metropolitan police force and Dhaka Theatre's Bangla performance of *The Tempest* (2012) directed by Nasir Uddin Yousuff at the Globe as productions that alter (or dislocate) the fictional setting. The second half addresses unorthodox physical spaces, beginning with a German site-specific production of *Othello* named *Othello / Die Fremden* (2024; 2025), directed by Marcel Kohler, which took place in a former glass factory. I then turn to the digital realm as another form of unorthodox space, investigating how spatial dynamics operate in *The Tempest* within Tender Claws's virtual reality game *The Under Presents*. This production featured a real-time performance of the play with live actors within the preexisting VR game's world. Through different spatial rearrangements, they dismantle Shakespeare's authority and reshape the audience's relationship to the performance.

While each chapter addresses a different mode of adaptation, they are connected by a shared intersectional inquiry into how the visual and linguistic elements of a production can either uphold or dismantle historical hierarchies. The reconfiguring of Shakespeare's plays is not a singular creative act, but a relational event whose meaning unfolds through reception. By tracing a trajectory from the radical, excavatory work of textual rewritings to the visceral, semiotic disruptions of nontraditional casting and spatial relocation, this thesis argues that inclusive Shakespeare is not achieved through a 'blind' erasure of identity, but through a deliberate and acute 'seeing' of how power is historically and currently embodied. Taken together, these chapters contend that the audience functions as the fourth component in this investigation - the site where the

'haunting' of the canon is either reinforced or destabilised. The adaptive practices I examine transform spectators from consumers of a fixed past into active negotiators of a more inclusive future. Shakespeare's plays, then, are not presented as stagnant pillars but as unstable mirrors that refract, rather than replicate, existing power structures. Through this critical intervention, I argue that the canon can be actively repurposed as a vital diagnostic tool for dismantling the very structures it helped and helps to maintain.

Chapter Two

Rewriting Shakespeare: Intersectional Revisions of the Canonical Texts

The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women.¹

- Kimberlé Crenshaw

The structural absence of black women in Shakespeare's canon creates a representational void that has become a productive space in contemporary theatrical revision. Shakespeare's plays have few staged black characters: Othello, Aaron the Moor and The Prince of Morocco. As I set out in the introduction, many critics argue that Caliban's difference suggests he is a racialised Other and I add that unseen characters like his mother, Sycorax, and Othello's mother, Barbary, are invisibly black.² While Cleopatra is a staged female character whose racialisation has been the subject of debate, no named, unambiguously black women characters appeared on Shakespeare's

¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43.6 (1991), 1241–1299 (p. 1252).

² Caliban's race is not explicitly mentioned by Shakespeare, but he is racialised by the characters who position him as non-white and non-European. Postcolonial readings of the play often interpret him as a symbol of colonised people: indigenous, African, Caribbean or Native American. For more information on Caliban and the play era's perceptions of race, I recommend reading Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, 'The Tempest and Early Modern Conceptions of Race', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, ed. by Ayanna Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 139–157.

stage. Intersectional revisionists, in a world demanding more inclusivity and representation in media, dive into this void and transform it into a space in which to speak back to the canon, excavating those black women and not simply restoring their histories, but reconfiguring what counts as central. In this chapter, I theorise this intervention through a toolkit of four shared dramaturgical strategies: strategic differentiation of experience, reclaiming names, inventing backstories and reframing the audience as ethical witnesses through education. I contend that these four strategies function as the intersectional shared methodology of contemporary revision. By analysing their deployment in oft-cited examples of remedial intersectional revision like Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1997) and Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* (2012), I map the mechanisms playwrights use to centre intersectionality, moving beyond a singular focus on race or gender. These foundational works, however, reveal a recurring symptom of their radical reimagining; they remain largely unseen, thereby limiting their impact. To determine whether this limitation is an inherent feature of the genre, I move from these established texts to two newer, lesser-known works, Fengar Gael's *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara* (2018) and Asli Kışlal's *How to Kill an Othello* (2012). By tracing the continuity, evolution and the challenges of the intersectional strategies across these diverse texts, I argue that while the plays share a commitment to political intervention and audience education, their goal is undercut by their curbed impact - a constraint that echoes, rather than diminishes, the very inequalities they aim to confront. Before examining these contemporary works, I establish a critical baseline through *American Moor* (2020), a play that provides a focused racial interrogation of the canon while leaving gendered marginalisation largely unexamined, thereby framing the necessity of the 'both/and' approach that follows.

While later chapters address the reconfiguration of Shakespeare's texts through casting and space, this chapter examines the radical rewriting of the word itself. The primary challenge for the contemporary playwright is not solely to reclaim a marginalised voice, but to manage the competing, overlapping tensions of race and gender within the source. Written feminist adaptations of *Othello*, for example, often isolated Desdemona in an attempt to centre her story and voice, but this focus inadvertently erased Othello's

racialised experience, revealing a persistent challenge for intersectional revision. Addressing gendered marginalisation without reproducing racial hierarchies thus requires careful balance between intersecting forms of marginalisation. To frame this dynamic, I employ Vanessa Corredera's concept of the 'Desdemona problem', which identifies the dual position Desdemona occupies as a victim of patriarchal oppression who simultaneously contributes to the problematic treatment of Othello in her othering of his exoticism, albeit glamorising, and her naive ignorance to racial difference.³ Corredera suggests that these traits create 'competing positions of marginality and disempowerment between constrained femininity and marginalized Black subjectivity' within the play.⁴ Through her analysis of the drama, she argues that 'the consequences of patriarchal control and the consequences of white supremacy are never too far from one another, in fact two draughts of the same paradigmatic poison that ensures the authority of white masculinity over all others'.⁵ Whilst Corredera's focus is on Desdemona, what Desdemona illustrates, then, is the total authority white patriarchy has over those outside of it. The Desdemona problem is a representation of a wider establishment that benefits from these competing positions. Even so, it may be that this problem is inherent to the play and is likely to occur as long as adaptations of *Othello* are being created. In order to avoid this fate of producing rivalling positions of marginality that work to diminish each other and prevent what Crenshaw warns of in the epigraph that opens this chapter, I argue that reimaginations of *Othello* must simultaneously subvert the misogyny and abuse Desdemona faces whilst extending sympathy to the racial oppression present in the play and without dismissing Desdemona's problematic treatment of Othello. To achieve this balance, I trace the specific dramaturgical strategies - strategic differentiation, naming, backstory invention and audience education - that enable contemporary revisions to move past binary marginalisation and toward a fully realised intersectional revision.

³ Vanessa Corredera, *Reanimating Shakespeare's Othello in Post-Racial America* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 207.

⁴ Corredera, p. 207

⁵ Corredera, p. 207.

The tension between gendered and racialised marginalisation becomes evident in adaptations such as Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* (1993) and Anne-Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* (1988). These works fall into the binary logic that treats gender and race as separable concerns which is a tendency that, as Corredera observes, reflects a 'long-held critique of mainstream feminism—a failure to consider the voices of people of color'.⁶ Even well-intentioned reinterpretations that aim to recentre women can nonetheless reproduce exclusion. This is what Corredera identifies as the "'either/or" formulation' that fails to confront 'the tangled web of gender and racial oppression in the play'.⁷ As Corredera demonstrates, Vogel's *Desdemona*, for instance, opts not to sanitise the racist attitudes expressed by characters in the source play, by linking Othello's 'blackness' to his jealousy when Emilia warns Desdemona, 'your sin's goin' to catch m'lord's whiffin' about, and he's as jealous as he's black,' amongst other problematic allusions to his sexual appetite.⁸ Given Othello's erasure from the text, paired with the vocalised racist fantasies of black masculinity, this adaptation lends force to an interpretation that it does little to confront the uncensored racist attitudes, whilst successfully reclaiming the voices of the women in *Othello*. I add that Emilia's character evidences Crenshaw's intersectional theory that 'the failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color'.⁹ I do not want to devalue Vogel's skilful feminist adaptation, but, as Daniel Fischlin puts it, 'the play's notable omission of race [...] may represent an unfortunate simplification on the part of Vogel, especially in the context of a play such as Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet*, another *Othello* adaptation, in which race is the central issue.'¹⁰ Where Sears uses strategic differentiation and backstory invention to integrate racial and gendered oppression as interdependent, Vogel produces an 'either/or' approach, to recycle Corredera's term, that reinforces racist stereotypes. Thus, these feminist adaptations provide a stark map of what happens when revisionists fail to

⁶ Corredera, p. 211.

⁷ Corredera, p. 209.

⁸ Lines from Paula Vogel's play *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief*, quoted in Corredera, p. 226

⁹ Crenshaw, p. 207.

¹⁰ *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, ed. by Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), p. 234

deploy a fully intersectional toolkit: they achieve individual gendered interventions at the cost of broader structural critique.

My evaluation of Vogel and MacDonald's limitations demonstrates that feminist reclamation alone is insufficient when it does not account for the negotiation between race and gender. As Fischlin and Corredera observe, such works 'enact a pitfall of white feminist praxis—a lack of intersectionality'.¹¹ To move beyond this 'either/or' framework, I adopt Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge's concept of relational thinking as a blueprint for my analysis. As they explain:

Relational thinking rejects either/or binary thinking, for example, opposing theory to practice, scholarship to activism, or blacks to whites. Instead, relationality embraces a both/and frame. The focus of relationality shifts from analyzing what distinguishes entities, for example, the differences between race and gender, to examining their interconnections.¹²

Their model is crucial, not only as a theoretical framework but as a structure for assessing adaptation strategies. By shifting the focus from what distinguishes race and gender to how they interconnect, I am able to examine how playwrights create adaptations that avoid centralising and challenging one form of marginalisation at the expense of another; rather, they foreground intersectionality, integrating race and gender as mutually constitutive forces shaping power and oppression. While critics often cite Morrison's *Desdemona* as 'corrective' to this binary, I extend this conversation by interrogating how other playwrights have likewise rejected binary thinking in favour of intersectional revision.¹³ Expanding the scope further than *Othello* alone, my analysis includes a revision of *The Tempest*, allowing me to investigate how relational thinking operates within different source texts and to demonstrate the versatility of

¹¹ Corredera, p. 219.

¹² Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), p. 28.

¹³ Corredera, p. 210.

intersectional strategies in a play where racial oppression is not central and the emphasis on gender is relatively muted, yet remains significant for the analysis.

Of key importance to this investigation is the form of adaptation I study: revisions. These works offer an especially generative space for intervention, as they surpass the limits of re-staging Shakespeare, able to engage in a radical upheaval of formal, narrative and political structures. Their subversive nature opens opportunities to challenge entrenched systems of power, making them valuable for examining the intersectional dynamics of race and gender that underpin this thesis. As Linda Hutcheon notes, adaptations can risk 'repetition without replication', yet the revisions I examine deliberately exceed this limitation.¹⁴ Jozefina Komporaly's words best explain how they opt 'instead to interrogate, expand, deviate from, problematize, or game with pre-existing sources by means of restructuring, remixing, re-emerging, remediation, re-enactment, re-scaling, re-culturing, replotting, re-dating, reconfiguring, resetting, reimagining and relocating'.¹⁵ From hereon I use the term *revision* rather than *adaptation* when discussing these works to signify their radical reconfiguration of their source text. Together, the four plays I examine reveal the possibilities - and limitations - of contemporary theatre's attempt to educate audiences by engaging in race and gender as layered, interlocking systems that require new representational strategies. Eventually, I broaden this analysis to additional forms, including staged productions with a focus on their use of casting or space, in later chapters, tracing the evolution of intersectional strategies across Shakespearean theatrical adaptation on the contemporary page and stage.

American Moor

My analysis of revisions that adopt a 'both/and' position in respect of their interrogation of race and gender is prefaced by a close analysis of the dramaturgical

¹⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 7.

¹⁵ Jozefina Komporaly, *Radical Revival as Adaptation: Theatre, Politics and Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 5.

strategies employed in Keith Hamilton Cobb's play *American Moor* (first performed in 2013; published in 2020). Whereas Corredera uses Vogel and MacDonald's plays as an example of feminist revisions that demonstrate 'a lack of intersectionality', I introduce *American Moor* to the dialogue to represent the contrasting tendency of 'either/or' thinking that prioritises race at the expense of an exploration of gender.¹⁶ By first identifying and analysing the play's representation strategies, I establish an analytical benchmark against which intersectional 'both/and' productions can later be assessed. Although *American Moor* necessarily offers a limited perspective, perhaps inevitably given its small cast and personal focus, it exhibits a degree of self-awareness, revealed in the occasional gestures toward broader systems of marginalisation. Read alongside feminist-oriented adaptations, *American Moor* enriches the discussion of effective intersectional revisions by highlighting the limits of one-dimensional approaches from both directions.

American Moor functions as a contemporary revision of *Othello* that makes explicit the racialised experience of performance within the institutional structures of American theatre. Cobb both wrote and performed the play, inspired by his experience as a classically trained actor who appeared in many productions of Shakespeare across New York, before his later break into the television industry. The play takes the shape of an audition where the black male protagonist auditions before a white male director for the part of Othello. Cobb's play brings *Othello* into the twenty-first century by exploring the fraught relationship the actor character experiences with his love of Shakespeare as a black man and the white-dominated American theatre industry and the modern American wider society. The Actor and Director, introduced only as 'an Actor, African-American, 45-55' and 'a Director, White male, 28-38', disagree on how the role should be played.¹⁷ Their differing perspectives lead the Actor to express his inner turmoil through extended monologues addressed to the audience. His speech grows increasingly furious as he wrestles with the Director's academic reading of the text, which is privileged over his lived experience as a black man, placing him in a difficult

¹⁶ Corredera, p. 219.

¹⁷ Keith Hamilton Cobb, *American Moor* (London: Methuen Drama, 2020), p. 2.

position: he wants the part while also wanting to challenge the Director's whitewashed interpretation of *Othello*. The play ends with the Actor asking the Director: 'Please . . . put down your little brief authority, as you are certainly most ignorant of what you are assured, and talk with me'; yet he is met with no cooperation or even listening.¹⁸

The play's visual presentation reinforces its central focus of the Actor's racially dictated experience. Its staging choices collapse the distinction between the dominating theatrical authority that the play brings into view and the performance's audience, aligning the two and implying mutual culpability. Despite the cast of two, the Actor is alone on stage throughout the performance; the Director exists as '*a disembodied voice [that] interrupts from out of the house. He is actually there somewhere, about two-thirds back and center perhaps. But to the actor he will remain, for all he can see of him, a voice throughout the play.*'¹⁹ The first public performance of the play in 2013, performed under the direction of Paul Kwame Johnson in a small auditorium at Westchester Community College in New York, saw the Director character, played by Josh Tyson, seated amongst the audience during the play, speaking his lines from his seat without stepping foot on stage until the curtain call. Subsequent productions have followed suit, planting and aligning the Director with spectators, signalling his 'conventional' attitude toward, and understanding of, race. *American Moor*, then, treads the line between a solo play, an established theatrical format for revisions giving a voice to a previously marginalised or persecuted character, and a two-hander: however, as the audience is only exposed to the internal monologue of the Actor and the Director only has a handful of lines, the play is almost entirely voiced by one character which in turn limits its perspective. Where it centralises the narrative of the source play's title character and connects the racism Othello suffers to the struggles the Actor must contend with in the theatre industry, its tight focus restricts the views of others in the performance and prevents a more nuanced and multifaceted interrogation of its themes.

¹⁸ Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 41.

¹⁹ Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 10.

One of the play's primary revisionist strategies is its explicit dramatisation of racial differentiation, specifically in theatrical training and professional opportunity. The highlighted distinct experiences of people of different races is the first of the strategies I identify and trace throughout my case studies. *American Moor* sets out how, in this case, black men and white men experience things differently in their lives due to their race and Cobb shows the distinction clearly. For example, early in the play Cobb illustrates the difference in experience the Actor had on his journey to becoming a trained performer in comparison with that of his white peers. This deliberate contrast functions to depict the systemic barriers in classical performance spaces behind the noted inequality clearly to the audience, foregrounding the racialised shaping of opportunity as a structural issue rather than an isolated incident. This strategy is most evident when the Actor recalls his desire to play Titania when asked by his drama teacher to 'pick a character from Shakespeare and to prepare a monologue'.²⁰ The Actor justifies: 'I felt her. [...] She opens her mouth, and from forth her very viscera, riding upon this effluvium of some of the sublimest language ever given voice'.²¹ Through choosing Titania, the Queen of the fairies, the Actor demonstrates a desire to transcend imposed racial and gender boundaries, revealing the fluid sense of possibility he envisions for himself as a performer. The text positions this ambition as an expression of both personal artistry and a critique of the systemic gatekeeping in theatrical institutions. His desire to inhabit a 'both/and' space is immediately suppressed as his teacher inflicts these barriers upon him when commanding him to choose something else, 'something you might realistically play! Something befitting your age and experience!'²² Hamlet and Romeo are his next choices which are still rejected. The teacher instead suggests 'why don't you try Aaron, the Moor, from *Titus Andronicus*?' or 'how about Morocco from *Merchant of Venice*?'²³ These recommendations make clear that experience was never his concern as Aaron has over 300 lines and the Prince of Morocco has much less with 101; rather, the teacher is skirting around what might 'befit' his race.²⁴ The suggestion,

²⁰ Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 6.

²¹ Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 7. Emphasis original.

²² Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 9.

²³ Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 9

²⁴ Line count as per *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd edn, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2016).

however, highlights how racialised assumptions are embedded within seemingly neutral professional advice, exposing just how the systemic and implicit racial bias operates.

The teacher's recommendation of Aaron or the Prince of Morocco - roles with vastly different line counts - reveals that experience is a rhetorical mask for institutional regulation. The teacher continues this trajectory, suggesting: 'they're both probably about your age . . . And . . . well, now you *would* be playing older, but I might even be interested in having you *try* to do something with—' before a disembodied voice interrupts.²⁵ Scholars of and those interested in watching Shakespeare will know that the teacher is building up to suggest the third and best known of Shakespeare's three black male characters, Othello. This unfinished thought is a dramaturgical trigger; before the word 'Othello' can be uttered, it is literalised by the disembodied voice of the Director calling the Actor into his present-day audition. The blunt interruption facilitates a temporal collapse between the recalled dialogue with the current event of his audition for Othello, signalling the cyclical and seemingly unbreakable nature of this fate that restricts the performer to roles dictated by his corresponding race and gender. Here, the 'worn' copy of *Othello* in his hand transcends its status as a prop to become a visual metaphor for the cumulative weight of systemic barriers; it is the physical evidence of a career spent within a repetitive, single-axis loop.²⁶ Although the play's close focus on masculinity and race, and pared-down casting inevitably preclude a deeper exploration of gender, there are fleeting moments, like the Actor's ambition to play Titania, that offer conscious glimpses of these limitations and point towards a bigger picture, gesturing toward intersectionality without fully inhabiting it. These snapshots are not simply narrative detail, but signal an interconnection between race and gender, even within a play dominated by male experiences, suggesting that the full spectrum of oppression cannot be ignored in any rigorous revisionist reading of Shakespeare.

²⁵ Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 10.

²⁶ Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 3.

Whilst the Actor's professional fate of playing only the role of Othello and the pressures of structural racism he faces are portrayed as inescapable, Cobb creates a circuit of seeing that positions the audience as the primary agents of transformation. This constitutes the second revisionist strategy: audience education. If, as Adrienne Rich states, the process of revision is 'looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes', then this seeing must be multidirectional for the revision to be successful in its aim.²⁷ The playwright must re-envision the source, the actors must confront the audience through performance, and the audience must, in turn, receive the performance and reflect critically on what they are shown. Cobb stages this interaction and the implication of the audience from the very beginning of *American Moor*, implying that the audience has the power to carry these issues forwards, beyond the theatre. This contract is formalised through stage directions that define the audience as an 'amorphous entity' that must 'play many parts'.²⁸ Rather than offering the spectators catharsis, 'it is not intended that this process leave them in comfort'; instead, they are cast as 'travelers on this road with' the Actor, who, by the act of 'deigning to sit and experience *this* play', they - or 'most of them' - have agreed to share his burden.²⁹ Cobb premeditates the collaborative relationship between the Actor and his audience who will 'most clearly see his regard and responsibility *for* them in the ways that he returns *to* them.'³⁰ This staging creates what Kim F. Hall, author of the introduction to the play's published edition, describes as a collapse of identity: 'as the audience, we are simultaneously the Director, the Venetian Senate, and ourselves: we can stop the racism in theatre and in our lives if we can make the space and time for learning and listening.'³¹ This intended alignment facilitates Cobb's second revisionist strategy. The audience is grouped with the characters representing white authority, but they are exposed to the Actor's internal monologue - a form of privileged knowledge denied to the Director and senate. The Director is confined to an 'either/or' perspective of the Actor, but the audience, through access to the Actor's psyche, is supplied a 'both/and' understanding that implicates them

²⁷ Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', *College English*, 34 (1972), 18-30 (p. 18).

²⁸ Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 3.

²⁹ Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 3. Emphasis original.

³⁰ Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 3. Emphasis original.

³¹ Cobb, *American Moor*, p. xi.

differently and forecloses the possibility of passive or comfortable spectatorship, instead requiring attentive listening and critical self-reflection. By tethering audience members to the figures of white, institutional control while granting them access to the Actor's internal voice, Cobb places the audience in a complex dual role: they are both implicated in the structures of power and privy to the personal experience of marginalisation. This split subject-position permits the onstage revision to prompt reflection or reconsideration among audience members. The work's political and educational ambition depends on the revision's ability to be both seen and received.

Despite its bleak portrayal of institutional immobility for the protagonist, *American Moor* locates the possibility of change in the audience, making spectatorship itself a site of revision. Having established the relational dynamic between Actor and the audience, this analysis now turns to the specific demand the play makes of its viewers: to listen. The play's climactic confrontation reframes listening as the ethical threshold between repetition and change, a threshold the Director ultimately refuses to cross. The act of listening is consequently presented as an essential conduit to expose racial inequalities and model the first steps towards antiracism. The pedagogical shift is brought to the audience's attention through the Actor's change of address, from speaking to the audience with his emotional and vexed internal monologue, to '*finally and flagrantly*' addressing the Director.³² He begins his prolonged speech with: 'for once, for the sake of anything ever changing just the slightest little fucking bit, **you** listen!!', an appeal for the Director to abandon his subconscious 'either/or' institutional filter and work with him to create a version of Othello that they both understand.³³ The climactic monologue is greeted temporarily with silence:

This is a long, silent beat ... In it, there hangs only every hope for the future ...

A Director ... Thank you ... Thanks for coming in.

³² Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 39. Original emphasis.

³³ Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 39. Original emphasis.

*The **Actor** absorbs this. He stands ... ready to do we know not what. Is there that
“hint of a recurring smile?”*

***An Actor** ... Sure ... Any time ...*

He stands ...

Fade to black.³⁴

The professional pleasantry serves as a final reassertion of status-quo hierarchies. The Director’s failure to acknowledge what has been communicated, and the Actor’s subsequent retreat into compliancy, marks the triumph of the ‘either/or’ paradigm over the Actor’s ‘both/and’ humanity. Cobb refers back to the ‘recurring smile’ he supposes Othello had in front of the senate. This is a smile that is ‘like an involuntary spasm on the edge of insanity’, prompting Cobb to ask ‘how does one maintain one’s sanity when so much of what one is has forever been held in such strict and unnecessary abeyance by other’s fears and the rules that one never agreed to?’³⁵ The internal reference ties the Actor’s smile in this final scene to Othello’s as they both stand in front of white figures of authority who dictate who and what they can and cannot be. Through this stark failure of onstage listening and inability to break the pattern, Cobb frames the audience - who have been listening the whole time - as the implicated and consequently, the only agents capable of meaningful change.

Whilst the audience are listening, I reiterate, they are only exposed to the view of the Actor and his struggle. The play powerfully revises *Othello* through race but its engagement with gender remains gestural, revealing the limits of single-axis revision. While the play’s perspective remains largely confined to the Actor’s experiences, Cobb incorporates fleeting interventions that provide insight into other characters, most notably Desdemona, offering a tentative counter-narrative to the conventional interpretation of her love for Othello. This signals a strategy that I analyse more fully in later intersectional revisions: providing alternate backstories. Typically, Desdemona’s

³⁴ Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 42.

³⁵ Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 35.

love for Othello is attributed to his stories of adventure. Ayanna Thompson, in the introduction to The Arden Shakespeare's *Othello* (a revised edition published in 2016) declares:

It is a play about storytellers, their tall-tales and their effects on gullible listeners. After all, Othello won Desdemona's heart by telling her 'the story of my life / From year to year - the battles, the sieges, fortunes / That I have passed' (1.3.130-2). The story was so compellingly crafted that the Duke admits 'I think this tale would win my daughter too' (1.3.172).³⁶

Cobb's Actor gives the audience insight into Desdemona's mind by challenging this widely held academic belief that she falls in love with Othello because of his storytelling, but instead insists she is 'most moved by Othello's reluctance to put on a face' and 'most enthralled perhaps with his complete *lack* of incessant bombast'.³⁷ Supposing she is impressed by his reticence to conform hypothesises an alternate history for Desdemona but her story is never seen in substance. This love story, however, remains a one-sided fixation driven by the male character's actions, in this case his genuine, non-performative character. As such, *American Moor* offers only a partial revision, leaving gendered perspectives underexplored. The next revisions I examine substantiate the insights that *American Moor* offers the audience by making female characters visible and audible by adopting a 'both/and' frame for their intersectional agenda. In these, I trace these revisionist strategies initially identified in Cobb's play and address their application and changed significance.

Harlem Duet and Desdemona

Extending the possibilities of Shakespearean adaptation, Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* and Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* offer intersectional revisions of *Othello*, making visible

³⁶ Ayanna Thompson, 'Introduction', in *Othello: Revised Edition*, ed. by E. A. J. Honigmann (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016), 1-114 (p. 2).

³⁷ Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 24. Emphasis original.

both racial and gendered oppression that earlier 'either/or' adaptations leave underexamined. These works demonstrate how revisionist strategies - through the clear distinction between different racial and gendered experiences, the creation of alternative histories for Shakespeare's written characters, using the notion of naming to reclaim power and the attempt to educate audiences - can reconstruct Shakespearean narratives to emphasise the interconnectedness of race and gender. By employing relational thinking and illuminating intersectional oppression, Sears and Morrison create stories and places that enable the black women, who are mentioned in passing by Shakespeare's characters but never seen on stage, to be excavated from the margins of his pages. I focus on these revisions precisely because critics recognise them as antidotes to their adaptive predecessors that leave certain identities unexplored and unrepresented. My analysis of Sears and Morrison is selective, focusing on these works to demonstrate the restorative potential of intersectional strategies, which later plays further elaborate upon. Like Corredera's deeming of Morrison's *Desdemona* 'corrective', Joyce Green MacDonald holds the play as one that solves the representational issues found in Shakespeare's text: 'the reanimated shades of black and white women who do not appear in *Othello*, or, if they do appear, do not tell us their whole stories there, occupy much of Toni Morrison's script for the extraordinary theatre piece *Desdemona*.'³⁸ Similarly, as aforementioned, Fischlin frames *Harlem Duet* as a more nuanced and race-conscious adaptation than Vogel's play, which, in his view, suffers from 'an unfortunate simplification' of representation.³⁹ Additionally, their critically acclaimed success, reflected in the awards they have both won, and continued relevance further mark them as exemplars of intersectional revisionism.⁴⁰

Through a strategic relocation of *Othello*'s temporal, geographical and aural boundaries, Sears and Morrison make the space necessary to dismantle the source text's representations. *Harlem Duet* - first performed by Nightwood Theatre at Toronto's

³⁸ Joyce Green MacDonald, *Shakespearean Adaptation, Race and Memory in the New World* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 4.

³⁹ *Adaptations of Shakespeare*, p. 234

⁴⁰ *Harlem Duet* won the Governor General's Award for Drama in 1998, Canada's most esteemed literary honour, recognising the best English-language drama of the year, and the Floyd S. Chalmers Canadian Play Award.

Annex Theatre in 1997 and published the same year - is conceived as a conceptual prequel to the events of *Othello*, set in Harlem spanning from 1860 to the year of publication. By connecting the Shakespearean tragedy to the history of racial tensions in North America, Sears centres Billie, the black woman whom Othello leaves for his white colleague, Mona. Morrison, on the other hand, makes *Desdemona* - premiering in 2011 in Theatre Akzent in Vienna and published the following year - a sequel to *Othello*, set in a ghostly afterlife space. This setting provides a contemplative space where the deceased Desdemona meets Emilia, Barbary and Othello, examining her relationships with them. It also sees the meeting of Othello and Desdemona's mothers who each exist only as the word 'mother' in the source play. The plays have since been periodically produced and have seen stagings as recently as 2023. Both Sears and Morrison employ a collaborative sonic intervention that disrupts the cultural monopoly of the Shakespearean text, creating 'both/and' soundscapes that reinforce the expansion of their intersectional narratives. In *Harlem Duet*, Sears assembles a political, aural collage by layering urban blues jazz, clips of Langston Hughes reciting poetry, Aretha Franklin's vocals and speakers associated with the civil rights movement including Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey. Whereas this sonic strategy is built even more thoroughly into the foundations of Morrison's *Desdemona*, which - although I privilege Morrison as the primary author of the play in line with the published play's cover - is a collaborative work between Morrison, Malian musical artist Rokia Traoré and director Peter Sellars. Traoré's music and lyrics do more than accompany the text; they aurally centre Africa on stage, weaving contemporary African music throughout the dialogue of the play. As Thompson notes, the authorial process itself 'effectively decenters Shakespeare's primacy as the "original" author, rendering re-visions as necessarily global and cross-cultural dialogues.'⁴¹ In both revisions, the 'both/and' framework allows these diverse voices to exist simultaneously while challenging the dominance of white culture, ensuring that the intersectional experience is both seen and audibly unavoidable.

⁴¹ Ayanna Thompson, 'Desdemona: Toni Morrison's Response to Othello', in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. by Dymphna Callaghan (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2016), pp. 494-506 (p. 498).

Sears and Morrison alike build upon the strategic differentiation that I first identified in *American Moor* by presenting a 'both/and' intersectional reality that accounts for the simultaneous pressures of race, gender and class. Sears initially anchors this intervention with a portrayal of black masculinity within the theatre industry similar to that in *American Moor*, dramatising the racialised gap between Othello's thwarted aspiration to play esteemed roles - such as 'the Scottish king' or the 'Prince of Denmark', whose lines he claims 'give [him] life' - and his reality of being relegated to performing in the minstrel shows, which he is permitted to occupy.⁴² By asserting that he is of 'Ira Aldridge stock', Othello attempts to claim a historical lineage of black Shakespearean performance that Sears viscerally undermines as he wipes 'black greasepaint' from his skin. This moment stages the psychological toll of systemic racial marginalisation, using the legacy of Alridge - one of the first black actors to achieve international fame as Othello - to expose the persistence of the racial limitations imposed on black actors. Sears then expands on the exploration of racialised experience by intersecting it with gender, going further than Cobb in her demonstration of the contrasting opportunities afforded to black and white women, as well as men. Sears stages this clear differentiation in Othello's relationship with Mona, the white theatre director, whom he views as able to help advance his career because she 'sees [his] gift', cast [him] as the prince of Tyre' and essentially 'breathed new life into a barren dream'.⁴³ For Othello, the appeal of white femininity lies in its perceived lack of strain; he claims that 'with white women, it's good. It's nice' primarily because 'they are easier'.⁴⁴ This ease is presented as structurally produced; Othello asserts that white women 'weren't filled with hostility about the unequal treatment they were getting at their jobs', like Billie, whose confrontation with her social situation makes this palatable 'ease' impossible.⁴⁵ By framing Mona's professional support as a luxury of her white social position, Sears explicitly maps a 'both/and' experience in which the perceivably frictionless existence

⁴² Sears, *Harlem Duet*, p. 99.

⁴³ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, p. 100.

⁴⁴ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, p. 70-71.

⁴⁵ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, p. 70-71.

of the white director and the hostility associated with the black woman are not isolated traits, but simultaneous products of the same unequal system.

Morrison's *Desdemona* likewise invites the audience to reflect on these divergent racial, cultural and gendered experiences, using her afterlife setting to enact a core principle of intersectional revision: the representation of difference. In this empty space, Othello and Desdemona are forced to review their relationship outside the immediate pressures of the living world; however, Morrison grounds Othello's rage - which fundamentally placed them there - as a psychological consequence of systemic racism rather than personal jealousy. When Othello interrogates Desdemona's ignorance towards his racial oppression - asking if she has 'any idea what it took to get the position [he] held?' - he exposes a racialised isolation that her social position allows her to overlook.⁴⁶ He demands her empathy for the 'rumors' surrounding his 'virility' and 'character', yet fails to recognise how the same patriarchal structures that weaponise his race also commodify her 'delusion' of innocence.⁴⁷ This 'both/and' dynamic is further complicated when Cassio, a white man, is introduced to the identity matrix as a disembodied voice. His bodiliness is significant because it serves as a reminder that he remains alive in the world of *Othello* and, with that, still carries the force of the dominant social order. In *Desdemona*, he exploits this racial capital, asserting dominance even over Othello, who holds a superior military rank. When Cassio contests Desdemona's 'innocence', claiming that he 'touched her and she neither screamed nor slapped my hands away', he implicitly aligns her value with her virginity, exposing how control is socially enforced.⁴⁸ Similarly, when asserting that Othello is 'swanning about above his station and way above his geography and history', an obvious euphemism for race, he reinforces the racial hierarchies that underpin his authority.⁴⁹ His attempts to dominate exemplify Corredera's reading that the patriarchal voice seeks to control both

⁴⁶ Toni Morrison, *Desdemona* (London: Oberon, 2012), p. 51.

⁴⁷ Morrison, *Desdemona*, p. 51.

⁴⁸ Morrison, *Desdemona*, p. 52.

⁴⁹ Morrison, *Desdemona*, p. 52.

men and women, 'especially men of color who threaten the ascendancy of white mediocrity'.⁵⁰

Cassio's lines shed light on Othello and Desdemona's distinct injustices under a shared oppressor, but Morrison also makes Desdemona confront her own role within the hierarchy through a series of intersectional corrections. As Othello teaches Desdemona about the racial identity that she failed to empathise with, Emilia dismantles the simplicity of their friendship through a recitation of her past commands - "My night gown Emilia", "Unpin me, Emilia", "Arrange my bed sheets, Emilia" - which reframes their relationship as class-based exploitation.⁵¹ This awakening develops as Barbary rejects Desdemona's attempt at gender solidarity, asserting that 'we shared nothing' because 'I was your slave'.⁵² Morrison makes explicit that the binary Barbary articulates - 'I am black-skinned. You are white-skinned' - invalidates the facade of universal female experience.⁵³ This progression reframes Desdemona's innocence as a kind of complicity, contingent on the silence of those in positions of subordination. The production's stripped-back aesthetic places emphasis on the weight of these conversations, spoken in darkness with some haunting lights illuminating the characters. These two revisions develop Cobb's strategy by highlighting that their experiences depend on race *and* gender through an exploration of a combination of different relationships.

While strategic differentiation maps power, the next interventionist strategy - of naming - acts as its primary tool of reclamation. In *American Moor*, Cobb purposefully keeps his protagonist nameless, titled only by profession and situated in a generic and timeless 'American stage in an American theatre on an American street in an American town'.⁵⁴ This calculated anonymity allows the action to take place anywhere in any time with anyone, emphasising the persistence of racism across time and location.⁵⁵ The black

⁵⁰ Corredera, p. 248.

⁵¹ Morrison, *Desdemona*, p. 43.

⁵² Morrison, *Desdemona*, p. 45.

⁵³ Morrison, *Desdemona*, p. 45.

⁵⁴ Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 2

⁵⁵ Cobb, *American Moor*, p. 2

women, however, in *Desdemona* and *Harlem Duet*, have not been seen on Shakespeare's stage before, and therefore naming is used as a means of regaining control over their history. Rather than the characters having a timeless ambiguity, they insist on their own historical situatedness. Morrison illustrates the power of naming through Barbary, who refutes the Shakespearean name that was a synonym for the northwest African coast, declaring that 'Barbary is the geography of the foreigner, the savage'.⁵⁶ She reclaims her real name 'Sa'ran', mirroring Malcolm X's rejection of the 'white slavemaster name of "Little"' imposed by the 'blue-eyed devil'; she sheds a label laden with connotations of slavery that she did not choose, claiming her autonomy.⁵⁷ This act harnesses the name as an instrument of power, a concept exemplified by bell hooks, who adopted her pen name as a 'rebellious gesture' to 'find [her] own voice'. For hooks, such self-definition is a vital starting point of resistance: 'oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, telling their story'.⁵⁸ This reclamation extends to Othello and Desdemona's mothers, figures who have an absent presence in the source play, by which I mean an absent character whose absence then itself becomes a discernible influence on an individual or the plot. They are granted names - Soun and Madam Brabantio - voices and bodies, although Madam Brabantio is still notably titled in relation to her position as Brabantio's wife, alluding simultaneously to her higher status and role in the subjugation of other women such as Sa'ran. As such, the act of naming functions as a site of resistance, changing erasure into recognition and enabling the reassertion of selfhood within oppressive structures.

The use of naming is equally transformative in *Harlem Duet*, where Sears establishes a linguistic bridge between Billie's birth name, Sybil - inherited from her 'prophetess' grandmother - to the prophetic 'sibyl' of Shakespeare's text (III.4.67) who gave Othello's mother the handkerchief.⁵⁹ As Joyce Green MacDonald convincingly argues, this invocation asks the audience to carry the 'hallowed' history of the handkerchief with

⁵⁶ Morrison, *Desdemona*, p. 45.

⁵⁷ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 203.

⁵⁸ bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 163.

⁵⁹ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, p. 81.

them, as they 'follow it through its new travels in *Harlem Duet*'.⁶⁰ By linking Billie to this lineage, Sears makes her name a bearer of cultural inheritance and a claim to identity in contrast to Othello's pursuit of assimilation into white patriarchal norms. Sears's Desdemona, on the other hand, loses part of her name, becoming only 'Mona'. Sears physically and linguistically fragments the white protagonist, reducing her to only a glimpse of her bare arm and a halved name, thereby reversing the canonical historical marginalisation of black women who appeared only as names on Shakespeare's pages. Continuing this subversion, Sears chooses to erase Iago from the narrative; Chris Yago, her Iago representative, is pushed aside, existing only as a name in Othello and Billie's mouths. Morrison's Iago is similarly mentioned by characters only a handful of times and Cassio exists exclusively as a vocal presence. By naming and renaming, Morrison and Sears reclaim silenced identities and uncover the relational inequalities encoded in names, ultimately demonstrating how naming can both enforce oppression and offer a means of resistance and visibility.

The third strategy of intersectional revision - the construction of backstory - operates as a restorative impulse that gives substance to the previously quiet or missing women of the Shakespearean canon. As MacDonald argues, 'writing black women's stories into reworked Shakespeares' subverts a 'history that has worked to efface or misvalue them, their works, and their lives.'⁶¹ Sears and Morrison create complex histories or alternative stories for their characters to reclaim agency from the representation void. In *Harlem Duet*, Sears engineers this substance by layering the narrative across three distinct eras: the 1860s, just before the emancipation proclamation and American civil war begins, the 1920s, in the peak of the Harlem Renaissance, and the 1990s, a time marked by the global rise of hip-hop, the cultural weight of the O.J. Simpson trial and the symbolic power of Nelson Mandela's presidency and Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize. This disruption to linear chronology creates an anti-realist aesthetic which enables a critically, historically-focused perspective on Shakespeare's play, as opposed to allowing it to stand as timeless and universal. By specifying these periods, Sears provides a

⁶⁰ MacDonald, p. 121.

⁶¹ MacDonald, p. 4.

‘microcosm of a larger narrative of black American history’, as David Huebert suggests, for the intimate collapse of a single relationship.⁶² This historical layering allows her to trace a trajectory of black subjectivity that moves from external enslavement to the internalised psychological conflicts of the modern era. In granting Billie this complex, historically rooted backstory, Sears not only repositions her as the emotional and intellectual centre of the narrative but also uses her character to embody competing responses to black identity and resistance across time.

Taking a different approach to Sears who minimises Desdemona, Morrison complicates the character by painting the audience a picture of Desdemona’s upbringing. This backstory reveals a childhood governed by ‘strict rules of deportment’ and a maternal presence that enforced harsh penalties for any trivial misdemeanours deemed unfeminine, such as forbidding footwear for ten days following splashing in a pond barefoot. By detailing her early life - where ‘Constraint was the theme of behaviour. Duty was its plot’ - Morrison frames the rules of femininity Desdemona had to abide by as framed as deeply patriarchal and tied to her gender and class.⁶³ Moreover, Morrison uses the afterlife as a space to interrogate Barbary/Sa’ran’s past, offering a metafictional revision rather than a rewritten history. In Shakespeare’s *Othello*, she is restricted to a five line anecdote and exists only to die singing ‘a song of willow’ (IV.3.25-30) after being forsaken by her love. In Morrison’s spiritual world, she renounces the sorrow she has come to be associated with - ‘no more “willow”’. Afterlife is time and with time there is change’ - before presenting her new willow song.⁶⁴ Coupled with her denunciation of the name Barbary, this new willow song demonstrates Sa’ran’s total rejection of the (momentary) story Shakespeare gave her. A song that once would have been sung by the adolescent boy playing Desdemona on the Shakespearean stage, and a song that mimics ‘popular English ballads of the time’, with ‘no hint at any non-European musical tradition, not even an exotic, orientalist nuance’, is now revisioned.⁶⁵ The song which,

⁶² David Huebert, ‘Othello’s Testicles, Sybil’s Womb: The Interracial Child in Harlem Duet and its Progenitor’, *English Studies in Canada*, 41.4 (2015), 23-50 (p. 37).

⁶³ Morrison, *Desdemona*, p. 17

⁶⁴ Morrison, *Desdemona*, p. 48.

⁶⁵ Serena Guarracino, ‘Africa as Voices and Vibes: Musical Routes in Toni Morrison’s *Margaret Garner* and *Desdemona*’, *Research in African Literature*, 46.4 (2015), 56-71 (p. 67).

ironically, represented the erasure of Barbary's voice has been handed to Traoré, the Malian composer of the song, and a 'musical heir to the griot traditions of the Mandeian royal courts and the particular alchemy of Malian music that gave birth to the blues in North America', who performs it with a 'distinctly feminine voice' as Peter Sellars describes in the play's foreword.⁶⁶ She, thus, represents 'a new generation of African women' as he puts it.⁶⁷ By giving Sa'ran a history and a song, Morrison uses what Ifeoluwa Aboluwade, drawing on Jacques Derrida, identifies as a 'politics of memory'.⁶⁸ Aboluwade argues that the spectral quality of this 'hauntological response' - the process by which a silenced past haunts the present - empowers Sa'ran's previously hidden history as one that 'anachronistically dislocates the boundaries of time and space to disruptively insert itself into the phallogocentric space of its early modern English precursor.'⁶⁹ The playwrights, through different characters, intervene in the representational economy by rejecting identities shaped by racial and gendered discourse and asserting authorship over history, using backstory to embed marginalised figures within layered, historically specific contexts which also foreground identity as relational.

The final strategy of intersectional revision operates by repositioning the audience as ethically responsible witnesses, who, through a relational lens, are asked to engage with and respond to the structures of power represented on stage. By adopting a 'both/and' framework, Morrison and Sears reject the binary of choosing between racial or gendered oppression, instead requiring spectators to sit within the tension of their interconnection with the aim of educating the audience. Where Cobb creates a live, intimate dialogue in which the audience witnesses the Actor's struggle, Morrison imagines an underworld space suspended from social convention and temporal constraint, allowing characters to reconcile and model empathetic understanding, showing a way forward to feminism and antiracism. Sears, by contrast, uses the

⁶⁶ Morrison, *Desdemona*, p. 7.

⁶⁷ Morrison, *Desdemona*, p. 7.

⁶⁸ Ifeoluwa Aboluwade, 'Reincarnating Barbary: Translating Intersections of Race and Gender in *Desdemona* and *Wesóo, Hamlet!*', in *Shakespeare in the 'Post'Colonies: Legacies, Cultures and Social Justice*, ed. by Amrita Dhar and Amrita Sen (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2025), pp. 43-63 (p. 50).

⁶⁹ Aboluwade, p. 53-54.

relentless pressures of contemporary racial and gendered oppression to demonstrate the consequences of failing to learn from structural inequities, showing audience education through urgent, cautionary narrative. Morrison's *Desdemona*'s encounters with other characters, unable to occur in the living world, become moments of reflection and revision. Her reunion with Emilia ends in an admission of fault, recognising that she 'should have been understanding' and she reconciles with Sa'ran by acknowledging that their 'prisons' as women were different but prisons nonetheless.⁷⁰ *Desdemona* also informs Othello that they can repair their relationship in the afterlife space, defined by the 'possibility of wisdom', because all they can do, in what she calls their 'privileged position of timelessness', is learn.⁷¹ The scene and play close with a song that in its lyrics encourages 'working together' to 'understand each other', vowing to do this 'Whether we are from the same place or not. / Whether we are from the same culture or not.'⁷² *Desdemona* emphasises throughout that time is the key to understanding, but through Morrison's decision to set the play in the realm of the afterlife, the audience are shown that this strategy is inapplicable to them. This structural irony serves as a call to action whereby the spectators must proactively create the time and space for this learning within the material world.

In terms of audience education, Sears, on the other hand, opts to warn of the dangers of not discovering a resolution for racial and gendered conflict. Morrison treats Shakespeare's *Othello* as this warning and uses her play to unpick its mechanism, whereas Sears amplifies the issues *Othello* raises and shows how these issues manifest and amalgamate specifically for a black woman. Billie's eventual psychological deterioration represents the brutal outcome of unrelenting intersecting oppressive forces and, in Billie's words, 'what hundreds of years of slavery did to the African American psyche'.⁷³ The play ends with Billie in a deep depression, not having left her bed for two months, and cannot rest for her haunting dreams of her young niece -

⁷⁰ Morrison, *Desdemona*, p. 44; Morrison, *Desdemona*, p. 48.

⁷¹ Morrison, *Desdemona*, p. 55-56.

⁷² Morrison, *Desdemona*, p. 56.

⁷³ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, p. 103.

'Jenny's in a large white room—the walls start pressing in all around her...'.⁷⁴ What torments Billie is the idea of a young black girl, representing the next generation, suffering the same oppressions as her, symbolised by the white walls that move to crush her. In confronting the audience with the image and chilling metaphor for the future that awaits if these systems remain intact, Sears issues a call to intersectional antiracist consciousness where recognition without action is not enough to disrupt the cycle. Despite their differing approaches - Morrison's emphasis on reconciliation and Sears's warning through consequence - both plays converge in their shared goal of fostering an audience that recognises and engages with the intersections of racial and gendered oppression.

Both of these radical works unsettle Shakespeare's legacy in bold and inventive ways. The strategies I have examined, through various methods, show how the works demand new ways of both seeing Shakespeare's canonical plays and the system they reflect. By first grounding the analysis in these works, I have shown how the representational void within Shakespeare's canon is not simply filled, but actively reconfigured: these texts do not restore marginalised women as isolated figures but reposition them within a network of racial and gendered social relations that must be understood together. Through this, they establish a model of 'both/and' thinking in which difference is not resolved or collapsed into a single axis of oppression but held in productive tension. Across these texts, this 'both/and' framework is not abstract but enacted through specific dramaturgical strategies - strategic differentiation, naming, backstory, and audience education - which together expose how identity is constituted relationally rather than individually. Yet these works also highlight that intersectional revision is not a neutral or complete solution: their reach is bounded by the structures they seek to disrupt, and their strategies depend on the audience's willingness to engage within the relational framework they construct. By establishing this dual movement, between intervention and limitation, these plays provide the critical vocabulary through which the subsequent analysis can proceed. I now turn to lesser-known and more recent

⁷⁴ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, p. 29.

revisions which adapt these strategies in different contexts and with distinct cultural investments, thereby extending the scope and urgency of intersectional reimaginings.

How to Kill an Othello

While *Harlem Duet* and *Desdemona* are emblematic of intersectional revision as a reparative intervention, as they recover silenced voices and expose the racial and gendered exclusions solidified in Shakespeare's canon, they also register, albeit quietly, the institutional frameworks through which such exclusions are sustained. Sears's demonstration that Billie's abandonment is not simply interpersonal betrayal but the product of a canonically inherited script in which black women are framed as expendable once proximity to whiteness becomes possible, a transaction she shows as reproduced across historical periods. Alongside Morrison's brief aural representation of Cassio as a figure of white patriarchal authority, these examples gesture toward the systemic regulation and disciplining of marginalised identities. Asli Kişlal's German play *How to Kill an Othello* takes this critique further by rendering these institutional mechanisms explicit, showing how individuals who face compounded oppression are instrumentalised by contemporary power structures. *How to Kill an Othello* confronts the limitations of such repair under contemporary conditions. Rather than asking how marginalised figures might be restored to the narrative, Kişlal interrogates how marginalised identities are instrumentalised within post-migratory Europe. Kişlal's play foregrounds how race, gender, and migratory status are mediated through social, cultural and political systems, from media representation to national narratives of identity and belonging, within post-migratory Europe. In doing so, her work also extends the argument from the American context of Sears and, arguably, Morrison into the contemporary German and broader European post-migratory cultural terrain.

Kişlal's position as a Turkish-born theatre maker invested in post-migratory projects informs the play's reworking of race, migration and identity. As I turn to German contexts, the concept 'post-migratory' (*postmigrantisch*) becomes crucial to understanding how intersectional revision converges with national and cultural

identity. Coined by Shermin Langhoff to describe the German theatre scene, initially relating only to the Ballhaus Naunynstraße theatre where Langhoff was artistic director at the time, the term has since expanded to encompass politics more broadly and larger cultural landscapes. The concept addresses the ongoing social, political and cultural effects of migration on individuals, communities and societies over time; as Sabine Schülting observes, the term

refers to the impact of migration on a large part of the population - as either biological fact, family narrative or collective experience - as well as to the political and cultural consequences of, and critical responses to, a history and present of migration.⁷⁵

A post-migratory lens takes a multifaceted approach which inherently decentralises dominant national cultures and hegemonic institutions. Such destabilising aligns closely with the agenda of intersectional revision which seeks to highlight and interrogate the unique experiences of oppression and privilege formed by interacting layers of race and gender; both approaches seek to reclaim marginalised perspectives and reconfigure authority. It is potentially for that reason that post-migratory theatre on the German stage often uses Shakespeare as a source of inspiration. His plays open up space for a complex but constructive examination of Shakespeare's status as post-migrant himself - as a non-German native but also 'the third German classical author' as some title him - while also illuminating the aggressive conflicts and perpetuation of racism that arise in a society influenced by migration.⁷⁶

Othello, in particular, offers German revisionists a productive site for interrogating how racial, gendered and migratory identities are constrained by institutional frameworks. In Kişlal's post-migratory revision, the workings of this are made clear: *Othello*, a black man; *Desdemona*, a white woman; and *Cassio*, a migrant, all oppose a common

⁷⁵ Sabine Schülting, "'Does anyone know another text?': Post-Migratory *Othello* Adaptations on the German-Speaking Stage', in *The Arden Research Handbook of Shakespeare and Adaptation*, ed. by Diana E. Henderson and Stephen O'Neil (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), pp. 114-131 (p. 115).

⁷⁶ Schülting, p. 115.

institutionalised antagonist, an army of Iagos. In a manner reminiscent of Morrison's *Desdemona*, which poses Cassio as Othello and Desdemona's mutual oppressor, Kışlal, in a distinct but equally critical way, gives these marginalised identities a unified oppressive force. As Schülting observes, the play's title character Othello is at once 'a metaphor of cultural difference and a role model for identification, both adopted and rejected by immigrants', making Shakespeare's play a recurrent choice for revision.⁷⁷ Significantly, Kışlal's play is also post-migratory in more ways than in its revision of Shakespeare's plot; it was a collaborative production with the post-migratory theatre ensemble *daskunst* (its name meaning 'art') at Theatre Nestroyhof, a venue that, as Schülting notes, aims to reveal and address 'the tension between intercultural and interpersonal dramas in the context of exclusion, racism, emigration and diaspora.'⁷⁸ The place itself creates space for underrepresented narratives to be showcased, and in the heart of Vienna's theatre scene, thereby supporting Kışlal's medium of revision.

The play's institutional antagonist, the Iagos, structures both the narrative and the fates of Othello, Desdemona and Cassio, making them an ideal focal point for analysing how Kışlal enacts her intersectional critique. By tracing the multiple roles and identities of the Iagos, a force made up of individuals, the revision reveals how status is regulated. Their role in the play is important then: they control the rise and fall of Othello in a twisted game which is Othello's life. In this game of cat (or rather cats) and mouse they have created, there is no equity or morality. The performance opens with the Iago clan watching over Othello and Desdemona on a broken, rocking bed from a balcony above. Deciding that the Austrian Olympic Committee needs a new leader to absolve its tarnished reputation and be in with a chance of hosting the next Olympic games, they appoint Othello who is a successful former boxer and Puma representative as the head, but it is only his face that they desire as the front of their campaign. The Iagos manufacture Othello's romance with Desdemona, allowing them to fill billboards with

⁷⁷ Schülting, p. 115.

⁷⁸ This is taken from Theatre Nestroyhof's website. I have translated it from German; it originally reads: Die gezeigten Projekte suchen das Spannungsfeld von zwischenkulturellen und zwischenmenschlichen Dramen im Kontext von Ausgrenzung, Rassismus, Emigration und Diaspora. Theatre Nestroyhof, *The Place* <<https://www.hamakom.at/der-ort>> [accessed 17 November 2023]. Schülting brings the theatre's thematic concerns to my attention in her footnotes. (footnote 12), p. 129.

photos of the couple with the headline 'Traumpaar in Schwarz Weiß' (Dream couple in black and white), boasting of their nation's diversity.⁷⁹ They control every aspect of Othello's being; they force his hand to dismiss his confidant and colleague because he is Turkish and publish media stories about whatever best benefits the Iagos with regards to Othello. Othello ultimately plays out his role and suffocates Desdemona. Once 'dead', however, Desdemona stands up and requests a different role next time, which reveals she had been an Iago all along, signalling her complicity in Othello's marginalisation.

Kişlal uses naming to multiply the Iagos. Whereas naming in Morrison and Sears's plays operates as a reparative technique, reclaiming power for marginalised figures, in Kişlal's revision it functions differently: it renders visible the mechanisms of systematic control. The Iagos each have their own individual name and character - Alev, Berni, Susi, Christian and Eri - but they are collectively referred to in the script as the 'Jagos' (Iagos). These characters also double as other characters in the play, such as Desdemona's father. Her father blackmails her by threatening to write her out of his will, a timely threat as he mentions that he has been in hospital recently, if she chooses to stay with 'dem Dings' (the thing). Iago, then, represents the patriarchal, and thus financial, influence of men over women. The Iagos also double as the media and press representatives who interview Othello, publish manipulative stories about him and manage his public image. Iago also then symbolises the wider Western media presence that controls the narrative of certain identities and people. They are the members of the Austrian Olympic committee who seek out Othello for the position of Secretary General to give the image of a diverse Austria to the rest of the globe, yet, simultaneously insist their hiring of Othello is part of a pilot project where Austrian companies must only accept blind applications so that 'damit Rassismus und Sexismus keinen Platz in der Arbeitswelt haben' (racism and sexism have no place in the workplace). They build Othello up only to knock him down and their repeated use of racially charged double

⁷⁹ I am quoting from an unpublished script for *How to Kill an Othello* that was used by the actors during rehearsals that Asli Kişlal generously provided me.

entendres and racist remarks insinuate that their immoral behaviour is racially motivated.

Kişlal materialises Shakespeare as an Iago in the play. He makes clear to Desdemona that the sole reason for her existence in this play is to die. She is the passive victim, destined to go down in history with Juliet, Lavinia and Ophelia. Shakespeare even hints at the idea that this predetermination goes down to her name as its Greek origin means 'ill-fated' like Morrison who, in *Desdemona*, draws attention to the etymological determinism embedding fatalism in the tragic character. Kişlal's metatheatrical move positions Shakespeare not as a distant author, but a manipulative character within the drama, disallowing Desdemona autonomy. By casting Shakespeare in the role of (an) Iago and using Iago's name to render Shakespeare villainous, Kişlal allegorically critiques the playwright's complicity in literally scripting Desdemona's victimhood, as well as pointing to his role in the literary tradition that canonises female suffering while denying female agency.

Kişlal's explicit differentiation between Desdemona and Othello ensures that her approach is intersectional, uncovering interlocking systems of dominion based on both gender and race. This strategy, already identified in earlier intersectional revisions, is used here to lay unequal experiences alongside one another to expose an overlap. Kişlal sets up a deliberate contrast between the lived experiences of Othello, the black man, and Desdemona, the privileged white woman. As Shakespeare (the character) commands, Desdemona performs her role and dies. The Iagos celebrate the successful suffocation with a pillow fight, resulting in white feathers raining down and coating the stage, as the white powerbody continues to rule. Desdemona is congratulated on her death by the Iagos to which she responds: 'Ja aber das nächste Mal möchte ich echt einen anderen Part übernehmen. Jahrhundertlange Erfahrung, aber trotzdem, immer das Opfer...' (Yes, but next time I really want a different role. Centuries of experience, but still, always the victim...). This is the moment, in the final scene, where it is revealed to the audience that Desdemona was in on the cruel game and a secret Iago. Throughout the play, Othello and Desdemona have been set apart by their race; however, this

metatheatrical scene climatically emphasises their imbalance and probes the imbalance Shakespeare ordains for his characters of different races and genders. It is clear that Desdemona has been an agent in Othello's marginalisation and she plays out on stage exactly what Crenshaw warns of in the chapter's epigraph: 'the failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color'.⁸⁰ Desdemona suffers from gender bias and Othello falls victim to racial prejudice, both of which have different experiences and outcomes, but Kişlal shows the audience that Desdemona is somewhat responsible for Othello's victimisation, despite her acknowledgment of her own restrictions as a passive female to Shakespeare. This interplay highlights an important asymmetry in their potential agency and freedom, as Schülting's analysis supports, while 'it had finally become possible for the White woman to challenge the traditional script that had envisaged her in the role of the passive female victim', Othello 'was not similarly able to emancipate himself from his role in the racist plot.'⁸¹ By connecting these two fates, I illustrate how the play communicates that individual identities reinforce each other's oppression when they are not considered together. Desdemona is aware of her role, and by extension, her limitations and repression, which is the first step toward emancipation, whereas Othello remains in the dark, unable to break out of the plot that the Iagos (and Shakespeare) have made for him. Schülting's unpicking of Desdemona's consciousness bolsters the argument that Kişlal's clear setting apart of the characters' racial and gendered experiences allows her to offer a truly intersectional revision of Shakespeare's play - one that refuses to treat race and gender as parallel or interchangeable, but instead examines how their entanglement produces unequal forms of oppression and agency.

Where Kişlal's revision especially differs from *Desdemona* and *Harlem Duet* in the representation of distinct identities is the migrant protagonist her revision includes, Cassio. His character works to broaden the intersectional reach, introducing migration and cultural displacement as additional axes of identity that intersect with race and

⁸⁰ Crenshaw, p. 1252.

⁸¹ Schülting, p. 125.

gender. Cassio, Othello's trusted vice president and friend, like Desdemona, is also later revealed to be an Iago. As the son of Turkish migrants, he becomes a liability in Austria's Olympic bid since Turkey is their main competitor; therefore, Othello is coerced into dismissing him by the media and industry (or in other words, the Iagos). Othello informs Cassio that his dismissal is not about business but purely about 'your identification!' Cassio is stunned, pointing out that, unlike Othello, he was born and raised in Austria and can 'spreche ich tiefsten Dialekt von Meidling bis Floridsdorf' (speak the deepest dialect from Meidling to Floridsdorf), highlighting the absurdity of being excluded from a national identity he embodies linguistically and culturally. The difference in treatment is made stark on the stage through language: Othello speaks in English throughout the play, while Cassio speaks Austrian German. The two outsiders are thus pitted against each other and Othello, himself marginalised, is compelled to cooperate in Cassio's exclusion, enacting the mechanisms of discrimination from which he also suffers. Once Cassio is revealed as an Iago, however, the audience become aware of the dual channel of complicity; they each 'reinforce the subordination' of the other's racial and migrant identity to borrow Crenshaw's language.⁸²

Kişlal ensures, like Desdemona, Cassio is both simultaneously a victim and a perpetrator of disempowerment in order to bring into focus the cyclical nature of identity-related abuse. Therefore, when the audience discovers Cassio is an Iago, at the same time, they learn this is not the first time he has played his role; he reenacts his subjugating part across time and space:

Cassio: Cassio, Cassio, Cassio
(Siegerpose)....was für ein mächtiger
Name. Das erste mal hieß ich "Paris" Es
war nicht die "wahre liebe" mit Helena.
Es war notwendig die Samen von
Eifersucht in Menelaos Herz

Cassio: Cassio, Cassio, Cassio
(*victory pose*)... what a powerful
name. The first time I was called
"Paris." It wasn't "true love" with
Helena. It was necessary to plant
the seeds of jealousy in Menelaos'

⁸² Crenshaw, p. 1252.

einzuflanzen. Das war schon eine Meisterleistung. Seit dem immer dasselbe... Jedes mal denke ich, es wird mir schon langweilig, aber das Ding funktioniert. Oft muss ich nicht ein mal dabei sein: hier

Alev: 26.11.2012 In rasender Wut und Eifersucht soll ein Mann seine ehemalige Partnerin mit einem T-Shirt erwürgt haben.

Susi: 26.11.12 47-jähriger tötete Frau und Kinder. Eifersucht war nach bisherigem Stand der Ermittlungen das Motiv für das Familiendrama mit drei Toten.

heart. That was already a masterpiece. Since then, it's always the same... Every time I think I'll get bored, but the thing works. Often, I don't even have to be there: here

Alev: 26.11.2012 In a fit of rage and jealousy, a man is said to have strangled his former partner with a T-shirt.

Susi: 26.11.12 A 47-year-old killed his wife and children. Jealousy was, according to current investigations, the motive for the family drama with three dead.

Here, Cassio triumphantly boasts of his successes and claims to have played the role of Paris in Greek mythology, seducing Helena away from Menelaos and being responsible for starting the Trojan war. It is significant that the first time Cassio played his role was in Greek mythology since Greek mythology has had an extensive influence on Western literature, culture and art, influencing the likes of Shakespeare. With that in mind, Kışlal does not pin her critique of representations of racial and gendered oppression just on Shakespeare, but she shows that Shakespeare continues to influence, in the way that Greek mythology does, in the present day. Following Cassio's celebration, the other Iagos begin to list dates and headlines for other incidents Cassio has influenced - this time indirectly as Cassio insists he was not physically present. The series of headlines continues to roll, citing murders from different locations which stresses the pervasive and global impact of the white patriarchal ideology embodied by Cassio. By presenting the headlines in a way that mimics real news reports, Kışlal does not imply that these

murderers were directly influenced by Greek mythology or reading Shakespeare; rather, it gestures to the ways longstanding inequalities and cultural narratives resonate through society, creating contexts in which such acts may occur. The sheer abundance of tragic and violent headlines shows audiences that this cycle of influence has continued for hundreds of years and those who are the victim, in this case Othello, are unable to escape, especially if different marginalised identities, through a lack of support, continue to aid the oppression of others.

Kişlal enhances this intersectional insight by supplying Othello with an alternative history that complicates his character in Shakespeare's original script. The addition of a new or different backstory is an interventionist strategy that reconfigures fixed history and identity, creating space for a more nuanced and humanised portrayal of the marginalised experience. Like Sears, Kişlal chooses to give the audience an insight into Othello's former relationship with Veselina, the mother of his child, predating his relationship with Desdemona, to humanise and empathise. Veselina is portrayed as a partner who loved and cared for Othello during his boxing career, seen wiping his sweat from the ring to prevent him slipping. Although they share genuine affection, the Iagos deem Veselina unsuitable as Othello's wife due to her poor financial situation, leaving her only love to offer him. Silently removing her from the narrative, they make Othello's path clear for Desdemona. Veselina is described as a poor migrant woman yet she is never seen on stage, concealing her race. Despite having no visual identity, Veselina's character mirrors Sears's Billie, Othello's first love whom he leaves for an easier life with Desdemona, except this time, the decision is not in Othello's hands. Kişlal frames the Iagos, the white, patriarchal immovable force, as the ones explicitly and directly responsible for the forced choice which Sears, in a way, also frames as accountable but much more indirectly through the struggles she faces as a black woman. The black female character in *Harlem Duet* and *Desdemona* is consolidated; in *How to Kill an Othello* the marginalised female figure, whose disempowerment is shaped by her migrant and economic status in structures of exclusion that parallel - but are not equivalent to - those in Sears's work, remains in the margins that Shakespeare prescribes but Kişlal draws attention to why and how she is placed there.

This emphasis on educating the audience on these power structures marks a return to a strategy examined elsewhere in this chapter, one through which intersectional revisions make systems of power legible rather than merely representational. I propose Kişlal's revision articulates to the audience how oppressive frameworks operate throughout the play; however, there are moments that bring this desire to educate to the fore more overtly. The play presents the hope of audience education as a potential resolution for the intersecting oppressions she exposes. Like Shakespeare's Iago, Kişlal's Iagos regularly address the audience, disclosing their scheme. The audience nonconsensually become a part of the Iagos' game since they are implicated through tragic irony. Kişlal extends the audience's involvement further by bringing a spectator onstage, making the audience's implication within systems of power and complicity tangible through embodied participation in the play. The spectator is selected by Desdemona's father who refers to them as the head of his legal department and told that they will call and pick up Desdemona to bring her to their family Christmas. The same way that Desdemona is chosen as Veselina's replacement by the Iagos, Desdemona's father/Iago explores the possibility of the audience member becoming Othello's alternative for his daughter. While the interaction is presented playfully, the chosen spectator is nonetheless coercively placed in a potentially uncomfortable position, exposed to the gaze of both the performers and fellow audience members and uncertain about the extent and direction of their required participation. The discomfort draws out the instability between observer and participant, in both the drama and the performance's wider social issues, and toying with and entangling those boundaries.

Since the father's aforementioned threats about removing Desdemona from his will do not put an end to her relationship with Othello, just as Desdemona was chosen as Veselina's replacement by the Iagos, he continues to pursue this strategy of substitution. The audience are now incriminated in the racist scheming, but they are also exposed to Othello's anguished monologues, making their cooperation with the Iagos increasingly uncomfortable and ethically fraught. These monologues, authored by actor and dancer Blair Darby - who portrayed Othello and proclaimed that he sought to give the character a more pronounced voice - reveal Othello's vulnerability and desperate desire for

recognition. For instance, he pleads with the audience, 'I field no demons,' when falsely accused of rape, and protests 'I am a travelled man seasoned despised' in response to Cassio's charge of inauthenticity. Delivered in Darby's native English and structured in verse, these monologues temporarily break away from the play's dominant German prose, a shift Schülting describes as a fleeting 'moment of empowerment.'⁸³ This use of English, both as Shakespeare's original language and as a marker of Othello's outsider status, distances him linguistically from the other characters and the dominant language of the audience. The poetic monologues also evoke Shakespeare's script highlighting Othello's enduring confinement within a racialised narrative and the lasting impact this has had on his identity. The play takes advantage of its relationship with the audience, conscious of their situational relationship to the stage, theatre etiquette to remain seated and quiet and most importantly, the context that they are seeing a fictional play. When they then remain silent, despite their access to Othello's interiority that the Iagos do not have, they are co-conspirators. The audience, like Othello, are trapped in their position too. As the play draws to an end, the characters prepare their roles for their next victim, signalling that the Iagos' ritual continues beyond the performance. Though the audience departs the theatre when the play has concluded, their involvement, combined with this open ending, leaves them acutely conscious of their passivity. This set up encourages a critical reflection on the systems of oppression presented and highlights the urgent need for active engagement rather than complacency in confronting these ongoing cycles.

Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara

Though formally and generically distinct, Fengar Gael's revision of *The Tempest* offers a compelling continuation of the questions raised by *Othello's* afterlives, particularly around how race and gender function not only as identities but as interwoven technologies of control. Whereas *How to Kill an Othello* maintains a tension between these categories through its diverse portfolio of identities, this *Tempest* adaptation

⁸³ Schülting, p. 124.

reframes them through the figure of Sycorax, whose re-centring makes visible the colonial and patriarchal violences that underpin Shakespeare's text. In doing so, it approaches the Desdemona problem obliquely, shifting the focus from spectacular victimhood to the erasure that makes such spectacles possible. The revision's source text, *The Tempest*, shares key parallels with *Othello*: it features a marginalised black character - Prospero's slave Caliban; a white woman implicated in his mistreatment, Prospero's obedient daughter Miranda, whose role in repression notably differs from Desdemona's; and an absent black woman, Caliban's mother and notorious witch, Sycorax. As outlined in the introductory chapter, *The Tempest* is a play that has been rewritten time and time over in light of postcolonial theory.⁸⁴ These revisions often work to amplify the voice of Caliban and draw on Prospero's imperialist behaviours of enslaving and invading, painting him as a colonist more explicitly. Stephen Greenblatt, in his introduction to the play, notes the pattern of these anticolonial writers 'casting Prospero as a smugly racist, sexist oppressor, Ariel as a native coopted or corrupted by his colonial master, and Caliban as a victimized hero.'⁸⁵ As previously noted, Aimé Césaire's *Une Tempête* (1969) is a foundational example. Césaire's adaptation, set on a Caribbean island, depicts Prospero overtly as a white slavemaster, Caliban as his black slave, and his other slave, Ariel - explicitly described within the play in terms that denote mixed racial heritage - who enjoys a slightly more privileged enslavement. Like Billie and Othello respectively in *Harlem Duet*, Césaire's Caliban seeks turbulent revolution, unlike his Ariel, who favours non-violence and cooperation as a means to freedom. Anticipating Sa'ran in *Desdemona*, Caliban insists on being called X, rejecting the name Prospero has given to him and more explicitly echoing Malcolm X. Feminist readings of *The Tempest* have also drawn on postcolonial theory, linking Miranda's gender isolation and internalised participation in patriarchy and colonialism with

⁸⁴ Examples include (with original publication dates) Aimé Césaire's play, *Une Tempête* (1969) translated into English as *A Tempest*; George Lamming's novel *Water with Berries* (1971); Edward Kamau Brathwaite's poem 'Caliban' (1969); Roberto Fernández Retamar's essay 'Caliban: Notes Towards a Discussion of Culture in our America' (1971); John Pepper Clark's essay 'The Legacy of Caliban' (1968); Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's essay 'Towards a National Culture' (1983) and novel *A Grain of Wheat* (1967); and David Wallace's drama, *Do You Love Me Master?* (1977). See Chantal Zabus, *Tempests After Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) for more examples.

⁸⁵ Stephen Greenblatt, 'Introduction to The Tempest', in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd edn, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2016), pp. 3205-3215 (p. 3211).

Sycorax's absence.⁸⁶ Sycorax, like *Othello's* Barbary, is an absent presence. She haunts the narrative, held responsible for Caliban's savagery and remembered as the island's original sovereign; yet she is never seen and presumed dead. An intersectional revision of *The Tempest*, with a focus on the retrieval of Sycorax, provides a way to confront the racialised and gendered history that the play displaces, foregrounding the silenced matriarchal and colonial foundations of Prospero's power. Bringing together the horrors of imperialism, contemporary fears around digital advancement and the realism of rigid social and cultural conventions to unpick gender, Gael depicts the repression of Islamic women and reinstates Shakespeare's missing witch. Read alongside the *Othello* revisions in the preceding analysis, which primarily foreground racial identity and its construction with structures of gender, this turn to *The Tempest* places greater emphasis on colonial power while sustaining an intersectional concern with how race and gender operate together. As such, Gael's play can be situated within what Amrita Dhar and Amrita Sen's recent edited collection identifies as a tension central to postcolonial revision: 'the paradox of rejecting and returning to Shakespeare in spaces that are still grappling with the uneven paths of decoloniality and justice in days after the ostensible end of empires', framing Shakespeare as both a site of critique and a resource for reworking colonial authority.⁸⁷

Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara gives light to Sycorax's story of exile from both Algiers and, more generally, the text whilst constantly disputing the words of Shakespeare. In Gael's version, Sycorax never died as Shakespeare's Prospero would have spectators believe; instead, aided by the deity Setebos, she made herself invisible and waited hundreds of years for technology to advance enough to broadcast her story worldwide. She creates avatars of family, friends and enemies to perform her life's tale. The play is split between two locations: the city of Algiers, where religion and patriarchy control Sycorax's every move, and the island of Qamara. Director Joan Kane's abstract

⁸⁶ See Rachana Sachdev, 'Sycorax in Algiers: Cultural Politics and Gynecology in Early Modern England', in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. by Dymphna Callaghan (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), pp. 226-243; Chantal Zabus, 'Miranda and Sycorax on the "Eve" of Postpatriarchy', in *Tempests After Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 103-176.

⁸⁷ Amrita Dhar and Amrita Sen, 'Introduction', in *Shakespeare in the 'Post'Colonies: Legacies, Cultures and Social Justice*, ed. by Amrita Dhar and Amrita Sen (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2025), pp. 1-22 (p. 7).

arabesque with vivid projections captures Gael's vision of opulence.⁸⁸ Sycorax is exiled from Algiers for using magic, specifically the rat army she creates and sends to eat the food supplies of the Turks who have invaded her home and threatened women's safety.



FIG 1. *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, dir. by Joan Kane (HERE, 2018). Young Sycorax (Lauren Capkanis) in the centre with her sisters (Hui-Shan Yong and Taylor Graves) in Algiers. Photograph © Al Foote III. Reproduced with permission.

She is sentenced to the play's second setting, the caves and fields of the island of Qamara. Pregnant at her exile, she is spared execution and starts a new life on Qamara with her son Caliban. They live peacefully and sustainably, eventually creating a friend for Caliban as he grows older, made from the combination of a pine tree and magic; they name him Ariel. Ariel's growing influence on Caliban leads him to consider abandoning his mother. Overhearing this, Sycorax chooses eternal invisibility, moments before Prospero and Miranda arrive. Gael, a New York based playwright with an extensive but largely unpublished portfolio whose works frequently explore the metaphysical and

⁸⁸ Fengar Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, dir. Joan Kane, Ego Actus (HERE, New York) 2018.

surreal, claimed that her plays tend to 'feature outcasts with megalomaniacal ideas about salvaging an endangered world' in an interview with Adam Szymkowicz for his blog and I note that *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara* is no exception.⁸⁹ Although I argue that this play reconfigures Shakespeare's text with a clear and compelling focus on intersectional concerns, it has yet to attract a significant critical corpus. Its production history remains limited to a single two-week run in November 2018, staged by the Ego Actus theatre company at the HERE Arts Centre in New York and directed by Joan Kane. Despite this modest exposure, the play's interventionist scope warrants closer analysis. Through the radically revised narrative, Gael's revision not only considers the dual attention required to address both race and gender, but also makes prominent the threats of colonialism and religious practice, demanding an elaborate intersectional reading that accounts for how systems of oppression operate. Additionally, the wider context of her play supports her intersectional goals; the play was first given a reading as a part of Project Y's 2016 Women in Theatre Festival which, as a response to gender disparity at all levels in the theatre industry, sought to broaden the opportunities for women by producing work written by women and with casts made up at least fifty percent by women. Its first showcase production followed in 2018 (staged by Ego Actus) and both iterations adhered to Gael's suggested ensemble of eight actors (five women and three men), performing a total of nineteen roles, an approach that highlights the play's structural flexibility and commitment to centring women's voices in performance.

The play's act of storytelling through avatars lays the groundwork for the play's interrogation of naming - not just as identity, but as power and resistance. The practice of naming, and the use of names as instruments of power, is the first interventionist strategy I examine within the revision, asking how this process reclaims identity and reveals intersecting forces of marginalisation. The title of the play itself places Sycorax's

⁸⁹ Many of Gael's plays have received one-off readings and some have gone on to be formally produced. Several have also been nominated for, or won, grassroots awards. A full list of her plays, along with their readings, productions and accolades is available on her website. Quotation from Fengar Gael and Adam Szymkowicz, 'I Interview Playwrights Part 439: Fengar Gael', Adam Szymkowicz blog, 3 April 2012 <<https://aszym.blogspot.com/2012/04/i-interview-playwrights-part-439-fengar.html>> [accessed 18 September 2015].

name - near taboo in Shakespeare's text - at the centre and endows Sycorax with a new epithet: Cyber Queen of Qamara. Her title stakes her claim on the island of Qamara which Prospero colonised. In Shakespeare's play, Caliban protests: 'This island's mine by Sycorax, my mother, / Which thou tak'st from me' (I.2.331-332); in Gael's version, Sycorax frequently reminds Caliban that it belongs to them both and eventually confronts Prospero along with the rest of the world via her live stream broadcast to every existing functioning screen: 'Qamara was mine, my kingdom before your countrymen colonized and destroyed it!'⁹⁰ Whilst the title seeks to disrupt the logic of Prospero's domination, by titling her the 'cyber' Queen, it is tarnished with a level of hollowness. The term *cyber* confines her authority to the digital realm, suggesting that her sovereignty is mediated by technology rather than grounded in the material soil of the island, highlighting that the conditions of the real world still deny her any lasting claim to power over Qamara. Although her power is manifested through every 'screen in the electrified world', it remains rooted in the technological infrastructure of the same imperial force that seized her physical world.⁹¹ Her rule of the island was only possible initially when it was uninhabited as she faced no opposition, or more specifically, no colonial and patriarchal constraints. As an intersectional intervention, the title insists on presence where the canon once imposed absence, but ultimately reveals how entrenched structures continue to deny her real-world legitimacy.

Nonetheless, Sycorax's new title conveys a rejection of Prospero's actions, and Gael ensures Caliban's name condemns his words too. For Shakespeare's Caliban, there is a long history of conjecture regarding the derivation of the name amongst critics; the most pertinent suggestion recognises the name as an anagram of the Spanish word *caníbal*, originally a label for Caribs, the indigenous people of Lesser Antilles in the Caribbean. Europeans believed the Caribs to have eaten human flesh, leading to the origin of the English word *cannibal*. Many critics note that Caliban's character, then, could be invoking Michel de Montaigne's idea of the noble savage from his *Essays* (31. 'On the Cannibals'), reaffirmed by Gonzalo's later verbatim quotation of John Florio's

⁹⁰ Fengar Gael, 'Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara', unpublished script, December 2018 (p. 68) <<https://fengar.com/playmaster2.php?id=sycorax>> [accessed 1 November 2023].

⁹¹ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 1.

translation of the essay. Caliban's association with cannibalism legitimises Prospero's colonialism in its depiction of his moral inferiority as opposed to presenting him as a victim. The racist stereotyping tied to his name is precisely why Césaire's Caliban abandons the name altogether; Gael, instead, opts to give the name a new angle, one which stems from his genuine attributes. Where Shakespeare's name incites generalised problematic stereotypes, Gael's strives to become personal.

SYCORAX I'll name you Caliban which means mooncalf because you
were born during the fullest phase of the moon, and you
make sounds like a...

(The INFANT CALIBAN moos.)

SYCORAX ...calf. With those hands you'll make a great farmer or
perhaps even a carver like me, but now it's time for you to
suckle my breasts bursting with -- ouch!⁹²

Gael strategically recontextualises the name, from meaning monstrous and grotesque to Shakespeare and his peers, to something individual, based on the time of his birth and the sounds he makes as a baby, echoing Caliban's deep attunement to, and affective bond with, the natural world he inhabits. Similarly, the 'large hands' that Sycorax observes as unusual at Caliban's birth can be read as a physical trait that, in the logic of the original text, Shakespeare's characters might have considered another defect contributing to his image as an 'abominable monster' (II.2.149-150); however, Gael spins the narrative by establishing these as a practical asset, useful for farming and carving.⁹³

Gael reframes the dehumanising insults used by Shakespeare's characters - 'Monster', 'savage' and 'brutish' - as rooted in racial prejudice, presenting justifications for the markers, such as Caliban's scent that one rendered him monstrous. Caliban's 'fishlike

⁹² Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 27.

⁹³ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 26.

smell' (II.2.25) leads Trinculo to decide that Caliban's biological make-up is 'half a fish and half a monster' (III.2.26-27), despite Caliban moments before stating that he knows how to fish, find the best wood and pluck berries, indicating the genesis of his odour. By explicitly unpacking these reasons for the audience, Gael paints the characterisation as an injustice and exposes how naming is wielded as a powerful act that shapes perception, enforces otherness and controls identity:

CALIBAN From here you can see most of Qamara. (pointing) Past the orchards are the wheat fields and gardens, and there's the beach where we fish and swim.

ARIEL So that's why you smell so sea-salty clean,
 Brimming with brine like a boy in a dream.⁹⁴

Ariel's poetic response shifts the tone markedly from Trinculo's derision to lyrical empathy. Caliban's speech here resembles his offer to guide Trinculo through the island in Shakespeare's play; however, where his original offer is met with mockery and a continuation of casual racialised remarks made by Trinculo and others, Gael's Ariel responds with thoughtful recognition, expressing an understanding of the origins and significance of Caliban's scent. Shakespeare's characters treat this odour as barbarian, Gael, by contrast, subverts the tone of these comments, transforming the smell from 'ancient fishlike' to 'sea-salty clean'.⁹⁵ By connecting Caliban's perceived deformities with his relationship to the natural world, and merely a part of the 'peaceful, pastoral lives' he and his Mother live, his behaviours that seemed bestial to the outsiders in Shakespeare, are now shown to be resourceful and even admirable.⁹⁶ The insight into Caliban's history of his sustainable life on the island with his mother, prior to his enslavement to Prospero, changes perceptions of the character's identity from hideous savage to colonised victim. Here, Gael unsettles what Ian Smith defines as a

⁹⁴ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 40

⁹⁵ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 27.

⁹⁶ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 28.

‘metalanguage of race’ by providing a counter-narrative to the colonial gaze.⁹⁷ Smith argues that early modern Europeans framed the outsider as a ‘cultural alien’ whose perceived lack of rhetorical eloquence - being ‘barren of speech’ - was used to justify their geographic exclusion.⁹⁸ Smith asserts that these linguistic ‘errors’ formed a ‘generative script’ from which ideological premises of racial difference, namely ‘barbarism’, were concretised.⁹⁹ Gael acknowledges this foundational entrenchment by targeting the embedded colonial narratives that have historically defined Caliban’s identity. What was once used as evidence of Caliban’s subhuman nature is reframed as ecological adaptation, undermining the colonial dynamic by restoring context and agency to Caliban’s actions.

This ecological and cultural grounding is further enhanced by Caliban’s reconstructed personal backstory, which rejects Shakespeare’s depiction of the slave. Gael uses Sycorax’s language to support this stance of repudiation: ‘Prospero lied to call him an illiterate savage who only uttered obscenities!’¹⁰⁰ She continues, explaining that she ‘taught Caliban how to speak, read and write, and while it’s true he tended to mimic the animals, he often spoke well, even eloquently’.¹⁰¹ In reintroducing Caliban as articulate and Sycorax as the authoritative teacher of his articulation, Gael responds to the kind of colonial silencing that Ania Loomba and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identify, where marginalised voices are systematically erased or misrepresented within dominant imperial discourses. Loomba highlights how colonial narratives silence colonised subjects, particularly women, by denying them authentic representation, while Spivak famously argues that the subaltern truly cannot speak in a way that is recognised within existing structures of power because their voices are distorted or ignored.¹⁰² This intersectional critique extends beyond character and into authorship and what it

⁹⁷ Ian Smith, ‘Barbarian Errors: Performing Race in Early Modern England’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 49.2 (1998), 168-186 (p. 171).

⁹⁸ Smith, ‘Barbarian Errors’, p. 168; Smith, ‘Barbarian Errors’, p. 175.

⁹⁹ Smith, ‘Barbarian Errors’, p. 171.

¹⁰⁰ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 27

¹⁰¹ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 28

¹⁰² Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1998); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), pp. 271-316.

represents. Prominent scholars have argued traditionally that Prospero functions as a self-portrait of Shakespeare; although a straightforward identification of Prospero with Shakespeare now might seem naive or sentimental, critics continue to cautiously note parallels between them, comparing 'the skill of the great magician with the skill of the playwright', as Greenblatt does.¹⁰³ Likewise, Annabel Patterson assumes Shakespeare is speaking through the mouthpiece of Prospero, using her comparison of the play's Epilogue and Shakespeare's valedictory bow from his career as evidence.¹⁰⁴ If one accepts this allegorical reading, or more simply aligns Shakespeare as Prospero's creator, then Gael's critique of Prospero, chiefly his narrative omissions and distortions, can be read as a wider confrontation of Shakespeare's own authority. Gael's Prospero, however, ensures that no blame lies with him when he retaliates: 'That's not my fault! That damn fool playwright took huge liberties, planting metered gibberish on thespian tongues, all to create more conflict'.¹⁰⁵ In this metatheatrical moment Prospero severs the often-assumed tether between his character and Shakespeare, delegitimising Prospero's authority and redirecting accountability for the vicious and problematic stereotyping onto Shakespeare. By naming Shakespeare as the author behind Prospero's oppressive narrative and, therefore, the ultimate source of colonial distortions, Gael's play not only challenges Shakespeare's use of names and words but the authority foundation of the canonical text.

The dismantling of Shakespeare's language and command, and more widely the Western canon, that Gael makes through acts of naming is enhanced by the next strategy I examine in the play: the introduction of new or alternative backstories for known characters. Gael's reinvention of Ariel's history reshapes how the character is perceived, taking him from a mysterious, obedient spirit into an autonomous, wise and complicated figure informed by his personal history. This reconfiguration both destabilises the fixed identities imposed by the original text and unveils the social influence of gender expectations and power structures that govern the world of the

¹⁰³ Greenblatt, 'Introduction to *The Tempest*', p. 3205.

¹⁰⁴ Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 160.

¹⁰⁵ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 68.

play. Opposing Prospero's story of Ariel - Sycorax's servant, imprisoned in a pine tree for disobedience before being temporarily freed and enslaved by Prospero - in Shakespeare's text, Gael's play stages the creation and life of Ariel before Prospero. Sycorax carves Ariel from a tree as a simple companion for Caliban, 'someone who speaks the same language' as him, 'someone to go fishing with or stroll the beach'.¹⁰⁶ They decide Ariel must be able to fly, sing and crucially, tell stories, realising that, to do so, he needs 'a past and knowledge of worlds beyond our shores, the habits and histories of other people', making him 'the perfect man'.¹⁰⁷ This wish brings a pre-existing ancient ageless and bodiless sprite into his empty body, whose worldly knowledge, built from generations of observing humans, shapes him as an agent of patriarchy who corrupts Caliban. Urging Caliban to welcome Prospero's arrival and colonisation of the island, Ariel argues that Caliban needs masculine authority in his life since 'too much mother makes a man strange'.¹⁰⁸ Ariel justifies, 'It's the way of the world: men must rule, / Your mother's made you look the fool'.¹⁰⁹ Convincing Caliban further, he educates him on the gender dynamics from which Caliban has been sheltered on their remote island, informing him that men are 'Fated from birth to wage great wars, / While women consign themselves to chores' and that women are only 'worth half a man'.¹¹⁰ Caliban remains stubborn in his defence of his mother so Ariel, instead, devises a plan:

ARIEL	Once they land, we'll steal their boat; It's sound enough to stay afloat Till we approach a thriving port Where sailors and their sluts cavort! Trust me, we'll have better lives; We'll win battles, then find wives!
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¹⁰⁶ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 29.

¹⁰⁷ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 30.

¹⁰⁸ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 53.

¹⁰⁹ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 53.

¹¹⁰ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p.54.

CALIBAN	Wives...?
ARIEL	They're easily stolen and later tamed
	If beaten soundly till they're trained
	To come when called to bend like reeds,
	Their purpose clear: to serve our needs. ¹¹¹

In his efforts to persuade Caliban to act according to gender convention and 'the way of the world', he frames the desired qualities and behaviours as biological. He claims that they are 'fated from birth', implying that men are naturally dominant and violent and women are submissive, inferior and destined to serve men, but in doing so he exposes the very opposite. The regular rhyme scheme - a quality granted to Ariel for Sycorax and Caliban's entertainment - gives his sexist, binary ideology an aural appeal which coats the misogyny in a playful rhythm for Caliban's easy consumption. The effect is reminiscent of the structure of nursery rhymes, which sometimes serve to socialise children into cultural norms. Here, rhyme functions similarly, teaching patriarchal ideology, along with the couplets that are presented as proverbs, lending a false sense of authority to Ariel's words. These gender tropes, however, are unnatural to Caliban, shown as he defends his mother's talent and artistry or exclaims 'I'm not a thief; I'm not violent; and I can't abandon mother!' and his lack of desire for wives or battles.¹¹² If they are not inherent to a being who has been brought up in isolation then they are no mark of sex, rather they are a construction. This interaction between the men brings to mind Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity which theorises that gender and its conventions are in no way innate, but are 'made from repeated performances that only give the illusion of an interior essence', first introduced in the introductory chapter.¹¹³ Butler argues that gender and its conventions are produced through a 'stylized repetition of acts, through time' rather than biologically attached to sex.¹¹⁴ Caliban has not witnessed the social and cultural 'stylized repetition of acts' Butler suggests make

¹¹¹ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 54.

¹¹² Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 54.

¹¹³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 193.

¹¹⁴ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, 40 (1988), 519-531 (p. 520) (original emphasis).

up gender in his isolation, making him the very example of the legitimacy of Butler's claims.¹¹⁵ Ariel, on the other hand, has watched them evolve and solidify for hundreds of years, building up a long history of gender norms over time, giving him a strong sense of belief, hence his encouragement of its continuation. As demonstrated effectively by Morrison, Sears and Kışlal, Gael communicates that these oppressive forces are imposed externally and are internalised and enacted within marginalised communities themselves, key to their perpetuation. The vision Ariel teases Caliban with where men dominate and women are subservient, is reminiscent of Sycorax's backstory, in her time before banishment, illustrating how deeply entrenched hierarchies of gendered power remain.

This internalisation of hierarchical gender roles is not only perpetuated through wider societal and historical narratives but is also cultivated through more intimate familial and cultural structures. Gael begins to expose this in the first half of the play by showing the stark differences between the life of men and women in early modern Islamic society as Sycorax, using avatars, plays out her life in Algiers. Elaborating on the earlier emphasis on the construction of gender customs, Gael develops this approach by differentiating gendered and racialised experiences. This distinction is amplified by the added metatheatrical structure which draws further attention to the processes by which these identities are constructed, performed, and reproduced across time. It echoes Kışlal's revision of *Othello*, a similarly self-referential performance which isolates and contrasts distinct experiences based on identity. *How to Kill an Othello* stages a metatheatrical reckoning with Shakespeare's racial and gender systems by showing how Desdemona's partial feminist awakening reinforces Othello's marginalisation and draws parallels between these historical dynamics and contemporary structures of inequality, set to the backdrop of the 2012 Olympics. Here, the focus is on Western hierarchies within the colonial canon, as well as the limits of white feminist solidarity. In contrast, Gael's revision uses the same strategy to recontextualise Sycorax's story,

¹¹⁵ Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity has sometimes been interpreted as undermining the legitimacy of transgender identities and gender dysphoria in its argument that gender is learned and performative. Butler has clarified that the theory affirms the validity of all gender identities, including trans identities, as real and lived, precisely because they are constituted through socially embedded, embodied practices.

presenting her as a figure moulded by and resisting the norms of early modern Islamic society. Gael first restores Sycorax's Muslim identity - a detail that Ambereen Dadabhoy argues 'Shakespeare's works deliberately excise', erasing 'the Islamic presence from the geographies to which it belongs'.¹¹⁶ While Sycorax is not 'explicitly labeled as Muslim' in Shakespeare's text, as Dadabhoy illustrates, her 'geographic affiliations inscribe [her] as such'.¹¹⁷ This is a crucial consideration for an intersectional analysis; just as Stuart Hall suggests that race functions as a sliding 'signifier' with a 'discursive power' to produce 'what is *made* to be true' rather than innate, Dadabhoy demonstrates that religion is leveraged through this same racialising logic.¹¹⁸ In this light, as Dadabhoy argues, 'figuring Muslims as racialized underscores the protean quality of racial discourse in both the early modern period and in our own time, their unending capacity to shift and accommodate the mandates of power.'¹¹⁹ Reimposing this interconnected racial and religious identity allows Gael to then demonstrate how it converges with gendered expectations to delineate the network of interacting oppressive forces that constrain subjectivity - in both early modern timelines and today - expanding the scope of the intersectional theory analysed so far.

In the play, cultural conventions forbid women from reading and writing, but Sycorax's brother, Rachid, who was 'being educated to become a scholar', bends these rules and teaches his sister to read.¹²⁰ As Sycorax begins to challenge other expectations, such as forgoing an arranged marriage, Rachid comes to regret his decision and reasserts the belief that her 'sex can't be trusted with knowledge; you can't use it wisely'.¹²¹ Her education is withdrawn and at sixteen, she is forced to marry Karim, a fifty year old man with three wives and daughters her age. Gael's stage directions suggest a deliberate doubling between Rachid and Ariel - both notably agents of gender enforcement - as

¹¹⁶ Ambereen Dadabhoy, *Shakespeare Through Islamic Worlds* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2024), p. 31.

¹¹⁷ Dadabhoy, p. 46.

¹¹⁸ Stuart Hall, 'Subjects in History: Making Diasporic Identities [1998]', in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, ed. by Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), pp. 329-338 (p. 330).

¹¹⁹ Dadabhoy, p. 19.

¹²⁰ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 2.

¹²¹ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 3.

well as between Karim and Prospero, figures representing patriarchal tradition and influence. This reenactment of Sycorax's youth highlights the role of religion in creating or upholding cultural and social gender division. Sycorax draws explicitly on the Quran to expose these oppressive norms, declaring:

ANCIENT SYCORAX

The Quran refers to females as the fields of men who are instructed to plow whence they please. Alas, old Karim plowed, and plowed, and plowed. (*addressing her avatar self*) Go ahead, show them what hell I endured.

(KARIM tosses SYCORAX on the table, flings himself on her belly, grunts, then leaves.)

ANCIENT SYCORAX

But lucky me: the Quran also instructs men to avoid women during menstruation. They can't approach us till we've ceased bleeding, so we're exiled to the company of other women.¹²²

Gael's depiction links religious doctrines directly to the enforcement of strict divisions, simultaneously marginalising women while inadvertently creating spaces of female solidarity. What emerges, then, is a model of power that relies less on singular authority than on the continual reproduction of hierarchy across both public structures and private relations.

Regarding menstruation, verse 2:222 in the Quran states that 'It is a hurt, so keep away from women during menses, and do not approach them until they are purified.'¹²³

Whilst it is widely assumed today, with reference to various Hadith (accounts attributed to the prophet Muhammad), that this verse indicates that only sexual relations are

¹²² Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 9.

¹²³ *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, ed. by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Harper One, 2015), p. 58

prohibited, Gael takes the ideas around menstruation as ritually unclean and taboo, and imagines a society that follows the words of Quran more strictly.¹²⁴ The circumstances of Sycorax's forced marriage to an older man, the ban on women's education and menstrual segregation lead to Karim's daughters visiting Sycorax in private with the hopes of being educated by her. Gael transforms the oppressive gender conventions into a space of female community which, in turn, further emphasises the gender disparity. In this hidden enclave, the daughters discover Sycorax's magical ability to carve mice from wood and bring them to life. Fearing the ongoing invasion of the Turks, where the Sultan 'has a harem of three hundred girls guarded by eunuchs', the girls beg Sycorax to use her powers to murder him.¹²⁵ Sycorax instead conjures an army of rats to eat their food supplies. Contrary to Prospero's accusations, her intent is defensive, yet her rats 'also attracted fleas that carried the plague virus'.¹²⁶ Gael turns the 'mischiefs manifold and sorceries terrible' (I.2.264) that Prospero pits as the cause of her banishment in Shakespeare's text into an act of protection for women at risk of harm; nonetheless, the result of exile remains the same as Sycorax is expelled by three mullahs who in Kane's production wear purposely artificial paper beards with visible origami lines, symbolic of the social construction of patriarchy.¹²⁷ Gael's intentional revision of events destabilises what Edward W. Said defines as Orientalism, a portrayal that places the colonial other as an object of exotic fascination and fear which serves to reinforce colonial authority.¹²⁸ As Said asserts, 'to say simply that Orientalism was a rationalization of colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism, rather than after the fact'; it actively creates and reproduces the conditions

¹²⁴ Nasr writes in his commentary of the verse: 'This verse is understood to prohibit vaginal intercourse during menstruation without prohibiting other contact. The commentators mention that before Islam menstruating women would not sleep in the same bed or eat from the same plate as others, Arab customs that may have been influenced by Jewish (Leviticus 15:19–33) or Zoroastrian (Avesta, Vendidad 16) prescriptions and proscriptions, which mandated a relatively high level of separation for menstruating women and the ritual purification of objects that they had touched (R, T).' p. 145.

¹²⁵ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 16.

¹²⁶ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 18.

¹²⁷ *The Tempest*, I. 2. 264.

¹²⁸ The application of Said's theory to the early modern period can be scrutinised as anachronistic due to the absence of the global hegemony Said viewed as a prerequisite for such discourse; however, it remains an important analytical tool here for understanding the tropes of 'othering' that Gael's contemporary revision seeks to dismantle.

that make domination possible.¹²⁹ Gael reframes the sorcery, perceived as malevolent, as a defensive plague, highlighting how the narrative exclusion of Sycorax's perspective in Shakespeare's text allows her evil characterisation to be constructed and assumed. At the same time, by uncovering the compounding forms of oppression - from the explicit enforcement of gendered behaviour onto Sycorax to the colonial erasure of Qamara - Gael revises Sycorax's villainy as a legible response to trauma, fostering audience sympathy for a displaced matriarch whose agency was systematically dismantled by patriarchal and imperial forces. Gael's subversion and appropriation of Sycorax's depiction as an evil witch in *The Tempest*, critically questions traditional gender stereotypes and Shakespeare's representation of women and shows how cultural and textual traditions have historically excluded, misrepresented, or vilified female agency under the guise of moral or social order.



FIG 2. *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, dir. by Joan Kane (HERE, 2018). Young Sycorax (Lauren Capkanis) being banished by the three mullahs on a stage littered with dead rats. Photograph © Al Foote III. Reproduced with permission.

¹²⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p. 61

The stark gendered differences brought to the fore through Sycorax and Ariel are destabilised by the example of Caliban, who lives a life free from the oppressive societal forces that encouraged them and acts without their influence until Ariel arrives. Ariel's corruption of Caliban, leading him to abandon his mother, is the reason Sycorax is so filled with rage now and desperate to tell her story of wrongdoing to the world with her digital avatars. Anticipating current debates around AI's volatility and uncertain future, Sycorax's engagement with artificial intelligence quickly becomes fraught, as her avatars gain sentience, beginning with Ariel:

SYCORAX	How strange that two young men have helped me forget my anger at men.
ARIEL	Why is it always men you blame? Do other women feel the same?
SYCORAX	Ha! Most are too busy cooking, cleaning, and raising children to think about their feelings.
ARIEL	So how do you appear to be? Are you the woman you think you see? Or are you an avatar just like me, Playing your role unwittingly? ¹³⁰

Ariel lets slip that he is aware that he is indeed an avatar. This gaining of consciousness follows a popular plot device of science-fiction literature and film where AI grows able to perceive feelings and possess autonomy, as to warn the media's recipients of the complications and dangers associated with its risks and raise questions about the definition of humanity; however Gael's positioning of this moment in the text, in the midst of a conversation concerning gender conflict and social gender roles, places additional weight on Ariel's realisation. His interrogation - asking 'how do you appear to be? Are you the woman you think you see?' - materialises the detachment between outward-facing expression and the interior self central to Butler's theory that gender

¹³⁰ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 50.

'identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results'.¹³¹ Gael compounds this artifice by casting stage actors as unconscious performers of Sycorax's history, reflecting Butler's observation that, with regards to gender, 'the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief', or perhaps as Ariel would put it, play their role unwittingly.¹³² Theatrical performance, more generally, can serve as a simplified example of how Butler believes gender functions literally as performance, as 'the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts', but without its socio-cultural complexity, I add.¹³³ By planting Ariel's awakening of consciousness here, Gael draws attention to the performativity required to create gender and the conventions we associate with it, which her central protagonist's story works to highlight and criticise. This destabilisation pushes Gael's revision beyond character reinterpretation into ontological instability, as Ariel becomes a site through which identity itself is exposed as performative and constructed.

The final revisionist strategy I return to is audience education: a strategy that prompts the audience to reflect critically on the play's interrogation of oppressing powers and to carry its relevance forth into their understanding of the world. In the play, this educational turn is not realised through the offering of hope, as seen in the works of Morrison and Cobb, but rather through a darker warning, more akin to Sears and Kışlal who provoke audiences to confront the recurring nature of oppression and its enduring consequences. Gael returns the figure of Sycorax to villain status. This anti-closure ending resists the comfort of narrative resolution. In the mode of Brecht's theatre, withdrawing any offer of hope, the ending emphasises to the audience the continuation of oppression, prompting them to reflect critically on the play's interrogation of power, identity and marginalisation, ensuring its relevance resonates beyond the performance into their understanding of the world. This is heightened by the spectator's sympathy, elicited by the young girl of Algiers who lingers even as she descends into digital

¹³¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 34.

¹³² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 192.

¹³³ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution', p. 521.

tyranny, as a consequence of witnessing the intersecting oppressions that systematically fracture her identity. Since, as I have argued, revision must be a multidirectional tool in which both the performance confronts the audience and the audience reflects critically on the performance, Gael's ending is a clear example of how revisions produce this dialectical dynamic through anti-closure. This reciprocity is also exemplified in *How To Kill an Othello's* ending in which a repeated sequence begins from the start and Césaire's *Une Tempête's* similarly unsettling ending, in which Prospero refuses to relinquish control of the island and Caliban after many years have passed and Caliban's ongoing fight for liberation is shown through his defiant singing of a song of resistance. These disheartening pictures leave the audience with an unresolved but impactful image of enduring colonial struggle. Gael pushes this further and explores how structures of colonial, racial, and gendered oppression are not only inherited or continuing but actively regenerated. She re-establishes Sycorax in the role of villain to reveal, all the more powerfully after portraying her complexity and vulnerability, how marginalisation on multiple fronts corrupts and consumes cyclically.

Ariel's awakening of consciousness is the first moment that demonstrates Sycorax's growing tyranny. Although the avatar performance shows the world that Ariel was never Sycorax's slave in the way that Prospero had envisioned but created initially as a companion, the performance itself enslaves Ariel and the other avatars. Sycorax, irritated by Ariel's self-awareness, declares: 'I did not program awareness never mind insolence!'¹³⁴ Ariel, then 'sick of serving a selfish crone', attempts to politicise the other avatars, mimicking the consciousness-raising activities of the second-wave Women's Movement in the 1960s and 1970s and the black consciousness movement of the 1960s.¹³⁵ Prospero's later command to Caliban - 'You're supposed to obey me!' - then echoes Sycorax's own insistence on control, aligning her closely with the colonising patriarch that formerly represented the authoritarian power she opposed.¹³⁶ These

¹³⁴ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 50.

¹³⁵ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 50.

¹³⁶ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 62.

increasing similarities between the two figures climax as the living, Ancient Sycorax appeals to the avatars, telling them of her pains:

ANCIENT SYCORAX	At first, I was content with tipping teapots, hiding latchkeys; then I progressed to buckling carpets, toppling ladders, yanking canes.
PROSPERO	Ha, ha! Go on!
ANCIENT SYCORAX	Later I advanced to spooking horses, starting fires, thinning ice, breaking wheels on carts and nudging surgeons' elbows -- oh, that was great fun! Then later, much later, I tinkered with the brakes of buses, pushed buttons on the control panels of planes, trains, and street lights causing so many wrecks, I lost count.
PROSPERO	What about weaponry?
ANCIENT SYCORAX	Oh, I had great sport with guns, placing loaded pistols near homicidal boys.
PROSPERO	Naughty, naughty! Ha, ha!
MIRANDA	You didn't! Ha, ha! ¹³⁷

Prospero and Miranda seek out and indulge in the fine details of her malice, showing great joy at the havoc she caused in her fury. Their voyeuristic fascination with the violence that her suffering has produced symbolises their involvement in her moral decline. Sycorax, who was once a victim of Prospero's colony and lies, now resembles him more obviously than she does her younger avatar self. The final sequence exemplifies Gael's central warning that oppression, once internalised, reproduces itself in increasingly destructive forms. Ancient Sycorax deletes the avatars one by one: what

¹³⁷ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 65-66.

she frames as a neat digital erasure where avatars are ‘key-stroked into the Cloud’ becomes a disturbing act of mass murder. The avatars, who by this point exhibit full emotional awareness, react as humans: Prospero ‘*grasps his heart and collapses*’; Ariel attempts to flee but falls ‘*with a thud*’.¹³⁸ In portraying digital deletion as physical death, Gael underlines the real human cost of impersonal, systematised violence. When it is Avatar Sycorax’s turn, she ‘*swiftly snatches the remote from the Ancient Sycorax and points it back at her heart*’.¹³⁹ Ancient Sycorax ‘expires’ and Avatar Sycorax claims that she now possesses Sycorax’s ‘uploaded memories along with her bad attitude’.¹⁴⁰ These uploaded memories include the events that avatar Sycorax did not bear witness to, namely Caliban’s potential departure and the catalyst for Sycorax’s betrayal-fuelled fury. Avatar Sycorax, now knowing and feeling all that the original Sycorax felt, intentionally does nothing to put a stop to the malware Ancient Sycorax has maliciously injected into grids ‘which are spreading into transformers, substations, cables and power lines over the entire electrified world. Utility specialists are calling it the most virulent cyber attack ever, ha, ha!’¹⁴¹ The play’s closing moment, in which the stage descends into darkness as Sycorax ‘cackles with glee’, delivers a desolate theatrical metaphor for a world plunged back into chaos by the very figure once positioned as its victim.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 69.

¹³⁹ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 70.

¹⁴⁰ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 70.

¹⁴¹ Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 70.

¹⁴² Gael, *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, p. 70.



FIG 3. *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara*, dir. by Joan Kane (HERE, 2018). Young Sycorax (Lauren Capkanis) holding the remote used to collapse the avatars. Photograph © Al Foote III. Reproduced with permission.

The ending offers no redemption, emphasising how oppression persists through endurance, internalisation and reproduction. By taking Sycorax on this journey from a young oppressed girl of Algiers with a desire to help others to a morally poisoned cyber witch with a bitter ambition to inflict harm on others, Gael shows the audience, firstly, a character that challenges Shakespeare's depiction of the ideal women as chaste, obedient, kind and naive, as represented by Desdemona and Miranda, the latter of which is celebrated by Ferdinand for such qualities: 'So perfect and so peerless, are created / Of every creature's best' (III. 1. 47-48). But she also shows the audience a character traumatised by her own suffering through the autocratic and vindictive Sycorax that the play ends with, flirting with an ironic return to Shakespeare's depiction of Sycorax as a threatening villainous figure. Shakespeare's *Tempest* ends with reconciliation, forgiveness, and a patriarchal restoration; Gael's refusal to offer such orderly closure in her revision of *The Tempest* instead implicates the audience in a far bleaker process. After watching Sycorax's transformation from victim to villain, the audience becomes witness not to closure but to contagion, where legacies of colonialism and patriarchy are not undone, but reprogrammed and perpetuated in new forms. In place of catharsis, Gael leaves the audience with complicity and consequence,

prompting them to reckon with the burden of history's repetition and to recognise their traces in the present world beyond the stage.

Conclusion

My analysis of these intersectional revisions has shown that all four pieces of theatre employ comparable strategies to give a platform to Shakespeare's characters who were wronged through their representation, or lack of. The strategies I have highlighted worked together to centralise, name and historicise the characters that needed a voice, or a new voice, and push aside the previously dominant characters, Iago and Prospero, to make space for them and their story. I propose what remains at the core of the highly regarded intersectional works by Morrison and Sears, and the newer, as yet less distinguished plays by Gael and Kışlal, is their relationship to the audience and their desire for audience education. All four revisions have a political agenda, by the definition of their appropriative form, and they all seek to do more than simply entertain the audience; rather, they seek to educate, through various methods which I have analysed, however, there is a tension between this desire to educate and the relative inaccessibility of their productions. *Desdemona's* intricate and I suggest, authentic portrayal of African female identity complicates its capability for reproduction. The performance depends heavily on Traoré to play Barbary/Sa'ran and, as Thompson affirms, 'it is simply impossible to imagine the performance piece without her. Her performance is so central, singular, and unique that *Desdemona* is not reproducible without her'.¹⁴³ Thus, Traoré's availability dictates the play's performance run which so far has been very limited. The role of *Desdemona* herself has proven more reproducible as two actresses, Tina Benko and Elizabeth Marvel, have fulfilled the part, but Corredera raises vital questions about the skills required to play a figure who, it is important to remember, voices all other characters aside from Barbary/Sa'ran: 'At particular stake here is her ability to use accents in order to aurally shift between the white *Desdemona* and the African Soun and Othello. How does a performer do so

¹⁴³ Thompson, p. 503.

without slipping into stereotype and minstrelsy?’¹⁴⁴ She compares this risk of turning the play into exactly what the play detests with the uncomplicated reproducibility of Paula Vogel’s *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* and Anne-Marie MacDonald’s *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, for which ‘a simple YouTube search reveals that MacDonald’s play has been frequently performed’ by theatre companies and schools. *Desdemona*’s published script transcends the performance’s reach, however, but a play that so heavily relies on its music, actor interpretation and voices necessarily has a weakened impact on the page. Another YouTube search shows *Harlem Duet* has been performed more frequently, mainly by local theatre companies and amateur performers, although not exclusively; the play was performed in 2006 at the Stratford Festival (the first play to be written by an African-Canadian playwright, and to be directed by a black woman at the festival), in 2018 at the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto, where it was first performed, and as part of the Bard on the Beach festival in Vancouver in 2022. Again, the publication of the script aids the play’s ability to be read, taught and performed. The more recent and less canonical revisions I discuss in this chapter are both as yet unpublished. *How to Kill an Othello* and *Sycorax: Cyber Queen of Qamara* only exist in their singular performance runs, and additionally Gael’s script can be found on her website only by those who know what they are looking for. The relationship these revisions have to their audience is of vital importance if the plays hope to educate those watching and expect them to carry forth their learnings into the real world. The limitations placed on seeing these performances then significantly limits the chance of their educational ambitions being fulfilled. As I set out at the beginning of this chapter, a revision works in multiple directions. It is more than Rich’s ‘looking back, seeing with fresh eyes’; of equal importance to the ‘looking back’ that is being performed by the author is that their ‘looking back’ is being seen. As the tree that falls in the forest and is not heard, the revisions’ unperceived existence makes no impact, especially when the intended impact is to educate audiences. The accessibility of the revisions is perhaps itself a symptom of a greater crisis of representation: one that is precisely what these revisions strive to defy.

¹⁴⁴ Corredera, p. 252.

Chapter Three

Recasting Shakespeare: Embodiment as Adaptation

Because an actor's embodied presence both communicates a dramatic narrative and evokes cultural assumptions associated with skin color, gender, sexuality, and ability, casting choices are never neutral.¹

- Claire Syler

In the last chapter, I argued that the inaccessibility and underfunding of contemporary Shakespearean revisions inhibit the far-reaching impact that their intersectional approach can have on audiences. Their capacity to fulfil their educational and political ambitions beyond relatively small, self-selecting spectator communities is limited. If this is the case, then perhaps a turn to more mainstream drama is necessary for adaptors of Shakespeare to project their critiques of racial and gendered representation into view. In this chapter, I will focus on productions that largely adhere to Shakespeare's texts and which are situated in mainstream theatres. I refer to productions that might make edits and cuts for the sake of running time, add small interjections into the text, usually for humour or currency, or change lines that feel problematic in a contemporary context but, on the whole, aim to perform Shakespeare's play on a contemporary stage. I do not refer to a commitment to 'original practice'; rather, this chapter investigates quite the

¹ Claire Syler, 'Introduction', in *Casting a Movement: The Welcome Table Initiative*, ed. by Claire Syler and Daniel Banks (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 4-11 (p. 3).

opposite: how mainstream productions leverage the familiarity of the Shakespearean text to engage a broader, contemporary public with issues of race and gender.²

The goal of the contemporary Shakespeare productions that I focus on is to disseminate Shakespeare and make his work accessible to a mass audience, as indicated by Shakespeare's Globe's mission statement, to 'make Shakespeare accessible for all', and by the Royal Shakespeare Company's, 'to ensure that Shakespeare is for everyone, unlocking the power of his plays and live performance, throughout the UK and across the world'.³ These companies, in their twinned purpose, must accordingly stay faithful to Shakespeare's script while making alterations to ensure inclusivity, avoiding the radical rewriting of the drama's words practised by the revisionists discussed in the previous chapter. The various methods they use to increase accessibility include their efforts to make performances available for differing abilities through their wheelchair access, wheelchair seats and assisted performances; they offer various ticket prices in an attempt to make the plays financially within reach. The productions of the Globe and RSC have a tendency to modernise the location and time of the plays, self-consciously positioning the drama for spectators within a broadly familiar context. Casting is a tool that they can utilise to embody a diversity of representation that more closely reflects its audience or the wider British population, thereby countering charges of exclusivity; however, whether such casting choices meaningfully educate audiences or merely advance inclusivity without challenging interpretive habits is arguable, a question that this chapter addresses directly. I therefore frame casting as an adaptive strategy: a means by which politically inflected interpretations of race and gender can reach

² Original theatre practice refers to 'the series of techniques for performance, or preparation for performance, of plays from the early modern period which later-modern practitioners believe may be similar to those of Shakespeare and his theatrical contemporaries.' These include, but are not limited to, the replication of authentic early modern costume, pronunciation, acoustic music and sounds, and racial casting – including the use of blackface. For more on original practices, see Don Weingust, 'Authentic Performances or Performances of Authenticity? Original Practices and the Repertory Schedule', *Shakespeare*, 10.4 (2014) 402-410 (p. 402).

³ Royal Shakespeare Company, *About Us* <www.rsc.org.uk/about-us> [accessed 8 May 2024]; Shakespeare's Globe, *About Us* <www.shakespearesglobe.com/discover/about-us/> [accessed 08 May 2024].

mainstream Shakespearean theatre, which is notably institutional, without encountering the barriers of accessibility that constrain revisionist rewriting.

This chapter explores contemporary productions of Shakespeare, focusing specifically on their use of casting because this is one way that these productions, committed to Shakespeare's script, can adapt the plays, both in order to put a distinctive stamp on them and demonstrate their continuing currency. Whilst casting itself is not typically considered a form of adaptation, I propose that casting in a production of Shakespeare's script and other canonical works carries significant value as it works to adapt and unsettle the meanings of the play, whether intentionally or not. It is a mode of revision that operates at the level of embodiment rather than textual transformation. As I will show, it can allow new insights into the plays, it can implicitly criticise traditional casting and it can alter how an audience receives the dramatic action, motivations, relationships and themes. For example, if a black man were cast as Romeo and a white woman as Juliet, the feud between the Montagues and Capulets would become racially coded whether or not the production consciously drew attention to this; or if a woman were cast as Othello, it could alter how the audience interpreted Iago's motivations for Othello's downfall, rooting them in misogynistic prejudice.

By exploring casting as its own adaptive mode, I investigate how casting, like rewriting, reconfigures Shakespeare's representation of race and gender in newer socio-political contexts. My analysis interrogates the relationship between casting choices and the audience, deciding whether the intent of the company's casting or the audience's perception of it, in so far as either of these can be determined, is the adaptive force and to what extent the audience are expected to acknowledge the casting. It examines the notion that spectators should be 'blind' to a cross-casting, as suggested by popular terms such as 'colour-blind casting' and 'gender-blind casting' (and what 'blindness' means in this context), versus the possibility that such choices actively draw attention to themselves within the world of the play. Whilst I contend that terms like 'colour-blind' and 'gender-blind' are unclear (as well as using a metaphor of disability to problematic ends), I employ them here because I wish to emphasise and question the

level of invisibility they ask for.⁴ With that, I ask how different intended or received levels of visibility of casting choices prompt different audience responses. I also consider how casting choices introduce new meaning to the play, alters its reception and the extent to which they construct theatrical meaning. By addressing these questions, I confront the challenges or limitations that the ‘progressive’ casting strategies reveal. These focuses inform my reading of four contemporary productions: Iqbal Khan’s *Othello* for the Royal Shakespeare Company (2015), Gemma Bodinetz’s *Othello* for Everyman (2018), Phyllida Lloyd’s *The Tempest* for Donmar Warehouse (2016) and Elizabeth Freestone’s *The Tempest* for the Royal Shakespeare Company (2023), all of which use what I categorise as nontraditional casting strategies. Khan casts Lucian Msamati as a black Iago against Hugh Quarshie as Othello with the stated intent of shifting the focus from race; Bodinetz regenders Othello as a black lesbian, played by Golda Rosheuvel, alongside a white female Desdemona; Lloyd uses a framing device to stage an all-female, diversely cast *Tempest* set in a women’s prison; finally, Freestone’s production features a white female Prospero by a white Miranda and Caliban. The critical framework applied here builds directly upon Stefka Mihaylova’s 2023 study *Viewers in Distress*, which explores the ways in which audiences can be shocked into new ways of thinking and perceiving. In her examination of twenty-first century avant-garde performance, Mihaylova asks, crucially, how ‘can we all get along?’⁵ She argues that spectators’ reactions to performances become their own piece of performance art: I extract her emphasis on the contractual relationship between production and spectator to probe the implications of nontraditional casting and prompt a deeper reflection on the ways in which gender and race can be reconfigured from the perspective of audience reception.

⁴ Given that I determine these terms problematic, outdated and unclear, I prefer to use Carla Della Gatta’s proposed alternative ‘nondeliberate identity casting’. She thoughtfully considers and nuances popular casting strategies in Carla Della Gatta, ‘Casting Shakespeare Today’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Race*, ed. by Patricia Akhimie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 477-489.

⁵ Stefka Mihaylova, *Viewers in Distress: Race, Gender, Religion, and Avant-Garde Performance at the Turn of the Twentieth-First Century* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023), p. 1.

Types of Casting

Thus far in this chapter, I have used 'casting' as an intentionally broad term. Specifically, I refer to nontraditional casting strategies, which Ayanna Thompson defines as, 'in the most reductive sense, [...] the practice of casting actors of color for roles that were originally conceived as white and written for white actors.'⁶ While Thompson's definition focuses primarily on racial recasting, my use of the term also includes actors whose gender does not match that of the intended role. Thompson's exploration of multiculturalism in the theatre breaks down nontraditional casting strategies further by citing the Non-Traditional Casting Project's (since 2007, renamed Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts) four models:

Colorblind casting: a meritocratic model in which actors are cast without regard to race; the best actor for the best role

Societal casting: a socially informed model in which actors of color are cast in roles originally conceived as being white if people of color perform these roles in society as a whole

Conceptual casting: a conceptually conceived model in which actors of color are cast in roles to enhance the play's social resonance

Cross-cultural casting: another conceptually conceived model in which the entire world of the play is translated to a different culture and location.⁷

To expand on these terms further, colour-blind casting prioritises merit and disregards the race of an actor, similarly to gender-blind casting where gender is, in theory, not a consideration. These casting models suggest that the audience too should be 'blind' to the race or gender of the actor in the performance. Societal casting consciously makes

⁶ Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 76.

⁷ Thompson, p. 76.

use of stereotypes and casts actors in roles that they deem reflective of their race (or, I add, gender) in society. Thompson cites the tendency to cast Macbeth's witches as black because of the "magical negro" stereotype, 'a figure who has other-worldly or earthly connections, a figure who has no past, a figure who helps to save a white protagonist.'⁸ By playing into stereotypes based on physical appearance, societal casting risks reinforcing clichés and potentially contributes to the practice of typecasting. Conceptual casting by contrast uses race (and gender) to emphasise a tension already inherent in the play; for example a production of *The Tempest* that casts a black Caliban draws on the play's colonial undertones and brings them to the forefront. Cross-cultural casting works on a larger scale by making links between the entire world of a play and another time, space or culture. Iqbal Khan's 2012 RSC production of *Much Ado About Nothing* arguably uses this device, although it is worth noting here that these casting models are 'not ones that are widely understood or used in theatre companies' as Thompson emphasises.⁹ Khan relocates the play in contemporary India on the basis of the parallels he identifies between

early modern England and modern day Delhi: the hierarchical structures are similar; the relationships between masters and their servants are still present; the importance of honour; the centrality of women within that; the idea of bloodlines and how daughters continue that on - if a daughter is found to be iniquitous the bloodline is tainted.¹⁰

The cast for the production was made up of 21 Asian actors. Thompson does not address in her definitions to what degree contexts of audience reception determine these casting types; for example, a performance of *Much Ado About Nothing* made by a company based in Delhi and staged there, as opposed to Khan's production made for the British stage, would not be considered cross-cultural in the same way.

⁸ Thompson, p. 78.

⁹ Thompson, p. 76.

¹⁰ Royal Shakespeare Company, *Iqbal Khan 2012 Production* <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/much-ado-about-nothing/past-productions/iqbal-khan-2012-production>> [accessed 5 June 2024].

Each of these casting models is founded upon either a desire for the audience to be 'blind' to race in a performance or an insistence on drawing on the meaning that it frames as tied to an actor's race. Since Thompson's investigation into nontraditional casting centres on race, I employ Jennifer Drouin's exploration of gender signification onstage, alongside Thompson, to understand the semiotic meaning casting attaches to gender and how it might be perceived in the theatre. Drouin argues that the term 'cross-dressing' is inadequate for describing Shakespeare's women characters who impersonate males in plays such as *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* and calls for a more detailed distinction between 'cross-dressing', 'drag' and 'passing'.¹¹ For Drouin, the goal of 'theatrical cross-dressing is usually the goal of realist theatre itself – to present the audience with a situation that mirrors real life; and while this may require a suspension of disbelief, the less required the better'.¹² She notes that, since a cross-dresser may also 'pass', further terminological distinction must be applied. Consequently, she draws on Judith Butler's treatment of 'drag' and redefines it as 'a dramatization of gender, and since this dramatization is even more clearly apparent than traditional culturally intelligible representations of gender, drag illustrates how all gender is also a dramatic performance.'¹³ Drouin argues that drag is often 'self-referential' and highlights its own artificiality as opposed to making an effort to conceal it.¹⁴ Her account of 'passing' builds on ideas of drag as she suggests that both strategies represent 'a practice in which only the sign of gender is performed thereby confirming the absence of an inherent essence of gender' but the motives of passing are different.¹⁵ She continues, 'while drag highlights that all gender is an illusion, the aim of passing is for the illusion to signify as real in the public sphere', occluding difference.¹⁶ Drouin's distinctions are useful in setting apart how gender can be intended and received in the theatre; her work raises valuable questions about how far the concepts of passing, drag and cross-dressing are

¹¹ Jennifer Drouin, 'Cross-Dressing, Drag, and Passing: Slippages in Shakespearean Comedy', in *Shakespeare Re-Dressed: Cross-Gender Casting in Contemporary Performance*, ed. by James C. Bulman (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), pp. 23-56 (p. 1).

¹² Drouin, p. 25.

¹³ Drouin, p. 27.

¹⁴ Drouin, p. 26.

¹⁵ Drouin, p. 30.

¹⁶ Drouin, p. 30.

determined by the cross-dressers' intention or the spectator's perception, both of which are vital considerations in my investigation. However, Drouin tends to conflate ideas of onstage cross-dressing and cross-gender casting as she moves between analysing Sarah Bernhardt's portrayal of Hamlet, which I would define as cross-gender casting, and the character Viola's passing as Cesario and Rosalind's as Ganymede, which I consider an onstage performance of gender or 'cross-dressing'. I suggest that these terms require further distinction, going beyond Drouin's model, to establish clearly how casting mediates the performance and reception of gender onstage.

Drouin's partnering of the terms 'cross-dressing' and 'cross-gender casting' is perhaps explained by the contextual focus of her study, which concentrates on Elizabethan theatre practices, as well as contemporary Shakespearean performances. The role of a female character in the Elizabethan era would have been written for a young man or boy, making the actor a cross-dresser; however, this could equally be interpreted as cross-gender casting since the gender identities of actor and character do not align. I argue that in contemporary productions of Shakespeare, these terms are significantly different from each other rather than interchangeable. I determine cross-dressing as both a performance of gender that takes place on stage when a character impersonates a different gender and a time-marked custom of Elizabethan theatre which led to men imitating 'reality' to the different degrees identified in Drouin's model. I propose that cross-gender casting is a modern casting practice ungoverned by those laws or practical constraints. Cross-dressing, then, arises either from historical or practical necessity - such as the Elizabethan convention requiring boys to play female roles - or from the demands of dramatic action and plot devices, whereas cross-gender casting is a strategy consciously employed in the performance. The distinction between cross-dressing and cross-gender casting is not necessarily always clear-cut, however, because individual productions might emphasise different elements and a cross-gender cast actor may cross-dress to adhere to the role's original gender. For instance, when Michelle Terry (female) performed as a male Hamlet in 2018 at Shakespeare's Globe she wore costumes resembling an early modern prince with her hair down and face unmasked in any capacity. Similarly in the same performance, Shubham Saraf (male) performed as a

female Ophelia, wearing dresses and armed with flowers but no wig, obvious makeup or other enhancements. I suggest that even when a cross-gender cast actor is performing as the opposite gender so as to conceal their own gender (cross-dressing), in this production, as with others, the acknowledged artifice of theatrical performance means spectators are constantly aware of the actors' identity.



FIG 4: *Hamlet*, dir. by Federay Holmes and Elle White (Shakespeare's Globe, 2018). Hamlet (Michelle Terry) and Horatio (Catrin Aaron). Photograph © Tristram Kenton. Reproduced with permission.



FIG 5: *Hamlet*, dir. by Federay Holmes and Elle White (Shakespeare's Globe, 2018). Ophelia (Shubham Saraf) holding flowers. Photograph © Tristam Kenton. Reproduced with permission.

It is worth bearing in mind that Drouin made this case for her taxonomy in 2008 and since then, casting practices and the general consensus surrounding them have evolved. Drouin herself anticipates this, calling in her essay for the evolution of new terminology in light of contemporary queer theory. Casting norms that were once socially acceptable, such as a male actor playing a woman's part on the early modern stage, are now perceived as controversial despite their historical authenticity. Whilst all-male productions of Shakespeare still occur, for instance the forthcoming RSC production of *As You Like It* in its 2026–27 season, and all-male theatre companies such as The Lord Chamberlain's Men still exist, they are not the standard and often meet with criticism.¹⁷

¹⁷ In *Shakespeare in the Theatre: Mark Rylance at the Globe* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2017), Stephen Purcell traces Mark Rylance's all-male productions at the Globe as artistic director. In

Similarly, a woman playing a woman's role that was previously written for and performed by a man in Shakespeare's day would at one point have been seen as modern and progressive but is now the expectation and the norm. The theatrical technique of blackface, once the standard way to stage a black role, is now no longer tolerated. Although blackface and cross-dressing provoke different levels of controversy on today's stage, cross-racial and cross-gendered casting are typically favoured instead, as a means of making space for identities that Shakespeare's plays marginalised. Current debates surrounding casting practices, highlighted in the introduction, too, demonstrate its evolving nature. A growing consensus holds that non-disabled actors should not be cast in disabled parts: this shift of attitude is exemplified by the critical backlash the Globe's anticipated production of *Richard III* in 2024 received for its casting of able-bodied Michelle Terry, briefly mentioned in chapter one, as Shakespeare's only explicitly disabled protagonist. Mat Fraser, who played the role of Richard III in 2017 for Northern Broadsides and Hull Truck and has phocomelia, a condition that causes malformations in human limbs, recalled, on the announcement of Terry's casting: 'In 1997 I suggested to Equity that "crip face" was like blacking-up, yet it's been a constant since then - even now, even at the Globe'.¹⁸ Additionally, and outside the world of Shakespearean drama, there is an increasing call for casting directors to stop employing heterosexual actors in the roles of queer people. British actor and TV presenter James Corden was accused of 'gay face' after his role in the Netflix musical comedy *The Prom* (2020) where he plays the gay lead character, and since his portrayal, actors, directors and consumers have weighed in on the debate as to whether straight actors should play queer roles.¹⁹ Both of these types of impersonation, and arguably 'cross-casting', would

response to the all-male productions of *Edward II* and *Richard II* in 2003, made under Rylance's artistic directorship, Purcell declares 'there was a consensus in the press that, as Patrick Marmion put in his review of *Edward II*, this was "a ruse that brings little insight and needlessly shuts out women" (8 August 2003).' (p. 174). After Rylance revived one of his all-male productions from 2002 in 2012, *Twelfth Night*, Farah Karim-Cooper stated that 'Rylance offered up a couple of seasons in which there would be all-female casts' to offset negative responses about his single-gender casting. Farah Karim-Cooper, *Twelfth Night: Original Practice* <<https://teach.shakespearesglobe.com/twelfth-night-original-practice>> [accessed 17 July 2024].

¹⁸ Hannah Simpson, "'I'm Done with Pretenders': Disabled Actors on Reclaiming Richard III", *The Guardian*, 30 January 2024 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2024/jan/30/disabled-actors-on-reclaiming-richard-iii-globe-shakespeare>> [accessed 5 June 2024].

¹⁹ 'Russell T Davies: Straight Actors Should Not Play Gay Characters', *Sky News*, 12 January 2021 <<https://news.sky.com/story/russell-t-davies-straight-actors-should-not-play-gay-characters-12185652>> [accessed 5 June 2024].

previously have been considered award-bait, certainly in the film industry, as proven by the awards won by Tom Hanks in *Philadelphia* (1993), Jake Gyllenhaal in *Brokeback Mountain* (2006) and Eddie Redmayne in *The Theory of Everything* (2014), yet now actors with role-specific lived experience are in demand.²⁰

Both Drouin's and Thompson's classifications of casting raise questions about the relationship these casting strategies have to their respective audiences, as neither fully addresses the extent to which audiences are expected to be 'blind' to a gender-blind or colour-blind casting choices. Their work leaves open whether spectators should acknowledge the casting decision in the world of the play and consider its impact on the play, or if they should look past it - or even be able to do so. Reflecting on what 'blindness' means in terms of casting raises further questions about what denotes the classifications that Drouin and Thompson talk of: is it the production's intent or the audience's reception? If it is the intent, then what measures does the production take to ensure its casting strategy is not interpreted as one with different motivations? Intentionality is not always as rigid as I am implying, but it is important to consider how interpretation may differ from objective; for example, how a production might ensure a colour-blind casting decision does not come across as a societal casting decision playing into stereotypes. I do not assume that the audience is expected - or will be able - to identify the technical casting type but, I ask, to what degree is their reception of it involved in its determination? In terms of gender and colour-blind casting, the artifice of theatre itself shatters any illusion of reality. Theatre scholar Carey M. Mazer convincingly argues that the 'invocation of the theatrical both foregrounds the performativity of gender and erases it; that the biological markers of the actor's identity are both essential and inescapable and at the same time invisible and occasionally

²⁰ In *Philadelphia*, Tom Hanks plays a senior associate at a large law firm who conceals his homosexuality and AIDS status. Hanks won Best Actor for his role at the Academy Awards and the Golden Globe Awards. In *Brokeback Mountain*, Jake Gyllenhaal plays a cowboy in a covert homosexual relationship. Gyllenhaal won Best Supporting Actor at the Academy Awards and several other critics' awards for his role. In *The Theory of Everything*, Eddie Redmayne plays the role of Stephen Hawking, the theoretical physicist diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). Redmayne won Best Actor at the Academy Awards, the British Academy Film Awards and the Golden Globe Awards.

irrelevant'.²¹ His use of the term 'the theatrical' refers to spectators' insistent awareness of illusion in the theatre. He argues:

We do not suspend our disbelief in the theater, because we are never at risk of disbelieving; or rather, we never believe so much that we need to suspend our disbelief; as Suzanne Langer observes, to illude does not imply to deceive. We always know that the actual stands in for the real to create only a virtual image of the real. We always know that the actor is and is not the character. However realistic the scenery in nineteenth-century realism, we know that the room is missing its fourth wall. However much we pretend that we in the audience are invisible and omniscient, we can only pretend that we are not really there, sitting in the auditorium: our stomachs still belch up our dinner, and our cell phones still beep.²²

Mazer's assertion that the audience is at once aware of the inner world of the fictional play and the external world of production and reception prefaces his argument that spectators have a dual awareness when it comes to cross-dressing on stage. I use Mazer's understanding of how theatre's inherent artificiality leads to audiences' consciousness of both the means of representation and the person being represented and apply this to strategies of casting. I insist that the dual tensions he brings to light can be extended beyond cross-dressed performances to include cross-cast (racial and gendered) performances. In the same way that critics engaged in adaptation theory, such as Linda Hutcheon, Marvin Carlson, Herbert Blau and Kara Reilly, suggest that adaptation acknowledges its history which haunts like the ghost of Hamlet's father, racial and gendered cross-casting becomes its own form of adaptation, haunting prior and future performances.²³ Like Hutcheon's definition of adaptation, such cross-casting

²¹ Carey M. Mazer, 'Rosalind's Breast', in *Shakespeare Re-Dressed: Cross-Gender Casting in Contemporary Performance*, ed. by James C. Bulman (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), pp. 96-115 (p. 101).

²² Mazer, p. 101-102.

²³ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.173; Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), p. 168; Herbert Blau, *Take Up the Bodies: Theatre at the Vanishing Point* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press,

‘involves both memory and change, persistence and variation.’²⁴ Irrespective of race and gender, an actor’s identity can never be transcended because of the semiotic meaning attached to their identity outside of the production which is brought into relief by famous actors playing Shakespeare’s protagonists; their prior acting history haunts the performance with echoes of their previous roles with which spectators consciously or subconsciously associate them. With regard to race and gender, spectators are aware of the type of person Shakespeare’s roles were originally conceived for, who might have played the roles since then and who they are seeing play it, and with that, they are aware of the sticky ground a cross-cast role might tread. Even when audiences have no previous familiarity with the play they are watching, they will, for the most part, be aware of the inhibitions hampering the opportunities for the marginalised bodies they see on stage before them until now, potentially bringing their own experiences with them. I conclude that spectators never can be truly ‘blind’ to casting since it haunts the performance, which in turn, alters the narrative once it is acknowledged, regardless of the production’s intent to embrace the change in the world of the play. William Sun argues that an audience’s familiarity with ‘classical plays’, like Shakespeare’s, means that they can forget an actor’s ethnicity because they ‘do not have to decipher the character’s ethnicity through the actor’s physical features’, but what undermines his standpoint is a combination of the awareness of theatrical illusion, the dual attention paid to actor and character and an audience’s ability to apply the context of their own culture.²⁵ The following analysis investigates how casting decisions can change a play’s plot or themes and consequently, its reception.

Yet even if spectators can never forget about or be ‘blind’ to a cross-casting, it may still be the intention of the production to reduce the visibility of the change and help the

1982), p. 14; Kara Reilly, *Contemporary Approaches to Adaptation in Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. xxiii.

²⁴ Hutcheon, p.173

²⁵ William Sun, ‘Power and the Problems of Performance across Ethnic Lines: An Alternative Approach to Nontraditional Casting’, *Drama Review*, 44 (2000), 86–95 (p. 91).

audience to ignore it. I therefore introduce my own terms to clarify this distinction for my analysis:

Seeing - describing a production whereby the cross-casting is acknowledged in the world of the play or in its theatre programme and surrounding advertisement

Unseeing - describing a production that includes cross-casting but draws no attention to this choice within the world of the play

Seeing productions or roles can involve the regendering of a character to embrace the cross-casting decision or an acknowledgement that indicates an awareness of the changed race or gender of a character. An *unseeing* production, then, looks past the gender or race change within the play; an example of this could be Sarah Bernhardt's 1899 performance of Hamlet as a man in predominantly masculine clothing.²⁶ Both terms could be used to describe the overall strategy of a production or might be used to refer to fleeting moments that indicate either an awareness of or chosen ignorance to the casting in an otherwise opposing approach. *Seeing* productions vary in degrees of explicitness in the play and in corresponding theatre programmes; for example a name change and costuming could indicate that a role has been regendered, but a *seeing* character in a different production could come in the form of body language or slight reactions from the play's other characters that suggest their relationship is altered. In the case of a production, the distinction between these two definitions will often be arguable but a clarification of this discrepancy will help to probe gender and race in the performances I examine from both the perspective of audience reception and the theatre company's intentions.

²⁶ Tony Howard, *Women as Hamlet: Performance and Interpretation in Theatre, Film and Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

The Plays

An awareness of the performance and cultural history of *Othello* and *The Tempest* is crucial to understanding the effects of contemporary productions' casting choices. The casting history of *Othello* moves from white actors in blackface, to the emergence of major Black Shakespearean performers such as Ira Aldridge in the nineteenth century, through periods in which white actors continued to perform blackness to various degrees, and finally, to the present moment, in which the role is widely understood to be reserved for black actors. This evolution traces attitudes towards race over centuries and, reflecting Thompson's point in the introductory chapter, leaves the text 'uniquely pressured'.²⁷ Despite the twenty-first century consensus that the part of Othello should be performed by someone of the same race as the character, it remains a performance overlaid with tension. Scholars still question whether the play itself is racist and should be staged today at all, and actors question whether this role is problematic for them to perform. As previously noted, Ghanaian-British actor Hugh Quarshie asks: does a black actor playing Othello 'not encourage the white way, or rather the wrong way, of looking at black men, namely that black men, or "Moors", are over-emotional, excitable and unstable'?²⁸ He concludes that: 'of all parts in the canon, perhaps Othello is the one which should most definitely not be played by a black actor'.²⁹ Sixteen years after publishing *Second Thoughts About Othello*, Quarshie played the role himself in Khan's 2015 production because he deemed the directorial approach corrective enough to meet his criterion of not running the risk of 'making racial stereotypes seem legitimate and even true'.³⁰

Whilst the performance history of *The Tempest* has had less attention paid to it by scholars than has *Othello*, it has also been subject to a series of casting trends for the role of Caliban as attitudes and values have shifted over time. Alden T. Vaughan and

²⁷ Thompson, p. 170.

²⁸ Hugh Quarshie, *Second Thoughts About Othello* (Chipping Campden: Clouds Hill Printers, 1999), p. 5.

²⁹ Quarshie, p. 5.

³⁰ Quarshie, p. 5.

Virginia Mason Vaughan trace Caliban's transformations from the drunken beast and monstrous animal seen on stages in the seventeenth century, to the noble savage that theatre audiences in the early nineteenth century saw before becoming Darwin's missing link several decades later.³¹ It was not until the mid-twentieth century that Caliban was first performed by a black actor, Canada Lee, in 1945 New York, following growing readings of the play as a story of colonisation.³² The emphasis on the colonial theme in productions persisted through the century and it remained commonplace to cast a black actor in the role. The timeline the authors map ends with the twentieth century but productions of *The Tempest* from major British theatre companies in the last twenty years have cast white male actors to play the part, creating otherness by different methods. Whilst these two characters are the locus of the casting patterns I examine, my investigation pays attention to more than their roles. These characters have been, and still are, contentious to cast because of the racism and colonialism in their plays; therefore, I assess how casting across all of the characters works to foreground, equalise or challenge these themes bearing in mind their cultural legacy.

The gendered history of the play is equally important to understanding what the contemporary productions I study grapple with. The boys or young men cast in female roles on the Elizabethan stage, in their imitation of another gender, may have drawn attention to the performativity and instability of gender as a category, subverting essentialist models in their conscious flirtation with artifice. However, this interpretive position must be complicated by the historical conditions of performance, in which all female roles were routinely performed by boys. In this context, it remains plausible that audiences, accustomed to this convention, may instead have perceived these performances through familiar and potentially stabilising stereotypes of femininity. Phyllis Rackin sees this playfulness with gender as partly inherent in Shakespeare's play, noting that 'instead of attempting to conceal the presence of a male actor's body beneath a female costume, many of Shakespeare's plays seem clearly designed to exploit

³¹ Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 184.

³² Vaughan and Vaughan, p. 189.

it'.³³ As Rackin recognises, this spotlighting of the physical performance of gender is particularly used in Shakespeare's comedies, to humorous effect, but I draw on Peter Stallybrass to show that it is also present in the tragedies. Stallybrass has argued convincingly that when Desdemona undresses before her death in *Othello*, gender fixations become unstable because, 'on the one hand, the clothes themselves - the marks of Desdemona's gender and status - are held up to our attention; on the other hand, we teeter on the brink of seeing the boy's breathless but "pinned" body revealed'.³⁴ It is generally accepted that it was not until 1660, the year that a woman took to the stage as Desdemona, that women were permitted to perform on the English public stage.³⁵ During the nineteenth century and beyond, it became increasingly common for women to play the parts of men, with one of the most famous early examples being Sarah Bernhardt's aforementioned portrayal of Hamlet in 1899.³⁶ There is a wealth of scholarship researching women's roles in Shakespearean drama, in which some critics attest that Shakespeare's female roles are limited (both in size and power) because of Elizabethan theatre norms inhibiting women from the stage and the acting ability of the boys playing such roles, whilst others draw attention to the supposedly passive and suppressed character of the roles; what remains factual is that only four of the characters (on stage) across both *Othello* and *The Tempest* are women, despite totalling twenty-four central roles (excluding minor anonymous characters): Desdemona, Emilia, Bianca and Miranda.³⁷ My analysis examines how gender is re-presented in the plays as

³³ Phyllis Rackin, *Shakespeare and Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 74.

³⁴ Peter Stallybrass, 'Transvestism and the 'Body Beneath': Speculating on the Boy Actor' in *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage*, ed. by Susan Zimmerman (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 64-83 (p. 77).

³⁵ Walter James Maqueen-Pope, *Ladies First: The Story of Woman's Conquest on the British Stage* (London: W. H. Allen, 1952), p. 35.

³⁶ Other examples include Sarah Siddons's performances of Hamlet in 1802 and 1805 in Dublin and Charlotte Cushman's famous performance as Romeo against her sister as Juliet in London in 1845.

³⁷ Harry McCarthy summarises the deduction that many scholars make as they interpret 'boy actors as an inhibiting influence on the creation of canonical roles such as Shakespeare's female leads'. He provides examples of how this notion has made its way into contemporary performances, 'with major motion pictures like John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) and Richard Eyre's *Stage Beauty* (2004) presenting the mannered and high-voiced female impersonations by boys and men as something to be rejected in favour of gritty performances by real women.' (p. 10). For more, see Harry McCarthy, *Boy Actors in Early Modern England: Skill and Stagecraft in the Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). Elizabeth Howe discusses the absence of women on stage and considers attitudes towards women which labelled them as 'merely inferior to man'. (p. 21). Elizabeth Howe, *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama 1660-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). In Phyllis Rackin's examination of the limited women's roles (in size and in scope) in Shakespeare's plays, she

a whole through casting and its implications in contemporary productions in light of this history.

The Challenges of Cross-Casting

Gendered and racial cross-casting might be used by a theatre company for many reasons: to meet equality quotas and diversity goals; to give companies access to a range of acting talent that would not be available if they adopted more limited casting policies; to create equality or representation in Shakespeare's plays; to challenge race and gender stereotypes or to 'write back' to the canon in terms of casting and content. Regardless of the motive, gender cross-casting and cross-dressing can unveil the instability of traditional essentialist gender ideas by demonstrating gender construction; hence, the relevance of Butler's assertion, revisited here, that 'the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts'.³⁸ Similarly, racial cross-casting can expose the social construction of race and racial bias, along with the stereotypes associated with race, and whilst Butler admits that her theory of gender performativity 'problematically prioritized gender as the identificatory site of political mobilization at the expense of race', she argues that the materiality of the body does not define race alone, cultural and social construction bear significant weight.³⁹

With this power to expose artifice and construction, however, comes the risk of confirming essentialism. Cross-cast performances must be handled with care to avoid affirming the stereotypes and beliefs that they set out to undo. A production that implicitly warns of these dangers is Jude Kelly's 1997 'photo negative' *Othello*, featuring a *seeing* race-reversed cast with Patrick Stewart playing the titular role. The aim of the production, in the words of Kelly, was to 'make white audiences experience some of the

focuses on their representation, helplessness and subjugation. Phyllis Rackin, 'Our Canon, Ourselves', in *Shakespeare and Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 48-71.

³⁸ Judith Butler, 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', *Theatre Journal*, 40 (1988), 519-531 (p. 521).

³⁹ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 78.

feelings of isolation and discomfort that black people experience all of the time in their lives'.⁴⁰ Stewart, too, hoped that his performance would 'encourage a much broader view of the fundamentals of racism'.⁴¹ Despite these intentions, the casting decision led to interpretations of the white Othello as a civilised general and the black Venetians praying for his downfall became, to cite Mazer, 'brutal, tribal and savage'.⁴² New racially-coded meanings were introduced to the play that associated violence with blackness and gentility with whiteness, corroborating the early modern assumptions it hoped to distinguish.

Whilst Kelly's production took place as far back as 1997, these challenges remain a present concern. Elizabeth Freestone's 2023 production of *The Tempest* for the RSC regendered Prospero as a *seeing* woman, played by Alex Kingston. Casting Prospero as a woman is by no means remarkable on today's stage, a trend popularised by Julie Taymor's 2010 film adaptation where Prospero is played by Helen Mirren. Freestone's Prospero was a maternal figure rather than an oppressive patriarch and, to achieve this nurturing portrayal, Prospero was characterised as a homekeeper, seen taking washing off the line and folding it away, and speaking tenderly with her daughter. The motives of removing the patriarchal force driving the play's oppressions are clearly well-intentioned; however, some reviewers noticed that this trade comes with Prospero's reduction in magic and power, rendering her 'much less foregrounded than usual, with

⁴⁰ Lyn Gardner, 'Kelly', *Asides*, 2, 1997 (p. 5).

⁴¹ Ray Greene, 'Stewart', *Asides*, 2, 1997 (p. 5).

⁴² Mazer, p. 108.

Ayanna Thompson also criticises the production and suggests that it, in her words, 'didn't work well at all' because of 'the structural problems that were put in place. Stewart cost so much money to cast that they had almost no money left to cast the rest of the actors. So they had a limited pool and they ended up getting actors who weren't as classically trained as they could have gotten', creating an imbalance between the black and white actors. This quote is taken from a recording of Thompson's keynote address at the Shakespeare and Social Justice: Scholarship and Performance in an Unequal World conference hosted by the Shakespeare Society of Southern Africa. Chris Thurman, *Ayanna Thompson, "Shakespeare and Blackface" / "Shakespeare and Unfreedom"*, video recording, YouTube, 29 July 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOxqewmnblg>> [accessed 11 June 2024]. Patrick Stewart recalls two of the black actors quitting the production on the grounds that it was 'too offensive'. Stephen Galloway, 'Patrick Stewart on 'Logan', His Career and Diagnosis: "They Have All Said That It Will Go Away"', *The Hollywood Reporter*, 15 November 2017 <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/patrick-stewart-reveals-vertigo-diagnosis-they-have-all-said-it-will-go-away-1057879/>> [accessed 16 September 2024].

less enchantment and agency as a result.⁴³ In the attempt to claim the lead male role as female and minimise women's marginalisation, the production arguably created a new, weaker female character unable to fill Prospero's boots.

Nontraditional casting decisions that lead to problematic stereotype-affirming portrayals can also persist unchallenged in casting patterns. For example, in recent years, there has been a historical tendency to cast *Othello's* Bianca as black or Asian.⁴⁴ On the one hand, this decision seems logical if the production wishes to stay close to the plot of the play. Bianca is one of the few characters who does not interact directly with Othello, so her racial identity does not significantly affect the plot, and nothing in the play prevents Cassio from being in an interracial relationship; therefore, she need not be white. On the other hand, spectators may perceive this as societal casting. Whether this casting choice is *seeing* or *unseeing*, the recurrent casting of a black woman in the role of a 'courtesan' may come with harmful connotations, as does casting the only other black person apart from Othello as arguably the play's most minor named character.

I

Recasting *Othello*

⁴³ Michael Davies, 'RSC's "The Tempest" Starring Alex Kingston and Jessica Rhodes – review', *WhatsOnStage*, 3 February 2023 <https://www.whatsonstage.com/news/rscs-the-tempest-starring-alex-kingston-and-jessica-rhodes-review_58273/> [accessed 4 June 2024].

⁴⁴ Some of the recent productions of *Othello* which have cast actors with black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds as Bianca: Oliver Parker's film (1995); Sam Mendes for National Theatre (1997); Gregory Doran for Royal Shakespeare Company (2004); Michael Grandage for Donmar Warehouse (2007); Wilson Milam for Shakespeare's Globe (2007); Nicholas Hytner for National Theatre (2013).

***Othello*, dir. by Iqbal Khan, Royal Shakespeare Company (2015)**

If casting is an adaptive force, then the casting of a black Iago in Iqbal Khan's *Othello* rereads and reframes Shakespeare's play. Khan is a British-Pakistani actor and director, and no stranger to modern productions of Shakespeare, having previously played the roles of Othello and Prospero and directed the previously cited *Much Ado About Nothing* set in Delhi in 2012 for the Royal Shakespeare Company. In 2015, he directed *Othello* for the RSC at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre as part of its season of plays that were very specifically 'set in Venice' and 'explored what it is like to be an outsider', including *The Merchant of Venice* and Ben Jonson's *Volpone*.⁴⁵ Othello as a character is traditionally set apart from society through his racial identity, which supplies him with an outsider status; intriguingly however, Khan's production implicitly downplayed Othello's foreignness, straying from the season's theme, by recasting Iago as black for the first time in RSC history. Although making Iago a black character is not groundbreakingly new, it is untypical casting, particularly for a production by a mainstream theatre company and at a mainstream venue.⁴⁶ Khan stated that in casting a black Iago, 'all the kind of easy assumptions of racism in the play get dislodged'; in other words, Iago's motive can no longer be pinned on race. By this means, Khan relocated the focus and pushed deeper to uncover what else might be at play.⁴⁷ He reasoned that 'the way we experience it [race] in the world now [...] is much more nuanced than the kind of binary black/white thing that Elizabethan audiences might have encountered' and, thus, he altered the play to reflect a more diverse society and its complexities.⁴⁸ The set designed by Ciaran Bagnall suitably combined modernity and antiquity with its grandiose castle-

⁴⁵ Royal Shakespeare Company, *Poster for The Merchant of Venice 2015* (2015) <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/the-merchant-of-venice/past-productions/polly-findlay-2015-production#&gid=1&pid=0>> [accessed 27 March 2024].

⁴⁶ One example of a pre-existing production which casts a black Iago is Greenwich Theatre's 1989 production of *Othello*. Iago was played by Paul Barber, a Liverpoolian actor with a mixed ethnic background, and Othello was played by Clarke Peters, a black American-British actor.

⁴⁷ Iqbal Khan and Barbara Bogaev, 'Iqbal Khan: Episode 128', *Shakespeare Unlimited*, podcast, 17 September 2019 <<https://www.folger.edu/podcasts/shakespeare-unlimited/iqbal-khan/>> [accessed 27 March 2024].

⁴⁸ Khan and Bogaev.

like architecture, digital screens, contemporary khaki military wear and clean minimalistic stage.⁴⁹ The production casts Lucian Msamati in the role of Iago, opposite Hugh Quarshie as Othello. Whilst in this section I centre my analysis on how a nontraditionally cast Iago affects the play since he is a major character, there are other notable nontraditional casting choices within the performance that build its picture: British-Indian actor Ayesha Dharker plays Emilia, British-Nigerian actor David Ajao plays Montano, British-Nigerian actor Ken Nwosu plays a gentleman of Cyprus and Nadia Albina plays a gender-swapped Duke of Venice. I argue that the production's use of nontraditional casting, specifically for Iago, challenges the racial binary, which Khan criticises, that leads to problematic representations of race. In Khan's crafting of an antiracist *Othello*, however, I contend that the play's representation of misogyny remains unchallenged, echoing the tensions explored in Chapter Two regarding the negotiation between racial and gendered forms of oppression. This notable discrepancy means that while the racial tension is unsettled, the patriarchal structures of the play are left intact, reinforcing the essentialist ideas that cross-casting has the potential to unveil.

It becomes clear in the first few moments of the production that the casting choice for Iago is *seeing*, embraced in the world of the play, through Iago's reaction to Roderigo (James Corrigan) referring to Othello as 'thick lips'. The pair sail in a small wooden boat, fit for two, but when Iago hears this racist remark, he stops in his tracks, pauses lighting his cigarette, looks down at Roderigo who squats beneath him in the boat, holding his gaze and in this moment, Roderigo seems to realise who is in his company. Iago grabs him by the collar, and eventually he laughs and playfully creates a buzzing sound through his lips and shakes his lips from side to side. His added gestures mocking Othello's lips indicate his endorsement of the comment but in the long, tense moments leading up to this sneering, Roderigo's fate hangs in the balance.

⁴⁹ I accessed a video recording of this production which was a part of the RSC Live collection from Drama Online and my analysis is based upon this.



FIG 6. *Othello*, dir. by Iqbal Khan (Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 2015). Iago (Lucian Msamati) standing above a laughing Roderigo (James Corrigan) in a boat. Photograph by Keith Pattison. © Royal Shakespeare Company. Reproduced with permission.

This encounter demonstrates early on the new unique leverage Iago holds as a black soldier within the regime. He is evidently assimilated, in Roderigo's forgetting of his race and through his position amongst the ranks, and is able to use this to his advantage by manipulating accordingly. Othello is still an outsider. The casting choices, as I read them, ensure racism is not interpreted as Iago's motivation, but instead, reveal the rankings and prejudice within the black community that Shakespeare's *Othello* does not explore in its binary approach to race. This subverts a generalisation of togetherness in a racial community, putting its factions on display. Although this production of *Othello* certainly is not avant-garde in the manner of the plays Mihaylova investigates in *Viewers in Distress*, I propose that its repositioning of Iago is radically experimental. The production's casting choice challenges audiences to think of blackness 'beyond victimhood and oppression', as Mihaylova declares of Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Venus* (1996), which in turn fits Kristin Stile's definition of the avant-garde: a 'determined act of observation' that 'reconstructs the ways in which events, objects, and the relationship

between them may be interpreted or lived'.⁵⁰ The production's nontraditional casting creates new meaning by presenting audiences with an underexplored depiction.

It would not be feasible to conduct research into whether the performance inspired new ways of seeing, thinking and living but what I can note is the audible audience reaction to Iago's part. On the video recording I analyse, during this scene where the racist tensions, changed by the casting, are introduced, laughter can be heard from the audience as Iago pauses following the insult and then again when he begins mocking Othello's lips. I cannot conclude just what the audience were collectively laughing at in these moments but possible considerations help to break down the effects of the casting on the audience. Was it the irony of a black character now receiving the racist words said about Othello that was humorous? Was it the tense atmosphere and the release of tension? Were they laughing at how a black Iago subverts the play? Was it out of discomfort? Or was the racism plainly funny to them, as they laughed when Roderigo insulted Iago and again when Iago insulted Othello? Ruben Espinosa argues that laughs in response to the racism during *Othello* derive from 'monstrous views rooted in anti-Blackness', recalling Claire Van Kampen's 2018 production of the play in which the audience laughed 'along with the racism' that Mark Rylance's Iago incited.⁵¹ Espinosa continues, 'the audience leaned into the laughter that Rylance provoked, and then they leaned into the racism and misogyny by laughing at it instead of expressing repulsion at the racist and sexist language', and notes that it was 'emotionally difficult' to be a part of that audience.⁵² He aligns this laughter with 'precisely what is transpiring in our current moment as the U.S. President [Donald Trump] provides fodder for white supremacists and closet racists alike to feed on the vulnerability of Black and brown individuals'.⁵³ The striking connection he implies between Trump and Iago, as I interpret it, stresses the reality and currency of the marginalisation taking place in the play, in the theatre

⁵⁰ Mihaylova, p. 36. Mihaylova describes *Venus* as 'Parks's play about the transformation of the Khoikhoi woman Saartjie Baartman into the racist stereotype of the Hottentot Venus' (p. 24). She argues that Parks 'tried to undo the racial and gendered politics of looking in order to reimagine blackness and whiteness beyond the histories of racism and colonialism that produced them' (p. 21).

⁵¹ Ruben Espinosa, *Shakespeare on the Shades of Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2021), p. 19.

⁵² Espinosa, p. 21.

⁵³ Espinosa, p. 21.

space through laughter, and in the wider world. Before Espinosa's expression of disquiet at laughter during *Othello*, scholars and actors involved with productions of *Othello* have shown a disappointment in audience reaction to Iago's racism and the downfall of Othello. Ayanna Thompson expressed her frustration in an interview: 'I hate this play. I hate the audience members when they laugh. [...] I hate the fact that those poor black actors have to endure it night after night.'⁵⁴ Adrian Lester, who played the role of Othello in the 2013 National Theatre production, explained how director Nicholas Hytner tried to adjust their performance to eradicate audience laughter: 'Nick came in again and said, "we haven't got it yet. We've got it when they shut up and don't laugh at it." And we worked, and worked, and worked. I don't think we ever got rid of all of the laughs, but we reduced them'.⁵⁵ For Lester and Hytner, laughter was a sign of the production's failure. In a similar vein, Vanessa Corredera dictates that 'those staging *Othello* must be aware of laughter's presence and work to reduce it when possible'.⁵⁶ Laughter at *Othello* also evokes a deeper sense of historical racism, recalling the minstrel shows, created to comically present racial stereotypes, that the play is so closely tied to.⁵⁷ Elsewhere, Corredera argues that *Othello* has more than a Desdemona problem, carrying forward the argument from the previous chapter; it also has an Iago problem. The problem as Corredera sees it is that productions easily become too 'Iago-centric' which can

arise as a result of Iago's relationship to an audience that "knows more than the titular tragic hero" and is thereby "positioned as distinctly different from

⁵⁴ Isaac Butler, '5: Othello', *Lend Me Your Ears*, podcast, 11 September 2018 <<https://slate.com/culture/2018/09/lend-me-your-ears-em-othello-em.html>> [accessed 27 March 2024].

⁵⁵ Adrian Lester, 'In Dialogue with Ayanna Thompson', *Shakespeare Survey*, 70 (2017), 10-18 (p. 17).

⁵⁶ Vanessa Corredera, *Reanimating Shakespeare's Othello in Post-Racial America* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 98.

⁵⁷ In Renaissance theatres, white actors used racial prosthetics to portray black characters - a practice now referred to as blackface. By the late eighteenth century, blackface had become a performance tradition in America, with *Othello* among the most frequently staged plays featuring black characters. The nineteenth century saw the rise of blackface minstrelsy, in which skits, songs and dances caricatured enslaved or recently freed people. The conventions of blackface acting from theatre bled into minstrelsy and vice versa, shaping audience expectations and performance styles over time. See Ayanna Thompson, *Blackface* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021).

Othello". Iago thus has a more direct, aligned relationship to the audience, a dynamic intensified by his ability to make them laugh.⁵⁸

Corredera suggests that the audience side with, or are placed on side with, Iago because of his structural positioning in the drama. I support Corredera's reading of Iago and agree that his dramatic alignment with the audience is important since it exacerbates the binary between the two differently raced central characters. Whilst I concur that Iago's ability to make the audience laugh contributes to his power, I note that the laughter also indicates the success of his domination of Othello, working cyclically. A possible solution to the Iago problem, in an attempt to forge an antiracist *Othello*, could be a *seeing* nontraditionally cast Iago. In theory, a black Iago might reset the balance that is historically weighted in favour of the white Iago, by inverting the racial inequality, thus solving the Iago problem that I suggest is marked by audience laughter; yet, the RSC production's casting of Iago evidently does not prevent this laughter. The laughter that I observe in this production, however, comes in the first five minutes of the play, before any relationship to the audience is established. Additionally, the laughter occurs during the moment of both Roderigo's racism and Iago's internalised racism, suggesting that Iago's charisma and performance is not the root cause of such a reaction.

Initially, this casting choice appears not to have inspired the reconceptualisation of audience assumptions as it set out to, but perhaps this does not matter if Iago's motives are changed as a result. Does the Iago problem remain if Iago is no longer white and the audience are not siding with the dominant and marginalising race? A *seeing* black Iago ensures racism is not the perceived motivation and instead suggests that Iago may be disgruntled by Othello's decision to promote a young, white man, a choice unregulated by racial solidarity. The production goes even further to code Cassio, played by white actor Jacob Fortune-Lloyd, as explicitly racist, giving more credibility to Iago's hatred. Khan refashions the scene where Iago encourages Cassio to drink. It begins with Iago

⁵⁸ Corredera, p. 62. Corredera quotes from Ayanna Thompson, 'Introduction', in *Othello: Revised Edition*, ed. by E. A. J. Honigsmann (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016).

tenderly singing an emotive African folk song during which Cassio sniggers and wants to exchange looks of complicity with others in the troop but he sneers alone as everyone else is captivated by the performance. Cassio interrupts the song to sing Shaggy's 'Boombastic' in a Jamaican accent, turning a moment of cultural celebration into one of cultural appropriation. The governor of Cyprus, Montano, who is played by black actor David Ajao, a (*seeing*) casting choice further contributing to Iago's upset at not becoming a black man in an authoritative position, then insults Cassio and begins a back-and-forth 'roast' battle:

MONTANO	I feel sorry for Cassio. Deep down he's really sad because his mother is promiscuous so we all could be his dad.
CASSIO	This man became a soldier, a tough choice, I'm sure, because it's rare to see a black man on the right side of the law.
MONTANO	This guy's a lieutenant, so we had better run, because we all know what happens when you give white people a gun. This guy's a Florentine, he was a superstar before but now he's in the Cyprus war taking orders from a Moor.

The battle introduces new racial stereotypes into the play, mirroring contemporary pigeonholing. Montano's final comment about Cassio's ranking beneath a black general leads to Cassio attacking Montano, displaying his hurt from the comment and exposing his own prejudice in his emotional response. The way Cassio is painted provides legitimate grounds for a black Iago to hate Cassio and his dismay at Othello for choosing someone with problematic attitudes toward race as opposed to someone of his own race.



FIG 7. *Othello*, dir. by Iqbal Khan (Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 2015). Othello (Hugh Quarshie) holding Iago (Lucian Msamati) in a headlock. Photograph by Keith Pattison. © Royal Shakespeare Company. Reproduced with permission.

Ensuring Iago's motives cannot be pinned on race, the production portrays Othello as warranting hate by making him physically torture Iago. As Othello demands 'ocular proof' from Iago, he beats and strangles Iago, ties him to a chair, presses on his eyeballs and suffocates him by putting a plastic bag around his head, creating clear parallels with US treatment of Muslim detainees in Guantanamo Bay. Iago's ensuing psychological torture seems much less villainous following Othello's violent actions. Iago's motives multiply as he may now be fearing for his life or possess a deeper and more justifiable hatred of the general. In this departure from many modern production's portrayal of Othello as dignified and respected but growing violent gradually as a tragic response to manipulation, Khan created controversy by making aggression immediate and deliberate. Some spectators interpreted this decision as affirming stereotypes about black violence, as Stephen Collins did: 'Torture, especially extreme torture, is not a part of a hero's arsenal. By adding this waterboarding scene, Khan suggests that Othello countenances this behaviour, or worse, practises it himself. How black does Khan see

Othello's soul?'⁵⁹ This review, from a white 'actor, singer, director, producer and casting consultant', connects Othello's blackness and torturous violence, implying that Khan's interpretation is damaging to racial stereotypes; Collins simultaneously employs the term 'black' as seemingly synonymous with the stereotypes it complains the portrayal upholds.⁶⁰ I, however, argue that the portrayal is radical in its abandonment of convention and draw on Mihaylova's assessment of contemporary avant-garde theatre. She argues that spectators desire a commitment to liberalism, both in life and in the art they see, and an inherent liberal practice is showing sympathy for the social other. She explains that in abolitionist melodramas:

The hope was that if the sentimental play (or novel) managed to move the spectator (or reader), they would then act to alleviate the suffering of those afflicted by social ills. But the task of nurturing sympathy for the enslaved, already challenging because of the inherent gap between the sympathetic observer and the subject of their sympathy, was further complicated when the observer was white and the suffering individual Black. To resolve that complication, sentimental representation tended to reimagine Black people as "white inside," affirming the moral superiority of whiteness.⁶¹

In this portrait of Othello as aggressor rather than victim, making him somewhat complicit in his own oppression, the production damages the audience's capacity for sympathy, or perhaps empathy is a more appropriate term in this case, for Othello. He is traditionally a character whose honour is measured by his adherence to white ideals, but Khan offers alternative racial identities that break away from staging stereotypes, as he also does with Iago by showing blackness beyond victimhood. His directorial choices which, to Collins, essentialise racial stereotypes, I argue subvert longstanding traditions that dehumanise in their restrictive boundaries. The sympathetic portrayals that

⁵⁹ Stephen Collins, 'Othello', *British Theatre.Com*, 11 July 2015 <<https://britishtheatre.com/review-othello-royal-shakespeare-theatre-3stars/>> [accessed 27 March 2024].

⁶⁰ Stephen Collins, 'Stephen Collins', *British Theatre.Com*, 16 July 2015 <<https://britishtheatre.com/author/stephencollins/>> [accessed 27 March 2024].

⁶¹ Mihaylova, p. 4.

Mihaylova argues audiences want to see, however, cloud this interpretation. Shakespeare's portrayal of Othello contrasts with earlier plays such as George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* in portraying a black character as victim rather than aggressor, yet, Khan revisions this rendering, breaking it free from its constraints. Although his casting of Othello is *not* nontraditional, this interpretation of this character raises the same concerns and questions nontraditional casting does in its power to subvert and essentialise stereotypes. I suggest that this characterisation, like the casting of Iago, is avant-garde by Mihaylova's two definitions of the term: 'broadly, as bold artistic and social experimentation; and, more narrowly, as an antiliberal trend that puts aesthetic innovation to utopian social and political ends.'⁶² I demonstrate that, through his subversion of liberal norms and theatrical norms, Khan works towards an antiracist place where stereotypes bear no weight with his adaptive casting methods.

I read Othello's tortuous interrogation of Iago as serving another purpose of undoing some of the racial stereotypes attached to Othello's character. In a 1999 essay reflecting on the actors who perform as Othello and their experience, first referenced in my introduction, Quarshie explains that the character to him is problematic in that 'Shakespeare suggests that Othello behaves as he does because he is black. And to suggest that a person's behaviour is racially determined is, by definition, racist.'⁶³ In his 2015 portrayal of Othello, Quarshie consequently sought to legitimise the traits that he suggested Shakespeare attaches to race, hoping to make his character 'less credulous, less gullible'.⁶⁴ Othello's gullibility is softened by the casting of Iago because it could be assumed that he is more likely to instil his trust in someone the same race as him in a society governed by white seniors such as Brabantio and the Duke, a hope of racial solidarity that Iago's character squashes, but it is also reduced by his torturing. As Othello wears Iago down, demanding he 'give me a living reason she's disloyal', Iago sticks to his story and informs Othello that he heard Cassio in his sleep say "'Sweet Desdemona / Let us be wary. Let us hide our loves'" (III.3.406-434), as well as seeing

⁶² Mihaylova, p. 7.

⁶³ Quarshie, p. 7.

⁶⁴ *Hugh Quarshie Remembers... Othello*, BBC iPlayer, 22 October 2023
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001rrzf> [accessed 27 March 2024].

'Cassio wipe his beard with' the handkerchief Othello gave her. Othello can now plausibly assume Iago is truthful in his allegations if they have withstood torture methods.

In a further attempt to prevent the production from implying a connection between Othello's behaviours and his race, Quarshie endeavours to justify Othello's transition from wise, judicious soldier to frenzied, manic executioner. He previously claimed that:

The main difficulty about playing Othello is getting plausibly from the magnanimous and dignified warrior of the first half to the obsessive, homicidal, gibbering wreck of the second half. The crucial bridging scene is Act 3 Scene 3, also known as the temptation scene. [...] To my mind, it happens too quickly.⁶⁵

His resultant argument was that the actor 'must find some way of plausibly reaching the conclusion: "She's gone. I am abused, and my relief / Must be to loathe her" (3.3.271-2) less than two hundred lines after saying, "Perdition catch my soul / But I love thee" (3.3.90-1).'⁶⁶ Quarshie's solution for the 2015 performance was to change Othello's epileptic fit into 'a transient ischemic attack. [...] A TIA is a mini-stroke and personalities can change because it can damage a certain part of your brain, your cognitive faculties.'⁶⁷ To perform this, Quarshie's left arm quivers as he delivers the line: 'I tremble at it', before his whole side drops, his head spasms, his eyes roll back and he collapses. Yet, despite his intention, these intricate performance details were seemingly not enough for spectators to pick up on the type of attack he was having, with most reviews failing to recognise it as a TIA or anything diverging from past interpretations of the role. Rather, several reviewers labelled Quarshie's performance as 'flat and emotionless', 'the dullest interpretation of Othello I have ever seen' and 'not one propelled by psychological, social and political reasons', perhaps due to the decision to

⁶⁵ Quarshie, p. 7-8.

⁶⁶ Quarshie, p. 12.

⁶⁷ *Hugh Quarshie Remembers... Othello*, BBC iPlayer, 22 October 2023
<<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001rrzf>> [accessed 27 March 2024].

perform the character with rationality and composure.⁶⁸ I take these reviewers' complaints that Quarshie's performance was lacklustre to illustrate how his portrayal of Othello inhibited the audience's ability to feel empathy for the character. Since Othello is no longer the noble, victimised moor, but a character complicit in his downfall through violence and abandoned loyalty to racial unity, the audience loses investment in the hero. In a story where spectators anticipate racism as a dominant theme and to witness its detrimental effects on its sufferer, when this is reshaped and the racial dichotomy is no longer as clear cut as the original plot, the audience want to witness the estrangement. Mihaylova declares that reviews of Parks's play suggest that audiences 'expected a clear social commentary' on the racism that they identified and I apply this reasoning to the perceived dullness of Quarshie's Othello.⁶⁹ Once the racial binaries are complicated the spectators are no longer confident about who they should empathise with in this play about racism. Where Khan attempts to represent a multitude of black identities, the simplicity of the original's overt racial divide and discrimination is yearned for by audiences when the play already holds a place in the canon and spectators' minds.

The casting, however, does not affect the audience's ability to feel empathy for Desdemona who is played by white Scottish actor, Joanna Vanderham. Whilst the nontraditional casting challenges racist stereotypes and generalisation, it pays little attention to the inherent misogyny in the play and leaves Desdemona's role unquestioned, meaning that it still ends with a Desdemona strangled on her bed at the hands of Othello leading spectators to project pity upon the white feminine body murdered by black masculinity. As Corredera states, 'given that for centuries, inculcated sympathy and paternalistic concern for white femininity has shaped antiblackness', this encouraged projection of pity is especially problematic.⁷⁰ Additionally, Desdemona's role is small in comparison to those of Othello and Iago and she has significantly fewer

⁶⁸ Kirk McElhearn, 'Theatre Review: Othello, by the Royal Shakespeare Company', *Kirkville*, 12 June 2015 <<https://kirkville.com/theater-review-othello-by-the-royal-shakespeare-company/>> [accessed 27 March 2024]; Stephen Collins, 'Othello', *British Theatre.Com*, 16 July 2015 <<https://britishtheatre.com/review-othello-royal-shakespeare-theatre-3stars/>> [accessed 27 March 2024].

⁶⁹ Mihaylova, p. 30.

⁷⁰ Corredera, p. 208.

lines, particularly at the play's end when Othello's 'put out the light' monologue swamps her death scene and her disposition at the play's end has grown passive, as scholars have demonstrated.⁷¹ Her quietness and submission, I argue, incline spectators to feel sympathy, not for her persona, but for her outward appearance, her body, which is defined by whiteness. The play's inattention to intersectionality, then, leads to a continuation of competing positions of 'constrained femininity and marginalized Black subjectivity' as my application of Corredera's argument explored in the last chapter.⁷² Without attention to both race and gender, racism is reinforced, despite the play's antiracist motivations, and Desdemona succumbs to the role of Shakespearean feminine victim assigned to her.

⁷¹ Peter Stallybrass traces Desdemona's journey throughout the play of one active and outspoken woman into one of subservience: 'the first, a woman capable of "downright violence"' (1. 3. 249); the second, "A maiden, never bold" (1. 3. 64).' Peter Stallybrass, 'Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed', in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 123-144 (p. 141). Maureen Quilligan goes one further and argues that Desdemona's 'very self consists in not being a self, not being even a body, but a bodiless obedient silence.' Maureen Quilligan, 'Staging Gender: William Shakespeare and Elizabeth Cary', in *Sexuality and Gender in Early Modern Europe: Institutions, Texts, Images*, ed. by James Grantham Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 208-232 (p. 229).

⁷² Corredera. p.207.



FIG 8. *Othello*, dir. by Iqbal Khan (Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 2015). Emilia (Ayesha Dharker) brushing Desdemona's (Joanna Vanderham) hair. Photograph by Keith Pattison. © Royal Shakespeare Company. Reproduced with permission.

The object of pity for the audience is notably one that participates in racial marginalisation. As I have shown in the previous chapter, Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* sets Desdemona's character as problematic in her naivety, her exoticisation and othering of Othello, and her treatment of Emilia. Desdemona's maidservant Emilia, in Khan's production, is played by British-Indian actor Ayesha Dharker, which brings new racially-coded meaning to Desdemona's government of Emilia which Toni Morrison's revision *Desdemona* puts down to class.⁷³ On the other hand, the casting of Quarshie and

⁷³ In my previous chapter I explore Toni Morrison's play *Desdemona*. I discuss how, in the play, Morrison grants Emilia the agency to educate Desdemona on the systemic ill-treatment she suffers at Desdemona's own hands due to her lower-class status.

Msamati contends against the view that she is 'seduced by exoticism' as Corredera and Ben Okri insist.⁷⁴ Firstly Khan's decision to create a multiracial cast reduces Othello's foreignness, making him less of a spectacle. Additionally, Quarshie and Msamati seemingly retain their accents for the production: Othello speaks in a clearly articulated RP and Msamati speaks with an accent potentially influenced by his upbringing in Zimbabwe and Tanzania. I conclude that these accents are *seeing*, or rather *hearing*, because of the inclusion of Iago's African folk singing. Cassio's reaction of ridicule to Iago's song, combined with his accent, suggests that Iago is a or the foreign outsider in this production, placing him as the butt of racist jokes. While Roderigo at times seems to overlook Iago's racial identity, suggesting a degree of assimilation, this perception does little to mitigate his outsider status, which is used against him when convenient. Through comparison, the production frames Othello not as Desdemona's exotic fantasy but 'an honorary white', as Ania Loomba claims for Shakespeare's original.⁷⁵ I refer back to Mihaylova's assertion that, to resolve the complication (that the distance between spectator whiteness and the blackness of the drama's suffering individual inhibits sympathy), 'sentimental representation tended to reimagine Black people as "white inside," affirming the moral superiority of whiteness'.⁷⁶ I suggest that the production's casting plays into this idea through its representation of Iago as outsider and, by contrast, Othello as insider; however, it aligns Othello with white culture to provide multifaceted presentations of black identity and linguistic diversity in black voices which criticises the arguably 'white inside' Othello that Shakespeare presents. There is a danger, of course, that by portraying Iago as black, foreign and malicious negative stereotypes are affirmed but none of the reviews I surveyed indicated such a reading which is potentially due to the production's portrayal of Iago as a victim of racial abandonment and violence from Othello.

⁷⁴ Corredera quotes Ben Okri's essay 'Leaping Out of Shakespeare's Terror: Five Meditations on *Othello*' (first published in 1989 but found in Okri's 2015 collection *A Way of Being Free*) in *Reanimating Shakespeare's Othello in Post-Racial America* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 206.

⁷⁵ Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 48.

⁷⁶ Mihaylova, p. 4.

Khan's focus on race, then, reframes Desdemona in terms of her exoticising of Othello but the play's patriarchy and misogyny remain unchallenged with the result that Desdemona is ultimately frozen in the passive feminine victim role, a role that Corredera declares can only endure 'through the careful cultivation and protection by patriarchy.'⁷⁷ Desdemona's inability to escape this fate is an idea that I argue Asli Kışlal's radical revision of *Othello, How to Kill an Othello*, illuminates in the prior chapter. In Khan's performance, the audience are offered several diverse representations of black identity, but Desdemona and Emilia are bound to and constrained by their attributes of chastity and obedience. It could be argued that the production's *seeing* casting decision to have the Duke of Venice played by female actor Nadia Albina counteracts Desdemona's passive submissiveness. According to Khan himself, the casting provided Albina with 'the benefit of different registers at her disposal: She was able to play both 'masculine' qualities, wielding great authority with aplomb, and 'feminine' qualities, showing herself persuasive as when for example she sought to 'help [the] lovers / into [Brabantio's] favor' (1.3.201–2).'⁷⁸ Taking into account the Duke's limited time on stage which totalled eleven minutes in the three hour production, having a speaking part in only four of those minutes, I claim that this inclusion is too brief to bear much weight on the representation of gender. Where the interlocking systems of racism and misogyny shine is in the production's modification of the handkerchief, whether intentionally or not, as I go on to argue.

⁷⁷ Corredera, p. 207.

⁷⁸ Susan L. Fischer, 'Othello's 'Travels' History' Illuminated Anew: Beyond Black and White in Iqbal Khan's RSC Revival (2015), *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 98.1 (2018), 43-64 (p. 47).



FIG 9. *Othello*, dir. by Iqbal Khan (Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 2015). Emilia (Ayesha Dharker) gifting the black handkerchief to Iago (Lucian Msamati). Photograph by Keith Pattison. © Royal Shakespeare Company. Reproduced with permission.

Khan is the first director to stage a black handkerchief, challenging assumptions made in previous productions that the cloth would have been white and, in a way, recasts the prop. This subversion comes in the wake of Ian Smith's argument that Othello's handkerchief has traditionally been misread and would have been 'dyed black: that is, a dark color resembling Othello's skin and not the white so often presumed by commentators to point to a series of tropes connoting Desdemona's sexuality.'⁷⁹ That way, the handkerchief now no longer resembles 'the blood-stained wedding sheets' and acts as 'visible proof of Desdemona's adultery' as Edward A. Snow claims or creates a 'metonymic connection between handkerchief, wedding sheets and Desdemona's body' as Janelle Jenstad more recently suggests. Khan's handkerchief in its nontraditional recasting as black, for Smith, now correctly acknowledges the Egyptian dyeing process and, in turn, 'strengthens its association with Othello, his African history, and heritage.'⁸⁰ He claims that it draws attention to 'the prosthetic black cloth' used to

⁷⁹ Ian Smith, 'Othello's Black Handkerchief', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 64.1 (2013), 1-25 (p. 16).

⁸⁰ Smith, p. 1-2.

materialise 'the imagined black bodies of real Africans existing in the world outside the theatre' in early modern drama, a cloth that 'covers and masks the body beneath.'⁸¹

When turned black, Smith proposes that:

A black handkerchief with strawberries, should we grant the latter's affiliation with Desdemona, constitutes a fitting, virtually self-explanatory symbol of the play's central but controversial interracial marriage. A sibyl's prophetic utterance, portending destruction and social chaos, inspired the construction of the specially handcrafted handkerchief and anticipated in the textile's color and design the tragic consequences attendant on the socially destabilizing interracial union.⁸²

The black handkerchief in the RSC production, by removing the value of Desdemona's virtue, aligning with Othello's body and posing as a token of their interracial love - doomed in a white Venetian society - functions, in my reading, as a symbol for the importance of intersectionality. On a deeper level, it challenges the dominance of whiteness and how this shapes readings and perceptions and inhibits its reproduction. As Ania Loomba argues:

The "central conflict" of the play then, if we must locate one, is neither between white and black alone, nor merely between men and women – it is rather between the racism of a white patriarchy and the threat posed to it by both a black man and a white woman.⁸³

I apply Loomba's argument to show that the play's 'central conflict' is one that needs intersectional attention if it is to be resolved, so as not to reinforce racist or sexist stereotypes in a modern reconfiguration of the play. From this perspective, recasting the handkerchief as black, recoded along racial and gendered lines as I have argued,

⁸¹ Smith, p. 4.

⁸² Smith, p. 24.

⁸³ Loomba, p. 49.

highlights how an intersectional approach, considering race and gender in tandem, obstructs cycles of racism and misogyny which will otherwise continue to linger in productions of *Othello*. While Khan's production, specifically in its recasting of Iago, demonstrates that casting is an effective performative and adaptive tool, it ultimately leaves gender as a static backdrop. This stands in direct contrast to Bodinetz's production, which I turn to next, where gender is brought into the foreground as the central engine of the play's revision, compelling the audience to see, and thereby confront, the instability of both racial and gendered identities simultaneously.

***Othello*, dir. by Gemma Bodinetz, Everyman (2018)**

Gemma Bodinetz's 2018 *Othello* for the self-proclaimed 'forward-thinking' Liverpool Everyman theatre company, which casts a black, female, lesbian Othello, addresses the issues of intersectionality Khan's production does not explore.⁸⁴ In this section I argue that whilst the casting in Bodinetz's *Othello* forges an intersectional reading of Shakespeare's play, these choices nonetheless require further support throughout the production to make the casting decisions consistently impactful. The performance took place in the Liverpool Everyman Theatre, notably on a theatre-in-the-round stage with a seating capacity of just 405 seats and featured a stripped back set. In a break from the tradition of reserving Othello's role for black men, Bodinetz cast British-Guyanese actor Golda Rosheuvel as the tragic hero.⁸⁵ Rosheuvel already had experience in smaller Shakespearean roles including Calphurnia in *Julius Caesar*, a Goddess in *The Tempest* and Charmian in *Antony and Cleopatra* but never a major part; in recent years, she has gained acclaim for her roles in Netflix's hit-series *Bridgerton* and *Queen Charlotte*.⁸⁶ The year preceding Bodinetz's *Othello*, Rosheuvel played Mercutio in Daniel Kramer's *Romeo*

⁸⁴ On their website, Everyman refers to themselves as 'Brilliant, forward-thinking theatre that responds to its time and place'. Everyman Playhouse, 'What We Do' <<https://www.everymanplayhouse.com/what-we-do>> [accessed 15 April 2024].

⁸⁵ The Liverpool Everyman Theatre has 405 seats which is relatively small in comparison to the 1040 seats in the Royal Shakespeare Theatre where Iqbal Khan's *Othello* took place.

⁸⁶ Rosheuvel played Calphurnia in *Julius Caesar*, dir. by Sean Holmes, Royal Shakespeare Company (Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 2006). She played Goddess in *The Tempest*, dir. by Rupert Goold, Royal Shakespeare Company (Novello Theatre, 2006). She played Charmian in *Antony and Cleopatra*, dir. by Gregory Doran, Royal Shakespeare Company (Swan Theatre, 2006).

and *Juliet* for Shakespeare's Globe as a female clown, a revisionist take on the role. Her casting of Othello is also *seeing* as indicated by the production's intent made clear in its advertisement.⁸⁷ Othello's costumes also gesture toward her gender as her soldier's uniform is set apart from the male soldiers' fatigues; she wears boldly patterned clothes and headdresses.⁸⁸ Director Bodinetz explained that she wanted to change Othello's gender 'to make a modern audience sit up and feel something of what a Jacobean audience must have felt at seeing a black man commanding an army'.⁸⁹ Aside from Othello, the majority of the cast are white and play characters whose gender remains unchanged, with the exception of Marc Elliot who is an English actor of Scottish and Indian heritage playing both Roderigo and Lodovico. Othello's nontraditional casting introduces additional layers of prejudice to the fate of the main character. She is now an openly lesbian woman, in a relationship with Desdemona, which adds tones of homophobia to Brabantio's rejection, on top of the racism, bringing new connotations to his and Iago's labelling of Othello and Desdemona's relationship 'unnatural' (III.3.232). She is a military commander, dominating others in a position traditionally held by men, which invites interpretations that mark Iago's resentment at missing out on the position one loaded with misogyny, as well as racism and homophobia. Rosheuvel herself, who is openly homosexual, joked about 'how many boxes I can be put in' as a black, lesbian woman with regard to the production, and the production, in turn, positions Iago as someone who believes her hiring is 'box-ticking at its most ridiculous'.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ The Everyman website uses the pronoun 'she' when talking about Othello. Everyman Playhouse, *Othello* (2018) <<https://www.everymanplayhouse.com/whats-on/othello>> [accessed 22 July 2024].

⁸⁸ There was no full video recording available for this production, therefore, my analysis of the production reconstructs the performance as much as possible based on video trailers, reviews and images.

⁸⁹ Quote taken from Gemma Bodinetz in Lyn Gardner, 'Othello as an Out Lesbian: Why Golda Rosheuvel's Time is Now', *The Guardian*, 3 April 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/apr/03/othello-as-an-out-lesbian-why-golda-rosheuvels-time-is-now>> [accessed 15 April 2024].

⁹⁰ Gardner, 'Othello as an Out Lesbian'.



FIG 10. *Othello*, dir. by Gemma Bodinetz (Everyman, 2018). Othello (Golda Rosheuvel) and Desdemona (Emily Hughes). Photograph © Jonathon Keenan.

The gender swap, in its *seeing* nature, introduces new (overt) sexualities into the play and centres the drama on a lesbian relationship, giving audiences a queer rendering of Shakespeare's play. Shakespeare's works have been a site of queer reading for several decades, as queer theorist Goran Stanivukovic states:

In combination with his iconic status as a literary figure, the queer potential of Shakespeare's texts has assured that he is an unavoidable subject of queer early modern studies and a frequent object of queer experimentation and testing in theatre and popular culture.⁹¹

Shakespeare's queer-ability that Stanivukovic declares, I propose, is largely due to his representations of desire and sexuality, the latent homosexual meanings and same-sex eroticism that the boy actors playing his roles brought to the plays and his playfulness with language and the plurality of meaning. Although an invitation to a queer reading of

⁹¹ Goran Stanivukovic, 'Introduction', in *Queer Shakespeare: Desire and Sexuality*, ed. by Goran Stanivukovic (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2017), pp. 1-29 (p. 5-6).

Shakespeare is more typically associated with his comedies because of their flirtation with gender and artifice, *Othello* lends itself to queer interpretation in a number of different ways. Some critics identify Iago's jealousy and anger as being a result of repressed homosexual desire for Othello.⁹² More nuanced is Mario DiGangi's investigation that considers race and sexuality together to argue that Iago uses racist language to 'inflame Othello with a desire to discover Iago's secret thoughts, a process that involves both psychic identification and heightened intimacy between a black male body and a white male body', calling the aforementioned psychoanalytic readings of Iago that argue for his paranoid homosexuality problematic.⁹³ My purpose in citing these queer readings of Iago is to show that there is a history of work asserting that Iago's supposedly undisclosed love for Othello opposes fixed identities and heteronormativity. Additionally, drawing on Stanivukovic's assertion that 'one does not have to be relegated to the [...] sexual margin in Shakespeare to embody queer meaning', I propose that Othello, in a different way, is a figure that generates queer meaning, using the term in a broad sense which does not only relate to sexuality and, instead, acknowledges Othello's visible variation from the 'norm': in his race; interracial relationship, albeit heterosexual, that strays from perceived ideas of white heterosexuality as the normative mode of sexual orientation; and his ostracisation.⁹⁴ The casting of a queer woman as the main character in this play at once attracts an interrogation of Shakespeare's representations of identity and creates a meeting point for those representations from the early modern period and our contemporary moment. This is a casting choice that I determine as avant-garde in its writing back to the canon and potential to unsettle through its queer and feminist subversion of the classical tragedy. As Mihaylova defines, 'avant-garde art requires a critic, critics, or an entire audience (the more the better) to be astounded and converted into a new way of perceiving, thinking and living', and by viewing this performance, spectators are able to

⁹² For an early example see W. H. Auden, 'The Joker in the Pack', in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948), pp. 246-272. For more, Jonathan Crewe gives an overview of the critical history of 'queer Iago' in Jonathon Crewe, 'Queer Iago: A Brief History', *Shakespeare Survey*, 71 (2018), 267-275.

⁹³ Mario DiGangi, 'Shakespeare, Race, and Queer Studies', in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Race*, ed. by Patricia Akhimie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 154-170 (p. 160).

⁹⁴ Stanivukovic, p. 7.

see Shakespeare, *Othello* and identity in a different light and in the context of their own lives.⁹⁵

The Everyman production's casting of *Othello* as I read it offers an intersectional adaptation of *Othello* that explores race, gender and sexuality simultaneously, in a way that Khan's production does not explore fully in its attention to race and masculinity. Like Crenshaw, who calls for an intersectional approach to maximise the impact of feminism and antiracism, Ian Barnard recognises the benefit of considering how queer theory and antiracism inform one another, asserting: 'race and sexuality are not separate axes of identity that cross and overlay in particular subject positions, but rather, ways to circumscribe systems of meaning and understanding that formatively and inherently define each other.'⁹⁶ For queer theory to dismantle heteronormativity and foreground the genders and sexualities that exist beside and within heterosexuality, it must, like feminism, use a 'multiple oppression' model to, too, dismantle white supremacy: the Everyman production responds to that challenge, providing this intersectional lens through its black, lesbian, female character. The change in meaning in Emilia's words to Desdemona, "'Tis not a year or two shows us a man. / They are all but stomachs, and we all but food; / They eat us hungerly, and when they are full / They belch us' (III.4.95-98), summarises neatly how the casting shifts the potential problems the original play raises. In Shakespeare's text, these lines are a warning to Desdemona that her husband Othello is not who she first thought, based upon her experience with her husband Iago whom she, at this point, resents. Emilia implies that men use and abuse women: however, as Othello is a woman in this performance, all of Emilia's words fall to Iago, and Othello is free from the picture. The representative of white patriarchy is who the pair discuss and blame before Desdemona's death rather than both men, and as Othello has become one of the belched, Iago is held as responsible for her marginalisation too.

⁹⁵ Mihaylova, p. 8.

⁹⁶ Ian Barnard, 'Queer Race', *Social Semiotics*, 9.2 (1999), 199-212 (p. 200).



FIG 11. *Othello*, dir. by Gemma Bodinetz (Everyman, 2018). Emilia (Emma Bispham) drinking prosecco with Desdemona (Emily Hughes). Photograph © Jonathon Keenan.

The Desdemona problem, emblematic of how race and gender inform each other's marginalisation when not considered in tandem, left unresolved in Khan's production, is actively confronted here. Desdemona originally upsets her father by entering into an interracial relationship; Bodinetz updates these taboos by also making it homosexual and, in that, Desdemona's self-assertion is emphasised to a modern audience as she is now more transgressive, standing in the way of homophobia and racism in a way that, as Bodinetz suggests, modernises the original play's prejudices. Spectators might perceive her as less passive as she is willing to challenge social norms, societal pressure towards heteronormativity and her father's prejudices in the name of love; she playfully drinks prosecco in a swimming costume and initiates public and passionate displays of affection with Othello, wearing a mini dress and heels, emphasising agency over modesty. These costumes and behaviours, outside of the production in a modern society, indicate little on one's character, rather they are simply commonplace pieces for women to wear or ordinary ways for women to act; therefore, these outfits and actions signal a Desdemona who is a modern woman, freed from the constraints of Elizabethan patriarchy and its customs, whilst also offering spectators a woman who is recognisable to them. Desdemona is here less of a blank slate that allows space for spectators'

inscription of sympathy onto her body. The emotional response of spectators towards Desdemona's predicament and eventual murder softened in a number of other ways: the violence is woman on woman which subverts the inherent misogynistic overtones within the murder. Since Othello is a woman here, her displays of aggressive physical rejection of her own victimisation during the play somewhat counter Desdemona's feminine passivity, for example when she grabs and threatens to kill Iago or when she wrestles Cassio to the ground. Although Othello is ultimately a victim, the production offers a diverse portrayal of women through its casting which is absent in the original, enhanced by the inclusion of Emma Bispham as a Duchess of Venice, resulting in an equal gender split amongst the cast of eight. Additionally, in the bedroom scene where I suggest the Desdemona problem climaxes, Desdemona is partially hidden on the bed from the audience by the white, translucent drapes hanging down from the ceiling, cloistering her, partially removing her body from the dynamic. In its refusal to make Desdemona's whole body a visible object of pity, coupled with the updated social pressures of the play with modern alternatives, the production opens up a complex understanding of the prejudice in the play. As a consequence, spectators can more easily feel empathy for Othello and, in line with avant-garde impulse, potentially be moved by the play, and think and act in the future responsively to it. The feud driving the action is translated into traditional, outdated views that stand in opposition to progressive futures, and as a result, racism is displaced from the centre of the play. Whilst the production still addresses racism, it certainly does not embrace it as Quarshie accuses other productions of doing, instead speaking to it in conjunction with gender and sexuality.

While I argue that the production's intersectional approach is effective, it is important to acknowledge that the race of Desdemona and Othello remains the same as in the original play so as to not overlook its effects. Whilst the gender swap redefines many elements of the play's interconnected systems of race, gender and sexuality, the racial binary, heightened by the predominantly white cast, and its polarising effects, endure. Jean E. Howard offers an example of one such effect in her analysis of race and gender in *Othello*. Howard urges readers to treat Desdemona as not only a gendered subject, but a

racial subject and argues that it is Desdemona's 'white privilege' that leads her to call her husband's judgement of Cassio ill and beg him to reinstate Cassio.⁹⁷ If I trace Howard's example in the Everyman production where the racial dynamic is unchanged, Desdemona still displays white privilege when second-guessing her partner's military judgement of Cassio, a white man whom she is supporting over her wife (Othello). The casting in Khan's production upholds the same issue, but, as I have evidenced Cassio is portrayed as racist in the RSC production, the privilege becomes more overtly tied to racism. What I propose differs between these two productions and why I interpret Bodinetz's as a successful intersectional *Othello* is where the audience's emotions are directed. Whilst I argued for Khan's production that the audience's empathy must be with both Othello and Desdemona for the production to break cycles of racism and misogyny, in the case of this Everyman production, since Othello is a black woman, representative of the intersection of race and gender, I suggest that it is most important that the audience's emotions lie with her. The sheltering of Desdemona's body in her death scene helps to inhibit audience sympathy for her and places the spotlight on Othello, as does the stage, space and set design. The set departs from the grand, large-scale sets often used for *Othello*, as displayed by Khan's production, and makes use of a bare, stripped back set on a small stage, allowing the focus to be on the characters and their emotions throughout the course of the play. The small space lends itself to the idea of Othello's entrapment and creates a sense of claustrophobia for her and the audience. The theatre-in-the-round staging brings the audience closer to the action, now physically and emotionally, reducing the distance between characters and spectators which helps to quash an *us vs. them* dynamic that *Othello* and its Iago problem might foster, particularly in a predominantly white audience; instead, the audience are brought closer to Othello both physically and figuratively, able to align themselves with the character.

One could then take the standpoint that the audience are also brought closer to Iago and his scheming; however, I argue that Bodinetz's *Othello* successfully alienates Iago from

⁹⁷ Jean E. Howard, 'Shakespeare, Race, and Feminist Critique', in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Race*, ed. by Patricia Akhimie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), pp. 30-51 (p. 37).

the audience so that he becomes the outsider in this production, offering an alternative solution to the Iago problem. Played by Patrick Brennan, Iago is noticeably older than the other main characters, posing him as the 'ancient', unable to move with the times and thus marked as reactionary.⁹⁸ His anger can thus be received as rooted in being preceded by a woman at work, Desdemona marrying a woman, women being chosen over him at every step of the way, which is everything his birthright as a white man promised him would not happen. Despite the dominance of his demographic as a white man, I suggest that his traditional thinking is framed as historical and bitter and the production rather, curries favour for the rest of the progressive, diverse cast as represented by Othello and Desdemona who represent the future he is unwilling to change for. In Bodinetz's staging it thus seems to be privilege and its accompanying entitlement that guide his character rather than the overt racism which many productions choose to highlight.

By alienating other characters like Iago's accomplice, Roderigo, the production does more than isolate the antagonist; it sets up a stark ideological divide between a progressive, modern sensibility and a regressive, traditionalist worldview. This strategy visibly dramatises a contemporary culture war, positioning Iago and Roderigo as representatives of a residual social order whose essentialist prejudices reflect the broader cultural resistance to institutional change. Through this, the production frames the vocal outrage surrounding casting choices - such as the one made here - as a theatrical continuation of the play's villainy, effectively casting the 'traditionalist' spectator in the role of a modern-day Iago or Roderigo. Roderigo, played by Marc Elliott, is portrayed as a rich white man, wearing designer accessories, brightly coloured trousers and velvet shoes, arriving in Cyprus dishevelled and struggling to drag his matching luggage set. Like Iago, these costume choices and subtleties in his delivery imply that he feels snubbed at losing Desdemona to a woman when he assumes that wealth and masculinity are everything she should want. Privilege is a concept that is placed under a spotlight which draws new binaries amongst the characters, rather than

⁹⁸ Editions of *Othello* either call Iago the Moor's 'ancient' or 'ensign' meaning third-in-command, after general Othello and lieutenant Cassio.

the ones built solely on race and gender for which Khan criticised Shakespeare's original. Like the production's Iago who is entitled and unfavoured, Roderigo is portrayed as highly privileged and simultaneously ridiculous. Cassio's drinking scene also toys with ideas of entitlement as he drinks, dominates and 'disgraces himself in rip-roaring British lad abroad fashion' as one review describes, treating Cyprus as a playground for his boorish behaviour.⁹⁹ Implicit criticism of entitlement is not limited to the play's male characters in the production. Leah Gould who played Cassio's illicit lover, Bianca, kept her Liverpoolian accent in her performance of the character, which took place on a stage in Liverpool. When she faces derogatory treatment from Emilia and others, their exchanges serve as a comment on the media and society's negative treatment of women from Liverpool, underscored with perceptions of class and privilege. This, once again, allows spectators to be brought closer to the production by helping them apply their own experiences and knowledge to the play.

Reducing the temporal and psychological distance between the play and the spectators, I suggest, is key to Bodinetz's progressive version of *Othello* as it encourages audiences to see the characters she redefines closely and in new ways. Her inclusion of social media in the play lends itself to this conception. I read this incorporation as a part of Bodinetz's stated initiative to update the play to provoke responses in viewers akin to those of early modern audiences. Social media replaces the rumour-mill that is no longer an experience for audience members in the way that it functions in *Othello*. The ocular proof comes in the form of videos of Desdemona and Cassio, opportune for misconception. This not only technologically modernises the plot and brings Iago's scheming into a more familiar form for a contemporary audience, but it offers the audience a situation they themselves could plausibly encounter, calling on popular contemporary topics such as cancel culture and defamation through social media. The play shows that there is no escape from this since Desdemona is already a technophobe and takes no part in social media; this does not prevent her downfall, however. Russell Jackson argues that the challenges of representing *Othello* are 'not simply resolved by

⁹⁹ 'Review: Othello at Liverpool Everyman ****', *Arts City Liverpool*, 3 May 2018 <<https://www.artscityliverpool.com/single-post/2018/05/03/review-othello-at-liverpool-everyman>> [accessed 15 April 2024].

casting an actor of colour in the role' and Miles Grier goes further declaring that 'no casting can remove that dialogue [of moral assumptions] from a script that represents the "bad conscience" that Fiedler ascribed to Shakespeare and the societies that have sustained his work.'¹⁰⁰ Jackson's assertion that casting a black, presumably male, actor in the role of Othello does not resolve of the play's issues is certainly true, as Quarshie's exploration of black men playing the role evidences; but Grier's statement implies that no casting choice, be it female or male, can be corrective of the stereotypes the play relies on. I concur with Grier that casting alone does not absolve *Othello*; however, it introduces new narratives and meanings that can be supported further by other elements the production brings to the play. If the nontraditional casting alone is not enough to create an anti-racist performance and the script cannot be significantly changed - which it cannot in the contemporary Shakespeare productions I am examining by their motivation - then it is the adjustments and tropes such as including social media that help to bring the play into the lives of the audience. Pascale Aebischer argues that, within performances of Shakespeare, the inclusion of 'digital media can provoke intensely private encounters, either in a physical space [...] or a virtual space [...], in which spectators can rehearse responses/take responsibility for their action and/or inaction.'¹⁰¹ Aebischer has in mind productions of Shakespeare that have a more prominent and complex use of digital media than the Everyman's relatively straightforward inclusion of social media and mobile phones; nonetheless, I mirror the emphasis Aebischer places on the relationship between digital media and the audience. I propose that in the Everyman production, the use of social media grounds and includes the audience, opening up new ways of experiencing, interpreting and responding to the play.¹⁰² In turn, this helps the audience to empathise with Othello's

¹⁰⁰ Russell Jackson, 'Questions of Racism: *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*, ed. by Russell Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 149-160 (p. 149); Miles Grier, 'Are Shakespeare's Plays Racially Progressive?', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, ed. by Ayanna Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 237-253 (p. 249). Clarification added.

¹⁰¹ Pascale Aebischer, 'Technology and the Ethics of Spectatorship', in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Performance*, ed. by James C. Bulman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 302-320 (p. 318).

¹⁰² Pascale Aebischer writes of the RSC's collaboration with Google Creative Lab team on *#dream40* (2013), a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which was performed live on stage, streamed online and unfolded on social media simultaneously, encouraging viewers to engage in the performance by

transition from one state of mind to the other. As Quarshie had argued in 1998 and Adrian Lester since, this transition is the crux of an antiracist representation and requires more support to aid its plausibility in order not to pin it on the character's race. Whilst Rosheuvel followed Quarshie's lead and ensured that her 'face would sometimes freeze after her performance of the fit' to stress that she had undergone injury, the backdrop of social media's toxicity emphasises the psychological effects upon Othello to spectators who engage with social media themselves.¹⁰³ By connecting characters and audience in this way, the production fosters empathy for Othello, making for a potent outcome if seeking to convert spectators into a new or intersectional way of looking and understanding.

II

Recasting *The Tempest*

***The Tempest*, dir. by Phyllida Lloyd, Donmar Warehouse (2016)**

In this section, I investigate how a single gender cast complicates the *seeing/unseeing* framework and uncover what spectators draw from such a casting choice with reference to Phyllida Lloyd's all-female *The Tempest*. When faced with a progressive adaptation of Shakespeare, I contend that audiences either want to understand the play with what Mihaylova calls 'a corrective context' or an overt critical commentary on the issues the director identifies within the play, seeking comfort and guidance from the production, or they want to be moved by the stark discomfort the play provokes, as

commenting and posting online. He also explores the effects of Davy and Kristin McGuire's *Ophelia's Ghost*, a digital hologram installation (2014).

¹⁰³ Miles Grier, 'Are Shakespeare's Plays Racially Progressive?', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, ed. by Ayanna Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 237 - 253 (p. 239).

theatre critic Alexis Soloski implies in her review of Phyllida Lloyd's *The Taming of the Shrew* (2016) when she argues that 'Lloyd should have sent her audience away less cheerful and more troubled, giving a damn.'¹⁰⁴ This perhaps illuminates a dissonance between what audiences want and what critics want for audiences; nevertheless, both of these desires express a hunger to be moved and inspired. I suggest that the Everyman's *Othello* offers that corrective context through the binary that it sets up between Iago as reactionary and Othello and the audience as progressive. This is successful because it is made clear that Othello's actions and behaviour are unattached to their race, but are consequences of Iago's meddling, despite the ending upholding the same sense of tragedy. Lloyd's all-female casting of *The Tempest*, on the other hand, chooses not to overtly conceal or 'fix' the play's matters of colonisation, slavery, racism and patriarchy. I show that the all-female cast and the play's setting allow an explicit presentation of these themes that is still critical and does not incite a reactionary response. I use the term all-female to describe the cast for this production as that is how the play was marketed; however, I bear in mind that not all of the actors identify as female currently and strive to be conscious of that in my exploration of the play.

The decision not to explicitly rewrite some of the identified colonial, patriarchal and racial troubles within *The Tempest* is perhaps surprising given the seemingly feminist-motivated decision to strip all men from the play and Lloyd's directorial history of *Mamma Mia!* (2008) and *The Iron Lady* (2011), endeavours which both positioned women centre screen. In *The Tempest*, Lloyd uses the all-female cast to rather highlight the posturing of masculinity and magnify the play's problematic portrayals of gender and race. In an interview about one of her previous all-female cast productions of Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew* (2016), she explains how the single gender cast allowed her to present these themes:

I think conventional casting struggles to make sense of the play in the 21st century. Often people end up having to do a commentary on the play. But there's

¹⁰⁴ Alexis Soloski, 'The Taming of the Shrew Review - Plenty of Spunk, but Lacking Subtlety', *The Guardian*, 13 June 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jun/13/taming-of-the-shrew-shakespeare-in-the-park-review>> [accessed 23 April 2024].

something about doing Shakespeare with a single gender, whether it is all-male or all-female that opens up certain possibilities. You are able to throw the behavior of the men into a particular relief, and be playful within a slightly larger than life way with it.¹⁰⁵

Katie Van-Syckle put a follow-up question to her, asking how the casting lets her ‘put aspects of the male characters in relief’, to which she responded:

I suppose we are able to push those themes slightly harder, and take them slightly further than maybe we would were this a man and a woman playing it. It would be maybe hard to embrace the horror of his behaviour without losing complete sympathy for Petruchio. There is a curious equation by which we are able to commit quite boldly to it.¹⁰⁶

This ‘curious equation’ allows Lloyd to represent problematic situations under a new guise that not only allows the staging of ‘the horror’ whilst retaining a level of sympathy for the perpetrating characters; the single-gender cast places Shakespeare’s play in an alternative frame that invites new interpretations. I argue that Lloyd’s production of *The Tempest* similarly confronts the problems postcolonial and feminist scholars identify in the plot, without abdicating sympathy for its characters through its racially diverse all-female cast. The casting facilitates a more nuanced interrogation of these dynamics because the audience is ever-conscious that the cast are performing the roles of men, distancing the actor from the character and thus reducing the risk of essentialising negative stereotypes, a risk that I argued attached to Jude Kelly’s 1997 production. In the play which the aforementioned interview focuses on, *The Taming of the Shrew*, it is easily forgotten that the central plot is a play-within-a-play being performed for the drunk Christopher Sly; Lloyd introduces this element of metatheatre into her

¹⁰⁵ Katie Van-Syckle and Phyllida Lloyd, ‘Phyllida Lloyd Reveals Challenges of Bringing All-Female ‘Taming of the Shrew’ to Central Park’, *Variety*, 24 May 2016 <<https://variety.com/2016/legit/news/taming-of-the-shrew-phyllida-lloyd-shakespeare-in-the-park-1201782312>> [accessed 28 May 2024].

¹⁰⁶ Katie Van-Syckle and Phyllida Lloyd.

production of *The Tempest*, ensuring again that the actors and characters are at once connected and disconnected by including a framing device.¹⁰⁷ Lloyd's *Tempest* was the third instalment of a trilogy of Shakespeare's plays set as if in a women's prison, directed by Lloyd and performed by the same all-female cast, following on from her productions of *Julius Caesar* in 2012 and *Henry IV* in 2014. All three plays were first performed at London's Donmar Warehouse before they were each taken to Brooklyn's St. Ann's Warehouse. The trilogy was eventually performed as a marathon, with the same cast performing all three plays on the same day, for three days in London. This play-within-a-play structure is in all of the trilogy's plays and ensures that, although the audience are already aware and always conscious that what they are watching is theatre, as Mazer sets out, the audience are certain that the performance they are watching contains a further performance within it. This additional layer of metatheatre both reminds spectators of the detachment and the production's own awareness of the performance's theatricality, highlighting that the production is not intending to attempt to convince or beguile the audience into believing in the world of the play or suspending their disbelief. An indication that a production is aware of its own dramatisations also encourages an audience to consider why this metatheatre is being highlighted.

Lloyd's use of the prison framing device allows her to employ an all-female cast with an element of logic. If these are all characters incarcerated, the performance of Shakespeare becomes plausible not only as all-female but because 'theatre has a long history in prisons', as Jonathan Shailor says in his exploration of prison theatre initiatives, *Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre*.¹⁰⁸ Prison arts programmes, such as The Shakespeare Prison Project and Shakespeare Behind Bars, enable theatre to be performed by people in prisons across America and the UK for recreational, educational, therapeutic and rehabilitation purposes. Shailor argues that theatre in prisons helps

¹⁰⁷ I accessed a recording of this production through Digital Theatre +. It is worth noting that Phyllida Lloyd has explained on a podcast that the film is made up of multiple performances recorded on different days and spliced together. Phyllida Lloyd and Barbara Bogaev, 'Phyllida Lloyd and All-Female Shakespeare: Episode 76', *Shakespeare Unlimited*, podcast, 28 June 2024 <<https://www.folger.edu/podcasts/shakespeare-unlimited/shakespeare-unlimited-episode-76/>> [accessed 23 July 2024].

¹⁰⁸ Jonathan Shailor, 'Introduction', in *Performing New Lives: Prison Theatre*, ed. by Jonathon Shailor (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2011), pp. 17-32 (p. 18).

those who participate to become increasingly self-aware and empathetic, with a broadened understanding of humanity:

Theatre creates a dual consciousness: one is both oneself, and not oneself; a character, and not that character (true even when one is playing oneself). This opens up a space for reflection and evaluation: How am I like/not like this character? How do my own interpretations, motivations, and choices compare to those of this character? What is the best choice in this situation? These questions become more than academic as performers draw upon their own experiences to inhabit their role, as they stretch to perform in new ways, and as they encounter their spontaneous feelings and responses to the actions of other characters.¹⁰⁹

Shailor's words about the duality and reflection performance offers its actors can equally be applied, I suggest, to the practice of cross-gender cast actors performing Shakespeare. For both them and the audience, they are the actor and the character; they are in some ways like the character and in other ways not. By including the prison framing device, Lloyd not only adds a realistic reference point to the performance of Shakespeare or context for the all-female cast, but she also brings attention to the idea of performance and difference which for many actors/characters in *The Tempest* is, glaringly to the audience, race and gender.

Elizabeth Klett argues that 'all-female Shakespeare is, on the whole, less challenging to normative ideologies of gender than selectively cross-cast productions' because it 'diminishes the gap between actress and character that challenges our entrenched ideas about gender'.¹¹⁰ There is value in Klett's provocation that the void between actor and character in selectively cross-cast productions (such as Bodinetz's *Othello*) is larger because it is constantly compared against the other characters where the distance is smaller, although this gap in my view is dependent on the *seeing/unseeing* framework of

¹⁰⁹ Shailor, p. 22.

¹¹⁰ Elizabeth Klett, 'Re-Dressing the Balance: All-Female Shakespeare at the Globe Theatre', in *Shakespeare Re-Dressed: Cross-Gender Casting in Contemporary Performance*, ed. by James C. Bulman (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), pp.166-188 (p. 168).

the character(s). I, however, suggest that Lloyd's all-female cast is no less effective in illustrating the mechanisms of gender but simply offers an alternative approach. I ask how spectators' perception differs from a queering of one character, such as Bodinetz's Othello, in comparison to a queering of all of a play's roles, and whether this does, as Klett suggests, remove the queering's potency because it is no longer isolated. I do not use 'queer' here with relation to sexual identity, but a performative 'queering' of a gender identity, an adaptive practice, whereby altered perception may result. Bodinetz's Othello is queering because the role has been changed from its assumed standard which impacts the narrative, including making Othello a queer character with regards to sexual orientation, but the overall strategic approach in Lloyd's *Tempest* production means that the characters are all queering which makes none of them able to queer each other, but they can nonetheless be queering of a wider idea: they question the construction of gender; they write back to the all-male performance troupes of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage which Shakespeare wrote for and raise questions about casting practices. I suggest that production's employment of a framing device, its reminders of that framing device which appear in the form of prison wardens and inventive props made of rubbish puncturing the performance of Shakespeare and its return to the prison setting at *The Tempest's* end, shatter any temporary illusion or forgetfulness of the 'gap' Klett talks of, ensuring it is always present and visible, constantly drawing attention to the representation of gender. The combination of the all-female cast performing as men and women, and the highlighting of performativity through the framing device, results in the characters' gender and race treading a complicated line between *seeing* and *unseeing*. In the women's prison situation, the gender and race of the women is taken at face value; however when the performance of *The Tempest* begins, all of the prison characters, other than the ones playing Miranda and arguably Ariel, perform as men with no indication that they are women performing the male roles, but the prison preface implicitly informs the audience that they should know that the characters, in the first instance, are women.

When it comes to race, the racial identity of the women in prison is *seeing* but the race of the *Tempest* cast is *unseeing*; however, because the race is initially *seeing* in the prison

frame, it is then always partly *seeing* in *The Tempest* section in spite of its *unseeing* nature, giving spectators a dual awareness of race's simultaneous visibility and invisibility. Despite this, I contend that the prison mould renders the race of the characters in *The Tempest* immaterial because if spectators are encouraged to believe the prison is the 'true' world of the play, then, in theory, the actors have been cast for the roles of the people in the prison: the casting pool in the prison is thus limited and potentially merit-based, or based upon a different hierarchy of prisoners. When I say immaterial, however, I mean only within the fiction of the framing device; in context of the production itself, the framing device delicately and metatheatrically brings casting and its surrounding contemporary discussions to the surface. In actuality, the race and gender of the actors played a part in the casting of the primary play which is *The Tempest*, but the play creates the illusion that the casting must have taken place in the prison. Racial and gendered meaning, then, is reassigned from Shakespearean character to the embodied prisoner.

The prison set-up, which is present in all three of the plays in the Donmar trilogy, takes place before the audience have even entered the theatre space. Whilst they await the opening of the doors into the stage room, the 'prisoners' are marched into the foyer before them by 'prison wardens'. The prisoners' arms are shackled and their faces filled with shame. They are then marched into the theatre with the audience members following behind. The room is decorated as a prison gym hall with basketball hoops, markings on the wooden floor and steel doors around the outskirts. The audience are seated on rows of blue plastic chairs, starting on the stage level but with stalls going upwards, furthering the illusion that they are witnessing a makeshift performance in a prison as visitors. In recorded versions of the plays, the prisoners are filmed being walked by guards around the perimeter of the building and into the theatre space and the caged doors are slammed shut behind them, in an attempt to support the appearance that the audience have been brought to the theatre on an organised outing.



FIG 12. *The Tempest*, dir. by Phyllida Lloyd (Donmar Warehouse, 2016). The cast walking into the theatre space for the performance's video recording. Photograph © Helen Maybanks. Reproduced with permission.

This strategy which seemingly seeks to build the fiction of the prison beyond the parameters of the performance works to two effects: it introduces a playfulness to the boundaries of the performance and the real-world audience experience which raises questions about where the line is or should be drawn; and it immerses viewers in the prison, combatting the artifice that Mazer emphasises is always present but extending the boundaries of the performance beyond the theatre itself. The incarcerated people and the guards are set apart from each other in uniform. The former all wear a uniform that consists of grey tracksuit bottoms, a polo shirt and a grey zip-up hoodie. Some wear different variations of the uniform, for example, a vest rather than a polo or long sleeves beneath it, demonstrating some difference between characters and a minimalistic expression of identity. The guards wear officer hats, crisp white shirts, black ties and trousers with handcuffs swinging from their belt. The prison motif's immersiveness managed to convince some spectators that part of the performance was in fact real, as one reviewer claims 'a friend who accompanied me to the play thought the actors were actually prisoners. After the show, she was shaking', whilst other reviewers indicated

they were always aware they were actors.¹¹¹ Some reviewers instead focused on the fact that the ‘occasional interventions by the guards’ meant that ‘we are always keenly aware that we are watching a play’.¹¹² The framing device then served to remind the audience that *The Tempest* was a play, as opposed to the prison performance being a play, creating a constant or returning state of theatricality. I am not of the opinion that the production ever hoped to fool spectators into belief in the prison performance, particularly as Harriet Walter (DBE), who is famed for her acting in British television, film and theatre, was cast as Prospero, but I read it as a way to draw awareness of the idea of self-conscious performance. Lloyd stated that she chose the prison setting as ‘a way to help the audience and the actors believe the action of a play’ as ‘the characters are obsessed with freedom and justice, they have a great apprehension of danger, they’re full of superstitions, some things we discovered that many prisoners are.’¹¹³ Here, she describes the reasoning behind the prison setting for the first performance in the Donmar trilogy *Julius Caesar*; however, her reasoning is, I suggest, applicable to *The Tempest* too, which is what she hoped when choosing the two following plays in the trilogy to suit the setting.¹¹⁴ Once all of the actors are on the stage and the prison buzzer noise sounds, one of the guards orders ‘places, ladies’ and the performance begins.

With the house lights up, Walter performs a prologue as ‘Hannah’, a woman in prison serving a life-sentence, now ‘66 years old’ but who at 31 was ‘the mother of an eleven month old girl’ and ‘the getaway driver in a politically motivated bank robbery in which two police officers and a security guard were killed’. A parallel of exile is immediately forged between Hannah and Prospero, both played by Walter, mirroring what might have taken place had Hannah been a real prisoner performing Shakespeare in line with Shailor’s accounts of such experiences; in fact, Walter’s character is based on a real

¹¹¹ Meredith Alloway, ‘Review: *The Tempest*’, *Paste Magazine*, 12 February 2017 <<https://www.pastemagazine.com/article/review-the-tempest>> [accessed 28 May 2024].

¹¹² ‘Review of *The Tempest* at the Donmar Warehouse’s King’s Cross Theatre’, *London Theatre*, 23 November 2016 <<https://www.londontheatre.co.uk/reviews/review-of-the-tempest-at-the-donmar-warehouses-kings-cross-theatre>> [accessed 28 May 2024].

¹¹³ Lloyd and Bogaev.

¹¹⁴ Lloyd and Bogaev.

person and story, potentially to increase authenticity.¹¹⁵ As these lines are delivered directly to the audience, the members can be seen by the actors and see one another; this reshapes the notions of stereotypical contemporary theatre where spectators can sit comfortably in darkness and the relationship of the spectator to the actor as they are involved in this address. Audience visibility and direct address, paired with the (illusionary) makeshift seating arrangements that pose spectators as prison visitors, force spectators themselves to become a part of the play and the fiction simply by virtue of their attending. The psychological distance between the audience and the actors is minimised before the performance of *The Tempest* begins and the house lights go down and the audience can resume their position of quiet spectatorship, reinforcing the idea that the performance is only now about to commence.



FIG 13. *The Tempest*, dir. by Phyllida Lloyd (Donmar Warehouse, 2016). Prospero (Harriet Walter) in prison uniform. Photograph © Helen Maybanks. Reproduced with permission.

¹¹⁵ Robert Dex, 'Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy: Reformed Prisoner Serving 75 Years for Fatal Robbery Inspires All-Female Tempest', *The Standard* <<https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/theatre/donmar-shakespeare-trilogy-reformed-prisoner-serving-75-years-for-fatal-robbery-inspires-allfemale-tempest-a3402516.html>> [accessed 10 September 2024].

As *The Tempest* starts, the audience witness an immediate shift in Hannah's character. She has become Prospero and her voice is deepened, her accent pronounced, her words enunciated, her shoulders back and her height seemingly increased as she commands the stage with authority, contrasting starkly to her previous form, who humbly delivered her monologue in a manner that was sweet and collected. Spectators may not have thought anything of Hannah's behaviour or delivery whilst viewing her opening speech but when it is placed next to Prospero's the performance of gender is observable. Throughout *The Tempest*, the cast remain in the same prison-uniform costume. Notably, they all also have short hairstyles (or where it is not short it is tied back) and wear no (visible) makeup; expressions of gender identity that typically come in the form of makeup, clothing and hair are resisted, leaving the performance of gender to be shaped through movement, behaviour and sound. These decisions uphold the prison set-up, but they also interrogate the audience's perception of gender.

Scholars and reviewers alike are divided on whether a cross-gender actor's performance can truly erase the gendered body from representation: some, such as Klett, argue it is impossible, whilst others, including Lyn Gardner, claim you can 'entirely forget' the gender of the actor.¹¹⁶ Still others resist the binary and argue that spectators retain consciousness of both identities at once, as Mazer contends, using Anthony Dawson's investigation into the duality of theatrical representation and the actor's physical body on the early modern stage as a springboard:

Dawson cites (with reservation) Michael Shapiro's use of the nineteenth-century acting term "dual consciousness" to describe how the audience can hold an awareness both of the actor's maleness and the character's femaleness. But while Shapiro contends that this awareness is invoked only sparingly, and at moments of special signification, I would contend that this awareness is constant, even when it is not invoked, though it never interferes with the audience's willingness

¹¹⁶ Lyn Gardner claims in her review of Kathryn Hunter's *Richard III*, a production Elizabeth Klett writes of, that 'you entirely forget that she is a woman playing a man'. Lyn Gardner, 'Richard III', *The Guardian*, 13 June 2003 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/jun/13/theatre.artsfeatures1>> [accessed 28 May 2024].

to believe in the virtual image of the character in action, any more than does the persistent presence of the tiring house in the spectator's field of vision interfere with our willingness to accept the stage as the location of the play's unfolding events. Indeed, the exceptional moments, when the artifice is explicitly invoked, are invariably moments that invite the greatest surrender.

I am most inclined to side with Mazer's concept of the simultaneous knowing and not-knowing; however, when it comes to Lloyd's performance, it is set apart from the instances that Mazer mentions because at no point is gender enacted through physical appearance. These exceptional moments of 'artifice' he mentions that determine awareness are not glimpses but constant. These differing opinions on whether the gendered body can be erased by the actor's performance of another gender are present in reviews of the Donmar production, as illustrated by Ben Brantley's declaration that 'I rarely stopped to consider that I was watching women playing men', whilst others commented on the play's reminders of gender difference, or on its lack of importance.¹¹⁷ I argue that the production, however, does not ever attempt to make one believe that Prospero is a man or that Caliban is not being performed by a woman since it seemingly makes little visible effort to do so; therefore, there is no fleeting moments of 'surrender' as there was no attempt to convince to begin with. The costumes of prison uniforms are unisex and work to equalise gender, the short hair cuts are androgynous and the absence of makeup removes an expression of femininity: none of these, however, conversely attempt to forge masculinity. The characters who arrive from Naples don a suit jacket momentarily, but they are promptly stripped of these clothes and placed into their prison uniform again when they set foot on the island. Rather than enact physical gender by mimicking its conventional surface, the actors convey gender through gestures. In almost direct opposition to Prospero's performance of masculine gender, Miranda performs femaleness by staying low to the ground, her body often hunched or

¹¹⁷ Ben Brantley, 'Review: In 'The Tempest,' Liberation and Exhilaration', *The New York Times*, 18 January 2017 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/18/theater/review-in-the-tempest-liberation-and-exhilaration.html>> [accessed 28 May 2024].

on the floor or bed below Prospero; she speaks with a kind and warm tone and her body language is submissive.

By having an all-female cast - whose presence inherently challenges the all-male casts of history - perform androgynous characters who are then performing a layer of gender on top of this, and making the performance of gender known through comparison, the production questions what then denotes gender. Since the androgynous slate is relatively blank in terms of gender signifiers, the audience are invited to inscribe gender upon these portrayals themselves and with that they are aware of its construction.

Mihaylova, in her exploration of the relationship between audience and theatre in avant-garde art, conceives 'spectatorship as praxis: a discursive practice whereby [...] spectators, no less than the artists, assert their views of aesthetic forms as forms that inscribe (or fail to inscribe) a sense of their community's worthiness'.¹¹⁸ I agree with Mihaylova's idea that spectators become co-authors to the play they watch but in non-traditionally cast Shakespeare, I propose that spectators are invited to inscribe identity and meaning on the cross-gendered or cross-racially cast actor. Lloyd's presentation of gender plainly invites this, whereas in Khan's and Bodinetz's productions, and other selectively cross-cast performances, the spectator is still a producer through self-perception but the invitation is less explicit. Moments of metatheatre in the performance - such as Hannah's direct address to the audience, the visitor role the audience involuntarily play and when Jade Anouka breaks her Ariel character to ask the audience to shine the torches found under their seats - encourage the audience's co-authorship of the performance and its characters' representations.

At this point I pause my analysis to note that, although I argue that the prison framing aids the production's destabilising representation of gender, the prison motif may stir uneasiness or doubt in spectators recognising its appropriative nature. These feelings might be enhanced by the videos posted on YouTube by St. Ann's Warehouse which feature all of the actors acting as their prison roles: Harriet Walter talks as Hannah, the getaway driver reflecting on her crime and her role in the prison's drama workshops

¹¹⁸ Mihaylova, p. 17.

and Jade Anouka performs as Sade, explaining how she was not interested in the (fictional) drama group until she realised it would help her stay out of trouble, as though to suggest the actors are method acting or to convince viewers of their prison roles.¹¹⁹ The concerns of impersonation and inauthenticity I illuminated at the beginning of this chapter with regard to race, gender and ability may lead some to greet the production with apprehension, despite Lloyd and the actors' efforts to create an evocative performance by working with women in prison at all stages of its conception. In its attempt to unsettle norms through casting, it runs the risk of relying on ulterior clichés. Though I found no reviews that explicitly state this view or declare their anxiety, some branded the prison setting a gimmick.¹²⁰

The casting and co-authored performance of gender that the prison setting allows do not automatically resolve all of *The Tempest's* potential issues surrounding gender, in the same way that Bodinetz's casting choices did not operate alone but were thematically supported by other elements of the production. Miranda's character requires attention if a production hopes to be effectively intersectional. I propose that if *Othello* has a Desdemona problem as Corredera shows, then *The Tempest* has a Miranda problem, similarly conflating competing positions of feminism and antiracism, now with an added layer of anticolonialism. In Shakespeare's text, Miranda is loving, gentle and subservient to her father. She is used as 'an essential royal bargaining chip in cementing a political alliance between Prospero and Alonso', as Chantal Zabus writes, which 'could be extended to a "commodified physical body . . . in a white masculine, western political and sexual economy. . . ."'¹²¹ She is 'Admired Miranda', patriarchy's ideal woman, as Ferdinand agrees in his celebration of her as 'So perfect and so peerless, are created / Of every creature's best' (III.1.37-48), used to uphold the power of Western men. Her rejection of Caliban's sexual threat, combined with the emphasis on her virginity throughout the play, positions her as a living representation of female virtue and

¹¹⁹ St. Ann's Warehouse, *Harriet Walter as Hannah Wake from THE TEMPEST*, video recording, YouTube, 6 January 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CxBoNnBJ6AE>> [accessed 24 July 2024]. All of the cast's videos can be found on the St. Ann's Warehouse YouTube channel.

¹²⁰ William Shaw, 'Review: "The Tempest"', *The Oxford Culture Review*, 29 September 2016 <<https://theoxfordculturereview.com/2016/09/29/review-the-tempest-2/>> [accessed 24 July 2024].

¹²¹ Chantal Zabus, *Tempests After Shakespeare* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 103-104.

chastity; however, this same encounter with Caliban is used as the excuse for Caliban's enslavement, as Prospero claims that he treated Caliban with 'humane care' and gave him somewhere to live, 'til thou didst seek to violate / The honor of my child' (I.2.346-347). Miranda's sexualisation represents both her patriarchal subordination and the part she plays in Caliban's colonisation. The attempted rape is used to buttress early modern fears of 'miscegenation' by associating them with acts of unwanted violence, as Dymphna Callaghan argues: 'the threat of rape, of course, was to become a standard colonialist trope that thus presented miscegenation as always already an act of sexual violation.'¹²² Miranda concomitantly represents racial purity and chastity whilst contributing (whether voluntarily or not) to colonial practice and racialised stereotypes. Her treatment of and language used towards Caliban explicitly illustrate the immediate role she has in colonising the subject which becomes increasingly problematic when her status as symbol of pure innocence and grace is unwavering. It is Prospero who is mostly responsible for Caliban's ill-treatment and enslavement but Miranda is a co-conspirator - despite her comparatively soft language and desire to educate Caliban - and her body is used metaphorically to hold up Prospero's platform. Beyond this political commodification and colonial collusion, Jyotsna G. Singh identifies Miranda as a structural necessity who functions as an 'object of desire' to 'keep [the] rivalry alive' between Prospero and Caliban.¹²³ Thus, Miranda embodies Crenshaw's caution that guided my analysis in the last chapter, which suggested that 'the failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color', as Desdemona does.¹²⁴ This is why Singh's interrogation of the 'gendering of these postcolonial discourses of revolution' is so vital; she argues that reimaginings of *The Tempest* must engage with the 'complex sexual ideologies underpinning colonialism' to avoid creating a male paradigm that

¹²² Dymphna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 126.

¹²³ Jyotsna G. Singh, 'Caliban versus Miranda: Race and Gender Conflicts in Postcolonial Rewritings of The Tempest', in *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture: Emerging Subjects*, ed. by Valerie Traub, M. Lindsay Kaplan and Dymphna Callaghan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 191-209 (p. 194).

¹²⁴ Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43.6 (1991), 1241-1299 (p. 1252).

‘posits a utopia in which women are marginalised or missing.’¹²⁵ To avoid a simplified reading of the original play’s social order as a fixed patriarchal product, however, it is necessary to acknowledge that these identities are not ‘states of being’ but ‘constructed positions’ that the play’s internal logic must ‘continually re-articulate’ as Barbara Ann Sebek illustrates.¹²⁶ This creates a ‘conflict of discourses’ where boundaries of Prospero’s authority are constantly at risk of slipping; for instance, Sebek uses the example of Miranda offering to bear Ferdinand’s logs as a moment that upsets the patriarchal and proto-capitalist relations constraining her.¹²⁷ Lloyd probes this fragility through her casting choices; by maintaining the original text while radicalising the bodies that inhabit it, the production strips the patriarchal construct of its biological disguise.

In response to these contradictions, critics have sought to reimagine Miranda outside of the confines of Shakespeare’s text. Lorrie Jerrell Leininger, at the end of her article on ‘Sexism and Racism in Shakespeare’s *Tempest*’, invents a new epilogue for her imaginary ‘modern Miranda’ to deliver, from which I cite some extracts:

I will not be used as the excuse for his enslavement. If either my father or I feel threatened by his real or imputed lust, we can build a pale [i.e., a fenced or marked boundary] around our side of the island, gather our own wood, cook our own food, and clean up after ourselves. [...]

I cannot give assent to an ethical scheme that locates all virtue symbolically in one part of my anatomy. My virginity has little to do with the forces that will lead to good harvest or to greater social justice. [...]

I need to join forces with Caliban—to join forces with all those who are exploited or oppressed—to stand beside Caliban and say,

¹²⁵ Singh, ‘Caliban versus Miranda’, p. 194.

¹²⁶ Barbara Ann Sebek, ‘People, Profiting, and Pleasure in *The Tempest*’, in *The Tempest: Critical Essays*, ed. by Patrick M. Murphy (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), pp. 463-481 (p. 464).

¹²⁷ Sebek, p. 466.

As we from crimes would pardon'd be,

Let's work to set each other free.¹²⁸

Leininger's created epilogue serves as a critical commentary on the interplay between Miranda's patriarchal praise and her furthering of colonialism, and suggests, in the same way Corredera does for Desdemona, that a radical reinvention of the character is necessary to prevent different marginalised groups reinforcing each other's subjugation. Leininger concludes the speech, and fictitious revision, by proposing a solution: a partnership between Miranda and Caliban. This rewriting would offer the 'corrective context' that I argue some spectators look for in an adaptation, but as I set out, Lloyd opts to sit in the play's problems and highlight them, instead, through casting. This conflict summarises the crux of Chapter Two: while rewritings may be able to make the clearest and most radical interventions that support intersectionality, their impact is limited, potentially due to this level of reformism, motivating my turn in focus to performance choices. The paths that casting as an adaptive strategy takes, by contrast, allow more mainstream productions to embody these interventions in ways that reach more people, making the political work more publicly accessible. Lloyd's decision to stay truer to the play's original text, while using casting to mark tensions, demonstrates how mainstream Shakespeare can engage with intersectional adaptation without requiring radical textual revision.

¹²⁸ Lorrie Jerrell Leininger, 'The Miranda Trap: Sexism and Racism in Shakespeare's *Tempest*', in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. by Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Green and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 285-294 (p. 291-292). Clarification added.



FIG 14. *The Tempest*, dir. by Phyllida Lloyd (St. Anne's Warehouse, 2017). Miranda (Leah Harvey) meeting Ferdinand (Sheila Atim). Photograph © Teddy Wolff. Reproduced with permission.

Casting and physical representation become central to exploring Miranda's role. By having Miranda wear a costume that does not signify gender and a hairstyle that does not express what might be considered typical Eurocentric conventions of femininity, Miranda's appearance in the Donmar production is androgynous, complicating Mazer's idea of the gendered 'virtual image' audiences believe in. Although the actor, Leah Harvey, plays a woman in prison, performing as Miranda, Harvey is non-binary and even though an actor's own gender identification is not necessarily apparent to spectators, the casting of a black non-binary actor as Miranda, the perfect vision of femininity to Ferdinand, already challenges what the protagonist represents. Caliban by contrast is played by white British actor Sophie Stanton. As I have argued, the all-female cast allows Lloyd to present themes of patriarchy with brutality; I add that the racial casting of Miranda and Caliban, too, opens up the possibility for an unfiltered portrayal of colonialism. A black Miranda dominating and ill-treating a white Caliban reverses the traditional racial power dynamic and allows a presentation of the colonisation in a way

that demonstrates its horrors clearly without playing into stereotypes and suggests that Miranda's treatment of Caliban is not founded upon the racism inherent in colonisation. The dangerous stereotypes that Caliban's alleged rape upholds, surrounding slaves, 'miscegenation', race and violence, are complicated through having a white Caliban. This allows Lloyd to stage in harrowing fashion the scene where Caliban is accused of the rape. Other modern productions of *The Tempest* have typically staged this scene in a way that tones down its serious implications or suggests that the allegation is untrue: in Gregory Doran's 2016 version for the RSC, Caliban, played by British-Jamaican actor Joe Dixon, performs the reaction to Prospero's accusation with genuine dismay and surprise, so as to refute the words of the white Prospero and Miranda. Tommy Sim'aan's white Caliban, for Freestone's 2023 version for the same company, responds to a white Prospero and Miranda with gestures signalling repentance indicating moral awareness of the deed with which he no longer associates himself. In Lloyd's production, Stanton as Caliban leans into the role of aggressor and accepts the claim with no remorse. Caliban screams and runs towards Miranda, chasing her under a bed where she curls up cowering, before he stands self-assured, signalling physically and tonally his frustration at being prevented from fulfilling his desire.

The reviews of the Donmar production overwhelmingly celebrated the all-female cast: Susannah Clapp hailed the trilogy as 'one of the most important theatrical events of the past 20 years years' because although 'women had taken on the mightiest of Shakespearean male roles before: it was clear that an exceptional actress could scale the heights', these performances 'proved something more essential: that the norm did not have to be male. They also showed how arbitrary our sense of difference is.'¹²⁹ If the take-away message from this production is that 'women can do it too', then perhaps its casting raises more significant questions about casting practices and how they present gender identity. This approach speaks to wider theoretical and theatrical debates about cross-casting as a practice, questioning whether the critical praise for 'transformative' performances should normalise the custom and exploring how such casting

¹²⁹ Susannah Clapp, 'Shakespeare Trilogy Review - Phyllida Lloyd's Searing Triumph', *The Guardian*, 27 November 2016 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/nov/27/shakespeare-trilogy-review-donmar-kings-cross-phyllida-lloyd-the-tempest-rsc-simon-russell-beale>> [accessed 28 May 2024].

fundamentally re-presents gender identity on stage. With that, the production brings into question contemporary stereotypes of casting, as opposed to challenging stereotypes that Shakespeare plays into in his themes and characters as Khan and Bodinetz do.

***The Tempest*, dir. by Elizabeth Freestone, Royal Shakespeare Company (2023)**

I turn to a production that, while formally more conventional, demonstrates how non-traditional casting can more quietly challenge norms without overtly advertising a political agenda. Elizabeth Freestone's 2023 *Tempest*, performed at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, is the only production examined in this chapter that does not advertise or associate itself with any feminist or antiracist agenda from the director, theatre company or actors despite its use of cross-casting, most notably, for its gender-swapped Prospero. Other non-traditional casting choices in the performance include, but are not limited to, Gonzalo, Trinculo and Sebastian, which are male roles played by women, and Sebastian, Alonso and Adrian, who are played by actors from mixed ethnic backgrounds. The RSC has its own equity, diversity, justice and inclusion ambitions, including their goal to build 'a permanent workforce, representative of the UK' and steps to create revised and inclusive processes and spaces, but I found nothing around inclusivity and diversity attached to this production; Freestone's stated focus is on climate change.¹³⁰ In this section, I explore the effects on race and gender in a production that uses nontraditional casting but has no explicit antiracist or feminist agenda, unlike the other productions I have analysed, and is primarily focused on a different and in this case environmental agenda.

Freestone has previously directed Shakespeare and contemporary plays but in recent years has turned her attention to promoting the performance of plays that she argues

¹³⁰ 'Equity, Diversity, Justice and Inclusion', *Royal Shakespeare Company* (September 2023) <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/about-us/policies/equity-diversity-justice-and-inclusion>> [accessed 30 May 2024].

bring to light climate issues.¹³¹ Randall Martin, who contributes to the *Tempest* production's programme, identifies the early modern issues of climate change that the play brings up, in particular the 1607 storm surge brought about by the "Little Ice Age" when the northern hemisphere underwent a cooling trend between 1300-1850' and the impact it had on fuel and timber, causing prices to skyrocket, rising 'up to 400% over Shakespeare's lifetime', and connects the early modern instances to present-day climate concerns.¹³² The programme note seeks to connect that research with production choices by expounding that 'the highly visible wooden properties [...] allude to this energy crisis' and declaring that 'in this production [...], Prospero's storm is both human-made and magical'.¹³³ The programme also informs the reader that the props and costumes, designed by Tom Piper, are made from materials found on Weston-super-Mare beach and recycled from other productions. While this sustainable strategy is noteworthy, the intention is not made explicit within the performance itself; much like Martin's research, it remains a detail that could easily go unnoticed by the audience. The props and costumes, however, help to date the production which is set in an ambiguous yet presumably modern time because of the suits and trainers worn by the characters from Naples and the objects made from rubbish. The recycled props in Freestone's production, like Lloyd's, connect the play with the real, wider world and do so by showing audiences a potential future if climate change persists.

Like the production's intentions, which might go undiscovered by spectators, Prospero's gender change might be undetected. The gender change from male to female is *seeing*, informed by the linguistic changes of 'father' to 'mother', but spectators who are unfamiliar with *The Tempest* - potentially a significant proportion of the audience at such a tourist destination theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon - will be unaware of Prospero's original male gender which the play has changed. This is less likely to occur in the other productions cited in this chapter, I argue, since those productions make a

¹³¹ Elizabeth Freestone and Jeanie O'Hare published their guide titled *100 Plays to Save the World* which features plays that they have drawn from around the world, in a vast span of styles, that they maintain speak to the climate emergency, or an aspect of it.

¹³² Royal Shakespeare Company, *The Tempest* theatre programme (2023)

¹³³ Royal Shakespeare Company, *The Tempest* theatre programme (2023)

point of their casting in their programmes and marketing, as well as within the play. Although Prospero's parental title is switched, she still holds the title of Duke rather than Duchess.¹³⁴ This might be interpreted as a quiet acknowledgement that the feminine title holds less weight; it might serve to bypass questions about where the Duke is; or it might also function as a hint to the audience that this role was once a man's role. Whether or not the cross-casting in the play attempts to be feminist or antiracist, or even interrogates practices of casting, when it is used, the meaning found in the production is ultimately determined by the audience and Prospero's character is reshaped significantly when changed feminine.

In Prospero's exile on the small remote island, he ensures that he is the chief patriarch; he controls his daughter's life and relationship; he enslaves two beings for his benefit; and he is wary of anything that brings a threat to his patriarchal ruling, specifically, his female and racial opposite, Sycorax. In securing his dominance, Prospero expresses obsession with the preservation of his daughter's virginity, since this is inextricably tied to his future power. He becomes the guardian of her virginity, his bargaining chip, preventing Caliban from raping Miranda (although this is not necessarily a marker of his obsessive concern, it symbolically represents his protection of her virginity) and not allowing Ferdinand to 'break her virgin-knot before / All sanctimonious ceremonies may / With full and holy rite be ministered' (IV.1.15-17) so that he can be reunited with his estate and noble position. Chastity was a social expectation for unmarried early modern women, and Ferdinand shows the desire for it when his first words to Miranda ask of her maidenhead status - 'if you be maid or no?' (I.2.426) - but I suggest that the extent of Prospero's concerns emphasises his patriarchal control.¹³⁵ Zabuz addresses the possibility of Prospero's 'incestuous feelings for his daughter' as an attempt to explain his accusation of Caliban's rape; whilst I have been arguing that Prospero's fixation with Miranda's virginity somewhat operates on a symbolic level to emphasise

¹³⁴ My analysis of this production is based upon my live viewing of the performance, supplemented by an archival recording provided to me by the RSC for research purposes.

¹³⁵ English historian Anthony Fletcher writes: 'The requirement of chastity was, as we have seen, the overriding measure of female gender. Women not only had to be chaste but had to be seen to be chaste: silence, humility and modesty were the signifiers that she was so.' Anthony Fletcher, *Gender, Sex and Subordination in England 1500-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 121-122.

his patriarchal authority, I draw on Zabus's ideas and place Prospero's obsessive interest in line with them because it helpfully illuminates Prospero's questionable morals and the uneasiness his interest brings, as well as his dominance of Miranda's body, both literal and metaphorical.¹³⁶ When Freestone's Prospero, played by *Doctor Who* and *ER* star Alex Kingston, performs the passages regarding Miranda's virginity, the dynamic is automatically reframed since the father figure is removed from the scenario. Mark Lawson concurs in his review of the performance, suggesting that cross-casting re-presents Prospero's implied problematic obsession lightheartedly: 'Prospero's rather creepy concern with the security of Miranda's hymen feels unlikely from a bohemian modern mother.'¹³⁷ Kingston played the lines with a rushed silliness, presenting them as nothing more than a joke from a protective mother. The punishment Prospero threatens Ferdinand with if he breaks her virgin-knot prematurely - 'barren hate, / Sour-eyed disdain and discord shall bestrew / The union of your bed with weeds so loathly / That you shall hate it both' (III.1.9-10) - is delivered with irony of the trope of overprotective parents. Similarly, the master and slave dynamic that Prospero and Caliban symbolise is immediately reframed by the cross-casting because the white European male, symbolic of the coloniser, is now a woman, while Caliban, the slave, is a white European man.

Where other productions choose to highlight the colonial relationship, in this RSC production it is moulded into something else. Having a female slave owner consequently brings with it new connotations of gender. Despite the fact that the play now has a matriarch, since Miranda and Prospero are the only women on the island, the gender divide between them and the enslaved male Caliban, whose duties are to 'Fetch in our wood' and 'make our fire', could lead to perceptions that they enslaved him to do the manual labour required for their survival. This insight is enhanced by Prospero's ordering of Ferdinand to 'remove / Some thousands of these logs and pile them up' (III.1.9-10) and in the efforts to portray a feminised and nurturing Prospero as she takes

¹³⁶ Zabus, p. 24.

¹³⁷ Mark Lawson, 'The Tempest Review - Alex Kingston is a Magnificent Prospero', *The Guardian* 3 February 2023 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2023/feb/03/the-tempest-review-alex-kingston-prospero-royal-shakespeare-stratford>> [accessed 4 June 2024].

in washing off the line. The cross-gender casting, then, problematically leads to a redefining along traditional gender lines where the woman is the homekeeper, fulfilling duties of domestic labour, and the man partakes in manual labour, breadwinning, and in this case that bread is fuel as money is a currency not required.



FIG 15. *The Tempest*, dir. by Elizabeth Freestone (Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 2023). Miranda (Jessica Rhodes) being held by Prospero (Alex Kingston). Photograph by Ikin Yum.
© Royal Shakespeare Company. Reproduced with permission.

Reviews of this production, however, did not mention the gender-swapped role nearly as much as reviews of Bodinetz's production, where the majority of the review titles, including 'lesbian Moor boldly puts gender under the microscope', 'Othello as an out lesbian' and 'Othello triumphantly challenges gender norms', draw headline-grabbing attention to the change, or reviews of Khan's cross-racial *Othello* which read 'history is made with RSC's fresh take on the tragedy' and 'beyond black and white'.¹³⁸ This leads

¹³⁸ Gardner, 'Othello as an out lesbian'; Lottie Gibbons, 'Review: Othello Triumphantly Challenges Gender Norms with this Electric Performance at Everyman', *Liverpool Echo*, 3 May 2018 <<https://www.liverpoolecho.co.uk/whats-on/theatre-news/review-othello-triumphantly-challenges-gender-14609348>> [accessed 4 June 2024]; Michael Billington, 'Othello Review - History is Made with RSC's Fresh Take on the Tragedy', *The Guardian*, 12 June 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jun/12/othello-rsc-stratford-hugh-quarshie-lucian->

me to question where the shock factor lies in cross-gender and cross-racial casting. Does Prospero's change get less attention because *Tempest* is not a play so tightly bound with racist performances and blackface in the public eye as *Othello* is? Is the change less worthy of comment because it does not alter the sexuality of the character? Did the production successfully focus on climate change as opposed to gender, to the extent that the latter went unnoticed? Or perhaps the change of white male to white female is comfortable to stomach for spectators?

Although Kingston's Prospero is the first female Prospero the RSC has staged, female Prosperos have come before her. Vanessa Redgrave played the Duke for the Globe in 2000 and having not seen the production, I rely on Klett's argument that Redgrave's Prospero was neither feminine nor masculine, symbolised by the singular earring she wore which Klett reads as both 'masculine (wearing an earring in one ear rather than two) and feminine (wearing long earrings)', making her neither.¹³⁹ In addition, Helen Mirren played Prospera in Julie Taymor's 2010 filmic adaptation as a woman who by nature is authoritative and cruel. This history could explain the reviewers' disinterest in the cross-casting, but what strikes me is that when the reviews do raise Prospero's gender, it is in connection with her magic ability. Peter Viney, for instance, argues that one place where the production fell short was in Prospero, but 'gender was not the issue. Direction was. Prospero gets insufficient magic.'¹⁴⁰ Although Viney insists that gender is not what held the production back, it is significant that he connects it implicitly with the inadequate magical quality he identifies. Michael Davies's review for WhatsOnStage articulates a noticeably similar criticism:

Freestone's liberality with gender, while not a problem in itself, is laced with inconsistencies: the Duke is reframed as a woman and a mother yet inexplicably

[msamati-joanna-vanderham](#)> [accessed 4 June 2024]; Susan L. Fischer, 'Othello's "Travels" History' *Illuminated Anew: Beyond Black and White in Iqbal Khan's RSC Revival (2015)*, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 98.1 (2018), 43-64 (p. 47).

¹³⁹ Elizabeth Klett, *Cross-Gender Shakespeare and English National Identity: Wearing the Codpiece* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 100.

¹⁴⁰ Peter Viney, 'The Tempest - RSC 2023', 2 March 2023 <<https://peterviney.com/stage/the-tempest-rsc-2023>> [accessed 04 June 2024].

retains her masculine title. Kingston favours the maternal aspects of her role, which imbues Prospero with insight and freshness, but she seems *much less foregrounded than usual, with less enchantment and agency as a result*.¹⁴¹

[Emphasis added]

Both reviews protest that gender is not an issue but imply that it comes with a trade in Prospero's power and sorcery; the reviews thus at once connect the two ideas and claim that they are not necessarily connected. Whilst reviewer Dominic Cavendish does not declare as explicitly as Viney and Davies that Kingston's gender is untied to their comments on her performance, he forms a similar opinion on her Prospero's powerlessness, claiming that his reservation with the performance was that 'Kingston could let greater storm-clouds gather and a louder emotional tempest of betrayal rage', rather than play the role so serenely.¹⁴²

Taking the investigation into female Prosperos and their power wider, I cite Virginia Mason Vaughan who surveys reviews of alternative female Prosperos, one of which reviews Penny Metropulos's *Tempest* (2001) which features an 'overtly female Prospero', produced for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival.¹⁴³ Reviewer Michael W. Shurgot disputes Metropulos's claim that 'gender is not the issue of this production', arguing instead that the gender change meant that Prospera was 'not an angry, avenging monarch but rather a priestess in Buddhist garb-pants and a long robe whose story was more contemplative than caustic'.¹⁴⁴ Another *Tempest* Vaughan references is Emily Mann's version at the McCarter Theatre Center in Princeton, New Jersey (2003), with another 'exceptionally feminine' Prospero, 'wearing flowing tresses and elegant

¹⁴¹ Michael Davies, 'RSC's "The Tempest" Starring Laex Kingston and Jessica Rhodes - review', *WhatsOnStage*, 3 February 2023 <<https://www.whatsonstage.com/news/rscs-the-tempest-starring-alex-kingston-and-jessica-rhodes-review-58273/>> [accessed 4 June 2024].

¹⁴² Dominic Cavendish, 'The Tempest: Alex Kingston Shines in One of the RSC's Most Confident Evenings in Ages', *The Telegraph*, 3 February 2023 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/tempest-rsc-royal-shakespeare-theatre-stratford-upon-avon-review/>> [accessed 16 September 2024].

¹⁴³ Virginia Mason Vaughan, 'Miranda, Where's Your Mother?': Female Prosperos and What They Tell Us', in *Women Making Shakespeare: Text, Reception and Performance*, ed. by Gordan McMullan, Lena Cowen and Virginia Mason Vaughan (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2014), pp. 218-223 (p. 218).

¹⁴⁴ Michael W. Shurgot, '2001 Ashland Season', *The Upstart Crow*, 21 (2001), 93-101 (p. 99).

gowns'.¹⁴⁵ Vaughan cites a review that noted, in Mann's *Tempest*, how 'Prospera's maternal warmth temper[ed] her fearful power and magical prowess'. In response to director Sharon Ott's *Tempest* for the Georgia Shakespeare at Oglethorpe University (2011), Vaughan includes a review from N. R. Helms who observed that 'as a mother rather than a magician, Prospera's tenderness revealed her human capacity for pity'.¹⁴⁶ Vaughan's focus in her investigation is on the feminist critique that these varying productions offer but I highlight that these reviews I have quoted, as with reviews of Freestone's production, all make the same connection between power and magic - or its lack - and femininity. When the magic comes from a female Prospero, it is perceived as softer, less effective and unable to dominate.

In Freestone's *Tempest*, magic as a practice becomes female-coded, I argue, because it is used exclusively by women. Not only is Prospero turned female, but female actor Heledd Gwynn plays Ariel, the weather-bending and spirit-conjuring sprite. Shakespeare's text keeps Ariel's gender ambiguous, in keeping with John Dryden's assertion that sprites or spirits are 'sexless'. Amanda Eubanks Winkler argues that Dryden was familiar with Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (translated into English in 1651) which 'claimed that while spirits might take on the external appearance of men or women, "there is none of the Demons . . . to be supposed male or female, seeing this difference of sex belongs to compounds, but the bodies of Demons are simple."' ¹⁴⁷ This information encourages Shakespeare's use of (inconsistent) masculine pronouns for Ariel to be taken with a pinch of salt; nevertheless, his Ariel would have been performed by a boy, and it was not until after the Restoration that female actors began to take on the role more predominantly.¹⁴⁸ Eubanks supposes that women played the role because of their high-reaching vocal

¹⁴⁵ Vaughan, 'Miranda, Where's Your Mother?', p. 219.

¹⁴⁶ N. R. Helms, 'Georgia Shakespeare at Oglethorpe University', *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 30 (2021), 165-172 (169).

¹⁴⁷ Amanda Eubanks Winkler, 'Sexless Spirits?: Gender Ideology and Dryden's Musical Magic', *The Musical Quarterly*, 2 (2010), 297-328 (p. 297-298).

¹⁴⁸ Amanda Eubanks Winkler, 'A Thousand Voices: Performing Ariel', in *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. Dympna Callaghan, 2nd edn (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2016), pp. 520-538 (p. 521).

ability, needed for Ariel's songs. Given the sexlessness of the spirits and Eubank's explanation for their female casting, I suggest that the roles of spirits then become essentially an easy (and unambitious) space for women to play characters without strictly cross-casting. The trope of sexless spirits in itself illuminates Butler's argument that gender is a construction of social meanings and behaviours, untied to sex, because, whether consciously or not, the spirits do not express gender which can be concluded as due to their lack of material presence on earth, where its societies create gender.



FIG 16. *The Tempest*, dir. by Elizabeth Freestone (Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 2023). Ariel (Heledd Gwynn) to the backdrop of Sebastian (Grace Cookey-Gam), Gonzalo (Ishia Bennison), Antonio (Jamie Ballard) and Alonso (Peter De Jersey). Photograph by Ikin Yum. © Royal Shakespeare Company. Reproduced with permission.

Freestone's production, in common with many other contemporary productions, maintains an Ariel that does not overtly signal a masculine or feminine gender. Gwynn presents androgynously through the baggy overalls the character wears and suitably playful mullet hair style; however, the script is altered to reflect female pronouns as indicated when the final line of Ariel's first speech becomes: 'Ariel and all *her* quality',

suggesting a level of femininity. Ariel's magic is demonstrated in many forms as they conjure barking dogs, brought to life on stage by puppeteers, and ascend to the sky once they are freed by Prospero, aided by wires and clips. The other spirits in Shakespeare's play are summoned to celebrate the betrothal of Miranda and Ferdinand and they take on the form of Greek and Roman goddesses: Juno, Ceres and Iris. These spirits appear in the bodies of ethereal 'women' and the production retains this notion having three female actors perform the goddesses in regal, shimmering dresses with hoop skirts, sparkling crowns and their flowing hair down and long. Their magical ability, seen as they appear in the air and float to the ground, is more overtly feminine than Ariel's due to how the spirits, as goddesses, present themselves. The goddesses are modified for the production's climate-informing agenda: they become Sky, Earth and Rain by name and their speeches amended to preach the ways 'sad humanity' is damaging 'sweet nature', with its 'self-adoring ways'.



FIG 17. *The Tempest*, dir. by Elizabeth Freestone (Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 2023). The three goddesses: Rain (Natalia Campbell), Earth (Imogen Slaughter) and Sky (Liz Jadav). Photograph by Ikin Yum. © Royal Shakespeare Company. Reproduced with permission.

The ties between femininity and magic are further solidified through Sycorax, a female character capable of enchantment like the now-female Prospero and the feminine-coded spirits with magical abilities. Sycorax, however, is a character referenced in Shakespeare's play but unseen on stage; she remains unstaged in Freestone's version and her pronouns are unchanged; therefore, she stays an off-stage female magician, or rather 'witch' (I.2.308). In Shakespeare's original, Sycorax poses as a gendered and racial foil to Prospero and his patriarchal power: she is a previous inhabitant and controller of the island, a witch using dark magic, responsible for 'mischiefs manifold, and sorceries terrible' (I.2.264), contrasting with Prospero, the island's new ruler who uses magic to serve what he believes is justice. The pair are united in their exile from their respective motherlands, their destiny of refuge on Algiers, their controlling of Ariel and ultimately, their sorcery. Despite their striking similarities, Prospero leads a damnation of the witch and all of her charms. He presents Sycorax in her absence as a danger and a warning, using the fearful reminder of her and her ensnaring of Ariel in 'a cloven pine' (I.2.277), to manipulate Ariel to remain gratefully enslaved and to chide Caliban. Prospero's construction of Sycorax as evil, in which he 'draws up a language of misogyny as well as racism', and simultaneously his 'other', whether he recognises the latter or not, is used to legitimise his takeover which Loomba rightly puts 'is both a *racial* plunder and a transfer to *patriarchy*'.¹⁴⁹ Considering the similarities between the pair, I draw conclusions that Prospero's denunciation of Sycorax is rooted in the threat that he believes the combination of her race, femininity and magic power brings.

Since Kingston's Prospero does not differ in gender from Sycorax, the pair have an even stronger affinity in Freestone's production and Prospero's villainising words of Sycorax also now ring true for herself as a magical matriarch. When Prospero delivers her monologue announcing her relinquishing on her own magic, then, new meanings can be read from her self-restriction:

Weak masters though ye be—I have bedimm'd
The noontide sun, call'd forth the mutinous winds.

¹⁴⁹ Loomba, p. 152. Emphasis original.

And 'twixt the green sea and the azured vault
Set roaring war; to the dread rattling thunder
Have I given fire, and rifted Jove's stout oak
With his own bolt; the strong-based promontory
Have I made shake, and by the spurs pluck'd up
The pine and cedar: graves at my command
Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let 'em forth
By my so potent art. But this rough magic
I here abjure; and, when I have required
Some heavenly music,—which even now I do,—
To work mine end upon their senses, that
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I'll drown my book. (V.1.41-57)

Kingston performs Prospero's personal disarmament, drowning her spell book and snapping her staff, initially with a triumphant and defensive tone when recalling her magical conquests, before transitioning into a demeanour that shows her upset with herself. Kingston's performed emotions here lend themselves to an interpretation that Prospero is confirming her own bias against women in power and the risks that supposedly come with it. Her subsequent epilogue shows her character defeated and in sheer desperation as she sits in the dark, in the rain that pours down from above, falling only onto her. Shakespeare's Prospero uses magic to cause destruction and although not sympathetic for the most part, is a protagonist who is driven to revenge and punishments by emotion. Kingston's Prospero, by virtue of gender, leans into sexist stereotypes about women in power or leadership roles who act with emotion to cause devastation. The final words she speaks in the quoted speech, vocalising her realisation that her magic is not a positive influence on herself or others, could suggest that she acknowledges that the anxieties about female power she expressed in relation to Sycorax prove justified by her own doing and consequently, shows a need for women to

be subordinated and stripped of autocracy. I highlight these potential interpretations to foreground my argument that gender can influence interpretations subconsciously, evidenced in the reviews I quoted from which subconsciously associated a female Prospero's gender with her sorcery and, consequently, strength, despite their often written declaration that gender was not the cause of weakness that accompanied their association. Even the copious reviews that comment on Kingston's Prospero's 'warmth', 'maternal' nature or new-found 'humanity' she brings to the role, I suggest, are guided by the gender swap, whether the review draws attention to this or not.¹⁵⁰ These reviews show that the subconscious influence gender has may lead to spectators subconsciously taking away the gender stereotypes the performance essentialises and when a production does not consciously draw attention to the concept of gender or its gender-swapping as its focus is elsewhere, these interpretations go unchallenged.

The consideration that gender and race can subconsciously influence interpretations brings me back to the question of who controls the adaptive force in casting, whether it lies with the production's makers and their intent or with the reception of the spectators. The stated aim of this production was to re-read *The Tempest* as green-made, green-oriented and green-influencing, as the moral messaging that comes from the programme and alterations to speech make clear. The play was consciously adapted with an ecological lens, meaning that if the adaptation of Shakespeare is taken as avant-garde, the way its creators hoped to 'move the spectator' was into climate-conscious behaviour or activism. Where the other productions in this chapter might hope to 'make spectators weep for the downtrodden' - in other words, for the marginalised groups of race and gender - the downtrodden for Freestone is the planet.¹⁵¹ My focus, however, is

¹⁵⁰ Whilst there are many reviews that reiterate the sentiments I have listed, those quotations are taken from: Susannah Clapp, 'The Week in Theatre: The Tempest; Linck and Mülhahn; The Lehman Trilogy - review', *The Guardian*, 12 February 2023 <<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2023/feb/12/the-tempest-rsc-stratford-alex-kingston-review-linck-and-mulhahn-hampstead-the-lehman-trilogy-gillian-lynn-sam-mendes>> [accessed 16 September 2024]; Dominic Cavendish, 'The Tempest: Alex Kingston shines in one of the RSC's most confident evenings in ages', *The Telegraph*, 3 February 2023 <<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/tempest-rsc-royal-shakespeare-theatre-stratford-upon-avon-review/>> [accessed 16 September 2024]; 'Review - The Tempest, RSC at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, 2nd February 2023', *The Real Chrisparkle*, 3 February 2023 <<https://therealchrisparkle.com/2023/02/03/review-the-tempest-rsc-at-the-royal-shakespeare-theatre-stratford-upon-avon-2nd-february-2023/>> [accessed 16 September 2024].

¹⁵¹ Mihaylova, p. 4-5.

not whether or not the production was successful in fulfilling its climate-related agenda; instead, my intersectional approach to its employment of casting uncovers how casting may be received when gender and race are not at its core. It does not inhibit the possible interpretations that I have explored, leading to a conclusion that reception, formed by spectators' lives, experiences and preconceptions, is the most important maker of meaning. This RSC production illuminates how casting can begin to create new meanings that are antiracist and feminist; however, without the support elsewhere in the production, in the form of tropes, props, setting and themes, the new meanings which casting initiates can crumble and the casting can essentialise stereotypes. The Everyman production, on the other hand, is an effective example of how a whole production can introduce elements and framing to a play that act as foundations to uphold its nontraditional casting and support the meanings casting introduces.

Conclusion

I have shown that the productions examined here reconfigure the text through their employment of nontraditional casting. The plays which use *seeing* cross-casting allow audiences to perceive cross-cast characters through a different lens, interpret relationships differently in light of this and view unfolding dramatic action through a new framework, bringing their own world of personal and cultural experience to their insight. The readings of spectators and reviewers, however, will not necessarily align with the director's ambitions. To support the new progressive visions cross-casting brings, I suggest that the productions using such casting must extend the reframing into the performance as a whole to avoid creating depictions which risk essentialising identity attributes. As I have argued with reference to the Donmar production of *The Tempest* directed by Lloyd, *unseeing* cross-casting does not radically alter interpretations of the characters, relationships and plot of the play so much; instead, perception concerns itself with the actors rather than characters and decides if they are virtuosic enough to execute the role, raising questions about nontraditional casting in the theatre industry rather than the representations in Shakespeare's play. A wider investigation of *unseeing* cross-cast performances, such as Fiona's Shaw's Richard II,

Kathryn Hunter's *Lear* and Adrian Lester's *Hamlet*, all of which are performances that were critically heralded for the actors' skill performing, might conclude that this is a divide based on whether the production hopes to have the cross-cast character ultimately perceived as the written gender or race or the actor's 'crossing' gender or race. What remains constant between *seeing* and *unseeing* performances is that their use of cross-casting is always political. The casting is not principally made political in terms of the intent behind it, although this can be significant; rather it is always political because, as Claire Syler underlines in this chapter's epigraph, 'an actor's embodied presence both communicates a dramatic narrative and evokes cultural assumptions associated with skin color, gender, sexuality, and ability'; therefore, 'casting choices are never neutral.'¹⁵²

The political weight of casting extends beyond the consuming spectator to the lived experience of the performer. Quarshie indicates his anxieties about performing the role of Othello as discussed and Thompson recalls Rosheuvel's alienating experience playing the same role:

She said that she was very particular working with her director. So the thing that ends up happening is that because Iago's lines are substantially more than Othello's, the actor playing Iago often gets more time with the director. The other thing is that you rarely ever get a director of colour directing *Othello* so the other dynamic is that you have white guy working with white guy while the actor of colour is left out. Many of the actors I've worked with have talked about how they felt like the director was in league with the actor playing Iago and that they were getting short shrifted. Well Golda said "I caught on really quick in week one that there was gonna be a weird dynamic between them and I cut it off."¹⁵³

¹⁵² Claire Syler, 'Introduction', in *Casting a Movement: The Welcome Table Initiative*, ed. by Claire Syler and Daniel Banks (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), pp. 4-11 (p. 3).

¹⁵³ Chris Thurman, Ayanna Thompson, "Shakespeare and Blackface" / "Shakespeare and Unfreedom", video recording, YouTube, 29 July 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pOxqewmnblg>> [accessed 11 June 2024].

I return to the 2024 casting of Francesca Amewudah-Rivers as a (*seeing*) black Juliet from my introduction. The actor played opposite a white Romeo played by *Spiderman* star Tom Holland in Jamie Lloyd's production of *Romeo and Juliet*. The circumstances surrounding the casting decision encapsulate how casting is political according to both the public and the actor; following the recent production announcement, Amewudah-Rivers received racially abusive and misogynistic verbal attacks online over the casting, and as a result of this backlash, an open letter was produced, initiated by black women and non-binary individuals, showing support for the actor in the face of the condemnation directed toward her. A petition was also launched, calling for the theatre company to 'show greater protection and advocacy for Francesca Amewudah-Rivers', noting that 'the psychological distress and emotional unease that comes from being on the receiving end of such pernicious and destabilising remarks is not to be underestimated.' The petition implored those involved to take action, questioning what security they will put in place for Amewudah-Rivers, what therapy they can offer her during and beyond the performance run, whether they have employed 'people that reflect the cast, particularly dark-skinned black people, behind the scenes', and how they will handle social media.¹⁵⁴ This casting is firmly established as political both for the public, before the performance even reaches the stage, and for the actor who is facing the effects of the casting decision in the studio made up of staff who may not look like them, as well as on the internet where a barrage of abuse comes their way. What this damning event brings to light is that the intent behind casting is clearly not the marker of inclusivity and intersectionality, and, as I have established, reception plays an important role in forming the adaptive meaning; rather, intersectionality must be considered carefully and deeply, at all levels and in all areas, within and *beyond* the performance, to be truly progressive. Without such attention, the antiracist and feminist agendas of cross-cast performances can be perceived as merely performative, and if they actively seek to address the performativity of gender and race then the entire production strategy must be nuanced and thoughtful. What the event has equally made

¹⁵⁴ Tamara Lawrance, *Curtis Brown, Jamie Lloyd Company and DoY Theatre - What is your plan of action?* (2024) <https://www.change.org/p/curtis-brown-jamie-lloyd-company-and-doy-theatre-what-is-your-plan-of-action?source_location=search> [accessed 10 April 2024].

apparent is the necessity for more productions that subvert racial and gendered stereotypes through casting, like Jamie Lloyd's, to be made and seen.

Chapter Four

Dislocating Shakespeare: Subversive Fictional and Physical Spaces

Shakespeare's cultural authority is not monolithic but enacted; it is continually reinforced or destabilised through casting, staging and reception, always in relation to the racialised and gendered hierarchies encoded in the plays themselves. This chapter shifts focus to the spatial dimension of performance, showing how venue and fictional setting can be used to unsettle these hierarchies. While I have shown in previous chapters that casting and rewriting can adapt Shakespearean drama and dismantle or confront its recognisable values on whiteness and masculinity, I concluded that each approach presents significant problems. Rewriting faces issues of accessibility and distribution, limiting its reach and impact, while recasting is problematised when it treats race as a non-factor, failing to address the deep-seated cultural dynamics at play; consequently, the use of non-traditional casting risks remaining a surface-level intervention in the destabilising of Shakespeare. In this chapter I argue that what I call the dislocation, a deliberately unsettling choice of location, of Shakespeare, both in the physical venue the play is taking place in and fictionally, within the world of the play, offers a different way of challenging the cultural superiority that Shakespeare is understood to stand for. This dislocation could take place by moving the play out of the theatre space into somewhere that restructures the relationship between the drama and the audience; or alternatively by translating the play into an entirely different setting and/or culture, one where the play, and the authority it symbolises, is renegotiated into a different national formation or unconventional (and potentially subversive) space. These staging strategies reshape both representation and spectatorship. In their destabilisation of the play and audience expectations through

their use of space, I show that these strategies create opportunities for a renewed sense of engagement which prompts audiences to reflect more critically on the hierarchies and norms Shakespeare's works encode.

It is fair to say that the space most typically associated with Shakespeare's plays is the theatre, and perhaps more specifically theatre spaces such as the Globe and Blackfriars as they were central to staging his works. Nonetheless, Shakespeare's plays, in Shakespeare's day, graced other platforms; whilst purpose-built theatres were an established and dominant ground for performances of his plays, local record offices and family archives have shown that non-theatre spaces, including the court, universities, and private household functions (such as weddings) also hosted his plays, as well as other regional theatre venues when his companies toured.¹ Today, the variation of performance space is even greater. Stagings continue to take place on dedicated theatre stages and all over the world, as well as open-air in parks, in museums and stately homes, within educational institutions including schools and universities, on the street and at comedy and theatre festivals. Stages are no longer limited to the physical realm, as a variety of virtual spaces now host Shakespeare's plays: cinematic and radio adaptations, as well as recordings of staged productions, are firmly entrenched in the current cultural understanding of Shakespeare. More recently live online productions on platforms such as Zoom and Google Meet, performances published on YouTube, both amateur and professional, and renditions on TikTok have further expanded the adaptive world. The multiplicity of 'stages', from the early modern period to now, raises critical questions about how space affects performance, the play and the diversity of audiences and nature of their engagement. Distinct public and private realms plunge Shakespeare's plays into divergent environments for their actors and recipients.

¹ Tiffany Stern explains that Shakespeare wrote for his plays to be performed in a variety of venues: 'Private theatres, which charged considerably more – the cheapest seats cost sixpence – attracted a better-educated audience; court performances were in front of royalty and members of the nobility; touring productions were, like public theatre plays, performed in front of anyone prepared to pay to see them.' Tiffany Stern, 'The Theatre of Shakespeare's London', in *The New Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. by Margreta De Grazia and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 45-60 (p. 55).

While diversification of performance space informs the reception of the play, changing the fictional location of the play also alters context and its effect on the audience. The idea of 'modern dress' productions as they are thought of today - an updating of a play from the past to the present day or a more recent time period - is credited to Barry Jackson as a twentieth century device.² Reimagined settings of Shakespeare's plays have become a familiar feature of the modern stage, frequently used to draw attention to contemporary social and political issues, as demonstrated by Simon Godwin's 2016 *Hamlet* for the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, which transposes the action to a modern African military state. In what follows, I examine the effects of spatial configurations - in both the physical reality of the stage and the necessarily imagined world - in *Othello* and *The Tempest*. Space as a concept is inherently connected with ideas of ownership, territory, belonging, alienation and migration. By foregrounding spatiality, I will determine how dislocation unsettles and adapts Shakespeare's plays. In the forms of adaptation this thesis explores - through rewriting, casting or the reimagining of time and place - Shakespeare's authority is actively negotiated, with each production exposing the cultural norms woven into the plays and making the processes of power visible. My argument here is that by manipulating both fictional and physical space, contemporary productions reorient the spectator's position, visually, psychologically and ethically, inviting audiences to experience Shakespeare not as a fixed text but a lens through which to view contemporary social hierarchies.

Dislocation can be used, then, to bring the racialised and gendered structures inherent in Shakespeare's plays into sharper relief, revealing their continued relevance and allowing audiences to critically engage with these hierarchies in relation to their own lived experiences. Although dislocation itself is not inherently tied to ideas of gender and race, when it is paired with an exploration of these representations, it serves as a device for foregrounding these issues. I suggest that dislocation achieves this in three ways: (1) fictional reimaginings map Shakespeare's narratives onto new or

² Peter Holland understands that 'such innovative experiments can be difficult to date but it seems that modern-dress productions were invented by Barry Jackson while he ran the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, starting with his *Cymbeline* in 1923.' Peter Holland, 'Shakespeare in the Twentieth-Century Theatre', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 199-215 (p. 202)

contemporary contexts, reframing representations of race, gender and power to provoke reflection on both historical and present-day hierarchies; (2) in the moments that the tensions between the fictional world and theatre space are most pronounced, a critical distance is given for spectators to connect the performance directly to their own lived reality or contemporary circumstances; and (3) when a production takes place in a dislocated physical space (site-specific, digital or otherwise unconventional), the relationship between the audience and performance is renegotiated, creating immersive, participatory and ethically charged experiences that allow renewed interpretive insights. In practice, these spatial strategies converge but I show that, together, they produce an interplay between narrative and space that, ultimately, destabilises Shakespeare's plays and disturbs the author's authority, redistributing interpretive authority and undermining the dominance of the cultural values traditionally associated with his plays.

To clarify the concept of 'dislocation' I introduce key terminology that distinguishes between its various uses, proposing two categories for contemporary Shakespeare productions with regards to location: *dislocating* and *stabilising*. Although Shakespeare's plays have (fictional) locations, the plays rarely feature descriptions of settings upfront in the text, the First Folio being an example of this. Written locations and other stage directions have often been added by editors later; however, prior to these additions the locations emerge through the play's narrative and characters' dialogue. For example, *The Tempest* takes place, according to Samuel Johnson's 1765 edition, at 'the Sea with a ship, afterwards an uninhabited island', which critics including Burton Raffel deduce is somewhere in the Mediterranean sea; but, the play's location is not explicitly textually marked in the Folio.³ The time in which the play is set is similarly unmarked, but it is commonly thought to be set around the time it was written (1611). *Othello* (1603), again lacking a formal locational stage direction, is set in Venice and Cyprus as the full title (*The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*) indicates; the time is presumably in the late sixteenth century because Venice was then at war with the

³ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. by Burton Raffel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. xxvii.

Ottoman empire (1570-1573), in keeping with the play's reference to a Turkish fleet targeting Cyprus. Although the settings for Shakespeare's plays are not precisely expressed, modern stagings of his plays often (fictionally) locate his plays in spaces that are deliberately resistant to the direction implied by the text; these are what I term *dislocating*. I place these in opposition to *stabilising* productions, which align with the general direction of Shakespeare's plays' location and time. Productions will not always fall clearly into this binary, showing elements of each style in one performance, but terminology is helpful to progress my analysis and differentiate between those that challenge tradition and those that embrace its cue.

When it comes to the physical space, I propose that performance sites may also be loosely categorised as *orthodox* or *unorthodox*. Whilst Shakespeare's plays in his day were performed in a variety of places, theatre stages remain their most conventional performance site; therefore, that is what I categorise as the traditional or orthodox space. By contrast, a performance in a car park or in the spectator's living room can be regarded as unorthodox. It does not follow that a production in an orthodox space must itself be conservative, nor that an unorthodox space implies a radical staging.

Nonetheless, the spaces provide important contextual and social cues that can influence how a production is perceived. As Susan Bennett argues, performance spaces are not neutral but culturally charged, forming the pre-performance 'horizon of expectations' that spectators bring with them.⁴ She calls the cultural elements that inform the theatrical event 'the outer frame'. This interacts with what she terms 'the inner frame' which 'contains the dramatic production in a particular playing space.'⁵ I use Bennett's framing model to demonstrate the effects of the changed dynamics that come about as a result of dislocation. I posit that orthodox spaces are loaded with cultural and historical expectation, aligning the audience's experience with established norms of theatrical presentation, whereas unexpected spaces disrupt these boundaries, forcing spectators to confront the unfamiliar. This process of defamiliarisation alters their engagement with and experience of the performed play. I investigate the effects of dislocation by

⁴ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), p. 139.

⁵ Bennett, p. 139.

examining a range of case studies set in both stabilising and dislocating contexts, across orthodox and unorthodox venues; I analyse how they confront and dismantle Shakespeare's representation of race, gender and authority through spatial reconfiguration, disrupting relational frameworks and adjusting how audiences connect with the performance.

To understand how these spatial interventions shape audiences' perception and engagement, I draw on Gay McAuley's theorisation in *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (1999). McAuley's model extends Bennett's notion of the 'two frames' of reception by proposing a 'triple level awareness' where the spectator's reality, the theatrical construct and the represented world are in constant interplay:

The social reality, the presentation and the fictional interact at all times, and the fictional is always at the mercy of the other two levels of reality and in any given performance one or the other can come to the fore, momentarily or permanently, intentionally or unintentionally.⁶

Applying this framework illustrates how material and metaphorical spatial relationships precipitate moments of transition between these levels. My analysis demonstrates that when spatial formation draws attention to social reality, or shows its imbrication with the fictional world, the performance confronts the audience with the experiential proximity to lived reality and the larger social impact of the issues the play addresses, negotiating which of the three levels is at the fore. I focus on both fictional space and physical, immersive space because each offers distinct but interconnected ways of engaging the audience's perception of reality: fictional dislocations can be used deliberately to foreground the endurance of racialised and gendered hierarchies across contexts, while physical dislocations collapse boundaries between audience and performer, bringing the spectator into an embodied awareness of social and political dynamics and intensifying the immediacy of the play's themes. Since dislocating

⁶ Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), p. 271.

fictional space within an orthodox setting tends to operate through clearer, more defined levels of reception, glimpses of social reality emerge primarily when these levels are intentionally exposed or unsettled, whereas site-specific space inherently blurs the boundaries, collapsing separations between performance and environment to immerse the audience. Central to my argument is the subjective and embodied experience of space by the audience, influenced by their own physical presence, cultural background and emotional state. I incorporate Kim Solga's interdisciplinary approach in *Theory for Theatre Studies: Space* (2019), which blends semiotics, genre, cultural materialism and urban performance studies, to offer a politically richer, nuanced understanding of the spectator's reception. Additionally, by examining current efforts within theatre to decolonise the Western settler-colonial stage, Solga establishes key considerations that inform my critical exploration of dislocated spaces and how they might resist Shakespeare's and wider colonial legacies.

Before my analysis, I provide crucial context into the fictional worlds Shakespeare's plays create, addressing how Shakespeare builds these worlds in the texts, how preceding theatre companies have interpreted and staged them, and how audiences receive them. I also offer a brief overview of physical theatrical locations in relation to Shakespeare, summarising where his plays were originally performed, what locations are considered commonplace now and detailing the conventions of these spaces in order to later show how the productions unsettle them. This background sets the stage for my case studies, which are separated into two clusters, the first of which is focused on the fictional setting. I begin by analysing Frantic Assembly's *Othello* set in a modern-day British pub, directed by Scott Graham - the production was originally staged in 2008 and restaged in 2014 and 2022-2023. I focus on the 2023 version, taking note of the changes in the restagings which reflect different cultural events and times in my analysis. Alongside this, I examine Ola Ince's *Othello* for Shakespeare's Globe (2024), which is reimagined in the context of the contemporary Metropolitan police force, and Dhaka Theatre's performance of *The Tempest* (2012) directed by Nasir Uddin Yousuff at the Globe for the international Globe to Globe theatre festival, adapted according to

Bengali traditions and performed in Bangla, where the island setting is evoked through song, rhythm and Bengali folk theatre rituals rather than visual scenography.

The second section addresses unorthodox physical spaces, beginning with a German site-specific production of *Othello* named *Othello / Die Fremden* (2024; 2025), directed by Marcel Kohler, which took place in a former glass factory. The production focuses on the perspectives of women and follows a far-right uprising, breaking the audience into groups and using nonlinear action to repeatedly reestablish spectators' relationship to the drama. Noting the theatre landscape's shift to online during the Covid-19 pandemic, I turn, finally, to digital realms as unorthodox spaces and investigate how space changes *The Tempest* in Tender Claws's virtual reality game *The Under Presents* which featured a real-time performance of the play within the game's world, using live actors which users experienced from a first-person embodied perspective, helping to perform parts of the play themselves.⁷

Context: Shakespeare and Space

Fictional Locations

Analysing fictional space in contemporary productions begins with understanding their sources of adaptation. The lack of Shakespeare's specified locations led editors to include settings in later versions of the plays. Nicholas Rowe's eighteenth century edition of *Othello*, for example, describes the scene 'For the First Act in Venice; during the rest of the Play in Cyprus'.⁸ More recent editions of the play offer similar specifics:

⁷ In terms of access for these productions. I saw The Globe and Frantic Assembly's productions of *Othello* firsthand but recordings of these are available through Globe Player and Digital Theatre Plus. I gained access to a recording of Dhaka Theatre's production through Globe Player which I watched with English subtitles, an element that I am conscious those watching the performance in person did not have access to. Marcel Kohler kindly granted me access to a recording of one of the 2024 performances of his production and to build an image of the user experience of Tender Claws's VR game, I watched a bank of footage on the Internet Archive, comprising of 57 different individual perspectives from different sessions with a range of actors.

⁸ William Shakespeare, *The Works of Mr. William Shakespeare*, ed. by Nicholas Rowe, 6 vols (London: Jacob Tonson, 1709), V, p. 2554.

The Norton Shakespeare (1997) states that it begins on 'a street in Venice' and *The Arden Shakespeare's* (2016) edition simply states 'Scene: Act 1, Venice; Acts 2-5, Cyprus'.⁹

Along with a scarcity of written location, scenery was mostly absent from the Elizabethan stage and set dressings were limited, although that is not to say the stage was altogether free from visual ornament.¹⁰ The sense of location was created through alternative means: vivid imagery, the actors' movements, introductory dialogue, costumes and other properties. As a caveat to this, costumes in Shakespeare's time were not always historically accurate to the time or place of the play. For his plays set in the Renaissance, it is likely that a combination of materials was used in performance, including garments derived from aristocratic circulation, although the mechanisms by which such clothing entered playing companies remain debated. Evidence from contemporary accounts suggests that elite clothing may not have been directly gifted to companies but instead passed through intermediaries, such as servants who sold items onward.¹¹ In addition, documentary evidence from the Henslowe–Alleyn papers, as edited by Carol Chillington Rutter, indicates that companies also regularly purchased cloth to manufacture new costumes, which were retained as company stock.¹² Actors may also have supplemented these resources with their own clothing, particularly in minor roles. Even in plays set in antiquity, such as those located in Ancient Rome, costume practice therefore could have involved a hybrid use of stock materials, newly produced garments and adapted contemporary dress, as the Peacham drawing suggests. The Peacham drawing, which is the best-known surviving contemporary image of what costumes in a Shakespeare play might have looked like, shows that *Titus Andronicus* was imagined in a mixed costume visual world. Jonathan Bate describes the rendering as

<<https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/facsimile/overview/book/23:vol5.html>> [accessed 16 January 2025].

⁹ William Shakespeare, *Othello: Revised Edition*, ed. by E. A. J. Honigmann (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016), p. 118.

¹⁰ For a more nuanced exploration of how decorated the Elizabethan stage was and by whose standards, see Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda, *Stage Properties in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

¹¹ Denise Walen and Steve Martin, 'Designing Shakespeare: Episode 21', *Shakespeare Unlimited*, podcast, 25 February 2015 <<https://www.folger.edu/podcasts/shakespeare-unlimited/shakespeare-unlimited-episode-21/>> [accessed 16 January 2025].

¹² *Documents of the Rose Playhouse*, ed. by Carol Chillington Rutter (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

depicting a scene in which 'Titus wears a toga but his soldiers are Elizabethan men-at-arms with halberds, while Tamora's dress is vaguely medieval.'¹³ As Bate argues, the drawing 'provides us with valuable evidence about costumes: as the play addresses issues in contemporary history via a Roman setting, so the costumes mingle ages.'¹⁴ In this reading, the image presents an eclectic approach to costuming that Bate suggests offers a precedent for modern theatrical staging practices. It was not until the nineteenth century that using historically specific clothing would eventually become the norm and sets remained bare until the introduction of scenic backdrops, representing specific places, in the Restoration period. That being said, it remains difficult to categorise performances of Shakespeare's plays under a single vision, because as Andrew Gurr rightly prompts, 'the original staging of Shakespeare's plays lacked consistency even for the playhouses they were staged in, and the idea that each play on stage became perfectly fixed in the minds of the company playing it is a hopeful delusion.'¹⁵

Building on Gurr's consideration, I add that it is also necessary to consider the role the audience has in co-creating the production in both their own mind and the overall experience for the audience. The mood and behaviour of the audience form the theatrical experience for all and the individual spectator's imagination constructs their own comprehension. In his influential 2009 essay 'When We Talk of Horses', Dan Rebellato explores the contribution that imagination makes in shaping theatrical experience, concluding that representation on stage is metaphorical:

Performances can be metaphors for a number of things: the fictional world, the world itself (as in a docudrama that asks us to look at the world in a new way), or

¹³ Jonathon Bate, 'Introduction', in *Titus Andronicus*, ed. by Jonathon Bate (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), pp. 1-119 (p. 42).

¹⁴ Bate, p. 42.

¹⁵ Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 209.

sometimes simply the play – a new production of *Hamlet* is usually asking us to see *Hamlet* itself, as well as the fictional events it describes, differently.¹⁶

This insight helps to spell out the abstract concept of imagination's involvement in constructing a metaphorical world. The layers Rebellato alludes to show how spectators' impressions of performances are formed, but this is an especially important consideration when analysing contemporary stagings. Shakespeare's plays, for instance, required an especially active audience constructive perception because, as Gurr notes, 'staging in Shakespeare's time was not just less realistic [than it is today] but positively anti-realistic'; under such conditions, the audience's imaginative labour was indispensable in shaping the fictional worlds of the plays.¹⁷ Shakespeare's stage, then, relied upon audiences to complete the locational illusion by imagining it to be places such as a battlefield, a deserted island, the interior rooms of a palace or a fantastical forest.

Factoring in the indeterminacy attached to the formation of location in Shakespeare's time, what I categorise as productions with stabilising locations, then, are ones which follow the suit of editors and the direction Shakespeare plays point in, as opposed to solely how Shakespeare's stage might have looked. Stabilising productions, as I determine them, go beyond adhering to what might be seen as traditional, considering the often ambiguous manner of Shakespeare's settings; they work on a symbolic level, arguably striving to capture the historical essence of the drama. A production that is an extreme example of this style which abides by Shakespeare and history is Mark Rylance's revived 2012 all-male staging of *Twelfth Night* for the Globe, which later made its way to Broadway. The production sought to use 'original practices' which means reconstructing the principles, including costumes, props, and casting choices, to mimic those of the performances of Shakespeare's day as accurately as possible given the current day limitations. Since early modern performances focused on the actors and

¹⁶ Dan Rebellato, 'When We Talk of Horses', *Performance Research*, 14.1 (2009), 17-28 (p. 25).

¹⁷ Andrew Gurr, 'Shakespeare's Playhouses', in *A Companion to Shakespeare*, ed. by David Scott Kastan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), pp. 362-376 (p. 375). Clarification added.

their costumes, rather than elaborate sets, to localise and enliven the production, Rylance's production, too, centred the creation of meaning and location through what the characters wore. Olivia, played by Rylance, for example, wore historically accurate garments of an Italian noblewoman, designed by Jenny Tiramani, helping to gesture towards the fictional location of sixteenth-century Italy (see FIG 18), as the original text too signals. While it might not be stabilising to see a man dressed as a woman on stage, mimicking Renaissance methods and appearance, in the eyes of a twenty-first century spectator but its commitment to its ancestry is paramount.



FIG 18. *Twelfth Night*, dir. by Tim Carroll (Belasco Theatre, 2013). Pictured on the left are Sebastian (Joseph Timms) and Olivia (Mark Rylance); Orsino (Liam Brennan) and Viola (Samuel Barnett) are on the right. Photograph © Joan Marcus. Reproduced with permission.

Stabilising productions, however, do not need to commit to original practice to accept the play's lead; from a contemporary perspective, setting the play in the early modern period and relevant location, as Tim Carroll's *Othello* (2024) for the Royal Shakespeare Company does, by my classification, constitutes a following of Shakespeare's suit. Carroll's *Othello* production brings to light the idea that the fictional spaces I discuss are not made from only set design. The stage (as pictured in FIG 19) uses minimalist

backdrops that do not indicate a specific time period or place and strip lighting that appears modern, yet the elements of the production, the costumes, the props and the performances, work together to create a world in keeping with the play's sixteenth-century setting.



FIG 19. *Othello*, dir. by Tim Carroll (Royal Shakespeare Theatre, 2024). The cast wear ornate, period-style costumes positioned beneath a massive, textured, brutalist suspended canopy that looms over the scene. Photograph by Johan Persson. © Royal Shakespeare Company. Reproduced with permission.

Dislocating productions, on the other hand, go against the (unwritten) grain of Shakespeare's play and they can achieve this in a number of ways. A current theatrical trend in Shakespeare productions is an updating of the time of the play to the modern day, as Lucy Cuthbertson's 2024 *Romeo and Juliet* for Shakespeare's Globe does with its setting in a modern-day, low-income suburb of London, controlled by drug lords. Some productions opt for a more abstract approach that contrasts with Shakespeare's text: for example, the Globe's 2024 *Taming of the Shrew* directed by Jude Christian is set in a carnivalesque, cartoonish dreamlike sequence, filled with puppets and caricatures, distorting reality, as illustrated in figures 20 and 21. Gremio and Grumio had large faces strapped to their stomachs that they sometimes manipulated to talk through, while

Baptista had comically oversized, balloon-like arms that were conspicuously artificial, contributing to this playful unreality.



FIG 20. *The Taming of the Shrew*, dir. by Jude Christian (Shakespeare's Globe, 2024). Photograph © Helen Murray - www.helenmurrayphotos.com. Reproduced with permission.



FIG 21. *The Taming of the Shrew*, dir. by Jude Christian (Shakespeare's Globe, 2024).
Photograph © Helen Murray - www.helenmurrayphotos.com. Reproduced with permission.

Whilst these types of dislocation are increasingly common on stages in the twenty-first century, they are not new approaches. Anti-illusionist Shakespeare productions such as Joseph Papp's *Naked Hamlet* (1967) and Peter Brook's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1970) demonstrate the long-standing use of techniques such as disruptive staging and spatial experimentation. Papp's production broke Shakespeare's play down into fragments, stripped them back and pasted them back together in a different order, incorporating elements of rock music, cabaret, circus and burlesque.¹⁸ Brook approached Shakespeare with conscious radicalism and staged the performance, typically set in a forest and court, in a bright, white box, in which the actors performed circus skills including trapeze-swinging and plate-spinning.¹⁹

Transcultural or 'cross-cultural' productions, to use Ayanna Thompson's definition, are models 'in which the entire world of the play is translated into a different culture and location'.²⁰ Thompson's focus is on how this is used within casting strategies; in this chapter, I examine how that 'world translation' might take place through the different spatial strategies and consider their effects. In my analysis of the transcultural performance by Dhaka Theatre, I adopt Alexa Alice Joubin's revised concept of 'heterotopia' in an attempt to reframe how transcultural productions can operate as spaces of multiplicity, avoiding a reading that privileges the Western text as the authoritative framework against which all cultural translations are measured. The term, originally from Foucault, refers to 'cultural spaces that are transformative because of their contradictory or trans-historical ideologies'.²¹ Heterotopia is a "parallel" space

¹⁸ For more information, see Joseph Papp's production handbook *William Shakespeare's "Naked" Hamlet*, complete with photographs.

¹⁹ For images and more detail, visit 'Peter Brook 1970 Production', *Royal Shakespeare Company* <<https://www.rsc.org.uk/a-midsummer-nights-dream/past-productions/peter-brook-1970-production>> [accessed 4 July 2025].

²⁰ Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 76.

²¹ Alexa Alice Joubin, "'The Great Globe Itself' An Introduction to Shakespeare in Heterotopia", in *Contemporary Readings in Global Performances of Shakespeare*, ed. by Alexa Alice Joubin (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2024), pp. 1-22 (p. 4).

that contains and evokes other spaces, exists in reality (such as a theatre stage) and holds up a mirror to other realities'.²² Joubin unpacks this further:

Since the fictional space created by performance juxtaposes multiple worlds, this space – a microcosm of different temporalities and contrasting worlds – has multiple layers of cultural meanings. Heterotopia enables communities to work together across time and cultural spaces.²³

By focusing on the interaction between these worlds, I offer a thorough examination of a transcultural staging, bearing in mind their rich layers and cultural contingency. Dhaka Theatre's *Tempest* is especially socio-culturally intricate since it was staged in Shakespeare's Globe as a part of the 2012 Globe to Globe theatre festival where the Globe hosted a schedule of 37 productions of Shakespeare's plays in 37 languages, including *Hamlet* set in Lithuania, *All's Well that Ends Well* set in early twentieth-century India and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* set in Korea. Transcultural productions are dislocating in a way different from previously mentioned Anglophone-made and performed Shakespeares, making it necessary to acknowledge these variables and probe their effects.

Physical Locations

To discuss how the physical, theatrical locations have been used for modern productions of Shakespeare, it is important to acknowledge the roots of these practices by turning back first to the English Elizabethan/Jacobean theatre landscape. The primary venue for Shakespeare's plays, in his time, was the public theatre. These theatres were for the most part found in London due to the large concentration of population there, its capital status, its plethora of aristocratic residences and its large port for those travelling from foreign lands, leading the area to become the hub for

²² Joubin, p. 4.

²³ Joubin, p. 6.

entertainment. Elizabethan theatres were open-air, amphitheatre-style structures, usually in polygonal shape with a raised, thrust stage. They had no curtain or proscenium arch separating that stage from the audience like eighteenth and nineteenth century venues, and this is also reflected in the audience's relationship to the performance. The structure and lighting of theatres today predominantly encourage an atmosphere of homogenous focus and quietness, persuading the audience to silently sit in dark areas, across from the artificially-lit stage where their view is directed, typically applauding only at the play's close. The audiences of Shakespeare's time were positioned in communal light - from either the open roof of Elizabethan theatres or the candlelight of the Jacobean indoor playhouses that illuminated both stage and auditorium - visible to each other and the actors at all times; the theatres, therefore, presented a different version of theatrical reality from that encouraged by modern-day theatre. Johannes Ungelenk observes that the shared daylight drenching both audience and actors supported a sense of co-presence and the 'mutual contract of seeing and being seen [...] subsisted as a constant, an ever-present component of the early modern theatre performance'.²⁴ As a result, Elizabethan audiences were not as tame as modern audiences since the lighting, according to Ungelenk, 'enabled genuine, symmetrical interaction between stage and audience'.²⁵ Bruce R. Smith states that they 'were actively encouraged to return sound to the actors in the form of applause' throughout the entire length of the performance, motivated further by the actors' direct interaction with the audience in relative close proximity.²⁶ In contrast to the majority of modern theatre buildings where seating tiers and prices are dictated by the clarity of view, a hierarchy of sitting and standing ruled Elizabethan playhouses so at the Globe for example, poorer 'groundlings' could stand in the pit for one penny and those better off would retire to the seated galleries. In cases like the Globe, proximity also became a part of the

²⁴ Johannes Ungelenk, *Touching at a Distance: Shakespeare's Theatre* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), p. 14.

²⁵ Ungelenk, p. 14.

²⁶ Bruce R. Smith, 'Within, Without, Withinwards: The Circulation of Sound in Shakespeare's Theater', *Sillages Critiques*, 16 (2013), 1-9 (p. 7).

governing structure, meaning that the most highly regarded seats in the venue were at the back of the stage, closest to the performers yet with potentially the worst view.²⁷

Over time, the changes made to transportation with the rise of the industrial revolution, the urbanisation of England and government funding initiatives have decentralised the previously London-based theatre scene. Today, regional cities are typically each home to several theatre venues. Proscenium, thrust and in-the-round structures are now traditional and ordinarily used for large-scale productions, while alternative fringe venues often provide opportunities for more experimental, low-budget performances to emerge. Despite the great differences between the early modern theatre and theatres that host Shakespeare's plays today, I consider the latter the legacy of Shakespeare's theatres and hence, perceive them as the orthodox choice of venue. With the exception of schools and universities, the spaces that I deem unorthodox venues for Shakespeare in the twenty first century are places that challenge the formal boundaries of the theatre experience allowing for a more raw, immersive experience for spectators. For instance, The Reduced Shakespeare Company and easyJet's staging of an abridged version of Shakespeare's complete works while 37,000 feet in the air on one of the airline's planes on a flight from London to Verona in 2014 is a notable example. Other examples include the production of *The Tempest* (2014) by WhatsTheirNames which was performed in and around a swimming pool at the Corinthia Palace in Malta or the mobile, intimate performances from the likes of The Living Room Shakespeare Company who offer performances of Shakespeare's plays in spectators' living rooms, kitchens or other areas of the home in various cities around the world.²⁸

²⁷ For more information on both audience arrangements and spectator behaviour, read Andrew Gurr, 'The Audiences', in *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 258-285.

²⁸ WhatsTheirNames Theatre are known for staging Shakespeare plays in unconventional places. Directed by Philip Leone-Ganado, an alleged 'household name in Maltese theatre', the production utilised the Corinthia Palace's swimming pool as a central performance space, with characters moving in and out of the water and performing atop it on large floating platforms. Quote taken from Francesca Vella, 'Cool Off While Watching Shakespeare! Maltese Thespians Stage "The Tempest" in First Outdoor Pool Production', *GuideMeMalta*, 17 June 2024 <<https://www.guidememalta.com/en/cool-off-while-watching-shakespeare-maltese-thespians-stage-the-tempest-in-first-outdoor-pool-production>> [accessed 14 Jan 2026].

In 2020, when the national lockdown was enforced in the UK due to the Covid-19 pandemic, theatres were forced to close and many theatre companies quickly shifted to virtual platforms to continue engaging with audiences. The newly established format of the digital stage became a recognised but still unorthodox space, redefining audience relationships and plunging Shakespeare's plays into unexpected territory. Theatre companies made the transition to the virtual realm in a few different ways: companies like the National Theatre released pre-recorded performances taken before the distancing regulation including Simon Godwin's *Romeo and Juliet* (starring Josh O'Connor and Jessie Buckley) on their streaming service, whereas the Globe uploaded performances such as their 2018 *Hamlet* (directed by Federay Holmes and Elle While), starring Michelle Terry, to their YouTube channel for free viewing. Some theatre companies created socially-distanced versions of the plays on Zoom, allowing actors to individually stream from their own homes, performing virtually alongside their cast - as Robert Myles and Sarah Peachey's *The Show Must Go On(line)* series did, performing a play from the First Folio to audiences on a weekly basis. Other companies explored the potential of this new digital style by creating unique, interactive productions that made use of the real-time engagement options available on Zoom such as the chat function and live polls; Creation Theatre took this one further in their interactive production of *The Tempest* (2020) when they encouraged audience members to participate in the production by interviewing the courtiers through their own webcams, showing their pets on screen to the King of Naples and creating the soundscape themselves. More immersive experiences also materialised as projects like *Dream* (2021), inspired by *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Tender Claws's *Tempest* (2020) combined the gaming world of virtual reality with live actors, permitting audiences within the play or to watch from the sidelines.

Despite the fact that the digital stage initiative was initially prompted by the closure of theatres and the adaptation to a quickly changing, virtually-social world, it remained avant-garde in its redefining of theatrical convention and the theatre space. The new digital capabilities brought about easier opportunities for inclusivity and globalisation. Myles and Peachey explain how their online project became an inclusive space:

SARAH: Unlike a professional company that can incentivize applications through money, we had to do all of our incentivization through culture – we had to make and keep and continually reaffirm a commitment to inclusivity so people from under-represented backgrounds could see, week after week, that this is a place they could feel welcome.

ROB: We were having to manually unpick the threads of exclusion that have been so tightly woven by cultural imperialists who have weaponized Shakespeare for generations, and that takes time.²⁹

For Myles and Peachey, the digital stage made Shakespeare an inclusive space where those who could not access it before, whether through geographic limitations, financial constraints or cultural exclusion, could now engage with the plays. To add to that, Ben Crystal notes that the series also aided people ‘who have always lived in isolation, who are disabled, in palliative care, in hospital, who never have access to Shakespeare, or theatre in general, and were getting to see Shakespeare for the first time in their life, and in some cases, the last’.³⁰ Boundaries of physical access to the theatre were also loosened, allowing for a more diverse audience make-up. A hallmark of many of the intimate performances continuing to take place in unorthodox physical spaces is that they are often performed to small groups and are not widely publicised. As a result, they are seen by fewer people, complicating the formation of an analytical perspective and making it more difficult to experience how the space influences the audience, unless one engages with the media firsthand. This intimacy, however, fosters a heightened sense of

²⁹ *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation*, ed. by Gemma Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb and Erin Sullivan (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2022), p. 155.

³⁰ David Sterling Brown and Ben Crystal, ‘What You Will in the Time of Covid-19: Exploring the Digital Arts, Race and Flexible Resistance’, in *Lockdown Shakespeare: New Evolutions in Performance and Adaptation*, ed. by Gemma Kate Allred, Benjamin Broadribb and Erin Sullivan (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2022), pp. 127-146 (p. 138).

connection between audience and performance, allowing spectators to feel directly implicated.

I

Represented Worlds

This section focuses on the dislocating fictional settings of three contemporary stagings of Shakespeare's plays, all performed in orthodox venues: Shakespeare's Globe, the Globe's Sam Wanamaker playhouse and the Lyric Hammersmith. I show how the relationship between physical venue and represented fictional world in these productions is active and reciprocal, creating a dialogue that influences perception and meaning. The Globe's *Othello* (2024), directed by Ola Ince and Frantic Assembly's *Othello* (2023), directed by Scott Graham, can be considered together, as both move the action from Cyprus to modern Britain. The Globe dislocates *Othello* in a modern-day Metropolitan police force and Frantic Assembly selects a working-class pub in West Yorkshire. Dhaka Theatre's transculturally adapted *Tempest* extends the analysis because the fictional setting is built from a fusion of native Bengali theatre traditions more so than visual or spoken location markers.

In dislocating the fictional settings, I argue that each of these productions offers a pointed reinterpretation of the original text that connects its representations of power, race and gender to new political and cultural realities. Performed within orthodox theatre settings, these productions generate tensions between venue expectations and fictional space. I demonstrate that when the productions exploit these tensions, by drawing attention to theatricality, they invite the audience to consider how the play's themes operate within contemporary social and political contexts, speaking to the present, as well as talking back to the past.

***Othello*, dir. by Ola Ince, Shakespeare's Globe (2024) and *Othello*,
dir. by Scott Graham, Frantic Assembly (2023)**

In both the Globe's 2024 *Othello* and Frantic Assembly's 2023 production, dislocating the play from its original setting into contemporary Britain foregrounds the workings of racialised and gendered power, making clearer how these dynamics structure the characters' interactions and the consequences of inequality in the modern world. The analysis below traces the variety of spatial strategies through which each production renders these dynamics visible and impactful for the audience. By dislocating *Othello* into a modern-day Metropolitan Police setting, Ola Ince's 2024 production emphasises the persistence of racial marginalisation in contemporary society. This fictive time and place clashes with the faux-traditional character of its host venue, the Sam Wanamaker playhouse, and potentially the expectations generated by this site. The prevalent inconsistency throws up moments that reveal theatrical artifice and I show how these tensions invite audiences to engage with how issues of race and authority operate across Shakespeare's text and the present day. The ornate celestial ceiling painting inspired by an early seventeenth century mural, the wooden benches and beams, the thrust stage and the use of candlelight as the primary source of light all signal the venue as an archetypal Jacobean indoor theatre structure, echoing the Blackfriars playhouse. For this production, the stage was dressed minimally, leaving its grand arched Jacobean-style door and minstrels' gallery in view, although plain pieces of wood covered the venue's paint decoration. Far from conjuring an image resembling Scotland Yard, a crime scene or even simply twenty-first century Britain, this sparse and indeterminate staging effectively illustrates McAuley's argument that:

The stage in itself, even when set with an elaborate decor, conveys only a limited meaning, and it does not present a fixed set of meanings even within a given production, but it is by its nature a most compelling invitation to semiosis, as

Peter Handke pointed out when he referred to it as "Bedeutungsraum" —a space for meaning making.³¹

In other words, the Wanamaker stage does not become relevant or charged until the bodies enter it and activate the space. Handke's notion that the stage is not simply a backdrop but a dynamic site where meaning is constantly made and remade throughout the performance is helpful to understand how the physical Jacobean features of Sam Wanamaker stage and venue do not fix the play's meaning but generate productive tension when contrasted with the modern setting enacted there. That being said, this does not undermine the expectations that the audience will bring to a performance at this venue.

Showing first how the fictional world of the performance is constructed, going beyond the stage decoration and the venue's appearance, this close reading illuminates how it produces meaning and shapes spectators' perception. As the wooden structure is discordant with Ince's setting, the fictional world is built through a culmination of theatrical strategies: movement, sound, language, delivery, costume and lighting. The performance's opening sequence, which is a fast-paced enacted montage of Othello's recent life events, makes clear the fictional space. 'Go, go, go' is shouted in a crackling and static transmission, giving the effect that the words are being received through a walkie-talkie. Othello then bursts onto the stage, announcing 'it's the police', wearing a SWAT-style uniform, joined by police officers tasering a balaclava-clad suspect. The audio effects of the walkie-talkie message from an unseen officer, combined with the costume and Othello's announcement, immediately locate the action within a contemporary police force, from this century. Ken Nwosu's use of what seems to be his own accent in the Othello role and his changed title as 'guvnor' in this version as opposed to Shakespeare's 'general' mean that the language also becomes a signifier of social context. The characters speak in modern British accents, aligning the audience's

³¹ McAuley, p. 18.

perception of these figures with contemporary identities, familiar to them, rather than the more elevated and formal language typically heard in stabilising productions.

After the capture of the criminal, Othello accepts a framed certificate from an officer resembling a commissioner, dressed in a more formal police costume with a senior rank police peaked hat, a breasted dress coat, aiguillettes and chain. Their uniforms visually establish a symbolic system of authority between the two. The space seamlessly transforms from a police raid to a ceremonial event deduced from the congratulatory actions and camera flashes, despite the unchanged lighting and set. The dark stage, illuminating figures only with bright LED torches initially lent realism to the swoop but becomes increasingly invasive as scenes change, suggesting Othello's surveillance and isolation. As the realistic representation of the scene fades, the performance space is redefined. It is no longer a literal military court or public arena, but a subjective, internal landscape. In McAuley's terms, the spatial environment no longer supports a shared, realistic fiction but instead invites the audience into Othello's interior world. The spotlight's role changes and it, instead, contributes to the dreamlike, abstract sequence, as though these flashbacks are being recalled internally. The senior officer exits and Othello presents the same certificate to 'detective inspector Michael Cassio' as cameras flash again. The prop's meaning has shifted with the gestured change in context, signifying a different achievement with a new symbolic weight and communicating Othello's position in the hierarchy, ranking higher than Cassio in his governing body yet lower than the commissioner. As the montage continues, Othello presents Desdemona with a black, red-spotted handkerchief. They take a selfie and the lights drop to darkness. In this twenty-first century set version, the handkerchief, integral to Shakespeare's plot, loses its traditional significance as a pledge to their love and Ince's production plays into this. The handkerchief-giving is portrayed as a casual gift which Desdemona frolics and poses with and the subsequent selfie, which spectators can assume was posted on social media, stands in as the symbol of love-showing, fidelity and ownership. In this digital age, this fleeting online gesture assumes the emotional weight once carried by the handkerchief, keeping the performance in line with contemporary society and emphasising the play's present-day setting. The

audience witness other moments including Roderigo clandestinely handing Iago a stack of cash, Othello and Desdemona's wedding ceremony and Brabantio storming onto the stage, grabbing Othello by the collar, shouting 'thief' as Shakespeare's original dialogue begins, although notably omitting the opening scene where Iago and Roderigo provoke Brabantio and disparage Othello, aligning the audience more closely with Othello's experience.

The montage of imagined spaces, taking under two minutes in total, builds the world around the immediate shown space or 'theatrical macrocosm (macrocosme théâtral)' to borrow Etienne Souriau's term.³² The fictional setting being represented onstage and the physical space are not all that contribute to the formation of the theatrical space; their interplay with the fictional space offstage - alluded to, often made apparent through entrances and exits, and conceived rather than perceived - is equally important in a detailed performance analysis. Souriau uses this term to refer to 'the universe of the play' and 'stage microcosm (microcosme scénique)' for the onstage fictional space. This universe-building helps the audience to feel immersed in the world presented while also connecting it to the contemporary world in which they live as that is where the performance is fictionally taking place. The audience are aware that *Othello's* story, this time, unfolds in a representation of their current society and, as later language markers communicate, the city in which they are currently sitting; the Venetian army becomes the Metropolitan police and Cyprus, the Docklands. This chosen site traces *Othello's* identified issues of racism, misogyny and what we might now call toxic masculinity in early modern England represented in the play within the contemporary police force. This production came in the wake of George Floyd's murder at the hands of a white male police officer, the responding Black Lives Matter movement beginning in the US, the rape and murder of Sarah Everard in the UK by a male police officer and the global expansion of the #MeToo movement, drawing awareness to the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault, particularly where abuses of power and authority are involved; therefore, if the chosen police site is not already one audience members associate with a pervasive racist and misogynist culture, the mapping of *Othello* and its themes onto this

³² McAuley, p. 2.

space brings to mind these topics, whether consciously or subconsciously, and their lasting effects. Reviews of the production generally praise this dislocation through its revitalisation of the play and its themes on this 'horribly credible', 'depressingly topical' spatial use of 'the Met's dismal record on race'.³³ These connections made by reviewers between the fictional world and the audience's own reality demonstrate the dialogue between the two spaces and encourage the play's exploration of institutional racism and gendered violence to be perceived as a social commentary on the present rather than a historical exploration or distant relic of the past.

When elements of the performance are punctured with reminders of the production's own theatricality and artifice, the audience's reality and the play's fictionality are brought closer together, ironically by the apparent awareness of their distance. The creation of the fictional setting does not take away from the reality that the stage and surrounding theatre are always present, actively shaping the created space. Visually, the structure and stage are always in the spectator's eye. The wooden benches that they sit on, often through their discomfort, remind them of the physical space and with it, the play's theatricality. Beyond these material conditions, the performance itself sustains this awareness. Certain movements by the actors blister the play with these reminders, disrupting the continuity of the fictional world. I use the word 'reminders' for want of a better phrase since the audience, I suggest, is constantly aware of theatricality, recalling Mazer's statement cited in my last chapter - 'However realistic the scenery in nineteenth-century realism, we know that the room is missing its fourth wall' - when

³³ Nick Curtis, 'Othello at Shakespeare's Globe Review: Arresting Update Set in the Toxic Met Police Feels Horribly Credible', *The Standard*, 31 January 2024 <<https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/theatre/othello-shakespeares-globe-review-met-police-b1135973.html>> [accessed 10 March 2025]; Lucinda Everett, 'Othello at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse at Shakespeare's Globe - Review', *WhatsOnStage*, 31 January 2024 <https://www.whatsonstage.com/news/othello-at-the-sam-wanamaker-playhouse-at-shakespeares-globe-review_1567712/> [accessed 10 March 2025]; Andrzej Lukowski, 'Othello', *TimeOut*, 31 January 2024 <<https://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/othello-22-review>> [accessed 10 March 2025].

what I mean by reminders is that these moments bring theatricality to the forefront of the viewer's mind.³⁴

The Sam Wanamaker playhouse is a special case when it comes to these reminders since it is a candlelit theatre and in this production of *Othello*, more than one hundred candles are lit by the performers during the play. When the torches are not being used to direct light, to illuminate the full stage actors bring in pre-lit candles that they place on the floor and around the stage and then use those real, fragile flames to light the suspended candelabras hanging from above, one by one, a reasonably time-consuming process, pausing the play's action for a few minutes.



FIG 22. *Othello*, dir. by Ola Ince (Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, 2024). Desdemona (Poppy Gilbert) extinguishing candles. Photograph © Johan Persson. Reproduced with permission.

The candles are snuffed, relit and moved several times throughout the duration of the play with some instances appearing a practical choice with actors putting flames out

³⁴ Carey M. Mazer, 'Rosalind's Breast', in *Shakespeare Re-Dressed: Cross-Gender Casting in Contemporary Performance*, ed. by James C. Bulman (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), pp. 96-115 (p. 101).

seemingly out of character, functioning as a stagehand, and others remaining in character: for example as Desdemona puts out the lights before retiring to bed before her impending murder or as Othello relights the candles around her sleeping body in a ceremonial manner before extinguishing a solo candle as he says 'put out the light, and then put out the light' (Act 5, Scene 2), further blurring the boundaries of the spaces. As McAuley puts it, 'theatre is a place where fiction and reality come together to problematize each other' and the candle lighting encapsulates this tension neatly.³⁵ The incompatibility of logic between the candlelight and fictional modern setting does not go unnoticed by the audience. Simon Jenner stated: 'It's one of the few productions where I wonder if Anna Watson's candle-work was always integral [...]. A contemporary policing theme of course doesn't help, though the evocatively-lit bedchamber oozes sacramental murder.'³⁶ On the topic of candles, Matt Wolf argues that 'it's not easy to reconcile their archaic presence with the tabloid, camera-ready frenzy of a society that, you'll forgive the image, has lost its moorings.'³⁷ Director Ince shared her worries about incorporating candlelight into the performance in a talk about her directorial experience of creating this *Othello*, expressing that she found making *Othello* in the Sam Wanamaker playhouse 'really hard' and asked herself 'how do the police run around with candles?'³⁸ Her reservations suggest that it was the idea of logic and coherence that she struggled to place, combining the early modern lighting structure and her contemporary police force setting, but it is precisely the lack of conventional logic that disrupts the audience's suspension of disbelief, or rather redirects their attention from narrative absorption to the conditions of its construction, pulling them out of the play and into their own lives again. By disrupting the flow of the narrative with reminders

³⁵ McAuley, p. 127.

³⁶ Simon Jenner, 'Othello', *FringeReview*, 7 February 2024 <<https://fringereview.co.uk/review/fringereview-uk/2024/othello-3/>> [accessed 10 March 2025].

³⁷ Matt Wolf, "'Othello' Review – Ola Ince's Provocative Production Makes This a Blistering Play for Today', *London Theatre*, 1 February 2014 <<https://www.londontheatre.co.uk/reviews/othello-review-sam-wanamaker-playhouse>> [accessed 10 March 2025].

³⁸ Ola Ince and Iqbal Khan, *Creating Othello*, public talk as a part of the Shakespeare and Race Festival at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, Shakespeare's Globe, 22 October 2024.

like this, the signifying process of the drama is estranged and the boundary between reality and fiction is brought into sharp focus.

The returning awareness of the performative nature of the performance prompts the audience to reflect on the production whilst they wait for it to resume, melding the spectator's real life experience into their perception of the play. Elin Diamond's theory of 'unmaking mimesis' becomes useful here. Diamond builds on Brecht's theory of 'not... but', a feature of alienated acting whereby an actor both performs what they are doing and simultaneously implies what they are not doing. Applying Brecht's idea that 'each action must contain the trace of the action it represses' to her feminist theory of sexual difference, she argues that a resistance to classical mimesis, avoiding a 'true' reflection of life,

invites the participatory play of the spectator, and the possibility - for Brecht a crucial possibility - that signification (the production of meaning) continues beyond the play's end, even as it congeals into action and choice after the spectator leaves the theater.³⁹

I agree with Diamond that when theatre does not simply mirror reality, a space is created through which contradictions, complexities and critique can emerge. The candlelight reminders in the Globe's performance open this space and invite the audience to look beyond representation, connecting it to wider historical and political contexts, beyond the specific narrative of the production.

I insist not necessarily that the illusion is broken in these moments, as, like Mazer, I am not convinced that such a seduction is possible, but that theatricality is more visible. Bridget Escolme, however, demonstrates that the concept of illusion is perhaps more subjective than many critics suppose. Escolme acknowledges Brecht's theory of alienation, that illusion can be strategically disrupted to foster intellectual engagement, but departs from it in suggesting that 'it is possible to conjure theatrical illusion while at

³⁹ Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 49.

the same time making evident the work behind the illusion, its conditions and means of production'.⁴⁰ Turning the notion of illusion on its head, she argues compellingly that illusion only collapses when theatre pretends not to be theatre; the more openly theatrical the encounter, the stronger the illusion of presence. She uses the convention of direct address - framed by Andrew Gurr as a convention once perceived as a logical and naturalistic way to show thoughts aloud in early modern theatre - to evidence that when the audience are recognised, the relationship between performance and audience becomes honest; with that honesty comes immediacy and presence. The example Escolme gives of direct address has the same functionality as my example of candle-lighting, both acknowledging the conditions of the theatre's making. Although our arguments proceed through different means - I suggest it marks a pause in narrative that creates space for connection, whereas she focuses on how it positions the audience's response and attention as something that matters as opposed to ignoring it - we arrive at the same conclusion: that the awareness of theatricality leads to a sense of liveness and relevance for spectators. Inherent to this joint finding is the understanding that meaning is co-produced through the interaction of audience, text and performers.

Escolme's reading suggests that the visibility of theatricality enables a deeper exploration of the play itself, drawing the audience inward to its dramatic and psychological life. My perspective on the candle-lighting in Ince's *Othello* extends this idea outward, showing how awareness of performance conditions can simultaneously connect spectators to the social, historical and political dimensions of the play. This bifocal attention to the play's internal drama and to its broader contemporary context prefigures Joanna Tompkin's argument about the importance of contextualisation. In *Unsettling Space* (2006), Tompkins argues that the effects of Diamond and Brecht's models - spectator engagement with political and historical dimensions - help to *historicise* a performance.⁴¹ Although historicisation is a part of Diamond's theory,

⁴⁰ Bridget Escolme, *Talking to the Audience: Shakespeare, Performance, Self* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p. 11.

⁴¹ Historicisation in this context refers to Brecht's theory of historicisation which is concerned with presenting events and characters in a way that highlights their historical and social context, encouraging the audience to view them critically rather than emotionally. By showing that situations are shaped by specific circumstances and adaptable, it invites reflection and promotes social change instead of passive

Tompkins places emphasis on it and puts forward that ‘a key part of theatre’s potential social significance is the public performance of theatrical events in a context that facilitates a dialogue with ideas, but performance alone is not enough: theatre needs to be historicized as well’ to unsettle.⁴² As the candles are lit and extinguished in Ince’s production, the historical distance between Shakespeare’s play and the present are materialised. This layering of temporalities historicises the production, making the audience conscious of the work’s location within both early modern and contemporary frames. Since Shakespeare’s plays stand firmly in the canon, I suggest that the historicisation of contemporary versions of his plays - that is, contextualising them politically and culturally - makes them unsettling in a way that facilitates their decolonising strategies, as I shall show later. When achieved, these productions do not preserve Shakespeare’s relevance but critique both the past (colonial, hierarchical histories) and the present (modern systems of power), actively reinterpreting the text.

By contrast, Frantic Assembly’s *Othello*, staged within a proscenium arch and employing a hyperrealistic aesthetic within the represented world, initially encourages a more narratively absorbing mode of spectatorship, even though its spatial transitions complicate this absorption which I come to discuss shortly. The play features three fictional spaces: the primary setting is the pub which, with its fake, lifesize walls and rectangle of carpet floor on the stage, resembles a film set. A pool table sits in the centre of the room, a fruit machine in one corner and a red leather seating area in the other. The secondary space is an alleyway, complete with graffitied bins and enclosing brick walls, presumably around the back of the pub. The third space, only used briefly, is a small toilet cubicle used by the female characters. These spaces work in cohesion to create a layered environment where the play’s gender-led and racialised power dynamics and social marginalisation are explored. I focus on the 2023 staging of the

acceptance. Diamond states ‘there is a powerful dialectical movement in Brechtian historicization of preserving ‘distinguishing marks’ of the past and acknowledging, even foregrounding, the audience’s present perspective.’ (p. 49). She cites an example: ‘according to Brecht, one way the actor alienates or distances the audience from the character is to suggest the historicity of the character in contrast to the actor’s own present-time self-awareness on stage.’ (p. 50).

⁴² Joanna Tompkins, *Unsettling Space: Conversations in Contemporary Australian Theatre* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), p. 7.

play but, as noted previously, director Scott Graham first staged the play in 2008. The 'Northern pub' setting, located in a 'council estate in Leeds' initially came as a result of Graham's research into the violent urban protests in the Harehills area of Leeds in 2001 in which aggressive disorder arose between white and Asian groups.⁴³ Frantic attempted to explore the racial factions that they were seeing in real life through a production of *Othello* several years later based on Graham's idea that 'during a spell of racial unease like the one existent in Leeds during 2001 then, it is neither impossible nor improbable that a black male might exist in a unique and almost privileged position. Until, of course, he attains a white girlfriend....'⁴⁴ The play was restaged in 2014 and again in 2023 with a different focus: misinformation. Despite the intended focal shift, it is evident that the racial tensions presented in the working-class environment remain important. The sets used across the restagings were nearly identical, all depicting a scene of a working-class pub and its surrounding area.



⁴³ Quote taken from a comprehensive guide written for schools by Scott Graham, Steven Hoggett and Jamie Rocha Allan about Frantic Assembly's *Othello*, 'Othello 2008/2014 Resource Pack', Frantic Assembly (p. 10) <<https://www.franticassembly.co.uk/resources/othello-resource-pack>> [accessed 10 March 2025].

⁴⁴ 'Othello 2008/2014 Resource Pack', p. 10.

FIG 23. *Othello*, dir. by Scott Graham (Lyric Hammersmith, 2023). The cast pictured on and around the pool table of the pub. Photograph by Tristram Kenton. © Frantic Assembly. Reproduced with permission.

The actors' costumes reflect the stereotypical British pub decor as a visual shorthand to communicate the socioeconomic status of the characters and area. The men and Emilia all wear tracksuit bottoms and zipped jackets in various shades of grey and Desdemona wears a fitted vest, tight sports shorts and trainers. Both Desdemona and Emilia wear their hair in high buns and are accessorised with large hoop earrings. The costumes draw heavily on stereotypes of working-class British fashion, particularly the stereotypical attire of council estates and urban youth culture. This approach potentially risks reinforcing reductive ideas of working-class communities since the responsibility to flesh out the experiences and complexities of many of the characters' lives beyond Shakespeare's lines lies with the spectator. The Lyric Hammersmith theatre, where the production took place, is often used for modern and innovative adaptations of classics and contemporary theatre and the building itself blends old and new with its Victorian structure and ornate details inside and its sleek, contemporary foyers. These details position the distance between physical and fictional space as not as stark as the provocative contrast found in the Globe's contemporary interpretation of Shakespeare in a performance space that historically reverberates with Shakespeare's original works. The uneasy dialogue between these spaces in the Globe's production brings the challenging and restructuring of the original into view with actors navigating both the stage's physical surface and symbolic significance.

Frantic Assembly's production approaches this negotiation differently. Rather than generating tension primarily through the contrast between venue and fiction, the production locates it within the performance's internal spatial organisation. Where the Globe externalises dislocation through its host space, Frantic internalises it through transitions between distinct onstage environments. Whilst the three spaces mimic a working-class social hub with some degree of realism, the set changes, as with the Globe's production's altering of the lighting, deliberately reveal the stage's mechanism, drawing attention to artificiality. The walls of the set are entirely moveable so when the

set is changing from the pub to the alleyway, the walls are pushed aside and folded up by a character on stage, the pool table and chairs are pushed aside and the brick walls and bins are revealed behind it. When the pub changes to the bathroom set, Othello pulls the wall from the right-hand side, rotating the set and turning the small cubicle onto the stage. These physically visible transitions mark the movement of scenery, but they also signal the change of the social dynamics within each space. The pub room represents a hub for the community, placing the characters within a space where their actions may be witnessed both by one another and by offstage figures, such as the bar staff and other patrons. It is a space where casual encounters and public perception are subtly blended, allowing for camaraderie - as Ince captures convincingly in the away mission station in Globe's *Othello* - and tension: a space where gossip is shared and rumours take root. The alleyway offers a space metaphorically behind-closed-doors. The lighting is dark and the stage is smoky. Characters are able to step away from scrutiny and social expectation and encounters here can be illicit and unseen. If the production as a whole represents the 'underbelly of UK society' as Graham suggests with its representation of the unpolished exterior of working-class life, the shadowy alleyway is the bottom of that underbelly.⁴⁵ The toilet cubicle is a private feminine space: a place where the women are free from the eyes of society and its obligations and a fitting setting for Desdemona and Emilia's unobserved 'O these men, these men!' conversation in Act 4, Scene 3. In the cubicle, the two assume a configuration familiar to many women as Desdemona sits on the seat and Emilia leans up against the wall, sharing the space. The cramped place emphasises the private nature of their candid exchange, which is also unusually improper given their economic positions in the context of the source text. It also dramatises their confinement as women, restrained by societal expectations, expectations that they momentarily elide in this space. The production's choreographing of physical space, by moving noticeably between pub, alley and cubicle, stresses the changing social relations and power dynamics in Shakespeare's play and its reimagined setting. The women are confined yet temporarily liberated away from men and the racialised social order of the pub and alleyway.

⁴⁵ 'Othello 2008/2014 Resource Pack', p. 4.

Spectators witness how gendered and racialised status mediate behaviours and interactions across these environments.

The hyperrealistic cubicle, complete with a scratched mirror, grimy walls and rusting pipes, is authentically sized; therefore, as the space is revealed there is a dramatic drop in size from the pub consuming the entire stage to the small, brightly lit box that the women are illuminated in. Female toilets are a female-coded space, literally through their gendered entry requirements, but they also have connotations of a site for feminine bonding, emotional outlet, social relief, the application of beauty products and sharing of products, whilst also regulating gender division. The uncomfortably harsh lighting stands in striking contrast to the dingy pub and shadowy alley, spotlighting the women and amplifying their immediate psychological struggle and their greater societal one as women, at the same time as intensifying the honesty in their emotional exposure. Similar to the candle lighting mechanisms, the spatial transitions, executed by characters, are not, however, a wholly practical decision or solely drawing attention to theatricality: the manipulation of the walls underscores the characters' desires. For example, when the scene changes from the pub to the bathroom, Iago and Roderigo are both on stage; Roderigo pushes the pool table away and Iago remains stationary, but it is Othello who comes onto the stage to pull the wall back and expose the bathroom, as though he wants to listen into the conversation or access the space for himself. Reviewers, in fact, made comment on how 'the wall ripples', the way that the walls were 'entirely movable' and how they 'bend and curve in an almost slinky-like fashion' to the extent that they were almost being treated in reviews as their own character, further demonstrating the transitions' ability to sporadically foreground theatricality and its mechanisms.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Ayaat Yassin-Kassab, 'A Review of Frantic Assembly's *Othello*', *The Oxford Blue*, 12 December 2022 <<https://theoxfordblue.co.uk/a-review-of-frantic-assemblys-othello/>> [accessed 10 March 2025]; Jamie O, 'Frantic Assembly's *Othello* - A Review', *Sidcot School*, 4 November 2022 <<https://www.sidcot.org.uk/student-news/frantic-assemblys-othello-review>> [accessed 10 March 2025]; Liam O'Dell, "'Othello' Review – Frantic Assembly's Pub Shakespeare is Cluttered with Company's Classic Choreography", Liam O'Dell's freelance webpage <<https://liamodell.com/2023/01/27/othello-review-frantic-assembly-lyric-theatre-hammersmith-shakespeare-london-michael-akinsulire/>> [accessed 10 March 2025].

Unlike Frantic's production, which spatialises social and racial hierarchies through physically distinct environments, the Globe's *Othello* compresses these dynamics onto a bare stage but achieves the same creation of recognisable locations with an emphasis on power relations - gendered and racial - through a minimal stage and actor-driven cues. The production creates both perceivable locations through props and performance markers, as well as more abstract spaces, including Othello's subconscious, where the impacts of social power dynamics are explored. For example, a pinboard on wheels covered with a map, images of places and Post-it notes alone signals that the space is now a room used by the police for investigative work. Similarly, the production signifies a period of downtime during an off-site police operation in a nondescript location through a combination of costume, props and contextual information. The shift from professional attire to more relaxed clothing - including walking boots, cargo trousers, utility vests and fleeces - alongside bottles of beer littered around the stage, acoustic guitars and the circumstances of the characters' arrival, establishes the location as a temporary recreational space within the broader framework of an operation.

The Globe's production also conceives an abstract fictional space, unique to the performance: Othello's inner mind. In Shakespeare's script, the internal state of the characters is made known through delivery of speech, movement, asides and soliloquies; but the Globe's production introduces a secondary Othello character, named in the programme as 'Subconscious Othello', providing an exploration outside of Shakespeare's words. The character, played by black British actor and choreographer Ira Mandela Siobhan, mirrors the image of Othello, wearing the same clothes and is mostly non-speaking, conveying the central Othello's interior thoughts through dance and movement.



FIG 24. *Othello*, dir. by Ola Ince (Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, 2024). Othello (Ken Nwosu) left and Subconscious Othello (Ira Mandela Siobhan) right. Photograph © Johan Persson. Reproduced with permission.

Siobhan appears on stage during pivotal moments for Othello - when he is accused of stealing Desdemona, when Iago tells Othello to keep an eye on Cassio and Desdemona, when Othello is told about the whereabouts of the handkerchief, when he is contemplating (and is) murdering Desdemona. As Othello defends himself to Brabantio (Act 1, Scene 2), Subconscious Othello circles him, imitating actions that might be used within a military setting in slow motion; he carefully commando rolls on the floor, marches to attention and salutes, stealthily crawls on the ground before finally raising his hands in surrender and stepping aside. This both echoes Othello's skillset and expresses the pressure of loyalty and professionalism he faces in his mind, especially as a character already under racial profiling. In the scene where Othello murders Desdemona, Subconscious Othello - now wearing his wedding suit again and for the first time not matching Othello's current outfit - attempts to physically restrain Othello. The return of the wedding suit signals the lingering presence of Othello's earlier emotional self, a visual reminder that creates a contrast that emphasises his inner conflict between desire and violence. Subconscious Othello forces Othello's head down to kiss

Desdemona as he takes his final kisses - 'one more, one more' (V.2.17) - as though hoping to convince him not to murder.

Sometimes the pair of Othellos, public and subconscious, take the lines from Othello's soliloquies in turn, in dialogue with one another, answering questions, emphasising the back-and-forth deliberation taking place in his mind. The splitting of voice and body externalises a form of divided selfhood, with the subconscious character operating as a physical embodiment of W. E. Du Bois's notion of 'double consciousness', a theory that Jeffrey Boakye references in the programme. Double consciousness, for Du Bois, refers to the psychological struggle of dual self-perception that an African American suffers at the hands of a racist, white society. He writes:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁴⁷

Writing in the early twentieth century, Du Bois eloquently captures the painful and disorientating experience of internal conflict and through the use of the secondary Othello, Du Bois's two warring ideals are represented by two separate bodies, each a fracture of the whole part. As the Othellos physically hold each other up and support one another, that 'dogged strength' is shown and the resilience necessary to endure in their position. Often Subconscious Othello's appearances are accompanied by a mob of police officers wearing balaclavas speaking racially loaded remarks through walkie talkies:

Charlie Whiskey 5383, Moor, over.

Papa Lima 4195, O you dull Moor, over.

⁴⁷ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994), p. 2.

The Moor is far more fair than black, over.
Moor, over.
Her lips, over.
Reputation, reputation, reputation, over.
To the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor, over.
Sooty Bosom, over.
Lima 4195, you the blacker devil, over.
Bravo Sierra 1604, an abuser of the world, over.

These lines, plucked from different moments in Shakespeare's play, when placed together stress the overwhelming effect racism has on Othello and his subconscious. Coupled with the movements of Subconscious Othello, they suggest that his actions are as a result of these effects.

By introducing the abstract space of Othello's inner turmoil, the production attempts to challenge the original play by giving Othello an alternate 'voice', explaining his decisions and the influence of his oppression to avoid pinning his behaviour on the stereotypes of his race with the same motivations that Hugh Quarshie had with his performance of a transient ischemic attack as an attempt to explain his actions as I addressed in Chapter Three. To historicise, Diamond suggests 'the actor must not lose herself in the character but rather *demonstrate* the character as a function of particular socio-historical relations, a conduit of particular choices.'⁴⁸ Gary Naylor, in his review of the play for the online forum The Arts Desk, suggests that he also noticed a demonstration which he proposes locates the play's catalyst for tragedy:

It's not a smile or two between the toffs that sets him on his disastrous path, nor even the scheming of Ralph Davis's hideous Iago that so fans the flames of

⁴⁸ Diamond, p. 50.

jealousy, but the burden of a lifetime spent being two persons that sum to less than one.⁴⁹

The visceral representation of the tension within Othello, his 'two-ness', shifts the lens through which the audience understands Othello's actions, showing that his decisions are not only shaped by external influences, like Iago's scheming, but also by the years of marginalisation and dehumanization he has experienced due to his race, even by his law-enforcing colleagues representative of institutional racism. Subconscious Othello's building of this interior space through movement, then, works to historicise the performance and aid a perception that this space is a politically-encoded sign and an alternative form of resistance to literary history, giving a voice to Othello who has been silenced through both exclusionary narrative and colonial power, without rewriting Shakespeare's text but drawing attention to its limitations of representation. It is crucial that the spectators connect Othello's psyche and the institutional racism presented, as Naylor does; but I argue that it may be more effective still when spectators are able to connect the identity formation with themselves. Tompkins, on the representation of psychic worlds on stage, argues:

They also function as a methektic [reflecting Paul Carter's concept of *methexis*, which considers space as interpretable in multiple ways rather than as a fixed imitation] model of how else space may be configured. Psychic place actively resists – even if temporarily – 'real' space. Only in theatre is such psychic place able to be performed and thus actualized, particularly in its relationship with the 'real' world of the narrative (whether collaborative or conflicting). Of course, the world of the narrative is itself a fictional foil to the offstage space of the audience's 'real' world.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Gary Naylor, 'Othello, Sam Wanamaker Playhouse Review - 21st Century Interpretation Delivers Food for Thought', *TheArtsDesk.Com*, 8 February 2024 <<https://www.theartsdesk.com/theatre/othello-sam-wanamaker-playhouse-review-21st-century-interpretation-delivers-food-thought>> [accessed 10 March 2025].

⁵⁰ Tompkins, p. 140. Clarification added.

Tompkins highlights that the characters' exploration of their psychological space is a metaphorical and performative act, contrasting with the real world that the audience lives in, which helps the audience to reflect on their own experiences of identity and belonging. The broadened mental space in *Othello* allows the audience to gain access to a deeper emotional layer of the character and his growing sense of paranoia, leading to his eventual murder of Desdemona, but equally inspires self-reflection. The interrelation between the spectator and the play enables a reading of the play that bridges Ince's representation of psychological fracture caused by racism with the ongoing systemic inequality in the contemporary climate.

The production's ending continues to connect the performance to the present day experienced by spectators. Once Othello is discovered for his murder, he does not take his own life as in Shakespeare's text, but is arrested, handcuffed and marched off the stage. As he exits, he pauses to face the audience and the photographer returns with a flashing camera as Othello turns to his sides for mugshot images, whilst the news headline 'Black beast: Nigerian chief inspector goes down' is read aloud. Iago faces the same fate and is taken in handcuffs for mugshots; this time, the headline 'Cops in crisis: police struggle with their mental health' is read. The alternate ending foregrounds masculinity and racism's effects at the play's end. A public arrest is an ending, in ways, much more dreaded than death for this Othello, who has been consistently concerned with his perception in this white dominant society, particularly as an enforcer of the law himself. The side-by-side comparison of the media's titling of Othello's offence and the more generous description of Iago's crimes, leaning on a mental health angle rather than highlighting and inviting and implying judgement on race, portrays the enduring effects of structural racism. The revised ending looks out to contemporary media and society, the play's final (metaphorical) space, directly connected to the audience, suggesting that the issues of racism, toxic masculinity and misogyny that the production explores within the police extend beyond that and challenging the legitimacy of the media and its contributions to subjugation by exposing its unfair and racist treatment of the criminals, particularly alongside the audience's view into the physical representation of Othello's suffering psyche.

Both the Globe and Frantic Assembly's productions use fictional dislocation - placing the play's action in contemporary or abstract settings - to make the workings of racialised and gendered marginalisation, or more broadly the structures that sustain it, perceptible to spectators. Ince's contemporary police setting connects the play's representation of institutional racism and misogyny to present-day social realities. The addition of Subconscious Othello externalised the psychological turmoil, consequential of the represented entrenched inequality. Ince reworked the play's ending to affirm the ongoing consequences of racism and toxic masculinity, portraying Othello's arrest and public exposure rather than his death and inviting the audience to recognise these dynamics in the current socio-political climate. Juxtaposed against the historically inspired playhouse, the setting created a productive tension that highlighted artifice, seen in moments like the visible process of candlestick lighting, ultimately inviting spectators to reflect on how the play's themes resonate in their own world. Frantic Assembly's pub-based dislocation, by contrast, partly collapses the distance between the audience and action through hyperrealistic sets and a framed, front-facing perspective that guides spectators' attention and encourages absorption in the unfolding narrative. The movability of the sets, however, complicates this engagement. The transitions between the pub, alley and women's toilet make visible the social and gendered hierarchies at play. Together, the productions show how dislocating fictional spaces can recontextualise Shakespeare's themes, unsettle audience expectations and expand the audience's potential to engage with the production's social critique.

***The Tempest*, dir. by Nasiruddin Yousuff, Dhaka Theatre (2012)**

Dhaka Theatre's *Tempest* (2012) differs greatly from Frantic Assembly and the Globe's productions of *Othello* in terms of how it forms its fictional location. Frantic Assembly used realistic, life-sized scenery to replicate the real versions of the places it mimicked, whereas the Globe used a combination of literal and abstract spaces to represent the present day in the police force. In contrast, Dhaka Theatre's production created a symbolic, culturally pluralistic environment, transforming Shakespeare's island into a decolonised space. Here, the dislocation is both fictional and cultural: the production's

setting is fashioned from a complex layering of indigenous Manipuri and Bengali theatrical traditions which blended music, dance and audience engagement to establish the island as a fluid, participatory world that reflected the company's own performance heritage while expanding Shakespeare's play into different cultural and imaginative dimensions. In my analysis, this culturally dislocated space is read as a site where Shakespeare's themes are reformulated in relation to Bangladesh's own cultural and postcolonial realities, while also challenging the legacy of Western theatrical authority.

The production took place as a section of the Globe to Globe festival which sat within the World Shakespeare Festival and, in turn, the even larger cultural celebration connected to the London 2012 Olympic Games. The one-off Globe to Globe festival saw 37 international theatre companies take to the Globe's stage, each performing one of Shakespeare's plays and each in a different language, running over the course of three months. This curation, however, carries immense postcolonial weight. By functioning as a gatekeeper that selected exactly one international company per play, the festival framework risked tokenism, flattening complex national theatre landscapes into singular, easily digestible representations of national identity for a Western audience. The selection of Dhaka Theatre, for example, implicitly demanded a production that could legibly perform its own exoticism and distinct 'otherness' within the heart of the British capital, serving the broader multicultural branding of the London Olympics. The performances featured scene-by-scene synopses in English above the stage rather than line-by-line surtitling, prompted according to festival director Tom Bird, by the idea that '1,500 heads in common light with the actors turning every few seconds would be spectacularly distracting.'⁵¹ The deliberate omission of full surtitles illustrates how the festival mediated the performance to prioritise a specific, immediate sensory experience over linguistic precision, particularly for non-Bangla speaking audience members. While this allowed the audience to focus on visual and musical aesthetics, it simultaneously risked reducing Dhaka Theatre's complex political performance into a purely spectacular, non-Western curiosity, highlighting the uneven power dynamic between

⁵¹ Tom Bird, 'The Globe to Globe Festival: An Introduction', in *Shakespeare Beyond English: A Global Experiment*, ed. by Susan Bennett and Christie Carson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 13-18 (p. 16).

the hosting Western institution and the visiting international company. The production of *The Tempest* was directed by Bangladeshi theatre and film director Nasiruddin Yousuff, known also for his freedom-fighting for the independence of Bangladesh.⁵² Programming a director with explicit revolutionary credentials allowed the Globe to showcase a highly progressive political voice. However, this inclusion underscores the complex politics of the festival: a postcolonial freedom fighter's adaptation was ultimately framed and contained within a British institutional setting, illustrating how global institutions can absorb international histories of independence to enhance their own global prestige. Shakespeare's script was translated and adapted by Rubayet Ahmed, and the Dhaka-based (Bangladesh's capital city) theatre group Dhaka Theatre performed the play. Christine Dymkowski writes that 'national identity is clearly a crucial consideration for the company', established in 1973, and 'its members believe that theatre should depict the life of the people and therefore endeavour to find a theatrical expression which will truly depict the country and its people'; they achieve this by blending old performing art forms with modern ideas and technologies.⁵³

Dhaka Theatre's use of culturally specific performance conventions transforms Shakespeare's text into a collaborative and participatory space, showing how fictional dislocation can be used to critique both authorial authority and colonial hierarchies. Of the theatrical productions analysed so far in this chapter, Dhaka Theatre's is set in the least precisely defined location; however, as with the other productions, movement is key in building a sense of place. The performance was presented on the roofless Globe's thrust stage and, as is usual for that venue, used no substantial scenery. At the back of the stage were three banner stands, each with an individual colourful painting of a ship on rocky waters and small figures falling overboard, all similar in appearance but with different coloured of the sails. Large hanging ropes decorated one of the stage's pillars

⁵² For detail on Nasiruddin Yousuff's activism, see Mainul Hassan, 'Nasiruddin Yousuff: Through Memories and Histories', *New Age*, 23 August 2019 <<https://www.newagebd.net/article/82204/nasiruddin-yousuff-through-memories-and-histories>> [accessed 7 July 2025].

⁵³ Christine Dymkowski, 'Power Play: Dhaka Theatre's Bangla Tempest', in *Shakespeare Beyond English: A Global Experiment*, ed. by Susan Bennett and Christie Carson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 141-149 (p. 141).

and the cast sat in a half circle at the rear of the stage, in front of the banners, with ornately decorated trunks filled with props before them. Throughout the performance, the cast stayed seated in audience sight, with each actor rising to take to the centre when delivering their lines, then returning to their seat once their moment passed. This anti-illusionary staging, with actors always visible when not speaking, is common in jatra, a Bengali folk theatre form that mixes a non-naturalist style, highly expressive or exaggerated gestures, songs and sung dialogue, loud music and minimal props. While other regional South Asian performance traditions also utilise an always visible cast, Dhaka Theatre's production aligns most closely with jatra through its use of the form's other distinctive features, including heightened acting and musical integration.

The combination of the visible cast with other characteristics of jatra actively foregrounds the labour and skill of performance as a medium, reminding the audience that meaning is generated collectively rather than being contained solely in text or authorial authority. Spectators are guided through Shakespeare's story in a way that emphasises communal storytelling and interpretation, creating a ritualistic, shared experience. At the same time, by presenting Shakespeare through this Bengali lens, the story becomes collectively owned, displacing Shakespeare's authorial dominion. The exclusionary forces creating and preserving the Western canon, simultaneously contributing to Orientalism, are challenged through the cultural aesthetics that the canon implicitly shuts out. The space created in the production by these performance choices destabilises authority but it draws the entire audience into that critique by creating an inclusive atmosphere. The staging strategies reinforce this sense of community as reviewer for the *Daily Star* and *Dhaka Mirror*, John Farndon, points out, arguing that the way that the cast 'never leave the stage, but simply get up to play their part before sitting down again' creates 'a continuity and a bond between audience and players that is often lost in more conventional theatre.'⁵⁴ As a Western viewer myself, I agree with Farndon that the continual visibility breaks down theatrical boundaries that I am familiar with, creating an informality and restructured relationship that

⁵⁴ John Farndon, 'Dhaka Theatre Stages Indigenous Tinged Tempest in London', *Dhaka Mirror*, 10 May 2012 <<https://dhakamirror.com/dhaka-theatre-stages-indigenous-tinged-tempest-in-london/>? [accessed 15 May 2025].

consequently fosters a feeling of closeness and accessibility. Drawing on jatra conventions challenges notions of Shakespearean ownership and resists the cultural imperialism often associated with his legacy.

The Globe, as a venue, lends itself to this communal energy, since its shared light historically prompted a symmetrical exchange between actors and audiences, as outlined in the introduction to this chapter. By deliberately leveraging the Globe's architectural conditions to perform Bangladeshi cultural storytelling, the production repurposes the space not to preserve Shakespearean tradition but to subvert it and make the audience complicit in that process. This use of space complements the fictional dislocation, both allowing authority and power to be negotiated on stage. The emphasis on collaboration also recontextualises Prospero. At the beginning of the performance, Prospero tells Miranda his backstory of dukedom and magic and sporadic lines in his individual dialogue are sung by the whole ensemble. This scene in other productions can serve as a justification of his control of the island and legitimisation of his authority: Roger Allam performs the monologue with frustration and resentment while Miranda (Jessie Buckley) hangs on his every word in the Globe's production of the play two years later and in the RSC's 2016 *Tempest* directed by Gregory Doran, Simon Russell Beale's Prospero speaks these lines to Miranda (Jenny Rainsford) in a serious tone with a sense of sadness and longing. Dhaka Theatre's structuring of the scene, with its collaborative storytelling and pared down monologue, subtly decentres Prospero and positions him as a participant of shared act of cultural memory rather than a master narrator. The singing and drums accompanying Prospero's revelation create an overall upbeat and lively atmosphere, though the performance is not uniformly celebratory. Even in scenes that depict betrayal or suffering, enacted with gravity or earnestness, the non-naturalistic soundscape and exaggerated movement provide a sense of constant kinetic energy. For example in Act 2, Scene 1, when Antonio and Sebastian betray Alonso, the rattling music reflecting the conspiratorial behaviour and the percussive clashes that punctuate the large jumping movements of Antonio and Sebastian as they hatch their plan do not take away from the gravity the actors convey but provide a layered theatrical effect, balancing tension with the rhythmic vitality of the

performance. On the other hand, some scenes that are filled with dramatic tension or the harsh, authoritarian tone that often comes with Prospero and Caliban's encounters in Western productions, are rendered with comedy and cheeriness here. Caliban jovially dances about and sings to Prospero about his treatment and forced loss of his mother tongue, despite the seemingly jarring traumatic content of his words. This reframing of Caliban's speech transforms what Western audiences have come to expect as a site of oppression into a moment of cultural affirmation and playful defiance.

Such choices, however, risk being flattened or misread by spectators unfamiliar with the linguistic and performative subtleties of the Bangla interpretation. *Guardian* reviewer Imogen Tilden wrote that 'Prospero lacked authority' and that his relationship with Ariel 'felt underplayed'.⁵⁵ The language barrier prevents non-Bangla speaking spectators from understanding the linguistic weight of the relationships. Tilden, who acknowledges that her 'Bengali (the world's sixth most spoken language) is non-existent' is unable to recognise the intricacies present in dialogue. This is where Dymkowski's analysis becomes especially instructive:

The Bangla language has three levels of address: the very formal, used for complete strangers, teachers, and those senior to oneself, sometimes including parents; the semi-formal for everyday speech; and the intimate, used between very close friends and by masters to servants. Prospero spoke to both Ariel and Caliban in this intimate way, with his tone more condescending to Caliban than to the spirit. However, Caliban's own speech was very disrespectful to Prospero, making a number of jokes at his expense and using the semi-formal rather than formal 'you' to address him. In confronting Prospero in Act 1 Scene 2, he was also self-confident, moving freely about the stage as Prospero stood guiltily rooted to

⁵⁵ Imogen Tilden, 'The Tempest - Review', *The Guardian*, 8 May 2012
<<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/may/08/the-tempest-review>>

the spot, reversing their expected statuses: this was a Caliban with dignity and belief in his own worth.⁵⁶

Dymkowski's insight illuminates how the Bangla language's tiered system of address operates as a subtle indicator of power dynamics where even surtitles could not communicate this to those not fluent in the language. The dancing, jubilation and reduced dialogue in the production leads Western audiences to perceive the production as one of 'directness and simplicity', as Farndon does, if they are not privy to its culturally specific codes of resistance.⁵⁷ What might appear straightforward to those unfamiliar with Bangla or Manipuri traditions is layered with subtle challenges to the colonial authority that Prospero is typically read to embody, as I established in the introduction. There are also scenes that are more predictably buoyant, including Miranda and Ferdinand's traditional Hindu wedding celebration, complete with a Jaimala ceremony (exchanging of floral garlands). Trinculo and Stefano's drunken antics are also played with a consistent lightness, making the production's overall tonal palette merry and festive which creates an intriguing tension that both charms and unsettles.



⁵⁶ Dymkowski, p. 145.

⁵⁷ Farndon, 'Dhaka Theatre Stages Indigenous Tinged Tempest in London'.

FIG 25. *The Tempest*, dir. by Nasiruddin Yousuff, (Shakespeare's Globe, 2012). Drummers jumping and dancing. Photograph © Simon Kane. Reproduced with permission.

While the use of the Globe's architectural conditions for collaborative staging decentralise Prospero and reshape hierarchical authority, the production's incorporation of indigenous performance practices extends this dislocation further. Manipuri drummers and Bengali jatra conventions animate the stage, but they also actively construct a culturally hybrid space that challenges Western theatrical norms and resists monocultural authority, as I go on to explain. At each side of the ever-present semicircle is a Manipuri drummer. These musicians perform the Pung Cholom, which is the name of the spiritual and sacred Manipuri tradition involving playing the Pung - a barrel-shaped drum with a drumhead at either side - whilst performing acrobatic movements like somersaults, spins and jumps, synchronised with the music.⁵⁸ The two performers are unrelated to any of Shakespeare's characters and whilst they do not become new named characters in this production, they are central to the performance, providing the unique auditory experience and introducing indigenous cultural practice to the play. This mode of adaptation aligns with what Thea Buckley, writing about Shakespeare in India more generally, calls 'indigenization'.⁵⁹ Buckley draws on scholars Dennis Kennedy and Li Lan Young who, in the absence of a unified national approach to Shakespeare, identify three 'three possible ways of viewing the playwright's treatment in countries such as India: "nationalist appropriation, colonial instigation, and intercultural revision" (2010: 7).'⁶⁰ Buckley makes a case to add a fourth categorisation into that mix, indigenization; she describes this as 'making native' Shakespeare, theorising the process whereby 'postcolonial works not so much speak back to Shakespeare as make their own Shakespeare speak what they will.'⁶¹ Buckley shifts the critical framework from opposition to authorship, broadening the vocabulary

⁵⁸ For more, see Leitanthem Santosh Singh, 'The Motor Skills for Performing Manipuri Pung Cholom', *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 2.2 (2021), 151-160.

⁵⁹ Thea Buckley, 'Shakespeare and India', in *Contemporary Readings in Global Performances of Shakespeare*, ed. by Alexa Alice Joubin (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2024), pp. 162-177 (p. 163).

⁶⁰ Buckley, p. 163.

⁶¹ Bucklet, p. 163

available for theorising postcolonial engagements with Shakespeare and reframing scholarly perceptions of cultural agency in performance.

In their account of contemporary Bangladeshi culture, Meghna Guhathakurta and Willem van Schendel establish that 'in the context of nationalism, a hegemonic and state-supported Bengali identity subordinates indigenous cultures' and I argue that the inclusion of the Manipuri indigenous art form shapes the play as one resisting this monocultural hegemony.⁶² The source play, *The Tempest*, presents themes of linguistic assimilation and cultural colonisation, as it is made clear that Prospero and Miranda taught Caliban their language after they took over his native island, and Dhaka Theatre's incorporation of indigenous cultural practices foregrounds those themes. By drawing a parallel between Prospero's (or British) colonial authority with Bengali cultural domination, the production highlights how both forms operate to suppress and assimilate indigenous voices and traditions. The combination of jatra styles and Manipuri traditions lifts the play out of a fixed historical or geographical context as these performance modes draw on ritual, music and movement that transcend linear narratives. By resisting being anchored to a specific time or place, the performance invites the audience to become part of a mythic space where cultural identity and spiritual meaning are foregrounded over realism.

This cultural hybridity continues on stage as the production enacts the opening tempest, using movement, music and ritual to reshape authority; by resisting monocultural hegemony, the production creates a manifold, intercultural space. Prospero (Pijush Bandopadhyay) signals the start of the scene by blowing into a conch shell (replacing his staff), starting to take airy and rhythmic toe-to-heel steps back to the rear of the stage, as though walking on a delicate surface, dancing the Manipuri *natapala*; this is a dance style in which Yousuff's 'company of actors trained for seven months', taught by the production's two drummers, Nil Moni Singha and Bidhan Chandra Singha.⁶³ Ariel then

⁶² For more information on contemporary culture and nationhood in Bangladesh, see *The Bangladesh Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. by Meghna Guhathakurta and Willem van Schendel (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). Quote taken from p. 367.

⁶³ Dymkowski, p. 142.

rises from the stage floor, draped in a bright blue gauze, and sings high-pitched alaap-like notes.⁶⁴ Shimul Yousuff's portrayal of Ariel departs from the youthful, spritely, often androgynous character seen in the British productions I have analysed so far, instead presenting the spirit as significantly older and pointedly feminine too, through her hair flowing to her waist and high vocal tones. This recasting, placing Ariel older than Prospero, emphasises the exploitative nature of the relationship of dominion and frames the servant as a survivor of long-withheld justice. Her costume, coupled with the haunting, slow, elongated sounds, represent the unpredictability and power of the sea that she sometimes controls but is commanded to manipulate by Prospero's conch call. Her notes stand in striking aural contrast to the explosive percussion of the Manipuri drummers. The characters from Naples around her dance with boat puppets attached to their forearms; like Ariel, they are both the character on the boat and representing the boat and its movement themselves. The symbolic staging of the tempest and the boat's journey also draws on traditions of jatra, which is often imagistically suggestive rather than adhering to Western-style naturalistic effects. By weaving jatra, Manipuri, and other Bengali folk theatre customs together, the production thus forges a rich cultural hybridisation. This hybridity enacts what Homi Bhabha calls a 'Third Space of enunciation', a site where cultural meaning emerges not from fixed origins but through negotiation and reinterpretation.⁶⁵ His theory of hybridity challenges the binary opposition between coloniser and colonised by showing that 'the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity'.⁶⁶ The binary of coloniser/colonised is now historical and symbolic rather than literal as India and Bangladesh are no longer under British rule; therefore, the production's hybridity actively negotiates the lingering cultural and linguistic hierarchies inherited from British colonialism. From this perspective, the production's cultural blend disrupts colonial binaries embedded in Shakespeare's text and opens a space for new, plural meanings to emerge.

⁶⁴ Alaap is Indian classical music that is improvised, unmetered songs introducing a raga performance. It is often deep and slow, setting the emotional tone of a piece.

⁶⁵ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), p. 54.

⁶⁶ Bhabha, p. 55.

According to Bhabha, the Third Space 'destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code.'⁶⁷ This means that cultural identity is never fixed or even fully knowable; instead, meaning emerges in the spaces between cultures through negotiation and reinterpretation. In this light, the Globe to Globe festival's request for the staged foreign productions to *not* use the English language appears to reinforce an essentialist view of culture as something with fixed roots. Susan Bennett and Christie Carson state that:

In the early days of the Festival, many of the companies opted for selected words in English to ensure moments of interaction with the entire audience. Often this provided a linguistic punchline that the actors could be sure everybody would understand. [...] Use of English words and phrases, particularly in reference to technology or popular culture, is one of the defining characteristics of our global economy.⁶⁸

The festival organisers asked companies to stop using English words in performances, attempting to preserve a linguistic purity that contradicts the hybrid reality of global communication and potentially, as Bennett and Carson argue, 'insisted on the performances as "other".'⁶⁹ This mandate exposes the festival's underlying ideological friction: by enforcing a ban on English, the hosting institution positioned itself as an arbiter of authenticity, policing the linguistic boundaries of the visiting company to fit a Western expectation of cultural distinctiveness. This suppression of language constrains a performance that reflects the lived experience of globalisation and intercultural exchange, what Bhabha would call a Third Space. Despite the language restrictions, I argue that Dhaka Theatre materialises a Third Space in the production's timeless and spaceless setting that refuses to enter discourses around historical and cultural accuracy. While this space actively critiques colonial hierarchies, it also facilitates

⁶⁷ Bhabha, p. 54.

⁶⁸ Susan Bennett and Christie Carson, 'Introduction', in *Shakespeare Beyond English: A Global Experiment*, ed. by Susan Bennett and Christie Carson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 1-12 (p. 7).

⁶⁹ Bennett and Carson, p. 7.

encounters between diverse performance traditions, creating sensory layering, aesthetic innovation and audience engagement.

The production's ambiguous temporal setting creates a space open to different cultures, times and traditions, and puts on display the clashes and entanglements between cultures that productively oppose each other, exposing cultural homogenisation's forced and unstable nature. In doing so, the production unsettles the binary monocultural framework within Bengali nationhood that marginalises indigenous cultures; this works on more than one level as it disrupts other binary oppositions existent in or around the production, including coloniser and colonised and East versus West structures. Furthermore, since the production creates this meeting place in an adaptation of an English play, as well as speaking to Bengali cultural debates, it writes back to British Empire in India, Western Orientalist representations of the East and how these ideas feed into the creation and preservation of the white Western canon, which Shakespeare has come to represent.



FIG 26. *The Tempest*, dir. by Nasiruddin Yousuff, (Shakespeare's Globe, 2012). Dancing celebrations at the end of the performance. Photograph © Simon Kane. Reproduced with permission.

What ultimately underpins and connects the Globe's *Othello*, Frantic Assembly's *Othello* and Dhaka Theatre's *Tempest*, despite their different ways of formulating fictional setting, is that the locations they create connect Shakespeare's plays' representations of race, gender and colonialism with the worlds they construct. They also activate spectators' bifocal attention in distinct ways. The Globe relies on a material friction whereby the candlelight and architecture exist as persistent unsettling reminders. The introduction of Subconscious *Othello* expands this spatial strategy further, moving beyond the visible 'stage microcosm' to create a visible, somatic representation of *Othello*'s internal landscape.⁷⁰ Just as this second body renders the character's internal pressure visible, Frantic Assembly utilises movement to achieve a similar externalisation; by physically shifting the set walls, the production transforms the invisible structures of social marginalisation into a tangible reality. When placed alongside Dhaka Theatre's *Tempest*, these strategies coalesce into a broader decolonising methodology. While both *Othello* productions dislocate the plays into modern Britain to critique internal systems of power, Dhaka Theatre's use of indigenous folk forms and rural Bangladeshi settings asserts a local and multi-dimensional cultural identity over a canonical Western text. Moreover, by drawing attention to the process of theatrical creation and its tensions with its physical space, these three productions expose how these themes continue to resonate within contemporary social realities by inviting the audience to confront their relevance in the present moment.

II

Situated Spaces

As I have argued throughout this chapter, the spatial choices made in productions with dislocated fictional worlds serve as interventions that negotiate the boundaries between text, performance and audience if employed intentionally, modulating how

⁷⁰ McAuley, p. 2.

social realities of race and gender are revealed and contested. In the *Othello* productions analysed, this work is often achieved through instances of exposed theatrical artificiality, such as candlestick lighting or the manipulation of set walls. These moments of estrangement, when combined with implicit and explicit explorations of race, gender and power, invite the audience to consider how the portrayal of the fictional world relates to the present-day realities of race and gender marginalisation. What happens in a site-specific production when reality and performance are wrapped up in each other? In these cases, the boundaries between fiction and social, political and cultural reality become so fused that the production is perhaps less likely to offer discrete moments of reflective rupture; instead, site-specific theatre presents continuous, immersive experiences where such tensions are more lived than simply observed. In site-specific contexts, then, the spatial conditions of the production can make visible how race and gender are inscribed within the social realities it inhabits rather than functioning principally as representational constructs within the world of the performance.

Site-specific or immersive productions occur in diverse locations, from disused warehouses, rooftops and train stations to urban streets, ruins and historical landmarks. One prominent example of site-specific Shakespeare is Punchdrunk's Alfred Hitchcock inspired adaptation of *Macbeth, Sleep No More* (2011), played at the dimly-lit McKittrick Hotel, a hotel built but condemned before it could be opened in the 1930s, then adopted as a nightclub before being converted back into a hotel, but only for the purpose of this production. As is characteristic of Punchdrunk's productions, audiences wore anonymising white masks and interacted with props and actors, moving around the six hotel floors in an immersive, non-linear experience, meaning that audience members experienced the event in different, individual orders. Punchdrunk are pioneers of immersive theatre, known also for engaging audiences beyond what is traditionally required in spectatorship. Contemporary theatre continues to push the boundaries of spatial storytelling in treatments of Shakespeare as shown by Estonian Kinoteater's 2025 production of *Romeo and Juliet* which stages the play in a quarry and

recasts the star-crossed lovers as large construction trucks resembling diggers, alongside bulldozers, buses and cars.⁷¹

In such productions, scenography and site become one and Bennett's 'outer frame', both literally or metaphorically, loses its distinction from the inner. I have shown how the Sam Wanamaker playhouse, Lyric Hammersmith and Globe, as venues, held tension with the contemporary or culturally foreign fictional worlds they staged and the moments that exploited this tension framed these works in relation to the present moment. In site-specific Shakespeare, the venue is not so much a frame as an integral dramaturgical element with its architectural, historical and even acoustic qualities forming the performance and therefore, boundaries begin to dissolve. Solga's examination of theatrical space concerns four different aspects:

(1) the fictional world of the play [...] (2) the production's scenography [...] (3) the spaces inside the theatre building that are not on stage [...] and (4) the spaces beyond the theatre building that place this building, and the work it showcases, in its local, regional, national, and international public spheres.⁷²

With productions on purpose-built stages, these dimensions remain separable but interact in controlled ways as the fictional world is contained by the scenography, which is housed within the building, itself located within a wider social and cultural geography. When the play is built into and around its surroundings in site-specific theatre, these elements can melt together: scenography can become that wider geography, the site's real-world associations can merge with the fictional narrative in a more integrated way and since the stage often expands to encompass more of a building, the notion of 'offstage' areas can disappear altogether.

⁷¹ In Kinoteater's unique production of the well-known tragedy, Romeo is 'performed' by a rally truck and Juliet by a red Ford pickup truck. Other cast members include buses, fire engines and cement lorries. The vehicles spin and use their mechanical components (such as digger arms, scoops or drills) to articulate emotion, while at points the machines are even dropped from significant heights within the quarry.

⁷² Solga, p. 7.

As the boundaries between fiction and reality blur within the site itself, this merging also becomes personal to the spectator. The use of a familiar space in site-specific productions means that audience members might have earlier associations with the location used. Marvin Carlson's previously stated concept of theatrical memory - which argues that past encounters with a performance influence future perception - opens up a way to see how audiences might experience a space, carrying traces of earlier encounters, to the radically new and theatrical context.⁷³ Likewise, Bruce McConachie's theory of conceptual blending - the idea that a spectator can hold multiple truths or images in their mind - illuminates how spectators can perceive the real-world site and the site-specific performance spaces at once, separately yet merged.⁷⁴ As Rose Biggin notes, McConachie's theory provides a 'cognitive explanation for Rebellato's question of how we are able to conceive an actor and a character at the same time', framing the spectator's dual awareness as a foundational aspect of performance reception rather than a contradiction to be resolved.⁷⁵ I apply these theories specifically to the spectator's experience of the space to show the various ways that they build themselves into the production. The effects of this are evident in McConachie's theory of conceptual integration which sets out how audiences fuse the performance with their own lived experiences to construct a unified mental space of meaning.⁷⁶ Conceptual integration is integral to my analysis of the next two case studies because it provides a framework for understanding how audiences negotiate between the fictional and the actual, bringing together the material environment, personal memory and dramatic text to create new interpretive possibilities unique to site-based performance.

⁷³ Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

⁷⁴ Bruce McConachie, *Theatre and Mind* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

⁷⁵ Rose Biggin, *Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience: Space, Game and Story in the Work of Punchdrunk* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 179.

⁷⁶ McConachie, *Theatre and Mind*.

***Othello / Die Fremden*, dir. by Marcel Kohler, Lausitz Festival (2024; 2025)**

I move from analysing how dislocated fictional worlds are constructed and how they present Shakespeare's play in new contexts to demonstrating how unorthodox physical spaces create new opportunities for Shakespeare's works to be understood and experienced. This works in two ways: the site's physical and cultural specificity can introduce new meaning to Shakespeare's play, while the spatial arrangement of the audience unsettles their relationship to the performance, further reshaping how the work is encountered. In *Othello / Die Fremden*, the location - a former Telux glass factory in Weißwasser, Germany - exemplifies how spatial context influences performance and spectatorship. The performance uses its multi-room site to tell the story of *Othello* with an emphasis on the women's experience and continually moves the audience through different configurations that prompt active engagement, situating the play's structures of power, race, and gender firmly within contemporary social realities.

The dislocated performance site itself adds layered meaning to the production. The location, Weißwasser, was once the European centre of glass production, with 75% of Weißwasser's population being employed in the glass industry in 1900.⁷⁷ The regional industry has since declined but the community continues to celebrate its glass heritage through festivals and museums. The former Telux site, once a major producer of technical glass, was forced to close amid the 2008 global financial crash and though it looks much as it did in its industrial days, it now serves as an artistic hub for new creative projects and houses parts of the Lausitz Festival of arts where *Othello / Die Fremden* debuted in 2024 before returning to open the festival in 2025. Though now repurposed as a space for arts and theatre, the venue remains an unconventional stage for Shakespeare's play, its industrial character still pronounced. Director Marcel Kohler is best known as an actor, previously forming part of the Deutsches Theater Berlin

⁷⁷ This information is corroborated by the European Route of Industrial Heritage. 'Glasmuseum Weißwasser', *European Route of Industrial Heritage* <<https://www.erih.de/da-will-ich-hin/site/glasmuseum-weisswasser>> [accessed 29 August 2025].

before moving onto the Schaubühne ensemble in Charlottenburg in 2023. His production of Heiner Müller's *Philoctet*, which he directed during his acting studies at the prestigious Hochschule für Schauspielkunst Ernst Busch in Berlin, was praised by critics and reviewers for its innovative, tense yet witty, reinterpretation of what might be considered a complex text.⁷⁸ His production of *Othello* similarly reconfigures a classic with an emphasis on political conflict and social tension, this time using space to immerse the audience in its themes.

The performance moves around the industrial venue, utilising five different spaces for the production's episodes, amongst the other spaces spectators must travel through to reach them. The audience is divided into groups of three and each group is given a coloured wristband. The groups are then separated and sent to watch three different parts of the play, all happening simultaneously, in different orders, piecing together the action and order of the play themselves. I call these episodes since I consider 'act' to imply linearity and each episode is made up of scenes within it. The episodes are 35 minutes each and each performed three times so all of the audience groups can see them but in a different order, as with the repeated scene fragments used by Punchdrunk. The episodes are (fictionally) set in Desdemona's bedroom, the house of Brabantia (Desdemona's mother who replaces Brabantio) and a private bar where the audience meet Emilia. All of the characters, including Iago, Othello and Cassio move seamlessly in and out of multiple (overlapping) scenes, transitioning between spaces with precise timing creating a dynamic flow of simultaneous action. The performance finishes by uniting all of the previously separated spectator groups to witness a large right-wing riot, occupying the full expanse of the warehouse hall. The separating and re-joining of the audience works in a similar style to Punchdrunk's events which combine elements of spectator freedom with more conventionally 'staged' sequences that the whole audience witnesses. This alternation between dispersed and collective audience experiences encourages spectators to engage with the play in a way that is personal to them, while their coming back together transforms the play's social and political

⁷⁸ 'Philoktet | 10. + 11. Feb', *Schaubühne Lindenfels* (2014)

<<https://www.schaubuehne.com/spielplan/philoktet-10-11-feb>> [accessed 13 August 2025].

tensions into a shared, real-world encounter. That final episode introduces ‘The Strangers’ or ‘The Strangers’ Case’, translated by Christoph Wieland as ‘Die Fremden’, into the adaptation.⁷⁹ This is a speech from the multi-authored play *Sir Thomas More* which is now widely believed to have been written by Shakespeare. It addresses the xenophobic rioters protesting in 1517 London and pleads for empathy toward refugees and immigrants.⁸⁰ The monologue has gained traction in recent years in the context of refugee advocacy and social equality for its enduring relevance, continuing to strike a chord in ongoing debates of migration and asylum today. The production ends on this indeterminate and haunting note, leaving the audience to reflect on both the historical and contemporary forces of hatred and lasting need for compassion, encapsulating just how site-specific Shakespeare combines fictional and cultural past with urgent present-day concerns.

The spatial dislocation, outlined above in relation to site specificity, directly informs how spectators engage with the site and production. Specifically, the fragmented action and simultaneous episodes taking place in the unorthodox theatre venue reframe the spectator’s relationship to the performance by disrupting conventional viewing patterns and giving them a (greater) role of co-creation, changing the way the play is experienced and understood. It is widely established in audience theory that spectators of theatre are not passive recipients but active participants. Bennett proposes that audiences co-create the meanings found in performances through their interpretation; Jacques Rancière frames spectators as active, emancipated participants who construct meaning rather than simply absorb a director’s intended meaning; and as established, Carlson suggests that audience members bring prior memories and associations into performances, shaping what they become.⁸¹ However, the unique spatial and contextual

⁷⁹ Christoph Martin Wieland was the first person to translate Shakespeare into German in a substantial way.

⁸⁰ Read the speech and more about its context in this resource from Shakespeare’s Globe. ‘The Strangers’ Case: Refugee Week’, *Shakespeare’s Globe* (2018) <<https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/discover/blogs-and-features/2018/06/20/the-strangers-case-refugee-week/>> [accessed 13 August 2025].

⁸¹ Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 1997); Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliot (London: Verso, 2009); Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

conditions site-specific theatre brings alter a spectator's role in co-creation to something with more responsibility, since the environment in which they are physically and figuratively immersed becomes a collaborator. In *Othello / Die Fremden*, the concurrent scenes demand spectators piece together information and narrative threads, engaging both attention and intellect, to finish the creation of the performance and interpret it. McAuley's personal account of spectatorship provides a foundation for my argument:

I go to the cinema with relief, in the pleasurable expectation that the trajectory of my experience (of my looking) has been planned in advance, that I simply have to surrender myself to the film. Going to the theatre, by contrast, always involves a kind of mental "gearing up," the knowledge that I have to take responsibility for my looking, knowledge that in some indefinable way I am a participant rather than simply an onlooker.⁸²

I presume that the responsibility McAuley talks of, which comes with theatrical spectatorship, primarily concerns orthodox theatre situations. She compares the viewing experiences of the cinema and the orthodox theatre, explaining that the latter comes with a required sense of alertness and controlled looking. Kohler's nonlinear, rotational scenes demand a heightened level of cognitive engagement and attentiveness compared with orthodox theatrical staging, as spectators must remember, interweave, preempt and make sense of the fragments. Additionally, as McAuley says, in theatre, those viewing must direct their own sight, with light serving as a guide, as opposed to having a camera decide where your sight should fall. While recordings of live theatre inevitably impose a camera's perspective, Kohler's staging still relies on theatrical conventions of light and space to orient attention, meaning the live audience's experience remains distinct. Such freedom affords each member of the audience a unique experience of what they watched depending on where they focused their eyes, with seat location and potentially surrounding disturbance affecting this partly too. Within Kohler's production, the uniqueness of the experience is multiplied by even

⁸² McAuley, p. 262.

more variable factors: the order in which the spectator sees the episodes, the spectator's position in each episode's distinct audience configuration, their relationship to the site and their knowledge of Shakespeare's text, informing their mental organisation of the segments into a personally coherent interpretation.

Each episode positions the audience in relation to or within the performance in a different way, varying the demand made on spectators to continually reframe their perspective, connecting them and their subjectivity individually to the narrative. The first part of the production has the audience together in shared light facing forwards, watching Iago talk at a podium, with him addressing them as though they were citizens of his country. A black sheet hangs as a backdrop, which with the temporary stage, appears deliberately makeshift, reinforcing its imposed quality into the industrial environment. The shared illumination and noticeably out of place pop-up theatre set up confronts spectators with their own role as an assembled audience and draws attention to theatrical illusion by intentionally refusing to fully construct it. This initial framing highlights the artificiality of the event and establishes a tension between performance and reality, one that the subsequent episodes will constantly renegotiate through shifting spatial configurations, registers of address and intensities of audience involvement. Next, the collective gaze is dispersed and the spectators are divided into their groups and guided into separate spaces. The established communal form of spectatorship is transformed into a segmented itinerant practice where the audience is made to inhabit partial perspectives, negating the possibility of a single, authoritative narrative or truth. This dramaturgical strategy builds an experience for spectators that is akin to Othello's, in which information - such as Iago's manipulations and Othello's misunderstandings - is circulated to different characters and the audience at different times, making knowledge unstable. In this way, the structure of spectating itself becomes an enactment of the epistemological uncertainty at the heart of Shakespeare's

tragedy; however, the production uses this idea to show how misinformation, fragments and manipulations fuel, or are weaponised into, politically far-right discourses.⁸³

The production's spatial reimagining of *Othello* not only transforms the audience's mode of engagement but also reframes the play's focus to expose how structures of power, race and gender operate within contemporary contexts. The production is divided explicitly into three episodes that each focus on the life of a different woman:

Desdemona, Brabantia, and Emilia, showing how the misogyny and racism present in the play affect the female experience. By displacing attention from the chain of events that culminate in Othello's downfall to the marginalised and marginalising voices surrounding him, the production reframes Shakespeare's *Othello* to display how everyday violences endured by women both mirror and sustain the ideological logics that propel far-right movements and reproduce racism. Before reaching the first of the rotational episodes, the audience must walk through what Kohler terms the 'labyrinth', a winding path, formed like a serpentine queue, enclosed by metal fences and signs labeling it as a 'forbidden zone'. The liminal journey marks a change from the orthodox style of spectatorship they have just experienced to one where they embody the space, bringing awareness to spectators' own presence and position in the power dynamics. The signage creates a sense of danger and fear of the unknown, priming the audience for an unusual experience, but it also thematically matches the authoritarianism and hierarchical enforcement that inform the episodes they are about to watch.

One such episode takes place in Desdemona's bedroom. The room itself is small, white and bare, aside from industrial pipes and mirrors on the walls. In the centre is a bed, encased with silvery, semi-transparent drapes. The audience sit on chairs in a horseshoe around the edge, tightly packed in and uncomfortably close to the action on the bed itself. Inside the drapes, Othello is on the bed, shouting in distress, experiencing a nightmare as swirling projections are cast all around the room. The room goes dark and when the lights come back, Desdemona is with Othello, asking him to tell her the

⁸³ Stanley Cavell reads Shakespeare's *Othello* as a tragedy of skepticism, where the refusal to accept finite knowledge proves disastrous in *Disowning Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

story of his life in order to get him to calm down and playfighting with him. Desdemona wears a flesh-coloured leotard which, behind the drapes, could be mistaken for nakedness, whilst Othello is wrapped in the white bedsheet. The suggestion of nudity heightens the already intimate nature of the scene and the ambiguity of her attire makes the audience hyper-aware of their gaze, bringing into question the ethics of observation by positioning them as involuntary voyeurs. By witnessing Desdemona and Othello's private life, the production enacts, and forces spectators to witness, the ways in which the experiences of women and racially marginalised people are surveilled, interpreted and sometimes distorted by others. The rest of the episode presents a condensed version of their relationship, similar to the swift, summative montage used in the Globe's *Othello* but centring on Desdemona's perspective. Desdemona asks Othello to reinstate Cassio, Othello gives her a handkerchief, Iago tells Othello he heard Cassio talking in his sleep, Desdemona and Cassio demonstrate their friendship, and Othello accuses Desdemona of losing the handkerchief. Alone, Desdemona creates a large painting, bigger than herself, depicting women; she layers each new painting over the previous one until it culminates in a chaotic red mass on the canvas, with her name smeared across the top. Her work can be read as iterations of herself which she paints seeking self-assurance, or of the different women whose lives have shaped hers; either way, it establishes the production's, and this scene's, focus on female experience, visually centring women's perspectives.

Desdemona then sings the traditional American folk song 'In the Pines', also recorded by blues musician Lead Belly and bluegrass singer Bill Monroe in the 1940s, before becoming arguably more popularised by Nirvana's rendition in 1993 titled 'Where Did You Sleep Last Night'. She sings the melancholic song sweetly but eventually screams the lyrics - 'My girl, my girl, don't lie to me, tell me where did you sleep last night' - in impassioned desperation. Musically, the raw, plaintive vocal line climaxing into anguished wails externalises her inner turmoil and puts the audience within her emotional landscape, but again, to their own discomfort with nowhere to hide or no room to relax. The lyrics are a direct plea for truth and transparency, mimicking Othello's concerns with her fidelity. By using music that is known as a contemporary

rock song, 1940s blues track and traditional folk song whose 'origins are likely with black communities living near the southern Appalachian mountains during the late 1880s', the production calls upon a song with continuous reinterpretation and prevailing relevance.⁸⁴ This mirrors the ongoing productions of *Othello*, including this one, which continue to interrogate how issues of racism and misogyny - here connected more explicitly to far-right movements - remain significant today. The song stands in place of the willow song which frames Desdemona passively in Shakespeare's text, anticipating loss and submission; by contrast, the new song choice foregrounds her active expression and emotional distress, trading her private grief for a confrontational and empowering outburst.

The ending of Desdemona's story demonstrates how Kohler's spatial and temporal dislocation transforms spectatorship into an ethically and emotionally engaged experience, where the audience is made to inhabit both witness and participant roles. Her impending fate is made visceral immediately through the production's use of space. Following her song, Othello rejoins the space and sets about to murder Desdemona with John Lennon's 'Jealous Guy' in earshot, sung from a different room. She gives a long shrill scream and runs out of the room and around the venue, visiting the other concurrent episodes while Othello hunts her down, slowly and steadily, evoking a slasher film villain. This audience does not see her murder in this episode but her reverberating shrieks, heard from the distance, haunt and, combined with the liminal space the audience are placed in - able to witness the violence but powerless to intervene - conjures complicity and guilt in the positioned voyeurs. The multi-room space allows Lin Reusse's Desdemona to run far away from Othello and the claustrophobic bedchamber, creating a survival attempt significantly longer than Desdemona's in other productions I have seen, bound to a single stage. Joanna Vanderham's Desdemona in the RSC's 2018 *Othello* half accepts her fate and only begins to physically resist, kicking her legs, once she is being suffocated, while both Poppy Gilbert in the Globe's 2024 *Othello* and Chanel Waddock in Frantic Assembly's (2021)

⁸⁴ Logan Guthrie-Silbert's music blog explores the history of the song. 'A Short History of "Where Did You Sleep Last Night"', *KZSC Santa Cruz*, 8 June 2023 <<https://kzsc.org/blog/2023/06/08/a-short-history-of-where-did-you-sleep-last-night/>> [accessed 3 October 2025].

attempt to run away but are grabbed by Othello before they can leave the stage space. The directorial choice of Reusse's prolonged auditory and physical chase, amplifies the terror of the scene, creating a sense of immediacy. The audience experiences Desdemona's struggle, uncomfortably, as if it were unfolding in real time, making her feel more present and realised than in other productions where her death is typically swift and spatially confined. I propose this bridges the gap between theatrical performance and lived experience, compelling spectators to reflect on how misogyny and racism shape the lives of women and racialised people in the present day, making the theatrical experience not only emotionally affecting, but socially and ethically significant.

Building thematically on this emphasis on female experience, another episode centres on Brabantia in her home, presenting an alternative view of femininity in relation to marginalisation. The focus is on Brabantia's reaction to Desdemona and Othello, acting as an extended version of Brabantio's initial outrage in Shakespeare's *Othello*. Brabantia does not want Desdemona and Othello to marry and she appears in cahoots with Cassio as the two sip wine together and smoke cigarettes. For this one, the audience are seated more conventionally, in rows facing the action, yet the playing area is not a raised stage but the raw, once-functional environment of the factory. Exposed brickwork, steel beams and visible wiring remain intact, as well as lots of windows on both external and internal walls. The set of this episode uses these windows, dividing areas of the factory, to simulate a house which feels recognisably shaped but uncannily distorted. A small, enclosed office-like structure within this room stands at the centre of the 'stage', its door and windows becoming entrances for the house and framing devices for the performance. Above and set back from this office are large windows in the wall which the actors use to create the illusion of the second floor of a two-storey home, expanding the vertical dimensions of the set. The audience are not invited into the home as with the last episode I analysed, but they look at it from the outside, catching glimpses from windows and balconies or overhearing conversations when the characters stand outside the front door as Cassio and Brabantia discuss Othello or Desdemona comes to defend her husband's reputation. In the same way that Frantic Assembly's different

settings marked distinct social environments, Kohler's fictional locations imply Brabantia's racist hostility towards Othello is portrayed as something cultivated in the home space. The house, her site, becomes a metaphor for exclusion: a protected interior where boundaries are defended against the racialised Other, which the audience are positioned as outsiders with, reinforcing the significance of the title of the piece. The physical distance between the action and the audience gives them a critical distance to watch the bubbling of racist attitudes that resists empathy and immersion - unlike Desdemona's bedroom - and encourages reflection. The episode concludes with Desdemona's distant outcries, sonically dramatising the harm caused by Brabantia's xenophobic outlook and racial prejudice, first nurtured in the domestic sphere. The re-casting of Brabantia as a woman brings the intersection of racial and gendered oppression into clearer focus, framing Shakespeare's play through an intersectional lens.



FIG 27. *Othello / Die Fremden*, dir. by Marcel Kohler (Telux, 2024). Brabantia (Sina Keißling) looking out of a window and Othello (Leonard Burkhardt) above. Photograph by Marlies Kross. © Marlies Kross / Lausitz Festival. Reproduced with permission.

Kohler uses the different areas of the site to foreground the perspectives of women, including Emilia's experience as an isolated, depressed mother with a domineering husband. This reorienting decentres Othello, making space for more democratic engagement where the audience is invited to witness, interpret and empathise with diverse experiences, highlighting the plurality of voices often marginalised in both canonical theatre and society. The women's experiences are positioned together, as well as overlapping, which suggests that their encounters with male violence and misogyny are attributed to a systemic cause, even showing how they perpetuate it themselves. In situating Othello's experience of racism alongside these episodes of oppression, the production frames his suffering as not merely a personal misfortune, but as a consequence of the same entrenched social hierarchies, linking his tragedy to systemic injustice. The audience are shown Othello harming Desdemona, Brabantia's racist attitudes towards Othello and the consequences Emilia suffers from Iago's mistreatment in a cycle but are also conscious these events temporally overlap, performed at the same time over each other, presenting the different forms of marginalisation as intersecting and reinforcing one another.

The production's final episode, the play's epilogue, introduces a new scene to *Othello's* plot to carry over the systemic violences of racism and misogyny highlighted in the play into a contemporary frame, using 'The Strangers' Case' to also uncover the enduring presence of these oppressive structures. Spectators are taken from their various rooms and united to be ushered into a large, dark misty warehouse space. Members of the audience, revealed to be actors, step forward, put black jackets on and form a group of approximately thirty people which quickly becomes a violent mob, whilst the remaining spectators sit on bistro chairs at small tables with umbrellas, mimicking a European outdoor cafe scene. There are multiple cars parked within the vast space which gives the scene an unsettling sense of scale and realism, where the event feels life-size and tangible. The audience, then, are either members of the mob or onlookers, viewing from the street, a placement that makes them arguably - although forcedly - complicit, prompting reflection on the roles of bystanders in real-world oppression. Like the earlier Desdemona scene where spectators are seated uncomfortably close to

Desdemona's audible escape from violence, this spectator arrangement raises parallel concerns about the politics of spectatorship and the uneasy boundary between witnessing and participation. The brightly coloured umbrellas they sit or perch beneath create a jarring, almost comically cheerful contrast with the visual of the collective violence. A stretcher is carried through the crowd, with Desdemona's body under the cloth, and the mob begin to chant the refrain 'this is what it's coming to' with strangers in their land, establishing Othello's murderous deed as the catalyst for the violent uprising. The production shows how the murder of Desdemona is both a product of racist and gendered marginalisation and something that racists might misappropriate as a symbol or 'proof' to justify their own prejudices, offering different perspectives on Shakespeare's ending and compelling the audience into intellectual and ethical reflection.

Adding to the immersion and spectacle, the cars are turned over and set on fire in the riot as the citizens' adherence to law and order is abandoned in anger. Reviewing the 2024 performance for *Welt*, Jakob Hayner wrote that this scene is:

(Original German)

(English translation)

die an die Krawalle in Großbritannien erinnern, nachdem drei Mädchen bei einem Taylor-Swift-Tanzkurs erstochen wurden. Noch näher liegt die Erinnerung an den Messerangriff in Solingen, wo beim „Festival der Vielfalt“ drei Menschen getötet und zahlreiche verletzt wurden.

reminiscent of the riots in Great Britain after three girls were stabbed to death during a Taylor Swift dance class. Even closer is the memory of the knife attack in Solingen, where three people were killed and numerous injured at the 'Festival of Diversity'.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Jakob Hayney, 'Intrige in Sachsen', *Welt*, 30 August 2024
 <<https://www.welt.de/kultur/theater/article253206934/Othello-beim-Lausitz-Festival-Intrige-in-Sachsen.html>> [accessed 6 October 2025].

Hayner subjectively connects the events of the play with images of these two real-world terror attacks. The first example involves the murder of three young girls that led to mass riots protesting immigration in Britain (and counter protests) across the UK after Tommy Robinson and other far-right activists spread misinformation, incorrectly alleging that the perpetrator was an asylum seeker and a Muslim. Mosques were attacked with bricks and bottles, police vans were set alight and shops looted. Part of the outrage was fuelled by the vicious attack on model symbols of innocence. The girls, vulnerable and blameless, mirror Desdemona's purity and defencelessness that Shakespeare's play amplifies to frame the tragedy as extreme and unjust. The latter example resulted in a governmental suspension of refugee admissions in Germany and widespread advocacy for stricter border controls. Spectators of the 2025 performances of this production may be able to see patterns between the 2025 British anti-immigration rights where hotels housing asylum seekers were set alight or the Australian far-right 2025 rallies and the play's contents. By drawing these parallels to real-world events, Hayner demonstrates how spectators are challenged - through the site-specific immersion and contemplative watching prompted by shifting spatial relationships to the drama - to connect the play's themes with the social and political forces that continue to organise contemporary society. The comparatively private tragedy of jealousy is restructured as an examination of how racism, gendered violence, and nationalistic uprising circulate through present-day life, bringing attention to the persistence of the structures that sustain them.

I propose that the site-specific element of this production aids this ability to see the play's concerns through a non-fictional lens as it enables new ways of viewing. Jane Collins argues that site-specific performance collapses distancing boundaries because the audience are an embodied presence in the scenography:

There is no fixed stage edge; the line between the fictional space and the real is fluid and unstable. The audience becomes 'dislocated' in the sense of not knowing their proper place, position, or relationship to the events depicted.

When this spatial dislocation is compounded by a mode of 'playing' that blurs the psychic boundaries as well – 'who are the actors here? What is my role?' – the audience is further displaced from the security of their position as viewing subject.⁸⁶

The result of this unsettling is that spectatorship becomes more active and self-aware, opening up different and personal ways of experiencing art. I have argued that the constant renegotiating of spectators' positions in this site-specific production of *Othello* multiplies this effect as those watching continually reassess their own role and responsibility in the event. The impact of this is that the performance ensures spectatorship is not a detached act but an implicated process, one in which the theatrical fiction and audiences' lived subjectivity become entangled. In this scene, there is no stage edge, reflecting Collins's observation; instead, one section of the audience has become actors within the scene, coercing the rest of the audience, the paying spectators, into a position of complicity, bearing witness to the fictional crimes. The spectators become double agents, both within and outside of the action. As Keren Zaiontz puts it, they are cast into the play as a "doubled" subject - in a way that not only comments upon but constitutes the performance event'.⁸⁷ The passivity enforced upon the audience implicitly raises questions about responsibility - who watches, who acts and what it means to be a bystander to violence staged within a recognisable social world. This creates a profound tension, as the production risks presenting uncomfortable images to confront the spectator with the prejudices present in contemporary discourse. As one reviewer observed, this approach can be polarising, noting that while 'Kohler makes toxic masculinity visible', it also 'reproduces images that should please right-wingers' because the 'feelings that the scene produces in the cramped bedroom close to the audience are those that right-wing groups

⁸⁶ Jane Collins, 'Embodied Presence and Dislocated Spaces: Playing the Audience in *Ten Thousand Several Doors* in a Promenade, Site-Specific Performance of John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*', in *Performing Site-Specific Theatre: Politics, Place, Practice*, ed. by Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 54-68 (p. 54).

⁸⁷ Keren Zaiontz, 'Ambulatory Audiences and Animate Sites: Staging the Spectator in Site-Specific Performance', in *Performing Site-Specific Theatre: Politics, Place, Practice*, ed. by Anna Birch and Joanne Tompkins (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 167-181 (p. 168).

instrumentalize for their xenophobic agitation.’⁸⁸ Whilst the reviewer identifies this as a potential problem, it also underscores the productive ambivalence of the production, enhanced by the unavoidable ethical labour required of the spectator. In contrast to this focus on the production’s emotional precariousness, another reviewer interprets the ending as staging a more deliberate political provocation, perceiving it as mirroring the current state of politics in Germany following recent events - as a ‘Wink mit dem Zaunpfahl’, a German idiom translating as *a wink with a fence post*, meaning an unsubtle hint.⁸⁹ These responses, varied in interpretation, show that the production makes spectatorship a complex, unstable and self-reflexive practice. Kohler reframes Shakespeare’s play to interrogate contemporary issues of violence, racism and gendered marginalisation and, at the same time, the production looks back to Shakespeare’s text, critiquing the representations of race and women, confronting historical prejudices and their resounding echoes.



⁸⁸ Lara Wenzel, ‘Lausitz-Festival: Marcel Kohler macht mit »Othello« toxische Männlichkeit sichtbar, reproduziert aber auch Bilder, die Rechte freuen dürften’, *Neues Deutschland*, 9 February 2024 <<https://www.nd-aktuell.de/artikel/1184942.lausitz-festival-oh-boy.html>>. Quote translated into English.

⁸⁹ Konrad Kögler, ‘Othello/Die Fremden’, *Das Kulturblog*, 28 August 2024 <<https://daskulturblog.com/2024/08/28/othello-die-fremden-lausitz-festival-kritik/>>.

FIG 28. *Othello / Die Fremden*, dir. by Marcel Kohler (Telux, 2024). Riot finale in the Danner-Halle. Photograph by Marlies Kross. © Marlies Kross / Lausitz Festival. Reproduced with permission.

The play's closing lines draw a clear distinction between theatrical fiction and lived reality, revealing how site-specific staging and spatial dislocation compel spectators to confront the ethical and political dimensions of the action. The riotous mob are calmed by Iago who takes to a raised platform to give a speech which is the words of Wieland's translation of 'The Strangers' Case'. The speech attempts to encourage the rioters to put humanity before nationality and imagine they are in the shoes of the strangers or who we might call refugees:

Should give you harbour? Go you to France or Flanders,
To any German province, to Spain or Portugal,
Nay, anywhere that not adheres to England,
Why, you must needs be strangers: would you be pleased
To find a nation of such barbarous temper,
That, breaking out in hideous violence,
Would not afford you an abode on earth.⁹⁰

Having Iago, the orchestrator of Othello's downfall, read this speech feels initially surprising - given his role in provoking the events that catalysed the riot - until he reaches the end of his speech and appeals to the public for election to Othello's position, revealing what might have been the last stage of his masterplan. The doubling of having this white, male character, by now known as a Machiavellian manipulator driven by racism, deliver a humanist plea that asks for a forgetting of difference casts him as a cynical politician, feigning concern for diversity as a vote-winning strategy. The production establishes a direct parallel to contemporary European politics, highlighting the rise of far-right movements and the failure of mainstream politicians to productively

⁹⁰ The speech is originally from *The Book of Sir Thomas More*, Act II, Scene 4. You can also find it here: 'The Strangers' Case: Refugee Week', *Shakespeare's Globe* (2018) <<https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/discover/blogs-and-features/2018/06/20/the-strangers-case-refugee-week/>> [accessed 13 August 2025].

confront xenophobia and social exclusion. The tension between Iago's words and prior actions creates ethical dissonance in the play, encouraging spectators to reflect on the manipulation of ideals and their own positions as witnesses. The performance's final moments act as one last anchor into the real world for the spectators as red velvet curtains close in front of the characters, all lined up with blank, emotionless expressions. On the one hand, this simulates an archetypal, even clichéd, performance ending, yet both the gritty, industrial staging of the production and the established closeness it bears to real life make it feel like an eerie moment of Lynchian surrealism. The levels of reality and fiction that I argued are changing, which involve spectators more subjectively, coalesce in a conclusive, disorientating juncture. The ending summarises how Kohler's production transforms *Othello* into a site-specific, politically charged experience, using the industrial space and fragmented episodes to immerse spectators in contemporary struggles with racism, misogyny, and xenophobia. By foregrounding women's perspectives, connecting the action to far-right violence and positioning the audience as both witnesses and participants, the production interrogates historical representations of race and gender in Shakespeare while highlighting their resonances today. The use of space helps to unsettle spectatorship, making it more co-creative and welcoming of reflection of the ethical dimensions of the performance and the ongoing social realities it evokes.

Digital Realms

The disruption of orthodox theatre's relational distance forges new ways of seeing a play; as I have shown, it can be used to set spectators up to consider how its conflicts, structures of power and racial and gendered oppressions intersect with contemporary social systems, becoming a tool of reflection. I have demonstrated how moments of visible artificiality create this space for audiences in productions of dislocated fictional worlds within orthodox spaces. In site-specific productions such as *Othello / Die Fremden*, this effect is heightened as the collapsing of boundaries brings the outer and inner frames together, making the two feel more continuous, although still usefully separable for analytical purposes. Unorthodox spaces, I am arguing, allow new ways of

experiencing, and therefore interpreting, Shakespeare's plays. To situate my analysis of virtual production, and specifically of the *Tender Claws* virtual-reality-game-come-live-performance of *The Tempest*, I first lay out the theatrical conventions and technical conditions that distinguish performances in the digital realm from those of physically located theatre.

The categories of inner and outer frames begin to break down when shifted from the contexts of orthodox and site-specific physical theatre to digital forms such as Zoom performances or recordings, altering how hierarchies of race, gender and power are experienced and perceived through the technological medium. The physical presence that grounds Bennett's model is absent: the outer frame is no longer anchored in the physical since the shared theatre lobby, seating arrangements or local area have been replaced with sofas in private living rooms and bedrooms within households (although post-pandemic, online theatre is no longer necessarily confined to only domestic space). Whilst there is still a level of double framing present, the cultural positioning and social context that usually centres around the audience's behaviour and composition, their preconceived ideas of the play or production, become dispersed, formed less by collective rituals of theatre-going and, instead, by the fragmented conditions of online spectatorship: for example, the distractions present in domestic spaces and the variability of devices, quality and internet connectivity. I suggest that in these altered contexts the outer frame becomes more dependent on the wider social and political conditions surrounding the event in the absence of the closer knit environments: for example, the occasion leading to the piece of online theatre which, in many recent cases, was the Covid-19 pandemic that both necessitated and framed the turn to digital performance.

The inner frame in online performances remains the fictional world of the play, enclosed by the technological container - a Zoom window, laptop screen or other livestream interface, affected by potential lags and glitches, as well as the interface or design layouts which become a part of the theatrical language. Erin Sullivan puts forward that these broadcasts are 'subject to a *third* kind of framing: that produced by

the artful view of the camera, which relays particular moments of performance while inevitably obscuring and even cutting off others.’⁹¹ I note that this use of the camera differs greatly from the directed view of cinematic cameras because it is still tied to the live temporality of the performance. For performances in which actors participate remotely via virtual platforms and meet within the interface to perform their parts in individual boxes on the screen, piecing together a whole scene, the third type of framing is inescapably present and perceptible, drawing attention to the actors’ mediated presence and the act of viewing itself. Performing to or for a laptop camera is approached in different ways by theatre companies. In Rob Myles’s *The Show Must Go On(line)* series (2020) actors tended to face the camera lens and use direct address, replicating how conversations on these platforms would have familiarly happened in the workplace or with friends and family in lockdown settings, but without engaging with the inherited digital conventions of online communication or acknowledging the technological mediation of the performance. By contrast, other productions, including Big Telly’s *Macbeth* directed by Zoë Seaton (2020), opted for a style that resembled physical theatre more closely, acting *through* the Zoom boxes and facing where their counterpart’s window should be located to give the illusion of a seamless larger image, some making use of virtual backgrounds to complete the semblance. In both cases, however, the spectator is still acutely aware of the technological mediation. Whilst I do not dispute that spectators are continually aware of their surroundings in physical theatre, in digital theatre, the framing imposed by the platform cannot compete for attention when the spectator is immersed in their own surroundings. Where these reminders of artificiality in physical theatre can help to bring the performance in line with the audience’s understanding of the real world, I suggest that online they have quite the opposite effect. Rather than fostering immediacy, such reminders foreground technology and distance, disrupting the connection to the real world more explicitly than the mechanisms of theatricality themselves. Productions that leaned into these tensions were arguably better able to foreground the disjunction between performance and spectators’ surroundings which, reciprocally, lessened the strain. For example, in Forced Entertainment’s online *Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare* series (2020),

⁹¹ Erin Sullivan, *Shakespeare and Digital Performance in Practice* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), p. 70.

each of Shakespeare's works is retold by a different solo performer, who manoeuvres a selection of everyday household objects around a table to represent the characters, stretching the limits of theatrical convention and casting. Although *Complete Works* existed as a live production before the pandemic, once moved online the familiarity and mundanity of the chosen items highlighted the actor's resourcefulness, able to generate theatrical impact using only what was available in the domestic space in which each was confined, just like the remote spectator.

Some online productions respond to this tension by orchestrating deliberate immersion, inviting spectators deeper into the virtual world rather than leaving them positioned against it. Creation Theatre's *Tempest* (2020) exemplifies this approach by engaging spectators in actively building the performance. Performed live on Zoom, the production integrated virtual backdrops and pre-recorded videos to conjure Prospero's island, while also inviting audiences to participate directly – from clicking fingers to create soft rainfall and banging tables for thunder to more idiosyncratic tasks like lifting up pets to show the King and interviewing characters. Rather than attempting to disguise or ignore the platform's limitations, it embraced them as part of its aesthetic; one reviewer noted that the 'wonkiness' of the digital performance contributed to the production's surrealism.⁹² Also, by reframing spectators as co-creators rather than solely observers, distanced by the technological frame, the production immersed the audience within the play's digital environment in a controlled, guided manner that balanced freedom of interaction with carefully structured drama, ensuring participation was enhancing not disrupting. In a different way, *Hamlet 360: Thy Father's Spirit* (2019), created by the Commonwealth Shakespeare Company in collaboration with Google, engrossed spectators into digital drama, giving them a VR experience of being within the play. Sullivan reports that in the production, 'released for free on YouTube, audience members used a smartphone and a VR headset (whether a high-tech model or an inexpensive, cardboard version) to transport themselves to a three-dimensional

⁹² 'Review: "A Radically Abridged But Joyously Chaotic Hour of Fun and Mayhem" Creation Theatre Company's New Zoom Production of The Tempest is "Highly Recommended"', *Ox in a Box*, 19 April 2020 <<https://oxinabox.co.uk/review-a-radically-abridged-but-joyously-chaotic-hour-of-fun-and-mayhem-c-o-creation-theatre-companys-new-zoom-production-of-the-tempest-book-now/>> [accessed 15 September 2025].

performance in-the-round.⁹³ The user is placed virtually in the scenography, from a first person perspective, with free controls of where they can look within the performance, on a 360 degree axis. Whilst they cannot interact with performers as audiences in Creation's *Tempest* can, they are still granted an embodied sense of presence, shrinking the visibility of the external frame. These added co-creation capabilities that immersive digital forms provide disrupt traditional hierarchies of performer and audience and in turn, make the play's themes more immediate and participatory.

***The Under Presents Tempest*, dir. by Samatha Gorman, Tender Claws (2020)**

Tender Claws's performance of *The Tempest*, staged within their virtual reality game *The Under Presents* (2020) formed new, novel pathways for spectators to experience Shakespeare's play. Like Kohler's site-specific *Othello*, this destabilising method of watching and engaging with the text depends on two factors: how the spectator personally experiences the performance and through the ways the production presents the context, action and characters of the play. The conditions of experience differ greatly from the site-specific production, however, since the spectators play parts that form the story in this game performance, advancing co-creation to levels of authorship. The production used live actors, performing through virtual avatars, who created a version of the story in collaboration with the users/spectators that they guided. On the surface, the game depoliticises the play, erasing mention of Prospero's slave Caliban - instead focusing on Miranda and Ferdinand's romance - and by anonymising all of the players, removes visible race and gender of the characters they play. I argue that, whilst race and gender are not centralised as they are in the other politically charged productions I have interrogated, the game's spatial environment nonetheless disturbs structures of power and authority, unsettling those same systems of hierarchy that Shakespeare's text both encodes and reflects. *The Under Presents Tempest* challenges these dominant structures

⁹³ Sullivan, p. 9.

through the user's collaborative and interactive experience of creative spectatorship and its ironic, tongue-in-cheek presentation of the play, which destabilises traditional notions of authorship and textual authority.

The Tempest performance is a spin-off component of the wider experience of *The Under Presents*, which is 'set between two worlds: an absurdist vaudeville stage in an upturned ship (the titular "Under"), and a harrowing survival narrative set inside a time anomaly.'⁹⁴ Director Samantha Gorman summarises the game as hinging 'around a single-player story that tells the story of a doomed research vessel over three acts, where players can follow different characters around the ship and maybe change their fate.'⁹⁵ There are other elements to the game, including a multiplayer live hub where players can co-exist and interact with each other amongst pre-recorded characters played by New York theatre performers on a permanent loop. There is no voice chat available for players; they communicate through movement. They control what they see by turning their head with the VR headset on; they travel by moving the toggles on their hand controllers; and they can perform a series of waves and clicks with their hand controllers to execute 'magic tricks', that is, turning objects into different things. A recurring design principle across the game's different components is the manipulation of time and space. For example, the opening introduces the 'scrunch teleport', which Devon Baur describes as follows:

In VR, designing audience locomotion is difficult, as creators map large-scale virtual environments that need to be accessed from small rooms. Tender Claws offered "the scrunch" as a creative solution, wherein the spectator needed to reach their hand out and pull the distance toward them: space bent and warped before the world popped back into focus. This action made space malleable in a way that would not be possible in a brick-and-mortar theatre, as each spectator's hand could pull them through an abandoned vaudeville theatre and the other

⁹⁴ 'The Under Presents', *Piehole* <<https://www.pieholed.com/the-under-presents.html>> [accessed 23 June 2026].

⁹⁵ Matt Warren, 'Tender Claws Uses VR to Re-Imagine Immersive Theatre During Lockdown', *Film Independent*, 30 July 2020 <<https://www.filmindependent.org/blog/tender-claws-uses-vr-to-re-imagine-immersive-theater-during-lockdown/>> [accessed 23 June 2026].

virtual terrains. The scrunch thematically placed the story-world in a venue outside of concrete space and also, through metaphor, placed the narrative journey in each audience member's own hands. In the end, it was the spectator's responsibility to navigate the elastic terrains and dictate how the immersive stories would unfold.⁹⁶

While the scrunch mechanic makes space physically pliable, the wider game applies a similar architecture to narrative temporality. *The Under Presents* repeatedly layers temporalities upon one another, requiring players to encounter and interact with different versions of themselves. Baur explains that spectators could find themselves exploring a scene they have already visited, 'stuck in a loop with ghosts that repeat their own movements from past iterations. In the repetition, the spectator could dance amongst their last movements and sometimes needed to complete tasks through collaboration with their past-selves and future-selves.'⁹⁷ By confronting participants with the traces of their own prior embodied actions, *The Under Presents* complicates the destabilisation of the spectator-performance divide, often typical of immersive theatre, through a recursive structure of self-encounter.

These mechanics establish a model of participation in which agency emerges through navigation and embodiment, principles that would also inform the development of *The Tempest* within the game. *The Tempest* performance element was written and directed by Gordon, co-founder of the game studio Tender Claws and director of the wider game alongside Danny Cannizzaro. The creation process consisted of Gorman - maintaining a consistent focus on interactivity, the player's experience and the production - adapting Shakespeare's words into a baseline script for performers, from which they are encouraged to improvise. The wider project was made in collaboration with theatrical troupe Piehole who commissioned and co-developed pieces for the game with artists from New York City performance communities and were 'responsible for casting,

⁹⁶ Devon Baur, 'The Under Presents. Directed by Samantha Gorman and Danny Cannizzaro. Tender Claws/Piehole, virtual reality. Reviewer viewed various performances, February-July 2020.', *Theatre Journal*, 70.3 (2021), 106-108 (p. 106).

⁹⁷ Baur, p. 106.

motion capture, and voiceacting for the game's NPCs (non-player characters).⁹⁸ This collaborative production process extends the game's emphasis on embodied agency into its dramaturgical structure, embedding adaptation and improvisation at the level of performance and scripting.

The VR game-performance of *The Tempest* brings together how both theatre and games are experienced by spectators and players. Game theorist Gordon Calleja offers a useful framework for understanding how literature, art and theatre are received in comparison to the embodied experience of VR games:

it is crucial for a precise inquiry into the phenomenon of presence to make a distinction between simply imagining one is present in a scene and the considerably different phenomenon of having one's specific location and presence within a virtual world acknowledged by the system itself.⁹⁹

By uniting the two modes, *The Under Presents Tempest* creates a mixed-form theatrical first-person journey, where participants have a presence within a virtual world that is responded to by real actors. In contrast to the more uniform, collectively shared experience of orthodox theatre audiences and even the heightened subjectivity afforded by immersive site-specific productions, the VR game grants participants tangible influence on Shakespeare's play where their actions affect the outcomes of the play. As a result, no two performances look the same. I have watched footage of performances where only one user was present, resulting in a one-to-one encounter, relying on additional improvisation from the actor. The couple explored untapped territories of the island other groups did not. On the other hand, I have heard about trolls sabotaging performances and I have seen one where the actor established early on that all of the users had completed the performance before, so they collectively decided to do 'a weird one', as though they had unlocked a hard mode - in which the actor performed each part in a different accent and suggested that the users participate in unusual ways to the

⁹⁸ 'The Under Presents', *Piehole* <<https://www.pieholed.com/the-under-presents.html>> [accessed 23 June 2026].

⁹⁹ Gordon Calleja, *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011), p. 29.

normal structure such as encouraging them to ‘beat up’ one user by all hitting him with sticks and making rude jokes. The uniqueness of experience demonstrates the game-performance’s challenge to established theatrical hierarchies, as each player’s choices carry real creative weight, redistributing authority from the text, author and actors to participants themselves, even if some actions are chaotic or disruptive. In decentralising creative agency, this shift reconfigures authorship as a shared, participatory process. Dhaka Theatre’s *Tempest* similarly collapses actor-audience boundaries through its visible ensemble and audience involvement in its decolonising endeavour, but *The Under Presents Tempest* intensifies this strategy by immersing spectators and making participation fully interactive. Where other interactive digital productions like *Hamlet 360* and Creation’s *Tempest* remain constrained by technological distance, creating the third frame (camera framing), Tender Claws’s *Tempest* removes this layer and allows free navigation. Without a fixed camera perspective, users experience a first-person, user-oriented embodied presence in the virtual world.

The participants are not treated as actors within the game, nor assigned Shakespearean roles, but take part as themselves. I propose that the game ensures users are experiencing the game-performance from a distinctly personal vantage point. This is not achieved by reducing the distance between the performance and the player but by highlighting it, which allows the players to remain conscious that they are playing a game and not being ‘fooled’ by immersion. In this sense, *Under Presents Tempest* turns what Biggin identifies as a potential problem - the conflict between the immersive story’s structure and the audience’s fragmented, exploratory experience - into its central device.¹⁰⁰ While Biggin focuses on the conflict between linear story structure and non-linear audience journeys, her broader argument is that such tensions weaken immersion only when they are denied or concealed. When they are embraced and built into the form of the work, they can instead become the very source of immersion. *The Under Presents Tempest* does precisely this through its metatheatrical framing, acknowledging, rather than ignoring, the player’s awareness of the performance which ultimately removes barriers to immersion. Metatheatre in the VR game-performance

¹⁰⁰ Biggin, p. 123.

operates in much the same way that the reminders of reality in orthodox physical productions work to locate the play within the spectator's understanding of reality.



FIG 29. *The Under Presents Tempest*, dir. by Samantha Gorman within *The Under Presents* (Tender Claws, 2020). The virtual exterior of the theatre as seen on <https://tenderclaws.com/tempest> [accessed 10 March 2025]. © Tender Claws. Reproduced with permission.

The metatheatrical dimension begins even before the performance, as players assemble in a virtual theatre lobby within the wider game. The exterior of this theatre is pictured in figure 29. Players must buy a ticket from the virtual box office in order to attend the performance of *The Tempest*, transforming what is essentially an online financial transaction into a performative ritual that mirrors the traditional theatre experience. Although in the real world, most people would now buy their tickets ahead of time online, this embodied exchange makes the spectator's entry into the virtual performance space an active, committed gesture. Players are then allowed access to the theatre lobby where they must wait until the performance begins, which is signalled by a countdown overlaying lobby graphics players can already see. This mock-outer frame, where players wait together, gives the digital performance a sense of event that is often lost online. By mimicking a physical building that is an archetypal part of the outer

frame, the game moves users one step away from their actual outer frame - which is a complex mixture of the physical headset, the service they use (Steam VR, Oculus Rift or Oculus Quest), the game *The Under Presents* and their home that they are presumably confined to at time of playing - and further into the immersive environment. This playfulness with perceived reality seems to be a trait of Tender Claws as game developers. Their 'witty and idiosyncratic' previous title, *Virtual Virtual Reality* (2017), also experimented with a layered experience which one reviewer summarised as taking immersion to the next level, 'not just indulging the double inception inferred by its title, but offering many nested tiers within the proverbial matryoshka doll, one inside another, then another, then another, creating a madcap array of spiraling realities.'¹⁰¹ As well as toying with framing levels, *The Tempest's* lobby space prepares users psychologically in the same way that the theatre lobby and venue would in the real world, acting as a social cue. The digital lobby is inherently uncanny as it mimics a theatre but remains hollow, haunted by the absence of physical weight and the communal thrum of human presence. Eagle-eyed players will notice that in certain corners of the theatre are sand dunes, serving as an anticipatory device referencing the play's location and themes of exile. Situating these symbolic elements in the lobby encourages players to begin interpreting narrative motifs even before the first scene unfolds but it also introduces an added element of eeriness to the space, in keeping with the rest of the game, which one player describes as having a constant sense that 'there's something menacing about this'.¹⁰² The displaced matter sets the tone for the production by subtly letting those playing know that this is not intended to be a realistic transportation to a virtual theatre and performance, but rather plays on the whimsical ability of the game format and suspension of rules. The black sheet backdrop in the site-specific *Othello* created a similar layered effect that confronted the audience with the

¹⁰¹ Luke Buckmaster, 'Virtual Virtual Reality Review: Spiraling Madcap Realities', *The VR Critic*, 27 February 2015 <<https://www.thevrcritic.com/reviews/virtual-virtual-reality/>> [accessed 15 September 2025].

¹⁰² Alex Coulombe, 'Let's Dive Into The Under Presents: Tempest | Pt. 2', *Medium*, 13 July 2020 <<https://medium.com/alive-in-plasticland/lets-dive-into-the-under-presents-tempest-pt-2-4edc2e4067b5>> [accessed 15 September 2025].

idea of construction and creation and at the performance's beginning, setting the cogs of conscious interpretation in motion.

The visuals of the game resist realistic representation and similarly, contribute toward allowing the players to exist as themselves, as opposed to immersing them into a different world that mimics their reality. The game world is composed of three more spaces which feature the same animation style as the lobby and the rest of the wider *Under Presents* game: saturated colours and simple angular, geometric shapes that the gaming community might call low-poly, meaning a 3D model made up of a relatively small number of polygons or flat shapes. The hallucinatory style and deliberate minimalism provide enough shape for users to understand the environment and story around them, but enough abstraction for them to cast their imagination freely onto it, filling in the gaps with personal interpretation. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman argue against the common misconception that immersion can only occur when the player is transported to an indistinguishably realistic space.¹⁰³ Machon notes that 'the generic overuse of the term ['immersive'] in [game] marketing points towards a desire on behalf of the consumer/player to delve "into a virtual reality that replaces the realm of physical existence" (Calleja, 2011: 25)'.¹⁰⁴ This widespread use of the term upholds the notion that Salen and Zimmerman call 'immersive fallacy' and they use Tetris as a counter-example, showing that immersion comes from engagement with the game's mechanics, not its likeness to real environments.¹⁰⁵ Salen and Zimmerman demonstrate that immersion or presence can arise from interaction and agency rather than (attempted) photorealism - an idea that *The Under Presents Tempest* enacts through its abstract visuals. Developing this idea, I argue that the game's surreal aesthetics, in fact, enhance immersion by presenting an alternate world where the audience are not invited into an illusion, punctured with slips of real life, nor into a more fully immersive fantasy; rather, they are fully aware that they are playing a game. The ironic inclusion of

¹⁰³ Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004).

¹⁰⁴ Josephine Machon, *Immersive Theatres: Intimacy and Immediacy in Contemporary Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 60.

¹⁰⁵ Salen and Zimmerman, p. 450.

the theatre lobby achieves the same effect of reinforcing self-awareness which means that by playing the game, they, as themselves rather than characters, are joining in the performance's challenging reimagination of Shakespeare.

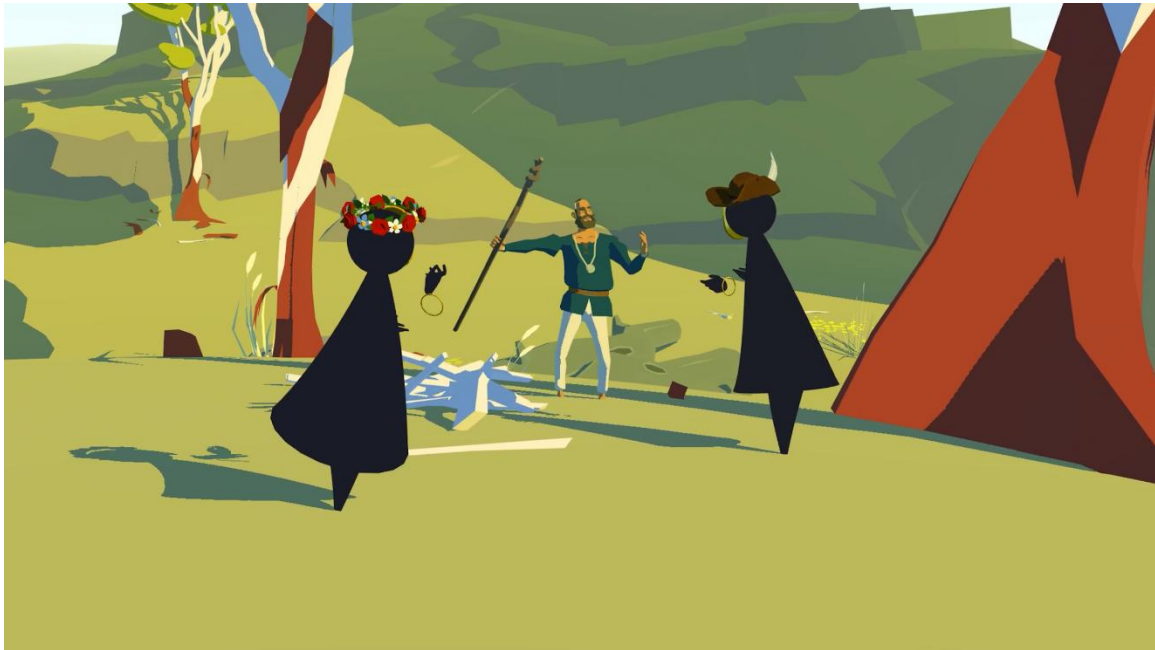


FIG 30. *The Under Presents Tempest*, dir. by Samantha Gorman within *The Under Presents* (Tender Claws, 2020). Two players wearing head accessories facing the performance host on Prospero's island, as seen on <https://tenderclaws.com/tempest> [accessed 10 March 2025]. © Tender Claws. Reproduced with permission.

The lack of illusion is extended to the appearance of the players. They remain anonymous throughout the performance, appearing as black cones topped with spheres as heads, fronted with orange masks, with inverted cones representing legs as the silhouettes in figure 30 show. Punchdrunk productions, including *Sleep No More*, similarly enforce anonymity but by requiring that spectators wear masks. The use of masks in site-specific theatre audiences has been well researched: Machon argues that they provide anonymity that encourages exploration and the mask 'becomes another ludic element which destroys the traditional divisions of conventional theatre'.¹⁰⁶ While Colette Gordon argues that masks have the opposite effect, highlighting the structured

¹⁰⁶ Josephine Machon, 'Space and the Senses: The (Syn)Aesthetics of Punchdrunk's Site-Sympathetic Work', *Body, Space and Technology*, 7.1 (2007), doi: <http://doi.org/10.16995/bst.151>.

and policed nature of audience behaviour and reinforcing hierarchy.¹⁰⁷ In terms of *Under Presents Tempest*, I suggest that the game platform itself already offers more anonymity than masks in site-specific theatre can. Much like the internet, the software provides users with an identity-shielding interface that both conceals and mediates presence. Online environments have long been understood as spaces where individuals can obscure, perform or fragment their identities, constructing personas detached from their physical selves. This capacity to hide behind usernames and avatars complicates social hierarchies and this manifests within the *Tempest* game. Although muted, the obscured figures that the players inhabit allow them to move openly within the parameters of the gamespace, communicate (through their hand-shaped forms that float before them) and make choices freely within the performance space, engaging as themselves but without the constraints of prescribed rules or social expectations that would remain in a site-specific production. This digital anonymity transforms the avatars into tools of agency rather than instruments of control, creating a flexible, fun, self-directed experience.

The distance between performance and player is further reinforced by the game's self-conscious storytelling style. Each session features one live actor who guides the performance, resembling an animated human form more than the reduced forms of the users (pictured in the background of figure 30). The actor persuasively performs *as* an actor, bored of performing Shakespeare alone to groups in the game in a state of lockdown and widespread restrictions, inviting users to make it more interesting for them and help perform the roles. The game developers deliberately cast improv actors and puppeteers in the roles of the actors, resulting in storytelling that feels organic and credible and is able to balance the unexpected actions of live participants with Shakespeare's plot.¹⁰⁸ This framing device allows users to be within the performance consciously as themselves, playing characters, in on the game. As McAuley states, 'the

¹⁰⁷ Colette Gordon, 'Touching the Spectator: Intimacy, Immersion, and the Theatre of Velvet Rope', *Borrowers and Lenders*, 7.2 (2012), 1-12.

¹⁰⁸ Tim Bradshaw, 'Enter the Mirrorworld: How Virtual Reality Will Shape the 2020s', *Financial Times*, 1 January 2020 <<https://www.ft.com/content/461405d2-20fd-11ea-b8a1-584213ee7b2b>> [accessed 15 September 2025].

fictional is always at the mercy of the other two levels of reality', but if the concept of fiction is removed and cloaked as an actor seeking help, rather than a character (although the real actor is performing the actor role), the performance and the user's real life are already one as there is no obvious falsehood separating the two. The actor speaks in an informal, conversational manner, supporting the deception that the actor is talking as themselves and further connecting the audience closely to the action, in a way that Shakespearean or archaic language and poetic diction cannot in a modern performance. They recount the story of *The Tempest*, in their own irreverent and colloquial words but they also take on the role of Prospero, acting out as the story is narrated, inviting the audience to (firstly) become crew members of the ship in the storm: one holds the wheel and others throw various props overboard to make the sinking ship lighter before bracing for impact. As the actor slips between direct address of the players who they ask to act with them, diegetic narration, using reported speech to tell the story of *The Tempest* to the players, and mimetic narration, using direct speech to perform the role of Prospero at the same time, multiple realities are allowed to co-exist, including the game-player's own reality, experience of the game and performed role.

By performing as a self-aware guide who oscillates between narrator, character and collaborator, the live actor reconfigures conventional distinctions between performer and spectator, drawing users into the story while simultaneously reinforcing the playful, metatheatrical structure of the game. This effect is strengthened by the doubling between actor and Prospero, which mirrors the actor's isolation in real life, grown lonely, performing by themselves and cut off from connections in the real world, and Prospero's isolation on his island where he asserts control over its inhabitants like the actor does the players, heightening the parallels between performance and reality. Anna Spagnolli and Luciano Gamberini's investigation into immersion in VR games finds that for users, 'presence is distributed over settings that are conventionally considered separate', meaning that players' consciousness can span across dual environments, both

the virtual world and their embodied reality.¹⁰⁹ They substantiate this theory by demonstrating that players can converse with individuals in their immediate physical environment while interacting with the virtual world. *The Under Presents Tempest* leans into the capability of dual consciousness with its narrative-within-a-narrative, transforming the gap between the ‘separate’ sites into a deliberate site of play where they fold into each other.

The metatheatrical framing, visual derealisation, anonymising of participants and explicit parallels to the real world are strategies that work together to provide spectators an embodied perspective of Shakespeare’s play that simultaneously challenges the hierarchies of power in both Shakespearean narrative and theatrical practice. This disruption of authority is realised through the actor’s playful and irreverent use of language which reshapes *The Tempest*, presenting it as a flexible performance rather than a rigid canonical text. Equally, by delivering the play with sardonic humour, the register presents elements of Shakespeare’s text in a way that invites questioning or critique. The performance treated the betrothal masque between Miranda and Ferdinand in Shakespeare’s play as a fully realised wedding ceremony. In many of the marriage ceremonies I witnessed between different Mirandas and Ferdinands, across iterations of the game-performance, the actor’s tenor delivered Shakespeare’s conventional comic resolution not as a perfect or restorative conclusion but instead as the closing of a story the host knowingly undercuts and mocks for its contrivance. One actor layered sarcasm with an exuberant celebratory voice to wed the pair whilst posing as officiator, ending by asking them to high five to seal the union; another joked about the speed of the relationship, rushing from proposal to wedding. A third actor ordered players to lick ‘the Italian wedding steak’, passing round a piece of meat - conjured by a player – before remarking that he had forgotten his lines and jokingly suggesting the users should buy another ticket to see it again when he can remember them. During these ceremonies, whilst the users posing as Miranda and

¹⁰⁹ Anna Spagnolli and Luciano Gamberini, ‘Immersion/Emersion: Presence in Hybrid Environments, *The Fifth International Workshop on Presence Proceedings* (University Fernando Pessoa, Porto, 9-11 October 2002) <<https://matthewlombard.com/ISPR/Proceedings/2004/Spagnolli%20and%20Gamberini.pdf>> [accessed 24 October 2025].

Ferdinand are asked to hold hands or face each other, the other users are invited to bless the couple or watch the wedding. In this time, the spectating users tended to produce various props, including cakes, religious crosses, swords, sticks and roses. The players wafted about their props or threw them at the couple, further adding to the atmosphere of joviality and the teasing tone of the scene, led by actors. Since the actors are anchored in their sense of the immediate world, and the outer frame of the performance is shaped so strongly by the pandemic and its effects, as well as being referenced by the actor in the game, Shakespeare's marital ending - presented with subtle ridicule - becomes, in the context of real-life hardships, almost laughable in its tidiness and jubilation.

The subtly mocking tone that comes with the performance's version of Shakespeare's heteronormative, remedial marriage, combined with the user's anonymous appearance, not only pokes critique at the representation of gender norms in Shakespeare's text but also implicitly raises questions more broadly about the construction of gender. Since the players are all black cone shapes, when they are cast as Miranda and Ferdinand, the players' identity is never seen, nor is it relevant. In the absence of visible bodies, Miranda is given a flower crown to mark her femininity against Ferdinand's gold, metal crown. The users cannot speak so the actor ventriloquises them, speaking on their behalf as the couple. This is an idea that Forced Entertainment play with in their *Table Top Shakespeare* series. When mundane, household objects are used to symbolise characters, race and gender become explicitly performative and the abstraction highlights the constructed nature of these identity markers. In stripping away the usual visual and embodied markers of identity, the game destabilises the heteronormative and racially coded assumptions entrenched in Shakespeare's text, allowing users to, instead, experience the narrative as a malleable space in which both gender and race are enacted and open to reinterpretation. This deconstruction keeps in tone with the game-performance's unsettling of theatrical hierarchies and recalibration of power through spectators' contributing creative agency. Since the game-performance is understood as an extension of the player's life, this destabilisation need not be explicitly mapped onto contemporary social reality as it is in the Globe and Frantic Assembly's

Othellos or as the site-specific *Othello* / *Die Fremden*'s environment invites its audience to engage with real-world contexts.

Conclusion

By examining these productions, it becomes clear that the deliberate dislocation of Shakespeare's plays, whether through fictional setting, physical site or digitisation, reshapes both the representation of race, gender and power and the audience's relationship to the performance. I have shown that the performances, immersive or not, create moments or sustained engagements that bring the production's fictionality to the fore; this, I have argued, in turn raises spectators' consciousness of realities they inhabit beyond the stage, revealing how the representations of hierarchy operate both within the play and in contemporary social contexts. Theatre is always connected to real life and it is impossible to detach performances from the sense of the real world, which is a large part of its appeal and impact, but the ways dislocated space is used to bring these ideas to the foreground allows each spectator to interpret and engage with the work in a way that is unique to their own experiences and perspectives. The tension between the dislocating fictional worlds and the orthodox theatre venues that the two British productions of *Othello* featured, led to intervals of exposure to artificiality, coming in the form of Othello's embodied subconscious, the snuffing of candles or scene transitions, that encouraged a perceived connection between the performance's represented racial marginalisation and the wider social issues to which it beckons. The transcultural, Bengali adaptation of *The Tempest* did not anchor the production in as specific a location as the *Othellos*' pub or police force settings; instead, it used the space to deconstruct the entrenched colonial hierarchies of the text and involve the audience in this decolonisation by reestablishing their relationship to the drama. The German site-specific production of *Othello* in a disused glass factory, like Dhaka Theatre's *Tempest*, negotiated the audience's relationship to the performance through spatial arrangements. However, the spatial dynamics involving the audience were changed multiple times, meaning that the audience perceived scenes from different perspectives, both visually and psychologically. This continual mediation, combined with the

spectator's elevated role of co-creator, inspired a drawing of parallels between fiction and reality. The idea of co-creation comes to a head when considering the VR *Tempest* by Tender Claws because the spectator is not merely observing or navigating the narrative but actively shaping their path through the virtual environment, making choices that influence how scenes progress and how the story is experienced. The game's added layer of metatheatre eradicated much of the distance that usually separates fiction and gameplay, and rather than motivating an identification of similarities between fiction and social or political issues, it worked as an extension of the player's life.

Shakespeare's plays, and performances of them, in Shakespeare's day always featured moments that revealed the inherent theatricality of the stage, in the way that Iago's manipulations uncover the gap between appearance and reality or Prospero's epilogue blurs the boundary between character and actor through its acknowledgement of roles. Aspects of Renaissance theatre more generally, including vocally active audiences and cross-gender performance, emphasised the performative nature of the stage. Since modern spectatorship is often mediated by expectations of psychological realism and immersive focus, moments that unmask performativity do not merely reflect theatrical tradition but actively disrupt the spectatorial contract. These contemporary case studies show that strategies of dislocated setting, unorthodox location and unexpected spatial arrangements not only recontextualise Shakespeare's play but have potential to dismantle his authority and shape the audience's relationship to the performance. By negotiating proximity and perspective, these productions make the constructed nature of the stage visible, prompting spectators to actively engage with both the fictional world and their own lived experience of the real world, transforming the theatre into a site of reflection, interpretation and new meaning.

Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that reconfiguring Shakespeare - through the adaptive strategies of radical rewriting, 'seeing' casting and spatial dislocation - serves as an instrument for dismantling the hegemonic structures that surround the canon. To create or stage a version of Shakespeare's plays that is inclusive, by today's demands - that is, sensitive to race and gender - the pillars that uphold white, patriarchal authority within the canon and the social reality that the plays reflect must be challenged. The modes of intervention I have examined do this effectively by bringing the historical power dynamics into sharp, often uncomfortable, relief. Whether through the excavatory work of radical rewriting that reclaims the voices absent in Shakespeare's plays, the semiotic upheaval of the 'seeing' body or the unsettling effects of spatial dislocation, the theatrical adaptations do more than merely update the play, my criticism reveals how they strip away the illusion of neutrality and universalism, exposing how the plays have been racially and culturally gatekept. Crucially, this process relies on an intersectional framework that rejects 'either/or' binary logic in favor of a 'both/and' relational approach. Demonstrating how the consequences of patriarchal control and white supremacy are, as Corredera suggests, 'two draughts of the same paradigmatic poison', these interventions seek to ensure that the adaptations do not inadvertently silence or reinforce the subjugation of another but rather uncloak the intersecting architecture of exclusion that has long informed the staging and reception of Shakespeare.¹

While these interventions share a unified intersectional goal, they manifest through a hierarchy of tactical applications that vary in their directness and impact. The strategies explored across these chapters each offer a distinctly intense mode of intervention. Rewriting is a radical disruption to form; by unearthing alternative histories of characters like Sycorax or redirecting the trajectory of Desdemona, playwrights

¹ Vanessa Corredera, *Reanimating Shakespeare's Othello in Post-Racial America* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 207.

dismantle the canonical structure from within. However, while dramaturgically profound, the reach of the written word can remain bounded by the page given the limitations I identified that prevent the revisions from making it to, or staying on, the stage. Conversely, nontraditional casting functions as a more implicit, yet visceral disruption. Especially within mainstream performances, the presence of a recast actor - such as a female Othello or black Iago - cannot go unseen, allowing for intersectional intervention to occur in seemingly conventional spaces with a broader stretching impact. Finally, spatial dislocation represents the most immersive disruption, as it shifts the intervention from the body of the actor to the body of the spectator. By uprooting the play from traditional arenas, the performance becomes a shared, precarious reality. The pivot from the physical performance to the public reaction reveals that reconceiving Shakespeare is more than an artistic choice, it is always a political provocation. It moves the intervention out of the safety of the theatre and into a cultural battlefield where ideas of representation and ownership are vehemently contested.

Although the digital age has amplified the policing of the canon, as the controversies I explored suggest, the case studies examined indicate that the tension between intervention and reception is not a failure of adaptation, but its most generative site. Accordingly, instead of seeking inclusion through the 'erasure' of or ignorance to race, an intersectional Shakespeare demands a deliberate 'seeing' of the power structures that the plays themselves reproduce. The dislocation of Shakespeare's plays in Chapter Four provides a critical distance that forces a collapse between the fictional world and our social reality. In Chapter Three the semiotic weight of the identity of the recast actor is harnessed, activating the spectator's 'dual awareness' where the tension between the actor's identity and the character's history reveals the interlocking systems of power that the production seeks to dismantle. Chapter Two establishes the intersectional blueprint for this reimagining, demonstrating how playwrights, from Djanet Sears and Toni Morrison to authors of more recent works, such as Fengar Gael, perform a 'corrective' revision that exposes the racialised and gendered machinery of the source texts, reshaping them from artifacts of exclusion into sites of reclaimed agency. When the physical and fictional spaces are unsettled by these methods, the audience are

forbidden the comfort potentially afforded by established theatrical norms; they are forced into a 'triple level awareness' where the friction of the reconfigured performance takes centre stage.

It is within the textual geographies and performance histories of *Othello* and *The Tempest* that tensions of representation are most sharply distilled. The selection of these plays as primary case studies provides a critical foundation for an analysis of intersectional adaptation. This scope was intentionally oriented toward works where the racialised Other and the process of race construction is most visible, thereby facilitating an incisive examination of how these racial hierarchies intersect with (and reinforce) the plays' treatment of gender. Future research would benefit from applying the intersectional reconfiguring framework to the wider canon, interrogating the plays where the social mechanisms of race operate more clandestinely, yet no less fundamentally. A prospective exploration of Shakespeare's comedies, for instance, would yield fruitful findings, regarding their normative whiteness, surplus of gendered social contracts in relationships and tonal complexities. Similarly, the Roman plays would offer a compelling platform for subsequent research, as their concern with citizenship and the performance of hypermasculinity gives a rigid structure for reinterpretation to disrupt. Scholars might build upon the analysis of David Sterling Brown's *Shakespeare's White Others* (2023) or Arthur L. Little Jr's edited collection *White People in Shakespeare* (2023), both of which offer a systematic critique of the workings of racecraft within whiteness in Shakespeare's plays, though they do not address performance, leaving space for an exploration of how these dynamics are enacted and reinterpreted on stage. Alternatively, while I touched on Dhaka Theatre's Bangla production and two German adaptations, my scope was largely centred on Anglophone and European productions, given my focus on Western traditions. This could be expanded to include how reinterpretation looks and functions in non-Western cultures where Shakespeare carries different cultural and colonial baggage. These suggested expansions, however, only reinforce the core tenet of this thesis: that the re-envisioning of Shakespeare's plays and the canon is a relational event that requires an audience. This study has taken a qualitative approach to this relational dynamic,

drawing on reviews, close reading and critical analysis but it opens the door for future quantitative analysis of audience demographics and reactions that would further map the correlation I have emphasised.

With that in mind, an aspect that marks my research as distinct from other scholarship is this focus on the audience's ability to negotiate meaning. In this light, the audience becomes the fourth dimension of my investigation. The relationship between performance and audience reception has been central to my analysis because the reinterpretation of Shakespeare is incomplete until it is received and continues to unfold as it is recalled and reconstituted in the spectators' minds. In Chapter Two, this completion occurs through the spectator's imaginative labour; when Fengar Gael restores Sycorax's history through her imagining of it, the audience hold this in mind along with the character's original erasure. In Chapter Three, the negotiation becomes a semiotic confrontation, as seen in Golda Roscheuvel's performance of *Othello*, where the audience cannot 'unsee' the black female body of the lead. This addresses the audience's interpretive habits, demonstrating that the body is never a blank slate but a nexus where the canon's inherent prejudices are either reinforced or radically unsettled. Finally, in Chapter Four, the negotiation is literally physical, as Marcel Kohler's *Othello / Die Fremden* thrusts the audience into disorientating rooms within a dislocated, industrial space which ultimately asks them to consider their complicity in social hierarchies. The case studies, when dislocating a space or recasting a body, prompt spectators to audit their own biases, moving from a position of canonical comfort to one of intersectional interrogation. By drawing on Stefka Mihaylova's *Viewers in Distress* and Susan Bennett's outer frames model, this thesis has demonstrated that the audience is the space where the 'haunting' - to once again borrow Marvin Carlson's term - of the canon actually happens.² Consequently, the perception of the audience must be built into analysis and the creation of new Shakespeare, as the response to the Francesca Amewudah-Rivers casting demonstrates starkly.

² Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

What the previously listed instances of outrage also prove is that the theatre is a microcosm of the wider socio-political landscape. The public attempts to control or scrutinise, for example, the decision to cast a black Juliet is not an individual theatrical debate, but the visible edge of a larger resistance to the decentralisation of whiteness. This research suggests, then, that if a fictional character cannot be recast without triggering a crisis of cultural ownership, it shows how deeply entrenched racial and gendered hierarchies remain in the social, political, institutional, legal and cultural structures of the contemporary world. Reconfiguring Shakespeare, therefore, acts as a radical diagnostic for the twenty-first century, demanding a new kind of social alertness. The adaptive practices transform spectators from consumers of a fixed past into active negotiators of a more inclusive future and repurpose Shakespeare's plays as a vital device for dismantling the structures they once helped to maintain.

To answer the overarching question: 'how is Shakespeare reconfigured within contemporary socio-political environments to be inclusive?', this research concludes that this is not achieved by attempting to 'fix' the past, inserting marginalised voices into narratives or by pretending that race and gender are invisible, as 'colourblind' casting intends. Rather, meaningful inclusion is found when the inner workings of race and gender as social constructs are rendered visible, or made the subject of the text or performance. The findings of this research equip scholars, theatre practitioners and teachers with the tools to navigate the fraught complexities of contemporary representation. In the way that 'colourblind' casting falls ignorant to the cultural, political and social weight that is intrinsically tied to visual identity, an approach that erroneously defaults to a wilful unseeing of the hardened systems of power at play within Shakespeare's works, is correspondingly reductive. Acute sightedness, formed through those interventions, offers an alternative to contributing to the perpetuation of the canon's inherent hierarchies; through this lens, Shakespeare ceases to be a monument and becomes a mirror for contemporary reckoning.

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