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Living Between the Lines: Intersectionality and Self-Actualization in Shakespeare's Plays

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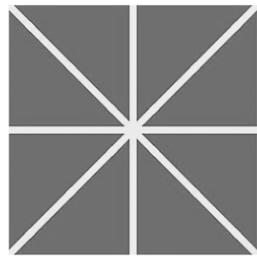Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/cusrd_abstracts

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Genesis of the idea

As a double major in English and Theatre I have long read, analyzed, and watched the works of Shakespeare. 2016 marks the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, and thus we must examine what about his text appeals to us and how we view the ideas, themes, and characters of his work in the new millennium. Race and gender are often at the center of our cultural experience, and because theatre is one of the cornerstone's of Western culture race and gender inherently feature into our theatrical discourse. The new ways in which we can explore diversity and intersectionality in the work of Shakespeare allow us to see his work in a new light with a new appreciation for the playwright's incredible capacity to write the depths and pitfalls of humanity. By looking at *Antony and Cleopatra, The Merchant of Venice,* and *Othello* I could look at plays that very specifically dealt with issues of identity and intersectionality. They are popular plays for performance and allowed me to explore multiple levels of characters and their performance history in relation to race and gender.

Methodology

I conducted my research by first reading scholarly books and articles on the texts themselves as well as the history of critical thinking in relation to race and gender in the three plays. As I narrowed my topic of research, I began to focus more effort on the perceptions of Elizabethans and how they would have seen the character's story arch and struggles in comparison to how contemporary audiences view these same characters. I began to examine theories of performative ghosting, the idea that characters have ghost characters, often real figures of history with whom the audience would be familiar. For Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* this figure is the mythos of Anne Boleyn, a woman who is too ambitious, and who exploits power she should not have. The conversion of Shylock cements the religious similarity of the two women. Othello is plagued by the ghost of the mark of Cain, the first murderer whom all black people were thought to descend from. This link caused English people to associate Moors with the devil and wild abandonment including lack of control of their sexuality and tempers. Cleopatra is doubly ghosted by her historical counterpart for audiences today, and by the tabloid version of her provided by Roman propaganda. Shakespeare would have therefore known her as an unstable seductress who both exploited and was exploited by her own exotic sexuality.

Why Should We Care?

400 years after his death, Shakespeare is still the world's most popular playwright. The two largest theatre companies in North America, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, are both primarily dedicated to Shakespeare. There are well over a dozen summer Shakespeare festivals across the United States, and many regional theatres perform at least one of his play's each season. It is a far shorter list to name the languages his work has *not* been translated into, since all of the world's major theatre districts regularly feature his work. Shakespeare speaks to something in human beings' fundamental psyche that few other writers have managed to find. But while he speaks to something fundamental in our collective unconscious, our social sensibilities have changed over the years and vary by culture. Without changing the way in which the plays are performed, that fundamental resonance would not be enough to continue the popularity.

Focusing on the issues of race and gender in the works of Shakespeare allows researchers and artists to provide a socially relevant discourse that contemporary audiences care about and often find problematic in the original texts. By acknowledging the inherent biases and prejudices Shakespeare would have held as a man in the Early Modern Era and working in more human portrayals of the characters whose identities have been historically disenfranchised, we can work through those problematic elements without pretending that they do not exist.

Moving Forward

I plan to continue my research through my senior thesis project. I will first construct a paper on ghosting and sexuality in the character of Cleopatra. This paper will be submitted to conferences and journals for presentation and publication, respectively. I will be looking at the historical Cleopatra, the Roman Cleopatra, and the Cleopatra of Shakespeare's text and how those three versions of one of history's most captivating figures create the incredible mythos we see come to life in performances of her. A large part of this focus will be on Shakespeare's choice to portray her as a black woman, although he would have known she was a Macedonian Greek, and the possible reasons he may have made that choice.

In writing about Othello, I will focus on the legend of the Mark of Cain and how Cain is the ghost Othello must live with throughout the text, but not an association modern audiences would make. To people seeing the play today a more resonate ghost is Malcolm X, a powerful black man viewed as volatile and who demanded more power than white people around him thought he was worth. He is also ghosted by the wild sexuality thought to exist in black people both in the Early Modern Era and today.

Portia, the only powerful woman Shakespeare did not damn to death or powerless marriage, is ghosted by the Elizabethan mythos of Anne Boleyn, the queen who changed the country forever. The conceptual figure of the woman who uses her sexuality to get the men around her to do what she wants, and has enough education to be dangerous figured into many works of Renaissance, fiction and non-fiction. This problem of the play has been central the debate over whether or not Portia is the play's protagonist.

Throughout the thesis I will use the joint ribbon of performative ghosting and sexuality to discuss the issues of race and gender in each of the three plays: *Antony and Cleopatra, The Merchant of Venice,* and *Othello.*

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