

“Tell it again, but different”:
Gender, Race, and Adaptation in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Othello*

by

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*To
Wilbur and Dawn Hixon
&
Eleanor and William Hyde*

*For investing in my future
and believing I could do anything.
You may not get to see this,
but I know it exists because of you.*

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Abstract

“Tell it again, but different”: *Gender, Race, and Adaptation in The Taming of the Shrew and Othello* analyzes contemporary adaptations of two of Shakespeare’s most problematic plays: *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Othello*, which have received considerable critique for how they voice and rely on sexism and racism. Focusing on adaptation enables me to reorient critical attention from Shakespeare’s plays to how they are used to perpetuate or disrupt problematic representations of gender, race, sexuality, and class. Doing so requires a methodological innovation. Shakespearean adaptation scholarship typically relies on two analytic methods: single-text close readings (a micro level analysis) or broader comparisons across plays to consider large-scale patterns and institutions (a macro level analysis). Bringing these two methods together, my meso level analysis illuminates how expectations of genre and form operate comparatively and across media and/or institution (the macro) to dictate and circumscribe the work of particular reworkings (the micro) in relation to adaptive clusters around specific plays (the meso). Insofar as my method balances these imperatives, I aim to change how Shakespearean critics approach adaptations—not as singular texts and their contexts or as part of Shakespeare’s larger oeuvre, but as curated groupings. By comparing both the multiple adaptations that constitute each play’s cluster and the way different plays produce different patterns, as well as analyzing the effect those patterns have on subsequent reworkings, my method attends to the limitations and possibilities of adaptation, specifically when it comes to the cultural impact of Shakespeare’s “problem plays.”

Part I examines how the prevailing tendency to present *The Taming of the Shrew* as a pop-feminist romantic comedy has limited its adaptations' ability to provide a feminist recuperation of Shakespeare's play. Chapter 1 details how adaptations across media types frequently attempt to neutralize *Taming's* misogyny through a recourse to romance, producing a dilemma I call the pop-feminist paradox: the contradictory impulse to attempt to fix the sexism of the play through the romantic comedy genre, when the conventions of that genre necessarily replicate the play's problematic portrayal of gender, class, and sexuality. Chapter 2 analyzes *Taming's* pop-feminist paradox in adaptations that represent the three largest contemporary Shakespeare markets: *10 Things I Hate About You* (a 1999 teen film), *ShakespeaRe-Told: The Taming of the Shrew* (a 2005 BBC TV film), and Anne Tyler's *Vinegar Girl* (a 2016 Hogarth Shakespeare novel). I argue that *Taming's* connection to the romantic comedy genre recreates gender inequality by requiring heroines in these adaptations to shoulder the burden of their hero's emotional liberation.

Part II explores the recent popularity of *Othello* stage adaptations in relation to the "liveness" of performance and how such re-visionings showcase the possibilities of adaptation by modeling an active, social justice-oriented engagement with the play's racist and sexist characterizations, themes, and structure. Chapter 3 details how *Othello* is a problem in performance by mapping out the play's performance history, exposing the critical intersection of gender, race, sexuality, and class in its representations of the Black male body, interracial sex, and intraracial intimacy. Chapter 4 analyzes eight *Othello* stage re-visionings—from Paula Vogel's 1993 *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* to Keith Hamilton Cobb's 2019 *American Moor*—to consider how they utilize the theater in order to respond to *Othello's* problems without repeating them.

Introduction

In the fall of 2021, I taught a Shakespeare course through the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute to adults over 50. The goal of my course was to examine some of Shakespeare’s most challenging plays alongside adaptations that might challenge how they are interpreted. I described these “challenging” plays as those that are especially tricky to produce today because of how they voice and rely on ideologies of oppression (such as sexism, racism, classism, and anti-Semitism) and thus possess a potential to do harm—to audiences and actors. With a syllabus focused on four Shakespeare plays—*The Taming of the Shrew*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Measure for Measure*—I began our semester with what I believed would be the easiest play for my audience to approach in this manner—*The Taming of the Shrew*—due to the recent resurgence of feminism in popular culture through the #MeToo movement. Imagine my surprise, then, when on our first day together, an older gentleman explicitly resisted my framework of feminist critique and declared that *Taming* was Shakespeare’s greatest love story. While it is not uncommon to view *Taming*’s plot as romantic, I was flabbergasted at his effusive and sentimental reading of what has often been labeled (with all the derision such a designation carries) one of Shakespeare’s earliest plays.¹ My expectation of critical engagement was perhaps naïve when one considers that *Taming* remains an extremely popular play with audiences. Its popularity, however, has not gone unquestioned.

¹ In “A *Shrew* for the Times, Revisited,” Diana Henderson notes that as an early play, *Taming* is “lacking the gendered inversion of power and the poetic complexity of Shakespeare’s romantic comedies” (120).

In fact, *Taming*, alongside a number of other Shakespeare plays, can be categorized as contemporary “problem plays.” The phrase “problem play” was first given in the late 19th century by Frederick S. Boas to the four plays he charted as representing the shift in Shakespeare’s dramatic tone/theme from his earlier comedies and histories to his later tragedies: *All’s Well that Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Hamlet*.² There is a generic element to his labeling of these plays, as he argues they “cannot be strictly called comedies or tragedies,” as well as an attention to how these plays might affect an audience’s emotions and, specifically, deny them catharsis, noting that “throughout these plays we move along dim untrodden paths, and at the close our feeling is neither of simple joy nor pain; we are excited, fascinated, perplexed, for the issues raised preclude a completely satisfactory outcome.”³ In 1963, Ernest Schanzer redefined the term and its scope, labeling *Julius Caesar*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* as Shakespeare’s problem plays due to the central moral problems they create for audiences, “presented in such a manner that we are unsure of our moral bearings, so that uncertain and divided responses to it in the minds of the audience are possible or even probable.”⁴ For Schanzer, a problem play evokes a “double vision” that divides an audience member’s mind against itself.

More recently, however, the term “problem play” has been increasingly leveraged to describe those Shakespeare plays that spark intense debate over their problematic political content, which necessarily troubles their performance reception.⁵ To build off of Schanzer, these

² Boas, *Shakespeare and his Predecessors*, 344-5. E. M. W. Tillyard’s *Shakespeare’s Problem Plays* (1950) followed Boas’s definition and play selection.

³ Boas, 345.

⁴ Schanzer, *The Problem Plays of Shakespeare*, 6. Schanzer’s definition pulls from William Witherle Lawrence’s revision of Boas’s definition in *Shakespeare’s Problem Comedies* (1931), in which Lawrence removes *Hamlet* and “confines the problem in these plays to the sphere of ethics,” though Schanzer contends that Lawrence’s readings ultimately contradict his definition because the plays themselves do not fit actually the label.

⁵ See, for example, Ann Thompson’s Introduction to *The Taming of the Shrew*, Moten’s “Letting Go of *Othello*,” and the Untitled *Othello* project: <https://untitledothello.com/>. Even in the 1980s, feminist critics were appropriating

plays are contemporary problem plays because they present *ideological* problems and thus have the potential to make audiences unsure of their *ideological* bearings. In her 2019 interview for NPR's *Code Switch*, Ayanna Thompson argues that three Shakespeare plays—*Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*—are “toxic,” “resist rehabilitation and appropriation,” and should, therefore, no longer be performed.⁶ While the playscripts can be and often are changed in performance, she contends that “ultimately, those three end up kind of circling us back to a really regressive and uncomfortable standpoint.” Those standpoints are, respectively, “deep racism,” “deep anti-Semitism,” and “deep misogyny.” While I do not believe that a full moratorium on producing these Shakespeare plays will address the roots of their problematic ideological status, I do recognize that their continued production—including directors’ willingness to paper over their politically problematic content—helped create the social conditions that allowed my student to tell me, quite seriously, that *Taming* was romantic because Petruchio “broke Katherine down in order to build her back up to self-actualization.”

Textual Selection: Shakespeare and Shrews and Moors, oh my!⁷

Rather than focus on performances of Shakespeare’s plays, my dissertation explores these social conditions by focusing on the adaptation of his plays across various media. While the line that separates adaptation from production changes over time,⁸ the framework of adaptation enables me to decenter Shakespeare’s plays and reorient critical attention to how they are used to

the term to explore and critique what they deemed to be the unsatisfying conclusions to Shakespeare’s “romantic comedies,” in defiance of traditional readings. See, for example, the essays in the anthology *The Woman’s Part* edited by Lenz, Greene, and Neely.

⁶ Demby and Meraji, “All That Glitters.” While other scholars can and have used “appropriation” to also refer to adaptations, Ayanna Thompson only discusses stage productions in her interview.

⁷ A play on the line “Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!” from the 1939 musical film *The Wizard of Oz*, an adaptation of the 1900 children’s book *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum.

⁸ Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*.

perpetuate or disrupt problematic representations of gender, race, sexuality, and class. Thus, this dissertation is less interested in what Shakespeare does than what we do with him.

While my dissertation could explore any number of this new type of Shakespearean problem plays and their adaptations, including *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest*, I have focused on *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Othello* for three reasons. First, these plays hold special salience to current social movements, #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, which have provided a social framework throughout my writing of this project. Second, each of these plays has inspired a large variety of adaptations. Third, these two plays hold pride of place as contemporary problem plays. Even *The Tempest*, which has inspired as many adaptations as *Taming* and *Othello* and garnered intense scrutiny over its interplay of patriarchy, colonialism, race, and gender relations, has not been as unquestionably labeled a problem play by critics, scholars, and audiences. And while *The Merchant of Venice* is, unfortunately, perennially relevant to this topic due to its depiction of the complex intersection of antisemitism, protofeminism, and unequal justice, it has garnered few adaptations outside relatively “faithful” film productions.⁹ Similarly, while *Measure for Measure* may hold a lot of resonance for our contemporary moment in relation to sexual harassment, power dynamics, and the #MeToo movement, it does not exist in many forms beyond stage productions, and therefore offers less chance for discussion of the effects of adaptation than does *The Taming of the Shrew*. (This situation may well change in the

⁹ Adaptation scholarship was, at once point, dominated by discourse around and against fidelity, as many fought to approach adaptations as more than simply “derivative” texts. As Worthen discusses in *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*, fidelity is defined most readily by an idea of proximity: “the value of theatrical representation is measured not by the productive meanings it releases or puts into play, but by the ‘proximity’ it claims to some sense of authorized meaning, to something located in the text or, magically, in ‘Shakespeare’” (37-38). Yet, while pushing against any devaluation of an adaptation as compared to its “source” remains one of the main tenets of contemporary adaptation studies at large, scholars have found it difficult to completely escape valuation in regard to authenticity in terms of fidelity, which plays a large role in how the line between adaptation and not, Shakespeare and not, is drawn. As Lanier points out in his Afterword to *Shakespeare/Not Shakespeare*, “without some degree of fidelity, there can be no adaptation” (296).

next few years as directors rediscover its relevance.) In terms of popularity, *Romeo and Juliet* has been adapted to film possibly more than any other Shakespeare play,¹⁰ yet while it can certainly be employed to comment on sensitive political, social, and cultural divides, it does not incite the same kind of discomfort and pushback as a play like *Othello*.

And both *Taming* and *Othello* have inspired considerable discomfort and pushback since at least the 1970s. In describing his own 1974 reworking of *Taming*, playwright and director Charles Marowitz paints a haunting image of a corroded, cancerous love that marriage cannot save and reads Katherine as fighting against “her cruel punishment to the very end.”¹¹ In his now-famous review of Michael Bogdanov’s 1978 production of *Taming*, Michael Billington suggests that the play should no longer be performed, writing that “there is . . . a larger question at stake than the merits or otherwise of this production. It is whether there is any reason to revive a play that seems totally offensive to our age and our society. My own feeling is that it should be put back firmly and squarely on the shelf.”¹² Ten years later, Shirley Nelson Garner further insists that “no matter how you read the ending, no matter how you define the genre of the play, it is still a ‘bad’ play.”¹³ As Ramona Wray notes, “*The Taming of the Shrew* present[s] obvious updating problems, especially in relation to the treatment of women, sexuality and the place of romance.”¹⁴ To sum up all these reactions, in her introduction to the New Cambridge edition of the play, Ann Thompson observes that “since the late nineteenth century the movement for the liberation of women has done for *The Shrew* what reaction to the antisemitism of our time has done for *The Merchant of Venice*: turned it into a problem play.”¹⁵ Yet, for as many critics as

¹⁰ Lehmann, *Screen Adaptations*, 95.

¹¹ Marowitz, *The Marowitz Shakespeare*, 19.

¹² Billington, “The spluttering firework.”

¹³ Garner, “*Taming of the Shrew*,” 106.

¹⁴ Wray, “Shakespeare and the Singletons,” 185.

¹⁵ Ann Thompson, Introduction to *Taming*, 21.

there are who see the misogyny of *Taming* as an important barrier to its contemporary production, there are readers or viewers who champion its continued presence on the stage.

As for *Othello*, in 1999, Edward Pechter postulated that “*Othello* has become the Shakespearean tragedy of choice for the present generation” because of the racial and gender issues it raises,¹⁶ and only five years earlier, Virginia Mason Vaughan famously wrestled with its racial discourse: “I think this play is racist, and I think it is not.”¹⁷ In a recent article for *The Paris Review*, Fred Moten echoes Ayanna Thompson in declaring that “Shakespeare’s *Othello* is a ‘problem play.’”¹⁸ *Taming* and *Othello* are problem plays precisely because they elicit such deeply emotional, bi-modal, and often self-contradictory or ambivalent responses.

My introductory chapters to each play will explore in more detail the complications that have arisen from these plays and their performance histories which have contributed to their labeling as “problem plays.” For now, however, I propose that performances of *Taming* and *Othello* tend to reproduce the sexism and racism of Shakespeare’s plays, even in those instances when they may also work to subvert it. Performances that seek to recuperate Katherine “the Shrew” or wrestle with the stereotypes of Othello “the Moor” must still first (re)produce those controversial associations and all the baggage that comes with them; the result is that any attempts to completely exorcise the plays of their sexism and racism inevitably fail. My dissertation explores how artists have responded to the performative problems posed by these two popular plays by turning instead to adaptation.

¹⁶ Pechter, *Othello and Interpretive Traditions*, 2.

¹⁷ Vaughan, *Othello*, 70.

¹⁸ Moten, “Letting Go of *Othello*.”

“No matter where you go, there you are”: Shakespearean Adaptation Studies¹⁹

The opening lines of the 2011 children’s adaptation *Gnomeo and Juliet* could be used to introduce any adaptation or performance of any Shakespeare play: “The story you are about to see has been told before. A lot. And now we are going to tell it again, but different.” “Tell it again, but different,” the line from which my dissertation takes its title, cannily echoes the oft-quoted definition introduced by Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation*: “adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication.”²⁰ Adaptation has and continues to be a tricky concept to define and theorize, leading many scholars to lean on spatial metaphors to conceptualize it²¹ as a continuum,²² intertextual web,²³ or rhizomatic constellation,²⁴ while others have argued adaptation resists theorization completely.²⁵ How to define or delimit adaptation becomes even more complicated in the case of *Shakespeare* adaptation, considering the sheer number of adaptations that exist, the historical debates over the authorial boundaries of his playtexts,²⁶ and the cultural weight given to Shakespeare’s name.²⁷ As such, Shakespeare often is given a special place in adaptation studies with its own pocket of scholarship within it.²⁸ My research joins the growing body of scholarship on Shakespearean adaptation that aims to

¹⁹ The quote is from the 1984 sci-fi film *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension*, though variations of it have appeared before.

²⁰ Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, 7.

²¹ Sujata Iyengar’s *Shakespeare and Adaptation Theory* explores the seven metaphors she identifies that scholars often use to describe adaptation: botanical (plant/network), appropriation (theft/property), familial (parent/child), transfer (information/data), meme (network/community), translation (relocation/tradaption), and accident (unacknowledged/accommodation).

²² Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, 171-2.

²³ Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*.

²⁴ Lanier, “Shakespearean Rhizomatics.”

²⁵ Elliot, “The Theory of BADaptation” and *Theorizing Adaptation*.

²⁶ See Stephen Orgel’s examination and critique of some of these debates in “The Authentic Shakespeare” and a more recent exploration of what counts as Shakespeare in Desmet, Loper, and Casey, *Shakespeare/Not Shakespeare*.

²⁷ See, for example, Dobson, *Making of the National Poet*; Bristol, *Big-time Shakespeare*; Hodgdon, *Shakespeare Trade*; and Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*.

²⁸ In her book *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Sanders devotes an entire chapter to Shakespeare, alongside the more capacious categories of myth and fairytale/folklore.

increase, elevate, and expand attention to adaptations in the same way scholars have done with performance—by attending to questions of proximity/fidelity, language/form, and cultural context.

My dissertation does not seek to retheorize adaptation, however, but to offer a new method for leveraging it in the study of Shakespeare. Therefore, rather than retreading the already very trampled ground of (re)conceptualizing adaptation, I list here the field’s key claims that form the basis for my approach to the concept of Shakespearean adaptation:

1. Adaptations can be studied and are sometimes interacted with as independent works, but adaptation studies focuses on the relationship between works, an approach which is, by necessity, comparative and which avoids implying a hierarchical relationship.²⁹
2. “Adaptation” describes both a process and a product.³⁰
3. The study of adaptation requires considering both production and reception.³¹
4. Neither Shakespeare’s works nor Shakespearean adaptations are stable but change over time based on cultural context and audience perception.³²
5. The connection between an adaptation and its “source” text is never linear or one-directional, and this connection becomes even more complicated when one considers that there is no “authentic” Shakespeare text for an adaptor to interact with—Shakespeare and Shakespeare’s works are always already intertextual.³³

²⁹ Cutchins, “Introduction to the Companion.” As Hutcheon writes, “an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary” (9).

³⁰ Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, 15.

³¹ Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*; Desmet, “Recognizing Shakespeare, Rethinking Fidelity.”

³² Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*; Lanier, “Shakespearean Rhizomatics”; Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*.

³³ Lanier, “Shakespeare / Not Shakespeare: Afterword.” In “Twelve Fallacies,” Thomas Leitch has also argued that it is a fallacy to assume that while “adaptations are intertexts, their precursor texts [are] simply texts,” instead arguing that “every text is an intertext that depends for its interpretation on shared assumptions about language, culture, narrative, and other presentational conventions” (165, 167).

6. In that same vein, “Shakespeare” never just means Shakespeare the author, but (pulling from the theory of Michel Foucault) the author-function “Shakespeare”: “the array of works and practices . . . that have in some way laid claim to being Shakespearean and thus shaped our sense of Shakespeare’s larger meaning and power.”³⁴
7. Adaptations do not need to be remediations.³⁵ An adaptation can reimagine a work within its same genre.

Drawing from these principles, this dissertation treats adaptation as a twofold process: 1) production—the creative and artistic vision of an artist, director, or writer when retelling, remaking, or remediating a centuries-old story for a new audience; and 2) reception—how these audiences or readers create networks and associations by recognizing one work in relation to another and how that recognition and response affect their knowledge of both objects. An adaptation, therefore, is an interpretation of a (or multiple) previous work(s), actively inviting a viewer/reader to draw connections between it and other work(s). It is an adaptation if declared one by those who produce it and/or if recognized as such by those who receive it. Adaptation itself, therefore, is not something easily pinned down, as it involves constant negotiations and renegotiations of recognition, which can take place at both the collective and individual levels. Further, the process and reception of Shakespearean adaptation itself can be thought of as an ambivalent process: on the one hand, it is apt to reify Shakespeare’s cultural status within the literary canon; on the other hand, it offers the opportunity to decenter Shakespeare and recenter the “process, ideology, and methodology” readers and audiences use to interact with him.³⁶

³⁴ Lanier, “Shakespeare and Cultural Studies,” 230. See also Desmet and Sawyer, *Shakespeare and Appropriation* and Iyengar, *Shakespeare and Adaptation Theory*. In *Extramural Shakespeare*, Denise Albanese refers to this as “the Shakespeare-function” (5).

³⁵ Hutcheon, *Theory of Adaptation*, 170.

³⁶ Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 25.

“All this has happened before, and it will all happen again”: Adaptive Patterns³⁷

Shakespearean adaptation studies have steadily moved away from the early approach that Sujata Iyengar calls “a structural analysis” of adaptation—“how ‘true’ or faithful” it is to Shakespeare—and towards an analysis driven by post-structuralism, an approach that allows for the deconstruction of hierarchies (of original/derivation, faithful/unfaithful) and a focus on readers and audiences.³⁸ Even as this scholarship branches out into new media³⁹ and new audiences,⁴⁰ however, most scholars continue to use the same methods of analysis: producing single-text close readings or broader comparisons across plays. Using the framework of sociological research, these types of readings cover the “micro” and “macro” levels of research. According to sociologist Amy Blackstone, “at the micro level, sociologists examine the smallest levels of interaction; even in some cases, just ‘the self’ alone.”⁴¹ In its close focus on an individual adaptation and its context, the “case study” approach in adaptation studies matches this microlevel of analysis.⁴² Conversely, “[a]t the macro level, sociologists examine social structures and institutions,” often by focusing on “large-scale patterns.”⁴³ In adaptation studies, such a strategy often means comparing multiple adaptations across different plays within one

³⁷ The quote is the opening line from Disney’s 1953 film *Peter Pan*, based on the story by J.M. Barrie.

³⁸ Iyengar, *Shakespeare and Adaptation Theory*, 5.

³⁹ More critics are paying attention to Shakespeare in conjunction with digital studies, game studies, and virtual reality. See, for example, Fazel and Geddes, *The Shakespeare User*; Bloom, *Gaming the Stage*; and McInnis and Wittek, *Shakespeare and Virtual Reality*.

⁴⁰ The fast-growing field of Global Shakespeare, for instance, often overlaps with adaptation/appropriation studies. Fazel and Geddes’s recent *The Shakespeare Multiverse* borrows from fan studies to focus on new types of community interaction with Shakespeare.

⁴¹ Blackstone, *Principles of Sociological Inquiry*, 13.

⁴² See, for example, Friedman, “The Feminist as Shrew” and Corredera, “*Get Out*.”

⁴³ Blackstone, *Principles of Sociological Inquiry*, 13.

single media genre, cultural institution, or theme, such as the Shakespeare teen film,⁴⁴ BBC productions,⁴⁵ or race.⁴⁶

Combining the micro level's close attention to language and imagery with the macro level's broad consideration of patterns, my dissertation operates at what sociologists call the "meso" level, which reveals the connections between the micro and macro levels by "investigat[ing] groups."⁴⁷ These groups or constellations are made up of multiple adaptations of singular Shakespeare plays—in the case of this dissertation, popular ways of adapting *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Othello*. By analyzing both individual adaptations and the larger adaptive patterns that emerge from specific Shakespeare plays, my meso level analysis illuminates how expectations of genre and form operate comparatively and across media and/or institution (the macro) to dictate and circumscribe the work of particular reworkings (the micro) in relation to specific Shakespeare plays (the meso).

By operating at the meso level, *Tell It Again* thus enacts a new scholarly method of approaching individual plays through their larger adaptation trends, resulting in analyses of adaptations of specific plays that are more comprehensive as well as comparative. In my view, because adaptations are inherently intertextual and frequently multimodal, they place unique methodological demands on the reader and viewer, requiring a careful balance of close reading, comparison, and attention to historical, cultural, and generic specificity. Insofar as my method balances these imperatives, I aim to change the way Shakespeareans approach analyzing adaptations—not as singular texts and their contexts or as part of Shakespeare's larger oeuvre,

⁴⁴ See, for example, Balizet, "Teen Scenes"; Burt, "Te(e)n Things I Hate"; Friedman, "Introduction"; and Neely, "Cool Intentions."

⁴⁵ For example, Willis, *The BBC Shakespeare Plays* and Downes, "'If You'll Excuse My Shakespeare'."

⁴⁶ For example, Burt, "Slammin' Shakespeare" and MacDonald, *Shakespearean Adaptation*.

⁴⁷ Blackstone, *Principles of Sociological Inquiry*, 13. Joseph Gamble, who shared a thesis director with me, also uses the concept of the meso level in their dissertation, "Sex Before Sex Ed," though I was initially unaware of this connection between our projects.

but as curated groupings. For instance, rather than analyzing the teen film *10 Things I Hate About You* to examine its presentation of a more conservative view of sexual politics through close reading or to demonstrate how it operates within the larger structure of teen Shakespeare through comparison with other plays' adaptations, my dissertation examines multiple adaptations of *Taming* across media types in order to illuminate the trend of *Taming* adaptations writ large: what I will argue is their connection to pop-feminism through the romantic comedy genre. I note a similar pattern in recent adaptations of *Othello*, which most often take the form of stage re-visionings. Rather than close reading some of these re-visionings or comparing them to re-visionings of other Shakespeare plays, my exploration of *Othello* focuses on why recent adaptors have chosen to utilize the space of the stage to reimagine Shakespeare's most famous "race play." By mapping these textual clusters, *Tell It Again* decenters Shakespeare and his plays and reorients critical attention to how they have been and continue to be used.

This is not to say that scholars have not noticed such groupings before, but these Shakespearean clusters and their adaptive patterns have not received adequate explicit or sustained attention. In his introduction to the section on "Film Spin-Offs and Citations" in Richard Burt's encyclopedia of Shakespeare in popular culture, Douglas Lanier argues that "several plays have seemed to fall inescapably into the gravitational pull of specific genres," though he does not pursue the "ideological pressure points" behind such play-genre pairings.⁴⁸ Diana Henderson's "A *Shrew* for the Times, Revisited" charts an important connection between conservative backlashes against feminist progress and clusters of *Taming* film adaptations, but is limited to an argument focused on the feminist possibilities of historical film production methods; I thus build on her insights by broadening my scope to examine *Taming* adaptations

⁴⁸ Lanier, "On the Virtue," 134, 135.

across media.⁴⁹ Most closely allied to my own approach is Vanessa Corredera's recent monograph, in which she examines what she calls post-racial *Othello* "reanimations" across genres and forms between 2008-2016 in order to "uncover pieces of America's racial habitus."⁵⁰ Corredera emphasizes her interest in examining a specific historical set of *Othello* adaptations and in working across media, as my project does; but the guiding principle for her textual cluster is the theoretical environment of "post-racial America." By using *Othello* adaptations to expose the racecraft of this America, she ultimately emphasizes the macro level over the meso level, whereas my project remains focused on the adaptive pattern of *Othello* (and *Taming*) itself, emphasizing the histories of these plays as much as their present context.

By examining multiple adaptations of *Taming* and *Othello* through the lens of their adaptive patterns, *Tell It Again* not only provides new analytic foci for each adaptation I discuss, but also shows how larger patterns of adaptation (especially in relation to genre and/or form) circumscribe the plays' capacity to withstand and accommodate critique as well as the capacity of adaptations to provide that critique. My chapters on *Taming* reveal how the adaptive pattern of presenting *The Taming of the Shrew* as a pop-feminist romantic comedy has limited its adaptations' abilities across media to provide a feminist recuperation of Shakespeare's play. I thus argue that being aware of this adaptive pattern can allow scholars to celebrate the feminist moments that do exist within *Taming* adaptations, while also enabling them to better contextualize how and why such adaptations are unable to fully critique the play's misogyny. The chapters in my second section on *Othello* conversely explore the possibilities of adaptation by analyzing the recent popularity of stage re-visionings of *Othello* and how such adaptations

⁴⁹ Henderson, "A *Shrew* for the Times, Revisited." This is an updated version of her chapter, "A *Shrew* for the Times."

⁵⁰ Corredera, *Reanimating Shakespeare's Othello*, 4, 24.

model an active, social justice-oriented engagement with the play's racist and sexist structure. I argue that by acknowledging how these re-visionings both distance themselves from the white patriarchal system of Shakespeare's play and empower Black bodies and voices through performance, scholars can more accurately assess how such re-visionings respond not only to the racist and sexist content of *Othello*, but also its place in histories of anti-Blackness in Western culture today. Therefore, by comparing both the multiple adaptations that constitute each play's adaptive cluster and the way different play's produce different adaptive patterns, as well as analyzing the effect those patterns have on their continued adaptation, my method of analysis attends to the limitations and possibilities of adaptation, specifically when it comes to the cultural impact of Shakespeare's problem plays.

I am guided throughout *Tell It Again* by an intersectional perspective that reads gender, race, class, and sexuality in terms of their mutually constitutive influence. Along the way, I engage with film theory, media studies, popular culture studies, performance studies, feminist theory, and critical race studies, framing Shakespearean adaptation as an ongoing process that requires continual interdisciplinary contextualization.

Chapter Overviews

Tell It Again is organized into four chapters: two parts with two chapters each. The first chapter of each section focuses on the original playscript and its performance history, while the second chapter offers my analysis of specific adaptations. Part I examines *The Taming of the Shrew* and how adaptations across media types frequently attempt to neutralize *Taming's* misogyny through the romantic comedy's generic conventions, producing a dilemma that I call the pop-feminist paradox: the contradictory impulse to attempt to fix the sexism of the play through the romantic comedy genre when in fact the conventions of that genre necessarily

replicate the play's problems. Part II explores the recent popularity of stage adaptations of *Othello*—adapted in this form more in the Western world than any other Shakespeare play—in relation to the “liveness” of performance, which calls attention to the embodied violence of *Othello* and its performance history, as well as the work this play has done, and may continue to do, in crafting, upholding, and reproducing structures of whiteness and anti-Blackness in U.S. culture today. Thus, while the two large sections of my dissertation focus on distinctive adaptive genres or forms in relation to *Taming of the Shrew*, on the one hand, and *Othello*, on the other, my analyses across these foci are united by their attention to performance history and their exploration of how artists rework each play for contemporary audiences, providing a comparative analysis of the limitations and possibilities of adaptation. In each part, the first chapter of the section considers the problems that have arisen from the play and its performance history, while the second surveys how adaptations have approached those problems in order to illuminate the play's adaptive pattern and its effects on the capacity of that play's adaptations to rework Shakespeare without reproducing the sexism, racism, and cross-class violence that these plays enact.

When I first began detecting the adaptive patterns my chapters illuminate, I also quickly found my archives narrowing significantly by geography and language. While the tropes that make up romantic comedies can be found worldwide,⁵¹ the romantic comedy genre's connection to *The Taming of the Shrew* has a very Western history, with most of the examples I found

⁵¹ Romantic comedy K-dramas (Korean dramas), for instance, are extremely popular with audiences all over the world.

coming from Anglophone countries, especially the US and UK.⁵² Similarly, by choosing to focus on the recent trend of adapting *Othello* for the stage, I was again limited to Anglophone texts.⁵³

All of the adaptations I examine were published from the 1990s to 2020, a decision that responds to the popular cultural and scholarly landscapes of the last thirty years. Christy Desmet and Sujata Iyengar argue that the study of what Ruby Cohn called Shakespearean “offshoots”⁵⁴ “gained traction in the early 1990s, with the advent of feminist, psychoanalytic, materialist, multicultural, and postcolonial approaches to Shakespeare.”⁵⁵ The adaptations of *Taming I* examine also correlate with a particular moment in feminism’s impact on popular culture. Following the conservative backlash to feminism and the intracommunal debates regarding sex and pornography of the 1980s, radical feminism was replaced in prominence by liberal feminism, a shift that had a direct impact on the Hollywood romcom, which, according to Stacey Abbott and Deborah Jermyn, “enjoyed a massive revival since the 1990s.”⁵⁶ This revival aligns the romantic comedy genre with what Elizabeth A. Deitchman defines as the appropriation of the Riot Grrrl movement by the mainstream, consumer-driven Girl Power movement in the mid- to late-90s,⁵⁷ a shift characterized by the prioritization of the individual and her pleasure over structural analyses of power; feminism is no longer primarily an ideology, but an aesthetic to be purchased, worn, and desired. The texts I have chosen thus exemplify the proliferation of pop-

⁵² There is, however, also a relatively large cluster of Indian adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

⁵³ There is an earlier stage adaptation of *Othello*—*Not now, sweet Desdemona: A Duologue for Black and White within the Realm of Shakespeare’s Othello*—by the African author Murray Carlin that premiered in 1968.

⁵⁴ Cohn, *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots*.

⁵⁵ Desmet and Iyengar, “Adaptation, appropriation,” 10.

⁵⁶ Abbott and Jermyn, “Introduction,” 3. Many studies of romantic comedies have defined the most recent wave of romcom films as beginning at the end of the twentieth into the early twenty-first century, what Tamar Jeffers McDonald calls the “neo-traditional romantic comedy” (108). See McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*; Abbott and Jermyn, “Introduction”; Mortimer, *Romantic Comedy*; and Kaklamanidou, *Genre, Gender and the Effects of Neoliberalism*.

⁵⁷ Deitchman, “Shakespeare Stiles Style,” 480.

feminist adaptations of *Taming* due to the convergence of genre and gender politics in popular culture, though my chapters on *Taming* also chart the historical precedence of this association.

The *Othello* re-visionings I examine are likewise tethered to a particular historical and cultural moment.⁵⁸ The earliest were performed/published in the wake of the 1992 L.A. protests over the beating of Rodney King by police in 1991; and they can all also be seen in the context of the major wave of premodern critical race studies scholarship that appeared around the 1990s, which Ian Smith argues “initiated a revolution that challenged the preexisting methodological and hermeneutic status quo, expanded the range and substance of investigatory inquiry, rendered explicit the political stakes of critical representation, and effected a reorientation of intellectual perspective in Shakespeare and premodern texts.”⁵⁹ The eight stage re-visionings parallel this critical movement by challenging preexisting approaches to *Othello* through questioning aspects of its performance history too long taken to be the status quo and by making visible the political stakes present in any reworking of Shakespeare.

My first chapter, “‘No profit grows where is no pleasure ta’en’: The Pop-Feminist Paradox of Shakespeare’s *Shrew*,” examines the adaptive pattern that has led to *The Taming of the Shrew*’s association with the romantic comedy genre and the limitations this genre has placed on the feminist possibilities of its adaptations due to what I call *Taming*’s the pop-feminist paradox. Pop-feminism is a feminism that is depicted broadly in mass media (itself shaped by a neoliberal capitalist appropriation of feminism), which sells because it appeals to a wide audience through the evocation of girl power, individualism, and female visibility without actually challenging the power relations of the economic, patriarchal, political framework(s) that

⁵⁸ For reasons that I address in the next section, I use “re-visioning” rather than “adaptation” in my *Othello* chapters in order to follow the lead of the theater practitioners themselves.

⁵⁹ Smith, *Black Shakespeare*, 3. For more the different “waves” or phases of premodern critical race studies, see Erickson and Hall, “‘A New Scholarly Song’.”

perpetuate gender inequality.⁶⁰ Pop-feminist media is thus often ambivalent in its depiction and deployment of feminism as it is more about celebrating a woman's individual freedom than about advocating for political action or substantive change.⁶¹ In reworking Shakespeare's play for the romantic comedy genre, *Taming* adaptations across media perpetuate the flashy (and often enjoyable), but typically politically toothless pop-feminism that has characterized the romantic comedy genre since the '90s. Thus, the play's depiction of sexism and cross-class violence is not critiqued but simply reproduced for a new audience through the romantic comedy genre's explicitly romantic narrative thrust, even as the play's sexism resists romanticization within contemporary expectations of gender equality—a contradiction that I argue constitutes the play's pop-feminist paradox.

Chapter two, "The Limitations of Pop-Feminist Adaptations of Gender Roles in *Taming*," analyzes *Taming*'s pop-feminist paradox in adaptations that represent three of the largest contemporary markets for Shakespeare in the last 30 years: the 1999 film *10 Things I Hate About You* (a teen Shakespeare film), the 2005 British TV film *ShakespeaRe-Told: The Taming of the Shrew* (a BBC production), and the 2016 Anne Tyler novel, *Vinegar Girl* (a Hogarth Press text in a series rewriting Shakespeare's plays). Despite their different media, each text utilizes the

⁶⁰ In her book, *Pop-feminist Narratives*, Emily Spiers posits that "at its core, pop-feminism illuminates the tension inherent in the encounter between political activism and popular culture in a neoliberal economy" (3). While there may be what she calls "emancipatory potential" within pop-feminism, too often pop-feminist discourse maintains "the neoliberal status quo" (6, 2). My definition also aligns with Sarah Banet-Weiser's conceptualization of "popular feminism," a feminism constituted by uplifting women through the "corporate-friendly" visibility of women in media (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg, 10). Such analyses of popular culture are also indebted to and intimately connected with earlier scholarship on liberal feminism, commodity feminism, and postfeminism. See, for example, Gill, "Postfeminist Media Culture" and McRobbie, "Post Feminism and Popular Culture" for considerations of postfeminism as a critical object of study.

⁶¹ In *Empowered*, Banet-Weiser notes that "popular feminism exists along a continuum" with corporate or celebrity feminism receiving more visibility than those feminisms that more often "critique patriarchal structures and systems of racism and violence are more obscured" (4); "that is, in order for some images and practices to become visible, others must be rendered invisible" (11). Elsewhere, Banet-Weiser argues that there are forms of popular feminism that are more intersectional and do this labor, but she believes that a shift from "a *popular* feminism to a *populist* one" may be needed for real, systemic change to occur (Banet-Weiser, Gill, and Rottenberg, 20).

contemporary romantic comedy genre to rework the interweaving of gender, class, and sexuality that makes *Taming* a modern problem play, but ultimately fail to provide a feminist recuperation of Shakespeare's play. This failure is due to the genre apparatus of the romantic comedy, which ultimately highlights *Taming*'s pop-feminist paradox: in order to make the adaptations romantic, each Petruchio character needs to be saved from the misogyny of his Shakespearean counterpart, a trick that the adaptations accomplish by emphasizing his vulnerability. Yet this same romantic framework then relies on the Katherine character shouldering the burden of responsibility for responding to and sympathizing with the hero's emotions, thus reaffirming the very gender inequalities these adaptations purport to challenge.

The first chapter of my *Othello* section, "'Black love of Shakespeare': The 'Vexed Object' of Shakespeare's *Othello*," analyzes *Othello*'s Western performance and reception history and its place in the construction and preservation of whiteness through its positioning of Blackness as the dangerous "Other." This chapter lays out the foundation for my argument that stage re-visionings are the most popular form in which to adapt the play because *Othello* is performatively a problem—a point that has been detailed by other scholars interested in its performance history. By mapping out the performance history of *Othello*, I expose the performance "problems" that the stage re-visionings of my next chapter respond to—the play's critical intersection of gender, race, sexuality, and class in its representations of the Black male body, interracial sex, and intraracial intimacy.

I then use this background to inform my investigation of the eight stage re-visionings in my final chapter, "The Possibilities of Performative Re-Visionings of Black Life in *Othello*." There are more contemporary Anglophone reworkings of *Othello* for the stage published within the last 30 years than any other Shakespeare text—almost all of them written by artists of color:

Paula Vogel's 1993 *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* (Vogel 1994), Barbara Molette and Carlton Molette's 1995 *Fortunes of the Moor* (Molette and Molette 2016), Caleen Sinnette Jennings' 1996 *Casting Othello* (Jennings 1999), Djanet Sears' 1997 *Harlem Duet* (Sears 1997), Toni Morrison's 2011 *Desdemona* (Morrison 2012), Lolita Chakrabarti's 2012 *Red Velvet* (Chakrabarti 2014), Joseph Jomo Pierre's 2013 *Shakespeare's Nigga* (Pierre 2013), and Keith Hamilton Cobb's 2019 *American Moor* (Cobb 2020). I argue that, unlike the *Taming* adaptations that ultimately reproduce the sexism of Shakespeare's play, these re-visionings purposefully distance themselves from Shakespeare's *Othello* and are thus able to more adequately critique how it has defined and limited racial representation on stage. My efforts to amplify the voices the history of Shakespeare's play has too often marginalized include both conventional literary methods and interviews with several of the authors, actors, and directors involved with some of the *Othello* re-visionings, using ethnographic methods to emphasize the embodied and "live" aspect of theatrical performance.

My meso level approach to adaptation studies thus aims at a particular payoff: through its comparative focus, it enables us to see both the limitations and possibilities of adaptation. While scholars may not advocate for adaptation as an inherently progressive process, many recent scholars do approach adaptations themselves through what one might call a politically conscious, ethical lens in order to consider how their content, production, casting, etc. rework a centuries-old play for our current moment.⁶² Such a focus means that many scholars structure their arguments around the success or failure of specific adaptations or adaptation genres to capture the nuances of race, gender, sexuality, and class that concern contemporary, liberal audiences.⁶³

⁶² See Huang and Rivlin, *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*.

⁶³ For example, Kidnie praises the racial and gender complexity of *Harlem Duet* in "There's Magic in the Web" and Burt critiques the conservative feminism he sees in the genre of the teen Shakespeare film in "Te(e)n Things I Hate."

By focusing on the meso level of adaptive patterns, I add another layer to this conversations by asking scholars to recognize how certain genres and forms map onto specific Shakespeare plays and thus limit or enable the capacity of their adaptations to produce the nuanced, complex, and often ethical reworkings scholars look for in “successful” contemporary adaptations. The two sections of my dissertation explore the relatively extreme examples of how adaptive patterns can restrain or authorize the political redress of the various oppressions represented within Shakespeare’s plays, while also demonstrating the cultural complexity of adaptations that make designations of success and failure all but impossible.

The Limitations and Possibilities of Shakespearean Adaptation

Thus, as I move from Part I on *Taming* to Part II on *Othello*, I shift from examining “adaptations” to what I refer to as “re-visionings.” Adaptation, as I define it, signals that the text in question can be seen as having drawn inspiration from a previous text in a way that moves beyond mere quotation or citation. The stage plays I consider in Chapter 4 are adaptations insofar as they all clearly derive from the action, characters, and/or performance of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. Yet, many of the playwrights of these plays and the various theater artists involved in them specifically eschew the label of “adaptation,” due to how it could be seen to connote a text as derivative of or secondary to another. Further, most of these texts do not merely transpose the play to another time or place, but rather directly comment on it and make it their subject.⁶⁴ Many

⁶⁴ Some scholars might label these works “appropriations,” which Sanders describes as “affect[ing] a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain” in contrast with adaptation (26). However, the definition of “appropriation” and its difference from “adaptation” have varied so widely that I have found the language of re-vision more useful to my project. For more on appropriation see Desmet and Sawyer, *Shakespeare and Appropriation*; Lanier, “Shakespeare and Cultural Studies” and “Shakespearean Rhizomatics”; Huang and Rivlin, *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*; Desmet, “Recognizing Shakespeare, Rethinking Fidelity”; and Desmet and Iyengar, “Adaptation, appropriation.”

of the artists instead use words such as “a response to” to or “trope on” *Othello*,⁶⁵ a “remaking of the play,”⁶⁶ or, in the case of Morrison’s *Desdemona*, as variously “a séance . . . a meditation . . . an exorcism.”⁶⁷

While my own definition of adaptation does not position such texts as derivative, in deference to their views, I use “re-visioning” to describe the relationship of these plays to *Othello*. Adrienne Rich first described re-vision in 1972 as the specifically feminist “act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction.”⁶⁸ Peter Erickson adopted this language as an alternative to Shakespearean “adaptation” in order to counter the fact that “new developments are always interpreted and co-opted, in circular fashion, as an adaptation and extension of Shakespeare’s plays” instead of being recognized for the “new directions” they often chart.⁶⁹ Djanet Sears describes *Harlem Duet* as a re-visioning, a label she also applies to Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*, explaining that “these re-visionings, as I call them, they always point back to the original, but they take it and they recenter the central character, or the central perspective.”⁷⁰

Importantly, this conceptual shift helps mark the different consequences that come from *how* one adapts a Shakespeare play or, as *Tell It Again* illustrates, how one adapts a Shakespeare *problem* play. While the *Taming* adaptations I examine all modernize Shakespeare’s play in terms of setting, language, and plot, each presents a relatively straightforward retelling of the play: the heroine is a “shrewish” woman whom “normal” society finds off-putting. Her parental figure sets the stakes for her future while her non-normative femininity has its foil in her sister,

⁶⁵ Booth, Interview. Dechêne similarly called Morrison’s *Desdemona* a “response to” *Othello* in her interview with me.

⁶⁶ Jennings, Interview.

⁶⁷ Benko, Interview.

⁶⁸ Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 18.

⁶⁹ Erickson, “‘Late’ has no meaning here’,” 1.

⁷⁰ Sears, Interview.

who exemplifies society's image of an ideal young woman. The hero is "bought" in some capacity to woo/win the heroine; hijinks ensue until they are united, and the heroine has declared her love and fidelity to the hero. I argue, however, that it is not these adaptations' fidelity to Shakespeare's plot that limits their feminist potential, but rather their recourse to the pop-feminist ambivalence of the romantic comedy genre. As I explore in Chapter 2, while *10 Things I Hate About You* follows the plot of Shakespeare's play even more closely than its BBC TV and Hogarth Shakespeare novel counterparts, its status as a teen film allows it to move further away from the generic structure of the romantic comedy genre and, thus, to move further away from the play's problematic status as sexist and classist. The reproduction of *Taming* adaptations within the pop-feminist romantic comedy genre is what so often limits their capacity for feminist critique.

In contrast, the stage *re-visionings* that I examine deliberately utilize the original theatrical mode of *Othello* while moving beyond the framework of Shakespeare's play in order to respond to *Othello*'s problems without repeating them. While retellings of *Othello* do exist, most often in the form of film, these re-visionings are counterfactual: they imagine what might have occurred in the scenes Shakespeare's play does not depict, envision events before or after the action of the play itself, and think metatheatrically about the play by focusing on its production or performance. In so doing, they model an active, social justice-oriented engagement with *Othello* and its controversial legacy, re-visioning what it might look like to think about Shakespeare's famous race play with new eyes and new voices for new futures.

Chapter 1

“No profit grows where is no pleasure ta’en”: The Pop-Feminist Paradox of Shakespeare’s *Shrew*

Spoken by Tranio to his master Lucentio, the line quoted in my title refers most explicitly to Lucentio’s studies and Tranio’s advice that his master not devote so much of his time to philosophy that he forgoes those topics—music and poetry—that will offer him pleasure.¹ By framing the events that follow, however, this line also highlights the intense interweaving of gender, class, and sexuality at the heart of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Addressed to a youth who will soon switch places with his servant and masquerade as an instructor in order to woo a fair maiden, a youth whose endeavor depends on the success of a separate exchange of bride for dowry, this line firmly links economic profit with the pursuit of pleasure, which, in this play, involves the pursuit and taming of a wife.

It is these same themes, however, that also mark *Taming* as problematic, as it must wrestle with sexism and classism. As a modern problem play, then, it is no surprise that teachers, scholars, directors, actors, and other artists have found working with the play tricky, and these issues extend to adaptations. While adaptations may have more space to play in terms of Shakespeare’s text and the troubles it presents, the themes of gender, class,² and sexuality that

¹ Shakespeare, *Taming* 1.1.39. All quotes from *The Taming of the Shrew* are from the third edition of the Arden Shakespeare.

² I take my definition of class from Press and Rosenman, “Consumerism and the Languages of Class,” who remark that:

scholarly assessments of social class difference in the USA have determined that social class identity is a mixture of the factors of educational attainment (which confers a certain cultural capital), occupational category or position (some occupations confer social or cultural capital over and above the remuneration they yield), and financial capital (this would include access to wealth, perhaps that accrued through

constitute *Taming*'s problematic status are often central to any retelling or rewriting of its narrative and, as I note in my introduction, *Taming* still remains a popular play to perform and adapt.³ So how do adaptors approach a play with such fraught content? In her book, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation*, Margaret Jane Kidnie demonstrates how some adaptations imply that Shakespeare "did *not* get it right," but how his plays are therefore "corrected" depends on the production team, the medium of transmission, and the audience—in other words, "what exactly one wants 'in this day and age'."⁴ Due to *Taming*'s intersection of gender, sexuality, and class, most contemporary adaptations attempt to rework the play through a feminist lens and my next chapter examines three such adaptations: Gil Junger's 1999 film *10 Things I Hate About You*, the BBC's 2005 TV series *ShakespeaRe-Told*, and Anne Tyler's 2016 novel *Vinegar Girl*.

Spanning the last three decades and representing three different mediums, these adaptations spin different stories from Shakespeare's play, and yet all three place a specific emphasis on gender, class, and sexuality, and, like most contemporary adaptations of *Taming*, all seek to rewrite Shakespeare's play by emphasizing the relationship between Katherine and Petruchio as explicitly romantic. In order to make the play palatable for a modern audience, most recent adaptations of *Taming* have at least one of two main goals.⁵ First: "saving" Katherine from her subordinate position in the play's narrative by centering her voice, creating more sympathy for her character, and fleshing out her backstory in order to legitimate her "shrewish"

inheritance or through business ventures, as well as the salary attendant upon one's own or one's partner's job). Social class identity is a complex phenomenon drawing from the status conferred by each of these categories. (81-2)

Each adaptation I explore demonstrates class utilizing a different configuration of these categories.

³ Henderson notes that while we may expect *Taming* to be a less popular play (more like "its farcical companion *The Comedy of Errors*"), "more than eighteen screen versions of the play have been produced in Europe and North America, putting *Shrew* in a select league with the 'big four' tragedies, and outpacing those comedies scholars usually dub more 'mature'" ("Revisited" 120).

⁴ Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*, 111.

⁵ Relatively recent examples include *Deliver Us from Eva* (2003 film), *10 Things I Hate About You* (2009-2010 TV show), *Isi Life Mein...*! (2010 Bollywood film), and *Kate the Cursed* (2014-15 YouTube series).

nature. And second: “redeeming” her relationship with Petruchio by emphasizing their equality and creating sympathy for his character so that her growing affection for him makes some kind of sense.⁶ These agendas also transform *Taming* into a palatable liberal feminist or “pop-feminist” romance.

As noted in my Introduction, pop-feminism appeals to a wide audience by celebrating female individualism and power without necessarily challenging the larger patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality. Such a feminism aligns well with the contemporary romantic comedy genre made familiar by fiction, drama, and film made for TV or the cinema. Douglas Lanier argues that “several plays have seemed to fall inescapably into the gravitational pull of specific genres . . . *Macbeth* and the gangster saga, *Hamlet* and film noir, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and sex comedy, *Othello* and the backstage thriller, and *King Lear* and family melodrama.”⁷ *The Taming of the Shrew*, I submit, similarly falls into the gravitational pull of the romantic comedy. While the “romantic comedy” genre—often recognizable by a light-hearted tone and a plot that emphasizes and usually ends with romance—has most recently been applied almost exclusively to films, it also has a long literary history, which I will discuss more below. Important for now is the acknowledgment that the medium of the different adaptations I examine do have an effect on their relationship to the genre of romantic comedy as well as the salience of that label for them. For the purposes of my argument, I will thus use the term “romcom” to refer to the film (*10 Things*) and the TV film (*ShakespeaRe-Told*), but will retain the longer, more literary label of “romantic comedy” for the novel (*Vinegar Girl*). While some film scholars may object to this designation, I follow the more recent colloquial convention of applying that generic

⁶ As White notes of *10 Things* in *Shakespeare’s Cinema of Love*, this has the added effect of making some adaptations of *Taming* more like those of *Much Ado About Nothing*, with the relationship between Katherine and Petruchio now mirroring the “merry war” between Beatrice and Benedict (41-2).

⁷ Lanier, “On the Virtue,” 134.

category to novels⁸ and the numerous reviewers who named it in their description of Tyler's book.⁹

Yet, due to the emphasis on a romantic resolution that characterizes the romantic comedy genre, when *Taming* is adapted within the romantic comedy's generic formula, such adaptations fail to provide a feminist rehabilitation of the play's misogyny. While many scholars do list *Taming* among what we might now call Shakespeare's "romantic comedies," it stands out against the others due to its use of farce and presentation of marriage as a solution to and controlling of female power. Where plays like *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Much Ado* celebrate the intelligence and witty repartee of their heroines, *Taming* ultimately silences its own. Indeed, *Taming* seems to have more in common with *The Comedy of Errors* in its portrayal of comical violence than any of Shakespeare's marriage comedies. *Taming* certainly exhibits Shakespeare's development as a playwright, serving as a bridge between *Comedy of Errors* and *As You Like It* as Shakespeare moved from farce to farcical romance to "romantic comedy," and its placement of a marriage at the center of its text rather than the end solidifies its distinction from Shakespeare's other marriage comedies. There also remains a difference between Shakespeare's marriage comedies and contemporary romantic comedies, as the comedic endings to Shakespeare's plays typically enact a return to social stability through marriage,¹⁰ while contemporary romantic comedies focus instead on the achievement of individual happiness through romance. *Taming* itself is almost unrecognizable as a romantic comedy when one factors

⁸ A quick Google search will show many articles, blogs, and sites devoted to romantic comedy books. (The website Goodreads even lists "Romantic Comedy" under its genres for searching: <https://www.goodreads.com/genres/romantic-comedy>.)

⁹ McAlpin's review for *NPR* calls *Vinegar Girl* "a fizzy cocktail of a romantic comedy." In the *Chicago Tribune*, Memmott refers to it as "like a New Age romantic comedy." A blurb in *Cosmopolitan* labeled it as "family drama meets rom-com" ("Vinegar Girl").

¹⁰ Feminist and queer scholars have problematized the notion, however, that heterosexual marriage operates as the telos of Shakespeare's comedies. See, for example, Traub, *Desire and Anxiety*; Orgel, *Impersonations*; and Crawford, "The Homoerotics" and "*All's Well*."

in this emphasis on romantic love. When Petruchio and Katherine speak of love, it is always performative—such as when Petruchio lies about their feelings to Katherine’s father or tries to couch his abusive behavior in honeyed words¹¹—persuasive—as when Katherine tries to convince Petruchio to stay for their wedding feast or not to return home when she at first refuses to kiss him in the street¹²—or within the context of Katherine’s final speech about a woman’s duty to her husband.¹³ In all of these contexts, the register of romance is conspicuously absent. Compare this absence to the plentiful language of romantic love in many of Shakespeare’s other comedies and even some of his tragedies, in which couples frequently declare their love for one another.

Further, while Shakespeare’s *Taming*, alongside his other marriage comedies, may comprise the historic roots of the contemporary romantic comedy, this does not mean that his plays do not require updating for contemporary audiences. In fact, there is enough of a genre shift between his comedies and contemporary romantic comedies that numerous scholars read various contemporary *Taming* adaptations as specifically working to redeem or rewrite Shakespeare’s text; such efforts at “redemption” stem from the desire to make *Taming* into something digestible for its current audience, not only in terms of complexity, but also in terms of misogyny and patriarchy.¹⁴ This shift requires certain changes to Shakespeare’s narrative: a Katherine whom audiences can sympathize with and root for, a Petruchio who deserves to win her heart, and a relationship that feels genuine and necessary for both characters—which in the romantic comedy genre means a romantic one.

¹¹ Shakespeare, *Taming* 2.1.159, 314 and 4.3.40, 54.

¹² Shakespeare, 3.2.205 and 5.1.139.

¹³ Shakespeare, 5.2.159, 170.

¹⁴ For this argument concerning the BBC *ShakespeaRe-Told* series, see Downes, “‘If You’ll Excuse My Shakespeare’”; Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare*; Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*; and Wray, “Shakespeare and the Singletons.” For a consideration of *10 Things* as simplifying the play’s message for its audience, see Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare* and Burt, “Te(e)n Things I Hate.”

Taming's narrative of wife-taming may have passed as a comical farce in early modern England,¹⁵ but today's pop-feminist audiences seem to require a happy ending that at least implies gender equality and mutuality. Even the best productions have trouble providing this because Shakespeare's text does not lay a good foundation, by contemporary standards, for the "progressive" romance most audiences want to see.¹⁶ This creates a genre problem: since Shakespeare's play is identified as a comedy, contemporary adaptations most often update it using the closest equivalent—the romantic comedy. Because the creation of an emotionally satisfying relationship is an essential component of the romantic comedy genre, in reworking *Taming* in order to present Katherine and Petruchio's relationship as explicitly romantic, romantic comedy adaptations of *Taming* are unable to escape the sexism of the play.¹⁷ The contradictory impulse to attempt to fix the sexism of the play through the romantic comedy genre when in fact the conventions of that genre necessarily replicate the play's problems comprises what I call *Taming's* pop-feminist paradox.

By using a comprehensive, comparative analytic, I use *Taming* to demonstrate how genre expectations operate across media types to dictate and circumscribe the work of adaptations. Thus, while numerous scholars have observed that new productions and adaptations of *Taming* tend to reproduce the play's fraught issues with gender, sexuality, and class, single-text close

¹⁵ In her own reading of the play and its history, Garner argues that "Though *Taming* does not feel to me like farce, I do not wish to argue about its genre. Accepting it for a moment as farce, I would ask rather: Could the taming of a "shrew" be considered the proper subject of farce in any but a misogynistic culture?" ("*Taming of the Shrew*," 109). Similarly, I am less interested in pinpointing *Taming's* original genre than in demonstrating that it cannot operate as a farce today (as some might claim) without a serious reworking of its misogynistic themes.

¹⁶ As Leggatt posits of the play in relation to *10 Things* specifically, "calling their relationship a love story signals a crucial difference between the movie and the play. Whether Katherine and Petruchio can really be called lovers is debatable, and to do so may be the triumph of hope over close reading. But *10 Things* is unequivocally a romantic comedy that aims to work within the audience's comfort" ("Teen Shakespeare," 246). In other words, it is extremely difficult to simply read the play as presenting Katherine and Petruchio's relationship as one of romance. This element instead occurs through the shift of the play into a romantic comedy adaptation.

¹⁷ Moving away from this genre could offer more chances for a feminist critique of the play. Marowitz's 1974 *Shrew*-collage represents a good example of such a genre shift and what it makes possible.

readings or broader comparisons across plays have meant that they have missed how adapting *Taming* with an emphasis on romance through the romantic comedy limits these adaptations' capacity for feminist critique and, thus, the terms by which they can be critiqued.¹⁸ By operating at the meso level—combining close readings of specific *Taming* adaptations (the micro) across media types (the macro)—I am able to chart a pattern in *Taming* adaptation: how the ability of these adaptations to critique the sexism of Shakespeare's play is limited by their recourse to romance due to their investment in pop-feminism.

This is not to say that pop-feminism and the *Taming* adaptations that evoke it never critique aspects of patriarchal culture. As Emily Spiers makes clear of pop-feminist media in general, the medium of popular culture can create opportunities for feminist engagement, but these opportunities might be limited by the media's entanglement with capitalism.¹⁹ In terms of the *Taming* adaptations I examine, this means subordinating individual moments of feminist potential to the overall romance arc of the romantic comedy. This is true of their depiction of sexuality and race as well. Both *ShakespeaRe-Told* and *10 Things* open up the possibility for non-heterosexual or heteronormative relationships, but ultimately end with heterosexuality, and

¹⁸ For examples of scholarly articles that conduct single-text close readings of *Taming* adaptations in relation to these themes, see: MacDonald, "The Right Foundation" (though her full book project considers individual texts within the larger framework of Shakespearean adaptation and race); Friedman, "The Feminist as Shrew"; Jones, "An Awful Rule"; and Pittman, "Taming *10 Things*." There are many examples of scholarly works that look more broadly at Shakespeare adaptations across plays, what follows only are those that include a consideration of *Taming* adaptations. For works that think across adaptation in terms of genre, see Cartelli, "Doing It Slant" and White, *Shakespeare's Cinema of Love*. In particular, there exists much scholarly work that looks specifically at the phenomena of teen Shakespeare. For instance, Balizet, "Teen Scenes"; Burt, "Te(e)n Things I Hate"; Friedman, "Introduction"; Leggatt, "Teen Shakespeare"; and Neely, "Cool Intentions." Both Cartelli, "Doing It Slant" and Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare* look specifically at the four films from *ShakespeaRe-Told* in relation to the romcom genre. Other scholars examine adaptations across Shakespeare's plays through the lens of certain themes, such as gender and feminism: Henderson, "A *Shrew* for the Times, Revisited," Wray, "Shakespeare and the Singletons," and Deitchman, "Shakespeare Stiles Style"; authenticity versus accessibility through updating: Downes, "If You'll Excuse My Shakespeare," Hodgdon, "Wooing and Winning," Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare*, and Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*; race: Burt, "Slammin' Shakespeare" and MacDonald, *Shakespearean Adaptation*; and advertising: French, *Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood*.

¹⁹ Spiers, *Pop-feminist Narratives*, 6.

while there have been recent efforts to diversify both Shakespeare and the romantic comedy genre, each have been extremely white/whitewashed for much of their histories, a phenomenon reflected in the adaptations I consider as well.²⁰ As Sarah Banet-Weiser observes, “the popular feminism that is most visible is that which is white, middle-class, cis-gendered, and heterosexual.”²¹ Thus, while the adaptations I examine can all be read through an intersectional lens, few explicitly wrestle with issues of race or class. In fact, the utilization of the problematic intersection at the center of Shakespeare’s play to rework and update his play in order to fix that problematic intersection constitutes another aspect of *Taming*’s pop-feminist paradox, as a pop-culture audience both desires the appearance of subversive narratives of gender, class, and sexuality while also seeking satisfaction in the formulaic, heteronormative genre of the contemporary romantic comedy. This is not altogether unique for pop-feminist media, as Spiers argues that “some pop-feminist attempts to articulate a feminist response to contemporary manifestations of discrimination and gender inequality involve them drawing on the principles of the very discourses upholding those oppressive practices.”²² None of the adaptations I’ve examined therefore ultimately critique the play’s tale as rooted in sexism and cross-class violence, but instead use gender, class, and sexuality to tie themselves into new and different knots from those in Shakespeare’s play. These knots, I argue, are a function of these adaptations’ investment in pop-feminism, which prioritizes individual happiness through romance over communal and systemic change, by adapting *Taming* as a romantic comedy.

²⁰ See Burt, “Slammin’ Shakespeare,” and Deitchman, “Shakespeare Stiles Style” for a consideration of race in *10 Things*, and Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare* for a reading of *Shakespeare Re-Told’s Taming* as racially conservative. In terms of *Vinegar Girl*, while Dr. Battista is noted as being “olive-skinned” and Kate is described as “dark-skinned,” the only moments in the text remotely touching on race have to do with Pyotr’s ethnicity as an immigrant, but he appears to be Eastern European and so racial diversity in Tyler’s novel is, at best, ambiguous. For more on the whiteness of the romantic comedy genre, see chapter six of MacDonald, *Shakespearean Adaptation*.

²¹ Banet-Weiser, *Empowered*, 13.

²² Spiers, *Pop-feminist Narratives*, 18.

To clarify *Taming*'s connection to the romantic comedy genre, I begin with a brief overview of the history of that generic category and its application to Shakespeare's works. Scholars as varied as L. Monique Pittman, R. S. White, Claire Mortimer, and Cherry Potter have noted that the romantic comedy genre is often assumed to have its roots in Shakespeare's comedies,²³ and while White views screwball or 'odd-couple' comedy as specifically "anti-romantic," he goes so far as to argue that *The Taming of the Shrew* is the source of that subgenre.²⁴ Cherry Potter takes this claim to its extreme when she insists that this Shakespeare play "is the most enduring and the most popular romantic comedy of all time."²⁵ While it does not mention *Taming*, the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* asserts in its definition of the romantic comedy genre that "the best-known examples are Shakespeare's comedies of the late 1590s, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, and *As You Like It*."²⁶ David Shumway traces the romantic comedy's history back even farther, with one ancestor being the "Greek New Comedy," which presents the function of marriage as "the renewal of society," and another being the medieval romance, which idealizes love though not always in connection with marriage.²⁷ He argues that "Shakespearean romantic comedy," however, is the first genre that "expresses a new,

²³ Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare*, 147; White, *Shakespeare's Cinema of Love* (esp. 3 and 16); Mortimer, *Romantic Comedy*, 10; Potter, *I Love You But*, xiv-v. In *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, Grindon similarly touts the "pedigree" of romantic comedies, which "includes William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Oscar Wilde," in order to argue that this is not a genre to be dismissed (1).

²⁴ White, *Shakespeare's Cinema of Love*, 56, 54.

²⁵ Potter, *I Love You But*, xv. This claim becomes a little less surprising, however, when one considers her own reading of *Taming*, which emphasizes the sexual chemistry between Petruchio and Katherine from the beginning (xvii), somehow sees Katherine as "despite herself agree[ing] to marry Petruchio" (xvii), interprets Katherine as "in good spirits" on the ride back to her father's house *because* she gets to be playful with her husband (xviii), reads her final speech as "brilliant if enigmatic . . . one of triumph" (xviii-xix), and ultimately argues that "Kate's spirit as a woman has not so much been tamed as liberated" (xix).

²⁶ Baldick, "romantic comedy," 2015.

²⁷ Shumway, *Modern Love*, 12-13. Kuhn and Westwell also write in their definition of "romantic comedy" in *A Dictionary of Film Studies* that "antecedents of the romantic comedy include 18th-century restoration comedy and 19th-century romantic melodrama in literature and theatre, though these related forms tend to treat their subject matter in a less comedic manner."

middle-class myth that links romantic love and marriage.”²⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a romantic comedy as “(originally) a comedy having qualities associated with a literary romance . . . (subsequently also) a film or other work with a light, comedic tone and a plot centering on a romantic relationship (often viewed in a sentimental or idealized way),” with citations beginning in the eighteenth century.²⁹ Thus, while some early literature has now been given this generic designation, such labels have been applied post hoc, including to Shakespeare’s plays.

Many contemporary readers and scholars are familiar with the second definition of this term, which describes the film genre that most scholars agree originated in the 1930s, though with ties to “the marital comedies of the 1910s and 1920s.”³⁰ As it is used today, “romantic comedy” most often refers specifically to the formulaic genre such films made popular. This genre’s first iteration, the screwball comedy, became popular during the Great Depression, as Mortimer argues that it “offered energy, fun and playfulness . . . [and] an exhilarating sense of escapism and, ultimately, optimism, as the audience remain comfortable in the knowledge that out of the chaos there will be a happy ending” that unites romance and marriage.³¹ With the outbreak of World War II, these films also delved into the new gender politics arising out of women leaving the home. After the war, the romantic comedy genre lost some of its popular appeal as “society had undergone a sustained period of revisionism in terms of gender relations” with the return of men to the workforce.³² The mid-50s, however, brought about the return of this genre in the form of the sex comedy; as public attitudes towards sex changed, the focus of the

²⁸ Shumway, *Modern Love*, 16.

²⁹ “romantic, adj. and n.”

³⁰ Mortimer, *Romantic Comedy*, 10.

³¹ Mortimer, 11-12.

³² Mortimer, 15.

films became seduction more than romance, though often to foreground one character's resistance to sexual consummation. But romantic comedies became outdated again as this exploiting of the comedic features involved in withholding sex was at odds with the sexual freedoms of the "swinging sixties."³³ There were few romantic comedies produced again until the '80s, aside from some isolated examples that were not well received and what some have termed the "nervous comedies" of the late 1970s (such as Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*) that rejected happy endings for more cynical realism.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the diminutive term "romcom" appeared as the popularity of romantic comedy waned, first coming into use in the '60s. While it was originally used only to describe films, it is now often used interchangeably with romantic comedy to refer to a work or the genre itself, regardless of media.³⁴ When the genre's popularity surged again in the late 1980s (a popularity that continues today), such films "reflect[ed] a concern with traditional models of heterosexual relationships and a desire for more conventional and old-fashioned pairings . . . steadfastly reject[ing] the downbeat endings of the nervous romance in favour of fantastical happy endings."³⁵ With its diminutive title and turn to the celebration of a fanciful ending, it became far too easy to deride the romantic comedy as a genre for sentimental women.³⁶ While the romantic comedy genre has its roots in a longer literary tradition, then, the "romcom" is the newest iteration of a genre that has depicted and evolved alongside various social (and often traditional) attitudes towards gender, romance, sex, and marriage.

³³ Mortimer, 17.

³⁴ "romcom, n."

³⁵ Mortimer, *Romantic Comedy*, 17-18.

³⁶ In *Romantic Comedy*, McDonald gives as an example of this gendered association the scene from *Sleepless in Seattle* where Suzy cries remembering the film *An Affair to Remember* and her husband and brother mock her by pretending to cry over *The Dirty Dozen*: "the implication is that women enjoy crying over love stories, even successful ones, whereas men much more calmly watch scenes of destruction where important actions are performed" (1-2).

The general romantic comedy plot follows a typical formula: 1) the introduction of the romantic leads and their individual struggles (in love, family, society, etc.), then 2) the couple meets and sparks fly (the battle of the sexes theme often relies on initial antagonism), until 3) romance blossoms as they see each other as the ‘answer’ to their struggles, though they still must contend with 4) the central conflict/source of tension, which 5) they overcome individually and then together through transformations, culminating in 6) their happy ending as a couple.³⁷ This formula persists, despite the fact that this genre has, over time, been split by scholars and practitioners into separate subgenres.³⁸ Two of the three texts I examine—*Shakespeare Re-Told* and *10 Things*—are easily recognizable as part of the romcom genre, though they could be further differentiated according to the categories of Hollywood romcom, British romantic comedy, and even screwball comedy. While romance does not drive the plot of *Vinegar Girl* in the same way as the other adaptations, the way its paratext frames it as a romantic comedy, its categorization as a romantic comedy by readers, and its focus on an individual woman’s empowerment while reinscribing gender roles puts it firmly under the rubric of a pop-feminist adaptation of *Taming*, with all the complexities that designation brings with it. My interest in these texts is thus in emphasizing how they illuminate a pattern in *Taming* adaptations because a recourse to pop-feminism inevitably shapes *Taming*’s narrative with a pop culture, mass audience in mind due to

³⁷ Many scholars have listed the simple/assumed formula of the romantic comedy as some variation of: boy and girl meet, boy and girl separate due to conflict/obstacle, boy and girl overcome the conflict/obstacle and reunite. See, for example, Abbott and Jermyn, “Introduction,” 2; Mernit, *Writing the Romantic Comedy*, 13; Mortimer, *Romantic Comedy*, 4; and Shumway, *Modern Love*, 157. Other, more abstract definitions might state only that a romantic comedy has a central quest for love, which almost always resolves happily. See McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 9. In *Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, Grindon offers the most detailed model I’ve come across, listing ten “moves” that make up the “master plot” of the romantic comedy (8-10). Many scholars also make clear the difficulties of defining the borders of any genre, but especially one as prolific as the romantic comedy. In *Masculinity in the Contemporary Romantic Comedy*, Alberti overcomes this difficulty by arguing that, like gender, genres “are mental constructs” (9) and can be read performatively “as a series of culturally dynamic and constantly evolving assumptions, expectations, and marketing practices, conceptual categories that include iconography, plot, and theme but that are also inherently unstable and never uniform from viewer to viewer, from any one given marketing campaign to another” (8). Similarly, Abbott and Jermyn approach the romcom as “a living genre” (“Introduction,” 3).

³⁸ McDonald, however, argues that there is fluidity and overlap between these categories (*Romantic Comedy*, 3, 9).

how the romantic comedy genre imagines its audience in terms of the capitalist system of cultural production. This audience is presumed to desire narratives that both fit the formulaic nature of the genre—making them easily consumable and so profitable—and yet also offer a seemingly feminist perspective on gender, class, and sexuality. In other words, pop-feminism both invites a reworking of Shakespeare’s text and limits how subversive and/or recuperative those reworkings can be.

In this chapter, first I examine Shakespeare’s playtext to show how gender, class, and sexuality are integral to the story and its status as a problem play. Then, I take a brief look at some of the recent stage productions that have tackled *Taming*, with varying degrees of success, through an emphasis on these same themes in order to explore what adaptive conventions are readily available for interpreting Shakespeare’s play. Finally, I turn to adaptations of *Taming* more generally and briefly consider the specific contexts of the three adaptations I have chosen—the BBC’s 2005 TV series *ShakespeaRe-Told*, Anne Tyler’s 2016 novel *Vinegar Girl*, and Gil Junger’s 1999 film *10 Things I Hate About You*—to show how they emphasize the play’s intersections of gender, class, and sexuality via the romantic comedy genre.

Shakespeare’s Shrew

The intense interweaving of gender, class, and sexuality both drives and problematizes the plot of Shakespeare’s *Taming* and its presentation of Katherine as “shrew.” After hearing Baptista’s edict that he will not marry off Bianca until Katherine has a husband, both Gremio and Hortensio frame any suitor of Katherine’s as inevitably there only for the money, if even that can make the endeavor worthwhile.³⁹ Hortensio soon finds the solution to his problem in the arrival

³⁹ Shakespeare, *Taming* 1.1.122-9. For consistency across the texts I work with, I use the more common spellings of “Katherine” and “Petruccio” instead of the Arden’s “Katherina” and “Petruccio.”

of Petruchio, who announces that, with the death of his father, he has come “to wive it wealthily in Padua.”⁴⁰ Hortensio offers him the possibility of “a shrewd, ill-favoured wife” with the caveat that “she shall be rich, / And very rich,” and Petruchio immediately determines he must have her.⁴¹ Katherine’s dowry therefore sets the terms for her desirability, in contrast to Bianca, whose beauty and demure nature establish her value. Yet, Hortensio also speaks of Bianca in the language of economic worth: “in Baptista’s keep my treasure is. / He hath the jewel of my life in hold.”⁴² Katherine echoes this when she complains to Baptista about the way he treats his daughters differently, also calling Bianca his “treasure.”⁴³ When Gremio and Tranio later compete with each other for Bianca’s hand, they do so by promising more and more lavish bride prices as Baptista has stated that the man who “can assure my daughter greatest dower / Shall have my Bianca’s love.”⁴⁴ Both women, then, are exchanged with or alongside money, their value measured by what they are worth economically to buy or sell.

This misogynistic exchange of women is paralleled by the deep imbrication of gender and class struggles during the early modern period. In her discussion of the play and its historical context, Lynda E. Boose puts forward “a model of class-to-gender displacement as the appropriate lens for reading *The Shrew*,” as she notes the way land enclosures put increasing pressure on class status in relation to the privatization of property.⁴⁵ Class anxieties, however, were displaced onto “the public subjugation and private ownership of women.”⁴⁶ While the play itself begins with class issues, these too are couched inside gender discord and audiences are never returned (at least in *The Shrew*) to the Induction’s frame in ways that might foreground this

⁴⁰ Shakespeare, 1.2.76.

⁴¹ Shakespeare, 1.2.59, 61-2.

⁴² Shakespeare, 1.2.116-7.

⁴³ Shakespeare, 2.1.32.

⁴⁴ Shakespeare, 2.1.347-8.

⁴⁵ Boose, “*Taming of the Shrew*,” 213n41.

⁴⁶ Boose, 203.

displacement.⁴⁷ Instead, anxieties about losing one's status as "husband" (land owner) become hostilities enacted through the enclosure of wives.⁴⁸ In Petruchio's taming of Katherine, then, gender and class become entwined: "Beginning with her public humiliation at the wedding, every time Kate resists submission in the arena of gender, she is punished by degradation in the arena of class. Ultimately, what the play is designed to teach Kate is that, in the arena of gender, the only privileges she may claim are the passive, receptive ones of femininity."⁴⁹ As Boose cleverly notes, Petruchio's permission for Katherine to outfit herself as a gentlewoman depends upon her ability to be "a gentle woman."⁵⁰ Class and gender, therefore, at least as pertains to Katherine's position in the play, cannot be separated.

Frances E. Dolan approaches class and gender in the play from an intersectional angle in her consideration of domestic violence in the early modern period, as she points to how "prescriptive literature" redirected spousal violence towards "more acceptable, that is, unambiguously subordinate, targets": children and servants.⁵¹ Her argument focuses on "the wife and mistress's contradictory position in the early modern household—as both her husband's partner and his subordinate," but also touches on *Taming* as she points out that Katherine's violence becomes acceptable when directed at servants instead of Petruchio.⁵² Part of Katherine's taming, therefore, involves her learning "the complex etiquette for domestic

⁴⁷ I speak here about Sly's disagreement with the Hostess precipitating the Lord's jest to make the drunk man believe he is the lord. As Boose posits, "To rechannel the implied class resentment into the arena of gender, the frame effectively transposes the woman's and landlord's positional relations to Sly. What is thereby produced is a narrative in which the woman becomes the agent of dispossession who throws the impoverished Sly out of domicile and the Lord becomes the benefactor who welcomes him, makes him lord of the castle, and lavishes on him sumptuous food and soft bedding" (*Taming of the Shrew*, 213).

⁴⁸ Boose, "Taming of the Shrew," 208.

⁴⁹ Boose, 219.

⁵⁰ Boose, 221.

⁵¹ Dolan, "Household Chastisements," 208.

⁵² Dolan, 204-5.

violence.”⁵³ Dolan also draws attention to Boose’s argument and Katherine’s class, positing that “[Katherine] acts simultaneously out of gender subordination and class (or age) privilege. It is not just that class is displaced onto gender, as Lynda Boose has brilliantly argued, but also that attention to gender alone can obscure conflicts of class in which Katherine is a privileged participant.”⁵⁴ For Dolan, in matters of household violence, not only is class discord displaced onto gendered hostilities, but much of the violence in the play is actually enacted along class lines. In marking a gendered component to household violence (that is, who could beat whom), Dolan points to “how inseparably intertwined are the categories of class, gender, race, sexuality, authority, and violence as they conflict and overlap to position co-habitants in the household.”⁵⁵

Violence also provocatively links the three axes I identify as central to *Taming’s* narrative, with gendered, sexual, and class violence continuously driving the plot. In the Induction, the Lord and his servants attempt to trick Sly by offering him titillating pictures depicting scenes from Ovid—Adonis, Io, and Daphne—all stories that Garner notes contain “suggestions of violence, particularly rape,” presenting “a notion of sexuality associated with the violent, the predatory, the sadistic.”⁵⁶ This connection of sexual activity with violence continues into the main play with Petruchio claiming before he has even met Katherine that “I will board her though she chide as loud / As thunder when the clouds in autumn crack.”⁵⁷ Most of the physical abuse that Dolan points to in the play takes place across gendered and classed lines, with Petruchio beating his servants as both threat and model to Katherine who thus learns to redirect her anger toward the “appropriate” targets. At the base level of the narrative, therefore,

⁵³ Dolan, 218.

⁵⁴ Dolan, 219.

⁵⁵ Dolan, 221.

⁵⁶ Garner, “*Taming of the Shrew*,” 108, 107.

⁵⁷ Shakespeare, *Taming* 1.2.94-5. For more on these lines, see Garner, “*Taming of the Shrew*,” 114.

violence forms the connective tissue between the intersectional themes of gender, class, and sexuality, pointing to this imbrication as itself central to the play's status as a "problem play."

It is this intersection, therefore, that I argue scholars must keep central in any reading of the play; otherwise, one risks erasing the complexity of the play's misogyny. For instance, sexual activity plays an integral part in the gendered exchange of the taming plot. Gremio marks "bedding" Katherine as a necessary step in removing her as an obstacle to Bianca's marriage, asking for someone "that would thoroughly woo her, wed her, and bed her, and rid the house of her."⁵⁸ When Katherine and Petruchio first meet, their exchange is full of sexual puns:

PETRUCCIO. . . . come, sit on me.
KATHERINA. Asses are made to bear, and so are you.
PETRUCCIO. Women are made to bear, and so are you.
KATHERINA. No such jade as you, if me you mean.
PETRUCCIO. Alas, good Kate, I will not burden thee,
For, knowing thee to be but young and light—
KATHERINA. Too light for such a swain as you to catch,
And yet as heavy as my weight should be.
.
PETRUCCIO. Who knows not where a wasp does wear his sting?
In his tail.
KATHERINA. In his tongue.
PETRUCCIO. Whose tongue?
KATHERINA. Yours, if you talk of tails, and so farewell.
PETRUCCIO. What, with my tongue in your tail?
Nay, come again, good Kate, I am a gentleman—⁵⁹

Beginning with a sexual invitation, Petruchio most often twists their conversation towards the topic of sexual activity using puns: "bear" refers both to the idea that a woman must bear a man's weight in the act of sex and that she will bear children as a result; "burden" plays on a similar idea of her bearing his weight in bed, though he implies he will keep it off of her; "light" could

⁵⁸ Shakespeare, *Taming* 1.1.142-4.

⁵⁹ Shakespeare, 2.1.199-206, 214-20.

imply both that she is sexually wanton or sexually inexperienced (as paired with “young”); and the last line could imply either cunnilingus or anilingus with “tail.” Katherine also, however, puns sexually in their exchange when she herself brings in the word “bear” and replies to his “light” accusation with the suggestion that her weight is both “too light” and exactly appropriate. Later in their exchange, when Katherine tells Petruchio he is apparently wise enough to keep himself warm, Petruchio insists, “Marry, so I mean, sweet Katherine, in thy bed,” making clear his intent to wed and bed her as Gremio hoped. The use of puns to connect sexual activity and wealth extends to the male suitors as well, as when Grumio jokes about Gremio’s “bags,” referencing both his money and his testicles.⁶⁰ Male characters, especially, intertwine talk of sex with their discussion of marital exchange as part of what they are buying and selling is the privilege of “bedding” their wives.

This connection of sexual activity, the gender subordination of women in marriage, and class as wealth first reveals itself in the Induction. Indeed, Sly disbelieves he is a Lord until he is told he has a “wife”: “Thou art a lord, and nothing but a lord. / Thou has a lady far more beautiful / Than any woman in this waning age.”⁶¹ After hearing how she wept for his “madness,” Sly decides, “Am I a lord, and have I such a lady? . . . Upon my life, I am a lord indeed” and immediately asks to see “her.”⁶² When Bartholomew the Page enters dressed as Sly’s Lady, he quickly reassures Sly of his Lordly identity and their own relationship:

SLY. Madam wife, they say that I have dreamed
 And slept above some fifteen year or more.
 BARTHOLOMEW. Ay, and the time seems thirty unto me,
 Being all this time abandoned from your bed.
 SLY. ‘Tis much. Servants, leave me and her alone.
[Exeunt Lord and Servants.]

⁶⁰ Shakespeare, *Taming* 1.2.176.

⁶¹ Shakespeare, Induction 2.59-61.

⁶² Shakespeare, Induction 2.66, 70, 72.

Madam, undress you and come now to bed.⁶³

Sly quickly tries to take advantage of his wife's presence and her apparent desire to do her marital duty, but Bartholomew deftly turns his request aside by explaining that Sly's physician said "I should yet absent me from your bed."⁶⁴ The Lord's long instructions for how Bartholomew should behave to trick Sly and Sly's own reaction to learning he has a wife make marriage and the sexual activity it sanctions integral to the Induction's jest around class difference and gender reversal; it is only through the presentation of a wife (and what that entails) that Sly accepts the trick as truth.

Similarly, while audiences may not be returned to the Sly frame in *The Shrew* as in *A Shrew*, Petruchio's last lines of the play pick up the interweaving of gender, class, and sexuality laid out by Bartholomew's involvement:

Come Kate, we'll to bed.
We three are married, but you two are sped.
— 'Twas I won the wager, though you hit the white
And being a winner, God give you good night.⁶⁵

Katherine's "reward" for her obedience, as Sly seeks to comfort his wife's sorrow of being absent from his bed, is to finally have her wedding night. Having won her husband even more gold through his wager, they are off to celebrate. Lucentio won his own wife through his class-deception, an echo of the Lord's trick, only to have lost the wager by the revelation that his wife is now "the shrew." While it stands to reason that the second half of the Lord's jest is to return Sly to his lower-class reality once he's had his fun, *The Shrew* does not give us this scene, never returning to the frame at all. Instead, the echoes of the Induction's themes throughout the play

⁶³ Shakespeare, Induction 2.109-114.

⁶⁴ Shakespeare, Induction 2.120. This scene also, of course, contains homoerotic attraction, both between Sly and Bartholomew, but also in the Lord's longing to see his Page dressed as a woman and giving Sly "kind embracements, [and] temping kisses" (1.117).

⁶⁵ Shakespeare, 5.2.190-93.

allow audiences and readers to imagine a space in which Sly remains in his borrowed clothes next to his crossdressed wife even as Petruchio leaves to enjoy his own.⁶⁶ Class thus cannot be disentangled from the exchange of women and their position as status symbols, just as the gender dynamics in the play are often articulated through sexual and economic terms.

The Taming of the Shrew, therefore, requires an intersectional approach that attends to class as much as to gender and sexuality to fully understand the “deep misogyny” Ayanna Thompson labels as inescapable for any production. My interest lies in how adaptations have portrayed, translated, or rewritten these imbrications in their own attempts to rework or escape *Taming*’s most infamous themes. The adaptations that I explore more deeply in my next chapter allow their audiences to consider the many ways in which misogyny and patriarchal power continue to be represented in terms that link gender, class, and sexuality through their attempts to “save” Katherine and “redeem” her relationship with Petruchio. Before a consideration of these adaptations’ frameworks, however, I briefly examine some of the recent and innovative approaches to staging *Taming* that have similarly emphasized gender, sexuality, and class in their attempts to save *The Shrew*. While some of the adaptations I examine are specifically attempting to distance themselves from the theatrical archive of Shakespeare’s history and authority, theatrical productions and adaptations have much in common in terms of how they approach and present the misogyny and patriarchal power of Shakespeare’s play.

Staging the Shrew

The Taming of the Shrew has a rather erratic interpretive history, with performances at different points in time playing the text as romantic comedy, farce, gothic tragedy, black

⁶⁶ I follow Hodgdon in her reading of *A Shrew* and *The Shrew* “as separate textual entities which are bound together, especially though not exclusively in theatrical practice, in an inter- or intra-textual relationship” (Introduction to *Taming*, 36).

comedy, satire, and problem play.⁶⁷ This vast array of genres demonstrates how productions have variously responded to the play's misogyny by critiquing it, excusing it as comedy or farce, or attempting to portray the taming as romantic. While numerous important scenes can help elucidate what tone a specific production aims to strike, the moment many scholars look to as expressing most clearly a production's "take" on the play remains Katherine's final speech, which has existed at the center of the play's most contentious debates.⁶⁸ Barbara Hodgdon observes that:

Much late twentieth-century criticism begins with and on what has come to be called Katherine's 'speech of submission' and reads the play backwards through it—a quirk of critical practice that tends to erase the layering of the speech, detaching it from a scene that troubles comic form and cultural custom Moreover, discussions of the speech often split it apart, separating those lines evoking biblical texts and the *Book of Common Prayer* from what follows.⁶⁹

Critics who aim to excuse Shakespeare's play or even champion it often do so by referencing just these religious aspects of Katherine's speech as evoking Protestant teachings on mutuality and companionate marriage. This works best, however, when critics also compare *The Shrew* to *A Shrew*; in short, Shakespeare's play becomes the lesser of two misogynistic evils.⁷⁰ On stage, how the final speech is performed by Katherine and received by others, especially Petruchio, has vast consequences for the overall tone of the play. Adaptations such as Charles Marowitz's 1974 *Shrew*-collage and productions such as Edward Hall's 2006 *Shrew* portray a bleak or brutal life

⁶⁷ Hodgdon, Introduction to *Taming*, 4, 71.

⁶⁸ Hodgdon remarks that "for performers, directors and critics alike, Katherine's last speech, which caps her history and renegotiates her role, is a fatal attraction, a locus of obsessive attention" (118).

⁶⁹ Hodgdon, 120.

⁷⁰ Bean does both and, interestingly, he also couches his claim in the language of genre, arguing that through an attention to the final speech as demonstrating Kate's humanist education, Shakespeare's play "rises from farce to romantic comedy to the exact extent that Kate, in discovering love through the discovery of her own identity, becomes more than the fabliau stereotype of the shrew turned household drudge" ("Comic Structure," 66). Hodgdon intervenes in this discussion in her Introduction by arguing that if Katherine's speech is meant to ventriloquize the *Book of Common Prayer* and/or the *Homily of the State of Matrimony* then it is out of place, occurring after the wedding and allowing her to "invad[e] the domain of masculine biblical interpretation by preaching" (Introduction to *Taming*, 54).

for Katherine, where the final speech demonstrates how she has been broken or cowed into speaking words that are not truly her own.⁷¹ In others, such as Gale Edwards' 1995 RSC production, it is Petruchio who learns a lesson through Katherine's speech, realizing the humiliation he has caused her and seeming to offer a silent apology after the fact.⁷² Still others attempt to use the speech to present Katherine and Petruchio as equals or as sharing a joke together at the expense of everyone else. Whether such performances of the final speech can erase or rewrite what came before depends on who you ask; it most likely will remain a subject of debate.

Whereas many critics read the play through the lens of the final speech, an audience begins with the Induction and Act 1, and from the first moment of the play many of the directing, casting, and acting choices that affect how an audience understands Katherine and her relationship with Petruchio still come down to gender, class, and sexuality. There has been a recent trend toward all-male or all-female productions of many of Shakespeare's plays. All-male productions have perhaps never completely disappeared, especially as they are sometimes promoted as the original practice of the Elizabethan stage, but all-male productions of *Taming*, such as the Propeller company's 2006 production directed by Edward Hall, seem to authorize a more violent rendering of Shakespeare's play than might otherwise be considered acceptable. As Sandy Holt observed in her review of Hall's production, "in today's post-feminism world audiences are less likely to feel ill at ease seeing a man abuse his wife, if his wife is played by a male actor."⁷³ In contrast, an all-female production, such as the one directed by Phyllida Lloyd at Shakespeare's Globe in 2003, authorizes a lean towards satire where the performance of

⁷¹ Hodgdon, Introduction to *Taming*, 122-23.

⁷² Hodgdon, 127-28.

⁷³ Quoted in Hodgdon, Introduction to *Taming*, 123-4.

masculinity itself is called into question. Another provocative option is that employed by Justin Audibert’s Royal Shakespeare production in 2019 of a gender-flipped cast, with the women now bartering over and abusing the men. In this iteration, all the names of the characters are flipped to their closest male or female equivalent (i.e. Petruchia, Lucentia, Bianco, etc.) except for Katherine, whose name remains the same, but who is portrayed by a male actor. Overall, I found the production extremely enjoyable—seeing so many women on stage with so many lines was a nice change of pace and the gender-flipped characters allowed for a kind of defamiliarizing of “normal” gender expectations or stereotypes that might otherwise pass unnoticed. Petruchia was artless and unrefined in contrast to the other female characters, sometimes walking or gesturing with a more masculine swagger, and I felt drawn to her in a way I am not to Petruchio typically; but even with the clear chemistry she and Katherine sometimes shared, their romance felt unearned and far-fetched—and abuse remains abuse no matter the gender. Cross-gender and same-sex casting does, however, seem to authorize effective and provocative approaches to the troubling gender dynamics presented by Shakespeare’s play.

In contrast to the way contemporary productions experiment with gender, class differences often operate less obviously; yet all productions, whether they mean to or not, take a strong stance on class dynamics when they choose whether to include the Induction scenes.⁷⁴ In her brief mapping of the performance history of *Taming*, Hodgdon points out that “during the near-century that [David Garrick’s] *Catherine and Petruchio* controlled the stage, Sly had gone missing, a casualty, perhaps of gentrification.”⁷⁵ Due to the performance questions that arise if the Induction is staged—Should Sly and Bartholomew remain onstage for the duration of the

⁷⁴ Some productions that do so, also choose to add in the other framing scenes in *A Shrew*, in order to keep the frame clearly present throughout the play. This can have the added effect of reframing the play itself as merely a performance for Sly, a kind of “theatrical fantasy” (Hodgdon, Introduction to *Taming*, 104).

⁷⁵ Hodgdon, Introduction to *Taming*, 81.

play? How and where? What actions should they take? If not, how and when will they be removed from the stage?—it is perhaps not surprising that many productions have opted to remove the Induction scene. Those that choose to include Sly must then decide how to present such a character when much of the comedy of his scenes derives from the mocking of a poor, drunk man. Some productions, such as Toby Frow’s 2012 Globe production, may employ double casting to get around the issue of when/how to remove Sly from the stage by having him reappear as Petruchio, which in turn may keep questions of performativity at the fore of audiences’ minds. Even without the Induction scene, however, there are ways to emphasize class dynamics in the play, as in the class-crossdressing of Tranio and Lucentio. Bill Alexander’s 1992 RSC production, for instance, presented the possibility of a Tranio wooing Bianca not for his master, but for himself and therefore affording himself a possible change in class status. Such performance choices make what are otherwise comic scenes much darker and constitute “a serious challenge to the world of the play.”⁷⁶

Another serious challenge to the world of the play comes in the form of sexuality, whether in terms of sexual violence or irrational romantic passion. One of the most common ways to produce *Taming* is as a comedy, which usually relies, in some way, on presenting Katherine and Petruchio’s relationship as (eventually) good. Marowitz’s 1974 *Shrew*-collage turns this configuration completely on its head with what Hodgdon describes as “a Grimms’ fairy-tale of sinister archetypes and hopeless victims that involved Stockholm syndrome,” and rape.⁷⁷ A brutal rendering of the taming, Marowitz’s stage adaptation leaves no room for questioning Petruchio’s motivations or Katherine’s status as the victim. Sexuality is most often

⁷⁶ Gilbert, “Performance as Deflection,” 328. For more on this production, see Gilbert, 323-28 and Hodgdon, Introduction to *Taming*, 115-17.

⁷⁷ Hodgdon, Introduction to *Taming*, 122.

deployed, however, as sexual tension for the opposite end goal: as justification for and proof of their romance. Diana E. Henderson, for instance, notes that in many live performances, sexual passion “provides the quick-fix to explain away the societal dynamics of power.”⁷⁸ Gender, class, and sexuality, therefore, provide both the sticking points and interpretive solutions most often employed by directors and actors in their attempts to point out or gloss over the misogyny and patriarchal dynamics of Shakespeare’s play.

Adapting the Shrew

Many of the issues of misogyny and patriarchy that haunt stage productions of Shakespeare’s play also trouble adaptations across genres and some of the solutions for these issues remain the same. For example, Henderson contends that, like many stage productions, the “post-‘sexual revolution’” film adaptations of *Taming* emphasized “the erotic appeal of Petruchio’s body as a motivation for Kate’s conversion.”⁷⁹ In these adaptations, Petruchio’s sexuality and Kate’s desire for him become a motivation for her submission and a motivation for the submission of the female viewer who identifies with Kate and does not wish “to deprive herself of what is represented as the means to heterosexual pleasure.”⁸⁰ In playing up the sex appeal of the lead actors, as well as the sexual tension and attraction between them, the more unsavory aspects of Petruchio’s behavior and their relationship can be explained away, and the female viewer can fall back into the patriarchal, heterosexual, domestic fantasy that Henderson contends drives the *Shrew*’s constant return to film. While Henderson’s chapter on *Taming* adaptations analyzes how certain artistic choices in films can create a female subjectivity for Katherine not available in the playtext, she also demonstrates how gender and class have been

⁷⁸ Henderson, “Revisited,” 131.

⁷⁹ Henderson, 121-2.

⁸⁰ Henderson, 122.

intertwined in the very production of *Taming* adaptations, pointing out three waves of *Shrew* films/TV shows, which can be grouped as responses or “backlash[es]” to women’s political participation outside the home: 1) in response to suffrage; 2) after WWII when women were pushed out of the workforce and back into domestic life; and 3) with the emergence of “women’s liberation.”⁸¹ Cultural context, therefore, plays a large role in when, how, and to what purpose adaptations of *Taming* are produced.

The three adaptations I will close read in my next chapter belong to three of the largest markets for Shakespeare in the contemporary moment: BBC films for TV, Hogarth Press Shakespeare, and cinematic teen Shakespeare. Well-known as an education- as well as an entertainment-based production company, the BBC has long been synonymous with Shakespeare⁸² (especially outside of England’s borders) and specifically with televised Shakespeare, as “the BBC began producing individual Shakespeare plays for television as early as 1937.”⁸³ Its ambitious televised canon of all of Shakespeare’s plays, which ran from 1978-1985, still features prominently in many classrooms; indeed, its educational value was a huge selling point with American investors.⁸⁴ One of the critiques of this series, however, was that it only proved that Shakespeare is not made for television.⁸⁵ Since its completion, the BBC has explored different ways of broadcasting Shakespeare on and specifically for TV. In 2005, it launched its New Shakespeare Season, which featured “a variety of ‘tellings’ of Shakespeare,

⁸¹ Henderson, 121. Henderson alternately uses the words “text” and “script” to describe what I refer to as the playtext.

⁸² The front of its headquarters in London even features statues of two characters from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.

⁸³ Willis, *The BBC Shakespeare*, 7.

⁸⁴ Willis, 3. Pittman notes that the Complete Works series was meant to constitute “a permanent viewing warehouse for educators throughout the English-speaking world” (*Authorizing Shakespeare*, 138).

⁸⁵ Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*, 119. See also chapter five of Pittman’s *Authorizing Shakespeare* and chapter one of Willis’s *BBC Shakespeare Plays* for more details concerning the larger production goals of the series and the restrictions placed upon the BBC series, which contributed to its conservative approach.

from radio broadcasts and cartoons to documentaries and screen adaptations,”⁸⁶ including its *ShakespeaRe-Told* series, modeled after its award-winning *Canterbury Tales* series from two years prior.⁸⁷ The series adapted four of Shakespeare’s plays (*Much Ado About Nothing*, *Macbeth*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*) for television, airing them four Mondays in a row on BBC1, with all of the plays updated to a contemporary-Britain setting and rescripted fully.⁸⁸ Margaret Jane Kidnie argues that, unlike the original televised canon, *ShakespeaRe-Told* produces “these works as drama made for, not translated to, television.”⁸⁹ Kidnie also points, however, to this series’ temporal-, cultural-, and medium-specificity, reasoning that these new iterations of his plays “will not only inevitably and quickly date but are so culturally specific as to have currency only with an audience keenly attuned to trends in British popular culture.”⁹⁰ In terms of medium, for example, this series worked specifically in its moment to educate the public on the differences between analog and digital TV by including an interactive feature at the end of each broadcast that only those with digital televisions could access. While the extra content was made available online afterwards, by presenting the series itself as “a broadcast event,” Kidnie posits that the BBC sought to underline its critical role in educating the public by grounding new technology in the familiar and enduringly popular: Shakespeare.⁹¹

⁸⁶ Wray, “Shakespeare and the Singletons,” 185.

⁸⁷ Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*, 105.

⁸⁸ Kidnie, 105.

⁸⁹ Kidnie, 120.

⁹⁰ Kidnie, 130. Pittman makes a similar claim when she posits that, unlike the Complete Works series, which was meant to endure, “*Shakespeare Retold* . . . imagines no such long-term distribution and focuses on creating contemporary entertainment and relevance out of the Early Modern texts” (*Authorizing Shakespeare*, 141).

⁹¹ Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*, 133. Both Kidnie and Pittman also note, however, how the interactive material for each film emphasizes the theatrical origins of Shakespeare’s playtexts, a move that requires authorizing the TV Shakespeare through its dramatic roots, even as Shakespeare authorizes the move away from the theater into digital TV.

The Hogarth Shakespeare series, of which *Vinegar Girl* is the third installment, also clearly seeks to tap into the booming “Shakespeare Trade.”⁹² As the Hogarth Shakespeare website proclaims, the Hogarth Press was originally founded by Virginia and Leonard Woolf “with a mission to publish the best new writing of the age. In 2012, Hogarth was launched in London and New York to continue the tradition. The Hogarth Shakespeare project sees Shakespeare’s works retold by acclaimed and bestselling novelists of today. The series launched in October 2015 and to date will be published in twenty countries.”⁹³ An international endeavor, the series not only assumes that Shakespeare should still be read, but that he continues to be relevant today; he simply needs to be rewritten. In a 2016 article about The Hogarth Press in *The New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik writes:

Most of the authors in the Hogarth series, to their credit, aren’t so much ‘reimagining’ the stories as reacting to the plays. They’ve taken on not the tale itself but the twists in the tale that produced the Shakespearean themes we still debate: anti-Semitism in ‘Merchant of Venice,’ the subjugation of women in ‘The Taming of the Shrew,’ art and isolation in ‘The Tempest.’ Each of the novels gives us a revisionist account of the central Shakespearean subject, and asks us to think anew about that subject more than about the story that superintends it.⁹⁴

Anne Tyler chose to tackle *The Taming of the Shrew* in the third installment of the series,⁹⁵ with other famous authors in the series including Jeanette Winterson, Howard Jacobson, Margaret Atwood, Edward St. Aubyn, Tracy Chevalier, and Jo Nesbø. Hogarth Press has, however, received some pushback for the lack of diversity in their authors, even going so far as to choose a

⁹² Hodgdon, *Shakespeare Trade*.

⁹³ This information was originally taken from the Hogarth Series website, which is now defunct: <http://hogarthshakespeare.com/>.

⁹⁴ Gopnik, “Why Rewrite Shakespeare?”

⁹⁵ In an interview with Ron Charles for *The Washington Post*, Tyler explains her own reaction to the Hogarth series: “When they first mentioned the possibility to me, I actually laughed, because here’s somebody with terrible plots — and they’re not even his own — but wonderful words, and then someone comes along and says, ‘Why don’t you take *his* terrible plot and add *your* inferior words to it?’ I mean really, does it make any sense?” She clearly, however, came around to the idea.

white woman, Chevalier, to rewrite *Othello* in *New Boy*, which has been the least well-received book of the series. Gillian Flynn was slated to write the adaptation of *Hamlet* (advertised for publication in 2021), but it never appeared, and between 2020-2021 the Hogarth Series' website began to redirect elsewhere, implying that the project will not continue with Shakespeare's other plays.⁹⁶

In the realm of Hollywood, some of the best-selling Shakespeare adaptations have been teen films.⁹⁷ Douglas Lanier argues that “many free adaptations take the form of reshaping Shakespearean texts to the formal conventions, ideological contours, and demographic targets of dominant film genres, a process particularly clear in the raft of teen Shakespeare adaptations that flooded the megaplexes in the decade following Baz Luhrmann's enormously successful *Romeo + Juliet* (1996).”⁹⁸ Indeed, the 1990's witnessed an onslaught of Hollywood teen films, with the late '90s onwards experiencing a large upsurge in the specific subgenre of Shakespeare teen films.⁹⁹ Richard Burt argues that these new Shakespeare teen films, what he calls “Shakesploi flicks,” were specifically marketed towards teen and preteen girls, which drastically affected their content and promotion.¹⁰⁰ Barbara Hodgdon's consideration of how Shakespeare maps onto

⁹⁶ For more on the project of the Hogarth Shakespeare series, see Lanier, “The Hogarth Shakespeare Series” and Rivlin, “Loving Shakespeare.”

⁹⁷ In her book, *Teen Film*, Driscoll explains that:

The gradual generationalization of popular culture across the twentieth century has produced teen film as an audiovisual language for representing youth, so that any film reference to youth brings with it the capacity to ‘become’ or ‘perform’ teen film. . . . participation in youth culture can mean a film about adolescence is using or doing teen film. Approached in this way, to name something teen film is always to show how it uses the idea of teen film, and of the teen film audience. (140)

Not always created *for* teen audiences, the teen film genre more generally appropriates a mix of different genres to represent something about adolescence, marking itself as especially open to intertextuality (135). In *Selling Shakespeare*, French makes the important point that even the teen audience itself “is not a homogenous entity, it is multivalent and unstable” (105).

⁹⁸ Lanier, “On the Virtues,” 134. Other examples include Raja Gosnell's 1999 *Never Been Kissed*, Michael Almereyda's 2000 *Hamlet*, Tommy O'Haver's 2001 *Get Over It!*, Tim Blake Nelson's 2001 *O*, and Andy Fickman's 2006 *She's the Man*.

⁹⁹ For more information, see French, *Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood* (chapter 4) and Burt, “Te(e)n Things I Hate.”

¹⁰⁰ Burt, “Te(e)n Things I Hate,” 208. This marketing involved the framing of the film using trailers and posters, but also the casting of specific stars and the inculcation of these films into MTV culture. For example, both Deitchman

existing genres in film adaptation similarly views *10 Things I Hate About You* as “High-School Shakespeare, a genre driven in part by late twentieth-century teenage commodity culture.”¹⁰¹ Both Burt and Hodgdon’s arguments also introduce the importance of Shakespeare into how the teen film operates,¹⁰² with Shakespeare becoming a kind of currency to authorize, for various critics, conservative readings of gender, sexuality, and feminism. These films, therefore, provide a key mix of Shakespeare and pop culture, as “Shakespeare provides a means of introducing high culture into the traditionally popular culture, American site of the teen movie,”¹⁰³ thereby validating the teen struggle even as such films rejuvenate Shakespeare’s relevancy.¹⁰⁴

My interest in *ShakespeaRe-Told: The Taming of the Shrew, Vinegar Girl, and 10 Things I Hate About You* lies in the ways they emphasize the play’s intersections of gender, class, and sexuality via the romantic comedy genre through the feminist ambivalence of pop-feminism. In *10 Things I Hate About You*, for example, Kat (Katherine) Stratford’s “shrewishness” is directly linked to her past sexual experience, and class dynamics clearly propel the taming plot, serving both to villainize the suitor stand-in, Joey’s, upper-class privilege and to excuse or explain Patrick’s (Petruchio) participation in gulling Kat. In *ShakespeaRe-Told: The Taming of the Shrew*, the exchange of money and status leads Katherine and Petruchio to marry, but it is the sexual aspect of the play—their intense mutual erotic attraction and the over-the-top sexual encounters between them—that ultimately drives their positions as outsiders who find

and French, *Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood* comment on the vast star power and teen following that Julia Stiles eventually cultivated, starring in three out of the seven films listed above: *10 Things*, *Hamlet*, and *O*. Scholars have also investigated the soundtracks of both Luhrmann’s film and *10 Things*, elements of the films meant to commercially appeal to a generation raised on MTV, with Burt reading *10 Things* as itself thematizing “adaptation in terms of an aural register, using the cover song and the register of sound to create a series of cynical puns that invite us to read the film as a cover of *Taming*” (“Te(e)n Things I Hate,” 212).

¹⁰¹ Hodgdon, “Wooing and Winning,” 259.

¹⁰² Burt, “Te(e)n Things I Hate,” 215, 219.

¹⁰³ French, *Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood*, 122.

¹⁰⁴ Balizet, “Teen Scenes,” 132.

acceptance in each other. In *Vinegar Girl*, Kate must contend with the huge amounts of unpaid domestic labor her father expects of her, frustratingly balancing the roles of sister, mother, and housekeeper, even as her father attempts to market her as both wife to and future mother for his lab assistant who needs a green card.¹⁰⁵ Each text presents the imbrication of gender, sexuality, and class differently, for different purposes and with different results; for instance, *10 Things* emphasizes all three themes, while *ShakespeaRe-Told* focuses most on gender and sexuality (with a light emphasis on class) and *Vinegar Girl* thinks mainly about gender as class.

The way in which the relations among gender, sexuality, and class are revised, and the consequent weight given to each, has the effect of emphasizing unexpected themes, such as Katherine's age and how it affects the reception of her non-normative femininity. In each adaptation, the Katherine-character's age is explicitly stated—18 (in *10 Things*), 38 (in *Re-Told*), and 29 (in *Vinegar Girl*). These age differences influence how an audience might receive each iteration of Katherine in a romantic comedy context: a teenager just come of age; an “older” woman supposedly past the age of female desirability and marriageability; a woman at the “right” age to settle down. While a feminist reader or viewer might recognize the sexism in measuring a woman's desirability in relation to her age, the romantic comedy asks that audiences consider Katherine's desirability and age as inextricably linked; this in turn affects how each Katherine-character's physical appearance is presented and transformed. Physical appearance is also linked to sexuality, as various characters speculate that the Katherine-character in both *10 Things* and *Re-Told* is a lesbian due to her “unfeminine” appearance, angry demeanor, and apparent lack of desire (or ability) to have sex with a man. As these characters morph into the

¹⁰⁵ Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage” and Goodman, “Feminist Theory,” both point out the necessity of considering gender and class together through feminism, discussing the connection between capitalist and patriarchal exploitation of women's labor.

“proper” romantic comedy heroine by the end, they assume a softer and more (hetero)normatively feminine look. This connection of female age, appearance, and heterosexual desirability is paralleled by a similar emphasis for the Petruchio-character on an amalgamation of masculine vulnerability, sexuality, and violence. In both *10 Things* and *Re-Told*, the Petruchio-character’s aggressive demeanor elicits female desire while his threatening nature is at least partially undercut by a sympathetic backstory related to his working class or underdog upbringing. Yet, all three heroes also embody the traditional masculine virtues of the honorable “gentleman,” which both informs their position as a sympathetic figure and highlights their sexual desirability.

In my next chapter, I consider more substantially how, by tying the protagonists’ characterizations into the central narrative thrust of the romance, these adaptations are not only unable to critique, but ultimately put a new spin on, the problematic intersection of gender, sexuality, and class at the center of Shakespeare’s play. No matter the media in which the adaptation presents itself, each new spin creates an impasse for feminists—a zero sum game—that reveals a fundamental ambivalence in the overarching romantic comedy genre that unites them all. In the case of *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare’s play presumably helped create the very requirements of genre that it now struggles with, as our idea of romance has changed since the seventeenth century. Such is the pop-feminist paradox that, while the romantic comedy genre may represent the formula closest to the play’s “intended” outcome, it can no longer or perhaps never could support the feminist reimagining many of us look for in contemporary performances or adaptations of *Taming*.

Chapter 2

The Limitations of Pop-Feminist Adaptations of Gender Roles in *Taming*

The first Shakespearean talking film adaptation was also the first of what we might consider the contemporary adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew*: the 1929 film directed by Sam Taylor, starring Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks Sr. In a surprising reversal of almost two centuries of stage tradition, Pickford's first appearance as Katherine shows her holding a whip.¹ David Garrick's 1754 adaptation of *Taming, Catharine and Petruchio*, famously depicted Petruchio wielding a whip, a prop which Barbara Hodgdon notes "would define his figure for nearly two centuries."² As a theater property, it has "perhaps as long a performative afterlife as such famous Shakespearean stage properties as the dagger, skull and handkerchief,"³ and yet it should be noted that of those properties, Petruchio's whip is the only one not signified by the text itself. For almost two hundred years, however, Petruchio's whip played an integral part in crafting the tone of Petruchio's character, his relationship with Katherine, and *Taming* itself. As a prop, the whip presents an ostentatious image of control, a clear threat of violence (with possibly sexual overtones), and marks Petruchio as the master.

By giving Katherine's character a whip, the 1929 adaptation presents the first example of what I would argue is the pop-feminist effect of modern romantic comedy on *Taming*'s narrative: an overt shift in gender dynamics that implies gender equality without completely escaping

¹ Taylor, *The Taming of the Shrew*. Petruchio also first appears in the film holding a whip and in their first meeting they each have one. In addition, the first two title cards of the movie show first Mary Pickford as Katherine and then Douglas Fairbanks as Petruchio, both of whom are shown holding their whip.

² Hodgdon, Introduction to *Taming*, 86-88.

³ Hodgdon, 98.

traditional gender roles. Key to that shift is an introduction of and subsequent emphasis on Petruchio's vulnerability that necessitates and activates Katherine's "taming." In the 1929 film, for instance, after managing to knock him on the head with a stool, Katherine immediately regrets her actions and cuddles him as he overplays his injury, "taming" her temper in response to his pain. In her discussion of the 1929 film, Diana Henderson argues that: "While the film alters the story to undo Petruchio's harsh agency in effecting a change, Katherina's speech must nevertheless be tamed, a sign of her tender feminine heart when she discovers her husband's vulnerability."⁴ By also holding a whip, Katherine is presented as having a power equal to Petruchio's, an image paired with increasing her lines so that they are seen as sharing screen time. While the narrative of taming implies gender inequality, this sexist function is tempered by Katherine's knowledge of her husband's plan and her eventual desire not to hurt him, so that she decides to tame herself for his pleasure. Yet notably, by the end of the film, Katherine has chosen to burn her whip, while Petruchio retains his.

The three adaptations I examine below—the BBC's 2005 TV film series *ShakespeaRe-Told*, Anne Tyler's 2016 Hogarth Shakespeare novel *Vinegar Girl*, and Gil Junger's 1999 teen film *10 Things I Hate About You*—continue this legacy of uneven gender reform and demonstrate how even supposedly revisionist *Taming* adaptations fail to escape the sexism of Shakespeare's play. In each, developing the Petruchio character's backstory and vulnerability—his precarious social position, his lack of family, and his inability to fit in—is meant to rescue him from the misogynistic violence of Shakespeare's original character and present him as a sympathetic romantic comedy hero. All three adaptations solicit sympathy for both protagonists by positioning them as social outsiders whose experience of heterosexual romance allows them

⁴ Henderson, "Revisited," 125.

(re)entrance into society. Through their romantic involvement, however, Katherine becomes more normatively feminine and thus recognizable as a romantic comedy heroine and Petruchio's vulnerable position is stabilized through their union and her acceptance of him. Petruchio's character is softened in order for the romance to occur, while Katherine's character is softened *through* the romance she eventually embraces.

For instance, both *Re-Told* and *Vinegar Girl*, in their attempts to present Petruchio as the romantic comedy hero through giving him an emotional complexity that exceeds the bounds of traditional masculinity, require his romantic partner to assume responsibility for recognizing and addressing his vulnerability in ways he does not have to reciprocate. It is only by placing that burden on Katherine—whose acceptance of this burden entails embracing feminine stereotypes—that these adaptations allow Petruchio to break from masculine gender norms in a way that makes him sympathetic to contemporary audiences. By adapting *Taming* as a romance, *Re-Told* and *Vinegar Girl* thereby position Katherine as “saved” only when she provides Petruchio with the maternal nurturance he had, until then, lacked—ultimately reaffirming the very gender inequalities they purport to challenge. In contrast, while *10 Things* ultimately remains a conservative feminist retelling of *Taming* through its emphasis on girl power over substantive feminist protest, its position as a *teen* romcom allows it to escape some of the traditional gender roles and inequalities of the other two adaptations by depicting the protagonists' relationship as mutually vulnerable and reciprocal. This is accomplished, in part, because *10 Things* presents an ensemble cast, whereas *Re-Told* focuses its attention more on Katherine and Petruchio than any of the minor characters, and *Vinegar Girl* narrows that focus even further by presenting Kate through a third person limited point of view, which gives a reader access to her thoughts over those of the other characters'.

This chapter builds on existing feminist scholarship on *Taming* adaptations by putting them in conversation with each other to consider how *Taming*'s specific connection to pop-feminism limits their ability to escape the sexism of Shakespeare's play due to the romantic comedy's reliance on romance. By adapting Petruchio and Katherine's relationship within this genre, adaptations of *Taming* ultimately reinscribe traditional, unequal gender roles.⁵ My argument is allied to that of Diana Henderson's updated chapter "A *Shrew* for the Times, Revisited,"⁶ Margaret J. Kidnie's chapter on the BBC's *Re-Told* series, and Elizabeth Rivlin's recent article on *Vinegar Girl*. All three scholars push for considerations of Shakespeare's works and adaptations of them in relation to larger patterns of media production or classification. For Kidnie, such imperatives mean attending to "how a recognition of Shakespeare's work—both what one thinks it is and how one comes to know it—is caught up in, and shaped by, technologies of production."⁷ For Rivlin, the imperative is to consider Shakespearean adaptations in relation to social history: "how the work imagines the communities it will reach and its uses in the world, and how, in turn, those real or imagined communities and uses shape the work."⁸ Henderson's piece explores both film production and historical context, as she argues that looking across *Taming* screen adaptations can illuminate the feminist possibilities presented through the use of the camera to play with gender politics and "the particular cultural 'solutions' and frustrations tied to the eras of their production."⁹

My work differs from theirs, however, insofar as I connect the larger network of *Taming* adaptations across media types to their pop-feminist reworking of Petruchio and Katherine's

⁵ As Garner argues, "Underlying the notion of heterosexual relationships in *Taming*, especially in marriage, is that one partner must dominate. There can be no mutuality. The male fantasy that the play defends against is the fear that a man will not be able to control his woman" ("*Taming of the Shrew*," 108).

⁶ Henderson, "Revisited."

⁷ Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*, 104.

⁸ Rivlin, "Loving Shakespeare," 74.

⁹ Henderson, "Revisited," 122-3.

relationship as a romance through the romantic comedy genre. As I mentioned in my previous chapter, part of how these adaptations attempt to rework Shakespeare's play is by attempting to address the misogyny of the *Taming* through an attention to the problematic knot of gender, sexuality, and class at the center of its plot, though their recourse to romance means they ultimately simply present this knot in new ways. In the sections below, I explore in depth how each adaptation presents and utilizes the imbrication of gender (femininity and female presentation, masculinity and male vulnerability, and/or gender roles and expectations), class (wealth, patriarchal exchange, and/or socio-economic status), and sexuality (sexual activity and/or sexual identity) present in Shakespeare's play. By demonstrating their use of this intersection to reinscribe traditional gender roles, I thus show how these adaptations embody *Taming's* pop-feminist paradox through the romantic comedy genre and their fundamental ambivalence towards feminism.

Seducing the Sad, Strange Screw-up

Broadcast on BBC One in 2005, *ShakespeaRe-Told* adapts four of Shakespeare's plays (*Much Ado About Nothing*, *Macbeth*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) for television. Completely updated—both in setting and language—these adaptations marked a new shift in the BBC's televised Shakespeare, meant to “re-animate” Shakespeare's relevancy¹⁰ and make him “legible” for a 21st century audience.¹¹ Yet, while these adaptations may look shiny and new, L. Monique Pittman contends that they are “a remarkably safe take on

¹⁰ Wray, “Shakespeare and the Singletons,” 185. Pittman similarly argues that “the *Shakespeare Retold* productions employ plot modernizations to demonstrate the lasting relevance of Shakespeare's drama and welcome textual interplay with previous film adaptations.” See Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare*, 137.

¹¹ Downes, “‘If You'll Excuse My Shakespeare,’” 122.

the dramatic possibilities of the plays themselves.”¹² Many of the critics who examine the series have noted the influence of genre on the BBC’s retellings of Shakespeare’s tales. Wray, Pittman, and Thomas Cartelli, for example, all consider how the romcom genre affects an audience’s interaction with *Re-Told*’s various adaptations. Wray sees the use of the romcom genre in *Taming* and *Much Ado* as productive for allowing “twenty-first-century reflections upon love, marriage and heterosexual relations” in relation to the early modern period,¹³ while Cartelli argues that the “Shakespeare-derived plot” is “flattened and deformed by the romantic and comedic genre conventions of British commercial television” in *Midsummer* and *Much Ado*.¹⁴ I agree with both insofar as adaptations of *Taming* that make its plot romantic must, by necessity, invite a feminist reflection on the current state of heterosexual representation, and that the romcom genre does, in some form, limit the possibilities of Shakespeare’s plots. However, neither scholar notes the plays’ long adaptation histories in relation to the romcom—good or bad, romanticizing these plots is not new. Pittman addresses this history in her consideration of the series when she notes that “while a more modern and filmic approach authorizes the BBC’s renovation of Shakespeare, the series struggles with inherited gender, ethnic, and class biases associated with the plays, their film adaptations, and the genre of romantic comedy film, biases one might expect a deliberate modernization to rethink.”¹⁵ One aspect of this history that she does not mention, however, is how the series also struggles with sex; I will explore how the representation of sex—depicted here as sexual tension and sexual assault—alongside gender and

¹² Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare*, 137. Her chapter on the BBC focuses specifically on the way in which these adaptations are conservative in terms of their gender, class, and ethnic representations. Downes similarly reads the adaptations as attempting to minimize or remove all interpretive challenges for the BBC’s audiences—in other words, Shakespeare “made safe” (“‘If You’ll Excuse My Shakespeare,’” 123, 126).

¹³ Wray, “Shakespeare and the Singletons,” 186.

¹⁴ Cartelli, “Doing It Slant,” 28.

¹⁵ Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare*, 137. Pittman analyzes *Re-Told*’s invoking of the romcom genre as part of its appeal to two avenues of authority: “the cinematic history of each play” and the “romantic comedy film history[,] from screwball to the British romantic comedies of the 1990s and 2000s” (137).

class in the BBC's retelling of *Taming* makes its recourse to romance fail. By attending to the intersection of gender, sex, and class within the adaptation of Petruchio and Katherine's relationship as specifically romantic, my reading recognizes the limitations of the BBC adaptation as a side effect of its placement within the larger pop-feminist pattern of adapting Shakespeare's *Taming*.

Adapted by Sally Wainwright and directed by David Richards, *Taming* presents Katherine Minola (played by Shirley Henderson¹⁶) as an uptight, workaholic 38-year-old Member of Parliament with her sights set on being elected the next Leader of the Opposition and, eventually, Prime Minister. Unfortunately, her anger management issues and abrasive personality have not made her very popular. To help her numbers, her mentor, named John Naps,¹⁷ advises her to get married, telling her that "certain lifestyle choices" are expected of people in that position.¹⁸ Elsewhere in London, Petruchio (played by Rufus Sewell), a destitute nobleman, appears at the door of his friend Harry's (Hortensio's) apartment after being kicked out of Australia, announcing (like so many Petruchios before him): "I've come to wive it wealthily in Padua."¹⁹ Desperate to marry Bianca, who says she will not marry until her sister does, Harry mentions Katherine to Petruchio in hopes of a match. One thing leads to another and eventually Katherine and Petruchio agree to enter into a mutually beneficial marriage: Katherine

¹⁶ Pittman observes that before this film aired, Shirley Henderson had already appeared in *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001) and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* (2004), where her character is "a high-powered executive suffering love's pangs at the hands of a feckless boyfriend" (*Authorizing Shakespeare*, 158). Pittman suggests that this informs an audience's viewing of her character here: "Henderson brings to her pugilistic embodiment of Katherine a romantic comedy past that stresses career savvy and relationship ineptitude, a personal inadequacy requiring a cure in the formulation of the genre" (158).

¹⁷ John Naps is one of the names a servant in the Induction lists off as proof of their "Lord", Sly's, madness: "Why, sir, you know no house nor no such maid, / Nor no such men as you have reckoned up— / As Stephen Sly and old John Naps of Greet" (Shakespeare, *Taming* Induction 2.89-91). By using this name, Katherine's marriage here becomes directly related to the playtext's Induction and the jest of class reversal it entails.

¹⁸ Richards, *Shakespeare-Re-Told*, 05:08. All quotes taken from this TV movie are based on my own transcription.

¹⁹ Richards, 15:15.

will have the image she needs to climb the political ladder and Petruchio will have the money he desires to repair and keep his ancestral home.²⁰

Sexuality and class are both deeply entwined with *Re-Told*'s romance plot; however, sexuality plays a larger part than class in the taming plot, marking this adaptation's main goal as the redemption of Katherine's relationship with Petruchio. With both Katherine and Petruchio presented as social and sexual outcasts, it seems that they may have found their perfect match in each other; and indeed, this is the tone struck by the end as their presumed non-(hetero)normative sexualities (Katherine's status as a 38-year-old virgin and Petruchio's penchant for crossdressing) appear to unite them, even as they are sexually attracted to one another, allowing them to form a united and accepting relationship. In an insightful claim buried deep within her larger argument, Wray asserts that "Kate's sexuality emerges to meet Petruchio's, and it is this dynamic upon which the success of the appropriation is wholly dependent."²¹ In this adaptation, sexuality provides the motivation and explanation for their relationship and, ultimately, their love.²² Yet, sexuality also becomes linked to violence in this adaptation, as it is implied to be in the playtext—a violence that never fully resolves by the end, but instead feels swept behind the door. Kidnie asserts that, unlike Wainwright's previous work on the *Canterbury Tales* project, this screenplay of *Taming* does not "make a similarly strong

²⁰ In thinking of their arrangement in terms of material exchange, it is interesting to note that she receives something she does not yet have, whereas he maintains something he already has.

²¹ Wray, "Shakespeare and the Singletons," 198.

²² McDonald might call this aspect of the film a leftover remnant of the sex comedy, which "pits woman against man in an elemental battle of wits, in which the goal of both is sex. Only the timing and legitimacy of this differs from gender to gender, with women wanting sex after, and men before or without, marriage" (*Romantic Comedy*, 38). While Petruchio differs from the sex comedy hero by actually *desiring* marriage (with or without sex), his emphasis on sex throughout the film aligns well with this genre. In fact, the sexual tension I believe we are *meant* to read between the lead characters suggests to me that the film could be aligned almost completely with this romcom sub-genre, as the BBC seems to assume that "much audience pleasure derives from seeing the couple openly fight and insult each other, underhandedly plot to foil the schemes of the other, and secretly yearn to fall into bed together. The sex comedies suggest the intense animosity between the pair will guarantee a passionate sexual relationship by the film's end" (39).

feminist intervention.”²³ Indeed, as she demonstrates when putting this *Taming* adaptation in relation to the play’s longer history (which she argues the BBC itself attempts to do in its advertising), “this production . . . deflects rather than confronts the work’s critical legacy by reconfiguring marriage as an issue less of female exploitation than of male vulnerability.”²⁴ I contend that *ReTold*’s emphasis on Petruchio’s vulnerability over his acts of violence—and Katherine’s ability and responsibility to soothe and manage both—is an inescapable side effect of the adaptation’s recourse to pop-feminism within the romcom genre.

While issues of (violent) sexuality dominate this adaptation, class also plays an important role.²⁵ The Minola family—consisting of Katherine, Bianca, and their mother—is rich. Katherine makes a decent salary as an MP and Bianca is a world-famous model. Both women are clearly used to getting their own way. The first scene of the film features an incensed, terrifying Katherine marching back into her office to slap and then attempt to fire one of her employees.²⁶ Bianca, meanwhile, uses her power to upgrade a “gorgeous” boy (Lucentio) to sit next to her in first class as she flies back to England from Italy.²⁷ Their mother, a widow, also possesses a large amount of money—demonstrated by her first appearance on screen with a large shopping bag and the declaration that she has just “spent so much money.”²⁸ Money also drives the conflict at the end of the movie that leads to Katherine’s final speech, with both Bianca and her mother defending their desire for a prenuptial agreement before marriage. Harry, who, after having been rejected by Bianca, aims to marry Mrs. Minola herself as his “rich widow,” seems distraught at

²³ Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*, 106.

²⁴ Kidnie, 106.

²⁵ Both Pittman and Mortimer assert that representing the upper-class is a feature of the British romantic comedy. See Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare*, 137 and Mortimer, *Romantic Comedy*, 97.

²⁶ This moment fits well into Dolan’s configuration of Katherine’s class position as occasionally privileged. Here, too, we see a Katherine who feels entitled to abuse those below her. See Dolan, “Household Chastisements,” 204-225.

²⁷ Richards, *ShakespeaRe-Told*, 04:15.

²⁸ Richards, 06:07.

the thought of losing the money which was his main reason for pursuing their marriage.

Lucentio, on the other hand, sees the prenup as an insult to his and Bianca's love, though he tells his father he does not want to study anymore, and so must also imagine living off his future wife's wealth. Since it is also the impetus for Petruchio's desire to wed Katherine, wealth clearly establishes the marriageability of all three women.

In fact, on both sides, the whole reason for Katherine and Petruchio's marriage entails the exchange of money and status. When Petruchio arrives at Harry's apartment, he reveals that he is £54,000 in debt, plus interest. His father has died and left him no money, so he has come back to England with the sole purpose of marrying rich. After their first meeting, where Petruchio introduces himself to Katherine by declaring "I'm going to marry you," he finally comes clean about his actual purpose, telling her "I'm not a fraudster, I'm not, just appalling with money."²⁹ He then shows her his deteriorating home, which has been in his family for sixteen generations, and which he cannot afford to keep unless he marries extremely well. While he does not seem to have had the best relationship with his father and his mother "cleared off" when he was six, he clearly feels attached to the house and wishes to keep it.³⁰ As Katherine listens to his tale of woe, she visibly softens toward him and openly contemplates the benefits for herself—not only a marriage to temper her appearance, but also a marriage to an aristocrat, as Petruchio bears the title of Earl of Charlbury. Their marriage, therefore, involves a beneficial shift in status on both sides and, unlike the play, requires Katherine's complete and explicit consent.

When Bianca and Mrs. Minola turn to Katherine at the end of the movie to back them up against their fiancés, Katherine disappoints them. First, she mentions that a prenup never occurred to her and then she launches into a rambling speech about the husband as "the boss":

²⁹ Richards, 23:42, 29:59.

³⁰ Richards, 32:23.

All we do is sit in front of the telly all day eating chocolates. I know I do, when I'm not running the country. . . . I've been like you: argumentative, obnoxious, bad-tempered and what good did it do me? Eh? I think you should do whatever he tells you to do, whenever he tells you to do it. I mean, good lord, how can we ever be equal to *them*? Big, noisy, opinionated, and we're little, noisy, opinionated. It's so obvious, I'm surprised I'm having to spell it out. . . . I think you should be prepared to place your hands below your husband's feet in token to your duty to him and not ask him to sign any bloody silly agreements. If you don't feel you can do that, you shouldn't be marrying him, frankly.³¹

Due to Katherine's usual response to the notion of anyone telling her what to do, her family is appropriately gobsmacked to hear her say all of this. As I discuss in my previous chapter, *Taming*'s final speech has been played many ways to emphasize different emotions and endings for Katherine's character: subservience, oppression, love, etc. With her line about doing nothing when she is not "running the country," the beginning of Katherine's speech here feels like a jest, but after that it is unclear how much of this she speaks sincerely and how much is her playing at madness as Petruchio seems to do throughout the film. With its dramatic music, tight close-ups, and quirky characters, this adaptation gets the closest of those I examine to the comedic form of the original play, and perhaps we can read that same farcical tone in this scene as well.³² Yet, even as Katherine contrasts her own political power with that of her unemployed husband in a moment that might otherwise be read as sarcastic, her face and tone never express anything but annoyance at her family and love for her husband.

Critics remain split over how to read this speech. Downes posits that the tenor of Katherine's speech "seems to hover blithely between earnestness and irony,"³³ and Wray concludes that the speech is meant to highlight the relationship that has grown between Petruchio

³¹ Richards, 1:21:08-22:07.

³² Kidnie observes that the scenes portraying Katherine's violence and intense anger issues, while perhaps not realistic for a person of her occupational position, are a "level of farce [that] quickly establishes Katherine as recognizably Shakespeare's comic heroine" (*Problem of Adaptation* 106). Wray offers an alternative but similar lens through which to view the film when she calls it "hyperbolic" (*Shakespeare and the Singletons*, "188).

³³ Downes, "'If You'll Excuse My Shakespeare,'" 124.

and Katherine.³⁴ More importantly for my argument, Kidnie posits that it emphasizes how this production flips the gendered power dynamics of marriage in Shakespeare's play.³⁵ In this adaptation, it is the women who have the power to turn down marriage proposals (as Bianca does to Harry), create the terms of their marriage (as Katherine does with Petruchio), and stipulate the conditions of sharing their wealth (as Mrs. Minola and Bianca both do with their fiancés). Through the threat of divorce, these women can also dictate the types of marriages they want, and their husbands must obey or lose their income. Kidnie thus sees Petruchio's insecurity in their marriage, demonstrated throughout the film by his desire not to speak of divorce, as the motivation for Katherine's speech:

This speech on female duty thus seems as meaningless as the pre-nuptial agreement that Katherine moments later tells her husband never holds up in court. But like the legal document, it functions as an important symbolic promise of intent. The fact that Katherine delivers a speech of marital obedience explicitly obviates any need for divorce – and so for even the possible security of a legal safety net – since it offers an unconditional affirmation of the institution of marriage.³⁶

The film's goal is not only to save their relationship by presenting it as mutually beneficial and ultimately loving, but to save the institution of marriage from an age of divorce. Perhaps the moment that seems the most pertinent to consider, then, is Katherine's response to Bianca's dare that she go through with her statement and put her hand under his foot: "I would, if he asked me to, but he won't ask me to because he feels exactly the same way about me and he wouldn't expect anything from me that I wouldn't expect from him."³⁷ Like so many productions before it, this *Taming* presents Katherine and Petruchio as social outcasts who have, together, found love and acceptance without the need of "a legal safety net."

³⁴ Wray argues that the speech helps transform "what might appear as a genuine 'taming' into impersonation and performance" ("Shakespeare and the Singletons," 202).

³⁵ Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*, 106.

³⁶ Kidnie, 109.

³⁷ Richards, *Shakespeare-Told*, 1:22:13.

The film thus methodically marks Katherine and Petruchio as societal outsiders who find their place in each other. Katherine's anger issues extend to flipping a table at the nice restaurant where she and her family are having lunch together when other patrons interrupt to ask for her sister's autograph. Her temperament also apparently affects her sexual appeal, with Harry now trying to warn Petruchio *against* Katherine by stating that she is an "ugly, bad-tempered, puerile, violent, sad, strange screw-up with problems And, she's a virgin. Bianca told me. 38 years old and still a virgin. That's how bad it is! That's not what you want is it, these days . . . Just don't go there, not even for a gold mine."³⁸ While at lunch, her mother tells her that marriage is a good idea, as people see her as "frumpy and peculiar" in contrast to her sister, who apparently was proposed to six times that week already, and "it's only Tuesday."³⁹ Not only does her temper apparently damage her sex appeal, but multiple characters link Katherine's disposition and lack of a relationship to her sexuality itself. Harry states to Petruchio that "Everyone thinks she's a dyke or mad or Hitler."⁴⁰ Her mother comes to her office after their lunch to ask if Katherine is a lesbian and, after Katherine says no, responds that Katherine marrying will correct people's misconception, implying that this is not only a common one, but also one that *should* be corrected. In other words, the "certain lifestyle choices" that John mentioned earlier do not include being gay. This adaptation therefore presents heterosexual romance, marriage, and sex, perhaps not in that order, as Katherine's proper narrative arc, which "privileges traditional—albeit in this particular programme gender-inverted—family values."⁴¹ Katherine's taming, construed as her journey to become a romcom heroine, involves desiring and learning how to fit into a normative relationship (as well as desiring to learn and learning to desire).

³⁸ Richards, 18:00.

³⁹ Richards, 6:27, 6:35.

⁴⁰ Richards, 17:45.

⁴¹ Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*, 112.

This emphasis on marriage and “traditional family values” also centers Katherine’s non-traditional femininity. Consistent with Katherine’s representation in the play as *not* “of gentler, milder mould,”⁴² this Katherine speaks and acts out far more even than Petruchio (though I argue that this Petruchio threatens more and worse than she does). Already contrasted with her elegant, worldly sister in terms of desirability, Katherine is constantly presented as the outsider in her own family. Mrs. Minola is played by Twiggy Lawson, who became famous in real life as a model in the 1960s, marking Bianca’s career as part of a “family business” with Katherine as the outlier.⁴³ Indeed, both Bianca and Mrs. Minola appear regularly in more extravagant makeup and luxurious clothing than Katherine, who barely seems to wear makeup. Katherine is not pretty or elegant like her sister and mother, another aspect of her character that, like her temper, mark her as not traditionally feminine. Katherine’s understanding and dislike of this positionality, even as she cannot seem to change it, represents that aspect of her character with which I posit audiences are meant to sympathize: her inability to fit in. For example, after urging her to marry, Mrs. Minola pushes for Katherine to attend the party Bianca is hosting, telling her even “you can’t lose your temper and make a fool of yourself in five minutes.” Katherine seems disappointed when she answers, “I can.”⁴⁴ Wray determines that this “rejoinder suggests a fragile and uncomfortable conception of self,” the cure of which lies in romance.⁴⁵ Katherine’s relationship

⁴² Hortensio speaks this line to Katherine in 1.1.60.

⁴³ Pittman asserts that “[Katherine’s] tall, blond, wealthy mother and supermodel sister contrast physically and emotionally with Katherine and offer a psychological explanation for her alienating tactics and behavior” (*Authorizing Shakespeare*, 146).

⁴⁴ Richards, *ShakespeaRe-Told*, 21:28.

⁴⁵ Wray, “Shakespeare and the Singletons,” 192. More specifically, the cure comes from “the covert delight entertained once a soulmate has been secured: for example, references to her wedding provoke half-smiles from Kate, pointing up a conservative cure for the singleton disease” (192). This narrative aligns with what Wray calls “chick lit,” a genre itself most often aligned with the romantic comedy, which she argues, quoting Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, “‘brings in focus’ issues of ‘identity . . . femininity . . . feminism . . . consumerism and self-image’” (192). See Ferriss and Young, *Chick Lit*, 2-3.

with Petruchio allows her to finally fit into the normative framework of family and femininity long denied to her, perhaps even to fit in better than her mother and sister.

Central to this pop-feminist romance is its promise of sex as a similar “fix” for Katherine’s abrasive personality and outsider status. Katherine’s virginity actually seems to operate as a queering element of her character.⁴⁶ Not only presented as non-normative, her supposed status as a 38-year-old virgin also becomes read as borderline pathological: both the cause of her horrible temper and what cannot be changed because of it. As Harry articulates, a 38-year-old virgin is “not what you want, is it, these days.”⁴⁷ While this virginal state might be encouraged for and desired in a younger woman in the context of the heteronormative romcom, at a certain age virginity becomes unacceptable and off-putting: no longer a state of desirability but proof of multiple men’s *lack* of desire or of the woman’s similar and non-normative lack of desire herself.⁴⁸ Whereas the Petruchio of the playtext denies Katherine the accoutrements of a gentlewoman until she can act like one, here Petruchio refuses to have sex with Katherine until she starts being nice to him. Katherine’s driving motivation is no longer class-status, but sex-status. Katherine’s virginity is part of what needs to be tamed in order for her to no longer be the “bitch” that Petruchio later declares her to be. Paired with Katherine’s own disappointment in her temper, her eventual disappointment at their wedding night also seems to connect with a desire for the more traditional femininity displayed by her mother and sister. Katherine does not argue with Bianca as she does in the play, but she clearly feels saddened by her sister’s general

⁴⁶ While I disagree with much of her reading of their sexual encounters, Pittman brilliantly recognizes how “it is sexual union that transforms Katherine in *Retold* and translates Petruchio’s sexual ambiguities into heteronormative activity” (*Authorizing Shakespeare*, 162).

⁴⁷ Richards, *ShakespeaRe-Told*, 18:19.

⁴⁸ Katherine’s lack of sexual experience could also invite a reading of her character as asexual or aromantic, though the BBC’s adaptation relies on viewers’ assumption that she does indeed desire Petruchio sexually and romantically and perhaps has always desired such a relationship. For general introductions to the aspect identity, see Decker, *The Invisible Orientation* and Chen, *Ace*. For readings related to premodern asexuality/aromanticism, see Blake, “Teaching Premodern Asexualities and Aromanticisms.”

desirability and how different she is from the rest of her family. The movie, therefore, portrays sex both as the taming mechanism for her temper and that which might allow her to become “normal.”

As with Katherine’s anger issues, Petruchio’s paradoxical position as a destitute aristocrat identifies him as a social outcast; but perhaps more pertinent to his characterization—and what links him more tightly in the narrative with Katherine—is his gender and sexuality, or at least how they are perceived. On the day of their wedding, viewers see Petruchio and Harry drinking while dressed in their tailcoats. Harry has just commented that he did not think Petruchio would go through with the marriage when Petruchio bursts out that he cannot do it “dressed like this.”⁴⁹ Harry, clearly worried, tells Petruchio he cannot “do that” to Katherine on her wedding day, but Petruchio insists, “I’m not going to lie to her. . . . There are things about me she needs to know.”⁵⁰ The main thing Kate needs to know (and what Harry was referring to), apparently, is that Petruchio sometimes likes to wear women’s clothing makeup, which he wears, while obviously inebriated, to their wedding as an ensemble of a mini-skirt, fishnet tights, knee-high, high-heeled boots, and a very open shirt. As Katherine finally manages to enunciate, after being dragged into the church by a drunk Petruchio, “You are dressed as a woman,” or as she revises later, “a tart.”⁵¹ Here, as Wray observes, “whereas the Shakespearean play stresses Petruchio’s motley plebeian dress and, through the description of his improperly decked horse, a blurring of human and animal categories, the appropriation elects to favour a more embarrassing entanglement of class and gender transgressions.”⁵² While it could be seen as endearing that he

⁴⁹ Richards, *ShakespeaRe-Told*, 38:00.

⁵⁰ Richards, 38:33.

⁵¹ Richards, 41:05, 41:44.

⁵² Wray, “Shakespeare and the Singletons,” 204.

wishes for Katherine to know the whole truth of who he is before they marry, it is also in this scene that the tone of the film begins to shift.

Petruchio is quick to assure Katherine that “I’m not a poof . . . common misconception . . . I’m sorry, I should have mentioned it before, but it’s-it’s difficult, it’s-it’s-it’s not easy. People tend to laugh or cry.”⁵³ Indeed, Petruchio’s entrance at the wedding courts a misguided form of laughter by leveraging stereotypes of crossdressing for comedic effect. The music for his entrance on his moped is jaunty and bouncy, and many of the reporters that surround them to take pictures chuckle when the couple first sees each other outside the church. The more somber wedding march takes over as Petruchio makes his confession while they walk down the aisle; here, instead of laughter, their appearance is met with faces displaying shock and, at times, disgust. This scene can be read two ways; on the one hand, the wedding attendees’ reaction may correspond to that of a mainstream audience that has little understanding of crossdressing. On the other hand, their horrified reaction also courts the audience’s sympathy for Petruchio who may be alienated from the scandalized spectators. The second reaction begins to take hold as the scene prioritizes Petruchio’s speech, which makes clear that his drunkenness is a reaction to his own vulnerabilities: he apologizes for drinking, which he blames on feeling frightened she wouldn’t show up, and later admits that “I did try the suit on, Kate, I just felt odd in it.”⁵⁴ Pittman proposes that, “*Retold* translates Petruchio’s outrageous wedding-day behavior from the play text into an identity crisis of genuine integrity, trading the game-playing cruelties of Shakespeare’s Petruchio for the sincerities of a romantic comedy hero simply endeavoring to be true to

⁵³ Richards, *Shakespeare-Re-Told*, 41:14. While Katherine is clearly upset by his crossdressing at their wedding, perhaps the way they are both occasionally identified by others as gay somehow unites them and makes their sexual interest in each other more complicated as well as more compelling. Yet, similar to *10 Things, Re-Told* ultimately removes all possibility of same-sex desire from its narrative, making this moment feel more homophobic than sexually subversive.

⁵⁴ Richards, 47:22.

himself.”⁵⁵ The audience, and eventually Katherine herself, are asked to view Petruchio’s rash decisions on their wedding day as romantic and, thus, excusable—he surprised her with “inappropriate” wedding attire (not only due to its gender but working-class presentation) because he wanted to enter into their marriage in genuine sincerity and he drank because he was nervous about her reaction to learning about his desires.

Yet, even as this scene garners audience sympathy for Petruchio, it also marks a sharp and troubling shift in the tone of their relationship. For instance, after dragging her down the aisle and to the priest, when Katherine snarls at Petruchio, “I want you to let go of my arm,” his response is to ignore her struggles and ironically ask, “You’re not going to embarrass me, are you Kate?” The only response we receive from her are pained grunts as she attempts to escape his grip. When the priest asks if everything is okay, Petruchio yells at him in response. So, while the tone shifts in this scene from comedic to serious, it does so not due to a defense of gender nonconformity but through the threat of Petruchio’s violent masculinity.

Up until now, their unconventionality has made the two seem like they could be a good match. Petruchio’s first glimpse of Katherine comes as she leaves her sister’s party after smashing a guitar over another guest’s head. Petruchio and Harry stand witness to the aftermath and then Petruchio dives into the elevator with her immediately afterwards, to face the worst of her wrath, yet he emerges unscathed. He actually seems delighted by Katherine’s retorts, telling her, “I like everything you do. I like everything about you. And I’m serious. *[laughs]* I wanna marry you . . . I was told you’re horrible, disgusting, and obnoxious, you’re nothing of the kind! It’s lies! You-you-you’re plucky, you’re fun, you’re exciting! That’s the thing, that’s the big thing, I don’t think I’ve ever thought about what my kind of woman was before.”⁵⁶ Wray

⁵⁵ Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare*, 160.

⁵⁶ Richards, *Shakespeare-Told*, 26:01.

contends that an audience is meant to read this moment as “love at first sight” for Petruchio,⁵⁷ and while his compliments end up feeling like a form of negging,⁵⁸ he seems genuinely surprised by his own revelation as he speaks to her. Similarly, while she glares at him for the whole ride, when the elevator finally opens, she does not immediately get off. Instead, they stay inside staring at each other while Harry waits awkwardly for them to emerge. Further, in response to his continued assertions that they are to be married, Katherine actually tones down her anger, merely rolling her eyes at him instead of flying off the handle, as she has done with everyone else. They also get along well when they meet at the park and visit his family home. In these interactions, viewers can see that though she may not exactly care for Petruchio, Katherine is willing to tolerate him.

Their burgeoning relationship, however, begins to deteriorate once he arrives at the wedding drunk, late, and wearing women’s clothing. Katherine sees all of this as a big joke meant to humiliate her and tries to leave, but he restrains her, yells at the vicar, threatens her with bad publicity if she fails to go through with the marriage, and then has the vicar skip to the vows. He also reveals that he screwed up their plane tickets and they have to leave for the airport as soon as possible, missing their reception. The entire vow sequence loses much of its gravitas by being interspersed with an argument.⁵⁹ Outside of the church, Petruchio picks up a struggling Katherine and kisses her in front of the press, then drags her to their car and pushes her inside. Again, while Petruchio’s desire to be known by the woman he is to marry might be commendable, his drunkenness leads him to create a PR nightmare for Katherine and, worse, he

⁵⁷ Wray, “Shakespeare and the Singletons,” 197. Wray also remarks that, “from the first moment (in the lift to Bianca’s shiny modern-art apartment), Petruchio and Kate are established as paradoxically ‘right’ for each other” (190), and Downes reads their chemistry as having a “sympathetic electricity” (125).

⁵⁸ Negging is “the practice of making negative or slightly insulting comments to someone you find attractive in order to make them take an interest in you.” See “negging.”

⁵⁹ In presenting the wedding scene, both *Re-Told* and *Vinegar Girl* bow to the conventions of the romantic comedy genre over the content of Shakespeare’s play.

spends much of the scene physically moving her body as he pleases, ignoring her struggles. Katherine clearly also displays “physically aggressive tendencies,”⁶⁰ but Petruchio’s own physicality has and continues to be presented as an underlying tension and threat, visible most readily in the restraining and manipulating of his new wife.



Figure 1: Rufus Sewell (Petruchio) and Shirley Henderson (Katherine) in *Shakespeare in Love* (2005) directed by John MacKenzie.

After their mad dash to the airport, much to Petruchio’s dismay, Katherine tells him she wants out, saying she will not be taken seriously now as everyone will just see her as pathetic: “Oh, yes, Katherine Minola, she was tip for the top until she married that *freak*. Oh, and here’s the funny bit, she only married him because she was *stupid* enough to be flattered by his pathetic half-arsed declarations of love and then it was only five minutes before they got *divorced*.”⁶¹ When she continues to spit vitriol at him, Petruchio calls Harry and asks his friend to take a

⁶⁰ Wray, “Shakespeare and the Singletons,” 188.

⁶¹ Richards, *Shakespeare in Love*, 38:11. (Italics used to mimic the delivery of the lines.)

plane out to Italy so he does not have to be alone with her, declaring with a growl, “If she wants a bad marriage, I’m going to *give her one*. And then I’m going to tame the bitch.”⁶² For the viewer, it is at this moment that his previous violence or threats of violence resurface to darkly foreshadow their honeymoon. Such threats of violence include the moment when Petruchio first arrives at Harry’s apartment, Harry has a hangover, which Petruchio ultimately tells his friend to deal with “the way you deal with a woman”; only moments before, however, his more specific advice was “to grab [the hangover] by the jugular, slap it in the face, and kick in the balls . . . you give in once and it will think it can walk all over you every time,” indicating that the way you should deal with a woman is through violence.⁶³ When Bianca asks what Petruchio is like, Katherine tells her that he is “big, eccentric, overwhelming, he talks too much, he hits people when they get in his way.”⁶⁴ The first time they meet, Petruchio threatens to return Katherine’s violence with his own. This violent and threatening physicality is exacerbated and emphasized by the extreme height difference between the two characters. The actors’ “eighteen-inch height difference” both adds to the film’s over-the-top comedy and underlines Petruchio’s ability to control or hurt Katherine if he chooses.⁶⁵ Indeed, he continuously looms over her in the elevator scene and when he picks Katherine up to kiss her in front of the church for the press, her feet dangle kicking in the air at least a foot off the ground. Once on their honeymoon, he begins the taming process by moving from physically to emotionally manipulating her: making her change a tire on her own while still wearing her wedding dress, hiding her bags and phone and telling her there was a screwup at the airport, gaslighting her when she says she knows she put hers in the trunk, and then letting air out of the car tires so that she cannot leave their vacation home,

⁶² Richards, 52:12.

⁶³ Richards, 16:42, 16:27.

⁶⁴ Richards, 35:53.

⁶⁵ Wray, “Shakespeare and the Singletons,” 188.

effectively trapping them both without clothes or food. That night, he keeps her awake by blasting opera music. Unlike the Petruchio of the playtext, he is not even couching that his taming is meant in “kindness” but in negligence and disrespect. The worst, however, comes when he decides to also starve her of sex after threatening to give it to her whether she wants it or not.



Figure 2: Rufus Sewell (Petruchio) and Shirley Henderson (Katherine) in ShakespeaRe-Told: The Taming of the Shrew (2005) directed by David Richards.

When Katherine wakes up to the blasting opera music, she has to unbolt a heavy door latch on her bedroom door to leave, clearly indicating that she did not want her new husband anywhere near her as she slept. After she walks downstairs to the lounge area where he sits drinking on the couch and shuts off the music, he tells her to come sit on him. When she refuses, he exclaims that he “can’t wait to get started” and lurches after her, following her back up the stairs. She tells him “don’t you dare touch me,” “keep away from me,” and “if you touch me, I’ll scream,” as he follows her into the bedroom and starts removing his clothes. His response:

“Oooo, promise?”⁶⁶ She seems momentarily shocked as he removes his pants and, presumably, his underwear (though the framing of the screen blocking anything below his waist allows the film to keep its PG rating), after which he throws her onto the bed as she shrieks and claws at him. “You have no idea how long I’ve waited for this,” he growls as she struggles and after she tells him, once again, not to touch her, he responds angrily, “You’ve teased me long enough.” The movement of his hands and her skirts indicates he is positioning himself for penetration when she snarls back at him, “Fine, okay, get on with it!”⁶⁷ What follows could be a textbook example of dubious consent:

PETRUCHIO. I’ve longed for this since the first time I clapped eyes on you.

KATHERINE. Fine, do it!

PETRUCHIO. I’m going to!

KATHERINE. Go on then!

[both panting]

KATHERINE. Alright then!

PETRUCHIO. *[softer]* You ready?

KATHERINE. *[still panting loudly]* When you are.

[She leans up to kiss him.]

PETRUCHIO. *[pulling away]* No, you’re right.

KATHERINE. What?

PETRUCHIO. *[off the bed now]* It’s no good, I can’t do it.

KATHERINE. *[sounding disappointed]* Can’t you?

PETRUCHIO. Oh, you can beg. You can get down on your hands and knees and you can grovel but it’s no good. Forget it. I’m not having sex with you until you start being nice to me. You gonna start being nice to me?

[Katherine looks torn]

PETRUCHIO. Alright, fine, I get it.

*[Petruccio leaves and Katherine angrily tucks herself back into bed.]*⁶⁸

The power dynamics of this scene are also emphasized by the camera angles, which Pittman argues are “stressing Petruchio’s dominance by showing him on top of Katherine repeatedly. . . .

⁶⁶ Richards, *Shakespeare-Told*, 1:00:47-1:01:19.

⁶⁷ Richards, 1:01:23-36.

⁶⁸ Richards, 1:01:37-02:23.

The disparity in physical power is then emphasized by low-angle shots that look up at Petruchio from Katherine's subordinate perspective."⁶⁹ These angles emphasize the size difference between the two characters, as Petruchio easily looms over his petite wife and threatens to physically control her once again.



Figure 3: Shirley Henderson (Katherine) in *ShakespeareRe-Told: The Taming of the Shrew* (2005) directed by David Richards.

Yet, in this scene, viewers are clearly meant to read Katherine as ultimately not only willing to have sex, but desperate for it. Her disappointment at his refusal to go through with his threat makes it feel as if the audience should also be disappointed, not just that Petruchio did not, indeed, rape her, but also that she did not immediately agree to be kinder to him in order to make him do so. Not only that, but the opera at the beginning of the scene might remind viewers of the first scene of the film, where dramatic vocal music plays over Katherine's angry march back to her office where she assaults an employee. The violent culmination of Petruchio's taming becomes aligned with Katherine's demonstrated violence and anger, as if to imply that Katherine needs Petruchio's taming, in the form of rape, to keep her in check. As Kidnie observes, when Petruchio steps away, "the spectre of a Marowitz-like brutality is replaced with the troubling yet no less familiar spectacle of the unruly woman who secretly desires of a husband social and sexual mastery."⁷⁰ Rape is threatened and then deflected into a patriarchal control that hides behind desire.

⁶⁹ Pittman, *Authorizing, Shakespeare*, 163.

⁷⁰ Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*, 108.

A queer affirmative analytic would suggest that we read this scene and its depiction of their relationship as kink, and the film is open to such a reading; to do so creates an interesting justification for reading their relationship as reciprocal *due to* its inequality, with Petruchio taking on the dominant role and Katherine playing his willing and eager submissive. If we read this scene through a BDSM lens, though, we have to ignore the gender issues that *Taming* and its performance history expose. In particular, we run into two issues: either the BDSM is non-negotiated and thus unsafe (specifically for Katherine), or it is sexy in part *because* it is non-negotiated, but then ultimately falls flat when the tension of the scene diffuses rather than culminates in any form of sexual gratification (for the characters or the audience). In short, if it is meant to be kinky, it is oddly boring.⁷¹ The problematic gender dynamics of the play also cannot be fixed by simply making *Taming* sexy; indeed, such a move dangerously rewards the patriarchal dominance of the play and *Re-Told* that occurs outside the bedroom. While an exploration of kink and sexual nonconformity in Shakespeare and early modern drama is important,⁷² in our post #MeToo era, such a reading in this instance neatly avoids the sexism at the center of the play in much the same way as the romcom genre does.⁷³

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When Rape Becomes Romance: A Brief Interlude Exploring Sexual Violence Post #MeToo

It is here that my analysis of this adaptation stumbles across an interesting complication as some of the feminist scholars who have analyzed and written about *Re-Told* not only are *not* disappointed by this adaptation's representation of Katherine and Petruchio's relationship but are

⁷¹ I am also not convinced that Katherine has a submission kink because while Petruchio's desire to wear women's clothing is clearly articulated in *Re-Told*, Katherine's desire is shown as her need to be normal, not necessarily as a need to be obedient.

⁷² See, for example, the forthcoming collection: Knoll and Gamble, *The Kinky Renaissance*.

⁷³ See also this chapter that discusses the need to wrestle with the challenges of #MeToo in so-called "sex-positive" spaces too, such as the LGBTQ and BDSM communities: Newman and Haire, "'A Reckoning That Is Long Overdue,'" 235-250.

in fact *taken in* by its illusion of a feminist romance. The pop-feminist paradox can thus solicit the approval of certain critics around a particular manifestation of heterosexuality, that is, its normalization of sexual violence as romance. Post #MeToo, however, male (sexual) aggression as an accepted part of romance narratives has come into question. Romance novelists, for example, have reported reexamining their earlier novels in light of #MeToo and even revising their current projects to move away from the trope of “that horrible impenetrable alpha evolving through love to be a fully formed human.”⁷⁴ While there are clear, historical differences between the genres of popular romance and romantic comedy, the romance genre has been having conversations about and wrestling with the place and possibility of sexual violence in romance for decades,⁷⁵ something more mainstream romcoms are really only having to grapple with more recently. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that critics reviewing the BBC’s *Re-Told* before the popular resurgence of #MeToo in 2017 were not framing its narrative as scholars might today.

For instance, in a troubling reading of *Re-Told*’s almost-rape scene, Wray proposes that Petruchio’s actions are made acceptable to a modern audience through the lens of romance, specifically down-playing Petruchio’s manipulating, gaslighting, and assault, and insisting that “[a]lthough sleep deprivation forms part of this experience, here it takes a romantic form, with Kate being awakened by Petruchio playing opera to a sea of candles: the modern translation insists upon its greater acceptability.”⁷⁶ She argues that Petruchio’s sexual dominance throughout the film should be read as “always on the sexy side of a fine line between desire and threat,” with “the most obvious instance being the attempted ‘rape’ scene.”⁷⁷ Likewise, while Pittman notes

⁷⁴ Flood quoting the famous romance author Sarah MacLean in “‘Women are having different fantasies’.” MacLean also notes, “I’ve never not written consensual sex, but now it feels like the consent needs to be explicit, vocal and enthusiastic.” See also this advice post written for Harlequin itself: McCluskey, “Writing Romance and #MeToo.”

⁷⁵ Colyard, “Has #MeToo Changed Romance.” MacLean also argues that “[t]he fashions of romance have always changed over the years . . . And maybe in the current climate, women are having different fantasies” (Flood).

⁷⁶ Wray, “Shakespeare and the Singletons,” 194-5.

⁷⁷ Wray, 197.

that Katherine and Petruchio's "sexual relationship begins uncomfortably" with him chasing her into the bedroom where she resists him, this understatement too quickly glosses over the sexual violence of this scene, and she ultimately argues that Petruchio's cross-dressing "domesticates" his sexual threat, as if wearing feminine clothing has anything to do with either male gender identity or the disavowal of male privilege or aggression.⁷⁸ According to her, what Katherine experiences is not "emotional and physical abuse," but "her own self-actualization through sexual fulfillment."⁷⁹ Wray and Pittman's neutralization of Petruchio's violence and the almost-rape scene demonstrate, I believe, the response the BBC intended their audience to have. Katherine's disappointment in the lack of consummation, even if violent, mirrors an audience's desire for them to consummate their relationship in order to achieve romantic fulfillment. Presenting Petruchio's sexuality as connected specifically with a masculine and 'edgy' violence links "desire and threat,"⁸⁰; by this means, Katherine's sexuality (and the audience's desire for its realization) becomes explicitly linked to Petruchio's violence.

This narrative linking of sex and violence begins with their first interaction, when Petruchio mentions sex as a way they could become better acquainted:

PETRUCHIO. I was just thinking . . . sex in the lift . . . the kind of thing that people show off about.

KATHERINE. What are you talking about? Are you threatening me?

PETRUCHIO. No, I'm just—

KATHERINE. You are.

PETRUCHIO. —pointing out that some people might regard this, in certain circumstances, as an ideal opportunity to, um, to get to know each other.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare*, 162-3.

⁷⁹ Pittman, 162.

⁸⁰ Wray, "Shakespeare and the Singletons," 197.

⁸¹ Richards, *Shakespeare-Told*, 25:05-25.

In fact, she slaps him in the elevator *because* he makes clear he is thinking about her sexually, linking his desire for sex to his own capacity for violence: “Oh Kate, you don’t know how tempting you are to a man like me. [*She slaps him.*] You do that again and I’ll hit you back . . . *harder.*”⁸² His emphasis on “harder” is underlined by sexual tension, as if he thinks his threat may also be seductive. The second time they meet he remarks, “I want you to have all my babies,” and he tries to tempt her to remain married to him by declaring at the airport that they’re going to have wild athletic sex fifteen times a night.⁸³ Finally, after finding her crying in their vacation home, revealing the “accidents” he cooked up, and announcing that Harry will join them soon on their honeymoon, he tells her, “I’m going to go and lie down, get myself together, then I’m going to rip your knickers off and have sex with you.”⁸⁴ Insofar as sex and the threat of sex permeates almost every conversation they have, it appears that part of Petruchio’s purpose is to provide Katherine with the sex she has supposedly never had. As we shall also see in *10 Things*, the status of virginity operates like Chekhov’s gun—a necessary element for the plot to progress and a promise of future action.

Yet, by also making Petruchio vulnerable, this adaptation attempts to remove the misogyny often associated with Petruchio’s character. Wray argues that his wedding nerves “situate Shakespeare’s Petruchio in a contemporary register while at the same time deflecting the ‘original’ character’s misogyny.”⁸⁵ She also argues that the couple’s satisfaction and comfort in the morning-after scene “serve to exorcise any remaining traces of misogyny,” underlined by Petruchio getting up to apparently make breakfast.⁸⁶ For Wray, a clear motivation for his

⁸² Richards, 25:40-52.

⁸³ Richards, 29:28, 48:39.

⁸⁴ Richards, 58:11.

⁸⁵ Wray, “Shakespeare and the Singletons,” 194.

⁸⁶ Wray, 199. Pittman similarly reads this scene as meant to emphasize their “compatibility and equality” (*Authorizing Shakespeare*, 163).

behavior at the wedding and a moment of gendered role reversal adequately excuse or distance this Petruchio from the misogyny of his namesake. Kidnie, however, implies that he is similar *enough* to the play Petruchio for an audience to recognize him as such, which I argue includes his misogynistic behavior.⁸⁷ Similarly, while Downes argues that “the sucking of all class antagonism out of Petruchio’s character . . . makes it far easier to view him as a likeable if eccentrically wired rogue,”⁸⁸ this does not remove the violence from his character: if he is no longer recognizable by his class-based violence, than an audience will recognize him by his gendered violence. So, though this Petruchio certainly has more psychological depth than his predecessor and we may be drawn to his quirky and queer personality, his violence toward Katherine has not been removed, but instead integrated into the romance plot. Such a dynamic is not unknown to the romance genre, but it looks decidedly problematic in light of the U.S.’s recent reckoning with male sexual violence and the power it upholds.

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After leaving Katherine sexually frustrated and unfulfilled, Petruchio talks with Harry who shows up with food, the scraps of which Katherine is invited to eat once she emerges from her room. When Petruchio leaves to retrieve their suitcases, Harry tells Katherine that she needs to accept Petruchio as he actually is: “He’s just an unstable, unbalanced exhibitionist who needs someone to think the world of him.”⁸⁹ Katherine reveals that she knows this and demonstrates her ability to understand her new husband just fine by correctly predicting his threat to throw her suitcase into the pool unless she is nice to him. Harry then tells her that “[h]e does think the

⁸⁷ As Kidnie notes, Petruchio’s name is never actually given to us in the dialogue of the film itself. While he is listed as such in the credits, “the name Petruchio is entirely, and it would seem deliberately, erased from the television drama” (*Problem of Adaptation*, 108). Instead, “this character *achieves* the name ‘Petruchio’ only to the extent that he conforms sufficiently to one’s expectations of Shakespeare’s shrew-tamer” (113).

⁸⁸ Downes, “‘If You’ll Excuse My Shakespeare,’” 126.

⁸⁹ Richards, *ShakespeaRe-Told*, 1:06:09.

world of you in his own strange way” and—despite much evidence of any romantic inclination—compels Katherine to admit that she loves Petruchio and cares more about him than her career.⁹⁰ A parallel scene with Petruchio is not offered. Instead, when Petruchio makes good on his threat and tosses her suitcase into the water, she calmly wanders over, tells him “I don’t wear knickers anyway,” and kisses him.⁹¹ He looks surprised, but quickly chases her back into the house; the next scene reveals Katherine and Petruchio in bed together the following morning.⁹² She sleepily argues with him about the sun being the moon, agrees not to speak any more about divorce, and refuses to tell him if she was, indeed, a virgin. When he leaves to make breakfast, she curls happily into the spot he just vacated, clearly pleased with what has occurred. While Katherine never admits to Petruchio if she really was a virgin—only telling him she’s disappointed he asked—her morning-after glow and the progression of their relationship marks a definitive shift in her character.⁹³ In short, Katherine gives in to Petruchio’s demands and she is rewarded with sex and an apparently loving marriage.

Harry’s discussion with Katherine also reveals the way an audience is meant to read and sympathize with Petruchio’s character. Not only does Harry explain Petruchio’s nervousness before their wedding and his feelings for Katherine, but he also presents a reason for his friend’s immature behavior. In the early scene when Petruchio walks Katherine through his dilapidated family home, he mentions to her that his mother left when he was six, the exact age Harry tells Katherine that Petruchio actually acts. Downes reads this “pop psychologizing” as meant to

⁹⁰ Richards, 1:07:16.

⁹¹ Richards, 1:10:02.

⁹² Pittman asserts that, when Katherine kisses Petruchio instead of flying off the handle, “the two are viewed from exactly the same perspective as equals, and now when Petruchio follows Katherine it is not with force but by invitation” (*Authorizing Shakespeare*, 163). Further, she alleges that their “first attempt at love-making is subsequently corrected by the couple’s actual consummation which stresses healthy heterosexual desire on the parts of both.” This and readings by other critics gloss over or erase the sexual violence of Kate and Petruchio’s previous meetings and initial encounter of the wedding night.

⁹³ See Pittman’s discussion of this scene and Katherine’s “transformation” (*Authorizing Shakespeare*, 164).

soften Petruchio's character,⁹⁴ and Kidnie similarly sees Petruchio presented throughout the film as "psychologically fragile."⁹⁵ In Petruchio's reveal and Harry's repetition, Kidnie posits that "anxiety about a man's ability to be lord and master in his own home is reworked in this film as a male fear of female abandonment, with family and divorce providing the coordinates around which a peculiarly modern idea of marriage is constructed."⁹⁶ While it is true, as Kidnie argues, that Petruchio's motivation to tame Katherine comes from "need not power," driven in large part by "male insecurity,"⁹⁷ it is also bolstered by male privilege and physical intimidation and capitalizes on women's perceived need to nurture: Katherine is expected to assume the task of understanding and accepting Petruchio's gender nonconformity and soothing his insecurities.

Returning to Katherine's speech at the end of the film with these details in mind, it may no longer seem completely absurd that the tone of her message is jumbled—with the speech exemplifying and underscoring the larger ambivalence *Re-Told* displays towards feminism. As Kidnie contends, Katherine's "depiction of a marriage in which the husband works to support the wife who stays at home watching television notably bears little relation to the show's narrative circumstances or conceptual framework."⁹⁸ Given that the content of her speech does not fit her circumstances whatsoever, it is a performance, not necessarily of taming but of romance. While Katherine uses her speech to espouse wifely obedience—"I think you should do whatever he tells you to do, whenever he tells you to do it"—she partially contradicts this point by also explaining how similar men and women are: "[Men are] big, noisy, opinionated, and we're little, noisy, opinionated."⁹⁹ She argues that the only difference between them is one of size, but also allows

⁹⁴ Downes, "'If You'll Excuse My Shakespeare,'" 126.

⁹⁵ Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*, 108.

⁹⁶ Kidnie, 109.

⁹⁷ Kidnie, 108-9.

⁹⁸ Kidnie, 109.

⁹⁹ Richards, *ShakespeaRe-Told*, 1:21:42.

this difference to necessitate female submission, a submission that involves trusting one's husband without the need for legal documents: "I think you should be prepared to place your hands below your husband's feet in token to your duty to him and not ask him to sign any bloody silly agreements. If you don't feel you can do that, you shouldn't be marrying him, frankly."¹⁰⁰ Presented with this chance to one-up her mother and sister, Katherine does not hesitate to perform her new position of traditional, married femininity.

With Katherine's assurance that her husband would never ask her to submit to her, the film attempts to mark their relationship as one of reciprocal vulnerability and care, but the narrative itself cannot support this reading. Though Pittman alleges that "while the film keeps intact a version of Katherina's troublesome speech of submission, it qualifies the statements by insisting that Petruchio would offer the same level of submission,"¹⁰¹ a close look at the scene implies otherwise. Whereas Petruchio agrees to her statement at Katherine's prompting, his full reply implies he either was not paying attention—we see him flipping through a magazine during her speech—or is not sure how to answer. Katherine gives a whole speech defending him and his position of authority over her to her family and in return receives a noncommittal, "Yep. No. Probably not" response to her assertion that he will not ask for her obedience. There is, in short, no guarantee of reciprocity. Further, while the speech demonstrates "an unconditional affirmation of the institution of marriage,"¹⁰² it also affirms a woman's role as that of nurturer. Through her final speech, Katherine is both saved by and saves the traditional patriarchal marriage/family structure, a transition marked as due to and promoting romantic, heterosexual

¹⁰⁰ Richards, 1:21:55. Her speech may also be meant to teach her family and the audience something about love as she sees it. Kidnie reads Petruchio's insecurity as the motivation for Katherine's final speech, allowing the audience to see Katherine, once again, as able to understand her husband and respond to his needs, which also presents Katherine as a kind of maternal figure, a position more clearly articulated in the other two adaptations, though in this case for her new husband, not her sister.

¹⁰¹ Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare*, 164-5.

¹⁰² Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*, 109.

love, a mainstay of many romcoms. *Re-Told* tries to save their relationship by presenting it as reciprocal and loving, but Katherine must do all the emotional heavy lifting.

After her speech, Petruchio and Katherine find themselves alone in an elevator once more, a scene that clearly echoes and revises their first interaction. After she has revealed that she is in fact pregnant with triplets (all boys)—an ovarian excess in line with the general farce of the film—Petruchio declares, “Oh god, I’m going to shag you right here, right now.”¹⁰³ In contrast to their first elevator ride, Katherine does not shy away. In an echo also of their wedding-night, Katherine replies “I dare you”—recoding both previous encounters as mutually desired and sexually safe.¹⁰⁴ By eagerly accepting the position as house-husband so Katherine can continue her career, this Petruchio also continues the gender-role reversals that differentiate him from Shakespeare’s patriarchal tyrant. Although Wray reads this scene as “signif[ying] the holy grail of contemporary heterosexuality,”¹⁰⁵ Pittman rightly observes that such a gender-role reversal still requires a social class privilege to which not all have access.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, as Downes remarks, “for the viewer familiar with Shakespeare’s play, however, it is hard to shake the sense that a dénouement has been served up that is a little too pat, a little too smoothly accommodating to twenty first-century liberal sensitivities.”¹⁰⁷ In fact, the last ten minutes of film—encompassing her final speech, the elevator scene, and the epilogue—read as a rushed attempt to present and prove Katherine and Petruchio’s love and marriage as true, sustainable, and ultimately good.

¹⁰³ Richards, *ShakespeaRe-Told*, 1:23:30.

¹⁰⁴ Richards, 1:23:45.

¹⁰⁵ Wray, “Shakespeare and the Singletons,” 203.

¹⁰⁶ Pittman, *Authorizing Shakespeare*, 165.

¹⁰⁷ Downes, “‘If You’ll Excuse My Shakespeare,’” 126.

Right before her final speech, viewers see Katherine angrily dominating the floor as the newly elected Leader of the Opposition, apparently keeping her attitude much the same at work as before. Petruchio then shows up at her office declaring, “Where’s my woman?” and manages to convince Katherine to make out with him right then and there, a performance repeated later in the car after they find out Bianca’s wedding is cancelled.¹⁰⁸ That same day, she gives the speech discussed above, declaring herself subservient to her husband and, in the elevator after they leave, announces to Petruchio her pregnancy. Overjoyed, he is completely fine with her declaration that he must raise them, as she refuses to give up her career. As an epilogue, during the credits viewers are treated to pictures of the happy couple, Katherine’s political career (she does become Prime Minister), and their eventual children; one photo shows Katherine standing next to Petruchio when he is dressed in feminine clothing again, demonstrating that she has accepted his crossdressing as well.¹⁰⁹ While presenting Katherine as the liberal feminist careerwoman who can have it all (sex, family, and work), the epilogue also presents Katherine as softer and more feminine than before, with multiple pictures featuring Katherine with her hair down.¹¹⁰ Katherine has both gained the upper hand over her family and found a way to fit in, Petruchio is both sexually dangerous and sexually safe, their marriage is both traditional and liberal. In other words, *Shakespeare Re-Told* constitutes a clear pop-feminist paradox.

¹⁰⁸ Richards, *Shakespeare Re-Told*, 1:16:25.

¹⁰⁹ Pittman remarks that “in its closing montage of black and white photos, *Taming* makes use of the photographic epilogue, a staple of the happily-ever-after ethos of romantic comedy” (*Authorizing Shakespeare*, 164).

¹¹⁰ The closest we get to this image is when Katherine’s hair is messily half-down during her honeymoon, both a representation of her disheveled state and a mark of her liminal position in the midst of her transformation from single, sad shrew to happy, married wife.



Figure 4: Rufus Sewell (Petruccio) and Shirley Henderson (Katherine) in the end credits of *ShakespeareRe-Told: The Taming of the Shrew* (2005) directed by David Richards.

All in all, this series attempts and almost succeeds at presenting Katherine and Petruccio's relationship as one of acceptance, love, and *a lot* of personality. The adaptation fails, however, to adequately address its pairing of sexual aggression with themes of gendered dominance and submission. Other moments of sexual tension limned with violence or threats of violence could perhaps be written off as "sexy" if the violence of the wedding night had not occurred. Instead, it seems that viewers are asked to excuse Petruccio's aborted rape as a necessary evil for the end result of a Katherine who is in fact kinder to him. He tames her temper, "cures" her virginity, and ultimately allows her to fit into the normative framework of family and femininity she seems to crave, while still letting her (and him) retain the quirks that make them who they are. Thus, while *Re-Told* embraces and translates the outlandish and seemingly outdated violence of Shakespeare's play, it also fails to adequately face up to or examine the unbalanced gender dynamics such violence presents. Petruccio eagerly accepting the task of raising their three children while Katherine continues her career should not blind viewers to the way he performs male privilege. Even as this adaptation attempts to gesture to the inadequacy of patriarchal expectations of gender roles for the twenty-first century, it fails to provide any space for critiquing the gender roles it insists on perpetuating in terms of both female nurturance and sexual submission, an oversight further complicated by the BBC's

positioning of itself as an educator of the public.¹¹¹ Instead, this adaptation echoes the issues of sexuality often generated by stage productions of Shakespeare's play that rely on the frisson of sexual tension and the possibility (or in this case, the culmination) of sexual fulfillment to sweep away all other problems of gender or class. While its recourse to the romcom genre makes these expectations seem more reasonable, and I applaud its decision to frame both Katherine and Petruchio as unlikely romantic leads, *Re-Told* still falls into the trap of trying to have it all ways.

Unlike a film like *10 Things*, which remains popular with audiences, the BBC's *Re-Told* TV films have largely faded from view after having accomplished their main goal (of interaction and education) at their moment of broadcast. Examining *Re-Told's Taming* and its imbrication of gender, class, and sexuality, however, illuminates the BBC's appeal to an audience's desire beyond this original purpose—a desire for a seemingly intersectional feminist appropriation of Shakespeare's play. Socioeconomic class status both frames the relatability of the film for its audience as a British romantic comedy and initiates the relationship between Katherine and Petruchio. Katherine's status as 38-year-old virgin establishes her (within the romcom genre) as supposedly well-past the age of marriageability, with the combination of her virginity and age functioning to emphasize both her inability to conform to traditional feminine standards of beauty and desirability and her need for masculine (sexual) intervention. Petruchio's position as a destitute nobleman who occasionally enjoys dressing in woman's clothing should mark him as the worst choice Katherine can make if what she wants is to improve her own image in conventional terms, but instead the BBC presents their quirky and volatile personalities as the perfect match—a classic screwball romcom technique. And feminist critics have been

¹¹¹ As Mills explores in *The BBC*, while the BBC has often been “maligned” or “lauded” for its supposedly “left-wing bias . . . in fact its journalism has overwhelmingly reflected the ideas and interests of elite groups, and marginalised alternative and oppositional perspectives” (2).

surprisingly complicit with the BBC's conflation of sexual attractiveness and sexual aggression: the film apparently seduced them to view Petruchio and Katherine's relationship, full of sexual tension and barely restrained violence, as the perfect recipe for love and acceptance, with the BBC topping off its celebration of the institution of marriage with a nod toward "liberal heterosexual feminist politics."¹¹²

To return to my definition of *Taming*'s pop-feminist paradox, the BBC crafted *Re-Told* to appeal to audiences in desire of a specifically pop-feminist Shakespeare: in this case, a *Taming of the Shrew* that appears feminist, but contains very little political substance that would actually disrupt heteronormative values of romance—a classic outcome of pop-feminism's ambivalence. Katherine is able to pursue the life she desired because she married Petruchio, thus conforming to the cultural norms expected by her constituents and finding joy through her ability to conform (perhaps better than her more traditionally feminine sister and mother). While the film does leave space to imagine gender role reversals or queer intimacies within and for the various characters and their relationships, such imagining is left completely up to the audience, with *Re-Told*'s ending ultimately reaffirming the traditional "happily ever after" approach most productions bring to *Taming*. This is not completely surprising, however, as unlike *10 Things* and perhaps even *Vinegar Girl*, *Re-Told* is deliberately and specifically positioned as an adaptation; the series *re-tells* Shakespeare for contemporary audiences and all four main romantic characters have the same names as in the play. The BBC imagines an audience with some knowledge of and investment in Shakespeare's *Taming* being made contemporary and, thus, feminist. However, *Re-Told*'s position within the romcom genre (and *Taming*'s long performance history) means it

¹¹² Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*, 111.

is unable to fully critique or subvert *Taming*'s gender roles and gender violence; thus, it ultimately re-affirms more than it re-tells Shakespeare's play.

Saving the Viperish Old Maid

The second adaptation I consider does not fit easily into the configuration of the romantic comedy, but it nonetheless utilizes many of the same techniques of the genre in its reworking of Shakespeare's tale for a pop-feminist audience. The now-defunct Hogarth website and some versions of *Vinegar Girl*'s covers tout that in this book "Pulitzer Prize winner and American master Anne Tyler brings us an inspired, witty and irresistible contemporary take on one of Shakespeare's most beloved comedies." Although describing *The Taming of the Shrew* as "beloved" seems far-fetched, it is a popular Shakespeare play to perform and adapt. In an interview with Ron Charles, it is revealed that Tyler "got first pick of the plays" in the Hogarth project, perhaps because of her own popularity.¹¹³ She has published 22 novels and won numerous writing awards. Her novels are often character-driven and in his interview with Tyler for *The Guardian*, Tim Teeman describes her oeuvre as novels that "subtly chronicle the tensions and secrets of middle-class family relationships," a description that seems pretty spot-on for *Vinegar Girl* as well.¹¹⁴ In this same interview, which takes place after Tyler had begun work on *Vinegar Girl*, Teeman quotes Tyler discussing *Taming*: "'I hate it,' Tyler says of the original. 'It's totally misogynistic. I know it thinks it's funny, but it's not. People behave meanly to each other, every single person.'" Similarly, in an interview with Ron Charles for *The Washington Post*, Tyler says, "The Katherina in Shakespeare's play is insane. . . . She's just spouting venom. She's shrieking at Petruchio from the moment she meets him. And he's not much better. So you

¹¹³ Charles, "Anne Tyler."

¹¹⁴ Teeman, "Anne Tyler."

know I had to tone them down.”¹¹⁵ In other words, Tyler approached *Taming* and its lead characters as something to fix, an interpretation bolstered by her explanation for choosing this play to adapt: “Since my greatest joy in writing novels has been the deepening understanding of my characters in ways I’d never predicted, it seemed to me that ‘The Taming of the Shrew’ was the natural choice.”¹¹⁶

In rewriting *Taming*, however, Tyler also, like many adaptors before her, has changed the genre of the story itself to what approximates, in novelistic terms, a romantic comedy. Seeking to deepen our understanding of the characters, she softens them; in Charles’ opinion, she makes “all the characters behave with considerably more humor and gentleness than in the Bard’s version.”¹¹⁷ Tyler recognizes that this might make some readers say of Kate, “This isn’t a shrew at all,”¹¹⁸ and indeed that was the reaction of many critics—though few seemed disappointed by it.¹¹⁹ Still, these edits constitute a generic shift that has important implications for readers’ reception and understanding of *Taming*. For instance, Charles submits that Tyler’s rewriting of Katherine’s final speech allows for “another way to preserve Kate’s dignity while serving up a sweetly romantic ending,” and Tyler herself calls her novel “a meringue,” doubling down on the presentation of this adaptation as light and sweet—words few would use to describe Shakespeare’s play or the relationships it represents.¹²⁰ Indeed, the back cover of the novel itself sets the story up much like the synopsis of a romcom film:

In this witty and warm interpretation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, preschool teacher Kate Battista feels stuck. How did she end up running house and home for her eccentric

¹¹⁵ Charles, “Anne Tyler.”

¹¹⁶ Tobar, “Sending Shakespeare.”

¹¹⁷ Charles, “Anne Tyler.”

¹¹⁸ Charles.

¹¹⁹ Reviews of *Vinegar Girl* in online news sources varied: pieces from *NPR*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* celebrated the novel as a successful fix for Shakespeare’s problematic play, while those from *The Telegraph* and *The Irish Times* were much more ambivalent.

¹²⁰ Charles, “Anne Tyler.”

scientist father and uppity, pretty younger sister Bunny? Plus, she's always in trouble at work—her students adore her, but their parents don't always appreciate her unusual opinions and forthright manner.

Dr. Battista has other problems. After years out in the academic wilderness, he is on the verge of a breakthrough. His research could help millions. But his brilliant young lab assistant, Pyotr, is about to be deported. And without Pyotr, all would be lost. When Dr. Battista cooks up an outrageous plan that will enable Pyotr to stay in the country, he's relying—as usual—on Kate to help him. Kate is furious: this time he's really asking too much. But will she be able to resist the two men's touchingly ludicrous campaign to bring her around?¹²¹

Emphasizing the quirky nature of her characters with words like “eccentric” and “unusual,” the book jacket paints Tyler's novel as a charming story about family, and the word “touchingly” mitigates any negative reactions an audience might have to the “ludicrous campaign” begun by her father.

I am also not alone in categorizing *Vinegar Girl* as a romantic comedy. In her description of Tyler's novel, the scholar Sheila T. Cavanagh argues that “*Vinegar Girl* employs standard romantic comedy manoeuvres that ignore the sharp edges that keep its dramatic counterpart so timely and controversial.”¹²² This designation was also common in reviews of the book, with Heller McAlpin's review for *NPR* calling *Vinegar Girl* “a fizzy cocktail of a romantic comedy,” Carol Memmott in the *Chicago Tribune* referring to it as “like a New Age romantic comedy,” and a blurb in *Cosmopolitan* labeling it as “family drama meets rom-com.”¹²³ Thus, Hogarth Shakespeare and many of Tyler's interviews market this novel specifically and purposefully as falling within the romantic comedy genre, even though the text itself ultimately complicates this genre by focusing more on Kate than her relationship with Pyotr.

¹²¹ This book jacket synopsis comes with the cover featured on the Hogarth website itself. Other editions have slightly different summaries, though all share many of the key elements: Kate's position, her father's situation, and his plan involving her.

¹²² Cavanagh, “There's My Exchange,” 106.

¹²³ McAlpin, “Fizzy ‘Vinegar Girl’”; Memmott, “Anne Tyler's ‘Vinegar Girl’”; and “Vinegar Girl.”

In contrast to *Re-Told*'s emphasis on Katherine and Petruchio's relationship, *Vinegar Girl* clearly aims to accomplish the other goal of many *Taming* adaptations—"saving" Katherine—through an emphasis on domesticity and class relations. Whereas *Re-Told* gives relatively equal screen time to Katherine and Petruchio, in Tyler's adaptation, the reader only has access to Kate's thoughts with her voice representing a third person limited point of view. While the novel places little explicit emphasis on their relationship as a romance, it still bows to the generic conventions of the romantic comedy through its paratextual framing and its inclusion of a "happy ending" epilogue. Most importantly, Kate's narrative arc ends with her defending Pyotr and her father as victims of societal expectations of masculinity. While she may escape the household in which she felt trapped, it is unclear whether she has also escaped the gendered expectations of labor that characterized her confinement.

A 29-year-old preschool teacher's assistant who was "invited to leave" college, Kate Battista has had no plan for her life since.¹²⁴ Instead, she remains at home, where she cooks, cleans, and generally takes care of her father and younger sister, even going so far as to do her father's taxes for him. While *10 Things* will briefly present Kat as a maternal figure to her sister, in *Vinegar Girl* Kate helped raise her sister Bunny after their mother died. With their absent-minded father, Dr. Battista, spending much of his days in his lab, Kate, at only fourteen, took on much of the work of parenting her not yet one-year old sister. Presently, however, Kate and Bunny could not be more different, and it sets both of them on edge. Unlike Bunny, who obsesses over her makeup, hair, and clothing, Kate (like the other Katherine figures) is represented as less conventionally feminine. She hates gossip, beauty parlors, and refers to her own hair as "a bunch of dead cells."¹²⁵ Where Bunny is blonde and demure, like their mother,

¹²⁴ Tyler, *Vinegar Girl*, 31.

¹²⁵ Tyler, 47, 21.

Kate is “dark-skinned and big-boned and gawky.”¹²⁶ Yet while she hates the way Bunny acts like a different person around boys, she finds herself doing the same when faced with the man she likes, Adam.¹²⁷ At one point, while talking to him, Kate “longed all at once to be softer, daintier, more ladylike, and she was embarrassed by her own gracelessness.”¹²⁸ She might disparage Bunny’s pretenses, but it appears she sometimes wishes she was more like her sister or her co-worker Natalie. She cannot, however, seem to be anything but herself: sarcastic and blunt. With Kate’s lack of social skills and inability to embody a more traditional femininity, Tyler presents her protagonist as an outsider, an image already familiar to us from *Re-Told*.

The novel also, however, attempts to soften her “shrewishness” and perhaps salvage her femininity through an extreme presentation of Kate as a maternal and domestic figure. In *Vinegar Girl*, Tyler depicts a typically unequal gender dynamic of household labor (though this one is father-daughter instead of husband-wife), with Kate taking on the burden of grocery shopping, cooking, cleaning, doing all the laundry, and all the other small activities that keep their household running. Arlie Hochschild calls such domestic duties following a full day of work “the second shift,” and in her 1990 book entitled the same, she claims that “adding together the time it takes to do a paid job, housework, and childcare, I averaged estimates from the major studies on time use done in the 1960s and 1970s, and discovered that women work roughly fifteen hours longer each week than men.”¹²⁹ While there has been some debate over the influence of feminism on Tyler’s novels,¹³⁰ as an author writing since the ’60s and often focusing

¹²⁶ Tyler, 51.

¹²⁷ Tyler, 85-6.

¹²⁸ Tyler, 44.

¹²⁹ Hochschild, *The Second Shift*, 3-4.

¹³⁰ In his analysis of Tyler’s 1995 novel, *Ladder of Years*, Paul Christian Jones briefly discusses the then-ongoing debate concerning Tyler’s stance on feminism and Brooke Allen wrote in 1995 that Tyler’s characters seemed “eerily untouched by any of the revolutions, be they sexual or feminist, of the last forty years” (“A Re-Awakening” 27).

on family dynamics, there can be no doubt that Tyler was aware of this feminist critique of domestic labor.

Though this critique of domestic inequality has waned in recent decades in favor of other feminist concerns, the issue itself has not disappeared. Although the distribution of household tasks has become more equitable over the years, a 2019 Gallup Poll reported that “[m]arried or partnered heterosexual couples in the U.S. continue to divide household chores along largely traditional lines, with the woman in the relationship shouldering primary responsibility for doing the laundry (58%), cleaning the house (51%) and preparing meals (51%).”¹³¹ In honor of International Women’s Day in 2020, *The New York Times* presented the findings of an Oxfam study that tallied women’s “shadow labor” in America as worth over \$1.5 trillion the previous year, noting that “[i]n the United States, women perform an average of four hours of unpaid work per day compared to men’s two and a half hours.”¹³² And a 2021 survey by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics found that, on an average day, more women still spend more time on household activities than men.¹³³ With numerous examples of such unequal and unacknowledged gendered household labor dotting *Vinegar Girl*, Kate’s experience clearly evokes a feminist critique of housework. It is only after she is presented with a way out of her situation that she seems to finally realize she has been stuck: “Who else has ever given me a thought? Here in this house I’m just part of the furniture, somebody going nowhere, and twenty years from now I’ll be the old-maid daughter still keeping house for her father. ‘Yes, Father; no, Father; don’t forget to take your medicine, Father.’ This is my chance to turn my life around . . . !”¹³⁴ Presented as an

¹³¹ Brenan, “Women Still Handle.”

¹³² Wezerek and Ghodsee, “Women’s Unpaid Labor.” The issue received even more coverage across newspapers after the COVID pandemic hit and work-from-home requirements, alongside the sudden necessity of at-home childcare, exacerbated already strained gender household disparities.

¹³³ U.S. Department of Labor, “American Time Use Survey.”

¹³⁴ Tyler, *Vinegar Girl*, 179.

unsatisfied pseudo-mother, housekeeper, and wife for her father, Kate becomes a perfect example of the invisible, double duty of labor often placed on women.

Yet, while Kate protests that she hates small children and her approach to teaching at the preschool is unconventional, she clearly cares for her charges and the children love her.¹³⁵

Having practically raised her sister, Kate also has a lot of experience. As Kate tells Pyotr:

When [Bunny] was born I more or less thought she was my own; I was at that age when kids like tending babies. And she looked up to me so when she was a little girl; she tried to act like me and talk like me, and I was the only one who could comfort her when she was crying. But after she reached her teens she kind of, I don't know, left me behind. She changed into this whole other person, this *social* person, I don't know; this social, outgoing person. And somehow she turned *me* into a viperish, disapproving old maid when I'm barely twenty-nine. I don't know how that happened!¹³⁶

While thinking of Adam, Kate “wished she had had a mother. Well, she *had* had a mother, but she wished she'd had one who had taught her how to get along in the world better.”¹³⁷ Kate clearly tried to be this person for her younger sister, reveling in the time when she was. Now, at 15, Bunny cares more about what her friends think than the feelings of her older sister/mother-figure, behaving towards Kate “like the mean girls Kate used to know in seventh grade.”¹³⁸ Bunny's new attitude has the added effect of making Kate feel like her life is practically over before the age of 30. Compounded with her father's implications that Kate may not find another man to marry, perhaps it is unsurprising that she eventually agrees to a green card marriage with his lab assistant, Pyotr Shcherbakov.¹³⁹

When her father attempts to introduce Kate to Pyotr, he does so, unbeknownst to her, as a potential spouse. Pyotr is months away from deportation and Battista, desperate to help him

¹³⁵ Tyler, 25, 40.

¹³⁶ Tyler, 104-5.

¹³⁷ Tyler, 44.

¹³⁸ Tyler, 98.

¹³⁹ Tyler, 76.

change his visa status, sees Kate as the solution, eagerly demonstrating this to Pyotr as he calls her “domestic” twice, emphasizes how “she runs our whole house,” and mentions that “she’s wonderful with small children.”¹⁴⁰ His language clearly reads as an attempt to market Kate as “wife material” to Pyotr so that he can formalize his status and continue to help in the lab. When their father’s plan becomes known, Bunny, trying to convince her sister not to go through with it, asks Kate if she is “chattel”¹⁴¹—an echo of Petruchio’s lines about Katherine in the play as “my goods, my chattels,”¹⁴² and a clear sign of Katherine/Kate’s position in a patriarchal exchange.¹⁴³

When Dr. Battista finally explains his plan to Kate, she is deeply hurt. She decides that “He must think she was of no value; she was nothing but a bargaining chip in his single-minded quest for a scientific miracle. After all, what real purpose did she have in her life? And she couldn’t possibly find a man who would love her for herself, he must think, so why not just palm her off on someone who would be useful to him?”¹⁴⁴ After the second time he “forgets” his lunch as a pretense to make her come to the lab and see Pyotr, and she refuses, he has the gall to say, “I don’t ask very much of you.” To which, for perhaps the first time, Kate is able to acknowledge and reply, “Actually, you ask a lot of me.”¹⁴⁵ Later, Dr. Battista attempts to apologize, admitting that his pleasure in and dependence on Kate is one of the reasons he did not push her to return to school:

I know I expect more of you than I should. You look after your sister, you run the house. . . . I worry you’ll never find a husband. . . . you’re not out where you could *meet* a husband. You’re shut away at home, you’re puttering in the garden, you’re tending children in a preschool. . . . I should have made you go back to school. . . . I’ve been

¹⁴⁰ Tyler, 24-5.

¹⁴¹ Tyler, 131.

¹⁴² Shakespeare, *Taming* 3.2.231.

¹⁴³ In her classic feminist essay, “The Traffic in Women,” Gayle Rubin’s identifies this type of exchange as part of the kinship system that lies within the sex/gender system itself, as Kate becomes the commodity exchanged between her father and Pyotr.

¹⁴⁴ Tyler, *Vinegar Girl*, 81-2.

¹⁴⁵ Tyler, 96.

indulging myself. I told myself, ‘Oh, she’s young; there’s plenty of time; and meanwhile, I get to have her here at home. I get to enjoy her company.’ . . . It may be, too, that that was another reason I thought of pairing you off with Pyoder. ‘I’d still get to keep her around!’ I must have been thinking. ‘No harm done: it’s a marriage only on paper, and she would still be here in the house.’¹⁴⁶

With this admission, suddenly Kate can “see [his] side of it” and agrees to consider the arrangement.¹⁴⁷ A woman who lost her mother young and then practically raised herself suddenly the center of her father’s attention and aspirations? While Dr. Battista may not emotionally manipulate his daughter on purpose, Kate clearly desires to earn her father’s approval, especially in relation to Bunny, on whom he constantly dotes. She even has a secret fantasy in which Bunny ages badly and their father confides in Kate that her sister “had turned out to be such a disappointment.”¹⁴⁸ In his apology, Battista admits to enjoying Kate’s company and keeping her from pursuing a different future due to his own selfishness. Well-meaning and endearing but ultimately destructive, Battista kept Kate at home to keep him company and do the work he did not want to. Ironically, after apologizing to Kate, he then meekly asks her, again, to do his taxes for him. Further, in Battista’s fantasy, the marriage will not change anything: Pyotr will remain in the lab and help Battista finish his work and Kate will remain at home and continue to keep his house. All will be well.

Pyotr, then, also exists as part of Dr. Battista’s fantasized future, inhabiting a vulnerable socioeconomic position as an immigrant hoping to make the US his home. Both he and Kate see Dr. Battista as sometimes acting as an “oligarch,” Kate seemingly taking that term from Pyotr himself, as he currently relies on Dr. Battista for his continued residence in the US.¹⁴⁹ Kate’s father also relies on Pyotr to keep his lab funded, remarking that without him he might as well

¹⁴⁶ Tyler, 118-9.

¹⁴⁷ Tyler, 119.

¹⁴⁸ Tyler, 99.

¹⁴⁹ Tyler, 103, 178.

abandon his research.¹⁵⁰ Yet, Tyler tells us little about Pyotr. From his name and accent, he appears to be Eastern European, probably Russian, but while he often says “in my country . . .” readers never actually learn where he is from.¹⁵¹ Dr. Battista informs Kate that Pyotr is “brilliant. He qualified for an O-1 visa . . . an extraordinary-ability visa.”¹⁵² Pyotr also looks up to Dr. Battista and, like Petruchio in *Re-Told*, he lacked strong parental figures, telling Kate that he is an orphan, abandoned on the porch of an orphanage at just two days old.¹⁵³ Like Petruchio’s crossdressing and eccentricity in *Re-Told*, Pyotr’s passion for immunology and proverbs, as well as his brusque way of speaking, mark him as a quirky outsider who simply needs someone to understand and care for him. While his assumption that Kate being nice to him means she might consent to marry him is full of masculine pretension, his actions and words toward her appear genuine and mark him as likable. Similar to Petruchio in *Re-Told*, Pyotr’s backstory and vulnerability are meant to rescue him from the misogyny of Shakespeare’s original character.

What sets this adaptation apart from many others is that, for much of the plot, no “taming” occurs at all. Even as he clearly views Kate as his best chance to stay in the country, Pyotr also enjoys her attitude, calling her “a shrew” and “vinegar girl” with much delight and taking no steps to change Kate’s attitude or curb her tongue.¹⁵⁴ He is short with her on the day of their marriage and immediately afterward tries to make her obey him as the husband, but his actions are seemingly excused by the loss of the mice he and Battista have carefully cultivated and on which all of their research relies. Overall, he clearly respects Kate’s boundaries and

¹⁵⁰ Tyler, 55.

¹⁵¹ With much of the recent immigration discourse centering on migrants from Mexico and refugees from Syria, it seems almost apolitical of Tyler to feature an Eastern European immigrant. While obtaining a visa and then staying in the US can be difficult for citizens of any country, Eastern Europeans have not faced significant immigration barriers in decades. As one of my early readers noted, “Pyotr” is the Russian version of “Peter.” In other words, “Pyotr” could have been “Pedro” but he’s not.

¹⁵² Tyler, *Vinegar Girl*, 27.

¹⁵³ Tyler, 73-4.

¹⁵⁴ Tyler, 101, 134.

individuality. He even calls Battista out as “sexist” at one point.¹⁵⁵ Indeed, if any taming occurs, it seems to come more from Battista than Pyotr.¹⁵⁶

At first, Kate finds Pyotr confusing and irritating, demonstrating considerable xenophobia in her reactions to him. When she first meets him at her father’s lab, after hearing him speak, Tyler reveals that “[Kate] had no patience with foreign accents.”¹⁵⁷ She also assumes he cannot understand everything she says if she talks fast enough and implies that she thinks foreigners could easily learn to sound American, but they do not because “they’re proud they have an accent.”¹⁵⁸ Later, she does readjust her viewpoint after realizing that “he *was* thinking—that only his exterior self was flubbing his *th* sounds and not taking long enough between consonants, while inwardly he was formulating thoughts every bit as complicated as her own.”¹⁵⁹ Yet, while she recognizes his bravery in coming to a new country, she still regards him and his “foreignness” with “a mixture of pity and impatience.”¹⁶⁰

Due to her own changing opinion of him and Pyotr’s seeming delight in her attitude, Kate comes to view their sham-marriage as a chance for her to escape her life thus far, “to turn [her] life around.”¹⁶¹ The sham-marriage, therefore, becomes simultaneously the epitome of her father taking advantage of her dependent position and Kate’s chance to break away from her imprisonment in domesticity.¹⁶² While she often laments the fact that no one seems to find her

¹⁵⁵ Tyler, 143.

¹⁵⁶ In her SAA seminar paper that considers *Vinegar Girl* through the lens of evaluating adaptation, Regina Buccola contends that “the play grapples with gender stereotypes and assumptions about marital roles and relationship dynamics that Tyler dodges by focusing on the father/daughter dynamic rather than the spousal one. The modern setting of the novel does not justify this change of focus, since marital relationships are still subject to internal negotiation, public debate, and social norms and stereotypes in the twenty-first century” (“Interpersonal Whatchamacallit’,” 6). Thank you to Regina for allowing me to share and cite her work.

¹⁵⁷ Tyler, *Vinegar Girl*, 23.

¹⁵⁸ Tyler, 104-5.

¹⁵⁹ Tyler, 106.

¹⁶⁰ Tyler, 153.

¹⁶¹ Tyler, 179.

¹⁶² Indeed, her father is not happy when Kate decides to go against his original plan and move in with Pyotr (Tyler, 163-5), and Kate clearly plans not to return to her old life, looking forward to escaping her father’s home and the

sudden marriage surprising or, as she interprets it, seems to think she deserves better, she also sees marrying Pyotr as her chance to have a better life: her own space, a college degree, and a new job. She has also come to realize that, unlike Adam, Pyotr appears to accept her: “[Adam] would always make her feel too big and too gruff and too shocking; she would forever be trying to watch her words when she was with him. He was not the kind of person who liked her true self, for better or worse.”¹⁶³ This same theme of acceptance runs through the relationships of the other two adaptations, though here the focus remains on Kate: through contemplating the change this marriage will bring, Kate has come to terms with what her life has been and what she wants it to be, as well as *who* she wants to be.¹⁶⁴

This realization comes alongside a recognition of some of the barriers that men face in their lives as well. After hearing her father speak exhaustedly about his work over the years and how her mother did not understand, Kate thinks that she at least can interpret what he *means* to say, and that “if her mother had known too—if she had been able to read the signals—the lives of all four of them might have been much happier.”¹⁶⁵ Comparing this to Pyotr’s experience of feeling so alone in America—“I have to pretend I am fine here. I have to pretend everything is . . . how you say? Hunky-dory?”—Kate comes to the realization that “Men were just subject to this belief that they should keep their miseries buried deep inside, it seemed, as if admitting to them would be shameful.”¹⁶⁶ *Vinegar Girl* thus positions the absent mother as the cause of social inadequacies—for Kate, Pyotr, and Dr. Battista. While Kate took on the maternal position for her

expectations of labor that have become part of her life there: “She had used this *life* up. And after Pyotr got his green card she was not going to move back home, whatever her father might fantasize. She would find a place of her own, even if all she could afford was a little rented room somewhere. Maybe she would have her degree by then; maybe she’d have a new job” (181).

¹⁶³ Tyler, 195.

¹⁶⁴ Centering the woman’s point of view is a common trend in novelistic adaptations of Shakespeare. See, for example, Jane Smiley’s 1991 adaptation of *King Lear, A Thousand Acres*.

¹⁶⁵ Tyler, *Vinegar Girl*, 182.

¹⁶⁶ Tyler, 210.

sister, she only reaches her true position as the romantic comedy heroine when she also takes on that position for her partner. In fact, in *Vinegar Girl* and *Re-Told*, the Katherine character's ability to become the romantic comedy heroine relies upon her ability to address the vulnerability of her Petruchio.

Kate's approximation of the wedding speech comes after Bunny voices her outrage at Pyotr for assaulting Edward (who stole all the mice from the lab) and her disbelief in Kate's willingness to go along with him and the marriage. To which Kate replies:

It's *hard* being a man. Have you ever thought about that? Anything that's bothering them, men think they have to hide it. They think they should seem in charge, in control; they don't dare show their true feelings. No matter if they're hurting or desperate or stricken with grief, if they're heartsick or they're homesick or some huge dark guilt is hanging over them or they're about to fail big-time at something— 'Oh, I'm okay,' they say. 'Everything's just fine.' They're a whole lot less free than women are, when you think about it. Women have been studying people's feelings since they were toddlers; they've been perfecting their radar—their intuition or their empathy or their interpersonal whatchamacallit. They know how things work underneath, while men have been stuck with the sports competitions and the wars and the fame and success. It's like men and women are in two different countries! I'm not 'backing down,' as you call it; I'm letting him into my country. I'm giving him space in a place where we can both be ourselves.¹⁶⁷

As one of the most inventive rewritings of Katherine's final speech, Tyler's Kate does not talk of obedience and wifely duties, but about belonging and acceptance. In contrast, while *Re-Told* ultimately ends up highlighting the latter, it does not completely erase the former, as the BBC's Katherine still espouses wifely obedience and subordination, even if her speech may be read as partially tongue-in-cheek. Here, Kate speaks of leveling the playing field for both her and her new husband, recognizing the barriers she feels he may experience as a man as similar in weight to those she is eager to leave behind as a woman. Her speech also points to a contemporary

¹⁶⁷ Tyler, 239-40.

concern with the negative effects of toxic masculinity on men themselves.¹⁶⁸ As Peggy Orenstein’s article, “The Miseducation of the American Boy,” argues, we are still stuck with an antiquated notion of manhood that requires boys and men to act dominant, glorify in sexual conquest, and suppress their more “sensitive” emotions.¹⁶⁹ In line with Kate’s own concern, Orenstein articulates that “Masculinity, then, becomes not only about what boys do say, but about what they don’t—or won’t, or *can’t*—say, even when they wish they could.”¹⁷⁰ Tyler voices an interest in this exact subject in an interview she gave on writing in 2012, noting that:

as a novelist she is attracted to the challenge posed by the fact that men “are almost forced by society to hide their feelings. When I’m writing from a man’s point of view, particularly if it is first-person, all of a sudden I’m aware of how confined I feel, how I can’t use that word because it is emotionally charged, too gushy. I feel I’m walking this narrow path with high walls on either side of me. The first time I realised I was so surprised, I thought, well here we are always worrying about women’s liberation, but how about men?”¹⁷¹

She clearly delves into the topic men’s emotional oppression and possible liberation in *Vinegar Girl*.

Yet, while opening up a space of acceptance and belonging in relation to gender equality, Kate’s speech also shuts down an important conversation about gendered expectations and misogyny. First, her speech is directed at Bunny—a 15-year-old girl, unhappy with her sister’s new husband for assaulting the boy she has a crush on and unhappy with her sister for actually going through with their father’s ludicrous plan that she sell herself off for the betterment of his career. While the third person limited point of view of Tyler’s novel means seeing Bunny,

¹⁶⁸ Many reviewers found Tyler’s rewriting of the final speech delightful and clever. In a quote that represents this overall response well, Gopnik argues that she “re-orchestrates it to become at once a feminist statement, a love letter, and a musing on the perils of modern masculinity” (“Why Rewrite Shakespeare?”).

¹⁶⁹ Orenstein, “The Miseducation of the American Boy.” This article is adapted from her 2020 book, *Boys & Sex: Young Men on Hookups, Love, Porn, Consent, and Navigating the New Masculinity*.

¹⁷⁰ Orenstein, “The Miseducation.”

¹⁷¹ Allardice, “Anne Tyler.”

through Kate's eyes, as annoying and shallow, her sister is also the *only* character who does as Kate so desperately wishes in protesting her marriage: she verbalizes that Kate deserves better. Rivlin also notes that it is Bunny who "voices many of the novel's anti-patriarchal statements," but since the novel overall "invites readers to laugh at Bunny's youthful 'excesses' . . . Bunny's strength of conviction is comically—or 'gently'—undermined throughout the novel."¹⁷² Second, Kate outright states that men are "less free" than women due to the way the patriarchal society they benefit from has simultaneously caged men into performing a self-destructive form of masculinity. While toxic masculinity is a societal problem, to go so far as to state that men (as a homogenous group) are somehow less free than generalized "women" is ridiculous and dangerous. Her speech ignores the social expectations and restrictions that have *forced* women to *have* to learn to read emotions and respond empathetically, which means ignoring the other side of the patriarchal oppression she to which she alludes.¹⁷³

In one of Elizabeth Burritt's dances in Joe Goode's performance piece, *What the Body Knows*, Burritt sing-songs, "I was born to understand. I was taught to be sympathetic. . . . I was taught: watch, listen, understand, embody. . . . my face right there in your moment, ready to understand everything you're feeling."¹⁷⁴ In her dance, Burritt expresses the fact that, as a girl, she was "taught" from a young age to act and react a certain way, to embody and express the emotions of others for them. As Orsenstein's article points out, however, it is not the responsibility of women—"girlfriends, mothers, and in some cases sisters"—to provide the

¹⁷² Rivlin, "Loving Shakespeare," 71-2.

¹⁷³ Rivlin reads this speech as demonstrating "a retrograde sensibility, but one that is calculated to forge connections with readers from across the ideological and political spectrum"; women are shown to be "emotionally superior to men," but "thus have the responsibility to understand them" (72-3). She argues that "[t]his sort of affirmation of women's emotional labour is central to a good deal of 'middlebrow' contemporary fiction" (73), a designation that would also cover the romantic comedy.

¹⁷⁴ Burritt, "What the Body Knows."

emotional labor of “processing men’s emotional lives.”¹⁷⁵ In *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, Kate Manne calls this type of work “feminine-coded forms of caregiving labor,”¹⁷⁶ the emotional and social labor that is *expected* to be performed by women:

a woman is regarded as *owing* her human capacities to particular people, often men or his children within heterosexual relationships that also uphold white supremacy, and who are in turn deemed entitled to her services. . . . And it is plausibly part of what makes women more broadly somebody’s *mother, sister, daughter, grandmother*: always somebody’s someone, and seldom her own person. But this is not because she’s not held to be a person at all, but rather because her personhood is held to be *owed* to others, in the form of service labor, love, and loyalty.¹⁷⁷

Kate, as a woman, is expected to *give* the type of understanding she sees her father and Pyotr as needing and, as men, they are allowed to *take* it. By earlier placing the blame for her family’s issues on the shoulders of her dead mother, Kate seems to have internalized the misogynistic aspect of these gendered expectations—questioning the harm done in a patriarchal system to men by inhibiting their displays of vulnerability, while forgetting or refusing to question the burden this puts on women as well.¹⁷⁸

Additionally, Pyotr never frames his problem as having to do with masculinity, but with his status as a foreigner, who no longer belongs at home and does not feel that he belongs in America: “There is no *place* for me. So I have to pretend I am fine here.”¹⁷⁹ It is therefore important that Kate’s speech couches belonging in the terms of immigration itself: she is letting him into her country, her life, so that they can build a space *together* where they can both belong and be themselves. However, to parallel Pyotr’s experiences with her father’s, as Kate does when she first hears about his loneliness, elides the complexity of Pyotr’s immigrant status and the

¹⁷⁵ Orenstein, “The Miseducation.”

¹⁷⁶ Manne, *Down Girl*, 111.

¹⁷⁷ Manne, 173.

¹⁷⁸ Both Rivlin, “Loving Shakespeare” and Eschenbaum, “Modernising Misogyny” note that Tyler’s novel only mildly addresses the play’s misogyny.

¹⁷⁹ Tyler, *Vinegar Girl*, 210. Italics my own.

effect this has on how he feels he must process and express emotions. While Kate asserts earlier to Bunny, “Pyotr’s not Father,”¹⁸⁰ her speech at the wedding reception stems from the way she reads their confessions together as highlighting the restrictions placed on men’s expressions of their emotions, specifically in relation, here and earlier, to how women can or do not choose to enact this labor for them. Kate’s speech, then, circles readers back to the integral position of Kate’s labor in this adaptation, first domestic and now emotional.

While Kate leaves her father’s home and eventually, with Pyotr’s encouragement and support, attains the degree in botany she desired, she still delivers an approximation of the infamous final speech in which she excuses both her father’s past behavior and defends that of her oftentimes clueless husband. Even with the knowledge that Kate has grown as a person and both she and Pyotr deserve the opportunities for intimacy this marriage will bring, the message still boils down to the idea that “It’s *hard* being a man. . . . They’re a whole lot less free than women are, when you think about it.”¹⁸¹ With this speech and her expressions of xenophobia, Tyler’s protagonist does not elicit the same affective investment from the reader that Kat Stratford does in *10 Things*, as I will discuss in the following section. Nonetheless, it is hard to be inside someone’s head and not garner some sympathy for their situation, an important result of the shift from playtext to novel.¹⁸² The presence of Kate’s voice and point of view, plus Dr. Battista’s expectation that she will run his household, fills out Kate’s character by providing the motivation for her disgruntled position in her family and sweetening her aggressiveness into socially awkward “vinegar.” In addition, Pyotr’s own situation and attitude towards Kate allows

¹⁸⁰ Tyler, 179.

¹⁸¹ Tyler, 239.

¹⁸² Henderson notes the possibilities that the camera can offer in creating Katherine’s subjectivity on film, but even the shots in Zeffirelli’s film (which Henderson notes as one of the best examples of this technique) that “establish Kate as the movie’s silent thinker” (“Revision,” 131) cannot give us her thoughts like a novel such as *Vinegar Girl* can and does.

her to remain relatively unchanged and, therefore, untamed. Kate's speech raises the question, however, of whether Kate will ever completely escape the misogynistic viewpoint that men have to *suffer* "fame and success," while women *get* to perfect "their intuition or their empathy" for the benefit of others. In short, even while performing a feminist critique of gendered domestic labor, the novel's approach to feminism remains ambivalent in its shorthand of feminist concerns about gender without a real consideration of or push for political and substantive change—it is a pop-feminist adaptation.

Unlike *Re-Told* and, as we will see, *10 Things, Vinegar Girl* does present a more complicated and perhaps realistic story, as it offers neither a conventional romantic comedy heroine and triumphant ending, nor a woman trapped in a new form of oppression through marriage. The novel attempts to "save" Kate from being read as a "shrew" by letting us live inside her head as she experiences the world alongside a cast of equally quirky characters, rewriting her anger as sarcasm and an inability to belong. This redemption of her character stems most crucially from the sympathy she garners from readers by existing as she does at the intersection of gender and class in her struggles with the gendered domestic and emotional labor expected from her by her father. Leaving readers in the epilogue with the image of Kate and Pyotr standing "side by side, and very close together, neither one in front or behind, and they were holding hands and smiling," Tyler emphasizes the distance the couple has traveled together, and the future Kate has labored to build, finally, for herself.

Tyler's novel still, however, offers a paradox in its very framing of itself as part of the romantic comedy genre. While clearly a marketing technique, this framing presents expectations for the novel that are never quite delivered.¹⁸³ A romantic comedy, according to Tamar Jeffers

¹⁸³ In her review of the book, Groskop's subheading reads "This update of *The Taming of the Shrew* is enjoyable but never manages to convince that it's more than a mere marketing exercise" ("Vinegar Girl").

McDonald, “has as its central narrative motor a quest for love, which portrays this quest in a light-hearted way and almost always to a successful conclusion.”¹⁸⁴ Kate’s journey certainly seems to be a quest for love, but it is not always romantic in nature: she searches for familial love from her father and sister, as she aches for the relationship she had with Bunny when she was younger and for the recognition and praise from her father that Bunny so easily receives; she seems to search for a type of self-love as she most often spends her days feeling like an imposter everywhere except her garden; and when she does search for romantic love it is not with Pyotr, but with Adam. In fact, the recognition that she *cannot* have this romantic love because it would mean being untrue to herself subsumes the romance back into the novel’s emphasis on Kate’s journey of self-actualization. The elements of desire and sexual tension, which characterize almost all romantic comedies, are virtually nonexistent in *Vinegar Girl*, as it focuses more on the comedy and drama of family and self than on romance. Yet, Tyler’s novel still ultimately falls into the trap of the pop-feminist paradox by ending with a firm recourse to romance: Kate has the future she wants *because* she married Pyotr and because they have apparently come to love one another as husband and wife. Tyler’s rewriting of *Taming*, therefore, bows to and utilizes the happy ending of the romantic comedy to appeal to its pop-feminist audience, which requires that Katherine and Petruchio’s romance not only stay intact, but flourish. Like *Re-Told*, pleasing its popular audience necessitates that *Vinegar Girl* close out its narrative arc with proof of a romance done right.

¹⁸⁴ McDonald, *Romantic Comedy*, 9.

Romancing the Rampallian Wretch

For generations born in the '90s and after, Gil Junger's *10 Things I Hate About You* stands out as one of the most well-known and popular Shakespeare adaptations.¹⁸⁵ Providing the breakthrough roles for fan favorites Julia Stiles, Heath Ledger, and Joseph Gordon-Levitt, the movie remains beloved for many today. Karen McCullah and Kirsten Smith, the screenwriters for *10 Things*, also wrote the screenplays for other famous romcoms of the 2000s: *Legally Blonde*, *Ella Enchanted*, and that other popular teen Shakespeare romcom, *She's the Man*. All of these films operate within the pop-feminist, girl power movement, featuring a crappy ex-boyfriend or traumatic event that inspires the heroine to become more independent and pursue her own dreams. Along the way, though, she finds herself falling in love with a new guy who appreciates her strengths *and* her faults, and she achieves her dream with her new man by her side. In *10 Things*, the marriage plot of *Taming* becomes a dating plot in which Kat (Katherine) and Bianca's overprotective father will only agree to allow the younger, more popular Bianca to date boys if her older sister Kat dates as well. Consequently, Joey, the movie's villain, pays Patrick (Petruccio) to take Kat out and (at least implicitly) to seduce her or, in Patrick's own words, to "tame the wild beast."¹⁸⁶

The film's use of both the teen film genre and Shakespeare's authority may seem counter-intuitive, but this combination actually manages to boost its appeal. In *Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood*, Emma French contends that "incorporating Shakespeare content ensures that the film is set apart in a crowded genre in which originality is at a premium. The film is also, however, placed within the safe bounds of the easily identifiable and marketable

¹⁸⁵ In "An Awful Rule," Melissa Jones notes that "The film opened in the U.S. on March 31, 1999, and its obvious success (budget: \$16mil; U.S.A gross by 29 Aug. 99: \$38.176mil.) testifies to its immense popularity with teen (and parent) audiences" (154).

¹⁸⁶ Junger, *10 Things*, 29:58. All quotes taken from this movie are based on my own transcription.

teen-comedy genre.”¹⁸⁷ Following in the footsteps of *Clueless*, a 1995 adaptation of Jane Austen’s *Emma*, and Baz Luhrmann’s 1996 *Romeo + Juliet*,¹⁸⁸ *10 Things* was marketed specifically to teens. Unlike *Clueless*, however, *10 Things* marketed itself as an adaptation, though not to the extent of Luhrmann’s film and not always necessarily as a specifically Shakespearean adaptation.¹⁸⁹ For instance, French notes that the trailer for the film makes no reference to the film’s roots in Shakespeare,¹⁹⁰ instead “positioning the film generically as a straightforward romantic and familial comedy. The trailer focuses on the blossoming love affairs of both Kat and Bianca, positioning it as a romantic comedy with broad-based appeal.”¹⁹¹ Yet, some of the taglines for its promotional material do link audiences directly to Shakespeare—“Romeo, Oh Romeo, Get Out Of My Face.”—or even directly to the play—“I pine, I perish!”¹⁹²—but the quote featured on the most posters is actually a rewrite of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Sonnet 43: “How do I loathe thee? Let me count the ways.”¹⁹³ In rewriting these famous declarations of love to promote the film, *10 Things* marks itself as an explicit reworking of a traditional romance and of Shakespeare, which it does by redeeming both Katherine *and* her

¹⁸⁷ French, *Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood*, 122. This is partially accomplished through the use of familiar settings: “a sports stadium, a nightclub, an archery field and a paintball contest . . . reassure the audience that the film is an irreverent teen comedy as well as a literary adaptation” (119). French also demonstrates how “aspects of the shrew’s taming which sit uneasily with late twentieth-century gender politics . . . [were] removed from the marketing for *10 Things I Hate About You*” (117).

¹⁸⁸ While many scholars read Luhrmann’s film as sparking the trend of adapting Shakespeare for teen films, *Clueless* can be seen to have sparked a more general trend of adapting classic literature for teen films: *She’s All That* (an adaptation of *Pygmalion*) and *Cruel Intentions* (an adaptation of the 1782 novel by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses*) both screened alongside *10 Things* in 1999.

¹⁸⁹ Press and Rosenman note of *Clueless* that “Heckerling feared, and rightly so, that a more overt connection to high literary culture would scare off the American mass teen audience, and producers seeking a mass audience for their products as well” (“Consumerism and the Languages of Class,” 82). French explains that “The marketing campaign for *10 Things I Hate About You* broadly displays more hesitancy in referring to its borrowings and assimilation from Shakespeare than the campaign for *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet*” (*Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood*, 117).

¹⁹⁰ French, *Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood*, 118-19.

¹⁹¹ French, *Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood*, 117.

¹⁹² Melissa Jones points out that this is also the only line from the play—said in full by Cameron when he first sees Bianca: “I burn, I pine, I perish!”—directly quoted in the film (“‘An Aweful Rule’,” 153).

¹⁹³ See IMDb’s page on *10 Things I Hate About You* taglines: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0147800/taglines>.

relationship with Petruchio. This redemption is accomplished by explaining Kat's combative attitude as a feminist awakening due to her negative sexual experience with the movie's villain, Joey, and excusing Patrick's participation in the taming plot by emphasizing his lower-class status. The film therefore offers a '90s pop-feminist take on the play's imbrication of gender, class, and sexuality, yet the film also presents a more complex feminist approach to this imbrication than most scholars thus far have acknowledged as it balances both the limitations of the romcom genre and offers the possibility of intersectional feminism to its teenage audience.

Barbara Hodgdon assesses *10 Things* as belonging to "a genre driven in part by late twentieth-century teenage commodity culture," and indeed, teen investment in commodities as markers of social belonging is highlighted early in the film. In his first tour around Padua High, Cameron (the Lucentio character) accompanied by Michael (Tranio) overhears Bianca telling her friend, "I like my Sketchers, but I *love* my Prada backpack."¹⁹⁴ When Chastity (the loose widow-substitute) asserts that she, in fact, does love her Sketchers, Bianca helpfully points out that this is only because Chastity does not have a Prada backpack. Levels of affection are immediately attached to economic value, a theme that the film plays with throughout the taming process.¹⁹⁵ Kat quickly places herself in opposition to this socioeconomic order, however, tearing down a prom poster within the first five minutes and later describing a party her sister wishes to attend as "just a lame excuse for all the idiots at our school to drink beer and rub up against each other in hopes of distracting themselves from the pathetic emptiness of their [*and here Chastity and*

¹⁹⁴ Junger, *10 Things*, 5:21.

¹⁹⁵ Neely argues that this scene also demonstrates the connection between commodity and identity that is so common in teen films: "Identity is entirely formed through appearances and brand names and has little to do with individuality or what is below the surface. In this respect, the teenpic's characteristic movement from adolescence to adulthood is charted out by the ways in which the character adequately negotiates the meanings of various cultural symbols" ("Cool Intentions," 77).

Bianca jump in] meaningless, consumer-driven lives.”¹⁹⁶ Clearly, Kat has made this critique before.

Kat’s critique seems rather hypocritical, however, when one takes into account her own class background. The Stratford sisters, like the Minola family in *Re-Told*, are clearly well-off financially with their obstetrician father—what Kat’s English teacher calls “upper-middle class suburban.”¹⁹⁷ Joey consistently flaunts his wealth and even Cameron, who may not otherwise seem to demonstrate much wealth compared to Joey, early in the film asks Bianca to go sailing with him—an activity often associated with a higher socioeconomic class. In contrast, Patrick Verona can be found working in the school’s shop class, frequenting dive-bars, using a laundromat, and is rumored to have sold his liver on the black market. In one noteworthy exchange, Joey even calls Patrick “trailer park” when Patrick attempts to negotiate for more money.¹⁹⁸ Taken together, these attributes and labels mark Patrick as working-class.¹⁹⁹ Therefore, when Joey offers to pay Patrick to ask out Kat, it may not surprise or even upset the audience that Patrick agrees. Class difference becomes an aspect of male rivalry and class

¹⁹⁶ Junger, *10 Things*, 39:17.

¹⁹⁷ *10 Things*, 6:51. This moment is also raced, as Mr. Morgan (the teacher) is a black man, with his full line directed at Kat: “I know how difficult it must be for you to overcome all those years of upper-middle class suburban oppression, but the next time you storm the PTA crusading for lunch meat or whatever it is you white girls complain about, ask them why they can’t buy a book written by a black man.” Kat’s complaint that her class is reading Hemingway instead of Sylvia Plath, Charlotte Bronte, or Simone de Beauvoir aligns her with a white feminist agenda, which Mr. Morgan appears to critique alongside a claim for the recognition of racism. In “The Feminist as Shrew,” Friedman reads this moment as one that helps move Kat from second to third wave feminism, which he argues is part of her narrative taming as it pushes her to think beyond herself and her gendered oppression (55).

¹⁹⁸ Junger, *10 Things*, 22:39.

¹⁹⁹ Press and Rosenman contend that in *Clueless*, the class differences that mark the relationship between the heroine, Emma, and her friend, Harriet, become in the film “cultural differences that may be indicative of class. But, according with the much more ambiguous nature of social class identification in the American context, the class inflections of these differences remain abstruse” (“Consumerism and the Languages of Class,” 83). So it is, I argue, with Patrick’s character here—his class status may not be explicitly stated but is culturally implied. For more on class being symbolized by presentation, see Hebdige’s *Subculture* in which he explores the styles of working-class youth subcultures.

becomes the marker that encourages the audience to reconsider and sympathize with Patrick/Petruchio, even as he executes his part in the ‘taming’ plot.



Figure 5: Heath Ledger (Patrick Verona) and Andrew Keegan (Joey Donner) in *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) directed by Gil Junger.

In fact, much of Patrick’s charm derives from his classed appearance: long, rather greasy unkempt hair, jeans, and his general disregard for authority all mark him as working-class and comprise part and parcel of his sexual appeal.²⁰⁰ This portrayal of working-class masculinity as both sexy and sympathetic is not new to Hollywood. Early examples from the ’50s include Marlon Brando and James Dean, whose most famous roles made them cultural icons for rebels, outcasts, and those more estranged from “good society.” Some of Hollywood’s most famous recent romances have featured a working-class male as one half of a heterosexual couple: Patrick Swayze as a dance instructor who grew up on the streets in Emile Ardolino’s *Dirty Dancing*

²⁰⁰ Patrick clearly has little interest in following rules, demonstrated by his apparently weekly visits to the guidance counselor, his disinterest in attending class or following basic school codes (such as not smoking in biology), and his big declaration scene, which involves hijacking the football field’s sound system in order to serenade Kat and dancing around the two security guards sent to take him to detention (Junger).

(1987), Leonardo DiCaprio as a poor artist in James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), and Ryan Gosling as a lumbermill worker in Nick Cassavetes' *The Notebook* (2004). Working-class heroes steal the spotlight in dramas as well, such as Patrick Swayze and Tom Cruise's portrayal of members of a lower-class teen gang in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Outsiders* (1983) and Matt Damon's role as a janitor in Gus Van Sant's *Good Will Hunting* (1997). Teen dramas such as *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *Step Up* (2006) also mirror this trend; and even popular romantic comedies, such as *Overboard* (1987), and musicals, like *Grease* (1978), feature a working-class male lead. Certain actors have made their names by portraying working-class male heroes,²⁰¹ and Heath Ledger appears to be one of them, with a body of work that leans heavily towards working-class characters.²⁰² What is it about the working-class male that makes him, in Hollywood's opinion anyway, such a strong romantic lead?²⁰³

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work on sentimentality and antisentimentality offers a good place to start when answering this question. While sentimentality was typically relegated to the realms of women and gay men, Sedgwick notes that after the First World War, "the exemplary instance of the sentimental ceases to be a woman per se, but instead becomes the body of a man who . . . physically dramatizes, *embodies* for an audience that both desires and cathartically identifies with him, a struggle of masculine identity with emotions or physical stigmata stereotyped as feminine."²⁰⁴ One must only consider the films that have won Best Picture at the Academy Awards to recognize the truth of this, as the majority of them are dramas that center on a vulnerable and thus "sentimental" male lead. Sedgwick quotes Nietzsche as explaining that "a

²⁰¹ Patrick Swayze is one such actor and, for a more recent example, consider Channing Tatum's oeuvre.

²⁰² See, for instance, *Two Hands* (1999), *A Knight's Tale* (2001), *Ned Kelly* (2003), and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005).

²⁰³ It should be noted, however, that many of the films I list above are not about working-class-ness, but a working-class character in a firmly middle-class frame, and feature white, heteronormative leads/relationships. In fact, some representations of characters as working-class, as in Patrick's case, remain ambiguous, allowing such representations to stay palatable for a middle-class audience.

²⁰⁴ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 146.

man who can do something, carry out a decision, remain true to an idea, hold on to a woman, punish and put down insolence . . . in short a man who is by nature a *master*—when such a man has pity, well! *that* pity has value!’ (*Beyond*, 198).”²⁰⁵ In other words, the reason male vulnerability sells so well is because it is culturally framed as rare and, therefore, more valuable than the vulnerability of women or gay men. And while Nietzsche specifically claims that the man whose emotions, whose “pity,” is the most valuable “is by nature a *master*,” in contemporary culture this man is often working-class, while his mastery is gendered male.

In comedies and parodies, the figure we laugh to see break down, whose vulnerability we find enjoyable because it is surprising, often takes the form of a burly, hardened working-class man, sometimes even a criminal. In her synthesis of the work of British sociologist Beverley Skeggs, Nadine Hubbs notes that criminality as a property attaches itself to white working-class men (we can certainly see this element at work in Patrick’s character) and “can be detached and deployed as resources by white middle-class men to enhance their cultural power.”²⁰⁶ The working-class man therefore gains sympathy easily because his need for pity feels hard-won. Attached to this pity is affective and erotic appeal. Exemplified by genres like the war film, the Western, and the crime drama, the Hollywood masculine ideal is tough, gritty, and hard. His masculinity is not typically viewed as performative, but natural; edgy, earthy, and effortless. Found at the intersection of these two Hollywood hotspots—masculine vulnerability and masculine appeal—lies the working-class man: a diamond in the rough with a heart of gold. How working-class masculinity operates in Hollywood does not necessarily reflect how it operates socially and culturally in the US and it obviously depends on the film, the genre, the audience,

²⁰⁵ Sedgwick, 146.

²⁰⁶ Hubbs, “Gender Deviance and Class Rebellion,” 109. For Skeggs’ work itself, see “Uneasy Alignments,” 296, 293 and *Class, Self, Culture*, 153.

and the cultural context of any viewing. Nonetheless, a consideration of popular films and their leading men demonstrates the deliberate use of a working-class male lead for sympathetic and sexual appeal. Patrick Verona's character is but one example of this trend.

Financial exchange also provides the backbone of the taming for an end result of sexual exchange: Joey pays Patrick to take out Kat so that Joey can take out Bianca and eventually "take" her virginity. As Joey so eloquently puts it, "If you don't get any, I don't get any. So get some," thereby marking sex itself as a commodity.²⁰⁷ The plan for this exchange and the subsequent taming begins, as in the play, due to Bianca's desirability. Cameron likes her as soon as he sees her, defending her later to Michael, saying, "She's totally pure."²⁰⁸ One of Joey's friends calls attention to her with the phrase, "Virgin alert" and bets Joey that she is out of his reach.²⁰⁹ Joey says that he will pursue Bianca for fun, not money, but as his discussion with Patrick makes clear, his ultimate plan is "to get some." As Chastity reveals to Bianca at prom, "Joey only liked you for one reason. He even had a bet going with his friends. He was gonna nail you tonight."²¹⁰ Perhaps Dr. Stratford is not so far off, then, in his fear concerning his daughters' sexual activities, though the only one he lectures is Bianca, as Kat has publicly sworn off dating. As an obstetrician, he has had to deliver children to very young girls and his deepest fear seems to be one of his own daughters "being impregnated."²¹¹ As viewers hear early in the film, his one firm *original* house rule is no dating until after graduation. When they are allowed out of the house to go to a party, Dr. Stratford keeps the possibility of sex directly in the forefront of the viewer's minds by first making Bianca wear "the belly"—a padded vest meant to simulate the

²⁰⁷ Junger, *10 Things*, 28:22.

²⁰⁸ Junger, 10:04.

²⁰⁹ Junger, 9:07.

²¹⁰ Junger, 1:23:50.

²¹¹ Junger, 15:26.

swollen breasts and belly of a pregnant woman—and think about “the full weight of [her] decisions.”²¹² Bianca’s desirability, on some level, rests for both Cameron and Joey in her sexual purity, and the possibility of that changing drives the film’s plot.

It is Michael and Cameron who come to Joey with the plan to pay someone to take out Kat so that Bianca is free to date, a plan required due to Kat’s *undesirability*. After trying and failing to find a guy willing to date her, Cameron sees Patrick as someone crazy and brave enough to take on the form of “extreme dating” apparently necessary to tackle “the mewling, rampallian wretch herself.”²¹³ Michael and Cameron do not have the money to hire him, however, and so convince Joey that the whole thing is his own idea. When Joey approaches Patrick, Kat’s *undesirability* further affects the parameters of their exchange:

PATRICK. How much?

JOEY. Twenty bucks.

[Both of them watch as Kat violently body checks another girl on the field beside them, knocking her down.]

JOEY. Fine. Thirty.²¹⁴

Patrick then goes on to negotiate for even more money to pay for the events of their date but fails in his first attempts to ask her out. To try again, he is fed information by Cameron and Michael from Bianca, who similarly sees her sister as unlikable: “a particularly hideous breed of loser.” She also reveals to Cameron that Kat was not always like this: “She used to be really popular, and then it was like she got sick of it . . . or something. Theories abound as to why, but I’m pretty sure she’s just incapable of human interaction. Plus, she’s a bitch.”²¹⁵ Besides Kat’s friend Mandella, it seems that the rest of the school agrees: Kat Stratford is so horrendous that only one guy will date her, and he has to be *paid* to do so.

²¹² Junger, 40:00.

²¹³ Junger, 17:35, 11:48.

²¹⁴ Junger, 23:03-14.

²¹⁵ Junger, 17:01-21.

Like Bianca, Kat's character also becomes linked to sexual activity and sexuality, though in her case it is not inexperience that shapes her story. When it seems Kat is not going for Patrick as they hoped, Cameron hints at another concern, to which Bianca replies, "No. I found a picture of Jared Leto in [Kat's] drawer once, so I'm pretty sure she's not harboring same-sex tendencies."²¹⁶ Coupled with her ardent feminism, Kat's refusal to date the only male apparently willing to approach her raises the possibility that she is a lesbian, a prospect just as quickly discarded and forgotten. As in *Re-Told*, there is no space for lesbian desire in this romcom.²¹⁷ But as Bianca and Cameron apparently discover, just because Kat has not accepted Patrick's overtures, does not mean she does not desire sex:

BIANCA. Aha! [*holding up a black pair of underwear*] Black panties!

CAMERON. What does that tell us?

BIANCA. She wants to have sex someday, that's what.

CAMERON. [*clearly flustered*] She could just like the color . . .

BIANCA. You don't buy black lingerie unless you want someone to see it.²¹⁸

Kat later reveals to Bianca, however, that she has already had her first sexual encounter, and it drastically changed her outlook on life. As it turns out, Kat dated Joey for a month in ninth grade:

BIANCA. So, what happened?

[*Kat raises her eyebrows and tilts her head to indicate that they had sex.*]

BIANCA. [*shocked, she chokes out a gasp*] O-oh! Please tell me you're joking.

KAT. Just once, right after mom left. Everyone was doing it, so . . . I did it. Afterwards, I told him I didn't want to anymore because I wasn't ready, and he got pissed and dumped me. After that I swore I'd never do anything just because everyone else was doing it. And I haven't since.²¹⁹

²¹⁶ Junger, 32:17.

²¹⁷ The film also presents many "no homo" moments between Cameron, Michael, and Patrick, which, in light of the lines above, marks *10 Things* as a homophobic film. Further, both *Legally Blonde* and *She's the Man* (written by the same screenwriters) also hint at but ultimately deny viewers a lesbian romance.

²¹⁸ Junger, *10 Things*, 33:01.

²¹⁹ Junger, 1:16:05.

Bianca then asks why Kat did not tell her:

KAT. I wanted to let you make up your own mind about him.

BIANCA. [*angrily*] Then why did you help Daddy hold me hostage? It's not like I'm stupid enough to repeat your mistakes.

KAT. I guess I thought I was protecting you.

BIANCA. By not letting me experience anything for myself?

KAT. Not all experiences are good, Bianca. You can't always trust the people you want to.

BIANCA. Well, I guess I'll never know, will I?²²⁰

Richard Burt reads this exchange and its representation of sex as “taking a Nancy Reagan-like ‘just say No’ position,” and claims that in the film, “the price of avoiding domestic abuse is the repression of women’s sexual freedom.”²²¹

Michael Friedman links this idea of sexual repression with the teen film genre itself. As he points out, a banner on the wall of Mr. Morgan’s class declares, “What is popular is not always right; what is right is not always popular,” an idea that “does not appear at all in *The Taming of the Shrew*, but flows logically from the value system that dominates the genre of teen comedy.”²²² Teen films, much like the banner in Mr. Morgan’s class, which probably has its duplicate in hundreds of high schools across the country, often put forward this type of anti-peer pressure message in terms of drugs, alcohol, sex, and even bullying.²²³ Yet Kat’s own message to her sister fails to completely fit this traditional formula. I have known women who had sex in high school and wish they had waited, not out of some misplaced sense of conservatism or sexual purity, but because they were not emotionally ready to take that step, yet felt it was expected of them. Kat’s experience resonated with many people, partly as a result of America’s

²²⁰ Junger, 1:17:02.

²²¹ Burt, “Te(e)n Things I Hate,” 214, 217.

²²² Friedman, “The Feminist as Shrew,” 50-51.

²²³ Leggatt reads the film as respectful of Kat’s bad sexual experience—“It is as though the film shares, and respects, Kat’s caution after one bad experience”—further arguing that “The film takes an equally mild stance on drugs. The teacher in the detention room confiscates a package of pot and a package of snacks, and they seem equally serious” (“Teen Shakespeare,” 251).

woefully inadequate sex education in secondary schools, and partly because most 9th grade boys are not proficient sexual partners. Also, while bad sex should not be labeled as rape, it can have lasting psychological consequences. A bad sexual encounter should be taken seriously not as a curtailing of youth sexuality, but as a critique of the *lack* of information about sex teenagers are being given, making it more difficult for them to make informed decisions about their sexuality.

Further, while some critics read Kat's feminist vehemence as simply due to this early and unsatisfactory sexual encounter with Joey, Kat herself notes its proximity to another traumatic event in her life: their mother leaving. In her short reading of the film, Henderson notes this event as a factor, but ultimately also interprets Kat's turn to feminism as lacking in political salience because of it:

Kat's feminism turns out to be a reaction to Joey's having rejected her because she would not continue their sexual relationship (itself a one-night stand occasioned by the combination of Kat's mother's desertion and peer pressure). Like her 'statement' of ripping down prom posters and lecturing Bianca about doing things for her own reasons, Kat's politics are reduced to predictable personal responses to her own emotional vulnerability.²²⁴

Many feminists, however, turn to feminism due to a personal response to one's own emotional vulnerability in the face of negative encounters with men, and these early motivations often turn into more substantive critiques of the gender system.²²⁵ In fact, while Kat's feminism may derive from a personal experience, other moments in the film (such as her comment in English that calls out Hemingway, Picasso, and the education system's canon) demonstrate that her concerns *have* expanded beyond herself. In other words, Kat's character and her feminism, as Christopher

²²⁴ Henderson, "Revisited," 136.

²²⁵ In this and other responses, I have noted a clear generational split between how older scholars read *10 Things* and how I have heard my friends born around the '90s discuss their own reactions to the film. For instance, Henderson also writes that "beyond the slapstick reversals, girls talking political rather than heterosexual remain uncool," but Kat's willingness to talk politics, and to do so loudly, was one of the things many of the women I know who enjoy the film liked most (Henderson, "Revisited," 137). I did not grow up watching *10 Things*, but while I can find many things to critique about it, I also have found much to love.

Bertucci puts it, are not a “downgrade.”²²⁶ More conservative, yes; in desperate need of intersectional intervention, yes; but for some young viewers, Kat’s feminist anger and vocalizations were eye-opening. To agree with a different claim that Bertucci makes about the film, “it still puts forward feminist ideas that can be taken up by young women.”²²⁷

Yet, critics still often ignore the way that Kat’s past trauma is linked to her mother leaving, as well as the position this creates for her as the older sister: that of the maternal stand-in. In the above scene, Kat attempts to offer Bianca the advice she wishes she had received herself, perhaps from her absent mother: “I’m a firm believer in doing something for your own reasons, and not someone else’s.”²²⁸ Earlier in the film, at another moment during which Kat and Bianca’s worldviews clash, Kat tells her sister, “You don’t always have to be who they want you to be, you know.”²²⁹ Speaking from her own experience, Kat attempts to protect Bianca from having something similar happen, though, without explaining the impetus for her own realizations, she also leaves room for Bianca to make up her own mind. Her reasoning for keeping the truth from Bianca seems to resonate with this event as well: she wanted to *protect* Bianca, taking on a more maternal role for her sister that continues throughout the film, as she ultimately chooses to go to prom so that her sister can also attend and experience the dance for herself.

Kat’s desire to protect her sister may also stem from their father’s use of Kat as an instrument for his own control. As Michael tells Cameron of Bianca at the beginning of the film, “Listen. Forget her. Incredibly uptight father, and it’s a widely known fact that the Stratford

²²⁶ I say this in response to Bertucci’s claim in “Rethinking Binaries” that Kat’s “convenient excuse” for her hostility towards men (her early loss of virginity) “downgrades Kat’s feminism from a social concern to a personal problem” (418).

²²⁷ Bertucci, 421.

²²⁸ Junger, *10 Things*, 1:15:26.

²²⁹ Junger, 25:27.

sisters aren't allowed to date."²³⁰ Dr. Stratford may not be the shotgun-toting father that protects his daughters' virtue through threats, but he clearly cares about protecting his daughters from early, unplanned pregnancies. By revising his rule at the beginning to one where Kat's behavior dictates her sister's, he effectively shifts the role of "protector" to Kat. Yet, at the end, he also validates Kat's behavior as a model for her sister:

KAT. Bianca beat the hell out of some guy.

WALTER. Bianca did what?

KAT. What's the matter? Upset that I rubbed off on her?

WALTER. No. Impressed.

[Kat looks surprised.]

WALTER. You know, fathers don't like to admit it when their daughters are capable of running their own lives. It means we've become spectators. Bianca still lets me play a few innings. You've had me on the bench for years.²³¹

Dr. Stratford indicates his own loss of control at his daughters' independence, but also approves of Bianca adopting Kat's self-defensive violence toward boys who cross her boundaries. As Friedman posits, unlike the play, in which Bianca and Katherine seem to have switched places at the end, in the film, "Kat and Bianca move towards each other on the feminist spectrum . . . by the end of the movie, [Bianca] has adopted some of Kat's combative traits and put aside her devotion to the code of popularity."²³² He also links feminism with sexuality and critiques those who read the film as conservative, arguing that "Bianca, the film suggests, needs to stop using her chaste appearance in a sexual way to enhance her popularity and to arrive at a more direct method for pursuing her romantic desires."²³³ Bianca's plot therefore involves a movement away

²³⁰ Junger, 5:32.

²³¹ Junger, 1:28:05.

²³² Friedman, "The Feminist as Shrew," 59-60. He sees them meeting in the middle at "third-wave feminism," into which Kat's feminism has evolved and which Bianca has finally accepted as her own.

²³³ Friedman, 60-61.

from using her chastity as a sexual motivator and instead toward embracing her sister's more assertive role of feminist sexual autonomy.²³⁴

Bianca demonstrates this decision by mirroring Kat's earlier off-screen action (of kicking a boy in the balls for groping her) when she punches Joey twice in the face before kneeing him in the balls, yelling with each hit, "That's for making my date bleed. That's for my sister. And that's for me!"²³⁵ In the teenage world of *10 Things*, adults are presented as feckless and ineffective, and like Kat, Bianca has learned to take matters into her own hands, treating every hit as a moment of justice—defending Cameron and seeking revenge for her sister and retribution for herself. Both Bianca and Kat's plots still revolve around romance, demonstrating the teen romcom genre's dominance over the feminism it nods towards and softening Kat's rebellious nature by the end of film. Yet by revising Bianca's approach to her own sexuality and to the resident popular hunk, the film also opens up important questions *about* approaches to sex that respect youthful virginity and present feminism as an avenue for justice. Most importantly, by the end, neither Kat nor her father have a say in Bianca's choices: that role, and that voice, is her own.

Female sexuality and the feminism that derives from both negative and positive experiences of it therefore drives much of the taming plot, but the success of the romance plot relies on male sexuality as well. Drawn together by their plan to woo Kat, Patrick and Cameron seem unlikely friends, but they are united from the beginning of the film in relation to sex. Viewers are introduced to both young men for the first time in the guidance counselor's office. As a new student, Cameron is there to receive his class schedule, but he is made to wait briefly

²³⁴ Bertucci emphasizes the importance of considering Bianca's character in this and other adaptations, as "the Bianca plot and Kate and Bianca's relationship remain essential to understanding the feminist dynamics of all productions" ("Rethinking Binaries," 414).

²³⁵ Junger, *10 Things*, 1:25:29.

while the guidance counselor, Ms. Perky, finishes typing a sentence of her latest racy romance novel: “As his hand slid up her creamy white thighs, she could feel his huge member pulsing with desire.”²³⁶ Cameron’s meeting is immediately followed by one with Patrick, who is sent to the office after using a bratwurst in the cafeteria to simulate his penis—to which she inappropriately comments “Bratwurst? Aren’t we the optimist.”²³⁷ Once Patrick has left, Ms. Perky returns to the line she wrote before and replaces “member” with “bratwurst.” By framing both characters within the writing and revising of a romance novel, the film effectively orients viewers towards both boys’ respective sexualities, which are meant to reflect and complement their female counterparts’ and their roles as the romantic leads.

Cameron may willingly put Bianca in his “spank bank,”²³⁸ but otherwise he appears just as sexually innocent as Bianca. When he reveals that she kissed him, Patrick asks “Where?” with a sly grin, to which Cameron dreamily responds, “In the car.”²³⁹ In contrast to Joey, Cameron’s desire for Bianca appears sexually safe and his intentions, while still convoluted due to the taming plot, ultimately “pure,” as Michael himself comments later—an adjective that links him clearly with Bianca and how the male characters have viewed her and her sexuality. Patrick’s sexuality, on the other hand, derives partly from his own position as a guy with experience: in life and in sex. Cameron and Michael choose him to ask out Kat partly because they think he just returned from a year in jail and so must be horny.

Yet, while Patrick’s presentation implies a certain level of life and sexual experience, he has also clearly found that presentation to work against him, not only in regard to people like

²³⁶ Junger, 2:05.

²³⁷ Junger, 3:10.

²³⁸ Junger, 10:25.

²³⁹ Junger, 57:59.

Joey, who read his class-status as something dirty, but also in terms of his relationships with other people. Part of his attraction to Kat stems from her reactions to him:

PATRICK. [*looking at Kat with interest*] You're not afraid of me, are you?

KAT. Afraid of you? Why would I be afraid of you?

PATRICK. Well, most people are.

KAT. Well, I'm not.

PATRICK. Well, maybe you're not afraid of me, but I'm sure you've thought about me naked, huh? [*He winks at her*]

KAT. [*clearly sarcastic*] Am I that transparent? I want you. I need you. Oh baby, oh baby.²⁴⁰

Here, Patrick's previous experiences, often negative, lead him to find Kat refreshing in her blatant disregard for what others find off-putting about him. As Kat later admits that people find her scary too, the film unites Kat and Patrick as difficult outsiders and hints at the possibility of their own present or at least future sexual attraction. And there is attraction. Patrick calls Kat "sexy" twice,²⁴¹ and after he initially fails to ask her out, he manages to get her to Bogey Lowenstein's party, as Joey demanded. While his taking her on this "date" may be a pretense, he genuinely seems to care about her health after she injures herself and refuses to kiss her when she is drunk, playing hard into the role of the hero as a gentleman who will not take advantage of a lady.²⁴² Unlike in *Re-Told* and *Vinegar Girl*, Kat therefore also gets to present herself as vulnerable and receive care, presenting theirs as a more reciprocal relationship.

Kat warms up to him at the party, though she takes it badly when he will not kiss her. She is won over again, however, by his song and dance routine on the bleachers, going so far, in my least favorite scene of the film, as to flash her breasts to a teacher to get him out of detention.

²⁴⁰ Junger, 26:19.

²⁴¹ Junger, 38:08, 1:11:12.

²⁴² Leggatt submits that, unlike Petruchio's claim in the play that all the tyrannical things he does to Katherine are "in reverend care of her" (Shakespeare, *Taming* 4.1.193), in *10 Things* "Patrick's caring streak is real, and it develops as a crucial part of his relationship with Kat" ("Teen Shakespeare," 247).

This moment and the scene at the party that features her drunkenly dancing on top of a table both blatantly sexualize Kat and link her sexuality to Patrick and their budding relationship. After they escape detention, they go on their first real date and share their first kiss. It is both a sign of Kat's changing feelings towards Patrick and her sister that they attend prom together, and while this night marks the end of Patrick's role in Joey's plan, Patrick also appears to have "tamed" Kat in ways he was not paid to, softening her anger at the world around her and opening her up to a romantic relationship. Indeed, while she begins the film by ripping down a prom poster, at the end, she displays a vulnerability read she would not have shown previously as she cries while reading the poem for her English assignment that is clearly about Patrick. Further, as is typical in films in which feminist anger is diminished, her appearance has significantly shifted by the end of the film: her edgy clothing and hairstyle are replaced with a white short-sleeved blouse, long skirt, and French braid.²⁴³



Figure 6: Julia Stiles (Kat Stratford) in *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) directed by Gil Junger.

While this softening and normalizing of Kat's character may seem problematic, the audience has also been treated to a similar softening of Patrick's character, or at least our

²⁴³ Numerous scholars have already critiqued *10 Things*' approximation of Katherine's final speech through this reading of a rather lackluster sonnet to her English class, but one aspect of this scene I want to note is its vast difference from the play in terms of the nature of Katherine's declaration: this Petruchio does not *demand* that Katherine humiliate herself through a submission speech, instead Kat *chooses* to write and read the sonnet. The film highlights here, as elsewhere in the film, female agency, not male supremacy.

understanding of him.²⁴⁴ When Joey begins to pay Patrick \$200 to take Kat to prom, Patrick refuses the money, saying “I’m sick of playing your little game.”²⁴⁵ When Joey brings out another hundred, however, Patrick ultimately takes the money, but his face clearly shows his distaste at the situation and himself. The fact that he then uses the money to purchase Kat the guitar she’s been eyeing in the hopes of starting her own band, however, allows Patrick’s participation in the taming plot to be excused: the financial exchange of the taming becomes translated into romance. Further, when Patrick and Kat dance together at prom, Patrick reveals that the real reason he took a year off of school was to look after his ill grandpa. Patrick was not in San Quentin, as Michael believed—a rumor that potentially has its own classed assumptions—but sitting on his grandpa’s couch, “watching Wheel of Fortune and making SpaghettiOs.”²⁴⁶ Through these moments that highlight the sentimentality of Patrick’s character, *10 Things* offers its audience a compelling reason why Patrick would participate in the ‘taming’ process at all, which gives the film the foundation it needs to develop Kat and Patrick’s romance in a plausible and satisfying way—something the playtext and many performances that aim to make their relationship romantic do not offer.

Through Patrick’s presentation as working-class, the connection of the taming plot to sexual exchange, and the portrayal of Kat and then Bianca’s feminism as stemming from a desire for bodily autonomy, *10 Things* inextricably links gender, class, and sexuality. How it does so, though, remains heavily influenced, perhaps even regulated, by the pop-feminism of the Shakespeare teen romcom genre and the film’s cultural context. Various feminist critics have thus read the films’ representation of Kat and her romance with Patrick as conservative or

²⁴⁴ This also aligns with the romance genre, as the brooding hero becomes “tamed” by (his love for) the heroine.

²⁴⁵ Junger, *10 Things*, 1:00:07.

²⁴⁶ Junger, 1:24:16.

specifically un-feminist due to its relationship to Shakespeare and the teen film genre.²⁴⁷

Elizabeth A. Deitchman sees this as part and parcel of its position in the Girl Power movement of Hollywood cinema, which represents a coopting and commodified appropriation of the Riot Grrrl movement of the early '90s. She reads Julia Stiles—star of *10 Things*, *Hamlet*, and *O*—as “the perfect icon of this de-fanged Girl Power femininity,”²⁴⁸ seeing Kat’s depiction as “Riot Grrrl” as paralleling mainstream media’s taming of this movement into that of Girl Power, by stripping it of “its rage and feminist politics.”²⁴⁹ Deitchman also insists that *10 Things*, as mainstream teen Shakespeare, represents and supports “corporate patriarchy”²⁵⁰ and Burt similarly contends teen Shakespeare films “legitimate a rather repressive notion of female intelligence” by pitting smart, good girls against stupid but hot bad girls.²⁵¹ Shakespeare’s authority, for both Deitchman and Burt, becomes essential to the film’s representation of a conservative feminism.²⁵²

²⁴⁷ Hodgdon sees *10 Things* as neither “a full-scale critique of bourgeois teen culture” nor “a critique of patriarchal ideology,” but notes that the end offers the characters more ambiguity than the typical Shakespearean comedic ending of marriage (“Wooing and Winning” 262). Henderson is much more critical, reading the romance itself as “emotional submission” (“Revisited,” 137). While that assessment seems a bit extreme, as Pittman points out, both *10 Things* and *She’s the Man* “demonstrate the conservative construction of gender” and *10 Things’* plot, which positions Patrick as the “solution” to Kat’s angry hostility towards others, hides its “quiet misogyny” behind “feminist literature and Riot Grrrl music” (*Authorizing Shakespeare* 100-101).

²⁴⁸ Deitchman, “Shakespeare Stiles Style,” 480. She also reads Stiles, in her position as the “poster girl of teen Shakespeare,” as “Shakespeare’s white lady” (478, 491).

²⁴⁹ Deitchman, 480. This leads to her argument that Kat’s trajectory in the movie first links her Riot Grrrl attitude with the simplified “femi-nazi” of second wave feminism, marking her movement later not towards what Friedman sees as third-wave feminism, but towards the Girl Power movement, which Deitchman posits is actually in line with patriarchal values and protects heterosexual masculinity (481).

²⁵⁰ Deitchman, 481. Similarly, Pittman reads the male characters as emerging triumphant at the end, as Kat’s “independence” remains safely contained within patriarchal gender norms (*Authorizing Shakespeare*, 108, 111).

²⁵¹ Burt, “Te(e)n Things I Hate,” 206-7. While Burt criticizes *10 Things’* representation of feminism, he does note that the adaptation “revises heterosexual romance in *Taming* so that it no longer involves ‘right’ male ‘supremacy’ and hierarchy of husbands over wives but instead involves reciprocity and equality. . . . *10 Things* tells a story about the taming of male desire” (214). The issue of the film for Burt is not in its representation of gender/gender dynamics, but of feminism and “a conservative idealization of the good girl” (214). He also uses this film, and its conservative feminism, to point to how materialist feminist critical practice also becomes conservative when faced with the teen Shakesploi genre, with the “conservative good girl and materialist bad girl” revealing themselves to be the same in their division of good and bad, winners and losers, by intelligence and stupidity (225-6).

²⁵² Burt argues that *10 Things* “reveals its own use of Shakespeare’s high cultural authority to exchange an earlier Shakespearean form of feminized sexism for a nineties form of sexist feminism that, ultimately, is itself a form of prostitution, a cheap(ening) trick” (219). Both Pittman and Deitchman also see the more regressive representation of

While I agree with portions of both their arguments—*10 Things* certainly reflects the commodification of Hollywood and the corporate patriarchy it exists within, as well as problematically villainizes Chastity as the “slut” of the film²⁵³—neither Deitchman nor Burt acknowledge the full breadth of the movie in their critique of its feminism. While the film visibly softens Kat by the end, much of her “rage and feminist politics” remains. She is proud of her sister’s choice to “beat the hell out of” Joey, and when she tells her father of the event, she clearly prepares herself to defend her sister and her actions, only to be surprised when she does not have to do so. Similarly, she has not given up on her dream to attend Sarah Lawrence—a school often associated with white feminism—and ultimately it is her father who bends to her wishes on that topic as well. And while the film utilizes Chastity as the standard “hot bad girl” at the end, her character remains almost insignificant to the trajectory of Bianca’s narrative, undermining Burt’s claims concerning the separation of female characters in the film. In fact, the film complicates the easy binary many scholars discussing the play fall back on of Bianca versus Katherine by repairing the sisters’ strained relationship through recourse to the feminist principles of solidarity and female empowerment. *10 Things* therefore does not “defang” or “diminish” feminism, so much as it depicts what feminism might look like in a high school setting, where feminism may feel like an unfamiliar and socially difficult political framework for many teens already struggling to discover and navigate their position in a regimented social hierarchy.

gender and feminism as partly resulting from the Shakespearean aspect of films like *10 Things*. Working off of Burt and Lehmann, Pittman contends that “such conservatism specifically in the teen Shakespeare oeuvre directly echoes the vexed understanding of Shakespearean authority manifested by the films themselves” (*Authorizing Shakespeare*, 100). Deitchman interprets *10 Things* as “marrying Shakespeare’s patriarchal world of sixteenth-century Verona to the corporate patriarchy of millennial mass media” (“Shakespeare Stiles Style,” 481).

²⁵³ This move is doubly problematic as Chastity, played by Gabrielle Union, is the only main character of color in the film.

Yet, many scholars also read the *teen* aspect of teen films as the force which negatively impacts the Shakespearean text the films adapt. This critique most commonly boils down to the accusation that teen films require that Shakespeare be ‘dumbed down’ for the target audience.²⁵⁴ Pittman makes a similar assertion when she argues that *10 Things* simplifies the complexity of Shakespeare’s exploration of identity. While *10 Things* does simplify aspects of the plot significantly, Pittman’s argument demonstrates a common scholarly mistake of viewing simplification for cultural translation as negative, when in fact *10 Things* makes legible for teens the exact tension of identity she sees operating in the play. Pittman contends that Shakespeare’s *Taming* “manages to hold in tension [two] opposing notions of self until the final moments of the play,” allowing her teenage students to learn to “resist the pleasing simplicity of sham certainty and learn to abide with comfort in the world of unending ambiguity so masterfully demonstrated by Shakespeare’s plays.”²⁵⁵ In contrast, she alleges that “the film perpetuates the contradictory ideology of subjectivity embraced by young adults. At the same time they desire independent identity, they also long for acceptance, to feel part of a larger, socially condoned model for the self. The movie appears to allow teenagers to have it both ways.”²⁵⁶ Her language of tension and ambiguity versus contradiction is clearly meant to paint *Taming*’s exploration of identity as positive and *10 Things*’ as negative, yet her dichotomy is flawed. In fact, her reading of the film opens up for readers and students the possibility of holding in tension two opposing senses of self, allowing viewers of the film to experience an approximation of the ambiguity and, I would argue, ambivalence Pittman reads as essential to the play. This is one example of how, as

²⁵⁴ Burt posits that “the price of teen interest in Shakespeare is the radical dumbing down of his writings,” due to the emergence of the “loser” figure that emerged in the 1990s (“Te(e)n Things I Hate,” 217, 206). Elsewhere, he links this “celebration of dumbness and stupidity” (207) with so-called “kiddie-culture,” connecting the infantilizing of Shakespeare with the desire in popular culture for children’s products for adults (*Unspeakable ShaXXXspeares*, 9).

²⁵⁵ Pittman, “Taming *10 Things*,” 146, 151.

²⁵⁶ Pittman, 150.

Friedman articulates, “far from ‘dumbing down’ Shakespeare, teen adaptations of his plays can offer new and important ways to perceive the significance of his dramatic efforts and their implications for modern times.”²⁵⁷

Douglas Lanier widens his own response to such critiques to encompass popular culture’s uses of Shakespeare more generally, noting that while Shakespop works (pop culture adaptations/appropriations of Shakespeare) “have become the poster children for the cultural trend of ‘dumbing down,’” such a generalization ignores pop culture’s own forms of sophistication.²⁵⁸ While Shakespop works may not be as verbally complex as Shakespeare’s plays, they “are certainly capable of a visual sophistication that rivals Shakespeare’s semantic density,” including through intertextuality.²⁵⁹ Further, rather than seeing such adaptations as dumbing down Shakespeare, Lanier notes that, for some critics, such works’ “strong strain of anti-intellectualism might be understood as resistance to Shakespeare’s close association with the authority and perceived privilege of intellectual and authority figures like academics and teachers.”²⁶⁰ French demonstrates, however, how this type of resistance has been and continues to be commodified in the teen film industry, revealing that the website used to advertise *10 Things* explicitly played into the desire of its teenage audience to separate themselves from and push back against such authority figures.²⁶¹ *10 Things*, therefore, both utilizes the high culture authority of Shakespeare and attempts to extricate him from it, both emphasizes his relevance

²⁵⁷ Friedman, “Introduction,” 5.

²⁵⁸ Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, 99.

²⁵⁹ Lanier, 99-100.

²⁶⁰ Lanier, 100.

²⁶¹ For example, French reports that the website “commanded all adults to stay away, emphatically stating ‘ALL POSERS STAY OUT! If you’ve already graduated and you’re still coming to this site, get a life. To all moms and dads: Gestapo tactics don’t work! If you want to know what we do, just ASK!’” (*Selling Shakespeare to Hollywood*, 120). While advertising such as this may not be within the control of the creatives who actually crafted the movie, it does shape its audience’s horizon of expectations in terms of the film’s genre: who it’s intended audience is and how they should approach the film.

and subsumes him under the more marketable power of the teen romcom,²⁶² both simplifies *Taming*'s plot and complicates its connection to feminism and contemporary culture. In other words, its pop cultural ambivalence concerning conservative, but introductory feminism marks its pop-feminist paradox.

This paradox requires that scholars recognize the complexity of the cultural work the film accomplishes by pushing past the conservative/radical binaries most critics use to discuss it. While many of the critics above ultimately view *10 Things* as a conservative and possibly dangerous representation of feminism, I agree with Bertucci:

10 Things is conservative, even anti-feminist, in certain specific ways, but what I suggest is that we do not let this blind us to the complexity of the film and the ways that consumers might respond to it. . . . [Kat and Bianca] are neither completely dominated by consumer culture nor free from its influence. Instead they remain involved in a struggle against the pressures of gender and identity norms, negotiating the cultural contradictions.²⁶³

In other words, "*10 Things*, then, is neither completely debased and manipulative nor progressive and liberatory. Instead it is a site of cultural struggle."²⁶⁴ This struggle, this tension between the sometimes conservative pull of mass media and a desire to appeal to (pop-)feminism points to a more complicated relationship between process and product than many of the critics who discuss this film have acknowledged.

This relationship specifically involves how the imbrication of gender, class, and sexuality is utilized to update the play and make it palatable for a contemporary audience through the romcom genre. In fact, the intense attention to commodity culture in the film mirrors the mode of adaptation itself, with the popularity of the romcom motivating the genre shift of the play into a

²⁶² French theorizes that "the film's marketing exploits the film's 'girl power' message and its relationship to other teen films far more than its status as a Shakespeare adaptation" (122).

²⁶³ Bertucci, "Rethinking Binaries," 423.

²⁶⁴ Bertucci, 421.

contemporary teen romcom, which in turn affects how gender, class, and sexuality are presented in the film. Patrick's position as working-class, and the appeals this makes to sentimentality, stems from a long history of Hollywood romance and invites viewers to sympathize with his decision to pursue Kat and "tame" her by emphasizing his vulnerable masculinity. This sympathy also allows the film to soften his character as much as Kat's, marking their relationship as one of equivalent gendered and emotional labor in a way that neither *Re-Told* nor *Vinegar Girl* accomplish. In line with the conservative and homophobic nature of many '90s and early 2000s romcoms, Kat also softens in terms of appearance, becoming more feminine by the end of the film and marking her move away from the unattractive "lesbian" figure and toward the normatively feminine heroine prepared to embrace a heteronormative relationship. The attention of the film to female sexuality and sexual activity also becomes inextricably linked to the financial exchange of the taming plot and the desire of the mainstream audience for the ultimate conclusion of heterosexual union, a required ending for a profitable romcom.

Some of these imbrications therefore mirror those that exist in the play and the way many audiences continue to consume it, but others stem from the contemporary romcom genre and *10 Things*' specific appeal to pop-feminist teen culture and the Girl Power movement. While many critics therefore find *10 Things* critically lacking or even dangerous, ultimately, like the other texts I examine, *10 Things* never *could* offer a full-scale critique of patriarchal ideology due to its position within the pop-feminist genre of the Shakespeare teen romcom. The inability to acknowledge and move past this point has meant that many scholars have failed to acknowledge the complexity of the film's intersectional treatment of gender, class, and sexuality and the ways that has affected its reception.

Conclusion: And They Lived Happily Ever After?

Spanning three decades, three types of media, and two continents, the adaptations I have analyzed present vastly different topical reimaginings of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. And yet, considering them together allows an important thematic pattern to emerge that relates directly to their investment in pop-feminism through the romantic comedy genre: they all invoke the ideas and language of feminism's commitment to gender equality and liberation without ultimately challenging the heteronormative gender roles that come with the romantic comedy framework so often read onto *Taming*. Specifically, those gender roles require women to shoulder the burden of men's emotional liberation. Audiences, thus, are expected to desire gender equality while compromising on what equality means for women, who remain emotional and, in Tyler's novel, domestic caretakers.

The romantic comedy genre's traditional narrative structure also affects how *Taming* becomes updated for its intended pop-feminist audience. In all the adaptations, Katherine is made sympathetic by being presented as an outsider whose journey to become the romantic comedy heroine involves finding someone to accept her, though this usually requires Katherine herself to change and, thus, better fit into the society that had rejected her. Each work connects Katherine's outsider status to her non-normative femininity, comparing her, as in the play, to her sister, and often eliciting sympathy for her by emphasizing her wish to be "normal" (though *10 Things*' Kat never seems to desire to fit in, so much as to be accepted as she is). Thus, while the adaptations explain, excuse, and elicit empathy for Katherine's behavior (whether it be violent, anti-social, or that of an "angry feminist"), her role as the romantic comedy heroine requires her not only to take on feminine stereotypes, but to desire them.

Petruchio is also made sympathetic through his position as an outsider, but where these romantic comedies present Katherine's journey as a return to femininity, Petruchio's is marked by a move away from masculinity, specifically by being made vulnerable. The romantic comedy genre has always accommodated if not celebrated strong women, but Petruchio's status as a romantic hero requires him to suffer from a regime of masculinity that confines him. While explaining away his problematic aspects, his ability to be vulnerable relies upon and requires his heroine (and audiences) to sympathize with him. In two of the adaptations, this aspect is taken even further as his heroine must take on the maternal role he lacked by accepting and nurturing him—creating a romantic relationship that, while less violent than Shakespeare's, remains grounded in conventional gender roles. Even in *10 Things*, while Kat does not take on that role for Patrick, her maternal nature is emphasized in her relationship with her sister.

In positioning these characters as outsiders, all three adaptations also present their romance (and the gender roles it requires) as the impetus for their integration into 'normative' society. The stakes of that integration, however, is also where the adaptations diverge from one another. Due to their depiction of adult couples, *Re-Told* and *Vinegar Girl* remain invested in the structure of marriage as essential to their depiction of *Taming* as a romance and so their narratives involve more intense relationships between their heroines and heroes. These relationships, however, are also decidedly lopsided. While *Re-Told*'s Petruchio professes to like Katherine's "plucky" attitude, he still 'tames' her behavior without having to moderate his own. And while Pyotr, unlike Shakespeare's and the BBC's Petruchio, makes no attempt at 'taming' Kate, Kate's wedding reception speech demonstrates that she has internalized a misogynistic viewpoint towards gender roles all on her own. While both couples eventually accept their partner as they are to achieve their "romance," that acceptance requires vastly different forms of

labor from the male and female characters: Petruchio and Pyotr must simply be vulnerable; Katherine and Kate must take on the labor of recognizing and addressing that vulnerability—the traditionally feminized labor of emotional service and nurturance. That labor is most clearly articulated in *Vinegar Girl*, where Kate feels obligated to take on the task of interpreting and managing her father and Pyotr, but even in *Re-Told* Katherine must learn to manage Petruchio’s temper, even as he baits her own.

The endings of both *Re-Told* and *Vinegar Girl* also reinforce conservative structures of gender, marriage, and futurity. Petruchio, Pyotr, and even Dr. Battista represent what has ‘gone wrong’ in society when women are not present to take care of their men—whether due to abandonment or death. Their narrative arcs make it clear that the heroine’s ability to step into the maternal shoes will remediate earlier failures. Further, the epilogues of *Re-Told* and *Vinegar Girl* offer an idealized fantasy of a new generation of men who will be able to be better—husbands, fathers, citizens—because they will be brought up with a mother’s care in a more egalitarian home. Such a vision of the future aligns with second-wave psychoanalytic feminist scholarship on gender role expectations and parenting. For example, in her influential 1978 book *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Nancy Chodorow argues that women mother due to the social organization of parenting (rather than a biological imperative), which recreates itself because of the psychosocial effect of learned gender roles and orientations. She posits that if parenting were to be shared equally by men and women, it would benefit everyone: “This would reduce men’s needs to guard their masculinity and their control of social and cultural spheres which treat and define women as secondary and powerless, and would help women to develop the autonomy which too much embeddedness in relationship has often

taken from them.”²⁶⁵ Petruchio and Katherine’s triplet sons will not be abandoned like Petruchio was and Kate and Pyotr’s son, named after Dr. Battista, will grow up learning to articulate himself and his emotions in ways Dr. Battista and Pyotr could not.²⁶⁶

In contrast, due to its status as a teen film, *10 Things* enables an escape from the marriage comedy’s seemingly inevitable future of marriage and children by presenting a more open-ended conclusion—Kat and Patrick get back together, but there is no guarantee that they will stay that way as Kat has received her acceptance letter to Sarah Lawrence, and Patrick’s plans remain unclear. Kat does become more visibly feminine by the end of the film, and she literally “saves” Patrick from detention by flashing her breasts at a teacher, but in a move unparalleled by the other adaptations, we also see Patrick taking care of Kat without the expectation of reciprocation. For example, after Kat has drunk too much and vomited outside Bogey Lowenstein’s party, Patrick drives her home and refuses to kiss her while she’s drunk. In true romcom fashion, we also see Kat and Patrick spending time together and having fun getting to know each other when they have their date, which involves paddle boating and paint ball. In short, *10 Things* presents a more traditional romantic arc for its couple—built on mutual vulnerability and care in a way the other adaptations’ relationships are not—and yet, as a consequence of the teen film genre’s emphasis on the coming-of-age narrative that emphasizes *self*-discovery, avoids a traditional marital closure.

Because of their status as on the verge of adulthood, Kat and Patrick also avoid perpetuating traditional gender roles to the extent of the other two films. When Kat does take on

²⁶⁵ Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, 218. Dinnerstein’s 1976 *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* makes a similar argument about uneven parenting arrangements producing and reproducing gender inequality and misogyny, and she too points to male parenting as an important move towards a more egalitarian society.

²⁶⁶ Eschenbaum observes that “We never find out if Kate takes Pyotr’s last name or remains Battista, but in the Epilogue we do discover that Pyotr and Kate have a son named Louie Scherbakov. The names of both Kate’s father (Louie) and Pyotr (Scherbakov) represent the fully patrilineal society that dominates Kate, who might have chosen Battista-Scherbakov or, simply, Battista for her son’s last name, but did not” (“Modernising Misogyny,” 41n32).

a maternal role, it remains directed only at her sister and is challenged by their conflict; importantly, her maternal presence does not involve performing emotional service or nurturance for Patrick. Kat's future is also not dependent on her relationship with Patrick, as both Katherine and Kate's futures are made to appear in relation to Petruchio and Pyotr. *10 Things* therefore does not focus on futurity in the same way as *Re-Told* and *Vinegar Girl*.

These adaptations thus exist on a kind of sliding scale in terms of their reliance on the romantic comedy genre and the possibilities they open up—the further they get from the traditional romantic comedy structure, the more they are able to escape from some of the limitations of pop-feminism in terms of depicting gender, sexuality, and class. For instance, another adaptation that also complicates *Taming's* connection to the traditional romantic comedy genre is Gary Hardwick's 2003 film *Deliver Us From Eva*, a Black romantic comedy that replaces the patriarchal structure of Shakespeare's text with an emphasis on family and community.²⁶⁷ The film centers on Eva Dandridge—the Katherine character—who looked after her three younger sisters after their parents died. All grown up, the sisters' significant others believe Eva now has too much control over their lives. The sisters, on the other hand, look up to Eva and constitute a tight knit community greatly at odds with Katherine's isolation in Shakespeare's play. The film may still pit the genders against each other and ultimately soften Eva's intense personality through romance, but it, like *10 Things*, also presents an image of familial love and care that supports the Katherine character so that romance does not remain her only way forward to happiness.²⁶⁸ Thus, those adaptations that deviate most strongly from

²⁶⁷ The revision of my dissertation will examine this film more closely.

²⁶⁸ MacDonald sees such a shift in the film's focus as a result of its centering of Blackness. She argues in her book that by "centering blackness," the film "produces a version of *The Taming of the Shrew* that revalues the original's preoccupation with material success and social prestige, and displaces its normalization of male privilege. *Eva* sets aside *Shrew's* patriarchal notion of family life, where fathers sell their daughters to the highest bidders, by imagining a female household where women own themselves and freely give themselves to the men they love" (*Shakespearean Adaptation*, 136).

Shakespeare's story—either by avoiding the tale's movement towards marriage or undercutting the patriarchal power of the family in Shakespeare's play—are also able to present the most successful romances featuring egalitarian relationships, a correlation of proximity and fidelity affecting adaptational critique that I will explore in my chapters on *Othello*.

Returning to the 1929 *Taming*, which similarly presents a vulnerable Petruchio in order to excuse Katherine's taming, we might wonder where this desire to attempt to recuperate the play's patriarchal problems through romance came from. Yes, *The Taming of the Shrew* is a marriage comedy, but it also looks nothing like Shakespeare's other marriage comedies with the couple's marriage coming halfway through the play and the final act presenting a questionable "happy ending" more similar to that of *The Merchant of Venice* than *Much Ado About Nothing*.²⁶⁹ These issues have as much to do with the play's performance history as it does with Shakespeare's text itself. Like some of Shakespeare's other plays, *Taming* was not staged during the late seventeenth and entire eighteenth centuries, appearing only in adapted forms, such as John Lacey's *Sauny the Scot: or, The Taming of the Shrew* (first performed in 1667) and David Garrick's *Catharine and Petruchio* (1754). In fact, *Taming* became "the last of Shakespeare's plays to be restored to the stage in its original form" in 1844, and was not performed in the U.S. until 1887.²⁷⁰ Garrick's play was by far the most successful and long-lasting of these adaptations and works to create a much more sentimental romance and palatable comedy from Shakespeare's play by making Katherine's interest in and love for Petruchio explicit in the text, cutting out the side plots completely to focus on their romance, and making it clear that Petruchio is actually a

²⁶⁹ *Much Ado's* ending is obviously not without flaws, as we see Claudio "rewarded" with Hero's hand in marriage even after he ruined her and her family's reputation through his accusations of infidelity. However, most of the focus on romance in the play is placed on Beatrice and Benedict, whose ending has much in common with today's idea of an ideal happy ending and whose relationship provided the prototype for the "battle of the sexes" romantic comedy.

²⁷⁰ Ann Thompson, Introduction to *Taming*, 20.

kind man who has only put on an aspect of tyranny, which he doffs happily at the end.²⁷¹ Both Michael Dobson and Hodgdon argue, however, that Garrick's play keeps in place the male dominance and patriarchal supremacy of Shakespeare's *Taming*, simply trying to make it easier for audiences to swallow.²⁷²

Hodgdon also implies that the legacy of Garrick's revisions to Shakespeare's play helped shape early cinematic adaptations and those that followed, as "they are not far away" from "Garrick's strategy of sweetening Shakespeare with sentiment."²⁷³ The desire to read *Taming*'s central throughline as one of romance, and the recognition that this might take some stage magic or heavy editing, created the more "sentimental" reading and performance of Shakespeare's play that some would argue now is simply playing it "straight." Yet, as I argue in Chapter One, the romance aspect of Shakespeare's play consistently falls flat, ultimately unable to erase or excuse the patriarchal violence of *Taming*; romance instead appears as an attempted smokescreen. The 1929 film marked a new trend toward cinematic *Tamings* as modern romantic comedies that sought to elevate the play's romance and downplay its misogyny through an emphasis on Petruchio's vulnerability. In the contemporary adaptations I examine, this theme becomes even starker, as new settings allow directors and actors to rework Petruchio's background more creatively to evoke the sympathy and suffering apparently necessary to fix his problematic status.

Thus, as adaptations across media types attempt to neutralize *The Taming of the Shrew*'s misogyny through the romantic comedy's generic conventions, they consistently run into the issue of the pop-feminist paradox—their inability to both create a satisfying romance and

²⁷¹ Such an adaptation choice can be linked to the scholarly move to read Shakespeare's play as representative of "the Protestant ideal of companionate marriage" (Hodgdon, Introduction to *Taming*, 120). See, for example, Miola, "The Influence of New Comedy." For more on the scholarship surrounding marriage in the early modern period and how histories that chart a movement from "patriarchal to companionate" marriage are misleading (9), see Dolan, *Marriage and Violence*.

²⁷² Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet* and Hodgdon, Introduction to *Taming*, 80.

²⁷³ See Hodgdon, Introduction to *Taming*, 78-9.

adequately address the sexism of the play—in part *because* of their desire to focus on Petruchio’s emotions and his problems. By tethering the success of the romance on an audience’s ability to sympathize with Petruchio, these adaptations either emphasize his problems over those of Katherine or require her to shoulder the burden of fixing them both: Petruchio’s problematic behavior is solved by Katherine’s love and affection and Katherine’s “shrewishness” is fixed due to the care she must show those around her. These adaptations are not without their feminist moments, but until audiences, artists, and scholars can better consider *The Taming of the Shrew* in the context of its pop-feminist paradox, it seems that new iterations of this play will continue to repeat this restrictive adaptive pattern.

Chapter 3
“Black love of Shakespeare”:
The “Vexed Object” of Shakespeare’s Othello

In her introduction to Keith Hamilton Cobb’s 2020 stage re-visioning of *Othello*, *American Moor*, Kim F. Hall writes that “Black love of Shakespeare is a site of profound struggle and *Othello* is its most vexed object.”¹ This struggle has to do with both the play’s content and the many barriers that have been placed between Black people and Shakespeare: enslavement, denigration, exclusion, racist critique, and scholarly gatekeeping to name a few. In a recent virtual lecture, Hall eloquently summed up the continued relevancy of this history by contending that “people of color, but particularly Black people, are not free to love Shakespeare. Our relationship to Shakespeare is frequently managed—I dare say, policed—both by those who love him and those who see him as an agent of cultural dominion.”² And *Othello*—the play and the character—remains a contentious subject for Black actors, directors, audiences, and scholars, from Ayanna Thompson’s arguments that *Othello* cannot be recuperated (due to its stereotyped main character and comic structure)³ to Ian Smith’s call for scholars to take responsibility for *Othello*’s final request and speak of him as he is by speaking “reliably about race.”⁴

Hall, Thompson, and Smith all agree, however, that there has often been a critical gap that exists between Shakespeare and race or, more specifically, Blackness. Hall reports that she

¹ Hall, “Introduction.”

² Hall, “‘Othello Was My Grandfather’.”

³ See Gene Demby and Shereen Marisol Meraji, “All That Glisters Is Not Gold” and Greenberg and Karim-Cooper, “Shakespeare and Race,” #SuchStuff 1.

⁴ Smith, “We Are Othello,” 119.

began her career during “the culture wars,” when “a politically conscious Blackness” began to threaten the “transcendent, ahistorical Shakespeare” that many in the academy championed, noting that, even now, “the divergent values between Shakespeare and Blackness linger.”⁵ In charting “encounters between Shakespeare and race,” Hall asks her audience to “imagine that space between ‘Black’ and ‘Shakespeare’ as that 400 years of history that largely denied Blacks access to the structures—particularly education and the stage—that generally shape relations to Shakespeare. . . . To claim or to reject Othello is to immerse oneself into a history of race and Black stigmatization.”⁶ While her own work unites the fields of Shakespeare studies and African diaspora studies, she finds the movement between her two worlds to be fraught and full of tension. In *Passing Strange*, Thompson—a recent president of the Shakespeare Association of America—similarly details the extreme ends of a debate about the salience of Shakespeare and race to each other:

The notion of being *freed by* Shakespeare encourages espousing and promoting an uncomplicated view of Shakespeare’s cultural capital: Shakespeare can uplift the people because his works are aesthetic masterpieces that speak to all humans, in all times, in all cultures. The notion of being *freed from* Shakespeare constructs Shakespeare studies as an obstacle that must be overcome to conduct research on contemporary race issues. . . . Shakespeare may actually disable the advancement of racial equality.⁷

While acknowledging these extremes, Thompson focuses on “the greyer areas between American constructions of Shakespeare and American constructions of race,” and argues that in order for Shakespeare to be made useful to race studies and racial activism, he needs to remain, like race, “unstable” and “contingent.”⁸ Smith argues that the best way to push past the binary that sets Shakespeare and race studies at odds is for white scholars to recognize and interrogate

⁵ Hall, “‘Othello Was My Grandfather’.”

⁶ Hall.

⁷ Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange*, 5-6.

⁸ Thompson, 6, 17.

the stakes of their own whiteness as a racial position that “might impede the[ir] ability to become the kind of reliable cultural narrators and race thinkers Othello envisions.”⁹ While premodern critical race scholars are actively bridging the ideological divide between a universal Shakespeare and contemporary race consciousness—while Shakespeare and Shakespeare studies may no longer “wince” at any proximity to critical race studies—these fields still do not always sit comfortably together.¹⁰ This is perhaps most notably true when it comes to the subject of *Othello*.

This chapter surveys performance, adaptation, and critical history to detail why *Othello* has been and continues to be such a “problem play” for contemporary audiences, theater practitioners, and scholars, both Black and otherwise. *Othello*’s problem status begins with Shakespeare’s text itself, and the complex ambiguity of Othello’s racialization, due to how Shakespeare’s *Othello* embodies the “sticky” nature of early modern racial meaning as it attached to ideologies of religion, class, lineage, ethnicity, geography, and skin color and intersected with gender and sexuality.¹¹ *Othello*’s performance and adaptation history also charts a long record of the play’s problematic connections to anti-Blackness, misogyny, and the erasure of women of color from Shakespeare’s stage. Each section below explores one of these aspects and ends with a nod toward the stage re-visionings of *Othello* I examine more closely in my next chapter, which I argue are more capable of responding to the performative problems that plague *Othello* than performances of the playtext because they explicitly call attention to Black bodies

⁹ Smith, “We Are Othello,” 113.

¹⁰ In reference to W. E. B. Du Bois’ famous line, “I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not” (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 104). For a recent discussion of the scholarly refusal to recognize Shakespeare’s investment in race, see Smith, *Black Shakespeare*.

¹¹ In “‘A New Scholarly Song’,” Erickson and Hall argue that scholars “should insist that race, as an ideology that organizes human difference and power, is always protean and sticky, attaching to a range of ideologies, narratives, and vocabularies in ways both familiar and strange” (12).

and voices that are at once invoked and obscured by the whiteness of Shakespeare, the theater, and the study of both.

Shakespeare's *Othello*

Othello opens with two separate, yet interrelated conflicts: a domestic dispute—as Desdemona, the white daughter of a prominent senator has eloped with the Moorish general, Othello—and a matter of state—as Othello has been called before the Duke to help Venice defend their position on Cyprus against the Turks. Both conflicts center on Othello's racial identity as a Black Moor. Iago, his trusted ensign who secretly works against him throughout the play (for obscure yet multiple reasons, including being passed over by Othello for promotion), stirs up the fury of Desdemona's father by emphasizing Othello's Blackness and position as a dangerous outsider. Othello's outsider knowledge, however, has so far proven useful to the Venetian senate, who specifically ask for Othello, “the noble Moor,” to take over the command of the fleet in Cyprus. Once on Cyprus, Iago puts his revenge into action by calling into question Desdemona's chastity and turning Othello against the man he promoted as his lieutenant, Cassio, intimating that they are lovers. At Iago's urging, Othello eventually murders Desdemona in their bed and, upon learning of Iago's deceit, commits suicide before other men of rank. Because of the centrality of race to *Othello*, it has been variously called Shakespeare's American play and one of (if not the most important of) Shakespeare's race plays; certainly, the play's engagement with race and racism has become the center of scholarly discussions of *Othello* in recent decades.

Medievalist Geraldine Heng defines race as “a repeating tendency . . . to demarcate human beings through differences among humans that are selectively essentialized as absolute and fundamental, in order to distribute positions and powers differentially to human groups . . . race is a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather

than a substantive content.”¹² While the existence of “race,” not to mention racism, has long been a point of contention within premodern studies, scholars have demonstrated that race not only existed as a concept in the premodern world, but that it played a crucial role in the organization of premodern culture; it “was defined based on now-familiar assumptions about exclusivity, authority, ethical, and moral character, and, most importantly, belonging.”¹³ Race, therefore, was and remains one of an array of socially constructed concepts used to differentiate and categorize human beings in order to regulate behavior and create social hierarchies.¹⁴ In the early modern period, race could also activate multiple meanings depending on the context, yoked together with or informed by such diverse concepts as religion/morality, location/geography, lineage/blood, class/status, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and skin color.¹⁵ At any moment, depictions of race or the racialization of a character in an early modern text could be drawing from any one or layering multiple of these attributes.¹⁶

Othello’s character emblemizes this messy, layered, sometimes incoherent history of early modern race, presenting a composite or aggregate image of the racialized “Other” through his characterization as a Black Moor. In this section, I explore understandings of race in early modern scholarship, the creation of the racialized “Other” that Othello represents for the purposes of early modern white world-making, and how Shakespeare’s play thus constructs Othello’s Blackness in various, contradictory ways. The white/black binary—once assumed by critics to operate in terms of aesthetics rather than racial difference¹⁷—took on new meaning in the early modern period as a representation of good/evil, Christian/non-Christian, self/Other,

¹² Heng, *Invention of Race*, 3.

¹³ Hendricks, “Visions of Color,” 512.

¹⁴ Hendricks, 512, 513.

¹⁵ See works by Loomba, MacDonald, Hendricks, and Hall.

¹⁶ For more on the importance of nuance in regard to reading race, see Grady, “Othello, Colin Powell” (esp. 76).

¹⁷ See Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 1.

subject/object, familiar/strange, and civilized/barbaric for the purposes of delineating English identity. Othello's character variously upholds and subverts these binaries, complicating any easy duality through the multiplicity of his racial resonances; and yet, his characterization never fully undermines such oppositions due to his character's entrenchment in what Kim F. Hall calls England's "racial project."¹⁸ In short, while Othello did not represent a single racial category, his characterization at the intersection of race, religion, class, and sexuality can tell readers much about how texts like *Othello*¹⁹ participated in the racial project through which England and other white, European countries identified themselves in relation to an increasingly racialized "Other," crafting their own whiteness as neutral and natural in the process.²⁰

While scholars have reached a general consensus on the applicability of race to the early modern period, how scholars define race in *Othello* continues to be a point of contention, with different scholars prioritizing different elements—geography, religion, class/status, skin color, and gender and sexuality. Mary Floyd-Wilson and Gail Kern Paster's work on geohumoral theory demonstrates how early modern understandings of nature (humorally-inflected behavior and emotions) were influenced by geography (climate and environment), in a process that

¹⁸ Hall, "Othello and the Problem of Blackness," 371.

¹⁹ Ayanna Thompson contends that "there were probably somewhere between fifty and seventy plays that contained characters of color in Shakespeare's era" (*Blackface*, 39). Some of the most commonly discussed plays, other than *Othello* (1603), are Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (1594), George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (1594), Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness* (1605), John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612), and Thomas Dekker's *Lust's Dominion, or The Lascivious Queen* (1657).

²⁰ See Hall, *Things of Darkness*, in which she argues that the English relied on "an idea of African difference" even when differentiating themselves from other ethnic groups, such as "Native Americans, Indians, Spanish, and even Irish and Welsh" (7). The representation of many Africans may have been informed by actual English interactions with Africans; yet, while numerous scholars have shown the presence of Black and brown individuals living in early modern England, their physical presence is perhaps less important than their representation, including the conflation of many different ethnic groups into the terms "Moor" and "Turk." For a record of Black people in Tudor and Stuart England, see Habib, *Black Lives*. For a discussion of the elasticity of the term "Moor," see Neill, Introduction to *Othello*, 45; Hall, *Othello*, 3; and Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 25-26. For the connections and overlaps between the designations of "Moor" and "Turk," see Neill, Introduction to *Othello*, 128 and Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 32-33. For why scholars should keep the terms separate, see Dadabhoy, "Two Faced," 123-4.

contributed to concepts of Othello's ethnic difference.²¹ Daniel Vitkus and Ambereen Dadabhoy read the play's construction of race through the lenses of religion and empire (English/Christian expansion and the Ottoman/Muslim threat), arguing, respectively, that Othello represents a hybrid "theatrical embodiment of the dark, threatening powers at the edge of Christendom"²² and the alien other denied incorporation into "a European imperial body politic."²³ Across various works, Ania Loomba considers Othello, while Black, as racially ambiguous insofar as "political colour" operates to differentiate and alienate racial "others" from whiteness for colonial discourse.²⁴ On the other hand, while Emily Bartels' more recent work on the play also emphasizes Othello's racial ambiguity, she argues that this does not preclude him from being accepted as part of Venetian society.²⁵ Patricia Akhimie charts the association of Blackness with other "stigmatized mark[s] of difference," showing how, in the early modern period's "highly regulated system of conduct," everyone was invited to practice self-improvement in order to achieve promotion, but certain groups (such as foreigners and Africans) were punished for actually attempting to climb society's ladder.²⁶ Hall and Anthony Barthelemy have focused on Othello's skin color, his Blackness, as the foremost "sign" of his racialized status,²⁷ and scholars such as Smith, Farah Karim-Cooper, Kimberly Poitevan, and Virginia Mason Vaughan have emphasized the ways in which race was materially represented on the early modern stage (via cloth and cosmetics).²⁸ Scholars such as Hall, Loomba, and Joyce Green MacDonald have also

²¹ Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race*; Paster, *Humoring the Body*.

²² Vitkus, "Turning Turk in *Othello*," 160.

²³ Dadabhoy, "Two Faced," 142.

²⁴ Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama*, 50. See also, Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*.

²⁵ Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor*.

²⁶ Akhimie, *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference*, 49.

²⁷ Hall, "Othello and the Problem of Blackness"; Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race*.

²⁸ Smith, "White Skin, Black Masks"; Karim-Cooper, "The Materials of Race"; Poitevan, "Inventing Whiteness"; and Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*.

pushed for the need to read race and gender as mutually constitutive.²⁹ While I will focus in my next section on how race collides with gender and sexuality in the character of Desdemona, it is crucial to recognize the extent to which Othello's character both supported and gave rise to even more virulent representations of African men's alleged hypersexuality and its putative relationship to sexual violence. In its representation of the romantic relationship between a Black/Moorish, Christian convert, and ex-slave turned military leader to a white, outspoken, Senator's daughter, *Othello* thus requires close attention to the myriad resonances of "race" available at the time.

In sum, there was "no single explanatory template to which audiences could automatically refer in their response to a black Moor"³⁰ and "hearing the title of his play, Shakespeare's audience members probably had various and potentially contradictory definitions and corresponding images in their minds."³¹ Therefore, as Hall argues, "Othello is not meant to be associated with any single racializing or religious category; he is rather a prism in reverse, concentrating a spectrum of narratives about Moors, Turks, Africans, and possibly Indians into a single figure."³²

Othello's representation thus enables and invites multiple interpretations of his racialization, and its implications, at any given moment in the play. For instance, the first scene

²⁹ Hall, *Things of Darkness*; Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*; and MacDonald, "Black Ram, White Ewe."

³⁰ Neill, Introduction to *Othello*, 128.

³¹ Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 26. Indeed, the subtitle of Shakespeare's play and the first reference to Othello in the play as simply "his Moorship" (Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.1.32) meant that, before he even stepped foot on stage, Shakespeare's audience would have perhaps assigned to him a pluralistic identity not fully attached to any specific ethnic, religious, or geographic group. For more on the effect of this delay, see Newman, "And wash the Ethiop white," 151 and Smith, *Black Shakespeare*, 60-64.

³² Hall, *Othello*, 6. Vitkus similarly asserts that Othello's character deliberately activates multiple racial categories simultaneously as a "hybrid" ("Turning Turk in *Othello*," 159).

capitalizes on the sexualized threat of Othello's Blackness in relation to his Otherness.³³ Iago's warnings to Brabantio of the loss of his daughter focus on the threat of interracial sex to Desdemona and therefore to the "purity" of Brabantio's line:³⁴

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram,
Is tupping your white ewe! Arise, arise,
Awake the snorting citizens with the bell
Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you
.
You'll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh
to you, you'll have coursers for cousins and jennets for Germans!³⁵

Iago's racist lines explicitly connect Othello and his Blackness to animality and bestiality,³⁶ with his sexual congress with Desdemona—itsself described twice as sex between animals—resulting in Brabantio's kinship with various types of horses ("coursers" and "jennets") and even the devil himself.³⁷ The designation of Othello as "a Barbary horse" also emphasizes Othello's connections to Africa and perhaps is meant to evoke his position as one who labors for a kind of master, in this case the Venetian Senate. Roderigo's account of Desdemona giving herself "to the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor" and so "tying her duty, beauty, wit and fortunes / In an extravagant and wheeling stranger / Of here and everywhere" similarly mark Othello as a licentious and dangerous outsider.³⁸

³³ As Hall notes, Othello's blackness is a "problem"—"an outsideness that interrupts desired structures of order and belonging" ("*Othello* and the Problem of Blackness," 371). For more on the history of the myth of the Black rapist in American culture, see Davis, *Women, Race and Class*.

³⁴ See MacDonald, "Finding *Othello*'s African Roots" and Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* for more on Brabantio's fear in this scene as rooted in race and gender.

³⁵ Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.1.87-90, 109-112. Citations of *Othello* come from the Arden Shakespeare, edited by E. A. J. Honigmann.

³⁶ For more on the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality in the animal imagery of these lines, see Masten's discussion of "tupping" in *Queer Philologies* (214-230).

³⁷ For more on the relationship between genealogy and racism in these lines, see Bovilsky, *Barbarous Play*, 46-8.

³⁸ Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.1.124, 133-5. This gets more complicated, however, when we consider how other characters in the play are similarly positioned as outsiders. For instance, Dadabhoj notes that Cassio and Iago also "have the distinctly non-Venetian identities of . . . Florentine, and Spaniard, respectively" ("Two Faced," 137). On this topic, see also Neill, Introduction to *Othello*, 151 and Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, 104.

Various moments in the play also call attention to the “problem” of Othello’s Black body, in particular how it signifies morally in the public space of the State and the domestic space of the bedroom. When Brabantio accuses Othello of the “theft” of his daughter,³⁹ he calls attention to Othello’s “sooty bosom” and in front of the senate claims that Othello used “foul charms” or “drugs or minerals” to trick and seduce her.⁴⁰ After Othello has defended himself, the Duke dismisses Brabantio’s claims and the assembly with the parting reassurance that “If virtue no delighted beauty lack / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black.”⁴¹ The Duke’s lines imply that while Othello may be Black, which in Christian morality signifies any number of negative attributes, Othello himself is “fair” outside of his looks; his virtuous nature supersedes his Black body.⁴² This opposition between Blackness and virtue appears again in the second half of the Act 3’s temptation scene. After Othello begins to believe Iago’s lies concerning Desdemona’s infidelity, Othello laments, “Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and

³⁹ Many scholars have noted how Othello’s “theft” of Desdemona aligns him with the Turkish fleet coming to “steel” Cyprus from the Venetians, displacing the expected violence of military into the domestic space. See Hall, *Othello*, 14-15; Genster, “Lieutenancy, Standing in”; and Vitkus’ “Turning Turk,” 169. Dadabhoy also contends that this connection “not only aligns Othello with the Ottoman Empire but also signals the latent danger of imperial expansion” (“Two Faced,” 122).

⁴⁰ Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.2.70, 73-4.

⁴¹ Shakespeare, 1.3.290-1.

⁴² Hall asserts that these words, “operate on an assumption that nobility or virtue is opposed to black skin” (“*Othello* and the Problem of Blackness,” 368) and Grady refutes Neill’s claim in his Introduction (127-28) that these lines demonstrate the Duke’s acceptance of Othello, instead declaring that “Clemency in the face of Brabantio’s intolerance rearticulates rather than undoes the prejudices that privilege the ‘curled darlings’ over ‘such a thing as’ Othello (1. 72)” (“Othello, Colin Powell,” 75). Many scholars similarly read Desdemona’s claim in this scene that, “I saw Othello’s visage in his mind” as a kind of apology for his Blackness—his Black visage, his outward look, does not reflect his inner mind (Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.3.253). In “Images of White Identity,” Erickson contends that both quotes demonstrate how, even for those who admire Othello, “acceptance is contingent on overlooking or sidestepping the outer blackness” (139). In contrast to Erickson’s reading of both speeches as setting up an opposition between interior and exterior (between Black skin and white virtue), Floyd-Wilson reads Desdemona’s lines more generously, arguing that early modern geohumoral notions of race lead Desdemona to believe that Othello’s Blackness represents his constancy: “Othello’s visage and mind are interchangeable. The constancy of his external blackness denotes the constancy of his internal disposition” (*English Ethnicity and Race*, 148). Keeping the ambivalence of Desdemona’s line alive, Jennings points out that it “has so many different possible interpretations . . . and it’s the not knowing of what that line means that makes her such an interesting character” (Interview). See also Pechter, *Othello and Interpretive Traditions*, 42, 46.

black / As mine own face.”⁴³ Here, Othello internalizes the reading of his own Blackness as existing in opposition to Desdemona’s originally fair visage—her whiteness and her virtue or chastity, as indicated by the reference to Diana, a Roman goddess associated with virginity. The possibility of her infidelity darkens or sullies her name, explicitly connecting moral sin with Black skin.

In a similar vein, Othello’s final lines represent the religious and geographic resonances of his Blackness with his unstable identity in relation to Moors, Turks, and even “the base Indian/Judean.”⁴⁴ After learning of Iago’s treachery and realizing his own fatal mistake, Othello asks his audience to speak of him as he actually was, imploring:

. . . say besides that in Aleppo once,
Where a malignant and a turbaned Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by th’ throat the circumcised dog
And smote him—thus!⁴⁵

At which point he stabs himself and dies. This request for an honest account of his actions refers to a moment wherein he aligns himself with Christians fighting against “turbaned,” and thus Muslim, Turks; yet, in rendering his fatal strike upon himself, he also identifies himself with this “malignant” and “circumcised” figure.⁴⁶ Even in death, even by his own words, Othello’s identity remains multifaceted and ambiguous.

⁴³ Shakespeare, *Othello* 3.3.389-91. These lines could also refer metatheatrically to how the blackface cosmetics of the Othello actor may have rubbed off on the actor playing Desdemona.

⁴⁴ Shakespeare, 5.2.345. The Arden edition uses “Indian,” though Honigmann lays out the case for both words in an extended note (346-7). For more on the debate over this textual crux, see Akhimie, *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference*, 82n35.

⁴⁵ Shakespeare, *Othello* 5.2.350-54.

⁴⁶ Vitkus contends that “the tragedy of Othello is a drama of conversion” and that, with its roots in the medieval morality play tradition, “the morality play of Othello is a tragedy of damnation” (“Turning Turk in *Othello*,” 145, 170). *Othello* is rife with the rhetoric of damnation and devils and Othello’s status as ‘belonging’ in Venice society is in question and under suspicion from the beginning of the play in part due to his unknown history and designation as a Moor, which Vitkus relates to the general suspicion that surrounded religious converts (162).

Thus, while scholars have prioritized various aspects of Othello's race—focusing on how his racialization resonates with issues of religion, class, geography, gender, and sexuality—Othello's character is an assemblage of race that has only grown more complicated with the accretion of further layers of racial meaning over time.⁴⁷ In the early modern period, England's efforts at nation-building and creation of a semi-stable sense of white, patriarchal selfhood relied upon the creation of an exotic, racialized "Other," a capacious category that could include the Irish, Indigenous peoples of the Americas, and Africans. Scholars have shown, however, that Blackness was becoming more central to racialization and *Othello* has played an important role in this historical process.⁴⁸ Neill claims that "the play's involvement in the white world's construction of 'blackness' has been to some extent a formative one,"⁴⁹ and Vaughan similarly identifies "*Othello*'s influence on white imaginations" as pervasive.⁵⁰ Yet, what and how Othello signifies racially, and how race informs audience interactions with *Othello*, has changed over time. My next section examines Othello's performance history in order to consider why his representation continues to trouble audiences, readers, and scholars today.

Othello Through the Ages

As Thompson articulates in her recent book, *Blackface*, "There is a filthy and vile thread—sometimes it's tied into a noose—that connects the first performances of blackness on

⁴⁷ In "Shakespeare through Critical White Studies," Little similarly articulates a "complicated history of *white* racial assemblaging" (my emphasis), which he argues the early modern stage was "instrumental" in solidifying. His definition of assemblaging is pertinent here: "the coming together, crisscrossing, clashes, infusions, and confusions, of various modalities and heterogeneous ideas, images, genres, genealogies, terms, elements, inter alia . . . always in the act of being (*re*)invented" (271).

⁴⁸ In her postcolonial reading of the play, "Othello's Identity, Postcolonial Theory," Singh argues that Othello's final speech demonstrates how "he straddles contradictory roles – as 'both infidel and defender of the faith'. Thus, we cannot really 'Speak of [Othello as he is]', for his 'otherness' as a black man cannot be contained within the dominant, Western fantasy of a singular, unified identity" (172).

⁴⁹ Neill, Introduction to *Othello*, 16.

⁵⁰ Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, 170.

English stages, the birth of blackface minstrelsy, contemporary performances of blackness, and anti-black racism.”⁵¹ The performance history of *Othello* and Othello’s representation over time not only bear this out but are a prime example of it. In this section, I chart the enduring spectacle of blackface in relation to performances of *Othello* and then briefly survey the historical shift from Othello’s portrayal by only white actors to (almost) only Black actors. I then turn to the problematic consequences that still haunt Othello’s character in this shift, characterizing the change as from one of impersonation to one of racial representation. Perhaps reacting to this haunting, the contemporary stage re-visionings I examine often attempt to distance themselves from the complex ambiguity of Othello’s racialization during the early modern period, but they cannot escape the subsequent baggage of *Othello*’s place in the construction and preservation of whiteness.⁵² In light of this fact, many of the re-visionings deliberately struggle with this baggage and the effects it has on Othello’s representation and how he can or should be understood.

For much of *Othello*’s stage history, Othello’s Blackness was represented materially through racial impersonation, most famously through the use of blackface cosmetics.⁵³ In her survey of the performative tactics used to represent Blackness onstage, Vaughan charts how face-blackening began in the medieval period with mystery cycles, conveying primarily religious connotations as a sign of evil, sin, and damnation. Sixteenth-century court pageantry then began to feature performers appared as “black Moors in masques and processions” as a sign of

⁵¹ Ayanna Thompson, *Blackface*, 98.

⁵² Vaughan argues that “the history of Shakespeare’s text is imbricated . . . in the history of English and American racial attributes. In fact, more than any other Shakespearean drama, *Othello* is weighed down by cultural baggage” (*Performing Blackness*, 171).

⁵³ While there are critics that believe blackface should only be used to describe the performance tradition of blackface minstrelsy, which began in the 19th century, I follow in the footsteps of early modernists such as Ayanna Thompson, Callaghan, Smith, and Vaughan, who use the term “blackface” to discuss cosmetics used in the early modern period to darken the skin so that the actor could represent other races (especially Moors/Negros).

“religious and geographical difference” and as a “carnavalesque” form of social liberation and misrule.⁵⁴ Around this same time, actual Moors were brought as slaves to court alongside and as part of sumptuous displays of wealth, exhibited like aesthetic objects or props in larger court revels.⁵⁵ By the mid-sixteenth century, travel narratives circulated with fanciful and grotesque images of Black Africans, and the English would most likely have been aware of the growing slave-trade, leading to a new fascination with depictions of Blackness, on the page and the stage. Vaughan notes that this culminated in an overlapping of many of the previous significations of Blackness, with the emergence of a new kind of villain: the talking devil.⁵⁶ In short, “blackface—and the theatrical patterns associated with it—accrued over time,”⁵⁷ and, during the Renaissance, “fear of the devil overlapped with fear of the black African other.”⁵⁸

Alongside the use of burned cork, cosmetics, or dye to blacken the faces of actors portraying non-white characters,⁵⁹ the practice of racial impersonation or crossdressing in early modern England also involved the use wigs, exotic costuming, and dyed black cloth “to mimic black skin.”⁶⁰ Ian Smith calls such theatrical articles “prosthetics of race.”⁶¹ These “multiple means of creating blackness theatrically operated simultaneously at the end of the sixteenth

⁵⁴ Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, 25-26, 28-29. Italy’s *commedia dell’arte* traditions may also have influenced English theater in the late sixteenth century, featuring stock characters like the Harelquin or “Little Devil,” who often appeared in blackface and acted as comic vice figures (31).

⁵⁵ See Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 23-24 and Callaghan, “‘Othello was a white man’.”

⁵⁶ Vaughan reads Aaron the Moor from Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* as an example of this character. In her chapter on *Othello*, she argues that Shakespeare turns this trope on its head by giving the position of the talking devil to Iago, yet color contrast and the black/white binary is very important to the play and its language.

⁵⁷ Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, 3.

⁵⁸ Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, 8. Such shifting continued after the Renaissance too, as Vaughan notes that “Over time, the actor’s blackened face hardened into a marker of racial difference; by the Restoration, it denoted slave status, and in the eighteenth century, it could also evoke the audience’s pity” (8-9).

⁵⁹ See Karim-Cooper, *Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama* and Poitevin, “Inventing Whiteness.”

⁶⁰ Smith, “White Skin, Black Masks,” 43. He also declares that “The diverse theatrical means of mimicking blackness—soot, dyed black cloth, dyes, and oil-based ointments—did not exist, then, in a temporal sequence of technical advancement but intersected to form a palimpsest, an overlay of conceptual images whose earliest residue remained vital even in the latest references to blackening” (57-8). See also Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 28 and Smith, “Othello’s Black Handkerchief.”

⁶¹ Smith, “White Skin, Black Masks,” 42.

century to inform a racial epistemology.”⁶² As Smith points out, such an epistemology produced whiteness as the place of subjectivity (the actor), and Blackness as the “material object devoid of interiority” (the prosthetic material).⁶³ Therefore, theatrical Blackness absorbed multiple signs of difference in order to constitute and stabilize whiteness; in the theater, “[the actors’] words and gestures say nothing about people of sub-Saharan ancestry, but they reveal much about European self-fashioning. Imagining the black Moor contributed to the white audience’s own imagined communities and to the dissemination of its social and cultural values.”⁶⁴

Othello was and remains one of the key texts and flashpoints in relation to the history of blackface. For much of the play’s performance history, Othello has been portrayed by a white man in blackface. Such attention to both the actor’s body and the character’s body—and the racial difference between them—has made the problem of embodying Othello a key factor in performances of the play. Many scholars have pointed to the way that the play itself metatheatrically draws attention to the white actor beneath the racial prosthetics,⁶⁵ and Vaughan contends that in the 18th and 19th century productions’ emphasis on Othello’s physicality, “the *display* of the body is integral to the role.”⁶⁶ In fact, she notes that the incongruous juxtaposition between the actor’s whiteness and Othello’s blackness was a source of delight for many audience members as it led to “a sort of double consciousness on the audience’s part.”⁶⁷ While Thompson argues that performances in the 18th century “emphasize[d] the character’s noble and heroic qualities” while still portraying him as Black,⁶⁸ the early 19th century saw the beginning of what

⁶² Smith, 44.

⁶³ Smith, 34.

⁶⁴ Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, 170.

⁶⁵ For instance, when Brabantio references Othello’s “sooty bosom” (Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.2.70) or when Othello laments that Desdemona’s visage has become “begrimed and black / As mine own face” (3.3.390-91). See Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, 95.

⁶⁶ Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, 99.

⁶⁷ Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, 98.

⁶⁸ Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 69.

has come to be known as the Bronze Age of *Othello*, the use of lighter cosmetics ushered in by Edmund Kean to portray Othello as “tawny” rather than Black.⁶⁹ Hall identifies the questioning of and disbelief in Othello’s Blackness as coinciding with “the era of transatlantic slavery,” leading to “quasi-ethnographic attempts to understand his ‘true’ racial origins.”⁷⁰ Such questioning, however, was rooted in anti-Blackness, stemming from the racist belief that a white woman of Desdemona’s status could not love a Black man.⁷¹ Kean’s move to a tawny Moor and his interpretation of Othello as “an intensely emotional character” with explosive passions influenced stage Othellos for the next century.⁷²

Othello’s performance history is also closely related to blackface minstrelsy, especially as the play traveled from England into the American colonies. The performance tradition of blackface came “to the American colonies in the late eighteenth century” and “*Othello* was one of the most popular plays on the early American stage,” even before minstrelsy.⁷³ Hall asserts that “Minstrelsy burst into public consciousness at the same time as the institutionalization of Shakespeare, the bronze age of *Othello* performance, attacks on African American theater, and the electrifying appearance of Ira Aldridge, the first major African American actor on the English stage.”⁷⁴ Minstrelsy began as small performances in entr’actes alongside other types of entertainment but eventually took the form of full-scale productions or long-form narratives.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Thompson, 71.

⁷⁰ Hall, *Othello*, 24.

⁷¹ See Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 29-32 and Cline, “Reviewing Ira Aldridge” for a discussion of this discourse. Thompson’s Introduction includes the anti-Black quotes from Samuel Taylor Coleridge.

⁷² Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 71.

⁷³ Ayanna Thompson, *Blackface*, 20.

⁷⁴ Hall, *Othello*, 356. In her Introduction to *Othello*, Ayanna Thompson gives a similar timeline for the *Othello* burlesque in paraphrasing work by MacDonald: “Edmund Kean began performing the Moor as tawny instead of black for the first time in 1820; the black American actor Ira Aldridge made his appearance onstage in London in 1825; the Slavery Abolition Act was passed in the UK in 1833; and *Othello* burlesques began appearing around 1834” (105). See MacDonald, “Acting Black,” 232-3.

⁷⁵ Hall notes that minstrelsy was “lauded . . . as the first truly American art form; it was in any case America’s most popular antebellum entertainment, lasting from the 1830s well into the era of film and beyond” (*Othello*, 355).

Blackface minstrelsy was “a specific performance mode and genre . . . comprised of skits, monologues, songs, and dances that supposedly imitated enslaved persons or recently freed enslaved persons.”⁷⁶ Thompson considers the tradition of blackface minstrelsy as directly deriving from the performance of Blackness in the early modern period according to the two modes of representation laid out by Dympna Callaghan: either as the exhibition of Black bodies (wherein the power lies with the white gaze) or the mimesis/imitation of Black bodies (wherein the power lies with the white performer). This bifurcation aligns with Smith’s articulation of early modern performances of Blackness as based on a racial dichotomy of subject and object—as producers of a mimetic Blackness, white minstrel actors could maintain their position as active subjects even as their performance cast Blackness as an object (a costume and affectation to be put on and removed).⁷⁷ In minstrelsy, “performing blackness is the performance property of whites” and relies on appeals to authenticity through imitation, even or perhaps especially when such imitation degrades its subject.⁷⁸

The Bronze Age of *Othello* performances in England and the new tradition of minstrelsy in early America can therefore be seen as connected in the “thread” of anti-Blackness that Thompson argues stretches back to medieval England. *Othello*, she contends, helped build that connection: “everyone who was involved in creating minstrelsy also performed in Shakespeare and knew each other and so the ties around it are pretty close”;⁷⁹ furthermore, “minstrel show versions of *Othello* were very popular in the nineteenth century, and they were the most popular

⁷⁶ Ayanna Thompson, *Blackface*, 22.

⁷⁷ Thompson, 36-40. See Dympna Callaghan, “‘Othello was a white man’.”

⁷⁸ Thompson, 60. Thompson reports that many originators of blackface minstrelsy claimed that their imitations were done to “celebrate” Black culture and described their own performances as similar to ethnography—impersonating or imitating for verisimilitude (23-31).

⁷⁹ Greenberg and Karim-Cooper, “Shakespeare and Race,” *#SuchStuff* 5. For the rumor that TD Rice first performed his Jumping Jim Crow after a production of *Othello*, see Hall, *Othello*, 356 and MacDonald, “Acting Black,” 233n10.

blackface adaptations of Shakespeare.”⁸⁰ Similarly comical in nature, *Othello* burlesques, which emerged from the minstrel tradition, “were an attempt to employ *Othello* to frame narratives about black masculinity as monstrous, laughable, and yet potentially threatening if not properly controlled.”⁸¹ For over 200 years, then, *Othello* constituted the most prominent English representation of Blackness onstage, and its new minstrel forms established the same authorization for white performance and imitation of Blackness in the U.S.

Yet, while minstrelsy was mainly the provenance of white men, Black actors also participated in it,⁸² including Ira Aldridge who performed in minstrel shows after his own productions of Shakespeare.⁸³ Aldridge was the first Black man to perform *Othello* in London in 1833 and went on to have great success playing *Othello*, as well as characters in whiteface (such as *King Lear*), but only outside the US and UK. Even though his stint in London was brief, Aldridge, a dark-skinned Black man, brought an end to the Bronze Age.⁸⁴ Thompson posits that while blackface minstrel scenes and productions still appeared alongside *Othello*, Aldridge’s own performances—which placed *Othello* first in the performance order—called such stereotyped portrayals of Black characters into question.⁸⁵ The casting of Black actors as *Othello* did not gain further traction, however, until Paul Robeson’s watershed performances in London (1930), New York (1943), and Stratford (1959). The strength of his performance had an enormous impact on how critics and audiences saw the character as well as the actor’s role in

⁸⁰ Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 102.

⁸¹ Thompson, 102-5.

⁸² Whitmore and Shier, “Our Own Voices with Our Own Tongues.” In this episode, Marvin McAllister claims that “the majority of Black performers post-1860, post-Civil War, were engaged in some type of connection to a blackface minstrel troupe. Now, not all of them performed in blackface. Some of them might have been opera singers, or other ethnic impersonators, but they were associated mostly with some type of colored, musical blackface traveling troupe.”

⁸³ See MacDonald, “Acting Black,” 231 and Hall, *Othello*, 357.

⁸⁴ Hall, *Othello*, 26.

⁸⁵ Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 86.

embodying him: the prominent scholar and reviewer, John Dover Wilson, declared that “a Negro Othello is essential to the full understanding of the play.”⁸⁶ Yet, until the 1980s, “white actors continued to dominate the role,”⁸⁷ on both the stage and screen: most famously Orson Welles in his own 1951 film,⁸⁸ Laurence Olivier in the 1964-65 production at the National Theatre (and subsequent 1965 film),⁸⁹ and Anthony Hopkins in the 1981 BBC film.⁹⁰ Patrick Stewart also made headlines in a “photonegative” production of Othello in 1997 at the Shakespeare Theater in Washington, D.C., in which he played a white Othello alongside an otherwise all-Black cast. While this production did not repeat the past imitative failures of blackface, Stewart’s performance of Othello failed to escape the pitfalls of blackface by asking audience members to accept a well-known white man as embodying the marginalized position of “Blackness.”⁹¹

Since the 1990s, a consensus has formed among the theater community that Othello should be played by actors of color. Nonetheless, having a non-white Othello does not

⁸⁶ Wilson’s introduction to the 1957 Cambridge edition to *Othello* quoted in Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 65.

⁸⁷ Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 80.

⁸⁸ Hall notes that Welles’ role was “the last major blackface performance in a U.S. film” and “was often condemned as caricatured and offensive” (*Othello*, 26).

⁸⁹ For more on Olivier’s performance and its reception, see Neill, Introduction to *Othello*; Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 82-4; Ayanna Thompson, *Blackface*, 61-4; Hodgdon, “Race-ing *Othello*,” 26-27; and Vaughn, *Performing Blackness*, 99-103. It is interesting to note that UK reviews were primarily positive, while reviewers in the US had mixed reactions, with some clearly believing the performance crossed a line (Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 82).

⁹⁰ Neill argues that Hopkins was made “a conspicuously pale Moor” because the director, Jonathan Miller, “believe[ed] the issue of Othello’s colour to be a distraction, and one that risked racial stereotyping” (Introduction to *Othello*, 92). Like many directors before him, Miller falls into the dangerous trap of assuming a white or “light” Othello equals a “race-neutral” production. See also Ayanna Thompson’s discussion of the film in *Blackface* (67).

⁹¹ In “Black and White,” Albanese reads the Shakespeare Theatre production in the context of color-blind casting, which she argues, even when meant to be “progressive,” can shore up racial inequality by insisting that race does not matter, therefore ignoring its material consequences and aligning it with contemporary criticism of affirmative action. In “Visions of Color,” Hendricks takes issue with part of Albanese’s thesis—that the production is problematic because it renders race performative—because “being black is always already a performative act” (523). I do not agree with Albanese’s assessment that the production treats race as a “neutral variable,” but her close reading of the play reveals a number of problematic and most likely unintended byproducts of such casting. For instance, it echoes early US history in having a white man lay violent hands upon a Black woman and ultimately renders (or attempts to render) a white Othello as “the racially beleaguered subject of the play” (249), which Albanese connects to contemporary criticism of affirmative action. She argues that, in effect, the production inadvertently “engaged the white Imaginary that is the legacy of race relations in the United States” (250). For more on this production, see also Neill, Introduction to *Othello*, 64-7.

automatically solve the problems stemming from the play's race and the racism or from its racialized history of performance.⁹² In fact, Black actors playing Othello has opened up a whole new set of performance problems. For instance, Thompson urges that "it must be acknowledged that black actors have other, more complicated responses to the role and the play [than white actors] precisely because their performance modes are not considered as impersonations but rather as embodiments."⁹³ Turning to audience reception, Vaughan similarly observes that "the danger with a black actor in the title role is that with the loss of the reminders that this is *not* real but an impersonation, the enactment of Othello's jealous rage and murder of his wife can strike audiences as the embodiment of their own stereotypes of black pathology rather than an actorly performance."⁹⁴ Such racial stereotypes have persisted since the early modern period, in which Black masculinity was associated with barbarity/savagery,⁹⁵ passion over reason,⁹⁶ and sexual licentiousness.⁹⁷ This has led some scholars to call for a return to blackface,⁹⁸ while others staunchly oppose such a move.⁹⁹

⁹² Ayanna Thompson notes that "at precisely the historical moment when black actors dominate the role of Othello many productions choose to de-emphasize themes of racial difference" (Introduction to *Othello*, 83).

⁹³ Thompson, 84.

⁹⁴ Vaughan, *Performing Blackness*, 105.

⁹⁵ Floyd-Wilson contends that even when critics debate the reason for Othello's fall into jealousy (nature versus racism), "no one seriously disputes the associations between savagery, blackness, and jealousy" (*English Ethnicity and Race*, 146).

⁹⁶ Hall identifies "Western associations of blackness with sexuality, emotion, and, significantly, Christian concepts of sin and evil" ("*Othello* and the Problem of Blackness," 358). Ayanna Thompson discusses the acting style of an Italian actor in the 19th century, Tommaso Salvini, who played a frenzied and physical Othello that many critics read as depicting the true nature of an African: devoid of reason, a beast in his passions (Introduction to *Othello*, 72-4).

⁹⁷ Hall notes that minstrelsy was born during "the heyday of scientific racism and its related fears of black sexual appetite as a potential threat to the white race" and that minstrel/burlesque adaptations of *Othello* speak to these anxieties about whiteness (*Othello*, 357).

⁹⁸ In her conclusion to *Performing Blackness*, Vaughan suggests a return (carefully selected and contextualized) to blackface performances because she argues that having Othello restricted to black actors makes "his characteristics become *essentialized*" and too easily lets audiences forget the history of blackface and the racism of impersonation (171-174). In "The Blackfaced Bard," Ayanna Thompson describes three other calls for a return to blackface productions of *Othello*, by Sheila Rose Bland ("How I Would Direct *Othello*"), Hugh Quarshie (*Second Thoughts about Othello*), and Hugh Macrae Richmond ("The Audience's Role in *Othello*").

⁹⁹ Ayanna Thompson explains that those who support a return to blackface productions of *Othello* demonstrate "conflicting desires for a return to Shakespeare's original intent and for an appropriation of the cultural and political semiotics of blackface," and that an "audience-oriented" approach shows that reception is ultimately more important

Performances of *Othello* necessarily carry this history of anti-Blackness with them, often unwittingly repeating and implicating themselves within it. Stage re-visionings, in contrast, wrestle with this history, even as they distance themselves from *Othello*. By rewriting the play, framing it metatheatrically, or imagining its characters to reside in a space elsewhere, they critically respond to the play's tumultuous history without necessarily repeating it. For example, some directly confront the whiteness of American theater and how, too often, Othello and his Blackness become the property of white directors (Cobb and Jennings), while others contend with the anti-Blackness of *Othello*'s history in relation to minstrelsy (Sears) and performance (Chakrabarti). They thus evoke and grapple with *Othello*'s place in history by exploring how the representation of its eponymous hero—impersonated or embodied—has had and continues to have a potent effect on contemporary understandings of race and racism.

Desdemona Through the Ages

While the problem of Othello within a racist culture lies in his Blackness and its representation over time, the problem of Desdemona in this culture lies in her desire *for* Othello (and his Black body) and how this desire has variously been written into and out of *Othello*'s performance history. While often portrayed onstage as innocent and naïve, Desdemona's outspokenness and her agency, specifically in choosing to elope with a Moor, reflected and supported anxieties concerning female unruliness and sexuality during the early modern period.¹⁰⁰ As Peter Stallybrass argues, even before Iago brings her chastity into question, "her

than intention ("The Blackfaced Bard," 440, 447). While blackface productions that challenge an audience to think about race and racism may be possible, she argues they cannot be possible with Shakespeare, for "when it comes to Shakespeare, reception is always written out of production because it is implicitly positively written into it. The force of Shakespeare's cultural capital is too strong to forego the fantasy of the Bard's intentions as race neutral or even race progressive" (453).

¹⁰⁰ See Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (especially her section entitled "The Infidelity of Women" in chapter 4); Hall, "Othello and the Problem of Blackness"; and Bovilsky, *Barbarous Play*.

withdrawal from house affairs and the government of her father marks her out as ‘untamed’.”¹⁰¹ Loomba similarly contends that “Desdemona’s free banter with Iago and her spirited defence of Cassio, although innocent, stages a model of behaviour that was controversial in the culture at large.”¹⁰² Such outspokenness and her capacity to pursue her own desires in contradiction to her father’s will make her a possible threat to patriarchal order.¹⁰³ In fact, it is this capacity that Brabantio warns Othello against,¹⁰⁴ that Iago preys upon,¹⁰⁵ and that ultimately helps convince Othello that Desdemona is “that cunning whore of Venice.”¹⁰⁶ Due to the association of her character with the label “whore,” Vitkus reads Desdemona as “a tragic inversion or parody of the pattern of the reformed courtesan”—in “the sexual equivalent of Othello’s racial oxymoron ‘noble Moor’,” Desdemona becomes the “honest whore.”¹⁰⁷

This association derives within the play from Iago, and while it most explicitly refers to her alleged infidelity with Cassio, Iago also links her sexual immorality with her desire for her husband. He describes Desdemona’s desire for Othello as “unnatural” in seeking out a partner not “of her own clime, complexion and degree,”¹⁰⁸ an opinion repeated by some reviewers and audience members.¹⁰⁹ Such a position shows a deep anti-Blackness and disgust with interracial

¹⁰¹ Stallybrass, “Patriarchal Territories,” 136.

¹⁰² Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, 102.

¹⁰³ See Newman, “‘And wash the Ethiop white’,” 152 and Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama*.

¹⁰⁴ Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.3.293-4.

¹⁰⁵ Shakespeare, 3.3.209-11.

¹⁰⁶ Shakespeare, 4.2.91.

¹⁰⁷ Vitkus, “Turning Turk,” 159. Vitkus reads both ‘honest’ and ‘whore’ as key terms in the play. Loomba notes how accusations of whoredom haunt all three female characters: “Bianca, who is treated as a whore, Desdemona, who is repeatedly accused of being one, and Emilia, who is dismissed as her ‘bawd’” (100). For a psychoanalytic approach to male anxiety about female sexuality in *Othello*, see Snow, “Sexual Anxiety.”

¹⁰⁸ Shakespeare, *Othello* 3.3.237, 234. Hall notes that in this scene, even “as Iago continually reminds the audience of the carnality and sinfulness of blackness, he makes Othello see Desdemona’s ‘grossness’ – to imagine her not as the wife of his heart, but as a dangerously desiring woman. The bestial language first used to alienate Brabantio from the couple is also used to inflame Othello’s jealous suspicions of his wife” (“*Othello* and the Problem of Blackness,” 369). Thus, Iago’s misogyny is inextricably linked to his racism in his plot to undo the General.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Rymer (writing in 1693) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (writing in 1903) do not place the blame on Desdemona but do remark on how unbelievable it is for a white woman of her stature to fall in love with and marry a Black Moor. See Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 54-58.

marriage and sex that impacts Desdemona as well as Othello. This disgust reached a peak during the period in which anti-miscegenation legislation took hold in the U.S.¹¹⁰ Such an intertwining of gender, race, and sexuality has a long history, however, as MacDonald asserts that “the domestication of women and their sexuality facilitated the accomplishment of explicitly racial goals” during the early modern period.¹¹¹ Examining marriage and family laws in the Virginia Colonies—stretching from just after *Othello*’s premier to the end of the seventeenth century—MacDonald notes that, at first, interracial marriage was common (especially between white men and Black women, as wives were scarce).¹¹² Soon, however, such marriages became subject to taxes; thereafter, children of interracial relationships followed the race of their mother, meaning that any children fathered by white men on women of color were condemned to slavery; and ultimately, any interracial sexual conduct became a crime.¹¹³ For MacDonald, “what is uncanny about *Othello* is the way in which it anticipates such legal codifications of ideologies of race and gender.”¹¹⁴ As Daileader suggests, “In *Othello* the inter-racial sex is metaphorically adulterous—in the sense that it is adulterating, impure, and thereby adulteress-making of Desdemona, whether she’s faithful to Othello or not.”¹¹⁵ In *Othello*, misogyny and racism go hand in hand and these forces within and around the text punish Desdemona both for her possible infidelity and for her very real love.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ In his writing on the play, John Quincy Adams declared their marriage “a gross outrage upon the law of Nature” and “unnatural, solely and exclusively because of [Othello’s] color.” Quotation from Brigitte Fielder, “Blackface Desdemona,” 47-48.

¹¹¹ MacDonald, “Black Ram, White Ewe,” 208.

¹¹² MacDonald, 209. Daileader also stipulates that “until 1800 the vast majority of women sailing to America were non-European” (*Racism, Misogyny*, 8).

¹¹³ MacDonald, “Black Ram, White Ewe,” 209.

¹¹⁴ MacDonald, 210.

¹¹⁵ Daileader, *Racism, Misogyny*, 209.

¹¹⁶ Daileader argues that “Racism will turn to misogyny on a dime; misogyny often obscures racism” (218). As Peter Stallybrass notes, “There is a corresponding transition in the play from the interrogation of Othello’s ‘witchcraft’ to the interrogation of ‘A maiden, never bold’ (1.3.94) who transgressed ‘Against all rules of nature’ (1.3.101)” (136).

Reactions to Desdemona's desire—both as a woman and specifically for a Black man—have heavily influenced *Othello's* performance history. In examining the differences between the Folio and Quarto editions of the play, Denise Walen asserts that Q represents a revision of F in order to respond to the shift in performance venue from the Globe to the Blackfriars—most notably trimming 4.3, the scene wherein Emilia unpins Desdemona while she sings the Willow Song and the two women speak of female infidelity.¹¹⁷ While the cuts may have resulted from shifting theatrical practice, Walen explains that they have had other lasting, negative consequences, as F's 4.3 depicts Emilia and Desdemona as complicated characters, while Q paints them as one-dimensional. Following this shift, later acting editions of the play cut the scene even further or eliminated it completely, representing “an inclination to suppress and restrain female agency.”¹¹⁸ In losing Desdemona's questions about female infidelity—and her own protestations against it—these editions no longer focus on her innocence, while also eliminating her and Emilia's capacity to contemplate and articulate female desire. In addition to the cuts around 4.3, in the 18th and 19th centuries, “the propriety of the play was questioned” and many of Desdemona's other lines referencing her sexual knowledge (as in her early banter with Iago) and desires, including those that only hinted at it (such as any references to bed sheets), were excised from the text.¹¹⁹ Such edits resulted in a meek, mild, and subordinate Desdemona. While the 20th century saw the return of a stronger and more passionate heroine—in part due to

¹¹⁷ Walen, “Unpinning Desdemona.” Walen claims that when the King's Men moved to the Blackfriars, the company began putting intervals between acts (in part to trim the candles and in part because it had become standard in private playhouses) and played music during these breaks, so that the Willow Song—and the break the scene itself gave from the rising tragic tension—may have felt unnecessary if not simply too slow in its pace.

¹¹⁸ Walen, 508. Bovilsky observes that the similar cutting of Desdemona's banter with Iago at the docks in 2.1 “suppress Desdemona's agency as a sexual subject and thereby also suppress important elements of the play's racial logic, which simultaneously insists on Desdemona's flawless ‘fairness’ and disturbing ‘blackness’” (*Barbarous Play*, 39).

¹¹⁹ Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 91.

the return of 4.3 and her Willow Song¹²⁰—Thompson reports that many “millennial productions have reverted to presenting Desdemona as extremely young, naïve and in love for the first time.”¹²¹ Even when present, her desire and agency are often softened by an emphasis on her youth and inexperience.

Also reflected in *Othello*’s performance are historical ideologies linking blackness and sexual immorality. For example, Othello reads Desdemona’s alleged impurity as blackening her fair skin and nature.¹²² This sentiment is prefigured in the play by Desdemona and Iago’s racialized banter on the docks,¹²³ a scene that Lara Bovilsky observes is often cut from performance in order to preserve audience sympathy for her because “she must be utterly ‘innocent’ for her murder to fully outrage the audience . . . she must have no whisper of extramural sexual experience, which the Renaissance sometimes called ‘blackness,’ about her.”¹²⁴ As Bovilsky asserts, attention to the absence of a Black-skinned woman can prevent scholars from attending to “the trope of the black woman” in the Renaissance policing of female chastity, which can illustrate “the period’s dense coarticulation of gendered sexual morality and racist metaphysics.”¹²⁵ For example, reading Iago’s lines to Brabantio that imagine his

¹²⁰ See Walen, “Unpinning Desdemona,” 500-02 and Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 94.

¹²¹ Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 96. Neill says something similar in his Introduction to *Othello* (106).

¹²² “Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face” (Shakespeare, *Othello* 3.3.389-91). MacDonald and Newman both also speak of how racialization overlaps with sexuality in the character of Bianca. MacDonald directly ties Bianca’s sexual promiscuity as a courtesan with the text’s racialization of her as Black—even if not in her actual skin color—as “Bianca . . . is racialized as black because of her sexual activity outside of patriarchal controls over the disposition of her body” (“Black Ram, White Ewe,” 215). This sets Bianca up in opposition to Desdemona both racially and sexually. Newman similarly reads Bianca and Desdemona alongside each other in terms of female racialized sexually, arguing that “The aptly and ironically named Bianca is a cypher for Desdemona whose ‘blackened whiteness’ she embodies” (“‘And wash the Ethiop white,’” 153). For more on blackening and female sexuality, see Iyengar, *Shades of Difference*.

¹²³ In this scene, Iago and Desdemona trade quips about how Iago would describe different women. When Desdemona asks after one who is “black and witty,” Iago responds, “If she be black, and thereto have a wit, / She’ll find a white that shall her blackness fit” (Shakespeare, *Othello* 2.1.131-3). For more on this scene, see MacDonald, “Black Ram, White Ewe” and the first chapter of Bovilsky, *Barbarous Play*.

¹²⁴ Bovilsky, *Barbarous Play*, 38-9. She also notes that “the interchange is omitted in every production of which I am aware, and critical opinion has been overwhelmingly negative” (38).

¹²⁵ Bovilsky, 50, 58.

daughter's congress with Othello as between a black ram and white ewe, Bovilsky observes that aside from simply representing Othello as Black and Desdemona as white, these lines also map color across gender difference, implying that marriage is thus always about "mixing."¹²⁶ Similarly, in transferring her obedience from her father to her husband, Desdemona demonstrates agency and desire, which automatically "taints" her virgin white chastity.¹²⁷ And her moral "blackening" increases twofold due to her desire for Othello specifically.¹²⁸ If Iago's lines to Brabantio in 1.1 prey on the Senator's fear of Othello's ability to pollute his bloodline, Desdemona's desire is doubly dangerous: both because she expresses it against her father's will and because of its subject. For much of the play's history (and arguably sometimes still today), Othello's Blackness automatically marks him as a sexual threat to the purity of Desdemona's white femininity and thus the purity of the white race. Such a perspective has consequences both for Othello—as the "threat"—and Desdemona—as the "victim" and yet willing participant in her own sexual "blackening."¹²⁹

19th century minstrel adaptations of *Othello* materially enacted this sexual blackening through blackface representations of Desdemona—a clear commentary on the expectations of purity for white womanhood. As Brigitte Fielder argues, such adaptations actualized anxieties concerning Desdemona's sexual relationship with Othello by presenting Desdemona herself in blackface, showing her as literally "begrimed" by her interracial relationship. These

¹²⁶ Bovilsky, 56.

¹²⁷ Bovilsky, 57.

¹²⁸ Through a survey of early modern English dramatic representations of "inter-racialism," Daileader hypothesizes that they "all work according to the same curious alchemy: white + black = black. We end up, almost inevitably, with a moral that is anti-black, anti-feminist, and even anti-sex" (*Racism, Misogyny*, 16). Ultimately, "if it isn't rape, if she 'wanted it,' it is not miscegenation, but rather proof that a woman is not truly white, but whitewashed" (22)—"WHITE WOMAN + MOOR = 'WHORE'" (46).

¹²⁹ Daileader observes that such a narrative therefore controls white women too, as the play's popularity in America "has served well as a cautionary tale for white women who might besmirch either their own (sexual) 'purity' or that of their race. In lynching, white female sexuality justifies racist violence: in Othellophilia the woman is lynched too" (9).

representations also illustrated beliefs at the time regarding the biological and material reality of race, as something that could be “transferred” through what Fielder calls “sexual kinship.”¹³⁰ By marrying Othello, Desdemona “betrays” her white womanhood and her duties to her race, effectively losing the morality her white femininity was seen to represent.¹³¹

Just as damaging, however, is the characterization of Desdemona as innocent or naïve, as this marks her white femininity as something that must be protected or defended from the “threat” of interracial blackening. In his influential lectures on Shakespeare’s tragedies, which, while published in 1904 continued to impact scholarship until feminist readings intervened in the 1980s, A. C. Bradley paternalistically characterizes Desdemona as “helplessly passive,” “quiet and submissive,” and “simple and innocent as a child”; her “suffering is like that of the most loving of dumb creatures tortured without cause by the being he adores.”¹³² While he admits that she shows some bravery in front of the Senate, he ultimately reads her as “the sweetest and most pathetic of Shakespeare’s women” because she is too innocent, naïve, and childish to understand the danger of Othello’s jealousy.¹³³ Until Helen Faucit and Fanny Kemble began to emphasize

¹³⁰ Fielder, “Blackface Desdemona,” 45. Fielder emphasizes sexual kinship over legal marriage because race was thought to be ‘transferred’ in non-linear ways, creating what she calls “a ‘queer temporality’ of racialization” as white women became re-racialized through their marriages to black men and/or through giving birth to mixed-race children (45); “Desdemona offers a temporality in which race does not follow normative genealogies of inheritance but works backward from sexual(ized) contact with Othello” (41). Fielder also notes that such depictions caricatured Black women, without actually representing them, as “impure, over-sexualized, and sexually available” (47, 54).

¹³¹ Fielder proposes that, in the eyes of some 19th century critics, “Desdemona is not sufficiently racist to represent white womanhood” (48).

¹³² Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 179, 203, 201, 179.

¹³³ Bradley, 203. While Bradley criticizes those critics who have argued for a Bronzed or brown Othello instead of the Black Moor Shakespeare clearly intended, he also admits that he might feel an “aversion in [his] blood” by seeing “Othello coal-black with the bodily eye” (202). Therefore, even though he argues against readers who would blame Othello for not realizing Iago’s plot and thus upholds the nobility of Othello as the play’s hero, his remarks concerning Desdemona’s innocence and “pathetic” suffering combined with his anti-Black aversion to seeing Othello realized as a Black man onstage (though it would have been a blackface performance) still aligns him with those who would see Othello’s Blackness as a threat to Desdemona. Charles Lamb makes a similar argument in the early 1800s, when he declares that audience members must “find something extremely revolting in the courtship and wedded caresses of Othello and Desdemona; whether the actual sight of the thing did not overweigh all that beautiful compromise we make in reading” (quoted in Welker Given, *Further Study of The Othello*, 74-5). In short, there is a vast difference between the mind of the page and the body on the stage.

Desdemona's strength and agency in the mid-1800s, playing Desdemona as meek and passive was the norm, though Neill asserts that "such interventions . . . appear to have had little effect on the habitually saccharine treatment of the heroine."¹³⁴ Such passive and weak representations of Desdemona not only ignore her outspokenness and agency, but also present her as a victim from the start—erasing her desire and positioning Othello as a possible threat even before Iago's plot begins.

Such a skewed reading of their interracial relationship had real and dangerous resonances for 19th century audiences, especially in the context of racialized violence, in which the honor of white women was positioned in opposition to the alleged hypersexuality and sexual violence of black men. In her exploration of Ida B. Wells' campaign against lynching in the 1890s, Vron Ware states that in the American South, lynching was often "carried out in the name of defending the honor of white women," stressing that "as long as white women were seen to be the property of white men, without power or a voice of their own, their 'protectors' could claim to be justified in taking revenge for any alleged insult or attack on them."¹³⁵ Tracing its path from the post-Civil War period through to its resurgence in the 1970s, Angela Davis notes that "the myth of the Black rapist has been methodically conjured up whenever recurrent waves of violence and terror against the Black community have required convincing justifications."¹³⁶

Whereas white women were often complicit in using their white privilege against men (and

¹³⁴ Neill, Introduction to *Othello*, 102-3. See also Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 92. Thompson notes that, due to this, Desdemona became less appealing of a role for actresses (92) and Neill reveals that Emilia's role was sometimes even billed higher (102). Neill does note, however, some more contemporary examples of Desdemona's who appeared to break from the traditional representations of Desdemona as passive and weak, though generally performances have "veered back towards more vulnerable heroines" (105-106).

¹³⁵ Ware, *Beyond the Pale*, 172, 182.

¹³⁶ Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, 173. Davis also argues that such a mythos increases the racism and sexism that Black women face because "the fictional image of the Black man as rapist has always strengthened its inseparable companion: the image of the Black woman as chronically promiscuous. . . . Viewed as 'loose women' and whores, Black women's cries of rape would necessarily lack legitimacy" (182).

women) of color, it is also true that their racialized, gendered, and sexual position within white patriarchy has also been used to control white women and their desires. This is not to equate their installation as white male property with the racialized terror of lynching weaponized against Black men, but to note how the punishment of Desdemona's interracial desire in Shakespeare's play prefigures the policing of desire surrounding white women as well as Black men.

Within feminist scholarship, there has been some debate over how best to conceptualize the misogyny that Desdemona faces alongside or in relation to the racism that Othello faces. In her influential essay on rhetorical miscegenation, Karen Newman highlights the parallels between the rhetoric of Brabantio, Roderigo, and Iago and critics such as Rymer, Coleridge, and Lamb, all of whom view a marriage between Desdemona and Othello as unthinkable.¹³⁷ Responding to Newman's argument, Jyotnsa Singh critiques what she sees as Newman's elision of "the condition of black masculinity with that of white femininity," and contends that "Historically, we know that the taboo of miscegenation was not so much based on the fear of the femininity of white women as it was on the potential phallic threat of black men, who, incidentally, bore the brunt of the punishment for violating this taboo."¹³⁸ Foreclosing Desdemona's desires and agency—even if they mark her as racist due to her exoticizing of Othello—makes a misreading of Othello as a stereotyped, uncivilized non-European "Other" more likely, "keeping alive the image of a besieged, white femininity so crucial to the production of the black man as a 'savage.'"¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Newman, "'And wash the Ethiop white,'" 144.

¹³⁸ Singh, "Othello's Identity, Postcolonial Theory," 175. For more on the need to recognize the difference between the oppression of white women and Black men, see Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* and "The Color of Patriarchy"; MacDonald, "Black Ram, White Ewe," and Espinosa, *Shakespeare on the Shades of Racism*.

¹³⁹ Singh, "Othello's Identity, Postcolonial Theory," 175.

Even without erasing Desdemona's desire from the text, Desdemona's character has often been neglected by directors and scholars in favor of a focus on the play's two male leads—Othello and Iago—rendering Desdemona's relationship with Othello secondary to his relationship with Iago by privileging male homosocial bonds over heterosexual love.¹⁴⁰ Focusing on Othello's relationship with Iago also privileges one thread of *Othello's* tragedy over all others, as demonstrated by the lack of critical attention on the play's depiction of domestic abuse.¹⁴¹ Daileader argues that “even those critics who categorize the play as ‘domestic tragedy’ overwhelmingly resist applying the language of domestic violence.”¹⁴² In her survey of *Othello* performances and adaptations after the OJ Simpson trial and the affect this cultural event had on the reception of Shakespeare's play, Barbara Hodgdon remarks that while “abuse” is used in many different contexts in the play, it is “traditionally understood primarily in terms of Iago's ‘practice’ on Othello.”¹⁴³ She argues that this prioritization represses the gendered domestic abuse in the play—particularly between Iago and Emilia—and “provides a literary logic not only for containing blackness within the white imaginary but also, by dreaming the death of ‘woman,’ for re-enclosing women's voices and bodies within a male imaginary which sanctions its own destructive desires.”¹⁴⁴

Desdemona's performance history has thus had a profound effect on how we read the play's racism and misogyny. In fact, a major tension within the play comes from how one seems

¹⁴⁰ We can see the beginnings of this fixation on male homosocial bonds in Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* as well as in Giuseppe Verdi's 1887 opera *Otello* and Zefferelli's 1986 film adaptation of it.

¹⁴¹ Vitkus demonstrates how the misogynistic violence in the play is often discussed, couching it in the language of military conquest and racial threat: “The frustrated male violence that was initially directed at the Islamic Other is turned on the feminine Other, forming a link between military aggression and sexual transgression, between the Turkish threat to Christian power and the contamination of female sexual purity” (“Turning Turk in *Othello*,” 169).

¹⁴² Daileader, *Racism, Misogyny*, 2. On domestic violence in the early modern period, see Dolan, *Marriage and Violence*.

¹⁴³ Hodgdon, “Race-ing *Othello*,” 38.

¹⁴⁴ Hodgdon, 40-1.

forced to choose between pitying Othello *or* Desdemona or weighing their tragedies against one another¹⁴⁵—a choice that has major gendered and racial consequences. As Loomba notes:

the audience knows that she is honest but by evoking these beliefs [concerning female sexuality] the play also suggests that perhaps Othello can be forgiven for thinking that Desdemona might be straying. This ambiguity is at the heart of the play—any sympathy for Othello reinforces the misogynist sentiments mouthed by some characters, and any sympathy for Desdemona endorses the view that Othello is a ‘gull, a dolt, a devil.’¹⁴⁶

Such a desire to shift the blame in one direction or the other not only assumes that generating sympathy is the point of the play, but also ignores the complex way race, gender, sexuality, and class operate within *Othello* to reward and punish both characters. If “it is sexual politics that gives racial and cultural differences their cultural meanings and effect,” as Loomba says,¹⁴⁷ then racial politics give sexual politics their meanings and effect as well: the effects of race, gender, and sexuality ultimately converge to produce the tragedies of both characters. Iago may have spun the web, but his structure stood due to the support of the twin pillars of misogyny and racism upholding white, patriarchal and Christian Venetian society.

Therefore, the “problems” that the re-visionings I examine must contend with are the misogyny of the play and its performance history, how misogyny and racism combine into the anti-miscegenation stance voiced by characters and critics,¹⁴⁸ and how the threads of misogyny and racism in the play have made it difficult to represent the tragedies of both Othello *and* Desdemona without one undercutting or undermining the other. Both Vogel and Morrison’s pieces, for example, operate as feminist rethinkings of *Othello*, deliberately reengaging

¹⁴⁵ For instance, Bradley argues that “we *pity* Othello even more than Desdemona; but we watch Desdemona with more unmitigated distress” (*Shakespearean Tragedy*, 179).

¹⁴⁶ Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, 100.

¹⁴⁷ Loomba, 100. Fielder also demonstrates this when she contends that “in imagining Desdemona’s supposed passivity or enchantment, Othello emerges as a sexual/racial threat to an innocent victim, contributing to the horror of racist audiences” (“Blackface Desdemona,” 47).

¹⁴⁸ Ayanna Thompson reads Iago as the source of “the racist and sexist logic that seems to radiate out from [him] into both the performances and scholarship of *Othello*” (“*Desdemona*,” 494-5).

Shakespeare's play on different terms by demonstrating how the play and its performance history have silenced or erased various female voices and bodies from its narrative. These re-visionings also provide an escape from the trap of treating Desdemona as merely a tool through which to comment on Othello or representations of interracial desire, a trap that I myself find hard to resist in my considerations of her performance history and scholarly reception. By giving her new life outside the play and its immediate history, these re-visionings allow her to be a more complex and independent character.

The Status of Blackness in/and Shakespeare

Thus far, I have done my best to indicate the way the content of Shakespeare's play (the racial ambiguity and complexity of Othello's character and how the racism and sexism in the play interact) and its performance history (the debates over who should play Othello and how they should represent him, as well as how various editorial and performance choices have effected Desdemona's agency) constitute the "problems" that contemporary artists, scholars, and audiences must contend with as they interact with *Othello*. This section follows that same pattern by emphasizing the concept of class, while also shifting to think more generally about the tension my title highlights in my citation of Kim Hall: that "Black love of Shakespeare is a site of profound struggle and *Othello* is its most vexed object."¹⁴⁹ I argue that class in relation to *Othello* and its performance history shows up as a problem of racialized class "status" and its precarity—the status of Blackness *in* Shakespeare and the status of Blackness *and* Shakespeare. *In* Shakespeare, Othello's status within the play revolves around his service to the state, which allows him to enjoy the privilege of his powerful position without thinking of himself first and

¹⁴⁹ Hall, "Introduction."

foremost as Black, though the nature of his value to Venice depends upon his Blackness and, as the events of the play demonstrate, his status as based on his use-value is quite precarious. The status of Blackness *and* Shakespeare reveals a related historical precarity in the “vexed” connection between Black actors who both took pleasure in Shakespeare and used him to gain cultural capital in the service of their own self-fashioning, an endeavor made difficult by white investment in and gatekeeping of Shakespeare. In both its content and its performance history, Shakespeare has had a vexed relationship to the status of Blackness.

As I mentioned above, class and status could signify race and there are multiple ways in which class/status appears throughout *Othello*: it is present in terms of the larger setting of military and social status in the cosmopolitan Venice,¹⁵⁰ in Othello’s past as a slave and his present position as a general, in Iago’s anger at being passed over for the promotion to lieutenant, in Desdemona’s position as a Senator’s daughter and elite lady, and in Emilia and Bianca’s lower status as Desdemona’s attendant and Cassio’s mistress respectively. Given, then, that class/status is intimately entwined with its depictions of race, as well as gender and sexuality, it is unfortunate that most considerations of class in *Othello* focus solely on Iago’s lack of promotion as the impetus to his malicious lies. The play opens, of course, with his complaints to Rodrigo of this event:

Three great ones of the city,
In personal suit to make me his lieutenant,
Off-capped to him, and by the faith of man
I know my price, I am worth no worse a place.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰ For more on how military rank operates in *Othello* in order to signal both social and sexual power, see Genster, “Lieutenancy, Standing in, and *Othello*.”

¹⁵¹ Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.1.7-10.

Believing he has the experience, reputation, and backing to be Othello's lieutenant, Iago is infuriated at being passed over, and he frames his displeasure and his plan for Roderigo in terms of "service": "'tis the curse of service . . . I follow him to serve my turn upon him."¹⁵²

Yet, I argue that the tragedy of the play does not stem from Iago's service being overlooked, but Othello's. In his final speech, Othello starts his entreaty to his onstage audience by reminding them of *his* value: "I have done the state some service, and they know't."¹⁵³ While the offstage audience is not given the exact details of his service or its length (though he does speak of having fought on battlefields since the age of seven), the urgency with which he is sought out by the Senate demonstrates the value of his service to the Venetian military.¹⁵⁴ "Sold to slavery" and redeemed thence,¹⁵⁵ given a military command and married (however scandalously) to a Senator's daughter, Othello's off-stage path is one of extreme upward mobility.¹⁵⁶ Yet, in comparing Othello's position to that of U.S. General Colin Powell, Kyle Grady highlights the subtle racism at work in what he calls the early modern's "pre-racial" society, which he means as a direct parallel to the labeling of the U.S. as supposedly "post-racial" after Barack Obama's election.¹⁵⁷ While Othello and Powell both occupied high status

¹⁵² Shakespeare, 1.1.34, 41. Akhimie reads Iago's speech on his price and the curse of service as a critique Venice's new system of preferment (versus one based on seniority and/or merit) (*Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference*, 74): "In Iago's formulation, 'service' is a metonym for good conduct; the term describes the social hierarchy inherent in a system that demands selflessness of all adherents while at the same time pitting them against one another in a competition for advancement and personal gain. The 'curse of service' is itself immutable, a black mark that affects all members of a culture of conduct" (75).

¹⁵³ Shakespeare, *Othello* 5.2.337.

¹⁵⁴ Iago explains to Roderigo that Othello is too important in Venice's war with Cyprus to actually suffer any real consequences for his marriage to Desdemona, saying "another of his fathom they have none" (Shakespeare, 1.1.150).

¹⁵⁵ Shakespeare, 1.3.139.

¹⁵⁶ Akhimie argues that "the Venice of Othello is a competitive republic in which an experiment in meritocracy encounters formidable obstacles. In this heady atmosphere of naked ambition and contest, Othello's fall becomes a cautionary tale about the desire for upward mobility, reminding audiences that the game is rigged; advancement is unattainable for some, while for others achievement yields only trouble by inviting greater scrutiny and the potential for increased distrust" (*Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference*, 73).

¹⁵⁷ Grady, "Othello, Colin Powell." As Grady notes, Obama and Powell "share an important similarity in that they are frequently invoked to gauge the racial climate of their respective societies. . . are renowned for military service, are members of overwhelmingly white communities, and belong to an elevated social class" (72).

positions, that did not make them immune to the pernicious effects of racism, and, importantly, Othello's status remained dependent on his use-value to the state.¹⁵⁸ As Akhimie so aptly states, he is both "valuable and vulnerable."¹⁵⁹ In his final lines, Othello attempts to prove his value through a reminder of his past military service against the Turks, positioning himself simultaneously as both racialized Other ("a malignant and turbaned Turk . . . the circumcised dog") and state-sanctioned warrior ("smote him – thus!").¹⁶⁰ Throughout the play, as Othello internalizes the lies, racism, and misogyny that Iago feeds him, he similarly internalizes a racial hierarchy wherein he associates both himself and the "blackened" Desdemona with animals. His sense of his own personal value has deteriorated throughout the play, from the beginning, when he confidently states that "My services, which I have done the signiory, / Shall out-tongue [Brabantio's] complaints," to his final tragic lines that seek to rebuild his honor in a reminder of those same services, even as he compares himself to a Turk and a dog. An attention to Othello's status in Venice based on his service to the state marks the beginning and end of Othello's story, serving as the bookends of the play and thus marking the mutually constitutive relationship between race and class as instrumental in considerations of *Othello*.

This intertwining of race/racism and class/status has continued in criticism and performance of *Othello*. Thomas Rymer grounds his famous critique of the improbability of *Othello*'s plot in the intersection of class and race: "With us a Black-amoor might rise to be a Trumpeter; but *Shakespear* would not have him less than a Lieutenant-General. With us a *Moor* might marry some little drab, or Small-coal Wench: *Shake-spear*, would provide him the

¹⁵⁸ In "Relating Things to the State," Moison notes that "references to 'the state' occur more frequently in *Othello* than in any other of Shakespeare's plays except *Coriolanus*" (190).

¹⁵⁹ Akhimie, *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference*, 51.

¹⁶⁰ Shakespeare, *Othello* 5.2.351, 353-4.

Daughter and Heir of some great Lord, or Privy-Counsellor.”¹⁶¹ Similarly, minstrel productions of *Othello* relied on their white audience’s assumptions of Black incivility, ignorance, and servitude. In an ironic twist, some twenty-first century productions that chose to emphasize the hierarchical military structure of the play ultimately deemphasized the issue of race.¹⁶² The very reproduction of Shakespeare’s play has thus relied upon a continued connection between race and class.

Across race, Shakespeare has also often been seen as a symbol of cultural authority and a source of cultural cachet. Douglas Lanier argues that, in relation to popular culture, “Shakespeare has become a reliable source of ready-made cultural prestige.”¹⁶³ For instance, Shakespeare was often used to authorize new media technologies, such as the early silent films, talkies, radio broadcasts, and television.¹⁶⁴ He has also often been “a flash point for all types of cultural battles”¹⁶⁵—from his use as a “civilizing” force to arguments over his status in the classroom. Shakespeare’s status as symbol and source of cultural power stems from his position within white, patriarchal society. As Ruben Espinosa declares, “Shakespeare embodies whiteness and exists as a cultural icon that many aspire to access.”¹⁶⁶ It is not surprising then, that in a 2015 interview with the Folger Shakespeare Library, Caleen Sinnette Jennings argued that “Shakespeare has often been used by African Americans as a way of proving worthiness,”¹⁶⁷ of proving their belonging. And for many early Black American actors, the gateway to Shakespeare was *Othello*. In his seminal survey of Black actors’ interactions with Shakespearean drama,

¹⁶¹ Quoted in Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 54.

¹⁶² See Thompson, 83-4.

¹⁶³ Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*, 43.

¹⁶⁴ Lanier, 43-44.

¹⁶⁵ Albanese, *Extramural Shakespeare*, 1. Albanese argues, however, that Shakespeare no longer should be, and perhaps no longer is, “a synonym for an ensemble of elite cultural goods,” instead occupying a more complex position in American popular culture (4).

¹⁶⁶ Espinosa, *Shakespeare on the Shades of Racism*, 7.

¹⁶⁷ Whitmore and Shier, “Freedom, Heyday! Heyday, Freedom!”

Shakespeare in Sable, Errol Hill documents almost 200 years of recitations, performances, and press surrounding Black actors and actresses and Shakespeare and the first Shakespearean role that most Black male actors attempted was Othello. Hill hypothesizes that the draw for them to Othello was inescapable because “success in that role alone . . . seems necessary to legitimize the black performers’ admission to the professional ranks of the Western dramatic stage. The role of Othello has stood as a formidable barrier that must be surmounted before the black actor can gain entry into the profession as a recognized artist of serious dramatic ability.”¹⁶⁸

Shakespeare and his *Othello* have thus historically been viewed by Black actors as a way to prove or elevate their own cultural status, but this relationship has also been marked by tension and precarity. In 1821, five years before the first (white) American actor would play *Othello*, “the first recorded Black theater troupe in America” opened The African Grove Theatre in New York City.¹⁶⁹ Called the African Company, they debuted with a Shakespeare play, *Richard III*, starring James Hewlett. In an interview with the Folger, Kim Hall argues that their choice was purposeful, “to kind of prove their mastery of a culturally authorized text and to prove that Shakespeare is the purview of blacks, as well as of whites.”¹⁷⁰ This theater and its performances came at a time when some African Americans were finally gaining freedom from slavery, while most others “were still chattel slaves, well over two million of them.”¹⁷¹ The African Grove Theatre thus became “a rallying point” and a space of “celebration,”¹⁷² until it closed three years later due to white hostility,¹⁷³ but not before presenting numerous productions of Shakespeare, including *Othello*. And when the famous comedian Charles Mathews satirized

¹⁶⁸ Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*, 40.

¹⁶⁹ Hill, 11.

¹⁷⁰ Whitmore and Shier, “Freedom, Heyday! Heyday, Freedom!”

¹⁷¹ Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*, 11.

¹⁷² Whitmore and Shier, “Freedom, Heyday! Heyday, Freedom!”

¹⁷³ MacDonald, “Acting Black,” 234-6.

the African Company in London, Hewlett responded with an open letter arguing for the value of Black Shakespeareans that included a reference to *Othello*: “when you were ridiculing the ‘chief black tragedian’ and burlesquing the ‘real Negro melody,’ was it my ‘mind’ or my ‘visage’ which should have made an impression on you?”¹⁷⁴ For Mathews, the supposed juxtaposition of Black actors and Shakespeare became a point of comedy, but for those Black actors producing it, it remained a point of pride.

In fact, the famous Black actor, Ira Aldridge, who got his start at the African Grove Theatre under Hewlett, would end up turning Mathews’ derisive language to his advantage, as he toured Europe using the moniker “the African Tragedian,” becoming the first Black man to play *Othello* in London in 1825. While Aldridge garnered much acclaim abroad, he never returned to the U.S. where, even after the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of the Civil War, “the only roles available to black performers were on the minstrel stage.”¹⁷⁵ Black actors and actresses who wanted to perform Shakespeare in the U.S. could either become solo touring elocutionists or members of specifically Black companies, some of which would occasionally put on Shakespeare, with the most popular plays being *Richard III* and *Othello*.¹⁷⁶

Yet, as Hill observes, numerous forces in the American theater scene were against Black Shakespearean actors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, making their use of Shakespeare for status precarious. Many Black actors were at a disadvantage when they were able to play a lead role, such as *Othello*, because unlike their white counterparts they had to do so “without serving a period of apprenticeship in subordinate roles with a reputable company, since no company would have them.”¹⁷⁷ Shakespeare plays are difficult to perform without suitable

¹⁷⁴ Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*, 14-15.

¹⁷⁵ Hill, 27.

¹⁷⁶ Hill, 44-5.

¹⁷⁷ Hill, 77.

training and many Black actors lacked the institutional support needed for such instruction and mentorship. Black actors were not welcomed on the mainstream white stages, but Black companies also often lacked a large enough audience of Black playgoers to keep their own theaters afloat. Those theaters that did exist found Shakespeare unsustainable for generating revenue, instead turning to the popular genres of “minstrel, vaudeville, or musical shows.”¹⁷⁸ One of the places where Black men and women could consistently produce Shakespeare were HBCUs, such as Howard University or Atlanta University. Marvin McAllister argues that Shakespeare productions at HBCUs created a form of cultural cachet: “students at Howard, in the Howard College Dramatic Club, and the administrators and the professors all saw Shakespeare and Shakespearean production as a way to sort of become citizens of the world, as a way to sort of show their aspirational desires to be citizens of the world. . . . it was a status thing. It was a matter of cultural elevation to do Shakespeare.”¹⁷⁹ When interracial casting did occur, rarely, elsewhere, Black actors “appeared in servile, comic roles,” as white managers continued to present images of Black Americans that white critics and audiences expected, keeping Black actors from roles with larger cultural cachet.¹⁸⁰

The 1930s brought about a sea-change, however, as more white theaters, and the opportunities they offered for increased social visibility and status, opened their doors to Black actors. In 1930, Wayland Rudd played Othello as the first Black lead in a Shakespeare play presented by a white theater company. Orson Welles’ famous “voodoo” *Macbeth* production, which featured an all-Black cast, was a result of the government-sponsored Federal Theatre Project that was established in 1935, and its success encouraged other “Negro units” of the

¹⁷⁸ Hill, 78.

¹⁷⁹ Whitmore and Shier, “Our Own Voices with Our Own Tongues.”

¹⁸⁰ Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*, 80.

project to produce Shakespeare.¹⁸¹ 1930 also saw the debut of Paul Robeson as Othello in London, though he would not bring his performance to the U.S. until 1942, and Broadway in 1943. His reception was a resounding success: “The previous record for continuous performances of *Othello* in New York was 57; for any Shakespeare play in America, the record at that time was 157 performances. Robeson’s *Othello* played for 296 performances.”¹⁸² Shakespeare became even more democratized in Joseph Papp’s creation of the free Shakespeare in Central Park program in 1954, and his emphasis on interracial casting was especially important for Black actresses.¹⁸³

While Black women did perform Shakespeare before the 1950s, their chances to do so were few and far between, making upward mobility through Shakespeare’s status largely inaccessible to them.¹⁸⁴ Some, such as Alice M. Franklin, ended up quitting the theater because of a lack of career opportunities.¹⁸⁵ Others were only given the chance to play Shakespearean roles in productions put on by Black colleges. In the late nineteenth century, Henrietta Vinton Davis had great success as a professional elocutionist, reading the parts of many of Shakespeare’s heroines alone or in scenes from his plays alongside other Black actors. Yet, despite her lauded skills and her light skin, Davis was still “unable to gain admission into the ranks of legitimate theater companies, then exclusively under white management, because of her color.”¹⁸⁶ She eventually left the theater to join Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement

¹⁸¹ Hill, 103, 107.

¹⁸² Hill, 128.

¹⁸³ In her introduction to *Colorblind Shakespeare*, Ayanna Thompson notes that even when interracial casting was employed, interracial relationships were not presented, with most romantic couples played by actors of the same race (“Practicing a Theory,” 8-9).

¹⁸⁴ For more on the Black women who performed Shakespeare, see MacDonald, “Actresses of Color.”

¹⁸⁵ Hill, *Shakespeare in Sable*, 53.

¹⁸⁶ Hill, 71.

Association. It was almost fifty years later that Black women finally gained employment in full, mainstage Shakespeare productions through Papp's Public Theatre.

The civil-rights movement led to more widespread “colorblind” casting in the '60s and '70s outside of Papp's festival, but those productions and the theaters they appeared in remained largely in white hands, meaning that white theater practitioners, especially white men, retained the power over who was allowed to benefit from Shakespeare. Hill records that in the nineteenth century only two permanent Shakespeare companies “were controlled and directed by blacks” and while the next century saw further employment, “there were but two productions under black control . . . and only two black directors employed.”¹⁸⁷ Thus, even with an emphasis on multicultural casting, creative control over Shakespeare remained a white property. Further, after the immediate push for racial equality after the civil-rights movement, and during the recession of the 1980s, Shakespearean jobs for Black actors began to disappear. In his survey of Shakespeare productions during 1981, Hill counts “127 productions of Shakespeare, none of which (from information currently available) was produced or directed by blacks. Of these 127 productions, the number of recognized black actors in principal roles was no more than four,” two of which were Othello.¹⁸⁸ 1986 saw the creation of the Non-Traditional Casting Project, whose aim was to increase roles for actors of color and disabled actors, and the mid-90s saw a now famous debate between August Wilson and Robert Brustein concerning the efficacy of nontraditional casting for the promotion of Black performance.¹⁸⁹ Wilson argued against the practice of colorblind casting and instead pushed for Black Americans to invest in themselves by

¹⁸⁷ Hill, 186-7.

¹⁸⁸ Hill, 191-2.

¹⁸⁹ *American Theatre* published their debate in four issues in 1996, allowing them to respond to each other, and they participated in a much-anticipated live debate entitled “On Cultural Power: The August Wilson/Robert Brustein Discussion” in 1997.

developing Black theaters and playwrights.¹⁹⁰ Brustein, on the other hand, believed that such a separatist move risked returning America to segregation and that colorblind casting was essential to avoid racial typecasting.¹⁹¹ While debates about Blackness and theater have not returned to the public furor they reached during the “culture wars” of the ’80s and ’90s—of which the Wilson/Brustein debate is but one piece of a larger heated discussion concerning what should be taught in schools¹⁹²—they have not disappeared either, especially, as I will explore in my next chapter, in relation to Shakespeare’s *Othello*.

Looking back over the history of Shakespeare and *Othello*, it is thus important to acknowledge the vexed and precarious relationship along the lines of “status” between Blackness and Shakespeare, a tension experienced historically by many Black Americans and epitomized by Othello’s own fraught relationship with a white society that both needs and, ultimately, discards him. In 2016, Kim Hall gave the Shakespeare’s Birthday Lecture at the Folger, the same year the institution hosted a slate of events in honor of the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death. Referencing the growing value of Shakespeare across those 400 years, Hall reminded her listeners that:

In those same 400 years, Black people dispersed from Africa to the New World also became a source of value, but as literal commodities brought in chains to different sites of the New World and as the ideological property—our Blackness used, particularly on the stage, as the means by which ‘masses of Americans could establish a positive and superior sense of identity.’ Like Othello, we ‘have done the state some service.’ In that dual history, the universal Shakespeare has served the same purpose, at some points, as many representations of Black people—to maintain a sense of mastery and superiority of one group over another.¹⁹³

¹⁹⁰ Wilson, *The Ground on Which I Stand*, 1996.

¹⁹¹ Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange*, 70.

¹⁹² See Thompson, 14-15.

¹⁹³ Hall, “‘Othello Was My Grandfather’.”

Inextricably linking Othello's service to the Venetian state, Shakespeare's legacy, and the numerous ways Black Americans have been 'put to use' in the service of U.S. history, Hall articulates an important connection between Shakespeare and the status of Blackness that needs to be acknowledged and studied for his plays to remain "usable" in the future. Joyce Green MacDonald makes a similar move when she compares the exploitation of Black women's enslaved labors in the service of empire to the conceptual roles Black women (even or especially when absent) have played in the production of whiteness in Shakespeare's plays: "The spectral quality of black women in our Shakespearean archive—physically absent, but socially present, and called on to do various kinds of work in establishing social, sexual, and racial hierarchies—develops within the history of this colonial abjection."¹⁹⁴

The stage re-visionings I examine stretch from the 1990s to 2020, beginning in the wake of the L.A. protests over the police beating of Rodney King and the continued push for (and backlash against) multiculturalism,¹⁹⁵ stretching through the "post-racial" era surrounding Obama's presidency, and ending with the immediate aftermath of George Floyd's death and the increasing awareness and activity of the Black Lives Matter movement. By taking a step back from the traditional focus of Shakespeare's play in relation to class/status—Iago's revenge—and refocusing on the Black women so often denied a place on Shakespeare's stage, these re-visionings not only give voice to the Black women so often silenced by Shakespeare's performance history, but they also present complicated representations of Othello that wrestle with Black ambivalence towards his character. They are thus able to contend with the complex problem of status in relation to race and gender in *Othello*'s performance history.

¹⁹⁴ MacDonald, *Shakespearean Adaptation*, 3.

¹⁹⁵ For the relationship between multiculturalism and theater, see the fourth chapter of Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange*.

My next chapter explores how artists have responded to the various embodied “problems” at the heart of *Othello*—its representations of the Black male body, interracial sex, intraracial relations, and class difference—by surveying eight stage re-visionings of *Othello*. While *Taming* adaptations often fall into the trap of the play’s pop-feminist paradox, these stage re-visionings purposefully distance themselves from Shakespeare’s *Othello* to more adequately critique how it has defined and limited racial representation on stage. Thus, where my previous chapter charted the *limitations* of *Taming* adaptations in regard to their capacity for feminist critique within the confines of the romcom genre, my next chapter highlights the *possibilities* of *Othello* re-visionings that use the “liveness” of theater to capitalize on those bodies and voices most in need of being center stage in discussions of racial and gender injustice.

Chapter 4

The Possibilities of Performative Re-Visionings of Black Life in *Othello*

Scholars, theater practitioners, and audiences have wrestled with Shakespeare's *Othello* as a "problem play" for centuries and, as my previous chapter explores, those who work with the play must struggle with its long and tumultuous performance history in relation to minstrelsy, interracial relationships, and race relations; the difficulty of representing its eponymous character without reinforcing racist stereotypes; the misogyny of the text and the way this misogyny can be reproduced in performance; and the physical absence of women of color from its action. In short, *Othello* is performatively a problem. As Joyce Green MacDonald noted, when *Othello* is performed, it has often "reinforced and reproduced and re-performed people's pre-existing prejudices."¹

Yet *Othello* continues to be performed. Scott Leonard Fortune, who acted the role of Jimmy (an actor who is himself playing the role of *Othello*) in Caleen Sinnette Jennings' 1998 production of *Casting Othello*, believes that artists of color have turned to *Othello* out of "convenience"—"cause he's the only Black character that is the lead in a Shakespearean play . . . [and] it's like, 'This is what we got.'"² Even recognizing its limitations, Beau Dixon, who starred as Othello in Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet* in 2018, notes that Shakespeare's play "exploits the Black man, for better or for worse, but at the same time, it allows the Black man to be heard . . . so that's why we welcome it, because we will do anything to get a Black man on stage. It

¹ MacDonald, Interview.

² Fortune, Interview.

reminds us, I think, how little diversity there is on stage, so we do it out of spite, we produce it out of spite and to prove a point.”³ Many artists I spoke with also mentioned how relevant *Othello* still is and how its content makes it especially salient to the recent rise in conversations about racism.⁴ Nigel Shawn Williams, who both appeared as Othello twice in *Harlem Duet*’s production history and directed the 2019 production of *Othello* at the Stratford Festival, maintains that, along with some of Shakespeare’s other problem plays, *Othello* “require[s] being done. We need to be told again and again and again that this shit still happens.”⁵ Given that *Othello* remains a staple in the mainstream theater world, and that Black theater professionals themselves support its centrality, while some scholars, directors, and actors argue about the need to shelve *Othello* (for a little while or indefinitely),⁶ it appears that Shakespeare and his play will not disappear from the stage any time soon.

Black actor Hugh Quarshie concluded his 1998 lecture, *Second Thoughts about ‘Othello,’* by imagining a production of *Othello* that could, with “judicious cutting and textual emendation,” allow Othello’s actions to be read not as a “natural” byproduct of his race, but as a result of racism.⁷ He responds to possible critics in his final lines: “But, you may say, that’s another *Othello*, not Shakespeare’s. That’s rather the point, isn’t it?”⁸ This articulates the mindset of the playwrights and actors of the re-visionings I explore in this chapter, as in the last thirty years, *Othello* has been reimagined for the stage at least eight times, with playwrights variously rewriting the action of the play, imagining what might have occurred before or after the events of

³ Dixon, Interview.

⁴ This topic came up in my interviews with Dixon, Gaffney, Kitu, Sears, and Sealy-Smith.

⁵ Williams, Interview.

⁶ See, for instance, comments by Ayanna Thompson in Demby and Meraji, “All That Glisters Is Not Gold.” In their interviews with me, Sears and Jennings both agreed with Thompson that *Othello* should not be performed. See my previous chapter for more examples of this argument.

⁷ Quarshie, *Second Thoughts about ‘Othello.’*

⁸ Quarshie, 23.

the play, or approaching the play metatheatrically through a focus on its production or performance. These texts include Paula Vogel's 1993 *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* (Vogel 1994), Barbara Molette and Carlton Molette's 1995 *Fortunes of the Moor* (Molette and Molette 2016), Caleen Sinnette Jennings' 1996 *Casting Othello* (Jennings 1999), Djanet Sears' 1997 *Harlem Duet* (Sears 1997), Toni Morrison's 2011 *Desdemona* (Morrison 2012), Lolita Chakrabarti's 2012 *Red Velvet* (Chakrabarti 2014), Joseph Jomo Pierre's 2013 *Shakespeare's Nigga* (Pierre 2013), and Keith Hamilton Cobb's 2019 *American Moor* (Cobb 2020).⁹ Given these eight texts, there are more contemporary Anglophone stage re-visionings of *Othello* than any other Shakespeare text—almost all of them written by artists of color—and performative reworkings have thereby become the most popular Anglophone form in which to adapt *Othello*.

As I discussed in my Introduction, in this chapter, I use the term “re-visioning” instead of “adaptation” to describe the plays I examine in deference to the preference of the theater practitioners involved with these plays. In the course of writing this chapter, the language of re-vision also provides an important counterpoint to the adaptative limitations I consider in my analysis of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Unlike the more “typical” adaptations I explore there, these stage re-visionings do not simply rewrite *Othello*, but “birth something new,”¹⁰ for instance, by giving voices to those who are voiceless within Shakespeare's play.¹¹ They also challenge Shakespeare's play—“forc[ing] it to hold itself up to the light and take ownership”¹²—the stereotypes it has presented,¹³ and the view it portrays “of this character [and] of this world,”¹⁴

⁹ There have been performances of Debra Ann Byrd's *BECOMING OTHELLO: A Black Girl's Journey* (2019) and stage readings of Anchuli Felicia King's *Keene* (2020), but neither has yet been published. I have seen Vogel's *Desdemona* and Cobb's *American Moor* performed live and have viewed an archival recording of Sears' *Harlem Duet*.

¹⁰ Griffith, Interview.

¹¹ Dechêne, Interview.

¹² Dixon, Interview.

¹³ Jennings, Interview.

¹⁴ Sears, Interview.

allowing and compelling audiences to keep asking questions of *Othello*¹⁵ and inspiring them to push for change in the world around them.¹⁶ While *Othello* can and has been rewritten, doing so can be seen as reinforcing the power of the white patriarchal system it depicts. As MacDonald argues, simply making Othello “heroic and sympathetic” only addresses half of the issue, because “even if you do that, you’re still doing it within this larger structure whose outcome is kind of foreordained.”¹⁷ Instead, these plays break out of that Shakespearean “system.”

To better explore the performative aspect of these plays, I interviewed sixteen artists related to these productions: two playwrights—Djanet Sears and Caleen Sinnette Jennings—nine actors and actresses that performed in their plays (*Harlem Duet* and *Casting Othello*) since their premiers as well as one actress from Morrison’s *Desdemona* and one actor from Pierre’s *Shakespeare’s Nigga*, and three other theater practitioners who worked on those productions. My goal in asking them about their experiences with *Othello* and their involvement in re-visioning the play was not only to enable these artists, the majority of whom are Black, to speak about their own experiences, but also to ask them why they think the genre of the stage play has become so popular for engaging with *Othello*; in short, what do they think the space of the theater, stage, and/or performance enables these re-visionings to accomplish?

Having focused on the specific “problems” that plague *Othello*’s performance and adaptation history in my previous chapter, I analyze how these stage re-visionings address them through their depictions of Othello (and the problem of racial impersonation versus racial representation in his depiction), Desdemona (and the problem of her agency), and Black women (and their absence in Shakespeare’s play). While I cover each play at least once in relation to the

¹⁵ Benko, Interview; Robison, Interview.

¹⁶ Dixon, Interview; MacDonald, Interview; Sears, Interview.

¹⁷ MacDonald, Interview.

issues they address, my chapter closes with an extended close reading of Djanet Sears' *Harlem Duet* because it exemplifies my selected texts' re-visionist response to the tangled web of race, gender, sexuality, and class that *Othello* presents and best illustrates the possibilities of adaptations that explicitly re-vision a Shakespeare play. Ultimately, I argue that while they cannot escape *Othello*'s historical role in constructing and maintaining white supremacy, these performative re-visionings provide the necessary distance from the play that allows audiences to critically respond to *Othello*'s controversial history without repeating it.

Further, by referencing *Othello* while also moving beyond simply retelling its narrative, these re-visionings accomplish the important social justice work of connecting the racism and misogyny of Shakespeare's play and its performance history to the larger history of those same issues that continue to affect its audiences today. Re-visionings addressing the racial representation of *Othello* do not wrestle simply with the play's history of blackface and the racial stereotypes it presents, but also with the violence that continues to be enacted upon Black male bodies in a white supremacist society that asks for racial assimilation but makes full integration and equality impossible, punishing those who fail and villainizing those who do not try. The two *Desdemona* re-visionings do not only center the female voices of Shakespeare's male-centric play, but also interrogate the pernicious effect of whiteness on white women as well as the narratives of oppression that some white women cling to instead of recognizing their own racial and/or class privilege. And the re-visionings that address the absence of women of color from *Othello* do not merely add these voices for the purpose of representation, but also reflect on the struggles Black women face in the theater industry and the history of misogynoir that has and continues to shape their existence. By moving beyond Shakespeare's text and by critiquing it through the very platform on which it built its controversial legacy of performance, these stage

re-visionings model an active engagement with *Othello* that not only addresses its racist and sexist content, but also its place in a historical legacy of crafting, upholding, and reproducing structures of whiteness and anti-Blackness in Western culture today.

Thirty Years of Re-Visioning *Othello*

The plays I consider cover a range of almost thirty years and multiple Anglophone countries (mainly the U.S., Canada, and England, with Morrison's text also travelling around Europe and into Australia). While performative responses to *Othello* existed before those I examine here (for instance, Murray Carlin's 1969 *Not now, sweet Desdemona*, C. Bernard Jackson's 1979 *Iago*, and Ann-Marie MacDonald's 1988 *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*), my selection of texts begins in the 1990s in order to delimit the scope of my research for my dissertation. While the word "adaptation" and, in this chapter, "re-visioning," operate well as umbrella terms to unite texts, the plays I consider can be sorted into three categories based on *how* they re-vision *Othello*: Metatheatrical Framings, Between-the-Lines Explorations, and Critical Reimaginings (though these categories are not mutually exclusive).

Metatheatrical Framings covers those plays that explore or depict the performance of Shakespeare's *Othello* within theatrical contexts: *Casting Othello*, *Red Velvet*, and *American Moor*. Caleen Sinnette Jennings' *Casting Othello* was first performed in showcase in 1996 and won the Washington Summer Theater Festival Award for Outstanding New Play. It was performed again with its companion piece, *Playing Juliet*, in 1998 at the Folger Theatre by The Source Theatre Company and the Folger Library Theatre, with both plays printed together in 1999. In an interview, the playwright mentioned an additional community theater production in

San Francisco (though she gave no date),¹⁸ and it was also directed by one of the original cast members, Kila Kitu, in Los Angeles in 2006.¹⁹ Jennings said she does not believe “there have been any other professional productions of it,” but that she knows it has since been produced at high schools, having been invited to some of the productions.²⁰

Lolita Chakrabarti’s *Red Velvet* premiered in 2012 at the Tricycle Theatre in London. It was revived at that same theater in 2014 before travelling to St. Ann’s Warehouse in New York City. It later appeared at the Garrick Theatre in 2016 as part of the Kenneth Branagh Theatre Company’s inaugural season. *Red Velvet* was nominated for multiple awards; Chakrabarti won Best New Playwright from both the Critic’s Circle and the London Evening Standard and Adrian Lester, who played the lead role of Ira Aldridge, was also nominated for numerous awards and won Best Actor in the Critic’s Circle.²¹ It seems that most if not all of its performances since have taken place in the U.S. at theaters in Massachusetts, California, New Jersey, Illinois, Maine, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Virginia, and Connecticut between 2015-2020. Most recently, the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, D.C. put on *Red Velvet* in the summer of 2022.

In a piece he wrote for the Folger Shakespeare Library’s blog, Keith Hamilton Cobb states that “the first public performance of *American Moor* took place on November 20, 2013, in a small auditorium at Westchester Community College in Valhalla, New York.”²² It then went through multiple drafts and performances—showcased in 2015 at The Wild Project in New York, produced in 2017 at The Plaza Theatre, Boston Center for the Arts, and produced in early 2019 at both the Anacostia Playhouse in Washington, D.C. and Robert J. Orchard Theatre,

¹⁸ Jennings, Interview.

¹⁹ Kitu, Interview.

²⁰ Jennings, Interview.

²¹ “*Red Velvet*: Know-the-Show Guide,” 2.

²² Cobb, “The irony of the American Moor.”

Paramount Center for the Arts in Boston—before finally having its off-Broadway debut at the Cherry Lane Theatre in Manhattan in September of 2019. The definitive version of the text came from that production and was published in 2020.²³ The play was most recently produced at the Pittsburgh Playhouse in 2022. *American Moor* has become extremely popular as an educational text in high schools and university, and Cobb has participated in numerous workshops about his play with students. While it is widely read, however, it is not yet widely performed as thus far it has only starred the playwright himself.

Between-the-Lines Explorations includes the two Desdemona plays—Vogel’s and Morrison’s—which use Shakespeare’s characters but show them in spaces within or immediately outside the play, exploring the liminality of “offstage” action. Paula Vogel’s *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* had “its first staged reading in October 1987 at Cornell University with Vogel herself directing” and was first produced in 1993 in New York by the Bay Street Theatre Festival in association with the Circle Repertory Company.²⁴ It was restaged by the Circle Repertory Company that same year in New York City and then published the following year. *Desdemona* has since been produced at least once a year across the U.S., the most of any of the adaptations I examine. Reviews were mixed when it opened and have remained mixed in the intervening years, though there was a notable gendered split in critic responses at the beginning.²⁵ While it has been performed a couple times in both England and Canada,

²³ I saw this production.

²⁴ Fischlin and Fortier, “*Desdemona*,” 234.

²⁵ Two male reviewers for *The New York Times* and a male reviewer for *Variety* in 1993 praised the acting, but disliked the script (see Klein, “Theater Review,” Brantley, “Iago’s Subterfuge,” and Gerard, “Desdemona”), while the women who reviewed the play for the *Wall Street Journal* and *Newsday* had more positive responses (see Kirkpatrick, “Theater” and Stuart, “Behind That Hanky”). The theme of praising the actors while questioning the script has continued with both genders in the intervening years.

Desdemona is now mainly produced in the U.S. at universities, small or regional theater companies, and community theaters.²⁶

Toni Morrison's *Desdemona*, with lyrics and music by Rokia Traoré, premiered in 2011 at the Akzent Theater in Vienna, Austria, the first stop on its international tour. Other stops included Brussels, Paris, Berkely, New York, and Berlin, with the *Desdemona* actress I interviewed, Tina Benko, taking over from the original actress early in the tour. *Desdemona* was also presented in London as part of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad, coming out in print that year as well.²⁷ It was revived in 2015 as part of Australia's Melbourne Festival. Benko noted that deciding how to designate the piece was tricky: "we went from calling it a play, to a play with music, which felt not enough, it was a séance, it was a meditation, it was an exorcism," with the director, Peter Sellers, ultimately telling her "to think of it as . . . channeling."²⁸ She expressed a desire to perform in the piece again, with the caveat that "it will be very, very interesting to see if the show is done again. I hope that it can be, and I hope that it can be with the songs that Rokia wrote. I don't know how you can perform them if you're not Rokia and her musicians."²⁹ Considering the weight placed on the Traoré's musical performance as central to *Desdemona*'s success, such a viewpoint has been supported by other reviewers and critics.³⁰ *Desdemona* was recently produced, however, as part of IN Series' (an opera company based in Washington, D.C.) 2022 season alongside Verdi's *Otello*; notably, the production did not feature Rokia's music, but

²⁶ I saw a production at my undergraduate institution, Knox College, in 2012. The Knox College Studio Production was directed by Avery Wigglesworth in October and featured Sam Auch as *Desdemona*, Missy Preston as *Emilia*, and Kate LaRose as *Bianca*.

²⁷ Morrison, *Desdemona*, 63.

²⁸ Benko, Interview.

²⁹ Benko, Interview.

³⁰ See Charles McNulty's review in the *Los Angeles Times* ("Toni Morrison's ghostly 'Desdemona'"), Robin Denselow's review in *The Guardian* ("Desdemona"), and Elaine Sciolino's article in the *New York Times* ("'Desdemona' Talks Back to 'Othello'"). Sciolino's article quotes some of the European news articles with similar views. Ayanna Thompson comments on this exact issue in her consideration of the play ("*Desdemona*," 503).

instead “tapp[ed] into Nina Simone’s legacy,” an African American singer, songwriter, and civil rights activist, alongside a number of other musicians’ work.³¹

The last category, Critical Reimaginings, includes *Fortunes of the Moor*, *Harlem Duet*, and *Shakespeare’s Nigga*, which all imagine new histories or futures for some of the characters from Shakespeare’s play. Barbara Molette and Carlton Molette’s *Fortunes of the Moor* was read first at the Frank Silvera Writers Workshop and the National Black Theatre Foundation, before premiering in 1995 at the Frank Silvera Writers’ Workshop under the direction of Charles E. Wise, receiving the AUDELCO Writers’/Directors’ award. In 1997, Molette and Molette were invited to workshop their play with Abibigromma, Ghana’s National Theatre Company, with the play then directed by Carlton Molette at the University of Ghana’s School of Performing Arts in Legon, the National Theatre in Accra, and the Pan-African Historical Theatre Festival in Cape Coast. Through the workshop in Ghana, they edited their play to the version I examine below, presenting the play in Abibigoro in order to move away from the Eurocentricism they believed was present in their earlier script.³² Between 1996-2001, it was performed mainly at universities (Western Michigan, Brown, Ohio State, Louisville, Pittsburgh, and Agnes Scott College) as well as at the Connecticut Repertory Theatre and the ETA Creative Arts Foundation.³³ The most recent performance appears to be that of the Encore Theatre in Maryland as part of their 2004-5 season. The playtext has been reprinted twice, in 2001 and 2016 (which is the edition I use).

Djanet Sears’ *Harlem Duet* was originally workshopped at New York City’s Joseph Papp Public Theatre and then premiered at Toronto’s Tarragon Extra Space Theatre as a Nightwood Theatre production, starring Alison Sealy-Smith as Billie and Nigel Shawn Williams as

³¹ Ford, “‘Othello/Desdemona’.” The other musicians included “Claudio Monteverdi, Barbara Strozzi, Omar Sosa and Yilian Canizares, and Tarquinio Merula.”

³² Molette and Molette, *Fortunes of the Moor*, 103-117.

³³ Molette and Molette, “About the Authors.”

Othello,³⁴ where it won the Governor General’s Literary Award for Drama and the Floyd S. Chalmers Canadian Play Award. After its successful premier, it was remounted in the fall at Canadian Stage, becoming the first “work by an author of [Black] African descent” to be produced there.³⁵ *Harlem Duet* won four 1997 Dora Mavor Moore awards: Best New Play (Djanet Sears), Best Direction (Djanet Sears), Best Female Performance (Alison Sealy-Smith), and Best Production (Nightwood Theatre). The play was then next directed by its original star, Sealy-Smith, in 2000 at the Neptune Theatre featuring Karen Robinson and Jim Codrington. Sears directed the play again in 2002 off-off Broadway at the Blue Heron Arts Centre in New York with the lead roles played by Perri Gaffney and Gregory Simmons. In 2006, she directed the play at the Stratford Festival with previous performers Karen Robinson and Nigel Shawn Williams—a historical first for Stratford, in that it was the first play produced there to be written by a Black playwright, directed by a Black woman, and to feature an all-Black cast.³⁶ Sears returned with the play to the Tarragon Theatre in 2018 alongside Virgilia Griffith and Beau Dixon. In 2020, she collaborated with Ayanna Thompson and Bard on the Beach for a livestream event called “Rac(e)ing Othello,” which featured excerpts of the play performed by Virgilia Griffith, Andre Sills, and Walter Borden (who played Canada in all but the 1997 production). *Harlem Duet* continues to be performed at various other theaters and colleges in Canada and the US.

Joseph Jomo Pierre’s *Shakespeare’s Nigga* was first read at the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto in 2008 and then produced by the Obsidian Theatre Company, Theatre Passe Muraille, and 3D Atomic Entertainment in its premier at the Theatre Passe Muraille Mainspace in Toronto

³⁴ I have chosen to list the actors and actresses for those productions about which I conducted interviews.

³⁵ Knowles, Sealy-Smith, and Sears, “The Nike Method,” 30.

³⁶ I viewed a video recording of this performance at the Stratford Festival archives.

in 2013. It was shortlisted for the Governor Generals Literary Award for Drama. André Sills played the role of Othello, and the role of Aaron was played by the playwright. In 2007, *Shakespeare's Nigga* was directed by Philip Akin, the first Black Canadian to play Othello at the Stratford Festival.³⁷ Panned by critics, the play has apparently not been produced since.

Performing/Being Othello: Impersonation versus Representation

Given its long and controversial performance history in relation to minstrelsy, interracial relationships, and race relations, it should come as no surprise that one of the most debated elements of the play is how to represent its eponymous character. The loudest debate is often *who* should play Othello, but that discussion relies on another, more fundamental question: how do we understand Othello's racial identity? In *Othello's* 400 years of performance, this question has usually revolved around how one understands the designation of "Moor,"³⁸ but today's artists and scholars most often interpret this question as about racial impersonation versus racial representation: that is, reading Othello as a stereotyped impersonation of a Black man written to be performed by a white man versus reading Othello as a familiar representation of the experience of Black men and their racial trauma within a white society. Five of the stage re-visionings represent these different interpretations of Othello through their construction of his character as misidentifying with whiteness or as providing a point of identification for Black audiences: Djanet Sears' 1997 *Harlem Duet* and Joseph Jomo Pierre's 2013 *Shakespeare's*

³⁷ Nestruck, "Stratford Festival 2019."

³⁸ For a discussion of the elasticity of the term "Moor" and the many ways Othello has been imagined for the stage, see Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 25-34. For a consideration of how "Moor" was understood and represented during the early modern period, see Bartel, "Making More of the Moor," 434-5. For a consideration of how "Moor" was entangled with an English understanding of the Ottoman Empire and how this affected stage representations, see Dadabhoy, "Two Faced." For a discussion of the relationship between "Moor" and the contemporary understanding of Blackness, see Hall, "*Othello* and the Problem of Blackness."

Nigga emphasize and critique Othello's possible identification with whiteness whereas Keith Hamilton Cobb's 2019 *American Moor* and Caleen Sinnette Jennings' 1996 *Casting Othello* articulate how Othello can represent the experiences of Black men. I end with a consideration of Lolita Chakrabarti's 2012 *Red Velvet*, which moves between these two constructions of Othello and their stakes. These re-visionings thus wrestle with the ambivalent position of Othello's character in Western society as both a chance for Black male representation in the literary canon and onstage, and a problematic and racially stereotyped image of Black male rage, violence, and senseless passion.

In 1997, Renaissance scholar Dympna Callaghan provocatively argued that "Othello was a white man,"³⁹ referring to the fact that Othello's role was written for a white actor, specifically Richard Burbage. While her argument centers on the representation (exhibition and mimesis) of Africans in relation to the commodification of gender and race in Renaissance England, in her final pages she connects this history to contemporary racism and the exclusion of racial others through racist representation. Ayanna Thompson, a scholar of Shakespeare, race, and performance, takes up this issue of representation throughout her body of work on *Othello*, translating it explicitly into an issue of the racial impersonation of a Black man.⁴⁰ She submits that, as a character, "Othello is not a real black man . . . This is a fantasy of black masculinity and what happens when that fantasy gets trotted out over and over and over again, it's toxic";⁴¹

³⁹ Callaghan, "Othello was a white man." In her focus on race and gender, Callaghan points out that Desdemona was too, contending that "Shakespeare's audience would have witnessed in Othello and Desdemona the spectacle of two men, one young with his face whitened and one older with his face blackened. While, culturally, blackness and femininity become identified with one another, literally . . . it is not blackness and femininity that are the same, but the extra-diegetic white masculinity that underlies them both" (211). Both characters, she argues, would have been represented through the use of cosmetics; unlike how it is often perceived now, whiteness during the Renaissance (especially in relation to femininity) was not invisible but manifestly material.

⁴⁰ Callaghan also heavily relies on the word "impersonation" in her article, but she is interested in the impersonation of Black bodies more generally whereas Thompson's work focuses in on the impersonation of Othello specifically.

⁴¹ Greenberg and Karim-Cooper, "Shakespeare and Race," *#SuchStuff* 1.

“the role is designed to be an impersonation of black masculinity, not an actual black man”;⁴² and “this is a role about racial impersonation instead of about a racialized identity.”⁴³ In other words, Othello is not a Black man, but a stereotype or myth, a character “created by a white author, to be played by a white actor in blackface, for a white audience.”⁴⁴ Sears similarly argues that Othello “is not human” as he is portrayed in Shakespeare’s play.⁴⁵ In his 1998 lecture at the University of Alabama, acclaimed Black actor Hugh Quarshie famously weighed in on the debate over whether *Othello* is a racist play by asking:

if a black actor plays Othello does he not risk making racial stereotypes seem legitimate and even true? When a black actor plays a role written for a white actor in black make-up and for a predominantly white audience, does he not encourage the white way, or rather the wrong way, of looking at black men? . . . Of all parts in the canon, perhaps Othello is the one which should most definitely not be played by a black actor.⁴⁶

While he has since further complicated his opinions on *Othello*,⁴⁷ Quarshie’s claims, shared by other Black actors,⁴⁸ articulate a deep tension within the role of Othello between the author’s stereotype and the Black actor’s reality—both of which are informed by the wider context of Shakespeare’s often majority white audiences.

Such a theorization of the relationship of Othello’s character to the actor playing him can be seen as ignoring the phenomenology of theatrical representation, but it is actually responding

⁴² Morofsky, “Othello with Ayanna Thompson.”

⁴³ Ayanna Thompson, “Illuminating Shakespeare.”

⁴⁴ Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 63, 89. Unlike actor and director Sheila Rose Bland and scholars Hugh Macrae Richmond and Virginia Mason Vaughan, however, Thompson does not believe the solution to this issue lies in a return to blackface performances of *Othello* (Thompson, “The Blackfaced Bard”).

⁴⁵ Sears, Interview.

⁴⁶ Quarshie, *Second Thoughts about ‘Othello’*, 5.

⁴⁷ In a debate hosted by the Royals Shakespeare Company entitled, “Is Othello a Racist Play?”, Quarshie claims that *Othello* is “racist by omission” because Shakespeare fails to flesh out Othello’s psychology as he does, for example, Iago’s, making many of Othello’s actions appear to be a result of his race, which is (he argues) textbook racism (Caputi, et. al). He submits that productions can, however, push against this racist representation and at the time of the recording in 2015, Quarshie himself was playing Othello in the RSC’s current production.

⁴⁸ In her introduction to the Arden’s *Othello*, Thompson discusses three: Sidney Poitier (87), Harry J. Lennix (89), and Laurence Fishburne (89-90).

more heavily to the reception element of performance theory. When Burt States discusses the phenomenology of theater, he does so to emphasize what a semiotic approach ignores: “the site of our sensory engagement . . . the point at which art is no longer *only* language.”⁴⁹ He advocates, instead, a “binocular vision” of theater, which allows a theorist to see both aspects together.⁵⁰ What happens, however, when those two lenses do not match up? This is arguably what occurs with cross-identity casting: the signs of the text (what the language *tells* us) clash with the senses of the viewer (what we actually see or experience). Such a dissonance can be extremely useful in prodding audiences to think critically about the play and their expectations of it, but it can also be harmful. Critics of colorblind casting, for example, have argued that audiences are “not always able to be ‘blind’ to race” and “that socio-political and cultural-historical factors influence an audience’s viewing abilities.”⁵¹ So what happens when the racial “tension” between actor and character creates not a dramatic tension, but a socio-political conflict?⁵²

When critics of *Othello* consider this racialized conflict between Black character and white actor, they are often responding to two different but related socio-political dangers: that of essentializing negative stereotypes as elements of Black male identity through racial impersonation and that of ignoring the specificities of individual identity through the practice of colorblind casting. Sujata Iyengar’s framing of Laurence Olivier’s performance as Othello in blackface provides a useful example of the first danger:

Olivier’s description [of his makeup] fetishizes blackness . . . the physical characteristics stereotypically associated with Africans . . . and the collapse of personality into mannerism . . . Olivier’s performance struck Kenneth Tynan as, more than anything else,

⁴⁹ States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*, 7.

⁵⁰ States, 8.

⁵¹ Ayanna Thompson, “Practicing a Theory,” 7.

⁵² The language of “conflict” here is taken from Weimann and Bruster’s discussion of the relationship between actor and character in *Shakespeare and the Power of Performance*, 141.

a ‘closely studied piece of physical impersonation’ (5), as if the painstaking imitation of an ideal ‘black’ body could more convincingly bring to life an imaginary black character on the stage.⁵³

In other words, Olivier’s performance essentialized aspects of Othello’s character into his mimicry of a Black male body. As explored in the previous chapter, this danger of essentialization is present when Black men take on the role as well, but without the accompanying discrimination of racial impersonation and fetishization. By working so hard to make his racial performance “authentic” through extensive cosmetics and movement and voice training, Olivier ironically emphasizes his Othello as a performance and, thus, as an impersonation. All other aspects of his performance as Othello—his swooning fits, his rolling eyes, his excessive gestures⁵⁴—thus also become as much a part of his performance of Blackness as the racial prosthetics he puts on, essentializing negative stereotypes of passionate rage within Othello’s black body.

The move to colorblind casting, however, had the unfortunate effect of flattening or erasing racial difference. As Fortune, who played Jimmy in *Casting Othello*, expressed, with colorblind casting:

the default is white. When we say, ‘we don’t see color,’ what we’re saying is ‘we’re going to do you the favor of making you white, of seeing you like us.’ . . . and I think that’s what colorblind casting does, it doesn’t bring out the subtleties in the human experience: being from a specific culture, in a specific place, being a specific color. Even in African Americans, my experience as a dark-skinned Black person is very different from a light-skinned [Black person].⁵⁵

For Fortune, colorblind casting does not highlight diversity but erases it, including by erasing intraracial differences. Sealy-Smith, who played Billie in *Harlem Duet*, similarly responded to

⁵³ Iyengar, “White Faces, Blackface,” 109-110.

⁵⁴ Crowther, “Minstrel Show ‘Othello’.”

⁵⁵ Fortune, Interview.

the idea of colorblind casting by asking: “How dare you be blind to who I am? How dare you be blind to my history, my mother’s history, my grandmother’s history? . . . I never ever felt as though I were embraced as a Black being. My history, my culture, everything beyond just this melanin stuff was never acknowledged, appreciated, mined for what might be interesting in it.”⁵⁶ Being blind to color means being blind to individual as well as collective histories and the way they necessarily affect an actor’s choices and an audience’s reception of those choices.

In contemporary stage re-visionings of *Othello*, the conceptualization of Othello’s character as rooted in racist impersonation often gets translated into an Othello that other characters claim *wants to be white* or *identifies with* whiteness. In other words, the whiteness of the actor who was originally meant to play Othello gets transformed into the whiteness of Othello himself at the level of identification or, through the eyes of other characters, misidentification. Sears’ *Harlem Duet* (1997) and Pierre’s *Shakespeare’s Nigga* (2013) both explore this dynamic, as they center on a character outside Shakespeare’s text who reflects on and implicitly guides our impression of Othello and race. Both characters critique Othello for what they see as his reaching for whiteness. Both texts also call attention to the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality as, in each, Othello’s alleged identification with whiteness becomes tangled up with his desire for a white woman.

Unlike some re-visionings of *Othello*, Sears’ goal in *Harlem Duet* is not to recuperate the play or even Othello, but to explore Shakespeare’s tale from a Black woman’s perspective by telling the story of the Black woman she imagines Othello loved first: Billie.⁵⁷ The play, which she describes as “a rhapsodic blues tragedy,”⁵⁸ takes place in Harlem across three moments in

⁵⁶ Sealy-Smith, Interview.

⁵⁷ As Sears articulated in a virtual event called “Rac(e)ing Othello,” Shakespeare’s *Othello* is Iago’s tale and *Harlem Duet* is Billie’s.

⁵⁸ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 14.

time—the summers of 1860/62, 1928, and the “present day”—and follows three versions of the same two characters: Billie and Othello.⁵⁹ The play focuses most on the present-day Billie, an African American woman whom Othello, a Black academic, has recently left after nine years together in order to marry his white colleague, Mona. Interspersed with the negotiation of their separation are short scenes of a temporally different Othello leaving a different Billie (though both are played by the same actors) for some version of Desdemona (also called Mona and Miss Dessy).⁶⁰ By imagining three historical moments and three different iterations of Billie and Othello, the play highlights the repetitive nature of history, racism, and interpersonal and social violence.⁶¹

Many of Billie and Othello’s arguments in present-day Harlem stem from Othello’s alleged identification with whiteness—represented in the play as a desire for a white woman, the fact of his job at Columbia (which another character calls “10 square blocks of Whitedom”),⁶² and what Billie calls “White respect.”⁶³ Othello’s own rationales for his conduct echo ideologies of colorblindness, arguing that “we’re all the same,” “I am not a minority,” and that “Liberation has no color,” as he prematurely declares the existence of a postrace society based on his own material success and desire to move beyond “this race shit bullshit.”⁶⁴ Magi, Billie’s landlady

⁵⁹ Many scholars have noted the double time scheme of *Othello* and how such inconsistency similarly destabilizes the chronology of Shakespeare’s play.

⁶⁰ To differentiate the characters in the three timelines, Sears calls the 1928 Othello “HE” and Billie “SHE” and calls the 1860 Othello “HIM” and Billie “HER.” They are still designated as “Othello” and “Billie” in the character list, but Sears uses these pronouns for the scene character tags. To avoid confusion, I simply use “Othello” and “Billie,” while clarifying timelines.

⁶¹ Ayanna Thompson and Sears discuss this aspect of *Othello* in the context of Thompson’s work with Black actors struggling to play Othello and the current Black Lives Matter protests, with both women focusing on how violence against Black people in America is not a recent phenomenon and that such instances of racial violence are not anomalies, they occur all the time, over and over and over (“Rac(e)ing Othello”). Thompson further argues that *Othello* itself continually rehearses and performs such violence on Othello’s Black body due to its racist performance history.

⁶² Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 67.

⁶³ Sears, 55.

⁶⁴ Sears, 54, 73, 55, 73.

and friend, says that Othello wants to “White wash his life” and calls him an example of “White minds parading around inside Black bodies.”⁶⁵ Billie takes this idea even further, declaring that not only has he internalized the white voice—spouting “White wisdom from the mouth of the mythical Negro”—but has come to fear his own skin, “A black man afflicted with Negrophobia.”⁶⁶ Indeed, Othello later asserts, “I am not my skin. My skin is not me.”⁶⁷ This Othello does not necessarily deny the color of his skin, however, as the other characters imply, but instead aims to distance himself from any sense of identity (or discrimination) defined by it, rejecting the notion that his race can define his totality—a valuable sentiment, though naive in the face of continuing racism. In doing so, though, he places himself among the privileged ranks of white men who do not have to worry about race, something Billie calls a “luxury.”⁶⁸

Sears’ Othello is represented by Billie and Magi as laying claim to whiteness based on his educational background, his academic job, and eventually through his choice to marry a white woman.⁶⁹ While his education and job choice can be read simply as a desire for respect, success, and financial security (which Billie argues cannot be separated from Whiteness⁷⁰), it is his last choice—of a white woman over a Black woman—that particularly resonates through the three time periods represented in the play. For instance, in 1860, an early and enslaved version of Othello refuses to leave with Billie for the safety of Canada as they had planned, citing their mistress Miss Dessy as having changed his mind: “She needs me. She respects me. Looks up to me, even. . . . When I’m with her I feel like . . . a man.”⁷¹ In 1928, it is Mona who breathes new

⁶⁵ Sears, 66, 67.

⁶⁶ Sears, 70, 66.

⁶⁷ Sears, 74.

⁶⁸ Sears, 56.

⁶⁹ I talk more about Othello’s decision to leave Billie for Mona—a choice informed by race, gender, and sex—below in my section “The absent presence of the black woman.”

⁷⁰ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 55.

⁷¹ Sears, 63.

life into Othello's dream of being a real, respected actor instead of simply a minstrel. In the present, Othello says that Mona sees and respects him, and he admits to preferring white women because they're "easier—before and after sex. . . . The White women I loved saw me—could see me," in comparison, apparently, to the Black women who, he argues, only ever see in him all the Black men who failed them.⁷² His repeated choice over a century of a white woman over a Black woman is represented as intimately tied to his desire for "White respect"; and in each time period, being with Desdemona marks an important step in his alleged reaching for whiteness. Indeed, in 1862, two years after refusing to start a new life with Billie in Canada, Othello has apparently been killed—most likely lynched for his relationship with Miss Dessy as he has a noose around his neck—and Billie cradles his body in her arms, saying:

Once upon a time, there was a man who wanted to find a magic spell in order to become White. After much research and investigation, he came across an ancient ritual from the caverns of knowledge of a psychic. "The only way to become White," the psychic said, "was to enter the Whiteness." And when he found his ice queen, his alabaster goddess, he fucked her. Her on his dick. He one with her, for a single shivering moment became . . . her. Her and her Whiteness.⁷³

Coming directly before the scene in which the present-day Billie poisons Othello's handkerchief, Billie's 1862 speech explicitly connects sex with the attainment of whiteness—Othello can only "become White" once he has "enter[ed] the Whiteness" of Miss Dessy's body through sexual penetration. Even then, however, that whiteness is only momentary—"a single shivering moment"—and so Billie believes Othello must continually seek out whiteness through sex. Because the play characterizes their relationship (and its meaning) through Billie's eyes, thus focusing intently on Billie's loss and mental trauma, and because it connects Othello's sexual

⁷² Sears, 54, 71.

⁷³ Sears, 91.

relationship with Desdemona with Billie's desire for revenge, *Harlem Duet* ties Othello's desire for Desdemona to his apparent identification with whiteness.

Pierre's *Shakespeare's Nigga* similarly centers a character besides Othello—Aaron, who also exists in tension with Othello in order to comment on race. The play transports its audience to a plantation owned by Shakespeare—a character who both is and is not the historical author—where he lives with his daughter, Judith,⁷⁴ and owns slaves, two of whom are Othello and Aaron, drawn from one of Shakespeare's other "race plays," *Titus Andronicus*.⁷⁵ Like Shakespeare, these characters both are and are not their literary equivalents, existing in new relations to their author/master and each other: Othello is Shakespeare's unclaimed bastard son,⁷⁶ whom the master educated and gave power to over the other slaves, while Aaron is an outspoken slave who had already tried to escape once and by the end of the play leads a successful slave revolt. André Sills, who played Othello in the 2013 production, described their contrasting characters: "you have these two Black men who are trying to live in the world, but in two very different ways. One is trying to assimilate and the other has more of a frustration of the system that is surrounding him."⁷⁷ Ultimately, therefore, their desires mirror the arcs and goals of Shakespeare's original characters, as Aaron fights to be free from, and Othello hopes to be equal within, the white supremacist institution that binds them.

While Othello and Aaron's roles are relatively equally balanced, Aaron seems to hold the play's main focus. According to Sills, the playwright's inspiration for this re-visioning came

⁷⁴ Judith was the name of the historical William Shakespeare's second daughter, Hamnet's twin sister.

⁷⁵ Aaron is also named as a Moor in his play, *Titus*, and while he is often considered the play's chief villain, he delivers a number of powerful speeches about race, including one that Ayanna Thompson has called "the first black power speech" (Greenberg and Karim-Cooper, "Shakespeare and Race," #SuchStuff 5).

⁷⁶ While Othello must be mixed race in this play, it seems that he does not appear to be so, with Aaron, Othello, and Judith all shocked at the knowledge of his paternity. Under *Partus sequitur ventrem*, Othello would have taken on the enslaved status of his mother even if he was passing as white, but the text unambiguously assigns Othello the status of "Black" throughout the play.

⁷⁷ Sills, Interview.

from his own experience playing Aaron in theater school and how his character was flattened into that of the “villain.” By placing him next to Othello, Sills believes that Pierre wanted to take these two characters—the villain, the hero—and then let them face off and say, “Who is which, really? Who is your hero and who is your villain? Or are they just both misunderstood?” This meant “giving Aaron a voice outside of Shakespeare’s words and putting him next to the acclaimed Othello, who is, I guess, revered and spoken about the most” of Shakespeare’s characters of color. While Sills sees Othello as trying to assimilate into the world that the Shakespeare of Pierre’s play has created, Aaron pushes for “revolution.”⁷⁸

Aaron, like Sears’ Billie, is disgusted by Othello’s desire to identify with that which he is not. In an exchange with another slave, Tyrus, Aaron explains his hatred for Othello:

AARON. The one that can look into a mirror and deny the very thing that reflects back.

TYRUS. You must handle Othello differently, Aaron.

AARON. I’ve heard you, I’ve heard you. I’ve buried the hostility that his look evokes within me. Left vacant a place in my being for him to come back to. And what for? He is like us only in shade.

TYRUS. You are willing to deny him the same way he denies you?

AARON. He does not want us, Tyrus; why are you so eager to claim him?⁷⁹

Othello may have black skin, but Aaron believes that he disavows this fact and instead mimics the whiteness of his master, striving for inclusion in a world that does not want him. Othello’s delusions and his subsequent desire to deny himself lead Aaron to differentiate between them as “Shakespeare’s negro” versus “Shakespeare’s Nigga.”⁸⁰

I am not Shakespeare’s negro. My palate is not so refined. My coarse hair knows not the acquaintance of a brush. I’ve not sat at his table; I’ve not slept under his roof. No I am not his *kneegrow*. I don’t exist in dreams or romanticized fantasies. I am not the one with the eloquent tongue. Let that negro jump, let that negro and his eloquent tongue grasp at

⁷⁸ Sills, Interview.

⁷⁹ Pierre, *Shakespeare’s Nigga*, 41.

⁸⁰ Sills reported that the play’s title and the distinction between these two terms was inspired by a passage from August Wilson’s 2005 play, *Radio Golf*: “I’m a nigger. Negroes are the worst thing in God’s creation. Niggers got style. Negroes got blindyitis. . . . a Negro don’t know he’s a Negro. He thinks he’s a white man” (76).

hopes of inclusion. The tongue can only disguise you from the blind. Doesn't he know the fallacy of his thoughts. Eloquence? Does eloquence dress itself in melanin? Eloquence, the very sweetness that it implies, makes my stomach raw. Tyrus, I am Shakespeare's Nigga. . . . Not his "contented" negro. I do not long for anything that is his. Not his tongue, not his customs. I long for what is mine.⁸¹

Othello, who has grown up with all the privileges afforded to a member of Shakespeare's household (a brush, a nice table and food, a house), has deluded himself with "dreams or romanticized fantasies," "hopes of inclusion" into Shakespeare's world. Shakespeare raised Othello alongside his daughter, educating both to read, write, discourse, and draw, and such attention has taught Othello "eloquence"; Aaron argues that it has also deprived Othello of his very self. Othello has gone so far as to align himself with his master, often wielding the whip to punish slaves such as Aaron, and so Aaron grants Othello his desire of inclusion: "When it is time for this revolt, his blood will flow alongside the very blood he would have circulate his veins."⁸²

Othello himself proves eager to put distance between himself and Aaron, whom he calls, at various moments, a "savage," "a mutt," "dirt," "a base creature," "grotesque," "malformed," a "matted black bore," "scum," and "an imbecile . . . not even a man."⁸³ Throughout the play, he takes on the language of racial binaries as he strives for the civility and refinement represented by the discipline and restraint that Pierre's Shakespeare endorses, while also degrading Aaron as a lowly, black savage.⁸⁴ This tension with Aaron, alongside Othello's desire to see himself as superior, also stems from the fact that Judith, whom Othello has loved for years, prefers Aaron. In the course of the play, Othello finds out that the two are lovers. Tyrus, however, submits that

⁸¹ Pierre, *Shakespeare's Nigga*, 40-1. This distinction echoes similar critical and artistic readings of Ariel and Caliban in relation to Prospero in *The Tempest*. Aimé Césaire's 1969 stage adaptation *Une Tempête* ("A Tempest") is probably the most famous example.

⁸² Pierre, *Shakespeare's Nigga*, 41.

⁸³ Pierre, 18, 30, 36, 37.

⁸⁴ Pierre, 13, 18.

Othello's desires and actions are not his fault because he has been "conditioned" by Shakespeare and nature itself to strive to emulate his father: "it is not whiteness that Othello seeks; it is the acceptance of a father."⁸⁵ Yet, when Othello goes to Shakespeare to ask for Judith's hand, Shakespeare does not refuse him on the grounds that Othello is his son (and Judith's brother); instead, he refuses Othello by saying, "You are black."⁸⁶ In this moment, it is not paternal affection that stands in Othello's way, but his race. As with Sears' Othello, Pierre's Othello is represented as driven by a desire for white belonging and white respect, desires tied up with and expressed by his love of a white woman.⁸⁷

In both plays, Othello is characterized by his consistent alignment with and desire for white culture and whiteness, a depiction that, on a narrative level, parallels Thompson's declaration of Othello's character as "racial impersonation." This is not to say that Othello is a simple character that audiences are made unsympathetic to in either narrative, but neither author attempts to fully recuperate his character. In fact, by guiding the audience's view of Othello by means of the views of another character—Billie or Aaron—who celebrates their Blackness and calls attention to historical and contemporary racism, both Sears and Pierre critique the ways Othello's representation has, especially in the twentieth century, limited the extent to which Black audiences have wanted to engage with Shakespeare. Their representations of Othello, I submit, are the authors' own way of speaking back to the deep racial traumas embedded in *Othello* and its stage history; instead of revisiting an already heavily trafficked play, they have

⁸⁵ Pierre, 42.

⁸⁶ Pierre, 47.

⁸⁷ Judith gives birth to Aaron's daughter at the end of the play, though, like her father, she refuses to claim the child. She parallels Tamora in *Titus Andronicus* as she wants the child killed in order to hide her affair. Like in *Titus*, Aaron refuses to kill the baby, declaring in this play that "There can be no greater sin, than for a man to deny his offspring" (Pierre, *Shakespeare's Nigga*, 54). These lines contrast Aaron's paternal care with Shakespeare's cruel refusal to claim Othello, even after he has died.

chosen to distance themselves from it and its performance history, instead creating a Black counter history.

Harlem Duet makes these voices literal in the speeches on race in America by Black men (and, in later productions, Black women) that play over the re-visioning's scene changes. Nigel Shawn Williams, who played Othello in *Harlem Duet*'s opening production and again in 2006, reported that part of his work preparing for the role meant reading the work of writers and political figures like Derek Walcott, Marcus Garvey, MLK, Malcom X, W.E.B. Dubois, and others: "because of all the references [in the play] . . . you have to understand the politics, you have to understand the arguments . . . you have to be familiar with not just the rhetoric, but the intellectual climb through the 20th century of all these figures and how the arguments of what freedom really is, or what it is to be an American and, therefore, what is it to be Black Canadian?"⁸⁸ It was only by taking in these historical Black voices that Williams felt able to understand the nuance of the history with which *Harlem Duet* asks its actors and audience to grapple. Like many of the playwrights and actors I spoke to, in an interview with *The Globe and Mail*, Pierre reports that "the draw [of theater] is being able to identify with the character, being able to embody yourself onstage," but "during theatre school, I never actually played black characters." If part of the impetus for *Shakespeare's Nigga* was to create more space for Black men onstage, another motive was to rewrite Aaron's character so he could speak outside the narrative of Black masculinity that Shakespeare's plays created. Through Aaron staging a slave revolution against Shakespeare, Pierre's play performs a revolution against Shakespeare's legacy. As Sills articulates, Aaron asks his audience, "do you fix master's house with master's tools? Or do you burn it all down? . . . do you use master's tools to build a new way?"⁸⁹ By

⁸⁸ Williams, Interview.

⁸⁹ Sills, Interview.

critiquing Othello's desire for whiteness through depicting a Black character who embraces their Blackness, *Harlem Duet* and *Shakespeare's Nigga* also critique the whiteness of *Othello's* performance history, including the racist impersonations of Othello that exemplified a white desire to control the representation of Black bodies.

In contrast, many contemporary scholars and artists view *Othello* as a chance for racial representation—a point of recognition and identification for many Black Americans by depicting their struggles against a white supremacist culture.⁹⁰ They would most likely not disagree with the above scholars' and artists' wariness concerning *Othello* and Othello's racially fraught positions within a white social structure, but would argue that the issue with the play lies not with Othello himself or *Othello* itself, but with the way that each is framed. In short, they would maintain that *Othello* is not necessarily a racist play, but one which has been too long misunderstood by its audiences; they would argue that Othello represents the familiar image of a Black man whose situation as a racialized Other marks his position as precarious and whose actions are a result of the racism that surrounds him.⁹¹ For instance, in his examination of Othello's plea that his audience "Speak of me as I am" in comparison with Hamlet's similar cry that Horatio "tell my story," Ian Smith contends that it is the whiteness of literary scholarship and not Shakespeare's texts themselves that has given Hamlet precedence over Othello.⁹² Because literary studies, and especially Shakespeare studies, has been and still is predominantly white, our general inability to speak of Othello as we do of Hamlet—as a representation of human subjectivity—comes down to an inability to speak reliably about race, including

⁹⁰ Ayanna Thompson also lists Black actors who, as opposed to the ones mentioned above, viewed Othello as a great man who held within his character the possibility for "racial uplift" (Introduction to *Othello*, 87). She specifically lists James Hewlett, Ira Aldridge, Paul Robeson, and James Earl Jones (85-87).

⁹¹ See, for example, Neill, "Unproper Beds"; Barry, "Othello's Alienation"; Little, *Shakespeare Jungle Fever*; and Erickson, "Images of White Identity in *Othello*."

⁹² Smith, "We are Othello."

whiteness. In his recent book, *Black Shakespeare*, Smith expands his argument to consider how “systemic whiteness” has created “epistemological limitations” for Shakespeareans in relation to racial literacy—in short, “systemic whiteness, the racial framework within which criticism and scholarship have been produced for centuries and which reproduce that system itself, inhibits and constrains the practices of reading and interpretation,” especially on the subject of race.⁹³ Smith argues that Shakespeare’s *Othello* purposefully highlights “the profoundly violent nature of the callous exploitation of blackness” represented in early modern society and that for white literary scholars, contemporary “white racial investments . . . impede the ability to become the kind of reliable cultural narrators and race thinkers *Othello* envisions.”⁹⁴ For him, the fault lies not with *Othello* or even Shakespeare’s play, but with white scholars’ unacknowledged investment in whiteness and a lack of attention paid to Shakespearean scholarship’s “racial blind spots.”⁹⁵

Vanessa Corredera’s reading of *Othello* through the lens of Jordan Peele’s 2017 horror film *Get Out* also invites scholars to reevaluate their understanding of the play’s tragedy. *Get Out* reimagines America’s race relations as the literal harvesting of Black bodies for white auction and occupation; it therefore recontextualizes *Othello*’s exploitation by the Venetian Senate as part of the larger structure of white supremacy and its use and misuse of Black bodies to sustain its own power, all of which is traumatizing to the psychology of Black men and women: “*Get Out* literalizes the horror of *Othello*’s racial experience by stressing white supremacy’s physical and psychological appropriation of and violence against black bodies, as well as the strategies that weaken black selfhood in order to make it susceptible to this white bodily and mental appropriation.”⁹⁶ While earlier critics, such as Edward Snow, psychoanalyze *Othello*’s jealousy

⁹³ Smith, *Black Shakespeare*, 8, 10, 14.

⁹⁴ Smith, “We Are *Othello*,” 118, 113.

⁹⁵ Smith, *Black Shakespeare*, 14.

⁹⁶ Corredera, “*Get Out*,” 2.

as typical patriarchal misogyny⁹⁷—a male hostility towards female sexuality—Corredera’s reading of *Othello* centers race by focusing on the many instances of microaggressions that Othello experiences throughout the play. This reading contextualizes Othello’s actions as initiated and shaped by the larger structure of white supremacy:

for it suggests that the fault does not reside with the savage racial self lurking just under the “noble Moor’s” surface; instead, the fault lies, at least in significant part, with a white society that enacts various forms of microaggressions upon Othello, actions that in turn place the one black Other in its midst under constant strain through its conscious and unconscious marginalization of him.⁹⁸

Since the 1980s, many scholars have called attention to the extreme, explicit racism represented by not just Iago’s, but also Roderigo and Brabantio’s many racialized insults concerning Othello, as well as to the no less harmful implicit racism demonstrated by the Duke and Desdemona.⁹⁹ By reconsidering Othello through the lens of such racial microaggressions and the structural racism they support, Othello becomes not an extension of the Venetian state or a harmful stereotype, but a Black victim of those same mechanisms.

Both Smith and Corredera reclaim *Othello* as an important text and Othello as an important character for Black and specifically Black American identification. Kim F. Hall similarly centers Othello’s Blackness as essential to a reading of Shakespeare’s play when, in a short video produced by the Folger Library, she notes that the question that always gets asked of *Othello* is “Was Othello black?” While her definitive answer is yes, she asserts that what’s more important is what comes after that declaration: “what the play asks you to think about is what it

⁹⁷ Snow, “Sexual Anxiety.”

⁹⁸ Corredera, “*Get Out*,” 12.

⁹⁹ See Orkin’s “Othello and the ‘plain face’ of Racism”; Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race*; Vaughan, *Othello*; Erickson, “Images of White Identity in *Othello*”; Hall, “*Othello* and the Problem of Blackness”; and Grady, “Othello, Colin Powell.” Earlier scholarship, such as Jones, *Othello’s Countrymen* and Hunter, “*Othello* and Colour Prejudice,” focus solely on Iago’s racism/prejudice.

means to call him black and for him to understand himself as black.”¹⁰⁰ In a recent virtual lecture, Hall expands on this idea by considering how while Shakespeare himself is sometimes heavily policed and his texts have played a huge role in the racial formations of this country, they have also been part of Black freedom activism since the 19th century. She further declares that “no Shakespeare play embodies Black struggles over authority and inclusion more than *Othello*. . . . The play seemingly offers Black people a place of entry—who better than Black Americans to understand the constant sense of judgement, the suspicion that accompanies being an outsider? Who better to feel the story of a black man with a singular relationship to the state . . . ?”¹⁰¹

Such a claim is supported by some of the Black men I interviewed who were familiar with or had played the role of Othello themselves. Fortune, who hopes to direct the play himself, argued that the play’s tragedy stems not from Othello’s jealousy, but from his own internalized racism and self-hatred, issues Fortune says he struggled with himself growing up. He also resonated with Othello’s isolation: “I was often the only Black in whatever situation I found myself with. And the emotional gymnastics that I had to go through were really instrumental to, I think, any sanity that I was going to have,” which *Othello* depicted for him.¹⁰² Beau Dixon, who has played Othello in Shakespeare’s play as well as Sears’, noted that, growing up, he could “never relate to any of those [other] characters because it wasn’t a representation of who I was,” but that finding Aaron and Othello really changed things for him and helped him become the actor he is today. As he said, “there’s very few characters . . . where I felt that I could take my race, my skin color, part of who I am, and apply it to the character. That’s how I felt, and it

¹⁰⁰ Hall, “Understanding Race and Religion.”

¹⁰¹ Hall, “NHC Virtual Book Club.”

¹⁰² Fortune, Interview.

wasn't until I did the role of Aaron and Othello that it was like, 'Yeah, I can bring more of myself to that'."¹⁰³

This naming of and identification with Othello's Blackness marks stage re-visionings of *Othello* as well, particularly meta-theatrical re-visionings such as Keith Hamilton Cobb's *American Moor* (2020), Caleen Sinnette Jennings' *Casting Othello* (1999), and Lolita Chakrabarti's *Red Velvet* (2014), which all focus on the Black actor who plays Othello and his own feelings towards the character and the role. In exploring how these actors view Othello and their own performance of him, each re-visioning translates the idea that Othello is a representation of the violence perpetuated against Black masculinity into a meditation on how Othello might speak to and for a Black man's experience of living in a racist society.

Almost a one-man play, Cobb's *American Moor* follows a 52-year-old Black actor during his audition to play Othello. While there is another character—a white director present somewhere in the audience—much of the playtext consists of soliloquies, as the actor speaks to the audience about what it is like to be a Black actor in America.¹⁰⁴ He describes his love for Shakespeare and his language alongside his own disappointment in an industry that assumes he is only fit for one role, especially one towards which he feels ambivalent. In between his deeply personal reflections on theater and life, he struggles to make the white director listen to him; as a Black man, he believes he can understand Othello best, but the director keeps preventing him from helping guide a story that he lives every day. The play also makes clear that this is not an

¹⁰³ Dixon, Interview.

¹⁰⁴ Up to this point in time, the Actor has only been played by the playwright himself, and while the character is listed in the *Dramatis Personae* simply as "The Actor," early in the text itself the Director specifically addresses him as "Keith" (Cobb, *American Moor*, 10). While the play is certainly based on some of Cobb's own experiences, the naming of his character after himself blurs the line between fiction and biography, lending weight to the personal narratives in the play while also allowing "the Actor" to represent more than just this one Black man, just as the Director stands in for more than just one white man named "Michael." In one of his soliloquies, the Actor alludes to this when he says of the Director, "You stand in for so much, but I do too, and I cannot just be me, for you are never, only you" (17).

isolated incident, as the notes before the playtext indicate that the setting is “An American stage in an American theatre on an American street in an American town,” with the time being listed, in a powerful repurposing of Iago’s racist speech to Brabantio in Act 1,¹⁰⁵ as “Even now, now, very now . . .”¹⁰⁶

The Actor initiates the action by describing how he learned early on how closed off the world of Shakespeare was for him as his college acting teacher instructed him to aim for roles he could “realistically” attain—Aaron, Morocco, and, if he was really lucky, Othello.¹⁰⁷ Yet, when he first encountered Othello, he hated him, calling him a “dumb fuck,” a “pitiful, love-struck Negro who loses his mind over some uncorroborated line of the purest bullshit that some white boy whispers in his ear, and deads his wife,” a “great emotionally unstable misogynist murderer,” a “credulous, self-loathing baboon,” and finally a “dumb-ass, embarrassing motherfuckin’ Negro!”¹⁰⁸ He hated what Othello symbolized and the fact that he was expected to pin all of his professional goals on that one role when there were so many others he’d rather play. One day, however, he began to feel Othello and to feel for him, declaring that “in that moment, that sacred moment, I suddenly could not *not* care for Othello. I began rather to feel like I have a brother who can’t defend himself. And you been slappin’ him around for four hundred years. . . . And I’m gonna defend and protect this much maligned, misunderstood, mighty character . . . my brother’s dignity . . . or maybe my own.”¹⁰⁹ Where before the theater industry had been forcing him into this role, now the Actor feels that the theater industry has been cheating them both.

¹⁰⁵ Having succeeded in bringing Brabantio to his window, Iago tells him he has been robbed and that “Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tuppung your white ewe” (Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.1.87-88).

¹⁰⁶ Cobb, *American Moor*, 2.

¹⁰⁷ Cobb, 9-10. These are the only explicitly Black male characters in all of Shakespeare’s texts (Caliban’s race is unclear).

¹⁰⁸ Cobb, 25-27.

¹⁰⁹ Cobb, 27-28.

The main tension in the play comes from how little the white Director actually knows about what it means to be a Black man; the Actor declares that the Director cannot adequately direct the play until he and all directors like him have a frank and honest discussion about race with their actors. More than that, he argues that these directors need to defer to the experiential knowledge of their Othello actors: “You ain’t gotta pick me. But you’re gonna respect that walkin’ through that door, purely by virtue of being born Black in America, I know more about who this dude is than any graduate program could ever teach you.”¹¹⁰ Even this audition experience, heavy as it is with racialized dynamics of power, allows the Actor to tap into an understanding of Othello that the Director simply can’t grasp, citing “my *extensive* experience as me, standin’ in rooms like this in front of guys like you. While *you*, conversely, draw upon your grossly limited experience regarding *anything* like me.”¹¹¹ The Actor, indeed, finds it laughable that men like the Director think that they are not represented in *Othello*, even as the Actor demonstrates how his audition process mirrors the scene he is being asked to read: 1.3, Othello in front of the Senate.¹¹² As the Actor points out over and over in soliloquies that direct his unspoken thoughts towards the Director, “Forget all that is familiar to you . . . Look at me. Listen to me. I might know . . . I can offer you the Moor from the inside out.”¹¹³

Such an offer includes a reconceptualization of Othello from a more complex and generous perspective. For instance, the Actor views Othello as a warrior, but also as a lover who

¹¹⁰ Cobb, 22.

¹¹¹ Cobb, 13.

¹¹² Cobb, 24. When the Actor first breaks down what exactly the Director wants him to do as Othello during his 1.3 speech before the Senate and why he dislikes it, he says, “You think that he thinks he needs to do . . . ‘a number’ for these guys, in order to succeed in getting from them the thing that *you* think he wants . . . And so, in order to get this gig, ah wait! . . . in order to succeed in getting from *you* the thing *you* think *I* want . . . you’re implying that *I* need to do ‘a number . . .’ for *you* . . .” (17). At another moment, he similarly links the Director to Brabantio (18, 20).

¹¹³ Cobb, 36-37.

was driven to horrible lengths by a system that used and abused him, that took his best years and gave him little in return. He believes that when Othello steps in front of the Senate:

Othello enters that scene like I just entered this dingy-ass, empty, cold motherfuckin' room, under scrutiny, his boyhood dreams now unrealizable, those of adulthood clearly in jeopardy, and immediately aware that who he *is* is not the *he* either sought or seen by those he stands before. In his heart, he is an invincible, indestructible powerhouse of a boy, with a deep, boyish desire to please, to be praised, to make people proud of him.¹¹⁴

This Othello is not a spectacle for a white audience, but a mirror for the Black actor. As he aims to provide a new and better understanding of Othello's character, Cobb's Actor also acknowledges that other Black men might not agree with him and imagines them asking him:

Little Brother, why? Why, why, why, why the broken vessel of Othello, incapable as it is of holding everything that we are; our breadth and depth, our magic, our magnificence; incapable of containing our truth? Why seek vainly to redeem him? He is no kin to you, rather he is the child of one who could have had no love for you. Nor can they who perpetually pick up this broken vessel and attempt to stuff you into its confines, making you fit to *their* satisfaction.¹¹⁵

And while the Actor acknowledges that Othello is "tragically flawed," he insists that this makes Othello just like everybody, except for one important detail: "He is wholly human. But *he* is Black. And to be Black here has only ever meant to be more misread, misrepresented, misinterpreted . . . more misunderstood. And maybe, just maybe a little something this poor player can lend him, and someone, one, anyone will say, 'Ah! I see!'"¹¹⁶ Playing Othello and playing him well means not just saving him from a white, irresponsible theater system, but also illustrating for an audience what it means to be a Black man in America.

¹¹⁴ Cobb, 35.

¹¹⁵ Cobb, 36.

¹¹⁶ Cobb, 37.

Caleen Sinnette Jennings' *Casting Othello* offers a similar perspective on what Othello's character can represent to and for a Black actor.¹¹⁷ The play is part of a set of two one-act plays: *Playing Juliet* and *Casting Othello*. Both follow a cast of actors at a community theater as they prepare to produce a Shakespeare play. In *Playing Juliet*, we are briefly introduced to Jimmy—the Black boyfriend and then husband of the Black lead actress, Georgia—who does not like the idea of his lover playing opposite a white man in *Romeo and Juliet*. In *Casting Othello*, however, Jimmy has returned to the theater with a new respect for acting and a desire to take on the lead role of *Othello* after the previous actor was scooped. The play's action revolves around the cast's debate over Jimmy's ability to take on the role, what *Othello* is about, and how Othello should be played. Jimmy, it turns out, has been rehearsing already with the white actress who plays Desdemona and Georgia is not pleased by this cross-race involvement or his sudden desire to act. Jimmy, meanwhile, feels drawn to the role of Othello due to his own experiences as a Black, working-class man who still feels the need to prove himself worthy of his accomplished wife.

Unlike the Actor in *American Moor*, Jimmy finds himself drawn to Othello almost immediately and retains a positive view of the character from beginning to end. He declares multiple times that he *knows* Othello, and clearly feels that Othello's experiences reflect his own.¹¹⁸ For example, he articulates throughout the play how Georgia's family, particularly her father, has always made him feel out of place and undeserving of his wife because he never went to college.¹¹⁹ While Georgia may be Black, Jimmy argues that she was “raised like [a white

¹¹⁷ This view has been held by Black British actors as well. For example, see “Playing Othello with André Holland, Chukwudi Iwuji and John Douglas Thompson,” a recorded interview of three Black actors, who have recently starred as Shakespeare's *Othello*, discussing their experiences and thoughts on the play/character. Thompson's views on playing the role were especially positive.

¹¹⁸ Jennings, *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello*. For example, when his wife dislikes the idea of him taking the part Jimmy explains, “But I know what he's saying, G. I know this guy. He's a brother, just like me” (79). In his interview with me, Fortune said that Jimmy “understood [Othello] in a way that I don't think even he at first understood” (Fortune, Interview).

¹¹⁹ Jennings, *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello*, 79-80, 95-96.

girl],”¹²⁰ so he can empathize with Othello’s feelings about being looked down upon as an outsider or as a threat:

Othello’s a soldier. A working guy like me. His home is the battlefield, right? But here he is living in the city. Just like my home is in the basement fixing stuff, but here I am hanging around a theatre with all you educated types, right? He’s a working-class black dude, but here he is hooked up with a rich girl. Just like me, right? . . . Othello’s around all these rich, educated folks, so he has to prove himself all the time—come off smarter, badder than everybody else. . . . People wanna make brothers into monsters all the time. This guy’s just a regular dude. I wanna show that. Women cross the street away from me. Black women and white women. Like I’m going to hurt them. This guy didn’t want to hurt nobody. That Iago dude just messed up his head.¹²¹

Similar to Corredera’s reading of Othello by means of *Get Out*, Jimmy focuses on how the microaggressions and structural racism he experiences daily have affected his own conceptualization of himself and his self-worth. As the Actor eventually comes to see and as Jimmy already knows, in these plays, Othello’s experiences and actions, being the result of racial prejudice, speak to those of other Black men trying to make their way in a society that vilifies and oppresses them. Scott Leonard Fortune, who played Jimmy in 1998, said of playing the role that “there are very few experiences that I’ve had where I believe an African American male’s voice was heard, and so to have *that* experience . . . It was nirvana; it was manna from heaven.”¹²² Fortune’s experience playing Jimmy thus perhaps echoed Jimmy’s experience playing Othello—providing the chance to have one’s voice and life accurately represented and foregrounded.

Jimmy also spends much of the play trying to push back against racial stereotypes that too often get applied to Othello (and other Black men) and which he believes do not fit the

¹²⁰ The exact exchange has Jimmy comparing himself to Othello by calling Georgia, like Desdemona, “a rich girl,” who responds by saying, “I ain’t a white girl.” Jimmy returns with, “You were raised like one” (Jennings, 95).

¹²¹ Jennings, 95-97.

¹²² Fortune, Interview.

character, thereby enacting one goal that Jennings had in writing her play.¹²³ When Georgia declares Othello a jerk, Jimmy disagrees, asserting that Othello is “very smart, he’s just out of place.”¹²⁴ The question of Othello’s intelligence comes up again when Dave, an older white actor who will play Iago and is intent on producing a “traditional” production, cannot understand all the fuss being made about the issue of race in the play:

DAVE. All we’ve got is the text. Othello is a big tough guy who’s just not very smart and he lets . . .

GEORGIA. That’s the stereotype.

JIMMY. That’s why I want to play him. He’s not some big dumb black guy off the street. He’s intelligent. He’s sensitive inside.¹²⁵

Georgia, who does not want to see her inexperienced husband playing such a controversial character, brings up these stereotypes the most, disgusted by the idea of watching her husband on stage acting “the big black buck lusting after the white woman” or “like some wild black psychopath.”¹²⁶ Ultimately, however, Jimmy refutes even Georgia’s reservations concerning Othello, wanting to prove that Othello does not fit such labels:¹²⁷

GEORGIA. But you know every time people see a black man with a white woman he’s got to be some kind of psycho-pimp.

JIMMY. But you can’t play Othello like a pimp, because he doesn’t know jack about women. The dude is clean, man. He’s gentle. Desdemona is his first, right? That’s why this hits him like a Mack truck.¹²⁸

Like Cobb’s Actor, Jimmy imagines Othello as a warrior, but as ultimately gentle and true in his love, an image that becomes twisted only by his enmeshment in a white supremacist society and

¹²³ Jennings, Interview.

¹²⁴ Jennings, *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello*, 89.

¹²⁵ Jennings, 94.

¹²⁶ Jennings, 89, 95.

¹²⁷ Fortune reported that while most of his reviews were extremely positive, one reviewer argued that “Jimmy’s performance [of Othello] was too studied . . . he thought that Jimmy understood it, the text, too well.” Fortune, however, believes that Jimmy is extremely smart, and trouble not reading that review as rooted in racist stereotypes: “Is this a white guy thinking from his preconceived notions of what Black people are or can do?” (Fortune, Interview).

¹²⁸ Jennings, *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello*, 96.

Iago's pernicious plan. Importantly, both the Actor and Jimmy aim to recuperate Othello not for the sake of the play, but for what they see of themselves—and of the effects of racism—in him.



Figure 7: Scott Leonard Fortune (Jimmy) and Susan Lynskey (Wendy) in *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello* by Caleen Sinnette Jennings and directed by Lisa Rose Middleton at the Folger Theatre in a co-production with Source Theatre Company in 1998. Photo by Ken Cobb.

The stereotype that receives the most traction in both these plays, however, is that of the angry Black man—a stereotype that has an early modern pedigree. Early modernist Mary Floyd-Wilson argues that *Othello* dramatizes the shift that was occurring in England at the time in terms of how Moors were understood, as geohumoral theory became supplanted by a new and emergent racial discourse, leading to the view that Moors were changeable and violent in their passions.¹²⁹ The 19th century also saw a number of staging decisions that had lasting influences

¹²⁹ In *English Ethnicity*, Floyd-Wilson contends that:
'racialism' in its earliest and most rudimentary form detached people's complexions from their traditional humoral significance. By attributing excessive sexual passions to cool, dry southerners, Bodin helped initiate this detachment, and Shakespeare's *Othello* dramatized it. . . . As incredible as it may sound, the

over subsequent productions and Edmund Kean led many of them, including the interpretation of Othello “as an intensely emotional character . . . who also could ignite into fury easily.”¹³⁰ In *Casting Othello*, as Jimmy and Dave rehearse 4.1, the white director Chris tells Jimmy, “Move all over the place, Jimmy. Physicalize his agitation. Shout! Run up and down as much as you can . . . Don’t be afraid to shout. Use the power of your voice.”¹³¹ Later on, Jimmy pushes against this interpretation, explaining, “I don’t see him like some wild man. I see him quiet. It’s like when your own wife hits you in your weakest spot, ain’t nothin’ you can do, right? That’s why it felt weird when you asked me to shout and run around and stuff. I thought he would be like almost crying, he feels so hurt.”¹³² In *American Moor*, the Actor similarly hesitates to follow the Director’s instructions that he play Othello as overcome by emotion and irrational, confessing, “I worry that we laugh at him. Will it not play better . . . Will it not be better to play, to take him from reserved, even in love, to reserved, even insane?”¹³³

From the stage directions of *American Moor*, it is clear that Cobb’s audience is meant to agree with this assessment. For example, the first time the Actor reads his audition lines, we are told, “In the following speech both he, and the character he enacts, exhibit a self-assurance that never boils over into arrogance or bravado. . . . Othello is always the largest, most obvious thing in any room. He never needs to play big, loud, or self-important.”¹³⁴ Throughout the play, the

Moor’s violent metamorphosis—his transformation from an extraordinarily calm state to passionate rage—severs external blackness from its longstanding (though now obscured) geohumoral associations with dispassion and constancy. And it is the legacy of Shakespeare’s play that this portrait of ‘Moorish behavior’ established many of the strains of modern racial discourse. (142)

¹³⁰ Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 71.

¹³¹ Jennings, *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello*, 77.

¹³² Jennings, 96. Ayanna Thompson reports that in the 1964 Central Park production of *Othello*, James Earl Jones (an experienced Othello actor) similarly refused such a stereotypical performance: “Despite the fact that the producer of the 1964 Central Park show, Joseph Papp, urged Jones to use his performance to express ‘black rage’ because it was the onset of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, Jones could not interpret the role in that vein” (Introduction to *Othello*, 87).

¹³³ Cobb, *American Moor*, 23.

¹³⁴ Cobb, 14-15.

Actor emphasizes how often he has had to rein in his own emotion because of the fear it causes others and connects these emotions to the very experience of playing Othello: “I seem a little angry to you? . . . You think any American Black man is gonna play Othello without being in touch with his anger . . . at you?”¹³⁵ While Othello as a character may represent an American Black man’s experience, including his rage at the systems of oppression that surround him, Jimmy and the Actor both feel that he could and would keep his emotions in check.

Lolita Chakrabarti’s play *Red Velvet* demonstrates a slightly different interpretation of Othello’s emotions, imagining how the famous Black Shakespearean actor Ira Aldridge had understood and performed the part. Chakrabarti’s play opens and ends in Aldridge’s dressing room in Lodz, Poland in 1867 as Aldridge, age 60, prepares to play the titular role in *King Lear*. The scenes in between, however, are set in 1833 London, as a 26-year-old Aldridge takes over the role of Othello from Edmund Kean after his collapse onstage at the Theatre Royal in Covent Garden.¹³⁶ In Poland, a young journalist interviewing Aldridge stumbles upon the topic of his brief work in London, a clear sore spot for the aged actor. In flashback scenes, we learn what happened, watching Aldridge’s new costars argue over the efficacy of allowing a Black man to play Othello with their perspectives relatively split between racist traditionalism and a desire to be progressive—even while retaining elements of racism. While Aldridge does end up playing the part, the subsequent reviews (which are historically accurate, though selective)¹³⁷ are overtly racist and dismissive, leading the board of directors to close the show completely even though

¹³⁵ Cobb, 22.

¹³⁶ Ayanna Thompson discusses Kean’s collapse and eventual death in as well (Introduction to *Othello*, 72).

¹³⁷ Cline explores this aspect of *Red Velvet* in the context of what she calls “‘revisionist narratives’ of black Shakespeare performance” in her article “Reviewing Ira Aldridge” (3).

audiences seemed to enjoy his performances.¹³⁸ In his final scene, we watch Aldridge haunted by his failure in London and the racist indictments that have never left his mind.

Unlike Jimmy and the Actor, Aldridge is accused by some of his costars of playing Othello with *too much* emotion, too much passion—a complaint directly related to race, given that the white actor he replaced, Kean, was known for playing the role with wild passion. In the first flashback scene, the theater manager, Pierre Laporte, warns Aldridge that he needs to play the part gently at first in order not to upset the audience who, at least in London, are older and set in their ways. As Kean’s son, Charles (who is set to play Iago), makes clear, the presence of a Black man onstage playing Othello is a controversial step for their establishment. Charles’ arguments against hiring Aldridge are steeped in racism and white privilege: he claims that Aldridge was groping the actor who played Desdemona, that having Othello played by a Black man will be too real and so not allow the audience the escapism they come to the theater for, that opening the role to a Black man will mean letting in everyone else (Jews, Blacks, and “half wits”) to play the parts that represent them, that Aldridge will start taking their jobs, and that the theater should reflect its audience, which he assumes does not include Black people.¹³⁹ Aldridge, however, is not willing to compromise his vision of Othello and Laporte eventually fires him at the behest of the board. Even with this news, Aldridge pursues his belief that Othello *cannot* be played gently:

PIERRE. . . . I said yesterday, here, I told you to play it...gently they need time to adjust, to get used to the whole...concept...

IRA. Oh sweet Lord...

¹³⁸ While the critical reception of Aldridge’s performance in actuality was mixed, his performance seemed to have been well-received by his audiences. Bernth Lindfors, for example, notes in his extensive detailing of publications concerning Aldridge in London, that “most commentators . . . expressed little surprise that the audience had been very pleased with the performance and had showered Aldridge with applause. See Lindfors, “Ira Aldridge at Covent Garden.” This article also depicts the numerous critiques of Aldridge playing the Moor that appeared in London periodicals even *before* he had actually performed the part there.

¹³⁹ Chakrabarti, *Red Velvet*, 42-45.

PIERRE. Gently, but you, you played harder and fiercer than I have ever seen you...
IRA. He loses his mind, brutally murders his wife. It's one of the most violent scenes
Shakespeare ever wrote, in an auditorium that requires scale. It's not gentle...
PIERRE. ...You're not listening...
IRA. It's what his jealousy does.
PIERRE. It was too strong...too intimate.
IRA. ...It's called acting.¹⁴⁰

Aldridge understands the real reason he is being fired and it's the same reason that requires Cobb's Actor to control his responses: the white board of directors fears a Black man's rage. As Aldridge notes, this fear does not extend to a white man impersonating a Black man: "So when Kean plays the moor, we're amazed at how skillfully he descends into this base African tragedy but with me it seems I'm revealin' my true nature."¹⁴¹ Kean's impassioned Moor, his white impersonation of Blackness, is seen as an art; when Aldridge similarly acts as he believes Othello would, his passion is naturalized as his own Black essence coming out.

¹⁴⁰ Chakrabarti, 76. Ellipses presented as written in the text.

¹⁴¹ Chakrabarti, 80.



Figure 8: Greg Matthew Anderson (*Pierre LaPorte*) and Dion Johnstone (*Ira Aldridge*) in Lolita Chakrabarti's *Red Velvet*, directed by Gary Griffin Chicago Shakespeare Theater in 2017. Photo by Liz Lauren.

In its complication of Othello's "racialized" performance, *Red Velvet* bridges the two views about whether the characterization of Othello should be viewed as a form of racial impersonation or racial representation. It does so by pushing on the assumption that his Othello should be more racially representative than that of Kean; like Jimmy and the Actor, Aldridge wants his Othello to be viewed *as acting*, instead of as an expression of his racialized self. Aldridge's elevation of the skill involved in acting does not disparage Othello but attempts to justify his emotions and asks his audience to see Othello's humanity and his tragedy. In straddling this divide, *Red Velvet* simultaneously acknowledges the dangers implicit in reading Othello as a representation of a Black man due to the stereotypes surrounding him, demonstrates

the dangers of equating an actor with the character they play,¹⁴² and mirrors the reservations, articulated by Thompson and Quarshie, that having a Black man play the role of Othello does not remove the racial stereotypes of the role, but instead simply maps them onto the Black body of the actor. Yet, Aldridge's desire for his performance to be read as "acting"¹⁴³ also calls into question the assumption that racial impersonation must always involve a white man in blackface. If a Black man playing Othello risks making racist stereotypes about Black men more tangible to an audience, does that performance itself not risk becoming a form of racist impersonation? Further, as both Thompson and Quarshie note, it is not just the actor that decides if a character is a racial impersonation or a racial representation, but their audience: context and reception matter as much as performance in terms of how we understand Othello's race. Reading Shakespeare's Othello as a representation of a Black man, even when taking note of the crushing weight of white supremacy, cannot completely erase the racist language of the play. Viewing Othello's character and emotional state sympathetically can thus open the play and Shakespeare's larger oeuvre to more complicated readings concerning race—less, perhaps, in terms of the putative psychology of Black men than in terms of how white supremacy affects so many aspects of their existence.

¹⁴² The climax of the play occurs at the end of Scene Six, when Laporte tells Aldridge that, in a last attempt to save Aldridge's job, he told the board that "in the heat of the moment you lost yourself in the play, your true nature surfaced and you descended into . . ." at which point Aldridge lunges forward and attacks his friend (Chakrabarti, 82-3). Laporte delivers the final blow by responding, "Look at yourself. This is who you really are . . ." (83).

¹⁴³ The historical Ira Aldridge actually worked hard to establish a clear connection between himself and his character, assuming "a fake African heritage" to better resemble Othello and to help him fill seats when he performed. See Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 85-86.

Desdemona's Desire: (E)racing Difference and (En)gendering Vulnerability

Throughout its performance history, productions and adaptations of *Othello* have variously erased Desdemona's desire (to render her a chaste ideal of white womanhood),¹⁴⁴ condemned it (to blame her for her own death),¹⁴⁵ or effaced it (in order to focus on the bonds between men).¹⁴⁶ Two of the stage re-visionings I examine complicate Desdemona by giving her a voice outside of these narratives: Paula Vogel's 1993 *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* and Toni Morrison's 2011 *Desdemona*. Many feminist scholars have noted the toxic masculinity at the center of *Othello*'s tragedy—for both Othello and Desdemona. By literally removing the male characters from the stage, both Vogel and Morrison center the female bonds in Shakespeare's play and so focus on how these female characters—represented or simply alluded to—might interact. Through their privileging of female voices and close attention to Desdemona's character, both plays present gender as central to *Othello*'s tragedy. While Desdemona's body, as a representation of white female chastity and vulnerability, has historically been weaponized against both Black men and Black women, these plays call attention to how narratives of whiteness can also punish white women through their sexual surveillance. Vogel's *Desdemona* ultimately exemplifies a liberal version of white feminism in its privileging of gendered unification over the realities of class difference, while Morrison's

¹⁴⁴ See Ayanna Thompson's discussion of 18th and 19th century productions, which excised any lines in which Desdemona even hinted at sexual desire in order to protect "the propriety of the play," vastly shrinking her role (Introduction to *Othello*, 91).

¹⁴⁵ For example, John Quincy Adams famously blamed Desdemona for her own death as "her just deserts" because she went against nature by marrying a Black man (see Fielder's discussion of his critique in "Blackface Desdemona.") In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt does not necessarily condemn Desdemona's desire, but does say her expression of it is as much to blame for her death "as Iago's slander" (250). Orlin notes that, similarly, "there is a long tradition of critics blaming Desdemona for her victimization" ("Introduction," 11) and cites as examples Rosenberg, *The Masks of 'Othello'*, 6, 7; and Ridley, *Othello*, 54n.

¹⁴⁶ Neill describes an "increasing dominance of Iago in performance" in the twentieth century and "the consequent displacement of the relationship between Othello and Desdemona in favour of that between tempter and victim as the principal focus of the play's tragic concerns" (Introduction to *Othello*, 37).

Desdemona complicates such easy identification across gender through an intersectional, Black feminist acknowledgment of class and racial differences.

While there has been much scholarly attention paid to *Desdemona* since the play's inception, she has also been relegated by scholars to a plot device,¹⁴⁷ dismissed as a one-dimensional representation of female passivity,¹⁴⁸ and denigrated for her sexual desires for a Black man.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, as my previous chapter notes, *Desdemona*'s character has often been discussed solely in terms of her relationship with Othello in order to make arguments about his character, the shape of the play's tragedy, and Shakespeare's representation of an interracial couple. Such representations of *Desdemona* limit her interiority and simplify her place in the play's narrative, ignoring the ways in which her gender, race, and class positions both inform her privilege and restrict her agency, resulting in a complex character capable of supporting other, richer interpretations.

Some of the contemporary stage re-visionings I examine elsewhere in this chapter subordinate *Desdemona* to focus on Othello or the Black women that *Desdemona*'s figure eclipses. For example, Cobb's *American Moor* introduces the image of *Desdemona* to further support the Actor's arguments concerning how Othello's situation makes him hide his true self:

Desdemona . . . Lovely, self-possessed, listening, discerning, inconceivably brave, watching. *Desdemona* is thrilled that such a man even exists. . . . beneath a too often

¹⁴⁷ Neill notes that Rymer "appeared to be in little doubt that the real heart of the action lay in the relationship between Othello and Iago," noting that while she participates in the play's action, "her function in the male-dominated drama of the Moor and his envious subordinate is conceived as a largely instrumental one" (Introduction to *Othello*, 101).

¹⁴⁸ Pechter summarizes the scholarship on *Desdemona* in the 18th and 19th centuries as convinced of her characterless-ness and passivity (*Othello and Interpretive Traditions*, 120), depictions that dominated the theatrical tradition as well. He argues that even contemporary critics read her as passive, though they do not celebrate this character trait like previous scholars did (124). Writing in 1999, he laments that "Whether celebrating or deploring it, the critical tradition has been remarkably consistent for two centuries in describing *Desdemona* as silent, submissive, and in a sense even complicit in her own murder" (124). Neill argues that, until Maggie Smith's performance as *Desdemona* in 1964, her performance was dominated by "the sentimentalist tradition, which reduced *Desdemona* to a doll-like creature of passive tenderness and goodness" (Introduction to *Othello*, 104).

¹⁴⁹ See Fielder's discussion of John Quincy Adams ("Blackface *Desdemona*").

scowling brow poorly concealing fifty years of adversity, she can see a child's eyes . . . and how his sculpted mouth makes words, and yet they are not always the words that express the thoughts that she sees him thinking . . . How far more often she sees that they are just the things that his situation demands that he say.¹⁵⁰

Cobb's Desdemona is not a character so much as a stand-in for the audience that the Actor hopes to create, an audience who can sympathize with and love Othello, including his faults. Pierre's *Shakespeare's Nigga* is haunted by the idea of Desdemona in the character of Shakespeare's daughter, Judith, who, like Desdemona, desires a Black man against her father's wishes. In opposition to *American Moor's* idealized image of Desdemona, however, Judith's love proves false as she would rather kill her bastard daughter than admit to her love affair with Aaron. In both plays, however, the white female character exists solely to introduce the concept of an interracial relationship and include further commentary on the Black men who desire them.

In both Jennings' *Casting Othello* and Sears' *Harlem Duet*, Desdemona's image is raised to comment on comparative racial dynamics and the colorism of beauty standards. Three times during *Casting Othello*, Georgia calls Wendy and her character (Desdemona), "Miss Anne," a shorthand insult referencing the historical figure of the white female slave owner, colloquially understood now as "a white woman, *esp.* one who is considered hostile to or patronizing of black people."¹⁵¹ When Georgia finally cracks and reveals her negative feelings concerning the play, part of her list of issues includes the designation of Desdemona as "the alabaster goddess," an image that comes up twice in *Harlem Duet* as well, in both the 1862 and 1928 scenes, and which alludes to Othello's speech in the final scene of Shakespeare's play wherein he describes Desdemona's skin as "monumental alabaster."¹⁵² Georgia's insecurity in allowing her husband

¹⁵⁰ Cobb, *American Moor*, 28-9.

¹⁵¹ Jennings, *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello*, 65, 88, 94. Defined by the OED as a compound of "miss."

¹⁵² Jennings, *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello*, 88. Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 91, 100. Shakespeare, *Othello* 5.2.5.

Jimmy to play love scenes with a white woman carries over from the first One Act play in Jennings' set, *Playing Juliet*, in which Georgia accuses Wendy, that season's director, of casting her as Juliet "against type . . . to make a statement."¹⁵³ Gesturing toward the lighter skinned Lorraine, another Black woman whom Wendy cast as the Nurse, Georgia declares, "She's the right Juliet and you know it. She's the beauty. . . . You were going for irony. The ugly black Juliet and the light pretty nurse."¹⁵⁴ By close reading Shakespeare's language in the play itself—e.g., "So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows"—she notes that "White is beautiful. Black is ugly."¹⁵⁵ While Wendy and Lorraine are quick to disagree, it takes Jimmy reassuring Georgia of his love for her and his appreciation of her beauty to convince Georgia to continue with the role. The cultural racism represented by this privileging of white or light skin over Black or dark skin, however, clearly carries over into the cast's rehearsals for *Othello* and Georgia's problems with the play. While Jennings' play ends with a reaffirmation of the love between Georgia and Jimmy, *Harlem Duet* ends with Billie in a mental hospital, still mourning the loss of her lover to a white woman. Thompson reads Sears' play as social commentary on the relationship between race and beauty, positing that, "The love between black men and black women is presented as true and passionate, and yet their relationships crumble under the social constructions that render white femininity as the standard for all beauty and desirability."¹⁵⁶ In these plays, Desdemona exists solely to call attention to the social standards, in both white and Black communities, that further oppress Black women in relation to white women.

These four re-visionings approximate the various representations of Desdemona in *Othello*'s performance history as a plot device that calls attention back to Othello or as a

¹⁵³ Jennings, *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello*, 34.

¹⁵⁴ Jennings, 34.

¹⁵⁵ Jennings, 37.

¹⁵⁶ Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 110.

simplified symbol of ideal white femininity. Neither goal is necessarily negative, especially as both *Casting Othello* and *Harlem Duet* decenter Desdemona in part to counteract the erasure of Black women that is a side effect of history's focus on Desdemona and Othello's interracial relationship.¹⁵⁷ Yet, this decentering means that Desdemona has no chance to exist outside the white patriarchal, and arguably misogynistic, structure of Shakespeare's play. Paula Vogel's 1994 *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* and Toni Morrison's 2012 *Desdemona* do the most to recuperate her character by allowing her to give voice to her own desires: for Othello, for sex, for love, for freedom.

First produced in 1993, Vogel's *Desdemona* is the earliest play I examine and the only one that is written by a white author. It imagines interactions between *Othello*'s three female characters—Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca—during the events of Shakespeare's play in order to explore issues of gender, class, and sexuality. What one reviewer called “a perversely heroic figure,”¹⁵⁸ Vogel's *Desdemona*, unlike most interpretations of her character, revels in her sexuality and even takes over as a prostitute for Bianca one night, to live out her dreams of adventure and travel through the men that come to her. She envies Bianca's freedom until Bianca reveals that all she wants is to be tied to a man through marriage, which Desdemona cannot understand. Emilia, meanwhile, feels torn between her hope for a better future working for a mistress who looks down on her and takes advantage of her labor, and her duty to a husband who mistreats her. In their conversations and arguments about men, sex, marriage, class, and gender roles, these three women expose the way that each of their lives, while different, is controlled by their relationships with men.

¹⁵⁷ See Daileader, *Racism, Misogyny*, 6.

¹⁵⁸ Winn, “Double Dose of Sexual Politics.”

In his introduction to a collection of Vogel's plays, including *Desdemona*, David Savran contends that Vogel's work "reacted strongly against the first wave of feminist theatre that surfaced during the 1970s, the 'let's-celebrate-ourselves-as-women' brand of feminism that Paula regards not just as simplistic and ahistorical but also as exclusionary because certain kinds of women (depending on their class or racial or occupational position) inevitably get left out of the celebration."¹⁵⁹ In response, Vogel's own brand of feminist theater meant "refusing to construct an exemplary feminist hero"; in the case of her re-visioning of *Othello*, "it means turning Desdemona into a whore for real."¹⁶⁰ Thus, at times, Vogel's play feels almost satiric in its portrayal of Desdemona:¹⁶¹ ribald instead of innocent, experienced instead of virginal, selfish instead of self-sacrificing.¹⁶² "Turn[ing] conventions upside down,"¹⁶³ Vogel does not recuperate Desdemona by refuting Iago's lies, but by rendering them immaterial. Her Desdemona calls Othello's handkerchief a "crappy little snot rag,"¹⁶⁴ proves guilty of the infidelity her husband fears (though not with Cassio), and consistently dangles the possibility of promotion in front of Emilia, while never having the intention of following through with it. She is flighty, self-serving, and insensitive, and yet, by the end of the play, Vogel has given her a depth of character that many interpretations of Shakespeare's play do not.

In 4.3 of *Othello*, the protofeminist Emilia suggests to the shocked and chaste Desdemona that adultery is not such a huge evil when it is men themselves who have taught

¹⁵⁹ Savran, "Loose Screws," xi.

¹⁶⁰ Savran, xii.

¹⁶¹ In her "Note to Director," Vogel writes that "*Desdemona* was written as a tribute (i.e., 'rip-off') to the infamous play, *Shakespeare the Sadist* by Wolfgang Bauer" (*Desdemona*, 4). In "Saving Desdemona and/or Ourselves," Novy submits that Bauer's play is "a send-up in which [Shakespeare's] name is used for the shock value of profaning it. There is something of the same spirit in Vogel's attitude toward Desdemona" (72).

¹⁶² Of course, in her exchange with Iago on the docks, Shakespeare's Desdemona demonstrates that she, as E. A. J. Honigmann notes "understands sexual innuendo," a characteristic that is highlighted in some performances and adaptations to demonstrate her sexual knowledge (quoted in Pechter, *Othello and Interpretive Traditions*, 71).

¹⁶³ Dolan, "Paula Vogel's *Desdemona*," 437.

¹⁶⁴ Vogel, *Desdemona*, 7.

women such ills through their own actions; Vogel's play inverts this conversation so that it is Desdemona who advocates for adultery and reveals the gender roles that have regulated her life:

DESDEMONA. The world's a huge thing for so small a vice.

EMILIA. Not my world, thank you—mine's tidy and neat and I aim to keep it that way.

DESDEMONA. Oh, the world! Our world's narrow and small, I'll grant you—but there are other worlds—worlds that we married women never get to see.

EMILIA. Amen—and don't need to see, I should add.

DESDEMONA. If you've never seen the world, how would you know? Women are clad in purdah, we decent, respectable matrons, from the cradle to the altar to the shroud . . . bridled with linen, blinded with lace. . . . These very walls are purdah.¹⁶⁵

This Desdemona chafes at the restrictions placed upon her as a married woman, arguing that, from birth to death, women of her class are veiled and controlled, both to protect them from the world and to keep them from it. Her analogy of “purdah” operates a few ways within the text. First, it confirms that Vogel's play presents and represents a Western, white, liberal feminist, and ultimately Islamophobic understanding of women's rights, with purdah standing in for a larger, global image of the dangers of patriarchal power: sexually stifling and disciplining woman's bodily autonomy. Second, it continues Desdemona's trend of understanding all women through her own experiences, using a very particular analogy to represent women more generally even though she is referencing her own complaints about gender. Finally, in referencing a Muslim tradition present in many Arab countries, Desdemona mirrors her own Orientalizing of Othello.

In fact, in this same scene, she remarks on her disappointment in learning that Othello, who she saw as an escape from this restraint, is no different from the rest of the men she knows:

I remember the first time I saw my husband and I caught a glimpse of his skin, and oh, how I thrilled. I thought—aha—a man of a different color. From another world and planet. I thought—if I marry this strange dark man, I can leave this narrow little Venice

¹⁶⁵ Vogel, 19.

with its whispering piazzas behind—I can escape and see other worlds. (*Pause.*) But under that exotic façade was a porcelain white Venetian.¹⁶⁶

Vogel's Desdemona is initially guilty of the act of exoticization that some Shakespeare and race scholars have laid at her feet, assuming that Othello's mind mirrors his black "visage" and that he will be as foreign and exciting as his skin is different from the Venetian norm.¹⁶⁷ This Desdemona did not marry Othello for love, but for the possibility of a new and liberated life from the gendered restrictions placed upon her by the white patriarchal structure of Venice.

Throughout the play, this desire for freedom is tied up with Desdemona's sexual desire.¹⁶⁸ She married Othello for the new life she thought it would bring her, but as Othello's jealousy worsens, Desdemona decides that she is going to leave him by running away with Lodovico, whom she reveals to be an ex-lover, hoping that her wealthy father will forgive her marital mistake or perhaps set her up in some other town or country out of shame. Her desire to see the world is also part of what drives her to fill in for Bianca as a prostitute: "they spill their seed into me, Emilia—seed from a thousand lands, passed down through generations of ancestors, with genealogies that cover the surface of the globe. And I simply lie still there in the darkness, taking them all into me; I close my eyes and in the dark of my mind—oh, how I travel!"¹⁶⁹ While Desdemona longs to expand her world, she seems to recognize that she can only do so through men: when her husband fails to provide this, she seeks out others, and will use Lodovico and her father to try again. As Emilia articulates, even with all her wealth and beauty, Desdemona is still a woman living in a patriarchal society: "in time you'll know. Women

¹⁶⁶ Vogel, 19-20.

¹⁶⁷ See, for example, Singh, "Othello's Identity."

¹⁶⁸ Coming on the heels of the sexual revolution, the feminist movement in the 70s-90s vigorously debated the topics of sex and sexuality, though most prominent discussions did not analyze race or class. Vogel's Desdemona exemplifies the sexual freedom celebrated by many feminists, while also allowing audiences to recognize her fetishization of Othello as problematic.

¹⁶⁹ Vogel, *Desdemona*, 20.

just don't figure in their heads—not the one who hangs the wash, not Bianca—and not even you, m'lady. That's the hard truth. Men only see each other in their eyes. Only each other."¹⁷⁰

In its articulation of the various restrictions placed on the women in *Othello*, Vogel's *Desdemona* challenges audiences to rethink where the tragedy of the play lies: for the women, tragedy exists before the play even begins in the social structures that discipline their agency and their sexuality; for Desdemona, the tragedy is not simply her wronged innocence, but her murder writ large. In other words, even if Desdemona were guilty of infidelity, even if she were not the compassionate and naïve girl that many scholars and directors often make her out to be, she did not deserve to die.¹⁷¹ By the end of Vogel's play, any frivolity or satiric humor that Desdemona's attitude or Emilia and Bianca's class-driven accents may have elicited disappears as the tragic deaths of Shakespeare's play hang over the stage.¹⁷² In the final scene that contains dialogue, having finally come clean about taking her mistress' handkerchief, Emilia tries to calm Desdemona's fear by assuring her of Othello's love:

EMILIA. Miss Desdemona—oh my lady, I'm sure your husband loves you!

DESDEMONA. How do you know that my husband—!

EMILIA. —More than the world! He won't harm you none, m'lady—I've often seen him—

DESDEMONA. —What have you seen?!

EMILIA. I've seen him, sometimes when you walk in the garden, slip behind the arbor just to watch you, unawares ... and at night ... in the corridor ... outside your room—sometimes he just stands there, Miss, when you're asleep—he just stands there—

DESDEMONA. (*Frightened.*) Oh, Jesus—

EMILIA. And once ... I saw ... I came upon him unbeknowin', and he didn't see me, I'm sure—he was in your chamber—and he gathered up the sheets from your bed, like a body, and ... and he held it to his face, like, like a bouquet, all breathin' it in— (*The two women pause: they both realize Othello's been smelling the sheets for traces of a lover.*)

¹⁷⁰ Vogel, 43.

¹⁷¹ See also Traub, *Desire and Anxiety*, 41, 48-9.

¹⁷² The character list describes Emilia as having a “broad Irish brogue” and Bianca as using “stage Cockney” (Vogel, *Desdemona*, 4).

DESDEMONA. That isn't love. It isn't love.¹⁷³

In this moment, both women realize what awaits Desdemona, as all of Emilia's earlier warnings of Othello's murderous jealousy are made real. In the following final three scenes, Emilia brushes Desdemona's hair to prepare her for bed and, for the first time, she seems to truly feel for her mistress; their class differences suddenly seem unimportant compared to the danger they both face as women with violent, jealous husbands. While the motivations behind Iago's machinations are debated, one he articulates is sexual jealousy, both over the possibility that Othello has slept with his wife as well as a possible desire for Desdemona herself. Bianca desires to marry Cassio, one of her regular customers, but in Shakespeare's play, he makes it clear that he has no intention of marrying a courtesan. Othello, of course, murders Desdemona due to his own belief in her infidelity. As Daileader notes, *Othello's* narrative is concerned with the "sexual surveillance" of women and Vogel's play pushes for a reading of *Othello* that acknowledges how the tragedy of Shakespeare's play is one of gendered violence.¹⁷⁴

Morrison's *Desdemona* similarly focuses on giving voice to Desdemona's interiority; however, whereas Vogel's play ultimately unites female characters through gender, Morrison's suggests that gender is not enough because such bonds among women are complicated by differences of race and class. Morrison's *Desdemona* takes place after Shakespeare's play, in the afterlife. Here, Desdemona finally has the space to speak of her thoughts and feelings, but she must also confront her own prejudices. She starts by describing her upbringing and the limitations she faced as a girl and then a woman; Othello subsequently tells her his story and,

¹⁷³ Vogel, 45. Ellipses presented as written in the text. This language echoes the feminist discourses surrounding domestic violence in the 1970s and '80s. See, for example, Celani, *The Illusion of Love* and Siegel, "'The Rule of Love'." In her review of the battered women's movement in *Battered Women and Feminist Lawmaking*, Schneider reminds us that domestic violence is often a problem of context because it "is commonly viewed not as a 'hate crime,' but, if anything, as a 'love crime'" (192).

¹⁷⁴ Daileader, *Racism, Misogyny*, 10.

through Desdemona, we learn of the horrors he faced and committed as a soldier. Desdemona's acceptance of him appears unconditional, but Emilia soon challenges Desdemona's compassion by chastising her misunderstanding of her privilege. The following scene features Barbary, a figure mentioned in Shakespeare's play in a reference Desdemona makes of her mother's maid; here, Barbary similarly criticizes Desdemona's ignorance of her actual status in the household as a slave. Finally, Othello appears, and he and Desdemona argue about their relationship before apologizing and agreeing to live in peace. Throughout, songs by Rokia Traoré frame and inform the characters' dialogue, mirroring the poetry of Shakespeare's original while keeping the play, like Vogel's *Desdemona*, centered on female voices. This centering is especially true in terms of performance, as Desdemona and Barbary are the only characters embodied onstage. Besides Cassio's lines, which are played as a pre-recorded voice over, and Barbary's, the actress who plays Desdemona voices all the other character's lines herself and Rokia Traoré (Barbary) sings all the music, accompanied by two or three Black female backup singers.¹⁷⁵

Like Vogel's play, Morrison's *Desdemona* gives Desdemona and the other female characters new depths, presenting their problems through an intersectional feminist lens. From the afterlife, Desdemona chafes under the gendered expectations assigned to her from birth, citing her name, which means misery, as a sign of what was expected for her:

Perhaps my parents believed or imagined or knew my fortune at the moment of my birth. Perhaps being born a girl gave them all they needed to know of what my life would be like. That it would be subject to the whims of my elders and the control of men. Certainly that was the standard, no, the obligation of females in Venice when I was a girl. Men made the rules; women followed them.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵ Morrison's *Desdemona* is therefore made up almost exclusively of female voices in performance. For descriptions of the play in performance, see Sciolino's review in the *New York Times* ("Desdemona' Talks Back to 'Othello'"), McNulty's review in the *Los Angeles Times* ("Toni Morrison's ghostly 'Desdemona'"), Brokaw's review in the *Shakespeare Bulletin* ("*Desdemona*"), and Ayanna Thompson's critique in "*Desdemona*."

¹⁷⁶ Morrison, *Desdemona*, 13.

Desdemona tells us, however, that she continuously pushed against these rules, even if only in her mind, and now she revels in her opportunity to speak freely as she could not on earth. She also explicitly challenges the audience's assumptions about her character: "Did you imagine me as a wisp of a girl? A coddled doll who fell in love with a handsome warrior who rode off with her under his arm? Is it your final summation of me that I was a foolish naïf who surrendered to her husband's brutality because she had no choice? Nothing could be more false."¹⁷⁷ This Desdemona knows who she is and desires that the audience recognize her strength, passion, and individuality. She also acknowledges the deep rift between genders that Emilia articulates in Vogel's play, a rift that keeps her from connecting to her husband in the manner she would like: "The wide wild celebrity men find with each other cannot compete with the narrow comfort of a wife. Romance is always overshadowed by brawn. The language of love is trivial compared to the hidden language of men that lies underneath the secret language they speak in public."¹⁷⁸ Desdemona argues that it is this gendered separation, and the preference of homosocial brotherhood over heterosexual romance, that enables Othello to believe Iago's lies, even as he knew they must not be true.¹⁷⁹ Like Vogel's Emilia, Morrison's Desdemona recognizes and laments the patriarchal structure that elevates Iago above her in her husband's eyes and, like Vogel's Desdemona, she longs to be free of such constraints.

Morrison's Desdemona is also ignorant of her own class and race privilege, but unlike Vogel's character, she must face the criticism of those affected by her entitlement. In Scene 8, Desdemona comes across Emilia, who quickly dismisses Desdemona's sense of betrayal at her

¹⁷⁷ Morrison, 16.

¹⁷⁸ Morrison, 37.

¹⁷⁹ Stallybrass argues that Iago is able to reinterpret the gestures of Desdemona's class status as specifically gendered and, thus, sexually promiscuous because, in the play, "his is the voice of 'common sense,' the ceaseless repetition of the always-already 'known,' the culturally 'given'" ("Patriarchal Territories," 139).

theft of the handkerchief by pointing out that they were not friends due to Desdemona's behavior: "'Unpin me, Emilia.' 'Arrange my bed sheets, Emilia.' That is not how you treat a friend; that's how you treat a servant. Someone beneath you, beneath your class which takes devotion for granted.'"¹⁸⁰ She then tells Desdemona of her own misfortunes growing up an orphan and the desperation this can instill in someone who learns to hide from everyone, even their own husband. She rejects her mistress' attempts to empathize with this positionality as a woman lacking not a mother but a mother's love, insisting, "It's not the same."¹⁸¹

This emphasis on understanding across divides of lived experience emerges again in the next scene, when Desdemona interacts with Traoré as Barbary, the slave who helped raise her and whom she remembers as the one person who truly loved her. Yet, as Barbary is quick to point out, Desdemona never really knew her, as indicated by the fact that she calls her "Barbary"—a metonym at the time for Africa, "the geography of the foreigner, the savage"¹⁸²—instead of her real name, Sa'ran, which Desdemona never knew.¹⁸³ Sa'ran further argues that Desdemona could never truly know her due to their racial difference.¹⁸⁴

DESDEMONA. Well, Sa'ran, whatever your name, you were my best friend.

SA'RAN. I was your slave.

DESDEMONA. What does that matter? I have known and loved you all my life.

SA'RAN. I am black-skinned. You are white-skinned.

DESDEMONA. So?

SA'RAN. So you don't know me. Have never known me.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁰ Morrison, *Desdemona*, 43.

¹⁸¹ Morrison, 44.

¹⁸² Morrison, 45.

¹⁸³ In a 2011 report about the then upcoming performance of *Desdemona* at UC-Berkley, Kitts mentions that Sa'ran means "joy," a name that therefore "challenge[s] the concept—implicit in the name of "Desdemona" ("misery")—that culturally assigned identities fix our doom" ("Reviving Desdemona," 11).

¹⁸⁴ While the character list names her as Barbary, I will call her Sa'ran in preference to her real name.

¹⁸⁵ Morrison, *Desdemona*, 45-6.

Sa'ran never had a choice in taking care of Desdemona, and while Desdemona herself did not mistreat her, their race informed their social positions and the limits of Desdemona's understanding.¹⁸⁶ As she did with Emilia, Desdemona attempts to reiterate that gender oppression brings them together: "We are women. I had no more control over my life than you had. My prison was unlike yours but it was a prison still."¹⁸⁷ As Thompson notes, Desdemona comes across "sounding like many contemporary white liberals" in her assumption that they have "shared so much."¹⁸⁸ At the end of the scene, Sa'ran sings a new song to replace her famous Willow Song of sorrow—which is typically credited to Desdemona in Shakespeare's play, although she in fact appropriates it from Barbary. Sa'ran's new song ends "I will never die again."¹⁸⁹ Desdemona, however, immediately rewrites herself into this declaration: "We will never die again."¹⁹⁰

Reviewers' interpretations of this scene and its meaning vary widely, with some reading Sa'ran's new song and Desdemona's articulation of a "we" as representing the creation of a female alliance or community, while others remain more pessimistic about the possibilities and limits of cross-race alliance. Katherine Steele Brokaw's reading, while noting that the play hauntingly implies that such reconciliation and female harmony can only come after death, emphasizes the positive nature of Barbary and Desdemona's interaction, reporting that:

The women joined hands, reconciling because despite racial and national differences, they are both women, and one had "no more control over [her] own life" than the other. While the performance led us to believe that it was about class, colonialism, and

¹⁸⁶ In an interview with me, Jean Howard mentioned that she often uses this scene from Morrison's text to ask students to consider Desdemona's white privilege in *Othello*: "you realize the white innocence that cocoons Desdemona and that there is something she must know before she can go further and recognize her complicity in her own death" (Howard, Interview).

¹⁸⁷ Morrison, *Desdemona*, 48.

¹⁸⁸ Ayanna Thompson, "Desdemona," 501. Morrison, *Desdemona*, 45.

¹⁸⁹ See Erickson, "'Late' has no meaning here" for a discussion of this song in relation to its first iteration as the third poem in Morrison's *Five Poems* collaboration with Kara Walker in 2002 (13-14).

¹⁹⁰ Morrison, *Desdemona*, 49.

servitude, in the end we learned that such ideas are peripheral to the larger concerns of the dangerous love women have for men, and the fragile communities women create with each other.¹⁹¹

Peter Erickson similarly reads the conversations Desdemona has with the other women as a turning point, a transformation, and a second chance, with the end of the Willow Song scene offering a “choric refrain [that] conveys a shared resolution in which the two women, and by extension all women, potentially participate.”¹⁹² He also reads the play itself as a reversal of Desdemona’s trajectory in *Othello* (as she moves from a childhood with Barbary into adulthood with Othello) because, through the conversations she has and the lessons she learns, she “moves away from her marriage to Othello toward commitment to a newly fashioned alliance with Barbary.”¹⁹³ Thompson takes a different, less optimistic stance, however, driven in part by her interpretation of Traoré’s Sa’ran as “dramatically uninterested in Desdemona/Benko, seemingly focusing instead on the music that she and her fellow Malian artists perform together.”¹⁹⁴ When Desdemona edits Sa’ran’s “I” to “we,” Thompson asks:

Are we to interpret Desdemona’s inclusion of her own suffering with Sa’ran’s as an epiphany about their conjoined future in the afterworld, or is it merely a return to the unthinking collapse of all female suffering, one that implicitly whitewashes the unequal treatment of black and white bodies? While the text is ambiguous, the performance by Traore as Sa’ran makes the distance between Desdemona and her former slave immense. While they occupy the same tightly focused space onstage for the entirety of the production, the gulf between Sa’ran and Desdemona seems almost insurmountable.¹⁹⁵

In direct opposition to Erickson, Thompson sees the relationships “that take the place of the Othello–Desdemona dyad” as potentially problematic, representing not female solidarity, but Desdemona’s—and perhaps, more broadly, white women’s—inability to recognize and cross the

¹⁹¹ Brokaw, “*Desdemona*,” 363.

¹⁹² Erickson, “‘Late’ has no meaning here,” 14.

¹⁹³ Erickson, 10.

¹⁹⁴ Ayanna Thompson, “*Desdemona*,” 502.

¹⁹⁵ Thompson, 502-3.

class and racial differences that divide her from others.¹⁹⁶ Written during a period of intense critique of white feminists by women of color, Morrison's *Desdemona* lacks the knowledge of difference that separates them despite their shared womanhood.



Figure 9: Rokia Traoré, her backup singers, and Tina Benko in Toni Morrison's Desdemona directed by Peter Sellars at Lincoln Center in 2011. Photo by Peter Dasilva.

In performance, however, this distance is both represented and, ultimately, crossed. *Desdemona's* stage is conceptually split into two, with Traoré and the African musicians on one side and the *Desdemona* actress on the other. Tina Benko, who played *Desdemona* beginning early in its 2011 tour, noted that it felt “very isolating to be stage left for the whole evening,”¹⁹⁷ and Anne Dechêne similarly described Tina's *Desdemona* as “alone in her own world” due to

¹⁹⁶ Thompson, 496.

¹⁹⁷ Benko, Interview.

this staging.¹⁹⁸ That distance does get bridged, however, during Sa'ran's scene with Desdemona, and Benko reported "run[ning] over to Rokia's side of the stage" as soon as she could and then sitting and watching her sing while Traoré herself looked out to the audience. She also noted that "we had a beautiful moment . . . where we lean towards each other until our foreheads touched," and the piece ends with Traoré, Benko, and the other female musicians sitting at the back of the stage around a cluster of lightbulbs like they are around a fire. Benko said, "usually, I ended up where my back was to the audience for the end . . . That should be the audience's experience at that point."¹⁹⁹ By positioning Desdemona with these other women in such an intimate circle, this staging implies that community is possible; and by sitting with her back to the audience, Desdemona's character becomes the audience's surrogate and model for how to ultimately create that community: by listening.

While Desdemona and Sa'ran's interaction presents the only embodied interracial relationship on the stage, the final scene of the play, in which Desdemona and Othello confront and then apologize to each other, also ends on an ambivalent note concerning the possibilities of a relationship across interracial lines. First, Othello accuses Desdemona of not actually loving him, declaring, "You fancied the idea of me, the exotic foreigner who kills for the State, who will die for the State. . . . What excited you was my strange story. . . . More than infidelity my rage was toward your delusion. Your requirements for a bleached, ultra-civilized soul framed in blood, for court manners honed by violence."²⁰⁰ Such a reading of Desdemona's love mirrors Sa'ran's accusations and Desdemona's own recounting of when she first met Othello, remarking on how his eyes reminded her of Barbary's and hinting that his stories must have sparked the

¹⁹⁸ Dechêne, Interview. She also acknowledged that this must have been "a little difficult" for the actress herself at times.

¹⁹⁹ Benko, Interview.

²⁰⁰ Morrison, *Desdemona*, 50-1.

same longing for adventure in her that Barbary's did.²⁰¹ The play therefore implies that Desdemona exoticized both of these Black bodies and projected onto the strange tales of her nurse and her husband's escapades her own longing for escape. Coming face to face with the horrors of war and rape that Othello has committed, however, Desdemona describes her love for him as unconditional,²⁰² and later, upon being accused by Othello of never truly loving him, she argues against the stereotyped image he paints of himself in her mind: "My mistake was believing that you hated war as much as I did. You believed I loved Othello the warrior. I did not. I was the empire you had already conquered. Alone together we could have been invincible."²⁰³ While she does apologize for not realizing that Cassio was actually a racist person (itself an interesting interpretation of his character in this re-visioning), she also moves Othello to apologize in turn and to admit that it was he who made their love a spectacle, not her, in murdering her for a lie. When Othello claims he would murder himself again, Desdemona asks for them to turn away from killing as a solution, offering up instead the opportunity of peace in moving on together. The playtext and its performance mirrors the ambivalence the play presents surrounding interracial relationships, as the final line—"We will be judged by how well we love."—is given to Desdemona in the playtext but appears to have most often been said by Sa'ran in performance.²⁰⁴ Desdemona clearly desires to connect with both Sa'ran and Othello on a deep, emotional level, but struggles to recognize why such a connection may be hampered by her position as a white, upper-class woman.

²⁰¹ Morrison, 22-3, 36.

²⁰² Morrison, 39. Her language in this moment also evokes Shakespeare's sonnet 116: "Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds, / Or bends with the remover to remove."

²⁰³ Morrison, *Desdemona*, 54.

²⁰⁴ Morrison, 56. Benko, Interview; Dechêne, Interview.

Vogel's and Morrison's plays both privilege Desdemona's relationship with Othello over his relationship with Iago, while also emphasizing the aspects of Desdemona's character that exist beyond her position as a wife murdered by her husband by, in turn, prioritizing her relationships with other women. These Desdemonas resist the constraints placed upon them as women in a patriarchal society and insist on the complexity of her character and her position in multiple interracial relationships. In emphasizing the female bonds—good or bad—that exist in and around the play, Vogel and Morrison offer feminist readings of the play that tease out new layers in its tragedy. Vogel's ultimate privileging of gendered unification over class difference exemplifies the problematic history of a white feminism that erases difference in order to fight for the advancement of a universalized "woman," while ignoring—and contributing to—the structural racism that disadvantages many other women. Morrison's play, on the other hand, illustrates the work of Black feminism by emphasizing difference through an intersectional lens, acknowledging the multiple oppressions that can come with a woman's class and racial status. Yet, in a surprising twist, while Vogel's play emphasizes female bonds, it also ends in the shadow of the gendered tragedy to come. Morrison's *Desdemona*, on the other hand, calls those bonds into question, but ends with the hope of new possibilities—provided we are committed to working towards them.

As Thompson argues, "*Desdemona* posits that cross-/inter-racial relationships can only be successful through hard work and long, sustained, and at times uncomfortable, dialogues."²⁰⁵ Such dialogue involves acknowledging the negative impact *Othello* has had historically, including through its representation of Desdemona, in the formation and perpetuation of racism in the U.S. The white female vulnerability that Desdemona often exemplifies and the threat of

²⁰⁵ Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 114.

and threats to white female sexuality that *Othello* represents has been simultaneously weaponized against Black men (e.g., the 19th century Southern narrative of the Black male rapist used to justify lynching), dichotomized with (and so against) Black women (e.g., *Othello* burlesques that used blackface Desdemonas to caricature Black women²⁰⁶), and leveraged both for and against the agency of white women (e.g., Desdemona representation as the ideal wife/woman often depends on reading her as passive). Therefore, while both Vogel and Morrison's plays offer Desdemona room outside of the white patriarchal structure of both Venice and Shakespearean drama to speak, they also critique her character as it has been used or viewed by critics, scholars, and audiences. Vogel upends an earlier imagination of Desdemona as innocent and naïve, asking audiences to face their own potential internalized misogyny by presenting a Desdemona that may not be easy to root for, but who deserves her tragedy no more than does Shakespeare's Desdemona. Morrison's play presents a Desdemona of the 21st century—strong and vocal as she pushes against the patriarchal limits that were placed on her in life—and then complicates appreciation of her feminism by revealing the class and race privilege she experiences and benefits from as well. These *Desdemona* plays thus challenge audiences to rethink what they thought they knew or wanted for Desdemona and invite them to potentially unlearn and relearn alongside her.

²⁰⁶ See Fielder's discussion of 19th century minstrel adaptations of *Othello*: "Blackface Desdemona relies upon stereotypes of race, gender, and sexuality, caricaturing black women rather than representing them" ("Blackface Desdemona," 54).

The Absent Presence of the Black Woman

Desdemona's speech in *Othello* is limited, but the voices of women of color, while referenced by others in the play, are completely absent.²⁰⁷ Three Black women are mentioned within Shakespeare's playtext, but only in passing and without further character development: Othello's mother (mentioned twice by Othello as he discusses the handkerchief's significance to him), the Egyptian Sibyl (also mentioned by Othello, twice in one scene, in the context of the handkerchief's origin), and Barbary (whom Desdemona mentions once as her mother's maid and the originator of her Willow Song).²⁰⁸ The physical absence of these women in Shakespeare's play exist as holes in the narrative, representative of the larger absence of women of color in Shakespeare's canon,²⁰⁹ as well as the scarcity of employment for women of color in professional and regional theater more generally.²¹⁰ Attending to such unequal representation,

²⁰⁷ Daileader articulates that her exploration of Othellophilia "is driven in part by my discomfort with the grand omission of Othellophilia: that is, the black woman in Desdemona's shadow" (*Racism, Misogyny*, 13) and I contend that such a discomfort was the driving force for the re-visionings I explore in this section.

²⁰⁸ While there has been and continues to be debate over the racial classification of early Egyptians, *Harlem Duet* imagines the Sibyl in the figure of Billie, a Black woman. Many recent scholars similarly read Barbary as a Black slave due to how Barbary, at the time, "was slang for the region of North Africa associated with Berbers or Moors, the so-called Barbary coast of Africa" (Ayanna Thompson, Introduction to *Othello*, 24). This connection may have been the intention of the original productions (consider Iago's racist description of Othello as a "Barbary horse" in Shakespeare, *Othello* 1.1.125), though in his editorial notes Neill marks the name as an "alternative form of Barbara," to which it was changed in some historical editions of the text and which whitewashed the character (Neill Introduction to *Othello*, 357). For more on Barbary as a Black maid/slave, see MacDonald, "Black Ram, White Ewe"; chapter five of MacDonald, *Shakespearean Adaptation*; and Marcus, "Constructions of Race and Gender," 130.

²⁰⁹ Cleopatra is the only woman of color physically represented in Shakespeare's canon and even her status as non-white has remained subject to debate for centuries, with many historians citing her Greek heritage as proof of her whiteness and numerous literary critics using such arguments to erase the racialized language of Shakespeare's text. White actresses have also dominated the role of the Egyptian Queen in *Antony and Cleopatra*'s performance history. For more on Cleopatra's representation in terms of race, see Royster, *Becoming Cleopatra*; the first chapter of Daileader, *Racism, Misogyny*; the second chapter of MacDonald, *Women and Race*; and Hall, *Things of Darkness*.

²¹⁰ The Actors' Equity Association (AEA) published a Diversity Report in 2020 with hiring statistics for their members covering 2016-2019. Their organization represents more than 51,000 professional actors and stage managers nationwide, though they note in their study that their statistics "fall short of reflecting demographics of the communities which the shows serve" ("Diversity Report," 2). For example, only 21.5% of AEA contracts go to people of color—a smaller number than the total percentage of people of color in the US. According to their statistics, women received fewer contracts (44.91%) than men (51.42%) and were hired less often for choral parts and to play principal characters both in a play and a musical. People of color received less contracts (21.5%) than white or European Americans (63.95%), with 10.37% of the total contracts nationally going to Black or African American AEA members. These numbers remained similar across all the roles of choral, principal play, and

Celia Daileader asks, “In an entertainment industry that routinely discriminates against women of color, can we afford to keep telling the same old story?”²¹¹

Morrison’s *Desdemona*, Barbara Molette and Carlton Molette’s 1995 play *Fortunes of the Moor*, Jennings’ *Casting Othello*, Chakrabarti’s *Red Velvet*, and Sears’ *Harlem Duet* tell a different story. All written by women of color, each of these plays invite onto the stage a presence and voice notably absent in *Othello*: that of a Black woman. As Sears asserts in her introductory notes to *Harlem Duet*, “Notes of a Colored Girl,” she has rarely seen herself, her family, or their lives accurately portrayed onstage and contends that “Writing for the stage allows me a process to dream myself into existence.”²¹² In the context of Shakespeare’s canon more broadly, as Joyce Green MacDonald contends, “adaptation becomes the flexible tool for excavating Black women from their repressed places in Shakespeare.”²¹³

They thus aim to accomplish within the theatrical canon what Saidiya Hartman’s groundbreaking work on “critical fabulation” aims to accomplish in historical archives: “By

principal musical. The AEA does not offer statistics that look at how overlapping identities—racialized gender or gendered racial positions (i.e., women of color)—affect hiring numbers, but extrapolating from the data, it seems appropriate to assume that women of color are hired less often than both white women and men of color. In their 2017 report, covering Broadway and Off-Broadway (“Looking at Hiring Biases”), the AEA did provide the category of “female of color” in their datasets alongside the race neutralized (and therefore presumably white) designations of simply “male” and “female” (“Actors’ Equity Releases”). In his article about the organization Women of Color on Broadway, Teeman notes of the AEA’s findings that “The number of women of color who were classified as principals in plays, musicals, as members of the chorus, and as stage managers was dramatically lower than any other demographic” (Teeman, “See Us, Trust Us”). See also the Asian American Performers Action Coalition’s (AAPAC) similar, more localized report published in 2021, which looked at hiring practices based only on race and ethnicity in the 2018-19 season for every Broadway show and the 18 largest non-profit theatre companies in New York City (Bandhu and Kim, “The Visibility Report”).

²¹¹ Daileader, *Racism, Misogyny*, 13.

²¹² Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 14. In a speech she gave in 1981 at the Ohio Arts Council, Toni Morrison similarly said, “If you find a book you really want to read but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it.” See Brown, “Writing is Third Career.” In a 2003 interview with *The New Yorker*, Morrison also said that “What was driving me to write was the silence—so many stories untold and unexamined. There was a wide vacuum in the literature. I was inspired by the silence and absences in the literature.” See Als, “Toni Morrison.”

²¹³ MacDonald, *Shakespearean Adaptation*, 11. The description of her book on Palgrave’s website offers an especially apt argument concerning adaptations use-value in this sense: “modern Shakespearean adaptation is a primary means for materializing black women’s often elusive presence in the plays, serving as a vital staging place for historical and political inquiry into racial formation in Shakespeare’s world, and our own.” See <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9783030506797>.

playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done.”²¹⁴ They do so by giving voices to the Black women only mentioned in Shakespeare’s play, offering an alternative cultural landscape to the white, patriarchal culture of Venice in *Othello*, revisiting important discussions concerning gender, race, and sexuality raised in the play and its performance, and imagining alternative histories for Shakespeare’s play. These plays do not necessarily seek to resolve the issues presented in *Othello* or to rewrite it conclusively by giving voice to what and who are missing; instead, they remind us of the gaps that often exist in our literary, theatrical, and educational canons, and call into question the earlier ideology of colorblind casting (that the main goal is representation). In fact, staging and/or centering Black women sometimes means acknowledging their traumas and their tragedies more than celebrating their presence.

Morrison’s *Desdemona* provides perhaps the most “traditional,” though complex, reworking of Shakespeare’s *Othello* by revisiting its events through Desdemona’s experience in the afterlife. Morrison further complicates this retelling by giving voices to two of the Black female characters Shakespeare’s text only mentions: Othello’s mother and Barbary. Halfway through the play, Morrison presents a scene in which Othello’s mother—here named Soun—and Desdemona’s mother, Madame Brabantio, meet and discuss their children, first in a relationship of enmity and then putting aside their anger to mourn their children together. Here, Soun has an identity outside of the context of the handkerchief and its haunted consequences of lost love, as she mourns her son and the circumstances of his death. Further, while Desdemona’s mother at

²¹⁴ Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 11.

first declares them enemies, Soun focuses instead on their shared grief. She does not completely collapse their differences, however; when Madame Brabantio suggests they kneel at their children's graves Soun instead determines to follow the traditions of her own people and insists that she and Madame Brabantio build "an altar to the spirits who are waiting to console us."²¹⁵ There are limitations to this Africanist representation, however, as Soun remains identifiable only in her position as Othello's mother—and since her lines are spoken by the Desdemona actress, she does not actually appear as an embodied Black woman onstage.²¹⁶ Therefore, while Morrison gives her audience more of this character, her voice is still mediated by others.

This is not the case, however, with Barbary/Sa'ran, the only character voiced by Rokia Traoré.²¹⁷ As Lenore Kitts reports from an interview she conducted with the director, Peter Sellars:

Sellars proposed the collaboration with Rokia Traore, he explained to me, because the project "required a voice of an African woman to speak as an African woman and to sing as an African woman." It was important to him as well as to Morrison that Africa no longer be "ventriloquized" by Shakespeare, nor even by Morrison, for that matter. In *Desdemona*, finally, the voice of "Barbary"—Africa—is . . . African.²¹⁸

Unlike the other characters voiced by Desdemona, Barbary's conversation with Desdemona is therefore an embodied, interracial dialogue, which involves Barbary actively articulating an identity for herself outside the framework of *Othello*.²¹⁹ This begins when she voices her real name—"Sa'ran"—and corrects Desdemona as to her actual status: not Desdemona's friend, but

²¹⁵ Morrison, *Desdemona* 27.

²¹⁶ Sciolino reports in her review of the play that on top of her own story, Desdemona "also channels the voices of Othello, Desdemona's mother in conversation with Othello's mother and Desdemona's own servant, Emilia" ("Desdemona' Talks Back to 'Othello'").

²¹⁷ Other than the voiceover of Cassio's lines by a disembodied male actor, Barbary is also the only character not voiced by the actress who plays Desdemona. See McNulty, "Toni Morrison's ghostly 'Desdemona'."

²¹⁸ Kitts, "Reviving Desdemona," 11.

²¹⁹ Many reviewers cite their scene together as the most interesting and powerful moment of the play. See, for example, Jason Zinoman's and Elaine Sciolino's reviews in the *New York Times* and Charles McNulty's review in the *Los Angeles Times*.

her slave. She also lays claim to a new future for herself by rejecting her sorrowful Willow Song and singing instead of the promise of eternal life after death. While this is the only scene in which Traoré voices Sa'ran, she remains onstage throughout the play, singing the numerous other songs she wrote in her own native Bambara, which are woven throughout Morrison's text, occasionally playing guitar and accompanied by two or three "female Malian backup singers" and "two male Malian instrumentalists."²²⁰ Through her presence and her music, Traoré keeps the image of Sa'ran and the African culture she stands in for at the forefront of the audience's mind, balancing Desdemona's monopolization of the spoken text. By giving "equal weight" to Traoré's music and Morrison's words, the production also gives equal weight to Desdemona's white, Venetian and Sa'ran's Black, African voices.²²¹

The introduction of African female voices into the otherwise white, patriarchal, Venetian society of *Othello* is also at the heart of Barbara Molette and Carlton Molette's *Fortunes of the Moor*, which operates as a kind of sequel to *Othello*, but with a twist: in this version of events, Desdemona's father cast her out and she gave birth to a son at a convent before leaving Venice to join her husband in Cyprus where the events of Shakespeare's play then take place. The re-visioning takes as its inspiration Lodovico's lines to his uncle Gratiano at the end of Shakespeare's text—"seize upon the fortunes of the Moor / For they succeed to you"²²²—imagining a future where Brabantio does not die and Othello's kin come from Africa to claim the child and his fortune, resulting in a fight for custody and inheritance that hinges on the differences between Venetian capitalist greed and African familial communalism.²²³ Meanwhile,

²²⁰ Ayanna Thompson, "*Desdemona*," 498. Thompson also offers more information about the instruments, which she identifies as "the Ngoni, the Bambara name for an ancient traditional lute found throughout West Africa, and the Kora, the traditional West African harp-like instrument made from a calabash" (498).

²²¹ Blake, "Desdemona Review."

²²² Shakespeare, *Othello* 5.2.365-6.

²²³ Molette and Molette, *Fortunes of the Moor*. A main point of contention between the Africans and Venetians in the play is that "Othello" is not the general's birth name but was instead given to him by the slavers who kidnapped

Lodovico and Gratiano plot to kill the child in order to remain Brabantio's heirs. The playwrights also decentered European/Western theater styles by telling the story in abibigoro, an African theatrical style described below, and locating the story itself in Africa, as Othello's uncle, Hassan, tells the people of their village the story of their trip to Venice. Hassan is accompanied on this trip by his wife, Elissa, and Othello's sister, Somaia, who has experienced multiple miscarriages and is determined to raise her nephew as her own.

Molette and Molette use all three of Othello's kin to criticize the culture and people of Venice. The characters of Elissa and Somaia, however, place special emphasis on the vast difference between the values of Venice and their own African community.²²⁴ In the Prologue, after Hassan in his position as Griot (the storyteller) pours a libation and sets the scene of their tale, Elissa and Somaia state their purpose in the story, saying of the child, "We have prepared a place for him in our village. We will teach him who he is, and who he can become."²²⁵ While they critique Venice for its horrible stench, gloomy weather, and the perpetual chill that seems to permeate the land and its people, their concern rests most with how such an environment might affect the boy as it must have Othello. They fear that if they cannot take him home with them, he will be forced to learn to be someone he is not, a fate they ascribe with sorrow to his father. In their minds, not only will the child be singled out and ridiculed for his differences if he remains, but he will also internalize the culture of Venice; as Somaia articulates to Brabantio, "If the child remains in Venice, he will become a Venetian—greedy, selfish, and arrogant, with no regard for

him; his family therefore insists on calling him "Tarik." However, the character list describes each African (Hassan, Elissa, and Somaia) by naming their relationship to "Othello," not "Tarik," and so I continue to use Othello in order to avoid confusion in my discussion of the re-visioning's connections to Shakespeare's play and character. I will, however, follow Othello's family in refusing to refer to the child as Antonio, the Christian name given to him by the nuns in whose care Desdemona left him.

²²⁴ The exact location of their village is never stated. The playwrights workshopped this play with the National Theatre of Ghana early on, however, and may have mirrored their presentation of Hassan's village and theatrical style after Ghanaian traditions.

²²⁵ Molette and Molette, *Fortunes of the Moor*, 5.

family or community.”²²⁶ Othello’s separation from his family and community and his integration into Venetian society both, they believe, led to his downfall, and his kin refuse to let the same happen to his son. Holding Venetian culture at fault for Othello’s death, Othello’s kin, and specifically the voices of the Somaia and Elissa, contrast with how the Venetian male characters in Shakespeare’s *Othello* drive the action of the play.²²⁷

When they began to workshop their play in Ghana, Molette and Molette edited it to move away from their “Eurocentric” assumptions about theater and closer to the *Abibigoro* tradition, founded by the African playwright Mohammed ben-Abdallah, whom Molette and Molette consulted with while in Ghana. *Abibigoro* “borrows heavily from traditional story-telling techniques, which include the use of music, dance, mime, audience participation and one or more story-tellers.”²²⁸ To make their play more Afrocentric, Molette and Molette shifted the setting from Venice to the hometown of Hassan, Elissa, and Somaia in Africa, where Hassan takes on the role of the Griot and the villagers themselves help tell his story, putting on masks and costumes to designate themselves as African or Venetian. Perhaps because of this shift, the play creates a binary formulation of African (good) versus Venetian (bad), and the use of masks frames the characterizations as more allegorical than nuanced. While reviews for the 1999 production were generally positive, one critic for the *Chicago Tribune* did note, in relation to this binary, that the play is “a melodramatic polemic in which all the Moors are perfect and the Venetians self-serving (Othello’s murderous rage barely merits a mention). With more complexity of character and theme, the play’s racial message would only gain more power.”²²⁹

²²⁶ Molette and Molette, 96.

²²⁷ His family also refuses to believe the “rumors” that Othello killed Desdemona, instead citing other reports/rumors that Iago killed both Othello and his wife while they slept (Molette and Molette, 5).

²²⁸ Asiedu, “Abibigoro,” 374.

²²⁹ Jones, “‘Moor’ a Promising and Provocative Tale.”

In this binary, the wife and sister stand in for a world in contrast to Venice, representing the life that Othello could have had and whose communitarian values might have saved him.²³⁰ As Elissa demonstrates, if the boy returns to Africa, a whole host of family members will look after him, while in Venice he will not have such a community. In fact, one of Somaia's critiques of Venice is the huge number of orphans present at the various nunneries they visit: "All the aunts and uncles and cousins in Venice seem to have deserted their children. Perhaps Venetians do not feel as much responsibility for their children as we do."²³¹ In the Prologue, the townspeople make clear their horror at Brabantio's banishing of his daughter from his home and declare that "Our ancestors have taught us there is no wealth where there are no children."²³² In contrast, Brabantio merely desires the child to secure his own legacy in order to claim Othello's fortunes, and Gratiano is only too happy to deceive his family for his own greed. In their crafting and presentation of a quilt for the boy—so that he'll know "his spirit connects to ours and to his ancestors"—Elissa and Somaia signal their contrasting value of familial and ancestral ties and community connection over individual wealth.²³³ Their gift signals their desire to protect and cherish the child, providing a warmth that Somaia declares will "burn away this gloom" that perpetually lingers in Venice.²³⁴ The communal responsibility and familial love that these women represent not only contrasts with Venetian greed, but can also overcome and conquer its pernicious effects.

²³⁰ This emphasis on the female characters' words and descriptions also aligns with the *abibigoro* tradition, as Asiedu reports that "Abdallah, perhaps more than any other Ghanaian playwright, has created some incredibly powerful women in his plays, making this an important feature of *abibigoro*" ("Abibigoro," 379). Other themes of *abibigoro* that appear in *Fortunes* is an attention to oral history and allusion to "the historical trans-Atlantic slave trade" (376-7).

²³¹ Molette and Molette, *Fortunes of the Moor*, 46.

²³² Molette and Molette, 4.

²³³ Molette and Molette, 60.

²³⁴ Molette and Molette, 59.

In Jennings' *Casting Othello*, Georgia and Lorraine, the two Black actresses slated to play Emilia and Bianca, must contend with a different pernicious effect of whiteness as they confront their white colleagues' resistance to reading *Othello* as a play about race. Georgia's main issue with their production is that she does not want her husband taking on the stereotyped lead role, but as she and Lorraine both argue, their casting also exacerbates racial stereotypes against Black women: "The way we're casting *Othello*, all the weak characters are black: Emilia the maid, Bianca the whore and Othello the fool, all duped by the powerful, white Iago."²³⁵ Georgia protests the direction that she should brush Desdemona's hair and Lorraine has apparently already made it clear she will not wear a costume that emphasizes her breasts, as both women refuse to "reinforce those racist stereotypes."²³⁶ Kila Kitu, the actress who played Georgia in 1998, said that she faced her own stereotype issues while playing Georgia:

when we performed it, I remember being frustrated by the audience's reactions to Georgia . . . it felt like people were seeing a stereotype of something that they had in their head. And, at the time, I didn't have the term 'angry Black woman,' but I think that's what they saw. . . . I can't stand it when people describe Black women as 'sassy,' and that was the first time I heard it, and it was in regards to my portrayal, and ever since then, almost anytime I get a review, or any Black woman, I see that word 'sassy' and it pisses me off! . . . I think it's a mistake to ascribe to Georgia those traits—it means you weren't looking.²³⁷

Instead of taking Georgia's emotions seriously, the audience often laughed at Kitu or clearly disliked the emotions she displayed towards Jimmy during the play, flattening her into the stereotype of the angry Black woman instead of recognizing the nuance and complexity of her character.

²³⁵ Jennings, *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello*, 93.

²³⁶ Jennings, 94.

²³⁷ Kitu, Interview.

Lorraine's objection to her role is further complicated by the fact that she is dating the white director, Chris, whose father does not approve of their relationship and will be attending the performance. As she asks him early in their discussion, "Have you thought about what it means to have cast me in this role?"²³⁸ Cassio calls Bianca a monkey and fitchew²³⁹ and, as Georgia points out, their performance will be attended by "white folks who think black women are nothing but monkeys, maids, or 'fitchews' anyway."²⁴⁰ When Lorraine eventually chooses not to continue as Bianca, she explains to a disappointed Chris that, in playing this character, "I'd be living all your father's stereotypes of me on that stage."²⁴¹

Critical discussions concerning the casting of *Othello* have occurred for centuries and in multiple countries. Such close attention is rarely paid to the race of characters such as Emilia or Bianca, though, as Jennings' play makes clear, such casting decisions have consequences. Keith Hamilton Cobb mentioned in an virtual discussion of *Othello* that Emilia has become part of the Black canon;²⁴² in her examination of gender and race dynamics in *Othello*, MacDonald contends that while Bianca is not literally dark-skinned in Shakespeare's text, "she is racialized as Black, assigned a set of negative sexual characteristics associated with Africa and Africans" through her animalization by Cassio and figurative darkening by Venice's moral and sexual order.²⁴³ While such chances for Black female casting are considered by many to signify

²³⁸ Jennings, *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello*, 93.

²³⁹ Jennings has Lorraine define this word as meaning "a prostitute and a skunk" (*Playing Juliet/Casting Othello*, 92) and MacDonald defines it as a "polecat," which, along with monkeys, were thought in the early modern period "to have particularly strong sex drives" ("Black Ram, White Ewe," 214).

²⁴⁰ Jennings, *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello*, 93.

²⁴¹ Jennings, 98.

²⁴² Cobb, Lin, and Pasupathi, "Shakespeare, Race, and Performance." For further discussion of the effects that come from casting a Black Emilia, see Pao, "Ocular Revisions." See also Jami Rogers' articles on what he calls the "unofficial 'black canon'" of Shakespeare, which he defines as specifically not the leading roles, but "the small- to medium-sized parts that are nevertheless enough for an actor to sink his or her teeth into" ("The Shakespearean Glass Ceiling," 425-6). Instead, "ethnic minority actors are more frequently cast in roles that uphold the stereotypes BAME [Black, Asian and minority ethnic] performers have been decrying in television casting practices," that of servants, best friends to the lead white actor, and exotic/colonial roles ("Is the Door Really Open").

²⁴³ MacDonald, "Black Ram, White Ewe," 214. In "Actresses of Color," MacDonald argues that:

progress within Shakespeare production, we need to ask: at what cost? As Thompson makes clear in her introduction to *Colorblind Shakespeare*, it is impossible to predict whether an audience can or will be “blind” to an actor’s race,²⁴⁴ and even if they can be, it is inappropriate to ask actors of color to erase the meaning of their bodies and the “full complexity of cultural history” that they represent.²⁴⁵ Indeed, Georgia and Lorraine articulate one of largest drawbacks of colorblind casting as they point to how their audience might read racial stereotypes onto the characters they play or allow the class and sexual status of those characters to confirm racist stereotypes they may already hold.

In their meta considerations of theater and the performance of *Othello*, both *Casting Othello* and Chakrabarti’s *Red Velvet* also depict Black women as offering otherwise unvoiced perspectives which are much needed in Othello’s life and in conversations concerning race, representation, and theater. Chakrabarti introduces a Black woman through Connie, a Jamaican servant who works at the theater and who, according to the character list, is “Older than her years and the voice of truth.”²⁴⁶ While such a idealization of Connie as a truth speaker is problematic, her character does provide a much needed critique of Aldridge’s performance that is not rooted in racial prejudice: when Aldridge asks her what she thought of his performance, she hesitantly replies, “It...it wasn’t for me. I didn’t like...that you was so easily turned.”²⁴⁷ In a comment that insightfully responds to both Othello’s narrative and Aldridge’s current circumstances, she

While black Cleopatras are much more common in American productions . . . the Shakespearean role that has become far more frequently cast with a non-white actress in the last thirty years or so has been Othello’s Bianca, in a theatrical move that I would argue serves as another example of how black women’s bodies can be racially pre-contextualized before they ever enter casting discussions. Although Bianca never identifies herself by color or race, and in fact denies that she is a courtesan (as Iago insists she is), casting her with a non-white actress not only allows for a rather lazy visual pun on the character’s name, but also silently works to reinforce racialized notions of Desdemona’s moral as well as physical ‘fairness.’ (219)

²⁴⁴ Ayanna Thompson, “Practicing a Theory, Theorizing a Practice,” 10.

²⁴⁵ Greenberg and Karim-Cooper “Shakespeare and Race,” #SuchStuff 1.

²⁴⁶ Chakrabarti, *Red Velvet*, 5.

²⁴⁷ Chakrabarti, 73. Ellipses presented as written in the text.

insists that “It’s common sense tho’ sir, marryin’ into that worl’s a mistake. Can’t trust no-one . . . Everybody smilin’ like them a friend but . . . I fin’ mo’ often than not, people mostly have two face don’t you think? An’ when you show ‘em a weak spot them rub it.”²⁴⁸



Figure 10: Shannon Dorsey (Connie) and Amari Cheatom (Ira Aldridge) in Lolita Chakrabarti’s *Red Velvet*, directed by Jade King Carroll at Shakespeare Theatre Company in 2022. Photo by Shakespeare Theatre Company.

Connie speaks to the dangers of Othello’s attempt to fit into the white world of Venice, a move paralleled by Aldridge as he attempts to make a place for himself in the white theatrical world of Shakespeare and London. Connie articulates the truth about these white worlds, though her warning comes too late to protect Aldridge from the racism of his critics and fellow cast members. Similarly, at the very end of *Casting Othello*, after Georgia and Lorraine force their castmates to consider the racial stakes of *Othello*, Jimmy proposes to his wife that “If Othello hadda hooked up with some Moorish sister in the first place, he wouldn’t have gone through all them changes.”²⁴⁹ Though such a stance may seem essentializing, Fortune notes that if some of

²⁴⁸ Chakrabarti, 73.

²⁴⁹ Jennings, *Playing Juliet/Casting Othello*, 104.

the characters (Iago, Emilia, and Desdemona) had also been Black, their relationships would have, by necessity, been different; perhaps there still would have been tragedy, but “there is a dynamic—an intraracial dynamic—that is going to change the trajectory . . . or at least add a new—pardon the pun—color to it . . . it would have been an entirely different play.”²⁵⁰

Therefore, in a move parallel to that in *Fortunes of the Moor*, both plays suggest that the presence of a Black woman in Othello’s life could have saved him from the specifically *racial* tragedy of Shakespeare’s play; further, they suggest that, at the level of performance, Black women need to be present in any discussions about producing *Othello*.

Sears’ *Harlem Duet* depicts exactly what Jimmy imagines in *Casting Othello*, though the consequences are not what he has in mind. In all three of the timelines she presents, Sears’ Othello continuously leaves Billie to pursue Desdemona and a place in her white world. In fact, in her play’s focus on the cyclical traumas of history and memory, Sears paints Othello’s betrayal of Billie and their love as seemingly inevitable; the play’s central storyline showcases Billie’s struggles to come to terms, over and over again, with the loss of the man she loved and the racial, gendered, and sexual tensions that surround his leaving. While we see Othello die onstage in the two early timelines of the play, in the present-day Billie foretells and perhaps crafts Othello’s offstage doom by soaking the handkerchief he gave her with Egyptian tinctures that she believes hold harmful magical properties. Her actions thus align her with Shakespeare’s Egyptian sibyl, whom Othello tells Desdemona “in her prophetic fury sewed” the handkerchief given to him by his mother, which also holds the possibility of “perdition” in its magic web.²⁵¹ By laying claim to the figure of the sibyl in all her destructive fury, Sears also orients the play away from its white, Western performance history and toward a Black feminist space,

²⁵⁰ Fortune, Interview.

²⁵¹ Shakespeare, *Othello* 3.4.74, 69.

proleptically imagining—and inverting—the circumstances for and consequences of Shakespeare’s play by transferring the famous elements of *Othello*’s tragedy from Othello to Billie.²⁵²

Harlem Duet therefore engages in a direct conversation with Shakespeare’s *Othello* by positioning itself as a “non-chronological prequel” to the play, disrupting the historical privilege of Shakespeare’s own narrative and subverting the temporal hierarchy of time associated with most adaptations by positioning Sears’ own tale as a precursor to Shakespeare’s play.²⁵³ In Billie’s position as the woman Othello loved first, who curses the handkerchief that Othello will give to Desdemona, Sears sets up and rewrites Shakespeare’s text, decentering Shakespeare and *Othello*’s narrative, and calling attention to the Black female characters who have been denied representation in *Othello* and Shakespeare’s oeuvre more broadly. In doing so, Sears highlights the misogynoir present in *Othello*’s performance history. “Misogynoir” was coined by Black feminist Moya Bailey, “to describe the unique ways in which Black women are pathologized in popular culture. What happens to Black women in public space isn’t about them being *any* woman of color. It is particular and has to do with the ways that anti-Blackness and misogyny combine to malign Black women in our world.”²⁵⁴ Since then, it has generally come to refer to the way race and gender combine in the misogyny directed specifically towards Black

²⁵² *Harlem Duet* could thus be seen as providing the same impetus as Corredera argues that Keith Hamilton Cobbs’ *American Moor* does for new approaches to *Othello* in the form of “adaptive re-vision.” Corredera presents adaptive re-vision as “another stop along the fluid spectrum between original, adaptation, re-vision, and appropriation,” due to how it:

expands adaptation to include a performance that may approximate whatever is deemed “original” but that intentionally takes a critical point-of-view, embracing instead of rejecting adaptation as a mode for challenging the white-oriented viewpoints and therefore theatrical traditions and standards shaping Shakespearean theater. It does so by inviting Erickson’s re-vision, accepting adaptation at the level of perspective, namely, a perspective that does not need to conform to the right/white one that has so long shaped the authoritative standard for performance. (Corredera, *Reanimating Shakespeare’s Othello*, 2)

²⁵³ Sears, Interview. In his own examination of Sears’ play, Dickinson writes that “[Sears] proleptically displaces Shakespeare’s *Othello* from its anterior position in dramatic history, so that by the end of *Harlem Duet* it is no longer clear which of these playwrights is calling and which is responding to whom” (“Duets, Duologues,” 204).

²⁵⁴ Bailey, “More on the origin of Misogynoir.”

women. Yet rather than focusing solely on contemporary representation, *Harlem Duet* makes space for recognition and acknowledgment of the fraught racialized and gendered tragedies that haunt the historical record, and it explores the uncertainty that the gaps thereby revealed will ever be filled.

“We keep doing this don’t we?”: Disrupting Cyclical Racial Trauma in Performances of *Harlem Duet*

Previous scholarship on *Harlem Duet* often emphasizes Sears’ goal to “exorcise” the ghost of *Othello* that has haunted her since she saw Laurence Olivier’s performance of Shakespeare’s character in blackface as a child,²⁵⁵ even as they mark her failure to completely escape Shakespeare, as is often the case with adaptations, appropriations, and re-visions.²⁵⁶ Yet, many note that she does succeed in focusing the play on her newly introduced Black female character in ways that complicate discussions of Shakespeare’s “race” play by adding in the important element of gender and, as some also note, sexuality and class. The scholarship most relevant to my own argument has explored Sears’ play in terms of how it moves beyond tragedy towards as yet unknown possibilities;²⁵⁷ how it stages the instability of memory and history in Billie’s attachment to Harlem and a collective Black cultural past she tries to gain access to through her relationship with Othello;²⁵⁸ and how its 1928 scenes specifically disrupt linear time

²⁵⁵ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 14.

²⁵⁶ For context of the play in terms of Canadian theater, see Knowles, “Othello in Three Times.” For an analysis of the play as responding to Canada’s (and specifically Nova Scotia’s) racial history in terms of the slavery—as a haven for slaves, but also as a place of slavery and discrimination—see Kidnie, ““There’s Magic in the Web of It’.” For a discussion of *Harlem Duet* as engaging with other adaptations of Shakespeare, feminist re-visionings, and postcolonial theory, see Dickinson, “Duets, Duologues.”

²⁵⁷ Kidnie, ““There’s Magic in the Web of It’.”

²⁵⁸ MacDonald, *Shakespearean Adaptation*.

to reveal “the cyclical nature of oppression,” especially as it informs the lives of Black citizens.²⁵⁹

My own reading of *Harlem Duet* supports these previous arguments by emphasizing how the play’s reorientation towards a Black woman—attending to gender alongside race—nuances considerations of the historical cycles of racial trauma experienced by Black women as represented by Billie across three time periods. By integrating data from my interviews, I layer onto these readings of the play the views of theater practitioners who discuss how the play, when it’s rehearsed and performed, disrupts and unsettles such cycles by giving Black women a space to voice their experiences and form a community around them. As an all-Black play, *Harlem Duet* also reverses the racial isolation caused by traditional productions of Shakespeare’s *Othello*; Billie may suffer, as character and actress, but she is not alone. The tragedy of *Harlem Duet*—Billie’s tragedy—stems in part from the racialized and gendered trauma it stages, but also from the actors’ and audience’s knowledge that that history is recurring and heretofore fundamentally unchanged. Performances of *Harlem Duet*, however, create a space of acknowledgement and hope by validating Black actors’ and audience members’ experiences and creating a community around them.

History and memory constitute the most important elements of *Harlem Duet* through its structure (three interwoven historical moments), its setting (“Harlem” throughout the ages²⁶⁰), and its attention to the central prop of Shakespeare’s play (the handkerchief given by Othello to Desdemona). The present-day Billie is also directly connected to the “history” of Shakespeare’s play through her birthname, Sybil, which she first refuses to use and then slowly comes to

²⁵⁹ Mehdizadeh, “Othello in Harlem,” 13.

²⁶⁰ Sears revealed in an interview with Valentina Rapetti that the Harlem of the earliest timeline—1860/62—is actually in Georgia (Rapetti, “Catching *Othello*’s echoes,” 301-2).

identify with, allowing her to take the place of the Egyptian sibyl Othello identifies as the handkerchief's creator. Within *Harlem Duet*, while the temporally different characters speak in distinct ways, through the "rhapsodic blues tragedy" frame of *Harlem Duet* they operate as variations on the same character; this conflation across time and space highlights how Billie's experience as a Black woman is both historically specific—tied to the political and material concerns of the moment through enslavement, the Harlem Renaissance, and a more contemporary Harlem—and persistent. Each iteration of Billie's tragedy is, therefore, a new experience of loss which also echoes and intensifies the trauma of the lifetimes that came before, in an example of what Christina Sharpe calls the Black experience of living in "the wake" of slavery: "In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present."²⁶¹

All the actresses I spoke with who played Billie conceptualized the three temporally different iterations of her character as intimately connected, even as they emphasized the importance of historical context in determining how the various Billies and Othellos spoke, acted, and related to each other. Alison Sealy-Smith, who originated the role of Billie in 1997, understood the historical Billies as "three different reincarnations of this sibyl, this future seer,"²⁶² while Karen Robinson, who played the role at the history-making production of the play at the Ontario Stratford Festival in 2006, observed that the relationship between these iterations of Billie is not about difference because they all "want the same thing."²⁶³ Virgilia Griffith, who played Billie when *Harlem Duet* returned to the Tarragon Theatre in 2018 and again in the excerpts of the play livestreamed during the 2020 collaboration "Rac(e)ing Othello," understood the connection among the three characters as spiritual, "ancestral," noting "the repetitive cycle"

²⁶¹ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 9.

²⁶² Sealy-Smith, Interview.

²⁶³ Robinson, Interview.

of Billie's lives.²⁶⁴ Perri Gaffney, who played Billie in the 2002 production in New York, reflected that the connection between the three iterations "just showed how, throughout the ages, the more things change, the more they stay the same."²⁶⁵ As Nedda Mehdizadeh notes, the very first line of the play introduces this idea of repetition, as the 1928 Billie says to her Othello, "We keep doing this don't we?"²⁶⁶ This in medias res line invites audiences to imagine that they are experiencing one moment in a cycle. Mehdizadeh further argues that "Sears magnifies the timelessness of this cycle by interweaving the story of three iterations of the same couple . . . with the events of three significant time periods in American history."²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ Griffith, Interview.

²⁶⁵ Gaffney, Interview.

²⁶⁶ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 21. Mehdizadeh, "Othello in Harlem," 13.

²⁶⁷ Mehdizadeh, 14.



Figure 11: Beau Dixon (Othello) and Virgilia Griffith (Billie) in Djanet Sears's Harlem Duet at Tarragon Theatre in 2018. Photo by Cylla von Tiedemann.

The different productions' sets as designed by Astrid Janson emphasized this historical continuity by almost always presenting all three timelines in the same space with a crack running through center stage.²⁶⁸ The 1860 scenes take place within the crack, but its schism was also meant to demonstrate “how elements from the past produce forces which continue to have significant effects on the contemporary world.”²⁶⁹ Another key part of the set was the presence of cotton—within the crack but also spread throughout the rest of the space—meant to symbolize

²⁶⁸ Teresa Przybylski designed the set for the 1997 premiere at the Tarragon, but Janson has designed the set for every production Sears has produced since, beginning with the remount at Canadian Stage. Przybylski's production did not feature a crack in the set and neither did Janson's 2006 production at the Stratford Festival.

²⁶⁹ Sears, Interview.

the racial history and labor informing all three timelines. Janson, the set designer for all the productions of the play after it moved to Canadian Stage in 1997, mentioned that “Djanet wants to have cotton in every production because the cotton industry was in many ways what upheld slavery—cotton more than anything else—and so it becomes very, very important, underlying all of these traumas. The political issues hearken back to the slave trade of cotton.”²⁷⁰ Griffith found the presence of the cotton to be a “brilliant” representation of how “the past informs us, history informs us, and that it’s always near.”²⁷¹ The set thus makes it impossible to fully separate these different temporalities, even as the spatial movement between these timelines disrupts a chronological reading of the couple’s history.²⁷² The further chronological shuffling of the 1928 narrative (whose scenes appear non-sequentially) emphasizes both the timelessness of Billie’s experience, as well as the asynchronous nature of time in relation to history and memory due to how history becomes recorded through selective memory, and memory itself unfolds in unstable and non-linear ways.²⁷³

This asynchronicity is further echoed by the audio clips that begin each scene. As a “rhapsodic blues tragedy,” Sears’ play reflects a blues aesthetic, which she identifies in a published interview as the elements of blues, such as “rhythm, tempo, syncopation, harmony, solos, fragmentation, repetition—inside and outside of the structure of the song—call-and-

²⁷⁰ Janson, Interview.

²⁷¹ Griffith, Interview.

²⁷² This sense of temporal overlap was also emphasized through scene changes. For example, Kidnie describes the Nightwood (1997) and Stratford Festival (2006) productions as effecting scene changes in which “the actors in the present-day action who never feature in the other two strands bring on and remove the few necessary properties. These actors would remain in character throughout the change, so creating a historical overlap, an anachronistic intrusion that seemed especially deliberate at those instances when characters from different strands would meet eyes, quizzically, reproachfully, or uneasily” (Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*, 81).

²⁷³ MacDonald discusses the relation of time and memory in her examination of Harlem as a site of personal and collective memory—one which Billie clings to and Othello turns his back on as they both move towards their differing visions of the future: “As we remember, we insert ourselves into history as an interpreter, an organizer, a conscious narrator of events,” yet “summoning the power of the past in order to inform the meaning of the present and the future is no straightforward task. We recall the past differently, partially, in opposition to the recollections of others” (MacDonald, *Shakespearean Adaptation*, 118, 121).

response, polyrhythmic improvisation, the sliding and blurring of notes,” which are then “transposed from music and applied to other art forms, layering them with a textual vitality and reinvesting themes and subject matter with a mythic, emotional and cultural dimension.”²⁷⁴ Such elements are immediately present at the start of each scene through the live duet of a cello and bass paired with decontextualized voiceovers from various, primarily Black, historical figures speaking on the subject of race in America.²⁷⁵ The audio clips themselves are not introduced for the audience or commented upon within the play itself; cut off from their historical context, they exemplify how history operates as both singular event and timeless cycle. By the middle of Act Two, however, these opening sounds have become discordant and jarring, with the audio clips looping and repeating in a distorted cacophony that collapses the different histories they represent.

Sears links this instability of sound and time to Billie’s rapidly deteriorating mental state: the growing distortion of the opening sounds mirrors Billie’s fracturing mind and her own inability to know who and when she is. Allen Booth, who arranged the music for *Harlem Duet*, described the sound design by noting that “when Billie starts to go crazy, we hear bits of [audio] kind of layered on top of each other, with some new bits as well, that kind of express her mental state, really, which is obsession. And the obsession with these political and racial things mirror, in a way, her obsession with Othello. It’s all part of that.”²⁷⁶ Sears explained that the looping and layering of all these voices “represents a range of perspectives on the experience of Black people

²⁷⁴ Knowles, Sealy-Smith, and Sears, “The Nike Method,” 29.

²⁷⁵ In the original production, all of these voices were male. Since then, Sears has traded out some of the audio clips for others, including speeches by women such as, at various times, Viola Davis, Coretta Scott King, Condoleezza Rice, and Oprah Winfrey (Sears, Interview). For more on the blues aspect of the play, see Ric Knowles’ interview with Djanet Sears and Alison Sealy Smith in “The Nike Method,” Valentina Rapetti’s interview with Djanet Sears (“Catching *Othello*’s echoes”), and Rapetti, “Beyond *Othello*.”

²⁷⁶ Booth, Interview.

in this society, and alludes to the recursive nature of the damage done to the Black psyche.”²⁷⁷

The discordant audio clips build across four scenes, culminating in Billie’s psychological disintegration in Act II, Scene 7.

While much of her mental decline results from the grief of losing Othello and the love that stood for so much to her, she and other characters in the play list two other reasons for her condition: the ever present and deeply personal pressures of ongoing misogynoir oppression, and the culmination of stress from centuries of traumatic racial history. Throughout *Harlem Duet*, racism and its effects are linked to mental health. Early in the play, Billie laments to Othello about how little research exists examining Black people and mental health; in the scene of her mental collapse, she asks Magi, “Did you ever consider what hundreds of years of slavery did to the African American psyche?”²⁷⁸ In her attempt to answer this question, Billie’s own thesis topic considers racism in America as a “classic behavioral disorder.”

In our discussion of these elements in the play, Sealy-Smith said she found *Harlem Duet*’s exploration of madness “fascinating . . . the whole idea that racism as a system is driving some of us mad is something that was really interesting to grapple with.”²⁷⁹ Nigel Shawn Williams, who played Othello opposite Sealy-Smith in the opening show and Robinson at Stratford, saw *Harlem Duet* as grappling specifically with the weight of history on the Black psyche:

. . . what did history do to tear those two asunder that caused these paths, that caused a Black woman to go mad—psychologically, physically? What is the cost of history upon Black women? And, therefore, what is the cost of Black men abandoning their Blackness or Black women? How has history done that to us? What is American history—not to vilify America, but sometimes we should—what has American history done to the Black

²⁷⁷ Sears, Interview.

²⁷⁸ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 51, 103.

²⁷⁹ Sealy-Smith, Interview.

psyche? And I think that that is one of the most important investigations in *Harlem Duet*.²⁸⁰

Harlem Duet articulates over and over again that the trauma of racism lies not only in singular events, but also in their cumulative effect over time.²⁸¹ Billie has already been left and is always being left; her trauma is deeply historical and overwhelmingly present; her story is a repetition of what has come before and always newly traumatic.

Bringing these threads of history, memory, and trauma together, Billie's grief-driven madness allows her character to transcend the already unstable boundaries of time that were suggested by her connection to Shakespeare's sibyl and Othello's handkerchief.²⁸² Indeed, the handkerchief, one of the most famous props in Shakespearean performance, shows up in every timeline of *Harlem Duet*, repurposed to signify the plurality and repetitions of history.²⁸³ In the prologue, the Billie of 1928 holds up the handkerchief as a reminder to Othello of their love and his promise to her that this love is eternal—a promise he has already broken. In the next scene, the Othello of 1860 gives it to Billie with just this promise, calling it “an antique token of our ancient love.”²⁸⁴ As Griffith noted, it “weaves throughout the whole piece, it weaves throughout

²⁸⁰ Williams, Interview.

²⁸¹ While talking to Magi, Billie describes the effect of race and racism as “a disease. We get infected as children, and . . . and the bacteria . . . the virus slowly spreads, disabling the entire system” (Sears 1997, 67). Later, when the strain of her depression becomes too much, she speaks of a tumour inside her, “Suddenly apparent, but it's been there, tiny, growing slowly for a long time. What kind of therapy to take? Chop it out? Radiate it? Let it eat me alive?” (Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 104).

²⁸² While not exactly a “black to the past” narrative like Madhu Dubey explores in her article on African American speculative fiction novels that send modern characters back to a period during slavery, *Harlem Duet* does “attempt to know the past as something other or more than history” (“Speculative Fictions of Slavery,” 779-80).

²⁸³ The handkerchief is highlighted as central to the piece by appearing in the play's opening tableau. Griffith described this in the 2018 production by saying that “at the beginning . . . Martin Luther King's ‘I Have a Dream’ speech is playing, and we just walk out and stare at the audience, and then the handkerchief comes from the sky, and I catch it” (Griffith, Interview). Kidnie mentions that this happened in the 1997 and 2006 productions as well (Kidnie, *Problem of Adaptation*, 78).

²⁸⁴ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 35. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, the handkerchief as a “token” carries the signification within itself of the quality it represented. In his subversive exploration of the scholarly assumption that the famous handkerchief is white, Smith asserts that “[c]losely identified with Othello, the handkerchief is a substitute self, a metonymic memento, which he gives as a pledge of marital fidelity: the two shall become one flesh” (Smith, “Othello's Black Handkerchief,” 100). Boose also notes that “[t]he idea of ‘token’ seems always to have carried overtones for Shakespeare of representative sexual exchange” (Boose, “Othello's Handkerchief,” 365). In this

time,” and thus operates as “an anchor” for Billie,²⁸⁵ which is perhaps why, when Othello betrays all that it signifies, Billie feels so lost.

Many of the other repetitions or echoes in the play are verbal, centering around Billie and Othello’s love, but with reference to what the handkerchief represents. In Billie’s flashback of the day she and Othello found their apartment, Othello proposes that they jump over a broom together in honor of the slave weddings of their ancestors and calls her “[m]y ancient love.”²⁸⁶ In the present, Billie similarly names him “My mate . . . throughout eternity” and returns his handkerchief by calling it “something you gave me . . . centuries ago.”²⁸⁷ The handkerchief in Sears’ play represents both an item of immense historical importance to Othello’s family (as it does in Shakespeare’s play) and, as I discuss below, a rupture in this history due to Othello’s denial of his place within it.²⁸⁸

In two consecutive Act I scenes that mirror each other in structure, Sears demonstrates how and why Billie’s decision to poison the handkerchief responds to both this historical rupture and historical denial. In Scene 9, Othello gives a long speech about how he is not defined by his Blackness. Making a claim to be simply human, he declares, “my culture is not my mother’s culture—the culture of my ancestors. . . . I am not my skin. My skin is not me.”²⁸⁹ Whereas

respect, the handkerchief in *Harlem Duet* does not just represent a promise of love and sexual fidelity, but functions as a binding force, a solemn synecdoche that breaks more than its symbolic vow.

²⁸⁵ Griffith, Interview.

²⁸⁶ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 107. Such a wedding is, of course, not recognized by the state, but Othello made it clear they did not need official trappings or tradition: “This broom is more than rings. More than any gold” (Sears 1997, 107). Billie, too, considered it to be “a solemn eternal vow,” but their unofficial wedding made it only too easy for Othello to leave Billie later, without the added security of alimony that she deserved after spending her own savings on his schooling (Sears, 56).

²⁸⁷ Sears, 75, 88.

²⁸⁸ MacDonald argues that “Billie’s characterization of the nature of the magic in the web of Sears’ handkerchief—that it is a token of racial, rather than romantic fidelity—stands in stark contrast to the story Shakespeare’s Othello tells about the handkerchief” (MacDonald, “Finding *Othello*’s African Roots,” 207). I would argue, however, that part of the power of the handkerchief as a prop in Sears’ play is that it is all of these things: an emotional repository and symbol of familial connection, a romantic token and symbol of their love, and a historical emblem and symbol of racial belonging.

²⁸⁹ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 74.

Billie becomes more and more obsessed with the meaning of skin color and her connection to her ancestors, Othello denies that his skin color holds any bearing on who he is and argues that his mother's culture—his ancestors' culture—holds no relevance for him as an American: he has moved beyond it. In Scene 10, Billie apostrophizes to Othello, "Once you gave me a handkerchief. An heirloom. This handkerchief, your mother's... given by your father. From his mother before that. So far back... And now...then...to me. It is fixed in the emotions of all your ancestors. [. . .] What I add to this already fully endowed cloth, will cause you such..... such... Wretchedness. Othe... Othello."²⁹⁰ From Billie's point of view, Othello has chosen to turn his back on his family and his love, and Billie uses the ancestral object that represents both to punish him. As she explains to her friend and landlady Magi, "I've concocted something... A potion... A plague of sorts... I've soaked the handkerchief... Soaked it in certain tinctures... Anyone who touches it—the handkerchief, will come to harm."²⁹¹

As Sears notes of the handkerchief, "there's a line in Shakespeare's play: 'there's magic in the web of it.' Well, I think there's malice in the web of it and part of my question was, 'where did this malice come from?'"²⁹² Her play tells us that it comes from Billie, born Sybil, becoming over the course of the play aligned with Shakespeare's sibyl, crafting a revenge that Sears herself called "earned."²⁹³ And while Magi immediately dismisses the efficacy of Billie's plan, if we read the events of *Othello* as following in some form after *Harlem Duet*, we can imagine that Billie's actions have had the desired effect. Indeed, *Harlem Duet* effectively sets up the action of *Othello*, with Othello's colleague, Chris Yago, upset that Othello was chosen over him to head their department's course in Cyprus that summer, and Othello and Mona planning to marry soon.

²⁹⁰ Sears, 76-7. Ellipses presented as written in the text.

²⁹¹ Sears, 102. Ellipses presented as written in the text.

²⁹² Sears, Interview.

²⁹³ Sears, Interview.

In fact, Billie's mental collapse could also be read as a result of her having accidentally come into contact with the potion in Act II, Scene 4.²⁹⁴

Importantly, the scene in which Billie mentally breaks is also the scene in which she takes on her identity as Sybil and aligns herself, through her manipulation of Othello's handkerchief, with Shakespeare's Egyptian sibyl. Sears prefigures this parallel with Billie's earlier interest in Egyptian alchemy, Magi's description of her mountain of self-help books in her room as "like a pyramid over her," and Billie's experience of vivid dreams, which Magi calls "messages from other realms"—one of which seems to prefigure her eventual stay in the psychiatric ward.²⁹⁵ Her dreams take on special significance when Billie insists that she hates her birth name—Sybil—and Canada, her newly returned father, responds that "it means prophetess. Sorceress. Seer of the future."²⁹⁶ Billie retorts that it "sounds like some old woman living in a cave." After insisting throughout the play that no one call her Sybil, Billie corrects Magi right before she loses touch with reality, saying "Sybil. I'm Sybil" and soon after calls out to her absent niece: "Jenny... Is that you Jenny. My beauty. My little girl. It's Sybil... Auntie Sybil... The woman who lives in the cave."²⁹⁷ This scene also contains the only flashback of the

²⁹⁴ Elsewhere in the play's present-day scenes, Billie's friends and family discuss her obsession with race after losing Othello to a white woman as a kind of poison or disease. Canada likens her situation to a story he was told about a man struck by a poisoned arrow who refused to remove it until the man who shot him was punished: "In the meantime, the wound festered, until finally the poison infected his entire body, eventually killing him . . . Now, who is responsible for this man's death, the archer for letting go the arrow, or the man for his foolish holding on?" (Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 83). Early in the play, Magi describes Billie's psychological state to Amah by likening Billie to "a discarded fruit sitting in a dish, surrounded by its own ripening mold" that threatens to boil its rot whenever Billie sees a Black man in public, "dangling his prize in front of her" (31). Later, when Billie tells Magi of her plan to poison Othello with the handkerchief, Magi replies that "Racism is a disease my friend, and your test just came back positive" (103) and when Amah visits Billie in the hospital, she warns her that "If I don't forgive my enemy, if I don't forgive him, he might just set up house, inside me" (116). In short, Billie's psychological disintegration could also be viewed as a result of her own inability to let go, though, as Griffith pointed out in her interview with me, Billie may also be experiencing this loss from her other lifetimes as well, meaning that no one else "truly understands the level of depth that she's feeling" (Griffith, Interview).

²⁹⁵ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 40, 25-29.

²⁹⁶ Sears, 81.

²⁹⁷ Sears, 101, 103. Ellipses presented as written in the text.

play—all the other timeline shifts occur between scenes. Billie’s new identity, therefore, coincides with a collapse of the boundaries of self and time within her and the play, as when Magi tells Canada “She’s in distant realms. . . . I thought she was speaking in tongues,” and Billie herself claims she is “trapped in history. A history trapped in me.”²⁹⁸ In this moment, she takes on some of the properties of the handkerchief she poisons: a palimpsest of histories, voices lost to time.

“Trapped in history,” Billie’s character represents not just an individual tragedy played out over multiple temporalities, but a collective tragedy, which exceeds the boundaries of the play, and which includes those actors who embody her and those who watch her onstage. Many of the actresses who played Billie discussed how her character and her experiences spoke to them on a personal level. Griffith asserted, “I just see so many Black women in her or I see her in so many Black women, and I see her in myself,”²⁹⁹ and Sealy-Smith declared “I know this person. I know her.”³⁰⁰ Responding to the larger phenomenon of Black female playwrights re-visioning *Othello*, Joyce Green MacDonald said:

I think part of the reason why Black women especially have been thinking about *Othello*, is it’s a story—it’s a love story—a story about intimacy from which they’ve been erased. The way that the play erases the possibility of an intraracial intimacy and substitutes, instead, the story of this interracial intimacy that is doomed to failure. . . . And so, you see all of these Black female creators wanting to take this play back and to retell it so it can say the things they feel need to be said and that haven’t been said about it.³⁰¹

Harlem Duet, she argued, “takes that sense of absence and erasure—just built into the narrative [of *Othello*]—and maps it over this pre-existing story of failures of intimacy between Black

²⁹⁸ Sears, 94, 101.

²⁹⁹ Griffith, Interview.

³⁰⁰ Sealy-Smith, Interview.

³⁰¹ MacDonald, Interview.

people and the different pressures mounted against the success of those kinds of relationships.”³⁰²

Billie’s eventual mental state results from the complex interweaving of her gendered, racial, sexual, and class experiences as a Black woman, and in all three timelines much of her grief seems to stem from losing Othello specifically to a white woman. As Magi points out of Black men, “I see them do things for White women they wouldn’t dream of doing for me.”³⁰³ Griffith similarly connects Billie’s sense of loss at the beginning of the play to racialized gender dynamics:

The beginning, the Prologue, when she’s reminding him like, “Do you do this? Do you do this to her? Do you do this to her?” This is all the things that he did to [her]—she is holding on so tightly because she doesn’t think he’s going to say “Yes, yes, yes,” but . . . the heartbreaking part of it is that she cannot compete. She cannot compete. She is a Black woman—a beautiful Black woman, intelligent, all of these things—but at the end of the day, a Black woman and a white woman . . . she cannot compete.³⁰⁴

As Griffith clarified later, “when [Billie] realizes that [Mona] is white, she knows that it’s over.”³⁰⁵ Connecting this individual conflict to a larger social issue, MacDonald explained that “[t]he play confronts us with our racist baggage and its origins, and it’s a play that especially asks us to think about racism in terms of how it damages and corrodes intimacy.”³⁰⁶

Billie’s grief at losing Othello is thus made worse by the knowledge of who replaced her in his affections—Desdemona, a white woman—and the misogynoir underlying his choice. In a particularly painful scene, Othello says that he prefers white women because they have been easier “before and after sex,” as they “weren’t filled with hostility about the unequal treatment

³⁰² MacDonald, Interview.

³⁰³ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 67.

³⁰⁴ Griffith, Interview.

³⁰⁵ Griffith, Interview.

³⁰⁶ MacDonald, Interview.

they were getting at their jobs” and they didn’t expect more from him than he wanted to give.³⁰⁷ He argues that the white women he was with saw him as a man, whereas “The Black feminist position as I experience it in this relationship, leaves me feeling unrecognized as a man. . . . To a Black woman, I represent every Black man she has ever been with and with whom there was still so much to work out.”³⁰⁸ Voicing a critique of his defense of Black patriarchy, Billie responds that Black women do not have the choice many white women do about letting the men be the bread-winners: “Your mother worked all her life. My mother worked, her mother worked. . . . Most Black women have been working like mules since we arrived on this continent.”³⁰⁹ At the end of the play, as she sits in the psychiatric ward, she marks the vast distance between herself and her white doctor by noting that “she could only see my questions through her blue eyes.”³¹⁰ Othello has chosen to marry a woman whom Billie believes can never truly see her and whose feminist struggle was built on the backs of Black women like her and her mother and her mother’s mother. Griffith labeled each of these points as “a very real conversation in the Black community,” mentioning that when Othello said that white women were easier there was an audible reaction from the Black women in the audience.³¹¹

In describing how she saw other women of color reacting to the show, Robinson imagined a large community who have shared Billie’s experiences:

One of the reasons why *Harlem Duet* means so much to me is because I know the feeling, I know what it feels like to have a Black man look right through me to the white woman who’s behind me. I know *exactly* what it feels like. And I think so did this colleague of mine who came over, so did those women in that car, probably so does Djanet and Virgilia and Alison. We all know what it’s like! We all know what it’s like, and we all

³⁰⁷ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 71.

³⁰⁸ Sears, 70-1.

³⁰⁹ Sears, 70-1. The image of the Black woman as a mule has a long history and has been discussed by many Black feminists. Billie’s statement echoes Zora Neale Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes were Watching God*: “De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see” (14).

³¹⁰ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 115.

³¹¹ Griffith, Interview.

know what it feels like, and I'm not saying we all feel the same, but it is a little explosion of something, or a big explosion of something that happens, especially the first time it happens.³¹²

For these women, Billie's experiences of emotional trauma, some of it at the hands of Black men, are not just accurate, but tragically familiar. In describing the process of writing *Harlem Duet*, Sears shared that:

I have to admit to putting down that play for about six, seven months when I realized Billie's story was moving in a direction that deeply concerned me. I went, 'What the fuck? I'm trying to write positive Black characters!' And there was the key. That's when I recognized how deeply I'd internalized an *uplift the race* ideology. I was trying to write only positive Black characters as a means of countering the abundance of negativity written about us every day. But Billie was forcing me to acknowledge that some part of me needed to write *whole* Black characters that reflected the breadth of our humanity.³¹³

Sears' version of "excavating" the Black woman of Shakespeare's play³¹⁴ requires her to move beyond a post-Reconstruction Era desire for "positive representations" of Black folk and instead depict Billie with all of her flaws, through all of her tragedy.

This connection to the character and the realism of Billie's situation also made acting in that role difficult at times. Griffith confessed that even rehearsing the scene in which Othello claimed white women were easier was difficult for her: "[M]y body wouldn't wanna hear this, and I would just want to walk away, and Djanet would be like, 'You have to stay, and you have to hear it, and you have to allow it to hurt you' . . . because he's basically saying what she has feared."³¹⁵ As both an audience member watching Sealy-Smith and an actress playing Billie, Robinson found the scene where Othello leaves Billie after they have sex to be "one of the most tragic things I've ever witnessed," adding, "I come from a generation of Black women who were

³¹² Robinson, Interview.

³¹³ Sears, Interview. Italics for emphasis in her speech.

³¹⁴ MacDonald, *Shakespearean Adaptation*, 11.

³¹⁵ Griffith, Interview.

single—some of whom still are—for much of their young adult lives because . . . because, because, because, because, because, because nobody wanted us. And to see him reject Billie in that way just broke everything inside of me.”³¹⁶

Just as difficult, if perhaps not more so, was playing the effect of this loss on Billie by embodying her “madness.” Robinson remembered trying to avoid rehearsing the scene of Billie’s mental crisis, saying, “as a younger actor, I had a tendency to want to protect myself, so as opposed to actually abandoning myself to things, I would find ways to play at it and hope that it would suffice, and I wouldn’t have to suffer. . . . I remember wanting to postpone.”³¹⁷ Sealy-Smith also struggled with that scene, especially knowing that some nights it could become all too real:

I do remember one day crying in the shower as I got ready to go to the theater and it was because I didn’t want to go mad that night, I just didn’t. I was there thinking, ‘It’s been a good day, and I don’t want to go there. I have no wish to go there.’ . . . I had to put some kind of barrier between me and the experience or I would have lost it. Some nights when I was under the good acting umbrella, the good acting bubble, it was real. It was really shit and it was horrible.³¹⁸

Griffith similarly revealed that some nights, “I would be afraid like right before going on, I would be afraid because it’s like, I know what I have to do, and I know how much I have to open my heart and . . . tell this story of where I am in grief and heartbreak and then in rage and then cracked open mentally.”³¹⁹ All three women recognized Billie as representative of Black female trauma but found the act of embodying her misogynoir-inflicted mental collapse not just difficult but frightening because of the intensity of emotions it invoked and how real her suffering became for them.

³¹⁶ Robinson, Interview.

³¹⁷ Robinson, Interview.

³¹⁸ Sealy-Smith, Interview.

³¹⁹ Griffith, Interview.

Taken as a whole, *Harlem Duet* raises the question: how do we not just change this cycle of loss and grief but end it? Connecting the play's story to its thematic blues element, Sears said that "[t]he role of repetition in *Harlem Duet* is very important, particularly in terms of what the repeated narratives suggests about our history. . . . it saddens me. Are things ever going to change?"³²⁰ In the constant shift between timelines and their nonlinear action, as well as the play's position as a "prequel" to *Othello*, the ending of *Harlem Duet* is not really an ending, just as its beginning—"We keep doing this don't we?"—implies an endless cycle of always already begun. In his performances as Othello, Williams saw the ending as representing this idea of continued repetition:

I always loved the ending of the play because I thought it was much more of a long ellipsis rather than a period . . . But I think that the ellipsis, the continuation of the historical core . . . the cyclical ignorance of how we treat history, I think that that was one of the most important things for me was that it did not have a button because it was going to continue, and unfortunately it is going to continue.³²¹

Harlem Duet thus stages the past as always informing the present even as it shapes the future as a continuation of what is and has been.³²²

There is some hope offered in the final scene of the play, however, where Billie's long-absent father, Canada, stays by her side at the psychiatric ward and tells Billie's friend, Amah, that he plans to remain in Harlem, admitting, "Way too much leaving gone on for more than one lifetime already."³²³ Othello may have left Billie, but unlike the other two timelines, which only contain Billie and Othello, this present-day Billie is not alone; while much damage has been done to her—and to the many women she represents—Canada's words and the presence of

³²⁰ Sears, Interview.

³²¹ Williams, Interview.

³²² Such a move is reminiscent of the theorizing of scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, and Frank B. Wilderson.

³²³ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 117.

Billie's friends represent a rupture in *Harlem Duet's* cycle of loss. This ending may not entail "the perfect Black family" that Billie envisioned creating with Othello,³²⁴ but as Sealy-Smith told Jon Kaplan in a 1997 interview, "The idea of the black family has a special resonance. . . . Throughout our history, in Africa and North America, families have been ripped apart. To reestablish a family after centuries of division means you've scored, no matter what shape that family takes."³²⁵ Margaret Jane Kidnie reads *Harlem Duet's* ending as similar to those of Shakespeare's romances, specifically *Pericles*, in "its ability to see beyond tragedy. . . . The happy endings dramatized in Shakespeare's Romances are qualified: the lost years are never recovered, and death, in some instances, cannot be reversed. Billie's happy ending, the possibility that she might yet transcend generations of inter-racial suffering, is similarly qualified."³²⁶ Instead of a happy ending "tied up in a beautiful bow," Billie gets a "glimmer of hope,"³²⁷ which comes in the promise of a reconstituted relation to her father and continued involvement in Black community. As Griffith reflected, "she just needs someone. She needs to feel supported because she's been holding this weight for so long."³²⁸

The production of this play mirrors its content in this glimmer of hope. Several of the actors I interviewed noted that performing in it offered a built-in Black theater community that they had not experienced before. Just picking up the text and reading it for the first time, Griffith remembered that "I felt seen, I felt connected, and I felt less lonely."³²⁹ Sealy-Smith described an even more profound feeling of connection while narrating her shift from performing

³²⁴ Sears, 43.

³²⁵ Kaplan, "Riveting Alison Sealy-Smith," 39.

³²⁶ Kidnie, "'There's Magic in the Web of It,'" n.p.

³²⁷ Robinson, Interview.

³²⁸ Griffith, Interview.

³²⁹ Griffith, Interview.

Shakespeare's plays at the majority-white Stratford Festival to starring in the all-Black *Harlem*

Duet:

It was heaven! It was like coming home. It was like all the parts, everything, sort of made sense. It was like I had been being groomed for the role. It was lived, it was lived and inhabited . . . it was relaxing, it was comfortable to be among Black people again. I don't think anybody white can understand how wearying it is as a Black person to live in and work in a white environment. I don't think we think about it consciously. . . . But it's exhausting, fucking *exhausting*, trying to navigate whiteness. And so, I think part of what I felt working on this was just relief.³³⁰

Sealy-Smith also noted feeling comfortable asking questions and being vulnerable in a way she couldn't elsewhere because those around her felt "like family."³³¹ This sense of belonging did not come without a price. Williams confessed that "it cost us to do the play emotionally and, really, psychologically. It was difficult,"³³² and Sealy-Smith reflected that "out of all of the plays that I have done . . . it took the most from me."³³³ In describing the rehearsal process, Beau Dixon, who played Othello opposite Griffith in 2018, articulated that Sears "needed us to feel what it feels like to be Black, to be marginalized, to be cornered, and to be threatened. . . . I think she always wanted us to have that feeling of we were never safe, it was never safe."³³⁴

Harlem Duet thus both facilitates intraracial bonds and stages their dissolution. It offers a reparative reading of the white patriarchal history of *Othello* through the embodied presence of a Black woman onstage and yet renders that presence tragic. It manifests a deep historical connection across time, from slavery to the present, and yet disrupts any linear cohesion. Set at the intersection of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Boulevards, Sears' Harlem echoes with the voices of its Billies and Othellos and their ancestors—"lined up below" Billie and "fixed" in

³³⁰ Sealy-Smith, Interview.

³³¹ Sealy-Smith, Interview.

³³² Williams, Interview.

³³³ Sealy-Smith, Interview.

³³⁴ Dixon, Interview.

Othello's handkerchief³³⁵—and these voices are joined by the audio clips of various historical figures attempting to define or explain what it means to be Black in America. In holding all of these disparate and often contradictory threads within and around it, *Harlem Duet* stages what Sears calls “the full humanity of Blackness;”³³⁶ she implies that the worst thing one can do in the face of history's tragic cycles of racial trauma and their impact on the lives of Black men and women is remain silent.

Conclusion: Theater as a Social Platform, Contract, and Invitation

As these eight stage plays depict and *Harlem Duet* emphasizes, re-visionings of *Othello* allow artists of color to put themselves back in the narrative,³³⁷ and to reclaim Othello, as Sealy-Smith argues, as “our character.”³³⁸ The artists I spoke to who were involved with two of the older re-visionings—*Harlem Duet* (1997) and *Casting Othello* (1998)—also explicitly pointed out their ongoing salience. Both Sears and Allen Booth, the sound designer for all of Sears' productions, argued that *Harlem Duet* is still “relevant,” with Sears noting this was especially true during the Trump era.³³⁹ Williams mentioned feeling frustrated and angry when he performed in the play again in 2006 because “nothing is shifted. . . . we realized it was necessary to tell the play, it was necessary to talk about the social politics, the sexual politics, the interracial politics, and it was necessary to continue to have that conversation,” and said later that it's still necessary, “especially right now, in 2021” to listen to Black women like Billie.³⁴⁰ Kitu

³³⁵ Sears, *Harlem Duet*, 60, 75.

³³⁶ Sears, Interview.

³³⁷ Jennings, Interview.

³³⁸ Sealy-Smith, Interview.

³³⁹ Sears, Interview; Booth, Interview. Interestingly, many of my Canadian interviewees mentioned Trump in their discussions with me.

³⁴⁰ Williams, Interview.

said of *Casting Othello* that “it will be nice when the play is dated.”³⁴¹ In terms of the medium of the stage play, it should come as no surprise that the theater practitioners I spoke with could not imagine a more powerful space to inspire conversations about *Othello* than the theater. They spoke of it as powerful because it is communal, visceral, and ephemeral. Because it operates as a platform or instrument to amplify voices that are otherwise marginalized. Because it informs, questions, and challenges its audience.

Many of these re-visionings also purposefully distance themselves from Shakespeare’s *Othello* to more adequately critique how it has defined and limited racial representation on stage. For example, all the re-visionings that work from *Othello*’s narrative (as opposed to those that metatheatrically frame Shakespeare’s play), completely remove Iago from the stage, one consequence of which is to allow audiences to interact with Othello and his story without the corrupting influence of Iago’s pernicious racism. MacDonald also sees this as the need for people “to step back from the anguish of the story that [*Othello*] tells” because “it’s very difficult to separate the anguish of what happens in the play from the racial anguish that the play has also been a sort of lightning rod for.”³⁴² By distancing themselves from Shakespeare’s language and action—through the introduction of new characters, new timelines, or by staging its production—these re-visionings give their audience space to breath and imagine new versions of *Othello*. Yet, it is not just about imagining change, but being invited to participate in it. As MacDonald put it:

one of the things I think adaptation can do really freely is to invite us to speculate about what seems like the foreclosure of Shakespearean meanings. . . . [Adaptation] can complete that circuit of performance and response, so at its fullest, it invites audiences into active relationship, rather than a passive reception kind of relationship. Adaptation

³⁴¹ Kitu, Interview.

³⁴² MacDonald, Interview.

finds what we're thinking about and asks us to follow through on putting those thoughts into action.³⁴³

Adaptations or, as this chapter argues, *re-visionings*, invite audiences to participate in the imagining of alternative pasts and the creation of more just futures.

By specifically writing their re-visionings for the stage, these artists also invite a specific kind of participation, as they model conversations about race, gender, sexuality, and class that Shakespeare's play and its performance history struggle to address. Adaptations, MacDonald contends, "invite people into a conversation."³⁴⁴ Some of the artists I spoke with emphasized the current need to have honest, difficult, uncomfortable conversations and dialogues about racism, misogyny, antisemitism, and other charged topics,³⁴⁵ and they see theater as the best place to begin to stage that dialogue with/for audiences. All of the artists spoke to the power of theater, but their answers about "why theater" emphasize variously the practical logistics of the theater industry, the affective and communal effect of theater's "liveness," and theater's position as an educational and/or political platform.

In terms of the logistic side of theater, three of the artists argued that the theatrical medium comes with industry benefits. For instance, Sealy-Smith noted that while it can still be difficult to get a play produced, it can be a lot easier and faster a process than, for instance, a film, especially if you can start with a small theater company.³⁴⁶ Aside from Morrison's *Desdemona*, Chakrabarti's *Red Velvet*, and (when it was at Stratford) *Harlem Duet*, most of these stage re-visionings appeared through small theater companies. Robinson noted that, whereas films and TV shows are often picked up based on their ability to make money, "the people who want to explore [*Othello*] in different ways can use theater as a medium because you're not doing

³⁴³ MacDonald, Interview.

³⁴⁴ MacDonald, Interview.

³⁴⁵ Jennings, Interview; Kitu, Interview; Fortune, Interview; Williams, Interview.

³⁴⁶ Sealy-Smith, Interview.

it to make money.”³⁴⁷ This is not to say that commercialism does not drive the larger theater industry, but that, as Sealy-Smith notes, smaller theater companies might be less restricted by the need to put on big name or mainstream productions. So too, Williams argues that many artists of color specifically “have used the theater to tell these stories because they were not invited to tell these stories in other mediums. . . . We’re seeing it now because of this [cultural] awakening [to racial issues], but I think that we’ve used theater because it’s a true springboard . . . And I just don’t think that the other mediums have invited artists of color to tell their stories in the same way that theater wants to tell their stories.”³⁴⁸ In other words, these artists believe that theater has allowed them more freedom to explore the stories they want to tell without being restricted by long timelines, commercialism, and exclusivity.

Many of the artists who discussed the affective and communal effect of theater’s “liveness” emphasized the proximity and intimacy created between actors and audience and between audience members themselves. Such proximity produces a shared sense of community, which in turn allows actors and audiences a safe space to experience their emotions,³⁴⁹ creates an illusion of realism for audiences,³⁵⁰ and invites genuine communication and change.³⁵¹ In emphasizing its ephemeral nature, Griffith also pointed to the way theater creates a kind of transient social contract:

theater has always, for me, been a very sacred experience. . . . when you’re in a space and you’re agreeing to tell a story and it’s live and it’s moment to moment to moment—all you have is that moment . . . And then it’s gone and you’ve, all of you in that room, have shared that moment, and have had different feelings, because we all come with our own experiences up until that point, but we’re all agreeing to sit here and—whether we learn something, whether we laugh, whether we hate it—to feel something.³⁵²

³⁴⁷ Robinson, Interview.

³⁴⁸ Williams, Interview.

³⁴⁹ Sealy-Smith, Interview.

³⁵⁰ Sealy-Smith, Interview; Borden, Interview.

³⁵¹ Kitu, Interview; Griffith, Interview.

³⁵² Griffith, Interview.

While we may all come away from a theater performance with different emotions and perspectives on the play itself, the theater, by necessity, connects each audience, if not with one another, then with the world of the play.

Finally, many artists reflected on theater's position as an educational and/or political platform. For some, this means that theater acts as a reflection of or lens for society and the world we live in.³⁵³ Some people may come for escapism, but theater also has the ability to challenge its audiences to think about what is happening outside the theater as well.³⁵⁴ Other artists maintain that theater provides information, instruction, and education as well as entertainment.³⁵⁵ Perri Gaffney, who played Billie in 2003 in New York, expanded on the role of education to suggest that, in theater, "you shine a light on the things in dark spaces that maybe people don't look at or maybe people avoid."³⁵⁶ Williams specifically designated theater as "our oldest newspaper . . . Cause it's the one art form—it's the oldest art form—that has informed us as a community and its citizen."³⁵⁷ Connecting this idea to the liveness of theater, he also argued that "theater gives us opportunities that no other medium can to tell certain truths and the truths that we tell in theater are more important because they're immediate and they're done in community and the message is alive and it's tactile in that moment." Jennings contended that theater should not just inform, but specifically challenge: "theater should be right at the forefront telling stories that make you think, telling stories that cause controversy"³⁵⁸—an idea supported by those artists who see theater as a platform for social change.³⁵⁹

³⁵³ Robinson, 2021; Astrid Janson, Recorded Zoom Interview, 17 June 2021. Published with permission.

³⁵⁴ Jennings, 2021.

³⁵⁵ Gaffney, 2021; Janson, 2021; Borden, 2021.

³⁵⁶ Gaffney, 2021.

³⁵⁷ Williams, 2021.

³⁵⁸ Jennings, 2021.

³⁵⁹ Dixon, 2021; Robinson, 2021.

Listening to their answers and examining these plays, I posit that stage re-visionings have become a popular form for adapting *Othello* because the “liveness” of performance, its immediacy and proximity to viewers, requires two different things of white and Black audience members. The experience of watching live bodies enacting, self-reflexively and sometimes metadramatically, the racialized history of *Othello*’s past implicitly asks white audiences to examine their own complicity in and relation to the white, patriarchal structure that generates so much of the violence in *Othello* (and its performance history). While this experience of reflecting historically is also available to Black audience members, the specific appeal of “liveness” for Black audiences is that it invites them to witness nuanced, varied, and, most of all, embodied Black engagement with Shakespeare that extends well beyond colorblind casting. Through their performances, these re-visionings also create opportunities for affective community and invite audience participation in imagining and fashioning new futures (both within and across racial divides). Thus, by emphasizing such engagement, these stage re-visionings remind us that theater is a living, embodied thing that requires us to not only desire and pay witness to real change, but to enact it in our own lives.

Epilogue

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd by police in 2020, protests and demonstrations across the world led to the physical and figurative removal of monuments to white supremacy. In the U.S., this ranged from the physical toppling of statues such as Edward Ward Carmack in Nashville and Christopher Columbus in Richmond to a rhetorical displacement through the renaming of buildings, such as on the campuses of James Madison University and Princeton University.¹ In conversation with her coauthor, Laura Turchi, during the Zoom event “Teaching Anti-Racism through Shakespeare,” Ayanna Thompson connected this mass movement to Shakespeare’s place within the institution of higher education: “if we’re not attentive to . . . the way that we teach Shakespeare, Shakespeare will probably disappear from the curriculum. And I don’t say this lightly because I think that if we’re tearing down statues in Liverpool and all across the U.S., Shakespeare is potentially one of the kind of cultural statues that could come down.”² While my aim is not to advocate that Shakespeare continue to be a required course in every U.S. school, I do believe that much is lost in removing him from the curriculum and the cultural conversation completely.

The main loss in this removal would be the opportunity to examine Shakespeare’s place in history and history’s effect on Shakespeare; as one of if not the most reworked authors in the English language, Shakespeare provides endless ways to explore literature as a vehicle for

¹ *New York Times*, “How Statues Are Falling”; Weissman, “What’s in a Name?” Such protests against statues and building names did not begin in 2020, of course. In fact, after mounting pressure, the U-M Board of Regents voted in 2018 to rename two buildings that had been named for men with ties to white supremacy: Clarence Cook Little and Alexander Winchell.

² Thompson, Turchi, and Woods, “Shakespeare Teachers’ Conversation.”

examining cultural change. From John Fletcher's 1609/1610 *The Woman's Prize, or the Tamer Tamed*, which presents itself as a sequel to Shakespeare's *Taming*, to the 2012 hip-hop musical *Othello: The Remix* by the Q Brothers that appeared as the U.S. entry to the Globe to Globe Festival in London, how Shakespeare is adapted can speak strongly to what cultures value and how people make meaning of the world around them.

Shakespeare's plays can also serve as a helpful remind of how far society still needs to go to combat issues of sexism and racism. Creating a media frenzy many have likened to that of the OJ Simpson trial in 1995—itsself sometimes referenced in relation to *Othello*—the 2022 Johnny Depp–Amber Heard defamation trial raised the specter of Shakespeare's *Taming* for me. The trial itself was not about the fact of domestic abuse, but about whether Heard had “defamed” Depp in her 2018 article for *The Washington Post* in which she spoke of herself as a survivor of domestic abuse; still, public debate soon ran rampant about who had abused who and the internet quickly turned the court proceedings—and specifically Heard herself—into a farce. As Moira Donegan declared in *The Guardian*, “The trial has turned into a public orgy of misogyny.”³ From clips of the trial circling on social media to memes on Instagram and Twitter⁴ to filters and sounds on TikTok⁵ to merchandise for sale on Etsy and Redbubble,⁶ Heard's often emotional testimony about her abuse became fodder for mockery and discreditation through laughter. Because humor and shock value are so often the catalysts for online virality, the derisively comedic lens through which the Johnny Depp–Amber Heard trial was filtered mirrors how the “farcical” nature of *Taming* often invites audiences to laugh at Katherine's abuse, serving as a reminder that narratives like these are only funny in misogynistic societies.

³ Donegan, “The Amber Heard-Johnny Depp Trial.”

⁴ Cai, “What's Really Driving the Memeing.”

⁵ Colombo, “The Meme-ification.”

⁶ Dickson, “Meet the Ride-or-Die.”

Similarly, Othello's fraught relationship with the white society of Venice feels all too familiar to a society that continues to not only devalue, but also destroy Black life in the name of the State. Since I began writing my dissertation in the Fall of 2019, more than 900 Black men and women have lost their lives to police violence⁷ and, as some have had to learn through the recent murder of Tyre Nichols, white cops are not the only ones who can perpetuate violence in the name of white supremacy. Further, the detrimental effects of racist violence stretch far beyond those who are physically assaulted or killed, intensely affecting the physical and mental health of minority communities. After the 2014 murder of Michael Brown, who was shot by police in Ferguson, Missouri, Shakespearean Arthur Little wrote of being haunted by his death, reflecting that "Once again my black body was under assault."⁸ His piece, much like Ian Smith's meditation on Othello and the whiteness of Shakespearean scholarship,⁹ considers how Shakespeare and the early modern period are too often assumed to be racially unmarked and, thus, to be "white property."¹⁰ Such an assumption, he argues, has had lasting effects on whose humanity we recognize and whose deaths we mourn—on, as Smith contends, the ability of some Shakespeare scholars to speak of a Black man and his life and death at all. In short, when a woman describing being beaten by her charismatic ex-husband can inspire thousands of memes and comedic trends on the internet and yet another Black man has died at the hands of a white supremacist institution, it is hard not to see the intense relevance these two plays still have in our sexist and racist society.

I hope my dissertation has demonstrated the importance of not simply attending to the sexism and racism within *Taming* and *Othello* themselves, but also to how artists, directors, and

⁷ Campaign Zero, "Mapping Police Violence."

⁸ Little, "Re-Historicizing Race," 85.

⁹ Smith, "We Are Othello."

¹⁰ Little, "Re-Historicizing Race," 88.

scholars have adapted them in ways that perpetuate or disrupt the norms Shakespeare's plays set forward surrounding gender, race, sexuality, and class. As I stated in my Introduction, completely removing *Taming* and *Othello* from the stage does not remediate the oppressions of which they are both producers and products. To address their problematic status, I have argued that scholars must instead expand beyond only micro level analyses of individual adaptations and macro level analyses of Shakespeare's oeuvre to also enact a meso level of analysis. The meso level enables an examination of how specific plays often fall into specific adaptive patterns, which can affect how the adaptations adapt the problematic content of Shakespeare's plays, as well as their ability to avoid repeating the sexism and racism such content evokes.

My meso level analysis illuminates how *Taming* adaptations are often limited by a recourse to the pop-feminism of the romantic comedy genre and how an emphasis on performance through stage re-visionings can open up new possibilities for *Othello* adaptations. In Chapter 2, I present the idea of a sliding scale in relation to the ability of *Taming* adaptations to respond to the misogyny of Shakespeare's play—the further they get from the romantic comedy genre, the better able they are to escape the limitations pop-feminism places on their depictions of gender, sexuality, and class. It would be simple to make this sliding scale about proximity to Shakespeare's plays and their plots, since the *Othello* re-visionings open up new possibilities in part because many of them move outside the framework of his play completely. But I believe what actually limits or opens up an adaptation to successfully wrestling with a Shakespeare problem play is not its proximity, or fidelity, to Shakespeare, but its proximity to an audience's *expectations* of Shakespeare. Many of these expectations are guided by the genres that have historically been used to label his plays and those which have come to be associated with them over time, as is the case with the use of "romantic comedy" to describe *Taming*.

Adaptations that reinscribe the dominant or conventional approaches to Shakespeare's plays, like those I explore of *Taming* in Chapter 2, have more trouble critiquing the problematic ideologies of their play than those that break away from such approaches, like the stage re-visionings of *Othello* I discuss in Chapter 4. In other words, how willing and able are adaptors to unmake what has historically been imposed on a Shakespeare play in order to open it up to new readings and for new voices? Do the adaptative patterns around specific Shakespeare plays improve their liberatory potential or inhibit it?

By exposing and analyzing two such adaptive patterns and examining the limitations and possibilities they produce, *Tell It Again* describes and models an innovative way of approaching Shakespearean adaptation that attends to its status as both product and process, both individual texts and larger adaptive patterns. My hope is that such a method of reading and interacting with Shakespeare—as author, cultural figure, and institutional apparatus—will better allow audiences, readers, and scholars to recognize the important part we play as receivers and shapers of Shakespeare.

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