

## An Invitation from a Black Shakespearean By Ayanna Thompson

People are always surprised to learn what I do when I meet them outside of George Washington University, where I teach. You see, I am a black woman who teaches and writes about William Shakespeare, and I am also someone who teaches and writes about issues of race. In the current climate, these topics—Shakespeare and race—are usually viewed as mutually exclusive: you are either interested in Shakespeare OR race.

I have always seen them as integrally entwined, though, perhaps because the first Shakespeare play I saw onstage—at age 13— was a production of *Romeo and Juliet* that had a multi-racial cast. While Romeo and Juliet were played by white actors, Tybalt, Juliet's cousin, was performed by the black British actor, Hugh Quarshie, whose swagger and strength was hypnotizing. It was set in the world of 1980's Wall Street, and that production imprinted on my mind that Shakespeare can and should be about contemporary racial politics. It wasn't until college that I realized that my Shakespeare was not everyone else's—and especially not my professors' Shakespeare!

And yet, Shakespeare provides us with incredibly rich plays that are filled with incredibly complex characters who frequently make references to racial differences. Sometimes the references are empowering: In *Titus Andronicus*, Aaron the Moor claims that black is actually better than white: "Coal-black is better than another hue / In that it scorns to bear another hue." But more often, the references are disturbingly racist: Roderigo refers to Othello as "thicklips," for example. And most disturbing are the constant digs at black women as those whose bodies are the least desirable. For instance, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when Lysander wants to thwart Hermia's romantic desire for him, he says, "Away, you Ethiop!" Likewise, in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, when Proteus believes that he loves Sylvia instead of Julia, he claims, "And Sylvia—witness heaven that made her fair— / Shows Julia but a swarthy Ethiop." And when Claudio, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, thinks he must marry someone he has never met, he boldly declares, "I'll hold my tongue were she an Ethiop". Everyone is more desirable than a black woman in Shakespeare's plays! These sentiments are not surprising when one realizes that Shakespeare was a product of his time; the beginning of the transatlantic slave trade was supported in part by a belief in the fundamental differences between black and white. The casual racism in Shakespeare's plays can be jarring if one has been taught to believe that Shakespeare's plays are timeless and universal because he was, in fact, of his time.

So I think through Shakespeare and race together NOT because I view Shakespeare and his plays as universally good and racially progressive. I bristle every time I read the lines above. I hate that black women are almost entirely absent from Shakespeare's plays and when they are present, they are the butt of jokes about the limits of desire. (I say almost entirely absent, because it is compelling and instructive to think whether Cleopatra was or should be performed as a black woman; after all, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, she is described as having a "tawny front.")

My interest, rather, stems from a belief that Shakespeare's plays offer us all unique opportunities to explore these complex issues. His plays continue to be the most produced throughout the world, and unlike many American classics, Shakespeare's plays invite discussions about race and difference because there is so much in them about those topics.

So as a black woman with both eyes open, I invite you to think through Shakespeare and race together. What new discussions and productions can we create if we allow Shakespeare AND race to occupy the same universe?? To borrow from Shakespeare and Prospero in *The Tempest*, I marvel, "Oh brave new world that has such people in 't!"

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