

## Book Review

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***Shakespearean Adaptation, Race and Memory in the New World.* Joyce Green MacDonald. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 179 pp. \$109.99 (cloth); \$16.99 (paper and eBook). ISBN 978-3-030-50679-7; ISBN 978-3-030-50682-7; ISBN 978-3-030-50680-3.**

Anyone familiar with the field of Premodern Critical Race Studies will know that Joyce Green MacDonald's work is foundational to our understanding of race in the early modern period, particularly when it comes to representations of African women. Her earlier monograph *Women and Race in Early Modern Texts* (2002) provided a clarion call to early modern scholars to analyze more deeply the relationship between race and gender in early modern English texts. She continues this intersectional approach in her latest book, *Shakespearean Adaptation, Race and Memory in the New World*, the seeds of which seem to be planted in *Women and Race*, particularly with her interest in "the removal of dark-skinned women from representation" in early modern texts (MacDonald 2002, 10). In this new book on race and memory in postcolonial America, she builds on this focus by investigating the presence (and absence) of Black women in adaptations of Shakespeare, ranging from novels to plays and films.

Each chapter features a Shakespeare play and its adaptation, with two chapters focused mostly on *Othello*. The first chapter, "Introduction: 'A Cemetery Inhabited by Highly Vocal Ghosts,'" also references Toni Morrison's *Desdemona*, alongside other examples of the shadowy presence of women of color in *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Winter's Tale*. Some of the adaptations discussed here, like the films *Mississippi Masala* and *Deliver Us from Eva*, do not consciously acknowledge their Shakespearean influences, while others like Gayl Jones's novel *Mosquito* and Derek Walcott's play *A Branch of the Blue Nile* feature characters grappling consciously with the legacy of Shakespeare performance and adaptation itself. Each chapter in *Shakespearean Adaptation* also delves into the critical responses to their respective adaptations and what their contemporary reviews tell us about critical perspective (and their lack of nuance, at times). It is no small feat to tackle readings of both Shakespeare's work and its many adaptations, but MacDonald's cogent style is consistently lively and engaging.

MacDonald's approach to adaptation studies also hinges on what adaptations can reveal about the Shakespearean text, and readings of the original plays here are enriched when viewed through the lens of their adaptations. "Adaptation," she writes, "can be a powerful means by which what has been forgotten, erased, or

suppressed about these characters — characters formed in cultures whose interests were served by this suppression — can reappear” (167). By viewing adaptation as a means for suppressed voices to speak out, MacDonald echoes other recent theatrical works by Keith Hamilton Cobb (*American Moor*) and Madeline Sayet (*Where We Belong*) that interrogate Shakespeare as a tool of white supremacist and colonial forces. By viewing adaptation not as something derivative of an original text, but as critical response and incisive revision, MacDonald shows how “studying adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays in concert with the Shakespearean text can offer paths into finding and naming what is simultaneously there, and not there” (4).

Each chapter includes a rich web of connections among multiple texts. In chapter 2, “Claiming Wisdom: Re-reading *Othello* in Gayl Jones’ *Mosquito*,” MacDonald reads Gayl Jones’s novel not only alongside *Othello*, but also the writing of Gloria Anzuldúa (viewing Cyprus in *Othello* as a kind of borderland), *The Tempest* and Aime Cesaire’s *Une Tempête*. Chapter 3, “Uncrossed Lovers: Remembering Race in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Mississippi Masala*,” skillfully excavates the complex issues of nationality, colonialism, colorism, sexism, and misogyny present in the narrative of the mixed-race relationship at its core alongside a discussion of the raced and gendered language of early modern English sonnets. In chapter 4, “Bodies, Race, and Performance in *Antony and Cleopatra* and Derek Walcott’s *A Branch of the Blue Nile: Memory’s Signatures*,” discussion of Derek Walcott’s play about a Trinidadian company producing *Antony and Cleopatra* also expounds on the practice of color-conscious casting in modern Shakespeare performance.

These chapters will work particularly well in undergraduate and graduate courses on Shakespeare, both as an introduction to Shakespeare adaptation and as dynamic case studies of how adaptations can inform readings of an original work. The focus in chapter 5, “Echoes of Harlem: Women’s Memories in *Othello* and *Harlem Duet*,” on the music and props present in both Shakespeare and Djanet Sears’s 1997 play adaptation that illuminate the women’s relationship to the Othello character would be of great interest to both theater and literature students. In chapter 6, “‘The Right Foundation’: Re-racing Romance from *The Taming of the Shrew* to *Deliver Us from Eva*,” a deep analysis of *Shrew*’s performance and adaptation history (starting with Fletcher’s *The Tamer Tamed*) gives a great overview of the play’s status as a “problem child” that needs to be fixed. This attention to literary and performance histories of the texts throughout give a rich and multifaceted view that would be especially useful for professors teaching this material. While I am loath to touch *Shrew* in the classroom, teaching it with this adaptation and this chapter would give students a brilliantly organized way to think through why it remains on our stages today.

In her afterword on *King Charles III*, there is even more to be said (that undoubtedly occurred after the writing of this book) regarding the recent events with Prince Harry and Meghan Markle and the eerie divergence of their story from the ending of Mike Bartlett’s play. Ending the book on this tantalizing note leaves the door open to further discussion and analysis. MacDonald describes the scholarly genealogy of early modern race and gender studies as “a critical method whose variety, breadth, and subtlety continue to reveal themselves” (3). I see MacDonald’s participation in that work here as an invitation to interrogate Shakespeare through the lens

of adaptation in a fresh and exciting way. Her work will be of great use to researchers and instructors alike in finding new ways to talk about these well-known Shakespeare plays.