

# Shakespeare's tragedies and the construction of difference

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Where curricular constraints silence conversations about race, Shakespearean tragedies lend themselves to critical awareness of how the performance of difference is socially and politically encoded. I use three interpretive questions to introduce the ways in which early modern frameworks scaffold modes of racialization:

Who is friend and foe?

Whose power is legitimate?

Whose suffering matters?

## Who is friend and foe?

Long before Shakespeare staged his tragedies, church sponsored morality plays used skin blackening techniques to represent devils. This stagecraft was familiar to early modern audiences. Phrases like *King Lear*'s "there's hell, there's darkness, / There is the sulphurous pit," and *Macbeth*'s "How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags!" connect dark figures to amplified evil. These brief examples might seem like mere speech acts, but the blackening of evil is not empty rhetoric. The association between dark figures and ill intent prime audiences to apprehend racial prosthetics negatively.

Mejia LaPerle, Carol. "Shakespeare's tragedies and the construction of difference." *Throughlines*. [www.throughlines.org/suite-content/shakespeares-tragedies-and-the-construction-of-difference](http://www.throughlines.org/suite-content/shakespeares-tragedies-and-the-construction-of-difference). [date accessed].

This racializing logic underwrites Othello's condemnation of Desdemona when she is suspected of infidelity: "Her name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrimed and black / As mine own face." In other words, Othello's "begrimed and black" face and Desdemona's loss of "Dian's visage" are equated with visual evidence of sin. Similarly, in *Titus Andronicus*, Aaron announces himself as the agent of chaos:

What signifies my deadly-standing eye,  
My silence and my cloudy melancholy,  
My fleece of woolly hair that now uncurls  
Even as an adder when she doth unroll  
To do some fatal execution?  
No, madam, these are no venereal signs;  
Vengeance is in my heart, death in my hand,  
Blood and revenge are hammering in my head.

(2.2.32-9)

Aaron meticulously itemizes his outward attributes as signs of villainy: deadly-standing eyes, hair like a snake, vengeful heart, lethal hand, hammering head. Blackened characters like him function as spectacle and warning, inviting a seamless transition from physical difference to moral depravity.

### **Whose power is legitimate?**

Because tragedies are often preoccupied with hidden motivations as much as with outward actions, they offer us moments of private contemplation: Hamlet's existential musings, Claudius's admission of foul murder, and Brutus's justifications for assassinating Julius Caesar are some examples. Macbeth calls attention to this tragic tableau: "Stars, hide your fires! / Let not light see my black and deep desires."

When Queen Gertrude, in *Hamlet*, is overcome with guilt, she looks inward to her soul: "And there I see such black and grained spots / As will not leave their tinct." References to dark tint convey the burdens and conflicts of conscience, deploying the genre's dependence on blackness as a potent metaphor for damnation.

Furthermore, these moments enact anxieties about the legitimacy of leaders who are too sly or too powerful for public reproach. In Shakespeare's Roman tragedies, in particular, concerns about political legitimacy cast foreign bodies as morally suspect and inherently dangerous. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Antony pronounces his belated esteem of Roman bonds over the lusty allures of Egyptian pleasure by regretting that he "Forborne the getting of a lawful race," when choosing Cleopatra over Octavia. Miscegenation, the marital or sexual union of people from different racial groups, is represented as an unlawful threat to order.

*Titus Andronicus* likewise grapples with issues of social order and racial purity. Aaron and Tamora's illegitimate, dark-skinned son was nearly swapped for a lighter-skinned bi-racial child who can "pass" as a Roman, potentially corrupting the royal line from within. Shakespeare's Roman tragedies delineate imperial boundaries by representing who belongs, and who is qualified to lead, based on their race.

### **Whose suffering matters?**

Shakespearean tragedies do not merely represent suffering, they furthermore adjudicate whose suffering deserves our pity. The recurrent glorification of the dead white woman underscores this process, solidifying her as the ultimate emblem of catharsis. Approaching his wife's reposed form, Othello imagines murder not as the destruction of Desdemona's fair beauty and righteous virtues, but rather as the preservation of her

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perfection: "...I'll not shed her blood / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster."

Juliet is likewise memorialized. Upon entering the Capulet vault, Romeo exclaims "For here lies Juliet, and her beauty makes / This vault a feasting presence full of light." Juliet's luminous beauty transcends death; her undimmed radiance is the corrective to actual darkness and an antidote to Romeo's—and the audience's—psychological dismay. In drama's fixation on emotional pitch, Desdemona, Ophelia, Juliet, and Cordelia are the pinnacles of pathos. But the cost of their elevated status is fatal. White womanhood is only idealized when these characters are silenced, stilled, and converted to "monumental alabaster."

These three framing questions do more than reveal how early modern representations of evil, of legitimacy, and of suffering evoke racial difference. They invite us to dismantle the racializing logics that have perpetuated over time. The elevation of white suffering and the villainization of Black bodies are not natural truths; they are scripted dramatic choices. The fact that these portrayals often verge on exaggeration or absurdity undermines their validity. Exerting pressure on the overdetermined stereotypes of Black figures, Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* announces:

For I must talk of murders, rapes and massacres,  
Acts of black night, abominable deeds,  
Complots of mischief, treason, villainies,  
Ruthful to hear, yet piteously performed.

(5.1.61-69)

Aaron's litany of misdeeds hints at coercion—"for I must talk"—alerting us to the construction, rather than the confirmation, of his legendary crimes. When the ill-will

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attributed to racialized characters hint at theatrical excess, it exposes itself as a fiction.

We ought to interrogate, rather than accept, the stereotypes the plays seem to promote.