

material goods, institutions and environments in ways which complicate the division between subjects and objects, those who act and that which is acted upon' (216). This complex and holistic approach to women's participation in the early modern book trade provides exhaustive evidence of women commissioning, producing, disseminating, consuming, and recreating the works of their male contemporaries, illuminating their essential role as full participants in humanist culture.

Ayanna Thompson. *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race and Contemporary America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp 224.

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With the election of Barack Obama as the forty-fourth President of the United States in 2008, much of the media chattered about the dawn of a post-racial America: a utopia where race was no longer an issue and equality had been achieved. The 'birther' movement seeking to discredit Obama as a US citizen and the spike in gun sales on his recent reelection may be seen as just two of the signs that race is still a dominant force in America. Ayanna Thompson's exceptional interrogation of race and cultural politics in contemporary uses of Shakespeare is a timely and important contribution to the national discourse on race.

What Thompson presents to her reader is not a narrative history of Shakespeare and race as they appear in America, but a series of interrelated case studies that cover multiple facets of the topic. Her examples appear on the surface to include a disparate collection of genres, considering the deconstruction of racial attitudes within non-Shakespearean films and novels as well as constructions of race in *Othello*. Thompson's investigation encompasses white, black, Hispanic, and Asian American attitudes to and experiences of race. She acknowledges that 'there are polemical moments in the book because this is a project that requires action and not just passive reflection' (14). For Thompson, the monograph sets out to 'reveal that it is not only our modern conceptions of race that need to be challenged, but also our modern conceptions of Shakespeare' (18).

For scholars of contemporary Shakespearean performance, the chapters most immediately relevant are those on multicultural casting, the use of blackface in performance, and the utilization of Shakespeare in prison reform programs. Although Thompson's book contains much that is illuminating, these three chapters alone provoke a number of questions not only about race but also about how Shakespearean drama is modified and translated for and by its various audiences and practitioners.

The subtitle of Thompson's chapter on multicultural casting in commercial theatre provides a barometer of the author's polemical intentions: 'The Classics, Casting, and Confusion'. This chapter begins by describing the logic behind contemporary casting of Shakespeare's plays in the US, noting that many theatre companies 'describe *and* justify their multiculturalism ... in terms of the universality of Shakespeare's plays, themes and characters' (71, emphasis Thompson's). Thompson's point is that such public rhetoric is essential to the ways in which theatre companies market Shakespeare as relevant to all humanity in hopes of attracting spectators from outside a regular audience that skews naturally toward older, white, and college-educated members. Intriguingly, Thompson also notes that these same companies tout multicultural casting as a 'new' development in theatre when in reality Joseph Papp pioneered non-white casting at the New York Shakespeare Festival in the 1950s (71). In fact, Thompson appears to trace the beginning of American multicultural casting to the 1930s and the Federal Works Progress Administration initiative that counted among its successes Orson Welles's now-famous Haitian *Macbeth* (74). These observations support Thompson's investigation of conceptual productions as the primary method by which multicultural casting is performed in the US. In particular, Thompson raises questions about actor and director training and asks how — or even if — an awareness of the cultural implications of multicultural casting in both its historical origins and contemporary practice has emerged. Thompson argues that while other dramatic genres have benefited from an engagement with the topic of race, the same conversation is lacking when it comes to classical work.

This critical analysis of theatre's lack of engagement with all but the superficial aspects of non-traditional casting finds parallels in another of Thompson's chapters, which interrogates the use of Shakespeare in prison reform programs. Among other examples, Thompson cites a program featured on Chicago Public Media's popular radio program *This American Life* that followed 'a prison performance of *Hamlet*' in which the cast was half white and

half black (124). The racial make-up of the prison population is important to Thompson's analysis of reform programs' use of Shakespearean plays. Racial questions play out particularly in the casting of the roles for performance, the usual claim being that the best actor is cast for each role. Under these circumstances, 'the actor best fit for the role' is often synonymous with the person whose personal experience best mirrors the experience of the character — hence, for example, people in prison for murder play the Macbeths (125). Prison casting thus implicitly follows the received notions of colour-blind casting that Thompson explored in the previous chapter, with race not considered in the process. As in the professional theatre, the resulting colour-blindness enables prison programs to ignore issues of race within contemporary America. With racial history erased and conversation stifled, the silence surrounding the inmates' personal histories (despite their having been cast for their experience) deprives them of an opportunity for genuine reflection on the socio-political reality that creates a prison population disproportionately comprised of racial minorities.

Thompson poses myriad questions for her reader by considering these aspects of casting. Those questions include her provocative query, 'Is there nothing rehabilitative or redemptive about a detailed examination ... of one's racial, ethnic, or cultural history? ... If redemption comes through self-examination, what tools are provided to disentangle the complex notions and constructions of the self on both a personal level and a social one?' (126). Melding multiple facets of race, Shakespeare, and the arts in contemporary America, Thompson's monograph is a rich, complicated, and challenging tapestry. By opening the discussion up to include a wide range of cultural factors, Thompson crafts a complex and absorbing document that will become essential in scholarly investigation. In confronting both positive and negative aspects of the many ways race plays out on the cultural stage, she asks questions that will help to drive the conversation about race in the arts forward into the second decade of the twenty-first century.