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Brandi K. Adams

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REVIEW



Black “(un)bookishness” in *Othello* and *American Moor: A Meditation*

Brandi K. Adams 

MIT, Cambridge, USA

As Iago reminds the audience of his continued plans to distort both truth and reality for Othello, he characterizes the burgeoning jealousy of his adversary as “unbookish”:

As he shall smile, Othello shall go mad;
And his unbookish jealousy must conster
Poor Cassio’s smiles, gestures, and light behaviours
Quite in the wrong. (4.1.99–102)

With an assumption of Othello’s supposed weaknesses caused by a “free and open nature” (1.3.391), and with what Ian Smith has identified as a “stratigraphic mind [which] designates Othello as cultural alien” (168), Iago presents the eponymous character as untrained in vital nuances of rhetoric needed to parley with a “super-subtle Venetian” (1.3.355). For Iago, Othello fails to demonstrate cultural literacy garnered from either formal education or reading books, both of which would allow him to exist competently within and outside of the military. This “unbookishness” of Othello’s not only marks him as wildly, emotionally unchecked – at least for Iago – but it also juxtaposes his supposed lack of learning with the preferred and yet not perfect “bookish theoretic” of Michael Cassio’s education steeped in “mere prattle without practice” (1.1.23; 1.1.25). Smith also notes that Iago capitalizes on the contrast between the soldiers by assigning Othello the “damning sobriquet ‘an erring barbarian’” (Smith 168). This epithet catalyzes the dissolution of the presence and potency of Othello’s eloquence – the very hallmark of rhetorical training for young men in early modern England (1.3.354).

Iago assigns a version of this rhetorical ability to himself as he begrudgingly accepts Cassio’s humanist and literary training; however disingenuously, these two men are yoked together in bookish opposition to Othello. Cassio’s language, steeped in a humanism rife with classical references and lofty metaphors, continually identifies him as educated in the world of a play that purposefully draws attention to his readerly habits and disposition as it modulates Othello’s nearly to the point of erasure. Furthermore, this attenuation of

Othello's speech and literacy in direct proportion to his mounting jealousy is, as most things in the play, racially marked. If, as Kim F. Hall has argued, "early modern notions of race, like modern ones, were at heart driven by questions of affinity and community" (*Othello* 5), then both Iago's and the play's never-ending push to position Othello as "unbookish" are successful by utterly dissociating him from books, the Venetian community and the political force of whiteness, with impunity.

For Iago, both Othello and his Blackness are at their very essence, "unbookish". This is, of course, at odds with the deft rhetorical moves – including his invocation of a modesty topos – that Othello makes in his speech to the Senate as he purposefully diminishes his rhetorical and military abilities for the comfort of white authoritative political figures. He frames himself with great care intellectually and physically as he recounts the story of his early meetings with Desdemona remaining fully aware of the subtleties, super or not, of the Venetians before whom he stands. A Black character such as Othello, according to Miles Grier, "has been a moor in a double sense, serving as national outsider and referential anchor. The guarantee of a black character's authenticity is that it is constituted by the materials the empire uses to make (itself) believe" (211). The materials to which Grier alludes necessarily include the ability to read and interpret books as well as Venetian citizens who control interpretative modes that define Blackness and "bookishness", and then deem them mutually exclusive.

It is the play's (and perhaps even Shakespeare's) elision of Blackness with unbookishness that Keith Hamilton Cobb skilfully decouples in his contemporary play about the staging of *Othello* entitled *American Moor*. Amberen Dadabhoy succinctly characterizes Cobb's work as "a meditation on the walls erected around Shakespeare by those who control its knowledge and production, the politics of *Othello* in performance, and the experience of being a racialized subject in the world of and beyond Shakespeare" (84). The protective wall, encircling both Shakespeare and Othello, much like the ramparts that surrounded the ancient city of Troy, can only be breached by the Trojan horse of Cobb's Actor as he drifts in and out of conversation with the Director during an audition. This particular appropriation of Othello also allows for what Vanessa I. Corredera has identified as a significant way to "imaginatively transform Shakespeare in ways that may extend his relevance and authenticity for those often excluded from thoughtful representation" (35). Through the character of the Actor, Cobb probes a white male director's unnuanced reading of *Othello* while subtly invoking and widening myriad questions and reactions concerning Black men's literacy – both Shakespearean and situational – and the historical and contemporary assumptions surrounding it.

Despite the Actor's claim at the start of the play that he "saw Shakespeare ... not in a book, but on a stage", and that it "was never written to be read. It was written to be seen, and heard" (Cobb 4), the play nevertheless engages in

sustained conversations and powerful observations about what it means to read early modern plays.¹ At one point, the Actor recalls a moment in which he articulates his reasons for wanting to play Titania, because he “felt her” as she

opens her mouth, and from forth her very viscera, riding upon this effluvium of some of the sublimest language ever given voice, comes, well, what should be said, the absolute truth of the matter: “*These are the forgeries of jealousy!*” (7)

He then stops the narrative to reflect upon the historical definition of the word jealousy as it appears in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and subsequently contextualizes the term as an Elizabethan audience might have understood it. The Actor thus signals to the Director as well as to the audience (which earlier could only be in a theatre, but who may now also be readers), that he has, in fact, read Shakespeare widely, as he mirrors and performs scholarly work on stage.

Throughout the play, the Actor consults a critical edition of the play entitled *Othello: Texts and Contexts*, edited by Kim F. Hall. This book, which the Actor brandishes, peruses, reveres, and reviles, is a crucial object of the performance. It is not simply an interchangeable stage prop – as perhaps some of the other parts of the set could be – because the book remains pivotal to larger issues raised in the play about reading and who controls the narrative of fundamental literacy about Shakespeare. This conversation with Hall’s book is ongoing: the Actor uses it continually to address the Director, audiences, and even himself. Additionally, the stage directions call for the book to read in ways that surely reenact a great many readers’ responses to frustrations involving *Othello* itself:

*He picks up the text and reads from it,
perhaps not quite aloud, but audible.
“... Her name that was as fresh*

*As Dian’s visage, is now begrimed and black
As mine own face.—”
He hurls the book again to the floor. (26)*

This particular moment also recalls Hall’s introduction to the newly printed version of *American Moor*, in which she argues that “Black love of Shakespeare is a site of profound struggle and *Othello* its most vexed object” (*American Moor* ix). The Actor physically engages with this object – his book – as he animatedly reads, embraces, and recoils from it. The seemingly “vexed object”, contained inside of Hall’s edition of *Othello*, also emulates *American Moor* itself as it embodies “complications of history” as well as the “power dynamics of theater” (x). By selecting Hall’s edition of the play for performance, Cobb affirms that there is space for all kinds of readers and experts of Shakespeare. Additionally, it bolsters Cobb’s own performance, by providing the play with a critical race theoretical framework both in theory, as he interprets *Othello*, and in essence, as he carries the book onstage.

What remains significant about this text, so actively read by Cobb's Actor throughout the play, is that it is edited by one of the very few Black women full professors of early modern English literature in the world. Hall's presence as expressed through the book delivers an endorsement of her scholarship and the significance it holds in reading, history, education, as well as cultural and theatrical practice. Furthermore, it could be argued – both for the play and for legions of readers and scholars – that Hall's edition, which envelops *Othello* and even Shakespeare in careful historical contexts that makes them bearable and inclusive for readers, is the apotheosis of the play itself. And readers of Cobb's play, perhaps unable to obtain Hall's book, may rest assured. She, of course, introduces *American Moor* with the same care and thoughtfulness that she does in her edition of *Othello*.

Most importantly, at the very centre of Hall's edition, which is at the centre of Cobb's play, is *Othello* itself. The text, originally edited by David Bevington, contains Hall's significant editorial interventions in glosses and footnotes. She ensures that a “great Variety of Readers” may see and understand the nuances of the words before them. Her work and Cobb's invites readers of Shakespearean and contemporary plays to join historical readers who encountered *Othello* for the first time in 1623 and gives them the “priviledges wee know: to read, and censure” (*First Folio*, A3r). Finally, contained in the book inside *American Moor*, even beyond *Othello* and the 1623 Folio edition of the play, is the first quarto printed in 1622. It is here that the word “unbookish” appears for the first time in the English language and where the elision of Blackness and unbookishness began (“unbookish” def. 1.).² And thankfully with Hall's edition of *Othello*, and Cobb's *American Moor*, these terms can be decoupled by examining and understanding their beginnings.

Notes

1. My reading is based on a combination of the printed book and performance that I saw at The Red Bull/Cherry Lane Theater in October of 2019.
2. After it appears in *Othello*, it should be noted that the only other time the word “unbookish” seems to have been used in the seventeenth century in print is by John Milton in *Areopagitica* (1644) in which he writes of the ancient Spartans, “it is to be wonder'd how muselesse and unbookish they were, minding nought but the feats of Warre.”

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ORCID

Brandi K. Adams  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7552-3573>

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