

CULTURE

ALL OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS ARE ABOUT RACE

A new book argues that the playwright's work was central to defining whiteness as a racial category—one that has persisted ever since.

By Daniel Pollack-Pelzner



White people, in Shakespeare? Isn't that, well, redundant? (Illustration by Joanne Imperio. Source: Bettmann / Getty.)

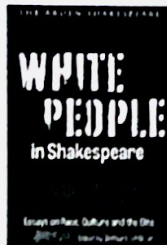
MARCH 10, 2023, 8 AM ET

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Pop quiz: Which of the following Shakespeare works is about race? (A) *Hamlet*, (B) *Othello*, (C) *Romeo and Juliet*, (D) the sonnets. If you answered B, you're not alone. Many of us have been taught that *Othello* is Shakespeare's primary race play, because, of course, it focuses on a Black character. You might also recall that Shakespeare wrote a few other plays with nonwhite characters: the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*, a suitor to the heiress Portia, who begs her, "Mislike me not for my complexion." Or Cleopatra, the African queen whom Roman soldiers blame for seducing their general, Antony, with her "tawny front." Or Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus*, a schemer alternately villainous and compassionate, who asks, "Is black so base a hue?" Or even Caliban, the island native in *The Tempest* whom Prospero, his enslaver, calls "this thing of darkness."


These works compose the lineup typically billed as Shakespeare's race plays. A limitation of that understanding, however, is that it assumes that race applies only when people of color are present. Such a view is definitively rejected in the revelatory new essay collection *White People in Shakespeare*. It's cannily edited by Arthur L. Little Jr., a UCLA professor and notable scholar of Shakespeare and race, and even the title

is a doozy. White people in Shakespeare? Isn't that, well, redundant? That reaction is part of Little's and his fellow essayists' point: White people have for so long been taken as the universal norm in the Western canon that to name them as white is to engage in critical race study. *White People* posits that *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and the sonnets are just as much about race as *Othello*, because they're all involved in defining whiteness. Shakespeare's work, the collection argues, was central to the construction of whiteness as a racial category during the Renaissance, and white people, in turn, have used Shakespeare to regulate social hierarchies ever since.



White People in Shakespeare: Essays on Race, Culture and the Elite

By Arthur L. Little Jr., editor

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This is not, to be clear, a book that tries to demonize Shakespeare or vilify folks who relish him. The complexity and power of his dramatic verse are givens in these essays. The collection contends, though, that what's beautiful in Shakespeare—or what Shakespeare's speakers take as beautiful—is often cast in racial terms. A striking example comes in the first essay of *White People*, by the late Imtiaz Habib, a founding scholar of race in early modern England. He takes up the opening line of Shakespeare's "Sonnet 1," which implores a handsome young man to reproduce: "From fairest creatures we desire increase." The key word here is *fairest*. In Shakespeare's day, *fair* could mean physically attractive or morally just. It could also

refer to complexion. More influential, it could be used to link attractiveness and justness to whiteness. When the Duke of Venice approves of Othello's virtue, for instance, he calls him "far more fair than black." (Is it any coincidence that the answer to the fairy-tale question "Who's the fairest of them all?" is "Snow White"?) The scholar Kim F. Hall, another contributor to *White People*, demonstrated the racial valence of *fair* almost three decades ago in her field-defining study, *Things of Darkness*—a dynamic work whose implications are still contested. Although I'm in Hall's camp, not all Shakespeare scholars agree with her ideas. As a result, it's still common for people to read passages such as those that open "Sonnet 1" without acknowledging that a paraphrase could basically be "We want the whitest people to have more babies." Habib calls the "Sonnet 1" opening a "declaration of the desirable eugenic privilege of white breeding," which is the kind of bracing take, both unsettling and compelling, that this collection offers at every turn.



**Things of Darkness:
Economies of Race and
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England**

By Kim F. Hall

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This method of race scholarship often attracts the charge of anachronism—that it's imposing contemporary categories on the past. That objection tends not to bother me; every era generates its interpretive questions from its own

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concerns, and an anti-racist approach to Shakespeare is long overdue. On historical grounds, though, there's a lot of evidence to suggest that even if people in the 16th and 17th centuries didn't use racial categories in quite the same ways we might, they were wrestling with the construction of social hierarchies based on emerging categories of race that went on to shape our world.

In fact, one of the chief interests of *White People* is how fluid and vexed the idea of whiteness—as both a racial and an aesthetic category—often was as it developed from the medieval to the early modern period. Little even proposes that in 1613, the first documented occurrence of the phrase *white people* (in a pageant scripted by Shakespeare's contemporary, Thomas Middleton) would have seemed an oxymoron. Whiteness was the property of the elite, who could boast pure Christian souls, the illumination of humanist learning, and cosmetically lightened faces, whereas *people*, the collective term for the common throng who had to labor for a living, couldn't claim the appearance, let alone the power, of being white. "White *people*," Little writes, "was not a thing."



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Yet already during that time, the theater was staging performances, deploying cosmetics, costumes, prosthetics, and props, that helped redefine the boundaries of whiteness. Those boundaries could be national and geographical, as in the case of

Shakespeare's history plays; or historical and civic, as in his Roman plays; or even romantic, as in his courtship plays. Romeo, for instance, spends much of his first few scenes trying to determine if there is anyone "fairer than my love"; degrees of whiteness in Verona, as the scholar Kyle Grady writes in *White People*, are a recurring concern.

The most provocative essay to show whiteness under negotiation comes from Ian Smith: "Antonio's White Penis: Category Trading in *The Merchant of Venice*." The provocation doesn't come from naming the merchant's penis; that's not a new move for scholars who have wondered whether the bond he signs with Shylock, a Jewish moneylender, in which he promises that if he fails to repay the loan, Shylock can cut off a pound of Antonio's flesh "in what part of your body pleaseth me," might involve a kind of circumcision or castration. Smith's ingenuity is noticing the precise terms of the bond: "an equal pound / Of your *fair* flesh" (Smith's emphasis). In Smith's reading, Antonio's whiteness is what Shylock covets as a Jew who, though not dark-skinned, is nevertheless excluded from the privileges that fair, Christian Venetians enjoy.

Read: Shakespeare wrote his best works during a plague

Is this too tendentious a reading? Not to my ear. Sure, some scholars might want to prioritize a religious interpretation over a racial one, but Smith is simply adding a layer of analysis, hidden in plain sight, that shows how, in Shakespeare's imagination, race and religion, like sex and money or flesh and blood, were so often intertwined. Smith's own new volume, *Black Shakespeare*, includes another innovative argument: that Hamlet's reluctance to take revenge against his uncle for murdering his father stems from his fear that avengers are marked as a type of "Violent, Murderous Black Man." If Hamlet committed revenge, he'd no longer be quite as white. That might seem a stretch until you look at the language that describes an avenging figure Hamlet recalls from the Trojan war: "he whose sable arms, / Black as his purpose, did the night resemble / When he lay couched in the ominous horse, / Hath now this dread and black complexion smeared / With heraldry more dismal." Whenever I started to feel skeptical—was race really the defining issue for Hamlet more than any other

psychological or social explanation scholars have proposed?—a passage like this one made the theory hard to dismiss.



Black Shakespeare

By Ian Smith

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By joining established scholars such as Smith, Hall, and Habib with emerging voices, *White People* heralds a breakthrough for a rising cohort of Shakespeare scholars—many of them people of color—whose focus on race has sometimes been excluded from the field’s top journals. One of this volume’s goals is to chart the history of white people controlling access to Shakespearean interpretation and, in turn, controlling access to the ideas that Shakespeare’s works helped fashion. White people invoked Shakespeare to justify opposition to miscegenation, as when former President John Quincy Adams wrote in 1836 that “the moral” of *Othello* “is that the intermarriage of black and white blood is a violation of the law of Nature.” A century later, his descendant, Joseph Quincy Adams, opened the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., with a celebration of Shakespeare as a centerpiece of a compulsory education system that had saved America from immigrants “who swarmed into the land like the locust in Egypt,” “foreign in their background and alien in their outlook upon life,” with “varied racial characteristics” that posed “a menace to the preservation of our long-established English civilization.” If in America, “the melting pot of races,”

Adams concluded, “there has been evolved a homogenous nation, with a culture that is still essentially English, we must acknowledge that in the process Shakespeare has played a major part.”

Focusing on these invocations, however, risks overshadowing the ways that some people of color globally have appropriated Shakespeare for their own purposes, many of them performing and rewriting the plays to challenge colonial legacies. So it’s salutary to see *White People* move in its second half toward creative counternarratives. A conversation with the playwrights Keith Hamilton Cobb and Anchuli Felicia King explores how they flipped Shakespeare’s script in their own adaptations of *Othello*. Discussing Cobb’s *American Moor* and an *Othello* reimagining, *Desdemona*, by Toni Morrison and Rokia Traoré, Hall says that is “incumbent on us to help students and audiences hear voices beyond the white noise of the Shakespeare industry.” And the Shakespeare and race scholar Margo Hendricks calls on her white peers to think critically about whiteness as an implicit standard of value. If those of us who, like me, fall into that category heed Hendricks’s call, that may be the lasting contribution of *White People*: to make it impossible to assume that whiteness is the norm, either for Shakespeare’s characters or for the audiences that interpret them. That doesn’t mean rejecting Shakespeare as an outmoded dead white man. On the contrary, it means reanimating him as a crucial part of a negotiation that continues to script our culture today, far beyond the theater and the classroom.

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