
Peter Erickson and Maurice Hunt, eds. *Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare's Othello*. New York: MLA, 2005. 244p.

JOANNE CRAIG
BISHOP'S UNIVERSITY

This volume brings together twenty short essays about teaching *Othello*. They range in scope from traditional academic considerations of the play to recipes that outline strategies, list questions for discussion in the classroom, or both. Understandably, color dominates these discussions. Samuel Crowl points out in his essay “Ocular Proof: Teaching *Othello* in Performance” that “*Othello*—particularly since our age has rightly made problematic the casting of a white actor in blackface for the title role—is no longer a staple of the Shakespearean repertory” (162), while Miranda Johnson-Haddad warns in “Teaching *Othello* through Performance Choices” that “to approach this play gingerly may empower its racist elements in the wrong ways” (160). On the one hand, color is the most compelling and troubling issue in the play; on the other, it is the most demanding because of the need to historicize it.

Gender takes second place, and it's interesting to see how the contributors distribute emphasis between the two kinds of difference. For instance, Kathy M. Howlett's concerns about the ways in which films of the play repress gender are central in her “Interpreting the Tragic Loading of the Bed in Cinematic Adaptations of *Othello*.” The ubiquitous term *race* itself is contentious. I share the reservations that Nicholas F. Radel expresses in “‘Your Own for Ever’: Revealing Masculine Desire in *Othello*.” He writes: “In deference to house style, I have omitted quotation marks around *race* and its derivatives. . . . It is important not to reconstruct race as an essential category while working to deconstruct sexuality” (71).

A long section by the editors, “Materials,” precedes the essays, which appear as “Approaches.” “Materials” in turn is divided into sections about editions and other teaching resources, each with its own subdivisions. The first subdivision, on complete editions, reports that according to the editors' survey the Norton Shakespeare is by far the favorite among collections of the plays, while E. A. J. Honigmann's edition in the Arden 3 series prevails among the separate texts. In my own survey, based on the contributors' lists of works cited, Riverside and Arden 3 dominate. The editors also survey recent work on the text and its sources and critical books and essays of interest to teachers and students, with a particular focus on gender and color; influence, appropriation, and comparison; and performances and films of the play. A tribute to Jim Andreas, the original editor, who died while the book was being planned, completes the extensive introductory material.

“Approaches” is organized under the headings “Histories of Race,” “Genealogies of Gender and Sexuality,” “Generic Frameworks,” “Classroom Strategies,”

“Approaches to Performance,” and “Comparative Contexts.” Obviously many of these categories overlap. Michael Neill in his essay “*Othello* and Race” comes directly to terms with the obsessively and irrationally fascinating subject of a black man and a white woman. After exploring the history of the play in performance and criticism, Neill traces both its condemnation as racist and praise as an antidote to racism in the 20th century to its incorporation of the “range of competing ideas about color” (51) in Shakespeare’s time. He carefully differentiates thinking on race in the 17th century from that of our own time, and then backtracks by pointing out the emergence of consistencies from the unstable mix. In Shakespeare’s theater *Othello* was a white actor in blackface, but over time the possibilities have come to include white *Othellos*, black *Othellos*, white *Othellos* in an otherwise black cast, and color-blind casting.

In “Improvisation and *Othello*: The Play of Race and Gender,” Emily C. Bartels fastens on the pivotal dialogue, vulnerable to cuts, in which Desdemona chides *Othello* about her intention to make sure that he is aware of her point of view as a kind of statement of policy for their new marriage (III.iii.41-92). Bartels suggests that we make the students, whose contact with the play is likely to be the fixed printed text of a classic, aware of the spontaneity and flexibility of the theater, with its capacity for improvisation and surprise, by emphasizing *Othello*’s status as husband in the relatively open context of marriage, as opposed to his relatively fixed public status as the Moor of Venice. The scene, Bartels says, is “a malleable crux of character and meaning” (76). To learn how it works, she recommends that students take the performance of the dialogue through a series of modulations and variations, for instance playing it first with a dominating *Othello* and a submissive Desdemona, then with a submissive *Othello* and dominating Desdemona, to contextualize the discussion of Cassio and his problems that takes place in it.

Virginia Mason Vaughan in “Teaching Richard Burbage’s *Othello*” recommends consideration of Burbage’s *Othello* as a way of encouraging students to see how concepts like that of color are historical and vary over time. The fluidity in the representation of *Othello* also reflects the terminology in the play, which fluctuates between references to its hero as black and as a Moor, and the ways in which Shakespeare’s contemporaries linked race with geographic, religious, economic, and cultural differences. Vaughan writes that “Shakespeare’s *Othello* was not the essential black hero but the product of a white imagination represented by English actors to a white audience” (149). That imagination sees the black man as jealous, passionate, easily out of control. Consideration of the racism of the past can help students to recognize “racist elements of their own culture that are much less transparent” (154).

In the section on comparative contexts, Lisa Gim's essay "Teaching *Othello* with Works by Elizabeth Cary and Aphra Behn" has a very strong practical orientation in its array of bibliographical references and questions for discussion and for students' research on *Mariam*, *Oroonoko*, and *Othello*. Sheila T. Cavanagh suggests teaching *Othello* with Cinthio's story, Verdi's opera, and Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play about a Handkerchief* to show students uncertainties and ambiguities in Shakespeare's text that the other three writers exploit. Janelle Jenstad uses Izak Dinesen's story "The Blank Page" to develop a subtle argument that links the handkerchief, the wedding sheets, and Desdemona's body in "Paper, Linen, Sheets: Dinesen's 'The Blank Page' and Desdemona's Handkerchief." Finally Joyce Green MacDonald's "Finding *Othello*'s African Roots through Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet*" works with an adaptation by a black feminist in which the emphasis falls on *Othello*'s abandonment of black women for a white one.

Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare's Othello should encourage teachers to confront the challenges the play offers. Like the others in its series, the book provides a useful overview of its subject and abundant bibliographic resources. It will probably contribute more to effective teaching in offering a multitude of attitudes and ideas than in its specific proposals of techniques, exercises, and other activities. ✱