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Ian Smith. *Black Shakespeare: Reading and Misreading Race.* **Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 226 pp. ISBN 9781009224086. \$39.99 hardback.**

Literary scholars are, arguably, first and foremost readers. Within literary studies, reading has often been understood as a process of interpretation, and one which informs the way that we teach, stage, discuss, and research the works and life of dramatists such as William Shakespeare. Debates about the stakes of different forms of reading—including “surface,” “symptomatic,” “paranoid,” or “reparative”—reflect the different ideological and cultural investments that a scholar might bring to bear on a text. Yet, how often does early modern scholarship consider the way that its reading practices have been influenced by the history of racial formation? In *Black Shakespeare: Reading and Misreading Race*, Ian Smith offers a nuanced and thought-provoking reassessment of the reader as an individual who is shaped by the historical conditions of “systemic whiteness” (3). Traditional interpretations of Shakespeare have routinely failed to recognize or adequately think through the playwright’s engagement with race, and Smith argues that this “blindness” to the

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textual evidence of race results from an epistemology and culture which is centered around whiteness (3).

For several decades, the practices of early modern race studies have challenged traditional readings of Shakespeare which overlook the author's explorations of race. In spite of arguments that race is a strictly modern concept, this scholarship has done vital work to show that race was conceptually available to early modern writers and that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century understandings of race drew on intersecting ideas of lineage, nation, religion, rank, embodiment, and skin color. Smith's study is clearly situated in relation to this critical history, and particularly early modern scholarship's resistance to race studies: an attitude which is captured with clarity in Smith's recollection of being told (repeatedly) that "*Othello* is not about race" (170). Whilst race scholars have critiqued the normativity of the white critical gaze, *Black Shakespeare* is the most extensive examination of how reading practices have been shaped by "the dominant white epistemology" in ways that deny the textual evidence of race (3). For Smith, the "tactical denial of blackness and race" (8) signals a desire to keep reading early modern writers like Shakespeare as raceless or race-neutral, and—in the process—creates readings which "are prone to elision, avoidance, and oversight" (6). The book argues compellingly that by severing early modern texts from the historical realities of race, scholarship sanitizes these texts of their clear racial content.

It is worth noting that *Black Shakespeare* is not Smith's first exploration of how Shakespeare's engagement with race has been ignored or distorted. In "Othello's Black Handkerchief" (2013), Smith outlined how the scholarly assumption that the handkerchief belonging to Othello's mother was white overlooks the fact that the fabric was actually "dyed by mummy," meaning that it was black in color. By linking the black materiality of the handkerchief to the use of textiles to impersonate black skin, Smith offered a key intervention in readings which had not considered the racial significance of black textiles in *Othello* and early modern culture more generally.¹ In *Black Shakespeare*, Smith builds on this research by understanding the reader as a "historically situated subject" (32) who comes at a text with a set of pre-existing racial biases. Drawing on the history of systemic whiteness and Toni Morrison's theory of the reader as "positioned as white" (9), the book outlines how the treatment of whiteness as universal encourages a form of reading in which certain things are taken

¹ Ian Smith, "Othello's Black Handkerchief," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 64.1 (2013), 1-25.

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for granted. Moving expertly between theory, history, and modern racial politics, the introduction persuasively demonstrates that the treatment of the white critical gaze as the norm creates gaps in our understanding of early modern texts and their racial content.

Black Shakespeare responds to such gaps and elisions by advocating for a development in “racial literacy” (14). The argument is clear: by developing their ability to recognize the textual signs of race, scholars would be better equipped to correct a tradition of erasing and distorting histories of racial formation. Whilst *Black Shakespeare* centers around three of Shakespeare’s most popular plays—*Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Hamlet*—the book is committed to the belief that racial literacy transcends Shakespeare’s texts. For Smith, rethinking how we read Shakespeare is an antiracist imperative. Racial literacy enables us to reassess “*how to be* in relation to others to meet the demands of a modern, just, plural democracy” (14) and opens up “possibilities of constructing antiracist *forms of whiteness*” (16). In this respect, the book’s reconfiguration of reading is rooted in antiracist praxis, and this is reflected in Smith’s provocative and necessary examination of reading in relation to the history of white supremacy, racism, and racial violence in the United States of America.

The first two chapters provide a robust theoretical framework for the book, moving from an analysis of theories of reading and literacy to a deep consideration of theatrical performance and the audience’s role in reading racialized bodies on the professional stage. In Chapter One, Smith gestures towards theories of reading based in book history, but his methodology is rooted in the history of racial formation and its shaping of the reader into an “historically situated subject” (32). This methodology is particularly successful when it places recent debates about reading as an act of interpretation in conversation with systemic whiteness. In his insightful critique of Stephen Best’s and Sharon Marcus’s concept of “surface reading,” Smith points out that scholarship which interrogates the readership so often assumed by the pronoun “we” still falters at the point of acknowledging “the racial homogeneity of this corpus of critics” (38). This critique of white normativity in literary studies is seamlessly integrated into an analysis of the historical and legal conditions of systemic whiteness in the USA, such as the 1790 Naturalization Act which restricted citizenship to white immigrants. Placed together, these sections deepen Smith’s claim that reading practices are shaped by the historical and cultural conditions of whiteness. Although

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readings rooted in systemic whiteness are treated as reliable, whiteness ultimately draws power from its misreading and misinterpretation of race.

Sight is a recurring motif in *Black Shakespeare*, and Chapter Two's focus on "blindspots" effectively captures the knotty connections between seeing, reading, and knowing race (58-59). The racial blindspot is a clear example of racial illiteracy, in which preexisting biases and beliefs fill in the gaps of what the reader does not know or see. In the opening scenes of *Othello*, for example, in which Othello is physically absent, Shakespeare dramatizes the racial blindspot in ways that make white reading visible. The play asks the reader or audience member "to try filling in the gaps" about the elusive "Moor" by drawing on pre-existing negative associations of blackness within literature, theatrical performances, and English culture more broadly (60). Smith's understanding of reading as a process which moves between texts, performances, and day-to-day encounters reminds us that whiteness is not simply a matter of skin color but rather "a form of knowledge" (68). In this context, there is a certain slippage between reading textual blackness and reading Black bodies which Smith articulates beautifully. In both instances, the white reader is positioned as a reliable interpreter of blackness, but Shakespeare's choice to upend the audience's assumptions about Othello offers a more complex critique of the relationship between whiteness and reading. Unless early modern scholarship addresses its racial blindspots, it risks perpetuating harmful misreadings of blackness.

Whilst Smith's analysis of *Othello* draws attention to the visibility of whiteness, Chapter Three moves on to consider how whiteness has avoided racial connotations. Systemic whiteness draws power from its invisibility, since it neutralizes the white gaze as the default perspective through which people experience the world. Significantly, readings of *The Merchant of Venice* have typically overlooked the fact that Shylock's stipulation is for a "pound / Of your *fair* flesh," a bodily descriptor which implies that the value of Antonio's flesh is tied to its color (83). For Smith, Shylock's specific desire for white flesh is a political, economic, and legal response to the injustices of white Christian supremacy. The play thus interrogates why violence against Venice's Jewish population is more permissible than violence against white Christian bodies. At the same time, the play's attention to Jewishness and its relationship to whiteness—including Portia's inability to distinguish between Shylock and Antonio during the trial scene—raises important questions about the readability of racial whiteness. Early modern scholarship needs to expand its racial literacy to account for different forms

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of whiteness, and this first requires scholars to recognize the visible signs of whiteness in early modern texts.

The last two chapters are structured around Smith's argument that *Hamlet* and *Othello* "are bound in an overt racial dialogue" (118). The scholarly emphasis has often been on Hamlet's inwardness, moving us away from the "racialized body" and into the "unraced" space of interiority (120). In Chapter Four, however, Smith argues that *Hamlet* plays a role in creating and sustaining the stereotypical association of black masculinity with violence. Hamlet's rewriting of Pyrrhus as a black or "sable" revenger, whose external body is as "black as his purpose," reflects a theatrical tradition in which racialized blackness is associated with violence, death, and abjection (129). In order to avenge his father's death, Hamlet embodies harmful stereotypes of blackness which we can also recognize in plays like George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (c. 1591) and the collaboratively written *Lust's Dominion* (c. 1600). Smith's attention to repertory and the typification of blackness reminds us that reading moves from text to performance, recalling his initial discussion of the racial illiteracy of *Othello*'s audiences, both in on- and off-stage terms. The framing of the book with *Othello* is powerful, and Chapter Five interweaves insightful close readings of the text with an ethically engaged reflection on racial violence, police brutality, and the killings of Black men and women in recent decades. Taken together, these chapters interrogate why so many critics have identified with Hamlet and not Othello, despite both men issuing requests for their stories to be told in just and empathetic ways. In Othello's request for somebody to "speak of me as I am" (163), Smith recognizes an urgent challenge for scholars to adopt forms of reading and teaching which are "rooted in a creative and emancipatory set of antiracist possibilities" (185).

Black Shakespeare is remarkable not only for its deep and insightful textual analysis, but also for its clear commitment to antiracism as praxis. Alongside insightful, complex readings of Shakespeare's plays, Smith provides tangible opportunities for readers to develop their racial literacy in their daily lives. Although the focus is on the history of racial formation in the USA, the book offers a brilliant framework through which all early modern scholars can interrogate their own racial literacy. The understanding of reading as a racialized process extends to a variety of racialized and globalized identities, and this makes the book an extremely valuable tool for future work on race in early modern literature. The current climate of racial politics highlights the urgent need for scholars to evaluate and address their racial

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blindspots. *Black Shakespeare* is a vital and important book which highlights the pitfalls of misreading race and asks us—as readers—to commit to the work needed to truly develop racial literacy in the classroom, in theatre-making, in early modern scholarship, and in our day to day lives.

Lydia Valentine
King's College London