Sarah G. Waisvisz

“This only is the witchcraft I have used”: *Harlem Duet* as a Feminist Adaptation of *Othello* (3.4.71)

In 1985, Maya Angelou delivered a speech entitled “Journey to the Heartland” to the (American) National Assembly of Local Arts. In this address Angelou discussed her relationship with the work of Shakespeare and its influence on her as an individual and as a writer. For her, Sonnet 29 is especially evocative: “When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes, / I all alone beweep my outcast state, / And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries, / And look upon myself, and curse my fate.” Says Angelou, “Of course, he wrote it for me: that is a condition of the black woman. Of course, he was a black woman. I understand that. Nobody else understands it, but I know that William Shakespeare was a black woman. That is the role of art in life” (*Cross-Cultural Perspectives* 6). Angelou’s comment articulates the powerful forces at work in the rich field of adaptations of Shakespeare; despite his obvious iconic and canonical status, Shakespeare is not an untouchable author figure, nor are his works completely sacred or even original. Instead, Angelou’s comment about Sonnet 29 highlights the flexibility of Shakespeare’s works— that is, not only their ability to be adapted but also what it is about them that has, for centuries, motivated diverse writers, including many women writers and feminist writers, to appropriate them and identify with them.

So, “is Shakespeare a feminist?” A cheeky question, I know, and one that is problematic to answer. Fortunately, the contemporary field of feminist criticism of Shakespeare is no longer obsessed as it once was with deciding whether or not Shakespeare’s works are feminist or proto-feminist, or at least compatible with feminism. In her seminal 1982 book *Comic Women, Tragic Men*, Shakespearean critic Linda Bamber writes that she is opposed to critics who support “assimilating Shakespeare into the system of [feminism]” (2) and she prefers instead “to insist on Shakespeare's indifference to, independence of, and distance from this system” (3). I align
myself with Bamber’s particular approach to criticism which seeks to “[locate] the feminism in the critic— not in the author or even the work” (3). Rather than attempting to label Shakespeare or his plays as feminist, I am interested in what happens after Shakespeare, and in how, as Carol Thomas Neely puts it, feminist readers and writers work to “remember Shakespeare differently” (“Remembering Shakespeare, Revising Ourselves” 244). I would like to uncover what exactly is at stake here, and to see if in fact feminist writers must critique and re-write Shakespeare in order to manage, for example, the “violent misogyny” that Bamber and other critics find in his works (Bamber 3). I would argue that through strategies of collaboration and affectionate redress, many feminist adaptations of Shakespeare disturb the “original” “source” texts in a way that forever alters how a reader approaches them. The adaptations therefore stand alone as works of art, but they are also charged spaces of resistance, challenge, and subversion. This paper will analyze Canadian writer Djanet Sears’s 1997 play Harlem Duet as a feminist adaptation that “remembers” Shakespeare’s Othello “differently.” In addition to the critique it offers on Othello with its investigation of the linkages between gender and race, I am interested in how, as a feminist play, it can contribute to the study of Shakespeare, and also about what it says about the nature of adaptation in general.

I would like to posit the claim that adaptations are subversive. Regardless of its chosen strategies, an adaptation inevitably destabilizes the “original” author figure of the “source” text and reconfigures the myth or story into something different that also defies traditional notions of authorship. Feminist adaptations of Shakespearean plays, additionally, privilege feminist perspectives and feminist enquiry, and use feminist strategies to tackle a variety of issues. In her article “Sexual Signatures After the Death of the Author,” Elizabeth Grosz argues that a feminist text must not only challenge “the patriarchal norms governing it; it must also help, in whatever
way, to facilitate the production of new and perhaps unknown, unthought discursive spaces that contest the limits and constraints” of normative literary and cultural production (23). Thus, the second part of this essay will analyze Djanet Sears’ play *Harlem Duet* as a feminist play and seek to prove that it does indeed reflect Grosz’s recommendations in full and change the way a reader subsequently approaches *Othello*, and in fact all of Shakespeare’s plays in general.

In the introduction to their anthology *Adaptations of Shakespeare: A critical anthology of plays from the seventeenth century to the present*, editors Daniel Fischlin and Mark Fortier discuss how “adaptation implies a process rather than a beginning or an end, and as ongoing objects of adaptation all Shakespeare’s plays remain in process…so that any adaptation is, and is not, Shakespeare” (3-4) because of its political or cultural recontextualization. Roland Barthes’ and Julia Kristeva’s theories on intertextuality argue that “Intertextuality [is] the condition of any text whatsoever” (Barthes in Fischlin and Fortier). This statement highlights the plasticity of the “Shakespearean originals,” themselves adaptations of myths, legends, and histories, and shows how inevitable it is that we continuously remake and reevaluate our cultural inheritance according to contemporary concerns. Fischlin and Fortier remind us that in the act of rewriting, adapting, and re-contextualizing, writers “inevitably rework and alter” already existing artistic material so that “the meaning of texts from the past is changed by their appearance in new conditions” (xvi). As critic Graham Holderness argues, “Shakespeare is, here, now, always, what is currently being made of him” (Graham Holderness in Fischlin and Fortier xvi); the meaning of “Shakespeare,” therefore, is never stable but instead constantly changing.

When Angelou says in “Journey to the Heartland” that Sonnet 29 is about the “condition of the black woman,” she demonstrates the extent of her internalization and appropriation of Shakespeare in order to make his text hers, or at least to prove that it is for her, and for black
women like her (Novy 6). Angelou implicitly critiques and resists standard ideas about who can identify with Shakespeare and then turns these standards back on themselves: not only can she identify with his work, but it is written for her, by a black female Shakespeare. In “The Power of Discourse” Luce Irigaray writes that feminist critics must “disrupt” and “modify” the “dominant order” by “starting from an ‘outside’ that is exempt, in part, from phallocratic law” (Irigaray 68). Angelou follows this strategy: rather than opposing the Shakespeare, she begins from the black woman’s marginal position and from there consumes Shakespeare’s work and transforms it. Likewise, in Harlem Duet, Sears refocuses Othello in order to force it to, in Irigaray’s words, “render up” and “give back” what it “owes the feminine” (74), and also what it owes the black community.

Kate Chedgzo’s introduction to Shakespeare, Feminism and Gender states that although contemporary feminist scholars are concerned more than ever with political, racial, class, cultural, and historical issues of disempowerment, “a thorough integration of questions of gender and sexuality with issues of race and colonialism has not yet been achieved, and there is a pressing need for more work on the imbrications of gender, sexuality and race in the shaping of national identities and cultures” (11-12). The intersection of gender with other varying political and historical issues thus is both a source of potent criticism and a significantly untapped source, appealing to certain particular critics but not yet used generally, nor is it often addressed in creative adaptations. While critics like Ania Loomba and playwrights like Djanet Sears cannot imagine an analysis of Othello that ignores race and racial politics, many feminist critics and writers have traditionally sidestepped the issue. Hence Sears’ play is not “simply” a play but also a critical challenge that is of paramount importance and that has tremendous consequences.
Harlem Duet, written in 1997, recontextualizes Shakespeare’s Othello by intermingling Othello’s themes of love, race, and betrayal with the racial and cultural politics of 1860, 1928, and present-day Harlem NY. In Harlem Duet Sears focuses not on Othello’s relationship with Desdemona but on the disintegration of his relationship with his first love Sybil, commonly known as Billie, and the betrayal that Billie feels when Othello leaves her for Mona, a white woman. These events are echoed in two other temporal settings with the parallel couples Him and Her and He and She. Although the names change, the relationship shared by Othello and Billie is shown to be eternal and mythic, pan-historical and fated, reaching past 1860 to the chrysalis of Shakespeare’s inspiration and further.

In Sears’s introductory note accompanying Harlem Duet, a piece entitled “Why I Write for the Theatre,” she explains her motivation for writing the play: “Othello is the first African portrayed in the annals of western dramatic literature. In an effort to exorcise this ghost, I have written Harlem Duet” (Sears in Fischlin and Fortier 285-286). In Harlem Duet, the racial politics at the heart of Othello are made paramount. This is not the story of Othello’s doomed and passionate love for Desdemona, but rather of his betrayal of Billie. Billie understands Othello’s new relationship to be symbolic of his desire to assimilate and pass as white, a desire which is juxtaposed against her sense of black identity and her understanding of the need for black solidarity. As Fischlin and Fortier suggest, “Billie’s struggle to deal with her own anti-white racism even as she seeks to affirm her identity apart from white culture is the crucial contradiction [that] the play highlights” (287). While in Othello the focus is on the tragedy of a black man, traditionally played by a white man, who is alienated from and deceived by the dominant white culture, in Harlem Duet Sears focuses on the experience of exclusion felt by black women and “asks important questions about how inclusion and exclusion work for people
who are part of the black community . . . Othello, for Sears, is to be understood in relation to a
black community, a fundamental shift from the Shakespeare original” (286). Othello’s love for
Mona, therefore, has political consequences as well as personal ones, and Billie finds it
increasingly difficult to deal with what she considers to be his treason and desertion. Sears
complicates Billie’s potentially dominant position, however. Although the audience and the
readers do not necessarily sympathize with Othello, Billie’s understandable anger is not
legitimzed by her peers either, who consider it excessive, potentially dangerous, and racist. But
for Billie “It’s about Black.” “I love Black,” she says, “I really do. And it’s revolutionary . . .
Black is beautiful . . . So beautiful. This Harlem sanctuary . . . here. This respite . . .Like an
ocean in the middle of a desert” (Sears 313). Racial politics do not enable easy solutions,
evidently, and with the complex portrayal of Billie and her relationship with Othello Sears seems
to advocate dialogue, regardless of its fury or lack of answers, in favour of ignorance or
complacency. This is a play concerned with subversion and resistance, and Billie’s struggle to
preserve her community and identity highlights the consequences of pushing too far or,
conversely, of not fighting at all.

Fischlin and Fortier comment that “Shakespeare’s text remains a barely visible (but
nonetheless significant) backdrop to the dissolution of Othello’s and Billie’s relationship” (287).
I disagree with their statement that the Shakespearean context is merely a “backdrop.” The
allusions to Othello, ranging from some of the obvious character names to more subtle examples
like Billie/ Sybil, seduce the reader with their carefully selected references. Although formally or
stylistically speaking what is more obvious in the play is the blues soundscape and the
integration of political and cultural soundbites-- in order that the political context of the play be
apparent and understandable-- nevertheless Harlem Duet owes its very existence and its choice
of political and literary strategies to *Othello*. If anything, the “barely visible” Shakespearean “backdrop” is *overshadowed precisely* to draw attention to Sears’ point of redress: *Harlem Duet* recontextualizes the racial politics of *Othello* from a white European context to a black American context. Second, in league with Irigaray, Angelou, and Grosz, Sears’ strategies neatly destabilize Shakespeare’s authorship in favour of a traditionally marginalized other, Billie, a black woman whose prophetic and ethereal presence empowers her as the true author of the myth. As Billie’s father, named Canada, makes clear, she plays a powerful role in the story of her life, in the play *Othello*, and in the larger pan-cultural and pan-historical experience. Canada explains that her name, short for Sybil, “is a good name. It was [her] Grandmother’s name. It means prophetess. Sorceress. Seer of the future” (307). The epigraph to the play further emphasizes its roots within the Shakespearean mythology; the lines from *Othello* remind the reader that Billie, like her love for Othello, is a force to behold: “That handkerchief / Did an Egyptian to my mother give. / She was a charmer . . . / There’s magic in the web of it. / A sibyl . . . in her prophetic fury sewed the work” (*Othello* 3.4.57-74). The handkerchief in *Othello* and its anonymous, legendary maker become personified by Billie who, with her significant dreams, powers, and social awareness, suffers from the Cassandra-like fate of being ignored and alienated but not, in the end, diminished.

I would argue, moreover, that Billie’s identification as a sibyl and prophet confirms her status as the author and wise fool who questions the role of the author in many Shakespearean plays. Billie’s position as a sibyl is what allows her to assert control not only on the interior world of her play, but also on the world of Shakespeare’s *Othello*. More precisely, Billie comes to embody the role of the wise fool who is otherwise physically absent in *Othello. Harlem Duet*, however, suggests that the mysterious maker of the handkerchief, the Egyptian sibyl, indeed
Billie herself, is *Othello*’s missing wise fool. Billie is characterized as a contemporary prophetess, shaman, sorceress, and *Obeah* woman. Her apartment “looks like a science lab” (Sears 291) and she is described as having “a real talent for herbs” (291). The “small chemical factory” on her table is well stocked with poisonous substances including “Saracen’s Compound . . . Toad . . . Hart’s tongue . . . Prunella vulgaris” as well as a copy of “*Egyptian Alchemy: A Chemical Encyclopedia*” (295), a direct link to *Othello*’s Egyptian sibyl. Billie’s intense dreams, an expression of her severe depression and anxiety, also liken her to the role of seer and prophetess.

The strawberry-spotted handkerchief, present in both *Othello* and *Harlem Duet*, comes to symbolize the mythic and legendary quality of the love between the *Harlem Duet* characters. The handkerchief is passed down through Othello/He/Him’s family until finally, in the present, Othello gives it to Billie. However, Sears derails the understanding in *Othello* that it is rightfully given to Desdemona by demonstrating in *Harlem Duet* that, before Othello meets Desdemona, it is first given to Billie, who returns it to Othello before his wedding to Mona. Moreover, if Billie is to be likened to the sibyl in *Othello* who sewed the handkerchief, then the love magic understood to be part of the handkerchief takes on a sinister quality for both plays, since Billie only returns it to Othello after having added her own magic to it in revenge. In her home laboratory, Billie performs her own witchcraft, her own type of exorcism: “I am preparing something special for you . . . A gift for you, and your new bride. Once you gave me a handkerchief. An heirloom. It is fixed in the emotions of all your ancestors . . . What I add to this already fully endowed cloth, will cause you such such . . . Wretchedness” (Sears 306). If *Harlem Duet* is the prologue to *Othello*, then the handkerchief, infamous symbol of Desdemona’s love and simultaneously the “ocular proof” (*Othello* 3.3.363) of her innocence or rather her guilt, is
irrevocably infected with Billie’s “fury,” whether or not her magic is to be believed (3.4.74). Ultimately, Billie’s role as sibyl and wise fool does not end in Harlem Duet, but transcends linear time once again to haunt the world of Shakespeare’s Othello.

Billie’s position as powerful sybil and author figure is one of many significant ways in which Sears reorients the play Othello and alters how we read it. Additionally, I am struck by Sears’s apparent opposition to Desdemona in her play. Rather than privileging Desdemona’s plight or attempting to redress her subordination and suffering, as many other feminist critics and writers do in their work, Sears chooses instead to privilege a character of her own invention, Othello’s fictional former wife, Billie. By not taking the expected course of redress by privileging Desdemona, Sears instead explodes expectations for a feminist adaptation and interrogates Othello’s and the canon’s idealization of Desdemona and Othello as a romantic couple, while also using Billie and her hostility towards Mona to highlight the implications and far-reaching consequences of racial prejudice and racial politics. In Harlem Duet the suffering is displaced from Desdemona onto Billie so that it is Billie who suffers from the misogyny, circumscription, containment, and strangulation of Desdemona, Emilia, and Bianca, as well as the racism experienced by Othello. Just as Harlem Duet is enriched by this re-orientation, so too is Othello enriched as well as changed: in reading Othello after Harlem Duet I find myself less and less sympathetic to Desdemona, and instead anxious to find traces of Billie, Othello’s mythic black sibyl, and the presence of her unmistakable powers.

Finally, because the play highlights and empowers Billie, Harlem Duet is Billie’s story, not Othello’s, and in this way the misogynist injustice of Othello is addressed and perhaps redressed. However, the ending of the play is ambivalent; instead of triumphing, Billie suffers from a nervous breakdown and is sent to a psychiatric hospital to recover. Despite this
pessimistic result, the final stage moment between Billie and her father is a hopeful one that, in the words of Fischlin and Fortier, holds for Billie and for society in general “the promise of a dialogue that begins to break with [the] historical inevitability of racism” (Fischlin and Fortier 287). As a political “reconfiguration” of Othello, Harlem Duet therefore successfully satisfies what Grosz lays out as the principles for a feminist text. The play problematizes and challenges the traditional patriarchal legitimacy afforded to Shakespeare the author by privileging instead a character who stands outside Shakespeare’s play. Additionally, because of its political and cultural concerns, it also fulfills Grosz’s third criterion by creating a charged space for dialogue about race and relationships within the black context that is “othered” into non-existence in Othello. Harlem Duet’s focus on race relations, assimilation, and racial solidarity cannot be undervalued. As Fischlin and Fortier comment, Sears puts black experience at the centre of her play so that Harlem Duet “is explicit in the way in which it constructs itself as a nexus for different forms of black voice. This is in marked distinction from Shakespeare’s Othello, where Othello’s otherness from white culture is a prime feature of the play” (286). Thus Sears successfully “exorcises” the ghosts haunting Shakespeare’s Othello by not shirking from, indeed by highlighting, the racial tensions of North American society. Harlem Duet is therefore a landmark revisioning. By giving voice to the black experience in Othello and bringing sexual and racial politics to the forefront of her play, Djanet Sears exemplifies the strategy for adaptations to interpret contemporary issues by redressing tradition. Hers is not an aggressive opposition to the Shakespearean play, nor a joyful celebration; rather, it is a complex and nuanced re-vision that seduces even as it subverts and challenges, and that disturbs how a reader subsequently approaches the “original” text. This paper’s title and epigraph, “This only is the witchcraft I have used,” is a line used in Act 1.3 by Othello to describe how Desdemona falls in
love with him for his words and for his storytelling, and it expresses the simple strategies of literary witchcraft used by Billie, Sears, and other feminist writers of adaptations to exorcise, redress, adapt, and seduce the Shakespearean texts in order to, as Neely says, “remember” them “differently” (244).
Works Cited


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