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Expos 20

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Racism in *Othello*:

An Opportunity to Combat Implicit Bias Today

Shakespeare's *Othello* is famous for its discussion and depiction of race and racism in the 17th century. As Shakespeare's only play with a black protagonist, the question of race's role in the play is inevitably inherent to our reading and interpretation of its meaning and significance. The play doesn't take long to dive into the racial tensions of the time, with the story opening as Iago and Roderigo plot and carry out a plan which attempts to turn Brabantio against Othello by reporting "sir, you're robbed. For shame... an old black ram/ Is tupping your white ewe" (1.1.94-98). The play opens on a scene driven by racial bias, as Iago likens an interracial relationship to a graphic description of animal sex. It therefore takes very little analysis to conclude that calling Othello a "black ram" is horribly offensive. However, from this superficial reading of the text arises a deeper question: is racism in the play an acknowledgement and condemnation by Shakespeare of the racism of his time or simply an inadvertent reflection of his own racial views? More broadly, is Shakespeare racist in his writing of *Othello*?

A deeper understanding of racism in *Othello* can be found using Banaji and Greenwald's exploration of unconscious bias in their 2013 book, *Blind Spot*. Banaji and Greenwald compare our unconscious biases to physical blind spots such as that "of the retinal scotoma in each of our eyes". Thus they argue that just as all humans have physical limitations to our awareness we also possess limitations in our ability to manage implicit, unconscious biases which are shaped by "our cultural environments" and undoubtedly influence our behavior (7). They then go on to lay out a certain method they devised, the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which reveals unconscious biases we possess by comparing the amount of time it takes the subject to match individuals of a certain group to symbols which represent certain traits such as good, bad,

American, or foreign (39). If we use Banaji and Greenwald's theory of implicit bias in *Blindspot* to interpret the significance of racism in the play, it becomes possible to differentiate between intent and possible unconscious forces which drove Shakespeare's writing of the play. Banaji and Greenwald define implicit bias as "hidden biases (implicit race attitudes or stereotypes)" which are independent of conscious intent or ideals (200). They further define a stereotype as an association or "mental habit that is difficult to override" even if it "clashes with [one's] personal views" (71), revealing the unconscious nature of stereotypes and thus implicit bias. Ultimately, the consequence of this application is that while Shakespeare may have consciously and outwardly presented an ideal of equality and a distaste for bias, he nevertheless inevitably harbored implicit associations, stereotypes, and biases which governed his unconscious thoughts and thus writing of *Othello*.

This contrast between Shakespeare's egalitarian intentions and deeper unconscious biases can be seen throughout the play. Iago's role as the play's antagonist and Othello's as its tragic hero clearly shows an attempt on Shakespeare's part to equate racism with evil. However, while Shakespeare superficially condemns the racism of Iago, he reflects these same biases in both Othello's character and the structure of the play. While Iago's blatant bias is not a product of Shakespeare's own racism, the presence of racial stereotypes in Othello's character and structural biases against him are attributable to Shakespeare himself and indicative of his own implicit bias. Thus this essay will illustrate that while Shakespeare attempts to condemn racism, his writing of *Othello* reflects both an implicit and structural bias, which reveal the dangers of speaking for others. With this implicit bias and racism in mind, we must reconsider how and whether Shakespeare's plays should be read today. More frankly, does implicit bias in Shakespeare's plays make them dangerous or inappropriate to read, especially as an integral piece of our educational curricula? For it undoubtedly necessitates a reevaluation of their meaning and functionality today.

I.

In order to fully understand both Shakespeare's outward expressions of equality and inward unconscious bias, we must first understand the historical context of his writing. While Shakespeare may have written his play with a conscious intent, his writing was undoubtedly subject to the influence of the social atmosphere of his time. This influence can be seen in the origin of the play itself, which was adapted from *Hecatommithi*, written by Geraldino Cinthio in the 16th century as a "cautionary tale of the credulousness and barbarity of Moors" (Morley). Although Shakespeare made obvious intentional changes to the plot and meaning of the play, the structure of his narrative nevertheless drew from a story written with the sole purpose of reflecting the racial stereotypes of the time: black's "credulousness" and "barbarity". Thus these same stereotypes inevitably must have influenced Shakespeare's writing of *Othello*.

Similarly, Shakespeare's language in the play can be better understood by examining the meaning of the words he used during the time period that the play was written. It is superficially unclear whether Shakespeare's use of the word Moor was knowingly racist. In the play, Othello is referred to as the Moor forty two times while being called by name only twenty one times. This stark contrast depicts how Shakespeare's use of the word extends beyond obviously racist contexts, becoming the most common term used to refer to Othello. For example, when Othello comes before the Duke, a senator announces "here comes...the valiant Moor." (1.3.55). In this context, Shakespeare clearly does not intend Moor in a negative sense, pairing it with the word valiant. However, during the 16th century, the word Moor would've been used to describe many non-white groups of color, and this broad use of the term gave it little specific meaning as to the place of birth or ethnic and racial background of those it described. Nevertheless, because it was used to describe those of color in comparison to white Europeans, Moor inevitably carried a "derogatory" meaning (Brotton). Thus it can be seen that while Shakespeare may have intended Moor as a descriptive term, it in fact carried little meaning other than to deride Othello in comparison to his white counterparts. Furthermore, Shakespeare's overwhelming use of the word to refer to Othello establishes Othello's blackness and thus second class status as his defining characteristic.

Finally, the circumstances under which the play was performed can provide further context for the unintentional influences of society on the meaning of the play. Despite being a play about the life and tragic demise of a black man, Othello, it would've been performed by an all-white cast during Shakespeare's time and well into the 19th century (Dobson), reflecting the white-centric view of the world espoused by nearly every element of European society during Shakespeare's time. The contrast between the story of a black man and its depiction by an all white cast mirrors the juxtaposition of superficial equality and deeper racial biases in the play, undoubtedly revealing the unconscious effect society had on Shakespeare's writing of the play.

II.

Despite these racist societal pressures, Shakespeare makes a clear effort to equate the racism and narcissism of Iago with his evil role as the antagonist of the play, demonstrating a conscious ideal of equality and distaste for racism. Shakespeare reflects this intent not only by making Iago the antagonist of the play but also through Iago's own words. At the end of Act I, Iago lays out his plan to deceive Othello and avenge his lack of promotion:

The Moor is of free and open nature
That thinks men honest that but seem to be so,
And will as tenderly be led by th' nose
As asses are
I have't. It is engendered. Hell and night
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light. (1.3.442-447)

In laying out his plan, Iago not only speaks of Othello in extremely racist terms, describing him as a gullible "ass", but also describes his own actions and his plans for the future as a "monstrous birth". Iago's own speech equates racism to evil by comparing his actions to the birth of a monster. Thus, Shakespeare makes a clear effort to condemn the offensive, racist language and thought used by Iago to describe Othello in the play. Shakespeare makes a conscious attempt to

reflect equality by casting a black man, Othello, as the protagonist and a conniving racist, Iago, as the antagonist, equating evil to racism.

However, despite this intent to condemn racism, Shakespeare's own writing reflects an implicit bias indicative of the racism of his time. Iago's soliloquy in the previous paragraph could be used as a counter argument to Shakespeare's implicit racism by emphasizing Shakespeare's superficial attempt to connect Iago's racism to his role as the play's antagonist. However, in reality it provides ample evidence for Shakespeare's own bias. While Iago's blatant racism is almost certainly an intentional choice by Shakespeare, Iago also discusses characteristics of Othello, such as his "free and open nature" as well as his tendency to blindly trust, which are reflective of a deeper implicit bias on the part of Shakespeare himself. While we can't attribute Iago's overt racism to Shakespeare's own bias, we can hold Shakespeare accountable for the fact that these stereotypes are in fact reflected in Othello's character in the play. Shakespeare depicts Othello as a naive and simple, a common stereotype of blacks at the time. This instance of implicit bias is analogous to that outlined by Banaji and Greenwald, in which most people, when told a story about a surgeon assume they are a male, revealing an unconscious association that "surgeon=male [as] part of a stereotype" (71). Likewise, Shakespeare's creation of Othello as a character was unconsciously guided by the racist stereotypes of his time. Similarly, in the play, Othello's fame and thus position in society is derived from his prowess on the battlefield and thus his propensity for violence. Othello himself recounts how his stories of the "[battles,] sieges, [fortunes]" (1.3.151) he endured and his encounters with "cannibals that each [other] eat," (1.3.166) led Desdemona to fall in love with him. Othello's violent past and success in war is the sole source of his status and influence in the play. Despite establishing Othello as the protagonist of the play, Shakespeare gives Othello a power which is derived from violence, revealing an implicit association similar to that described in *Blindspot* (71). Shakespeare expresses an outward ideal of equality, but harbors an implicit association between white and good, revealing an unconscious automatic association between black people and violence. Although Shakespeare paints Iago's racism in a superficially negative

light, Othello's role in the play reveals that Shakespeare harbors an implicit association between Othello and black stereotypes of being naive, violent, etc.

III.

Shakespeare's implicit bias manifests as a deeper structural bias against Othello. Despite being the protagonist and tragic hero of the play, Othello has only 3 soliloquies and is almost never seen alone, preventing the audience from understanding his inner thoughts or relating to his perspective. In contrast, Iago, who has seven soliloquies, drives the narrative of the play, and thus becomes the most relatable character to the audience, despite his racism. Iago has over one thousand lines while Othello has two hundred and seventy four, a striking contrast which is clearly indicative of Shakespeare's implicit bias and counterproductive to his egalitarian intentions. Similarly, while Iago is the first character the audience meets in the beginning of the play, Othello is not mentioned by name for the entire first scene of the play, instead simply being referred to as the Moor. Even in the performance of the play, Othello's narrative was recreated by a solely white cast, furthering the audiences stereotypical associations with race. Despite being the tragic protagonist, Othello does not take a central role in the depiction or action of the play. Thus Shakespeare uses stereotyping to allow the audience to "achieve the desirable effect of allowing us to rapidly perceive total strangers as distinctive individuals" (Banaji and Greenwald 90). Rather than allowing Othello to tell his story, Shakespeare uses stereotypes and implicit assumptions to enable the audience to build a quick relationship with Othello's character based off racial biases. This tactic strengthens the audience's own racial biases by allowing them to engage with a narrative that lends visual and audible evidence to their unconsciously held associations. Thus Shakespeare's play would appear to not only be riddled with implicit biases but also strengthen the biases of those who see it.

Therefore, as a testament to implicit bias, it seems *Othello* and all other Shakespearean works should be excluded from our academic and social doctrine. However, if one thing can be taken away from the biases of Shakespeare it is that even in our attempts to espouse equality we

will always be plagued by implicit bias. So then how can this inherent presence of implicit biases be combatted and how and to what extent can Shakespeare be involved in this process? Banaji and Greenwald comment that the best method to avoid bias is to simply eliminate it from a situation, using blind musical auditions as one such example (147). However, the most common and harmful biases that exist today can often be much too complex for such a binary, simple solution. For example, while most people may hold egalitarian ideals and thus not show drastic bias towards individuals, their bias can manifest in the form of group favoritism, the concept that an individual may in general give preference to a certain group such as being more likely to offer help or confer opportunities (158). In this case, simply blinding individuals to bias would mean avoiding virtually all social interaction and is thus not a valid solution. However, Banaji and Greenwald comment that success in counteracting implicit bias has been shown through the use of counter stereotypes and “alternative mental exercises” (150), showing the most inelastic success when individuals are exposed to sustained environments which present people and ideas that conflict with their biases (152). In essence, the results of these studies show that while bias can’t be eradicated, it can be continuously combatted. Although exact approaches may vary, the prevailing method is to acknowledge bias and engage in thinking which counteracts unconscious stereotypes.

So, in an effort to return to the question of Shakespeare, why not then see *Othello* and all Shakespearian works as an opportunity to accept the presence of implicit biases and engage in thinking which counteracts these acknowledged biases. For example, reading *Othello* in conjunction with *Blindspot* triggers the dialogue about race and bias which this essay attempts to address. However, it may not be a single answer that is most important, but rather the act of engaging in this thought which is most conducive to combating implicit bias. Nevertheless, as teachers approach teaching and discussing *Othello*, there are a few things which must be kept in mind to avoid furthering the implicit biases of their students and themselves. First, the class must discuss and accept the presence of racism and implicit biases in the play, allowing these observations to inform about the social biases of Shakespeare’s time and also those which

continue to pervade society today. Secondly, students should be informed on the unconscious aspects of bias which lie separate from their purposeful intent by reading *Blindspot* or other similar material. Finally, and most importantly, students must be presented with material that conflicts with their stereotypes and triggers the “alternative mental exercises” (150) to which Banaji and Greenwald attribute improvements in implicit biases. One such example would be Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona*, which presents *Othello* in a strikingly inverted nature and is written by a strong, intelligent, and very successful African American woman who strengthens positive associations to people of color. At the end of the play, Othello urges Lodovico to “these unlucky deeds relate”, saying “speak of me as I am.” (5.2.401-402). We must all take these words to heart, telling Othello’s story not as Shakespeare would have it but in its true nature, as an opportunity to acknowledge, discuss, and thus improve upon our own implicit biases.

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Grace Carney

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Expose 20.261: Why Shakespeare?

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“Black and Deep Desires”

Tragedy and Criminology in *Macbeth*

William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* narrates the tale of a hero’s tragic fall from grace. The curtain rises on a “peerless kinsman” renowned for his loyalty yet falls on a tyrant savagely decapitated for his treachery (1.4.58). The audience see Macbeth sharply and suddenly turn as “devilish” as the slaughter he commits in his ambition for the Scottish crown, sparking the murders of the esteemed King Duncan; his beloved friend Banquo; and even of those of an innocent woman and child. Thus Shakespeare asked the question of how Macbeth could turn so villainous.

This essay will attempt to unearth the roots of Macbeth’s “black and deep desires” (1.4.51), and ask whether they originate from ‘within’ his character or from somewhere ‘outside’. This problem of why Macbeth acts the way he does rests on the tension between the ‘internal’ vs. ‘external’ influence of behaviour, of which this essay will study three possible resolutions.

At the extreme end of internal influence is the argument of ‘Individualism’. This would explain Macbeth’s “black and deep desires” as entirely originating from ‘within’ him. Thus individualism would place *Macbeth* amongst other works of classical Ancient Greek tragedy. This tradition would view Macbeth as a character whose inner ‘hamartia’ of ruthless ambition (his characteristic fatal flaw) is the sole culprit for his demise (Massai). In more contemporary

terms this neatly translates into the biological argument of criminology, which states that an individual’s behaviour is caused by an innate nature predisposed by chemical hormones and DNA. However at the other, external end of the behavioural spectrum is the argument of ‘Determinism’. This stands at a direct polarity to individualism in that it would explain Macbeth’s desires as imposed by the external and mysterious forces of fate and destiny. This would rather place *Macbeth* with the ‘de casibus’ tradition, popular in medieval tragedies during Shakespeare’s 16th century. Such would view Macbeth as a character that falls victim to the witches’ cruel manipulation of ‘Fortune’s Wheel’, eradicating all personal agency asserted by individualism (Massai). However both individualism and determinism see individual character and its environment as mutually exclusive, thus failing to account for the important relationship between Macbeth and his surroundings.

Macbeth is neither a helpless victim of fate nor is he born the sole agent accountable for his crimes; rather his *internal* agency is shaped by his *external* environment. Shakespeare’s character should be seen as a product of his complex environmental influences, varying in degree of subtlety and severity. The witches’ prophecy, Lady Macbeth, Macbeth’s troubled past, and the social disorder of his Scottish society all combine to form the ‘perfect storm’ for the ruin of a hero and the rise of a villain.

In this sense the debate turns to ‘Environmentalism’ as a third and most promising explanation of Macbeth’s treacherous behaviour, as illuminated by Robert Merton’s theory of criminology presented in his famous essay, “Social Structure and Anomie.” He proposed that it is the external intricacies of social environment that shape the internal agency of an individual. In particular, Merton argued that behaviour is caused by the interplay of cultural goals and institutional ethics within an environment. Thus Merton can be used as a lens through which to

view *Macbeth*, revealing how ‘Macbeth the tyrant’ is fashioned from the clay of his surroundings. This has broad implications for both criminology and literary tragedy as the two widely different disciplines can be seen to play on the same terms.

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Merton’s theory highlights the witches’ prophecy as a crucial environmental influence of Macbeth. The prophecy dangles the cultural goal of royal power whilst remaining ethically unachievable, thus frustrating and provoking Macbeth to murder. Merton was particularly concerned with criminal activity or what he called ‘The Innovation Response’, a behaviour that adequately describes that of Macbeth in the play. The behaviours included “Fraud, corruption, vice, crime ... [and] become increasingly common when the emphasis on culturally induced success-goal becomes divorced from a coordinated institutional emphasis” (Merton 675-6). In other words individuals may diverge from institutional ethics in order to achieve the goals that they deem valuable. Merton argued that this is especially likely when individuals are predisposed to symbols of success whilst being unable to find socially approved means through which to attain such success (Merton 679).

This theory manifests in the play as Macbeth desires to be king without the presence of modern democracy to provide a relatively simple path to achieve the title, leaving him no option but to transgress the law and murder. Firstly the witches’ prophecy can be seen as actively placing an external success symbol onto Macbeth. In Act 1: Scene 3 the weird sisters forecast Macbeth’s upcoming promotion to Thane of Cawdor as well as, “All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!” (1.3.50). These lines immediately conjure the symbol of the Scottish crown, which taps into the conventional cultural goals of power and dominance. Macbeth confesses, “Why I do yield to that suggestion” (1.4.134). Here Shakespeare depicts Macbeth as passively

bowing to the active influence of the witches. Moreover, Banquo states how “To win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths”, again depicting themselves as passively won over to the tune of outside “instruments” to their harmful ends (1.4.124). This parallels Merton’s argument that external success symbols have the power to actively influence the behaviour of individuals.

Moreover, the cultural goal promised by the prophecy is soon shown to be ethically unachievable. Macbeth says himself how the fortune “stands not within the prospect of belief” (1.2.48-9). Indeed, Shakespeare presents the news of Malcolm as the Prince of Cumberland as “a step / On which [Macbeth] must fall or o’erleap” as Macbeth is faced with a kingly rival (1.2.48-9). In light of Merton’s theory Malcolm constitutes a “step” or obstacle along the path to success, resulting in either Macbeth’s “fall” (conformity to the law at the cost of not being king) or his “o’erleap” (transgressive innovation in the form of murder). Macbeth ultimately chooses the later and, much “like valour’s minion carved out his passage”, he too ‘carves’ out his own bloody path to power without concern for the institutional ethics that hold him back (1.2.19).

Lady Macbeth can be seen as a ‘fourth witch’ in that she too acts as a second environmental influence of Macbeth’s murder of Duncan. Macbeth, concerned that Duncan’s murder will earn him a “deep damnation” in hell (1.7.20), arrives to tell Lady Macbeth that they “will proceed no further in this business” (1.7.31). Nonetheless Lady Macbeth’s reproach poses itself as a far stronger influence than that of the afterlife as she proceeds to shower her husband with abuse calling him “a coward” (1.7.43). This relates to Merton’s discussion of the importance of “occasional sacrifices involved in institutionalized conduct [with] socialized rewards” or else individuals lack the compensation to stop them from transgressing the law (Merton 674). In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth does the opposite as she punishes Macbeth’s for even

thinking to sacrifice the crown. Shakespeare's metaphor of the spineless "poor cat i' th' adge" attacks Macbeth's cowardice as he fears to 'get his hands dirty' in order to achieve his ambitions (1.7.45). Lady Macbeth graphically challenges Macbeth's fortitude by asserting that she would have "dashed the brains out" of her own baby had she promised to do so, and condemning him for not matching her courage (1.7.58). Thus she joins the weird sisters in being a "spur / To prick the sides of [Macbeth's] intent" of murder (1.7.25-6).

It is not only the characters in the play that have the power to shape Macbeth, but also the experiences of his past. For instance Lady Macbeth claims to "have given suck" to an infant however there is no further mention of children in the play, suggesting that Macbeth may have suffered the death of a child (1.7.54). Another influential experience is presented through the Captain's recollection of Macbeth having "Unseamed [his enemy] from the nave to th'chaps / And fixed his head upon our battlements" (1.2.22-3). Shakespeare likened this brutal slicing in half of a person to the mundane act of unseaming of a stitch, implying how such violent behaviour can become normalised on the battlefield. The majority of today's sociologists would argue that both experiences would have a severe effect on Macbeth's behaviour. This is supported by Shakespeare's final depiction of Macbeth who says, "Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts / Cannot once start me" (5.5.14-15). He has been so "supped full with horrors" of war and grief that he is now numbed to fear and desensitised to pain (5.5.13).

Macbeth's environment in general can also be seen to reflect the same sickly nature found in his actions, supporting a sociological reading. Shakespeare presents a world with "lamentings heard i' th' air, strange screams of death" (2.3.54), and an earth that is "feverous and did shake" (2.3.59). This environmental disorder seems to be contagious to the individuals within it as even the horses turn "wild in nature ... contending 'gainst obedience" to devour one another

(2.4.16-7). Macbeth can be said to do the same as he breaks his "obedience" to the law, wildly killing his peers in order to be king. If social environment fashions behaviour, then it is not hard to picture why Shakespeare's sickly and chilling depiction of Scotland lends itself to the rotting of Macbeth's character.

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Viewing *Macbeth* in light of Merton's theory of criminology asks the audience to turn their attention away from Macbeth being the sole culprit of his sins, and outwards into the world in which he lived. In this sense it is Shakespeare's portrayal of Macbeth's relations with other characters, with his past and with Scottish society that hold the answers to the question of what causes a 'good' man to turn 'bad'. Without these factors Macbeth would not be the character that he turns out to be, nor would he have done what he did.

Merton's theory allows the view of Macbeth's environment as like a machine, within which lie various sociological cogs all uniquely affecting the production of his character. This is not to say that Macbeth is merely a puppet at the mercy of his societal strings, remaining completely innocent to the crimes that he commits. Rather his "black and deep desires" must be seen as stemming from beyond Macbeth's psyche alone and to a far more tangled pattern of external causation.

This insight produces a ripple effect throughout the reading of the text and into the domains of literary tragedy and modern criminology. As alluded to earlier in the paper, the debate of individualism vs. determinism vs. environmentalism is shown to manifest both in regards to why tragedy happens and also to why criminals behave the way they do. Though each position may speak in different terms depending on the chosen discipline (for instance individualism can speak in terms of either 'hamartias' or genetic traits) they all grapple with the

same problem of why people do bad things. It is especially fascinating to see how an American sociologist writing on homicide could have explored the same tensions four centuries after an English playwright writing about tragedy (Calhoun). It reveals how mankind is plagued by the study of how and why they can cause such tragedy to one another, marking the issue as one that cuts at the core of human nature.

Macbeth is a work far ahead of its time in the literary and criminological debate of internal vs. external causation of behaviour. It marks Shakespeare's departure from the popular tragedies of his time and into an unknown academic field sensitive to the complicated pattern of behavioural cause and effect. This work is forever altered as the sociological cogs, once hidden behind the drapes of language and dramatic effect, reveal themselves along Macbeth's path to murder. Thus Shakespeare's depiction of Macbeth's environment is its own 'witch's cauldron', its mixture of ghastly ingredients plaguing the kingdom with their sociological spell.

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Tragic Foundationalism

This essay puts the modern philosopher Alain Badiou's theory of foundationalism into dialogue with the early-modern playwright William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*. Doing so allows us to identify a new candidate for Hamlet's traditionally hard-to-define *hamartia* – his “tragic mistake” – but it also allows us to consider the possibility of foundationalism as *hamartia*. In other words, where Badiou's theory of foundationalism can help us understand what Hamlet's *hamartia* is and why it is a *hamartia*, Shakespeare's treatment of Hamlet's *hamartia*, and the genre of tragedy invoked, can help us further develop Badiou's theory of foundationalism. Specifically, *Hamlet* helps us conceptualize a notion of *tragic foundationalism*. Where Badiou discusses the origin and operation of foundationalism – how and why we come to affirm one single belief as an unshakeable truth that therefore grounds other questions like *What is real?* and *What should I do?* – Shakespeare's *Hamlet* brings us to consider the possibility that foundationalism is ethically perilous. Thus, the term *tragic foundationalism* refers to the notion that the decision to affirm one single idea as the basis of all knowledge and experience is one that involves ignorance and confusion and can lead to catastrophe.

My goal in this essay is not just to re-read a famous literary text, and not just to re-think a prominent philosopher; it is to re-theorize a philosophical concept through a Shakespearean intervention. Beyond the specifics of my argument about tragic foundationalism, I hope this essay opens up a vision of criticism where literature is not merely the recipient of philosophical ideas in the service of exegesis. Instead, the creative risks of literature provide exemplars that can be theorized outward to help us understand on-going issues in life today. Beyond an occasion

for the demonstration of an existing theory, literature can be a source for the creation of new theory.

I.

What is Hamlet's *hamartia*? One of the most meaningful elements of tragedy as practiced and theorized by the ancient Greeks, *hamartia* refers to the “error” or “mistake” a tragic protagonist makes which, of necessity, brings about the catastrophe at the end of the tragedy (Aristotle, 1453a; Frede). The term *hamartia* is often mistranslated as “fatal flaw,” a twisting of Aristotle's term inflicted by Saint Paul's use of *hamartia* to mean “sin that dwelleth in me” (Romans 7.20; Cox). A “flaw” refers to an attribute of someone's personality. Hamlet's “indecisiveness” is often mentioned: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Wilhelm Meister thought Hamlet was “devoid of that emotional strength that characterizes a hero” (518); August Wilhelm Von Schlegel cited “the resolutions which [Hamlet] so often embraces and always leaves unexecuted” (40); G.F.W. Hegel gave “hesitation and a complication of external circumstances” as Hamlet's *hamartia* (2.1226); Samuel Taylor Coleridge looked to “the everlasting broodings and superfluous activities of Hamlet's mind” (32); Percy Bysshe Shelley offered “the errors to which a contemplative and ideal mind is liable” (54); Laurence Olivier's influential *Hamlet* (1948) begins, “This is the tragedy of a man who could not make up his mind”; and Badiou himself once called Hamlet “the master of the undecidable act” (*Theory of the Subject*, 94).

But why seek to identify Hamlet's *hamartia* when Shakespeare never read Aristotle's *Poetics*? In Stephen Greenblatt's words, “The playwright's great achievement as a whole does not altogether comfortably fit the philosopher's influential descriptive account” (“Shakespearean Tragedy,” para 6). But Shakespeare certainly knew stories from the tradition of tragedy Aristotle

What is Love?

Jeffrey Hall's *The Five Flirting Styles* Gives the Wrong Answer, Shakespeare Says

"This book is designed to inflate the ego of the author."

"I don't really buy it."

"WHAT THE...?"¹

For a book advertised by its author as a "game changer" and "the best research on flirting... you'll find anywhere," Jeffrey Hall's *The Five Flirting Styles* received a shockingly poor reaction from its audience. Hall claims to have solved the age-old question of how to flirt by asserting that everyone—whether intentionally or not—fits into one of five "Flirting Styles": Polite, Physical, Playful, Sincere, or Traditional. Each style is characterized by its own mannerisms and preferences, which dictate to whom flirts of that style are most suited and which paths to romance they will most likely take. But many readers of *The Five Flirting Styles* have rejected the attitudes and relationship types that Hall claims are inherent to their flirting style, or failed to conform to Hall's compartmentalizations at all.

A lengthy bibliography at the end of Hall's book documents the extensive and remarkably recent research upon which his claims are based, including a slew of studies from the last few decades and his own survey of over 5,000 online daters from 2007. Why, then, did Hall's theories—which were both extrapolated *from* and designed *for* the modern world—fail so drastically to explain modern dating as he expects them to?

We can reach an answer to this question in a somewhat surprising way: by examining the interaction between this modern text and William Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, one of

¹ Amazon customer reviews of Jeffrey Hall's *The Five Flirting Styles*

the most well-known literary representations of early-modern flirting. Placing Jeffrey Hall's *The Five Flirting Styles* in conversation with Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* reveals implicit bias towards traditional relationships—those guided by strict gender roles and behavioral standards—in both texts. Hall's theories may have been born in the 21st century, therefore, but they echo 400-year-old opinions which are fundamentally at odds with the rapidly-evolving modern world.

This essay will tackle this argument in four distinct sections. The first applies Hall's methodology to *Much Ado About Nothing*; the second explains how doing so offers a more conservative reading of the play as a story about the persistence of rule-driven, mannerly love. And after the third draws attention to reflections within Hall's *own* text of the traditional bias that Hall illuminates within Shakespeare, the concluding section explains why we can say with certainty that such bias doesn't belong in the modern world.

I: Jeffrey Hall's Version of *Much Ado About Nothing*

Benedick and Beatrice, *Much Ado About Nothing*'s main protagonists, fall completely within Hall's Playful flirting style. According to Hall, one of the strongest attributes of Playful flirts is that they "see flirting as a game" (Hall, p.86): such a description immediately evokes Benedick and Beatrice's incessant teasing and snipes at one another. However, the characters' adherence to this style goes far beyond the minimum; in fact, both closely follow Hall's expectations for how men and women express Playful flirting in their own ways.

"Women who adopt a more Playful style," Hall says, "are particularly impolite flirts. They are less likely to adhere to norms of politeness and social grace" (Hall, p.89). Throughout *Much Ado About Nothing*, from her raunchy comment that Benedick is a "good soldier to a lady" (Shakespeare, I.i.53) in the play's very first scene to her invective against the powerlessness of women after Hero's humiliation—"O God, that I were a man!" (Shakespeare, IV.i.320)—Beatrice constantly fulfills and exceeds this expectation. Benedick, in counterpart, supports Hall's

assertion that Playful men often execute the “neg”, a compliment/insult hybrid that both demonstrates interest and forces its receiver to engage in return. He first addresses Beatrice, for example, as “my dear Lady Disdain” (Shakespeare, I.i.116), a name that couches his obvious gladness to see her in a playful jibe to which she must wittily reply.

Claudio and Hero, on the other hand, are textbook Traditional flirts. Both believe, as Hall expects them to, that “there are rules about how men and women ought to act” (Hall, p.137). “Is she not a modest young lady?” (Shakespeare, I.i.161) Claudio asks Benedick, seeking to determine whether or not Hero is worth pursuing *only* by gauging how purely and appropriately she behaves. Hero, too, demonstrates her value of womanly humility when she chastises Margaret for making a sexual joke on her wedding day, hissing “Fie upon thee! Art not ashamed?” (Shakespeare, III.iv.28)

And just like Benedick and Beatrice, Claudio and Hero embody the more nuanced idiosyncrasies of their respective genders. Just as Hall’s male Traditional flirt “idealize[s] and revere[s] women as princesses, ladies, and damsels” (Hall, p.147) Claudio first expresses his love for Hero by sighing, “Can the world buy such a jewel?” (Shakespeare, I.i.177), a question with an obvious undertone of objectification. Claudio also perfectly models the Traditional male who “does not like a woman who is open... to having casual sex” (Hall, p.148) when he dramatically renounces and humiliates Hero at the altar. “She knows the heat of a luxurious bed” (Shakespeare, IV.i.41), he snarls, believing that she had slept with another man and eager to punish her cruelly for it.

Hero, in turn, slips quietly into the role of Hall’s Traditional female: despite being mentioned 68 times throughout the play by other characters, Hero speaks only 45 lines, an amount that pales even further in comparison with Beatrice’s 106 lines. Hero, therefore is the model of “a lady who is demure and passive, yielding and subtle.” (Hall, p.152)

II. What Hall’s *Much Ado About Nothing* Reveals About Shakespeare’s

Such clean application of Hall’s principles to Shakespeare’s text is not merely an interesting parallel, however. While a primary reading of *Much Ado About Nothing* suggests that it is a blithe celebration of different types of love, reading it in conjunction with Hall’s *The Five Flirting Styles* offers an alternate perspective: that the success of the play’s lovers actually depends only on their adherence to Traditional relationship ideals. Hall, therefore, remodels the play from a happy comedy into a cautionary tale that urges its readers to stick to the well-worn path of convention.

For one, although Benedick and Beatrice happily engage in Playful flirting for the majority of the play, they achieve tangible romance only when they conform to Hall’s Traditional style. In fact, when each admits privately their love for the other, they begin to shed their Playful vigor and replace it with submission to the gender roles perpetuated by Traditional flirts. While Beatrice, in an uncharacteristic display of passivity, resolves to “tame [her] wild heart to [Benedick’s] loving hand” (III.ii.118), Benedick acknowledges that he must requite Beatrice’s love in order to fulfill the behavioral standards of an Elizabethan society man. “If I do not take pity of her, I am a villain,” he explains, “if I do not love her, I am a Jew.” (Shakespeare, II.iii.264-265) While the term “villain” obviously represents a lack of virtue, Elizabethan stereotypes deemed Jews hard-hearted and uncharitable (Papp and Kirkland, p.59): Benedick, therefore, is beginning to exhibit the Traditional belief that as a man, he must act “gentlemanly... and cordial.” (Hall, p.154)

Even more notable is the fact that Benedick and Beatrice only gather the strength to admit their love to *each other* after Benedick indicates he is willing “to be called upon to be a man for the sake of his lover.” (Hall, p.160) Immediately after he shows interest in becoming “the man... that would right [Hero]” (Shakespeare, IV.i.275-276), Benedick professes his love to Beatrice, and she quickly does the same. It is not their Playful witticisms and jokes that unite them, therefore; it is the

realization that Benedick is willing to be Beatrice's "gallant knight" (Hall, p.147), and thus to follow the Traditional ideal of male control and power.

Meanwhile, Claudio and Hero, the epitome of the Traditional style, reach their own joyful marriage only after a series of dramatic obstacles and downturns in their relationship. However, it must be remembered that neither Claudio nor Hero stray from their Traditional personalities or values throughout the course of the play, even when faced with the depths of struggle and anguish. In fact, it is Claudio's strict obedience to societal expectations that influences him to agree to "give [to Leonato's niece] the right [he] should have giv'n her cousin" (Shakespeare, Vi.304) in order to properly avenge Hero's death. This agreement, and the Traditional reverence of chivalry that fueled it, are what bring him to his marriage to the real Hero in the play's final scene.

Thus the success of Claudio and Hero's love—even after slander, heartbreak, and near-death—transforms their story from one of disaster into one of resistance. It makes for an even stronger encouragement of the Traditional style, by insinuating that while maintaining strict ideals and morals is not without its challenges, it makes for a worthwhile "staid, calm... and committed way of loving." (Hall, p.157)

III: What Shakespeare Reveals About Hall in Return

Hall's theories, therefore, undoubtedly inspire a surprisingly narrow reading of Shakespeare's play. This begs the question: what aspect of Hall's text induces it to provide such a reading? A closer look at how Hall handpicks and presents his research delivers the disappointing answer: the very bias towards the Traditional style that Hall teases out of Shakespeare is paralleled in Hall's text itself.

For one, although Hall calls upon research studies from the last few years to support his claims, he relies mainly on studies whose participants were heterosexual daters looking for a long-term relationship. The survey that inspired him to design the five flirting styles, for example, was

conducted amongst eHarmony users only. Not only was eHarmony at the time only available for heterosexual users (Britannica), but eHarmony founder and CEO Neil Clark Warren has consistently boasted that eHarmony "approaches matching... with a deep and driving focus on marriage." (Webb) Hall thus skews his text towards the limited relationship types expected of the Traditional style even before beginning to write.

Once he does begin to write, he interprets his data and presents his findings in a way that perpetuates his preference for the Traditional style even more strongly. For example, just as Shakespeare insinuates that Benedick and Beatrice must discard their Playful flirting styles in order to achieve serious love and commitment, Hall portrays all Playful flirts as immature and unlikely to form lasting relationships. Not only does he characterize Playful flirts as selfish and reckless—"a Playful flirt generally believes that getting your way is more important than making other people happy" (Hall, p.89)—but blatantly states that they are fundamentally "not well-suited to a committed relationship." (Hall, p.96) "The only good thing that a Playful flirt could say about her last relationship," Hall quips, "was that she had fun." (Hall, p.96) He displays Traditional flirts, on the other hand, as destined for enduring and devoted love, just like Claudio and Hero. He likens the Traditional relationship to a "fairy-tale romance" (Hall, p.138), and even insinuates that adhering to the Traditional style is a prerequisite to entering relationships by warning that "if you don't act in a Traditional way, you might miss out." (Hall, p.140)

Such favoritism of Traditional flirting extends into his descriptions of other flirting styles as well; Hall clearly demonstrates disapproval of styles that stray from the Traditional style and favors those that mimic or complement it. According to Hall, highly Physical flirts, who unlike Traditional flirts tend to have "a *lot*" of sexual experiences, "probably cheat more" (Hall, p.49). This conjecture suggests that Physical flirts, due to a failure to conform to Traditional sexual conservatism, are more likely to bungle serious relationships than maintain them. Conversely, Polite flirts, who Hall argues are often mistaken for Traditional due to their strict moral codes, "are seriously, seriously

committed to love" (Hall, p.73), and Sincere flirts, who (like Traditional flirts) see a deep emotional bond rather than physical attraction as the foundation of a partnership, "have important and meaningful relationships." (Hall, p.127)

IV: No Place in the Present

Throughout this essay, I've referred to Hall's text as "modern" because it uses recent data to formulate claims designed for application to the present day. The meaning of modernity, however, is so much more than temporal. Today's society is characterized by dramatic social change that sets it apart from the rest of history: thanks to the effort of widespread movements and individual action, our world no longer holds a singular definition of love. Instead, we allow each person to define love for themselves, no matter their sexual orientation, behavior, or gender expression. Lin-Manuel Miranda put it best: "Love is love... is love is love is love is love."

The Five Flirting Styles, therefore, cannot truly be called modern. After all, placing it in conversation with Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* reveals how Hall promotes above all others a *single* path to love, guided by unyielding behavioral standards and gender roles. Thus Hall embodies the very restriction and prejudice today's society strives to shake, a fault that makes his self-proclaimed "key to the modern dating scene" a perfectly imperfect fit.

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Elizabeth as America:

The Victor in McKellen's Adaptation of Shakespeare's *Richard III*

In Shakespeare's *Richard III*, the villainous Richard slaughters his way through his friends and family to become king of England. Knowing that his brother, King Edward, is on his deathbed, Richard begins a bloody quest for the throne. His crown comes at the cost of the lives of his brother Clarence, his nephews, and his right-hand man, to name just a few. Fortunately, the play concludes on a hopeful note: the young Earl of Richmond slays Richard in battle, claims the throne, and gives a noble speech promising "smooth-faced peace" (5.5.33) in the time to come. While we see Richmond as the victor of Shakespeare's play, Ian McKellen and Richard Loncraine's 1995 film adaptation of *Richard III* places less emphasis on his role, cutting his speech and ending the play at the death of Richard. At the same time, McKellen and Loncraine play up the role of Elizabeth, Edward's wife and thus the former queen of England. They portray her, as McKellen writes in his notes on the screenplay, as "the principal survivor in the film." McKellen's adaptation of *Richard III* changes which character the audience views as the victor of the drama.

Note that I write "victor" to mean not just the character who achieves the greatest objective success in terms of power, money, or happiness, but also the character who the audience finds themselves rooting for by the end of the drama. The "victor" of a text is the character with the greatest combination of personal success and audience support by the work's conclusion. To examine why McKellen would present Elizabeth as the victor of his film, it is

important to first understand the historical context that led Shakespeare to establish Richmond as the victor of his play.

Shakespeare's *Richard III* tells the story of the Wars of the Roses, a series of wars between two branches of English royalty, the House of Lancaster and the House of York, vying for the throne (Pollard). These wars ended when Richmond won the final battle against Richard III. Richmond went on to take the name Henry VII and become the first king in the Tudor dynasty. Shakespeare wrote his play *Richard III* at the end of the 16th century, under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, who just so happened to be the last Tudor monarch (Bjork). Thus Shakespeare had ample reason to portray Richmond as the heroic figure in *Richard III*: writing during the Elizabethan era, it was wise to portray the Tudors in a positive light.

McKellen's adaptation takes *Richard III* away from its original historical context and places Shakespeare's drama in the setting of a more recent war: World War II. McKellen relocates the play to a fascist version of 1930s England, imitating the aesthetic of the Third Reich. McKellen's Richard wears a uniform similar to Hitler's, soldiers march around in helmets, and battles are fought with tanks. Like Shakespeare, McKellen authored his work a few decades removed from the events he portrays: his film version of *Richard III* was released in 1995.

Knowing that Shakespeare made a Tudor monarch the victor of his play when a Tudor was in power, we can posit a guess as to why McKellen made Elizabeth the victor of his play by looking at who the current world power was in 1995: America. For much of the 20th century, America was the world's dominant economic, military, and cultural force. In fact, America's emergence as a global power was closely tied to its role in World War II. In the 1920s, America enjoyed a time of economic prosperity known as the "Roaring Twenties". In late 1929, the stock

market crashed and America, along with much of the rest of the world, fell into the Great Depression. When Hitler rose to power in Europe in the 1930s and World War II began, America remained largely uninvolved for the early years of the war. It was the Japanese bombing of the naval base at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 that prompted the United States to enter the war (Koppes). The participation of the United States helped to propel the Allied Forces to victory in World War II. After the war, a shift to a wartime economy and the retention of military bases around the world set the United States well on its way towards becoming an economic, military, and cultural world power.

The rise to power of the United States may not have been possible without its close ties to Britain. In 1946, Winston Churchill gave a speech calling for a partnership between the two countries: "Neither the sure prevention of war, nor the continuous rise of world organization will be gained without what I have called the fraternal association of the English-speaking peoples. This means a special relationship between the British Commonwealth and Empire and the United States." Indeed, the United States and Britain remained close partners throughout the 20th century, sharing military bases, nuclear weapons information, and intelligence, and investing heavily in each other's economies, for the mutual benefit of both countries (Khong).

In light of the historical contexts in which Shakespeare's *Richard III* and the McKellen and Loncraine film adaptation were created and portrayed, we can explore the relationship between Shakespeare's and McKellen's approaches to history. Shakespeare, living under the reign of the last Tudor monarch, emphasizes the victory of Richmond in the Wars of the Roses. McKellen, living at a time when America is the dominant world power, adapts Shakespeare's play to emphasize the victory of Elizabeth in a World War II setting. Thus the natural extension of McKellen's World War II metaphor is that Elizabeth represents America, and that America is

the true victor of World War II. Hence both Shakespeare and McKellen make their works relevant by catering to the current power at their respective points in history. I would argue, furthermore, that McKellen offers a criticism of the role Britain plays in its special relationship with America following World War II.

In Shakespeare's play, Richmond is portrayed as the heroic victor of the War of Roses who will be the savior of England. If Richard is a creature of hell, Richmond is a man sent from heaven. As Richmond tells his men, "God and our good cause fight upon our side" (5.5.241). Before battle, ghosts visit Richmond telling him that he is "virtuous and holy" (5.5.129) and that "good angels guard thee" (5.5.157). Shakespeare ends the play with a valiant speech from Richmond, who promises to unite the two branches of the English royalty and marry young Elizabeth so that their heirs will live in prosperous and peaceful times. This heroic, almost divine portrayal of Richmond makes sense since Shakespeare wanted to appeal to the Tudor dynasty currently in power. However, it might be less relevant in a different historical setting, and we see this in McKellen's adaptation, where the heroic role of Richmond is downplayed. In the film, Richmond does not give a gallant speech to end the play; in fact, he gives no great speech at all. A few of the lines from Richmond's closing monologue are retained in the film, but they are spoken by the priest who marries Richmond and Elizabeth. Even in Richmond's own marriage scene, a scene notably absent from Shakespeare's original play, he is not the character that grabs the attention of the audience. Instead, this scene presents a new and different hero: Elizabeth.

McKellen innovates the portrayal of Elizabeth in a number of ways in order to portray her as the victor of the film. In the play, Elizabeth comes across as shrill, but in the film, she comes across as strong. The Elizabeth presented in Shakespeare's play does not enjoy her position as queen and is reliant on the men around her. She tells Richard that he will not be

happy as king, just as she is not happy being queen: “As little joy you may suppose in me/ That I enjoy, being the queen thereof” (1.3.153-154). After the death of her husband Edward, she wallows in her despair, displaying obsequious sorrow: “Ah, who shall hinder me to wail and weep,/ To chide my fortune, and torment myself?/ I’ll join with black despair against my soul/ And to myself become an enemy” (2.2.34-37). Elizabeth declares that she will cry enough at the death of her husband to flood the earth in her tears: “That I, being governed by the watery moon,/ May send forth plenteous tears to drown the world” (2.2.69-70). Elizabeth comes across as a weak character in this scene, one we feel annoyed by rather than sympathize with. Only near the end of the play does Elizabeth potentially redeem herself, exchanging verbal barbs with Richard for an extended period of time as he tries to convince her to marry his daughter. At the end of the scene, Elizabeth tells Richard that she will let her daughter marry him, and this is the last we see of her. Shakespeare later lets us know that Richmond is due to marry the younger Elizabeth, but leaves ambiguous the extent to which the elder Elizabeth played a role in making this marriage happen, or if she had a role in it at all.

McKellen’s adaptation presents a much stronger Elizabeth, one who we root for and who emerges as the ultimate victor of the film. Elizabeth as presented by McKellen and Loncraine appears happier in her role as queen; she dances lovingly with her husband and sweetly entertains her son at the beginning of the movie. After her husband’s death, Elizabeth sobs and utters words of grief, but gone is the over-the-top lamentation from the play. Elizabeth’s finest moment in the film comes after the death of her two sons, when she goes to confront Richard. Loncraine uses powerful imagery to portray Elizabeth as a brave hero. She strides into Richard’s military camp with her daughter, two finely dressed women amidst a sea of soldiers in helmets and uniform, and brazenly screams out to Richard about his crimes against her family. Richard

threatens that she still has family left, and brings Elizabeth inside to try to convince her to let her daughter marry him. While the lines in this scene remain largely unchanged from the play, Loncraine’s directions place a particular emphasis on how strong of a fight Elizabeth puts up. Many of the lines Richard uses are reminiscent of his conversation with Anne, who he swayed to marry him without much trouble. Richard tempts Elizabeth, offering: “Again shall you be mother of a king/ and all the ruins of distressful times/ Repaired with double riches of content” (4.4.317-319). But the film demonstrates that Richard has significantly more trouble convincing Elizabeth. The scene begins with Richard confronting Elizabeth in front of his officers, confident that he will easily persuade her. Realizing that he is having little success, Richard closes the doors of the car, separating himself and Elizabeth from his soldiers in order to distance himself from his audience and try a more intimate approach. As in the play, Elizabeth resists Richard until the very last moment, and Richard dismisses her as a “shallow, changing woman” (4.4.431), convinced that he has turned her to his side. But in the film, this is not the last we see of Elizabeth: instead, she appears at the wedding of her daughter to Richmond, having deceived Richard and married her daughter to the man who will end up becoming king of England. In the moment that the camera pans over to Elizabeth, we see her as the true victor of the film: despite her many losses, she stood up to Richard, tricked him, and obtained the power he promised her through her own means.

The final significant difference regarding Elizabeth and her family’s characterization in the film versus in the play is that Elizabeth and her brother are American in the film. In an early scene, Elizabeth’s brother Rivers steps off a Pan Am flight. Later, he sits at the table reading the Wall Street Journal, and plays cowboys and Indians, a game referencing the American West, with one of the young princes. Both Elizabeth and Rivers speak with American accents. In

Shakespeare's play, it is also suggested that Elizabeth is somewhat of an outsider, but only through Richard's disdain. Richard suggests that the Queen and her friends do not belong in court: "great promotions/ Are daily given to enoble those/ That scarce, some two days since, were worth a noble" (1.3.80-82). Thus Elizabeth's role as an outsider in British court is played up in the movie, specifically, her role as an American.

The film's elevation of Elizabeth as a character is McKellen's way of adapting Shakespeare's play so that his new historical context has an appropriate victor. If we review Elizabeth's trajectory in the film, we see that her losses and subsequent rise to power parallel America as it becomes involved in World War II. Elizabeth starts out as queen of England, dancing happily with her husband as jazzy music plays at the beginning of the film. Her brother is a stylish American playboy: the two epitomize the spirit of the Roaring Twenties in America. When her husband dies, Elizabeth falls on hard times: In late 1929, America and the world fall into the Great Depression. Now the metaphor continues as the war begins: As Elizabeth struggles with the death of her husband, Richard gains power and incites the deaths of people around him. In the 1930s, as America continues to struggle through the Great Depression, Hitler rises to power and begins his conquest of Europe. Finally, Elizabeth experiences her Pearl Harbor: the tragic death of her two young sons. Elizabeth confronts Richard; America joins the war. Elizabeth orchestrates the marriage of her daughter to Richmond, and America and the Allies win World War II. Elizabeth gains power as the mother of a queen; the American economy booms, setting the stage for America as a world power, with Britain as its partner.

Thus we see that McKellen's portrayal of Elizabeth as the ultimate survivor of the film shows how America is the ultimate victor of World War II. Just like Shakespeare writes his play so that the first ruler of the Tudor dynasty currently in power comes out to be the hero of the

play, McKellen portrays the currently powerful America as the victor in his story, albeit with a twist. If Richmond and Elizabeth's marriage represents American victory, then we expect a positive suggestion of what is to come, some omen of a "smooth-faced peace" brought on by American leadership, with Britain as its partner. Yet McKellen's unexpected ending of the film has Richard jump backwards, smiling, off a tall structure into the flames below, as Richmond shoots at him. Richard extends his arm out towards Richmond right before he falls, telling him, "If not in heaven, than hand in hand to hell." And then we see something truly unexpected: Richmond looks at the camera and smiles evilly, much like Richard has been doing throughout the film. McKellen and Loncraine suggest that Richmond will not be the force of good he is portrayed as in Shakespeare's play. Instead, Richmond may continue the violent cycle; Britain may continue a violent cycle in its partnership with America, committing some of the same atrocities it condemned during World War II. Viewing young Elizabeth's marriage to Richmond as the American victory of World War II, this approach to history suggests a critique of Britain once it becomes a partner in America's rise to power.

One might ask why McKellen chooses to offer a critique of Britain, instead of critiquing America more directly. McKellen's decision to criticize Britain likely has to do with the fact that McKellen and Loncraine are themselves British, and therefore are more invested in the role of their own country in recent world history. Or, they simply may want to pay homage to the fact that Shakespeare's original play is set in Britain by offering a commentary on Britain in the present day. Either way, we can see McKellen's film as taking Shakespeare's approach to history one step further: both authors make their works relevant by portraying the current world power as the victor. However, McKellen's shocking ending offers a more modern take on the

idea of a victor by suggesting that Britain, who maintained a particularly close relationship with America following World War II, committed its own evils after defeating Hitler and the Nazis.

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Expos 20.043

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A Tender Spot for Cripples, Bastards, and Broken Things:

How the Judgment of Disability Has Changed Since Shakespeare

Disability is the underlying force of evil in the darkest period of the Tudor Myth - the rise and reign of Richard III. *3 Henry VI* - one of William Shakespeare's history plays that initially spread his name around the world - sets up the stage for the disaster. Although the play continues to tell the story of the Wars of the Roses - the confrontation between the Royal Houses of York and Lancaster that brought bloodshed and instability to the 15th century England - more importantly for this essay *3 Henry VI* depicts the forming of the character who is regarded as the epitome of evil in this period of English history - Richard Plantagenet's disabled son Richard III. Born with a physically deformed body, Richard sees himself as a flawed and ostracized creature and feels robbed of the possibility to lead a meaningful and fulfilling life. Having no other way out of this predicament, he decides to turn against everyone around him and let the internal forces cruelty and ruthlessness take full control over his action. As a result of this unconstrained violence, Richard is about to become one of the most villainous rulers England has ever seen. Of all the causal factors that are at play initiating this tragic development, disability is placed as a primary one by Shakespeare.

More than 400 years after Shakespeare's *Henry VI* plays, an American writer George R. R. Martin came up with a series of epic fantasy novels called *A Song of Ice and Fire* - a set of fictional narratives that take place in a setting very similar to *Henry VI*. Adapted by HBO a

couple of decades later, this work turned into what is now known as one of the most popular television series on the face of the Earth - *Game of Thrones*. Anyone familiar with *Henry VI* plays can easily infer that Martin drew a lot of inspiration from English history and Shakespearean drama when writing his own novels. His plot revolves around the conflict between the two Houses named Stark and Lannister (analogous to Yorks and Lancasters in the Tudor Myth) and the whole work is a display of complex developments in and around the royal court, the insatiable thirst for power and dominance exhibited by those who seek the throne, and, above all, the chaos that is brought to the kingdom by the eruption of a major civil war. Interestingly enough, just like in *3 Henry VI*, the tragedy of *Game of Thrones* is rooted in disability. Tracing back the conflict between the Stark and Lannister Houses to its origins brings us to the closing shots of the very first episode of the series, when Jaime Lannister shoves Bran Stark out of the window of a castle, disabling the young lord for life. Considering how Shakespeare treats Richard III's disability as a primary source of evil in the Tudor Myth, it seems highly unlikely that Bran's disability igniting the events of *Game of Thrones* is a coincidental parallel. In addition to that, one of the central figures in the cast of characters in *Game of Thrones* is also affected by nature's misfortune - lord Tyrion Lannister is suffering from dwarfism. The fact that disability is so integral to both works calls for a closer examination of how the notion of being disabled is portrayed and interpreted by their authors, and, in particular, what differences between those representations may be brought to light along the way.

The deeper look at disability in *Henry VI* and *Game of Thrones* does indeed prove to be fruitful. The true value of comparing those two works lies in that they are both attempting to recreate the same historical period but there is this a 400-year gap between the times of their writing. Whether consciously or not, through the portrayal of disability the writers of *Game of*

Thrones revealed a substantial discrepancy between the religious worldview of Shakespeare's time and the naturalistic perspective of the 21st century. In *Henry VI* disability is a purposeful act of God; in *Game of Thrones* no higher meaning is derived from it. In *Henry VI* the life of the disabled is doomed; in *Game of Thrones* life is always full of possibilities. This reveals a huge paradigm shift that occurred over centuries since Shakespeare - the achievements of science enabled people not only to decode the so-called ways of God by understanding the causal relationships between phenomena in nature, but also to control and alter their own fate with technologies that had never been outside the realm of divine capabilities before. At the very least, we do not treat disability as an evidence of God's antipathy towards a person. Yet, paradoxically, only by sincerely holding this belief, as did Shakespeare and his contemporaries, one can truly sympathize with Richard III. This ineluctable fading of medieval ideas on disability calls into question the ability of the 21st century's audience to fully grasp the profundity of tragedy that Shakespeare had in mind.

For a medieval man, the physique of Richard III was an embodiment of wickedness and a manifestation of God's hostility. His birth alone was acutely indicative of bad things to come: Richard is said to have come "into the world with [his] legs forward" (5.6.71) and, as his mother was giving birth to him, "The midwife wonder'd and the women cried / 'O, Jesus bless us, he is born with teeth!'" (5.6.74-75). Shakespeare's imagery here is supposed to portray what people from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance would recognize as *monstrous birth* ("Monstrous births"). It was prevalent to believe that major defects in a newborn baby ought to be taken as an omen, a sign from God, either as a moral warning or as God's judgment on a serious sin. The divine agency in Richard's malformation was, therefore, not a matter of debate - if his *monstrous birth* is a sign from above, it means that the poor man was chosen and purposefully deformed by

the mighty hand of the Creator. Richard's body, as described by Shakespeare, is indeed nothing but a biological monstrosity - he has an arm shrunk up "like a wither'd shrub" (3.2.156), an "envious mountain on [his] back" (3.2.157), "legs of an unequal size" (3.2.159) and is disproportioned "in every part" (3.2.160). According to another widespread belief of the medieval world, one's physical appearance is a window to one's character and soul; the practice of reading into a person this way was called *physiognomy* ("Physiognomy"). While the conclusions drawn by those who prided themselves on being able to read the "body language" would usually be rather ambiguous, there is certainly no difficulty in making a judgment about the villainous nature of Richard's character based on his appearance. It is hard to imagine how depressing it should have been for Richard to realize that, according to *physiognomy*, his character was predetermined to be as flawed and imperfect as was his physically deformed body. There was only one conclusion that could have come to his mind - God wished for him to suffer.

The idea that life holds absolutely no promise for the disabled Richard is what eventually turns him into a villain. He knows perfectly well that disgust and aversion are the first emotions that arise in people's minds after glancing at his highly unnatural figure. Love is then, tragically, just not among the possible experiences to be had: "am I then a man to be beloved? / O monstrous fault, to harbour such a thought!" (3.2.163-164). Having no hope to ever feel happiness and fulfillment in life, Richard adopts the attitude of complete animosity towards the world that mistreated him so badly: "Then, since the heavens have shaped my body so, / Let hell make crook'd my mind to answer it" (5.6.78-79). The thought that is at the very climax of Richard's transformation into a heartless beast is that of complete alienation from the rest of the world. His last soliloquy in 3 Henry VI culminates with words that clearly spell a disaster: "I have no brother, I am like no brother / <...> I am myself alone" (5.6.81-84). As we can see, there

is no light at the end of a tunnel for Richard III. This is Shakespear's take on what happens when you are born disabled - of course, not everyone ends up exerting their violence to conquer the throne of a kingdom, but the doors to a fulfilling or even bearable life are most likely closed.

Game of Thrones proposes a very different viewpoint on this matter, even though the historical setting of the series is the same as in Shakespeare's plays. The very fact that Tyrion Lannister is one of the most admirable characters for the audience of *Game of Thrones*, while Richard III is greeted with dislike by everyone around him, hints at a significant asymmetry between the outlook on the disabled in the two works. Tyrion's interaction with Ned Stark's bastard son Jon Snow in the first episode of season 1 encapsulates the modern attitude towards the defective nature one may acquire through birth: "Let me give you some advice, bastard. Never forget what you are. The rest of the world will not. Wear it like armor. Then it can never be used to hurt you" (Benioff et al. 1.1). Though being a bastard is not entirely equivalent to suffering from physical deformity, the advice that Tyrion gives here applies to everyone with inborn imperfections. Tyrion asserts that instead of feeling ashamed or worthy of insult one must embrace one's natural condition and use one's nature as a piece of armor. While Richard accepts people's hatred and aversion to him as an integral part of his fate, Jon is taught that his bastardy should never be used against him. This warrior-like attitude in *Game of Thrones* is highly contradictory to the medieval line of reasoning, where God is the ultimate author of one's defective nature and, since the induced suffering is a part of the divine plan, one has no choice but to comply with it. In *Game of Thrones*, there is never any talk of attributing natural misfortune to the will of God and the lack of such belief opens up a whole new world of possibilities for the unfortunate and the disabled.

The unending presence of hope in *Game of Thrones* is perhaps the single most profound idea differentiating the modern portrayal of disability from the Shakespearean understanding. After reading Richard's soliloquies, it may seem that the psychological trauma suffered by Bran Stark when he is made a cripple would quickly fill the boy's mind with suicidal thoughts and everlasting hopelessness. In fact, the perpetrator of the crime, Jaime Lannister, suggests that becoming disabled makes one's life not worth living at all: "Even if the boy lives, he'll be a cripple, a grotesque. Give me a good clean death any day" (Benioff et al. 1.2). However, the response he receives from his brother Tyrion completely contradicts this very Richard-like attitude: "Speaking for the grotesques, I'd have to disagree. Death is so final, whereas life... Life is full of possibilities" (1.2). One could hardly conceive of anything more foreign to the distressed and alienated Richard than seeing possibilities in life, while "I am myself alone" is something that would be impossible to hear from Tyrion. Contrary to *Henry VI*, *Game of Thrones* shows that no matter how many hurdles one may face throughout the course of life or how flawed or imperfect one may be by nature, there are always ways to make one's existence in the world worthwhile. Tyrion Lannister, for instance, is gifted with exceptional wit and eloquence that act as counterbalance to his dwarfism, and, while Bran may never walk again, a saddle specifically tailored for a cripple can enable him to become a rider. It is not a coincidence that Tyrion is the character who comes up with this idea to save the boy's life from eternal misery. It is his sincere solidarity with every unfortunate soul in the world that gives rise to this act of benevolence. In one of his most famous lines Tyrion not only explains why he was helping Bran but also perfectly captures the spirit of the series as a whole: "I have a tender spot in my heart for cripples, bastards, and broken things" (1.4). Clearly, the commitment to grapple with nature's wrong is more important to Tyrion than anything else - even the family conflict does not

stand in the way of helping another hapless being. What we actually see here, therefore, is a dwarf helping a cripple, not a Lannister helping a Stark.

The progress of natural sciences and rapid advancements in technology apparently made an impact on the human psyche. In the age when scientific endeavors like editing a human genome, reversing the process of aging, or terraforming Mars are taken very seriously by some of the brightest thinkers on Earth, disabled people have every right to believe that a cure for their disabilities will be discovered during their lifetimes. Even the fact that science can now answer how and why one's "frail nature" can be corrupted "with some bribe" takes a lot of negativity out of the equation. *Monstrous birth* is now nothing more than an unlucky outcome and the practice of *physiognomy* has fallen into the category of pseudoscience. All of that translates into a representation of a disabled personality that is very different from that of Shakespeare's drama. The comparison of *Game of Thrones* and *3 Henry VI* proves that to be the case even when the historical setting is held constant. While the writers of *Game of Thrones* still treat disability as a misfortune, it is not seen as a divine condemnation with an inherent purpose to destroy a person's life. If misery and suffering is all that the world has to offer for Richard III, there is always a myriad of opportunities awaiting everyone in *Game of Thrones*. A closer look at Shakespeare's portrayal of disability in *3 Henry VI* reveals that the tragedy of a character like Richard is rooted very deeply in the religious teachings of the past, namely the attribution of natural misfortunes to the will of God. As this way of thinking has become very foreign to most people in the 21st century, we have lost the ability to truly put ourselves in the shoes of Richard III.

There is one final observation to be made here. As much as *3 Henry VI* and *Game of Thrones* differ in their respective views on the disabled, they are the same in placing disability

among the central themes that they explore. One may be tempted to ask, then: what is it about disability that makes it such a prominent force in these texts? Why do authors from two completely different time periods see disability as such a powerful literary vehicle that, to a large extent, they center their works on it? While there probably is no single answer to that, perhaps there is just something inherent to our evolved minds that gets us to re-evaluate our condition of being human every time we are faced with disability. No matter the lens through which we look at the disabled characters in literature, film, or other mediums for storytelling, their presence in our texts never fails to evoke powerful emotions - be it antipathy, fear, or distaste for someone like Richard III, or pity, admiration, or fondness for someone like Tyrion Lannister. The prevalence of disability in literature throughout history makes it reasonable to assume that *the punished* and *the unfortunate* are not going away from our texts any time soon. Perhaps the only changing aspect of all that is the underlying cause for people's affection for the disabled characters. If Shakespeare's audience was thrilled to find out how tragic of a circumstance it is to be deformed in every way by God, the centuries that followed gave birth to a society that shows compassion and love to the disabled. A society that truly has a tender spot in its heart for cripples, bastards, and broken things.

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#BlackGirlMagic in Toni Morrison's *Desdemona*

Shakespeare's *Othello* disguises itself as a social commentary on the life of an esteemed commander, Othello, a Moor in Venetian society, and his contested romance with a young woman named Desdemona in the wake of an impending Turkish invasion. Originally based on a similar story in *Hecatomithi* by Cinthio, Shakespeare sought to redefine Othello's character into the tragic hero of his rendition (Dobson and Wells). Although Othello is the title character of Shakespeare's tragedy, the play doesn't leave room or place gravity on his personal narrative but rather emphasizes the narratives of those who commit racially motivated acts against him. More accurately, *Othello* succeeds in telling the story of Iago, a military official under Othello who seeks vengeance because he irrationally believes Othello to be sleeping with his wife and frequently makes derogatory statements about Othello's ethnic background. In an attempt to express and confront the abandoned narratives and identities within *Othello*, Toni Morrison responded with a play set in its aftermath: *Desdemona*.

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, magic characterizes and distinguishes Othello's otherness, serving a basis for his oppression, whereas, in Morrison's *Desdemona*, magical realism is evoked as a liberating force for formerly marginalized characters. This contrasting use of magic reflects Morrison's proximity to *Desdemona*'s oppressed peoples as a black woman in the 21st century and Shakespeare's remoteness from those in *Othello*' as an Englishman during the Elizabethan era. *Othello* and *Desdemona*'s characters draw their respective abilities to self-liberate from the experiences and social contexts of Shakespeare and Morrison. Morrison's empowerment of her

characters through magic displays the ideological phenomena behind social empowerment movements of Morrison's time and the present.

I.

The fantastical and mythological stories Othello utilizes to describe his past create a sensationalized fascination with Othello among the nobility that tokenizes him as a model minority. When justifying Desdemona's love for him, Othello argues she was attracted to his stories of "the Cannibals that each other's eat, the Anthropophagi and men whose heads Do grow beneath their shoulders," (1.3.145-147). Othello emphasizes the mythology in his background and development in order to capitalize on the foreignness of his Moor ancestry and as a result, Desdemona and the other listeners of his stories are captivated with Othello and his magical aura. This leads to Othello becoming a tokenized minority amongst the nobility; however, while tokenization may reap social benefits, it is still an oppressive force. The same magic and myths that individualize Othello and spur fascination simultaneously disempowers marginalized people

The supernatural ties between Othello and his culture serve as a means for his destruction. Othello gives Desdemona the handkerchief passed down to him by his mother who was given it by an Egyptian charmer (3.4.56). The handkerchief symbolizes the binding of Othello's unfamiliar and mystical culture and the ongoing reality of Desdemona's Venetian culture and social structure. However, Shakespeare sends a clear message through the play's development that these two worlds cannot be intertwined. After Othello discovers the handkerchief in the possession of Desdemona's suspected lover, he kills her with encouragement from Iago, a consistent force of oppression, in an act of rage and jealousy (5.2.52). The

handkerchief marks the catalyst to the subsequent destruction of Othello's life. Othello's loss of his job, his love, and his life all surround the symbol of the handkerchief and its magical origins.

Othello's association with magic is used to discredit him and repress his social mobility. After he discovers his daughter's romantic relationship with Othello, Barbantio asserts Othello "hast practiced on her with foul charms" (1.2.73). Barbantio does not express typical fatherly disapproval for Othello. Instead, he assumes that Othello could never win over his daughter under natural circumstances. Iago also echoes this sentiment, describing the stories of Othello's past adventures used to win Desdemona's love as "fantastical lies" (2.1.203). As a Moor, Othello is physically and culturally different than the other characters of *Othello*, and this otherness is portrayed as mystical and wicked. Othello is prescribed a magical characterization due to the inherent abnormality associated with his Moor identity. Othello's adventures and success as a military commander disrupt social order and pre-established notions of Moor inferiority. This creates anxiety in Othello's oppressors, resulting in the use of the supernatural to justify their prejudice.

What does this persistent display of magic and its negative consequences say about Shakespeare's personal view of oppressed people? Shakespeare employs an Orientalist approach when describing Othello and exaggerates the differences in Arab culture and practices from western traditions. (Davidson and Wagner-Martin). Magic is only referenced in *Othello* in relation to Othello's Moorish identity to support the narrative that he is antithetic to the accepted definition of normalcy. Heretics in Elizabethan times experienced similar sensationalization and resulting persecution due to their deviation from traditional Christian beliefs and values (Livingstone). Shakespeare parallels these patterns and combines them with Orientalist depictions of Othello's his history and culture which serve solely as barriers to his success,

eventually leading to his downfall. For Shakespeare, as long as oppressed people hold an inherent dissimilarity to the society they reside in, as demonstrated in *Othello* through magic and the supernatural, their attempts for social mobility or pride will result in failure.

II.

The supernatural in Morrison's *Desdemona* provides a space for liberation and exploration. Morrison brings fresh feminine perspective to the postmodernist literary movement, which prioritizes diversifying how stories were told and who they were told about. Morrison's complex time structures and supernatural realms underscore the themes of freedom and self-expression in her works and compliment the complex identities of her characters (Parini). In *Desdemona*, the characters exist in a world "between being killed and being undead" where "there is only the possibility of wisdom" (Morrison 14, 55). The supernatural setting allows the characters in *Desdemona* to speak freely about events that have already occurred and to shape their own narratives without the constant dismal of oppressors. Soun and Madam Barbantio engage in a dialogue where Soun rejects Madam's advances to make peace, and an interaction that would never be possible in true reality is executed by Morrison within the supernatural realm. Morrison employs magical realism to defy limitations for conditions and behavior and envisions new worlds for marginalized people.

Throughout *Othello*, Iago's prejudiced and racially perspective is offered as a substitute for the narratives and dialogues of marginalized characters such as Othello and Desdemona and he serves a silencing and oppressive force. Due to this, Iago is noticeably absent from Morrison's *Desdemona* because he does not possess the magic or normalized sense of otherness necessary to inhabit Morrison's world that prioritizes the marginalized and traditionally voiceless. This is consistent with Morrison's omission of white characters from many of her novels in order to

allow complete freedom of expression for traditionally repressed narratives. Othello recounts how his “deformities” or cultural differences were mocked in the past; however, his present space within *Desdemona’s* realm of after life allows him six pages of monologue for reflection and exploration of self without the constant presence of his oppressors or challenges to his truth (Morrison 33). Rather than serving as a foundation for prejudice, the magic and the supernatural provide a level playing field where the oppressed can reclaim their narratives.

Othello’s supernatural ties to his culture inspire him to resist in the face of oppression. Othello recalls how his caretaker taught him “...some of her science. How to breathe when there is no air” (Morrison 31). The word science legitimizes the formerly deemed mystic and magical customs of Othello. Othello demonstrates that there is a strength to be found in his foreign culture and it can be applied effectively. These customs are methodical and imperative to Othello’s survival and guide him as he navigates oppressive spaces and manages to thrive where he may be otherwise unwelcome and seen as an abnormality.

Magic and the supernatural symbolize the same things in both *Desdemona* and *Othello*: the customs of marginalized people. However, rather than defining these customs as disparate or unfamiliar to the oppressor, Morrison focuses on their liberating motivation for the oppressed. For Morrison, embracing personal magical features is fundamental to self- exploration.

III.

The appearance of magic and the supernatural in Shakespeare and Morrison’s texts serves to answer the question: where do self-expression and social mobility stem from- acceptance from the oppressor or acceptance of the self? The representation of magic within *Othello* as a symbol of the unpalatability of marginalized cultures to oppressors is intentional and manifests in *Othello’s* overall structure. Othello’s culture and personal experiences as a Moor in Venetian

society are too far out of the scope of Shakespeare’s perspective. Rather than focusing on the personal narrative and identity of his title character, Shakespeare’s focal point falls with a character whose discriminatory and repressive cultural and behavioral patterns he can more closely relate to: Iago. Citing his “otherness,” Shakespeare restricts Othello’s social mobility and expression, illustrating the assumption that the oppressed need to be given their freedom and liberation through the approval of their oppressors. Perhaps due to her resistive spirit, crucial to persisting as a black woman within a larger racist and sexist society, Morrison provides a much less pessimistic resolution for oppressed people. Morrison applies the supernatural as a framework for unchecked expression in *Desdemona* and allows her characters to harness their magic as a source of empowerment. *Desdemona* emblemizes that self-expression and social mobility can be achieved through self-reclamation of “otherness.”

Morrison’s sentiments are echoed throughout social movements across the country: most specifically, #BlackGirlMagic. #BlackGirlMagic calls for black women to embrace the metaphorically “magical” or amazing parts of their identities and envisions spaces for black women to uplift their voices because their specific narratives have traditionally been left out of the fight for black liberation or in the celebration of black achievement. #BlackGirlMagic traces its roots and foundation to Morrison’s use of writing styles such as magical realism that literally and physically demonstrate the complexity and illustriousness of the black feminine experience through the supernatural. However, #BlackGirlMagic demonstrates that black womanhood and its magic is not just limited to the fantastical events that take place between the pages of Morrison’s literature and can be found in the existence of black women everywhere.

Today, the literal and metaphorical empowerment of black femininity intersect in a display of #BlackGirlMagicalRealism through media depictions with black women superheroes leads such as “Lady Knight” in the popular HBO television series “Watchmen,” or the sibling pair “Thunder and Lightning” in the the CW’s “Black Lightning.” The popular children’s show “That’s So Raven” highlights the coming-of-age trials and tribulations of a psychic black teenage girl, displaying that “magic” is found in its greatest abundance amongst black youth. The way in which these women use their powers to fight paranormal evils or high school mean girls celebrates how despite a society intent on oppressing and neglecting them, black women persist and thrive everyday with an ease that seems almost supernatural.

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