



TRANSCRIPT

Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa

We Ask Literature Professor Ayanna Thompson “What Would Shakespeare Say?”

Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of the [Phi Beta Kappa Society](#), welcomes Professor [Ayanna Thompson](#). Professor Thompson specializes in Renaissance drama and issues of race in performance. She discusses the universality of Shakespeare while homing in on how he would have reacted to racialized readings of his work. Would he recognize that race plays a role in his plays? Would he agree with Thompson that one of his characters delivers “the first Black-Power speech in English”? What would he think of “Hamilton” and its non-traditional casting? These and other fascinating questions make for a memorable conversation with one of the country’s premiere Shakespeare scholars.

Fred Lawrence: Hi, and welcome to Key Conversations with Phi Beta Kappa. I’m Fred Lawrence, Secretary and CEO of The Phi Beta Kappa Society. This podcast features conversations with Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholars who spend one academic year with us. They travel to up to eight Phi Beta Kappa-affiliated colleges and universities, partake in the academic life, and present a lecture on a topic in their field. Lectures are always free and open to the public. For a full schedule and to learn more about the program, visit [pbk.org](#).

Today, I’m pleased to welcome Professor Ayanna Thompson. Professor Thompson is a professor of English who specializes in renaissance drama and issues of race in and as performance. She is the author of four books, including *Teaching Shakespeare with Purpose* and *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America*. Her lines of academic inquiry consider the effects of nontraditional casting in theater, perceptions of race in classical performances, and literary theories of revenge. Welcome, professor. Good to have you with us today.

Ayanna Thompson: Thank you. It’s wonderful to be here.

Lawrence: Emily Dickinson famously said that Hamlet wavered for us all. How do you explain the extraordinary ability of Shakespeare to speak to us individually after four centuries?

Thompson: Well, the plays have amazing complexity to them that I think allows us to focus on different registers and different time periods, and so *Hamlet* is not the same *Hamlet* that it was in the 17th century, that it is in the 21st century, and I think we pick up on new things now in different aspects and the fact that Emily Dickinson focused on the wavering of course is a very modern interpretation of the play.

Fred Lawrence: You've written a great deal about race and Shakespeare, and I want to ask you some questions about that in a moment, but first, I want to ask you a "What would Bill say?" question. Would William Shakespeare recognize the question of the role of race in his work?

Thompson: Oh, that's a hard one because the word "race" was just starting to come into what I think we would call a more modern definition. So if we had said, "Hey, Billy Boy, what do you think about race in your plays?", he'd say, "Well, they all have to do with lineage, and a lot of them have to do with family structures." I think in some ways, he would absolutely understand what race means in terms of the way that lineage and family structures led into a way of thinking about classifying different human beings. So I don't know that he would necessarily say, "Of course, I wrote about Othello, or Aaron the Moor, or Shylock," but maybe with some prompting, he'd get there.

Lawrence: So let's talk about some of those characters and your views on what you call nontraditional casting. That is, people of color playing roles not traditionally associated as roles of color. What's the significance of how we cast a play today? Again, would Shakespeare sitting in your theater be thinking about this? Would this strike him as odd, or would this strike him as making sense?

Thompson: Oh, I think for Shakespeare, it would probably strike him as very odd, but I think he was also such a consummate entertainer and so attuned to what an audience craved and desired that maybe if he looked at the audience and saw that audiences were expecting this or were familiar with it that he would go with it. But in terms of nontraditional casting for us now, this is something that has been going on for over 200 years because Ira Aldridge and James Hewlett, famous African-American actors in the 19th century, started performing at the African Grove Theater in New York, not only performing scenes and monologues from *Othello*, but also doing *Richard III*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* in white face.

We have images of Ira Aldridge in white makeup performing as King Lear, and he became superstar-famous in Eastern Europe, and then the story picks up again with the Orson Welles' *Voodoo Macbeth* in 1936 in New York with an all-black cast. And they were doing *Macbeth* as if it were set in the Caribbean, evoking the connections between Macbeth and the Haitian emperor, Henri

Christophe. It was hugely popular, 10,000 people showed up for opening night, and over 150,000 people saw it in its New York run.

Then, of course, we get Paul Robeson, and then a whole long line of very famous actors of color throughout the 20th century, whereas now, many theater companies say they don't do nontraditional casting, they do new-traditional casting. It's become the standard.

Lawrence: Turn it around. Could a white person today play Othello?

Thompson: White people want to play Othello. They bemoan the fact that this is the one tragic part that is withheld from their repertoire. Patrick Stewart famously did it in DC, in what has been called the photo negative *Othello* in which he was the only white actor on stage, and the rest of the cast were African-Americans. Bill Pullman recently played Othello in Norway where it was supposed to be about an American landing on the shores of Norway and being the outsider, and actually, Patrick Stewart has said that he wants to return to doing *Othello* again.

Lawrence: How did you find your way to Shakespeare? Can you remember a time before you were interested in Shakespeare?

Thompson: Yes, and in fact, I think my trajectory to Shakespeare is not a straightforward one. Although, I have been able to figure out how I got where I am. I grew up working class. We did not go to a lot of live theater. I did not have a natural love or affinity for Shakespeare. However, when I was 13 years old, my mother came into a little bit of money, and she decided that we should go to England, and she decided that we should go to Stratford-upon-Avon, and she decided that we should see a play at the Royal Shakespeare Company.

That play was *Romeo and Juliet* starring Sean Bean as Romeo and Hugh Quarshie, the very famous black British actor as Mercutio or Tybalt, I can't remember which one now. Tybalt, I think, and it was set in 1980's where all the characters were wearing leather suits, and there was a vague mafioso feel to it, and it was so alive and so electric, and it was so about the current moment. I looked at my mother and I said, "This is what Shakespeare is about? I thought it was pumpkin pants, and this is not pumpkin pants at all. This is my life. These people are sexy and amazing."

I had a poster of Sean Bean from that *Romeo and Juliet* production in my college dorm room, but I was not invested in Shakespeare. I was doing the modern British novel. I was doing postcolonial stuff. It took me a long time to travel back to Shakespeare and also to realize that that first production that I saw was a non-traditionally cast production, and I think that imprinted me in some fundamental way.

- Lawrence: Yet the language obviously spoke to you.
- Thompson: The language in performance is to me, see, like there's five minutes or so where you're like, "I don't know what they're saying." Right? The first five minutes where you're adjusting your brain to iambic pentameter and poetry, and then all of a sudden, you realize, "I'm getting it." If you don't think about it and if it's really well-acted, it is completely transparent what they're saying, and so I've always privileged the live performance because for me, that's where meaning is translated, and it becomes so clear, so on the surface.
- Lawrence: And he's always talking about us. My mother taught high school English for 40 years, and she taught back in the days when all the kids were tracked. She taught honor students and non-college-bound students, and she loved teaching Shakespeare to the non-college-bound students in particular. She would always talk about the way in which they related to *Hamlet*. Not in the abstract, but they understood the family complications that he had, and he spoke to them very directly. So I wonder if you've had experiences with that in your teaching.
- Thompson: Absolutely. I love teaching Shakespeare because I often teach non-English majors, and I often get them on their feet and thinking through the text through performance. Many of them leave the class saying, "I feel duped. I feel robbed. Why didn't I have this earlier?" I said, "Well, we've been waiting for you." So it is a great moment when you get students to realize that the plays are talking about things that are directly related to their lives whether it is being an outsider, feeling like you don't fit in, feeling like your family is falling apart, feeling like the world is topsy-turvy and you don't know which way it's going. It's all right there.
- Lawrence: We all have problems with our father; we didn't all write *Hamlet*. You got a good story for us of watching a student uncrack one of the puzzles of Shakespeare?
- Thompson: Yes, *Macbeth*. So I taught an honors class last year, and it was a Shakespeare in Performance class, and so I was taking them to see a bunch of plays, and so *Macbeth* was on the syllabus. The students came in the first day, and they're like, I don't know. They didn't seem impressed by it, and I said, "Well, don't you think that this is the happiest marriage you've seen in any of the plays," and they resisted that, and then I said, "Okay. What do you think Macbeth is talking about early in the play about his ambition?" They said, "Oh, he wants to be king. Whatever." I said, "Right, but he understands from the first moment he encounters the witches that he's going to kill Duncan, right? Like he says the thought makes his hair stand on end."
- I said, "So, what's the ambition for?" I saw them grappling with the speech, grappling with the speech, grappling with the speech, and finally, the student

looked at me and goes, "Oh my god. He's on the ladder because he's been told he needs to be on the ladder just like we've been told we need to be on the ladder, but the ladder doesn't go anywhere." The whole class gasped because these are honor students, and they realized what it was to be on a ladder that doesn't go anywhere.

Lawrence: As they say, it just got real.

Thompson: It got real for them. Very real.

Lawrence: Did the teaching of the play change from that moment?

Thompson: Yes, absolutely. I think they became more cognizant of themselves in the play, the things that they're willing to do to achieve their ambition, the things that they think they shouldn't do, and where those lines are. It became incredibly intense, I think, for those students.

Lawrence: The Folger here in DC just did a wonderful production of *Antony and Cleopatra*, and I was struck by the fact that some of the best speeches don't seem to go to Antony or Cleopatra. Enobarbus has this wonderful speech, "the barge he sat in like a burnish'd throne, Burned on the water." It was intoxicating. I had not heard that speech before. There were the famous ones that we all know. "This was the noblest Roman of them all," "To be or not to be," "The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars, but in ourselves," "We were underlings," et cetera. Do you have some favorite speeches that are in fact not the famous ones, and can you share a few and tell us how they came to be your favorites?

Thompson: Well my absolute favorite is *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare's first tragedy and little known, little produced play. One of the characters is Aaron the Moor, and he has what I think is the first black-power speech in English. He's talking to two white characters, and their mother has just had his baby. Obviously, it's a brown baby that comes out, and so they know who the father is, and they're telling him that he needs to kill the baby because otherwise, she'll be shamed. She's married to somebody else, and he looks at these two white men, and he says, "What? What? Ye white-limed walls. Ye alehouse painted signs. Is black so base of hue in that it scorns to bear another hue?"

He goes on and on, and it's this amazing speech in which he says why black is better. It doesn't blush. It doesn't reveal anything. Why whiteness is weaker, and he's looking at this child, and he is the one character--he's incredibly villainous, evil, evil character--but he is the one character in the play who actively tries to protect his own child. And so you see this kind of evil blackness though tied with a pride for his race, but also, a love of his child in a paternity that we don't see expressed elsewhere in the play.

Lawrence: Let me go back to where I started when I asked you, “What would Bill say?” That is obviously to us a racially-inflected story, and you say it’s the first black-power speech in the English language.

Thompson: Yeah.

Lawrence: Maybe in any Western language. So would he have recognized it as a racially-inflected plot, or would he have thought of it as a human piece coming from the soul of this actor?

Thompson: I do think that William Shakespeare, our dear Bill, would have said, “This is totally about blackness.” There’s nothing in this that is obscuring that. He talks explicitly about his blackness. He even says, “I, like the black dog as the saying is.” Right? This is a character who knows he’s black, who’s performing as if he’s black. Now, if Shakespeare could have extrapolated this to make it mean about race in general or blackness in general I think is a different question, but if you said, “Hey, is Aaron black, and is this about blackness?”, he’d say, “Yeah, duh.”

Lawrence: Does he do the same thing with Shylock do you think?

Thompson: Yes, absolutely. Shylock. I always say that there are three dangerous plays by Shakespeare: *Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *Taming of the Shrew*. Those plays are really hard, and they’re really hard because no matter what you do to them, they still have a tinge of ickiness that you kind of can’t escape. *Merchant of Venice* has an amazing performance history, right? We know that it’s a comedy, and we know that it has its roots in commedia dell’arte and that Shylock would have been a buffoonish type of character in the way that he was portrayed. We also know that he has one of the most amazing heartfelt speeches about humanity, right? “Hath not a Jew eyes. Hath not a Jew hands.” Right?

Lawrence: “If you cut us, do we not bleed?”

Thompson: “Do we not bleed?” Right? We’ve got this buffoonish commedia character saying one of the most intensely humanistic speeches that you can imagine, so there’s that dissonance that Shakespeare likes. Getting back to the performance history of *Merchant of Venice*, we know the Nazis were really interested in staging *Merchant of Venice* so that Jessica, Shylock’s daughter, could actually be a Christian who happily escapes from her evil Jewish father.

We also know that post-Holocaust that many Jewish actors, acting companies, and theater companies at colleges and universities used this as a type of Zionist text. I saw a production like that at Harvard by a student Jewish organization, so they’re really trying to appropriate Shylock. I’m not sure that it works. I think it’s still ... There’s yuckiness in the play. I think there’s a lot of yuckiness in

Othello as well because Iago is the one who controls everything, and Othello is the dupe, and Iago is ... It's a comic structure to that play as well. Even though it's a tragic ending, the structure is such that Iago makes the audience complicit with him in what he's doing and undermining Othello.

In *Taming of the Shrew*, from our feminist perspective, it's hard, hard, hard to get out of the words, right? When Kate at the end says, "I'll put my hand under your boot," she's totally submissive to Petruchio. Now, you can do that with a wink or not, but still, the words themselves ... This is the grappling part that I like.

Lawrence: We've been talking about nontraditional casting of Shakespeare plays. Let me take you out of Shakespeare for a second and maybe one of the most remarkable contemporary moments of nontraditional casting is the extraordinary performance of *Hamilton* on Broadway, and now, all over the country, all over the world. First of all, have you seen *Hamilton*, and what are your responses, reactions to it? Then, I'd love you to tell us a little bit about how you use it in your classes?

Thompson: I have not seen *Hamilton*. I am a member of the Public Theater, and I had tickets for the first run at the Public, and I couldn't go, so I gave my tickets to a graduate student.

Lawrence: The graduate student must be very, very grateful to you.

Thompson: My student came back, and he said, "Oh, you made a mistake." I have yet to see it, but I know a lot about it, and I know a lot about the casting. In fact, this is a question that I often get at the talks that I've been giving because people are familiar with *Hamilton* and familiar ... like much more familiar with nontraditional casting because of *Hamilton*, and I think ... One of the students said, "Don't you think it's important to study whether there's going to be a post-*Hamilton* bump in the way that people receive nontraditional casting?" I said, "That's exactly it. You're the person to study it."

I think there probably will be a difference in the way that people make sense of nontraditional casting even in Shakespeare plays after *Hamilton*, but we won't know until we get more researchers and more undergraduates involved in our research to ask the questions and create new devices and new ways for us to gauge audience reception.

Lawrence: I want to ask you a question that was a parlor game of sorts, certainly when we were in college. You'd invite three people from history to come to a party, who would they be? What would you ask them? So you have now spent a big piece of your professional life studying Shakespeare, so if you could invite three

characters from Shakespeare to a dinner party, who would you invite, and what would you ask them?

Thompson: Oh, that's a tough one. I'd want Aaron the Moor because I love him so much, but he's going to kill somebody at the dinner party so I can't have him.

Lawrence: We're going to assume everybody is going to behave nicely.

Thompson: Okay. I definitely want Aaron the Moor. I guess I'd want Katherine, Kate from *Taming of the Shrew* and say, "Did you really? Like what is love for you, and what happened at the end?" I guess I'd want to know that and maybe ... Oh, yeah. I love the romances, the late plays, but they're also ... like they end so sappily. I wouldn't want to have the sappy people, so maybe ... You know what? Ophelia would be pretty cool. She'd be cool. Before she's sad, if I get to pick the moment in the play.

Lawrence: You want her while she's still alive.

Thompson: Yes, definitely still alive.

Lawrence: That's for sure.

Thompson: Yeah.

Lawrence: We were talking earlier about favorite performances. I shared with you that seeing Simon Russell Beale play Hamlet and James Earl Jones play Othello were my two personal favorite performances I've seen. Now, I'm sure you've seen many more performances of Shakespeare than I, so tell us in closing, what's the single best performance you've seen in a Shakespeare play?

Thompson: Oh, okay. Well, I think it's going to have to be the Toneelgroep, this Dutch acting company that's led by Ivo van Hove, and they have two big Shakespeare productions that are like six hours long. One is called *Kings of War* and one is called *The Roman Tragedies*. Actually, a bit of *Kings of War* was *Richard III*, and the performance of that *Richard III* was the most terrifying thing I had ever seen. He was so scary, and you can see the whole audience was tense and clutching things to their faces because it was so terrifying, and I've never felt terrified in theater. I've felt sad, or emotive, or happy, joyous, light, but I've never felt terrified, and that was different, and I thought, "Ah, that's very Shakespearean."

Lawrence: You've had the occasion as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar to go to a number of different cities, a number of different schools. I know you've been to University of Houston and Rice in Houston, in Rhodes, and University of the South, Sewanee. Has a student asked you something that you were surprised

or not even a student, a townspeople asked you something that surprised you on this trip?

Thompson: I get asked questions all the time that surprise me because the talks that I'm giving, I've tried to gear as I don't have ... I'm asking questions, I don't have the answer, and I often say, "I'm giving you this talk because I think your generation has to solve these problems." So one of the problems is that we don't have any real data about how audiences understand nontraditional casting because theater companies are loathe to ask questions about it, and researchers, academics to date have not done any work on how audiences make sense of nontraditional casting in a Shakespearean production.

So I say to the students, "This is for you. You guys, this is the ... You are the generation." I've had numerous questions about, "How do we do it?" I said, "I don't know. How are you going to do it?" One of them is like, "Let's create an app. Let's create an app for audience response that everyone can use, any theater company could use, and then all that data in aggregate is what will inform us about what audiences are really seeing and how they're making sense of what they're seeing." And I thought, "That's it, right? Your generation is going to solve this, not my old generation."

Lawrence: You're on sabbatical this year from the George Washington University, and I hope that the Visiting Scholar opportunities that you've had will give you some experiences you're going to take into the classroom next year. Could you share a couple of those with us?

Thompson: Absolutely. I do feel like one of the huge takeaways for me is that I ... In these talks, I've been empowering the students to think about research and them being the future of research, and I think maybe I don't do that enough in my classroom, so I think I'm going to start posing bigger questions that are project-based because I think that that's the way for them to make Shakespeare truly their own and something that they will have a lasting takeaway from the class, but I've learned a lot this year. It's been an amazing experience.

Lawrence: The ability to look into the text four centuries old, find new meaning in it, and find the depths of our own lives. I suspect this is what you do every day in the classroom. I look forward to following all the wonderful things you're going to continue to do. Thanks for being with us today, and thanks for being with us this year as a Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar.

Thompson: My pleasure.

Lawrence: Thanks for listening. This episode was produced by Lantigua Williams & Co. Our theme song is "Back to Back" by Yan Perchuk. To learn more about the Phi Beta

Kappa Visiting Scholar Program, please visit pbk.org. I'm Fred Lawrence. Until next time.

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