

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

Borough of Manhattan Community College

2022

A Feminist Scholar Explains Why Will Smith's Words Speak as Loudly as His Actions

Marleen S. Barr

CUNY Borough of Manhattan Community College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/bm_pubs/168

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

American Association of University Professors

***Academe* blog**

The blog of *Academe* magazine

A Feminist Scholar Explains Why Will Smith's Words Speak as Loudly as His Actions

BY MARLEEN S. BARR

I could only look at the Will Smith meltdown from the point of view of that earlier Will, because Shakespeare has so many characters who precipitate a steep and stunning downfall: Macbeth, Lear, Othello, Hamlet, Shylock. The title of Smith's movie, in which he plays the father of Venus and Serena Williams, evokes a Shakespearean monarch; he rose from Fresh Prince to "King Richard."—[Maureen Dowd](#)



After Will Smith slapped Chris Rock at last week's Academy Awards ceremony, following the comedian's "GI Jane" joke about Smith's wife Jada Pinkett Smith—who has experienced hair loss or alopecia—the national conversation was replete with commentators, including Maureen Dowd, suddenly becoming literary critics who opined on the deep meaning of the incident. I wish to participate in the discussion from the point of view of a feminist scholar who is, in fact, a literary critic.

Rosie O'Donnell linked Smith to Trump in a March 28 [tweet](#) noting that both powerful men get away with breaking the law: "We watched him [Smith] do it – then like the trump years – we don't hold anyone accountable." In a subsequent [tweet](#), she called Smith's actions "a sad display of toxic masculinity from a narcissistic madman." Bill Maher observed that Chris Rock evoked Jackie Kennedy when he set a dignified example in response to a shocking circumstance. To my mind, Roxane Gay's abrupt shift from defending what she calls the "thin skin" right not to be the butt of a joke to discussing Republican senators' inappropriate confirmation hearing onslaught against Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson points to the crux of what Smith wrought.

Gay wrote, "During Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson's confirmation hearings for the Supreme Court, that distinguished jurist endured all manner of insult, racism and misogyny from Republican senators asking ludicrous questions that were really opportunities for grandstanding." Rock was subjected to verbal abuse too. While the slap received all the attention, the verbal attack he endured has been all but ignored. I will argue that Smith's committing verbal assault is as crucial as his inflicting physical assault. It is important for the national conversation about the incident to emphasize that words matter.

Rock did not feel threatened when Smith first approached him on stage. Seeming to exemplify Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, he reacted to Smith walking toward him by saying "oh oh Richard" before laughing. The remark positioned Smith in terms of the fictional *King Richard* role he played on screen, not as a real, present danger on stage. It suggests that Rock expected to be amused, not assaulted, responding as if Smith were an actor playing a role. According to John McWhorter, acting—assuming a guise to be watched by an audience—was precisely what Smith was doing: "Smith is a professional performer, of course, and it might be relevant that he slapped rather than punched Rock, with the intention, seemingly, of shock (and awe, even) rather than physical injury. . . . I suspect that Smith was, on a certain level, performing for Black America." Was audience gratification more important to Smith, as McWhorter suggests, than the possibility of an adverse impact on his acting career?

The expectation of amusement is ingrained to the extent that many viewers, as well as Oscar telecast lead producer Will Packer, shared Rock's initial expectation. Reporting on an interview with the producer, Nicole Sperling and Matt Stevens note, "Mr. Packer said that, like many viewers at home, he had originally thought that the slap might be part of an unplanned comedic bit" and that Rock told him, "I just took a punch from Muhammad Ali." If Rock had indeed taken a punch from Ali instead of a slap from Smith, he might have been too injured to maintain his sense of humor. While Rock was physically unharmed, the Oscar proceedings did not emerge unscathed.

Smith's slap is not an example of an out-of-control, angry man resorting to toxic masculinity. He initially sauntered toward Rock in an even-keeled, nonthreatening manner. The slap was not a punch; Smith pulled his punch and remained in control. The actor, who is taller and heavier than Rock, could have inflicted grave physical harm upon the comedian but chose not to do so. Regardless of O'Donnell's toxic masculinity claim, slapping someone across the face as a response to an insult echoes the patently feminine stereotype that real women and female movie protagonists of Jackie Kennedy's generation perpetuated. Smith's smack shows him enacting the role of an insulted woman, apparently acting as his wife's proxy. Although he initially laughed at Rock's joke, he sprang into action after turning to Pinkett Smith and observing her response. She could have chosen to stand up and calmly speak for herself by stating that the joke was not acceptable. Rock, in his physical restraint, was playing the part of the gentleman—not Maher's imagined Jackie Kennedy—who does not hit a woman back after she slaps him in the face but stands and takes the hit.

Smith did not pull his figurative punches when he inflicted his largely ignored verbal assault. He twice **shouted** “Keep my wife’s name out [sic] your f***ing mouth.” While a slap is a weak form of assault, the “f-word” is, of course, one of the strongest and most inflammatory epithets in the English language. Smith took care to emphasize the word, precisely mouthing it to make it clear to viewers despite the censoring bleep and giving it Shakespearean significance at the august Academy Awards ceremony. “A hit, a very palpable hit,” says Osric in response to Hamlet before Laertes states, “Well, again.” Smith’s f-word onslaught is indeed a palpable hit, equal in import to the slap.

Words are central to Academy Awards ceremony traditions. Each nominee wishes to hear their name, or the name of their film, come out of the presenter’s mouth. Smith’s use of the f-word was a full-force assault that detracted from the achievements of the nominees, arguably hurting them more than the slap hurt Rock. Using words to inflict pain has no place in public discourse.

McWhorter inadvertently places Smith’s action in the context of reader response theory: “I cannot know precisely what was going on in Smith’s head, but I suspect that a part of him was doing something that he thought the Black community, broadly speaking, would read differently than many other observers.” As Norman N. Holland explained in *5 Readers Reading*, every reader has an individual response. No one can predict reader response and know what is in other readers’ heads. When producing verbal or written texts, we can only use our own heads, doing our best to conduct ourselves with respect for decorum and other viewpoints.

Remember: Donald Trump decided to run for president because Barack Obama publicly insulted him at the 2011 White House Correspondents’ Dinner. Again, words and responses to them are of the utmost importance.

Marleen S. Barr is known for her pioneering work in feminist science fiction and is a winner of the Science Fiction Research Association Pilgrim Award for lifetime achievement in science fiction criticism.