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# Knowing What we are Making: Props, Scholarship, and the Pandemic

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# Knowing What we are Making: Props, Scholarship, and the Pandemic

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**ABSTRACT**

This article is mindful of two separate phenomena: that recent years have seen a plethora of methodologically diverse and rewardingly curious works on theatre props, and that the Covid-19 pandemic halted in-person dramatic performance in the UK to a greater extent and for a longer duration than at any time since 1660. Accordingly, this essay offers four broad headings for enquiry, situating theatrical props in their longer past as well as theatre and archival conditions as we recently knew them: definitions, racialised props, methodologies, and futures.

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I began writing this essay in the depths of the coronavirus pandemic, with less live theatre on British stages than at any time since the Restoration of Charles II. As the pandemic prohibited live and in-person theatre, noting the productive and lively state of theatre scholarship seemed tactless. Nevertheless, I come not to bury props but to praise them, and to suggest how this enforced moment of reckoning might redirect and encourage our collective energies towards the study of stage properties. If this piece is less of a literature survey than I or my editors envisaged, it is because two recent surveys by Andrew Sofer and Catherine Richardson have not merely covered but sown, cultivated, and harvested that field of enquiry, and my work is richly indebted to theirs.[1] Sofer and Richardson's articles catalogue the major studies of props before the mid-2010s. Substantial work has been published on props in the four years since Richardson's and seven since Sofer's, and in discussing (predominantly, although not exclusively) that more recent scholarship, I present four headings for enquiry. These headings situate props in their longer pasts, as well as their theatrical and archival conditions as we recently knew them.

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[1]Andrew Sofer, 'Getting on with Things: The Currency of Objects in Theatre and Performance Studies', *Theatre Journal* 68, no. 4 (2016), 673–84; Catherine Richardson, '"More Things in Heaven and Earth": Materiality and the Stage', *Shakespeare* 15, no. 1 (2019): 88–103.

The questions I ask (in a piece more concerned with questions than answers) respond not only to the gathered field of scholarship on props, but reflect the conceptual, historical, and material issues that have arisen in thinking about and with this journal issue. Some are issues of *what* we study when we study props: others emphasise the *how*.

My first concern is with definitions. Ongoing critical debates about props not only illuminate and trouble, but also occlude and misrepresent the practical theatrical distinctions between props, prostheses, and costumes: these distinctions vary over time, and some are difficult to recover, but none should be overlooked. Sometimes, the elision of differences reveals ominous assumptions about performers' bodies. Some of these assumptions are potentially racialised, as when a prosthetic used to create the illusion of an ethnic facial feature is reclassified as a 'prop'. This terminology, I argue, reinforces the objectification of racialised dramatic characters and the actors who embody them. The second question, arising from the first, attends to race. Black scholars and scholars of colour are transforming Early Modern studies. My work depends on theirs; they have given our field new opportunities and obligations to consider, and their work and influence is seen in this issue.[2] Although Ian Smith's 2013 article 'Othello's Black Handkerchief' is less recent than most of the work I discuss here, his astonishing study of the blackness of Othello's handkerchief in the light of textile prosthetics and theatre's propensity to forget demonstrates props' potential, under scrutiny, to revolutionise our scholarship.[3] My interest in the materiality of performing race includes the economics and politics of props which are used to stage racialised identities. What does it mean when objects from one area of the global South become surrogates for artefacts from another? This article's third consideration is methodological, extending the work of Richardson and Sofer. The critical shifts they identify, including (and perhaps especially) recent cognitive, phenomenological, and digital scholarship has afforded new possibilities for how technicians and performers think through and with props. The fourth heading, optimistically, is 'futures'. Even before the current pandemic began in 2020, cuts to arts funding were creating a necessarily props-poor theatrical aesthetic. Coronavirus has shifted our relationship to objects; early pandemic concerns about virus transmission via surfaces led to ritual public cleanings of surfaces and things: what John Nguyet Erni and Ted Striphas call 'hygiene theatre'.[4]

[2]See in particular Patricia Akhimie, '"Bruised with Adversity": Reading Race in *The Comedy of Errors*', in Traub (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment: Gender, Sexuality, Race* (OUP: 2016), 186–96; Matthieu Chapman, 'Red, White, and Black: Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and the Structuring of Racial Antagonisms in Early Modern England and the New World', *Theatre History Studies* 39 (2020), 7–20; Rebecca Kumar, '"Do You Love Me, Master?": The Erotic Politics of Servitude in The Tempest and Its Postcolonial Afterlife', in Smith et al (eds), *Early Modern Black Diaspora Studies* (New York: Springer, 2018), 175–96; Ania Loomba, 'The Great Indian Vanishing Trick: Colonialism, Property, and the Family in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', in Callaghan (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), 181–205.

[3]Ian Smith, 'Othello's Black Handkerchief', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (Spring 2013), 1–25.

[4]John Nguyet Erni and Ted Striphas, 'Introduction: COVID-19, the Multiplier', *Cultural Studies* 35, nos. 2–3 (2021): 211–37.

In 2002, Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda's landmark early study offered a vital critique of the idea that the Early Modern stage was bare and uncluttered, embracing instead props' materiality.[5] Nevertheless, other writing on theatrical objects has long imagined props as sites of decay: the pandemic reimagined them as the nexus of contagion and disease. How can the haptic actor-prop relationship survive this, when much writing about props also disdains the disintegrating prop as ageing 'thing'?[6] Whose objects will be remembered? And what avenues for the study of props are most possible and productive, now?

## Definitions

As in most things, scholars vary in their definition of props and their handling of 'props' as a term. John D. Lyons argues that 'when we speak of props we usually mean things that human beings can handle and use: a dagger, a sword, a bowl, a book, a pin, a portrait, a skull', building a revenge tragedy starter pack.[7] Lyons's 'usually' is, for Sofer, essential: for Sofer, an object only *becomes* a prop when it is 'triggered' by touch.[8] Other work does not insist on touch; Emmanuel Stelzer argues for the 'blatantly large' size of several Early Modern portrait props that would have been looked at but not handled by actors.[9] Similarly, despite the quotidian nature of many of Lyons's props, Richardson points out most prop scholarship emphasises not bowls and books, but 'outlandish objects' such as altars and chariots (which, although 'used' by human beings, are not 'handled' in the same way as Lyons's hand props).[10] Digital advances such as Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson's *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue* (2011–2018) cataloguing 2560 Early Modern plays' textual and material properties, have augmented interest in quantities as well as qualities of props (of which more later).[11] Accordingly, we are as far as we can or will get from Walter Benjamin's conviction that Early Modern theatre was propsless, free of 'the profane world of things'.[12] Receding too is 'the long-taught notion of Reformed England as an aniconic or iconophobic culture' and the critical (and sometimes theatrical) commonplace that plays were primarily aural, rather than overwhelmingly visual 'Playes, shewes […] or any other such sighte'.[13]

[5]Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda, eds., *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2002).
[6]See Sophie Duncan, *Shakespeare's Props: Memory and Cognition* (London: Routledge, 2019), 19, 197–8.
[7]John D. Lyons, 'Material Fatality: Props and the Baroque Drama of Chance', *Yale French Studies* 24 (2013): 38.
[8]Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 11.
[9]Emmanuel Stelzer, *Portraits in Early Modern English Drama: Visual Culture, Play-Texts and Performances* (Oxford: Routledge, 2019), 86.
[10]Richardson, 'More Things in Heaven and Earth', 89.
[11]Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson, eds., *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011–2018), 8 vols.
[12]Lyons, 'Material Fatality', 38.
[13]Stelzer, *Portraits*, 70; memorandum from the Lord Mayor to the Privy Council (8 November 1612), quoted in E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923), 341.

Just as textual scholarship emphasises the protean, 'untidy' or 'gappy' nature of the playtext, recent definitions of the prop have emphasised its unstable multiplicity.[14] For Sarah Wall-Randell, props in non-illusionistic stage sets contribute 'heavy realism' but are also 'metonymic'; some are only 'approximations of, or stand-ins for, the objects they "play" onstage', while others, notably books, can be 'at once a stand-in and the thing itself'.[15] Semantically, less influential than the notion of the prop as 'object' is the prop as thing theory's 'charged, wilful thing'. In fact, Sofer feels that the modish 'thing' has 'performed something of a theoretical putsch […] Having moved from signs to ghosts to the real, we are, it seems, increasingly in thrall to objects'.[16] Eleanor Margolies speculates that this is because for some, 'prop' invokes 'a musty smell, redolent of cupboards and store rooms, and […] negative connotations of theatricality and artifice'.[17] With equal wryness, Sofer chronicles 'a veritable arsenal of approaches' to props. Three other 'key recent shifts' in the 'theoretical fortunes of' and ways of seeing the prop include: as part of 'an object–object relationship unmoored from subjectivity, thereby decentring the human sphere (object-oriented ontology; posthumanism)'; as 'nodes within networks' that 'blur the distinction among discrete, causal agents and their effects (actor-network theory)', and most questionably (for Sofer), the new materialist approach in which props 'are found to exhibit various kinds of agency in their own right'.[18] Enacting that new materialist approach (indeed, that New Materialist approach) more recently is Brett Gamboa and Lawrence Switzky's 2019 collection *Shakespeare's Things*, which argues that things exert '"thing-power", the ability to affect our bodies and other things at a pace and scale we seldom apprehend'.[19]

Lena Perkins-Wilder, in her own excellent study of Shakespeare's comic props (such as letters in *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*; rings in *The Merchant of Venice*), worries about prop scholarship's potential to, 'as some Marxists theorists suggest […] risk becoming fetishistic tchotchke criticism'.[20] 'Tchotchke criticism' is Douglas Bruster's derisive term for (as he sees it) an overspread and under-politicised attention to the object, defined by Jonathan Gil Harris as 'the object of material criticism' made 'in bad taste […] overvalued idols that belong more properly to a superseded culture'.[21]

[14]Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Emma Smith, *This Is Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, 2019).
[15]Sarah Wall-Randell, 'What Is a Staged Book? Books as 'Actors' in the Early Modern Theatre', in *Rethinking Theatrical Documents in Shakespeare's England*, ed. Tiffany Stern (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2021), 129–30.
[16]Sofer, 'Getting on with Things', 674–5.
[17]Eleanor Margolies, *Props* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 2.
[18]Sofer, 'Getting on with Things', 674–5.
[19]Brett Gamboa and Lawrence Switzky, 'Introduction' in *Shakespeare's Things: Shakespearean Theatre and the Non-Human World in History, Theory, and Performance*, ed. Gamboa and Switzky (Oxford: Routledge, 2020), 6.
[20]Lena Perkins Wilder, 'Stage Props and Shakespeare's Comedies: Keeping Safe Nerissa's Ring', in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Comedy*, ed. Heather Hirschfeld (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 337–8.
[21]Douglas Bruster, *Shakespeare and the Question of Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 203; Jonathan Gil Harris, *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 6.

Perkins Wilder wonders whether new materialist studies 'overemphasize the "life of things" and credit objects with an unjustified weight of agency?'.[22] Sofer thinks so: 'new materialisms […] often invest the word *agency*' and thus props, 'with magically agential powers'.[23]

This gathered field of definitions and descriptions of props raises two issues. The first is that categorising all inanimate entities on stage either as 'objects' or 'things' has tended to occlude practical theatrical and disciplinary distinctions between props, prostheses, and costume. Not all things are props; *Shakespeare's Things*, for example, includes shoes, primarily items of costume, in Korda's chapter: only in specific works does a shoe become a prop, as in *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Red Shoes*, or *Cinderella*.[24] Some things onstage are not props, although they have been called so: there is a tradition of work on the prosthetic nose worn by some Shylocks which uses 'nose prop' (or an equivalent term) exclusively or interchangeably with 'prosthesis'.[25] This has multiple implications. One is etymological: 'prosthesis' in its bodily sense did not enter English until the early eighteenth century, whereas 'prop' is a nineteenth-century abbreviation of the word 'property', the term which had been in theatrical use from the 1450s. Another consideration is racial: a prosthetic nose, unlike a prop, typically signifies as part of the character's body (one character may mock another because of his nose's appearance, but not usually because it is fake, unless specified in the text). Defining the nose as a prop inscribes the racialised body as artificial and emphasises its status as a composite which includes inanimate objects: the racialised body, made up of parts including one or more objects, becomes an object itself. The term 'prosthetic' also has important resonances for disability studies: disabled bodies frequently incorporate objects with living matter, since the prostheses supposedly supply that which is lacking. These considerations might inform subsequent choices of terminology.

There are also economic implications. Paul Gansky argues that we should conserve and recognise props because they are 'the embodiment of otherwise unrecorded creative labor': this is equally true of prostheses and hair products made by wigmakers.[26] Practically speaking, a nose on the twenty-first century stage is typically not a prop because it is not the business of a prop-maker, and hasn't been for over a century, at the most conservative estimate. However, theatre scholarship on props rarely defines an object on the basis

[22]Perkins Wilder, 'Stage Props', 378.
[23]Sofer, 'Getting On With Things', 674–5.
[24]Natasha Korda, 'Understanding Shakespeare's Shoes', in *Shakespeare's Things*, eds. Gamboa and Switzky (New York: Routledge, 2019), 36–52.
[25]See Peter Berek, '"Looking Jewish" on the Early Modern Stage', in *Religion and Drama in Early Modern England*, eds. Jane Hwang Degenhardt and Elizabeth Williamson (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 55–71; Jessica Apolloni, 'Shylock Meets Palestine: Rethinking Shakespeare in Abdelkader Benali's Yasser', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 31, no. 2 (2013), 213–32; Becky S. Friedman, '"The Badge of All Our Tribe": Contradictions of Jewish Representation on the English Stage' (PhD diss., University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2021).
[26]Paul Gansky, 'Severed Objects: Spellbound, Archives, Exhibitions, and Film's Material History', *Film History* 25, no. 3 (2013), 126–48, 127.

of who supplied or made it. Foundational studies on Early Modern props defined them as '*all* the moveable objects of the stage […] theatrical furniture, costumes, and hand properties' (emphasis in the original).[27] This highlights the interrelation of these objects but has shortcomings: the interrelations are perceived as onstage, and do not extend to those who made the objects. Although Richardson notes that in more recent scholarship on the 'economic [and] social […] implications' of props, 'issues of skill and lived experience have been addressed', this is an area where it hasn't. Propmakers and prosthetic make-up artists are still frequently omitted from theatre history; our view prioritises the classifications of spectatorship (costumes, props, and prosthetics are all objects visible to audiences) over the process of theatre-making. This is true even of some of the very best writing on the materiality of props, and should not detract from the utility and interest of recent work on individual props, whether they be handkerchiefs or comfit 'hayle stones'.[28] The capaciousness of defining *all* objects as props and the tendency to look at props' object-object interrelations rather than the relations of prop-making people (a mistake we tend not to make when the people are writers or actors) erases the skilled labour of specific (sub)disciplines. We know a large number of property-makers' names, thanks to the Office of the Revels, but even within the category there is evidence of specialisation: John Ogle worked mainly with hair in the 1570s and 80s (as did numerous women *not* classed as property-makers); John Tryce seems to have provided leather goods, and records from the mid-1570s suggest a dual taxonomy of property-makers, some grouped or glossed as haberdashers, and some as carvers and joiners.

A key counterexample to the omissions above is Tracey Hill's marvellous study of occasional drama, specifically the Lord Mayor's show, which pays the closest attention to prop-makers of any work on Early Modern theatre. The study does so while examining the form of performance which would have been the major point of contact with drama for many working-class spectators and/or women and children.[29] The Lord Mayor's show was also key to the working lives of playwrights including Thomas Dekker, John Heywood, Thomas Middleton, Anthony Munday, and John Webster. Although Hill shows 'writers working *alongside* the artificers' who made props (the collaborators 'contested and took on commissions as teams'), by the 1630s it was sometimes the artificers who subcontracted the playwright.[30] In the text of *The Triumphs of Honour and Industry*, the 1617

[27] Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda, *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1.
[28] Ian Smith, 'Othello's Black Handkerchief'; Anouska Lester, 'Lost Properties and Where to Find Them: Comfit Hailstones', *Before Shakespeare* (25 January 2021), https://beforeshakespeare.com/2021/01/25/lost-properties-and-where-to-find-them-comfit-hailstones/.
[29] Tracey Hill, *Pageantry and Power: A Cultural History of the Early Modern Lord Mayor's Show 1585–1639* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 134.
[30] Hill, *Pageantry*, 65–8.

show, Middleton thanks engraver and carver Rowland Bucket and painters Henry Wilde and Jacob Challoner as his 'partners in the business'.[31] The materiality of the performance would have meant more to many onlookers than the text; Munday admitted in *Camp-bell* that child actors' 'weak voyces' were often inaudible amidst the 'noyse', while women frequently watched the shows from windows, at some considerable distance.[32] Large properties were reused between different shows and livery companies, recollecting previous performances and creating a network of visual, rather than verbal associations for the audiences.[33] Eyewitnesses with even the flimsiest recollections tended to remember the objects they saw rather than the words they heard; the German traveller Lupold von Wedel, watching a tableau from George Peele's 1585 show, remembered 'one […] holding a book, another a pair of scales, the third a sceptre' but little else.[34]

To return to Richardson's phraseology, work on 'lived experience' of props' 'relat[ion] to bodies and movement' still does not fully consider the bodies and work of technicians active today. An exception is Margolies's *Props*, which highlights the precarious and dangerous experiences of those bodies, collating quotations on inadequate protective gear, life-threatening materials, and shortened lives.[35] Richardson calls this the 'experiential priority of spectatorship' (89). A powerful corrective comes in the form of writing by propsmakers themselves. Eric Hart's revised 2017 manual of props-building offers its own kinetic definition of a prop, in deliberate opposition to scholarship: 'scholars love to play with all the gray areas of what a prop is or isn't […] but we don't have to deal with these theoretical questions. We just need to know what we are making'.[36] Margolies and Hart offer important challenges to the primacy of spectatorship and the scholarly tendency to focus on actors and authors over the other artificers involved in creating the stage picture. Richardson argues that our 'interests in the way that objects are implicated in human relations should probably be viewed as an extension of a wider interest in co-working in early modern studies'.[37] I agree, and would accordingly widen Richardson's memorably evoked 'two-way streets in which objects, spaces, words, actors and audiences mutually form and inform one another' into crossroads, at least.[38]

I have outlined how the labour and agency of propmakers can be occluded in scholarship. The new materialist assumption that props have agency also has troubling ethical implications. Some props do readily immediately blur the

[31]*The Triumphs of Honour and Industry* sig. C2r, quoted in Hill, *Pageantry*, 77.
[32]Munday, *Camp-bell*, sig. B3r. Quoted in Hill, *Pageantry*, 142; ibid., 134.
[33]Hill, *Pageantry*, 181.
[34]Quoted in Hill, *Pageantry*, 174.
[35]Margolies, *Props*, 117.
[36]Eric Hart, *The Prop Building* Guidebook (New York: Routledge, 2017), 2.
[37]Catherine Richardson, '"More Things in Heaven and Earth": Materiality and the Stage', *Shakespeare* 15, no. 1 (2019), 88–103, 94.
[38]Richardson, 'More Things in Heaven and Earth', 97.

subject/object distinction: prop babies, for example, and prop corpses.[39] But Sofer links 'the move to bestow agency on things like matchboxes and metal' with a phenomenon that Rebecca Schneider terms 'romantically expanded liveness for some wherein some people's and some things' lives *count* more than others, and whose lives count as *live* matters'.[40] As Sofer notes, for the millions 'currently enslaved around the world, agency in the sense of basic self-determination remains an aspiration. Might it be premature to confer agency upon the inanimate as well as the animate, the insentient as well as the sentient?'. Other disciplines are also currently confronting this problem, notably in scholarship on the transatlantic slave trade that seeks to broaden the definition of slavery to include animals as 'enslaved'.[41] The possible consequence of these 'more-than-human' histories is that, by considering animals and/or objects' agency and experiences in parallel to those of humans, we further dehumanise and objectify oppressed people.[42]

## Race

Debates are emerging around the economics and politics of props which are used to perform marginalised, racialised identities, or which are used by actors of colour. Race is not the only valence of identity with which scholars of props might be concerned: as the previous section indicated, the resonances of the term 'prosthesis' for lived experience of disability should prove a productive starting point for rethinking the body-prop relationship. Robin Bernstein's heuristic of the 'scriptive thing', meanwhile, demonstrates how props choreograph behaviour, and in turn how racemaking occurs through engagements with the material world.[43]

In reconsidering marginalised identities and props, recent curatorial scholarship also has much to teach us. As Lisa Stead asks, if a collection – of any artefacts, including props – is a way of managing memory, whose memories are being managed, and how?[44] Prop provenance is often unknown: when Sotheby's sold leading prop supplier Ken Paul's collection in 2002, less than 20% of props could be reliably linked to a single production.[45] Although institutional memory at flagship British props house Farley can link certain iconic props with productions, they only have complete records of all props' appearances in productions since 2014, and no inventory or hire details for items in the Louis Koch & Son collection (a huge prop store, acquired in

[39]Duncan, *Shakespeare's Props*, 146–94; See Snell's essay in this volume.
[40]Rebecca Schneider, 'New Materialisms and Performance Studies', *The Drama Review* 59, no. 4 (2015): 13.
[41]Cristina Brenganu-Hesch, *The Rhetorical Construction of Veganism* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2023).
[42]David Lambert, 'Runaways and strays: Rethinking (non)human strays in Caribbean slave societies', in *Historical Animal Geographies*, eds. Sharon Wilcox and Stephanie Rutherford (eds) (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 185–98.
[43]Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).
[44]Lisa Stead, *Reframing Vivien Leigh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 152.
[45]Sotheby's London, *Prop Art 13–15 March 2002* (London: Sotheby's, 2002).

1986).[46] Against this backdrop, props identifiably used by actors of colour are further underrepresented in major theatrical and film prop stores. Prop survival and the articulation of a prop's history both rest on association with a star performer, performance in a major (often subsidised) theatre with in-house archives and a strong fan community: opportunities still more common for white actors.

Tracking prop provenance also re-illuminates British theatre's relationship with the global South. Often, objects from one area of the global South become artefacts from another place or time. India, reports one properties house, is 'a wonderful source for generic pieces', since items that are not 'overtly Indian' can 'sit easily' in other 'scenarios'.[47] Artefacts' racialised identities are thus elided and forgotten, and 'forgetting', as Joseph Roach notes, is 'an opportunistic tactic of whiteness'.[48] Renaming, as occurs after that forgetting, is also an opportunistic tactic of the theatre, as objects are repurposed and recycled. Renaming, after all, is at the heart of theatre; a boy is renamed a girl, a stage is renamed Illyria, Cesario is renamed Viola.

There is also a danger that the curation, classification, and staging of props may reproduce (perhaps in aggravated form) the ways in which colonial museums have treated objects from other cultures. The use of religious objects as props has a violent history: Toni Pressley-Sanon has documented how the props master on 1936 Paramount horror film *Ouanga* stole Haitian sacred objects for use onscreen, including stuffed snakeskins and skulls, after locals refused to sell or loan them.[49] Today, searching the catalogues of leading props stores, it remains easy to find items such as bronze Buddhas, icons of the Virgin Mary, or images of the Sacred Heart. Thinking of the first category, it is illegal to remove statues of the Buddha from several countries including Thailand, except with special permission on religious or diplomatic grounds. Traditional beliefs include that images of the Buddha should only be displayed or stored facing East, not on the ground or lower than any other items in the room, and in a space only for that purpose. Few prop stores, rehearsals, or performance environments would accommodate those requirements. There is also the issue of environmental impact when props are imported: prop-making students are already asked to complete environmental impact evaluations at one drama school, and industry demands for sustainability are likely to increase.[50] Baz Luhrmann's heavily Latinx, Catholic aesthetic in his film *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) transforms sacred iconography into 'little more than accessories'; crosses and icons are everywhere, and the Virgin Mary is on

[46]Interview with Mark Farley, 26 September 2018.
[47]Mark Farley, *Farley: The First 55 Years* (London: Blurb, 2017), 117.
[48]Joseph C. Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 6.
[49]Toni Pressley-Sanon, *Zombifying a Nation: Race, Gender and the Haitian Loas on Screen* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016), 66–7.
[50]Margolies, *Props*, 116.

the barrel of guns, blasphemously.[51] The combination of this aesthetic with some of the performances perpetuates, as Philippa Sheppard notes, anti-Hispanic stereotypes caught up in the Black Legend: Hispanic Catholics as insincere, violent, and (in the case of the Nurse) servile.[52] Whilst there is always room for critique of organised religion, Luhrmann's work, filmed in recognisable Mexican locations, including Mexico City and Veracruz, has a predominantly white, almost exclusively non-Hispanic cast playing characters who live in a Hispanic country and practice a distinctively Hispanic religion.[53] The film's props, many of them vintage or antique sacred objects, some created for worship within Hispanic culture, displace and disguise what is essentially brownface performance away from the actors and onto their material surroundings. Peter Erickson notes that 'the Shakespearean field can too easily construct itself as a special, transcendent realm immune to the pressures and difficulties of meanings that pertain elsewhere'.[54] The pleasure of props, objects placed in fictional worlds, can encourage us to see theatre as a special, transcendent realm immune to the pressures and difficulties of meanings that attend transactions with the Global South.

## Methodologies

In his 2016 chronicle of theoretical approaches to prop scholarship, Sofer noted a then-recent decline in semiotic and psychoanalytical approaches, neither of which he much mourned. By contrast, Perkins Wilder argues that semiotics help us understand 'the complexity, the specific, historically bound ambiguity of the theatre' and 'its uncanny transhistorical power' since 'potential for semiotic confusion is one of the qualities that makes props unsettling'.[55] The language of semiotics is key to Aoife Monks's exploration of a highly unsettling prop, the skull of pianist André Tchaikowsky (d. 1982), bequeathed to the Royal Shakespeare Company and eventually employed, after permission from the Human Tissue Authority, as Yorick in the Stratford run of Gregory Doran's *Hamlet* (2008).[56] After leading actor David Tennant revealed the skull's identity, it was withdrawn through fear it might 'topple the show'.[57] Monks explores the

[51]Philippa Sheppard, *Devouring Time: Nostalgia in Contemporary Shakespearean Screen Adaptations* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2017), 153.
[52]Philippa Sheppard, 'Latino Elements in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*', in *Latin American Shakespeares*, eds. Bernice W. Kliman and Rick J. Santos (Cranbury, NJ: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2005), 242–62.
[53]John Leguizamo, Luhrmann's Tybalt, was born in Bogotá, Colombia. Gastón Adolfo Alzate, 'When the Subaltern in Politically Incorrect: A Cultural Analysis of the Performance Art of John Leguizamo', in *The State of Latino Theater in the United States*, ed. Luis A. Ramos-García (New York: Routledge, 2002), 132.
[54]Peter Erickson, 'Afterword: The Blind Side in Colorblind Casting', in *Colorblind Shakespeare: New Perspectives on Race and Performance*, ed. Ayanna Thompson (New York: Routledge, 2006), 242.
[55]Perkins Wilder, 'Stage Props', 381.
[56]Aoife Monks, 'Human Remains: Acting, Objects, and Belief in Performance', *Theatre Journal* 64, no. 3 (October 2012), 355–71.
[57]Simon de Bruxelles, 'At Last, for Yorick. Bequeathed Skull Stars in Hamlet', *Times* (26 November 2008), 27.

'far more than sign value' possessed by Tchaikowsky's skull and its replacement: another 'real skull […] used in 1813' by Edmund Kean as Hamlet.[58] As Perkins Wilder puts it, Monks demonstrates how 'the play's performance history comes to rest in an object which embodies death but has also survived, by a good margin, the actor who previously manipulated it': and, of course, the non-actor whose body it came from.[59] Monks also links the power of the skull to Stanislavskian acting theories' emphasis on the 'real' and true', and describes how '[b]y gaining a story and a name, the skull began to look back, returning Tennant's mildly cadaverous stare'.[60] Perkins Wilder's observation that 'the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century stage relishes the lack of boundaries between prop and actor' applies to recent history too.[61] Perhaps recency is key: the Human Tissue Authority did not require the RSC to seek permission to use the anonymous 'Kean skull' (which is, of course, not Kean's skull), but did for Tchaikowsky's skull, on the grounds that the latter was less than 100 years old.[62] Tchaikowsky enthusiastically consented to his skull's use; the original owner of the 'Kean skull' likely did not. There have been seismic recent shifts in curatorial thinking regarding museum displays of human remains, given changing attitudes to the issues of power and (often racial) oppression involved. Recalling Schneider's assertion that '[s]ome people's and some things' lives *count* more than others', this is equally true of some people's deaths and dead remains.[63]

Perkins Wilder concludes that props can be understood 'phenomenologically, as material objects perceived through the senses; semiotically, as signs; and culturally, as products of a system of exchange which extends into the playhouse and onto the stage'.[64] The specific presence of the Early Modern artificer or modern props master within those systems of exchange is crucial, as I argued in my opening section; so too is the explicit acknowledgement of the tiring-house and backstage crew within those spaces. Perkins Wilder's evocation of the phenomenological reflects current debates. Since Sofer's 2016 survey of theoretical lenses through which to see props, several books on props have used cognitive science and phenomenological approaches, particularly those of 4e cognition, to think about and with theatre objects.[65] This work arises partly from what Richardson identifies as a strong disciplinary interest in the temporality of objects and a 'renewed attention to anachronism, palimpsest,

[58]Aoife Monks, 'Human Remains: Acting, Objects, and Belief in Performance', *Theatre Journal* 64, no. 3 (October 2012): 355–71, 356.
[59]Perkins Wilder, 'Stage Props', 382.
[60]Monks, 'Human Remains', 358, 359.
[61]Perkins Wilder, 'Stage Props', 381.
[62]de Bruxelles, 'At last, for Yorick'.
[63]Schneider, 'New Materialisms', 13.
[64]Perkins Wilder, 'Stage Props', 381.
[65]Amy Cook and Rhonda Blair, eds., *Theatre, Performance, and Cognition* (London: Methuen, 2016); Duncan, *Shakespeare's Props* (2019); Susan Sachon, *Shakespeare, Objects, and Phenomenology: Daggers of the Mind* (London: Palgrave, 2020).

and exemplarity'.[66] 4e cognition is the (contested) cognitive science umbrella term for theories that assume cognition (1) is influenced by extra-neural bodily structures (a concept described as embodied cognition), (2) is created through interactions between the body and its environment (embedded cognition), (3) stretches beyond the body to include objects – books, diaries, smartphones – which become part of cognition (extended cognition), and/or (4) is in fact a form of bodily action, emerging from recurring sensorimotor patterns in the body (enacted cognition).[67] Mark Kaethler mentions the work of Cook, Duncan, and Sachon positively in his detailed 2020 retrospective of recent cognitive approaches to Shakespeare. Kaethler identifies 4e and phenomenological approaches to Shakespeare as the most promising directions for 'an evenly considered union of cognition and Shakespeare' over 'the next twenty years of cognitive approaches'.[68] As with Sofer and the New Materialists, however, Kaethler criticises the limited political ambitions of other cognitive Shakespeare scholarship. Interestingly, Richardson has noted that props scholarship without an overt theoretical focus or allegiance has sometimes been criticised for its 'antiquarianism' and the 'lowness of its political ambitions'.[69] There is clearly a desire for politically ambitious props scholarship, regardless of theoretical lens: what Kaethler adds is a methodological dread of 'scientism' in literary studies, and praise for cognitive Shakespeare work which is 'in keeping with the nature of English studies', although work specifically on theatre props (Shakespearean or otherwise) is not exclusively or even primarily the preserve of English departments.[70] He concludes optimistically, feeling that it is possible that C.P. Snow's 'two cultures problem' is being combatted by an emerging scholarly ethos that brings props study and scientific methodologies into contact.[71] One other faultline persists: there remain, as Richardson notes, 'continuing tensions between historicity and presentism', which seem scarcely more likely to be resolved in props scholarship than elsewhere.[72] It is not only explicitly cognitive work which has recently addressed how props enact or extend relations between subjects and objects: Perkins Wilder, examining props in comedy, notes that 'the object physically articulates, like a joint or a truss, the human relationship'.[73] Maddalena Pennacchia makes a parallel point about props in Roman plays, looking at how props define the 'intermediality'

[66]Richardson, 'More Things in Heaven and Earth', 92.
[67]James Carney, 'Thinking avant la letter: A Review of 4E Cognition', *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* 4, no. 1 (2020): 77–90; Haosheng Ye, Hong Zeng, and Wendeng Yang, 'Enactive Cognition: Theoretical Rationale and Practical Approach', *Acta Psychologica Sinica* 51, no. 11 (2019): 1270–80.
[68]Mark Kaethler, 'Shakespeare and Cognition: Scientism, Theory, and 4E', *Literature Compass* (18 March 2020), 1–13.
[69]Richardson, 'More Things in Heaven and Earth', 107.
[70]Kaethler, 'Shakespeare and Cognition', 7.
[71]Kaethler, 'Shakespeare and Cognition', 9.
[72]Richardson, 'More Things in Heaven and Earth', 89.
[73]Perkins Wilder, 'Stage Props', 394.

between characters, and the nature of their communication.[74] Lyons, in a self-consciously philosophical article that mingles Boethius and Benjamin to study *das Requisit*, nevertheless charts a recognisably new materialist course in defining the prop as 'in an enlarged sense' that which 'in its material being takes on particular significance and even seems to alter the course of events'.[75] Despite the questions which Bruster, Sofer and others pose about the efficacy of New Materialism, Gamboa and Switzky's 2019 collection, *Shakespeare's Things*, continues to advocate reading Shakespeare's things 'through New Materialist discourses […] to extend emergent New/new materialisms by proposing that our greatest humanist playwright may also be one of our most perceptive guides to the place of the non-human in human affairs'.[76]

Across the full range of possible scholarly methodologies, the best and most recent advance in resources is *British Drama,* a book and digital series which – among much other information – lists the stage objects whose presence is stated or inferred in Early Modern plays (both extant and lost). Although an early reviewer of the first five volumes claimed (I think wrongly) that they will not 'replace standard reference works by W. W. Greg, E. K. Chambers' et al., anyone with access to the digital edition will know the benefits of being able to search this 'enumerative, descriptive, and analytical catalogue' for references to a particular type of object.[77] One obvious opportunity is that of quickly calculating statistics for props' appearances in plays; Wall-Randell does just this to tally the number of plays which use codices.[78] Hugh Craig and Brett Greatley-Hirsch use Wiggins to calculate numbers of prop-types, rather than individual props.[79] Although useful in its own right, one side-effect of this emphasis on prop-types is the flattening result that a play using two swords and three chairs, and a play using ten swords and ten chairs, would both register as using two prop-types, despite the very different demands on artisans and the theatre company, and the very different stage pictures set before the audience.[80] Before Wiggins, Teague's numerical analyses of props and prop-types similarly counts the 'banquet' in *The Taming of the Shrew* is one prop, despite necessitating tableware and food for at least a dozen actors. Babies in the plays are also sometimes enumerated as props, and sometimes omitted, without explanation.[81] Post-*British Drama*, some statistical discontents remain: Stelzer's

[74]Maddalena Pennacchia, 'Intermedial Props in Shakespeare's Roman Plays', *Shakespeare* 15, no. 4 (2019): 335–43.
[75]Lyons, 'Material Fatality', 38.
[76]Gamboa and Switzky, 'Introduction', 8.
[77]Jean E. Howard, untitled review, *Renaissance Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (2016): 1577.
[78]Wall-Randell, 'What Is a Staged Book?', 130.
[79]Hugh Craig and Brett Greatley-Hirsch, *Style, Computers, and Early Modern Drama: Beyond Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
[80]Craig and Greatley-Hirsch address this issue as a trade-off between ambiguity and utility: *Style, Computers, and Early Modern Drama*, 113–19.
[81]Duncan, *Props and Cognition*, 13–14; Frances N. Teague, *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1991), 158; Craig and Greatley-Hirsch, *Style, Computers, and Early Modern Drama*, 113.

2019 book on portrait props criticises Yolana Wassersug's 2015 claims about the numbers and types of portraits – the latter's claims are based on Wiggins and Richardson's data as it existed before 2015.[82] There seems to be much room for future studies to build on the insights of these works.

In textual and cultural scholarship, Hill's study of occasional drama gives us particularly vivid evidence of consumable props in Lord Mayor's Shows, from the supposedly human heart eaten by Envy in Middleton's *The Triumphs of Truth* (1613) to Munday's live fish in *Chrysanaleia* (1616). Hill's reports of the 'Nutmegges, Gynger, almondes in the shell, and sugar loves' thrown to the crowd in the 1617 Grocers' Show are surely irresistible – and most of her meticulously recounted evidence of other coins, dates, fruits, and spices originate in non-literary sources.[83] Consumable props complicate any calculation of the 'numbers' of props in a production. Another piece of not only extra-literary but extra-textual evidence driving innovative recent work on props is the unknown British artist's portrait of a gentlewoman dressed as Cleopatra. Yasmin Arshad overturns the previous identification of the sitter as Lady Ralegh. She argues instead that it is Lady Anne Clifford in the titular role in Samuel Daniel's *The Tragedy of Cleopatra*, with the miniature of Clifford's husband 'playing' the miniature of Antony, in an instance of Wilton circle productions 'drawing on clothes and objects from the house itself'.[84] This speaks to Wall-Randell and Tiffany Stern's recent discussions of books 'playing' other books onstage, derived from Stern's consideration of Henslowe running a 'company library' within the Admiral's Men, one which supplied not only reference texts for writers, but also scrolls and codices as onstage paper props.[85] One beguiling section of Randell-Wall's article speculates on the movements of Bible-props between a 1619 revival of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *The Duchess of Malfi*; in the same collection, Stern describes the process by which printed ballad-texts may have appeared on stages.

Recalibrating the relationship between space, text, and prop, Sarah Dustagheer's discussion of the relationship between props and theatre space has important implications for prop study. Dustagheer argues that the candlelit 'glitter' of Blackfriars' well-dressed audience, visiting a theatre surrounded by 'retail site[s] for luxury goods' created 'a spatial practice of this repertory […] a prominent display of costume and props that, in the words of John Marston in *The Dutch Courtesan*, "shew[ed] well by candlelight"'.[86] Dustagheer asserts that the King's Men post-1609 Blackfriars repertory 'shows a marked increase of

[82]Stelzer, *Portraits*, 79; Yolana Wassersug, '"My Picture, I Enjoin Thee to Keep": The Function of Portraits in English Drama, 1558–1642' (PhD dissertation, University of Birmingham, 2014).
[83]Hill, *Pageantry and Power*, 139.
[84]Yasmin Arshad, *Imagining Cleopatra: Performing Gender and Power in Early Modern England* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019); Alison Findlay, *Playing Spaces in Early Women's Drama* (Cambridge, 2006), 29.
[85]Wall-Randell, 'What Is a Staged Book?', 132; Tiffany Stern, 'Shakespeare the Balladmonger?', in *Rethinking Theatrical Documents in Shakespeare's England,* ed. Tiffany Stern (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 216–38.
[86]Sarah Dustagheer, *Shakespeare's Two Playhouses: Repertory and Theatre Space at the Globe and the Blackfriars, 1599–1613* (Cambridge: CUP, 2017), 5.

eye-catching items' as the company entered a space in which the Children of the Queen's Revels had performed a series of plays in which characters 'flaunt[ed] elaborate clothing and exchange[d] or display gifts of jewellery' by the Blackfriars candlelight.[87] The illusion-building power of candlelit performance is demonstrated by Samuel Pepys's disappointment in props seen during a 1666 backstage visit: 'to think how fine they show on the stage by candle-light, and how poor things are they are to look now too near hand, is not pleasant at all'.[88] Dustagheer concludes, comparing the two playhouses, that Blackfriars props were 'most often a fleeting visual effect', whereas 'outdoor theatre' props were 'more frequently invested with symbolic and thematic significance' for the plot, such as the ring in *All's Well That Ends Well*.

Work on non-literary sources for understanding props – whether textual, visual, or spatial – is clearly flourishing. Simultaneously, placing different methodologies – cognitive, historicist, race-critical, presentist, material cultural, thing theory – in conversation offers us richer understanding of props' protean significances, and reflects theatre's essential hybridity. Despite the categories of competing methodology explored in this article, much work on props is inextricably methodologically hybrid: thankfully so.

## Futures

This article has advocated, thus far, for three things: first, the explicit incorporation of props-makers into everything we think and write about props; second, a reckoning and recalibration in our understandings of how race and colonialism have impacted the acquisition, curation, and staging of objects; and, third a move towards hybrid methodologies for dealing with hybrid props. These are largely challenges to be met within the discipline. The external pressures on prop staging, curation, and archiving also need to be considered. These pressures predate the pandemic but have been exacerbated by it.

One strong pressure on the props industry and archives comes from the closure of regional producing houses. This reduces the number of theatre companies with the expertise, funding, and space to create and archive prop-rich theatre. Funding cuts create a necessarily props-poor theatrical aesthetic. British film and television studios have not routinely made props in-house for four decades; major American studios have similarly recently outsourced props departments.[89] Freestanding prop houses are also declining. London prop houses benefit from proximity to each other, increasing the potential footfall from customers who can easily visit several stores in a single day, but the Park Royal props quarter is increasingly unaffordable. Moreover, HS2 – a

[87]Dustagheer, *Shakespeare's Two Playhouses*, 6, 123.
[88]Samuel Pepys, diary entry (19 March 1666) [https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1666/03/].
[89]Brooks Barnes, 'Dress the Set With Tears: It's a Wrap' *The New York Times* (17 June 2009) [https://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/18/movies/18props.html, accessed 22 September 2018]; interview with Mark Farley, 26 September 2018.

controversial, state-sponsored high-speed rail project connecting London and the north – compulsorily closed one of Europe's largest props houses in 2018, as the proposed route crossed the props house's site.[90]

As prop collections are likely recirculated and separated, prop provenance is likely to become a still more complex issue. The recent scholarship which best offers a way through this work on provenance – Stead's *Reframing Vivien Leigh* (2021) – considers both props in archives and those amassed by 'collectives and individuals outside the stage and screen industries proper'.[91] One such fan collection, that of the Vivien Leigh Circle, has been donated to the Victoria & Albert Museum. Stead sees the complexities of tracking props as 'opportunities for rich analyses of the processes of record curation and preservation, rather than problems or inconsistencies to be resolved'.[92] Stead's discussion of Leigh props including 'a delicate, foldable lorgnette' captures both the pleasurable 'affective impact of touching, smelling, and handling artifacts' and curatorial methodologies: 'how amateur techniques do and do not intersect [...] official archival institutions and how fan collectors develop their own distinctive methods for collective funding, preservation, and dissemination in the adoption and adaptation of archival practices'.[93] Stead's work, like Hill's on the non-literary traces of occasional drama, prove Richardson's point that we 'need to enter much deeper into the historical archive – going beyond the type of printed material with which we are most familiar' in understanding the material cultures of performance'.[94] Stead also emerges from her book as the natural heir to Barbara Hodgdon.[95] Throughout the book, Stead is aware that since collecting is a way of 'managing memory', the curation and archiving of Leigh's artefacts manage not only Leigh's memory but 'the identities and histories' of those who commemorate her.[96]

Alongside important discussions of the archive, much scholarship will continue to explore props we cannot see, whether in individual and outlandish form – as in Matthew Steggle's work on Philip Henslowe's 'artificial cow' – or through typologies generated by *British Drama*.[97] Although much of this article has dealt with work either on Early Modern performance or twenty-first-century revivals of the same, there are opportunities for productive conversations between these and the intervening periods, despite (and sometimes because) of their material, cultural and ideological discontinuities. Wall-Randell's consideration of onstage Early Modern threats to the Bible and outright

[90]Interview with Mark Farley, 26 September 2018; Tom Grater, 'Historic Prop House A+M Hire to close due to HS2 development' *Screen Daily* (19 January 2018) [https://www.screendaily.com/news/historic-london-prop-house-am-hire-to-close-due-to-hs2-development/5125739.article, accessed 27 September 2018].
[91]Stead, *Reframing Vivien Leigh*, 13.
[92]Stead, *Reframing Vivien Leigh*, 13.
[93]Stead, *Reframing Vivien Leigh*, 150–1.
[94]Richardson, 'More Things in Heaven and Earth', 90.
[95]Barbara Hodgdon, *Shakespeare, Performance, and the Archive* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).
[96]Stead, *Reframing Vivien Leigh*, 152.
[97]Matthew Steggle, 'Philip Henslowe's Artificial Cow', *Medieval & Renaissance Drama in England* 30 (2017): 65–75.

destruction of the Qu'ran might gain from conversation with scholarship on *The Notorious Mrs Ebbsmith* (1895), Arthur Wing Pinero's play in which the heroine plunges a Bible into flames before retrieving it, all onstage.[98] Stern's consideration of ballads 'playing themselves' onstage might speak to and with Dan Rebellato's meditation on twentieth- and twenty-first theoretical models of performance, and his own argument that we can best understand performance as metaphorical.[99]

In 2019, Richardson wrote of prop scholarship that 'We're poised to be better networked than ever before'.[100] The four years since have reworked and remade those networks, for good or ill. I hope the scholarship cited in this article, and the articles in this special issue, help us achieve Richardson's aim, and that two aims of our networks are to illuminate the work of artificers and advocate for the contributions and experiences of theatre technicians within and beyond our scholarship.

## Disclosure Statement

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[98]Joel H. Kaplan, 'Mrs Ebbsmith's Bible Burning: Page Versus Stage', *Theatre Notebook* 44, no. 3 (1990): 97–144.
[99]Dan Rebellato, 'When We Talk of Horses: Or, What Do We See When We See a Play?', *Performance Research* 14, no. 1 (March 2009): 17–28.
[100]Richardson, 'More Things in Heaven and Earth', 98.