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Performing Babies and the Properties of Race and Ethnicity

Megan Snell

Department of English, Wells College, Aurora, NY, USA

ABSTRACT

This essay explores how props that play babies perform not just individual characters but also racial and ethnic identities in two plays by Shakespeare and one by contemporary playwright David Ireland. Working across early modern and modern archives of text and performance to track ongoing, transhistorical processes of race-making, the article argues that the stage baby's mingling of the symbolic and material puts racial formation on display. Each play locates their baby-prop's performance of identity at the intersection of race and gender by featuring a paternal figure searching for evidence of a kinship with a newborn. The hypervisibility of Aaron's son's race in *Titus Andronicus,* and its connections to theatre history and material culture in performance and editing choices, contrasts with baby Perdita's relatively unspecific whiteness in *The Winter's Tale* that materialises Leontes's fears of the baby's indistinct, potential 'strangeness'. Ireland's *Cyprus Avenue* enacts Leontes's infanticidal threats and paranoia in the twenty-first century, staging the violent consequences of a grandfather's obsession with British purity. The repertorial relationships between baby-props across these three plays demonstrate how patriarchal questions of filial descent intertwine with constructions of race, ethnicity, and nationality, and how studying performance practices helps reveal social processes of identity formation.

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If actors bring characters to life, babies are usually brought to non-life on stage. Rather than contend with a human infant, most productions cast a prop to play the part of a newborn. This seemingly simple piece of theatre entails a multi-faceted representation; taking on the role of a person necessitates that a baby-prop's materials perform not only an individual character, but also a social identity. These props are not mere ciphers in this act of representation, in part because the construction of animacy for any inanimate object, as Mel Y. Chen claims, is already a 'nonneutral' process of 'racial mattering', shaped

CONTACT Megan Snell msnell@wells.edu
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by cultural hierarchies and anxieties.[1] In this essay, I consider how the 'racial mattering' of a baby-prop – an object explicitly tasked with helping to construct its own animacy – participates in its production's larger performance of race. My analysis treats two early modern plays and one contemporary play comparatively: Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *The Winter's Tale*, and David Ireland's *Cyprus Avenue* (2016). Despite the generic and temporal jumps between these works, each features scenes of a patriarch searching an infant for evidence of himself, thereby locating the child within a schema of racial, national, and ethnic identity. Characters and audiences thus turn their attention to an object that is exceptionally representational yet stubbornly material, even among the other actors and objects on stage. The baby-prop's inherent bundling of the symbolic and physical in its specific representation of humanness, I argue, puts the work of race-making on display, especially when patriarchal suspicion calls the baby's kinships into question. By considering these plays reportorially and across theatrical, editorial, and cultural histories, I show how the baby-prop's performance of familial belonging constitutes an ongoing process of racialisation.

On and off stage, children often inspire observations on how much they look like their relatives, their features appearing to signal membership in an established network. Yet the attempt to read an offspring's relations also broaches a potential gendered knowledge gap: a patriarchal system that suspects women of infidelity exerts significant pressure on the legibility of paternity in the child's body. A disjunction between this expectation of a baby's paternal resemblance and its relatively generic appearance has comic possibilities, and early modern plays such as Thomas Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, John Fletcher's *The Chances*, and Philip Massinger's *The Unnatural Combat* all present audiences with a woman assuring a man that a baby's eyes and nose reflect his own in an effort to secure financial support, even in the absence of any genetic relationship. Such episodes recall the more serious scene in *The Winter's Tale* when Paulina introduces baby Perdita to a suspicious Leontes as 'the whole matter / And copy' of his body, cataloguing the father's features in the baby's appearance (2.3.98–99).[2] Unconvinced, Leontes calls Paulina 'a most intelligencing bawd', unable to shake his misogynist suspicion that she is attempting to swindle him into accepting another's child as his own (2.3.67).

In all these plays, a woman's descriptions of a baby as a reproduction of the father in question likely apply to relatively generic baby-props in performance, usually to a bundle of blankets or a doll.[3] The same prop could even have appeared across productions: *The Winter's Tale*, *The Chances*, and *The*

[1]Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 5.
[2]William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. John Pitcher, The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2010). Parenthetical citations refer to this edition.
[3]On the lack of evidence for live babies on the early modern professional stage, and the very few exceptions in records of court entertainments, see Jennifer Higginbotham, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters: Gender, Transgression, Adolescence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 104, 137–38n; Sophie Duncan,

Unnatural Combat were all performed by the King's Men, for example. Any comment on the baby's appearance, as Sophie Duncan has claimed, draws our attention to the prop representing the child rather than attempting to hide the prop's theatrical charade.[4] The prop presumably offers little visual confirmation of these avowals of specific familial resemblance, and instead marks a contested intersection of gendered suspicion and readings of alleged kinship.

When a Nurse presents Aaron with his child in *Titus Andronicus*, however, the introduction elicits a singular sense of recognition. As the Nurse observes with disgust, this child born to the Empress is distinct 'amongst the fair-faced breeders of our clime' because he dangerously bears his true father's 'stamp' and 'seal' (4.2.70–71).[5] Aaron's rejoinder, 'Zounds, ye whore, is black so base a hue?', reclaims this personal and visible connection to the child (4.2.73); he then converts the alliterative sounds of 'black' and 'base' into tender monikers for the baby, calling it a 'sweet blowze' and a 'beauteous blossom' (4.2.74). Aaron recognises his child, as Ayanna Thompson argues, with a 'certitude of kinship, in all its multivalent meanings: biological, temperamental, emotional, and perhaps even moral'.[6] While Aaron still traffics in the misogynistic suspicions of paternity – he tells Chiron and Demetrius that the baby 'is your brother by the surer side, / Although my seal be stamped in his face' (4.2.128–29) – he knows that the child is 'this myself' (4.2.106).

The father and son's evident exterior similarities, primarily but not exclusively signified by their shared darker skin colour, constitute a racial difference within the largely white world of *Titus Andronicus* that clearly signals their relationship, and Tamora's infidelity, to all who see the child. These characters read the mixed-race child as black, Noémie Ndiaye claims, because they seem to understand race through 'early modern English eyes' (rather than through a framework more akin to an Iberian 'episteme developed through a rich taxonomizing racial lexicon and a comprehensive and nuanced human chromatic palette'). Simultaneously, Ndiaye observes, for early modern spectators 'the analogical setup might be giving way to the strength of English racial imagination, at a moment when the audience probably could not see but only imagine the complexion of the dummy child'.[7] Indeed, we do not know exactly what object early modern audiences would have seen or not seen to facilitate this act of imagining blackness. While readers of the original stage directions know that the nurse enters '*with a blackamoor child*' (4.2.51SD), Aaron at

Shakespeare's Props: Memory and Cognition (New York: Routledge, 2019), 156–57. See also Andrew Sofer, '"Take up the Bodies": Shakespeare's Body Parts, Babies, and Corpses', *Theatre Symposium* 18 (2010): 137–39.

[4]Duncan, *Shakespeare's Props*, 146.

[5]William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. Jonathan Bate, Revised edition, The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series (London: Bloomsbury, 2018). Parenthetical citations refer to this edition.

[6]Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race, and Contemporary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 57.

[7]Noémie Ndiaye, 'Aaron's Roots: Spaniards, Englishmen, and Blackamoors in *Titus Andronicus*', *Early Theatre* 19, no. 2 (2016): 68.

first cannot see the baby, so he must ask the nurse 'What dost thou wrap and fumble in thine arms?' (4.2.59).[8] In answer to Aaron's question, examples from the play's modern performance history show how dialogue and the prop itself work in tandem to form the racial identity of the baby.

Non-human objects and fabrics that are visibly black or brown in colour consistently play Aaron's son in modern performance, signifying race via a materialisation of his described complexion. These materials, however, are not necessarily the 'skin' of a doll. Archival photos from the 1955, 1972, 2003, and 2013 Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) productions and the 2006 Shakespeare's Globe production illustrate the frequent decision to swaddle Aaron's child in dark-coloured fabrics, even when a doll might not be visible or present, thus extending the racialised descriptions of Aaron's son to textiles. Sometimes, these choices continue beyond the immediate fabrics swaddling the baby. Gregory Doran and Antony Sher's account of their Royal National Theatre Studio's 1994 production of *Titus Andronicus* in South Africa notes that they used a doll 'concealed in a black bin bag'.[9] Jane Howell's 1985 BBC production and Julie Taymor's 1994 Theatre for a New Audience staging, both of which chose to have Lucius break his promise and murder the baby, each represented the child in the final scenes with infant-sized coffins, painted black.[10] Yukio Ninagawa's 2006 production at the RSC even provides an example of the baby's blackness as apparently more necessary to perform than Aaron's own: among an all-Japanese cast, Aaron's racial difference from the Romans and Goths was signalled only by the actor's distinct blond hair, but reviewers commented on how Aaron's son was 'incongruous [ly]' still played by a dark plastic baby.[11] Reading the racialised descriptions of the child's features, modern productions continually choose black and brown materials to signify a baby that all the attendants in the Empress's birthing room presumably anticipated to be white.

And not just white, but rather a child who was expected to be a miscegenation of the royal couple's different forms of whiteness: Saturninus's normative Roman (and by extension, English) whiteness and the foreign 'hyperwhiteness' of the Goths, as Francesca T. Royster argues. The aberrant, extreme whiteness of Tamora and her sons functions as 'a racial color-coding', according to Royster, that 'denaturalizes whiteness as a cultural signifier'.[12] Though the newborn combines Tamora's hyperwhiteness and Aaron's blackness, the

[8]On the use of the term 'blackamoor' in backstage performance documents of two Royal Shakespeare Company productions, see Duncan, *Shakespeare's Props*, 178.

[9]Antony Sher and Gregory Doran, *Woza Shakespeare! Titus Andronicus in South Africa* (London: Methuen Drama, 1997), 161.

[10]See Michael D. Friedman and Alan C. Dessen, *Titus Andronicus*, 2nd ed., Shakespeare in Performance (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 213.

[11]Friedman and Dessen, 234. See also Christian M. Billing, 'The Emperor's New Clothes: Review of *Titus Andronicus* (Directed by Yukio Ninagawa) at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, June 2006', *Shakespeare* 3, no. 2 (2007): 211n.

[12]Francesca T. Royster, 'White-Limed Walls: Whiteness and Gothic Extremism in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (2000): 442.

hyperwhiteness of the Goths is most apparent in contrast to the child in this introduction scene which can accentuate colour difference not only through the baby-prop's materials, but also through the costuming (or lack thereof) choices for the brothers. Modern productions at the RSC frequently juxtapose the black or brown prop with a shirtless (or near-shirtless) Chiron and Demetrius, such as in the 1972, 2013, and 2017 stagings.[13] Perhaps unintentionally, the contrast created by the shirtless brothers highlights not just the social construction of blackness through performance, but also of whiteness. Unlike his and his child's 'coal black' skin that 'scorns to bear another hue' (4.2.102), Aaron describes the brothers as cheaply layered 'painted alehouse signs' and 'white-limed walls' (4.2.100): a pun on 'white-limbed' (4.2.100n), which Morwenna Carr speculates may even be a nod to an early modern performance practice of painting the Goths white.[14] The connection between father and his biracial son that the dialogue establishes is thus foregrounded against a backdrop of the menacing half-brothers' hyperwhite flesh, becoming a scene of simultaneous processes of race-making in performance.

Yet as these performance choices create an apparent dichotomy of colours that clearly signals the child's true parentage and makes adultery uniquely legible, the play also allows that complexion can be deceiving. Later in the scene, Aaron explains a plan to fool the Emperor and substitute for his own child the newborn of his countryman, whose 'fair' wife has also just given birth to a mixed-race, white-passing child (4.2.154–56).[15] This unstaged parallel plotline, in contrast to the performance of racial difference and kinship as signalled by fabric colour or actors' bodies, suggests that even a readily perceived phenotype such as complexion is not a stable indicator of identity but rather is read through race's social and symbolic construction.

To more fully contextualise how this non-human object represents not just a character but also a specific and hypervisible racial identity, we can look both across modern performance examples andthrough theatre history to see how race-making is an ongoing practice. In Shakespeare's time, early modern performances may have covered white actors in dark fabrics to imitate black skin and signify racial difference. Scholars such as Carr and Ian Smith detail the historical coexistence of cosmetic and textile strategies of performing race in the professional theatre, in addition to court productions. Fabrics such as dyed gloves and stockings were practical supplements to cosmetics, says Carr, especially because gloves would have protected valuable

[13]See also the shirtless Demetrius and the sleeveless Chiron in Julie Taymor's *Titus* (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 1999), though in the film the child is played by a real baby, swaddled in brown fabrics.

[14]Morwenna Carr, 'Material / Blackness: Race and Its Material Reconstructions on the Seventeenth-Century English Stage', *Early Theatre* 20, no. 1 (2017): 85–86.

[15]On Aaron choosing a mixed-race baby, and the fear that 'his insistence on obtaining a baby who looks white but is "really" Moorish suggests allegiance to his race, a commitment to establishing a foothold of power for Moors within the very heart of Rome', see Royster, 'White-Limed Walls', 453.

costumes from cosmetic stains.[16] Distinct from clothing, such an 'epidermal prosthesis' creates a 'theatrical simulacrum of skin', Smith argues, that 'covers and masks the body beneath; its primary function is to materialize the imagined and absent real black subject and to give it meaning'.[17] The artificiality of this dark 'hue' remains a subtle reminder of what would have been true in Shakespeare's theatre: Aaron and his baby were, as David Sterling Brown claims, 'powerful extensions of the white imagination; that they, like other black dramatic figures, are being put to work, socio-politically and culturally speaking; and represent that they are false shadows of real early modern people'.[18] Black textiles often continue to inspire imaginations of an absent black body in modern performances of *Titus Andronicus* in the form of the bundle that plays Aaron's son. Even as black actors now portray Aaron, remnants of early modern methods of approximating blackness can echo in the baby-prop's materials that still function as 'theatrical simulacrum of skin', to a certain degree.

While fabrics have a potentially loaded history of performing racial identity, the role of baby dolls in over 400 years of racial formation outside the playhouse also informs the imagination of theatrical infancy. A note in the editorial history of *Titus Andronicus*, for example, reveals a transhistorical link between material culture and anti-black racism toward Aaron's son. On Aaron's use of the word 'blowze' to describe his child, John Dover Wilson's 1948 Cambridge edition speculates that the word 'is prob. used to raise a laugh at a hideous sort of golliwog'.[19] Wilson's note in this classic edition is short but significant. In this casual assumption about the late sixteenth-century stage appearance of the baby, Wilson's anachronistic 'sort of golliwog' reference supposes that the prop playing Aaron's son creates a laughable irony in the difference between the 'hideous' object that Aaron holds, and the 'blowze' – a white-coded word for 'a ruddy fat-faced wench' – that he passionately protects and esteems.[20] The golliwog was developed in the late nineteenth century as a literary character based on blackface minstrel dolls, which subsequently grew in popularity as a consumer good. Particularly in American history, as Robin Bernstein argues, such dolls 'repackaged blackface minstrelsy' and sold a narrative of white childhood innocence as white children 'read books about slavery and then used dolls to act out scenes of racialized violence and forced

[16]Carr, 'Material / Blackness', 81.
[17]Ian Smith, 'Othello's Black Handkerchief', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 64, no. 1 (2013): 4.
[18]David Sterling Brown, 'Remixing the Family: Blackness and Domesticity in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*', in *Titus Andronicus: The State of Play*, ed. Farah Karim-Cooper, 2019, 127.
[19]John Dover Wilson, ed., *Titus Andronicus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), 140. In the Arden Three edition, Jonathan Bate details that 'the more racially sensitive editor of 1984 [for the Oxford Shakespeare] suggested that in applying the phrase ironically "Aaron continues his reaction against the nurse's contempt for blackness" (Oxf)' (4.2.74n).
[20]See Samuel Johnson's gloss on 'blowze' (4.2.74n). Unlike other early modern fathers on the stage, Aaron is perhaps confident enough in the resemblance that he can be playful with his descriptions of the child.

labor'.[21] Bernstein also traces how later counternarratives of black children's self-identification with black baby dolls took on significant weight in American literature, culture, and law.[22] While there are crucial differences between the derogatory 'blackening up' of a white body through textiles or cosmetics and the black materials that signify the baby and its race in the absence of a real child, simply swaddling a white doll in dark fabrics could undermine the performance of the deeply felt kinship for a contemporary actor playing Aaron (more on this shortly). Wilson's assumption that the child was represented by 'a hideous sort of golliwog', then, serves as a reminder that selecting a baby-prop to play Aaron's son, whether a doll or fabric, is not a neutral act but rather a casting choice with its own particular complications and possibilities. The example of the baby in *Titus Andronicus* shows how props accrue and reflect cultural meaning for performers, audiences, and editors not just in theatrical repertoire across plays but also across centuries of performance practice and histories of racial formation.[23]

While Aaron immediately recognises himself in his child, Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* cannot see himself in baby Perdita, despite Paulina's descriptions.[24] For a production team of *The Winter's Tale*, Perdita's relative lack of evident differentiating features makes her easily interchangeable with the baby-props of other plays. Across Shakespeare's own repertoire, baby Perdita could easily be a repurposed baby Marina from *Pericles*, Edward V from *Henry VI: Part 3*, or Elizabeth from *Henry VIII*, as well as the many other white babies in other non-Shakespeare plays in both early modern and modern productions. Rehearsal notes for the 2010 production of *Henry VIII* at Shakespeare's Globe, for example, discuss borrowing a doll for Elizabeth from the Royal Court Theatre.[25] A baby-prop's performance resume and the repertorial, ghostly resonances grow as Shakespeare's plays continue to be staged again and again, accruing new significations and associations. Leontes's paranoia that he will 'rear / Another's issue' (2.3.190–91) not only echoes the plotline in *Titus Andronicus* of Aaron's plan to swap out his baby in the

[21]Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 21, 159; Robin Bernstein, 'Children's Books, Dolls, and the Performance of Race; or, The Possibility of Children's Literature', *PMLA* 126, no. 1 (2011): 160.

[22]Bernstein's archive includes, for example, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), in which the narrator recounts her feelings on receiving white blue-eyed baby dolls as a young black girl, as well as the sociological tests with children and dolls cited in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* that legally desegregated public schools.

[23]A moment involving the prop that takes on considerable transhistorical significance in modern performance is Lucius's threat to 'first hang the child that he may see it sprawl, / A sight to vex the father's soul withal' (5.1.50–51), and his subsequent move to start hanging Aaron from the tree instead. On the contemporary resonances of this attempted lynching, see David Sterling Brown, '"Is Black so Base a Hue?": Black Life Matters in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*', in *Early Modern Black Diaspora Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Cassander L. Smith, Nicholas R. Jones, and Miles P. Grier (Cham: Springer, 2018), esp. 147.

[24]This interchangeability contrasts with how 'the dramatic effect of the parallel sequence in *Titus Andronicus* is obviously heightened', as Duncan observes, 'if Aaron's baby's skin colour is visible to the audience as well as to Aaron'. See Duncan, *Shakespeare's Props*, 152.

[25]See 'Henry VIII – Props & Furniture List with Source Notes', *2010 Prompt Book for Henry VIII*, GB 3316 SGT/THTR/SM/1/2010/HVIII. Shakespeare's Globe Library and Archive. While modern theatrical repertoires are relatively more diverse, Aaron's son appears to be the only non-white baby-prop in a surviving early modern play. For an appendix of early modern plays with babies, see Higginbotham, *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters*, 135–37.

palace for the newborn of his nearby countryman, with the Emperor none the wiser, it also reflects a potential reality of theatrical practice if, say, Baby Perdita is the same prop as Marina from last season's *Pericles*. If Leontes's introduction to his daughter does not feel particularly racialised in isolation, its repertorial echo of the moment when Aaron meets his son shows how both distinctive blackness and relatively invisible, unremarkable whiteness are forms of 'racial mattering'.

While Paulina describes Perdita's appearance as generally reflective of Leontes's own, rather than mentioning specific racially-coded phenotypic features as in the descriptions of Aaron's son, trends emerge in the choice of colour for Perdita's prop in *The Winter's Tale*. Textually, the play sets up a hierarchy of fabric colours with its metaphors: Leontes says that women are as 'false / As o'erdyed blacks' (1.2.126–32), implying that 'false' fabrics are 'o'erdyed' black to hide imperfections, while Antigonus recounts that Hermione visited him in his dream 'In pure white robes, / Like very sanctity' (3.3.21–22) and Leontes fears the sullying of 'the purity and whiteness of my sheets' (1.2.325). *Texturally*, productions often wrap or represent baby Perdita in this colour of 'very sanctity' as Leontes threatens to kill her. Many of the photos in the RSC archive show Perdita as represented by soft, even lacey, white and cream-coloured fabrics (1960; 1976; 2002; 2006; 2009; 2013), rather than the dark textiles of Aaron's son in most RSC productions.[26] This whiteness in modern performance omits a possible historical choice of colour: the Shepherd describes Perdita as wrapped in 'a bearing-cloth for a squire's child' (3.3.112), and such early modern bearing cloths were traditionally red, as seen in Shakespeare's source text, Robert Greene's *Pandosto*, which specifies that the baby is found in a 'mantle of scarlet'.[27] Even when not represented by white fabrics, Perdita's prop can retain the associations of softness and innocence of feminised whiteness. In Forced Entertainment's 'at home' versions of their *Table Top Shakespeare* productions, which perform abbreviated versions of Shakespeare's plays using only household objects to represent each character, baby Perdita is played by a fuzzy, soft pink peach in *The Winter's Tale*, while Aaron's baby is a size D battery in *Titus Andronicus*.[28] Even when all the

[26]These observations about modern materials for the various baby-props are not without exceptions, of course. The 2017 RSC *Titus Andronicus* swaddled Aaron's son in white cloth, though there was a visible black doll within these fabrics. The 1999 RSC *The Winter's Tale* opted for a sparkly periwinkle mantle for Perdita, previously worn by Hermione and later worn by grown Perdita. However, the choice to illustrate the connection between Perdita and Hermione with a distinctive, non-white fabric seems to be a relatively rare design choice, though the text does name 'the mantle of Queen Hermione' as one of the many 'proofs' of Perdita's identity (5.2.31–32).

[27]See Robert Greene, *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time*, in *The Winter's Tale*, ed. John Pitcher, The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2010), 421, 444. See also Gloucester's simile for Winchester's 'scarlet robes, as a child's bearing cloth' (1.2.42) in Shakespeare's *King Henry VI, Part 1*, ed. Edward Burns, Reprinted, The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

[28]Forced Entertainment, 'The Winter's Tale'. Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare: At Home, 2020; Forced Entertainment, 'Titus Andronicus'. Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare: At Home, 2020. The 'At Home' editions of these performances were available on YouTube in late 2020. In the *Titus Andronicus* production, Chiron and Demetrius are transparent and white candlesticks, and the Nurse is a glass jar (used to carry in the battery-

characters are objects, the materials chosen to represent these two babies still differ according to racialised tropes of colour and texture.

If Aaron's son is an overt example of 'racial mattering' in Shakespeare's canon, to return to Chen's terminology, the material cast as baby Perdita in *The Winter's Tale* also portrays a character with a larger social identity, and its racial performance works collectively with later references to Perdita's race in the play. When Florizel (re)introduces Leontes to his grown daughter, he claims that Perdita 'came from Libya' (5.1.156), apparently crafting an obviously false black origin story for the granddaughter of the Russian emperor. In the Arden Three edition, John Pitcher glosses the line as a 'racial joke [that] may have brought the house down' (5.1.156n), and Lara Bovilsky sees a number of possible meanings in this line: Florizel perhaps conflates or substitutes race and (assumed) class difference to disguise Perdita, but the referencealso shows how 'Shakespeare often associates racially exogamous marriage with the guilty pleasures of illicit unions and filial defiance'.[29] Perdita's relationship to race illustrates Kim F. Hall's argument that 'whiteness often appears in hyperbolic comparison […] and in juxtaposition with references to African blackness' in early modern literature. Hall points to two other examples pertaining to Perdita to show how whiteness appears in contrast to blackness: when Florizel interrupts a different simile to liken the whiteness of Perdita's hand to an 'Ethiopian's tooth' (4.4.369), and when 'Polixenes mockingly comments "How prettily th" young swain seems to wash / The hand that was fair before!' (4.4.371–72).[30] The text thereby alludes to Perdita's whiteness multiple times, almost always in these relational forms.[31]

For a play that later collapses a divide between object and subject when Hermione's statue comes to life, performances may emphasise the connection between the actress playing grown Perdita and the materials of the baby-

baby), while Aaron is a dark bottle that appears to be balsamic vinegar. Even when staging a minimalistic Shakespeare at this level of 'things', the objects thus participate in the play's performance of race by again offsetting blackness against translucent and white 'bodies'. On how Forced Entertainment's *Complete Works* 'asks its audiences to cultivate a thing's-eye view of Shakespeare', see Lawrence Switzky, 'Art, Objecthood, and the Extended Audience: Forced Entertainment's Complete Works', in *Shakespeare's Things: Shakespearean Theatre and the Non-Human World in History, Theory, and Performance*, ed. Brett Gamboa and Switzky (New York: Routledge, 2020), 198.

[29]Lara Bovilsky, *Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 173–74n1, 44. Bovilsky's claim that 'Italian whiteness is never, in England, fully white' but rather 'fluctuates as it is used to figure shifting national and gender identities' should also be kept in mind when thinking about various dimensions of whiteness in *The Winter's Tale*. See Bovilsky, *Barbarous Play*, 132–33.

[30]Kim F. Hall, '"These Bastard Signs of Fair": Literary Whiteness in Shakespeare's Sonnets', in *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*, ed. Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 1998), 65–66. Leontes also describes Perdita's mother Hermione as having a 'white hand' (1.2.103).

[31]While overt references to Perdita's whiteness in comparison to blackness appear when she is grown, another early modern play provides an example of how a baby-prop's whiteness is established in heightened contrast to blackness. In Henry Chettle, Thomas Dekker, and William Haughton's *The Pleasant Comodie of Patient Grissil* (London: Edward Allde for Henry Rocket, 1603), after the Marquess steals one of his newborn twins away to test his wife, he asks a courtier whom the baby resembles. When the courtier eagerly avows that the baby resembles the father, the Marquess remarks, 'Had I but said my boy's a blackamoor, / He would have damn'd himself and so have swore' (4.1.40–41). The Marquess's joke about the absurd flattery of courtiers assumes that all should instantly perceive that the white baby, if of otherwise questionable paternity, is obviously not a 'blackamoor'.

prop, as in the 2002 RSC production when the Shepherd and Clown lifted up the baby bundle together as the actress who would now play teenage Perdita ran on stage to grab the white bundle and unfurl it behind her. Yet if the performance of blackness in the early modern theatre involved a process where, in Smith's description, 'black cloth – the material object – defines and determines a notion of racial subjectivity', the white fabrics of Perdita in these modern performance examples can appear almost coincidental and invisible, rather than as a continuity of skin, until seen in a repertorial relationship with Aaron's son, a theatrical echo of these references to Perdita's whiteness via blackness.[32] In the two collections of props used for Shakespeare's parallel scenes of a father looking at a baby for evidence of himself, we can find another iteration of Hall's observation of how 'the black/white opposition posits a special relationship between white femininity and black masculinity that is negotiated in artistic representation, discursive practices, and social modes'.[33]

Though the text refers to Perdita's whiteness in multiple ways, modern productions can choose to make different casting decisions that alter the racial coding and portrayal of relation in the play. These decisions include the selection of the baby-prop, which 'racially matters' to its fellow performers and audiences. Interested in how the final reunion of the suspicious Leontes and the revived Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* might revise the ending of *Othello*, Tom Wickman explores how colour-conscious casting of Hermione, Leontes, Polixenes, and their children may align with or challenge audience's expectations 'that one could see racial or familial relations'.[34] While Wickman does not comment on baby-props, Jenna Steigerwaldt's analysis of the 2007 American Shakespeare Center production, in which Leontes and his children were the only black actors in the cast, found that 'questions about paternity verge on the ludicrous, especially […] when he held a dark-skinned doll to portray baby Perdita and accused the white Polixenes of siring black Perdita with white Hermione'. Since 'the doll's color made [Leontes's] paternity a given' in performance though still ambiguous in the plot, the actor playing Leontes was 'livid' about the choice of doll, and he chose to carefully avoid looking at the prop. The director and actor, Steigerwaldt concludes, 'had fundamental differences regarding the character of Leontes, but the semiotics of skin color on stage, in the form of the baby Perdita, exacerbated the situation'.[35] The prop thus works alongside modern casting choices, rather than as a neutral

[32]Smith, 'Othello's Black Handkerchief', 4.
[33]Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 9.
[34]Tom Wickman, '"[M]ake Your Garden Rich in Gillyvors, / And Do Not Call Them Bastards": Perdita and the Possibilities for Redemptive Interracialism', *Borrowers and Lenders: The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation* 4, no. 1 (2008).
[35]Jenna Steigerwalt, 'Performing Race on the Original-Practices Stage: A Call to Action', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 27, no. 3 (2009): 427–28.

cipher, to either reinscribe or challenge the text's descriptions of race and patriarchal suspicion of kinship in performance.

Unable to discern his daughter's paternity, Leontes banishes her, aligning the 'purity' of his family with the 'purity' of his state. Though the play's Bohemian coastline notoriously renders its geography fictional and the dialogue does not seem to allude to specific visual signifiers of Sicilian, Bohemian, or Russian identity, Leontes indeed fixates on Perdita's underlying 'strangeness' when he orders that Antigonus 'carry'

> This female bastard hence, and that thou bear it
> To some remote and desert place, quite out
> Of our dominions; and that there thou leave it,
> Without more mercy, to its own protection
> And favour of the climate. As by strange fortune
> It came to us, I do in justice charge thee,
> On thy soul's peril and thy body's torture,
> That thou commend it strangely to some place
> Where chance may nurse or end it. Take it up. (2.3.172–81)

Twice, Shakespeare adds 'strange' to the equivalent lines in Greene's *Pandosto*.[36] Convinced that Perdita was conceived in 'strange fortune' – an allusion to Hermione's alleged crossing of the borders of their marriage and Sicilia itself with the foreign Polixenes – Leontes decides the baby must be estranged, that Antigonus must 'commend it strangely' to 'remote' shores. The 'strange' baby that Leontes pushes 'quite out / Of our dominions' will eventually be welcomed back into the royal family and her geographic homeland, assisted by a collection of material and verbal 'proofs' (5.2.31). After exile, those later references to Perdita's whiteness in contrast to blackness aid in this overarching project of reinstatingher identity.

While in *Titus Andronicus* the baby-prop supplements the hypervisibility of the child's race and parentage with additional dimensions of performance and cultural history, Perdita's less specific, usually white, baby-prop seems to offer no visual information to inspire or quell Leontes's sense of its 'strangeness'. This contrast between the two scenes in part reflects an organising principle of a racial hierarchy: that blackness immediately signifies while whiteness can function as an unmentioned norm – even with its own internal and slippery degrees of 'strangeness' – allowing it to maintain its position of power. *The Winter's Tale* asks and answers the question of Perdita's kinship, raised by misogyny, within this larger matrix of national and racial identity.

If Leontes exchanges his original plan to 'dash out' a baby's 'bastard brains with these my proper hands' (2.3.139, 138) for exile, David Ireland's 2016 play *Cyprus Avenue* fulfils this horrific threat, amplifying Leontes's suspicions of national 'strangeness' and taking them to their violent conclusion in a

[36]See Greene, *Pandosto*, 415.

twenty-first century setting. A newborn's contested identities create the central conflict for this co-production between the Royal Court and Dublin's Abbey Theatre, directed by the Royal Court's Artistic Director Vicky Featherstone and originally staged in 2016. The plot of *Cyprus Avenue* focusses on Ulster loyalist Eric's (played by Stephen Rea in both the 2016 and 2019 productions) illogical belief that his five-week-old granddaughter Mary-May *is* Gerry Adams, the then-president of Sinn Féin. Eric's fears reflect contemporary tensions of nationality, religion, sexuality, and ethnicity that operate within a larger formation of British whiteness in the play. These suspicions about the infant's true identity are both specific to the modern political setting while also harkening back to longstanding British anxieties of Irish alterity as understood through babies; Jean E. Feerick, for example, analyses how early modern Irish nursemaid's 'breast milk threatens to deluge tender English heirs with alternate bloodlines, confounding familial and national identification at large and raising the spectre of racial decline in colonial milieus'.[37] *Cyprus Avenue* explicitly makes the baby-prop a staging ground for contemporary ethnonational paranoia and its gruesomeconsequences.

Despite proudly flying the Union flag on his Belfast roof, Eric now fears that the call for reconciliation between the Irish and his 'Ulster loyalist culture' is coming from the baby inside the house. As Eric ineffectually attempts to explain, 'Gerry Adams has disguised himself as a new-born baby and successfully infiltrated my family home', and even 'perhaps other notable Republicans are disguising themselves as babies and infiltrating Protestant homes throughout the province as part of a long-term strategy to destabilise the Union' (51–52). In the tradition of his early modern predecessors, Eric suspects the baby's mother of sexual deceit, and this misogyny feeds on his fears that Irish Republicans have infiltrated his 'heritage' (21).[38] Eric desperately clings to this assertion that his house is 'exclusively and non-negotiably British' as he processes his memories of growing up in Belfast during The Troubles, projecting an anxiety onto his newborn granddaughter that transforms her identity in his eyes.

The prop that plays baby Mary-May, a generic plastic white baby-doll in a white onesie, comically contradicts Eric's worldview in performance. When Eric enacts his theory that the baby *is* the former president of Sinn Féin by drawing Adams's signature beard on the baby with a marker and giving it a pair of Build-A-Bear glasses, the prop works against his claim that 'if you look at that baby closely … especially now that I've drawn the beard on her', it proves 'that is a Fenian in our house' (25). While Leontes's suspicions of Perdita's 'strangeness' usually describe a relatively generic and interchangeable

[37]Jean E. Feerick, *Strangers in Blood: Relocating Race in the Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 22.

[38]David Ireland, *Cyprus Avenue* (London: Methuen Drama, 2016). Parenthetical citations refer to the first edition published for the original 2016 run. Ireland revised the script for a new production at the Royal Court in 2019, and a film version of a recorded performance spliced with some new short scenes, such as Belfast establishing shots, was streamed by the Royal Court in 2020.

prop, Eric's 'proof' for his false assertion makes for a laughable reveal in performance, when the audience sees a fake beard drawn with a marker on an equally fake doll. Yet as the Adams baby-prop works as a comedic gag, it also refracts two key aspects of how nationalism ultimately 'is a symbolic *performance* of invented community', as Anne McClintock argues. McClintock analyses how 'nations are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space' ('nation' is derived from the Latin for birth), while also, 'more often than not, nationalism takes shape through the visible, ritual organisation of fetish objects' which 'embody crises in social value'.[39] In *Cyprus Avenue*, the baby-prop unites these dimensions of nationalism, functioning as both fetishised object and the familial symbol of Eric's own reckoning with identity in a changing world.

Despite Eric's repeated assertion that the baby has 'Fenian eyes' (16), nothing about the baby legitimately signals Irishness, Britishness, or especially Gerry Adams to the audience. And while the audience sees an obviously plastic doll, the other characters can see only Eric in her features. As a fellow Ulster loyalist remarks:

Slim: She has your eyes.
Eric: What?
Slim: She has your eyes. Your ears. Your whole personality. She looks like you.
Eric: No she doesn't.
Slim: Yeah she's got your serious mouth as well. Your very serious mouth.
He imitates Eric's *mouth*.
Eric: But she looks like Gerry Adams.
Slim: No. No I'm sorry to say she doesn't.
Eric: Have another look.
Slim: I've looked.
Eric: But really look.
Slim *looks closer this time*.
Slim: Yeah … All I can see is you. (69–70)

As Eric looks at his kindred and can see only a famous Irish political figure, while others see Eric's own face, the baby amplifies Eric's own shaky hold on his sense of a British self. The exchange echoes the early modern scenes that describe a baby as an alleged copy of the father, placing them within a twenty-first century context of a grandfather grappling with the inherent fictions of an essentialised British identity.

Spectators' potential associations of the actor Rea (for whom the playwright wrote the part) add layers of meaning to Eric's ruminations on this possibleIrishness within himself and his assertions that his granddaughter is Gerry Adams, especially if they know that Rea was one of the actors who performed Gerry Adams's speeches during the British ban on broadcasting Sinn Féin spokespeople. Remembering a night at an Irish pub in London years ago,

[39]Anne McClintock, 'Family Feuds: Gender, Nationalism and the Family', *Feminist Review* 44 (1993): 63, 71.

Eric recounts how he felt 'the most terrifying thought of all. Maybe I am Irish. […] Maybe I've been led to believe that I'm British by successive governments of the English crown to further their own nefarious purposes' (36–37). Eric's flicker of awareness underscores that national identity could be something that he has 'been led to believe', perhaps for 'nefarious purposes' of those in power.

Eric's reflection occurs within a latter therapy session in prison, the framing device of the play. While audiences do not yet know exactly why Eric is in prison, the therapy session reveals how Eric's sense of Britishness rests on a foundation of white supremacy and colonial racism. When his black psychiatrist Bridget corrects his racist assumptions that she is not 'African' but rather British, and her parents moved to Britain from Nigeria, he incredulous demands 'you consider yourself British?' (33).[40] Eric readily defines his Britishness in opposition to blackness, confident in his erroneous assumption of its inherent whiteness, but within this construction of whiteness he ultimately cannot reconcile its potential hybridity of national and ethnic identities. At the end of the play, we finally see him commit the earlier crime; he murders his family as a violentrejection of his daughter's plan to teach the baby to 'respect all people and not judge a person on their religion or their race', to raise her as neither Unionist or Republican, 'as nothing' (61). The thought that ethnicity or nationality might not be inherent and obvious is so alarming to the nationalist Eric that he murders his family to silence it.

A jarring shift in style eclipses whatever initial mediation the fakeness of the baby-prop enforced on the absurdity of Eric's fears, as Eric conceals the prop in a trash bag and brutallymurders Mary-May by dashing her repeatedly on the floor. *Cyprus Avenue* thereby realises the disturbing filicidal threat present in both *The Winter's Tale* and *Titus Andronicus*: Eric directly enacts Leontes's threat to 'dash out' Perdita's brains with his own hands when he believes she is a product of Hermione's 'strange' infidelity, which itself refracts Tamora's command to Aaron that he 'christen' their child 'with thy dagger's point' because the child too obviously bears 'thy stamp, thy seal' (4.2.72, 71). More than serving as a simple substitute for an actor, the baby becomes a violently contested site of social identity making, a material reminder of and canvas for the ongoing construction of family, nation, ethnicity, and race.

The baby-props from these three plays, connected by an underlying misogynist anxiety of paternal legibility, evince the complex racial 'mattering' of staging infancy. In *Titus Andronicus*, all who see the child know with unique

[40]In the 2016 script of the play, Eric is even more overtly racist, and he uses the N-word in the opening sequence with his psychiatrist. At the request of a cast member, Ireland removed the word and changed other dialogue when he revised the script for the 2019 Royal Court production. In the therapy framing device, though, *Cyprus Avenue* still marginalizes Bridget's character, regulating her primarily role to helping Eric explore his own issues. Bridget can thus be seen as a theatrical example of the contemporary 'Black Lady Therapist' trope identified by culture journalist Aisha Harris. See Harris, 'New Pop Culture Trend Alert: The Black Lady Therapist', *Slate*, March 22, 2018.

certainty that he is the product of Tamora's infidelity to the Emperor due to the visual signifiers of race shared by father and son, especially in contrast to the brothers' whiteness. In modern performance, the black baby-prop's layered connections to early modern performance history, and centuries of cultural history at large, contribute additional meanings to the play's performance of blackness, even while the play's second, off-stage baby suggests that colour is not a fixed indicator of identity. In *The Winter's Tale*, Perdita's relatively generic baby-prop materialises Leontes's suspicions of her interchangeability and infiltrating 'strangeness'. This prop also participates in the play's performance of Perdita's race, a whiteness established in opposition to blackness later in the text and implicitly in the reportorial relationship between Shakespeare's two most infant-centric dramas. Finally, *Cyprus Avenue* takes Leontes's fears to the extreme in a contemporary setting of blurred borders that tests the inherent fictions of an insular and stable sense of 'pure' Britishness.

Analysing these plays as part of a repertoire of theatrical practice tracks how racial formation occurs in both representational and material dimensions, necessitating an interdisciplinary analysis. Because babies require others to be their interpreters, they become particularly revealing figures for understanding the reading practices of social categories. To play a human is some heavy ontological lifting for a baby-prop, and the objects chosen for these parts thus work with the text and productions to perform broader cultural codes of identity beyond the body on stage.

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ORCID

Megan Snell http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7796-4452