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# “Read it for restoratives”: Pericles and the Romance of Whiteness

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Résumé de l'article

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Noémie Ndiaye

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## ‘Read it for restoratives’: *Pericles* and the Romance of Whiteness

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*Pericles, Prince of Tyre* has been produced around the world more often over the last two decades than it has in the entire twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> *Pericles* thus seems poised to become one of the twenty-first century’s favourite rediscovered Shakespeare plays, and as such, it invites critical attention. Composed in 1607–8 and co-written with George Wilkins, *Pericles* was widely popular in its own time. It marked Shakespeare’s full embrace of a genre with which his repertoire had only flirted before: romance. Romance, from its Greek origins through its medieval development, to the present day has remained characterized by its episodic structure, the additive logic of which enables the story to stretch as wanted, and, in that sense, enables readers to not let go. The affect of romance responds to the deeply seated human hope that loss and death do not have the final word; that the loved ones we have lost are waiting for us in a paradisiac place where providence will ultimately take us if we act virtuously (most monotheistic religions are romantic in that sense). In *Pericles*, the refusal to let go operates at the level of form, affect, and readerly experience, but it is also foregrounded by the narrator, John Gower, who, in the opening lines of the play, addresses 1608 spectators to comment on the antiquated nature of the subject matter drawn from his own 1393 *Confessio Amantis*. As Gower puts it, his old story can still serve: ‘Lords and ladies in their

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lives / Have read it for restoratives' (1.0.7–8), and it has goods in store for us, right here right now.<sup>2</sup> To produce *Pericles* today is to read Shakespeare's play the way Shakespeare read Gower's *Confessio Amantis*: to not let go of this work and to find 'restorative' virtues in it. Which leads me to wonder: what 'restoratives' exactly does *Pericles* have in store for us, when 'us' is (as it always was and will be) diverse, Black, and Brown?

The plays we have come to know as Shakespeare's most famous 'race plays' may tend to be tragedies, but as a generic cluster, Shakespeare's romances are second only to the comedies in their frequent use of the word 'fair'. The term 'fair', Kim F. Hall has shown, anchored a black/white dichotomy in early modern England that 'not only served aesthetic purposes, but supported an ideology that still continues to serve the interests of white supremacy and male hegemony'.<sup>3</sup> And yet, Shakespearean romances have not received as much attention from race scholars as comedies recently have. By turning to a play like *Pericles*, which uses the word 'fair' no less than twenty-three times, this essay heeds Ayanna Thompson and Benjamin Minor's call 'to move beyond analyses of the obvious race plays' in the Shakespearean canon, thereby joining recent work by Patricia Akhimié, Andrew Hadfield, Ian Smith, and David Sterling Brown, among others.<sup>4</sup> The geographical location of this romance, which moves between ancient Lebanon, Turkey, Libya, and Greece, makes it suitable for cross-cultural multiracial casting in ways that might partially account for the attention that directors and companies have given to it over the last twenty years. Jami Rogers argues that contemporary colourblind, or integrated, casting in British Shakespearean theatre began in 1958 when Cedric Connor was cast as Gower in *Pericles* at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre, and recent productions of *Pericles* (such as those for the Royal Shakespeare Company directed by Adrian Noble in 2002 and Dominic Cooke in 2006) have confirmed those dynamics.<sup>5</sup> Yet the play's suitability for cross-cultural multiracial casting might prove a double-edged sword for the staging of early modern English romance, in which, as Margo Hendricks reminds us, 'regardless of form, there is a pervasive engagement with race-making, whether it is tied to nation, ethnicity, or colorism — and sometimes all three'.<sup>6</sup>

*Pericles* is a particularly tricky romance to hold on to as 'restorative'. Indeed, in *Fictions of Consent*, Urvashi Chakravarty enriches the genealogy of *Pericles* by compellingly reframing Terence's *Eunuchus* as a source text for Shakespeare and Wilkins's play, as she focuses on the similarities between Marina and Terence's Pamphila, a free citizen stolen away by pirates and 'sold as a slave for the purpose of sexual exploitation' — a plot line, she argues, which tapped into the early modern English anxieties expressed in captivity narratives. This precious genealogy

matters because 'while Pamphila recalls the threat of enslaved Englishmen and women to Renaissance readers and audiences, *Eunuchus's* other slaves [especially the silent Ethiopian maid] also evoke the spectre of *European* slave trading, of an incipient trade in racialized chattel slavery'.<sup>7</sup> Which leads me to wonder where the 'spectre' of colour-based slavery that Chakravarty brings to light appears in Shakespeare and Wilkins's play. In this essay, I look for that spectre in *Pericles*, as I attend to the ways in which it helps fashion whiteness in the moment of its historical emergence by animating the racial mechanics of this romance. Ironically, *Pericles* is, I argue, a play that stages its protagonist's great romantic quest for whiteness. Keeping in mind that romance is, in Geraldine Heng's words, a 'medium that conduces with exceptional facility to the creation of races', I offer here a reading of *Pericles's* romance through the lens of early modern critical whiteness studies in order to ultimately return to my opening question about the restorative affordances of this play for diverse audiences.<sup>8</sup>

### **Pericles's Melancholia, or, The Unfinished Business of Whiteness**

In Book 8 of *Confessio Amantis*, Gower invokes colour (white, red, and black) to describe the appearance of characters' skin and their emotional state. For instance, when Apollonius is stranded, naked and destitute, on the shores of Pentapolis, 'His colour, which whilom was whyt, / Was thanne of water fade and pale' (636–7).<sup>9</sup> While his skin has always been 'whyt', his troubles seem to have made him even paler. As critical whiteness studies scholars such as Cheryl Harris would notice, Gower depicts Apollonius as particularly white (with all the privileges attendant to whiteness in potentia) at the peak of dispossession, and whiteness might read here as a promise of compensation.<sup>10</sup> While such a reading may not have been the one Gower had in mind, it may very well have informed Shakespeare and Wilkins's early modern reception of those lines. Apollonius's future wife is 'fair' (731), and so is his daughter 'the faireste and the flour of alle, / Whos name Thaisis men calle' (1535–6). However, this medieval romance, unlike early modern cosmetic epistemologies, uses red and white to reveal characters' emotions, regardless of gender. They express Apollonius's future wife's feelings for him as she falls for him:

Thenkende upon this man of Tyr,  
 Hire herte is hot as eny fyr,  
 And otherwhile it is acale;  
 Now is sche red, nou is sche pale

Riht after the condicion  
Of hire ymaginacion. (845–50)

And they express general happiness when the family is finally reunited:

The descoloured pale hewe  
Is now become a rody cheke,  
Ther was no merthe for to seke,  
Bot every man hath that he wolde. (1908–11)

Similarly, blackness codes negative emotions: Apollonius's presumed widow dons black clothes as she takes the veil:

In blake clothes thei hem clothe,  
This lady and the dowhter bothe,  
And yolde hem to religion. (1263–5)

Dionise orders her household to don black clothes when she pretends to mourn Apollonius's daughter whom she sought to murder:

Hire housebonde and ek sche bothe  
In blake clothes thei hem clothe,  
And made a gret enterrement. (1521–3)

And when Apollonius is reunited with his daughter, he relinquishes darkness:

This king hath founde newe grace,  
So that out of his derke place  
He goth him up into the liht. (1739–41)

Shakespeare and Wilkins's protagonist takes the colour coding of emotions to the next level. Pericles is indeed grief personified. The grief of losing his kingdom, his ships, his wife, and his daughter accumulates, builds up, and leaves him in a catatonic state that defies the typical affective structure of romance, in which protagonists usually move from episode to episode with the same indefatigable energy. While black mourning cloth is associated with female characters in Gower's romance, Pericles appropriates it as emblematic of his dark emotions, as his ship ultimately comes to be known by its 'sable banners' (5.0.19). More strikingly, Pericles corporealizes black emotions by internalizing them in his own body, as his cumulative grief produces 'melancholy', the black humour, which sets upon him when he decides to leave Tyre and takes over his internal complexion. His melancholy receives mention throughout the play:

Why should this change of thoughts,  
 The sad companion, dull-eyed melancholy,  
 Be my so used a guest. (1.2.1–3)

Yon knight doth sit too melancholy (2.3.52)

Now, by the gods, I pity his misfortune,  
 And will awake him from his melancholy. (2.3.87–8)

Sir, 'tis the governor of Mytilene,  
 Who, hearing of your melancholy state,  
 Did come to see you. (5.1.207–9)

As Mary Floyd-Wilson has shown, for European Renaissance writers, 'there is a reliable correspondence between the external "complexion" of one's skin and one's humoral complexion', and this correspondence framed melancholy as the proper humour of dark-skinned Southerners, such as Ethiopians or Egyptians.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the humoral discourse deployed around Pericles smoothly opens the door to the early modern play's multi-fronted transformation of Gower's emotional economy of chromatic symbolism along emerging axes reading colour as somatic racial marker.<sup>12</sup> For instance, the play implicitly invokes Blackness as a somatic racial marker when Simonides jokingly accuses Pericles of having 'bewitched' his daughter, Thaisa, a joke that echoes Brabantio's accusations, and aligns Pericles with another well-known character who is no stranger to the genre of romance: Othello, the Black Moor of Venice (1604).

Although Pericles hails from Lebanese Tyre, the cultural identity that he embodies — like so many 'foreign' Shakespearean characters — is transparently English, so that we may read him a bit like Floyd-Wilson reads Hamlet, as 'an extraordinary Northerner, extraordinary because his inward melancholy [accrued through travel, education, and pursuits] has estranged him from his native Northern complexion'.<sup>13</sup> In the case of Pericles, his melancholia first sets in when he realizes that he must exile himself in order to save his kingdom and people from Antiochus's wrath, and his travels, littered with the loss of his wife and daughter, give free reign to the dark humour. Yet, rather than a process of estrangement from his own identity, we may understand Pericles's growing melancholia most productively through the lens proposed by Arthur Little when he re-reads Anne Anlin Cheng's *Melancholy of Race*: 'white melancholia operates in the Renaissance/early modern period, repeatedly calling attention to a whiteness that seems to be a property that's at once immanent, and out of reach ... whiteness always already signals a failure of those who construct around and through an ideology

of whiteness to ever truly become so'.<sup>14</sup> Rather than an example of estrangement, the uncanny tendency for Pericles's body to attract metaphors of racial blackness might thus read more interestingly as an allegory of the condition of whiteness, which is always aspirational rather than available, processual rather than ontological, deferred, and incomplete. If whiteness is the object of a desire that can never be fully gratified, *Pericles* deploys all the affordance of romance, defined by Patricia Parker 'as a form which simultaneously quests for and postpones a particular end, objective, or object',<sup>15</sup> around whiteness as the object of its longing — or melancholia. And because the desire that powers romance so often and so easily takes on erotic contours, so does Pericles's quest for whiteness.

### **The Erotics of Whiteness: Conversions, Endogamy, Incest**

In order to understand the significance of Pericles's erotic itinerary in relation to his quest for whiteness, we need the conceptual instruments that Dennis Britton forged in *Becoming Christian: Race, Reformation, and Early Modern English Romance*, where he explains that 'one of the primary desires of romance' is 'to transform and incorporate that which is different but desirable', and in Catholic and medieval English romances, the primary tool to effect such transformation and incorporation is conversion to Christianity.<sup>16</sup> In that medieval tradition, baptism and conversion have the power to radically transform the identity of the convert, and white skin functions as a precondition and sometimes as a consequence of that transformation and absorption into Christianity. Britton demonstrates that early modern English romances departed from that tradition because 'given the connections between race, lineage, and salvation in Protestant baptismal theology, neither in English churches nor in English romances could baptism be taken unequivocally to transform infidels'.<sup>17</sup> In other words, in early modern English romances, emerging racial formations responding to the emergence of European colonial projects and colour-based slavery in the Atlantic world — the 'spectre' that Chakravarty mentions — often manifest in moments of failed religious conversions. Now, consider our protagonist's erotic life. Apollonius's story is set in motion by a motif of failed conversion: his inability to secure the hand of Antiochus's daughter, subjected as she is to the authority of her incestuous father even as he successfully answers the riddle and 'he the king his sothe tolde' (448). Truth ('sothe'), understood here in multiple registers, does not bring light to those who choose to remain blind, and Apollonius thus fails to marry and symbolically bring into the fold of Christian truth Antiochus's daughter, who resembles the beautiful white-skinned Saracen converts of medieval romances. We can also

read Dionise's ingratitude through the lens of failed conversion: while Apollonius saved her and her city by feeding them and entrusted her with raising his daughter, her ungratefulness and betrayal reveal that her heart was untouched — Apollonius's grace failed to efficaciously transform and convert that woman's heart.

Only in Shakespeare and Wilkins's play, however, are those failed conversions colour coded, as the failed convert is poetically blackened. Indeed, it is Pericles, not Apollonius, who depicts Antiochus's relation with his daughter as 'black as incest' (1.2.76) committed in 'a bed of blackness' (1.3.89), and it is only the early modern Dionyza's 'black villainy' (4.4.44) that matched her daughter Philoten's being 'dark[ed]' like a 'crow' (4.2.32–5). In those scenes of failed conversion, the expanded symbolic register of colour moves beyond emotions into the realm of morality, which, as early modern blackface scholars have long known, consistently spilled over into the realm of somatic racial markers, just like humoural discourse.<sup>18</sup> Following Britton's interpretation, the racial other cannot be converted here, and association with racial Blackness becomes the means of excluding some white-presenting characters from whiteness because their behaviours do not align with the definition of whiteness.<sup>19</sup> In that sense, we are reminded that whiteness is an unstable conceptual assemblage drawing on various categories such as phenotype, religion, class, nationality, sexual manners, modes of civility, among others: the configuration of that assemblage is variable as each of those categories is weighted differently to redefine whiteness (and thus restrict its benefits to specific groups) at strategic junctures. In the words of Little, 'there is a long and complicated history of white racial assemblaging, that is, the coming together, crisscrossing, clashes, infusions, and confusions, of various modalities and heterogeneous ideas, images, genres, genealogies, terms, elements inter alia, to make something we can identify as "white people", something we can claim to be a thing of whiteness'.<sup>20</sup> In the pre-Christian world of *Pericles*, sexual manners (incest) and modes of civility (ingratitude) are particularly heavily weighted in the coalescing assemblage of whiteness.

By contrast with those inconvertible deceptively fair-looking women (Antiochus's daughter, Dionyza, and Philoten), Pericles's wife, 'the wondrous fair' Thaisa (2.5.36), and their daughter, the 'fairest' Marina with her 'white and red' (4.6.30), 'excellent complexion' (1.41), and fingers 'white as milk' (0.22), possess sexual manners and modes of civility that, in combination with their phenotype, grant them all the privileges of whiteness. Those privileges come with responsibilities, as it is their duty to uphold and protect whiteness through endogamous sexual practices, enacting what Hall identifies as the early modern English 'anxieties of an evolving monarchical nation-state in which women are the repository of the



symbolic boundaries of the nation'.<sup>21</sup> Thaisa and Marina's enlisting in the project of whiteness manifests primarily in how they choose their respective spouses. Indeed, the tournament scene in act 2 where Thaisa's suitors compete for her hand is eerily reminiscent of the casket scene in *The Merchant of Venice* (1600): with his shield featuring 'a Black Ethiop reaching at the sun' (2.2.20), and followed by a knight with a Spanish motto, the knight of Sparta reminds us of the Prince of Morocco followed by the Spanish Prince of Aragon, putting his mettle to the test to win fair Portia's hand.<sup>22</sup> In this configuration, Pericles is in the same position as Bassanio, and just like Portia, Thaisa finds a way to make the rigid tournament structure designed by her father accommodate her own wishes and favour the man she has chosen on her own — a cultural insider sharing her whiteness, values, and worldview. Thaisa takes a page out of the playbook of Portia, who is notorious for her anti-Blackness and anti-Semitism.<sup>23</sup> That George Wilkins should most likely have written the first two acts of *Pericles* suggests that Shakespeare chose a writing partner who knew his past work well.

In turn, the brothel scene in act 5, which we know was written by Shakespeare, and in which Marina learns that her first customers will predictably be a Spaniard, a Frenchman, and 'of every nation a traveler' (4.1.103), is a burlesque replay of the tournament scene in act 2. Marina uses her aristocratic breeding and skills to get out of sex work, and ultimately marries the governor of Mytilene, whose Greekness resonates with the intense cultural Greekness of Pericles's name (in Gower's source text, that character has the almost caricatural Greek name Athenagoras). Thus, Thaisa and Marina both perform their own casket scene: their chaste plot lines consist in actively avoiding racial mixing. Tellingly, they are both devotees of Diana, the 'goddess argentine', whitest of them all (5.1.327). Crucially, in Gower's medieval romance, the nationality of Apollonius's rivals during the tournament is never mentioned, and neither is the identity of the customers who would fain purchase Thaisa's favors in the brothel. The racist and xenophobic touches of those two scenes are Shakespeare and Wilkins's invention. Similarly, in Gower's romance, Thaisa does not meet her future husband in the brothel (she only meets him after she has found her father and been restored to her proper status); in other words, Gower's Thaisa does not need to convert her sexually dissolute husband to white/right sexual manners the way Marina has to convert hers. Shakespeare and Wilkins added that final conversion scene, and the successful nature of that conversion highlights the dependence of moral conversion's efficacy on the convert's ability, through his phenotype, ethnicity, and class status to claim some degree of belonging in the early modern assemblage of whiteness. This scene of moral conversion in the brothel, which contemporary spectators often find distasteful

or alarming for Marina's sake, is actually central to the play's romantic fashioning of whiteness.

Read in the light of this larger racial narrative, the motif of incest — which is explicitly staged at Antiochus's court, but, as Ruben Espinosa notes, symbolically underlies the relations between Thaisa and Marina and their respective fathers throughout the play — comes to represent the most extreme form of endogamy and self-replication in 'fairness'.<sup>24</sup> I share this reading with Chris Klippenstein who notices in her insightful review of the 2015 production of *Pericles* at the Stratford Festival that the production in question 'centred whiteness both within the story and in the act of storytelling itself' so that Antiochus's 'incest showed itself ... above all, through this production's insistence on the ubiquity of whiteness'.<sup>25</sup> Of course such incestuous self-replication is not only taboo but destructive. To quote Walter Cohen, 'the riddle's equation of cannibalism with incest — "I feed / on my mother's flesh" (1.1.65–6)' alerts us to the fact that such endogamous self-replication in whiteness actually constitutes lethal self-consumption.<sup>26</sup> However, by condemning Antiochus's incestuous relationship with his daughter through a racialized language of blackening that excludes incestuous people from whiteness — 'black as incest', (1.2.76), in 'a bed of blackness' (1.3.89), Pericles fails to draw the most valuable lessons he could have learned from that allegorical riddle and the episode at Antiochus's court. Instead of learning the dangers inherent in the project of whiteness, he doubles down: he may ultimately find a way out of incestuous dynamics, but not out of his self-destructive quest for whiteness.

### Questing for Restoratives

*Pericles* is 'a play subtly caught up in issues of nation-building, particularly the search for British national origins': that is because an important early modern anti-quarian narrative posited that the Phoenicians, otherwise known as Tyrians, had travelled westward in search of land and mineral resources and founded ancient Britain.<sup>27</sup> Thus, as Thomas Roebuck and Laurie Maguire astutely note, 'to an audience familiar with John Twyne's history (closely related to one of the sources of *Pericles*), Shakespeare and Wilkins's prince of Tyre, swept on a journey across the Mediterranean steadily acquiring new territories, cannot but have resonated with the ancient founding of the British nation'.<sup>28</sup> If that is so, Pericles's restorative quest for whiteness throughout the play became, via the logic of mythical origins, a metaphor for early modern England's self-fashioning as a white Protestant nation on the global stage. Something 'restorative' and usable in Gower's romance source texts for Shakespeare, Wilkins, and their spectators might thus have been

‘the diffractive medium of romance’s involvement in projects of empire’, which Geraldine Heng traces from the eleventh century onwards, and which, she shows, went hand in hand with romance’s role as ‘a literary medium that solicits or invents the cultural means by which the medieval nation might be the most productively conceptualized, and projected, for a diverse society of people otherwise ranged along numerous internal divides’.<sup>29</sup>

The answer to my initial question (What ‘restoratives’ does *Pericles* have in store for a diverse twenty-first century ‘us’?) may then lie in the play’s figuration of the ‘internal divides’ that Heng alludes to. Indeed, the fact that the characters most clearly involved in the project of whiteness in this play should be aristocrats is a good reminder that early modern racial discourses across Western Europe were first coined in aristocratic circles, framing nobiliary qualities as essential and hereditary in order to protect aristocratic privileges against any and all encroachments by non-blue-blooded subjects.<sup>30</sup> In its aristocratic protagonist’s quest for whiteness, *Pericles* captures a moment of historical overlap between the rank-based and phenotype-based paradigms of what I call the early modern racial matrix — a concept I fully develop in the introduction to *Scripts of Blackness*. While he uses a slightly different conceptual apparatus, Britton is similarly alert to the importance of the rank-based racial paradigm in his analysis of a later Shakespearean reworking of another medieval romance, *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, in which he notes:

the conjoining of race and class in crusade romance and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* suggests that race and class are sown in the same ideological soil. The two works reveal the processes by which discourses of race and class were becoming indivisible in the medieval and early modern periods, thus positioning race as a useful trope for representing class, and, vice versa, positioning class as a useful trope for defining the category of race.<sup>31</sup>

Unsurprisingly, then, resistance to the project of whiteness is voiced in the play by characters who do not benefit from aristocratic racial discourse: the fishermen who rescue Pericles in act 2 scene 1, giving him clothes, food, shelter, and crucial information. Gower’s source text has only one fisherman, who upon finding Apollonius shipwrecked, naked, and destitute, gives him some of his own clothes out of pity, shows him the way to Pentapolis, and sends prayers and good wishes his way (643–65). Shakespeare and Wilkins significantly expand upon that vignette and turn this good fisherman into a collective of three who are equally kind-hearted and generous (they retrieve his father’s armor for him and

open their community and resources to him, simply because they will not let anyone in need die) but who also voice a distinctively early modern anti-aristocratic political consciousness. For the fishermen, whose comments 'echo the language of the 1607 Midlands Uprising against landlord enclosures of the common land', what matters is resisting oppression of the many by a few 'rich misers' (2.1.29) and by 'drones that rob the bee of their honey' (2.1.45–6).<sup>32</sup> Their questions indirectly reveal that Pericles's inability to either beg or catch fish excludes him from the common economy of labour in which everybody else partakes (2.1.56–82), and they criticize 'the good king Simonides' (2.1.43) for failing to protect the working class despite his 'peaceable reign and good government' (2.1.100). As a result of the king's neglect, 'the great ones [men] eat up the little ones' (2.1.28). Even when they give Pericles his father's armor and outfit him for the tournament where he might win Thaisa's hand, the fishermen remind Pericles that fishing out that armor was their labour, and as such, deserves some future repayment (2.1.146–63). The fishermen's gentle assertiveness and keen sense of class interests bespeak a certain distrust of aristocratic behaviour that starkly contrasts with Gower's medieval romance, where it is Apollonius who immediately promises to reward the selfless fisherman:

And he him thonketh as he scholde,  
 And seith him that it schal be yolde,  
 If evere he gete his stat agein. (653–5)

Shakespeare obviously did not always figure working class characters as dissociating themselves from the project of whiteness: Trinculo and Stephano's dealings with Caliban on a colonial island three years later in *The Tempest* immediately come to mind. Rank and phenotype were two paradigms within the same early modern racial matrix; but that commonality did not automatically trigger solidarity between those racialized under those different paradigms (far from it). And ultimately, the fishermen's labour is what enables Pericles to enlist in the tournament and win the hand of Simonides's 'fair daughter' (2.1.105), thereby resuming his erotic quest for whiteness. But the fishermen's radical sense of communal solidarity nonetheless offers a viable alternative to the use of race as a system effecting, in Stuart Hall's words, 'the distribution of symbolic and material resources between different groups and the establishment of racial hierarchies'.<sup>33</sup> In other words, if *Pericles* offers, as Shakespeare's plays often do, any internal point of entry for destabilizing the toxic racial discourse that it shapes and disseminates, the fishermen are that point of entry. Theatre-makers who wish to

reclaim *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* as something greater than a man's romantic quest for whiteness and privilege, will surely find that point of entry a productive one.

Of course, that is only one point of entry into a larger quest for restoratives, and, as those of us who love seeing early modern drama performed know very well, theatre-makers' imaginations will not be constricted and will find ways to use early modern play-texts to tell new stories that scholars can hardly dream of. Let me conclude with one brief example. In October 2021, widely acclaimed director and veteran Shakespearean director Kent Gash directed the most magical public *Zoom* reading of *Pericles* for the Red Bull theatre in New York.<sup>34</sup> Gash's directing was incredibly alert to the politics of the people voiced in the fishermen's scene, and by using the same brilliant two actors (Michael O'Blenis and Anthony Michael Martinez) to play all the working class 'little fish' of the play who worry about their aristocratic leaders' neglect (the fishermen, the people of Tyre, the sailors, and more), he used double casting to radically amplify the fishermen's worldview and make it resonate throughout the production. Gash went further by symbolically putting the power of storytelling (Gower's) and the power of healing (Cerimon's) into the hands of the same regal Black actress (Michele Shay), and by deciding to cast Pericles and his family as Black Americans. Discussing this production with me, Gash disclosed that he read the play as

a fable or parable for adults ... about how the absurd brutalities visited upon Black people, people of the African diaspora and those who have been colonized ... and the lives lost, and the families destroyed, and the morals corrupted because you have been detached from your ancestry and your root — how that detachment could be healed through the telling of a story that addressed that ... I felt that there was an opportunity for this tale to inspire and to heal ... I felt that if there was some ancestral leadership in Gower, he was telling this tale for whatever community needed to hear it. Because even today, being Black, there are moments when we question whether or not we will be able to survive, because the brutalities and the absurdities continue to mount up. And so we need tales of healing, tales of resilience, tales of redemption and reconciliation that heal us enough for us to know that we can be reunited with our family, we can access the root, and we can rise and thrive. And in fact, we must, and we will, and there will be great joy in the doing of it.<sup>35</sup>

Gash's genius was to use the form of Shakespearean romance and its emotional intensity to heal the dislocations visited upon the Black American family by the Middle Passage and its aftermath. The reading climaxed during act 5 scene 1, when Marina and her father are reunited, finding in the play-text a most powerful

and generous 'restorative' for Black readers and spectators. It became very clear, during the subsequent interview, that Gash read *Pericles*'s quest for 'fairness' in moral, not racial terms, and that interpretive authority compellingly resides, for him, in the conceptual apparatus of modern readers and spectators, without much concern for 1608 epistemologies. Gash's magnificently directed reading (which might turn into a full-on production in years to come, should we be so lucky) demands that I reframe my opening question in slightly different terms at the close of this essay. The question is not whether *Pericles* has anything restorative in store for Black, Brown, and diverse twenty-first century audiences, but, rather, how scholarship that unearths all the toxic layers of plays like *Pericles* — such as early modern critical race and critical whiteness scholarship — might constitute a resource for theatre-makers who want to produce that play in an informed restorative manner. While that might be the subject of another essay, my hunch here is that artists who, like Gash, are incredibly skilled at finding materials for sustenance, hope, and community-building in early modern plays, will find supporting materials in our work too, and as always, they will engage with that work on their own terms, they will surprise us, and, for all involved, 'there will be great joy in the doing of it'.

## Notes

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I am grateful to *Early Theatre*'s peer reviewers, especially Ambereen Dadabhoy, for their keen and helpful suggestions.

- 1 'Shakespeare in Performance: Play'. *Internet Shakespeare Editions*. University of Victoria, [https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Theater/sip/play/Per/main.html#play\\_performance\\_list](https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Theater/sip/play/Per/main.html#play_performance_list).
- 2 All quotations to this play are from William Shakespeare, *The Play of Pericles, Prince in Tyre*, in *The Norton Shakespeare: Romances and Poems*, third edn, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Suzanne Gossett, Jean E. Howard, Katherine Eisaman Maus, and Gordon McMullan (New York, 2016), 139–206.
- 3 Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, 1995), 4, <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501725456>.
- 4 Ayanna Thompson and Benjamin Minor articulated this idea in response to Patricia Parker in "Edgar I Nothing Am": Blackface in *King Lear*, in *Staged Transgression in Shakespeare's England*, ed. Rory Loughnane, Edel Semple, and Jean E. Howard (New York, 2013), 153–64, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137349354\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137349354_11). For recent scholarship extending the domain of 'race plays' in the Shakespearean canon, see Patricia Akhimie, 'Racist Humor and Shakespearean Comedy' in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Ayanna Thompson (Cambridge, 2021), 47–61, and Andrew Hadfield, 'Race in Shakespeare's Histories' in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Ayanna Thompson (Cambridge, 2021), 62–76, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108684750>, as well as Ian Smith, *Black Shakespeare: Reading and Misreading Race* (Cambridge, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009224116>, and David Sterling Brown's forthcoming *Shakespeare's White Others* (Cambridge, 2023).
- 5 Jami Rogers, 'The Shakespearean Glass Ceiling: The State of Colorblind Casting in Contemporary British Theatre', *Shakespeare Bulletin* 31.3 (2013), 405–30, 411, 412, 422, <https://doi.org/10.1353/shb.2013.0039>. In her most recent monograph, Rogers reads Tony Richardson's 1958 production of *Pericles*, originally conceived as a tale of endurance around the figure of Paul Robeson, as an 'early example of cultural appropriation used to manufacture opportunities for performers of colour in Shakespeare'. Jami Rogers, *British Black and Asian Shakespearians: Integrating Shakespeare, 1966–2018* (London, 2022), 15, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350112957.ch-i>.
- 6 Margo Hendricks, *Race and Romance: Coloring the Past* (Tempe, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.54027/olvl5415>. Quotation excerpted from chapter one. The open access volume is unpaginated.

- 7 Urvashi Chakravarty, *Fictions of Consent: Slavery, Servitude, and Free Service in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 2022), 76–7, <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812298260>.
- 8 Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy*. (New York, 2003), 7. On the participation of Greek romance, and Heliodorus's *Aethiopika* in particular, in early modern racial formations predicated upon 'lineal descent' in England and France, see Noémie Ndiaye, "'Everyone Breeds in His Own Image": Staging the *Aethiopika* across the Channel', *Renaissance Drama* 44.2 (2016), 157–86, <https://doi.org/10.1086/688684>. On the significance of that very same tradition to authors in the Black diaspora, see Margo Hendricks's *Race and Romance*.
- 9 All *Confessio Amantis* quotations and line numbers are drawn from John Gower, *Confessio Amantis* vol. 1, ed. Russel A. Peck, trans. Andrew Galloway (TEAMS Middle English Texts, 2006), <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/peck-gower-confessio-amantis-book-8>.
- 10 Whiteness could function as a compensatory promise here because, as Harris explains, 'whiteness meets the functional criteria of property. Specifically, the law has accorded "holders" of whiteness the same privileges and benefits accorded holders of other types of property'. Cheryl L. Harris, 'Whiteness as Property', *Harvard Law Review* 106 (1993), 1707–91, 1731, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1341787>.
- 11 Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge, 2003), 69. By showing that melancholy was imagined in Renaissance Europe as a complexional imbalance associated with atheism, irreligion, or 'bad faith', Kim Coles helps us connect Floyd-Wilson's and Britton's arguments: 'black and brown skin eventually became an index of the religious melancholy residing within', thereby framing non-white people as inconvertible. Kim Coles, *Bad Humor: Race and Religious Essentialism in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 2022), xii–xiii, 2, <https://doi.org/10.9783/9780812298352>.
- 12 On the emergence of this new chromatic axis in what I call the racial matrix, see Noémie Ndiaye, *Scripts of Blackness: Early Modern Performance Culture and the Making of Race* (Philadelphia, 2022), 4–8, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2gz3zr2.3>.
- 13 Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama*, 78.
- 14 Arthur Little, 'Re-Historicizing Race, White Melancholia, and the Shakespearean Property', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67.1 (2016), 84–103, 92, <https://doi.org/10.1353/shq.2016.0018>.
- 15 Patricia Parker, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of Mode* (Princeton, 1979), 4, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400870646-003>.
- 16 Dennis Britton, *Becoming Christian: Race, Reformation, and Early Modern English Romance* (New York, 2014), 22, <https://doi.org/10.5422/fordham/9780823257140.001.0001>.



- 17 Ibid, 27.
- 18 See, among other early modern blackface specialists, Anthony Gerard Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* (Baton Rouge, 1987), Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Performing Blackness on English Stages, 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 2005), and Noémie Ndiaye, *Scripts of Blackness*.
- 19 Dennis Britton observes similar dynamics in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*: ‘Romance narratives attempt to establish the indivisibility of white skin, desirability and aristocratic class, but *The Two Noble Kinsmen* undermines this indivisibility by using images of Africanness to imagine the racial difference of undesirable white people’. Britton, ‘From *The Knight’s Tale* to *The Two Noble Kinsmen*: Rethinking Race, Class and Whiteness in Romance’, *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 6 (2015), 64–78, 66, <https://doi.org/10.1057/pmed.2015.3>. In that sense, *Pericles* (1607–8) offers a blueprint for reading *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1613–14).
- 20 Arthur Little, ‘Is it Possible to Read Shakespeare Through Critical White Studies?’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Ayanna Thompson (Cambridge, 2021), 268–80, 271, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108684750.018>. See also *White People in Shakespeare*, ed. Arthur Little (Arden Bloomsbury, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350283671>.
- 21 Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 9.
- 22 While the motto in question is Italian (‘Più per dolcezza che per forza’), Thaisa hears it as Spanish (2.2.25–7).
- 23 On Portia’s anti-Black and anti-Semitic racism, see Dennis Austin Britton, ‘Flesh and Blood: Race and Religion in the Merchant of Venice’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Race*, ed. Ayanna Thompson (Cambridge, 2021), 108–121, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108684750.008>.
- 24 Ruben Espinosa, *Masculinity and Marian Efficacy in Shakespeare’s England* (Farnham, England, 2011), 158, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315594156>.
- 25 Chris Klippenstein, ‘Review of Shakespeare’s *The Adventures of Pericles* (Directed for the Stage by Scott Wentworth; Directed for Film by Barry Avrich) at the Tom Patterson Theatre, Stratford, Canada. Staged 30 May–19 September 2015. HD Film Broadcast on YouTube as Part of Stratfest@Home, Streaming 25 June–16 July 2020. Viewed 2 July 2020’, *Shakespeare* 17.1 (2021), 102–6, 102, 106, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450918.2021.1890810>.
- 26 Walter C. Cohen, Introduction to *Pericles*, in *The Norton Shakespeare: Romances and Poems, Third Edition* (New York, 2008), 141–5, 144.

- 27 Thomas Roebuck and Laurie Maguire, 'Pericles and the Language of National Origins', in *This England, That Shakespeare: New Angles on Englishness and the Bard*, ed. Willy Maley and Margaret Tudeau-Clayton (Farnham, Surrey, 2010), 23–48, 28.
- 28 Ibid, 38–9.
- 29 Heng, *Empire of Magic*, 6.
- 30 On the genealogy of racial discourses, see Jean E. Feerick, *Strangers in Blood: Relocating Race in the Renaissance* (Toronto, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442686946>; Guillaume Aubert, "'The Blood of France": Race and Purity of Blood in the French Atlantic World', *William and Mary Quarterly* 61.3 (2004), 439–78, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3491805>.
- 31 Britton, 'From *The Knight's Tale* to *The Two Noble Kinsmen*', 76.
- 32 Cohen, Introduction to *Pericles, The Norton Shakespeare*, 143.
- 33 Stuart Hall, 'Subjects in History: Making Diasporic Identities', in *The House that Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York, 1997), 290, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478021223-020>.
- 34 Full biography of Kent Gash here: <https://tisch.nyu.edu/about/directory/drama/101937796>.
- 35 Full conversation available here: Bull Session 'An Interactive Online Discussion of *Pericles* and its History and Themes with Director Kent Gash, Scholar Noémie Ndiaye, and Members of the Companies', 28 October 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=frGZTtxH5uE>.