

"[M]ake your garden rich in gillyvors, / And  
do not call them bastards": Perdita and the  
Possibilities for Redemptive Interracialism

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Abstract

Of Shakespeare's plays, *The Winter's Tale* offers unique and until recently unexplored possibilities for interracial casting. With a black Leontes, *The Winter's Tale* can be seen as a redemptive alternative to *Othello*. Recent productions of *The Winter's Tale* have illustrated the fruitfulness of exploring racial issues in plays ostensibly not concerned with race and also the ambiguity that can result in an age of colorblind casting. Perspectives of directors and African-American actors, such as Curt Tofeland and Dmetrius Conley-Williams, are given from recent interracial productions of *The Winter's Tale*, with an emphasis on the desire of some black actors to embrace racial roles.

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*The Winter's Tale* is not a sexy play, and that is why it makes for a good interracial drama. *The Winter's Tale* has little potential for a hyper-sexualized interracial affair. There is no bed in *The Winter's Tale*, as in *Othello*; the whole of the play takes place in public spaces. Leontes and Hermione are prudish and decorous in their relations with one another, obsessed with virtue and fidelity. Even in his jealousy, Leontes does not indulge in the elaborate voyeuristic fantasies typical of adultery plots in Renaissance novellas and plays. Furthermore, whatever lasciviousness a director decides to inject into the first half of the play is inevitably diffused by the passage of sixteen years. Leontes and Hermione both endure a long period of celibacy, in which they mourn not only having lost each other, but also having lost their children. This is a family drama worthy of *Lifetime's* 8 pm programming, not *Showtime's* late-night prurience. In other cases, this very lack of libidinal passion might be taken as a weakness, but if we vet the play for its potential racial politics, the PG-rating thwarts the expectation that an interracial union will be acted out always with sweaty bodies. As Celia Daileader has demonstrated, directors intent on colorblind casting tend to cast black actors within lurid and steamy interracial relationships, breaking casting

barriers on the one hand, but also reinforcing racial stereotypes on the other (Daileader 2000). The persistent pattern of hyper-sexualized interracial unions unintentionally follows in the very tradition that for centuries associated black-white relationships with adultery. But interracial versions of *The Winter's Tale* depart from this tradition, not least because they feature not just a two-way interracial relationship, but a three-way interracial family. The union between Leontes and Hermione is undone and reconstituted by words, not dark deeds, and in its ultimate consummation their interracial relationship includes a third body, that of their child Perdita.

In the 2007 production of *The Winter's Tale* in Boston, Actors' Shakespeare Project attempted to investigate the potential for interracialism in *The Winter's Tale*. They brought in a middle-aged black actor, Ricardo Pitts-Wiley, the founder of the Mixed Magic Theater in Rhode Island, to play the protagonist Leontes. Cast opposite the lily-white Paula Langdon as Hermione, Pitts-Wiley would bring the element of race to a play that is often staged in a very white world (Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> In their original casting, the ASP also selected a mixed-race woman to play Perdita. In the words of associate artistic director Jennie Israel, "We cast the exact person who was right [for the role of Perdita], a woman whose mother was white and father was black, who looked like Paula [Langdon, who played Hermione] and who looked like she could have been the child [of the actors playing Leontes and Hermione, Pitts-Wiley and Langdon]" (Israel 2007). By bringing these actors together with guest director Curt Tofteland, of fame as the director of Kentucky inmates in the documentary *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, whom they presumed to have special insight from working regularly with many actors of color, they hoped they had a recipe for a fresh exploration of the interracial possibilities in *The Winter's Tale*. While their ultimate production failed to explore interracialism fully, it was provocative enough to consider the possibilities of a colorized *Winter's Tale*. With a black Leontes, a white Hermione, and a mixed-race Perdita, contemporary productions of *The Winter's Tale* like theirs offer revisions of Shakespeare's most famous interracial relationships, those of Othello and Desdemona, and Aaron and Tamora.

The ASP is not the first company to cast a black Leontes over the last few years; several recent productions have cast black leads in the play (Figures 2 and 3).<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it should be noted that companies have staged a few different racial permutations in *The Winter's Tale*: black Leontes and white Hermiones, white Leontes and black Hermiones, black Leontes and black Hermiones (Figures 4 and 5).<sup>3</sup> In some cases, Camillo and Polixenes are black; in a few cases, Perdita and Mamillius are played by actors of color, and in one case a black actor played Time. The variety of casting schemes bespeaks an era of colorblind casting. In the twenty-first century theater, many directors aspire to colorblind casting, but exactly what it means to be colorblind or postracial is open

to debate. As Ayanna Thompson points out, two very different tacit agreements often govern the relationship of theater troupes and audiences. In one, both actors and audiences work imaginatively to render race a less relevant or even irrelevant factor (Thompson 2006, 6-7). Humanistic directors of the last seventy years have aspired to a "meritocratic model," putting talent above outdated racial codes and defying audiences to leave race behind (6). Prior to the twentieth century, black actors appeared in only a few prescribed "black" roles — Aaron the Moor in *Titus Andronicus*, the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Othello* — but beginning in the 1940s, "black actors began to appear in nonblack roles without the aid of whiteface" (4). In the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, Joseph Papp's "systematic practice of colorblind casting in his New York Shakespeare Festival" allowed many black actors to debut in complex roles that had little to do with their race (4). Such casting broke barriers and propelled audiences toward a colorblind epiphany. Classical plays present perhaps the best opportunity for colorblind casting because, as William H. Sun has explained, "their plots are already so familiar that audiences do not have to decipher the character's ethnicity through the actor's physical features" (quoted in Thompson 2006, 12). Audience members see actors with recognizable ethnic traits, but they imagine how the character would have, or worse, should have looked. As is implied by its name, colorblind casting teaches audiences not to see race.

But should race be banished from the stage? The black playwright August Wilson called this kind of colorblind casting "an aberrant idea" that "blot[s] . . . out" black history and identity (Wilson 1996, 19). Wilson calls for an indigenous black theater, but inasmuch as Shakespeare remains one of the richest resources for American theater, ought we not to stage race in Shakespeare? Indeed, a different kind of "nontraditional casting" gives race a heightened relevance: "Actors of color [are] cast in roles not traditionally associated with race, color, or ethnicity" (Thompson 2006, 7). Directors and actors are not blind to color, but acutely attentive to the complexities of race and willing to explore or deconstruct race. Theater troupes do not assume that audiences "can or will be 'blind' to an actor's color, race, or ethnicity"; therefore, they "exploit this lack of 'blindness' by drawing attention to the actor's race" (7). They challenge audiences to look differently at familiar Shakespearean texts and to think critically about race in contemporary society. In the words of the artistic director Jennie Israel, who has led efforts at the Actors' Shakespeare Project to engage race in their productions: "I'm loath to send a whole bunch of white people out on stage to do Shakespeare. If we want to see our society in a different way, we have to represent it in a different way" (Israel 2007). Contemporary actors, including black actors, bring new perspectives to the bard's work:

Shakespeare was writing — bless his heart — in a limited culture. There was no frame of reference for him to [explore] race and culture. Everybody was one thing, completely

homogenized. So I can't sit here and blame him for it. I go to it through the other door, by bringing people of color to the work, who want to come to the work and be in the work, and people come and watch something represented on stage amazingly well which they wouldn't see normally. (Israel 2007)

If this latter kind of casting works towards a vision free of racism, it does so by way of a progressive understanding of the complex dynamics of race. It assumes that boundaries still need to be broken before theater can become blind to race. In Thompson's words, "A true colorblind/dialogical performance would challenge the production-reception contract by forcing a more open conversation about constructions *and* perceptions of race" (Thompson 2006, 17).<sup>4</sup> Recent productions of *The Winter's Tale* that feature a black Leontes do just that. They provoke audiences to reconsider interracial relationships on the Shakespearean stage. Of course, because some productions with a black Leontes do not explicitly signal to the audience that they intend to explore racism and interracialism, audiences are free to remain colorblind. The productions do provide, however, ample opportunity for audiences to consider the possibility of fully interracial Shakespeare.

### Updating *Othello*: Two Readings of *The Winter's Tale*

The first recorded performance of *The Winter's Tale* took place on May 15, 1611, about seven years after Shakespeare's more famous tragedy about jealousy, *Othello*.<sup>5</sup> In both, the central conflict is the same: the invidious rage of the protagonist leads to the death of his innocent wife. Several pairs of characters from the two plays parallel one another: the possessive and insecure husbands (*Othello* and Leontes), the loyal friends suspected of adultery (Cassio and Polixenes), the wives sacrificed to jealousy (Desdemona and Hermione), and the witnesses to the wives' innocence (Emilia and Paulina). And both plays take place in times when humans are more vulnerable to tragedy: *Othello* at night, and *The Winter's Tale* in winter. Critics have explored at some length the way both plays dramatize Elizabethan gender norms, critique patriarchy, and question the rules governing marriage.<sup>6</sup> A few critics have even pointed out how language from *Othello* reappears in *The Winter's Tale*, in reference to the perceived flirtations of the wives with their suspected paramours.<sup>7</sup> Though the two plays differ in other particulars, they resemble each other more than either resembles any other Shakespeare play.<sup>8</sup>

What is most peculiar about the similarity between the two plays is that while the first half of *The Winter's Tale* parallels and in some ways reproduces the entirety of *Othello*, the second half veers off in a different direction, offering an alternative ending. Critics have complained about the

time frames of both plays: *Othello* is far too compressed in time to allow the protagonist's jealousy to reach a murderous pitch, and *The Winter's Tale*, with a sixteen-year passage of time dividing it in two, defies Aristotle's unity of time and can feel disjointed. It appears to be a tragedy within a comedy. Certainly, the bard drew on Thomas Greene's *Pandosto* for the idea of the interposition of Time, as critics have shown, but the similarities between *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale* beg an explanation as well. By putting the plays in context with one another, we confront the possibility Shakespeare rewrote *Othello* by embedding it within a new, longer play, resurrecting the dead wife, redeeming the jealous husband, and even inserting the child that he refused to give Othello and Desdemona. Where the marriage of Othello and Desdemona ends in destruction and without issue, that of Leontes and Hermione weathers great tragedy and emerges intact, but for the loss of the older child. The wronged woman Hermione is restored to life; the jealous husband Leontes repents; the lost daughter Perdita is found; and thus the family is reunited.

Inasmuch as *The Winter's Tale* updates *Othello*, undoing its tragic conclusion, the question still remains whether it does so by removing the blackness of the protagonist or by replicating it. *The Winter's Tale* either offers mitigated tragedy with a white Othello or interracial resolution with a black Othello. These two possible ways to read *The Winter's Tale* as an update to *Othello* would not be colorblind in the strictest sense, but they would challenge twenty-first century audiences both to restructure the way they think about *Othello* and to embrace the staging of interracial families. For contemporary audiences, the fantastical setting of the play tempts the reader to imagine a postracial theater, but with a black Leontes it defies the dream of a colorblind Shakespeare and points to the historical problem of a whitewashed theater. Thus, *The Winter's Tale* has the potential both to portray a race-free world and to re-examine the relevance of race in *Othello*.

In one way, *The Winter's Tale* does seem to imagine a world outside history, in which race does not exist. In the Venice and Cyprus of *Othello*, characters such as Brabantio, Iago, and others act as proxies for the historical forces of racism, contributing to Othello's downfall and enforcing the taboo against interracial relationships. But the Sicilia and Bohemia of *The Winter's Tale* exist outside of history. Politics are embodied only in the friendship of the two kings, Leontes and Polixenes; the god Apollo looks over their realms; and forces of nature (in the form of a storm and a bear), not the forces of history, threaten the characters. In the words of British actor Hugh Quarshie, "We credit [Shakespeare] with sufficient imaginative power to believe that he could have fashioned a tale about a man coming to terms with the supposed betrayal and adultery of those closest to him without suggesting that a character's race determined his behavior. Did he not do precisely this in *The Winter's Tale*?" (Quarshie 1999, 10-11). For Quarshie, *The Winter's Tale* presents in some regards a preferable alternative to *Othello*. Under this reading, *The Winter's*

*Tale* revises *Othello* by removing Othello's blackness. Indeed, certain critics have found race to be irrelevant to the driving problems of *Othello*, jealousy and patriarchal rage, and therefore in one way *The Winter's Tale* clarifies *Othello* by removing race as a factor. *The Winter's Tale* atones for the first play's conflation of Othello's rage with his race. But while this second play, with its whitewashed Othello, circumvents the problems of race, it also loses the opportunities to confront and challenge the injustice and foolishness of racism. To whitewash the play would evade the important questions that *Othello* poses.

If *The Winter's Tale* replicated Othello's race, rather than erasing it, this would offer a progressive revision of the earlier play. Inasmuch as *The Winter's Tale*, with a black Leontes, overcomes taboos against interracial relationships, it does so by shifting the focus of interracialism away from titillating black-white sex, or "biracial porn," towards the product of interracial unions (Daileader 2000, 179): that is, toward interracial children. *The Winter's Tale* has a greater potential than *Othello* for a progressive portrayal of interracialism principally because it stages interracial children. Whereas the jealous protagonists and virtuous wives in *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale* resemble each other respectively, Othello and Desdemona of course have no child to consummate their union. As Arthur Little has noted, "In *Othello*, Iago promises that Othello's demonic seed will bring forth gennets, monsters, and nightmares (1.1.110; 1.3.394-5; and 1.3.365-66, respectively). The play threatens to bring forth a child, but does not deliver" (Little 1993, 323). *The Winter's Tale* not only delivers two children, but dramatizes both the difficulties and the redemptive possibilities of interracialism. The first child Mamillius becomes a kind of precursor to the modern tragic mulatto: he is not colored enough to convince Leontes of Hermione's fidelity, and he suffers death because his face cannot be read as either black or white. But where one mulatto child dies, the play offers a second, Perdita, one who was literally "lost" because of her unreadable mixed-race, but who eventually is redeemed and assimilated into the interracial family. Whereas Othello's marriage to Desdemona ends without issue and with both their deaths, *The Winter's Tale* ends with an interracial family re-union. By the end of *The Winter's Tale*, the black Leontes' marriage to Hermione promises to be both fruitful and lasting. Not only is Perdita found, but she also marries Florizel. Interracial relationships continue into another generation.

### Giving Name and Character to the "Blackamoor Child": Updating *Titus Andronicus*

With a depiction of interracial children, *The Winter's Tale* (1611) offers not only a revision of *Othello* (1604), but also of *Titus Andronicus* (1594). In the conventional Shakespearean canon, only Tamora and Aaron of *Titus Andronicus* deliver a biracial child. Perhaps conceived in that

"lonely part of the forest," where the leaves cast a "chequer'd shadow" on the ground and his parents lay "wreathed in each other's arms" (*Titus Andronicus*, 2.3.15, 25), this child represents the possibilities of interracial unions. It is unfortunate, if not damning, that the one mixed-race child that Shakespeare writes into his plays is imagined as the product of two of his worst villains. The child often is not listed as a character in the list of dramatis personae, and he has no name. In a stage direction, we come to know him simply as the "Blackamoor child" (4.2.52). The child thus risks becoming a mere prop, rather than a character. The one redeeming detail about him is that like the young Lucius, to whom Shakespeare does give lines, Aaron's child does live on beyond the end of the play. He is one of the few children to survive a Shakespearean tragedy. Nevertheless, the twenty-first century theater should not allow this nameless "blackamoor Child" to be the only interracial child on the Shakespearean stage.

*The Winter's Tale* provides one of the best opportunities to write into Shakespeare two more mixed-race children, Mamillius and Perdita, not least because the play already echoes *Titus*. Whereas in most interracial dramas evidence of blackness is a sign of illegitimacy, in a colorized *Winter's Tale*, as in *Titus*, blackness is a sign of "royal blood" (*Titus Andronicus*, 5.1.49). Although the nurse calls the birth a "joyless, dismal, black, and sorrowful issue" and the child "as loathsome as a toad / Amongst the breeders of our clime," Aaron takes the child in his arms and praises the black appearance of his son, envisioning for him a noble future (4.2.66-68). Using racist epithets — "black slave" and "thick lipp'd slave" — as terms of endearment and arguing that "coal-black" is a superior "hue," Aaron blesses and exhorts his son to embrace his racial background as a source of power (4.2.99-100, 120, 175). Aaron calls his child "the picture of my youth" and finds his own "seal . . . stamped in [the child's] face" (4.2.108, 127). "Look," he says, "how the black slave smiles upon the father, / As who should say 'Old lad, I am thine own'" (4.2.120-21). With certainty and triumph, Aaron proclaims the child his "first-born son and heir" (4.2.92). *The Winter's Tale* resonates with language from Aaron's defense of his child. Just as Aaron takes his child and looks into his face, in a colorized *Winter's Tale* Leontes wants to learn to read race in his children's faces in order to trust his relation to them. Examining his son's visage, Leontes three times asks if this was really a "copy" of his own face, or of another man's (*The Winter's Tale*, 1.2.120-21). A black Leontes would be looking for black features. Importantly, whereas in *Titus* the child's blackness implies illegitimate royalty, or royal illegitimacy, confirming the deep cultural connections between interracialism and adultery, blackness in *The Winter's Tale* would verify the children's legitimacy. As children of a black king and a white queen, they would be rightfully colored.

### Hearing Interracialism in *The Winter's Tale*

In addition to offering variations of earlier passages from *Othello* and *Titus*, *The Winter's Tale* also contains racially-inflected passages that can be drawn out in productions that explore the possibilities of interracialism. For example, Shakespeare's black and white imagery corroborates the casting of a white Hermione and a black Leontes. The play associates the color white with Hermione and black with Leontes, as in Hermione's white hand (*The Winter's Tale*, 1.2.102) and Leontes' black deeds (3.2.170). The reference to Hermione's white hand is echoed when Florizel waxes eloquent about Perdita's white hand: "this hand, / As soft as dove's down and as white as it, / Or Ethiopian's tooth, or the fann'd / snow that's bolted / By the northern blasts twice o'er" (4.4.356-60). The imagery of white hands implies Hermione's link to her daughter, but leaves open the question of paternity: Perhaps Perdita was indeed illegitimate because she was so white. The comparison of Perdita's white hand to an "Ethiopian's tooth" further compounds this sense of doubt that her father could have been of an African background. For his part, Leontes uses imagery that could be linked to black identity. In two rejoinders to Camillo's insinuation that the suspicion of adultery is unfounded, Leontes asks if Camillo thinks he is "so muddy, so unsettled" as to imagine the affair and later puts it another way, "Could man so blench?" (1.2.330).<sup>9</sup> Spoken by a black Leontes, the lines draw attention to Leontes' blackness as a royal and masculine attribute, of which lesser hues, whether muddy or blanched, would imply cowardice or infirmity of mind. Later, having realized the wrong he has done, Leontes laments that his deeds are "black," which could be read as an oblique reference to the color of his skin (*The Winter's Tale*, 3.2.170), echoing Othello's own use of the word black to describe vengeance (*Othello*, 3.3.450).

The possibility of a black Leontes could also become apparent in Leontes' obsession with his son's face. Equating visual appearance with identity and lineage, Leontes tries to find the blackness in his son's face. When Leontes asks if Mamillius's face is a "copy" of his own, or of another man's (*The Winter's Tale*, 1.2.120-1), the boy's answers do not allay Leontes' fears, for Mamillius can just repeat what has been told him: "I am like you, they say" (1.2.206). Leontes quizzically notes the "smutch" on his son's nose, as though to wonder if, but then deny that, the darkness could have been evidence of his paternity. Leontes voices concern about his own face as well; twice he refers to his own "brows," which in facial expression convey his frustration, but as racial features would also differentiate him from others (1.2.118-45). Later, in a peculiar digression, Mamillius focuses precisely on the "color of [his caretaker's] brows" and prattles on about "black brows." The boy attempts to do what Leontes is trying to do: to "learn" from "faces" (2.1.8-14). In any instance of



doubt about a child's paternity, the facial features of parents and child are relevant, but especially so when race is involved.

Furthermore, Perdita and Polixenes' peculiar digression about "streak'd gillyvors" explores the values attached to intermarriage and even to interracialism, as the audience knows that Perdita is herself a "streak'd gillyvor" (*The Winter's Tale*, 4.4.82). The light banter between Perdita and Polixenes about whether to graft different flowers together resonates not only with the question of whether the ostensibly country-born Perdita should marry the noble Florizel, but also with the question about interracialism in Perdita's own paternity and the unknown interracial implications of the young lovers' union. A "streak'd gillyvor" is a hybrid variation. Early botanists used the term "gillyflower" to refer to varieties including and similar to wallflowers and cloves, such as carnations, which Perdita mentions, and even African gillyflowers and African marigolds (*OED Online*). Both Perdita and Polixenes refer to the mixed quality of the flowers, their "piedness" (4.4.87), Perdita despising their impurity and Polixenes defending them as natural. Perdita calls streaked gillyvoors "nature's bastards" and refuses to take their "slips" for grafting, which she considers an unnatural and impious "art" (4.4.83, 85, 87). But Polixenes argues that grafting is quite natural, saying:

we marry  
 A gentler scion to the wildest stock,  
 And make conceive a bark of baser kind  
 By bud of nobler race: this is an art  
 Which does mend nature, change it rather, but  
 The art itself is nature. (4.4.92-97)

Beyond the direct references to human behavior ("we marry," "conceive," "stock," and "race"), Perdita and Polixenes use other botanical terms that resonate with human experience. The words "slip" and "scion" were in one sense synonymous as the twigs, sprigs, or shoots used for grafting, but they also both referred to human descendants and heirs, especially young ones (*OED Online*). Jacobean audiences would have understood the analogy to intermarriages between men and women of different classes, and critics for four centuries have taken this reading, but today's audiences would probably understand the passage as referencing interracial mixing.<sup>10</sup> Such an interpretation would be valid, based on the consistent reference not just to intermarriage, but also to the relation of color to grafting and interbreeding. The word carnation had a double meaning, referring not just to the varieties of the clove-pink, but also to human flesh color, which resembles the light rosy pink of the flower; The "streak'd gillyvoor" is the perfect metaphor for a mixed-race child; and Perdita vows

that she would not graft such flowers together any more than she was "painted" (4.4.101). Critics have noted the irony that Polixenes in effect exhorts Perdita to marry with a highbred man, advice he later takes back, but for contemporary audiences, his concluding lines could have a different resonance. His counsel to "make your garden rich in gillyvors, / And do not call them bastards" seems like a progressive vision of interracial society (4.4.98-99). Considering that Leontes seven times had called Perdita a "bastard," it is with an obvious subtext that this line appears, calling for a re-reading of Perdita's valuation. Not only is she a legitimate daughter, but in contemporary productions she could be a legitimate, and royal, mixed-race child. "Streak'd gillyvors" thus become objects of admiration and affection, rather than scorn. Would it be too romantic a flourish to publish a playbill with streaked gillyflowers for the cover-art or to charge the ushers to hand out the real thing? (Figure 6). Perhaps even this little touch could have prompted more viewers in Boston to contemplate the interracial possibilities of the drama they witnessed.

### Seeing Interracialism in *The Winter's Tale*

Notwithstanding the great potential to hear interracialism in *The Winter's Tale*, visual evidence of racial themes no doubt has the greatest influence on an audience's interpretation. Any given audience's decision to view a black actor as a black character depends first upon the skin color of the actors, and then upon the costume, choreography, and visual gestures accompanying the delivery of lines, all of which can communicate to the audience the significance or insignificance of race. Directors and actors signal to the audience whether racial or ethnic characteristics of the actors are incidental or interpretive, and the audience follows along accordingly (Pao 2006, 27). Because these decisions begin with directors, it is incumbent upon them to orchestrate an explicit exploration of race and interracialism, rather than merely planting subtle possibilities. Recent productions of *The Winter's Tale* demonstrate that an audience will not view black actors as relevantly-black characters without visual cues beyond the color of the actors' faces. Perhaps because of the headway made by colorblind casting, audiences are loath to view black actors as black characters unless they are told to do so.

In a 2006 Florida production of *The Winter's Tale*, directors Roberto Prestigiacomo and Kathi E. B. Ellis used black-and-white costumes to emphasize the difference between the black Leontes and white Hermione. As one critic observed,

By casting a black actor as Leontes, Ellis succeeded in providing the audience with one possible explanation for Leontes' otherwise puzzling lack of motive for his obsessive jealousy: the visual impact of the casting tempted the audience to believe Leontes' rants were justified and to view the light-skinned Mamillius and Perdita — who bore no physical

resemblance to Leontes — as the love children of Hermione and Polixenes. (Stodard 2006, 85)

In this case, the director overtly ventured the hypothesis — What if Leontes were black? — and let the audience read what it would. In this case, the production took advantage of the expectation that a black character would produce a child of color, aligning Leontes' suspicion with that of the audience. By revealing that the light-skinned Perdita was Leontes' child, the play undermined the expectation that one could see racial or familial relations. The play succeeded by staging interracial families, but also by warning against the pitfalls of racist vision.

In the 2007 production staged by the Actors' Shakespeare Project in Boston, casting difficulties led to contradictory intentions and ambiguous messages. Before director Curt Tofteland came on board, the artistic directors had cast a black Leontes (Ricardo Pitts-Wiley), a white Hermione (Paula Langdon), and a mixed-race Perdita. But later, when the actress cast as Perdita left the project, the artistic directors had to choose between two young women "of color," one of whom was African American, and the other, Christi Miles, born in Mexico of Mexican parents. By casting Miles, they took a risk that the audience would not view her as a person of color (Figure 7). The director and the artistic directors were aware that Perdita's racial features could determine whether viewers would read the racial features of her parents, Leontes and Hermione, as critical aspects of their characters, or as incidental traits of the actors — and if audience members misread Perdita's racial features, their perception could alter the plot of the play and lead to confusion and frustration. As associate artistic director Jennie Israel put it, "If Leontes is black, and Hermione is so white, and Perdita is white, and Polixenes is white, then the play does not work, because Perdita is Polixenes' child. That's just logic" (Israel 2007). For her part, Israel intended Perdita to be viewed as a mixed-race character; she even encouraged the light-skinned Miles to go to a tanning salon to enhance her readability as a person of color. But director Tofteland largely abandoned the idea of staging an interracial family because he did not believe audiences would see it. With the original cast, Tofteland felt they "had a lineage as far as having actors of color," but Miles was too light-skinned to be perceived as a child of a black man and a white woman: "She was very Caucasian, and the little boy was also very Caucasian. We couldn't really deal with the gene pool in the same way that we would have if we had gone with the original casting" (Tofteland 2007). Pitts-Wiley concurred: "If Mamillius had been a mixed-race child, it would be a different ball field" (Pitts-Wiley 2007). The original vision of interracial possibilities was thwarted by casting difficulties outside of their control. As Tofteland put it, "I wanted to help those audience members who were very reality-driven to be able to see: 'Okay, I see Perdita is a biracial actor, and we have a Caucasian Hermione,

and an African American Leontes: Okay, that makes sense.' In the end result, we had a far different picture" (Tofteland 2007). Tofteland's language is consistent with his belief that directors have to take into consideration the fact that many audience members are "reality-driven" — that is, fixated on visual signs of race. They look for evidence of the "lineage" and "gene pool" in the "picture" they "see" on stage. As children of a black Leontes and white Hermione, Perdita and Mamillius had to look like mixed-race children. Just as Israel, Tofteland, and Pitts-Wiley rejected the idea that the audience could be blind to color, they doubted that an audience could imagine Perdita's color where they did not see it. If audience members could not be expected to view blackness as incidental, they certainly would not fill in the blanks by assuming that actors' whiteness was incidental. If characters were to be black, they assumed, the actors would need black faces. As for the question of whether or not Pitts-Wiley, without a mixed race actor playing Perdita, should be viewed as a black Leontes or a white Leontes, Israel, Tofteland, and Pitts-Wiley left that interpretation to the audience. They had begun with the goal of bringing a legible racial storyline to *The Winter's Tale*, but they finished with one black actor who was only playing a black character if you wanted him to be. Colorblindness was the default, but the play came with an option of interracialism. In Pitts-Wiley's coy way of putting it, "Were we an interracial family?" (Pitts-Wiley 2007).

Judging by the reactions of audience members, the majority did not see any clues that they were watching an interracial drama. Not a single audience commented about race to Tofteland or actor Ricardo Pitts-Wiley; Israel found no reference to race in the fifty audience feedback forms she read, though many of them did compliment Pitts-Wiley's performance; and not one of the reviewers of the play discussed race or interracialism. One complicating factor might have been the casting of other actors whose ethnic features appeared to be inconsequential. Alongside the black Ricardo Pitts-Wiley as Leontes, the casting of the light-skinned Haitian-American Doublas Theodore as Camillo and Korean-American James Ryen as Florizel gave the impression that this was a colorblind production (Figure 8). Nevertheless, the lack of response about interracialism from critics and audience members does not prove that the production failed to lead the audience through questions about race and interracialism. In Israel's opinion, "race went in, even if it didn't come out their mouths. They saw it: It went in somewhere, even if they kept it for later" (Israel 2007). Two reviewers did describe Pitts-Wiley's performance as "Othelloesque," but such a pat description of a black actor does not imply that the reviewers saw interracialism in the play (MacDonald 2007 and Riba 2007). It would have been better if the reviewers had found the black actor's performance not "Othelloesque," but rather, black but different.

### Black Actors Signifying on Blackness

With the exception of the version in Florida, recent productions of *The Winter's Tale* with black actors in the role of Leontes illustrate the plight of black actors on the Shakespearean stage, permitted to look black but not to explore what blackness means. Uncomfortable with the idea of colorblind casting, black actors nevertheless end up with roles more often than not wherein their racial identity is a subtle addition to a character, rather than roles that allow them to explore race and racism in a way that they are equipped by long experience to do. They want to play black characters in Shakespeare beyond Othello and Aaron, and it is up to directors to find them characters such as Leontes to play as black. In recent interviews, two black actors who have played Leontes in the last decade, Ricardo Pitts-Wiley and Dmetrius Conley-Williams, renewed Hugh Quarshie's call for a Shakespeare that deals consciously, overtly, and intelligently with race.

Ricardo Pitts-Wiley takes what he calls his "blackness" to be one of his greatest reservoirs to draw from as an actor:

I go into every role with my first option available — the first level of acting — what are you? That's your stuff, that's what you bring to the table. One of my problems with colorblind casting is that very often actors of color are denied the opportunity to bring their stuff to the table, because it's about conforming to the other guy's stuff. But other times you say, I'm going to bring my stuff to the table, and directors say, that wasn't necessarily what I thought it would be, but that's what it is. (Pitts-Wiley 2007)

Directors express reluctance to let a black actor bring the entirety of his experiences to his role, Pitts-Wiley implies, both because it does not fit the directors' expectations for a white character, and other times because it departs from the directors' ideas of blackness. Navigating the precarious passage between Scylla of faux-whiteness and the Charybdis of caricatured blackness, Pitts-Wiley looks for the best way to express who he is and to "deny people the opportunity to build on their racial attitudes" (Pitts-Wiley 2007). Colorblind casting, for Pitts-Wiley, is the wrong way to confront racism. He prefers to bring his "blackness" to the stage and explore it in his own way, engaging both actors and audience members in a way that challenges them to redefine race or delve deeper into their own assumptions. Pitts-Wiley acknowledges directors' reluctance to cast black actors in a non-traditional role, such as that of Leontes, but he takes some responsibility for casting himself more often than not in black roles: "Either [directors] don't want to give it to me, or sometimes I'm not interested. I'm a black man. . . . Why are you asking me to be something that I'm not?" (Pitts-Wiley 2007). Pitts-Wiley's rhetorical question is ironic, of course, as by definition the actor's job is "to be something [he] is not," but with the confrontational question Pitts-Wiley underscores an important, if contradictory desire: Pitts-Wiley wants to be who he is on stage. This

entails using his experiences as a black man and challenging what people think he is or want him to be. Just as audiences want to see themselves as in a mirror, to see their experiences at a distance in order to grapple with and understand them, Pitts-Wiley wants, as an African American, to bring his experiences to bear on his roles, and colorblind casting does not let him. For this reason, we can understand why Pitts-Wiley enjoys playing Othello: "When I play Othello, I'm bringing all my blackness. One hundred percent" (Pitts-Wiley 2007). Where actors such as Hugh Quarshie have expressed concerns about the limitations inherent to the role, Pitts-Wiley finds it to be one of the few roles in which directors give him free reign to use his experiences as an African American. It is not just the Shakespearean canon that has restricted black actors to a few black characters: Directors have carried forward these limitations, denying actors like Pitts-Wiley an opportunity to signify on blackness by playing old roles as black roles.

One of the principal tasks of black actors is to resist being cast as virile and violent men and, instead, to bring fresh and subtle interpretations of blackness. Dmetrius Conley-Williams lists Leontes, whom he played in 2000, and Aaron the Moor, whom he played in 2007, as two of his favorite roles, because they allowed him to portray black characters in a way that defied stereotypes about black manhood (Conley-Williams 2007). Leontes not only raged like Othello, but also suffered over time and found limited redemption. Aaron played not just the villain, but also the devoted and persistent father who ensured the survival of his son. In these roles, Conley-Williams could signify in his own way on blackness. He has been cast in less complex roles and directed to exploit his black image rather than deconstruct it, and he has found that he has to resist directors' racist view of his black body:

I have to remind directors. I've been in certain plays and played lovers, and there are things that really bother me about being a black actor. They want to bring up the sexual things without having the relationship. I decided about three years ago: I'm not taking my shirt off in another production. A lot of times I'm cast in a show, they want me take me shirt off. I do work out, but I'm not doing it anymore. . . . I've gotten into arguments with a couple of costumers, where I refuse to take my shirt off. . . . I'm not taking my shirt off unless everyone else has their shirts off. (Conley-Williams 2007)

With little faith in colorblind casting, Conley-Williams evaluates directors even as they evaluate him. He looks for racially-progressive directors who embrace his "color" *and* his "culture" (Conley-Williams 2007). With the distinction between color and culture, Conley-Williams delivers a devastating critique of colorblind casting, which too often means that directors "want just the color of my skin and for me to do my best BBC voice" (Conley-Williams 2007). Protesting

the manipulation of his black body as an object to be displayed and even fetishized, Conley-Williams not only keeps his clothes on, but also has developed a unique delivery of the English language; he utilizes the regional culture he knew growing up in rural Kentucky. Culture, for Conley-Williams, includes the "way I move my body, the way I shake my head, the way I snap my finger at somebody, or stomp my feet the way Dad used to stomp at me" (Conley-Williams 2007). Extremely personal, culture encompasses Conley-Williams' full range of experiences, which of course includes experiences with race.

For both Pitts-Wiley and Conley-Williams, complex black roles for black actors are part and parcel of a progressive society. Pitts-Wiley envisions the "true American theater" as a pluralistic stage to which everyone is welcome to bring who they are and what they have experienced (Pitts-Wiley 2007). Conley-Williams shares this commitment to exploring each other's cultural experiences, which includes race and racism, even on the Shakespearean stage: "I will always be a black actor. And I want to be a black actor. I want to live in a civilization where people recognize each other's color and still get along. That's true diversity. That's truly progressive" (Conley-Williams 2007). Implied in Conley-Williams's statement is the idea that the way people look at black actors on stage has a direct link to the way people look at African Americans on the street.

As both actors see it, a dialogue has to take place between director and actor long before a public performance if the production is to succeed in challenging audiences to explore interracialism. In his Mixed Magic Theater, Pitts-Wiley has used Shakespeare and other classical works to explore contemporary issues, such as race. But Curt Tofteland, Pitts-Wiley's director in *The Winter's Tale*, believes that Shakespeare transcends racial difference. In his work with Kentucky inmates, Tofteland lets black inmates bring racial perspectives to productions, but he does not set out to adapt Shakespeare to our time. It is not surprising, then, that Pitts-Wiley and Tofteland, by both of their accounts, never talked about race in preparing to stage *The Winter's Tale*. Conley-Williams apparently experienced similar miscommunication when he played Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* in 2000 in Lenox, Massachusetts. In his own words he "was probably cast not as a black Leontes," but if his director had talked to him about race, Conley-Williams would not have had to guess about the director's intentions. Conley-Williams himself believes that directors who cast black actors have made a choice to cast black characters whether they want to think so or not:

[W]henver a person of color plays any Shakespeare character, it becomes a black Shakespeare character. I don't believe in colorblind casting, because you can't get past a person's color. And you shouldn't get past a person's color. You should recognize: "I'm casting a black man as this, or I'm casting an African American lady as this." (Conley-Williams 2007)

Conley-Williams points to the disjuncture between his own perspective that color is and ought to be ever visible and the director's assumption that race could be invisible or at least insignificant. Where colorblind casting would leave an audience ignorant of race, Conley-Williams's ideal relation among director, actor, and audience involves conscious "recogni[tion]" and exploration of race. The play should dwell on race, not "get past" it. Conley-Williams emphasizes that directors cannot deal passively with race, passing the buck as it were to the audience:

Directors like to cast a black actor, because it's something different, but they just want to leave it at that. They really don't want to get into it. There is a lot of skimming the surface of things. Like, "Let's suggest it, but let's not get deep into it." They leave the interpretation up to the audience. But nobody really wants to go to that place. If they let audience interpret it as they want to, no one gets in trouble. . . . It's putting racism on stage that people don't want to deal with. (Conley-Williams 2007)

If the Shakespearean theater is to put up a mirror to our contemporary society and facilitate self-critique, directors have to extend to black actors the freedom to explore blackness in a way that they determine, and directors have to cue audiences to the focus on race and racism.

### What If? The Possibilities of Interracialism in Shakespeare

Interracial couples deserve interracial children, and this is nowhere more true than in Shakespeare. To watch Othello and Desdemona's relationship, over and over, come to naught is counterproductive unless it is balanced in the theater by interracial relationships that come to fruition despite hardships. Theater-goers have seen interracial sex in theater and on stage for several decades, and they are ready to see interracial families that triumph and redeem. *The Winter's Tale*, surely, is not the only play with the potential to be interracialized. There is not a play in Shakespeare's work lacking the potential for interracial families. But *The Winter's Tale* does offer a compelling starting point because it so directly revises the iconic interracial relationship in Shakespeare found in *Othello*.

This essay offers an elaborate "What if?" What if we read *The Winter's Tale* as an update and response to *Othello* — and even to *Titus Andronicus*? Literary critics are warned to avoid such speculation, but directors and actors are not. Indeed, the fundamental question made possible by the theater is "What if?" To read race into *The Winter's Tale* may seem like a violation of Shakespeare's "original intent," but the bard himself was willing to appropriate stories, revise myths, and speculate about history. A winter's tale, after all, was in Shakespeare's day an unbelievable, fantastic story — what better opportunity, then, to explore the possibility of forbidden interracial relationships?



Though interracialism may not have been overtly at stake in *The Winter's Tale* as first written and performed, a twenty-first century version of the play exploring interracialism follows the impulse that animated the bard in the first place: the impulse to reframe and imagine anew. This essay tempts readers to imagine race in *The Winter's Tale* and offers reasons that this colorized version would be worth imagining.

We need not wonder how *Othello* might have been different if Desdemona had borne Othello children and if the two had been given the benefit of time as in *The Winter's Tale*, for in recent productions of *The Winter's Tale*, the black Leontes experiences the redemption that Othello did not. Though in *Othello* Shakespeare dared to stage an interracial relationship, he just as quickly stifled it. The relationship between Othello and Desdemona produced no interracial offspring. It was doomed from the beginning by Iago's ineffable mal-intent, as though Iago stood in for Elizabethan racists who would resist the phenomenon of interracialism. But Shakespeare introduced two key differences in his later play that he withheld in the former: time and offspring. With a black Leontes, *The Winter's Tale* becomes the only Shakespeare play to stage an interracial family that continues into the next generation. True to life, the interracial family encounters difficulties — but true to our best aspirations, it prevails.

This essay's question, "what if" Leontes were black and Perdita a mixed-race child, emphasizes the larger question at stake in an interracial drama: "What if" blacks and whites intermarried freely? Even if Elizabethans were not ready to explore the full possibilities of interracialism, today's audiences would do well to explore further this important "What if?" But by and large, audiences are too willing to be colorblind, and therefore they require challenging visual and verbal renditions of familiar Shakespearean dramas to jerk them out of their Elizabethan reveries and provoke them to consider the timeliness of Shakespeare rather than its timelessness. Directors have to be the first to ask "What if," and they have to let actors, both black and white, work out the questions on stage.

### Notes

1. From 25 January to 18 February of 2007, the Actors' Shakespeare Project in Cambridge, Massachusetts, performed the *The Winter's Tale* with a black Leontes. Figure 1 features a production photograph by Kippy Goldfarb, *The Winter's Tale* Production Photos, 2007, Actors' Shakespeare Project, available online at <http://www.actorsshakespeareproject.org/press/images.html>, accessed 8 March 2007.
2. See Stodard 2006 and Anonymous 2006.

3. For a description of a production with a white Leontes and black Hermione, see Pett 2004. For a description of a production with a black Leontes and black Hermione, see Weber 2000 and Gutman 2000.
4. The Non-Traditional Casting Project uses the term "conceptual casting" for productions that use actors' ethnic features to give a play greater contemporary resonance. As Angelo Pao describes it, conceptual casting moves "a production from the field of artistic representation to that of cultural criticism" and seeks to "elicit fresh readings of the plays." She adds that "The desired impact can only be achieved if spectators not only notice the color of the actors but simultaneously activate their consciousness of the social, historical, and cultural implications of racial difference" (Pao 2000, 15).
5. All quotations from *The Winter's Tale*, *Titus Andronicus*, and *Othello* come from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, second edition (Shakespeare 1997).
6. On gender in the two plays, see Cohen 1987; Danson 1994; Neely 1985; and Vanita 1994.
7. On the similarity of phrases from the two plays, see Rossetti 1962; Apseloff 1984.
8. Of course, the two plays diverge from one another in various ways. The two protagonists, Othello and Leontes, differ not only in terms of their apparent race, but also in age (Othello is older), in rank (Othello is chief military officer, while Leontes is king), and in relation to the community they serve (Othello is an outsider). Furthermore, critics have pointed out that Leontes' jealousy is unexplained in comparison to Othello's. And whereas Othello voices love for Desdemona, *The Winter's Tale* offers less evidence of Leontes' love for Hermione (see Vanita 1994). Likewise, Leontes' jealousy is mysterious: while Othello falls prey to an external voice, that of Iago, Leontes' jealousy is internal (see Trienens 1953). Because *The Winter's Tale* compresses the tragic half of its story into the first three acts, it has a short-hand quality that has led at least one critic to conclude that the play fails to attain the sublime in the way that *Othello* does (see Mowat 1969). Mowat systematically differentiates the plays from one another in terms of plot, character, and religious resonance.
9. "Blench," as an intransitive verb, could mean to flinch, shrink, or quail, or to become pale or white (*OED Online*).
10. For an extensive gloss of this passage, which makes no reference to race, see Turner and Haas 2005, 351-59.

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Figure 1. Black Leontes, White Hermione, I [Ricardo Pitts-Wiley and Paula Langdon]. Actors' Shakespeare Project, Cambridge, Mass., January 25-February 18, 2007. Photograph by Kippy Goldfarb. Used with permission.

Figure 2. Black Leontes, White Hermione, II [Robert Strain, Annemaria Rajala]. Play bill for the South Florida Shakespeare Festival, August 3-27, 2006. Permission pending.

Figure 3. Black Leontes, White Hermione, III [Dmetrius Conley-Williams and Kelly Cawley]. Shakespeare and Company, Lennox, Massachusetts, 2000. Photograph by Kevin Sprague. Internet Shakespeare Editions, University of Victoria, 2005.] <http://ise.uvic.ca/Theater/sip/artifact/18036/main.html>. Used in accordance with copyright policy.

Figure 4. White Leontes, Black Hermione [Steve Hendrickson and Marie-Francoise Theodore]. Minneapolis, Minnesota, May 2004. Photograph by Peter Vitale. Permission pending.

Figure 5. Black Leontes, Black Hermione [Keith David and Aunjaune Ellis.] From the New York Shakespeare Festival at the the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, July 6-16, 2000. Photograph by Michael Daniel. Used with permission.

Figure 6. "The fairest flowers o' the Season Are our Carnations & Streak'd Gillifloweres." Doris Hunt, *The Flowers of Shakespeare*. Exeter: Webb and Bower, 1980. Illustration in the public domain.

Figure 7. Perdita and Leontes [Christi Miles and Ricardo Pitts-Wiley]. Actors' Shakespeare Project, Cambridge, Mass., January 25-February 18, 2007. Photograph by Kippy Goldfarb. Used with permission.

Figure 8. Haitian-born Doublas Theodore as Camilo, Korean-American James Ryen as Florizel, and Mexican-born Christi Miles as Perdita. Actors' Shakespeare Project, Cambridge, Mass., January 25-February 18, 2007. Photograph by Kippy Goldfarb. Used with permission.

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