

The 2021 Josephine Waters Bennett Lecture: On Protean Acting: Race and Virtuosity

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Anachronism:

1. An error in computing time, or fixing dates; the erroneous reference of an event, circumstance, or custom to a wrong date.
2. Anything done or existing out of date; *hence*, anything which was proper to a former age, but is, or, if it existed, would be, out of harmony with the present.

(*Oxford English Dictionary*)¹

Wake Work:

“The disaster of Black subjection was and is planned; terror is disaster and ‘terror has a history’ and it is deeply atemporal.”

“We, Black people, exist in the residence time of the wake, a time in which ‘everything is now. It is all now.’”

(Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*)²

In November 2020, Manohla Dargis and A. O. Scott, the *New York Times* film critics, published an article entitled “The Century’s Greatest Actors,” in which

This essay benefited from a lot of generous feedback from friends and colleagues. While there are too many to name individually, I hope they know how grateful I remain. The strengths of this essay stem from their insights, but the weaknesses remain my own! I would also like to acknowledge the institutions that invited me to deliver early drafts of the talk: Cornell University, De Montfort University, Harvard University, Princeton University, the University of Toronto, and Yale University. Most of all, I am grateful to Clare Carroll, the 2018–20 President of the RSA, and Carla Zecher, the Executive Director of the RSA, who invited me to give the Josephine Waters Bennett Lecture at the virtual RSA conference in 2021, on which this essay is based.

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “anachronism”: <https://www.oed.com/oed2/00007764>.

² Sharpe, 5 and 41.

they proclaimed, “We are in a golden age of acting—make that platinum.”³ Celebrating the fact that their list of the top twenty-five actors from the last twenty years “looked beyond Hollywood,” Dargis and Scott declared that while there are Oscar winners on their list, “there are also character actors and chameleons.”⁴ One of the “radical shape-shifting” actors on the list is Tilda Swinton, whom Dargis characterized in the following fashion:

The woman of a thousand otherworldly faces, Tilda Swinton has created enough personas—with untold wigs, costumes and accents—to have become a roster of one. She’s a star, a character actor, a performance artist, an extra-terrestrial, a trickster. Her pale, sharply planed face is an ideal canvas for paint and prosthetics, and capable of unnerving stillness.⁵

I am interested in the way that Swinton’s “pale, sharply planed face” is praised for being so malleable: as Dargis says, “an ideal canvas for paint and prosthetics.” Swinton’s paleness—her whiteness—is appended to her ability to be a “trickster,” to sustain paints and prosthetics, and to radically shape-shift. Swinton’s acting craft is rendered visible to Dargis, because her “canvas” is “pale.”

Is whiteness required to have one’s acting craft linked with shape-shifting when one is deemed a star? Dargis and Scott’s list, after all, was not in praise of the best working actors, those men and women who populate the worlds onscreen. Rather, it was a list of the century’s “greatest” actors, and inherent in such a formulation is the notion that these actors do something different and extraordinary. While Dargis and Scott’s list of the top twenty-five actors of the twenty-first century is remarkably diverse with black, Indigenous, South Korean, Chinese, and Latinx actors included among its ranks, none of the actors of color are praised for shape-shifting; none of them are described as possessing faces that are ideal canvases for mutability; and none are described as being ideal for “paint and prosthetics.” The adjective used most often by Dargis and Scott to praise the actors of color on their list is *charismatic*. Denzel Washington’s “acting feels inextricable with his charisma”; Mahershala Ali possesses a “subtle craft and unshakable charisma”; and Sônia Braga has “old-school charisma.”⁶ Moreover, none of the white actors on Dargis and Scott’s list were praised for their charisma.

What is the difference between being praised for “radical shape-shifting” and being charismatic when critics and audiences identify and evaluate actors as

³ Dargis and Scott.

⁴ Dargis and Scott.

⁵ Dargis and Scott.

⁶ Dargis and Scott.

stars? On the most basic level, the difference stems from assumptions about craft (i.e., the labor of acting) and innate talent (i.e., inherited traits). This is not unlike the underlying assumptions that see black athletes being praised for having innate physical talents, while their white counterparts are praised for their discipline and dedication (think, for instance, about how the quarterback Tom Brady has been discussed in the popular media). If black actors are praised for being charismatic instead of shape-shifting, when and how did this begin? And how exactly is that related to the understanding of Proteus and protean transformations? I will argue that the terms we use to praise contemporary star acting traits stem from the birth of racialized performances. For, while the history of acting techniques and critiques is often analyzed and presented through specific historicized lenses that render them discrete and separate (e.g., Restoration acting techniques are often treated as discrete from contemporary ones), there are through lines that have been erased, ignored, and denied when it comes to the history of cross-racial performances. We must ask ourselves: what is at stake if we accept theater historians' disavowal of transhistorical or cross-period narratives, approaches, and methodologies?

I want to think through the ways that performing race, as opposed to being perceived as a racialized actor, are assessed and rewarded in acting, and I will draw connections from the early modern period through the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century. Having recently been accused of being anachronistic in such an endeavor, I want to make it clear that I view my approach as being in line with Christina Sharpe's "wake work," in that I, too, have "been trying to articulate a method of encountering a past that is not past."⁷ While the seventeenth century is not the same as the twenty-first century, that past is not past. The waves that rippled through the early modern London theaters continue to roll through twenty-first-century American ones. We, as academics, have been very good at creating and policing periodization. Our modern academic structures in literature and history, after all, frequently reveal their colonial underpinnings by upholding and rewarding those who adhere to subspecializations segregated by geography, time, and/or methodology. For example, the subfields of black Atlantic studies, early modern studies, and early transatlantic theater history can and do overlap temporarily, but the scholars in those fields are rarely in dialogue with each other because their methodologies and archives have been artificially segregated. Academics have been less good at creating ways to see and think through the systems that create and sustain inequities. Like Sharpe, I am asking "what kinds of ethical viewing and reading practices must we employ, now, in the face of these onslaughts?"⁸ What narratives and histories are we

⁷ Sharpe, 13.

⁸ Sharpe, 117.

enabling, erasing, and/or repeating if we do not recognize that many forms of oppression and terror are recursive, churning from one century to another, heedless of scholarly temporalities and divisions? What happens when we allow our scholarly work to reflect the repeating, recurring, and looping phenomena of the ocean's waves? What happens when we allow ourselves the freedom of an unfettered movement that has for too long been the provenance of the few (mostly men; mostly white men as well)?

It is fitting, then, that one of the governing metaphors for this short essay is Proteus, the shape-shifting, prophetic, pre-Olympian sea god who hailed from the island of Pharos off the coast of Egypt. In Homer's telling in *The Odyssey*, Menelaus was trapped on the waters outside of Egypt "for twenty days / by gods. No winds appeared to guide [his] ships / across the water's back" until Eidothea, the daughter of Proteus, took pity on him.⁹ She told him that

A deathless
old sea god haunts this place, named Proteus
of Egypt, who can speak infallibly,
who knows the depths of seas, and serves Poseidon.¹⁰

The only trick is that this Egyptian god "will change shape / to every animal on earth, and then / water and holy fire."¹¹ If Menelaus can successfully trap Proteus and withstand his transformations, Proteus will reveal not only how to get back home but also "what happened in your home, both good and bad, / while you were gone on this long, painful journey."¹² When captured,

The old god still remembered all his tricks,
and first became a lion with a mane,
then snake, then leopard, then a mighty boar,
then flowing water, then a leafy tree.¹³

Proteus's "tricks" encompass transformations into all manner of nonhuman animals, natural objects, and elements in the natural world. While there are a few other classical texts that offer differing narratives about Proteus, Homer's narrative has persevered and Proteus has become a symbol of versatility, mutability, and shape-shifting. Decades ago, A. Bartlett Giamatti revealed how widespread references to Proteus were in early modern European literature. Looking at

⁹ Homer, 4.359–61.

¹⁰ Homer, 4.381–84.

¹¹ Homer, 4.415–17.

¹² Homer, 4.390–91.

¹³ Homer, 4.455–58.

Italian, Latin, and French sources, Giamatti argued, “Proteus will appear before us successively in his guises of artist, lawbreaker, and lawgiver.”¹⁴

Yet I will focus exclusively on early modern English references to Proteus because a slightly different narrative emerges. For now, I want to store in the corner of our brains the fact that Proteus was Egyptian and prophetic, and I want to pause and reflect upon the fact that those attributes rarely figure in the symbolic logic that has been attached to him in these early modern English references. Why? What narratives and histories are being enabled, erased, and/or repeated when Proteus’s prophetic, African identity is forgotten? Thinking through Christina Sharpe’s “wake work,” which seeks to create “a method of encountering a past that is not past” for blacks in the diaspora, I will argue that our Egyptian, prophetic sea-god may provide a way to encounter the waves anew. We have been constrained, like Proteus was when he was trapped by Menelaus, but we may find ways to transform ourselves in the wake of that violence; we may find ways to see more clearly; we may find ways to free our scholarship.

English references to Proteus and to Protean states of being began to surface with greater regularity in late sixteenth century texts. I will spend time going through examples of early modern uses of Proteus and Protean to demonstrate that:

1. shape-shifting initially had negative connotations;
2. shape-shifting was frequently associated with color changing;
3. references to Protean and chameleon changes were often linked to idolatrous religions (i.e., non-Christian ones) and racialized people; and
4. a Protean shift occurred in the 1630s when shape-shifting became associated with an actor’s ability to play racialized roles.

Although I will not provide many nineteenth-century examples, I will spend a little time on the nineteenth-century fad of the Protean farce. I want to chart a course through Proteus’s uses in English to argue that racial impersonation created the concept of the Protean actor, a concept that continues to be a white property. Indeed, Culture Central, a “collective voice of the cultural sector in the West Midlands” in the UK, recently created the “More than a Moment” pledge for arts organizations to “take radical, bold, and immediate action, to dismantle the systems that have for too long kept Black artists and creatives from achieving their potential in the arts and cultural industries.”¹⁵ Arts organizations that sign the pledge admit, “We recognize that the perceived quality

¹⁴ Giamatti, 444.

¹⁵ More than a Moment Working Group, 1.

and value of artistic work has too often been related to its proximity to whiteness.”¹⁶ The notion of the shape-shifting, Protean, star actor is a white property. There are few, if any, star actors of color who are read, identified, and/or praised for being shape-shifting and Protean. And yet, I will conclude with the possibility of further transformations, mutations, and shape-shiftings—what I am calling Protean Wake Work.

Shape-shifting initially had negative connotations

Most of the early uses of Proteus in English are linked with the negative connotations of being unstable in one’s beliefs, especially religious beliefs; chameleon-like in one’s behavior, like the supposedly changeable nature of women; or intentionally false in one’s actions and/or words, like the devil himself. For instance, Henry Bull’s 1577 English translation of Martin Luther’s Latin commentaries on the Psalms (*Psalmi Graduum*), contains this reference, “For the deuill, the father of all heresies, is such a Proteus, so slippery and full of sleights, that we shall neuer knowe howe or which way to lay hold on him.”¹⁷ And Shakespeare’s Richard, Duke of Gloucester, clearly capitalizes on the devilish connotations of Protean behavior in *King Henry VI, Part 3* when he boasts:

I can add colours to the chameleon,
Change shapes with Proteus for advantages,
And set the murderous Machiavel to school.
Can I do this, and cannot get a crown?¹⁸

More often than not, the sixteenth-century English writers who employed references to Proteus and Protean were asking how a man can be trusted if he changes shapes and beliefs for his own advantage: mutability was viewed negatively, while stability was valued positively.

Shape-shifting was frequently associated with color changing

As is clear from the references above, many early modern texts associated Proteus not only with shape-shifting but also with color mixing. Proteus was frequently coupled with chameleons, the lizards who change their hue to camouflage their bodies in their surroundings.¹⁹ Because Proteus was frequently yoked with a chameleon-like ability to shift, Proteus too became connected with an inconsistency in color. This close connection is explicit in Thomas Hudson’s 1584 translation of Guillaume Du Bartas’s *History of Judith in*

¹⁶ More than a Moment Working Group, 6.

¹⁷ Luther, sig. 9b.

¹⁸ Shakespeare, *King Henry VI, Part 3*, 3.2.191–94.

¹⁹ Edgar Wind comments on the connections between chameleons and Proteus in his chapter “Pan and Proteus” in *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*: see Wind, 191–217.

Form of a Poem, in which the craftiness of the Roman leaders is described as being inconsistent in both form and “hewe”:

Ye sonnes of craft, beare ye as many faces,
 As Proteus tak[e]s among the Marine places,
 And force your nature all the best ye can
 To counterfait the grace of some great man:
 Camelion like, who take to him ech hewe
 Of black or white, or yellowe greene or blew,
 that comes him next.²⁰

A leader who is but a “counterfeit of grace” enlists shape-shifting and color changing as tools to deceive the people according to the logic of Hudson’s translation.

Sometimes the perception of color changing adhered to Proteus even more directly. For instance, in Thomas Drant’s 1567 translation of “Horace his epistle to Maecenas,” “the people” are described as “a beaste of manye braynes” that should not be consulted about their governance. Their vagaries are exemplified by their frequent desire for the situation they do not possess/inhabit:

In wedlocke (Lorde) how he admyres the blesse of single lyfe?
 Unmaryed, he swears him bleste, alone which hath a wyfe.
 What knot can hould this Proteus, that varies thus in hewe?
 The pore man What? merrie I hope he too muste change his stew.²¹

While it is clear that “hewe” here means “situation,” it does not shake off the implication of color entirely. Aaron the Moor in Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus* articulates the logic of this rhetoric, when he denigrates Chiron and Demetrius’s lack of fealty to their half-brother with the changeability of their whiteness: “Fie, treacherous hue, that will betray with blushing / The close enacts and counsels of thy heart.”²² Again, the mutability of both form and color were negatively associated with a lack of commitment and constancy.

References to Protean and chameleon changes were often linked to idolatrous religions (i.e., non-Christian ones) and racialized people

Stephen Gosson’s 1582 anti-theatrical tract may be the first English text to explicitly link Proteus with acting, and Gosson condemns actors, playwrights, and plays for being “suckt from the Deuilles teate, to Nurce vp Idolatrie.”²³

²⁰ Du Bartas, sig. 46b.

²¹ Horace, sig. 25a.

²² Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, 4.2.119–120.

²³ Gosson, sig. 21b.

Refuting Thomas Lodge's defense of the theater as an entertainment that can instruct, Gosson argues that: "the Poet with Proteus cut the same fit to his owne measure. . . . Which inuincible proueth on my side, that Plays are no Images of trueth, because sometime they handle such thinges as neuer were, sometime they runne vpon truethes, but make them séeme longer, or shorter, or greater, or lesse then they were, according as the Poet blowes them vp with his quill."²⁴ Gosson then admits, "I may boldely say it, because I haue seene it, that the *Palace of pleasure, the Golden Asse, the Aethiopian historie, Amadis of Fraunce, the Rounde table*, baudie Comedies in Latine, French, Italian, and Spanish, haue beene throughly ransackt, to furnish the Playe houses in London."²⁵ Gosson's example of the fluidity—both in the playwrights' minds and the actors' bodies—between playing the extremes of an early English history and an Ethiopian one strikes me as important in the way that Proteus is being understood and employed in this moment in history. Gosson links his belief in the perversion of this fluidity with non-Christian faiths: "I would wish the Players to beware of this kind of schooling, least that whilst they teach youthfull gentlemen how to loue, and not to loue; how to woo, and not to woo, their schollers grow as cunning as the Persians."²⁶

Echoing this type of logic, Antonio in the induction scene in Marston's *Antonio & Mellida* (1602) worries that he has to play multiple parts in the play, and he worries about his ability to distinguish the different characters in his performance. Finding it an impossible task, Antonio declares "thad bene a right part for Proteus or Gew: ho, blinde Gew would ha don't rarely, rarely."²⁷ In order to play multiple parts, one must either be Proteus or an unbelieving Jew. Thus, Persians, Jews, and Ethiopians are rhetorically linked with Proteus and acting.

A Protean shift occurred in the 1630s when shape-shifting became associated with an actor's ability to play racialized roles

Interestingly, almost all the early modern English playwrights included references to Proteus or Protean, including Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, William Shakespeare, George Chapman, Ben Jonson, Thomas Dekker, John Marston, Thomas Heywood, John Fletcher, Francis Beaumont, Phillip Massinger, and James Shirley. While the late sixteenth-century English references to Proteus and Protean were all pejorative, especially when linked with acting, in the early to mid-seventeenth century a shift occurred. Suddenly

²⁴ Gosson, sig. 34b.

²⁵ Gosson, sig. 35a.

²⁶ Gosson, sig. 28a.

²⁷ Marston, "Induction."

Proteus was linked positively with Roscius, the famous Roman actor whose name became an epithet of praise for skillful acting. The first example I have been able to find comes from Thomas Randolph's prefatory poem to his 1632 play *The Jealous Lovers*, which praises the actor Thomas Riley:

I Will not say I on our stage have seen
 A second Roscius; that too poore had been:
 But I have seen a Proteus, that can take
 What shape he please, and in an instant make
 Himself to any thing; be that, or this,
 By voluntary metamorphosis.
 When thou dost act, men think it not a play;
 But all they see is reall . . .

.....

In deeper knowledge and Philosophie
 Thou truely art what others seem to be,
 Whose learning is all face: as 'twere thy fate
 There not to act, where most do personate.²⁸

This is a startling bit of praise not only for transforming Protean transformations into something positive and laudable, but also for linking a shape-shifting acting style with believability and realism ("men think it not a play"). Riley, according to Randolph, appears "not to act," while other actors seem to "personate." This bit of praise seems to be the genesis for the terms used to separate star actors from lesser-skilled, working actors. Star actors are Protean; working actors "personate."

Furthermore, Protean transformations in acting were explicitly associated with an actor's ability to perform and inhabit racialized characters in the Caroline period. In the 1633 edition of Christopher Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, Thomas Heywood included a prologue that was read at the play's restaging at the Cockpit. In the prologue Heywood praises Edward Alleyn for playing Marlowe's most memorable roles, opining:

And He, then by the best of Actors play'd:
 In Hero and Leander, one did gaine
 A lasting memorie in Tamberlaine,
 This Jew, with others many th' other man
 The Attribute of peerelesse, being a man
 Whom we may ranke with (doing no one wrong)
 Proteus for shapes, and Roseius for a tongue,

²⁸ Randolph, "To his deare friend, Thomas Riley."

So could he speake, so vary; nor is't hate
 To merit in him who doth personate
 Our Jew this day, nor is it his ambition
 To exceed, or equall, being of condition.²⁹

In remarkably similar logic and rhetoric to Randolph's, Heywood describes Alleyn as both a Roscius and a Proteus and negatively compares other actors as only being able to "personate." Yet, Heywood makes it explicit that part of what made Alleyn's talents remarkable was his ability to play non-Christian, racialized figures like Tamburlaine and Barabas, the Jew of Malta. Alleyn was recognized and praised for being a "Proteus of shapes" for playing roles that transformed him by means of racial prosthetics.

Very similar terms were employed by Richard Flecknoe to praise Alleyn's chief acting rival, Richard Burbage, another early modern acting star. Reflecting on the differences between the early English theaters and the late seventeenth-century ones, Flecknoe declared:

It was the happiness of the Actors of those Times to have such Poets as these to instruct them, and write for them; and no less of those Poets to have such docile and excellent Actors to Act their Playes, as a Field and Burbidge; of whom we may say, that he was a delightful Proteus, so wholly transforming himself into his Part, and putting off himself with his Cloathes, as he never (not so much as in the Tying-house) assum'd himself again until the Play was done . . . so as those who call him a Player do him wrong, no man being less idle then he, whose whole life is nothing else but action; with only this difference from other mens, that as what is but a Play to them, is his Business; so their business is but a play to him.³⁰

Again, it is remarkable to note that Proteus is no longer a pejorative term; instead, Burbage is a "delightful Proteus," who wholly transforms himself for the roles he undertakes. Similarly, Burbage's Protean transformation is described as being complete and realistic ("he never . . . assum'd himself again until the Play was done"). And once again, Burbage's acting is described as a craft, a set of skills, that he took to master as "his Business," which includes cross-racial impersonation.

An anonymous elegy mourned Burbage's death because it signaled the end of his performances as Othello:

But let me not forget one chiefest part
 Wherein, beyond the rest, he mov'd the heart,

²⁹ Heywood, "The Prologue to the Stage, at the Cocke-pit."

³⁰ Flecknoe, sig. 51a–51b.

The grievèd Moor, made jealous by a slave,
 Who sent his wife to fill a timeless grave,
 Then slew himself upon the bloody bed.
 All these and many more with him are dead.³¹

Burbage's "chiefest part," Othello, required all the skills that Flecknoe praised as "his business," and Burbage's business credentials were inextricably linked with his versatility (playing lots of famous parts) and his "paint and prosthetics" parts, most notably Othello.

What might account for the Protean shift in the 1630s when quality acting—the skill of acting stars—was suddenly being praised as shape-shifting? By the Caroline period, English theatergoers had experienced sixty to seventy years of cross-racial impersonations. One scholar tabulates that between 1579 and 1642 there were at least fifty plays with racialized figures, and another counts at least seventy productions with black characters.³² There was enough theater history and experience for audiences and writers to construct the notion of the Great Actor, and he was often featured in roles that included and showcased cross-racial impersonation. Looking back in time and constructing the notion of the Great Actor who worked in the earliest English commercial theaters, writers in the Caroline period identified great acting skill with an ability to transform oneself into other, racialized personas.

How much distance and difference is there between the praise of Richard Burbage as a "delightful Proteus" for playing the "grievèd Moor" and the feting of Tilda Swinton for her "radical shape-shifting"? Swinton does not apply racial prosthetics (unless we ponder carefully the application of white makeup to her face), but her skill is visible precisely because she has a "pale" face that "is an ideal canvas for paint and prosthetics." Is the past past?

The nineteenth century's Protean farce

Although I do not have the space to do justice to the nineteenth-century theater history that I have been exploring, I will end with a few examples of how Proteus and Protean acting transformations sedimented into cross-racial impersonations in that era. In the early nineteenth century, a new performance fad emerged that has been called the Protean farce. It centered on one performer portraying wildly different roles in rapid succession, and frequently involved quick costume changes and physical transformations. As one scholar has summarized, the Protean farce involved "crossing boundaries of gender, race,

³¹ Quoted in Furness, 396.

³² Burton, 92; Chapman, 86.

nationality, age, and class with each character introduced.”³³ Charles Mathews popularized the genre with his *At Home* sketches, in which he imitated different people of different classes with different accents (e.g., an “old Scotch lady,” French urbanites, and rural Englishmen). Mathews was looking for new material when Stephen Price, the manager of the Park Theatre in New York, brought him to the US in 1822.

Mathews was initially frustrated by his trip to America. Writing to his friend James Smith on 23 February 1823, Mathews complained that “there is such a universal sameness of manner and character, so uniform a style of walking and looking, of dressing and thinking,”³⁴ and he worried he would not have enough material for a new show. The uniformity among early Americans, he worried, would neither be funny nor highlight his acting techniques, skills, and bravura.

But Mathews explains that he found something new and different, “specimens” of “black gentry.”³⁵ He crowed, “I shall be rich in black fun. I have studied their broken English carefully.”³⁶ By 25 March 1824 Mathews debuted his new one-man show, *A Trip to America*, in which he performed the new material he had gathered in the US, including the following skit and song about his supposed visits to the “Niggers Theatre”:

I take the opportunity of visiting the Niggers Theatre. The black population being, in the national theatres, under certain restrictions, have, to be quite at their ease, a theatre of their own. Here I see a black tragedian (the Kentucky Roscius) perform the character of Hamlet

To-*by*, or not to-*by*, dat is de question,
 Wedder it be noble in de *head*, to suffer
 De *tumps* and *bumps* of de outrageous fortune,
 Or to take up de arms against a sea of *hubble bubble*,
 And by *opossum*, end 'em.

No sooner had he said the “*opossum*,” which he meant for “oppose them,” than a universal cry of “Opossum! Opossum! Song! Song!” ran through the sable auditory. This, I learnt from a Kentucky planter, was a great favourite with the negroes, and a genu-*ine* melody. I was informed that “Opossum up a Gum Tree” was a national air, a sort of “God save the King” of the negroes,

³³ Schweitzer, 175.

³⁴ Quoted in Mrs. Mathews, 284.

³⁵ Quoted in Mrs. Mathews, 289.

³⁶ Quoted in Mrs. Mathews, 289.

and that being reminded of it by Hamlet's pronunciation of "oppose 'em," there was no doubt but that they would have it sung.³⁷

While it is unclear if Mathews used the aid of racial prosthetics when performing *A Trip to America*, his audiences often recalled his performances as if he had been physically transformed. There are several artistic sketches from *A Trip to America* that depict his black characters as looking black. In other words, Mathews was heralded as a Protean virtuoso for his ability to shape-shift, and central to his shape-shifting was this cross-racial performance at the heart of his Protean farce.

At the same time, there were black performers who were attempting their own cross-racial performances. The most famous examples stem from the black actors at the African Theatre in New York, including James Hewlett and Ira Aldridge. But I would like to focus on one earlier example, Richard Crafus (ca. 1791–1831, b. Maryland?), an American sailor who was captured by the British Admiralty in the War of 1812 and was sent to Dartmoor Prison in Devonshire, England, in October 1814. The prison, which was built in 1809, was organized into seven equal-sized buildings. While the prison was not at first segregated, the white American prisoners objected to having to live with blacks. So, the Dartmoor officials made "No. 4 the black's prison,"³⁸ and Crafus became the unofficial king of Number 4.

Memoirs written by three white American prisoners of war discuss their favorite pastimes at Dartmoor. One explained, "We had two theatres in Dartmoor; one in the cock-loft of No. 4, the other in that of No. 5. In the former, the actors were mostly blacks; in the latter, they were all whites. . . . The scenery, decorations and dresses of this theatre had been got up by the French prisoners, who had been confined at Dartmoor, and who went away shortly after the Americans began to come in. They were very good, and were purchased of the Frenchmen by the negroes. The performances in No. 5 [the white building] were altogether of a higher order, but the scenery and decorations were not so good."³⁹ The historian Jeffrey Bolster explains, "Weekly or twice-weekly performances in Number Four cost viewers six pence (four pence for seats in the rear) and included. . . the central attraction—Shakespeare."⁴⁰

The performances of Shakespeare at Number 4 flourished with the black prisoners playing to packed houses. In fact, they were so popular that the audiences were fully integrated. One prisoner noted in his diary, "Yesterday evening

³⁷ C. Mathews, 190.

³⁸ Pierce, 33.

³⁹ Hawthorne, 238–40.

⁴⁰ Bolster, 120.

Mr. Fellows and I went over to the No 4 prison among the blacks to see a play performed . . . such another crowding you never saw[,] for my part I got along side of a great he Negro about seven feet high[,] when he sat down 'twas with difficulty I could see over his head."⁴¹ Yet, one white American prisoner reserves harsh words for a production of *Romeo and Juliet* in Number 4. He notes, "The female parts were played, as they were in London in the early days of drama, by boys; and with their appropriate dresses, and being properly painted, they did the thing well enough. The only exception I ever noticed was in No. 4, where I witnessed a tall, strapping negro, over six feet high, painted white, murdering the part of Juliet to the Romeo of another tall dark-skin."⁴² It is unclear why the white prisoner, Benjamin Frederick Brown, thought that the black actor, whom many assume was Crafus, was "murdering the part of Juliet," but the white paint that the actor wore seems to spark his derision. White male actors playing female parts "properly painted" was a part of Shakespearean performance history, according to Brown, but a black actor in whiteface seems one step too far for him. Black bodies in racial prosthetics are assessed to be improperly painted; they are not assessed as being Protean or shape-shifting. Rather, they are viewed as doing violence, "murdering" the part.

A Protean conclusion

The *OED*'s second definition for anachronism proclaims, "Anything done or existing out of date; *hence*, anything which was proper to a former age, but is, or, if it existed, would be, out of harmony with the present."⁴³ But Christina Sharpe warns us that "'terror has a history' and it is deeply atemporal."⁴⁴ Despite the fact that Denzel Washington tops the *New York Times* list of the best actors of the century, Tilda Swinton, at unlucky number thirteen, is praised for having more than a wide acting "range." A. O. Scott declares, "that's almost a laughably inadequate word for the radical shape-shifting that Swinton accomplishes."⁴⁵ Can you feel the waves from the sixteenth century lapping onto our shores? Is that past past? Is it anachronistic to think that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century definitions and constructions of a star's acting skill impact how we understand them today in 2021?

More radically, though, I would like to ask if we can reclaim Proteus's birth right. Can we feel the ripple of the past that is not past that remembers that he was prophetic, that remembers that he was Egyptian? Can we hear the echoes

⁴¹ Palmer, 108–09.

⁴² Hawthorne, 239.

⁴³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. "anachronism."

⁴⁴ Sharpe, 5.

⁴⁵ Dargis and Scott.

from *Othello* in which an Egyptian, who was “a charmer and could almost read / The thoughts of people,” in a “prophetic fury sewed the work” into a magical handkerchief?⁴⁶ Can we think along with Jalondra Davis about the significance of the “Black Atlantic Merfolk” that exist in many diasporic narratives, and can we begin to position Proteus within that tradition?⁴⁷ Can we reclaim Proteus’s African mobility? What would a black Protean star’s performance look like? I ask this not as a way to promote whiteface performances by actors of color. While scholars like Marvin McAllister have proclaimed the radical nature of whiteface, I am not necessarily interested in pinpointing a radical tradition. Rather, I am more interested in interrogating the way we tell historical stories.

I am trying to think theoretically and methodologically about periodization, historicity, evidence, archives, and the stories and histories we allow ourselves to tell as teacher-scholars. If Sharpe is calling for “wake work,” I am amending her call by asking for Protean Wake Work. Protean Wake Work not only acknowledges that the past is not past, but also acknowledges the many ways that we have always known “what happened in [our] home, both good and bad, / while [we] were gone on this long, painful journey,” to rephrase a line from the *Odyssey*. Our histories and stories have been fractured by periodization, and its inherent belief in the fractured nature of truth, but “Proteus / of Egypt, who can speak infallibly” understood the connections between past and future, nonhuman animals and human ones, natural objects and natural elements. Is it possible to realign our scholarship with the type of mobility and mutability that Proteus symbolizes? What would it mean if we trained ourselves and our students to approach the past, present, and future with a Protean ethos of mobility and connection as a guiding frame? Perhaps out of constraint we can begin to experience a mobilizing mutability that would allow black Atlantic studies, early modern studies, and early transatlantic theater history (to name only three artificially segregated subfields) to intersect and mutually transform. Perhaps that would lead us to the new “ethical viewing and reading practices” that Sharpe calls for us to create.

⁴⁶ Shakespeare, *Othello*, 3.4.58–58, 74.

⁴⁷ Davis’s talk, “Black Atlantic Merfolk: The Crossing, the Human, and the Black Maternal” (University of California, Riverside, Department of English, 10 March 2021), is a part of her larger book project in process, *Sea People: Mermaids and the Black Atlantic*.

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