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**Hair in the BBC's *The Hollow Crown: the Wars of the Roses*:
class, nation, gender, race, and difference**

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Abstract:

This article considers how *The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses* (2016) — the adaptation of the *Henry VI* tetralogy and *Richard III* for the BBC — establishes a norm of white masculinity at the heart of its representation of political power, and uses deviations from this norm to mark out a series of others over the course of its three parts. Paying particular attention to class, nation, gender and race as the multiple lines of marginalisation through which otherness is manufactured, the article considers how the production of difference serves to bolster *The Wars of the Roses'* conservative semiotics of identity. It focuses primarily on how the 'costume' of hair is used to manifest otherness in performance, examining the intersection of production choices made in conjunction with the underlying misogyny of the plays, and conducting an analysis of how ordered and disordered hair is designed to embody national, classed, gendered and racial difference. Ultimately, the production choices that construct identity in *The Wars of the Roses* are argued to be gate-keeping processes, determining who or what counts as 'British' in an imagined medieval past, and also in contemporary Shakespearean performance.

Key words: Hair; gender; race; class, Britain, *The Hollow Crown*.

In *Engendering a Nation*, Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin argue that if women are missing from the second tetralogy, then they dominate the first, and yet their increased visibility is usually in negative and nefarious roles, noting the "dangerous, demonic otherness of female characters" in Shakespeare's early histories (26). This article considers how such difference is registered in the performances of the three-part BBC series *The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses*, an adaptation by Ben Powers of the *Henry VI* trilogy and *Richard III* for television (2016). Making particular reference to how the creators of *The Wars of the Roses* respond to the demonisation of women in the first tetralogy, I suggest ways in which the source texts' gendered otherness intersects with contemporary ideas and assumptions surrounding race, class and nationality to (re)produce conservative systems of authority and ideas of nationhood. What do the semiotics of identity in *The Wars of the Roses* tell us about how its makers create gendered difference, and other deviations from self-established norms, in order to manifest such authority? How do production choices in the adaptation render characters as outsiders to or within the embattled ruling class? And given the wide reach and influence of 'BBC Shakespeare', what are the consequences of these decisions on contemporary notions of Britishness?

Such questions are especially pressing given the casting of Sophie Okonedo - a British actor of mixed Nigerian and Jewish heritage - in the role of Queen Margaret, raising the issue of whether Okonedo's heritage as a facet of her embodiment of Margaret can be divorced from the negative depiction of femininity more generally in the plays. In a production which relies heavily on aural and visual semiotics to distinguish 'goodies' from 'baddies', it questions which elements of difference the audience are supposed to register, which are they not, and in what ways the deployment of sign systems in *The Wars of the Roses* make such differentiation difficult. Probing the levels of 'colourblindness' that operate both at the level of casting and performance in *The Wars of the Roses*, the key site of my analysis is the costume of hair deployed by its makers and director, Dominic Cooke. Hair is used aesthetically and semiotically in the production to denote and uphold multiple lines of marginalisation, centred on femininity, ethnicity and nationality, and I am especially concerned with how 'white' and 'black' hair figure in its scheme of idealised/demonised femininity.¹ While the vocabulary of hair deployed in *The Wars of the Roses* points backwards towards conservative historical attitudes of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries, it simultaneously points forwards to processes of gate-keeping about what constitutes 'Britishness' today, and, ultimately, *The Wars of the Roses* reinforces a set of gendered, classed and racialised norms. Following a trajectory from more obvious signifiers of difference, such as accent, I consider what *The Wars of the Roses*' embodied narrative of male hair tells us about its norms of representation, before concluding with an examination of how the treatment of Okonedo's hair proscribes her from such norms, thereby disrupting the series' claims to colourblind casting.

Hair-as-costume

The strands separating hair as a performative aspect of racial, cultural, individual, and theatrical identity prove difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle, not least because of the distinctly personal *and* political relationship that women of colour frequently have with their hair. As Cheryl Thompson puts it, "For the vast majority of Black women, hair is not just hair; it contains emotive qualities that are linked to one's lived experience" (831). Kobena Mercer elucidates the importance of hair when considering the lived experience of people who

experience racism when he writes that “black people's hair has been historically devalued as the most visible stigmata of blackness, second only to skin” (101). His assertion demonstrates why an examination of black hair from the perspective of a white scholar must be approached cautiously. Such caution is exacerbated by the fact that hair can be seen as a cultural locus that hierarchises white over black femininity, as Patricia Hill Collins’ comments on the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality shows. Collins argues that, while white women are also objectified by standards of beauty, “White skin and straight hair simultaneously privilege them in a system that elevates whiteness over blackness” (cited in Snook, 115). Assumptions around the hair of people of colour therefore expose broader, intersectional systems of inequality and racism. Afua Hirsch’s identification of the pressure on black women to treat their hair in contemporary professional settings, for instance, reveals that natural hair has the potential to invoke racist responses: “[O]ne of the side effects of a society that claims not to see race is that anyone whose appearance is an excessive reminder of difference needs to conform. Failing to do so is frequently perceived as an act of radical politics, which threatens to upstage our other professional accomplishments. In an environment where being black places you in a tiny minority, proudly displaying black hair appears to be seen as a threat” (50).

It is important to state, then, that the following analysis of the costuming of Okonedo’s hair is not a judgment on black hair treatments or straightening. Mercer has shown that, all too often, aesthetic opinions on black hair are attempts to control the bodies of black people. I also do not wish to reinforce the binary that Mercer detects which equates ‘natural’ with ‘blacker’ and so perpetuate a link between whiteness with culture or civility. My focus is rather on hair as an aspect of theatrical costuming as opposed to a personal choice. And in this context, the multivalence of hair proves its virtue, with hair’s efficacy in performance depending upon its mutability as a marker and maker of identity. Robert Bartlett gives three reasons why hair is a “particularly fertile and powerful bearer of meaning”. Firstly, hair’s malleability likens it to clothing insofar as it can be “shaped, dyed, removed”, while at the same time emerging “from the body” and so “organic in a way that clothes are not”; secondly, it is connected to the face and primary organs of communications; thirdly, it is able to deliver “a few pieces of biological information” such as age, gender, and ethnicity, “but only a few” (43-44). Hair therefore has the power to both express and absorb

contradictory meanings such as real/artificial, biological/cultural, and animate/inanimate. Put simply, hair speaks; and this makes it a potent and fundamental resource for dramatic representation.

In his semiology of hair, Barthes notes the extent to which it signifies nationality in Manciewicz's *Julius Caesar*, writing that "all the [Roman] characters wear fringes" (26). The hirsute legibility of nationality discussed by Barthes is mirrored in the manufacture of aristocratic English masculinity in *The Wars of the Roses*, but also in the way that the series constructs 'insiders' and 'outsiders' in terms of gender and race. However, any stability of hair-as-costume is provisional, with Will Fisher's recognition that prosthetic stage-beards are "paradoxical entities" which slide between designations of body, prop, and costume, proving true of staged hair more widely (232). As I have written elsewhere, the fluctuating stability of hair in performance "is contingent upon the particular semiotic structure of the theatre itself, a medium which deploys signs to produce a likeness, imitation, or resemblance recognisable to an audience". Hair-as-costume therefore "necessarily relates to perceptions of [...] gender and sexuality in early modern discourse at large, but at one remove" (16). In other words, hair-as-costume both reflects an external and bodily reality, while also producing an idealised or typologised version of reality. Staged hair therefore may tell us something about how hair 'is' or 'was', but equally it tells us how we imagine hair to be – and when it comes to the performance of historical hair, stage-managing of who passes as credibly 'historical' usually exposes norms of representation in our contemporary moment, as much as in the past.

The theatrical costuming of hair thus correlates with the powerful, liminal space that hair occupies as both a biological and social marker, and the often invisible way that dressed, treated, and false hair masquerades as part of the wearer's own body in performance. Because of the personal and political aspects of hair for people of colour, alongside the racist structures that ascribe meaning to bodies, this blurring of distinction between person and character, nature and culture, becomes more vexing. The complications for contemporary performance practice are disclosed by the black-identifying actors who discuss their industry experiences in Ayesha Casely-Hayford's 'Afro Archives' series. While the actors often refer to the flexibility and changeability of their hair as a great resource for

performance, their conversations also highlight how performance itself reflects and reproduces racial codes that usually remain unspoken. For instance, Ketorah Wilson refers to the fact that one character might have her hair “straighter” than another, but it is unclear exactly which aspects of the role underpin that decision.ⁱⁱ Of particular interest for this article is Martina Laird’s exposure of the difficulty of making her hair conform to historical ideals when filming a 19th century period drama, meaning she had to resort to a tignon, or head wrap, to avoid the ‘problem’ that her hair represented to the creative team in terms of styling.ⁱⁱⁱ The experiences outlined in the ‘Afro Archives’ serve to nuance Hirsch’s comments about hair in professional settings with regard to acting. Because of the nature of performance, acting may be one of the few professional venues in which naturally-textured hair is welcomed; however it is also a profession in which - because hair bespeaks cultural identity - assumptions about what a particular look ‘means’ go frequently untested. Historical drama emerges as a particularly fraught arena for perpetuating theatrical norms of representation which exclude hair that doesn’t fit into stereotypical moulds, with significance for the quasi-medieval version of England that *The Wars of the Roses* imagines.

The production of class and nation

Deviations from *The Wars of the Roses’* norms of representation help to establish what those norms are, occurring most notably in the earlier part of the series through its use of accents. A startling early signifier of difference in its field of representation is aural, with regional voices supplanting French accents in Part One. Hence Joan La Pucelle’s voice is key to the creation of her European otherness, with Laura Frances-Morgan portraying her as seemingly from somewhere in Yorkshire; displacing Joan’s ‘French-ness’ onto her ‘northern-ness’. The mapping of national European difference onto English geographical difference is especially marked because French otherness is almost entirely represented by Joan. The Dauphin barely appears in Part One, and when he does, speaks only briefly at 36.20. Not only is his part radically cut but he is also represented as Joan’s inferior when given any screen-time. Joan therefore becomes the only French character in *The Wars of the Roses* attributed with a substantial amount of speech, drawing further attention to her accent as a marker of difference.

This represents a regression even from the limited depiction of regionality in the first series of *The Hollow Crown* in which, as Anna Blackwell identifies, Northumberland and Hotspur are given County Durham accents. The second series instead relies upon “the audience’s recognition of crude regional caricatures” as a means of drawing class distinctions (173). The decision also determines the adaptation’s “effacement of the plays’ internationalism” because France exists “not in its own right but as an extension of England” (ibid.). Such international erasure eradicates the continent but also every other country of the British Isles, with no single major character displaying an Irish, Scottish or Welsh accent, thereby focusing and distributing class and national difference within the narrow confines of England’s north and south, and setting the scene for an extremely limited vision of cultural identity to come. The significance of this production choice lies in the fact that, in being asked to interpret Joan’s northern-ness as ‘foreignness’, we are also asked as an audience to attend carefully to visual and aural deviations from highly-restricted semiotic patterns at the very outset of the series. We are *meant* to notice that Frances-Morgan’s is the sole performance using a northern accent as this registers Joan’s difference from a southern norm, and therefore singles her out as a villain.

Compounding Joan’s northern otherness is the accent that actors portraying the male aristocracy deploy in order to pass as ‘Shakespearean’ in the production. Drawn from the cream of British actors - with Benedict Cumberbatch as Richard of York, Adrian Dunbar as Richard Plantagenet, Hugh Bonneville as Gloucester, Sam West as Bishop of Winchester, and Ben Miles as Somerset - the aural presentation of the nobility is universally RP. As a Northern Irishman, Dunbar is a particularly interesting case in point as he was lauded by critics for his “complete plausibility” as York in the production (Massai 31). Significantly, he was also condemned for his “transparently artificial” Edmund when he performed the role in his native accent in 1992/3 production of *King Lear*, a clear indication of which accents are privileged in the realm of Shakespearean performance (ibid.). Through its blanket use of RP for the courtly elite, *The Wars of the Roses* seems at pains to eschew any class dialectic from its adaptation of the source texts. Moreover, the focus on the nobility has been further constricted because of Power’s decision to excise scenes depicting the lower classes from his adaptation – most notably Jack Cade’s rebellion of *2 Henry VI* - meaning that the version of Britain presented almost entirely belongs to a white, male ruling class. Through its

dramaturgical processes then, the production enacts a series of intersectional erasures – beginning with nationality, proceeding through class, and ultimately involving, we shall see, race – that deliberately suppress elements of difference in favour of a monolithic ‘Englishness’.

Hair emerges as analogous to accent in *The Wars of the Roses* as a signifier of difference. The costume of hair provides another avenue through which to consider Joan’s deviation from the production’s norms of representation, for example, in relation to gender. Frances-Morgan’s hair not only distinguishes her from the other long-haired female characters in *The Wars of the Roses*, her short crop also singles her out as transgressive to femininity in a historical sense, as short hair was known to identify women as potential ‘martial maids’ or as deviant to their sex during the early modern era. As a result, she invokes historical trans figures such as Moll Frith and Long Meg of Westminster, the kind of androgyne who raised James I’s ire in 1620 when he instructed the clergy to “inveigh vehemently and bitterly in their sermons against the insolency of our women, and their wearing of broad-brimmed hats, pointed doublets, their hair cut short or shorn” (cited in Orgel, 119). In comparison to the flowing hair and elaborate medieval up-dos of the other female characters, Joan’s hair proves as noteworthy as her accent for producing her deviance, as it indicates her gendered otherness as well as alien nationality.

Figure 1

Both a part of the body and outside of it, hair thus lends itself to an extra-textual language that enables the audience to stratify class and gender in the production, connecting the audio imagery and visual imagery of *The Wars of the Roses* to determine who is able to pass as a member of the aristocracy, and in which gendered guise. In fact, over the course of the three parts of *The Wars of the Roses*, hair emerges as one of the most fundamental ways in which that difference is both signified and negotiated by marking out a series of others who encroach upon and infiltrate elite masculine hegemony at court. This process reveals that privilege is extended to a very limited band of white, male actors, for, semiotically, there is almost total visual and aural cohesion among England’s bishops, dukes, lords and earls in Parts One and Two.^{iv} While the ethnicity of Stanley Townsend as Warwick is less certain – he

is the sole wearer of a bushy beard that, in combination with headwear suggestive of a Turkish cap, arguably gestures towards a Muslim identity - the cultural and racial unity of the aristocracy is marked.^v The depiction of the ruling class in *The Wars of the Roses* is entirely dominated by white men.

From the perspective of the costume of hair, the homogeneously-imagined nobility of *The Wars of the Roses* are predominantly depicted with slightly grown-out hair – not long enough to be feminine, nor short enough to be a subordinate. The English elite are ever-so-slightly shaggy, a bit ‘John Snow’, somewhat rugged, somewhat rough-and-ready – the country is tearing itself apart and this is not an aristocracy with time for haircuts!^{vi}

Figure 2

Significantly, the Dauphin of France is also embroiled in this hair-mogeneity. In contrast to Joan’s crop, he wears his hair in the shoulder-length style of the English aristocracy and speaks in a southern English accent. Given both the internal dissension between English nobles as well as antagonism with external enemies, the presentation of aristocratic masculinity is therefore surprisingly consistent. According to the vocabulary of class, there is nothing but a fleur-de-lis to mark a Dauphin apart from a Suffolk or an Exeter. This is reinforced by Andrew Scott’s portrayal of the King of France in Part Two (from 1.15.02); with his lightly-curved bob and divested of his Irish accent, he looks and sounds exactly like the English nobility.

Figure 3

As with Barthes’ discussion of hair’s role in creating a legible national identity, a shaggy bob is situated as the mean against which to measure the outlying identities of other characters in *The Wars of the Roses*. In this way, the production’s use of hair to indicate class correlates very closely with ideological formations found in early modern texts. Writing about Mary Wroth’s *Urania*, for instance, Edith Snook asserts that female hair bestows class identity: "Giving class a physiological basis, aristocratic characters have the same natural hair: slightly curled, thick and, often, but not always, blonde. Colour is secondary to hair's texture,

softness, curl and abundance, the qualities that allow hair to function as a physiological sign of race, or origin, and most specifically of the class of one's birth" (125). Snook could as easily be describing the hair of the English nobility in *The Wars of the Roses*. The shoulder-length hairstyle of the male elite trumps national difference as a marker of identity; the fact of being shaggily-bobbed transcends nationality in depictions of the aristocracy. It is Joan's short hair and northern accent which render her an outsider, and this is primarily a class-based distinction.

Another notable outlier to the hair-gemony is Henry VI himself whose hair is exceptionally long in comparison to the rest of his court. What simpler (albeit misogynistic) way to demonstrate a fragile and incompetent ruler than to feminise him through long hair? Henry's hair helps to explain his womanish behaviour, as when he faints upon hearing of Gloucester's death (Part 1, 1.44), or the fact that he is repeatedly termed "bashful", "fearful" or "faint-hearted", and ascribed with "cold [female] blood". We are later encouraged to read Henry's degeneration when he has broken down in the Tower of London through his hair, finding that he has deteriorated into a wild man, matted and hirsute with a thick, bushy beard that the smooth-faced Henry of Part 1 looked scarce capable of growing. This deviance from a masculine norm at the further end of the hairy spectrum facilitates another feminised facet of his identity. Hirsute Henry - like other witches in the tetralogy - is able to foresee the future and predict that Richmond will become King.

Figure 4

Figure 5

The production of gender

Female hair is also standardised in the production. Women, like Henry, tend to wear their hair long and somewhat curly; a feminised counterpart to early modern assumptions about the nobility's hair texture and abundance recognised by Snook. When Somerset meets Margaret, for example, we see an example of what ideal femininity looks like.

Figure 6

According to the established aural norms, we know that Margaret is a gentlewoman because, while French, the class-based semiotics of speech mean that her RP accent indicates her gentility. However, unlike the elaborately-dressed hair of English women at court, which the audience have already witnessed, Margaret's hair is loose and free-flowing and tending towards the ungroomed, foregrounding her national and gendered deviance from the outset. This is emphasised through the adaptation's reversal of scenes 4 and 5 from *1HenryVI*'s final act, with the scene of her bewitching Somerset with her beauty immediately followed by one of Joan being taken captive by Plantaganet. Appropriating the lines from the source text in which he calls her an "enchantress" and a "witch" (*1HenryVI*, 5.4. 4, 13). Joan's arrest is connected to what has preceded it – another enchanting French woman. In the play (though not Power's adaptation) Margaret is presented as enthralling Suffolk, casting a spell with her beauty which means he has "no power to let her pass" (5.5.16). The feminine norm is therefore always concomitant with the demonisation of women.

This demonisation is equally as entangled with masculinisation as it is magical discourse. Margaret has a "valiant courage and undaunted spirit" (*1HenryVI*, 5.7.70) for instance – redolent of Lady Macbeth's "undaunted mettle" (*Macbeth*, 1.7.73) and suggestive of martial masculinity. Macbeth also teaches us, in the form of its bearded weird sisters, that discourses of the masculine and the demonic are intertwined in the representation of witches – their combination points towards the hybridised and monstrous superfluity of the witch's gendered body. While Margaret's ability to enchant is placed alongside that of Joan's occult power, it is not only Frenchwomen who are defined as witches in the early histories. While the sorcery of Eleanor Cobham in *2Henry VI* is mainly cut from Power's version, a vignette remains to indicate her supernatural powers. At the end of the scene in Part One in which she tells Gloucester of her dream prefiguring his overthrow of Henry, Eleanor (Sally Hawkins) produces a box of magical objects at 1.10.20, pulling out a glass sphere, an animal skull, and an effigy of the King, which she then stabs while silently incanting. This illegitimate pricking is immediately juxtaposed with the properly masculine activity of archery in the next scene; however, as the shot draws back from the target it reveals that the archer is, in fact, Margaret. The succession of one scene to the next draws a

parallel between the women's transgressive activities and endows both with penetrative capacities. Margaret's particular pursuit can also be seen to anticipate her metamorphosis from duplicitously demure medieval bride to masculinised warrior and leader of the royalist army in Part Two.

As women are increasingly exposed as monstrous witches, their hair is used to signify their disordered femininity. Unkempt hair materialises Eleanor Cobham's deterioration when she is taken prisoner, for example; a strategy which in early modern plays demonstrates that a woman "is distraught with madness, shame, rage, extreme grief, or the effects of recent violence" (Dessen 27). In *The Wars of the Roses*, it also signifies the decline from a groomed, aristocratic, female norm. While women at the court are defined by their extravagant coifs, ornate headpieces and apparel, and their immaculately long hair, their fall from grace and favour is as much signalled by lack of access to a hairbrush as it is their rags.

Figure 7

Colourblind casting: the production of 'blackness' and 'English history'

The final part of this article moves into a consideration of how Okonedo's mixed heritage intersects with the role of Margaret in light of the single major role that has been given to an actor of colour in the context of the semiology of the whole series, engaging with what Ayanna Thompson identifies as the "painful" dialogue that often ensues in the wake of 'colorblind' casting. Arguing that blindness to race is not necessarily the best way in which white interpreters of Shakespeare's works can be allies to performers who experience racism, Thompson asserts that gaps between sign and signified, mimesis and identity, necessarily open up ruptures which are uncomfortable, but which uniquely foster an opportunity for open dialogue (9). Indeed, as Lisa M. Anderson goes on to note later in Thompson's volume, the very ability to be 'colorblind' is in itself a mark of white privilege: "Colorblindness ultimately signifies assimilation. When white students claim that they 'don't see color,' or that a racialized person is 'just a person,' they are reading the racialized-other as being like them: 'white.'" While they deny that they see color, they do in fact see it; it is a part of their cultural ontology to see race and to assess people according to race" (91). My

analysis will therefore focus on the continued reverberation of Okonedo's heritage through her role as Margaret despite the hoped-for invisibility of her skin tone, and specifically on the interplay between her hair, *The Wars of the Roses'* costuming, and the vision of history that it promotes. My concern is to demonstrate how white norms dominate the production's system of representation, and raise questions about how the audience is encouraged to interpret bodies that are made to conform to or deviate from this system.

Initial promotional materials for the show quite rightly do not mention Okonedo's heritage, although sadly this did not stop racist responses to her casting as Queen Margaret.^{vii} In a number of interviews Cooke claims that his intention was to pick the best actors for the roles.^{viii} His strategy exemplifies Ayanna Thompson's first rationale for colourblind casting:

The initial idea behind colorblind casting was that neither the race nor the ethnicity of an actor should prevent her or him from playing a role as long as she or he was the best actor available [...] In this approach the audience is expected to make a distinction between the actor's appearance and the character's position, just as the audience would differentiate between a mask and a face, or even more fundamentally between the sign and the signified (6).

However, Anderson argues that such differentiation is rarely actuated, and questions whether it should be desired in the first place, seeing colourblind casting as a form of erasure which asks audiences to forget the "three centuries of images that have shaped and continue to shape the racial sign system in which we live" (92). Interpreters and receivers of Shakespeare's work have little control over the ways in which that history intersects with performance, and colourblind casting does little to dismantle existing structures. Thompson writes that "Although it was initially assumed that nontraditional casting would be a kind of magical panacea to cure the ills of racism and exclusion, it has become clear that the various models of nontraditional casting can actually replicate racist stereotypes *because we have not addressed the unstable semiotics of race*" (*Passing Strange* 77). The lack of attention to the inherent performativity of 'whiteness' and 'blackness' sanctioned by colourblind casting therefore exacerbates the potential for racism.

This is evident, for example, when considering Okonedo's performance in the context of the crude moral chiaroscuro deployed by Cooke in his production, which repeatedly equates

dark deeds with darkness. To take just a few examples of many, the plotting against Gloucester takes place in low light in Part 1 (1.40) while Richard III first appears in silhouette in Part 2 – a harbinger of his wicked nature. The climax of whole series involves the dark scene of his muddy demise (2.03.10), following which the sun rises on Richmond’s victory and the world is made glorious summer by this son of Lancaster. This moralised aesthetic is hyperbolised when Margaret’s night-time killing of York in Part Two of *The Wars of the Roses* is followed by the scene in which his three sons discuss the three suns in the sky (43.44). Significantly Margaret’s hair during her overseeing of York’s murder is concealed beneath a black head covering, divesting her of what early moderns thought of as the ‘ornament’ of femininity, and arguably duplicating her skin tone through fabric in ways suggestive of Ian Smith’s work on the production of race in early modern performance. The association between darkness and evil also implicates female sexuality, with the plot against Gloucester leading directly into a sex scene juxtaposed with his dimly-lit murder, making it appear as if Margaret is sexually excited by violence. The misogyny of a text which depicts her as aggressive, deceptive, and hyper-sexual is augmented by production choices which equate murder, insurrection, and female sexual pleasure.

In a series in which darkness is equated with wickedness, and light with right, *The Wars of the Roses* unavoidably raises the issue of how Okonedo’s heritage may figure in such a scheme, particularly when considered alongside the deployment of black fabrics noted as a feature of costume during York’s death scene. As Anderson writes, “When audience members encounter a situation in which they must decode the production’s signifying system, they do not leave their cultural codes behind”, contending that it is always the case for predominantly white Western audiences that when watching black performer, “Blackness signifies race” (*Colorblind Shakespeare* 93, 92). Unfortunately it also signifies evil according to the production’s aesthetic, with problematic implications for how we read Okonedo-as-Margaret and the invocation of negative black stereotypes. To return to Thompson:

Everyone involved in a Shakespearean performance makes conscious and unconscious decisions about the semiotic significance, or insignificance, of race in performance, but the power to determine the ultimate semiotic relevance, or

irrelevance, is completely contingent on the serial effects of the decisions made by everyone involved (*Passing Strange* 94).

So how does a partial list of such decisions affect the production of blackness in this particular performance? Firstly, as the adaptor of the first tetralogy and *Richard III*, Power foregrounds the role of Margaret, and hence the performance of Okonedo, even further than the original plays. Indeed the very final shot of the production is Margaret's, a lone figure on the battlefield as the camera pans out to reveal hundreds of fallen soldiers she stands amongst. In line with the source texts, Margaret is given a key role beside Henry in Part One, as military leader in Part Two, and as prophetess of Richard's downfall in Part Three. However she is also granted extra prominence, in Part Three especially, in which her occult abilities are especially highlighted and her role as seer manifested through an association with magical objects. Her prophecies at the outset of the episode are delivered with a mirror turned upon their recipient which becomes her motif for the remainder of the episode. In addition to presenting the ghosts to Richard on the eve of the Battle of Bosworth, she also turns her fortune-telling mirror upon him at the moment of his death, Cassandra-like, her prophecy fulfilled. So attention is focussed upon the sole major character who is also a performer of colour throughout the series, and her powers of sorcery are emphasised.

Secondly, a costuming choice uses Margaret's hair to chart her character arc over the three parts. When we first encounter the character in Part One, her hair is very long and slightly curly in keeping with Snook's assertions about early modern elite hair; she is the archetypal medieval maiden. During the Civil War of Part Two a transition occurs when Margaret conceals her hair beneath fabric and armour. Removing or concealing her luxuriously-long and complicatedly-dressed hair indicates her increasing distance from idealised femininity, although, tellingly, strands escape from the chain mail when she is defeated by the Yorkists – she is still a woman beneath it all. Her decline from womanhood really begins with the death of her son, Edward, however. At this point, the wild and disordered hair that signifies distress and madness emerges. This is important because hair is "central to the construction of 'hierarchies of femininity'" (Snook 115), as shown through Joan's masculinised crop or the degeneration of Eleanor from groomed power player to raving prisoner. In each instance,

deviations from an established feminine norm encourage us to read *The Wars of the Roses'* women as non-feminine, or fallen, or corrupt; it is a system taken to its extreme when Joan's head is shaven prior to her execution. Like Eleanor, Margaret's hair takes a similarly crazed turn throughout the series, her ultra-feminine flowing locks of Part One increasingly overtaken by matted, grey hair, so that, by part Three, Margaret has fully transformed into a hag. The fact that she is called "lunatic", and a "foul witch", in lines appropriated from 1.4 of *Richard III*, is therefore semiotically legitimised in the adaptation through her unkempt hair.

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10

A third decision is the rationale behind her colourblind casting, which asks the audience to ignore Okonedo's heritage. However, because the presentation of nobility in *The Wars of the Roses* is entirely dominated by white men, this factor cannot be erased when analysing her performance. It inevitably stratifies her both from them, and also from the other demonised women of *The Wars of the Roses*, with significant implications for the costuming of her hair. Bearing in mind Collins' earlier contention about the intersectionality of racial and gender identity resulting in the superiority of 'white' hair over 'black' hair, it is important to consider how Okonedo's styling connects with the semiotics of femininity in the series, and what this tells us about the production's construction of Englishness and English history more widely, especially in light of the cultural capital associated with Shakespeare in a postcolonial reading of the series, alongside Frantz Fanon's insight that "Every colonized people [...] finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country" (9). This language and culture dominates and supplants their own, so that "To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (25), and Shakespeare perpetuates both a very specific language and a very specific culture. While of course Okonedo is British, there is still an encounter between her colourblind casting as a medieval European queen, and the objective and embodied capital invested in Shakespeare as an icon of English culture, as well as the prejudice embedded in colonialism that the black person "has no culture, no civilization, no 'long historical past'" (Fanon 21).

Arguments made by Lyra D. Monteiro about the attempted fusion of performers of colour with white-dominated history in the musical *Hamilton* help to illustrate the issue. She asks whether it is “necessarily a good thing” for marginalised performers and audiences “to feel ownership over a celebratory, white narrative of the American past?” (97). The same question can be posed with regard to *The Wars of the Roses* in light of the historical oppression of people who experience racism in Britain. Ethical issues are raised when presenting a black queen in a series of plays which explore the inception of a dynasty that would oversee the first voyages to America and the beginnings of a process resulting in the mass enslavement of Africans. It is a complex problem that the simple solution of colourblind casting sutures over. The assimilation of black bodies into white histories precludes the space for critique, particularly when creative choices divest those bodies of biological signifiers that ‘allow’ for race. I include accent here too, as *The Wars of the Roses*’ determined avoidance of accents that signify regional and national identity – demonstrated in relation to the suppression of French, Celtic, and Gaelic difference – is extended to aural signifiers of race. Complexion therefore becomes the sole sign of race that isn’t assimilated into a white taxonomy of Shakespearean performance.

Margaret’s hair materialises this limitation of difference; initially figuring in a semiotic system which privileges long, slightly curly, groomed hair – ‘white’ hair - over the wild or short hair which signifies demonised femininity. Arguably, and problematically, the degeneration of Margaret brings Okonedo’s hair closer to its natural texture. As her hair becomes wilder, it also becomes less sleek – the marker of white beauty - racialising her madness and disorder. In addition, while skin tone doesn’t appear to have mattered to the makers of *The Wars of the Roses* when casting Okonedo, her natural hair does; presumably ‘medieval maiden’ hair requires either hair treatment or wigs, all of which ‘whiten’ Okonedo’s hair in order to produce her noble femininity. This costuming choice reveals that Okonedo's hair is not a biological feature accounted for in the colourblindness of her casting, suggesting that – in terms of the conventions of Shakespearean performance - the natural texture of Okonedo's hair is a semiotic step-too-far for a medieval queen; that there is a limit to how many ethnic features Okonedo is permitted as a performer of mixed heritage in a historical role. To reinvoké Ayanna Thompson, the creatives behind *The Wars of the Roses* may wish Okonedo’s background to be “irrelevant” to the production, but the

serial accumulation of decisions relating to dramaturgy, casting, the production's costuming, and the performativity of 'whiteness' and 'blackness' in its aesthetic, make it impossible to ignore the semiotics of race that is produced.

Unlike the colonised subject discussed by Fanon, Okonedo's Britishness means that she owns the language of Shakespeare - indeed, she can stake more claim to 'ownership' of Shakespeare than most, given her award-winning performance of Cleopatra at the National Theatre in 2017 - but, as an actor of colour, the costume of hair deployed in *The Wars of the Roses* infers that she still falls short of the imaginary/imagined standards of royal femininity in contemporary depictions of medieval history. This echoes Snook's earlier observation that the texture of hair is the quality that allows it "to function as a physiological sign of race, or origin" (115). For the audience to invest in Okonedo as a possible fifteenth-century English queen is seen by the programme-makers to require an erasure of her natural hair - or, perhaps more accurately, its overwriting - in order to reproduce her origin according to white markers of beauty. In this way, while the casting of Okonedo serves to widen the possibilities for more diverse future performances of Shakespearean histories, it does so only conditionally - the conditions being that certain standards of a femininity coded as white, and normative visions of medieval England, are also upheld. While Okonedo's hair is curled in line with the other depictions of noble hair initially, the treatment of her hair towards the end of the production no longer tames it to the same extent, with the effect of reinforcing pernicious stereotypes. Her early appearance can be seen as a form of passing, but the trajectory of the film is to 'expose' and so to underscore her biologically-inscribed race, and hence her deviation from a hegemonic definition of English femininity.

Such decisions are not merely historical gate-keeping; they also maintain a hegemonic and racially-exclusive vision of Britain today. While we are meant to read Joan's crop as evidence of her warrior nature and distance from courtly mores, the changes that Okonedo's hair undergoes to produce her as a medieval queen prove more invisible and insidious. But it is no less important to pay attention to hair as to complexion when analysing her embodiment of the role of Margaret; and while the logic of colourblind casting asks the audience to ignore skin, the treatment of Okonedo's hair continues to articulate which bodies are permitted to fit into particular ideas of English history, and into particular moulds of female

beauty, and who, therefore, is permitted access to the cultural capital of Shakespeare. In *The Wars of the Roses* a bodily ideal is posited, one that does not include naturally-textured black hair within its framework of female beauty. Significantly, the process of producing Okonedo as Margaret, entails treating her hair to first make it conform to, and then deviate from, this white-dominated representation of femininity. Such a process risks racism because it maps what counts as a credible, historical version of elite English femininity onto a discourse of beauty/ugliness, as Mercer illuminates: “If racism is conceived as an ideological code in which biological attributes are invested with societal values and meanings, then it is because our hair is perceived within this framework that it is burdened with a range of negative connotations” (101). There is a classed as well as a gendered aspect to all this. If naturally-textured black hair is implicitly a sign of female ugliness - because it remains absent from a system of beauty which privileges flowing locks - then it is also a sign of low status according to the logic of a system of representation which associates sleeker, non-kinky, ‘whiter’ hair with nobility and royalty.

One particular instance of hair-as-costume marshals some of the issues addressed here; a blonde plaited headpiece worn over Okonedo's hair near the beginning of Part Two.

Figure 11

Tellingly, there are no equivalent moments of white women wearing black hairpieces; they have no need as their hair already embodies the standards of female beauty. In style and in colour Margaret's prosthetic hairpiece is a sign of noble femininity, but it stands out starkly on Okonedo's body in a way which heightens awareness of the ‘natural’ and the ‘artificial’. The fetishising of false, blonde hair brings Okonedo-as-actor into the frame, drawing attention to biological features that the casting philosophy claims to erase. It also fulfils the function of fetish in that it prosthetically supplies Okonedo with the ‘missing’ whiteness that the casting philosophy may deny, but that the vocabulary of hair reveals, is still valorised in *The Wars of the Roses’* version of medieval England. As Emily MacLeod's incisive chapter on the role of feminised and racialised prostheses in constructing the roles of Joan, Eleanor and Margaret shows, “prosthetic devices” draw “our attention to the female characters, especially Okonedo-as-Margaret's positioning as a woman of color in a white ‘mythic’

medieval England”.^{ix} It is also significant that even Okonedo’s most mad and witchy hair by the end of Part Three is still a far cry from her naturally-textured hair in recent TV roles in, for instance, *Undercover* or *Chimerica*. Okonedo has often performed her roles with natural hair – even in her other major Shakespearean (albeit North African) role of Cleopatra. That this production requires a ‘taming’ of her hair demonstrates that the maintenance of a particular vision and version of English history remains paramount to the production.

When attention is drawn to Okonedo’s heritage despite the professed casting aims asserted by its director, *The Wars of the Roses* encourages its audience to think about how to read ‘blackness’ in the semiotics of the production as a whole, particularly how race interconnects with its representation of femininity and the overarching aesthetics of a production in which blackness is equated with evil. As has been argued throughout this article, the major female characters of the tetralogy are demonised as witches. However Okonedo’s difference from Frances-Morgan and Hawkins is her skin tone, something that the practice of colourblind casting asks us to ignore. Yet, as Anderson argues, for predominantly white western audiences, “Blackness [...] carries with it three centuries of sedimented meaning” (92). These meanings, and the ‘controlling images’ that mediate audiences’ reading of blackness, continue to reverberate with and against the content of historic texts, however unintended those meanings might be. That Margaret’s ineffectual husband disinherits her son, causing a civil war in which she must fight in lieu of an emasculated spouse, could inadvertently invoke the ‘strong black woman’ trope in its insistence on her total independence and indestructability for instance.^x Her murderous adultery in Part One and her role as insurgent and military leader in Part Two also potentially invoke two other persistent and pernicious stereotypes of black women: the ‘Jezebel’, or hyper-sexual deceiver on the one hand, and the ‘Angry Black Woman’ who is overly aggressive and dominant on the other. Melissa Harris-Perry has importantly demonstrated with regard to the ‘Jezebel’, the ‘Sapphire’ and the ‘Mammy’ that identifying and unravelling the role that these “painful” and “distorted images” play in the continued circumscription of black women is an essential part of challenging the shame that they are made to experience and suffer (32). The signifying systems created by the producers of *The Wars of the Roses* needed to be deployed especially carefully in relation to Okonedo’s performance in order to shield her from any stereotypes that might condition the

audience's view of her as a political actor. An irreversibly misogynistic text – something that could not be helped – in combination with a simplistic association between blackness and evil – something that could - amplifies the probability that such tropes are activated.

The potential for negative stereotypes to have interpretative purchase is increased by the fact that the production itself seems confused about how we are expected to understand Margaret. Are we meant to read her positively – as sexually-liberated and autonomous woman, wronged mother, and foreteller of the Yorkist downfall? Or, given that Margaret is presented as the uber-witch of the whole series, does Okonedo's heritage, however accidentally, correlate with her demonisation by Shakespeare as masculinised, adulterous sorceress – a reading that *The Wars of the Roses* not only reproduces but also, in some ways, furthers? Its makers arguably wants the former reading to triumph, and yet the misogyny of the text - its ambivalent gendering of Margaret and challenge to her very humanity with her "tiger's heart wrapped in woman's hide" (*3HenryVI*, 1.4.138) - and what I have termed the 'crude moral chiaroscuro' that the production encodes, fail to insulate Okonedo from the possibility of the latter reading.

Colourblind casting and twenty-first century Shakespeare

The colourblindness of *The Wars of the Roses* is ultimately unsuccessful as it proves impossible to separate Okonedo's performance from the fact that she is the only actor of colour among a cast of white nobles for nearly 6 hours of TV.^{xi} While some colour-conscious casting occurs in the last 30 minutes, this is far too late to modify the language of race and nobility that has already been articulated. Anderson writes that "rather than ignoring race (or pretending to ignore race), it is incumbent upon artists (particularly directors) to consider the ways race in performance signifies for an audience" (93). While we must engage in colourblind casting practices, the uncomfortable questions that are provoked by asking actors of colour to perform misogynistic texts that subordinate particular national and gendered identities must also be considered. The fact that *The Wars of the Roses* relies on a semiotic system which utilises hair and accent to produce difference from a white, male-dominated, RP-accented norm works against the hoped-for neutrality of casting the only black actor in a prominent role as Margaret – arguably the prime example of demonic, hypersexual, murderous, deceptive, monstrous, hybridised, insurrectionary (non)femininity

in the tetralogy. While of course they *should*, the question is *can* the audience remain blind to the fact that Okonedo is almost the only performer of colour in this production, whilst remaining attuned to the fact that Joan is the only 'northerner', when being asked to decode 'goodies' from 'baddies' in the series? The risk is that demonised femininity is racialised, just as national difference is northernised.

And yet if actors cannot perform roles because of their potential to invoke negative stereotypes, then performers of colour may be debarred from roles such as Margaret, or Joan, or Eleanor, and contemporary Shakespearean performance will fail to represent the diversity of British womanhood. A possible and partial solution to this problem, however, is to avoid casting a group of entirely white, male actors as the aristocracy, the effect of which is to place at the centre of a production an elite by and from whom difference is measured. Casting actors of different ethnicities means that a single actor of colour does not have to bear the weight of the director's desire for her race not to signify. If race doesn't matter, then it should be made not to matter through employing actors of colour in a range of virtuous and vicious roles so that any deviance from a white norm cannot be linked to race. Okonedo may be given the final shot in *The Wars of the Roses*, but this only reinforces the white uniformity of Henry VII's inauguration in the preceding scene, and the final images of an all-white court and a solitary Okonedo function as an unfortunate microcosm of the relationship between white and black actors in the production as a whole. Furthermore, a performance of medieval queenship using Okonedo's natural hair might have helped to denaturalise the binding up of whiteness and royalty in this production, challenging the dominant thinking that only certain people are allowed access to the cultural capital of Shakespeare. A refusal to make her hair pass as white would have revealed that whiteness is as performative as blackness. If race, as Stuart Hall argues, is a floating signifier, then locating the myths of medieval whiteness in the 'wrong' body begins the work of unravelling a harmful nexus of associations and assumptions, potentially producing change in the present, as well as the imaginary past.

Figure 12

Figure 13

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ⁱ While deeply unhappy with the ableist connotations of the term 'colourblind', I do not think there is a satisfactory, agreed alternative in scholarly parlance at present.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hN0VaLvWhUw> <accessed 13.08.2020>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kp4HgpGmtQw&list=PL1azqcGDYM6B9KKwwrHarD1x90bolK4fv&index=3&t=0s> <accessed 13.08.2020>

^{iv} There is a greater preponderance of short hair in Part 3 once Richard of York has taken the throne. The effect is more austere and military and acts as a semiotic shorthand for which faction men belong to: the Yorkists' short hair marks them out as foot-soldiers in Richard III's dictatorship.

^v The aristocratic norm of shagginess helps us to interpret bald, bearded Warwick, who combines the early modern expectation of bearded dissimulation with the baldness so beloved of Hollywood filmmakers as a signifier of villainy.

^{vi} Hugh Bonneville, as Gloucester, and Ben Miles, as Somerset, are exceptions to this rule. I wonder if the actors' own seemingly curly hair preclude them from having the nobility's 'hairstyle', or whether this can be interpreted in line with the characters' troubled relations with the court.

^{vii} <https://www.indy100.com/article/ukip-councillor-attempts-to-blast-bbc-for-historical-inaccuracy-gets-destroyed-by-actual-historian--ZyZAasU2fb>. Chris Wood was pleasingly rebuked by @chevalier_cygne on twitter for suggesting an image of Margaret's whiteness was a reliable source, as it also suggests that she is descended from a swan. In fact – while the evidence is conflicting – some points towards the fact that Margaret was brunette, including a letter from a Milanese ambassador to Bianca Maria Sforza in 1458, which portrays her as “a most handsome woman, though somewhat dark and not so beautiful as your Serenity” (*Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts Existing in the Archives and Collections of Milan*, ed. Allen B. Hinds. London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1912, 18).

^{viii} E.g. https://www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/news/dominic-cooke-hollow-crown-shakespeare_40342.html; <https://www.bbc.co.uk/academy/en/articles/art20160512135013337> <accessed 10/1/2019>

^{ix} The citation is taken from MacLeod's as-yet unpublished chapter, “Prosthetic Properties: The Materiality of Race and Gender in *The Hollow Crown: The Wars of the Roses*”, forthcoming in *Variable Objects: Shakespeare's Dispossessed Agency* (ed. Louise Geddes and Valerie Fazel, Edinburgh UP). I am very grateful to the author for sharing her work with me.

^x See, for instance, Melissa V. Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (Yale UP, 2011); Cailyn Petrona Stewart, “The Mule of the World: The Strong Black Woman and the Woes of Being ‘Independent’”, *Knots: An Undergraduate Journal of Disability Studies* 3 (2017).

^{xi} Some of Catesby's lines are given to a black actor playing a messenger in Part 3 at 1.38.43, and Ivanno Jeremiah plays 'Blunt' (a conflation with the role of Sir Christopher Urswick) at 1.47.47 and 1.59.03. There are also a few performers of colour appearing as extras throughout the series, mostly as soldiers in the Battle of Bosworth.