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Introduction: Properties of Matter and Performance

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In his biography *Year of the Fat Knight* (2017), Sir Antony Sher recalls the 'piles of weaponry, jugs, caskets, bags, and all sorts from the RSC stores' made available for rehearsal:

> Today, Jonny Glynn (playing Warwick/Rakehell) dug out something from a heap in one corner, and said, 'Tony, isn't this yours?' I went over. It was one of the black crutches I'd used as Richard III. A bit dusty and scuffed, but unmistakably the thing itself. God. If I think of all the time and trouble that went into this object: the discussions about whether it was a very good idea or a very bad one – to play him on crutches – the tests to make them strong and safe enough. To say nothing of my investment in that role, my dreams and fears […] And here it is now, an old prop in a rehearsal room. A timely reminder as I attempt another of Shakespeare's great roles: it's not life or death; it's just theatre, which is ephemeral.[1]

Encountering the crutch activates not only memories about the development and rehearsal of that 1984 Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) production of *Richard III* that would shape Sher's career, but also a network of emotions before and after that run. While Sher calls the crutch 'the thing itself', there were in fact many crutches made and still remaining in the RSC stores. According to collections manager Robyn Greenwood, there were 'multiple versions of the crutches made for the production' as it was not 'uncommon for us to make spares for props or costumes on stage in case of breakages'.[2] For the 1984 *Richard*, 'multiple crutches were produced in the "making" stage, as they struggled to find a material that was strong enough to support the weight applied on them'. Two versions of the pair of crutches survive in the RSC collection, attesting to the repetitions involved in making and re-making props in order to weather repeated use in performance. While the experience of a performance is certainly ephemeral, props themselves seem to resist such evanescence through their reuse, multiple lifelines and afterlives.

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[1]Antony Sher, *Year of the Fat Knight: The Falstaff Diaries* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2017), 120.
[2]Robyn Greenwood, 'Question about Sher's Crutches', Email, 2018.

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For more than two decades, researchers in the broad field of Shakespeare Studies have been paying increasing attention to the materiality of performance, driven by what Catherine Richardson has described as an interest in 'unpicking the rich complexity and luminous power of things on Shakespeare's stage', which has also meant confronting the theatre's 'essential materiality as a practice, and trying to grapple with methodologies by which embodied historical performance can be interpreted through partial, indirect evidence'.[3] Yet where studies of stage properties in this field have focused primarily on understanding the meanings and uses of these objects for specific plays in performance, the contributors to this special issue of *Shakespeare* consider instead the ways in which these objects function in the repertory system relied upon by early modern and contemporary playing companies alike. The performance of different plays in high rotation within a repertory season places significant material demands on a playing company and on the venue that hosts them, so it seems only natural that this 'material turn' in Shakespeare Studies should eventually find its way into the purview of scholars of theatre history and then, more recently again, into studies of playing company repertories.

The interest in stage properties was perhaps a surprisingly late development in the material turn exemplified in Shakespeare Studies by the Cultural Materialism and New Historicism of the 1980s and 1990s, but this may be in part because studies of everyday objects were arguably more interested in anthropological rather than performance perspectives, typified by their focus on what Arjun Appadurai called 'the circulation of commodities in social life'.[4] The direction of the scholarly gaze in such studies proceeds invariably outward from the playhouse to the world around it, or at least fixes its gaze upon plays and playhouses to understand them as objects also circulating within this emerging commodity culture. It was relatively easy to ignore stage properties in such studies so long as there persisted one of 'modern theatre history's enduring shibboleths […] that the Shakespearean stage was a bare one', as Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda noted in 2002.[5] Their collection of essays sought to repopulate the early modern stage with a multitude of movable, physical objects that accompanied the bodies of the actors, giving scholars of early drama a reason to interest themselves in the life of things that circulated within the playhouses as well. Yet this collection for the most part maintained the outward focus of earlier materialist studies by examining theatrical objects as commodities,

[3]Catherine Richardson, '"More Things in Heaven and Earth": Materiality and the Stage', *Shakespeare* 15, no. 1 (2019), 88.
[4]Arjun Appadurai, ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3.
[5]Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda, eds. *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2.

and it is therefore no surprise to find Appadurai cited frequently throughout the book.[6]

Andrew Sofer's *The Stage Life of Props* (2003) announced more fully the project of studying props with performance in mind, not by shifting attention altogether away again from the social life of things but by instead acknowledging that the social life of stage props includes their life on the stage.[7] Sofer relied on Marvin Carlson's concept of 'ghosting' to explain that playgoing audiences are also participants in the self-reflexive recycling process through which plays acquire meanings, which may explain in part why audiences enjoy seeing a play they already know well: 'Our pleasure in seeing the relic revived, the dead metaphor made to speak again'.[8] The key to Sofer's formulation of the 'stage life of props' thus hinges on understanding how props function as signs, the meaning of which is never locked in by a playwright, nor is it ever fully stable within a specific performance. Meaning is always acquired, negotiated, even contested. While Sofer's formulation has proved to be influential in mediating between materialist approaches to props and critical methods in a number of fields within Shakespeare Studies in the past two decades, the potential to understand repertory playing in terms of 'ghosting' has not yet been widely embraced.

One study that has more recently paved the way for this challenge to be taken up is Sophie Duncan's *Shakespeare's Props: Memory and Cognition* (2018), building on the framework of a notion of 'ghosting' to examine how the materiality of the prop activates unique, collective, and several affordances of memory.[9] Duncan's work extends studies like Evelyn Tribble's *Cognition in the Globe* (2011),[10] which have been helping to unpack our understanding of early modern playhouse practices in terms of recent developments in the cognitive sciences, particularly via models of '4e cognition, which comprise embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended cognition', but Duncan rightly observes that none of the studies of cognition in early modern playing had included any sustained focus on props as the objects with which cognition is embodied, embedded, enacted, or extended in the playhouse.[11] The role of memory in 4e cognition approaches cannot be understated, since repetition is a key component in reducing cognitive load or stress – in short, a performer who can offload cognitive activity to a prop is less likely to forget lines, for example. Importantly, repetition by performers also cues 'ghosting' of specific signs for audiences of repeat performances of a play, to which Sofer was referring as the 'relic revived'. While Duncan's work is not directly focused on plays in

[6]Harris and Korda, *Staged Properties*.
[7]Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003), 16–19.
[8]Sofer, *Stage Life*, 3.
[9]Sophie Duncan, *Shakespeare's Props: Memory and Cognition* (New York and London: Routledge, 2019).
[10]Evelyn B. Tribble, *Cognition in the Globe: Attention and Memory in Shakespeare's Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).
[11]Duncan, *Shakespeare's Props*, 5, 11.

repertory, the studies it presents of props in Shakespeare's plays expands this idea to go beyond repeat performances of a single play and covers the recycled use of a prop or symbol from one play to another.

The contributors to this special issue of *Shakespeare* pick up such threads to explore the function of props across a repertory, broadly construed, paying particular attention to props on early modern stages as well as in contemporary, intersectional theatre practice. Not simply understood as passive objects for adding flavour or texture, props participate in the violence of the stage and the coding of race, gender, class, and other politics of identity. The social life of things bleeds in both directions, meaning that props never signify in a vacuum since the stage is never completely removed from society. It is this signifying potential that also means props can be used purposefully to create positive, recuperative, or conciliatory uses of staging and to interrogate outmoded and harmful codes.

Part one includes articles considering the dramaturgical qualities of vizards, noses, feathers, swords, and arbors from a variety of vantages of theatre history. Some of these objects stretch and probe at distinctions made between props, costumes, and set pieces; we offer here a capacious view of 'stage property' to show how material things in a repertory are automatically unfixed and mobile, moving across different performances, plays, and actors' bodies. Articles by Hailey Bachrach and Laurie Johnson both consider materials associated with the actors' faces, black vizard masks and false noses respectively, that signify gendered, racial, and/or religious difference on the early modern stage. Bachrach shows that masks became a shorthand for anxieties about women's legibility, in terms of both their sexuality and their whiteness. The mask operates therefore to disguise identity and flaunt difference in comedies like *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Love's Labour's Lost*; it becomes a prop to be discarded in moments of revelation or surprise. While Bachrach argues that the ubiquitous use of black masks by female characters in the early modern repertory has been largely forgotten (hence their absence from modern performances), Johnson questions the presence of a prop, the false 'Jewish' nose, being imagined and added by modern scholars to the early modern repertory where it was not originally employed. While there was a false nose prop indicated in various early modern plays, including one used by the actor playing Barabas in *The Jew of Malta,* Johnson calls its association with Jewishness specifically into question, noting that other non-Jewish characters in the repertory also employed the nose prop as a sign of villainy or foolishness. The multi-faceted and sometimes conflicting meanings that these stage properties produced for their audiences are here uncovered and considered alongside the critical histories of representing race and religion on the early modern stage.

Moving past the era of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, John Kuhn and Emily MacLeod delve into the employment of crucial stage properties in later performance histories of the Restoration and Romantic eras and their

relationship to labour: the work of those who created them as well as the performers who used them onstage. Kuhn's article centers the role of indigenous crafts on the seventeenth century stage in John Dryden's 'Indian' plays, and the techniques of the indigenous American artisans who produced these props and costumes. Whether the materials were imported from abroad or made in imitation of those that were, the feathers featured in plays across the seventeenth century repertory demonstrated the substantial influence that indigenous featherwork had on English theatrical aesthetics. MacLeod's article, rather than tracing an object across a series of plays as the previous contributions have done, focuses on the movement of Edmund Kean's sword on the stage as he wielded it over the course of his career playing Richard III. Kean inhabited many roles that depended on prosthetics, such as his famous 'tawny' Othello and his 'humpbacked' Richard. His dynamic physicality in performing the deformed king became entangled with his own physical debility towards the end of his career when he started using his sword as a crutch. The articles in this section all participate in the imaginative work of theatre history; they consider how the spectacle of props in repertory created narratives that had specific and powerful meanings to their original audiences. Bringing together these histories of performance and material culture becomes a highly generative exercise in excavating the social and dramatic lives of things.

While previous essays relied on genre, character type, crafting techniques, and celebrity actors in their methodological approaches, Elizabeth Tavares's article on 'site-specific violence' locates the prop of the stage arbor as part of the Rose playhouse architecture after 1592. Here Tavares adds to our catalog that reaches beyond the oft-discussed handkerchiefs, rings, or other handheld props that circulated in the early modern repertory to larger objects that have been generally overlooked or undertheorized in recent scholarship, especially in the context of repertory studies. Tavares argues that repetitions of spectacle across plays in the repertory, such as dead bodies hung upon the arbor in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Massacre at Paris* or assignations between lovers under its canopy in *Titus Andronicus* and *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, utilised specific architectural features of the playhouse, such as its roof and pillars. This recycling of object might prompt an affective response from the audiences of multiple plays in repertory, whose memory of one play creates the opportunity to connect images and meanings to another.

Part two consists of three essays that each take on modern performances of early modern drama in the United States and the United Kingdom and the role that prop-based dramaturgy can have in shaping actor experiences and audience response. Matthieu Chapman contributes an autoethnographic essay reflecting upon and interrogating racialised trends in American theatre stemming from participation as the silent role of 'Othello's man' in a college production of *Othello*. Using 'black flesh' as 'an object to be exploited for cultural capital by white theatregoers and theatremakers', Chapman uses an

Afro-Pessimist methodology to consider how non-speaking black characters in early modern drama performance become a spectacle emptied of actual agency or 'being', akin to a stage property. The inclusion of black actors in mostly white Shakespeare productions often leads to 'mental anguish' for the performers, who inevitably become enmeshed in the anti-blackness of Shakespeare's dramaturgy. Megan Snell's article on the presentation of props 'playing' babies (or 'baby-props') also engages with questions of race, ethnicity, and the complexity of performing 'humanness' in modern theatrical performances. Looking at three plays (*Titus Andronicus, The Winter's Tale* and David Ireland's 2016 play *Cyprus Avenue*) that feature baby-props whose paternity is under scrutiny, Snell offers a comprehensive analysis of the material decisions made by theatrical designers over the twentieth century and notes that the textiles surrounding the babies also work to racialise them and highlight their blackness (Aaron's baby) or whiteness (Perdita). Analyzing these scenes and the use of these props from a repertory perspective shows how ingrained the use of baby-props is in plots that depict anxieties about racial difference and feminine infidelity. Both Chapman and Snell draw upon the work of Kim F. Hall and Ian Smith, foundational thinkers in the field of Premodern Critical Race Studies, who write on the relationship between objecthood and blackness that must be interrogated in work on props in the early modern repertory. Chelsea Phillips and her team of eight graduate students close out this section of the issue with their in-depth exploration of Ophelia's bouquet in *Hamlet* and the dramaturgical possibilities of presenting the bouquet as written or substituting other objects instead of the original flowers. Phillips guides the reader through their process in the classroom, where different groups each chose an aspect of Ophelia's character (innocent, sexual, perceptive) to illustrate their choices. By investigating the different staging options (which characters gets each flower/object among the textual variants of *Hamlet,* for instance), the article demonstrates the care and attention that props demand because of their narrative power.

In part three, Sophie Duncan offers reflections on the most recent debates in the study of stage properties, particularly as some of the terms of this debate have shifted markedly for scholars whose experience of live in-person theatre has been drastically reduced during a global health crisis. Duncan notes however that funding cuts to the arts in most parts of the world had already contributed to a 'props-poor theatrical aesthetic' and this in turn places greater emphasis on the decisions made by theatre producers about which props to use, how to use them, and what meanings they convey. Such questions are thus also brought into sharper focus for scholars studying stage props, making decisions about definitions and methodologies arguably more pressing now than at any time since the renewal in interest in props. Instead of a 'state of play', as such, Duncan thus presents a series of engagements in current critical debates about props and what is at stake in how the terms of these debates are

mapped out. Making 'prop' too broad a category, for example, risks painting over or even replicating specific forms of oppression or misrepresentation, especially in relation to ethnic or racialised minorities.

The arguments Duncan presents in pointing to future directions involve attending in this way to critiquing assumptions about theatrical bodies and practices embedded in the study of props. While many of the articles here explore props in later periods and contexts, the development of this special issue has made clear to us how necessary the exploration of props in specific cultural and international contexts is, especially the non-Anglophone. As major U.S. theatre festivals shift away from producing Shakespeare, the window of opportunity is closing on the chance to document long-term subscribers' memories of a lifetime of theatre-going, especially for locations that have taken on the status of annual pilgrimage or retirement community. For the early modern period, so much remains to be considered. How widespread was private ownership of props and actors' boxes? What did these typically entail? What about particularly large or unwieldly props? Were these attached to specific venues, did they in fact move between locations, or even go on tour? In what ways did the role of props differ at court, mayor's shows, and in the broader entertainment landscape? For example, if specially designed for a Christmas court performance, what was the afterlife of such props? Then as now, what about the props that don't make it to performance? Those props of rehearsal, such as practice weapons, rehearsal masks, and prototypes?

Some of these questions arise from the contributors who began the journey of this essay collection with us. A global pandemic and the ongoing labour precarity it exacerbated meant that many necessary voices were waylaid far outside anyone's control. We are so grateful to those interlocutors who were a part of the initial conception of this collection, and whose proposals and conversations continued to shape our priorities even after they needed to step away. We are also incredibly grateful for our nearly twenty peer reviewers, who generously gave of their expertise in exceptionally trying times. Finally, thank you to the general editors of this journal, especially Tom Rutter and Brett Greatley-Hirsch, for their interest, flexibility, guidance, and support to see this collection home.

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