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Peter Pan and the White Imperial Imaginary

To consider racial difference in terms of exclusion enables whiteness to retain its relative invisibility. Drawing upon the theoretical insights of critical whiteness studies, Mary Brewer examines J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan,* exploring how the amorphous status granted to whiteness in the text lends it cultural authority. She aims to uncover how race and racism structure the play and to find ways of exploiting the gaps in its representation of white identity. These gaps potentially may be exploited in production – that is, made to operate against the grain and yield explicitly oppositional performances that work toward the denaturalization of hegemonic constructions of whiteness, gender, and sexuality. Mary Brewer lectures in the Department of English and Drama at Loughborough University. Her books include *Race, Sex, and Gender in Contemporary Women's Theatre* (Sussex Academic Press, 1992) and *Problems of Exclusions in Feminist Thought: Challenging the Boundaries of Womanhood* (Sussex Academic Press, 2002).

AT THE TURN of the twentieth century, theatrical and literary ideas of race constituted important components of British public discourse, which helped shape the common understanding of racialized subjects and related rationales for the subjugation of racial 'others'. During the same period British theatre enacted cultural dialogues about race by interacting with historical and contemporaneous representations from a variety of sources, including discussions of race in popular scientific magazines, newspapers, political speeches, and public lectures. Some questions about the meaning of race that marked nineteenth-century debates, and ethical concerns over colonial practices, remained unresolved in early twentieth-century thinking – a position reflected in the theatre of the time.

The question of whether or not racial differences were natural or culturally produced dominated discussions about racial identity in the late nineteenth century. Writing about the essential mission of British colonialists – to transmit the values of their economic and political institutions, as well as cultural ones – Kenan Malik suggests that the disparity between the class and gender systems supporting capitalism, British historical democratic ideals, and Victorian religious ideology created a heterogeneous and contradictory mythology of racial identity (p. 225). This included a presumption of the natural superiority of white over black peoples, with Darwinism used to explain the stratification of perceived racial differences between white British and the diverse ethnic groups they ruled over in their imperial holdings. At the same time, it allowed to Christianity a potential civilizing agency: the idea that black people, despite their presumed 'natural inferiority', might be raised out of primitivism by virtue of contact with the civilizing influences of white culture.

Early twentieth-century theatrical representations reflected the different, contradictory versions of whiteness and of racial 'otherness' in circulation since the late Victorian era. This paper considers how theatrical representations and their meanings were critically affected by the terms of competing historical debates on race through the lens of J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan, or the Boy Who Would Not Grow Up.*

As one of the best known and most frequently produced twentieth-century plays, *Peter Pan* offers a prime example of how dramatic representations of race helped to create and communicate a shared vision of

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what it meant to be a white British national as opposed to this subject's 'other'.

My focus will be on how the play stages a white fantasy of racial difference, exploring how it echoes and mediates between the real world of imperial practices and the white imaginary – the repertoire of representations and meanings that make up our dominant sense of the world. I consider different versions of the play in order to ascertain more fully how its political unconscious reflects the context and content of white racial discourse.[1] I argue that the epistemic violence of colonial relations that reverberates throughout this popular idyll reveals some of the ideological underpinnings of the master code of whiteness in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Fairy Tale or Racial Myth?

Frequently *Peter Pan* has been received as a fairy tale, a charming fantasy that captures the innocence conventionally associated with childhood; but the play's political unconscious is rooted in real stories of violent conquest, the British Empire, and Victorian notions of racial difference. Catherine Haill comments upon one sense of the play's 'reality' when she says that its popularity relates to the fact that it issues from the common dream among children of fighting the 'baddies' and winning. Drawing upon a wealth of letters to actors who had played the role, she documents how, from the first performances, children identified with Peter as the representative of 'good' in this competition (p. 14).

Of course, adults also participate in fantasy contests featuring representatives of 'good' and 'evil'. Recalling that Peter Pan was not a character originally intended for children, Jacqueline Rose stresses the fact that when Barrie came to write the final version of the play (twenty-four years after its first production), it was published in a volume that had nothing to do with children's literature (p. 5–6). If, then, it contains childish elements, this is due more to the fact that childhood is something we continue to be implicated in rather than something that should be viewed as dissociating the story from relevant adult experience (p. 12). Indeed, at the turn of the twentieth century white Englishmen and women had the arena of empire in which actually to play out competitions featuring themselves as representatives of all that was best. Racial difference was one of the many significations associated with the categories of 'good' and 'bad' within the imperial field of meaning – with the African male, for instance, viewed as one of the greatest threats to the white English race.

The play's implications in white racial fantasies rest also in its origins – that is, in its author's personal experience. Jackie Wullschläger notes that the idea for the play arose in the course of a set of games about pirates, Indians, and islands between Barrie and the Llewelyn Davies children that took place near his home in Sussex. There is a clear racial undercurrent in these early games; for instance, one version sets events on a South Sea island, where the marooned boys are made to walk the plank by Barrie in the role of Captain Swarthy (p. 125–6). Considering the period of the play's inception, it would be difficult to read Barrie's choice of the name 'Swarthy' (dark, dark-complexioned) to represent the 'baddie' in his boys' game outside the context of colonial thinking on race.

Andrew Roberts traces the connections between socio-political ideas about racial difference and their literary manifestations. He notes that images of native peoples in the popular colonial mind at the turn of the twentieth century were coloured by the same 'tales of small wars in desert or jungle against veiled fanatics or naked savages' also prevalent in Victorian literature (p. 39–40). The discourse of savagery identified by Andrews resonates in Barrie's explanation to the Llewelyn Davies boys concerning the genesis of Peter's character: 'I made Peter by rubbing the five of you violently together, as *savages* with two sticks produce a flame' (Haill, p. 12, my italics).

In several of his writings, Jacques Derrida develops his concept of iterability. This idea helps to explain the significance of the play's

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'realistic' genesis in terms of its racial fingerprints. Derrida posits that any signifying element entails a structure of repetition. This process of repetition functions both to create context and to obviate the possibility of context-free meaning. Barrie's references to swarthiness and savagery within the interplay of a game between 'good' *versus* 'bad' repeat the extra-textual terms of late-Victorian racial discourse.

These terms also structure the play's internal dynamics. Barrie's description of Never Land clearly reproduces the same colonial mindset as do the narratives described by Andrew Roberts. There are the proverbial redskins and piccaninny braves on the warpath, and whose expressions are limited to degraded forms of English. The pirates are led by the 'dark and fearful' Hook, whose first mate is a 'gigantic black', said to be terrifying to children. There are frequent small pitched battles over territory with Hook and his men on one side and the 'pale-faces', Pan and his followers, on the other. Thus, the racial schema that emerges from this (white/black, good/bad, civilized/savage) functions to render Peter as a representative of the white racial self – in other words as an effect of the white author's and spectators' location in the British racial order.

The Sexual Politics of *Peter Pan*

Ann Wilson also refers to an earlier version of the play in which Tiger Lily voices a rape fantasy: 'Suppose Tiger Lily runs into the wood – Peter Paleface attack her – what then?' 'If Paleface chase Tiger Lily – she no run fast – she tumble into a heap what then? What then?' In this way, the play replicates the representation of colonized women as so desirous of white men that they want to be raped (p. 606-7). Moreover, like many a colonial governor before him, Pan rules the island largely by intimidation. The boys who make up his followers are described as 'like dogs waiting for the master to tell them that their day has begun' (Barrie, *Peter Pan*, p. 39), and who know that 'they will catch it' if they do not satisfy Pan (p. 37). However, the play demonstrates also a solid understanding of imperial *realpolitik*, showing the need for Pan to exercise more subtle means of control as well as relying on force.

As recognized by Albert Memmi, small colonizers who defend the colonial system vigorously do so because they benefit from it to some extent. Their gullibility lies in the fact that to protect their very limited interests it is necessary for them to protect other infinitely more important ones of which they all are, incidentally, the victims. However, though dupe and victim, they do also get their share of colonial spoils (p. 11). In the play, white racial discourse operates to smooth over the differences and inequities among the white inhabitants of what is in effect a small British colonial society.

This reflects the actual situation in the colonies as well as at home at the time of the play's original production. Those whites who were at the top of imperial society – who actually ran colonial affairs and profited directly from them – needed the backing of ordinary white British people. The working class was rewarded for its support by a system of collateral benefits attached to membership of the white 'race', not least of which was a shared feeling of moral and cultural superiority. This helps explain why, despite their subjugation, the boys willingly fight for the maintenance of Pan's regime; for their relatively comfortable position in the island hierarchy depends on Pan maintaining his position.

The nature of Pan's relationship with the island's inhabitants establishes a connection between national power, whiteness, and masculinity, while the games he enacts with Wendy and the boys affirm a connection between the white family and empire. In this construction, Wendy represents the figure of the national mother in Pan's island state, as she plays at nation building as well as family building with him and the boys. Consider the scene in which the lost boys are about to walk the plank. Wendy's message, delivered on behalf of all mothers, anticipates the line that many women would repeat during the First World War: 'I hope our sons will die like English gentlemen' (Barrie, p. 76). Further-

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more, before their rescue, the words of Hook are drowned out by the boys breaking into the national anthem, an avowal of loyalty to the Great White Father of imperial England, King Edward, as well as to Pan.

Pan explicitly equates himself with the figure of the all-powerful white patriarch. He ends a discussion with the Indians by stating: 'All is well. The Great White Father has spoken' (Barrie, p. 63). Barrie's stage directions state that 'this has a note of finality about it, with the implied "and now shut up" which is never far from the courteous receptions of well-meaning inferiors by *born* leaders of men' (Barrie, p. 63, my italics). In this context, 'born' echoes the racial hierarchy of Victorian discourse in which whiteness is naturalized as the superior category.

In fact, when Barry first submitted the manuscript for production he titled the play *The Great White Father*. Michael Mangan, while he agrees that there is racial accuracy in the imperialist overtones of this title, argues that the play's original producer was right to change the title back to *Peter Pan*, observing that although Pan adopts the title of Father, this is just what he does not want to be. Rather, he can cope with the role only in play (p. 201).

In contrast, I consider Barrie's original title to reflect more accurately the heart of his play's subject matter. However, as Mangan recognizes, Pan's relation to the concept of paternity is a complex one. His refusal of conventional adult masculinity is not straightforward. In his first literary appearance – in the novel *The Little White Bird* – Pan is described as a 'betwixt and between' figure, a position that he continues to occupy in terms of his masculinity in all his literary manifestations. Jonathan Rutherford characterizes imperial manliness as emotionally repressed, sexually confused, mother-fixated, women-fearing, and morbidly nostalgic for the days of boyhood (p. 26). At the same time, however, it connoted superior physical strength and reason, and emotional independence.

Clearly, Pan feels threatened by one facet of masculinity, and this is the active heterosexuality leading to paternity.[2] Whether in relation to Wendy, Tink, or the Mermaids, Pan remains unmoved by any expression of feminine sexuality, or displays an active aversion towards it. When Wendy asks him to remain with her in the nursery, he passionately insists: 'No one is going to catch me, lady, and make me a man' (Barrie, p. 88). Adult gender roles as they relate to sexuality and physical maternity/paternity equate to a kind of trap in Pan's mind.[3]

In one sense, Pan does play with Wendy and the boys by pretending to be the head of their household, because it amuses him to play happy families. However, this does not mean that their family games do not also form part of the gendered and racialized competition that characterizes the island society; for, clearly, Pan revels in the exercise of authority that occupying the position of the top male in his society affords him. He is completely comfortable with external, public shows of patriarchal power.

The Cult of the Leader

The construction of the father's role in the late-Victorian era was based on the public/private binary: fatherhood was constructed through the difference between women's responsibilities inside the home and men's wider social duties. As Steven Mintz points out, above all the Victorian father was a governor, not an emotional 'pal' to his wife or children (p. 61). This conception of fatherhood calls into question the notion that Pan can only deal with the role of the father in play, especially with regards to his guise as the Great White Father. To view his patriarchal role-playing as always merely playful ignores the fact that his performance of the role carries real force on the island, both within and outside the circle of lost boys. Rather, I suggest that by enacting the role of Great White Father, Pan makes a real bid for absolute authority over Wendy, the other white males on the island, and the island's indigenous inhabitants who are positioned as his racial 'others'.[4]

It is important also not to lose sight of the fact that Pan's ability to wield power over the island's people, particularly its indigenous inhabitants, is rooted just as much,

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perhaps more, in his racial character as it is in the masculine components of his identity. While Pan may reject such elements of patriarchal masculinity as active heterosexuality, he never renounces his allegiance to the dominant racial order. Pan does not need to exercise an active heterosexuality in order for his actions to have a deadly serious aim and effect.

To locate Pan in proper relation to a white patriarchal order, it is helpful to consider also how the familial games on the island reveal a number of proto-fascist elements in the play's representation of race-gender identities. The cult of the leader that characterized the Nazi creed mandated that the national Father's limited sexual relations with women be kept carefully hidden, for his power rested in part on the perception that he was wedded to his people. Just as Nazi ideology portrayed Hitler as Father of the Aryan nation, a symbol of rarefied masculine power, Pan is shown as immune to the temptations of female sexuality. In order to function efficiently as the island's Great White Father, he must remain aloof from personal sexual and familial entanglements – although, as Ann Yeoman contends, the play does allow for homoeroticism as a mode of expression through which the boys show loyalty to their leader (p. 169).

Pan's distance from the emotional desires and ties of his more ordinary followers is essential to maintaining his status as ruler, for his identity as Great White Father places him in a category of idealized patriarchal authority: the masculine figure for which one need face no competition. Pan's emotional desensitization, his unwillingness to forge emotional ties, may reflect what Aimé Césaire identifies as integral to the colonial situation: the potential for the violence inherent in colonialism to rebound on the colonizer. The imperial project may thus contribute towards the de-civilizing of the colonizer, his or her brutalization and degradation, by awakening buried instincts, such as covetousness, violence, and race hatred. Concomitantly, this may impede the development or expression of social practices such as love and committed family ties.

The Dark Side of the Island

Pan's asexual nature is most frequently read as symbolizing his desire to remain a child, but one may read it also as an attempt to negate the perceived destabilizing effects of heterosexual desire within the colonial equation (something reinforced perhaps by the tradition of cross-gender casting). As Jonathan Rutherford identifies, *Peter Pan*, as the culminating adventure story of the Victorian era, reveals the imperial fantasy of manly racial supremacy as well as the elements that this fantasy repressed – namely, sexuality and an emotional need of women (p. 25). Consequently, the play shows it as natural for Wendy, *as a female*, to dream of hearth and home. The Great White Father, however, must remain immune to any such desires, lest he be forced to abdicate the hedonist pleasures that his 'manly racial supremacy' yields him.

Michael Egan reads *Peter Pan* through a number of Freudian tropes. He compares Pan to Freud's idea of the selfishly amoral child, whose superego is still in formation and thus whose conscience is weak (p. 41). Never Land, with its archetypal representatives of terror – beasts, savages, and murderers – is said to resemble Freud's conception of the unconscious (p. 45), while Hook represents the symbolically castrated Oedipal father (p. 48).

It is possible to extend Egan's Freudian analysis to include a reading of Hook's and Pan's rivalry in terms of conflicting race-gender identities and further to show how the play is implicated in the imperial project. Hook's identity is one of the island's mysteries. We know nothing of his origins and little of his motives; he simply represents the dark side of life on the island. The darkness associated with his character can be read in two ways in relation to race. As Ann Wilson notes, Wendy is singled out from the other female figures on the island by virtue of her whiteness, which visually marks her as sexually pure (p. 606). It designates her also as an inappropriate object for the black father figure Hook. Consequently, Hook's desire to seize Wendy from Pan places him in a

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position similar to that of the African male, who, as a rival, was stereotyped as a sexual predator, covetous of white women. Historically, this construction has given licence to the use of sexual violence (including genital mutilation) against black men as a means of controlling the threat of their supposed anti-social sexual tendencies.

Secondly, there is much about Hook – mirrored in his symbolic castration by Pan – that cannot be fathomed, and this, along with his symbolic castration, links him to the metaphor of the 'dark continent' that Freud uses to describe female sexuality. Thus, his suppression by Pan is part of the colonial imperative noted by Rutherford involving the repression of the threat posed by the feminine.

To read *Peter Pan* as no more than a delightful children's story ignores how it is implicated in white supremacist discourse by virtue of reproducing the axioms of imperialism in a displaced and dispersed form. The play's staying power as popular drama and its countless adaptations over the course of the twentieth century – some more sugar-coated than others – signify the continued residence of past colonial systems of thought in contemporary cultural discourse. Moreover, its success reveals how staged representations of race can be crucial to the formation and perpetuation of whiteness and its cultural authority by working imaginatively upon people as social collectives and individuals.

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Notes

1. I refer here to Fredric Jameson's idea of the text's political unconscious as put forward in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, in which he uses the term to describe how 'texts come before us as the always-already read' (p. 9–10). The way in which spectators interpret a theatrical production may be understood in similar terms; they are apprehended through layers either of previous performances or, in the case of new material, the inherited interpretive traditions and viewing habits of the spectators.

2. Numerous critics have remarked on Pan's fear of the maternal, which relates to his sexual anxieties. Pan fears the power of motherhood to upset his order on the island by luring away those who uphold his power.

3. This is literalized in the complete domestication suffered by Mr Darling, whose family ties result in him ending up in a dog kennel.

4. Pan exhibits this desire for mastery over women also when he exhibits a spirit of competitiveness toward Mrs Darling over Wendy. After spying on Wendy's mother as she mourns her daughter's loss, he admits sharing a fondness for Wendy that transforms immediately into a moment of jealous aggression: 'She is awfully fond of Wendy. I am fond of her too. We can't both have her, lady!' (Barrie, p. 85). His desire for control and possession of the feminine is followed by a return to aversion – expressed in the stage notes as: 'A funny feeling comes over him' (p. 85). When Pan unlatches the window so that Wendy may return to her mother, he reaffirms the threat that emotion and desire could pose to his system of control.

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