Seeing Whiteness through the Prism of Early-Modern Portraits

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Abstract

I am frequently told how race in the early-modern period had little do with colour, and instead signified lineage, class, and gender. Therefore, any attempt to racialize the period is anachronistic (or political). The effect of such a restriction is to close off any discussion about anti-racist history telling and to fail to recognize how the colonial project, as manifested in British imperial legacies, underpins early-modern visual culture and its presentation in museum and gallery spaces today. I wish to mitigate this tendency by offering, from my lived experience as a Black woman, an analysis of how aristocratic whiteness shaped constructions of race in the early-modern period and now. My focus will be on two early-modern portraits from the collection at Tate Britain: Marcus Gheeraert's *Portrait of an Unknown Woman* (1595); and *The Cholmondeley Ladies* (c.1600), painted by an unattributed artist. My paper will subvert the usual historical debates about constructions of race and indigeneity –which tend to begin with a focus on an emphatic Blackness in comparison to an un(re)marked and unraced whiteness – and instead offer a road map for curators, museum staff, and historians eager to challenge white hegemony, alerting them to the blinding nature of whiteness, its ability to obscure, and the consequent need therefore to consciously and independently 'see' and 'hold' whiteness in their minds.[1]

Introduction

I am one of those rare occurrences in the art history world: a Black, English early-modern art historian. The early-modern age, despite our continued obsession with the Tudors and the subsequent popularity of the television adaptation of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* and its eagerly anticipated sequel *The Mirror and the Light*, is generally perceived as having little to tell us about African diasporic histories and the residue of such histories within our current lives. I believe that the impact of such limited interest by scholars of colour in early-modern art history telling, in addition to the obvious benefits a more representational scholarship brings to all history telling, is the sustained perpetuation, with little challenge, of a deep-seated belief in the pre-racial nature of the early-modern period. Race has been defined by early-modern scholars as denoting a range of cultural and social arrangements, such as lineage, offspring, class, gender, and nobility (Loomba 2002). More often than not historians are inclined to describe race in Renaissance Europe as characteristically "fluid" and in "flux", and as having questionable links with skin colour and the corporeal (Erickson and Hall 2016; Floyd-Wilson 2003). Consequently, race is afforded an abstract quality that conveniently ignores a European Black presence and lives lived in an era foregrounded by Britain's emerging status as a colonial force. Hence the importance of a growing number of scholarly works that seek to document the presence of Black and indigenous people in European and colonial contexts (Habib 2008; Warren 2016; Phillips 2014).

I remain astounded as to how much weight and certainty early-modern scholars ascribe to the term race, overly preoccupied with its semantic origins. A synecdoche for Blackness, it is viewed through a narrow teleological lens that ignores cultural essentialism as a precursor

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for race as physical difference, which is further compounded by an equally restrictive process of periodisation (Thompson 2022), whereby the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century are cited as the historical moments when scientific notions of race are believed to have brought a lasting rigidity and an immovable certainty to skin and its significance as an indicator of hierarchical difference.

Ania Loomba and Jonathan Burton advise that 'it is important to remember that even when racial ideologies and racial practices became more entrenched there was no singular approach to or agreement about human difference' (Loomba and Burton 2007: 4). In her book *The Complexions of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth Century British Culture*, Roxanne Wheeler cites the third quarter of the eighteenth century as the moment when skin colour emerged as the most important constituent of racial identity (2000: 9). The study is commendable in its ability to present another account of eighteenth-century perceptions of racial difference. However, such positions run the risk of defensive early-modern art history telling, coupled with the tacit assumption that present-day conceptions of racism and race formation are free from complexity and pernicious processes: driven by a fixed understanding of race as biological and phenotypical fact. Like history, race is, and continues to be, a slippery, sticky, and intangible concept. Since their inception, institutions like RaceB4Race, and Early Modern Scholars of Colour (EMSOC) have actively supported pre-modern critical race studies,[2] a theoretically expansive and historically-embedded field of scholarship that is interested in nascent and emerging forms of race as a means of promoting inclusive forms of early-modern history telling. Burton and Loomba fittingly describe the history of race as 'protracted and erratic' (Loomba and Burton 2007:1), beset with 'concepts and themes, and mechanisms for assigning different values to human beings arise, mutate, go dormant, resurface, relocate and adapt anew' (Loomba and Burton 2007: 1). Mercurial in character, the act of finding new mediums from which to study and index race, becomes all the more urgent.

Devaluing race in the early-modern period will not render it invisible. Using my work as an early-modern historian, who inhabits the public space of the gallery via gallery tours, I seek to engage visitors with new ways of understanding constructions of race and its impact on their current lives. The way I have chosen to do this is to acknowledge that any discussion about race in Renaissance Europe, and a desire to examine the full complexity of the term, must consider racialized whiteness and its construction. White studies is now a growing field within the gallery and museum sector, predicated on the belief that any meaningful analysis of the term race and its corresponding power structures, can only be achieved through an acknowledgement of a structured racial whiteness (Brown et al. 2022). A recent example is the Royal Academy in London's 2024 exhibition *Entangled Pasts 1768-Now: Art, Colonialism and Change*. A display that sought to address the role of both art and the institution in the shaping of colonialism, it included a room entitled *Constructions of Whiteness*. I would argue that early-modern art history is a uniquely apposite historical moment, and a discipline from which to interrogate constructions of racialized whiteness. From this perspective it is possible to expose the strategies used to mask its omnipresence, such as the use of light and shade, and references to both theatrical and literary counterparts, as well as to material culture. Unlike today, where white people are viewed as racially neutral – that is to say, blessed with an ability to transcend any processes of racial classification, and cultural othering – their early-modern counterparts revelled in their privileged whiteness, cosmetically enhancing their paleness and deliberately using their whiteness as a synonym for Englishness and indigeneity. As Geraldine Heng puts it, the 'ability of racial logic to stalk and merge with other hierarchical systems – such as class, gender or sexuality – also means race can function as class' (2018:20).

This paper seeks to bring ideas of whiteness to bear on two portraits from the early-modern period in Tate's collection: *Portrait of an Unknown Lady* (1595) by Marcus Gheeraerts II, and *The Cholmondeley Ladies* (artist unknown). These portraits have remained popular to visitors, effortlessly capturing the public's attention. They are therefore appropriate cultural objects from which to explore the ways in which whiteness is constructed in the paintings – through gender skin tone, dress, make-up, and heraldic symbolism – and to situate this whiteness and what it signifies within the broader socio-historical contexts from which the paintings emerged. In way of positioning the portraits within the dynamics of the gallery, I include the current wall caption for each work and a new caption. The essay offers a new way of reading early-modern portraits that brings racial identity into the discussion, revealing the inherent interconnection between whiteness and other thematic and contextual considerations of portraiture from the period, such as Englishness, colonialism, class, white womanhood, and motherhood. In addition, a close reading of whiteness in these purportedly racial neutral objects within the collection will create more meaningful ways of bringing the British Empire into the gallery.

I have always relished my status as a Black woman who has come to 'temples of whiteness'– a term coined by the artist John Akomfrie to describe the British museum and the gallery sector – with a background in social work practice and academia – roles that have afforded me a keen understanding of the structures that create and sustain social inequalities.[3] Unencumbered by the culture and professional mores of the heritage sector, like the emperor's new clothes, from my outsider position, I enter the art world armed with a clarity and determination to do 'wake work' (Sharpe 2016:13), and to challenge, with some success, Tate's white-supremacist policies and procedures that have prevented the recruitment of Black guides, and in turn champion the need for a more representational and global art history telling and curatorial practice, in the form of African heritage tours. As the only volunteer Black guide for many years at Tate, I am keenly aware of the impact a corporeal Black presence has in a gallery and museum environment. There is nothing more instantly alterable to the perception of a painting and gallery space, than to have a Black figure stand in front of an image never conceived as being viewed through a Black diasporic gaze: shining a clear light on the whiteness of the space.

Patricia Hill-Collins has observed that 'many Black female intellectuals have made creative use of their marginality – 'their outsider within' status (Hill-Collins 1986: 14). In this same way, I have used my locus on the periphery of the gallery and museum sector to decentre white-centric histories underpinning the public's engagement with the visual arts in general, and early-modern portraits in particular. Using my status as a Black woman who instinctively interrogates whiteness as a vital mode of survival, I have no confusion regarding the link between the subject under analysis and my personal self. First-person narrative enquiry is a valid qualitative methodology (Clandinin and Connelly 1990: 4) that is well suited to the critical analysis of white racial formation in the arts and its impact on museum cultures. It focuses on the study of experience, and the value of the voice and storytelling, which has been described by Janice Huber and colleagues as having transcendental and enduring qualities (Huber et al. 2013: 213). The use of lived experiences enables the narrator, as a consciously active and invested agent, to apply critical analysis through the interpretation of events (Coles 1989: 22).

My interest in racially indexing my chosen portraits was born out of a refusal or inability by a number of white gallery audiences, despite my encouragement, to read colonial accounts and brutalities in portraits with no discernible Black presence. With my insistence to managers at Tate that colonial histories underpin all gallery tours, and are delivered not only by white guides, but by individuals who identify as members of the global majority – Black bodies, whose very presence in the gallery disrupts, what Nirwal Puwar describes as 'somatic norms' (Puwar 2007: 8-9) – I have shifted the usual perspective on gallery tours, where race and difference is only spoken about in the presence of a Black figure – and in the context of the last three hundred years and the present – to one where a white figure can elicit similar themes, and where visitors are encouraged to speculate, and to use their present lives and racial identities as clues to past histories. The significance of bringing early-modern literature and visual culture together offers the opportunity to broaden the field of pre-modern critical race studies that, if instituted by Tate, will heighten the potential for structural change beyond the usual rhetoric underpinning their desire to decolonize the institution.

The refusal of some white people to acknowledge their whiteness as racially defined extends beyond the gallery visiting public. During the course of my research I was the subject of gaslighting and gatekeeping by an early-modern curator and historian who remained unwilling to engage in any meaningful dialogue with my work, choosing instead to denigrate my ideas by refusing to read my work on the grounds of grammatical mistakes, and consistently ignoring invitations to discuss my research. Undeterred by such behaviour, like a thorn in their reactionary sides, I remain even more determined and assured of the importance of my scholarship in relation to pre-modern portraiture, and its use within gallery spaces to highlight the continued power and pervasiveness of whiteness.

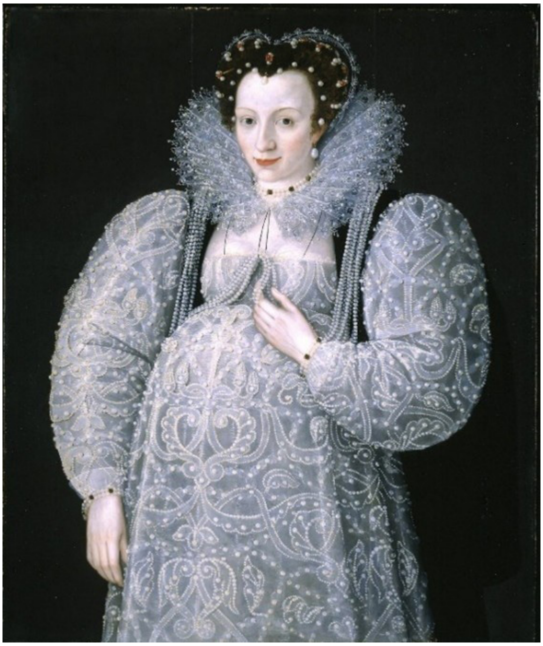

Fig.1 Portrait of an Unknown Lady c.1595, Attributed to Marcus Gheeraerts II

Like a pearl raised from the dark depths of the sea, the pregnant figure in Marcus Gheeraerts II's *Portrait of an Unknown Lady* (1595) (fig.1) emerges from an inky blackness. The sitter's cosmetically whitened "fair" white face is framed by a helmet of black hair, which emphasizes the lustre and gloss of the pearls that dangle from her alabaster forehead and drip from her reddened ear lobes. She also wears a choker of pearls and emeralds, and the whole is brought together with a sunburst ruff. The spectacle of whiteness continues with the woman's hyperwhite hand, threaded suggestively through a rope of pearls lying protectively on her bump while cupping one of her translucent white breasts. The cosmetically-applied blue veins on the figure's hands further emphasize the ideal of transparency, denoting a "blue bloodedness" synonymous with racial purity. The term "blue blood", emanating from the Spanish *sangre azul*, was originally adopted by the Spanish elite as a means of claiming familial pedigree, untainted by Moorish or Jewish blood. This picture serves as a visual exemplar of writer Toni Morrison's observation about how 'images of blinding whiteness seem to function as both the antidote for and a meditation on the shadow that is the companion to whiteness' (Morrison 1992: 33). The "shadow" is used here by Morrison to indicate a Black presence, either real or imagined. Gheeraerts seeks to challenge the presence of such a shadow through the visual language of whiteness, and yet is not quite able to hide the look of concern on the sitter's face, despite her ability to meet the viewer's gaze with a self-assured smile.

Marcus Gheeraerts liked to paint portraits of noticeably pregnant aristocratic English women. Other examples include *Portrait of a Woman in Red* (1620), *Anne Hale, Mrs Hoskins* (1629), and *Anne, Lady Pope with her Children* (1596). This was a relatively unique proclivity within early-modern European portrait painting, as observed by cultural historian Marieke de Winkel (De Winkel 1989), and one to which the art historian and curator Karen Hearn has ascribed the term 'pregnancy portraits' (Hearn 2002: 41-51). Hearn has suggested a number of reasons for the popularity of such images, including as 'visual evidence' of anticipated dynastic succession, and as an *aide-mémoire* for a husband whose wife may be lost to the 'rough sea' and 'dangerous rocks' of pregnancy and childbirth (Hearn 2000: 12).

While such motives might reasonably be applied to Gheeraerts' *Portrait of an Unknown Lady*, they do not account for the unique qualities of the portrait, in particular the racial significance of the figure's skin. Both Hearn and the art historian Richard Cork describe the skin of the figure as merely fashionable, with Cork observing that 'their blanched skin proved their pedigree' (Hearn 2002: 48; Cork 2003),[4] without considering the constitutive political and social significance of fashion and material culture. I instead contend that the image is inextricably linked with what cultural historian Kim F. Hall observes are 'proper gender relations shap[ing] the terms for describing proper colonial relations' (Hall 1995: 4). These 'proper colonial relations' are represented in the painting by Gheeraerts's use of the visual language of dark and light – the visual and racial potency of pearls, the maternal body, and cosmeticized white skin – to symbolize an unsullied white bloodline. As objectified and commodified as the pearls she wears, the woman in Gheeraerts's portrait is presented to the viewer as a desired and devotional object. The painting was made to be seen privately, functioning like a miniature, which was 'to be viewed', according to the master limner Nicholas Hilliard (c.1547–1619), 'of necessity in the hand near to the eye' (Thornton and Cain 1981: 87). In this instance, the portrait was in all probability commissioned by the sitter's husband, and designed to flatter and please him, as well as functioning as a memorial portrait in the event of his wife's death during labour. In addition, the portrait declares the similarly possessive intentions of England as a nation intent on imperialism and seizure.

Gheeraerts has created an image in which whiteness is synonymous with womanhood and nation-building. Here the white woman's body functions as an authorising aristocratic trope in both the domestic and global settings. As the art historian Erin Griffey notes of the period, 'within the context of elite marriages, the bride's complexion was widely scrutinized because beauty, health and fertility were all intrinsically connected' (Griffey 2021: 812). The woman is dressed in a gown that is wreathed in pearls to accentuate her belly, and which presents her as the guardian of an emerging aristocratic English identity that is further driven by her pregnant status. The early-modern pregnant body, perceived through medical texts, iconography, and oral tradition as a leaky, unpredictable, and impressionable vessel (McClive 2002; Churchill 2005), is tasked with protecting inheritance. In the playwright John Webster's *Duchess of Malfi* (1612-13), the titular Duchess's maternal body becomes a "super-body" that is able to command authority. In her analysis of the play, the literary scholar and playwright Sid Ray observes this effect, noting that 'if the mother was not pure, her body did become a kind of Trojan horse; it gestated another body that diluted, or worse, infiltrated aristocratic blood and authority' (Ray 2007: 25).

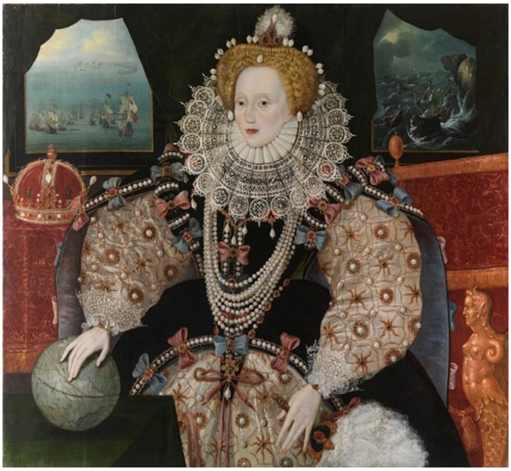

Fig.2 The Armada Portrait c.1588, Attributed to George Gower

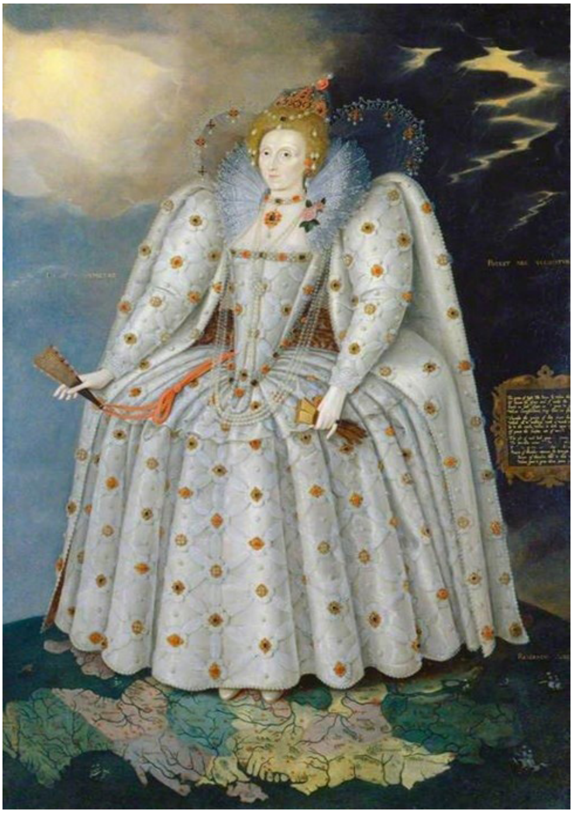

Fig.3 Queen Elizabeth I ('The Ditchley Portrait') c.1592, Marcus Gheeraerts II

Created in an age obsessed with genealogy and the delineation of bloodlines, *Portrait of an Unknown Lady* exists in opposition to the non-reproductive image of Elizabeth I, which celebrates her non-reproductive, virginal purity. While simultaneously mirroring the queen's protective maternal persona as 'mother o[her] contreye', the sitter wears the black and white colours of Elizabeth, whose portraits became a visual symbol for pure English whiteness. This affirms not only the power of the monarch but also links Gheeraerts portrait with established visual allegories of imperialist pursuits, as seen in paintings of Elizabeth such as *The Armada Portrait* (c.1588), attributed to George Gower (fig. 2), and the *Ditchley Portrait* (c.1592), also by Gheeraerts (fig.3). The portraits showcase imperial intent, sovereign power, and maternal protection respectively: a white hand pointing to the first English colony Virginia, named in her honour, and the figure of Elizabeth astride a map of England while sheltering its borders from the rest of the world (shown in the form of a globe) with her skirt. In making this connection, and by highlighting the sitter's skin colour through the use of cosmetics that were produced from ingredients procured from various parts of the world, *Portrait of an Unknown Lady* empathizes an English whiteness whose borders are in need of protection from the foreign.

The *Unknown Lady's* Fairness celebrates the continuation of English aristocratic whiteness through sexual reproduction. That such ideals had a shared appeal are evident in works such as William Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 1':

> From fairest creatures we desire issue,
>
> That thereby beauty's rose shall never die,

> But as the riper should by time decease
>
> His tender heir might bear his memory…
>
> (Shakespeare 1609: 3)

The value of white progeny depicted in *Portrait of an Unknown Lady* is rendered unstable, however, by the ever-present threat of the foreign and Black, evident in the inky background from which the figure emerges. This is underlined through strategically placed dark objects such as the black cord suspended from the figure's ruff and threaded through her pearls, and the contrast between the sitter's white bodice and her open black gown. Such contrasts between light and dark in the painting evoke both the pre-modern belief in racial formation, based on humoral theory and the impact of climate and environment (Floyd-Wilson 2003). They also reflect the popular fear of maternal imagination: the belief that a pregnant woman's thoughts and visions can cause harm to her unborn child. The French humanist writer Pierre Boaistuau (c.1517–1566) records how such a view allowed Hippocrates to save the honour of a woman accused of adultery:

> …for that she delivered a child black like an Ethiopian, her husband being of a fair and white complexion, which by the persuasion of Hippocrates, was absolved and pardoned, for that the child was like unto a [picture of a] Moor, accustomably tied at her bed (Boaistuau 1569).

Such concerns for besmudged bloodlines are further suggested, however obliquely, by the *Unknown Lady*'s breasts, and the potential threat that wet nurses 'of strange nation' posed 'lest she should give [the baby] strange or unseemly manners unfit or disagreeable to the customes and conditions of the house or citie wherein it is borne, and wherein it is to live' (Bryskett 1606).

Previous interpretations of Gheeraerts's painting have identified the woman's pearls as an indicator of purity and the hoped-for protective powers of Margaret of Antioch, the patron saint of pregnancy (Rogers 1994; De Jongh 1975). However, this fails to fully account for the significance of pearls in early-modern society. As objects of colonial exploitation and symbols of maritime power, they enunciate English nationalist interests in – and the possible wealth to be extracted from – the New World. In addition to this, they reference England's increasing might over Spain and her dominions. Until the early fifteenth century, most pearls originated from the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Gulf of Mannar. It was during the course of Christopher Columbus's third voyage to the Americas in 1498 that he realized pearls could be fished off the coast of what is now Venezuela. The harsh realities of Spanish-run pearl fisheries brought an inevitable depletion of indigenous divers, who were soon replaced by enslaved men from the west coast of Africa (Hopper 2015; Romero et al. 1999).

Pearls were used by early-modern artists as a chromatic synonym for luminosity, shimmer, and lustre – qualities synonymous with female beauty and virtue – and in its crushed form, it was used as a cosmetic ingredient. Pearls were associated with radiance and birth. They were thought to possess an inherent beauty that required no correction in order to catch light– a natural flawless brilliance that, according to historian Molly Warsh, did not have 'any need for manual artifice' (Warsh 2018: 18: see also Karim-Cooper 2014). The figure of the *Unknown Lady* is similarly displayed as an exemplar of shimmering beauty that requires no alteration. Yet through her use of white cosmetics, which is understood by cultural historian Kim Poitevin as the performance of race through the use of 'whiteface' (Poitevin 2011), Gheeraerts introduces an uncertain superiority and perfection in need of the 'manual artifice' of make-up. The use of cosmetics also invokes the threat of contamination by the foreign and strange since it would have consisted of ingredients such as ivory, coral, and cochineal, sourced from every corner of the globe. Increased contact with such foreign commodities and people produced, according to literary scholar Ania Loomba, a 'growing obsession with defining a white English self' (Loomba 2002: 10). Through her display of pearls and cosmetics, the *Unknown Lady*'s reproductive body assumes a uniquely evocative appearance that underwrites the brutality and violence of Atlantic enslavement. Her flawless white hand is both protective and indicative of the value and worth of her pregnant body. Her white body is a proclamation of family ties which in turn produces a chaste and legitimate progeny – a child who is able, due to the mother's status as a free white woman and wife, to inherit his or her father's wealth. This is in contrast to enslaved Black women, whose progeny followed them into bondage.

Britain's early-modern enslaving practices have remained contested by some historians, who nonetheless invariably cite the mid- to late-seventeenth century and the royal backing of joint stock companies such as the Royal African Company as early markers of Atlantic slavery (Andrews 1984). Ronald Pollitt goes as far as to describe England's slaving and joint stock practices as 'accomplishing to mingle the merchant and official classes in a profit-orienting melting pot' (Pollitt 1973: 40). Yet scholars such as Urvashi Chakravarty (2022) and Michael Guasco (2014) have usefully broadened the subject to include discussions of how ideologies and discourses of slavery were fashioned and sustained in the everyday, ordinary lives of early-modern England, and in turn shaped the way that the English corresponded with the Atlantic world. Instructional for the purpose of the current discussion is Jennifer L. Morgan's account of how Francis Drake captured an enslaved woman called Maria and an unnamed man from a Spanish ship during his 1577 circumnavigation of the world. On discovering Maria's pregnancy, he abandoned her, together with two men, on a deserted Indonesian island 'to found a settlement' (Morgan 2018: 6-7). Moreover, 'Drake thus used racialised notions of inheritance to support a property claim for the Crown' (Morgan 2018: 7). Maria's status was transformed from sexual object 'to a commodified place-marker on the map of Drake's colonial ambitions' (Morgan 2018: 7). Her reproductive function, and the reproductive function of future enslaved women, can be understood as reproductive labour, while notions of motherhood, family, and kin remained the preserve of free white women.

In works such as *The Ditchley* and *Armada* portraits, sovereignty and conquest are seamlessly conflated by the iridescent figure of Elizabeth I, standing upon a globe in the former, and extending an imperialist hand across a globe in the latter. By comparison, in the *Portrait of an Unknown Lady*, the sitter's pregnant body adopts the place of the globe both compositionally and metaphorically, tethering ownership of the female body to imperialist tropes that denote discovery and possession. Gheeraerts' fecund figure, her belly bursting with the promise of a rightful heir that is able to prolong her noble race, follows a long history of presenting the female body as the personification of land and territory awaiting penetration and ravage by the male adventurer. This is illustrated by the English statesman and colonizer Walter Raleigh's (1552–1618) famous proclamation that 'Guiana is a countrey that hath yet her Maydenhead' (Parker 1987: 127).

Using the miniature-like intimacy of the maternal, pearlized body of the *Unknown Lady*, Gheeraerts was able to use the portrait to project burgeoning notions of English nationhood, inheritance, aristocratic whiteness, and fear of the foreign, while offering visual reassurances of the husband's present and future investments that included his pregnant wife. The current caption for *Unknown Lady* reads**:**

> This portrait depicts a pregnant woman. Before modern science and medicine, pregnancy was dangerous, and women often died in childbirth. Yet, producing an heir to an elite family was considered an important duty of a wife. This painting celebrates the woman's role in continuing her husband's family line. We don't know the identity of the sitter, but her elaborate clothing demonstrates she was wealthy and of high status. The pearls are symbols of moral purity, as monogamy for women in this period was imperative. She smiles, unusual in portraits of this time.

An alternative caption for *Unknown Lady* might read:

> The most obvious aspect of this portrait is not just the unknown sitter's pregnant condition and smile, it is her cosmetically-enhanced whiteness, mirroring the red and luminous white colours of Queen Elizabeth I. This was a gendered and blue-veined aristocratic whiteness synonymous with an idealized beauty and English national identity. The portrait was commissioned by the sitter's husband to affirm dynastic achievements, paternity, and untainted racial bloodlines.

> Her pearl-encrusted maternal body, and the imported ingredients contained in her cosmetics, while denoting maritime prowess and colonial expansionism, unwittingly display concerns about the ever-present threat of penetration from the foreign.

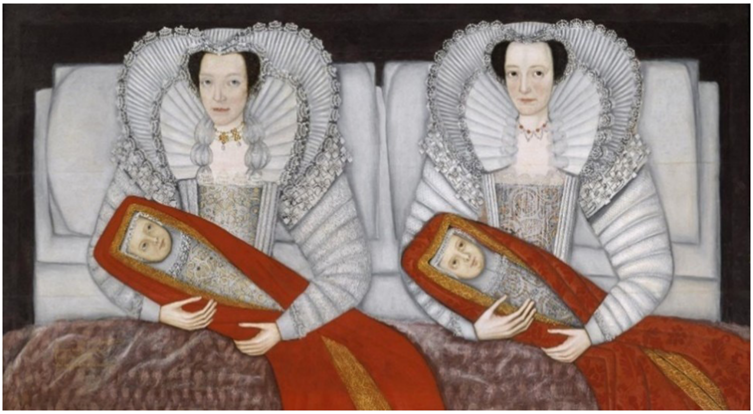

Fig.4 The Cholmondeley Ladies (c.1600–10), Unknown artist, Britain

Nothing quite prepares you for *The Cholmondeley Ladies* (c.1600–10) (fig.4). The viewer is presented with a darkly-painted rectangular panel on which two nearly identical, pale-skinned aristocratic women are depicted sitting upright in a large bed. Each holds a baby and gazes steadily out at the viewer. Their expressions, together with that of their babies, are the most naturalistic feature of the work: the women are quietly confident, with a barely discernible hint of concern. In comparison to their décolletage and hands, the sitters' vivid faces appear cosmetically enhanced, displaying a subtle hint of a blush, described by Paul Michael Johnson as 'a veritable litmus test for virtue', 'reinforcing the historical associations between white skin and moral virtue' (Johnson 2025: 68-69). Possibly whitened using Venetian ceruse, a lead-based compound, and reddened using cochineal made from crushed South-American beetles, their faces are further defined by heads of dark hair that, like skin colour, could denote national characteristics. The English playwright, Nicholas Breton, for instance, insisted that 'for a flaxen or a browne hayre, for a chaste eye,… for a good complexion…I think all the worlde is not better prouided [sic] for good Wenches then our countrie'(Korhonen 2019: 42).[5] With pale white hands, each figure presents her baby to the viewer. The babies are swaddled in red christening gowns and look skywards, their eye colour corresponding with the grey and brown eye colouring of their respective mothers. Aside from the crimson christening gowns, the only other deviation from the limited colour palette is a brownish-red coverlet with pinkish-brown flecks. An inscription that is written in gold paint at the bottom left-hand corner reads: 'Two Ladies of the Cholmondeley Family, Who were born on the same day, Married on the same day, and brought to bed [gave birth] the same day'.

The striking likeness of the two women, which diminishes on closer scrutiny, has remained something of a smokescreen, preventing deeper analysis of the work. Although the artist remains unknown, Robert Tittler and Karen Hearn have argued convincingly that the image is the work of a herald. Heralds, as members of the College of Arms, were entrusted with endorsing the legitimacy of existing arms, together with the inspection and adjudication of new requests. The herald painter and genealogist Randle Holme's definitive guide to heraldry, *The Academy of Armoire* (1688), describes a herald painter as an individual who 'Paints Coats of Armes on Escochions, Shields, Tables, Penons, Standards and such like'. A more expansive understanding of *The Cholmondeley Ladies* is possible by treating the figures as representatives of an armigerous family – a family entitled to bear heraldic arms – who were living at a time when, according to historian Lawrence Stone:

> Noblemen and gentlemen wanted above all full family portraits which take their place alongside genealogical trees and sumptuous tombs as symptoms of the frenzied status seekers and ancestor worship of the age. What patrons demanded was evidence of the sitter's position and wealth by opulence of dress, ornament, and background (Stone 1965: 712).

Equally significant and hitherto underplayed is what the painting tells us about the role that aristocratic men had in what would become the African slave trade, the scene for which was set by their desire to secure rights of ascendancy and inheritance that were buttressed by the discourse of white supremacy.

The ideal of early-modern aristocratic whiteness represented an important element within the social legitimation of elite families, and this remained the case well into the nineteenth century (Bonnett 1998). Female members of the gentry were perceived as both a signifier of and vanguard in this act of legitimation: constituted by whiteness, according to Chakravarty, 'womanhood is intrinsically white, and gender is delimited by race, in early-modern England as now' (Chakravarty 2022: 1151-1179). Literary historian Dympna Callaghan has argued that the use of cosmetics to impersonate women on the early-modern stage unmasks 'the pivotal role of white femininity in the cultural production of race' (Callaghan 2000: 84). More icon than portraiture, and therefore less concerned with conveying the personalities and subjectivities of the sitters (Tittler 2012: 120), *The Cholmondeley Ladies* functions as a heraldic shield. It is a visual blazon created to make known at a mere glance the virtues of a well-established, white, elite family, tasked with asserting their civic standing and antiquity of descent (Leslie 1985).

Tittler's argument that *The Cholmondeley Ladies* was likely painted by a local herald or by painter-stainers is based on his account of the ways in which the work follows heraldic painterly conventions, for example in its simplistic style and use of a limited range of colours that are chosen for their symbolic significance (Tittler 2009: 8). He omits, however, any discussion of the significance of emergent early-modern notions of aristocratic whiteness and race. My argument regarding the heraldic significance of the image is based on the deliberate and effective use of a heraldic style and conventions within the medium of portraiture to enunciate aristocratic whiteness, by emphasising the legitimation and succession of the Cholmondeley family estate, paternity, and bloodline. In addition to this, the presence of vernacular images such as *The Cholmondeley Ladies* was motivated by an obsessive desire to define status and familial standing, and cannot be separated from an increasingly mobile merchant class and noble elite in England at the time. Unlike their French and Spanish contemporaries, these families invested heavily in joint stock companies such as the East India Company, shaping England's trade and expansionist advancements and its future colonial rule. Tittler contends that the prevalence of heraldic motifs in English portraiture 'owe[s] more to the social context in which those portraits were commissioned than to any other factor', going on to highlight the 'unprecedented opportunities to acquire land and office' that were available at the time (Tittler 2012:102).Yet there is no acknowledgment by Tittler of the growing aristocratic involvement in joint stock companies, and desire to profit from, Portuguese monopolies in particular (Mancke 2009), which arguably is also a very important aspect of the social context in which these portraits were commissioned.

Described by Tittler as a complex and a widely understood 'symbolic language' (Tittler 2009: 8), colour was central to heraldic traditions. Popular early-modern heraldic texts such as John Bossewell's *Works of Armorie* (1572) offered a detailed system of heraldic conventions in which colours are imbued with symbolic and moral meaning. It consisted of five "traditional colours" or "tinctures": black or "sable" represented prudence and wisdom; green or "vert" signalled abundance and hope; red or "gules" symbolized sacrifice and blood; blue or "azure" indicated chastity and loyalty; and purple or "purpure" was associated with royalty and sovereignty. In addition to the five colours, there were two "metals": gold, referred to as "or", denoting yellow, and silver, or "argent", representing white (Beyer 2023).[6] Compositionally, the shield was the most important feature of heraldic devices. It displayed geometric quarterings and divisions on which were arranged a series of shapes known as "charges", and "furs", commonly in the form of ermine and vair, which were a mark of dignity, and were represented by black shapes replicating fur.

The colour symbolism of heraldic forms reflected an Elizabethan interest in the hierarchal qualities of colour. Like the need for the distinctive features of heraldic devices to be seen from a distance, the “pure”, undiluted flag-like display of white skin colour on the figures in *The Cholmondeley Ladies* and their babies, together with their red lips, pink cheeks, and pearl necklaces, creates an ordered appearance that aids the viewer’s understanding of the work. In the portrait we see enacted Elizabethan ideals of feminine beauty, and beliefs in the status and ranking of colour as related to heraldry, The heraldic schema, with its pure colours, flat static surface, and geometrical quartering of the composition through the position of the two women and the two babies, lends the work a feeling of symmetry and commensurability.[7]

Ignoring any reference to race in *The Cholmondeley Ladies*, Tittler instead discusses the use of white as ‘true to heraldic painting in general’, and as ‘standing for cleanliness, purity, and joy’. Consequently, when he describes the sitter’s skin, it is as ‘flesh’, and as a further example of the naive style and provincial status of the painting, where ‘flesh is modelled, to the extent it is modelled at all, in a flat monotone’ (Tittler 2012: 120). This is despite the fact that heraldic conventions prohibited the layering of the two “metals” over each other, and that the unknown artist nonetheless chooses to layer argent upon argent, as well as white on white. The bodies of the sitters are supported by a receding pile of white pillows; they are clothed in silver-white gowns, with schematically-rendered cannon sleeves that, like their ruffs, are edged in lace. In this way they resemble Imogen in Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* (1611), whom Iachimo affirms ‘becomest thy bed! fresh lily! And whiter than sheets!’ (Hodek 1979: 786).

The blanched bodies of the sitters are effectively enhanced by the dark background, drawing the viewer’s attention to the transparency of their skin. With the obvious use of outlining – another feature of heraldic conventions – their faces are framed and illuminated by the enormous fan-shaped ruffs that radiate a white iridescence suggestive of their status and rank: the two women are presented to the viewer like precious gems on a white pillow. This reflects the early-modern lyrical and dramatic tradition of comparing women with jewels: for instance, in an ode written for his bride, *Epithalamion* (1595), Edmund Spenser likens her facial features to ‘eyes like sapphires shining bright, her forehead ivory white’ (Smeaton 1952: p.21). Similarly, Iachimo compares Imogen’s lips to ‘rubies unparagon’d’ (Hodek 1979: 786).

The hands of both mothers are noticeably white and slender, an indicator of their maternal virtue as well as their membership of the elite. This reflects another recognisable use of heraldic chromatic conventions, in which the application of white/silver is used to denote a leisured class that is inherently unsuited to manual work and therefore worthy of armorial display. Like the face, hands also signified a racial whiteness that was synonymous with idealized beauty. In Christopher Marlowe’s *Hero and Leander* (1598), the narrator describes Hero’s beauty as follows:

> She wore no gloves, for neither sun nor wind
>
> Would burn or parch her hand, but, to her mind,
>
> Or warm or cool them, for they took delight
>
> To play upon those hands, they were so white.
>
> (Bullens 1895: 6)

Hero’s beauty is sustained by an unalterable and indelible whiteness, that ‘neither sun nor wind/Would burn or parch’.

The manner in which race in the early-modern period converges with issues of English nationalism, racialized whiteness, and Black subjection is evidenced by the endowment in 1565 of a coat of arms to the privateer John Hawkins, England’s first recognized slaver. The design features an enslaved Black person who is clearly visible on the crest; the inscription describes the figure as a ‘Demy moore in his proper culler bound in cord as bonde & captive with annulets on his armes and ears’ (fig.5).[8]

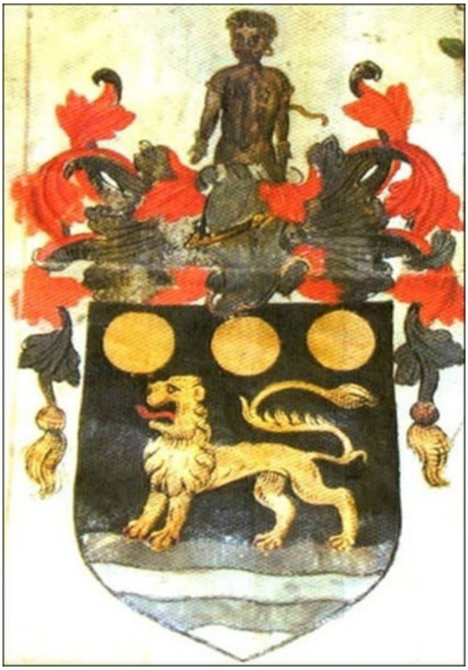

Fig.5 The coat of arms granted to John Hawkins by Elizabeth I, 1565, Robert Boissard

While omitting the conditions of human slavery, the crest evidences England's familiarity with Black Africans, and the permissibility of their captivity, shaping an evolving English nationalism defined by imperialist ideals that entered the public domain. In more emphatic terms, Jean Devisse and Michel Mollat, in their study of the inclusion of Black figures on early-modern coats of arms, contend that 'unquestionably, black colour was a symbol, and the black man became a symbol. Under both aspects-man and colour-black was inserted in heraldry following ranked individualized, codified order' (Devisse and Mollat 1979).

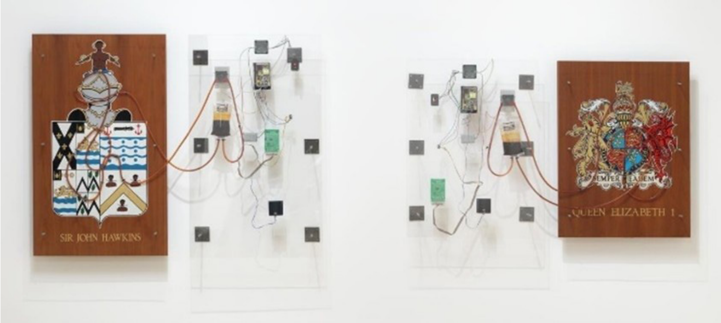

Fig.6 Visceral Canker, 1990, Donald Rodney

Twentieth century disavowal of the brutalities of the Atlantic trade and its intrinsic relationship with British identity are explored in (fig 6) Donald Rodney's 1990 installation, *Visceral Canker*, juxtaposing the coat of arms of Elizabeth I and Hawkins with a series of circularity, blood-filled pumping tubes that were originally intended to pump the artist's own blood. My encounter with

Rodney's *Visceral Canker* named after a major retrospective of the late artist's work in 2024, felt serendipitous: it is a work I was unfamiliar with at the time, and I very nearly decided against attending the exhibition in Nottingham, as it coincided with the one day in the year when it snowed, which rendered the rail network an unreliable mode of transport. It also provided a vindication of my earlier contention that the pre modern age is a valuable lens through which to analyse constructions of whiteness. For here was an artist, known for his acerbic engagement with the subjects of male identity, race, and personal illness, vividly bringing into the "heart" of a contemporary gallery space, emblems of England's expansionist histories – the coat of arms of John Hawkins and Elizabeth I – as living, blood-churning examples of connected and functioning legacies of whiteness and power, and a past that is not past.

Current caption:

According to the inscription (bottom left), this painting shows 'Two Ladies of the Cholmondeley Family, Who were born the same day, Married the same day, And brought to Bed [gave birth] the same day'. To mark this dynastic event, they are formally presented in bed, their babies wrapped in scarlet fabric. Identical at a superficial glance, the lace, jewellery and eye colours of the ladies and infants are in fact carefully differentiated. The format echoes tomb sculpture of the period. The identity of the women is unclear.

New caption:

The bigger the ruff the more space to occupy, the more authority to wield, and the more certain the claims of your pedigree. Layering white on white and emerging from a dark background, like a heraldic shield the ladies enunciate their white, English, feminine bloodlines, not once but twice. Unreservedly unvirginal, yet chaste through the power of marriage, motherhood, and perfected beauty, they present a carbon copy of themselves through the begetting of children. Each infant is strategically placed across each respective womb. Their christening gowns suggest a crimson flow of pure blood.

Conclusion

I hope my discussion will act as a road map for curators, museum staff, educators, historians, and museum scholars committed to navigating a course through temples of whiteness such as the Tate. Reminding them of the blinding nature of whiteness, its ability to obscure, and the consequent need therefore to consciously and independently "see" and "hold" whiteness in their minds: not in comparison with, or in contrast to, something else, but independently, as a deliberate construct and a tangible reality. In addition, what I highlight in my essay is the power of visual culture to construct racial identities. Despite early-modern historians' reticence to call out whiteness, for instance, referring to 'flesh' rather than 'skin', the whiteness on display in the portraits is deliberate and virtuosic. Returning to Rodney's *Visceral Canker,* owned by the Tate – In way of throwing down the gauntlet: imagine the curatorial impact if it was juxtaposed between Gheeraerts *Portrait of an Unknown Woman,* and *The Cholmondeley Ladies*? Imagine the curatorial impact if the portraits were accompanied with captions I have suggested as replacements for those that are current.

Notes

[1] A more comprehensive version of my research appears in the Spring 2025 issue of *Tate Papers*. See Janet Couloute, 'The Construction of Whiteness, Gender and Race in Early Modern Portraits'', Tate 2025. https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/36/the-construction-of-whiteness-gender-and-race-in-early-modern-portraits

[2] See https://www.emsoc.co.uk/, and https://acmrs.asu.edu/RaceB4Race.

[3] John Akomfrah, 'John Akomfrah in "London" - Season 10 - "Art in the Twenty-First Century" | Art21', Art21 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlF3e2b5qUY, accessed 24 April

2025.

[4] Cork, R. (2003) ‘Pearly Queen’, in *Marcus Gheeraerts II*, *Tate* Research Publication. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/marcus-gheeraerts-ii-206/pearly-queen, accessed 26th May 2025.

[5] It’s interesting to note that Hugh Cholmondeley takes great pride in noting how his great grandfather, Richard, was known as ‘the great blacke knight of the North’, on account of his ‘haire and eies blacke…’ hair colouring indicative of balanced complexion in humoral theory. See also Korhonen (2019: 41).

[6] Greg Beyer, ‘Heraldic Symbols and Colours: A Brief Overview’, The Collector 2023. https://www.thecollector.com/overview-heraldic-symbols-and-colors/, accessed 14 June 2024.

[7] Bird, M. (2004) ‘The Perception of Symmetry ‘, *Tate Etc.*, https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-1-summer-2004/perception-symmetry, accessed 30th May 2025.

[8] Jyotsna G. Singh (2021) gives a detailed account of Hawkins’s Grant of Arms and its ideological significance in England’s involvement in the Atlantic trade.

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