

# Appropriate This

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## Abstract

This essay maps three fundamental features of the Renaissance theater as a theater of appropriation. The first feature considers how early modern audience response can be fruitfully characterized as oriented toward appropriation, and particularly appropriation as action, as the re-situation of dramatic material to do or make something. The second involves a corollary, that a major aspect of production must have involved accommodating practices of appropriation, even though producers sometimes resisted this. Shakespeare and other playwrights seem to have worked to provide material for appropriation, so that audience appropriation came not just after production, but actually was factored into the creative process. *Hamlet* provides the best example of how a producer may have grasped the creative possibilities of audience appropriation. The third feature considers the theater's concern with the common good, as well as with particular goods. It places the theater's appropriative exchanges in the context of early modern economic exchange, and specifically in relation to evolving notions of the balance between private and public interests. Two of Shakespeare's uses of a key word in this regard, "commodity," suggest an ethical framework for understanding the theater of appropriation.

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Graham Holderness shows how practices of appropriation have gained major theoretical backing in postmodernism. Michel Foucault's announcement that "the death of the author is the birth of appropriation," he points out, broke with traditional scholarship that focused on discovering meanings inherent in texts (Holderness 2006, 2). The claim asserted that interpretation of supposedly intrinsic meanings could not be distinguished entirely from appropriation — that is, from the co-opting or seizure of textual material for extraneous purposes. It also implied that authorship itself depends on practices of appropriation, such as the quotation and collage that had come to characterize art and popular culture (Foster 1984). Appropriation has become an intrinsic aspect of postmodern culture. But when it comes to Shakespeare and other English Renaissance dramatists, there was another time in reception history when certain practices of appropriation were equal with, if not superior to, those grounded in respect for the intrinsic authority of performance or text. That was, well, the Renaissance.

Here I wish to map out three fundamental features of the Renaissance theater as a theater of appropriation, features that build on my recent book, *Early Responses to Renaissance Drama*, and other studies. The theater was about more than appropriation, but my emphasis here serves to redress an imbalance that has underestimated this crucial aspect. The first feature concerns appropriating audiences. Early modern dramatic audience response can be characterized as oriented toward appropriation, and particularly toward appropriation as action, as the re-situation of dramatic material to do or make something. Here, Paul Ricoeur's definition of appropriation as "event" is relevant: "Interpretation is completed as appropriation when reading yields something like an event, an event of discourse, which is an event in the present moment. As appropriation, interpretation becomes an event" (Ricoeur 1979, 92). Appropriation is an event, such as an allusion, that applies interpretation to a particular situation. But for Renaissance dramatic response, as for postmodern culture, one must qualify and adjust Ricoeur's conception. Appropriation may go beyond mere discursive action to physical action, and it need not reflect faithful interpretation of supposedly intrinsic meanings, since the appropriator may not be interested in such meanings or even acknowledge their existence.

The second feature of the Renaissance theater of appropriation involves a corollary, that a major aspect of production must have involved accommodating practices of appropriation, even though producers sometimes resisted this. Shakespeare and other playwrights seem to have worked to provide material for appropriation, so that audience appropriation not only occurred after production, but actually was factored into the creative process. *Hamlet* provides the best example of how a playwright may have grasped the creative possibilities of audience appropriation. The third feature considers the theater's concern with the common good, as well as with particular goods. It places the theater's appropriative exchanges in the context of early modern economic exchange — specifically, in relation to evolving notions of the balance between private and public interests. Two of Shakespeare's uses of a key word in this regard, "commodity," suggest an ethical framework for understanding the theater of appropriation.

### Appropriation in Reception

Before at least 1660, playgoers and play readers, as the record of response suggests, were most interested in discovering ways to apply, use, and adapt elements of plays. In the course of pursuing some goal, they often cite dramatic material extracted from its contexts in performance or text and apply it for a special purpose in analogy, example, or precept. Many such comments show fascinating insights into the plays that are dear to us. But the comments are far from being analytical interpretations, or interpretations at all, in the normal sense of elaborating a meaning assumed to

have been there already. The commenters generally do not want to show off their insights into plays. Their words express a willingness to leave behind the play as play and to *appropriate* its resources. That is, they reflect an assumed prerogative to adapt and apply specific dramatic material creatively, according to a range of interests and purposes. As opportunistic agents, such audience members take initiative in ways no playwright or performer could predict. The focus of interest is on the practical effects and uses of drama in life, not on structure or meaning, and in that sense is on appropriation rather than interpretation.

No extended analyses, discursive interpretations, or reviews of plays for their own sake survive from the English Renaissance. Appropriation was apparently the norm in dramatic response. Other forms of comment developed later in English history, in concert with new kinds of printed commodities (Donoghue 1993, 54-74). One eighteenth-century producer of such commodities, Samuel Johnson, advised journal-keepers "to write down everything you can . . . and write immediately" (quoted in Brady 1984, 50). But even when defending plays in print in the late sixteenth century, Thomas Nashe excused himself from any extended remarks about their contents: "And to prooue euerie one of these allegations, could I propound the circumstaunces of this play and that play, if I meant to handle this Theame other wise than *obiter* [on the way]" (Nashe 1592, sig. H2). The epistle to *Troilus and Cressida* also demurs, "And had I time I would comment upon it [the play], though I know it needs not" (quoted in Shakespeare 1997, p. 1826). Virtually no one we know of in the period ever had time, or thought such comment necessary.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, the most interesting responses are those that appropriate and apply — citing theatrical material *obiter* — in the course of fulfilling some other purpose. Contemporary habits of reading no doubt provided impetus to such responses. Readers of Shakespeare's poems often approached the text, Sasha Roberts finds, "as a groundplot of their own invention," extracting, appropriating, and applying passages "to personal or topical circumstances" and, with their commonplaces, de-emphasizing the notion of the author as creator (Roberts 2003, 7, 11, 100; on early personal uses, see also Duncan-Jones 1993, 490, 492). Rhetoric, which was taught everywhere, focuses likewise on the effects of discourse, but it concerns ways of moving audiences as one wants to move them. Appropriators among those audiences may resist the drift. And there was no "standard of taste," as they put it in the eighteenth century at a more advanced stage of cultural commodification, to prescribe or channel response. Many audience members in the early modern period felt empowered, as it were, to carry on the process of production, creating use-values themselves by adapting and re-performing theatrical material.

Here are some examples, with my interpretive inflections, in chronological order from 1598 to 1654. (For discussions of all except those of Nicholas Richardson and John Holles, see Whitney 2006.) Gentleman servant I. M. appropriates servant Costard's joke in *Love's Labour's Lost* about good and bad tips ("guerdon" vs. "remuneration") to defend the dignity of traditional service against the rise of wage-work (I. M. 1598, 11r-v). Shakespeare's affectionate satire of lovers in the same play frustrates the earnest amorous designs of Robert Tofte's playgoing persona, providing him with yet another opportunity to wallow triumphantly in self-abasing Petrarchan agony (Tofte 1598, G5r). Several years later, though, another frustrated playgoing lover uses Hamlet's love-madness to therapeutic effect (An. Sc. 1604, e. g. A2r, E4v). John Davies of Hereford's sonnet on Tamburlaine in his king-drawn chariot describes a process of resourceful response, the mastering of a challenging temptation through moral discovery and personal resolve that are his own insights, not the play's (Davies of Hereford 1967, 2:28). Simon Forman, of course, derives lessons from his visits to the Globe that are applicable to daily life and also finds a reflection of a passion of his own in *Macbeth's* revelation of guilt and punishment (Forman 1930, 2:337-41). But two years later, in 1612, Richard Norwood found his visits to the Fortune as morally corrupting as they were compelling, and in that way they played a significant role in his spiritual journey (Norwood 1945, 42, *passim*).

Later in the Jacobean period, Joan Drake habitually mocks her in-house spiritual adviser, comparing him to Jonson's Ananias, whom she had seen at the Blackfriars, as she searches for a new subject position in her family apart from obedient and pious wife (Hart 1647, 26). Inns of Court traditions of festive satire powerfully link stage and world, and for law student Henry Fitzgeoffery the Blackfriars's social mangle, as well as its plays, provoke anxious bravado that shapes his gallant's creed (Fitzgeoffery 1617). Oxford preacher Nicholas Richardson twice allegorizes Juliet's concern that the dawn will discover and endanger Romeo as God's care for his elect (Shakespeare 1997, p. 3345). Like I. M., workingman John Taylor uses a theatrical allusion to appeal to traditional values of reciprocity against newfangledness, hilariously comparing the hackney coach craze to the triumphant glee of Tamburlaine in his chariot (Taylor 1967, 2: 239). Courtier John Holles reports dourly to his political ally about the demise of their diplomatic strategy, as depicted in a performance of Thomas Middleton's *A Game at Chess* (Holles 1983, 2:288-90).

Moving on to the Interregnum, John Milton's *Eikonoklastes* uses Shakespeare's *Richard III* to help debunk monarchy (Milton 1953-82, 3: 361). At the court-in-exile, playgoer Anne Murray Halkett virtually re-performs lines of John Fletcher's Celia in *The Humorous Lieutenant* as she triumphantly asserts her moral authority and good taste following royal recognition for her undercover work during the Civil War (Halkett 1974, 54). For the benefit of her secret suitor,

Dorothy Osborne provocatively compares herself to Richard III in her epistolary effort to negotiate familial duty and romantic affection (Osborne 1928, 56). For disenfranchised Royalists Henry Tubbe and Edmund Gayton, Jonson's *Catiline* and *The Alchemist* become reference points in grim times that, respectively, bolster political conviction or provide festive solace (Tubbe 1915, 101; Gayton 1654, 3, 56, 79).

The number of extant allusions to Falstaff make him a special case. They suggest the existence of a popular orature (in the sense of imitative conversational allusions; see Roach 1996, 69), if not an actual tradition of impersonation. Young Toby Matthew's 1598 allusion to Falstaff's catechism on honor seems to express Matthew's discomfort with the identity imposed on him by parents, society, and his own infirmity (Matthew 1979). In a letter to her husband the Earl of Southampton, Elizabeth Vernon Wriothesley celebrates their recent, scandalous marriage and its fruitful outcome with an allusion to scandalous Falstaff and his supposed son by Mistress Quickly (Wriothesley 1872, 148). In a brilliant appropriation, Jane Owen's *An Antidote for Purgatory* (1634) strikingly reframes the credo embedded in Sir John's mock-catechism on honor as she exhorts her Catholic readers to reform and prepare for the next life. Beneath the irony of Sir John's hilarious re-inflection of sacred speech and ritual she finds a straightforward affirmation of resolved faith (Owen 160-61). Debt-ridden Barbados colonizer Richard Ligon's 1647 reverie of Falstaff and Doll contributes to his goal of promoting colonization, yet also gestures towards his own bondage and moral compromise (Ligon 1653, 12-13).

Every one of these cases richly repays historical and biographical study, revealing what the theater actually meant to some of the audience members for whom its plays were written, as well as to early modern society more generally. Such study celebrates the power of the plays to disseminate meaning, as well as the power of their audiences to appropriate resourcefully.

These appropriative activities are generally, although not necessarily, part of what can be called secondary audience response. Many of the responses cited above clearly had their roots in the primary experience of the theater, but developed and evolved over time. They were all recorded and preserved partly, if not entirely, because of the meaningful ways they were developed and applied outside the theater. This range of secondary experience is the main bridge between primary experience (occurring in the theater or study) and the myriad, more diffuse ways the theater is involved in culture and society — for instance, in the historical development of a public sphere recognizing diverse interests and viewpoints. Accordingly, the cases above do not usually indicate whether the plays in question were actually seen at all, rather than read or even simply heard about. The extant record of early modern audience response is, in fact, mostly the record of secondary response.

If in-theater experience is the place of "delight in the dramatic process, in the variety of episodes and the convoluted way they relate to each other, and delight in the completion of the process," as Jeremy Lopez puts it (2003, 133), secondary response is the place of delight in both interpretation and appropriation. The prominence of the latter in the record of response is a reason why so much evidence for early modern response has been neglected until recently. The essential materials for the study of early modern dramatic response, which originally catalogued many of the examples of response above, have been in place for a long time. The *Shakspeare-Allusion Book* (1932) first appeared in 1909, with compendia on Jonson and Marlowe to follow within about fifteen years. Yet this archive and later supplements have been largely ignored by generations of interpretation-oriented critics and scholars. Jejune, scattered, and ephemeral, evidence for early response, of course, seems underwhelming and inadequate in itself, especially in relation to the towering stature of the Bard. Moreover, the evidence is usually unsuitable for grounding inferences regarding the kind of analytic, literary interpretation that has been recognized as response worthy of consideration. So accounts of early reception resorted to inferring primary audience reception by examining how the plays themselves construct and address audiences in the theater during performance. These accounts celebrated the ways Shakespeare brilliantly managed, manipulated, and orchestrated primary audience response.

But the appropriating character of our forlorn, early evidence of response, skewed as it was toward application to the praxis of life, should attract new interest now. We have a heightened appreciation of how meanings and practices are created by audiences, of processes whereby meaning is generated through or "by" Shakespeare, for instance (Hawkes 1992). And by the same token, it should be easier for us to move beyond a narrow, production-centered view of the ethics of reading and realize how audience studies that rely primarily on evidence from the production rather than the consumption side may deny the Otherness or alterity of actual audience members in their full agency as human beings.

No one would question that the multifarious artistic "delight" of primary theatrical experience, of which we have so little direct evidence, was of primary importance to producers and consumers. Nor am I suggesting that, in that age of commentaries, interpretation was not important. But it is questionable that Shakespeare and company were interested in eliciting the kind of analytic interpretation that literary or theater scholars came to have. Those producers could not help but be aware of their audiences' appropriative response practices, and their productions must have accounted for them, to which question I now turn.

### *Hamlet* and Production for Appropriation

Not that producers were eager to advertise the power of plays to disseminate rather than control meaning. Anti-theatricalism and the suspicion of sedition required the early modern theater to remain modest about its openness to unpredictable applications. But players acknowledge audiences' use of commonplace books, which catalogue material for appropriation, and their practice of quoting plays in conversations and recitations. One returns to the theater partly because the first experience resonated in the interval, often through appropriation. Players must then have thought not only about gratifying audiences during the play, but afterward, as well (Weimann 1996, 1-20). The area of appropriation to which producers give by far the most attention is of course moral improvement, though some of that attention results from the need to defend the stage against anti-theatrical attacks. The ability of plays to improve audiences must generally involve post-performance introspection and application, despite the survival of an account or two of spontaneous confession in the gallery. Thomas Heywood explains how this is supposed to work in *An Apology for Actors* (Heywood 1612, F4v-G1v). Audience members respond to the stage's models of virtue and vice according to their individual needs, bolstering their strengths and remedying their weaknesses. In other words, they selectively appropriate dramatic resources — character, action, speech — and apply them to extraneous matters. In his preface to the works of Beaumont and Fletcher, James Shirley focuses on manners rather than morals, touting the finishing-school benefits of plays for the gentry, benefits that would also be realized through selective appropriation (Shirley 1970, 1:iv).

Another way in which producers recognized the importance of appropriation was through their own practice of it. Writers and performers imitate and emulate one another, and modern copyright law sets up certain roadblocks that did not exist in the early modern period. Toleration for appropriation by producers parallels that by audiences, partly for the same reason: lack of a highly developed sense of Foucault's "author-function," of a work as stemming from and belonging to an individual creator and legal subject. The author-function provides a rigorous way of identifying a producer's (illegal) appropriation of another's property, as well as of distinguishing between a responder's interpretation and her appropriation. Early modern audiences freely appropriated lines from plays, just as playwrights did. Soon-to-be Reverend Samuel Drake writes to a friend, "For the Apothecarys bill tis a sniueling inconsiderable summe; what sd Falstaffe in yt case to Lieft: Peto, Lay out Hall I'le bee responsible to all"; in *The Example*, James Shirley's Jacintha remarks, "Falstaff, I will believe thee, / There is no faith in villainous man" (both quoted in Whitney 2006, 88, 90). In context, both quotations reveal and extend the self.

Thomas Middleton's collection of plague stories, *The Meeting of Gallants at an Ordinary*, is a remarkable statement affirming the unexceptionality of both writers' appropriations of one another

and of audience appropriation. Plague survivors characterize their precarious situation by echoing the scene in *1 Henry IV* in which Captain Falstaff leads his lean and ragged band of conscripts toward battle, where most die (4.2). Their echoes include "latter ende of a Fraye," "two sheets & a halfe," "an Antient full of holes and Tatters," and "tottred Souldiers after a Fray" (Middleton and Dekker, 1604, B1r-v, B4r). In Shakespeare's grotesquely festive scene, death is a laughing matter, just as it is for the tale-telling host of Middleton's tavern, identified as Sir John Oldcastle's great grandson (B4v). (Like many other alluders to Falstaff, Middleton uses the original name of Shakespeare's character). It is the great-grandson who restores these survivors with his mirth and his grotesquely festive tales. The survivors themselves can also be said to have appropriated the festive solace that Falstaff in his tavern, and elsewhere, provided to thousands on the stage. During the plague, the memory of theatrical mirth could come in handy. Both audiences and players furthered an early modern culture of appropriation by quotation and other means.

This essay's un-posted motto, "appropriate this," then, complements the famous saying, *totus mundus agit histrionem*, "all the world plays the actor," for both suggest that early modern audiences are actors, free agents who take the initiative in adapting stage-plays to their lives and vice versa. Holderness calls our attention to the contradictions entailed by identifying interpretation and appropriation too closely: If postmodern logic dictates that "there is nothing other than appropriation" (Holderness 2006, p. 3 in PDF), then there can be nothing to appropriate. But along with Christy Desmet and John Joughin, he argues that a play can be both something distinctive and unique, and yet capable of becoming a protean resource through appropriation (Desmet, 1999; Joughin 2000, 16). It is not that people in the early modern period held an uncompromisingly postmodern view about the ubiquity of appropriation, but that, in the history of reception, appropriation seems to have been a relatively larger factor in transactions between authors or performers and audiences than it became later when analytic interpretation became the critical norm.

To what degree might the originality and power of early modern drama have been the result of a dialectic that challenged dramatists to deal with many-faceted practices of appropriation, practices that may at times have challenged aspirations to artistic form and audience management, but that opened alternative vistas? And with what different inflections could the tacit invitation to "appropriate this" have been uttered? Sometimes with a sense of inspiration at the opportunities of this audience-centered theater, or a sense of serviceable accommodation that eagerly offered quotable quotes or moral emblems available for diverse interpretation and application? But resistance to a culture of responsive appropriation would be natural, as well, in a culture in which one's work could be handled willy-nilly. Some might have viewed meeting this audience demand



as a duty that had to be discharged as they aimed for higher, more Aristotelian, literary or aesthetic goals, maximizing absorption and soliciting disinterest through the comprehensive management of collective response.<sup>2</sup> Yet that effort points to later ages, when better behaved audiences sat in the dark and expected to have a more explicitly aesthetic experience. Early modern producers were faced with a demand for useful material that was bound to be appropriated by audiences as they pursued their own purposes, interests, and views of the world.

Ben Jonson's desire to control interpretation and his occasional disgust with his audiences bespeak resistance to a perceived waywardness of appropriation. This "self-crowned laureate" (Helgerson 1983) furthered the development of the author-function. The later Jonson, who pled with himself in vain to stop writing plays, might inflect our motto this way: "Appropriate this and be hanged." Yet Jonson's plays, like those of some other dramatists, seem to have exploited the practice of personal application that audiences relished, fostering interest by drawing characters with suggestive resemblances to one or even several contemporaries, while still preserving deniability about authorial intention. And Jonson's greatest comedies challenge audience members to question themselves and their society, to search for positive values beyond the morally deficient worlds of the plays. His patron and admirer Lucius Cary appreciated this process, although he did not do it justice in the memorial volume for Jonson, *Jonsonus Virbius* (1638). Cary's splendid encomium could make ethical challenge sound almost automatic, when it could only have involved audience members' own initiatives, efforts, and insights as appropriators. Jonson's playgoers,

With thoughts and wils purg'd and amended rise,  
 From the *Ethicke Lectures* of his *Comedies* . . .  
 Where each man finds some *Light* he never sought,  
 And leaves behind some vanitie he brought;  
 Whose Politicks no less the minds direct,  
 Then these the manners, nor with less effect. (Cary 1990, 101)

The most intriguing inflection of "appropriate this" would stem from the challenge posed by audiences' particularizing agendas, a challenge that producers could return by offering provocative material that could — by being applied diversely — make appropriation a more deeply involving experience than many complacent, instrumentalizing audience members could have imagined: "Appropriate this — if you can," or "Appropriate this — if you dare." The dynamic animated by that inflection would raise the stakes of the theater and deepen theatrical production and experience. It would make appropriation truly a two-way process. Some such injunction might fit Hamlet's encounter with the First Player (2.2). Hamlet struggles with several phases of appropriating

response to the First Player's speech, and his struggles finally contribute to the larger compass of his tragedy. The dramatist, whether by design or accident, thereby seems to represent both the theater's accommodation of the practice of appropriation and the difficult, but productive, challenge that practice can mean for individual audience members. Since Hamlet's response can be seen as contributing to his tragedy, it cannot be judged as entirely effective or successful. Hamlet may have bitten off more than he can chew, or he may have failed to realize the appropriative potential offered by the Player's speech. But especially in the context of actual contemporary response, it seems unlikely that his work with dramatic performance is simply disabling or symptomatic of a perverse consciousness lost in words (as argued by Danner 2003). But however one interprets Hamlet, his relation to actual playgoers and his potential for illuminating the possibility of a Shakespearean theater of appropriation must be considered.

Hamlet gets more than he expected from the Player's "passionate speech" (Shakespeare 1997, 2.2.414).<sup>3</sup> His appropriation is unique to him, and it bears on great matters of duty, right, and the murder of a King. It also resembles those of some audience members surveyed above. John Davies of Hereford re-discovers his personal identity and goals after witnessing, like Hamlet, a dramatic rendition of rampantly violent heroism (Tamburlaine in his chariot whipping his harnessed kings). In both cases, a process of personal reflection and discovery involves emotion aroused not simply by dramatic action, but also by emotion released in the playgoer through the action's personal resonance — that is, its appropriation in a personal application. In each case, that resonance involves a challenge to a basic assumption the playgoer holds about himself, demanding further levels of charged, appropriating response that entail a new perspective and resolve. In Hamlet's case, the challenge also entails a series of specific actions, which actually turn out to involve the pointed appropriation of another play, the Mousetrap, as applied not only to Claudius, but also to Ophelia and Gertrude. The implication of Hamlet's total response is that Shakespeare expected ordinary audience members to frame their own kinds of applications and uses from theatrical material that was compelling to them, which, as in Hamlet's situation, might have unpredictable consequences in their lives. The perspective of reception here also allows us to understand the "To be or not to be" soliloquy afresh, as a contrast between response as appropriation or "action" and response arrested at the stage of interpretation or mere "thought" (2.2.87, 90). The whole complex process extending from the Player's speech to the springing of the Mousetrap represents Shakespeare's appreciation of the collaboration of players and audiences in a dynamic theater of appropriation. It suggests that he responded to audiences' challenges to provide material for their own creative appropriations — appropriations that he could neither predict nor contain — with

material that challenged audiences in ways they could not predict and on levels they could not have expected. "Appropriate this, if you dare, and you may never be the same again."

Hamlet, of course, has already heard the First Player's passionate rendition of Aeneas's speech to Dido recounting the actions of bloody Pyrrhus at Troy ("I heard thee speak a speech once . . . " [2.2.416]), and his enthusiasm has prompted him to commit part of it to memory (plausibly with the help of his "tables" [1.5.107-108] or commonplace book). He praises the speech according to disinterested criteria of excellence: "well digested in the scenes, set down with as much modesty and cunning . . . and by very much more handsome than fine" (2.2.420-26). But the avenging warrior motif could have interested Hamlet from the beginning because he admired his own warlike father, even though Hamlet recognized that he himself was not from the same mold. And now, of course, after the Ghost's revelation of murder and his injunction to kill Claudius, the scope for special application has grown, and the meaning of the speech has changed for Hamlet, prompting him now to request particularly its recitation. In one dimension, the personal application is potentially double: Sympathetic Dido, hearing about Pyrrhus killing King Priam, represents horrified Hamlet hearing about Claudius killing King Hamlet; but in another sense, wavering Hamlet is vicariously applying Pyrrhus to himself furiously killing King Claudius. Pyrrhus's sword, which "seemed i' th' air to stick" (2.2.459), could also be Hamlet's own self-aggravating wavering.

One imagines Hamlet immediately moved by the second performance, finding that it arouses more emotions than he is able to assimilate at once. He bids the Player stop and makes plans with the company to savor the remainder apart from Polonius's distracting comments (2.2.499-502). Hamlet asks the players to perform at court *The Murder of Gonzago*, fortified with a "dozen or sixteen lines" (518) that would prompt its audience to apply the action of the play to current circumstances in the Danish court. We are free to suppose that he got the idea to appropriate *The Murder of Gonzago* for this purpose from realizing how closely Aeneas's speech also recalls those topical circumstances. And just before asking for *Gonzago*, he shows explicit awareness of the possibilities of topical application, remarking to Polonius that stage players "are the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time. After your death you were better have a bad epitaph than their ill report while you live" (2.2.504-506). *Gonzago* will be appropriated as an "ill report" against Claudius, but Hamlet has yet to grasp fully its usefulness as an appropriation.

Hamlet's subsequent reflection on the Player's performance in his second soliloquy (2.2.527-82) clarifies its significance for him and takes his appropriation further. Reflection first releases Hamlet's frustration and outrage at himself and at Claudius. Applied to his present dilemma over killing Claudius, the Player's genuine tears become a goad to indict his own tardiness in failing to carry out the Ghost's injunction to murder Claudius: "What would he [the Player] do / Had he the

motive and the cue for passion / That I have? / He would drown the stage with tears" (2.2.537-39). This is how the moral textbook says plays should work: Staged models of "virtue her own feature," as Hamlet puts it in his instructions to the players (3.2.20-21), prompt audiences' self-criticism. But we see here that the self-criticism arises in the context of a particular person's particular crisis, for which dramatic material is appropriated and processed with effort and insight. And it is here, in his extended, performance-induced paroxysm of guilt and self-loathing, that Hamlet realizes that plays can effectively guilt-trip others, as well. Now Hamlet sees that *Gonzago* can also be appropriated more specifically as the Mousetrap, actually to entrap Claudius in his guilt ("I have heard that guilty creatures sitting at a play . . . have proclaimed their malefactions" [2.2.566, 569]). Hamlet's work with the Player's speech allows him to confront more deeply the depths of his self-hatred and to move beyond them. For he not only devises the Mousetrap, but also acknowledges that he has had good reason for not acting precipitously: "The spirit I have seen may be a devil . . . I'll have grounds more relative than this" (2.2.575-76, 580-81). His soliloquy represents audience response as a complex transformation that appropriates dramatic material, moving beyond play and performance to focus on present and personal matters, whose outcome is a course of action.

But is this playgoer up to carrying through his own theatrical appropriations? He has hardly set himself right with the Player's speech, as if it were fully adequate medicine or therapy. That speech addressed only some of Hamlet's issues. The next scene's soliloquy, "To be or not to be," acknowledges further doubts about his plan and himself:

Thus conscience does make coward of us all,  
 And thus the native hue of resolution  
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
 And enterprises of great pith and moment  
 With this regard their currents turn awry,  
 And lose the name of action. (3.1.85-90)

Rather than acting with the benefit of thought's due discretion, the playgoer may become a mere interpreter, an observer of life, settling for the "pale cast of thought" that contemplates without consequence, positing a universe in which thinking humans are trapped and paralyzed. And after the Mousetrap has been sprung, Hamlet passes up an opportunity to carry out his resolve, whether from paralysis or from appreciation of the complexities of the matter and of his own desires. But Shakespeare has nevertheless represented powerfully an overlooked dimension of what Hamlet has called "the purpose of playing" (3.2.18-19), one that accords a more active and collaborative role for the audience as the players' appropriating Other than we have yet realized. It represents

the audience member in his alterity, as an Other who remains a free agent and an end in himself. With the right audience, playing — we now see — presents "virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (3.2.20-22), as Hamlet says, partly through appropriation. Hamlet is an engaged and discerning audience member who is able to appropriate theatrical experience as part of a personal and political struggle of several stages, one that eventually loses its specificity as it flows into larger patterns of life. The play appropriates him, too, in the sense that its total effect and significance increase as it brings him to a new place.

In the Mousetrap scene itself, Hamlet carries out his intention to appropriate another performance. He becomes a tendentious commentator, ensuring that the others apply the play to the situation at court in ways that expose them, especially Claudius. In this sense, he answers the unspoken injunction to "appropriate this," modeling in a different way what might take place in the mind of a playgoer during or after a performance, what a playgoer might actually speak during a performance, or what a playgoer might say about a play afterwards in order to turn it to a special purpose. In this case, of course, the purpose is treasonous and therefore dangerous to speak. As *The Murder of Gonzago* begins, Hamlet sets up this guilt-arousing application by implying to Claudius that Hamlet's own hopes for the succession to the throne have been fobbed off with empty promises (3.2.85-86). Then, to Ophelia, he compares the play's brief prologue to a woman's brief love (3.2.136-37). Right after the Player Queen has reiterated her intention never to remarry after her husband dies, Hamlet coyly asks Gertrude, "Madam, how like you this play?" (3.2.209), provoking her immortal reply. A few lines later, he tells Claudius that the play is indeed based on a true story, "the image of a murder done in Vienna" (3.2.218), implying its applicability to other real murders. And then of course when the murderer Lucianus "*pours the poison in [the Player King's] ears*" (p. 1714, s.d. after line 238), Hamlet interrupts the play with an outburst meant as an accusation against Claudius, whereupon the King leaves, "marvelous distempered" (3.2.276), and the trap is sprung. All of these cases represent tendentious readings that appropriate dramatic material for present application, mainly to test Claudius, but also to indict Ophelia and Gertrude. Claudius's automatic response contrasts strongly with Hamlet's extended and strenuous play-work of appropriation. It seems that players in the theater who disrupt a performance can also lend to it an extra dimension of meaning.

In these ways, Hamlet appropriates both Aeneas's speech and *The Murder of Gonzago* in an evolving process of response. Dramatic production is represented here as a resource to be given up to the purposes of playgoers, who can shape and apply it at will. When they do so with discretion, powerful theatrical stimulants may be processed to become medicine rather than poison, to use words commonly applied to the effects of plays at the time (Pollard 2005). The degree

to which that process is successful here is debatable, of course. But what player, one might say at first, would not want a playgoer like Hamlet, unruly though he can get? He wants something particular out of a scene, yet when he gets more than he asks for, he rises to the challenge, allowing the experience to work on his inner conflicts, as he works through to a productive way of processing his theatrical experiences. But an application to a head of state as accusatory as this could get players in trouble, as it almost did with Shakespeare and his company shortly after, when Essex's men commissioned a production of *Richard II* the night before their attempted coup. Still, appropriating loose cannons such as Hamlet, bent on assassination, raises the stakes for the theater as a political, psychological, social, cultural, and at times, religious force. *Hamlet* is surely the world's most intensively *interpreted* literary work. It is a great irony of literary-critical history that near its center the author has placed a vivid account of how an audience member can creatively *appropriate* a play's resources for huge personal and political goals. That dynamic transaction between writer and audience calls forth powerful artistry from both sides. Perhaps Shakespeare also valued appropriation partly because it seemed to be a means to make the theater a multifarious force in the world, including a force for change.

### Commodity and the Common Good

*Hamlet*, then, represents the public impact of the theater as centering on its empowerment of the appropriating, personal agendas and aspirations of individual audience members. And in this respect, Hamlet's mode of reception illustrates the argument I have made elsewhere concerning the place of the theater in the early modern marketplace — that the theater offers its plays primarily as "commodities" to audiences, in the early modern sense of that word: as "a quality or condition of things, in relation to the desires or needs of man . . . conveniency, suitability, fitting utility" [*OED*, "commodity" 1]; and further, that the modern meaning of "commodity" as an item set to sale, while it is certainly part of the picture at this time, accords more with later periods' highly developed notions of aesthetic experience, authorial control over meaning, and analytic literary interpretation.

The invitation to "appropriate this" offers the stage as a "commodity" in the older sense, one that accommodates a range of desires, needs, and purposes of its audience, and supplies equipment for living. Hamlet's responses, as some of the extant actual responses do, also illustrate how that invitation can challenge audiences to explore beyond set ideas and understandings of self and purpose. Such appropriation can, in this way, contribute to the artistic excellence of the play, though it may compete with, as well as complement, other kinds of formal artistry and authorial control of response.

Clearly, the theater of appropriation or of accommodation does not tend toward reconciliation of disparate interests by unifying or harmonizing responses and attitudes according to a prescribed view of nation, faith, or culture. It is ideologically pluralist, yet that openness could bear hope for tolerance and reconciliation. For it broaches the possibility of a world in which the disparate multitude of "commodities" that audiences discover might somehow coexist, support one another, or be adjusted, redefined, replaced, and so reconciled. This theater forgoes mastery of signification for the sake of the Other, the audience, thereby bringing those Others to the question of what could join them. Valuing the alterity of the audience leads, logically at least, to valuing the pursuit of another radical alterity, a common good that contextualizes audiences' pursuits of particular goods. I. M. and John Taylor, two of the audience members mentioned above who appeal to shared values — albeit embattled traditional ones — and to the public good while promoting their own interests. I. M. appeals to traditional values when he speaks out against the decline of traditional service as the model of pure wage work advances. The generous tip or "guerdon" that Costard gets from Biron in *Love's Labour's Lost* represents the manifold rewards of traditional service, and Armado's stingy "remuneration" that of impersonal wage work. John Taylor defends urban civility against ostentatious and dangerous hackney coaches by comparing their occupants to charioteer Tamburlaine with his leash of kings. Republican agent John Milton seeks to counteract the pious sympathy Charles I had generated through his personal testament *Eikon Basilike* by comparing him to Shakespeare's Richard III, who feigned religious devotion to fool the public into accepting him as king. Rev. Nicholas Richardson was trying to help when he preached that Juliet's care for Romeo was a figure for God's providence. The goals of Prince Hamlet in his dramatic appropriations entail ridding Denmark of what is rotten. This ethical dimension of the theater of appropriation could also be called spiritual in that it risks depending on the Other — audience response — for its own identity, but posits that response as radically unknowable. Some history of the early modern sense of "commodity" and consideration of its uses by Shakespeare can concretize these ideas.

"Commodity," in its older sense, figures in a key moral issue in Tudor economic policy, what Keith Wrightson calls the conflicting demands of personal "commodity" and community welfare or "commonwealth" (Wrightson 1986, 23). The increasing respectability of an eye for self-interested "commodity" rather than for observance of reciprocal obligations to the commonwealth is registered in the following historical progression. The protests of Robert Crowley and other "commonwealthsmen" ministers in the mid-sixteenth century include an attack on the pursuit of "commodity" by "such as passe more on the world then god, more on ther pryvat profett then on the common welthe" (quoted in Wrightson 1986, 150). By 1571, Thomas Smith was searching for a rapprochement between self-interest and reciprocity amid the depredations of the advancing

market economy, standing up for what he paradoxically called "the commoditie . . . of the common wealth" (quoted in Wrightson 1986, 157). Finally, by the 1620s, merchants Thomas Mun and Edward Misselden were heralding capitalist ideology, asserting that the general pursuit of private "commodity" is sufficient in itself to secure the good of the commonwealth (Wrightson 1986, 204).

As has been emphasized for some time, the exchanges between theatrical producers and consumers were part of the evolving early modern economy. The theater of appropriation might appear in some respects to parallel the emerging doctrine of Mun and Misselden, that in the capitalist market the pursuit of profit benefits the whole, with appropriating audience members concerned more about their individual interests than their sense either of the play as a whole or any vision of commonality that the play might offer. But it could also accord with Smith's paradoxical ideal of combining self-interest and reciprocity in a "commoditie . . . of the common wealth" — that is, whatever is good for the commonwealth as a whole. Along these lines, Paul Yachnin insightfully distinguishes the values of the Shakespearean theater from purely commercial ones, aligning them with an artisan consciousness (rather than that of a capitalist entertainment industry) and with spiritual notions of community (Yachnin 2005). Good theater figures the good society. To this I would add that it is also through its focus on facilitating the audience's power to engage with self and world that the theater of appropriation remains fundamentally involved with ethical questions of commodity and commonwealth. It is produced by artisans who express their citizenship, as well as their craftsmanship, through performance.

Philip the Bastard's famous invective in *King John* draws on the paradoxes of the early modern discourse of "commodity." And if one substitutes "play" for "world" below in the second and third lines, the Bastard could speak for the impatience felt by Ben Jonson, and perhaps sometimes by Shakespeare, about appropriating audiences inclined to dismember and pervert the well-made play:

That smooth-faced gentleman, tickling commodity;  
Commodity, the bias of the world [play],  
The world [play] who of itself is peisèd well,  
Made to run even upon even ground,  
Till this advantage, this vile-drawing bias,  
This sway of motion, this commodity,  
Makes it take head from all indifferency,  
From all direction, purpose, course, intent . . . (*King John*, 2.1.575-82)

But the context undercuts Philip's moral: The English and French kings' agreement not to level the city of Angiers, of which Philip complains, seems less a case of private interest subverting fair



play — "indifferency" — and the course of nature than does Philip's own concluding admission: "And why rail I on this commodity? / But for because he hath not wooed me yet" (2.1.582-83). Philip's own behavior belies his cynical self-assessment here, for his advance combines personal ambition (his own "commodity") with admirable concern for and service to the nation. As the play's commentator, he emphasizes others' and his own mixed motives, expressing aspirations to justice and honor that in the world of the play are both noble and simplistic.

Philip's career actually shows how even that smooth-faced gentleman, Commodity, can be a hero (Hobson 1991, 95-114). In my tickled application, his career also shows that many players might resolve their reservations about the specter of "this vile-drawing bias" of appropriation in the playhouse with the understanding that it challenges them to greater achievements. They have the opportunity to make of themselves and their audiences mutually accommodating "commodities" who share an interest in a theatrical commonwealth that extends well beyond the moment of performance and contributes to the common good and an emerging public sphere. But Philip himself cannot envision this good. That is up to the audience.

In *The Merchant of Venice*, likewise, the term "commodity" implies a the embrace of a general as well as particular good, and the questions this play raises about community are also relevant to the theatrical community of players and audience, as well as to the society beyond. The Duke cannot dismiss Shylock's suit for a pound of Antonio's flesh because, Antonio says,

The Duke cannot deny the course of law,  
For the commodity that strangers have  
With us in Venice, it if be denied,  
Will much impeach the justice of the state,  
Since that the trade and profit of the city  
Consisteth of all nations. (*Merchant of Venice*, 3.3.26-31)

The phrase "commodity . . . with us" refers in the first place to the benefits that citizens extend to non-citizens, perhaps specifically trading privileges. Not allowing Shylock to carve up Antonio constitutes a denial of his trading privileges because his contract with Antonio to do so would be voided. Such privileges express "the justice of the state" because that justice is based on allowing "all nations" to conduct business and thereby contribute to the city as a whole. Citizens extend certain commodities, or useful privileges, to Shylock, but those commodities are also assets to the citizens and to all the residents of Venice. The anti-Semitic defendant is wry here about an expedient policy that requires catering to the special interests of a perverse group of aliens. But the principle to which Antonio refers involves the rudimentary semblance of a just, multicultural

society based on the reciprocal "commodity" that diverse groups with valid interests represent for one another (though only some of the groups are actually citizens).

The term "commodity," then, would suggest recognition of a duty to dispense equal justice by accommodating diverse interests for the common good. This is a principle that could also extend to the theater of appropriation as a dispenser of commodities and an enabler of audiences' discoveries of benefits. Of course, in this particular case it would be catastrophic to allow such "justice" to be applied, since doing so would result in murder. And Antonio is saved by an obscure provision specifically distinguishing between citizens and aliens: "If it be proved against an alien / That . . . / He seek the life of any citizen" (*Merchant of Venice*, 4.1.344-46), the alien loses his estate, and his life lies at the mercy of the Duke. It is ironic that a discriminatory law saves the day rather than a general, sorely lacking prohibition against murder that is equally respectful of everyone's commodity. There were limits to the theater's pluralism, and pluralism in or out of the theater has no power in itself to secure equal treatment for all interests. But where is the theater, where is the community, where is the world in which the goods we pursue are just, forgiving, and hospitable?<sup>4</sup> These questions posed by *The Merchant of Venice* resonate also in a theater that addresses diverse identities and conflicting needs and desires and yet tries to give all some of what they want. Such a theater does not provide the answers, but it does provide a means to them.

Many historicist studies have enabled us to appreciate how the Renaissance theater thrived artistically by magnetizing a powerful centripetal flow of social, cultural, and religious energy centered on performance "commodities" (in the fully modern sense) that appropriate and rehearse cultures and enable a new kind of distinctively theatrical experience. But the theater of appropriation, as I have defined it, runs all the other way. It sacrifices mastery of signification to provide material for appropriation by audiences. These audiences, as it were, re-appropriate by discovering, in the context of the common good, "commodities" (in the older sense) that are beneficial to their evolving practices of life and community. Besides that centripetal flow of cultural energies toward the stage itself, then, the Renaissance theater also recognized the value of striving to meet the challenge of a powerful undertow, a proliferating economy of use and application, a sublime, unfathomable, appropriating reversal powered by the supreme cultural centrifuge, the audience.

### Notes

1. The two who come closest are Nathaniel Tomkyns and Abraham Wright. See Tomkyns's letter of 16 August 1634 on *The Late Lancashire Witches*, in Herbert Berry, "The Globe Bewitched and *El Hombre Fiel*," *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 1 (1984): 211-30; and

Abraham Wright, *Excerpta Quaedam per A. W. Adolescentem*, BM Add MS 22608 (ca. 1640), transcribed by Kirsch, 256-61.

2. For a debate on the degree to which players tolerated or encouraged "distracted" or individualized response, see Anthony Dawson and Paul Yachnin, 79-81 and 89-105, *passim*.
3. All citations to Shakespeare's plays will be to *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd edition, edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997) and will be incorporated into the body of the text.
4. Ewan Fernie cites these "three great works of love" in his account of Hamlet's deconstructive spirituality (Fernie 2005, 179). See also "Merchants of Venice, Circles of Citizenship" (Lupton 2005, 73-102).

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