

Faith Acker

“From Trope to Meme: Establishing a Pattern of Shakespearean Adaptation”

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, numerous pithy extracts from Shakespeare’s plays and poems were extracted, copied, shared, and re-copied in commonplace books and literary miscellanies that, consequently, adapted passages and phrases to fit new contexts and audiences and allowed readers and transcribers to experience Shakespearean quotations in a wide variety of differing guises. Indubitably, some of the early transcribers of these passages must have enjoyed the decontextualized words not because they were Shakespeare’s, and not because they came from famous plays or historical tales, but because relevant phrases and messages reached their new audiences in fresh and culturally specific contexts that appealed to popular cultural ideals even as the contexts of their original plays or collections were overlooked. Furthermore, and significantly, while the contexts and receptions of these passages in the early modern period are mainly speculative, many of the same or similar passages now experience similar, secondary lives as internet memes, in which—as in the early modern era—famous and popular passages of Shakespeare’s are borrowed, adapted, copied, revised, recontextualized, and even reworded to fit the demands of modern internet readers, some of whom still, presumably, enjoy the memes not only because they are Shakespearean, but also because of their larger cultural connections. This paper explores the connection between the early modern miscellany and the twenty-first century meme, arguing that the contemporary transmission and influence of the Shakespearean meme can inform and benefit our study of early modern commonplaces and miscellanies containing Shakespearean excerpts.

John Henry Adams

“Concordances and Dictionaries: Heirs to the Commonplace Book?”

Commonplace books represent an aspect of book culture heavily interested in compilation and distilling reading down into moments of culturally relevant wisdom. Commonplace books as a formal practice have largely disappeared, but their core assumptions were taken up by other reference works, even ones that predated them. In this paper, I focus on the commonplace book’s more ponderous cousins, the concordance and the dictionary. Shakespeare has benefited from both of these genres, enjoying an early concordance treatment in the late eighteenth-century as well as commanding a large amount of attention in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Shakespeare’s reception draws our attention to the overlap between the genres. I argue that the same compiling culture that originally produced commonplace books was absorbed into a formalized reference system and in that regard remains active even today.

Rachael Faith Hilliard

“*Midsummer Night’s Dreaming*: Posting and Re-posting with Google+ Creative Lab”

Shakespeare’s work—itself arguably a masterful example of commonplacings—has subsequently been fractured, manipulated, and reassembled by various cultures and subcultures over four centuries. Evolving technologies of communication affect the resultant products of these acts of commonplacings and how they are used and consumed as new versions of Shakespeare. The RSC’s *Midsummer Night’s Dreaming*, one such adaptation on Google+, provides intriguing parallels to traditional commonplacings practices.

Dreaming illuminates the reciprocity between social networking and performance, engaging with digital culture to transform the mode of audience experience and participation into one of co-production. This adaptation allows, invites, and even anticipates audiences’ performativity as an integral step in generating the end product of the performance, which saliently includes the archival body of information that exists long after the performance ends. On the Google+ “stage,” we experience the direct, immediate, and reciprocal interactions between audience and performers, performers and audience: both actively produce meaning within the performance event and its digital echoes. “Audience members” of *Dreaming* are encouraged and expected to manipulate the Shakespearean material, and the digital performance space is organized to showcase their work alongside Shakespeare’s, commissioned artists’, and paid actors’. In this way, *Dreaming* repositions any subversive qualities of commonplacings into the authorized performance expectations for this new digital audience.

Matthew Hunter

“*Venus and Adonis* and the Distinctions of Commonplacings”

This paper will argue that the remarkable popularity of *Venus and Adonis*—especially with the young gentlemen of London’s Inns of Court—is the result of the poem’s effort both to enlist and to subvert the early modern practice of commonplacings. In keeping with the *sententiae* of the period, Venus’s language is utterly depersonalized. She speaks not of her own experiences of love, but of love in general; she frequently avoids the first person pronoun; and she sticks fast instead to a timeless and placeless present tense. Through such highly rhetorical but de-personalized language, Venus transforms her lines into *sententiae* that readers of the period prized so highly. But if Venus’s language is sententious, it is also sententiously erotic. “Graze on my lips; and if those hills be dry, / Stray lower, where the pleasant fountains lie.” Far from offering universal wisdom, Venus’s *sententiae* are spoken in the service of only the most sensuous pleasures. The poem makes aphorisms out of the erotic, and it dresses up the erotic as the greatest source of sententious wit. The effect of this eroticism is to make Venus’s language distinctly un-useful. She offers nothing that can be applied to better understand

the nature of timeless and universal truths.

It is precisely the *uselessness* of Shakespeare's poem, I will argue, that makes it a powerful source of social distinction in turn of the century London. With its many antitheses, similitudes, and *sententiae*, the poem offers its readers language to signal their mastery of the arts of rhetoric. But in making aphorisms out of the erotic, dressing up sensuous passion as if it were universal wisdom, *Venus and Adonis* also adopts a strikingly oppositional relationship to the rhetorical tradition that produced it. Far from a useful a for contemplating matters of universal import, *Venus and Adonis* is useful only for talking sex and contemplating courtship. To quote the poem in public, therefore, was to signal one's utter indifference to the arts of rhetoric one also had mastered. By accounting for the relationship that Shakespeare's poem adopts towards own *sententiae*, we can account for the ways that later efforts to commonplace the poem represent efforts not simply to quote the poem's lines, but to contest the cultural value that those lines could hold for their readers.

Andrea Stevens

“An action that a man might play: Performing the Commonplace.”

Recent attention has focused upon the commonplacing of English plays—that is, the printing of plays with *sententiae* or moralizing couplets flagged for the reader's attention by commas or inverted commas. These printing marks elevated the status of plays as literature, for as Zack Lesser and Peter Stallybrass have shown, prior to the 1590s, such marks tended only to appear in poetry or in ‘the most prestigious plays in the most prestigious languages’. The printing of professional plays with commonplace markers thus signaled what Lesser and Stallybrass call a ‘sea change’ in attitude toward the literariness of contemporary English drama. Importantly, one collected commonplaces not just for private perusal, but for public performance: that is, for reuse at the fittest moment and with ‘a certain nonchalance’. A method for constructing socially authoritative identities, the commonplace therefore belonged to a self-fashioning regime that was as much other-directed as it was inwardly-focused.

This paper (part of a longer project on the ‘commonplace’, broadly construed) does not, however, focus on the role of the commonplace in print culture or from the perspective of the private reader, but instead on the commonplace as an action that a man might play: the representation, within drama, of characters as they ‘rime upon any occasion at a little warning’. I begin by considering a range of scenes in which Shakespeare's men negotiate their complex social and affective relationships to each other by exchanging commonplaces, in some scenes combatively (1.3 of *Othello*, between the Duke and Brabantio); or playfully and cynically (in 1.2 of *Romeo and Juliet*). What bonds do these sorts of language games constitute? And why is it that Shakespeare's women rarely if ever engage in this sort of linguistic play as they negotiate their own alliances to each other? The paper thus concludes by considering the gender dynamics of the public exchange of forms of the commonplace as a method for

cementing social ties.

Asia Rowe

**“Sayings [put] upon me’: Interrogating Commonplace Wisdom in Shakespeare’s
Troilus and Cressida and *Measure for Measure*”**

A number of scholars since G.K. Hunter’s “Marking of *Sententiae*” have considered what Peter Stallybrass and Zachary Lesser have more recently discussed (and tabulated) as the “Commonplacing of Professional Plays.” The long list of these dramatic works includes only five by William Shakespeare that contain gnomic markers in their first printings. In my paper for “Commonplacing Shakespeare,” I focus on two of these plays, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure*, together with some of their shared features, including disillusionment with (or even dissolution of) comic conventions and conventional wisdom. In light of such similarities between these two late comedies or “problem plays,” their treatment of commonplaces is especially interesting. *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida* are the only two of Shakespeare’s plays in which marked *sententiae* are spoken by female characters. Furthermore, these conspicuous commonplaces both highlight the thematic and moral importance of chastity. In Isabella’s and Cressida’s universalized maxims, female chastity is singularly extolled (over the life of a brother and as essential to a woman’s worth and survival). Without chastity, a woman not only forfeits her honor, but also risks eternal damnation. So goes the traditional, recycled, patriarchal argument. Bearing in mind Laura Estill’s recent reminder that commonplace markers can change the meaning of a text in unexpected ways, my paper considers how the marking of Isabella’s and Cressida’s lines challenges the truth and wisdom of the commonplaces to which the speakers are ostensibly beholden. I am interested in the extent to which the textual features of font change and inverted commas affect the tone, meaning, and reception of commonplace anti-feminist arguments that, I argue, are offered and held up for scrutiny by two of Shakespeare’s most skeptical, self-conscious comedic heroines.