COMMONPLACE SHAKESPEARE

Christy Desmet[1][†]

In a well-known anecdote from *Clueless*, the 1995 U.S. teen film based on Jane Austen's *Emma*, Cher (Alicia Silverstone) and the snobbish Heather are conversing while Josh, the object of their mutual attachment, drives the car through Beverly Hills. Criticizing the phoniness of an unidentified third party, Heather says, "It's just like Hamlet said, 'To thine own self be true.'"

> Cher: Ah, no, Hamlet didn't say that.
> Heather: I think I remember Hamlet accurately.
> Cher: Well, I remember Mel Gibson accurately, and he didn't say that. That Polonius guy did.
> (Heckerling 1995)

Part of the joke is that Cher actually knows *Hamlet*, via Mel Gibson, better than the self-styled sophisticate Heather does. (In fact, her ability to quote high literature, even without proper attribution, is a sign that ultimately Cher will be worthy of the bookish Josh.)

Cher and Heather's exchange about the saying "to thine own self be true" demonstrates several key features of post-Renaissance commonplaces: first, they contain nuggets of familiar, even hackneyed wisdom; second, they are fungible, capable of being moved from context to context, and applicable to a wide range of persons and situations; and finally, they circulate and accrue authority irrespective of their authorial origin. It does not matter who invented particular commonplaces or what situation they addressed. They are *prima facie* true and authoritative—commonplaces just "sound right."

Commonplaces have always been part of the rhetorical tradition—Aristotle, Cicero, and others discuss their natures and uses—but both the rhetorical form and the practice of commonplacing was particularly characteristic of the English early modern period. In the late sixteenth century, commonplaces were new, fresh, captured only with considerable effort, and worthy of cataloging, repeating, and using in serious social and political situations. In the era of New Media and Web 2.0, Shakespearean commonplaces have

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1 † The late Christy Desmet co-founded *Borrowers and Lenders* with Sujata Iyengar in 2005. She was Meigs Professor of English at the University of Georgia, author of *Reading Shakespeare's Characters* (1992) and editor (with Robert Sawyer) of *Shakespeare and Appropriation* (1999) and *Harold Bloom's Shakespeare* (2001) and, most recently (with Natalie Roper and Jim Casey), of *Shakespeare/Not Shakespeare* (2018). She died in July 2018 after a short illness.

gained renewed traction — in part because of Shakespeare's celebrity status and public domain status, but also because of the rise of remix culture and internet memes and what Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green have called the "spreadability" of New Media.[2] This essay looks at the rhetorical commonplace, then and now, and while analyzing the different conditions under which commonplaces are created and disseminated in the two cultural moments, also takes a look at contemporary disdain for the supposed shallowness of commonplace thinking.

Early Modern Commonplace Culture

For Aristotle, the common topics or topoi are general structures of argument, such as comparison, cause and effect, and argument from the lesser to the greater — invitations to intellectual exercise rather than specific content useful to different kinds of argument.[3] For Cicero and Quintilian, the more direct sources for Renaissance rhetoric, commonplaces, or *loci communes*, are more literally the "places" one goes to find arguments. As in Aristotle, these are not specific sayings but argumentative moves (Rhodes 2004, 32). As Ann Moss notes in her discussion of the influence of Renaissance printed commonplace books on Renaissance habits of thought, "Quintilian follows Cicero in merging the places of dialectic with rhetoric," which entails in turn a general elision between the structure and content of commonplaces (10). Consequently, there is a decisive shift in emphasis from commonplaces as "well labelled containers of arguments, to that of containers full of specimen lines of amplification" (10). In this new scenario, the sentiment is as important as the commonplace's structure to its rhetorical success.

Commonplacing, or the selection and transcription of wise and useful sayings into one place, was both a domestic practice and a core principle of the educational system. As Adam Smyth notes, reading and writing were complementary activities (2010, 90). Erasmus's *De Rationii studii*, for instance, recommended for schoolboys marking up textbooks in a methodical fashion for understanding and memorizing (Moss 1996, 102–3). Generally, these excerpts were organized under headings, such as Abstinence, Adultery, Apocrypha — examples from John Foxe's *Pandectae locorum communium*, discussed by Rechtien (1978). From this list, Foxe's biblical interest is apparent, but commonplace books often included other general terms, such as Agriculture, Anatomy, and Antiquity, or even more specialized ones, such as Admirals, Archives, Bastards, and Codicils, topics of interest primarily to lawyers. As we know from the recently discovered

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2   On Shakespeare's celebrity and public domain status, see Sujata Iyengar, "Shakespeare Transformed: Copyright, Copyleft, and Shakespeare After Shakespeare" (2017, reprinted 2020). On "spreadability," see Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), *passim*. Spreadable media are those where user activity governs the attention economy, as opposed to "sticky media," in which corporate producers of web material actively seek out a maximum number of users.

3   See Ruth Amossy, "How to Do Things with Doxa: Toward an Analysis of Argumentation in Discourse," *Poetics Today*, 23, no. 3 (2002): 465–87. Common topics are to be distinguished from special topics, which matches the content of arguments to their rhetorical purpose. For instance, an epideictic argument might use the topic of virtue and vice, while a judicial argument might center on the question of justice versus injustice.

commonplace book of Edward Pudsey, spectators also recorded sayings from public plays; in Pudsey's case, the appearance of an extract from *Othello* long before it was published suggest that these aides-mémoires could also include oral transcriptions (Rees 1992, 330–31).

Within humanist pedagogy, the practice became a way of constructing a storehouse of inventive material for future oratory. As Smyth writes, "by deploying these collected quotations in spoken or written discourse, compilers will be led to an eloquence of expression, and through this eloquence to a good moral life" (2010, 91). Virtue follows eloquence, as it does in the famous definition of an orator in book 12 of *Institutes*, which Quintilian adapts from Marcus Cato: "a good man, skilled in speaking." Commonplace books are thus the ancestor of encyclopedias, collecting, selecting, and presenting knowledge for handy reference in one place. But they could also be quite personal, or even communal, as when a commonplace book recorded contributions from several generations of a family. They were also idiosyncratic, and as Smyth (2010, 93) says, "messy" and eclectic. Recipes appear next to poetry, and doodles are sprinkled at random on the page. Most often, commonplace books are always in process. Many contain empty pages, waiting for the next extract to be recorded.

The late sixteenth century also saw the first printed commonplace books, a phenomenon in which Shakespeare's works played a role. Aside from transcribing or copying passages in a manuscript book, the term commonplacing also indicated the printing practice of marking particular sayings, or *sententiae*, through inverted commas or a change in type font. *The Rape of Lucrece*, whose first quarto was printed in 1594 by Shakespeare's fellow Stratfordian Richard Field, was only the second text to bear Shakespeare's name and offers the first example of a Shakespearean printed text that includes commonplacing through the use of quotation marks, or inverted commas. Colin Burrow identifies twenty-three instances of commonplace marking in the first quarto (2002, 42). Zachary Lesser and Peter Stallybrass, noting the use of inverted commas to mark commonplaces in *Hamlet*'s first quarto, argue that the use of inverted commas (rather than font types) to mark commonplaces shows the activity of readers rather than the author or printer (381).[4] It is unclear whether the typographical habits of 1603, occurring in the printing house of Nicholas Ling, who was responsible for *Hamlet*'s first quarto, extend backwards to Richard Field's in 1593. What is clear is that readers a decade later recognized and appropriated *Lucrece*'s *sententiae* for miscellanies of English literary commonplaces, most notably Robert Allot's *Englands Parnassus* and its chief competitor, the learned grocer John Bodenham's *Belvedere; or The Garden of the Muses*, both of which sprung up around 1600.

These printed commonplace books, like their manuscript predecessors, arrange extracts under thematic headings ranging from Ambition to Love. Quotations from Shakespeare's early plays and poems are, by proportion, numerous. In *Belvedere*, Charles Crawford has found 214 extracts from Shakespeare, 91 of

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4   See also Laura Estill, "Commonplace Markers and Quotation Marks," *ArchBook: Architectures of the Book*, http://drc.usask.ca/projects/archbook/commonplace.php.

these being from *Lucrece* (1911, 198–228).[5] *Englands Parnassus* identifies the extracts by author, which makes the researcher's job easier. I counted fourteen extracts from *The Rape of Lucrece*, including Lucrece's long passage on women's weak will (under the heading of Women) and the blazon of Lucrece's body immediately before the rape (representing Beauty). There is no significant overlap with the commonplaces marked in *Lucrece* Q1, but both sets of commonplaces seem interested in the same topics.

As Kevin Petersen has recently shown, *The Rape of Lucrece* offers an epistemological exercise in the relative contributions to moral action that traditional wisdom, expressed pithily in *sententiae*, and experience have to offer. Petersen concludes that venerable wisdom does Lucrece very little good, as it cannot show her how to read Tarquin's deceptive visage. As a template to guide judgment and action, the *sententiae* fail; they make sense, however, in retrospect, as part of the reader's commonplacing, or culling, synthesizing, and reproducing of textual snippets of wisdom. Hence, *The Rape of Lucrece* demonstrates the life lived through *sententiae* and its tragic limitations.[6]

Commonplace People in *The Rape of Lucrece*

As Smyth notes, commonplace culture privileges the aphorism, small blocks of text. It is an art of the fragment (2010, 91). But in the early modern period, the commonplace was also a full-scale rhetorical exercise practiced by Renaissance schoolboys, which involved unfolding a pithy saying according to set topics. In Aphthonius's *Progymnasmata*, transmitted to the English Renaissance almost unchanged from the late Roman period, the "commonplace" was a prelude to the encomium, or praise of virtue in a particular person. The commonplace considered virtue and vice in more general terms, and its structure, although complex, revolved around a proverb or aphorism that defends or (more often) attacks the vice under consideration and moves on from there to praise or condemn the manifestation of that quality in an individual's case. Common topics included "gambling, theft, adultery, etc," and "sometimes the Commonplace took up the virtues/vices of specific kinds of persons; e.g., tyrants" (Burton 2007). Readers of *Lucrece* would have found the practice familiar, particularly in those parts where Lucrece herself schools Tarquin in a ruler's proper behavior and warns him against tyranny.

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5   Rhodes, however, says there are in Belvedere 236 examples from Shakespeare; see Neil Rhodes, *Common: The Development of Literary Culture in Sixteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 297.

6   Kevin Petersen, "Shakespeare and *Sententiae*: The Use of Quotation in *Lucrece*," in *Shakespeare and Quotation*, ed. Julie Maxwell and Kate Rumbold (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 46–59. I want to acknowledge Petersen's fine essay, which appeared in print after my own was drafted. Petersen nevertheless analyzes *Lucrece*'s *sententiae* as quotations, while I focus on them as commonplaces. Petersen actually points out that none of the proverbial-sounding sayings in *Lucrece* can be found in the standard compendia of Shakespeare's proverbial language. Shakespeare is constructing *sententiae* that sound like and resemble, but are not exactly, established commonplaces.

In *The Rape of Lucrece*, both principal speakers engage in this more extended form of commonplacing as rhetorical argument as they debate the wisdom and folly of Tarquin's intended rape and Lucrece's principled resistance. As Petersen notes, Tarquin begins by adamantly rejecting commonplace wisdom (51):

> "My will is strong, past reason's weak removing.
> Who fears a sentence or an old man's saw
> Shall by a painted cloth be kept in awe." (*Rape of Lucrece*, 243–45)[7]

Boasting of his powerful will, Tarquin dismisses reason's restraining force as nothing more than weak *sententiae*, the tedious "saws" of old men like Polonius. But Tarquin does not escape commonplace reason so easily. When he has retired to what Lucrece later will call his "borrowed" bed, Tarquin engages in a moral colloquy with himself, considering all the reasons why he should *not* rape Lucrece:

> "What win I if I gain the thing I seek?
> A dream, a breath, a froth of fleeting joy.
> *Who buys a minute's mirth to wail a week*
> *Or sells eternity to get a toy?*
> *For one sweet grape who will the vine destroy?*
>   *Or what fond beggar, but to touch the crown,*
>   *Would with the scepter straight be strucken down?*" (211–17, emphasis added)

This series of questions is really a string of proverbs or sayings that together form an argument based on implied dramatic scenarios that involve moral choice. He passes by quickly what gave both Hamlet and Faustus pause—the relinquishing of his eternal soul for a mere "toy." The remainder of the stanza, however, dilates upon other impediments. For instance, "What beggar, but to touch the crown, / Would with the scepter straight be stricken down" can be rephrased as "The beggar who seeks to touch the crown will be quickly struck down by the scepter" and filed in Tarquin's imagined commonplace book under the heading of "Ambition."

Tarquin may sneer at commonplaces and the cultural wisdom they offer, but he is not above using them in a final attempt to persuade Lucrece to yield during their tense bedside debate. At this point in the poem, Tarquin is looming over Lucrece's prone body, holding a torch in his hand with his face close to hers, and says:

> But if thou yield, I rest thy secret friend;
> The fault unknown is as a thought unacted;
> *"A little harm done to a great good end*

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7   All references to Shakespeare's works are to the Folger Digital Texts editions, *Shakespeare's Plays, Sonnets and Poems* (Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles, eds., n.d.), and are included in the body of the text.

> *For lawful policy remains enacted.*
> *"The poisonous simple sometime is compacted*
> *In a pure compound; being so applied,*
> *His venom in effect is purified."* (526–32, emphasis added)

(The quotation marks are present in the first quarto; this is one of the twenty-three instances of commonplace markers noted by Burrow.) The first argument, "*A little harm done to a great good end,*" looks forward to Angelo's verbal assault on Isabella in *Measure for Measure* (see 2.4.67–68), while the second, "*The poisonous simple sometime is compacted / In a pure compound; being so applied, / His venom in effect is purified*" points toward Friar Laurence's disquisition on the simples in his pharmacopeia from *Romeo and Juliet* (see 2.3.8–16).

Tarquin finally prevails over Lucrece by resorting to a verbal performance that is at once a threat and a rehearsal for future imagined conversations based on commonplace wisdom. If Lucrece will not yield, he says, Tarquin will kill both her and a slave, place them together in the bed, and then claim that he caught them in adultery. The future, Tarquin predicts, will resonate with reiterated stories of Lucrece's supposed sexual infidelity, until she becomes gossip's common theme and a walking proverb, the sexualized wife as whore:

> So thy surviving husband shall remain
> The scornful mark of every open eye,
> Thy kinsmen hang their heads at this disdain,
> Thy issue blurred with nameless bastardy;
> And thou, the author of their obloquy,
> *Shalt have thy trespass cited up in rhymes*
> *And sung by children in succeeding times.* (519–25, emphasis added)

Her appeals to Tarquin's better nature—to the obligations of hospitality and friendship and to the monarch's duty—having fallen on deaf ears, Lucrece offers Tarquin a matching scenario, in which a commonplace predicts for him an equally sordid, and unhappy fate:

> This deed will make thee only loved for fear,
> But happy monarchs still are feared for love.
> With foul offenders thou perforce must bear
> When they in thee the like offenses prove.
> If but for fear of this, thy will remove,
> > *For princes are the glass, the school, the book,*
> > *Where subjects' eyes do learn, do read, do look.* (610–16, emphasis added)

Anticipating similar sentiments from Ophelia expressed on the occasion of Hamlet's supposed madness (*Hamlet*, 3.1.163–67), Lucrece begins with the commonplace that princes are the book/school/mirror that their subjects as students read for examples of proper behavior. She asks:

> "And wilt thou be the school where Lust shall learn?
> Must he in thee read lectures of such shame?
> Wilt thou be glass wherein it shall discern
> Authority for sin, warrant for blame,
> To privilege dishonor in thy name?
>   Thou back'st reproach against long-living laud
>   And mak'st fair reputation but a bawd. (617–23)

Tarquin will both teach his subjects to rebel and become himself an emblem of tyranny.

After the rape, Lucrece finds new, if virtual interlocutors, making her complaint at length to several personified entities: Time, Night, and Opportunity. She continues to express her sorrow and moralize her situation in sententious language; if anything, she grows more sententious, as if for her as for Hamlet, the absence of an interlocutor makes resort to internal dialectic more urgent. The narrator, in sympathy, also indulges in an extended rhapsody of commonplaces to mark Lucrece's grief:

> The little birds that tune their mornings ioy,
> Make her mones mad, with their sweet melodie,
> "For mirth doth search the bottome of annoy,
> "Sad soules are slaine in merrie companie,
> "Griefe best is pleas'd with griefes societie;
> "True sorrow then is feelinglie suffiz'd,
> "VVhen with like semblance it is simpathiz'd.
>
> "Tis double death to drowne in ken of shore,
> "He ten times pines, that pines beholding food,
> "To see the salue doth make the wound ake more:
> "Great griefe greeues most at that wold do it good;
>
> "Deepe woes roll forward like a gentle flood,
>   VVho being stopt, the boūding banks oreflowes,
>   Griefe dallied with, nor law, nor limit knowes. (1107–20)

Here again, the quotation marks appear in *Lucrece*'s first quarto, signaling the presence of commonplacing, but under the pressure of strong emotion, the narrator's *sententiae* follow thick upon one another, forestalling the rhetorical unfolding of the saying's meaning that produces ethical reasoning.

The Rape of Lucrece dramatizes for us commonplace thinking but even more starkly, what it means to live and die by the commonplace. The deployment of commonplaces in the verbal sparring between Lucrece and her rapist in Shakespeare's poem is a tense business with great consequences. There is nothing "commonplace"—trite or self-evident—about the sayings traded here. There are broader social consequences, as well, in a world dominated by commonplace thinking. The entries in a commonplace book are free radicals, or in Rhodes's words, "detachable verbal unit[s] that can be reconnected to become part of a new textual whole" (2004, 150). Their meaning, their significance, is ever shifting. Furthermore, these sayings owe no allegiance to anyone. They circulate from the mouths or pages of authors to the commonplace books of receivers, whence they can be put back into circulation without acknowledging their origin and with no promise that the wisdom being articulated is indeed characteristic of the speaker. Rhodes points out that in commonplacing, there is a fine line between "recitation and creation, authentic action and feigned performance" (2004, 158). Commonplace discourse may be entirely fraudulent, masking a bad intent.

Conversely, commonplace thinking, taken to its logical conclusion, can turn the orator into a caricature, an emblem, a fossilized exemplar. Take, for instance, the litany of adages from Lucrece as she makes her complaint and weighs her options:

> "Tis double death to drowne in ken of shore,
> "He ten times pines, that pines beholding food,
> "To see the salue doth make the wound ake more:
>> "Great griefe greeues most at that wold do it good; (1114–17)

He that pines beholding food becomes Tantalus, not only a figure of supreme suffering but also a living lesson in why not to feed the gods your children. "Deracination is the fate of every commonplace," Rhodes warns (2004, 161). Deracination is also the threatened fate of every commonplace thinker, who may dwindle into an emblem, a cliché, or in the early modern sense of this term, a grotesque Theophrastan Character.

The Commonplace and Early Modern Appropriation

We have always been able to imagine Renaissance appropriators in the most common sense of that term, as "theft by taking" (Marsden 1991, 8). According to the textual theory of memorial reconstruction, the actor playing Marcellus stole and reproduced a garbled version of *Hamlet*, the 1603 first quarto. Thomas Heywood (n.d.) claimed that he had printed *The Rape of Lucrece* because a "mangled" text had been taken down "by ear" by some unscrupulous auditor and circulated previously in print. Even before copyright, the right to possession of texts was under debate, with the motives ranging from a transcriber's mandate to "perfect" a text to the piratical desire to wrest it from its proper home, "mangling" it in the process. With the resurgence of source studies, we have also grown accustomed to admitting casually that Shakespeare

"stole" his plots from myriad places and persons. The practice of commonplacing, likewise, involved acts of appropriation, not only in private commonplace collections but also in print. (Bodenham (1600) and Allot (1600) both were not only unreliable in matters of attribution, but also reworked passages to fit their own rhetorical needs.) Smyth claims that early modern commonplacers, if not explicitly concerned with ownership, demonstrated ambivalence toward the practice and were cautioned to conceal a dependence on commonplaces in argument as intellectually derivative (104).

There is another, particularly Renaissance species of appropriation, involving a dialogic exchange that is ethical in impact. There is in *The Rape of Lucrece* a striking example, where after her rape, Lucrece finds no solace until she comes upon the Troy painting. Here she achieves an emotional rapprochement with the painted figure of ancient Hecuba, mourning the destruction of Troy, the death of her children, and—if *Hamlet*'s Player is to be trusted—the mincing of her equally venerable husband Priam's limbs by Achilles's vengeful son Pyrrhus (*Hamlet*, 2.2.539–40):

> On this sad shadow Lucrece *spends* her eyes,
> And shapes her sorrow to the beldame's woes,
> Who nothing wants to answer her but cries,
> And bitter words to ban her cruel foes. (1457–60)

At first, Lucrece's sorrow taxes her body, as she "spends" on Hecuba her eyes' store of tears, then rages unchecked, imagining the satisfying act of tearing Helen's painted cheeks with her nails. Finally, Lucrece achieves a more equitable state in which she mourns the Romans through an affective exchange with Hecuba. Lucrece weeps Troy's painted woes "feelingly":

> For sorrow, like a heavy ringing bell,
> Once set on ringing with his own weight goes;
> Then little strength rings out the dolefull knell.
> So Lucrece, set a-work, sad tales doth tell
> To penciled pensiveness, and coloured sorrow;
> She *lends* them words, and she their looks doth *borrow*. (1492–98, emphasis added)

Here the central *sententia*—"sorrow is like a heavy ringing bell that once set ringing continues from its own momentum"—describes Lucrece's mourning, but it is completed and corrected by the buried metaphor of exchange in the couplet. Renaissance rhetoric, this cycle of borrowing looks and lending words goes by the name of *prosopopoeia*, the assumption of another person's identity, whether fictional or historical, in order to speak with their voice. This is the basic trope by which dramatists imagine characters and actors impersonate them. It is central to the early modern stage. Acts of *prosopopoeia* are not necessarily dialogic and need not be benign; but while Macbeth's borrowed robes are the sign that he is a usurper and

a tyrant (1.3.114–15), the borrowing and lending that goes on between Lucrece and her Trojan forbearer is a sign of an identification that is more equitable and generous.[8]

Lucrece achieves, if only temporarily, a respite from this agonistic world of argumentation through the dialogic act of borrowing looks from painted Hecuba and lending the Trojan queen words. In this act of rhetorical borrowing and lending, Lucrece both fulfills the promise of commonplacing—bringing *sententiae* to life—and provides an alternative to its argumentative tendency. There may also be a less happy fate for the subjects of commonplacing, however. The commonplace without rhetorical commonplacing is a degraded stereotype, producing through *prosopopoeia* a world in which speech acts are ethically unmoored and susceptible to cavalier manipulation.[9]

Shakespearean Commonplacing 2.0

The fate of the commonplace post-Renaissance is often seen as just that: the degradation of venerable wisdom into empty bromides and those who use them into ignorant or even malicious stereotypes. One of the twentieth-century's best-known examples in the United States was Alan Simpson's citation of Iago on the subject of reputation in defense of Clarence Thomas during the Hill-Thomas hearings, as part of Thomas's vetting for the position of U.S. Supreme Court Justice:

> Good name in man or woman is the immediate jewel of their souls.
> Who steals my purse steals trash . . .
> . . .
> But he who filches from me my good name
> Robs me of that which not enriches him
> And makes me poor indeed. (*Othello*, 3.3.182–84, 188–90)

Simpson attributed the quotation, wrongly, to Othello, when of course the commonplacer is Iago. Commentators were divided about whether Simpson was simply ignorant or whether characterizing Thomas as Othello while his white wife sat behind him strengthened the future justice's ethos. What generally goes unnoticed, however, is the method by which Simpson arrived at his commonplace—through a lingering memory, perhaps, but then by getting it from "the back of the book, *Othello*" (Russo 1994). Presumably, Simpson confirmed or supplemented his memory through one of those Shakespeare editions that lists famous lines at the back and got the quotation out of context, not being a good enough student to cross-

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8   A search on the word "borrow" via the Folger Digital Texts reveals a number of uses that are strictly economical (not surprisingly, especially in *The Merchant of Venice*), but also many other instances where the meaning centers on representation or even impersonation as an act hovering between unlawful usurpation and homage.

9   In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, this is definition 2.5.b: "Applied to a person who is the common topic or theme of remark."

check the quotation with its appearance in the play-text. The printed school text served as his commonplace book.

Often, as in the case of the Hill-Thomas hearings, the contemporary commonplace is equated with quotation and with the qualities that an act of quoting requires: direct repetition, even if it is inaccurate, and overt signaling that the words of another are being represented (Maxwell and Rumbold 2018, 5). In one Web 2.0 application, the ARTFL Project's database Commonplace Cultures, this trend holds true. The database plus search engine allows users, using established collections of digitized texts, to search for shared passages in eighteenth-century and earlier works (Commonplace Cultures 2012). This means that nearly exact repetition of word strings is required. When I used the site, it became apparent that many of the "hits" came from eighteenth-century editions of Shakespeare, while a smaller number came from collections of poetic extracts, also known as "beauties," admired for their stylistic polish as much as their wise sentiments.

The digital environment for New Media and active user participation has simplified the spread of commonplaces of all kinds. Through a simple Google search, one can find copious examples of "commonplace wisdom" from sources ranging from Dan Brown to Bill Gates, plus jeremiads against falling for the lazy thinking habits encouraged by commonplace thinking. Alan Jacobs has even compared the commonplace to Tumblr as a virtual place to collect his thoughts and matters of interest in real time, although he admits to the lazy habit of cutting-and-pasting information from different sources rather than writing them out in his own hand. (Renaissance commonplacers, as Jacobs points out, often cheated in comparable ways, cutting passages out of one book and pasting them into their commonplace book.)

Two new media technologies that work through the condensed syntax and stylistic polish of commonplaces are texting and Twitter. Texting is a *techne* in which people often dwindle into stereotypes or Characters. Think of the politicians and celebrities who have unwisely texted images of themselves to recipients willing and unwilling. At the same time, texts carry a factual weight uncharacteristic of the Renaissance commonplace, as when texts are used as evidence in rape trials (*USA Today* 2013). The particular rhetorical form of the text, brevity, reinforces the more recent *OED* definition of "commonplace," as "anything common and trite; an ordinary every-day object, action, or occurrence" (*OED,* 2.6). Compact hieroglyphs, such as "lol" or "omfg," respond to social situations with ritualistic, often phatic, cookie-cutter acknowledgments.[10] The text as verbal genre condenses an entire social scenario into a short saying—in effect, a commonplace.

When texting took off as a communicative technology, people were so worried that it would destroy the English language as we know it that linguist David Crystal had to write an entire book persuading them otherwise. Nevertheless, I found via Google relatively few examples of Shakespearean-themed texting, and those I did find were aimed at the Young Adult book market. There is the OMG Shakespeare series from

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10   At the same time, it is worth noting that "lol" now has an entry in the *OED*, so it cannot be completely trite and degraded!

Random House, which includes such examples as *Srsly Hamlet* and *YOLO Juliet* (2015). As in the case of *No Fear Shakespeare*, these efforts seem to be governed by no broader motive than making Shakespeare's "difficult" language available to jaded teens in the United States. YouTube also contains more genuinely amateur efforts to either render Shakespeare into ordinary language or capture scenes represented through LEGOs with brief snippets of Shakespearean text or famous lines from the play. (A popular Tumblr site, "Shakespeare Didn't Say That!" offers the advantage of cataloguing images of the offending sayings in their original material contexts, often artifacts that can be found on Pinterest.)

The characteristic features of texting—brevity and attention-grabbing rhetorical shape—have taken on a fuller life through Twitter. Sometimes, the commonplaces offered are nothing more than direct quotations, as is the case of @Wwm_Shakespeare, which offers a higher-tech version of those calendars with quotations or bible verses of the day. But Twitter has also attracted more serious artistic attention. The best known and most discussed Twitter production is the Royal Shakespeare Company's take on the contemporary commonplace in its version of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Such Tweet Sorrow* (2010). This production is (or was) a "live" performance: like the Renaissance commonplace, it evolved over time (April 10-May 12, 2010) with specific actors and actual audiences, both onsite and virtual, who could intervene in the rehearsal process. *Such Tweet Sorrow* is also an enduring artifact, recorded via Twitter and still available on the Internet for interested parties. In this form, it somewhat resembles both printed and manuscript commonplace books, in that when read in sequence, the tweets scroll by as a series of isolated utterances.

As Maurizio Calbi discusses, the metaconversation surrounding *Such Tweet Sorrow* (blogs and more tweets) debated its merits on the grounds of the production's lack of fidelity to Shakespeare's language. Opponents decried its vulgarization of Shakespeare's script; defenders replied that it was not another version of Shakespeare, but something new. As Calbi points out, the production was focused partly on exploring the medium of Twitter; Juliet is a neophyte who throughout the production comments on the affordances and constraints of living through Twitter. In many ways, the production aims, with tongue in cheek, to remake *Romeo and Juliet's* iconic characters as commonplace people, in the derogatory sense of that term predominating today. The Wikipedia page for *Such Tweet Sorrow*, although incomplete and prone to grammatical errors, offers a useful plot summary and character biographies. Its characterization of Juliet, reproduced below, portrays her as a dumbed down cross between Kat's little sister in *10 Things I Hate About You* and Claire Danes in *My So-Called Life*:

> A shy gentle 15-year-old girly girl who likes to stay at home and hang out with her sister Jess who is also her best friend. She is very innocent and seems to have little experience with anything to do with the real world. She likes singing and making music on her guitar other than that she is a typical teen and enjoys *Twilight* and Robert Pattinson. Her father is very strict and she is not allowed very much but her personality is set to obey most of the time and she enjoys being at home in her room. She doesn't seem to be very popular and doesn't have so many friends besides her sister. As

she was still too young to know about the events going on the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues seems strange to her. (Wikipedia 2021)

The entire performance, although improvised around a skeletal "story grid," refers liberally to teen *Romeo and Juliet*s, with a particular nod to the Baz Luhrmann *Romeo + Juliet*. But *Such Tweet Sorrow* also amps up the tendency of Shakespeare's play, like his earlier poem, to conduct conversation through sententious utterances. Many of the tweets are proverbial in tone, as when Friar Laurence, announcing the memorial for Mercutio, muses: "A life cut short but worth meditation," pointing users to a YouTube video for further consideration. Clicking on the hashtag "#mercutiomemorial" diverts us further into a discussion of who needs to be invited (such as Kelly from the gym, not a major player in the plot), to playlists for the funeral, and finally back to the main plot line, where Larry (a younger, hipper avatar of Friar Laurence) reports back from the event and Romeo adds his own prescient proverb foreshadowing his death: "If thou regret'st thy Youth, why Live?" The tendency of these fictional Twitter users to collect ancillary materials, such as the competing playlists for Romeo's funeral, also hearkens back to the eclectic nature of commonplace books.

Retweeting adds another level of redundancy that recalls the commonplace book's use for reproduction and storage, but further knots up the narrative line, and the slings and arrows of outrageous bureaucracy throw up their own roadblocks for later readers, as Mercutio's Memorial playlist, housed on YouTube, proves ephemeral. Clicking on the video brings up the familiar fuzzy black screen and the following, equally familiar, statement: "This video contains content from [Merlin] PIAS, who has blocked it in your country on Copyright grounds." *Such Tweet Sorrow* continues to have a minor afterlife on Twitter, where anniversaries are recorded and some of the participants' current projects remarked on. Despite the putative durability of commonplaces as traditional wisdom, however, the user trying to follow *Such Tweet Sorrow* after the fact meets with considerable frustration. As a web artifact, *Such Tweet Sorrow* is becoming rhizomatic, in Douglas Lanier's term, moving backwards from the print Commonplace Book's careful categorizing of its comments to the ad hoc quality of Tarquin and Lucrece's commonplace competition (21–40). *Such Tweet Sorrow*, through its self-conscious exploitation of Twitter's affordances and constraints, revives commonplace people through rhetorical play.

One step beyond the quasi-staged Twitter performance would be the kind of computer application epitomized by Cleverbot, which allows users to carry on a "conversation" with the bot, who spits out lines from Shakespearean works such as Sonnet 18, leaving the respondent to fill in the largely nonsensical gaps. Here is the opening of the "Shakespeare" category, as displayed in the "Cleverness files":

> User: Hiya: 3.
> Cleverbot: Shall I compare thee to SUMMERS DAY?
> User: If you want to do that, then sure.
> Cleverbot: Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
> User: Aww that's sweet.

> Cleverbot: And often is his gold complexion dimmed.
> User: Wait what? (Cleverbot 2016)

As the exchange continues, the participants, both human and machine, veer off into other Shakespeare works ("Alas, poor Yorick") and even "My country 'tis of thee." Cleverbot literally puts into random action Twitter's perceived disjointedness.

A final candidate for the position of heir to the Renaissance commonplace is an unlikely one: the Shakespearean web series, which Lanier considers as the up-and-coming New Media form of Shakespeare (185–206). Some features of the web series show technical similarities to Twitter productions like *Such Tweet Sorrow*: dissemination across multiple media platforms, performance in sequential time, and uncertain placement within the private/public binary. The fictional premise for the web series, such as the New Zealand Candle Wasters' *Nothing Much To Do* (2014), is a series of blog exchanges between teens that follow the plot line of Shakespeare's play, but are framed as private musings broadcast from various intimate settings, largely bedrooms, that are then shared with subscribers and fans. The exchanges themselves are not particularly memorable: there are occasional aphorisms, but they do not stand out, largely because the productions are dilated at length. *Nothing Much To Do*, for instance, aired over the Internet in no fewer than eighty-seven episodes on YouTube.

What brings the web series, in particular *Nothing Much To Do*, within the sphere of Tarquin and Lucrece is the cast's use of arguing via formulae—not just verbal commonplaces but also other kinds that one might find in an early modern commonplace book, such as the recipe that accompanies Beatrice and Hero's cooking lesson. The web series also moves steadily toward a dialogic frame of mind, where the cast members together reach an ethical conclusion on the wrongness of what we might now call Hero's "slut-shaming."[11] And to make matters clearer, this conclusion is framed as a proverb. After the trauma of Hero's slut-shaming and the subsequent sorting out of relationships—Don Pedro himself gets a partner in this version —Beatrice faces the camera and says "Remember: face-to-face communication is best." Beatrice finally comes forward as a commonplace person, sustaining traditional wisdom and its moral values.

Conclusion

Over time, commonplace sayings are reified as statements detached from speakers and readers, becoming the kind of fungible common wisdom offered up by *Bartlett's Quotations*. In this case, the commonplace's role as content takes precedence over its argumentative structure. Some of the most recent New Media

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11   "Slut-shaming" is the practice of shaming a woman for sexual activity, in which the usually pejorative term "slut" is used to empower women and acknowledge their right to sexual expression. The term appears in the Oxford Living Dictionary (https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/slut_shaming) but not yet in OED [editor's note: as of 2021, "slut-shame" and "slut-shaming" appear as compounds in the OED's entry for "slut"].

adaptations of Shakespeare, however, explore the rhetorical function of the commonplace as a form of intellectual reflection and moral argument. It is worth remembering that Polonius's well-worn speech of advice to his son, which concludes "Above all, to thine own self be true," was in its own time cited as a serious piece of wisdom. Long before Cher and Heather spar with Shakespeare quotations in *Clueless,* at least some people thought of Polonius as more than an old windbag peddling stale clichés; and reconsiderations of Polonius's wisdom can still be found in the blogosphere. Nicholas Clairmont's 2013 "Is 'To Thine Own Self Be True' Actually Good Advice?" is a good example. The Renaissance art of commonplacing and its material products have given rise to a seemingly inexhaustible industry of collecting quotations on different subjects — Shakespeare the Businessman, and even, as attendees at the 2006 World Shakespeare Congress will remember, Shakespeare the Coach. In its most recent instantiations, under the banner of Web 2.0, the process of transforming Shakespeare also involves accommodation to transmedian difference, so that Shakespeare 2.0 is at once radically compressed (as on Twitter) and dilated at length into narratives (as in the web series). Different from the Renaissance model, for sure, but always, in some fashion, the same.

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