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*The Skull on the Renaissance Stage:
Imagination and the Erotic Life of Props*

WHEN Hamlet returns to Denmark from England, only to find a very English-seeming churchyard and sexton, he walks into a scene unprecedented on the Elizabethan stage. Act 5, scene 1 of *Hamlet* is apparently the first known scene in English Renaissance drama to be laid in a graveyard, and the first scene in which skulls are used as stage properties.¹ Much ink has been spilled on this groundbreaking scene and, in particular, on Hamlet's famous address to Yorick's skull. It is a scene of such emblematic force (for, as Roland Mushat Frye has shown brilliantly, it is a scene with nearly a hundred years of memento mori tradition in the visual arts behind it) that it is hard to peel back the encrustations of time to uncover its original effect.²

1. Theodore Spencer makes this claim in *Death and Elizabethan Tragedy: A Study of Convention and Opinion in the Elizabethan Drama* (New York, 1960), p. 185. Roland Mushat Frye states in *The Renaissance Hamlet: Issues and Responses in 1600* (Princeton, 1984), p. 206, that "Shakespeare's presentation of that scene [of Hamlet contemplating Yorick's skull] was, as far as we can now tell, a striking innovation on the London stage when he introduced it in or around 1600." By contrast, in "Memento Mockery: Some Skulls on the English Renaissance Stage," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 10 (1984), 9, Phoebe S. Spinrad tantalizingly writes: "One of the last orthodox uses of the *memento mori* on the English Renaissance stage is the famous graveyard scene in *Hamlet*"—but Spinrad names no precursors. Failing further evidence, I am inclined to accept Spencer's and Frye's contention that *Hamlet* marks the first appearance of a fully-dimensional skull on the Elizabethan stage (if one does not count the casketed death's-head encountered by the Prince of Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*).

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2. See Frye's chapter "The Prince amid the tombs," especially pp. 206–20. Frye points to Rogier van der Weyden's triptych for Jean de Braque in 1450 as the first introduction of the skull as a visual symbol of death in Christian Europe, and to Lucas van Leyden's *Young Man with a Skull* (c. 1519) as "the earliest known example of the basic visual *topos* that Shakespeare gives us when Hamlet takes Yorick's skull from the Gravedigger" (p. 214). Frye cites several other skull portraits that pre-date *Hamlet*, including Jacob Binck's *Self-Portrait with Skull*; anonymous portraits of Sir Thomas

Why insert at this crucial point in the play's action such a stale motif, already so conventional by 1601 as to be more honored in the breach than the observance? The graveyard scene is hardly necessary to the plot, the gravediggers ancillary as can be; they are two extra mouths to feed, for the Lord Chamberlain's Men no less than for the court of Elsinore. Is it simply that Shakespeare could not resist the temptation to bring Yorick's skull, as it were, to life? Was the temptation of throwing up a real skull on stage too thrilling an opportunity to miss, as in those 3-D movies of the 1950s in which the audience shrank back in horror from monsters that lunged out of the screen? And why did Shakespeare's contemporaries then produce a rash of skulls on the stage in the following decades, only to consign them (for the most part) to the prop bin of stage history thereafter? To paraphrase T. S. Eliot on Webster, is there any way we can recover the skin around the skull?

The fascination of the skull for Shakespeare and his contemporaries went far beyond simply replicating in three dimensions the memento mori emblem enshrined in the visual arts. In this assertion I am aware of going against the weight of critical consensus. Bridget Gellert, for instance, has explored the graveyard scene's iconography of melancholy, while Harry Morris discerns memento mori iconography within the entire structure of Shakespeare's play.³ Frye, too, approaches the scene in terms of its emblematic connotations, asserting that Hamlet's address to Yorick's skull "prepared the original audience for accepting and understanding the serenity of mind and conscience Hamlet displays in the following scene which concludes the play" (p. 220). Given the overwhelming symbolic equation of skulls with death by the late fifteenth century, it is hard to see how *Hamlet* and its contemporary skull plays could be warping the emblematic tradition from within; yet this is precisely what the anamorphic skulls in *Hamlet*, *The Honest Whore Part 1*, and *The Revenger's Tragedy* achieve in performance.

All three plays invite the spectator to choose between a conventional memento mori tableau, in which a skull serves as a passive emblem reflecting the protagonist's mastery of its symbolism, and a second, "trick"

Gresham and William Clowes; Remigius Hogenberg's *English Gentleman*; and Theodore de Bry's *Self-Portrait*. In each of these canvases a contemplative young man is flanked by a skull, although the visual relation of man to skull varies in provocative ways.

3. Bridget Gellert, "The Iconography of Melancholy in the Graveyard Scene of *Hamlet*," *Studies in Philology* 67 (1970), 57-66; Harry Morris, "*Hamlet* as a *Memento Mori* Poem," *PMLA* 85 (1970), 1035-40.

perspective (or anamorphosis), in which the skull takes on an active role that undermines the very selfhood the protagonist seeks to establish.⁴ Moreover, this “trick perspective” alters the spectator’s relation to the action. Once we focus on it, the skull decenters our own “objective” grasp of its stage symbolism and our presumption of autonomous gazing from outside the “frame” of the emblem. In its oscillation between subject and object the skull exposes the illusion that we can attain a God’s-eye view. Lastly, by investigating the legal and semantic valence of property in the period, I will argue that, far from being an incidental twist on the memento mori, the anamorphic stage skull leads to the crucial ambiguity within the concept of “property” itself—which the early modern period was anxiously attempting to work through in its use of stage objects.

Phoebe Spinrad comes the closest to understanding these plays’ subversion of the memento mori tradition when she argues that the use of skulls on the Renaissance stage reflects a growing secular uneasiness with that very tradition, defined as “the meditation on death through the medium of a skull.”⁵ In Spinrad’s argument, between *Hamlet* and *The Tragedy of Lodovick Sforza* (1628) we witness an uncoupling of the signifier from the signified, the skull from its own symbolism, until by the time of Gomersall’s play, “We have reached the twentieth century . . . all we can see through the eye-sockets of the skull is the bone at the back of the head” (p. 9). According to Spinrad, “[l]ike Chaucer’s Troilus looking down from heaven and laughing, the medieval and early Renaissance Christian laughed at the skull because he saw in it the absurdity of human pretensions before the throne of God” (p. 1), but by the time of Gomersall this “absurdity” is no longer Christian but nihilistic, for the moral of *Sforza* reverses *Hamlet*’s hopeful message. Contemplation of the skull now leads to the comfortless conclusion that “[a] hundred years from now, we will all be Yorick” (p. 10). While Spinrad insists that *Hamlet*’s use of the memento mori tradition is still “orthodox” (p. 9), she notes that by the end of the sixteenth century (or thereabouts) the symbol no longer stands for anything beyond itself. The skull is simply an object; it has become a dead metaphor.

4. In their introduction to *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture* (Cambridge, Eng., 1996), Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass note the irony whereby objects in vanitas still-lives, including the skull, “perform the opposite of what they profess, richly and fully embodying things rather than emptying them out” (p. 1).

5. Spinrad, p. 1. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.

But when does a stone-cold metaphor become a hot property? If we wish to understand the real work skulls were performing on the English stage at the turn of the seventeenth century, we would do well to cast our eyes back seventy years to the first known association of young men with a skull in English iconography. I refer to Hans Holbein's famous painting of "The Ambassadors," Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve, who are depicted standing in Westminster Abbey during their visit to England in 1533.⁶ The young French nobles, exquisitely haughty in their finely-wrought robes, stand before a shelved table lavishly decked with props reflecting the men's power and mastery over the very latest in humanist learning: musical instruments, globes, clocks, books. The painting's surface verisimilitude is breathtaking; yet on second glance a mysterious disk seems to slice through the very canvas, floating between the young men's feet and casting its ominous shadow on the ornate mosaic floor—a shadow made more ominous by the fact that it falls in a different direction from those of the men.⁷

The phantasm's presence in the painting only makes sense when one realizes the painting is one of the anamorphic "perspectives" so beloved of the Renaissance: viewed downwards from the right-hand side of the canvas, the shadow turns into a radically foreshortened skull. From this new perspective, the two young men, so full of themselves just a moment ago, are distorted beyond recognition. They are as flattened, in fact, as the objects which only a moment ago seemed to belong to another visual plane, that of the richly furnished table behind. The two men themselves thus collapse into their humanist "properties," that which in its very materiality defines their place in and of the world. The anamorphic skull responds by seeming to spill out of the frame and in turn asserting its claims on what lies behind it. "*I own you,*" the skull seems to say to the nobles and, by extension, to the implied viewer outside the frame, himself (for it is presumably a he) so sure of his own dimensionality, his own visual "possession" of what is framed by and within the canvas.

But are we the possessors or possessed of this double image? The canvas initially offers us the illusion of frontal command of the perspective scene.

6. I am indebted here to Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980), pp. 17–27. Frye discusses the painting in *The Renaissance Hamlet*, p. 214, as does Marjorie Garber, "'Remember Me': *Memento Mori* Figures in Shakespeare's Plays," *Renaissance Drama* 12 (1981), 6–7. Lisa Jardine, "Strains of Renaissance Reading," *English Literary Renaissance* 25 (1995), 289–306, attempts to historicize the painting "away from the conventionally literary" (p. 306).

7. For the picture's use of shadow, see Mary F. S. Hervey, *Holbein's "Ambassadors": The Picture and The Men* (London, 1900), p. 205.

Because of the divergence in vanishing points, however, the skull is so radically elongated as to be virtually absent. In order to see the skull as a skull, we are forced to go nearly to the plane of the painting, becoming all but embedded in the canvas ourselves. The painting's execution is only completed when the viewer takes up this secondary position: we are "framed" in more ways than one, for in turning the two men into mere props and literally forcing us off-center, the skull exposes our illusion that the painting's contents can be captured in a glance from a single perspective outside the frame. As Stephen Greenblatt writes, "To see the large death's-head requires a still more radical abandonment of what we take to be 'normal' vision; we must throw the entire painting out of perspective in order to bring into perspective what our usual mode of perception cannot comprehend" (p. 19).

It is just this anamorphic shift we must make in order to "read" skulls on the Renaissance stage, for it is only by conceiving them as objects which take on "life" in the act of performance that they can properly be understood. Marjorie Garber makes the link between Holbein's anamorphosis and the "double take" of Shakespeare's "pictorial irony," whereby the viewer outside the frame (the audience) sees what those inside the frame (Hamlet, Gertrude) do not, in a sort of "tragic relief" (p. 5). Garber here extends Rosalie Colie's notion of "unmetaphoring," in which "an author who treats a conventionalized figure of speech as if it were a description of actuality is unmetaphoring that figure."⁸ Yorick's skull and Old Hamlet's ghost are examples of "literalized" or "reified" memento mori figures, dead metaphors resurrected. But Garber does not make the leap from the "literalization" of the memento mori skull as prop to its personification as character—its *refusal* to be "reified" into a dead thing—together with its insistence on turning others into its props.⁹ She instead collapses Holbein's double image back into the Christian paradox: "Earthly vanity and mortality occupy the same space and are, in essence, visual metaphors for one another" (p. 6).

The point of anamorphosis, however, is its either/or-ness.¹⁰ We can

8. Rosalie Colie, *Shakespeare's Living Art* (Princeton, 1974), p. 11.

9. Act 4 of *The Atheist's Tragedy* contains a neat visual joke in this vein when Charlemont, on the run, takes refuge in a charnel-house. He takes hold of a skull, which slips and causes him to stagger—a disagreeable prop here literally refusing to prop up a character. Charlemont comments wryly, "Death's head, deceivest my hold? / Such is the trust to all mortality." John Webster and Cyril Tourneur, *Four Plays*, ed. John Addington Symonds (New York, 1968), p. 277.

10. Garber describes a (lost) anamorphic miniature by Elizabethan miniaturist Nicholas Hilliard in which the figure of death lurks beneath the outward visage of a woman (pp. 6–7). Perhaps the closest we can get to the effect today is in the last second or two of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, in which a

choose to see ambassadors or skull, but we cannot see both at once as Garber tries to do (even though she accepts that anamorphosis collapses the distinction between tenor and vehicle, so that it is impossible to say in the case of skull and ambassador which is the metaphor and which is the literal fact). Garber thus tames the maddening duality of anamorphosis by collapsing the double perspective back into an emblem: "the particular perspective embodied in the twinning of life and death . . . presents to the eye a visual emblem of the Christian paradox: we die to live" (p. 7). Unfortunately, the eye must choose between skull and man—and handy-dandy, which is the person, and which is the prop?¹¹ Thus, in the graveyard scene of *Hamlet* we cannot simultaneously hold Hamlet and Yorick in focus; to "see" Yorick properly we must search for his theatrical traces—his properties—in and through the text in which he lies embedded.

The gravedigger throws up *Hamlet's* first skull while cheerfully mauling Thomas Lord Vaux's popular memento mori lyric, "The aged lover renounces his love." The gravedigger alters Vaux's lament to suit his present occupation: Vaux's "house of clay" becomes the gravedigger's "pit of clay" (5.1.94), about which he seems to feel quite proprietorial.¹² Already the term "property" is troubled. While Horatio and Hamlet are concerned with the gravedigger's "properties"—his appurtenances and characteristics—the gravedigger remains single-mindedly concerned with his pit of clay, for as Anne Barton remarks, "His riddles, his jokes, his small talk, and even his songs all end in the same place: a hole in the ground."¹³ As the gravedigger disinters skull after skull, Hamlet begins to play with their symbolic significance. The first skull is "Cain's jawbone, that did the first murder" (5.1.75). There is an implicit pun in Hamlet's ambiguous genitive, for "Cain's jawbone" could refer to the ass's jawbone with

frame or two of a skull is almost subliminally interposed with the film's final shot of Anthony Perkins.

11. The paradox that propositions which conflict cannot both be true, and that we must therefore live in permanent contradiction or face the madness of true experience, is a central theme in the magnificently anamorphic poetry of William Empson. See in particular, "Let It Go" in William Empson, *Collected Poems* (London, 1984), p. 81.

12. All quotations from *Hamlet* are from the Arden edition, ed. Harold Jenkins (London and New York, 1982). Jenkins discusses the gravedigger's alteration of Vaux's poem on pp. 548–50. Morris discusses the lyric on pp. 1036–37, pointing out that "[t]he skull itself may be found in Vaux only in an ambiguity: "Loe here the bared skull, / By whose balde sign I know: / That stoupyng age away shall pull, / Which youthfull yeres did sowe" (p. 1037).

13. Anne Barton, Introduction to the New Penguin edition of *Hamlet* (London, 1980), p. 45.

which Cain is proverbially said to have slain Abel, or it might be the bared jawbone of Cain itself. Is it metaphor (for Claudius' primal sin of fratricide) or metonym (of Cain's head); symbol or thing-in-itself (jawbone = jawbone)? Is "Yorick's skull" Yorick's or Hamlet's? Already the stage prop is arrogating conflicting "properties."

The skull proves irresistible to Hamlet's protean mind, and as the prince begins free-associating it becomes a Rorschach skull: now a jawbone, now a politician's pate, now a courtier's, now a lord's, now My Lady Worm's. Hamlet makes the obligatory reference to the wheel of fortune—"Here's fine revolution and we had the trick to see't" (5.1.89)—but the old verbal sparkle is missing, and we can sense that his heart is not in these conventional apothegms. Instead Hamlet teases the gravedigger for knocking the bones about, but already he is insidiously identified—and identifying—with them: "Did these bones cost no more the breeding but to play at loggets with 'em? Mine ache to think on't" (5.1.90–91). Hamlet is having difficulties separating objects from attributes, props from properties.

The gravedigger throws up a second skull, but although Hamlet is outnumbered, he continues his tiresome guessing game. This skull is that of a lawyer, and Hamlet deconstructs the legal discourse of property, substituting absence for presence. "Where be his quiddities now, his quillities, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks?" (5.1.97–98). Hamlet punningly mimics the memento mori clichés—"Is this the fine of his fines?" (5.1.104)—but as Horatio refuses to rise to the bait, Hamlet must resort to the gravedigger, whose relentless literalism outsmarts the prince. Each of Hamlet's verbal sallies is nullified one by one, and it is hard to find fault with Barton's elegant gloss: "There can be no arguing, nor even any dialogue, with a literal-mindedness so absolute and perverse. In the face of death, the wings of language are clipped. Hamlet's own verbal trick played back on him declares itself for what it is: a revelation of the essential meaninglessness, the nonsense of human existence beneath its metaphoric dress" (p. 47). Whereas Hamlet implies that the skulls are properties whose metaphorical exchange-value is limitless, the gravedigger's insistence over the skull's singular identity makes no bones about it: "This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the King's jester" (5.1.175).

Naming the skull transforms the scene. It is a moment of "unmetaphoring" in which the conventionalized figure of speech has suddenly become humanized. No longer can Hamlet ring the changes on the skull's identity; he has come face to face with someone he once knew and

cared about. After an instant of sheer physical revulsion—the prince actually gags on stage—he returns to the *ubi sunt* motif: “Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar?” (5.I.182–85). Hamlet’s little skull-game has turned sour; and, rather than accept the conventional *memento mori* admonition—seeing his own reflection, in fact—Hamlet displaces Yorick onto another familiar emblem: that of superbia, a woman seeing a skull in a mirror instead of her own reflection. “Now get you to my lady’s chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come” (5.I.186–87). Hamlet regresses to an invective of the sort he earlier directed at Ophelia, whose paintings he had heard of well enough, and instead of accepting Yorick’s unique presence he takes the easy way out by comparing the skull to Alexander and Caesar, both clichés of *memento mori*.

Once Hamlet lets go of the skull, he is on firmer ground and can improvise until Ophelia’s maimed rites interrupt him. But even Hamlet must admit that Yorick is smellier than Alexander, and in refusing Yorick’s nauseating “thingness” Hamlet misses the point. To paraphrase Eliot again, he *is* Yorick, and is meant to be. Hamlet, in effect, takes possession of the skull the way Holbein’s ambassadors take possession of their props. For Hamlet, the value of Yorick’s skull is to occupy his mental powers in a pause between crises, an excuse to strike a pose and dash off a literary parody. But Yorick has the last laugh; the gravedigger mentions that he began his job on the day Hamlet was born, and he will no doubt complete the prince’s progress by burying him tomorrow. The prince’s true identity is irrelevant, for he deals in corpses alone, and Hamlet is almost a corpse himself.

The skull in *Hamlet* thus performs precisely the same anamorphic function as the skull in Holbein’s painting. From Yorick’s (and his spokesman, the gravedigger’s) point of view, it is Hamlet who is the prop, and it is not coincidental that this scene flattens out Hamlet’s verbal poly-dimensionality; for if Hamlet asserts his freedom to bend Yorick’s skull to his own poetic ends, so too does Yorick assert his own imitable presence on the English Renaissance stage. Yorick refuses the status of mere emblem, insisting on one last “live” cameo appearance, one last royal command performance. The old pro graciously vacates the grave where Ophelia will lie, but at the price of offering the prince a mirror in which the latter refuses to recognize that the last laugh is on him.

Critics intent on the scene’s emblematic function as tableau miss the

irony of performance, whereby Yorick butts his way into the foreground. As Hamlet fleshes out Yorick's attributes, he himself is exposed as a skeleton clothed in words. This irony only becomes apparent in performance because on paper the word dominates over the image, so that the sheer theatrical *presence* of the skull is effaced. Yet on stage Yorick becomes a remarkable character, eloquent in his grinning silence, holding a mirror up to nature. The purpose of Shakespeare's scene is to divest Hamlet of his last defense against the inevitability of death: his incomparable way with words. By insisting (like the critics) on Yorick's essentially emblematic function, Hamlet forestalls the inevitable and defers rather than confronts the truth of his own demise.

When Hamlet's palliatives confront Ophelia's funeral procession, Ophelia's corpse proves only to be Yorick *redux*. Hamlet cannot bear being upstaged by Laertes' windy rhetoric because it reflects his own hyperbole, and so he explodes into the funeral canvas just as Yorick burst into the graveyard canvas. As the two men grapple in the grave for necrophilic possession of their now absurdly contested property (Ophelia), they perform a mordant dance of death, two skeletons in the making trying out their new home. Ophelia herself has been used as a prop throughout, by both Hamlet and her father; even her corpse gets shoved in the earth while God's back is turned, and the fact that she is upstaged at her own funeral is sadly appropriate. Yorick is far more animated: like Holbein's phantasmagorical skull, he holds the mirror up to the audience and rubs our face in the dirt—a trick Shakespeare used in *Macbeth*, when the mirror (we speculate) was turned on James I to indicate Banquo's continuing line. Only this time, the royal line comes to a dead end.

II

Dekker's *The Honest Whore, Part 1* (played at The Fortune by Prince Henry's players and printed in 1604) is a sandwich of leftovers from *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night*. While the placid draper Candido becomes an undeserving Malvolio dragged off to Bedlam on suspicion of madness, Hippolito begins Act 4 as a self-styled melancholiac in the mode of Hamlet, locking himself away every Monday, complete with skull, to contemplate his dead love. Spinrad notes that Dekker appears to be both parodying and paying tribute to Hamlet and Yorick's relationship here: "[S]ince Hippolito makes his usual rounds of town on days other than Monday, and since he will become a quasi-villain in *Part II* of the play, his

memento mori exercise may seem less a religious devotion than a self-pitying and misogynistic sulk. On the other hand, the whore Bellafront is converted when she sees the skull, so the confusion may be less in Hippolito's mind than in Dekker's" (p. 4). It is as if Dekker cannot quite decide if he is parodying an emblem or emblemating a parody, but the confusion dissolves under the anamorphic gaze of the spectator, for by treating the skull as a hollowly reflective emblem in Act 4, Hippolito misses the irony the skull embodies: he himself has already taken the place of the skull and become its mouthpiece in Act 2.

Act 2 begins in an emblematic mode, but not with a *memento mori*. The opening stage directions read: "*Enter Roger [Bellafront's servant] with a stoole, cushin, looking-glasse, and chafing-dish. Those being set downe, he pulls out of his pocket, a violl with white cullor in it, and two boxes, one with white, another red painting. He places all things in order and a candle by them, singing with the ends of old Ballads as he does it. At last Bellafront (as he rubs his cheeke with the cullors) whistles within.*"¹⁴ The phrase "at last" indicates that this dumbshow occupies a not inconsiderable amount of stage-time. Act 2, scene 2 marks the first appearance of the play's title character, so Roger's comic rigamarole may function as a prologue to whet the audience's appetite. When Bellafront finally enters, "*not full ready, without a gowne, shee sits downe, with her bodkin curls her haire, cullers her lips.*" In this rare glimpse behind the scenes—one which will eventually become a Restoration staple—we see the artifice behind the whore's trade, as all her backstage props are arrayed for the audience's voyeuristic pleasure (Bellafront orders "all these bables" whisked away before the day's first customers appear at 2.1.54). Dekker here plays on the superbia emblem—a beautiful woman at her mirror confronted by the mocking face of the skull—but although Roger offers the conventional remark, "theres knavery in dawbing I hold my life" (2.1.11), the skull itself is strangely absent from the obvious tableau. This is all the stranger in that Roger underscores the scene's emblematic significance a few lines later: "I looke like an old Prouerbe, *Hold the Candle before the diuell*" (2.1.35). Matheo, too, later refers to Bellafront's lodgings as "a house of vanity" (2.1.178).

The explanation for the skull's mysterious absence requires an anamorphic shift on our part: the skull is not to be found within the looking

14. All citations from *The Honest Whore, Part 1* are taken from *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker* Vol. 2, ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge, Eng., 1964). Bowers assigns the play jointly to Dekker and Middleton, but as authorship is not at stake in my discussion I refer to "Dekker" as author throughout.

glass but upon the mirror of the stage. When Hippolito re-enters after walking out of the party, a crowded stage suddenly hollows out to the two principals.¹⁵ The play's turning point is signaled by Bellafront's shift from prose to verse in response to Hippolito's question at 2.1.240—"Is the gentleman (my friend) departed mistress?"—a verse she refuses to abandon for the rest of the play even though she has spent the last two hundred lines speaking prose. Here it is Hippolito, not Yorick, who has proved to be the death of the party and who provides the incomplete emblem's missing link as he lashes Bellafront in a 104-line philippic against whores.¹⁶ In his unflagging verbal energy, Hippolito ventriloquizes the message of the skull, much as the gravedigger acts as Yorick's mouthpiece. Indeed, Hippolito all but accuses Bellafront of copulating with skulls:

Be he a Moore, a Tartar, tho his face
Looke vglie then a dead mans skull,
Could the diuel put on a humane shape,
If his purse shake out crownes, vp then he gets (2.1.339-42)

But whereas Hamlet rejects the skull's message, displacing it onto Ophelia, Bellafront internalizes it: "Would all whores were as honest now, as I" (2.1.456). The memento mori, it seems, still carries a charge.¹⁷

Where, then, is the ventriloquist behind the dummy? An actual skull does indeed appear at the beginning of Act 4, whose stage directions offer an unmistakable visual echo of Act 2: "*Enter a seruant setting out a Table, on which he places a skull, a picture, a booke and a Taper.*" Here we have a counterpoint to Bellafront's candle and cosmetics, but while her accouterments flesh out the body by disguising its decay, Hippolito's props strip it down to the essentials. Not content with playing the skull, Hippolito has decided to put himself into the memento mori frame of mind by staging a mini-performance of *Hamlet* for himself. The servant's commentary already indicates that the scene is a spoof of *Hamlet* (and, possi-

15. After Bellafront's entrance at 2.1.12, the stage fills up: Fluello, Castruchio, and Pioratto enter at 2.1.58, Fluello smoking tobacco; Roger brings in a candle at 2.1.68; Matheo and Hippolito enter at 2.1.18, and Roger brings in a pottle-pot behind them; "Tabacco" is called for at 2.1.54; and Roger is sent out for more wine at 2.1.145 and for larks and woodcocks at 2.1.239.

16. Webster plays the same visual trick in Act 3 of *The Duchess of Malfi*, when the Duchess combs her greying hair in the mirror only to see her murderous brother Ferdinand appear holding a poniard—yet another vanitas tableau come to murderous life.

17. Spinrad, p. 9: "*The Honest Whore*, then, is an uneasy compromise between the old and the new, still half-convinced that the old tradition ought to work, but no longer quite sure *how* it ought to work."

bly, Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*) by joking about what can only be termed the prop's emblematic overkill: "My master meanes sure to turne me into a student; for here's my booke, here my deske, here my light; this my close chamber, and heere my Punck: so that this dull drowzy first day of the weeke, makes me halfe a Priest, halfe a Chandler, halfe a paynter, halfe a Sexton, I and halfe a Bawd: for (all this day) my office is to do nothing but keep the dore. To proue it, looke you, this good-face and yonder gentleman [Hippolito] (so soone as euer my back's turnd) wilbe naught together" (4.1.1-11).

The servant underscores the parallel to the earlier "house of vanity" tableau. His function is to be the skull's bawd and keep the door—for the skull and Hippolito will "be naught" together (a wicked pun)—and he thus deflates Hippolito's Hamletian pretensions before Hippolito even enters. The servant's is a quasi-Brechtian "alienation effect" that estranges us from the memento mori frame even as he assembles it on stage before our very eyes. Here we see the labored machinery behind the symbolism apparently so effortlessly achieved in Shakespeare's earlier play, and when Hippolito does enter, he is more Olivia or Orsino than Hamlet:

Seru. What will your Lordship haue to breakfast?

Hip. Sighs.

Seru. What to dinner?

Hip. Teares. (4.1.21-24)

It is remarkable that the parodic element so clearly marked in such an exchange has been overlooked. Theodore Spencer, for instance, writes: "A short time after the production of *Hamlet*, the first part of *The Honest Whore* appeared (1604), and we there have the skull used much in Shakespeare's way . . . The creation of an atmosphere of death is not really necessary; it is brought in because it has been proved to be theatrically successful" (pp. 185, 186). Dekker's tableau, though, effects a dramatic *kenosis* of *Hamlet*, defined by Harold Bloom as an ebbing "so performed in relation to a precursor's poem-of-ebbing that the precursor is emptied out also, and so the later poem of deflation is not so absolute as it seems."¹⁸ *The Honest Whore* deflates both itself and its popular precursor, but the real *kenosis* occurs between the skulls and their respective properties, Hamlet and Hippolito, each of whom mistakenly believes he holds the skull in the palm of his hand. Hippolito and Hamlet are "hollowed out" to the extent that they refuse to confer humanity on a dead thing.

Hippolito does indeed "on a dead mans scull drawe out mine owne,"

18. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (London, 1973), p. 15.

since he is willing to take the place of the skull in Bellafront's *vanitas* conversion. The skull that finds its way onto his desk freshly unearthed from *Hamlet* is, by contrast, set up as a joke, a vacuous symbol no one (especially not the audience) is invited to take seriously. Yet in Hippolito's remarkable meditation on the relationship of props to mimesis, the skull fills out again—not as symbol this time, but as object.

Hippolito addresses in turn a picture of his beloved Infaelice and the skull: two representations, one of which is “alive” but a fabrication, the other of which is “dead” but authentic. Hippolito “reads” the portrait conventionally and emblematically, praising its lifelike qualities and linking it to the cosmetics we have seen earlier: “here 'tis read, / False colours last after the true be dead” (4.1.41). But the factitiousness of the painting is ultimately at odds with the verisimilitude of the portrait:

Of all the Roses grafted in her cheekes,
Of all the graces dauncing in her eyes,
Of all the Musick set vpon her tongue,
Of all that was past womans excellence,
In her white bosome, looke! a painted board,
Circumscribes all: Earth can no blisse afford. (4.1.42–47)

In the anaphoric triteness of his lines Hippolito performs the work of the skull in Holbein's “Ambassadors,” reading the painting anamorphically against itself. Instead of bringing Infaelice to life it freezes her in death, its slice of life revealed as “a painted board.” Hippolito extracts the appropriate moral (“Earth can no blisse afford”), but instead of following the logic of *memento mori* to its conclusion—realizing that we live *sub specie aeternitatis* and must embrace the consolation of God's eternity—Hippolito, like Hamlet, gets mired in details. Hippolito rejects the painting's implied divine consolations:

Nothing of her, but this? this cannot speake,
It has no lap for me to rest vpon,
No lip worth tasting: here the wormes will feed,
As in her coffin: hence then idle Art,
True loue's best picturde in a true-loue's heart.
Here art thou drawne sweet maid, till this be dead,
So that thou liu'st twice, twice art buried.
Thou figure of my friend, lye there. (4.1.48–55)

Here Hippolito internalizes Infaelice's living image, rejecting the picture as too morbid. The heart, not the board, will be Infaelice's reliquary; but there is a ghoulish echo in the line “Here are thou drawne sweet maid” of

Hippolito's urge "on a dead mans skull" to "drawe out mine own." Biology dictates that Hippolito's heart is a less lasting memorial than the picture, for the former only lasts "till this [i.e., Hippolito's body] be dead" and Infaelice buried a second time. Like a vampire, Infaelice keeps being brought back from the dead; art may be "idle," but at least you can count on it to stay put.

Hippolito turns to the skull mid-line, as if temporarily nonplussed. "Whats here? / Perhaps this shrewd pate was mine enimies: / Las! say it were: I need not feare him now" (4.1.55-57). Once again Hippolito, like Hamlet, fails to make the connection to his own situation, preferring to see in the skull's outlines (at least initially) the visage of the Other. In fact Hippolito prefers the skull to the picture because it allows him to indulge his theatrical bent and launch into another set-piece:

What fooles are men to build a garish tombe,
 Onely to saue the carcasse whilst it rots,
 To maintein't long in stincking, make good carion,
 But leaue no good deeds to preserve them sound,
 For good deedes keepe men sweet, long aboue ground.
 And must all come to this; fooles, wise, all hether;
 Must all heads thus at last be laid together (4.1.71-77)

Hippolito's vapid moralizing falls as flat as Hamlet's desiccated puns. Hippolito does at least concede the skull's reflective powers:

Draw me my picture then, thou graue neate workeman,
 After this fashion, not like this; these coulours
 In time kissing but ayre, will be kist off,
 But heres a fellow; that which he layes on.
 Till doomes day, alters not complexion.
 Death's the best Painter then (4.1.78-83)

Hippolito the patron completes his critique of the picture's two-dimensional naturalism by counterpoising it to the three-dimensional object on his desk. The skull is unaccommodated man; the picture, kitsch. In Spinrad's words, Hippolito "has not accepted death; he has put himself in control of it" (p. 5).

Why does Dekker introduce the skull into the scene in the first place? Is it simply a homage to his precursor? The skull troubles the very theatrical mimesis that frames the scene. Hippolito, Bellafront, and Infaelice are characters played by actors, but who is the skull impersonating? Is it not rather the thing itself? The more Hippolito tries to squeeze the skull into

his mental framework as a prop, the more obdurately antisymbolic it becomes; the skull outstrips Hippolito by its very materiality, much as the gravedigger nullifies Hamlet's verbiage. The skull flattens out Hippolito's language, showing him up as a performative caricature of an earlier man with a skull who was himself a performative caricature of other men with skulls, and so forth *ad absurdum*. We cease to take Hippolito seriously, in other words, at the very moment the memento mori emblem and Bellafront, who arrives unexpectedly dressed as a page, seem to authorize him.

Dekker cements this irony by restaging Hippolito's repudiation of Bellafront, this time with props: Hippolito resurrects the painting in self-defense ("should I breake my bond, / This bord would riue in twaine, these wooden lippes / Call me most periurde villaine," 4.1.162-63) and invites Bellafront to take his place in the memento mori tableau ("Stay and take Phisicke for it, read this booke, / Aske counsell of this head whats to be done," 4.1.172-73). Hippolito has faith that these props will support his thoroughly undermined symbolism. Bellafront, under his erotic sway, concedes; but Hippolito himself is under the erotic sway of picture and skull. Like Yorick, they refuse to stay dead and buried, bursting the inert frames which initially contained them.

III

The Revenger's Tragedy takes its genre's exhausted conventions and plays them as farce. In its unnamed city we no longer encounter characters, but roles. It is virtually impossible to particularize the cast in performance, as each character is defined solely by relationship ("the Duchess' younger son"), function ("the Duke"), or emblematic essence ("Vindice," "Lusurioso," and the rest). Names are consistently withheld from the audience, and even the characters cannot keep the royal brothers straight—the bumbling officers misunderstand Ambitioso's and Supervacuo's order to kill "our brother the duke's son" (3.3.3) and kill the wrong brother, while in one of the play's many ironies of confusion and substitution, a disguised Vindice is hired to kill himself.¹⁹ We are in a heavily ironized world of commodification gone berserk, an economy of lust which relentlessly deadens people into exploited objects. As Glenda Conway notes, "Among the eleven members of the two key families in the play, nearly

19. All citations are taken from Cyril Tourneur, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, ed. Brian Gibbons (London, 1989). Unlike Gibbons, who ascribes the play to Cyril Tourneur, I make no assumptions about the play's authorship (which is tangential to my discussion).

every repugnant act imaginable occurs—including murder, fratricide, torture, incest, rape, and pandering.”²⁰ From the start these characters are virtual walking corpses—“Oh that marrowless age / Would stuff the hollow bones with damned desires,” exclaims Vindice (1.1.6)—and as fast as they use and discard each other as objects, they are themselves recycled into props. This is melodrama teetering on the edge of parody, a play in which being alive or dead at any given point seems arbitrary. Today’s doomed Duke is merely a place-holder for tomorrow’s doomed Duke.

The play opens with Vindice carrying the skull of his dead mistress Gloriana on stage in order to explain (to it?) that Gloriana was poisoned by the old duke “Because thy purer part would not consent / Unto his palsey-lust” (1.1.32–33). Vindice’s brother sees nothing odd in his behavior (“Still sighing o’er Death’s vizard?” 1.1.49), and neither, apparently, should the audience. After all, the scene is a visual echo of Holbein’s woodcut series *The Dance of Death*, in which Death, unseen, watches a procession of nobles, and recalls the graveyard scene in *Hamlet* as well.²¹ If Vindice begins the play by turning the procession of corrupt nobles into a queasy morality tableau and Gloriana into a portable memento mori, he himself onomastically and visually completes the pictorial emblem as “Vengeance.” Vindice treats the skull as a stand-in for Gloriana, but he seems unaware of his own symbolic implication in the scene. He is a revenger who believes himself pure, and at him, too, the skull is grinning.

As in *Hamlet*, the reality of the skull flattens the very rhetoric Vindice uses to describe it. When Vindice tries to fill out “Thou sallow picture of my poisoned love” (1.1.14), we get no sense of Gloriana as a living, breathing person. It is as if Vindice has lost all memory of the skin around the skull and can offer only metalepsis, the glossing of one rhetorical figure through another:

When two heaven-pointed diamonds were set
 In those unsightly rings—then ’twas a face
 So far beyond the artificial shine
 Of any woman’s bought complexion
 That the uprightest man—if such there be,
 That sin but seven times a day—broke custom
 And made up eight with looking after her. (1.1.19–25)

20. Glenda Conway, “The Presence of the Skull in Tourneur’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*,” *Kentucky Philological Review* 7 (1992), 8.

21. I am grateful to Sylvia Gimenez for pointing out this visual echo in her manuscript, “‘I have a conceit a-coming in picture upon this’: The Skull as Art in *The Revenger’s Tragedy*,” which traces Vindice’s use of the skull in staging various pictorial tropes associated with death.

Inset in the skull's hollow "rings" are diamonds instead of eyes, polished gems that deconstruct the very naturalness Vindice is groping for ("So far beyond the artificial shine"). The diamonds' implied value as commodity reinforces instead of counters the "bought complexion" that Vindice wishes to repudiate. Far from establishing Gloriana's chastity, Vindice's language instead produces an illicit sexuality—her ability to excite an eighth erection in "the uprightest man."

Vindice's imagery turns Gloriana into a work of artifice; in Laurie Finke's words, she has been "killed into art."²² Moreover, Vindice cannot keep the language of property and exchange at bay. Even in life, Gloriana was coveted solely as an object of desire:

Oh she was able to ha' made a usurer's son
Melt all his patrimony in a kiss,
And what his father fifty years told
To have consumed, and yet his suit been cold:

Vengeance, thou Murder's quit-rent, and whereby
Thou show'st thyself Tenant to Tragedy,
Oh keep thy day, hour, minute, I beseech,
For those thou hast determined. (I.I.26–42)

Now reduced to a prop, Gloriana was in life, it seems, an avid consumer of wealth and property. Her kiss "melted" patrimony, a curious image that at once suggests commodity exchange (patrimony for kisses) and cashing in one's assets, melting down ingots for gold. In this image fifty years of usury vanish in a twinkling; the "cold suit" is ambiguous, suggesting both father and son as potential suitors. Was Gloriana her own woman, able to pick and choose her suitors, or simply an object passed down a chain of men? Vindice does not say, and we must draw our own conclusions based on her posthumous activities.

Vindice himself, like Hamlet and Hippolito before him, seems to miss the memento mori message behind the skull. "By dehumanizing the skulls of the dead and stripping the flesh off the living," Spinrad says,

22. Laurie A. Finke, "Painting Women: Images of Femininity in Jacobean Tragedy," *Theatre Journal* 36 (1984), 361. Finke sees in the skull's double function as both idealized object of adoration and loathed reminder of masculine mortality a projection of Vindice's (and hence the Jacobean's) split personality. She views the Elizabethan-Jacobean ambivalence to "painting" in a similarly misogynistic light, as a dialectical "fixing" of women "caught between male fantasies of idealization and exploitation" (p. 364). Despite Finke's feminist perspective, she sees Gloriana as "silent and decapitated" (p. 358): a literalized fetish representing the lovingly dismembered love-objects of the Petrarchan blazon. By asserting her own subjectivity, however, Gloriana has a head start over the feminist critics who dismiss her macabre agency as mere "painting."

“Vindice becomes a puppeteer of death, untouched by any thought of his own mortality” (p. 6). Instead of enjoining him to turn his eyes heavenward, it is as if Gloriana tells Vindice to get cracking and live up to his own name. Vengeance is “Murder’s quit-rent,” glossed by Gibbons as “rent paid by a freehold tenant in lieu of service to a landlord” (p. 6). Here vengeance is not even a service to the deceased, but rendered as a sort of bastard feudalism—simply a cash payment to fob off potential eviction, in this case the murder Vindice cannot escape. But what master does vengeance serve? It is “Tragedy’s tenant,” making the metatheatrical point that we are all provisional tenants on this earth. For a fleeting moment, Vindice recognizes his own appointment in Samarra, but he cannot escape the revenge economy which seeks to exploit both his mobility and expendability, his ability to turn people into things.

Gloriana returns to the stage as a painted lady in Act 3, scene 5, when Vindice, relishing his role as pander to the Duke, unmasks the hideously pranked-up skull to his brother Hippolito:

Here’s an eye

Able to tempt a great man—to serve God;
 A pretty hanging lip, that has forgot now to dissemble.
 Methinks this mouth should make a swearer tremble,
 a drunkard clasp his teeth, and not undo ’em
 To suffer wet damnation to run through ’em.
 Here’s a cheek keeps her colour, let the wind go whistle:
 Spout rain, we fear thee not, be hot or cold
 All’s one with us. (3.5.54–62)

Not only has Vindice dressed the skull up in borrowed robes in order to snare the Duke, he has entirely forgotten that the skull was once his beloved, preferring to see her by turns as a reluctant wench coaxed into serving the Duke’s lust—“I have took care / For a delicious lip, a sparkling eye” (3.5.31–32)—and as a grotesque memento mori. When Hippolito reminds Vindice that the skull once belonged to his mistress, Vindice indicates that he has long since forgotten her, except as a spur to revenge: “And now methinks I could even chide myself / For doting on her beauty” (3.5.69–70). Like Hamlet, Vindice turns to preaching against cosmetics, conveniently forgetting that it is he who has travestied Gloriana’s memory by daubing her lips with poison, the equivalent of the poison the Duke used to dispatch her nine years before. Vindice objectifies Gloriana into a memento mori symbolizing both the dance of death (“It were fine methinks / To have thee seen at revels, forgetful feasts /

And unclean brothels" [3.5.89–91]) and the comfortably misogynistic superbia emblem ("Here might a scornful and ambitious woman / Look through and through herself" [3.5.95–96]). In Vindice's mind Gloriana now exists only to prop up "my tragic business" (3.5.98). The sex-object has become a death-fetish.

Yet Vindice himself admits that Gloriana is no mere prop. "I have not fashioned this only for show / And useless property, no—it shall bear a part / E'en in its own revenge" (3.5.99–101). In these crucial lines lies the fiendish anamorphosis of the stage image, its insistence on the secret life of props. For if Vindice (to add insult to injury) refuses to stabilize the skull's symbolic function, content to use it as bait for the Duke *and* as warning against feminine wiles, by adopting a shift in perspective we may see that it is Gloriana who has engineered Vindice for her own devices. In effect, she out-emblemizes the emblemater, enduring Vindice's hollow mouthings simply as a means of taking center stage. Vindice may think he has transformed the skull into a "dreadful vizard" (5.3.149), a mask of its former self, but Gloriana herself arrogates the shape of bashful "country lady" for a lethally effective performance (3.5.132), using Vindice as her costumer, valet, and means of transportation to keep her fateful tryst with the Duke, literally melting him with a kiss.

As self-styled artificer and impresario of death, then, Vindice is literally staging corpses. He turns the Duke into a prop as well and stages a murderous danse macabre for the new Duke's investiture. But if Vindice turns the body into dismembered, metonymical flesh, he himself is casually dispatched by Antonio. Vindice must finally recognize that he, too, is a throw-away, Murder's quit-rent. In order for the tableau to be complete, the punisher must be punished. *The Revenger's Tragedy* thus offers us two simultaneous perspectives on the play's action. In the first Vindice continues the Hamletian tradition of sucking the marrow from the memento mori emblem and throwing away the bones, displacing memento mori onto superbia. But from the second perspective it is Gloriana who pulls the strings all along, manipulating Vindice for her own ends and discarding him when he no longer serves her turn.²³ Conway, Spinrad, and

23. For a reading of the play as a parody of the body as object of scientific inquiry, see Karin S. Coddin, " 'For Show or Useless Property': Necrophilia and *The Revenger's Tragedy*," *ELH* 61 (1994), 71–88. Coddin links the skull's simultaneous material "thingness" and semiotic "no-thingness" to the Renaissance *trompe l'oeil*, "wherein the seeming exactitude of mimesis actually serves to render imitation itself static and artificial" (p. 81). I would argue that anamorphosis is a more precise analogy than *trompe l'oeil*, because I see two simultaneous but incompatible perspectives on the

Garber correctly take note of Vindice's misreading of the skull, whereby what should be the reminder of death becomes the agent of death; they miss, however, the double irony whereby Gloriana transforms her lover, who has desecrated her wish to remain pure and intact by disinterring and mutilating her corpse, into the instrument of her own infernal revenge on the men who treat her like dirt. Unlike Browning's or Webster's Duchess, Gloriana refuses to take her culture's relentless emblematic deflections lying down. With Vindice's death, the skull's triumph is complete.

IV

The *OED* defines a stage property as "Any portable article, as an article of costume or furniture, used in acting a play: a stage requisite, appurtenance, or accessory." Yet when we think of the stage props that have most etched themselves into our theatrical consciousness, we are hard-pressed to explain their grip on us in these terms. A great deal has been written about props as symbol, but little has been said about their power to take on stage "properties" in performance. Is Richard II's crown a "requisite," an "appurtenance," or an "accessory," and from whose point of view? Even Richard, in a play anamorphically attuned to "perspectives, which, rightly gaz'd upon, / Show nothing but confusion; ey'd awry / Distinguish form" (2.2.18–20),²⁴ comes to feel that the crown is somehow more "real" than he is—indeed *makes* him what he is, as Gloriana's skull makes *The Revenger's Tragedy's* Vindice Vindice.

We do not know how theater men of the English Renaissance defined props; if they distinguished between stage properties and stage furniture, for instance, as the *OED* does not.²⁵ The two scholars who have written at book-length about props on the Renaissance stage, Frances Teague and Felix Bosonnet, disagree on definitions. Bosonnet cites the *OED's* definition.²⁶ Teague, however, expands Bosonnet's definition to list some

play's action as opposed to the "semiotic anarchy" between props and persons described by Coddin (p. 82).

24. All references to Shakespeare's plays other than *Hamlet* are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston, 1974).

25. Peter Thomson reminds us that "[t]here is negative evidence that properties were a lower priority for the Admiral's Men than costume—whereas the company certainly had a wardrobe master (or 'tireman') there is no parallel reference to a property master, nor to any equivalent of the modern stage designer." *Shakespeare's Theatre* (London and New York, 1983), p. 31.

26. Felix Bosonnet, *The Function of Stage Properties in Christopher Marlowe's Plays* (Bern, 1978), p. 10.

essential features. “Properties are objects. They can be carried. The distinction between properties and stage furniture or costume is that actors use properties for a purpose that differs from their ordinary function.”²⁷ Teague argues that props are distinguished by their “dislocated function”: “Properties do not operate in performance as they do in a nontheatrical context—they mean differently” (p. 17). If the “ordinary” function of a skull is to hold the brain safely in place, then the skull’s rhetorical function as memento mori is automatically a dislocated one; but I hope to have sufficiently demonstrated that Yorick, Gloriana, and their kind dislocate in turn the skull’s rhetorical function, thus creating an interesting tension between Teague’s first and third criteria, as well as countering Spinrad’s overly simplistic teleology whereby Shakespeare’s “orthodox” skull mutates into Gomersall’s “nihilistic” one.²⁸

Rather than calling attention to themselves, Teague suggests, props usually point away from themselves to something else, often the character who handles them. A prop can thus serve as a touchstone for a character’s qualities: the characters in *Richard II* or *1 Henry IV* may be defined by their various attitudes to the crown. Yet our concern here is with the prop that *does* call attention to itself when viewed from the anamorphic angle of performance, insisting on its own materiality, its “life-in-death” in the theater. Having limned the “double life” of stage skulls—their ability in performance to take on “live” attributes and exert an erotic pull on those about them, while at the same time remaining “dead” objects or well-wrought symbols—how may we locate stage properties in the larger discourse of “property” itself?

The Elizabethans were familiar with our ambiguous use of the word, for they too used the same term for stage props and material possessions. The *OED* cites “property” used in a theatrical sense as early as 1425 (*The Castle of Perseverance*’s “parcellis in propyrtes”). In *A Midsummer Night’s*

27. Frances Teague, *Shakespeare’s Speaking Properties* (London and Toronto, 1991), p. 16. Teague also cites David Bevington’s definition in *Action is Eloquence* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 35 (“appurtenances worn or carried by actors”), and Brownell Salomon’s definition in “Visual and Aural Signs in the Performed English Renaissance Play,” *Renaissance Drama*, n.s., 5 (1972), 160–61 (“Unanchored physical objects, light enough for a person to carry on stage for manual use there”).

28. Teague makes room for the imaginary, mimed prop in her definition, p. 16: “Presumably Yorick’s skull is a property in *Hamlet* whether it is tangible or not; if the actor wishes to mime picking up a skull, and if the audience is willing to accept that gesture and understand that it signifies an object, then the property exists, if only in the imaginations of the actor and the audience.” I myself cannot countenance such an inclusive definition. It raises confusing ontological issues and detracts from the very materiality of props in performance that is my subject here.

Dream (1595) Peter Quince says he will “draw a bill of properties, such as our play wants” (1.2.105–06), while Massinger’s *Caesar in The Roman Actor* (1626) remarks, “This cloak and hat, without / Wearing a beard, or other property, / Will fit the person” (4.2.226–28).²⁹

Yet by the Elizabethan era the word also ramified—in common parlance, if not in common law—into a further sense of “property,” the appurtenances or attributes of persons. Horatio wittily notes the gravedigger’s “property of easiness” (5.1.67), while as early as *Twelfth Night* (c. 1602), where Malvolio complains to Feste of being turned into a prop, there is an uneasy reciprocity between man and thing: “They have here propertied me; keep me in darkness, send ministers to me, asses, and do all they can to face me out of my wits” (4.2.91–93). The increased anxiety in Jacobean city comedy attending people’s sense of being reduced to their use- and exchange-value may be traced in part to James I’s own relentless quest for revenue: creating baronets, selling knighthoods (Sir Petronel Flash in *Eastward Ho!* is one such “thirty-pound knight”), and auctioning off profitable wardships (partly accrued through the abuse of royal prerogative) to the highest bidder. When Quarlous in *Bartholemew Fair* asks Grace Wellborn how she came to be Justice Overdo’s ward, she replies simply that “he bought me” of the king (3.5.289); during the trial of Vittoria Corombona in *The White Devil*, Cardinal Monticelso casually reveals that his nephew bought Vittoria from her father.³⁰ The line between marriage and prostitution is thin, and in plays such as *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, *Bartholemew Fair*, and *The Revenger’s Tragedy* no relationships seem to exist outside the bounds of economic self-interest. Persons, especially women, indeed become properties to be “conveyed” between parties, like poor Grace betrothed to the nincompoop Cokes. If the legal term “alienation” strictly referred only to the transfer of one’s “right, title, and interest” in real property, it is hard to see Grace or Vittoria as any less “real”—or any less alienated—than the wealth they represent to the men who purchase use-interest in them through the *habere et tenere* of the marriage contract.

It is true that Renaissance playwrights seem more concerned with “real” (royal) property such as land—which legally belonged to the king, and in which one had at best “right, title, and interest”—than with personal property, which was owned outright. For instance, after reading

29. *The Selected Plays of Philip Massinger*, ed. Colin Gibson (Cambridge, Eng., 1978).

30. Ben Jonson, *Bartholemew Fair*, ed. Eugene M. Waith (New Haven and London, 1963).

almost three hundred plays, Paul S. Clarkson and Clyde T. Warren found “less than a half a dozen outright allusions to the law of the inheritance and administration of personalty upon intestacy, as distinguished from the inheritance of real estate.”³¹ It would seem that the average Elizabethan landowner was far more exercised by the limits of his use-interest in the King’s property—its sale, purchase, lease, and conveyance—than in the disposition of what was indubitably his, as Henslowe’s props were indubitably Henslowe’s. But by viewing the emergent cultural anxiety over property through an apparently anachronistic lens, a dilemma at the heart of modern legal theory, we can throw the Renaissance relation of personal to stage properties (and hence of persons to things) into startling relief.

In *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, Lewis Hyde offers a useful definition drawn from the *Century Dictionary and Cyclopaedia*: “‘Property,’ by one old definition, is a ‘right of action.’ To possess, to enjoy, to use, to destroy, to sell, to rent, to give or bequeath, to improve, to pollute—all of these are actions, and a thing (or a person) becomes a ‘property’ whenever someone has ‘in it’ the right of any such action. There is no property without an actor, then, and in this sense property is an expression of the human will in things (and in other people).”³² This definition follows Hegel’s “will” or “personality” theory of property, which legal scholar and theorist Margaret Jane Radin has summarized nicely in *Reinventing Property*. “Hegel held that private property is necessary to realize or actualize the will of a person, which is necessary for freedom and concrete personhood. . . . it is the presence of a person’s will that makes an object her property; take away the will and property ceases.”³³

Yet Radin complicates this definition (property as a right or bundle of rights) by noting an ambiguity in the word “property” itself. In the legal and moral discourse of private property, “[p]roperty refers to an owned

31. Paul S. Clarkson and Clyde T. Warren, *The Law of Property in Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Drama* (Baltimore, 1942), p. 193. They add: “The fact is both remarkable and difficult to explain that the dramatists of the half-century from 1585 to 1635 should have made so few references to that branch of the law concerned with the inheritance of personal property. In the nature of things, the playwrights would very likely have been familiar with it” (p. 193). The authors hypothesize that most Elizabethans died testate, while most intestate properties might have been too small to inspire legal contestation.

32. Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York, 1983), p. 94.

33. Margaret Jane Radin, *Reinterpreting Property* (Chicago and London, 1993), p. 195. Radin here cites *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. Knox (Oxford, 1942), sections 44–45.

object ('this book is my property') or to rights and duties of persons with respect to control of owned objects ('to exclude you from my land is one of my property rights')" (p. 191). Radin labels this first meaning "object-property." The second meaning of property, Radin tells us, "is not found in the legal and moral discourse of private property, but rather in other philosophical discourses such as metaphysics and the philosophies of mind, language, and personhood. Here property means an attribute: of a thing, concept, argument, person, etc." (pp. 191–92). Radin calls this second definition "attribute-property," and she discerns an unresolved tension for legal theory in these two definitions "because they correlate with opposing views of personhood. Object-property correlates with an object–fungibility thesis underlying commodification and market freedom. Attribute-property correlates with a personal-continuity thesis underlying stable expectations needed for self-constitution" (p. 192). The market, in other words, argues that all properties are fungible, hence infinitely exchangeable; the philosopher (in this case, Hegel) states that some properties are internal, hence inviolable.³⁴ Put simply, the "deep tension" Radin describes (p. 192) is this: Is property something we own, or something we *are*? Can a person become a property, or a property (under special circumstances) become like a person? As we have seen, these are questions which have a direct bearing on the use of props on the English Renaissance stage (if not in the law courts). As far as we can tell from the records, Shakespeare himself was an expert on properties of both kinds.

If property is willed, Hegel tells us, the object itself must truly be an object—"a thing external by nature"—for Hegel considers as inalienable attributes those substantive characteristics of personhood that make up our identity. Yet Radin demonstrates that Hegel blurs his own distinction, because the very objects that start out as external *become* internal and constitutive of our personhood: if we define ourselves in some way through our property, our property, too, becomes *us*. But if the distinction between persons and properties dissolves, so must that between attribute-properties and object-properties. The personal continuity thesis (property is an attribute of ourselves) and the object-fungibility thesis (properties are objects that can be bought, sold, or traded for something of equal value) are thus deadlocked at the heart of liberal property theory. You cannot alienate (transfer) property without alienating (harming)

34. As de Grazia, Quilligan, and Stallybrass note, "Commodification is . . . not only the vanishing point of the subject into the commodified object but also of the object into pure exchangeability" (p. 4).

persons. The freedom of exchange that predicates transferability necessitates estrangement—a disruption within the very core—of persons. The market, in a sense, “transform[s] our world of persons into a world of alienable objects” (p. 202). If our objects today are legally “alienated,” we in turn become spiritually alienated from ourselves.³⁵

Radin’s twin deconstruction of the phrase “alienation of property” cuts to the heart of the commerce between props and persons in Renaissance tragedy, even if the legal notion of “alienation” had as yet little or nothing to do with personal property or stage props, applying only to the transfer of one’s “right, title, and interest” in real property, which was often restricted or “entailed” by covenant. For in watching these plays, we—as well as the characters themselves—cannot disengage the “dead” property from the “live” person whose property it is, the crown from the king. It is just this tension, I have argued, that *Hamlet’s* graveyard scene dramatizes, opening as it does with the gravedigger’s “property of easiness” and ending with the very uneasy property of Ophelia’s corpse. In Holbein’s “Ambassadors,” as in *Richard II*, the prop “makes” the man (Trinculo makes this same point in *The Tempest*).³⁶ Object–property seeps ineluctably into attribute–property: the “properties” of the object become the “property” of the owner as if through osmosis, the basis of what Margreta de Grazia calls “propertied individualism,” in which “what one is depends on what one owns.”³⁷ But cannot the current be reversed, the attribute–properties sucked back into the object, until the King is a nothing, the prince a skull-in-process?

Hyde attacks Radin’s dilemma implicitly in *The Gift*. He too wishes to separate the live artifact from the dead object, but using a model drawn from cultural anthropology rather than pragmatist legal theory. Hyde distinguishes gift–exchange from commodity–exchange as two essentially

35. As solution, Radin counsels a sane middle ground between “universal commodifiers” and “universal anticommodifiers,” in which some “goods” which society agrees to be important to personhood (such as women’s bodies) are removed from the market as essentially non-fungible (p. 200). Yet she acknowledges that an as yet unformulated “theory of the good or well-developed person, or a concept of human flourishing, is required to tell when objects are appropriately treated as personal” (p. 198). It remains to be seen whether such a project can come to fruition.

36. “Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver. There would this monster make a man; any strange beast there makes a man.” *The Tempest* (2.2.27–31).

37. Margreta de Grazia, “The Ideology of Superfluous Things: *King Lear* as Period Piece,” in *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, p. 34. In *King Lear’s* reactionary vision of propertied individualism, “the ideology of superfluous things holds the status quo in place by locking identity into property, the subject into the object” (p. 31).

separate (although porous) economies. In a gift economy “things are treated to some degree as persons and vice versa. Person and thing, the quick and the dead, are distinguished spiritually, not rationally” (p. 86). According to Hyde, whereas property is usually seen as inert, the gift is felt to be alive: “Even inert gifts . . . are *felt* to increase—in worth or in liveliness—as they move from hand to hand” (p. 25). Hyde cites the ornate ceremonial coppers exchanged by the Tsimshian tribes of the Kwakiutl, shattered at the mortuary potlatch only to become “the bones of the dead”: “They stand for what does not decay even though the body decays” (p. 33). The copper thus becomes “an agent of social cohesion” (p. 35), binding the tribe as it moves from hand to hand, finding an afterlife even as it irremediably perishes. The parallel with our literal (if literary) “bones of the dead” is highly suggestive. For if character, in some sense, “uses itself up” in tragedy—Flammineo in *The White Devil* being just one incendiary example—does not the gift of Yorick, of Gloriana, endure even as the skull itself drifts out of focus?

Of course, as Hyde acknowledges, the object itself is not truly “alive,” even for the Kwakiutl; it is, rather, the *vehicle* of a “felt” increase which is the true gift—that which is “left over” once the object is consumed. For while both gifts and commodities circulate as “properties,” in commodity exchange what is dead stays dead—hence the horror we feel in *The Merchant of Venice* when Shylock demands his “live” pound of flesh. “When exchange no longer connects one person to another, when the spirit of the gift is absent, then increase does not appear between gift partners, usury appears between debtors and creditors” (p. 111). Hyde thus sees a key difference between a gift’s “felt” increase in value and the financial profit or wealth derived from dead commodities.³⁸ “The distinction lies in what we might call the vector of the increase: in gift exchange it, the increase, stays in motion and follows the object, while in commodity exchange it stays behind as profit” (p. 37). Capitalism requires the reification of things and people in order to sustain itself, but such “usury” (to use Ezra Pound’s favorite term) breeds a kind of death, as acknowledged by cultures that bar charging interest on loans within the tribe. Thus according to Hyde, “there are two primary shades of prop-

38. Hyde also points out that gift economies elide the differences between “things” and “people.” The legal contract developed in later Roman law precisely to mark a distinction between *res* and *personae*, “real” and “personal” law—“between, that is, a law of things and a law of persons” (p. 86). If the distinction between thing and person were to blur, Hyde maintains, our modern legal system would collapse.

erty, gift and commodity" (p. 139). Hyde calls gifts "anarchist property" (p. 84), because they abolish boundaries, creating relationships as they change hands. As a kind of surreal estate, then, gift exchange is "an erotic form" (p. 73)—one to be embarked on with care, for it demands both commitment and reciprocity. Commodities, conversely, move between separate spheres without binding individuals to anything (p. 61). Gifts such as food are consumed as they circulate; bought and sold properties such as land endure as commodities. "*The gift is property that perishes. . . .* In gift exchange the transaction itself consumes the object" (p. 8). Desdemona's handkerchief may be seen as an ironic gloss on this proposition: in this particular gift circuit, the object consumes its transactors. We recall that in one version "it was dyed in mummy which the skillful / Conserved of maiden's hearts" (3.4.74–75). In a ghoulish parody of a handkerchief's usual function, Desdemona's literally incorporates its victims' bodily fluids into its own embroidery.

The skulls exhumed in this discussion perform much the same way, refusing to settle for the role of living gift or dead object.³⁹ They are, in fact, a crucible for the alchemy between object-property and attribute-property, the porous boundary between gift and commodity, property and person. The very characters who would commodify them as objects (the Duke, Vindice) or absorb them as attributes (Hamlet, Hippolito) find themselves eerily drained of their own vitality, even as the skulls in *Hamlet* and *The Revenger's Tragedy* take on "life" as Yorick and Gloriana—who administers her own posthumous revenge on the Duke who wronged her by slyly using Vindice as both costumer and stage-hand before making her final exit. Interestingly, none of these props makes it to the final tableau: it is as if they are consumed, willy-nilly, in the white heat of performance. But their traces linger on in our uneasy imaginations as we file out of the theater, unsure of just what it is we have glimpsed beneath the surface.

"What could there possibly be 'behind' Gloriana's skull?" asks Peter Stallybrass (p. 142). The paradox the skull embodies in *Hamlet*, *The Honest Whore*, and *The Revenger's Tragedy* is precisely the paradox of "property," its oscillation between live attribute and dead thing. Radin and

39. In "Reading the Body: *The Revenger's Tragedy* and the Jacobean Theater of Consumption," *Renaissance Drama* 18 (1987), 121–48, Peter Stallybrass sees the play as focusing on "the question of whether it is possible to reverse the direction of 'gifts': i.e., while the theater of power uses Vindice as the go-between for its 'offerings,' he attempts to use the power of theater to proffer in return his own poisoned gifts of words and sex" (p. 138). In this poisoned gift economy, Vindice's gift is the "split" body of a woman who has herself been erased from the transaction.

Hyde are correct to point to property's elusive double-life, captured in the very ambiguity of the term we use. The fascination of the skull for the Renaissance playwright lies less in its emblematic than in its anamorphic properties, its willingness to steal the show from under the noses of the *brotoi*, the "dying ones," and to put the spectator literally on edge. And if we wish to understand the function of skulls on the Renaissance stage, we must see them not merely as symbols, but as characters in their own right who may be less self-effacing than they seem.

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