Matisse in the Playhouse

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ON MY WAY TO EAST LONDON from a Shakespeare's Globe performance in August 2017, I noticed an advertisement in one of the Tube stations. Accompanying the billing for the Royal Academy of Arts' exhibition, *Matisse in the Studio,* was a quotation from Henri: "a good actor can have a part in ten different plays; an object can play a role in ten different pictures." It is from Museum Studies that we borrow the word *curation:* the selection and arrangement of preexisting art objects for a particular experience. But this notion of curation has now overleaped the bounds of the art world; "content curation" is the stock-in-trade of every major marketing, consulting, and Big Data firm—from fashion to Facebook, from American Girl to the American Dream. The concept of curation, which exploded in the 1970s art world and again in the 2000s web-based economy, is much older than Matisse's nineteenth century, however. In this essay, I argue that curation is a hermeneutic equipped to account for repertory economics that structured the sixteenth-century theater industry. Pre-Shakespearean cases will exemplify how the field of Shakespeare Studies' approach to troupes could evolve using this transdisciplinary paradigm.

Clicking for the Same Reasons

Repertory as a system for presenting theater is distinctive in that it asks consumers to think about plays in sets—which is to say, relationally rather than as individual art objects. Repertory Studies and several recently published company biographies have established which plays were owned by which company at which point.[1] The energy in these biographies is given to characterizing the venues and neighborhoods in which the companies performed, the osten-

sible relationship between the companies and courtly patrons, and individual personnel. What about the ways in which the marketplace differed, not only from how mainstream US and UK audiences watch today (in seasons with a handful of plays running one at a time) but also from other contemporaneous performance economies? For example, while England was operating this professional repertory system—using the same stable of actors to perform a different play every night of the week—major Italian companies such as those in Venice were staging but two operas a summer, front-loading all of their investment in a single production until it grew stale for audiences. The sixteenth-century English repertory model is still in use not only in a minority of contemporary theaters in the UK, US, and Germany, but in the majority of regional US Shakespeare festival theaters. Consider the casting calendar in the annual program of the Utah Shakespeare Festival. Readers can locate actors on the *y*-axis to see what shows they will be in on the *x*-axis—a marketing feature aiming to cultivate returner audiences.

If you plan to visit the Getty—or many another major museum—sometime soon, you can test the effects of curation for yourself: the connections your brain makes when you move from one room to the next full of paintings and sculpture. Those pathways are not haphazard. The curators have something in mind for the visitor's experience by way of the selection and arrangement of the works encountered. Hans Ulrich Obrist, the leading voice on curation in the contemporary art world, argues that curation is "*the* medium through which most art becomes known."[2] Curation usefully produces a coherent set of investments from a selection of art without necessarily having to locate that coherence in an individual person—like a playhouse-landlord such as Philip Henslowe, say. That arrangement is not a product of a singular subject, however, but an accretion over time as a viewer moves through the exhibit. To extrapolate for the repertory system, a playgoer could now dictate the theatrical experience when adopting repeated habits of playgoing, or by selecting from repeatable factors, such as a favorite actor or a spectacular prop.

I would take Obrist's observations a step further to suggest that curation by audiences was one of the paradigm shifts that helped to define the English Renaissance—a mode of consuming cultural products that informed the theater's repertory system. Terry Smith locates the power of the curated exhibit in the spatial: "it is a discursive, epistemological, and dramaturgical space in which various

kinds of temporality may be produced or shown to coexist."[3] This is to say, space conditions the experience of curated art, and the experience of a set of works stages a dialogue. Like Smith, Paul O'Neill argues the spatial and the performative are at the center of the modern curator's work, where exhibitions "produce temporary forms of order" and personal choice is converted into social and cultural capital.[4] This vocabulary of curatorial activities frames the polysemy made available by the set of texts owned by individual museums—or by playing companies. This model crucially can free literary critics from having to presume that there was a single individual guiding all of a company's purchasing choices and scheduling in advance.

David Balzer counters that to curate has become problematically synonymous with connoisseurship. His concerns for the contemporary art world point to how corporate entities have co-opted curatorial strategies as part of a larger *deskilling:* "the cost-cutting phasing-out of professional workers by machines or less-skilled workers" and consumers' complicity in it.[5] While Balzer points to the widespread deskillment curation promotes by way of "a self-fulfilling dependence on algorithms,"[6] theater historian Evelyn Tribble points, conversely, to the early modern repertory system as a venue in which curation promoted "enskillment."[7] Thus, curation provides a framework for exploring why it is that "we don't always click for the same reasons," "we don't always collect for the same reasons," and, by extension, playgoers did not always attend theater for the same reasons.[8]

Fire and Nuts, Chariots and Swords

Reading through the Strange's Men canon, it seems everyone is on fire. By using curation, one can trace the dramaturgical rather than the thematic features a company specialized in. Lawrence Manley demonstrates that many of this company's offerings called for the lighting of bodies, producing a trademark of theatrical experience—which then sent me looking for how one might actually light them.[9] Alongside recipes for toothpaste in early modern cookbooks, one can also find recipes for different cosmetics.[10] Some of these would safely allow one to immolate a part of the body, such as Abdelmelec's hand, made "a blazing brand of fire" (2.4.23) in *The Battle of Alcazar.* The odds that nut-based recipes were used

by actors increases when it is remembered that neighboring industries capitalized upon neighbors, and so perhaps the hazelnut shells from a soap mill not two hundred yards from the Rose theater were used both for flooring and to create pyrotechnic makeup.[11]

Following Strange's calendar of plays adds an additional layer of complexity to what might be considered distinguishable features of the company's habits of playing. During the six months of Strange's unrestrained (that is, not interrupted by censorship or plague) playing at the Rose between February 1592 and February 1593, the company staged 134 performances of 27 distinct playtexts. At least 11 (and as many as 15) of the 24 plays in repertory during that season—approximately half of their active properties—featured at least one contemporaneous Mediterranean figure.[12] As many as 20 of their 36 total known playtexts feature similar Mediterranean figures and locales. The pie below on the left indicates the percentage of playtexts in the company's stock that included characters of color, roughly less than half. If we take the same data and instead measure the number of performances staged by the company that included characters of color, the percentage was substantially more than half. It may be that the company was investing in materials and technologies, makeup and fire, to consistently provide an experience emphasizing the scale and cultural specificity of a range of Mediterranean peoples.[13]

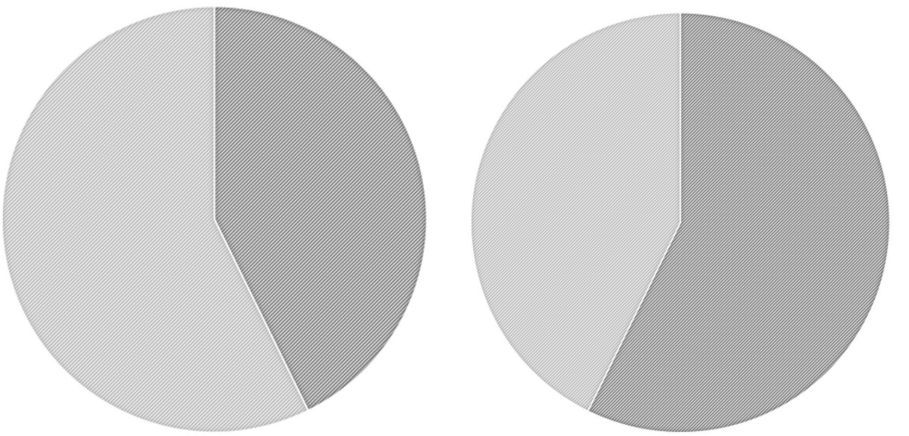

Fig. 1. The Lord Strange's repertory holdings, comparative: left, by number of individual play-texts (47%); right, by number of discrete performances (67%).

While Strange's Men were playing with makeup, the Admiral's were playing with cars. As I have argued elsewhere, at least four of their plays in the late 1580s, including *The Wounds of Civil War, The Reign of Edward III,* and possibly *Tamar Cham,* made use of a chariot.[14] If a company was going to invest in such a complex prop, designed to be pulled by at least two men, perhaps they would be interested in other plays that might up-cycle that investment. While Matisse likely had the repetition of monstera leaves rather than a torture chariot in mind when he talked about their multiple roles, his observation that objects have their own parts to play distills the usefulness of repetition for organizing an audience's aesthetic experience.

Most exciting about applying this curatorial logic to early modern drama are the possibilities it presents for working with archaeologists. Since 1989, when the change in planning permissions meant that any new construction in London required an archaeological survey, several playhouse foundations have been discovered. Consider that during the 1592/93 plague closure, the Rose underwent significant renovation to include a balcony. While the Rose offered this new latitude, the Curtain, as archaeologist Heather Knight has shown, offered spectacular longitude.[15] Her dig this past year has not only revealed that the Curtain was both rect-

Fig. 2. Recent variations on 2 Tamburlaine's chariot: left, Shakespeare Theatre Company 2007, dir. Michael Kahn; right, Theatre for a New Audience 2015, dir. Michael Boyd.

angular and immediately across the lane from a pre-eminent fencing school, but that the width of the stage would have been the same length required of Olympic fencers today. Perhaps one went to the Curtain for a "fighty play," and plots were primarily a vehicle to such special feats. How might the ways in which scholars talk about Elizabethan drama change if projects were designed around such patterns of material uses rather than generic or thematic priorities?[16]

The early modern repertory system challenges the present-day appeal of the algorithm that prioritizes generic conventions as markers of aesthetic innovation, diversity, and intellectual development while prematurely foreclosing discussions of what was distinctive about an individual company's means of performance. A framework like repertorial curation helps underscore the factors specific to Elizabethan habits of theatergoing. If the offerings were relatively unknown until a playgoer got to the playhouse itself, and proximity was not a conditioning factor for selection, how did one choose? By curating distinctive house styles rooted in technical innovation and the ability to respond to their cultural moment, I contend it was through the repertory system that playing companies managed playgoer expectations in order to ensure their financial success.

Notes

I would like to thank John Kuhn, Daniel Pollack-Pelzner, and Misha Teramura for their feedback and support on early drafts of this presentation. This paper represents a snapshot of the theoretic framework for my forthcoming book, *The Repertory System before Shakespeare: Playing the Stock Market.*

1. Particularly innovative examples include Mary Bly, *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queans on the Early Modern Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Laurie Johnson, *Shakespeare's Lost Playhouse: Eleven Days at Newington Butts* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Roslyn L. Knutson, *The Repertory of Shakespeare's Company, 1594–1613* (Fayetteville, AK: University of Arkansas Press, 1991); James J. Marino, *Owning William Shakespeare: The King's Men and Their Intellectual Property* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011); Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean, *The Queen's Men and Their Plays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Lucy Munro, *Children of the Queen's Revels: A Jacobean Theatre Repertory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Michael Shapiro, *Children of the Revels: The Boy Companies of Shakespeare's Time and Their Plays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977); Brian Walsh, *Shakespeare, The Queen's Men, and the Elizabethan Performance of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

2. Hans Ulrich Obrist, *A Brief History of Curating* (Zurich, Switzerland: JRP / Ringier, 2008), 7.

3. Terry Smith, *Thinking Contemporary Curating* (New York: Independent Curators International, 2012), 30.

4. Paul O'Neill, *The Culture of Curating and the Curating of Culture(s)* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2012), 39; 87–88.

5. David Balzer, *Curationism: How Curating Took Over the Art World and Everything Else* (Toronto, ON: Coach House Books, 2014), 99.

6. Balzer, *Curationism,* 131.

7. Evelyn B. Tribble, *Cognition in the Globe: Attention and Memory in Shakespeare's Theatre* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 115; 155.

8. Balzer, *Curationism,* 132.

9. Lawrence Manley, "Playing With Fire: Immolation in the Repertory of Strange's Men," *Early Theatre: A Journal Associated with the Records of Early English Drama,* 4 (2001): 115–29.

10. See Richard Blunt, "The Evolution of Blackface Cosmetics on the Early Modern Stage," in *The Materiality of Color: The Production, Circulation, and Application of Dyes and Pigments, 1400–1800,* eds. Andrea Feeser, Maureen Daly Goggin, and Beth Fowkes Tobin (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 217–34.

11. See John Orrell, "Nutshells at the Rose," *Theatre Research International* 17, no. 1 (March 1992): 8–14.

12. Strange's repertorial holdings have been compiled from Henslowe's Diary and title page ascriptions. Mediterranean labels for non-extant plays drawn from *The Lost Plays* database and conventions within Mediterranean Studies. Mediterranean percentages based on total number excluding the three plays about which nothing of the content can be speculated upon.

13. Elizabeth E. Tavares, "A Race to the Roof: Cosmetics and Contemporary Histories in the Elizabethan Playhouse, 1592–1596," *Shakespeare Bulletin* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 202–203.

14. Elizabeth E. Tavares, "Super Troupers; or, Supplemented Playing before 1594," *Shakespeare Studies* 45 (2017): 77–86.

15. Heather Knight, "What Can Archaeology Bring to the Party?," keynote presented at the Before Shakespeare Conference, University of Roehampton, UK, 24 August 2017.

16. I consider this question in greater detail in the post "Genre and the Elizabethan Troupe," for Before Shakespeare: The Beginnings of London Commercial Theatre, 1565–1595 (blog), May 11, 2017, https://beforeshakespeare.com/2017/05/11/genre-and-the-elizabethan-troupe.