"Thrift, thrift": A digression to hospitality and husbandry in Hamlet

With these lines, Hamlet charges his mother with both bad hospitality and good housekeeping: she has observed the everyday imperatives of thrift but broken the ritual calculus of mourning. A similar choice of words recurs in reference to remarriage later in the play, in the voice of the Player Queen: “The instances that second marriage move /Are base respects of thrift, but none of love.” Why should Hamlet twice use “thrift” – a quotidian by-word for household order – to name his mother’s transgression? Though it has been suggested that the play distances itself from the mundane principles of household wisdom (most often ventriloquized by Polonius), this paper proposes that Hamlet’s conflicted moral economy repeats and extends a tension already central to the printed advice literature of husbandry and household management.

Hospitality holds an often embattled position in husbandry manuals of the sixteenth century, pitting a neighborly impulse to spend against the basic imperative to save. As a reading of Christmas hospitality in Thomas Tusser’s *Hundredth Points of Good Husbandry* (first published 1557) shows, the tension between thrift and hospitality is not always resolved by striking a prudential balance; instead Tusser (much like Hamlet) negotiates it by means of formal digression and temporal dilation. In Tusser’s rendering, however, the formal and temporal dilation performed by poetic digression must be exceptional, a temporary reprieve from the everyday law and order of the household. Refocusing our attention on Hamlet’s vivid image of leftover flesh, the paper rereads Gertrude’s thrift and Hamlet’s superfluous mourning in light of the temporal politics of household economy, showing how the play engages the paradoxes of hospitality already theorized in the practice of everyday life.

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