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Valuable But Light: The Social Life of Othello's Handkerchief

"Staging Sacred Things" concludes with an examination of the after-life of stage properties, and this piece is taken from that conclusion. Early modern stage properties often had little economic value, but in plays like *Othello* they took on important roles within the fiction. The infamous handkerchief gains and loses value as it passes from hand to hand: it is a whore's token in one scene and a magical charm in the next. It thus reveals the difficulty of attaching any value, economic or religious, to an object circulating between multiple social spheres. I argue that the fluctuating value of this stage property illuminates the material processes through which the status of all stage properties shifts as they move from the tiring house to the stage and back again. I also read *Othello* as a text that, paradoxically, illuminates the stage properties that were enshrined as relics through their association with famous Shakespearean actors. The collectors who attempted to fix the value of these properties were resisting the ephemeral nature of the theater and reversing the logic by which properties were labeled mere things to be used and discarded.