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7

What Is a Staged Book? Books as ‘Actors’ in the Early Modern English Theatre

Sarah Wall-Randell

In his widely used textbook of theatrical props design, Thurston James begins the chapter on book-props with a brief comic scene:

ACTOR

On my entrance, I'm to be carrying a Bible. Do you have it ready?

PROP CREW HEAD

Sure, it's there on the prop table.

ACTOR (*Walking to the table, searching*)

You mean—this dictionary?

PROP CREW HEAD

You and I know it's a dictionary. But you're an actor.

You can make the audience think it's a Bible.

[. . .]

ACTOR

Here, look what this idiot is giving me to use for a Bible.

STAGE MANAGER

It looks like a dictionary.

PROP CREW HEAD

Aw, a book's a book.¹

In this vignette, James contrasts the stereotype of the oversensitive, demanding actor with the utility-minded, quick-and-dirty technician. The actor's view here, that a dictionary would be miscast in the role of a Bible onstage, turns out to be shared not only by the stage manager, but by the author as well, for the rest of James's chapter offers detailed and painstaking instructions for sourcing, adapting, or constructing, using wood, leather, twine, and various papers, what James calls 'character books', or books playing specific parts, whose identities must be made legible to the audience.² Certainly, for the skilled designer as well as the actor and the discerning audience member, James implies, it is far from true that 'a book's a book'.

What exactly are book-props, then, once we have granted that they are not uniform and interchangeable objects? Props overall are an especially significant element in the early modern theatre because, in a stagecraft without illusionistic sets, the objects actors hold take on greater prominence. Tiffany Stern has noted the duality in the mimetic expression of early modern props: their 'heavy realism', in contrast to the more suggestive or sketched-in quality of scenery, and, on the other hand, the symbolic or metonymic way in which they are used. The nimbler, more efficient medium of the prop, such as a crown or throne, can stand for what cannot, practically, be brought onstage, such as a castle.³ The way that props enact theatrical representation, the relationship they effect between the object and what it represents, is variable. Some props are only approximations of, or stand-ins for, the objects they 'play' onstage, when the real thing would be too dangerous or too

precious: a stage dagger is made of wood, or is blunted; a stage crown is made of base metal painted gold. Other, more quotidian objects, like cups or ropes, may straightforwardly play themselves. Books might be said to make up a distinct, third category of prop: at once a stand-in and the thing itself. When a book is required for a play, the precise title named in the text is not required; an existing book, of the right size and appearance, may be appropriated.⁴ But all books have a specific identity, whether or not an observer can see it from the outside; even if the actor in Thurston James' imaginary drama convinces the audience that the dictionary is a Bible, it is still a dictionary. What is the ontological status of a prop book, when it is, and when it isn't, the book that the play says it is?

The nature and provenance of book-props is a pressing question for the study of early modern drama, since late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth-century plays commonly require them. Alan Dessen and Leslie Thomson count 130 examples of books and table-books called for in the stage directions they tabulate in printed plays from 1580 to 1642.⁵ Martin Wiggins and Catherine Richardson, in their monumental *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue*, survey not only props specified in stage directions, but also props whose use is indicated or implied in characters' lines. Using Wiggins' and Richardson's prop lists, limiting my count to plays performed in the public theatres, and not including letters, scrolls, or other documents, but only books that may be presumed to be codices, such as Bibles, prayer-books, law-books, school-books, magic books, and specific works like Ovid, Virgil, and Seneca, I find 128 plays recorded by Wiggins between 1580 and 1623, first performed by over a dozen different companies, that include books as props.⁶ Many plays call for one book; more than a few, like Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Munday et al.'s *Sir John Oldcastle*, and Marston's *What You Will*, call for a small library.

So the early modern stage was a space regularly inhabited by books. Books on shelves or in stacks evoke scenes of study; in an actor's hand, they offer an image of privacy or pretext for solitude (for instance, the book that Polonius presses on

Ophelia in *Hamlet*, 'that show of such an exercise may colour / Your loneliness' [3.1.44–45]); they give verisimilitude to the swearing of oaths.⁷ Yet an assessment and analysis of book-props has lagged behind other exciting recent work both in the field of early modern theatre history and in studies of the material book. In their landmark collection *Staged Properties in Early Modern England*, Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda and their contributors define and advance the critical conversation about histories and theories of early modern stage-props, but the essays do not address books.⁸ Early modern histories of books and reading, meanwhile, have tended to focus on the many ways in which books, including play-books, were conceived, produced, circulated, and used in ordinary life, to the neglect of those exceptional, spectacular appearances of books onstage.

In considering prop-books, we must grapple with lacunae in the record. Even as they are graspable and portable by actors onstage, props are ephemeral within the archive, leaving only partial traces in stage-directions and references within play-texts. As scholars of early modern playing practices have made clear, surviving documentation of props – which includes Philip Henslowe's famous inventory of costumes and properties owned by the Lord Admiral's men in 1598 (as it survives in the transcription made by Edmond Malone for his 1790 edition), as well as some other documents of theatrical accounting and a handful of 'plots', or backstage outlines of entrances and exits – are, on the one hand, vivid evocations of the staging of plays both extant and lost, and on the other, incomplete documents (Knutson and McInnis have more to say on this in their chapter) that offer only a partial picture of early modern prop-use. Douglas Bruster notes that Henslowe's inventory seems to select for 'special things, objects related to particular characters and plays', as well as inherently valuable or hard-to-replace objects, while passing over less 'special' items necessary for staging the plays in the Admiral's Men's repertory, such as cups, plates, bottles, letters, and books.⁹ Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, for instance, is specifically accommodated in

the inventory by the ‘Hell mought’ and ‘j dragon in fostes’, but the multiple books called for by the play – at least four volumes, representing Aristotle, Galen, Justinian, and the Vulgate Bible, are required in Act 1, Scene 1 alone – are unaccounted for. Were these books held among the Admiral’s Men’s stock along with the hell-mouth and dragon, but left unmentioned, or did they come from somewhere else? Peter Thomson conjectures that actors could have made their own properties, while Neil Carson suggests that actors may have supplied small props out of their personal belongings.¹⁰ Korda has proposed that Henslowe, who also operated as a pawnbroker, may have sold or rented to the players, for use as props, items that borrowers had pawned and failed to redeem.¹¹ In the surviving pawn accounts, the goods Henslowe accepted as collateral are mostly clothing, but on at least one occasion, he received a book in pawn, when, on 16 September 1594, he loaned ten shillings to a Goody Haryson ‘vpon a bybell & x peces of lynen’.¹² The accounts are partial; perhaps there were other, unrecorded books among Henslowe’s stock of pawned property, which could have supplied the multiple books needed in the opening scene of *Doctor Faustus* and in other plays.

Tiffany Stern has suggested another theory of a source for book-props, besides the actors’ own possessions and items forfeited from Henslowe’s pawn business: a potential ‘company library’, a collection of reference books, such as the Bible, Holinshed’s *Chronicle*, Plutarch’s *Lives*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Painter’s *Palace of Pleasure*, and other key texts, that could have been owned by a playing company and made available to playwrights to mine as sources in the writing process.¹³ (See Munro’s chapter in this volume for records of one playwright, Robert Daborne, borrowing books from Henslowe in what may be precisely this way.) In *Tamburlaine*, as Ethel Seaton showed in 1924, Marlowe draws the list of Tamburlaine’s conquests not from a general idea of world geography, but specifically from Ortelius’s 1570 *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*; Ortelius’s atlas could well have been another of those reference works in the company library.¹⁴

Moreover, the books in the 'company library' could have done double duty as props, either emerging onto the stage meta-theatrically, 'as themselves' – Ovid in *Titus Andronicus*, Seneca in Middleton and Dekker's *The Honest Whore*, the Bible in many plays – or by playing the parts of other books as needed.¹⁵ (See Stern's essay in this volume for further discussion of printed materials, in this case ballads, appearing as props and perhaps 'playing themselves'.) Andrew Sofer has suggested that, through re-use, props can bring their own kind of intertextuality to early modern plays and to repertories. The King's Men performed both Jonson's *Alchemist* and Shakespeare's *Tempest*; what if the cittern played by Doll in *The Alchemist*, Sofer asks, was the same instrument played by Ariel in *The Tempest*?¹⁶ Book-props, as they too moved between plays, might carry extra resonances from their previous appearances. Was the Bible that Sir Hugh Evans reads while he waits to duel with Caius in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* 3.1 the same prop as the poisoned Bible Julia kisses in Act 4, Scene 2 of Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, a play first performed by the same company about fifteen years later, in 1612–13? *Merry Wives* was presumably still in the King's Men's repertory in the sixteen-teens, since it was issued in a 1619 Quarto; if the same Bible appeared in a comic context in *Merry Wives*, does that heighten the ghoulish absurdity of Julia's death? A Bible appears again in another King's Men play of about 1620, Middleton's British history *The Mayor of Queenborough* (or *Hengist, King of Kent*); the virtuous Queen Castiza takes an oath of her fidelity on a Bible in Act 4, Scene 2. If an audience member saw *The Duchess of Malfi* after *The Mayor of Queenborough*, would the memory of Middleton's innocent noblewoman swearing on the Bible make the abuse of the holy book by Webster's Cardinal, killing his lover Julia by forcing her to swear on the same Bible and then seal her oath with a kiss, all the more blackly odious? All these prior or simultaneous 'lives' of objects – props' origins in the households of pawn customers or of the elite patrons of playing companies, their service in other plays – become part of the associations

they bring with them for playwrights, actors, and audiences, and thus part of the meaning that these props make within their plays. We already acknowledge that the creative process was collaborative among playwrights, plotters, managers, and actors in the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century theatre. The human resources and reputation of a particular company certainly shaped the plays that writers like Shakespeare and Marlowe produced; perhaps the same is true for their resources of books, props, and book-props. Perhaps, that is, the presence of a particular book in a company library inspired a playwright to write another part for that book, or shaped how author or company conceptualized or realized a book that was a 'character' within the play.

In what follows I will examine two plays that make spectacular use of a book-prop. Marlowe's *Tamburlaine, Part II*, calls for a holy book, the 'Alcoran' (Qur'an) to be desecrated, while Thomas Heywood's *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody Part I*, requires a different holy book, a venerated English Bible. In these plays, then, we have two of what James calls 'character-books', props that must represent specific books and communicate their identities to the audience. These two books present different, but very material, problems of representation for an early modern playing company. The Qur'an could not draw upon familiar associations, could not be recognized, and thus would have to be envisaged, materialized onstage, anew; the physical attributes of the Bible, conversely, would have been intimately recognizable to the audience, so much so that details of its form, particularly its size, would have carried historical, doctrinal, and political import.

Tamburlaine, Part II is not the first English play to present a Qur'an onstage – one had appeared briefly in Robert Wilson's *The Three Ladies of London* (c. 1581) – but it is certainly the most spectacular.¹⁷ Late in the play, after vanquishing Persia, Turkey, and Africa, Marlowe's Scythian conqueror makes his next target the supremacy of God Himself. Tamburlaine calls for a copy of the Qur'an to be brought onstage, and commands that 'the Turkish Alcaron, / And all the heapes of superstitious

bookes, / Found in the Temples of that *Mahomet*, / Whom I have thought a God . . . be burnt' (STC 17425, K5r). 'My sword hath sent millions of Turks to Hell . . . And yet I live untoucht by Mahomet', Tamburlaine brags, and, following the medieval and early modern Christian misconception that Muslims consider Mohammed a god, he dares the Prophet to avenge, if he can, this ultimate affront, sacrilege against the holy book. The heavens remain silent as the book goes up in flames, and Tamburlaine exults in his debunking of religion:

Wel souldiers, *Mahomet* remaines in hell;
 He cannot heare the voice of *Tamburlain*,
 Seeke out another Godhead to adore,
 The God that sits in heaven, if any God
 For he is God alone, and none but he.

(K5r)

This is a showstopping moment of stagecraft that retains the power to shock even in the present.¹⁸ It is the last great gesture of Tamburlaine's will, and his death from illness shortly afterward may, it is suggested, be the result. What, though, did audiences see when they looked at Tamburlaine's Qur'an? Given the great unlikelihood that any member of the Admiral's Men or of their audience would have seen an actual Qur'an, how might the company have represented it? In a large or small format, slim or thick? With Arabic or explanatory English characters on its spine or fore-edge? What might it mean, in this context, for an English book to represent the sacred book of another faith, one seen as deeply foreign, in such a moment of blasphemy and iconoclasm?

The work of Nabil Matar, Daniel Vitkus, Linda McJannet, Bernadette Andrea, and others has opened up to us the huge presence of the Islamic world in the fears and imaginations of the early modern English, and has examined how English knowledge of Islam was shaped through the reports of captives and travellers in the wide reaches of the Ottoman Empire who had 'turned Turk'. But copies of the Qur'an, either in

manuscript, the medium used by believers until the nineteenth century, or in print, as studied by academic theologians, did not circulate in England in the sixteenth century outside the most specialized academic communities. In 1630, Abraham Wheelock, soon to be appointed the first Professor of Arabic at Cambridge, wrote to the Arabist William Bedwell, seeking to obtain a Qur'an in the original language for the University Library; Bedwell agreed to donate his own manuscript, since he could find no other source for an additional copy.¹⁹ The Qur'an was finally printed in English in 1649, translated from the French by Alexander Ross, but before then it was not readily available in Britain in either English or Arabic.

If English audiences had not seen the Qur'an, they were nevertheless accustomed to its invocation as a byword for false or pretended religious views. As Matthew Dimmock has shown, both Catholic and Protestant writers had sought to identify the errors of the other with 'Mahometanism'.²⁰ Both sides too co-opted the idea of the Qur'an specifically to dismiss writings across the confessional divide: *The Alcaron of the Barefote Friers*, a translation of the German humanist Erasmus Alberus's parody of the Rule of St Francis, appeared in London in 1550, while *Luthers Alcoran* (1642) was the English title of an attack on Protestantism by the French Cardinal Jacques Davy du Peron.²¹ The idea of the Qur'an as the epitome of error, and also specifically as a book, was a powerful one.

Some hint as to what Marlowe or his audience might have imagined a Qur'an to look like is provided by a visual representation of Mohammed contemporaneous with *Tamburlaine* that Dimmock cites as a late-sixteenth-century example of the long tradition of using the figure of the Prophet as the opposite of Faith in allegorical depictions of the virtues and vices. In one of a series of embroidered wall hangings on this theme commissioned *circa* 1580 by Bess of Hardwick, and still hanging in Hardwick Hall, a woman in Tudor dress, herself labelled *Fides* and holding a small book marked *Faith*, stands over the recumbent figure of a man in a turban. The man is propped on his elbow atop another book, marked

Acaron.²² The similarity of the books is striking; the need for labels indicates their potential interchangeability. Possibly created in response to the 1580 treaty between Elizabeth I and the Sultan Murad III (as part of the negotiations, Elizabeth affirmed to the Sultan in a letter their common monotheism and joint opposition to idolatry²³), the hanging shows one 'religion of the book' conquering another.

The parallel centrality of the English Bible to Reformation Christianity and the Qur'an to Islam, as shown in the Hardwick Hall hanging, is also an acknowledgement of an undeniable symmetry between the two faiths and their two books, and suggests other resonances that the burning of the Qur'an onstage in *Tamburlaine* may have had for an English audience. The scene, in which Tamburlaine seems at once to embrace scepticism ('if any God'), monotheism ('For he is God alone and none but he'), and megalomania, has long been read as either a celebration of iconoclasm or an excoriation of atheism.²⁴ Just a generation before, Marian authorities had used public burnings of books, including English Bibles, as a strategy for enforcing religious orthodoxy (instances are documented in Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*). Elizabethan censors did not generally employ such spectacles, however, so Tamburlaine's action resurrects a violence against books that had been submerged in memory. The Protestant insistence on the truest access to God being located in the word of God makes the burning of sacred texts, if we posit the Qur'an as standing in metaphorically for the previously endangered English Bible, especially fraught.

Indeed, it seems not unlikely that, in the absence of a widely accepted iconography for the Qur'an, a Bible, after all the most widely distributed book in early modern England, would have played its part here. Might it be disturbing, or seem blasphemous, to a Christian audience to imagine a Bible standing in for a Qur'an? If we return to the idea of props shared across plays enabling certain intertextual in-jokes and resonances, we might imagine the Admiral's Men using the same book or books for its performances of *Tamburlaine* and

Doctor Faustus. If Tamburlaine's prop Qur'an doubled for Faustus's 'Jerome's Bible', is it possible that an audience who saw both plays could have recognized the book in the two roles? Even if such a doubling would be invisible to the audience, the interchangeability of these books speaks to the iconic power of books in Marlowe's imagination and on the stage, and to the unique category they occupy of text and object. As their material textuality both sits within and intersects with the text of the play, book props both are and are not the roles they play.

From the sweeping Eastern travelogue of *Tamburlaine* to a play that depicts locations just outside the playhouse: another starring role for the Bible, and for a Bible, appears in Heywood's *If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody, Part 1*. First performed by the Queen's Men at the Red Bull theatre in 1604 or 1605, and first printed in quarto in 1605, the play is a bio-drama celebrating Queen Elizabeth as a Protestant heroine, focusing especially on her virtue and courage when imprisoned during Mary's reign, and culminating in her accession. The events of the play draw from the laudatory account of Elizabeth's princesshood in Foxe's *Actes and Monuments*, as well as from reports of the pageants and ceremonies surrounding her coronation entry into London in January 1559. In the closing moments of the play, the newly crowned queen graciously accepts from the Lord Mayor twin tributes from the citizens of London: a purse and a Bible.

ELIZABETH

We thanke you all, but first this booke I kisse,
Thou art the way to honor; thou to blisse,
An English Bible, thanks my good Lord Maior,
You of our bodie and our soule have care,
This is the Jewell that we still love best,
This was our solace when we were distrest,
This booke that hath so long conceald it selfe,
So long shut up, so long hid; now Lords see,
We here unclaspe, for ever it is free:

Who lookes for joy, let him this booke adore,
 This is true foode for rich men and for poore,
 Who drinckes of this, is certaine nere to perish,
 This will the soule with heavenly vertue cherish,
 Lay hand upon this Anchor every soule,
 Your names shalbe in an eternal scrowle;
 Who buildes on this, dwel's in a happy state,
 This is the fountaine clear immaculate,
 That happy yssue that shall us succeed,
 And in our populous Kingdome this booke read:
 For them as for our owne selves we humbly pray,
 They may live long and blest; so lead the way.

FINIS.

(ll. 1578–98)²⁵

In formally rhymed couplets, and in repetitive, plain phrasing – ‘this booke’ (l. 1578) ‘This is’ (l. 1582), ‘This was’ (l. 1583), ‘This booke’ (l. 1584), ‘this booke’ (l. 1587), ‘This is’ (l. 1588), ‘This will’ (l. 1590), ‘this Anchor’ (l. 1591), ‘This is’ (l. 1594), ‘this booke’ (l. 1596) – the Queen iteratively demands that the audience notice the book, returning their eyes again and again to the object in her hands. Displaying the English Bible, suppressed by Mary’s bishops, Elizabeth makes it wear a succession of different metaphorical costumes: jewel, food, drink, anchor, groundplot, and fountain.

Elizabeth casts the English Bible as a smaller version of herself, another Marian captive, ‘So long shut up, so long hid’, now ‘for ever . . . free’ (l. 1585–86). The scene’s source is in a pageant staged at the Little Conduit in Cheapside created for Elizabeth’s coronation procession in February 1559, an account of which was immediately published in a pamphlet, and is included in Stow’s *Survey of London* (1598, reprinted 1603). In the pageant, an old man with a scythe representing Time emerged from the locked door of a cave, leading a young woman dressed in white silk with a headdress labelled ‘in Latin and English, *Temporis filia*, the Daughter of Time’. As the Daughter approached Elizabeth, it became clear that ‘on her

breast was written her proper name, which was *Veritas*, Truth who held a book in her hand upon the which was written *Verbum veritatis*, the Word of Truth'.²⁶ Truth handed the book to one of the Queen's attendants, who passed it to her: an English Bible. Time brings Truth out of captivity; Truth is Elizabeth, the Reformed Church, and the English Bible, all newly free. As Heywood faithfully records in *If You Know Not Me*, the Queen kissed the Bible and held it aloft.

The connection between pageant and play is deepened and complicated because the Bible in the pageant refers to (and perhaps was) a specific, identifiable edition. As David Daniell has pointed out, not only did the 1559 coronation entry inspire Heywood's closing scene in 1604, but the pageant itself took its visual language from the title page of the 1557 Geneva New Testament (STC 2871), the first English Bible text to be printed since the Great Bible of 1539.²⁷ In a woodcut emblem on the title page, Time, with a scythe and hourglass, leads a nude woman, wearing a tiara, out of a cave. Text running up and down the sides of the emblem reads 'God by tyme restoreth truth / And maketh her victorious.' Here, truth is the Word of God freed from the old translation, the Catholic-establishment Vulgate, and brought directly from the original Greek into the language of the people, with explanatory notes on every page to liberate the meaning of hard passages for the individual believer. The pageant is a living tableau of the woodcut, and might be seen as a joint celebration of Elizabeth's ascension and of the publication of the Geneva New Testament; it would then make sense that the book that Truth gave Elizabeth was, in fact, a Geneva New Testament.

What, then, of the book extolled by Elizabeth onstage in Heywood's play? Considering that the Bible was the most commonly owned book in early modern England, and that the Geneva New Testament was printed over a dozen times between 1557 and 1604, the staged book could easily have been the real thing. What would have struck viewers about the Bible in this scene, though, whatever book 'played' it, was its size. In the sixteenth century, the size of an English Bible was a

FIGURE 7.1 *The Geneva New Testament* (1557), B.L.C.17.a.15. By permission of the British Library.

contentious and political matter. Reformers passionately held that the individual believer must have direct access to the Word, unmediated through clergy gatekeepers; the small size of a Bible clearly communicated the fact that it was meant for private contemplation and home use. The 1557 Geneva New Testament was an octavo, and although subsequent printings included at least one quarto (1583), it was far more often published as an octavo, duodecimo, or thirty-two-mo. The complete Geneva Bible (1560) was also a relatively small book, first and most often printed in quarto. By contrast, the Bishops' Bible of 1568, the product of an effort undertaken by Elizabeth's bishops to produce a new, official English translation that would replace the outmoded Great Bible and re-take control of Bible interpretation from the popular, but also populist, unauthorized, and foreign-made Geneva, was first and most often printed in folio. Its size showed its intended function, to be read aloud in church, and to serve, in that communal space, as a visible symbol of the Word. The Bishops' Bible, its title-page bearing an image of Elizabeth herself, remained the approved translation, going through many editions, until the appearance of the royally sanctioned version of 1611.

In 1604, then, the book carried by Heywood's Elizabeth could have represented either the official, public Bishops' Bible, associated with the Anglican middle way, or the private, unofficial, more nonconformist Geneva Bible; its size, large or small, would have signalled significant doctrinal difference. One might expect the book-prop in this final scene of Heywood's play to be monumental, since the book is made the focus of so much attention and the outdoor theatre was large; the milieu is not unlike a reading from the pulpit. The play as a whole works to confirm Elizabeth's legacy as a great and triumphant queen; this scene could be read in an accordingly conservative way, reaffirming the triumph of 'her' Bible, the Bishops' version, as the centre of the nation's religious devotion. Yet the practicalities of stage-use must be considered: the Bible has to be held by the Bishop concurrently with a purse, and

handed to Elizabeth, who speaks over it before kissing it and raising it aloft. The use of a smaller book-prop that could have been comfortably held in one hand by the actor playing Elizabeth, and thus signalling the Geneva Bible, would have had a more radical function, affirming the continued importance in the Reformed church of private, independent Bible reading for all, ranking above the legacy of any monarch. By investing it with polemic meaning, Heywood makes the book-prop speak.

This final scene is not the only time in the play in which a book did so. In an earlier episode not found in Foxe, the Princess Elizabeth is held under house arrest, guarded by Queen Mary's dangerous advisors including Sir Henry Beningfield and Bishop Gardiner. Elizabeth is installed in a room containing books including the Bible. The princess asks for writing materials to send a letter to Mary, and while she works on her message, Beningfield goes through her property, muttering horrified asides:

BENINGFEILD *takes a booke and lookes into it.*

BENINGFEILD

What has she written here? (He reads.)

Much suspected by me, nothing prov'd can be,

Finis quoth Elizabeth the prisoner,

Pray god it prove so, soft what book's this,

Marry a God, whats here an English bible?

Sanctum Maria pardon this prophanation of my hart,

Water *Barwick*, water, Ile meddle with't no more.

(ll. 1034–41)

Incorporating Elizabeth's famous prison couplet into this scene, Heywood has changed it both circumstantially and materially. Traditionally, Elizabeth is supposed to have scratched the lines 'Much suspected by me, / Nothing proved can be. / *Quod* Elizabeth the prisoner' into the window of her room at Woodstock, using a diamond.²⁸ Imagining Elizabeth's

inscription not on a window but in a book, Heywood turns Elizabeth's protest graffiti into a mimesis of the 'bookish' practices of annotation and marks of ownership through which many early modern readers really interacted with their books, especially with Bibles, and in which they expressed devotional thoughts and interpretive opinions of their own.

'Weary of writinge, sleepey on the sodaine' (1043), Elizabeth dismisses Beningsfield and goes to bed, upon which a dumbshow begins, following the traditional style of the staging of dreams on the early modern stage.

A dumb show.

*Enter WINCHESTER, CONSTABLE, BARWICK, and
FRYARS: at the other dore 2. ANGELS: the FRYAR
steps to her, offering to kill her: the ANGELS
drives them back. Exeunt. The ANGEL opens the
Bible, and puts it in her hand as she sleepes,
Exeunt ANGELS, she wakes.*

(ll. 1048–53)

Finding the Bible in her hand when she awakes, Elizabeth realizes that the book has travelled across the room on its own:

Then 'twas by inspiration, heaven I trust
With his eternall hand, will guide the just.
What chapter's this? *Whoso putteth his trust in the Lord,
Shall not be confounded:*
My savior thanks, on thee my hope I build,
Thou lov'st poore Innocents, and art their shield.

(ll. 1062–67)

Is this Bible the same book-prop that features in the final scene, and can we deduce anything further about its format from the context here? A 500-page folio seems unlikely to fit 'in' Elizabeth's hand, and to bring physical pain rather than spiritual comfort; this bedroom Bible seems even more

certainly than the presentation Bible in the finale to be a small-format book and thus to signal the Geneva translation. Yet confusingly, the line Elizabeth reads, from Isaiah 49.23, is closest to the language of the English Bibles of the 1530s, which combined William Tyndale's English translation of the Pentateuch and New Testament with Myles Coverdale's translation of the remaining books: the Coverdale Bible (1535), the 'Matthew' Bible (1537), and finally the 'Great' Bible (1539), the first royally authorized version. Aside from accidental variations in spelling and punctuation, Coverdale's wording of the Isaiah passage is the same in all these 1530s versions: 'thou mayst knowe howe that I am the Lord. And who so putteth hys trust in me, shall not be confounded.'²⁹ Notably, Coverdale has the singular 'his trust', as in Heywood, rather than the generic plural 'their trust' that appears in the later, revised Bishops' Bible of 1568: 'thou mayst knowe howe that I am the Lorde, and that who so putteth there trust in me shall not be confounded.'³⁰ The Bishops' Bible was the official English Bible for church use in Heywood's own time, and is the text we would imagine as his default source. It is entirely possible, though, that Heywood was transcribing from a 1530s edition such as the Great Bible rather than from the newer Bishops' Bible when he wrote this scene in 1604; old books do hang around, and perhaps the Bible available to him, his own or one that the Queen's Men held in a 'company library', was a Coverdale, Matthew, or Great Bible. And, of course, the 1530s Bible would be more historically appropriate than the 1568 one to a scene taking place during Mary's reign in the mid-1550s. The evidence here, the single word 'his' versus 'their', seems too slight to make a firm case, but one thing is clear: the edition that seemed most likely to be the 'character' book in the final scene of *If You Know Not Me*, the Geneva Bible, is the least likely here, as the Geneva wording is markedly different: 'thou shalt knowe that I am the Lord: for they shal not be ashamed y^t waite for me.'³¹ Perhaps the Queen's Men had two prop Bibles, or perhaps the prop-book in this scene is a Geneva Bible 'playing' a Great Bible.

The text that the actor playing Elizabeth reads, of course, properly comes from Heywood's play, not from the book-prop. We see that Heywood was not troubled by editing the Bible passage for brevity, turning 'I am the Lord, and . . . whoso putteth his trust in me' into 'whoso putteth his trust in the Lord'. The prop is not exactly the Bible, even if an actual Bible is used, and the action performed by the player is not exactly reading.³² This document onstage, although it has a speaking role, is not playing itself.

What does it mean for Heywood's players to use, or not use, real Bibles as prop Bibles, to 'cast' a secular book as a Bible, or to use one kind of Bible as a prop for another that had very different doctrinal associations? In this play about very recent English history, it is meaningful as well as convenient for the real books daily viewed and handled by English Protestants to appear onstage. Yet the books' very recognizability, as glimpses of the form and words of specific Bibles seem to appear between the lines of Heywood's play, creates representational tension as well. The slippage between new and old translations, between format and content, forces them to be analysed as objects too: they compel reflection on what sacred properties a book may have, on what devotional choices are encoded and made visible in size. By allowing the language and materiality of real books to interpenetrate the language of the play, books are both subsumed into the play and stand apart from it, evoking not the spectacular elsewhere of a Hell-mouth or a dragon, but the recent past of Elizabeth's reign, the here and almost-now.

In exploring the ontological status of a book onstage, and asking whether and how books can 'play' themselves, this essay has contrasted what was almost certainly not a Qur'an, with what is likely to have been an English Bible, though not necessarily the one it purports to be. Both raise questions about religion and text. Tamburlaine rejects the 'superstitious' nature of the 'Alcoran', but Marlowe is intending the book to represent all religions, and may have enjoyed the blasphemy of having the text of another religion 'played' by a book with the

correct 'look', a Bible. If so, the play equates Christianity with Islam. Somewhat similarly, Heywood's play equates two bibles, conflating the Bishop's and Geneva Bibles as though the differences between them and the forms of Protestantism they represent are negligible. Both plays thus deepen, question and ironize their fictional observations about faith by the physical books they stage. Through books, as sources, as actors, and as visual statements, the plays use the materiality of props to affirm, undercut or query the dialogue. What does this say for other books in other plays? Books onstage are both literally 'page' and literally 'stage', and if they are really the texts they play or sources for the play in which they feature, they are part of the fiction that is also part of the fact; while, if they are not, they are facts that are fictionalized. Whatever books onstage are, they represent a moment when the real interpenetrates the fiction, raising questions about the traditional opposition between 'page' and 'stage' and asking us to think in a wholly new way about early modern theatrical mimesis.

Notes

- 1 Thurston James, *The Theater Props Handbook: A Comprehensive Guide to Theater Properties, Materials, and Construction* (Studio City: Players Press, 2000), 35.
- 2 James, *Theater Props*, 40.
- 3 Tiffany Stern, *Making Shakespeare: From Stage to Page* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 94.
- 4 Given the relatively high cost of paper in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, it seems unlikely that a playing company would go to the expense of constructing a faux book by having a block of blank paper bound, rather than using a real book; I therefore assume that any book-prop onstage is an 'actual' book.
- 5 Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in Early Modern Drama, 1580–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 34–35.

- 6 Martin Wiggins in association with Catherine Richardson, *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue*, 8 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012–2018). (Since I am interested in props owned by playing companies, I did not count books called for in masques, civic pageants, or university plays.) Frances Teague has also done important work in cataloguing props in Shakespeare's plays; she combines letters and books in the category of 'documents'. Teague finds 'documents' occurring in Shakespeare's plays with a frequency ranging from 1 per play (*Comedy of Errors*, *The Tempest*) to 15 (*Love's Labour's Lost*), with an average of 6.3 documents required per play. See Teague, *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1991), 195–196.
- 7 Charlotte Scott has surveyed the uses of books, both as props and in metaphors, in Shakespeare's dramatic canon. See Charlotte Scott, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- 8 Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda, eds, *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
- 9 Douglas Bruster, 'The Dramatic Life of Objects in the Early Modern Theatre,' in Harris and Korda, eds, *Staged Properties*, 72–73.
- 10 Peter Thomson, *Shakespeare's Theatre* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 31; Neil Carson, *A Companion to Henslowe's Diary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 53.
- 11 Natasha Korda, 'Household Property/Stage Property: Henslowe as Pawnbroker', *Theatre Journal* 48, no. 2 (1996), 194–195. Since the majority of the pawn customers were women, Korda reads the movement of these items from women's household property to stage property as an overlooked way in which women contributed to early modern theatrical making. The pawn accounts appear in R. A. Foakes, ed., *Henslowe's Diary*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 107–118, 142–162, and 253–261.
- 12 Foakes, ed., *Henslowe's Diary*, 156.
- 13 Stern, comment during Folger Shakespeare Library symposium 'Shakespeare's Theatrical Documents,' Washington, DC, 18–19 March 2016.

- 14 Ethel Seaton, 'Marlowe's Map,' *Essays and Studies* 10 (1924), 13–35.
- 15 As Zachary Lesser and Holger Schott Syme commented during the Folger 'Shakespeare's Theatrical Documents' symposium (ibid.), one might begin to reconstruct the catalogue of such a 'company library' by tracking the influence of particular sources across a company's repertory, and to trace the circulation of books between playing companies and playwrights through notable appearances of books onstage.
- 16 Andrew Sofer, 'Properties,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Modern Theatre*, ed. Richard Dutton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 567–570. For a theoretical perspective on re-use in the theatre (of narratives, actors, music, and materials, including props), see Marvin Carlson, *The Haunted Stage: The Theater as Memory Machine* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001). I am indebted to Richard Preiss for this reference.
- 17 Kyd's *Soliman and Perseda*, from c. 1589–92, slightly after *Tamburlaine*, also calls for a Qur'an. The Qur'ans in Wilson's and Kyd's plays are deployed differently from the Qur'an in *Tamburlaine*. There they are used for swearing false witness, and are thus a stereotype of the doctrinally errant, including Catholics as well as Turks, who turned holy books into material talismans by which to swear. On Kyd's Qur'an, see Elizabeth Williamson, *The Materiality of Religion in Early Modern English Drama* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2009), Chapter 4.
- 18 Some contemporary productions of *Tamburlaine*, such as at the Bristol Old Vic in 2005, have chosen to make Tamburlaine's blasphemy against all religions rather than against Islam, by leaving the Qur'an unnamed among a heap of books (see Dalya Alberge, 'Marlowe's Koran-burning hero is censored to avoid Muslim anger,' *The Times*, 24 November 2005, 3). At the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2018, in a production directed by Michael Boyd that played interestingly with graphic versus symbolic representations of violence, the reference to the Qur'an was retained, but the books were tossed into a pit in which fire was suggested with flickering lights, rather than being unequivocally, visibly burnt. Scorched sheets of paper then fell from above, perhaps in an echo of the mass of documents and

office papers scattered over the streets of lower Manhattan after the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center.

- 19 See Nabil Matar, *Islam in Britain 1558–1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 74–75. A Latin text of the Qur'an had been printed in Basel in 1543, and copies survive in English academic libraries, but the heavy interspersal of analysis and refutation with the text makes this book more a work of Christian theology than a copy of the Qur'an *per se*; see Matthew Dimmock, *Mythologies of the Prophet Muhammad in Early Modern English Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 83–84.
- 20 Dimmock, *Mythologies*, 64–100.
- 21 *The Alcaron of the Barefote Friers, that is to say, an heape or number of the blasphemous and trifling doctrines of the wounded Idole Saint Frances taken out of the boke of his rules. . .* (London, 1550; STC 2nd edn 11313); *Luthers Alcoran, Being a Treatise first written in French by the Learned Cardinal Peron, of famous memory, against the Hugenots of France* (London, 1642; Wing D2638).
- 22 The image is reproduced and discussed in Dimmock, *Mythologies*, 74–76.
- 23 The letter was published in Haklyut's 1589 *Principall Navigations*. See Daniel Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theatre and the Multicultural Mediterranean, 1570–1630* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 51.
- 24 See Joel Slotkin, "“Seeke out another Godhead”: Religious Epistemology and Representations of Islam in *Tamburlaine*," *Modern Philology* 111, no. 3 (2014), 408–436, for a survey of critical responses to *Tamburlaine*'s Qur'an-burning.
- 25 Thomas Heywood, *If You Know Not Me You Know Nobody Part I*, ed. Madeline Doran (London: Malone Society, 1935).
- 26 Richard Mulcaster, *The Queen's Majesty's Passage through the City of London to Westminster the Day before Her Coronation* (1559), quoted in Hester Lees-Jeffries, 'Location as Metaphor in Queen Elizabeth's Coronation Entry (1559): *Veritas Temporis Filia*,' in *The Progresses, Pageants, and Entertainments of Queen Elizabeth I*, ed. Jayne Elisabeth Archer, Elizabeth Goldring, and Sarah Knight (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 77.

- 27 David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 276–277.
- 28 Leah S. Marcus, Janel Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose, eds, *Elizabeth I: Collected Works* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp. 45–46
- 29 *The Byble in Englyshe that is to saye the content of all the holy scripture, both of ye olde and neue testament . . .* (Paris, 1539; STC 2nd edn 2068), Hh1v.
- 30 *The. Holie. Bible conteyning the olde Testament and the neue* (London, 1568; STC 2nd edn 2099), M(6)r (fol. xciii).
- 31 *The Bible and Holy Scriptures Conteyned in the Olde and Neue Testament . . .* (Geneva, 1560; STC 2nd edn 2093), Eee3r.
- 32 In the present-day theatre, it is typical for prop books and documents to contain a *lorem ipsum*-style dummy text, to avoid breaking the concentration of the actor, who recites from memory the lines that are supposed to be ‘read’. See James, 40.