Introduction

This is a book about early modern literature and representation. In it, I will argue that in Renaissance England, figural representations – that is, fictive and symbolic articulations of something other than themselves[1] – are the site of profoundly important cultural negotiations; that literary criticism of the last two or three decades has, despite its near-obsessive focus on this phenomenon, tended to misrepresent it; that the function of representation in England has a specific, and very important, political and religious history; and that the crucial text in this history is the Book of Common Prayer. Consequently, though the entire book is of literary import, it will deal at some length with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century history, theology, and politics to produce a deeper, richer account of early modern English culture and its textually mediated internal network of connections and dislocations. And so, since many of the problems I address involve the way we interpret the past, I would like to begin by talking not about literature, but about the remarkably durable historiographical conflicts surrounding the English Reformation. I want to propose, if not a solution, perhaps at least some grounds for a truce.

The debate, in its general outlines, goes back to the very earliest days of the Reformation. As the Henrician reforms began to be implemented

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[1] Some crucial definitions should be given here at the outset. By *representation* – a category whose capacious flexibility has been usefully and endlessly demonstrated by new historicists – I mean "the fact of expressing or denoting by means of a figure or symbol" (*OED*, 2d): in this book, it will encompass theatrical performance, wafers and wine, political personae, fruit, a sea monster, and various complex texts (literary and otherwise). The fictivity necessarily implied here should in no way be mistaken for falsity. For Cranmer, Sidney, and Milton, figural representations are an indispensable means of truth, and for Shakespeare and Hobbes, they generate highly desirable effects.

By *interpretation*, I mean simply the engagement with representations that renders them meaningful. This of course takes different forms (one doesn't "read" a king or a sacrament quite like one reads a poem), but all share some key features. First, all interpretation requires a recognition of the disjunction and nonidentity of sign and referent, figure and reality – but also a recognition that a complex and significant conceptual relationship is posited therein. Reading is thus what mediates the signifying gap and invests the signs with receptive meaning, and how this is done *always* has consequences, whether spiritual, moral, intellectual, or political.

in the 1530s, a (religiously conservative) party argued that these reforms reflected neither popular nor divine will; they were rather the arbitrary caprices of an ambitious monarch, foisted upon a resistant populace which was overwhelmingly committed to, and satisfied with, traditional forms of Catholic piety. On the other side, a (religiously progressive) party contended that reform was in fact the will of both God and people, that England was fed up with Catholic corruption and broadly receptive to the radical changes being undertaken by the godly king. Foxe, certainly the most influential exponent of this view, pointed in particular to Wycliffe and the Lollards as historical evidence of England's long and innate tendency to look through a Protestant glass.

Four hundred years later, the controversy continued virtually unchanged. In the 1950s, Philip Hughes challenged the dominant Whiggish Protestant narrative with a massive new history that highlighted the viability of the medieval Church and the coercive nature of reform. A. G. Dickens responded in the following decade with a ringing and highly influential re-exposition of the progressivist story, which insisted (relying again on the history of Lollardy as well as more immediate evidence of receptivity, like late-medieval anticlericalism) that England was a fertile seedbed for reform, and that Protestant ideas took root quickly, deeply, and widely. Dickens's book remained the standard account of the English Reformation for decades. In the 1980s and 1990s, though, it was increasingly under fire from so-called "revisionist" historians (Haigh, Scarisbrick, Duffy, etc.) who used new historiographical methods like local history to vigorously reargue a very old point: that the late-medieval Church was vitally alive, foundational to English culture, and beloved by the vast majority of English people, who found its ritual, doctrine, and institutional presence to be profoundly satisfying. More recently still, scholars like Judith Maltby have in turn pointed out the biases and distortions that revisionism has introduced into our understanding of this era. And so we now find ourselves pretty much where we began.

The astonishing persistence of this debate and its basic faultlines warrants, I think, several cautious but important conclusions. First, the perennial viability of both sides indicates that neither side has conclusively disproven the other; the absence of a truly knockdown argument either way is what has animated this controversy from the very beginning. Second, this in turn suggests that each side is in some important sense *right*. One side correctly stresses the strengths of late-medieval Catholicism and the enormous resistances that state reform encountered; the other side, equally correctly, argues that Protestantism was rather quickly embraced by significant

numbers of people who clearly found it not only personally empowering but also ritually and theologically preferable to a Catholicism they perceived as superstitious, foreign, and corrupt. Recent revisionist studies have valuably qualified the triumphalist tendencies of the Protestant view, but the strong form of the revisionist project would seem to require that the fundamental claims of a Dickens be positively disproven, and this has clearly not been achieved; demonstrating the persistent appeal of traditional religion is not the same thing as proving that Protestantism did not have a considerable appeal of its own.

This standoff, finally, suggests that the terms in which this debate has been construed are in need of some rethinking. Practically speaking, as things stand now – and, after nearly five centuries, they seem unlikely to change much from within – our options would seem to be either resigning ourselves to stalemate or finding some synthetic or dialectical way out of it.[2] Since the second option seems to me the only really constructive one, we would need to conceive of a new model that is sufficiently capacious to incorporate the strengths of both approaches. This model would, for example, need to reconcile structurally the top-down and bottom-up models; it would need to acknowledge that the English Reformation was simultaneously a vertical and coercive exercise of state power *and* a horizontal distribution of political and religious authority; it would need, that is, to make sense of both aspects of the dynamic of subjectification (that is, the ways in which reform both subjected people to new structures of authority and recognized them as autonomous subjects).[3]

I believe that we have such a model. It has been available to us for four and a half centuries. It is a text – a text created and authorized by the combined force of Crown, Church, and Parliament; a text which spawned rebellions, and for (and against) which many people gave their lives; a text often found at the center of religious and political controversy; a text indisputably familiar to virtually every English subject; a text which forms part of the foundation of England's national identity. It is not the English Bible; it is the Book of Common Prayer.

[2] Ethan Shagan has recently proposed that we might get past these static binaries – Catholic/Protestant, above/below, success/failure – by rethinking the English Reformation as a more complex and dynamic "process of cultural accommodation" (*Popular Politics*, 7) in which politics and belief were experientially negotiated. Time will tell if this in fact proves to be a way out of historiographical stalemate, but in the meantime, my contention is that the Prayerbook is itself the textual site of such negotiations – not so much between Protestant and Catholic (though that tension is of course important to it) as between the conflicting models of authority upon which this particular Reformation was constructed.

[3] This useful term is of course Foucauldian, though part of my argument will register some important reservations about Foucault and his influence on recent critical practice.

If there is something slightly surprising about this claim, at least to scholars of literature, I would argue that this surprisingness is an effect of a longstanding critical blind spot in literary studies, which has paid relatively little sustained attention to the liturgy. But one might argue (though I will not explicitly do so in this book; I offer it here by way of provocation) that in certain respects, the Book of Common Prayer has proven more important to the history and identity of England than have specific theological formulations (e.g. Calvinism), polemical historiographical constructions (e.g. Foxe), or perhaps indeed the English Bible itself.

This last claim may seem absurd. So let me clarify what I do not mean here. I don't mean to suggest that the BCP has ever had an equal status to the Bible in terms of affect or authority; unlike the Scripture, which all sides agreed was the inspired Word of God, the Prayerbook never claimed to be the product of anything more than state authority, careful Bible-reading, and good judgment. Indeed, both its Preface and the essay "Of Ceremonies" are quite insistent on both the BCP's derivative nature and its contingency as a specific cultural product. Hence I'm not saying that the Book of Common Prayer exceeded or even approached the Bible in terms of sheer spiritual or political impact, on either the individual or national level. It was not nearly the catalyst for literacy that the Bible was, nor did it receive the sort of veneration that the Bible did, because it was clearly not regarded as a pure or direct expression of the will of God (in fact, its authors insisted that it *could not* be so regarded, although they certainly suggested that they had done their best).

So then what's left of my claim? This: that the BCP has functioned, quietly and deeply, *in opposition to* the English Bible. This will again seem absurd, given the Prayerbook's insistence on its own biblical foundation, and the vast amounts of Scripture so deliberately present in the liturgy, which was, after all, the primary context and vehicle through which most people experienced the Bible. And it has no doubt set Thomas Cranmer spinning in his grave (metaphorically, of course; having been burned at the stake for his efforts, he doesn't have one). So let me immediately explain that this is a constructive opposition. But the Bible had always, *always* been a site of chaotic potentiality: this is why the medieval Catholic Church controlled its availability and interpretation so scrupulously, and whatever one may think of the Church's final motivations, we must allow that its concerns were precisely on the mark. The dangers inherent in the Bible, and in the mad excess of inspiration it offered, were historically controlled by its companion authorities of church tradition, conciliar decrees, and papal

edics; but with the Reformation, many of these counterweights were cast off.[4]

It quickly became clear in the unruly early years of the Reformation that the power vacuum created by this revolution needed to be filled if religion and indeed society were to be saved from collapsing into anarchy. Three stabilizing options can be seen in the life and teachings of Martin Luther: a reinvigorated turn to Erastianism, the authoritative voice of a magisterial reformer, and the complicated recourse to a hermeneutic of literalism (which, I'll suggest, should be considerably less simple and synecdochic to us than it is). In England, where a different set of conditions obtained, this burden fell most squarely on the Prayerbook, which embodied a distinctive complex of forces: issued in the name of the king, enforced by parliamentary authority, created and administered by the episcopal hierarchy of the national Church, it staked its authority in a different sphere than that of the Bible. By regulating the conduct of public worship, the aural delivery of the Word, and by implication the format of the individual encounter with the divine, it was the central textual mediator of social and religious experience (a recent book has contended that "what church and state *meant* to by far the greatest number of people, high and low, was the Book of Common Prayer").[5] It also, crucially, provided a potent counterweight of order to balance the chaotic promise of Protestant scripturalism and its attendant controversy. The Prayerbook was, in short, designed to fix the problems that the English Bible caused, to stabilize a historical moment in which inspiration threatened to run amok. But by also incorporating the radical individualism implicit in Protestantism, it sought to weave a complex textual matrix of identity which held in productive tension both the imperatives of the hierarchical nation and the prerogatives of the evangelical soul.

It was in part this orderliness that provoked Puritan attacks in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; evangelicals saw the very idea of a coercively uniform liturgy as a popish relic which impeded the individual and improvisatory nature of true faith. Given these politico-religious valences, it is no surprise that the opposing parties in the Civil War defined themselves centrally in terms of textual affiliation. In fact, it

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[4] See Kastan, "Noyse," for a good account of the English Bible's rambunctious early history.

[5] Carrithers and Hardy, *Age of Iron*, 99. Similarly, Maltby (*Prayer Book and People*, 4) suggests that "there was probably no other single aspect of the Reformation in England which touched more directly and fundamentally the religious consciousness, or lack of it, of ordinary clergy and laity, than did the reform of rituals and liturgy."

might be useful to rethink the Civil War as less a matter of old dichotomies of Crown/Parliament or court/country and more a conflict between the competing social, religious, and political visions of a Bible party and a Prayerbook party. Parliament outlawed the BCP on the same day that it attainted Laud (that old arch-liturgist), indicating the high and related priority of both actions; conversely, reestablishing the Prayerbook in what would become its final form was a centerpiece of Charles II's Restoration – a textual monument that powerfully undergirded, and indeed outlived, England's commitment to a specifically religious sociopolitical identity.

So perhaps the Book of Common Prayer, not the English Bible, is the foundational and paradigmatic text of Anglicanism (and more generally of post-Reformation England). But the Prayerbook has, for some, more than a whiff of dusty arch-conservativism about it; it is, after all, the master-text of a putatively elitist Anglicanism once coercive and now moribund. It stands decrepitly, obsoletely, against a historical trend toward accessibility and improvisation to which even the Roman Catholic Church has not proven entirely immune. It is, in short, widely regarded as a relic, a quaint and predictably hegemonic artifact of a distant and repressive past. This alienated view of the Prayerbook, however, not only discourages careful critical attention to the liturgy but also obscures its cultural centrality, its internal complexity, and its deep radicality: while the BCP had extensive continuities with its immediate past, it was also both a revolutionary reconfiguration of that past and one of the deepest taproots of subsequent English identity.

On 21 January 1549, after over a month of debate, Parliament passed the first Act of Uniformity. Attached to this Act was a draft of a new "convenient and meet order, rite, and fashion of common and open prayer and administration of the sacraments," prepared by a committee of "the most learned and discreet bishops, and other learned men of this realm" to the great satisfaction of young King Edward VI.[6] As of Whitsunday of that year (9 June), the Act dictated, all ministers in the king's dominions were to use the new forms exclusively; penalties for using other forms, or failing to use the new form, or openly derogating it, ranged from £10 to life imprisonment and forfeiture of all property. A new era of English civil, religious, and political history was thus announced with the birth of the Book of

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[6] Gee and Hardy, *Documents*, 359. For an account of this debate, see Gasquet and Bishop, *Edward VI*, Appendix 5 (pp. 395–443).

Common Prayer, a smallish book designed to provide uniform orders of worship in English for all church services in the realm.[7]

Although at this writing, 450 years after its introduction, the same essential text is still the official liturgy of the Church of England, the BCP (1549, 1552, 1559, 1662) has a history of near-spectacular neglect among literary scholars; despite the incalculable importance of both the Reformation and the Book of Common Prayer to early modern English culture, literary scholars in recent decades have tended to neglect both, and particularly the latter.[8] But the convergence in the Prayerbook of many strands of political, religious, intellectual, and aesthetic traditions make it an unusually interesting subject for analysis. Politics as well as theology were dominant in its conception, birth, and subsequent history (indeed, I will argue that it is the central textual effort to reconcile the two); in another sphere, it seems to have been looked upon almost at once, and still today, as a critical part of post-Reformation England's cultural identity; in yet another, it became almost immediately one of England's most pervasive and dominant linguistic monuments (one writer has made the striking suggestion that the Book of Common Prayer and the English Bible provided the only regular and nationally uniform experience of the English language until the advent of radio).[9] The language of Thomas Cranmer (Henry VIII's Archbishop and the BCP's chief architect), along with that of William Tyndale and his

[7] The 1549 Prayerbook's contents: (1) Preface (2) Table and Kalendar for determining daily readings (3) Mattins and Evensong (Morning and Evening Prayer) (4) Proper readings for each Sunday and feast day throughout the year (5) Holy Communion (6) Baptism (7) Confirmation (8) Matrimony (9) Visitation of the Sick (10) Burial (11) Purification of Women (12) Ash Wednesday (13) "Of Ceremonies" (Holderness is simply mistaken when he says this essay was "added to the 1552 text" ("Strategies," 22) (14) Concluding rubrics. For a fuller account of the Prayerbook's form and contents, see Appendix.

[8] The last half-century of the Prayerbook's history as a subject of literary attention begins with C. S. Lewis's 1954 appraisal in the *Oxford History of English Literature*; notable commentators since then include Mueller, King, Wall, Booty, Guibbory, Robinson, Helgerson, Diehl, and Carrithers and Hardy (and, more indirectly, Chambers). Yet none of these brief and often incidental treatments – and the preceding inventory is something close to exhaustive – treats the BCP extensively and on its own terms, digging deeply into its text as well as its cultural position to explicate more fully its precise place in the contemporary discursive milieu, its pivotal function and enormous significance in English culture of the sixteenth century and beyond. To this end, there are, really, only two explicitly literary–critical books. The first is Stella Brook's 1965 *The Language of the* Book of Common Prayer, a book-length study of the language and style of the liturgy. Thirty-six years then elapsed before the appearance of the other – Ramie Targoff's 2001 *Common Prayer* – which is a provocative and welcome addition to literary studies, but it is also a thin and flawed book which, despite its insistence on the importance of practice, is poorly grounded not only in theology but also in history and ritual theory. Its emphasis on the triumph of the corporate voice quite deliberately ignores the individualizing implications of the BCP (and the Reformation); the dialectical complexity of the Prayerbook is thus more or less entirely left out of Targoff's account.

[9] Valerie Pitt in Bloom, *Jacobean Poetry and Prose*, 44–56.

successors in Bible translation, formed the twin textual and linguistic pillars
of religious Englishness. Ian Green has estimated that the Prayerbook went
through over 550 printings between 1549 and 1729 – an extraordinary figure
unmatched by any other book of the era, even the King James Bible – and
Judith Maltby has demonstrated the deep commitments many formed to
this book in the Tudor and Stuart eras.[10] Even today, Prayerbook coinages
continue to pervade our expression. Much of the modern wedding service,
from "Dearly beloved" to "to love and to cherish" to "those whom God hath
joined together, let no man put asunder," derives from the BCP; "ashes to
ashes, dust to dust" we owe not to Neil Young but to Cranmer's burial
service. And when Neville Chamberlain returned from the Munich Con-
ference in 1938, thinking that he had averted war, he found the resonance
of "peace in our time" (as had Ernest Hemingway) not in the Bible but in
the Order for Morning Prayer.

In short, the Book of Common Prayer is a text of enormous significance
for both literary and historical study, a pivotal text in the development
of early modern English nationalism and subjectivity, and a deeply per-
vasive presence in subsequent English language and literature. This book
thus attends to the BCP as a promising avenue for an exploratory literary–
historical understanding of the English Reformation and Renaissance, as
well as of the relationship between these complex and ambivalent phe-
nomena. I contend that the Prayerbook (and by extension the English
Reformation itself) was a profoundly important cultural effort to synthe-
size productively the claims and possibilities of two enormously potent, and
potentially contradictory, sixteenth-century conceptual entities: the early
modern nation and the Protestant individual. This synthesis is worked
out *hermeneutically*; the constantly renegotiated balance between individ-
ual and community, authority and conscience, pivots around a newly
stressed faith in the power of representations and their interpretation to
articulate and transform the relations of human and divine, Church and
State, subject and nation. The latter half of this study traces an extension
of these principles, this faith, into the theory, practice, and thematics of
Renaissance literature: Sidney and Shakespeare (and by further extension
Milton and Hobbes), I argue, define their literary/theatrical and political

[10] See Green, *Print and Protestantism*, ch. 5, and Appendix 1, p. 602; Maltby, *Prayer Book and People*,
passim. Maltby argues there has been a tendency in recent historiography to focus disproportionately
on Catholicism (both pre-Reformation and recusant) and the godly activists formerly known as
Puritans, to the neglect of the quietly satisfied, even enthusiastic, establishment center of the Church
of England (see ibid., esp. 1–30). She, as well as Wall, Guibbory, and Targoff, usefully counter the
revisionist tendency to assume that Protestantism consistently destroyed community rather than
creating it.

concerns around a distinctively Reformed axis of fictive signs and their faithful interpretation.[11]

My analysis seeks to make visible some complexities that are frequently overlooked or elided in current literary and historical scholarship. Excavating the tensions in a foundational text enables a more nuanced understanding of the interplay of identity, agency, and authority in this period; in the wake of the English Reformation, I argue, the negotiated reconstitutions of nation and subject were not only intertwined but interdependent. Looking at the Prayerbook – a text that simultaneously was built on coercive vertical authority, and demanded individual construal of its contents – also makes it possible to isolate some important ways in which this dialectic was itself constituted in terms of textuality, figuration, and hermeneutics. And this stress on representation and interpretation, as a mode of negotiating fundamental cultural questions of authority and identity, creates in turn a productive link between liturgy and literature, Reformation and Renaissance.

The importance of these links has not been fully understood in criticism of the last few decades. "For the understanding of English Renaissance literature," a perceptive critic wrote in 1987, "the contribution made by the Reformation in England, Germany and throughout Europe has not yet been fully appreciated."[12] More than a decade later, this continued to be an accurate description of the state of affairs in literary–critical studies of early modern England. For all of criticism's efforts to historicize newly the English Renaissance anew, there remained a curious weakness in the field, a tacit overlooking by many critics of the enormous historical and cultural significance of the Reformation that made it possible.

One might speculate on the reasons why this has been so. To begin with, the Reformation, whatever else it may have been, was a substantially religious phenomenon, and despite its potential to do otherwise, much New Historicist criticism has exhibited painful inadequacies in its treatment of religion; though it has to some degree talked about religion from the beginning, it has done so, for the most part, in highly problematic ways. This is due in part to the thorough secularization of literary criticism in the last several decades, particularly insofar as it has been a deliberate reaction to the former hegemony of warmly Christianized approaches to literature, and in part to the ideological and methodological

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[11] No biographical claims are necessarily implied in this; my concerns are not with authors' religious beliefs but rather with the ways in which they think about the cultural function of signification and reading.

[12] Weimann, "Discourse," 109.

precommitments of the theorists who have shaped recent critical practice; in the case of New Historicism, for example, the totalizing implications of Foucauldian and Althusserian criticism virtually guarantee in advance that religion will be counted as a variety of false consciousness, a discursive mechanism of ideology, rather than a sphere of human experience with its own coherent claims to validity.[13] Consequently, the rejection of religiously normative criticism was not immediately followed with a mode of reading that took religion seriously both in its own right and in terms of its deep implication in other modes of culture. Even a study which ostensibly attempted to do so, Stephen Greenblatt's brilliantly insightful chapter on Tyndale in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, ends up exemplifying the religiously hamstrung quality of High New Historicism. In Greenblatt's account, Tyndale's sacrificial devotion to the authority and availability of the Bible stems ultimately not from religious belief per se but from "an intense need for something external to himself in which he could totally merge his identity" (111) – a simple transfer of psychological dependency from the institutional Church (More's neurosis!) to the inspired Book. This psychologizing of Tyndale's faith is symptomatic of criticism's impulse to translate religious belief into *something else* – psychology, ideology, economics, politics – before it can be talked about; in such accounts, religion is often implicitly an effect or by-product of the "real" which is its putatively true referent. This tendency has persisted in Greenblatt's more subtle recent work: in "The Wound in the Wall," the Eucharist appears to be "about" Christian–Jewish relations, while in "The Mousetrap," it appears to be "about" the philosophical problems of material remainders.[14] My point is not that Greenblatt is necessarily wrong – the eucharistic topos may well have provided a powerful mode of articulating such questions – but rather that there's a lot more at stake, and that a lot is lost when scholars treat religion as really being something else altogether.

This is in part because, despite criticism's frequently professed desires to "make the past strange," it much more often makes it overly familiar. The depth, passion, and occasional ferocity of early modern religious belief simply doesn't resonate in a secular modern culture committed to toleration and agnosticism, so we tend to reduce its alienness by overlooking it, or

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[13] Historian Brad Gregory, writing on the perplexing phenomenon of early modern martyrdom, argues that "insofar as one wants to learn what life in the past meant to the people who lived it, such theories are not the answer. They are the problem" (*Salvation at Stake*, 351).

[14] Both essays are found in Greenblatt and Gallagher, *Practicing New Historicism*. See also David Aers's trenchant critique of the former piece and its critical underpinnings in "New Historicism and the Eucharist," and Beckwith's in "Stephen Greenblatt's *Hamlet* and the Forms of Oblivion," as well as Strier, *Resistant Structures*, ch. 4.