CHAPTER 1

Introduction: towards a materialist account of stage properties

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props (pr: ops) *sb. pl. Theatrical slang*. [Short for *properties*.]
1. a. Stage requisites: see PROPERTY 3.
1841 *Spirit of Times* 16 Oct 396/2 There we subsisted by *spouting*, not Shakespeare, but our dresses and props.

The *OED*'s earliest recorded use of "props" is revealing. Props are modeled in this Victorian exemplum as a diversion, and a ludicrous one, from Shakespeare's plays; unlike the latter, it is implied, props (or costumes) are hardly worth "*spouting*" about. The *OED* citation points to a devaluation of stage properties that is by no means confined to 1841. Subsequent criticism of early modern English drama has if anything intensified this disregard, although perhaps more by omission than commission: props have barely rated more than a passing mention in the vast majority of studies of Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

This neglect finds an objective correlative in the semantic baggage that attaches to the term. "Props" is derived from "property," as the *OED* points out. Yet the term has also acquired some of the connotations of "prop" in the sense of "an object placed *beneath or against* a structure" (emphasis added). The latter meaning certainly resonates with the tendency to regard stage properties as theatrical prostheses, strictly ancillary to and "beneath or against" the main structure, the play-text. Yet the etymological derivation of props should give the materialist critic pause. When props are regarded as *properties*, they may no longer seem to be so trifling: as objects owned by acting companies, impresarios, and players, as objects belonging to – proper to – the institution of the theatre, stage properties encode networks of material relations that are the stuff of drama and society alike.

We should make clear that by stage properties, we mean *all* the moveable physical objects of the stage. As the contributions to this volume

demonstrate, early modern English theatrical furniture, costumes, and hand properties were all implicated within a complex, shifting ensemble of property relations that both theatre history and dramatic literary criticism have been inclined to overlook. In this introductory essay, we offer historiographical explanations for the critical neglect of stage properties. We then propose ways in which specifically materialist analyses of theatrical objects might furnish new and invaluable information about the institution of the early modern London public stage, its play-texts, its modes of cultural as well as theatrical production, and the larger social and economic contexts in which it was embedded.

THE MYTH OF THE BARE STAGE

One of modern theatre history's enduring shibboleths is that the Shakespearean stage was a bare one. This assessment, of course, has never been considered to apply to all theatrical production of the period. It has been long acknowledged, for example, that Stuart court masques and even the children's company plays involved elaborate scenery, machinery, costumes, and props.[1] Yet a whiff of decadence has attached to these stage objects; they are often invoked so they may be reviled, whether as signs of James's and Charles's Neronian excesses – extravagantly masquing while the country burned – or as evidence of the poor taste of the élite private theatergoers, in craven thrall to spectacle and effects, rather than pure poetry. By contrast, the early modern English public stage has customarily been considered to be altogether empty of visual ornament, occupied instead by the comparative immateriality of the playwright's language. There is still a pronounced tendency to valorize the Shakespearean stage as a simple "wooden O" appealing to its audiences' minds rather than their senses, or to their ears rather than their eyes. Many primers on Shakespeare, for example, routinely inform their readers that his contemporaries went to *hear* rather than *see* plays – the implication being that public theatergoers were thoughtful auditors, not mindless spectators.

This view founders, however, on the jagged rocks of historical evidence. Such evidence includes the eyewitness accounts of contemporary theatergoers, the play-scripts themselves, the inventories of tiring-house costumes and properties kept by theatrical companies and entrepreneurs, and even the writings of anti-theatricalist Puritan divines. All these furnish innumerable reminders that early modern London playgoers did not just *hear* plays; they also upheld the original, Greek root of "theatre" – *theasthai*, meaning to watch.

The few recorded responses of individual spectators of Shakespeare's plays repeatedly note their stage properties. Samuel Rowlands, for example, was struck by Richard Burbage's constant caress of his stage-dagger in performances of *Richard III*. Recalling an actor's performance of Malvolio, Leonard Digges notably remembered his costume too, referring to him as "that cross gartered gull." Simon Forman's attention was captured by numerous stage properties, including a chair in *Macbeth*, the bracelet and chest of *Cymbeline*, and Autolycus's "pedlers packe" in *The Winter's Tale*.[2] Play-scripts often explicitly confirm spectators' investment in the visual dimension of performance. In *Pericles*, Gower announces that he is come not only "To glad your ear," but also to "please your eyes"; in the Prologue to *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's*, Thomas Middleton notes of playgoers that "Some in wit, some in shows / Take delight, and some in clothes."[3] Indeed, stage apparel seems to have held a particular fascination for early modern spectators. In *The Gull's Horn Book*, Thomas Dekker instructs playgoing gallants that "by sitting on the stage, you may, with small cost . . . examine the play-suits' lace, and perhaps win wagers upon laying 'tis copper."[4]

While critics have recently begun to reevaluate the importance of clothes and costumes within the nascent entertainment industry of the public theatre,[5] many other types of stage property remain neglected. That the public stage was populated not just by extravagant costumes, but by other eye-catching objects as well, is attested by Philip Henslowe's well-known, and doubtless incomplete, 1598 inventory of the Admiral's Men's properties (see appendix at the end of the volume). The latter includes not only a number of fairly humble, functional objects, such as "an elm bowl," a "pair of rough gloves," and "one plain crown," but also a quite staggering array of properties obviously designed to impress the eye: "one Hell mouth"; "one pair of stairs for *Phaëton*"; "two moss banks"; "one tree of golden apples"; "one great horse with his legs"; "one cauldron for *The Jew*"; "the cloth of the sun and the moon"; and, perhaps most impressive, "the city of Rome."[6]

Stage directions offer another invaluable and neglected source of information about theatrical properties.[7] The props listed in the stage directions of George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar*, for example, performed by the Admiral's Men in the late 1580s, include "raw fleshe" impaled upon a character's sword, "dead mens heads in dishes," and, in the induction to the final act, a tree from which Fame descends, several crowns, a blazing star, and fireworks.[8] The stage directions for the spectacular funeral of Zenocrate in *Tamburlaine Part Two*, in the Admiral's repertory at much the same time as Peele's play, demand the simulated burning of

an entire town.[9] Plays performed by other companies likewise entailed the display of visually striking properties and effects. The stage direction in 4.3 of *The Lady's Tragedy*, performed by the King's Men in 1613, expressly calls for a "tomb here discovered, *richly* set forth" (emphasis added);[10] Thomas Heywood's *Age* plays, performed by the Queen Anne's Men at the Red Bull in 1610–12, demand an abundance of lavish properties and effects such as a "sea-horse" ridden by Neptune, the colossal Trojan horse of the Greeks, a "raine-bow," "burning weapons," and, the *pièce de résistance*, a flying, flaming bed.[11]

As the properties called for in these stage-directions make quite clear, the objects of the early modern stage were often intended not merely to catch, but to overwhelm the eye by means of their real or apparent costliness, motion, and capacity to surprise. In performances of plays in all the public theatres, dazzling properties were exposed in the discovery space, wheeled onto the main playing area, raised through trapdoors, or – much to Ben Jonson's annoyance – lowered from the heavens (the conventional "creaking throne [that] comes down, the boys to please").[12] Despite the relative absence of scenery, Henslowe's city of Rome notwithstanding, the public playhouse supplemented the visual impact of its costumes and props with its spectacular architecture, whether wooden, painted, or even human. The gallery could serve as the wall of a city or a castle; the brightly painted canopy "or counterfit heauen ouer the stage," as John Higgins called it in his *Nomenclator* (1584), was where "some god appeared or spoke";[13] the wooden pillars supporting the heavens, which the Dutch tourist Johannes De Witt praised as "painted in such excellent imitation of marble that it is able to deceive even the most cunning," may well have doubled as the columns of Greek temples, Roman palaces, or *Tamburlaine*'s "stately buildings of fair Babylon" with their "lofty pillars."[14] Even the audience themselves could be co-opted for the spectacular display of the playhouse's materiality, as is made clear by the extended conceit of 1.2 of Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl* (1611), which transformed the Fortune theatre into Sir Alexander Wengrave's private library, and the colorfully clad audience members into its diverse books.[15] If the play was the thing, therefore, this was in part because the *staging* of the play often entailed a variety of marvelous, eye-catching things.

The widespread erasure of the visual dimensions of the public stage in modern theatre criticism, coupled with the glorification of its playwrights' supposedly accessory-less poetic inspiration and powers of imagination, has a long history. Although most forcefully articulated during

the Romantic period, its roots can be traced back, paradoxically, to the Puritan anti-theatrical writers who made it their business to attack the visual excess of the Elizabethan stage. The discourses of this tradition have been extensively plotted by literary as well as theatre historians, most notably Jonas Barish in his magisterial *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. Particularly suggestive for our purposes is Barish's analysis of how early modern English anti-theatricality was fueled in large part by a Protestant disdain for the supposedly "theatrical" accessories of Catholic ritual such as relics, priests' vestments and, most especially, the sacrament of the Eucharist. Barish explains how the "hardening Protestant attitude toward the Eucharist itself sprang from a distrust of visible and sensible things. The idea that so much supernatural potency lay in an inert biscuit, or that anything so palpable and localized in space could wield so much enormous leverage in the spiritual world, was one that the reformers could not accept . . . It had been turned into a thing of spectacle, to be gazed upon and marveled at."[16] As Barish's remarks intriguingly hint, Protestant iconoclasm and antipathy to the theatre operated in tandem with a pronounced hostility to *objects*: the props of religious and dramatic ritual alike served – as did the paltry Eucharist biscuit – to distract attention from more godly, hidden truths, by virtue of their very visibility. Indeed, the *OED*'s list of definitions for "object" suggests that one of the dominant meanings of the word in early modern England was "something placed before the eyes, or presented to the sight."[17]

In his well-known invectives against the evils of the Elizabethan stage, Stephen Gosson repeatedly warns against the distracting power of its visible objects. Some six years after the opening of the Theatre and the Curtain in 1576, he complained about "the masse of expences in these spectacles that scarce last like shooes of browne paper,"[18] an assessment that speaks to the power of the theatre's visual details even as it endeavors to belittle these as flimsy ephemera. "Sometime," Gosson tells his readers,

> . . . you shall see nothing but the adventures of an amorous knight, passing from countrie to countrie for the loue of his lady, encountering many a terrible monster made of broune paper, & at his retorne, is so wonderfully changed, that he can not be knowne but by some posie in his tablet, or by a broken ring, or a handkircher, or a piece of a cockle shell, what learne you by that? When ye soule of your plays is . . . meere trifles . . . what are we taught?

Complaining that "the statelynes of the preparation drownes ye delight which the matter affords," Gosson proceeds to ask: "what delight . . . hath the sight of 600. mules in *Clytemnestra*; or 3000. cuppes in the *Troian*

horse?"[19] In these passages, Gosson's anti-theatricalism expresses itself in an outrage directed less at drama as such, than at props' potential to displace or obstruct dramatic meaning due to their very visibility: the mere sight of those impressively inexplicable six hundred mules and three thousand cups – doubtless exaggerated figures – gets in the way of, even usurps, the ineffable "soule of your plays."

Gosson's animus against the visible dimensions of theatre was reiterated nearly half a century later by the Puritan William Prynne, who professed in 1633 to be disturbed by the "overcostly gawdinesse" of stage apparel.[20] Yet there is much more than a knee-jerk, religious aversion to the visible object at work in these outbursts. Significantly, Gosson's and Prynne's disdain for stage properties betrays a hostility to their extra-dramatic economic freight, the uneffaced signs of their costs and histories of production. Note Prynne's irritation at costumes' "overcostliness," or Gosson's at both the expensive "statelynes of the preparation" and the "broune paper" monster that flaunts not just its artificiality, but also the cheap and disposable materials out of which it was manufactured. Hence the anti-theatricalists' pointedly Puritan distrust of the visible is motivated, at least in these passages, just as much by the distracting glimpses stage properties afford of their material, economic histories as by their sensible objecthood.

For Gosson and Prynne, the economic histories that stage properties bring to visibility entail two related yet distinct dimensions: the conspicuous consumption of superfluous, perishable commodities by actors and/or theatre companies; and, perhaps more importantly, processes of production not necessarily confined to the companies, involving non-theatrical artisanal labor. Interestingly, the anti-theatricalists' aversion to this latter dimension of props' economic histories seems often to have been shared by playwrights. Ben Jonson repeatedly felt himself to be in competition with stage materials, their designers, and their artisanal manufacturers.[21] Even the relatively stage-property-friendly Thomas Dekker asserts in *The Magnificent Entertainment* (1603) that "the Soule that should giue life, and a tongue" to plays is breathed "out of Writers pens," but that "the limnes of it ly at the hard-handed mercy of Mycanitiens [i.e. mechanicals] . . . Carpenters, Ioyners, Caruers, and other Artificers sweating at their Chizzells."[22] The attention Dekker focuses here not only on the materials of stage performance, but also on their histories of manufacture by callous, sweating "Mycanitiens" and "Artificers," underscores how stage properties potentially introduce into any play a plurality of makers, a multiplicity of meanings, and alternate tales of the body or

of artisanal labor. These tales lead away from the playwright's scripted drama and into what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai terms the "social lives of things"[23] – the refractory histories of production, ownership, and exchange that constitute objects' trajectories through time and space.

Literary criticism of early modern drama in general and of Shakespeare's plays in particular has belittled or ignored these histories. In the process, it has worked to articulate a related sequence of oppositions or hierarchies, privileging the aesthetic over the economic, the textual over the theatrical, the ineffable over the material, the human over the mechanical, the subject over the object. Shakespeare has played a crucial yet contradictory role in the evolution of these distinctions, inasmuch as he and his plays have been variously aligned with both negative and positive poles in all the above oppositions. Initially cast as a base artisan inhabiting a commercial, theatrical world of trifling objects, Shakespeare came to be refashioned by later generations of critics, especially the Romantics, as the peerless representative of a transcendent dramatic literature whose native habitat, the individual imagination, disdains vulgar physical accoutrements.

THE RISE OF PROP-FREE SHAKESPEARE

The earlier, negative version of Shakespeare informs much of Thomas Rymer's legendarily splenetic censure of *Othello* in his *Short View of Tragedy* (1692). To support his contention that Shakespeare was "out of his element" in writing tragedy, Rymer repeatedly equates him with those "Carpenters, Coblers, and illiterate fellows," the artisanal players of medieval drama who "found that the Drolls, and Fooleries interlarded by them, brought in the rabble . . . so they got Money by the bargain." The medieval players' commercial acumen was emulated and even outdone by Shakespeare who, Rymer asserts with the help of a nimble equivocation on the double meaning of "master" as authority and as skilled artisan, "was a great Master in this craft." To Rymer's eyes, of course, the transformation of drama into money-making, artisanal "craft" can only be seen as "un-hallowing the Theatre, profaning the name of Tragedy." This language is markedly redolent of Puritan invectives against the materiality of the Catholic church, profaned by idolatrous props such as the Eucharist biscuit and priests' vestments. So it is no surprise that Rymer should proceed to attribute Shakespeare's baseness not only to the "Fooleries" of artisanal culture, but also to the distracting primacy of stage properties on the Elizabethan stage. In what is perhaps his most withering

criticism of *Othello*, Rymer exclaims: "So much ado, so much stress, so much passion and repetition about an Handkerchief! Why was not this call'd the *Tragedy of the Handkerchief*? What can be more absurd . . . ?" And he continues: "we have heard of *Fortunatus his Purse*, and of the *Invisible Cloak*, long ago worn threadbare, and stow'd up in the Wardrobe of obsolete Romances: one might think, that were a fitter place for this Handkerchief, than that it, at this time of day, be worn on the Stage, to raise every where all this clutter and turmoil."[24] One might note here that if the Elizabethan stage looks bare to the modern theatre historian, this early modern observer viewed it as positively "cluttered." The stage properties Rymer singles out, moreover, are not unconnected to his earlier critique of commercially oriented stage "craft." The handkerchief, purse, and threadbare cloak serve as synecdoches not only for Shakespeare's "unhallowed" or "profane" theatre, in which mere clutter has supplanted classical tragedy, but also for the economic world of artisanal production, commerce, and traffic in goods to which Rymer dismissively consigns that theatre.

The animus Rymer expresses against stage properties was by no means confined to those of a Puritan bent. In the introduction to his 1723 edition of Shakespeare's plays, the Catholic Alexander Pope displays a similar hostility towards stage properties. Unlike Rymer, however, Pope persistently sets up both artisanal culture and the stage clutter it produces as the vulgar domains from which the playwright's career, themes, and texts alike need to be rescued. A distinction must be drawn, Pope insists, "between the real merit of the Author, and the silly and derogatory applauses of the Players," which only reflect the fatuous tastes of the paying audience members. Observing censoriously that for commercial reasons Shakespeare's early comedies pandered to such audiences, locating "their Scene among *Tradesmen* and *Mechanicks*," Pope salutes the playwright's transcendence of this base artisanal world in his later, more mature work. Even if Shakespeare successfully escaped the squalor of economic themes and his theatre's commercial imperatives, however, editorial work still needs to be done to purge his play-scripts of any trace of the contaminating materiality and labor of the stage. Pope complains that "the notes of direction to the *Property-men* for their *Moveables*, and to the *Players* for their *Entries*, are inserted into the Text, thro' the ignorance of the Transcribers"; to make his point, he singles out in a footnote that much debated line about Falstaff's death in *Henry V*, "His nose grew as sharp as a pen, and *a table of Greenfield's*, &c" (2.3.17), and proposes that the mysterious "table" is in fact a stray stage property.[25] By evicting

such trespassers, Pope suggests, Shakespeare's plays may be successfully converted from unruly theatrical spectacles for and by the vulgar into disciplined texts of sublime, dramatic literature whose meanings are unsullied by the disruptive effects of stage properties, their handlers, or their makers.

Pope's attempts to distill a "pure," literary Shakespeare from the dross of the theatrical and the economic were repeated with far greater alacrity by the Romantics. Indeed, the baleful flame of a residual Puritanical anti-theatricalism flickers strongly in much Shakespeare criticism of the period. Samuel Taylor Coleridge makes this quite explicit with his decidedly ambiguous definition of "theatre," which he characterizes as "the general term for all places thro' the ear or eye in which men assemble in order to be amused by some entertainment presented to all at the same time. Thus, an old Puritan divine says: 'Those who attend public worship and sermons only to amuse themselves, make a theatre of the church, and turn God's house into the devil's. *Theatra aedes diabololatricae*.' "[26] Complaining about an actor's performance of Macbeth, Charles Lamb speaks yet more transparently of "the discrepancy I felt at the changes of garment which he varied, – the shiftings and re-shiftings, like a Romish priest at mass."[27] Both Coleridge and Lamb were reacting largely against the illusionist proscenium theatre of their age, whose extravagant, highly ornate visual tableaux they considered to detract from the sublimity of Shakespeare's poetry. For them, the only solution was to take Shakespeare out of the contemporary public theatre and reinstate him in the private study of the individual reader. Such a relocation was repeatedly justified by appeals to a nostalgic misconception of the early modern stage, one that left it looking a little like Coleridge's own study. In his lectures of 1811–12, Coleridge asserted that the accidents of Shakespeare's stage had forced the playwright "to rely on his own imagination, and to speak not to the sense, as was now done, but to the mind. He found the stage as near as possible a closet, and in the closet only could it be fully and completely enjoyed."[28] Initiating the remarkably tenacious trend of citing *Henry V*'s Chorus to support the image of the bare "Wooden O" filled only by text and imagination, Coleridge maintained that the Elizabethan theatre "had no artificial, extraneous inducements – few scenes, little music – and all that was to excite the sense in a high degree was wanting. Shakespeare himself said, 'We appeal to your imaginations; by your imagination you can conceive this round O to be a mighty field of monarchs and if you do not, all must seem absurd.' "[29]

What is particularly striking about the Romantics' Shakespearean stage of and for the imagination, though, is how it repeatedly evinces a scorn not just for sense-exciting performance or spectacle, but specifically for the stage property. Like Stephen Gosson, many of the Romantics regarded theatrical objects as usurping the soul or, to use their own terminology, the *ideal* of Shakespeare's plays. Lamb was most forthright in his hostility to the stage property:

> The reading of a tragedy is a fine abstraction. It presents to the fancy just so much of external appearances as to make us feel that we are among flesh and blood, while by far the greater and better part of our imagination is employed upon the thoughts and internal machinery of the character. But in acting, scenery, dress, the most contemptible things, call upon us to judge of their naturalness.

Lamb's discussions of individual plays repeatedly circle back to the "contemptible" nature of theatrical "things." He says of *The Tempest* that "it is one thing to read of an enchanter, and to believe the wondrous tale while we are reading it; but to have a conjuror brought before us in his conjuring-gown . . ." And of *King Lear*, which he famously pronounced unperformable, he observes that "the sublime images, the poetry alone, is that which is present to our minds in the reading . . . So to see Lear acted, – to see an old man tottering about the stage with a walking-stick . . . has nothing in it but what is painful and disgusting."[30] Like Gosson's objections to cups and mules, Lamb's animus against conjuring-gowns, walking-sticks and the body of the "tottering" actor is driven by a conviction that these constitute unwelcome physical distractions from a much more valuable immateriality, in this case "the poetry present in our minds."

That this Romantic hostility to the stage property involved more than a disdain for the visible and, like Gosson's or Dekker's observations about theatrical objects, entailed also an aversion to its material history, is evident from a review by William Hazlitt of an 1818 performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

> All that is fine in the play, was lost in the representation. The spirit was evaporated, the genius was fled; but the spectacle was fine: it was that which saved the play. Oh, ye scene-shifters, ye scene-painters, ye machinists and dress-makers, ye manufacturers of moon and stars that give no light . . . rejoice! This is your triumph; it is not ours . . . Poetry and the stage do not agree together. The attempt to reconcile them fails not only of effect, but of decorum. The *ideal* has no place on the stage, which is a picture without perspective; everything there is in the foreground. That which is merely an airy shape, a dream, a passing thought,