

STAGED PROPERTIES  
IN EARLY MODERN  
ENGLISH DRAMA

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CHAPTER I

*Introduction: towards a materialist account  
of stage properties*

*Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda*

**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.<sup>1</sup> 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*.<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup>

While critics have recently begun to reevaluate the importance of clothes and costumes within the nascent entertainment industry of the public theatre,<sup>5</sup> 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."<sup>6</sup>

Stage directions offer another invaluable and neglected source of information about theatrical properties.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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);<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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").<sup>12</sup> 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";<sup>13</sup> 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."<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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."<sup>16</sup> 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."<sup>17</sup>

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,"<sup>18</sup> 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 cuntry to cuntry for the loue of his lady, encountering many a terrible monster made of browne 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 statelines 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?*"<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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."<sup>22</sup> 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"<sup>23</sup> – 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.”<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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 un-sullied 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 diabolatrica.*'"<sup>26</sup> 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."<sup>27</sup> 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."<sup>28</sup> 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.'<sup>29</sup>

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."<sup>30</sup> 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,

immediately becomes an unmanageable reality . . . Thus Bottom's head in the play is a fantastic illusion, produced by magic spells: on the stage it is an ass's head, and nothing more; certainly a very strange costume for a man to appear in.<sup>31</sup>

Hazlitt's extended complaint betrays a deep-rooted hostility to the economic dimensions of theatrical production. The "spirit" or "airy shape" of his cherished "*ideal*" play – or rather, *play-script* – has been punctured by the contrivances of mere "manufacturers" such as "scene-shifters," "scene-painters," "machinists" and "dress-makers," an uncanny repetition of the play's own subordination of fairy spirits to the carnivalesque misrule of so-called rude mechanicals. As his remarks about the still ruder "manufacturers" make quite clear, what Hazlitt sees in the objects of the stage is not just their physical materiality, but also their pre-stage histories. These point decisively away from the "fantastic illusion" of the play: artifice presumes artificers and hence narratives of mechanical labor that compete with the sublime "dreams" of the poet. It is such narratives, we would argue, that constitute the "unmanageable reality" Hazlitt complains of. The phrase suggestively captures something of the refractory nature of stage properties. Like Snout's crude "rough-cast" wall in the play of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, theatrical objects always potentially refuse to be subordinated to the *logos* of the play in which they appear and instead make visible, by virtue of their conspicuous fabricativeness, alternate dramas of manufacture and the body.

#### TWENTIETH-CENTURY DEMATERIALIZATIONS

Hazlitt's invective against the spirit-evaporating "unmanageability" of stage properties hints at a generalized resistance of theatrical matter to domestication by and within "airy shapes." But his language evinces also a quite historically specific structure of feeling: his derogatory term "machinist" expresses an anxiety about a world in which the machine more than its operator has become the motor of production, thereby enabling the mass manufacture and consumption of disposable commodities. This anxiety arguably intensified in twentieth-century theatrical discourse.<sup>32</sup> Modernist theatre criticism was particularly haunted by the specter of the machine, which it sought to exorcize by repeated appeals to a higher power: early modern public stagecraft.<sup>33</sup> Take, for example, Harley Granville-Barker's idealization of Elizabethan public theatre in opposition to the Jacobean masque:

The Elizabethan drama made an amazingly quick advance from crudity to an excellence which was often technically most elaborate. The advance and the not less amazing gulf which divides its best from its worst may be ascribed to the simplicity of the machinery it employed. That its decadence was precipitated by the influence of the Mask and the shifting of its center of interest from the barer public stage to the candle-lit private theatre, where the machinery of the Mask became effective, it would be rash to assert; but the occurrences are suspiciously related. Man and machine (here at any rate is a postulate, if a platitude!) are false allies in the theatre, secretly at odds; and when man gets the worst of it, drama is impoverished; and the struggle, we may add, is perennial. No great drama depends upon pageantry. All great drama tends to concentrate upon character; and, even so, not upon picturing men as they show themselves to the world like the figures on a stage – though that is how it must ostensibly show them – but on the hidden man.<sup>34</sup>

A whiff of Papist “candle-lit” ritual arguably lurks in Granville-Barker’s remarks about the “decadent” private stage and its machinery: the latter gets in the way of, even replaces, what he regards as the true stuff of theatre – “the hidden man,” or interior Protestant subject. Far more noticeable than any residual anti-Catholic anti-theatricality, however, is Granville-Barker’s anxiety about the relationship between human and machine, which suggests an intensification of Hazlitt’s disdain for the “machinist.” In this context, his use of the adverb “technically” is quite striking. Elizabethan drama is for Granville-Barker “technically most elaborate” not because of its props, machines or physical special effects, but because of its *metaphysical*, or psychological, sophistication. Here we can glimpse how the notion that the Elizabethan public stage was a theatre of subjects rather than objects, of “hidden men” rather than “pageantry,” served as a consoling myth and rallying point for a precarious post-Romantic humanism threatened by the impersonality of mechanical production.<sup>35</sup>

In marked contrast to Granville-Barker’s disdain for machinery and spectacle, however, another strain of modernist theatre scholarship displayed more sympathy to stage objects. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1919), Walter Benjamin placed considerable emphasis on the role played by the props of baroque *Trauerspiel*, or mourning-drama. Benjamin saw reflected in this genre (whose most typical specimen, although non-German, he considered to be Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*) the defining feature of his own capitalist society – what he called *das Primat des Dinghaften vor dem Personalen*, the dominance of things over sentiment, of the reified over the personal: “if tragedy is completely released from the world of things, this world towers oppressively over the horizon of

the *Trauerspiel*... there is no getting away from the stage property.”<sup>36</sup> Benjamin’s reading of the baroque stage property arguably preserves the terms of the Romantic oppositions between subject and object, humans and mechanical things. Nevertheless, his sympathetic account of how “the life of [the] apparently dead” prop of *Trauerspiel* punctures any dramatic illusion of pure ideality by anchoring the play in the “profane world” of historical contingency not only contains the seeds of his later support for Bertolt Brecht’s materialist theatre of alienation;<sup>37</sup> it also provides a potentially fruitful starting point for theorizing the social as well as dramatic lives of stage properties.

Benjamin’s notes on the baroque stage property, however, were overwhelmingly ignored by subsequent twentieth-century theatre historians and literary critics.<sup>38</sup> Even the few scholarly studies devoted to early modern costumes, props, and scenery displayed a modicum of nervousness about the materiality of stage materials, frequently disciplining them and harnessing their meanings to those of the play-text by focusing exclusively on their functional and symbolic dimensions. This is the methodological orientation of the only two book-length studies of Elizabethan stage properties, Felix Bossonet’s *The Function of Stage Properties in Christopher Marlowe’s Plays* (1978) and Frances Teague’s important *Shakespeare’s Speaking Properties* (1991). Valuable as these studies are, they largely ignore theatrical objects’ specifically material dimensions. When properties “speak” to audiences, Teague argues, they communicate not their extra-dramatic histories, but “significant presentational image clusters” that stand in centripetal relation to the symbolic dimensions of the entertainments in which they appear.<sup>39</sup>

James Calderwood’s influential work on metatheatricality and early modern stage properties provides a particularly good illustration of this dematerializing tendency. In *Shakespearean Metadrama* (1971), Calderwood considers the status of a common early modern prop, the three-legged joint stool, in the scene where Lady Macbeth chides her husband for his embarrassingly public reaction to Banquo’s ghost. Calderwood’s remarks are worth quoting at some length.

“Why do you make such faces?” Lady Macbeth demands; “When all’s done, / You look but on a stool.” To be sure, and yet all the audience in the Globe has been looking on is but a stool too. This sudden casting of doubt on the nature and identity of the most innocent of stage props may cause us to wonder naively to whom the stool belongs. Is it the property, quite literally the stage property, of Shakespeare’s acting company, the King’s Men, or is it fully absorbed into the dramatic fiction where it becomes part of the furnishings of Macbeth’s castle, an

item on his steward's inventory? For the play to succeed as realistic illusion the audience must regard the stool as Macbeth's, which means fictionalizing in their imaginations an object that remains incorrigibly what it was before the play began. The process is analogous to the absorption of language into a literary work. For the language the poet uses comes as drab and gross from the everyday world as Macbeth's joint stool; but it has been transformed by the poetic imagination into a self-enclosed complex of meaning that abandons its referential dependence on the world outside. The joint stool in *Macbeth* undergoes one further transformation – from an object in the Globe theatre to an object in *Macbeth*'s castle to the hallucinated ghost of Banquo. Now Macbeth owns it uniquely; it has been wholly interiorized by the fictive world and no longer bears any likeness to its original form; there is no way back from Banquo's ghost to the joint stool owned by the King's Men. Nor is there any route by which we can return from the language of *Macbeth*, whose meanings are uniquely contained in their own ghostly linguistic forms, to the language of Jacobean England from which it came. This is true partly because just as the joint stool becomes Macbeth's by virtue of its insertion into a fictional context – its environment changing but not itself – so language is reconstituted by Shakespeare in *Macbeth* not through any material alteration in words but by virtue of their contextual relations.<sup>49</sup>

Calderwood's argument entails a two-step transubstantiation of the joint stool: the “drab and gross” materiality of the stage property, owned (or so he presumes) by the King's Men, is “fully absorbed into the dramatic fiction where it becomes part of the furnishings of Macbeth's castle,” and thus becomes apparently less material insofar as it is now merely a fictional joint stool. In order for its transubstantiation to be complete, however, the joint stool must undergo “one further transformation”: its fleshly materiality must be rendered ghostly spirit, the spirit not of an object but of a subject, Banquo. This final transformation, whereby Macbeth takes possession of the joint stool by interiorizing it, likewise allows it to be “wholly interiorized by the fictive world” of the play. Notably, Calderwood believes that the turnstile through which *Macbeth*'s piece of furniture passes can rotate in only one direction: “there is no way back from Banquo's ghost to the joint stool owned by the King's Men.”

Yet as we have shown here, and as Stephen Gosson already knew, early modern English stage properties repeatedly found ways to reverse the dematerializing trajectory plotted by Calderwood. Indeed, theatrical objects have a habit of drawing attention to themselves as things with material lives surplus to the “fictive worlds” into which they have been enlisted. If stage properties “speak,” to borrow Frances Teague's suggestive coinage, what they communicate often departs from the script of the Hazlittian “ideal.” Instead of regarding Gosson as just a Puritan

crackpot or killjoy, therefore, we might take seriously his claims about Elizabethan theatrical properties, and acknowledge their power to puncture dramatic illusion by pointing to alternate social dramas of economic production, exchange, and ownership. It is these latter dramas that the essays of *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama* attempt to bring to critical visibility, employing a variety of materialist methods of analysis.

#### REMATIALIZING THE STAGE PROPERTY

It is perhaps surprising that, to date, avowedly materialist criticism of early modern drama has tended to reinforce the Romantic preference for dramatic text or character over theatrical objects. Though singularly concerned with the emergence of institutions of private property on the stage of history, such criticism has yet to offer a cogent account of stage properties. Andrew Sofer's important forthcoming study, *The Stage Life of Props*, pays attention to the materiality of objects "within the unfolding spatio-temporal event in the playhouse."<sup>41</sup> Yet the extent to which the objects of the early modern English playhouses participated within larger material networks of property relations off- as well as onstage remains largely ignored. Materialist critics of early modern drama have adroitly countered Romanticist fallacies of the "internal machinery of characters."<sup>42</sup> In a perhaps typical case of critique serving unwittingly to reinscribe other conventional hierarchies of value, however, materialists' failure to pay attention to stage properties has helped buttress the illusion that the early modern theatre was invested exclusively, if problematically, in the "inner world" of the subject.

Recently, however, the critical tide has begun to turn. Early modern scholarship has become obsessed with materiality; the trickle of studies of material culture that began in the 1980s has turned into a veritable flood at the millennium.<sup>43</sup> In the process, theatrical objects have increasingly joined subjects as privileged sites of materialist critical inquiry. In *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare* (1992), for example, Douglas Bruster explores the interrelations of stage properties and the personal in plays from *Jack Juggler* (1555) through *Bartholomew Fair* (1614).<sup>44</sup> As Margreta De Grazia observes in the important recent collection *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture* (1996), early modern conceptions of identity always required external things: "subjectivity effects," she argues, were inextricably entwined with "personal effects."<sup>45</sup> Yet the objects of the early modern English public stage were not merely indispensable adjuncts to or determinants of Hamlet's legendary interiority, "that within

which passeth show.” As De Grazia’s essay itself makes clear, Renaissance objects also materialized changing conceptions of property and constellations of property relations. In what ways, then, might materialist dramatic criticism offer accounts of specifically theatrical objects that do not simply subsume the latter within the post-Romantic problematic of the subject?

Materialism, of course, is not monolithic. It boasts numerous, occasionally conflicting traditions, and the current wave of scholarship on early modern material culture is no exception.<sup>46</sup> For strategic purposes, it will be useful to distinguish between five methodologically discrete yet overlapping materialist approaches to Renaissance objects, each of which offers productive points of departure for the essays in this volume.

The first entails the qualitative analysis of the stuff of material culture. This approach reflects the dominant methodological strain of the new historicism, which since Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) has sought to disclose the contours and faultlines of cultural formations through nuanced accounts of synecdochic microdetail – a strategy redolent of the “thick description” famously advocated by cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz.<sup>47</sup> In contrast to the preoccupation with the subject that distinguished early new historicist work, qualitative analysis of early modern material culture has increasingly focused on the object, thanks in no small part to a growing engagement with Michel de Certeau’s theorization of the “everyday.”<sup>48</sup> This engagement is exemplified by Patricia Fumerton and Simon Hunt’s edited collection *Renaissance Culture and the Everyday* (1999), which takes as its starting point de Certeau’s dictum that everyday practices and their objects transform rather than simply reproduce social structures and cultural systems. Through detailed descriptions of objects such as buck-baskets and embroidered psalmbooks, the volume’s essays seek to show that early modern materials are not simply static things, but points of intersection for myriad relations of property and power.<sup>49</sup>

In focusing on the material attributes or properties of particular objects, however, exclusively qualitative analyses risk ignoring the larger economic frameworks within which such objects are situated. In tandem with this approach, therefore, materialist criticism has also begun to undertake quantitative analysis of patterns of production, consumption, and ownership of the world of goods. Such analysis has a rich tradition within social history, as is evidenced by the work of Joan Thirsk and, more recently, of Susan Staves, Carole Shammas, and Amy Erickson.<sup>50</sup> These scholars have ably demonstrated the importance of quantitative

analyses in determining what kinds of property passed through the hands of ordinary men and women in the period. In the case of materialist literary and dramatic criticism, quantitative analysis can yield insight into the divergences as well as the convergences of the text and its material contexts. Several contributors to this volume have begun to review archival documents of stage-history through a recognizably quantitative lens.<sup>51</sup> As the work of Douglas Bruster, Lena Cowen Orlin, Peter Stallybrass and Natasha Korda shows, statistical analysis offers materialist critics a convenient way of illuminating histories that have been excluded from literary or dramatic representation.

Much of the recent scholarship on the early modern world of goods, however, has avoided theoretical reflection on what constitutes materiality. As a consequence, there has been a pervasive tendency to equate the “material” with the “physical.” This equation unwittingly inverts the valences of the traditional Aristotelian opposition between “form” and “matter,” according to which form is actuality and matter potentiality (*dynamēos*). Aristotle thus understood materiality as a synonym not for physical presence, but for dynamic process; matter, in his analysis, is always *worked upon*. Marx attributed the same meaning to matter in his “Thesis on Feuerbach,” in which he criticized Feuerbach for understanding matter “only in the *form* of the *object*.”<sup>52</sup> Marx, by contrast, understood the materiality of objects to embrace as well the domain of labor and *praxis*, and thus to entail social relations of *production* – relations, Marx argued, that are effaced in the commodity form. Increasingly, scholarship on early modern material culture is returning to Marx’s more dynamic, labor-oriented theories of materiality.<sup>53</sup>

These first three types of object analysis often privilege the synchronic, offering snapshots of a cultural moment. Diachronic materialist approaches to early modern culture seek to bring to visibility changing relations of economic and ideological production; in the process, they tend to make critical use of Marx’s narratives of historical change, but in ways that avoid the teleological determinism and reductive economism of the latter. Recent materialist accounts of historical change in early modern England have often been critically interarticulated with Michel Foucault’s archaeological studies of knowledge, according to which an object is less a thing anterior to discourse and power than an effect of them.<sup>54</sup> A particularly good example of this more diachronic materialist approach to early modern culture is Richard Halpern’s *Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: the Genealogy of Capital in Renaissance Culture* (1991), which provocatively adapts Marx’s study of the early modern economic

preconditions for capitalism in order to illuminate the textual formations that prefigured it.<sup>55</sup> Halpern does not explicitly analyze physical objects in his study; but the approach to primitive capital accumulation that his argument models suggests how early modern property may be read not only in terms of changing relations of economic production, but also as a discursive effect, or Foucauldian “object,” of changing organizations of knowledge and power.

Perhaps the newest development in criticism of early modern material culture and property, and one exemplified particularly well by many of the contributions to this volume, involves a somewhat different type of diachronic analysis: the study of processes of institutional exchange. This type of analysis has been foreshadowed by Stephen Greenblatt’s evocative account in *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988) of the migration of religious properties from the vestries of dissolved monasteries to the tiring-houses of theatres.<sup>56</sup> The most comprehensive theorization of objects’ material trajectories of exchange is to be found in Arjun Appadurai’s edited collection, *The Social Life of Things* (1986). The majority of the volume’s contributions analyze objects and social processes well outside the orbit of early modern English studies (e.g. the history of cloth in Raj-era India and the circulation of *qat* plant in post-colonial northeast Africa). Nonetheless, their shared methodology is highly suggestive for scholars of early modern material culture. Objects, in Appadurai’s words, possess “life histories” or “careers” of exchange that invest them with social significance and cultural value. According to this view, objects do not simply acquire meaning by virtue of their present social contexts; rather, they impart significance to those contexts as a result of the paths they have traced through time and space. The significance a particular object assumes thus derives from the differential relation of its present context to its known or assumed past, and potential future, contexts. In order to read the meanings of any object, then, it becomes necessary to trace its “cultural biography” as it “moves through different hands, contexts, and uses.” It is “things-in-motion,” as Appadurai puts it, “that illuminate their human and social context[s].”<sup>57</sup> Appadurai’s choice of phrase might have a particular resonance for the scholar of early modern drama, for Shakespeare uses it – to similar effect – in *Troilus and Cressida*: “things in motion sooner catch the eye / Than what stirs not” (3.3.183–4).

These five strands of materialist criticism are by no means mutually exclusive. Although there are obvious ways in which (for example) a committedly positivist quantitative analysis of objects might come into conflict with a Foucauldian account of discursive production, the various

strands we have sketched here can also be mutually reinforcing. In collating the various contributions to *Staged Properties*, we have sought to highlight the ways in which seemingly divergent materialisms can work together to broaden and deepen our understanding of stage properties, the plays in which they appear, the institutions and agents that own them, and the social, economic and cultural contexts in which they are embedded – including the changing configurations of property that their social and dramatic lives disclose.

Our principle of organization has been to group the essays in four sections, each of whose contributions embody different, though highly complementary, materialist approaches to a specific issue pertaining to stage properties. In the process, numerous unforeseen links and new opportunities for materialist critical dialogue emerge. The essays in the opening part, “Histories,” offer two very different ways of understanding early modern stage properties and historical shifts within their types, meanings, and economic contexts. In “Properties of skill: product placement in early English artisanal drama,” Jonathan Gil Harris considers diachronic shifts in the phenomenology and meanings of props in light of two quite distinct discourses of property: property as public membership within a corporate body, and property as privately owned capital asset. Harris shows how these two discourses are made visible in early English drama through metatheatrical episodes that in certain respects anticipate the twentieth-century practice of product placement. Many of the props of the late medieval cycle plays advertise themselves as products of a guild economy in which the property of artisanal skill was understood to constitute public membership within a fraternity or corporate network of social relations. By contrast, the props of the Elizabethan professional theatre companies demand to be seen largely as a nascent form of capital; they often functioned as profitable investments by means of which joint-stock theatre companies or their principals could advance their wealth and social standing. Props were no longer emblems of artisanal skill, in other words, but private assets – a shift illustrated by the stage properties of Dekker’s *The Shoemaker’s Holiday*. Despite the play’s artisanal theme, Harris argues, its props advertise less the products and corporate fraternal relations of the guild than the social mobility afforded the private investor by theatrical stock.

Douglas Bruster’s contribution, “The dramatic life of objects in the early modern theatre,” offers a materialist history of early modern stage properties centered on form. Surveying the kinds of hand properties in early modern plays and how such plays employ them, Bruster passes

over the “thick description” that has characterized so much criticism of objects to date, as well as the economic mode of analysis undertaken by Harris. By describing hand props in a more general way, he seeks to give context to this quantitative detail, at the same time deepening our understanding of the material properties of the early modern playhouse. In the process, Bruster provides provocative answers to a variety of important questions: were hand properties a constant across genres, playwrights, and decades? Or were there significant differences in the numbers and kinds of props that appeared in early modern plays? If there were differences, what produced them? How, finally, might such differences influence our reading of the more familiar objects in Shakespeare’s plays?

The remaining essays of the volume are divided into sections that reflect the traditional categories of stage properties: furniture, costumes, and hand properties. This taxonomy was of course foreign to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and has been contested in our own time.<sup>58</sup> We utilize it here, however, to draw more effective attention to the multiple ways in which materialist criticism can complicate the conventional categories within which stage objects, early modern as well as contemporary, tend to be placed.

The essays in part II, “Furniture,” consider problems raised by what Christopher Sly in *The Taming of the Shrew* calls “household stuff.” In her essay “Things with little social life (Henslowe’s theatrical properties and Elizabethan household fittings),” Lena Cowen Orlin employs a mixture of quantitative and qualitative analysis to interpret early modern domestic “fittings” or fixtures. The latter constitute a unique category of property that has been overlooked by the traditional binary distinction between “real” property and moveables, each of which is represented in its own class of documents. Because fittings are not included in inventories, they have a largely hidden history despite their sometimes quite significant presence in the domestic environment. Orlin argues that this overlooked category can help illuminate a longstanding theatrical problem: the infamous inventory of stage properties in Henslowe’s diary is in theatrical terms comparable to a list of household “fittings,” and that is why it notoriously omits “moveables” such as pots, purses and all the other objects that plays required.

The next two essays, Catherine Richardson’s “Properties of domestic life: the table in Heywood’s *A Woman Killed with Kindness*” and Sasha Roberts’s “‘Let me the curtains draw’: the dramatic and symbolic properties of the bed in Shakespearean tragedy,” focus on two significant household properties employed in early modern drama. Examining