

Marlowe's and Shakespeare's Staged Books: Incarnate Texts and their Cruxes

*"I feel the horrible want of some faith—some hope—something
to rest on now—there must be such a book." – John Keats*

Saying that Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is a "drama of the book" is not saying much—it risks barely rising above the level of critical commonplace, especially in a roomful of Marlovians. Nevertheless, a survey of books in Marlowe's play (and were there time, throughout his plays) informs nicely a provisional taxonomy of the various ways this presence manifests itself—primarily as onstage codices, but also as other kinds of textual products (scrolls, most importantly, in *Faustus*); as references or visual contexts that may or may not involve – but would certainly invite – a material stage property; and as objects occurring metaphorically or allusively. I will punctuate and then conclude this overview of books in *Faustus* by identifying a few strains of influence of Marlowe's staged books within the plays and poems of Shakespeare.

Of course this influence cannot be attributed only to Marlowe. Books were key stage properties throughout Renaissance drama. Hieronimo enters "with a book in his hand" in *The Spanish Tragedy* (3.13. s.d.), and later a book provides material for the climactic play-within-a-play (4.1.79); Thomas Kyd's stage item was no worse for wear nearly a century later, at the beginning of *The Fatal Jealousie's* third act: "Enter Don Girardo with a Book in his Hand."¹ And even prior to Kyd, John Bale's *Comedy Concernynge Thre Lawes* features Deus Pater bestowing on Lex Christi "thys precyouse boke / for a token evydent, // A seale of my covaunant / and a lyvyng testament" (133-

¹ Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy*, ed. Philip Edwards (1959, repr. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), 83, 103; *The Fatal Jealousie: A Tragedy* (London: Thomas Dring, 1673), 33.

34).² Yet among Renaissance playwrights, Christopher Marlowe seems at once uniquely haunted by books and highly sensitive to their theatrical potential.

James Kearney has recently crystallized this focus on the Renaissance book as “a world of objects and a world of social relationships” at a time of both religious reformation and technological change.³ He speaks of “the incarnate text,” a material focus that also involves a new theological sensitivity. For Kearney, Marlowe uses books in *Doctor Faustus* to interrogate the tradition of “textual conversion” exemplified by Augustine and Luther. The play, therefore, becomes a statement about Protestant hermeneutics, but less ambitiously, the play’s books also reflect upon Faustus himself. There are codes within the codex, as Jessica Brantley has recently worded it, “the systems of thought that are both revealed and created by the physical structures through which ideas are expressed.”⁴ Books as properties serve to mark characters’ ambition, resignation, duplicity, penchant for being duped, etc. That said, I do not wish to limit the dramatic effects of books to characterization; also relevant here is Andrew Sofer’s argument in *The Stage Life of Props*: books, like other stage properties, are “drawn into the stage action and absorb complex and sometimes conflicting meanings” . . . like theatre itself, they “bring dead images back to life.”⁵ In short, staged books often

² John Bale, *A Comedy Concernynge Thre Lawes* [...], in *The Complete Plays of John Bale*, vol. 2, ed. Peter Happé (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1986), 65-124 (70). The following stage direction reads, “*Hic pro signo dat ei novum testamentum.*”

³ James Kearney, *The Incarnate Text: Imagining the Book in Reformation England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2009), 1. Kearney proposes to study “books as gifts, books as commodities, books as devotional objects, books as totems and trash” and the “rich variety of things called books.”

⁴ Jessica Brantley, “The Prehistory of the Book,” *PMLA* 124.2 (2009): 632-39 (632).

⁵ Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 2-3.

generate, in Roger Chartier's phrase, "the effects that material forms produce."⁶ These examples may risk seeming over-attentive, but in fact they reflect well the new attentions of this earlier era.

To be sure, Marlowe and Shakespeare lived and wrote in an age that saw books more fully adopted within a range of early-modern social contexts and contestations. Overall, the complex events that we associate with the Renaissance and Reformation succeeded in instituting significant expansions of textual replication, transmission, possession, and transgression. And taking for granted the simple reading of books, they increasingly lent themselves to various social functions— for example, signifying professional roles or personal identities. Consider, for example, the courtly fashion of girdle books (often elaborately gilded psalters or devotional works) especially prevalent at Anne Boleyn's and Katherine Parr's courts. William Heale's comment in *An Apology for Women* (1609) suggests the girdle-book fashion outgrew the court: "I could never approve those too too holy women gospellers, who wear their testament at their apron-strings, and will weekly catechize their husbands[.]"⁷ Similarly, William Cecil, Lord Burleigh, sometimes carried on business a copy of Cicero's *De officiis*, an outward sign of his capacity for good governance. In these cases books become a curious object projecting a mix of public and private, much like books on the Renaissance stage.

⁶ Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe Between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), ix.

⁷ William Heale, *An Apology for Women*, in *Sexuality and Gender in the English Renaissance: An Annotated Edition of Contemporary Documents*, ed. Lloyd Davis (New York: Garland, 1998), 63-88 (quotation at 77).

Doctor Faustus, then, was culturally timely in its numerous onstage appearances of books. Truly, this presence ranges from the play's opening moment to its final scenes, and indeed, its last line. Less noticeable are various contextual or allusive moments that would invite an even greater presence of books or writing, depending on directors. Most generally, the very setting of Wittenberg invokes Protestant book culture and Luther's emphasis on *sola scriptura*. Similarly, is humanist book culture present when, although part of an unstaged back story, we hear how Faustus has "made blind Homer sing to me / of Alexander's love" (2.3.26-27)?⁸ This moment foreshadows later conjurations of classical, and literary, figures; Faustus' bookish attention remains constant. More specifically, when Mephistopheles returns dressed as a friar, would he have had a breviary at his waist? And likewise with the friars in procession in the Vatican scene? This object in Protestant representations of friars became a symbol of false, ostentatious piety. Consider, for example, Archimago in *The Faerie Queene* – "An aged Sire, in long blacke weedes yclad, / His feete all bare, his beard all hoarie gray. / And by his belt a booke he hanging had" (1.1.29) – or various woodcuts in Stephen Bateman's *Christall Glasse of Christian Reformation*. These allusive or referential presences are likewise found in various Shakespeare plays, ranging from *Titus Andronicus*, where early allusions to Ovidian *raptus* are horribly literalized in the crime against Lavinia and the material copy of *Metamorphoses* to which she resorts, to *Henry VIII*, where Cranmer's blessing of the newborn Elizabeth echoes a tableau in one of the queen's coronation pageants, in which she kisses the English Bible. (Also relevant here is Thomas

⁸ Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, ed. David Bevington and Eric Rasmussen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993). I draw the quotations above from the A-Text, unless otherwise stated.

Heywood's *If You Know Not Me You Know Nobody* (ca. 1605), whose scenes of Elizabeth's troubles are populated with Bibles and prayer books.)

Now let us survey those more direct appearances of or references to books in *Doctor Faustus*. Faustus is first "discovered" in his study, but later wishes he had never seen a book in Wittenberg (5.2.20-21). In that final line, he faces ruin crying, "I'll burn my books. Ah, Mephistopheles!" (5.2.123), which itself echoes Envy's remark in the pageant of the Seven Deadly Sins – "I cannot read and therefore wish all books were burnt" (2.3.133-34). Envy sounds merely dismissive, and perhaps Faustus' too rejects these fatal books outright. In this way he would resemble the Ephesian conjurers from Acts of the Apostles – "Many also of them which used curious artes broght their bokes, and burned them before all men" (19:19, Geneva version). On the other hand, Faustus' last line may betray an attitude that still treats books idolatrously— they become, according to Kearney, objects by which he attempts to "redeem" his lost soul (177). This last line thus highlights Faustus' unchanged dependence on books, and for Kearney, he shares with other iconoclasts a "perverse respect, confirming the power of the book in the very act of violence intended to destroy it." Of course Caliban's appeal in *The Tempest*, "Burn but his books" (3.2.95), echoes but reorients that final cry of Faustus.⁹

Without exception, books are negative objects in Marlowe's play. Faustus is bored with his own books by the standard university authors – Aristotle, Galen, Justinian, the Vulgate – and "Divinity, adieu!" invites stage blocking that may include the tossing of a book (1.1.50), a gesture of textual dismissal that John Philip Kemble popularized in *Richard III's* prayer-book scene. Faustus instead covets "necromantic books" with

⁹ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1999), 154. For convenience's sake, the following quotations from Shakespeare are all taken from the most recent Arden edition of each play or poem.

“Lines, circles, signs, letters, and characters” (52-53), and these books appear at their efficacious best, possibly, when present in the conjuration scene. (This staging option brings to mind, of course, the later title page that famously features Faustus with a conjuring wand in one hand and in the other an open book, at the woodcut’s center.) Faustus’ early desire for books is insatiable: “Yet fain would I have a book . . . Now would I have a book . . . Now let me have one book more . . .” (2.2.169, 173, 177). However, repeatedly the promise of knowledge in these books disappoints, remaining inscrutable or proving anticlimactic. Even after the conjuration scene, Mephistopheles makes it immediately clear that Faustus’ book and spell did not compel the devil’s appearance; rather, it was the imperiled state of the magician’s soul that drew him there. More specifically, the demon had heard Faustus “rack the name of God, / Abjure the Scriptures and his Saviour Christ” (1.3.47-48). In one sense Faustus has succeeded in conjuring Mephistopheles not by the necromantic book he likely holds, but indirectly by one of the books he has already rejected-- those abjured scriptures. Likewise, those alternating comic scenes, whereby servant and clown play the conjuring scholar (“A book? Why, thou canst not tell ne’er a word on’t”) create a deflating comparison for Faustus’ own ultimate illiteracy.

Faustus’ dissatisfying encounters with books becomes increasingly problematic. Soon, Mephistopheles or Lucifer offers only more volumes when Faustus expresses discontent (2.1.162, 2.3.172), and by doing so successfully distracts the scholar from the dangers of his diabolical pact. The appearance of the Good and Evil Angels is likewise framed as a battle of textual preference: “lay that damned book aside,” entreats the Good Angel. “Read, read the Scriptures” (1.1.72, 75). Performances often heighten this battle,

with Faustus holding a book with angels on either side.¹⁰ More darkly, in the B-Text, Mephistopheles confesses that he has actively “turned the leaves” of the Bible to obstruct “thy passage”— meaning both the textual passage and Faustus’ heavenward course (B, 5.2.99-100).

These uses of books broaden and intensify with the pact, a “deed of gift” in the form of a scroll (2.1.35, 60). To appreciate better the importance of this textual presence, Kearney points to the far scarcer appearances of scrolls in Renaissance drama (five examples in Dessen’s and Thomson’s *Dictionary of Stage Directions*, as opposed to 130 for books), and he also emphasizes the differentiation between Jewish and Christian communities via scrolls and codices respectively. From the Christian perspective of Elizabethan playgoers, Faustus’ scroll likely seemed to carry on this contrast by embodying the old law, the letter that kills. Thus his declaration, “*Consummatum est*” acts as an echoing counterpoint of Christ’s words in the gospel: “Faustus’ deed of gift is then an inverted form of the Charter of Christ,” argues Kearney. “Faustus sells what Christ has purchased.” Moreover, that word “Charter” calls to mind the scroll’s association with bureaucratic, documentary culture, and its binding use in political, legal, and economic contexts.

This specialized use invites comparisons with Shakespeare’s character most opposed to such documentation – the rebel Jack Cade in *2 Henry VI*. Faustus’ textual antagonisms and fate are fascinatingly refracted through both Cade and the clerk

¹⁰ For example, Faustus held a book in the Stratford-upon-Avon RSC production featuring Eric Berry in the title role. For a photo reproduction, see Gerald Pinciss, *Christopher Marlowe* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1975), 47. See as well Pinciss’ *Forbidden Matter: Religion in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2000), 32-38, where he speaks of Faustus being distracted by the Bad Angel from the “joys of Bible study” (32).

Emmanuel, who has “a book in his pocket with red letters in’t” (4.2.83-84), likely a primer or almanac. Cade first suspects the clerk of being a “conjurer” since he possesses this book, and quickly condemns him to be hanged “with his pen and inkhorn about his neck” (100-1). (The scene that most obviously aligns with *Faustus* is the conjuration earlier in the play; its lines make it clear that books are onstage there.) Both Cade and the clerk draw upon Faustus’ vexed relationship to his books, and both look ahead to the deposed Richard II, for whom books signify judgment most of all. That king resignedly admits that he is “Marked with a blot, damned in the book of heaven” (4.1.236). The image resonates as biblical echo (cf. Exodus 32:33, Psalm 69:28, Revelation 3:5), and this sense of judgment continues to develop in Richard’s further remark: “I’ll read enough / When I do see the very book indeed / Where all my sins are writ, and that’s myself.” (273-75). There is iconographic significance here: even Henry IV on his deathbed, in Samuel Daniel’s *The Civil Wars*, beholds Conscience “holding out a Booke, wherein he read / In bloody lines the deedes of his owne hand.”¹¹ Richard, in Shakespeare’s play, prepares to meditate on his more complicated faults and – “Give me that glass, and therein will I read” (76). He studies himself in book form.

Faustus’ signing of the pact with his own blood, and its forming an “inscription” on his arm – *Homo fuge!* – also invoke the body-as-book trope that Shakespeare employs, less subtly and usually as an ornamenting figure, in frequent scenes. In amorous contexts, he describes the “fair volume” of a wooer’s face or “unbound lover” or that face’s “margin” or women’s eyes as “the books, the arts, the academes.” More relevantly, in *The Comedy of Errors*, Dromio of Ephesus explicitly harkens back to manuscript and

¹¹ Samuel Daniel, *The Civil Wars*, ed. Laurence Michel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 175.

vellum (much as Cade does) to condemn his master's apparent violence: If the skin were parchment and the blows you gave were ink, / Your own handwriting would tell you what I think" (3.1.15-16). Later Egeon, unrecognized by his son, more powerfully becomes a text on which his painful experience can be read:

O, grief hath changed me since you saw me last,
And careful hours with time's deformed hand
Have written strange features in my face. (5.1.307-9)

Kearney imaginatively sees Faustus' inscription, along with the earlier "staying" of his blood, as divine texts, which Faustus takes as such, but which he is incapable of interpreting well (163-65). He sees his blood as only an instrument for that diabolical "deed of gift," although his willingness to repeat his textual vow should make the chartering itself less reliable. This is usually the effect of the second signing upon audiences, who begin to see that the deed, if not textually valid, remains theatrically effective in ensnaring, or re-ensnaring, Faustus. For him, the book is always binding.

Learning from Marlowe's example, Shakespeare also realized many dramatic possibilities in onstage of figurative books. Perhaps the greatest lesson taken from *Doctor Faustus* is that books are not always what they seem, nor do they deliver what they promise.¹² This quandary sometimes results from characters' misreading. In "The Rape of Lucrece" Shakespeare figurally foregrounds this fact: Lucrece's chastity (rather than Faustian vanity or desperation) renders her socially (rather than spiritually) illiterate. She

¹² Arthur Kinney, *Shakespeare's Webs: Networks of Meaning in Renaissance Drama* (New York: Routledge, 2004), ch. 2, in focusing in "Shakespeare's books" returns repeatedly to themes of unreliability and duplicity surrounding the book – books can no longer be sworn on, even marginally noted texts are malleable and unstable, etc. (38-39, 44-49). See as well Adam M. Cohen, *Shakespeare and Technology: Dramatizing Early Modern Technological Revolutions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), ch. 3, on Shakespeare's characters' skepticism about the new print technology and the proliferation of printed "trash" (71), and, most germane to the context of *Faustus*, Kearney's verdict on books in that play's "privileged object" that is always a "source of hope and despair" (141).

cannot comprehend “stranger eyes” or “parling looks,” “Nor read the subtle shining secrecies / Writ in the glassy margents of such books” (99-102). Alternately, once possessed, books support misleading appearances – one thinks of Gloucester with his prayer book or Ophelia with hers, or her father’s. Quite early, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Shakespeare playfully invokes at once the duplicitous potentials of religious books and the silly sacralizing of amorous books. The departing lover Valentine asks his friend Proteus, “And on a love-book pray for my success?” to which Proteus responds, “Upon some book I love I’ll pray for thee” (1.1.19-20). The “prayerful” young men displace the unnamed Bible or prayer book in favor of a book more suited to Valentine’s desires, and, ominously, to Proteus’ self interest (“some book I love”).

Final examples abound. There is Lucentio/Cambio (Campion?) – “long studying at Rheims” (2.1.80-82)! – with his strategic copies of Ovid’s *Heroides* and *The Art of Love*. Juliet reacts to the killing of Tybalt by figuring her shock: Romeo becomes a book’s differing inner and outer parts. “Was ever book containing such vile matter / So fairly bound?” (3.2.83-84). Othello’s denunciation of Desdemona contains a similar repulsion: “Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write ‘whore’ upon?” (4.2.72-73). And in *Cymbeline*, Imogen more conceptually tropes on the biblical text itself to express disillusionment when reading Posthumous’ order to kill her: “The scriptures of the loyal Leonatus, / All turn’d to heresy? Away, away, / Corrupters of my faith!” (3.4.82-84). Imogen’s “scriptures” denotes Posthumous’ handwriting, but figuratively his scriptures’ misuse now promotes heresy, spiritual corruption, and false teaching. Imogen (like Faustus in a very different context) has misplaced her faith, and it feels to her like nothing less than despair.