

## Balaam to Bottom: Artifact and Theatrical Translation in the Sixteenth Century

Kurt Schreyer

University of Missouri-St. Louis  
Saint Louis, Missouri

*There is now in vogue that song of the feast of Corpus Christi which is patched together from many passages of Scripture. . . . It is the dream of a poor senseless idiot. Here [Melchizedek's bread and wine, Elijah's cake, and the manna of the fathers] have had to serve as figures of the sacrament. It is a wonder that he did not include Balaam's ass.*

—Martin Luther

It has been assumed since at least the nineteenth century that the rude mechanicals of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are a comic rendition of the artisan actors of the provincial mystery plays. In 1898, for example, Georg Brandes observed that Shakespeare's burlesque scenes "doubtless drew upon childish memories of the plays he had seen performed in the market-place at Coventry and elsewhere." In doing so, says Brandes, Shakespeare was satirizing older forms of English drama.<sup>1</sup> More recently, Clifford Davidson and Stephen Greenblatt have read the craftsmen-actors of *Dream* in the context of the "traditional plays" the boy Shakespeare might have witnessed in Coventry.<sup>2</sup> Louis Montrose argues that the mechanicals not only recall the civic and artisanal aspects of mystery drama, but its religious context as well. Although the subject matter of the mechanicals' play is nonbiblical, Montrose insists that their performance evokes the Feast of Corpus Christi with its elaborate ceremonial procession and pageants.<sup>3</sup> John Parker compares the rude mechanicals' presentation of *Pyramus and Thisbe* with the "hilarity of earlier artisan-sponsored" scenes in which the craftsmanship of the guilds was "rendered flamboyantly deficient."<sup>4</sup>

Yet while the rude mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have long been associated with late medieval and early modern English provincial drama, the ass's head "fixed" on Bottom by Robin Goodfellow, or Puck, is

generally discussed in the context of classical sources such as the story of King Midas in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Kenneth Muir, for example, acknowledges Reginald Scot's 1584 *Discoverie of Witchcraft* as a possible influence but argues that a more likely source of Bottom's transformation is the 1566 translation of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* by William Adlington.<sup>5</sup> This essay proposes that the ass's head brought to Shakespeare's stage cultic and material affiliations—especially with sixteenth-century mystery drama—that were likely to have been more culturally pervasive than its classical associations. I will, therefore, consider Bottom's asinine transformation in the context of the drama, liturgy, festival, and polemic of the sixteenth century. In doing so, however, I will attend to what Richard Emmerson calls “the great complexity of theatrical experience in the century that spans the traditional medieval/Renaissance divide.” Arguing against critical narratives that “trace how a naïve pre-Shakespearean theater flowered into the golden age of Elizabethan drama,” Emmerson proposes synchronic analysis that juxtaposes concurrent theatrical traditions previously separated by disciplinary and period divisions. Rather than homogenizing dramatic practices, synchronic study asks how their meaning changes over time; it is as much concerned with complexity and range as it is with temporal overlap.<sup>6</sup> This essay will therefore examine how the meaning of the ass varied and changed from pre-Reformation Chester, through the mid-century Reformation, to the Elizabethan stage.

As I trace the sixteenth-century provenance of the ass's head, I will further argue that it is a piece of theatrical artisanry, an artifact, and thus a material link, between the mysteries and the London stage. Shakespeare's *Dream* mocks the “palpable-gross play” (5.1.350) of the “hard-handed men that work in Athens here / Which never laboured in their minds till now” (5.1.72–73), and we'll see that in fact the handiwork of craftsmen-players was one of the most significant features of provincial mystery pageants.<sup>7</sup> When Bottom first comes on stage wearing the ass's head, he is greeted with the words, “Bless thee. Thou art translated” (3.1.105). In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, translation is both a mechanical as well as a linguistic practice. This essay will examine how Shakespeare's commercial theater “translates” this manufactured object: how it alters or transforms but also recovers and restores old dramatic material.

### **The Chester ass**

Sometime between 1505 and 1522, a new play was added to the Chester mystery cycle: *Moses and the Law: Balaack and Balaam*, performed by the cap-

pers or cap-makers.<sup>8</sup> It not only tells the story of Moses but also introduces the memorable character of a talking ass. Alarmed by the Israelites' defeat of other pagan kings, Balaack, king of Moab, sends for his prophet and servant, Balaam, whose magical powers he hopes will destroy Moses's people. As Balaam journeys to meet the king, however, an angel blocks his road, and his ass prostrates itself in fear and homage. Balaam is initially unaware of the divine messenger and thinks the beast is being stubborn:

*Balaham:* What the divell? My asse will not goe.

. . . . .  
 Tunc percutiet Balaham asinam suam. Et hic oportet aliquis transformiari in speciem asinae; et quando Balaham percutit, dicat asina [Then Balaam shall beat his ass. And here someone ought to be transformed into the guise of an ass; and when Balaam strikes, the ass shall say]:

*Asina:* Mayster, thow doest ill, secerly [truly],  
 soe good an asse as mee to nye [harm].  
 Now hast thow beaten mee here thrye,  
 that bare the thus abowte.

*Balaham:* Burnell, whye begylest thow mee  
 when I have most neede to thee?

*Asina:* That sight that before mee I see  
 maketh mee downe to lowte [bow].  
 Am not I, mayster, thy owne asse  
 to beare thee whyther thow will passe,  
 and many winter readye was?  
 To smyte me hyt ys shame.  
 Thow wottest well, mayster, perdee,  
 that thow haddest never non like to mee,  
 ne never yett soe served I thee.  
 Now am I not to blame.<sup>9</sup>

The exchange between man and beast closely follows the biblical text (Num. 22:28–30), with the ass proudly, and rather comically, declaring its long-standing record of loyal service. In scripture, furthermore, the ass first veers off into a field to avoid the angel, then runs into a wall and smashes Balaam's foot, and ultimately lies down in the middle of the road. When the prophet's eyes are finally opened to the angel's presence, his immediate response is to mimic the beast and lie prostrate: "And the Lord opened the eies of Balaám,

and . . . he bowed him selfe and fel flat on his face” (Num. 22:31; Geneva Bible).<sup>10</sup> So, even in scripture, the passage is humorous, and though no stage directions dictate the stage business of the ass’s movements, it is easy to imagine the cappers improvising its meanderings (and Balaam’s increasing frustration) in order to delight their audience. The Chester pageant adds to the comedy when Balaam calls his beast by the nonbiblical name, Burnell. The name effectively personalizes the female donkey, so much so that the quarrel between man and she-ass recalls the humorous bickering between the impatient Noah and his obstinate wife in the cycle plays.

It’s not surprising, then, that a 1572 proclamation of the plays known as the Chester Late Banns specifically calls for this animated scene to be performed yet again: “Make the Asse to speake and sett hit out lyuelye [in a lively way].”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the Records of Early English Drama (REED) confirm that the ass was in demand by Chester audiences as late as 1610: nearly four decades after the Whitsuntide plays had been prohibited, “greate charges” were incurred to furnish a new ass (termed “the beast”) for the city’s Midsummer celebration.<sup>12</sup> The talking ass must also have been memorable, for with the exception of the serpent, it is the only talking beast in the Old Testament. It is rather remarkable that no other surviving mystery play cycle seized upon the talking ass’s theatrical potential. York’s *Nativity* pageant comes closest, as it recalls Balaam, his prophecy, and his talking beast when Mary observes the star overhead:

For Balam tolde ful longe beforne  
 How that a sterne shulde rise full hye,  
 . . . . .  
 Forsuth it is my sone so free  
 Be whame Balam gon meene [about whom Balam meant].

As she then lays her child in the manger, Joseph is startled at the behavior of the ox and ass:

Oh, Marie, beholde þes beestis mylde,  
 They make louyng in ther manere  
 As þei wer men.  
 Forsothe it semes wele be ther chere  
 Þare lord þei ken.<sup>13</sup>

While the babe’s parents and the beasts do not exchange dialogue as had Balaam and the ass, Joseph nevertheless observes their human behavior:

they possess knowledge (“Þare lord þei ken”) and offer praise (“They make louyng . . . / As þei wer men.”).

Yet the Chester story of Moses could readily have been staged without this episode, and given that the play already tasks one actor with the role of Expositor, Balaam’s back-story is particularly superfluous. Beyond the sheer entertainment value of a talking animal, I want to suggest that the cappers, pinner (nail-makers), and linendrapers may have chosen to manufacture a talking ass for material and economic reasons. According to Lawrence Clopper, the cappers “had been granted sole rights to the retailing of coarse wares by Mayor Thomas Smyth in order that they might ‘brynge forthe A playe concernyng the store of kyng balak & Balam the proffet.’”<sup>14</sup> If we more broadly survey mystery pageants we can further see how these dramatic endeavors were deeply invested in craftsmanship. For instance, a stage direction from the Chester *Noah’s Flood* pageant reads:

Then he [Noah] shall send forth a dove; and there shall be in the ship another dove carrying an olive-branch in its beak, which someone shall send from the mast by a rope into Noah’s hands.

[Tunc emittet columbam; er erit in nave aliam columbam ferens olivam in ore, quam dimittet aliquis ex malo per funem in manibus Noe.]<sup>15</sup>

The stage direction makes clear that the ark would have been a massive stage set with multiple levels that could accommodate the movements of at least eight actors, including some means for a stage-hand to climb the mast (perhaps secretly) and operate the dove-on-a-rope. Perhaps this person was the actor playing God, *Deus ex machina*, for, as David Mills notes, “the opening stage-direction asks that God be located ‘in some high place.’”<sup>16</sup> The ark might have had other mechanisms for the raising of the rainbow when God gives the closing speech: “The stringe is torned towardes you / and towardes me is bente the bowe, / that such wedder shall never showe; / and this behett [promise] I thee. / My blessinge nowe I give thee here, / to thee, Noe, my servante deare” (321–26). The ship must also have had portholes or other means of hanging the pictures of animals enumerated by each of the members of Noah’s family as they boarded the ark. The stage direction following line 160 reads: “Then Noe shall goe into the arke with his familye, his wyffe excepte, and the arke muste bee borded rownde aboute. And one [on] the bordes all the beastes and fowles hereafter reahersed muste bee paynted,

that ther wordes may agree with the pictures.” As Noah’s wife speaks, for example, she lists the animals depicted on one of the panels:

And here are beares, wolves sett,  
apes, owles, maresmussett,  
wesills, squerrells, and fyrrett;  
here the [they] eaten there meate. (173–76)

For obvious reasons live animals were not used; the guildsmen of the Chester *Flood* manufactured painted boards to supplement the descriptive speeches.

In the York mystery cycle, the guilds performing the Noah story went to even greater pains. First, the play was divided in two: *The Building of the Ark* performed, not surprisingly, by the shipwrights, and *The Flood* itself, rendered by the fishers and mariners. The shipwrights designed their pageant so as to actually build the ark during the progress of their play. In Chester and in York, therefore, the actors’ words are accompanied not only by histrionic gesture, but by physical labor (prior to and during the play). In York, moreover, the opening speech of God in *The Building of the Ark* recounts the labors of creating the world and its inhabitants, and in doing so mentions the word *work* five times, *make* or *made* four, and the verb *wrought* on five occasions. This theme of the Divine Laborer climaxes with God’s command to Noah to be His co-laborer: “I wyll þou wyrke withowten weyn [in truth] / A warke to saffe [save] þiselfe wythall.”<sup>17</sup> The construction of the ark then begins accordingly. It would be an oversimplification to say that mystery drama was merely artisanal: musicians, scribes, clergy, civic officials, and many others played crucial roles. It is equally misguided, however, to overlook the incredible amount of labor that was invested in props, costumes, and staging materials. As Davidson explains, “the performance of drama in pre-industrial England was an activity that demanded much which we in modern times take for granted but which involved the use of scarce technology and expensive commodities for the construction and preparation of the stage, the creation of appropriate costumes and properties, and the arranging of theatrical effects.”<sup>18</sup> Davidson’s insight not only helps us to see that mystery drama required work (often extensive collaborative labor) but also explains why these pageant cycles are works, the material manifestations of guild labor, as much as they are dramatic stories or expressions of civic pride and religious belief. Shakespeare, as we’ll see, is keenly aware of the centrality of handiwork to mystery playing, and the *Pyramus and Thisbe* scenes in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* comically exploit it.

Beyond the story of Noah, almost every pageant afforded opportunities to showcase workmanship, whether in the bakers' *Last Supper* or the goldsmiths' *Herod and the Magi*.<sup>19</sup> The most powerful example, because the most visceral, is the crucifixion scene wherein the nailers and pinners (not only of York but of Chester as well) botch the construction of the cross so that Christ must be stretched and pulled to fit the pre-made nail holes. An odd way to advertise craftsmanship perhaps, yet according to John Parker the workers' "staged inadequacy" becomes felicitous insofar as it leads to God's suffering, and therefore their own salvation. In this way, says Parker, the mysteries see their own failed workmanship as comic, part of the larger *felix culpa* of Christianity's doctrine of original sin: "On stage, the vanity that appeared in likening their work to God's gave them hope that all would be repaired."<sup>20</sup> The tilehatchers' conspicuously deficient roof thus allows the miraculous star of *The Nativity* to shine upon the newborn God-child.<sup>21</sup> When the episode of Balaam's talking ass was added to the Chester mysteries in the early sixteenth century, therefore, it afforded the cappers, pinners, and linendrapers an extraordinary opportunity to showcase their handiwork. As Mills states, "the play also calls for Moses to return from the mountain with 'horns' and a shining face, and possibly we should assume similar head-dress here."<sup>22</sup> Wishing, perhaps, to maximize the exhibition of their wares, the cappers might have incorporated the ass's head into a more elaborate two-man costume with the actor playing Balaam donning the rear-end and, centaurlike, appearing to ride the stubborn beast. A fellow actor, meanwhile, would wear the front-end of the outfit and speak Burnell's lines.<sup>23</sup>

I have focused thus far on the material and economic significance of the Chester talking ass from the perspective of the guildsmen who staged it, but of course it was a polyvalent theatrical object whose meaning varied over time and among different audience groups. I will consider those variations once we examine how the Reformation received and altered the ass's meaning. But if we are to avoid the reification of the traditional medieval-Renaissance divide, then before turning to the Reformation and to Shakespeare, it must be noted that Balaam's ass was itself a theatrical innovation. As Clopper explains, "the Chester cycle underwent considerable growth through addition and revision within the period 1505–32." Prior to this, he says, the city's annual Corpus Christi drama was largely a Passion play. During the early decades of the sixteenth century, and prior to the Reformation, the plays were moved from Corpus Christi day to Whitsuntide and began to be performed over a three-day period on moving wagons that processed through the city. Consequently, "the content, the shape, and the techniques

of production which we associate with the plays at Chester . . . are early sixteenth century rather than medieval in date.” Clopper theorizes that Chester city officials moved their plays to Whitsuntide in order to “compete with Coventry and to draw large crowds.” Coinciding with this move, he further suggests, were efforts to make the plays “more spectacular” by adding more episodes and by performing the plays on small movable pageants.<sup>24</sup> From this perspective, we can see why city officials would have welcomed a new pageant episode featuring a talking ass, and perhaps, too, why Mayor Smyth subsequently agreed to protect the rights of the Cappers’ Guild: Balaam’s ass was a cash cow. In her study of “early modern remakings of medieval religious ideas and practices,” Theresa Coletti has shown how the Tudor Chester cycle is “neither stabilized as text nor fixed in time or topography as performance.”<sup>25</sup> Prompted by sacred and secular interests, the addition of the Chester ass supports Coletti’s assertion that the mysteries were continually adapting to meet new dramatic and cultural challenges and opportunities. Commercially implicated upon its arrival, Balaam’s ass also illustrates why we must abandon diachronic narratives that starkly divide static, conformist, religious medieval drama from vibrant, diverse, secular Renaissance theater, and that we further explore the possibility of material connections between these two stages.

### **The “Popish Ass”**

Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) includes the story of “a man turned into an asse, and returned againe into a man.”<sup>26</sup> The man is a sailor transformed into bestial shape by a witch, and, spurned by his shipmates, he eventually finds himself near a church as the consecration of the Mass is about to take place. Not daring to enter the church “least he should have beene beaten and driven out with cudgels,” he instead “fell downe in the churchyard, upon the knees of his hinder legs, and did lift his forefeet over his head, as the preest doth hold the sacrament at the elevation.” Seeing the “prodigious sight” of an ass “in great devotion,” the townspeople gather, discover the witch, and force her to remove the spell. The tale is so outrageous for Scot that his commentary derides more than it refutes: “What lucke was it, that this yoong fellow of England, landing so latelie in those parts, and that old woman of Cyprus . . . should both understand one anothers communication.” “I mervell then what would have become of this asse,” he later quips, “whether he should have risen at the daie of judgement in an asses bodie and shape.” A “vigorous defender of the Protestant

Reformation,” Scot takes aim not at witchcraft alone, but at sorcery as it relates to Catholic teaching on the Eucharist.<sup>27</sup> Pondering “the witch, the asse, the masse,” he states that he doubts “the miracle of transubstantiation” and jokes “that the asse had no more wit than to kneele downe and hold up his forefeete to a peece of starch or flowre which neither would, nor could, nor did helpe him.” The transformations performed by the witch and the priest are indistinguishable for Scot, both are equally preposterous. Witches supposedly transform shipwrecked sailors into beasts, and priests claim to transubstantiate wafers into God. In Scot’s account, the ass mimics the priest by “hold[ing] up his forefeete” when he hears “a little saccaring bell ring to the elevation” of the host. Scot then laughs at the futility of the ass’s imitation: “I wonder,” he says, “that the masse could not reforme that which the witch transformed.” The absurdity of the man-turned-ass thus confirms what Scot already believes about Catholicism: its priests are already asses (they don’t need a witch), and its eucharistic host is a mere “peece of starch or flowre.” As Stephen Greenblatt has noted regarding Protestant mockery of Rome’s dogma, “These contemptuous sallies come close to ridiculing the sacrament itself, even as they attempt to ridicule only the Papists. Yet the Reformers were driven to take the risk in order to counter what they regarded as the still greater risk of idolatry.”<sup>28</sup>

When editors and scholars discuss the possible nonclassical sources of Bottom’s translation, they most often point to Scot’s *Discoverie*. What they fail to note, however, is that Scot’s text is merely one example of the ass in Reformation discourse. By the time Scot published his *Discoverie*, the figure of an ass-headed man had long been an icon of Protestant propaganda mocking the wrongheadedness of the Church of Rome.<sup>29</sup> In a German pamphlet first published in 1523 but later translated into English and published in London in 1579, Philipp Melanchthon and Martin Luther warned of “Two Woonderful Popish Monsters” including a “Popish Asse” (see fig. 1) and a “Moonkish Calfe.”<sup>30</sup> The famous engraver, printmaker, and painter Lucas Cranach was commissioned to provide richly detailed, full-page illustrations to reinforce the 1523 pamphlet’s incendiary polemic. The *Papstesel* or “Popish Asse” was endowed with several hybrid features to signify the corruption of the Catholic Church: its griffinlike foot signifies its overweening legal authority; its feminine breasts and belly denote its voluptuousness; its scales represent secular princes who cling to and protect its spiritual and worldly authority; on its buttocks is a dragon’s head symbolizing the corrupt books and bulls issued by the pope; and the old man’s head signifies the papacy’s waning power. Yet, though the pamphlet considers each ele-



Figure 1.

*"The Popish Asse,"* from Melanchthon and Luther, *Of Two Woonderful Popish Monsters* (London, 1579), sig. A4v. By Permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D.C.

ment in this fantastic assembly in some detail, it is the ass's head that gives the creature its name, as both the original German and later English title pages bear witness: *Deutung der czwo grewlichen Figuren, Pabstesels zu Rom und Munchkalbs zu Frieberg in Meissen funden* and *Of Two Woonderful Popish Monsters to wyt, of a Popish Asse which was found at Rome in the riuer of Tyber, and of a Moonkish Calfe, calued at Friberge in Misne*. Melanchthon's interpretation of this feature, moreover, sets the terms by which the rest of the monster will be anatomized:

First of all, the heade of the Asse is a description of the Pope, for the Churche is a spirituall bodye and kingdome, assembled together in spirite. And therefore it cannot nor ought not to have a mannes head, nor a visible Lorde. But onely the LORD JESUS, which formeth the heartes inwardlye, by the holy Ghost. . . . Contrary unto these thinges, the Pope hath made himselfe the visible and outwarde heade of the Churche. (*Two Woonderful Popish Monsters*, sig. B1v)

Citing Exodus 13:13, which stipulates that a firstborn ass, an unclean animal, be redeemed by the sacrifice of a lamb just as God's chosen people are redeemed at Passover, Melanchthon adds, "For the holy Scriptures doe understande by the Asse, the externall and carnall lyfe, and the Elementes of the worlde" (sig. B1v–2r). Melanchthon crowns the pope with an ass's head, in other words, to signify the fleshiness of the Roman Church; indeed, the "Popish Asse" is spoken of as if it were a physical object. Like an artifact of the old religion, it is said to be "founde at Rome in the Riuer of Tiber" after the flood of 1496 receded. In contrast to the spirituality of the Reformers, the Popish Ass is a Catholic relic, a monstrous example of Rome's superficiality, its "shewe and appearaunce of truth," not to mention its "craft" and "trumperies" (sig. B1r). But God, writes Melanchthon, brought forth this monster as a "token" of his displeasure with the Church of Rome: "GOD at all times doth liuely represent by certeine tokens and after a wonderfull sort, either his wrath or mercie . . . to the ende that all true faithfull men and Christians should bee admonished in good time, and shoulde take heede" (sig. B1r). For Melanchthon, in other words, the Popish Ass is a stage prop in God's "lively representation," or drama, that simultaneously manifests the carnality of Catholicism and refutes it. True Christians, the audience for whom God "hath sette foorth this horrible figure," are admonished to continue the work of reforming their lives and the church (sig. B1r). In the

same pamphlet, then, the ass is subject and object, a Catholic agent of Antichrist and a Protestant mouthpiece of God, a relic of the past and a symbol of future wrath.

I will subsequently highlight some of the other features of the Popish Ass and situate this image in a brief history of liturgical practices, but I must first underscore its widespread and longstanding popularity and influence. The Popish Ass “was one of the most sensational monsters to appear in the age of the Reformation” according to R. W. Scribner, who also affirms that “it was one of the most heavily used for anti-papal polemic.”<sup>31</sup> Julie Crawford contends that Melanchthon and Luther’s illustrated pamphlet “established stories of monstrous births and their accompanying woodcuts as central tools of Reformation religious polemics.”<sup>32</sup> The number of editions and translations featuring the Popish Ass attest to its iconic power. There are nine German editions of the entire pamphlet, and five more of the Popish Ass alone. The 1579 English translation derives from a 1557 French translation to which John Calvin, though estranged from the German Lutherans over the doctrine of the Eucharist, contributes a commendatory preface. There is also a Dutch translation. In addition to *Two Woonderful Popish Monsters*, other English publications featuring the Popish Ass include John Barthlet’s *The pedegrewe of heretiques* (1566) and Pierre Boaistuau’s *Certaine secrete wonders of nature* (1569).<sup>33</sup> Scribner notes that the monster “passed into collections, such as Lycosthenes’ *Wunderwerck* of 1557.” In the seventeenth century, a new German edition of the Popish Ass was published, yet by this time the monster captured less polemical and theological interest than the scientific curiosity of Italian naturalist Fortunio Liceti and others.<sup>34</sup> The importance of the image for Luther is perhaps best evidenced by its inclusion as the first of only nine woodcuts in his 1545 *Depiction of the Papacy*, a work he was said to have called “his testament,” for it summed up his decades of struggles with Rome.<sup>35</sup>

Whatever its extensive post-Reformation popularity, Protestants were not the first to associate the ass with Catholic liturgy and practice. In fact, it was precisely because the ass was such a familiar sight in late medieval liturgical ceremonies that Luther and Melanchthon found it such a suitable objective correlative for popish idolatry. During the late Middle Ages, the church itself brought the ass to the altar during Christmas and Easter celebrations. In thirteenth- and fourteenth-century church pageants known as *Prophetæ et Stella*, the figures of Old Testament prophets parade sequentially, each testifying to the forthcoming messianic birth. Last to deliver a

monologue was Balaam, who told of the star that shall arise from Jacob (Num. 24:17). Following his speech, the angel appeared and the ass began to converse with her rider. For E. K. Chambers, the significance of this “miniature drama” is that it represents an attempt by the church to redirect vital pagan practices toward orthodox ends and “to turn,” he says, “the established presence of the ass in the church to purposes of edification rather than of ribaldry.”<sup>36</sup> He therefore suggests that Balaam’s appearance was merely a pretext “for the sake of his ass.”<sup>37</sup>

As Chambers notes, the ass did indeed have an “established presence” in church ritual and drama dating as far back as the thirteenth century. In Beauvais, France, a Christmastide holiday commonly known as the Feast of the Ass (*asinaria festa*) was held on January 14, so-called because it celebrated the Virgin’s flight into Egypt on a donkey. These festivals were often marked with religious ceremonies, even so-called “donkey masses” in which a swaddled infant was placed in the arms of a young girl, and the two were mounted on an ass and led in procession to the church. There a special mass was sung praising the ass and urging it to speak as the congregation imitated it with uproarious braying at various times.<sup>38</sup>

As at Christmas, the ass played a prominent role during Eastertide. On the Continent, special hobby-asses, called *Palmesels*, were used to celebrate Christ’s entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the start of Holy Week leading up to Easter. *Palmesels* were commonplace in the streets of many German and Swiss towns every year, and Luther and Melancthon probably seized upon the image of the Popish Ass after witnessing the adulation and applause this prop received from thronging crowds.<sup>39</sup> The German word *Palmesel* means “palm ass,” yet the term encompasses both man and ass, frequently referring to both the painted wood donkey as well as the statue of Christ affixed to it. The man-beast *Palmesel* was mounted on wheels for Palm Sunday processions through city streets and churches.<sup>40</sup> In England, however, a eucharistic host carried in a monstrance by a priest typically was used instead of a *Palmesel*.<sup>41</sup> The Catholic Rheims New Testament (1582) recalls this practice in a gloss on Christ’s entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:8): “These offices of honour [strewing of palms, etc.] done to our Saviour extraordinarily, were very acceptable: and for a memory hereof the holy Church maketh a solemne Procession euery yere vpon this day, specially in oure Countrie when it was Catholike, *with the B. Sacrament reuerently caried, as it were Christ vpon the asse.*”<sup>42</sup> The recusant author of the gloss not only finds the substitution of the sacrament for “Christ vpon the

asse” acceptable, but laudable; he adds, “The like seruice and the like duties done to him [Christ] in al other solemne Processions of the B. Sacrament, and otherwise, be vndoubtedly no lesse gratefull.”<sup>43</sup>

The Reformation overturned the teaching on transubstantiation and, as we saw with Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, mocked the association between the Eucharist and the ass. A 1589 annotated edition of the New Testament printed Reformer William Fulke’s responses to the “horrible Idolatrie” of the Catholic Rheims gloss on Christ’s entry into Jerusalem by rebuking the “Maygame and pageant play” whereby Catholics celebrate Palm Sunday with “theatricall pompes.” “But it is pretie sport,” says Fulke, “that you make the Priest that carrieth the Idole, to supplie the roome of the Asse on which Christ did ride.”<sup>44</sup> In Fulke’s bitter jest, the priest carrying the monstrance containing the Communion host plays the ass. If, in Scot’s *Discoverie*, the ass had behaved like a priest (raising his arms at the moment of consecration as the priest elevated the host), here we have the priest behaving like an ass, playing the role of the Palmesel. Both writers glimpse an inherent theatricality in bestial transformation that transcends witchcraft or the “pompes” of Palm Sunday processions and is, for them, bound up with the hocus pocus of Catholicism in general. This theatrical potential, which both the Chester play and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* tap for its comedic and commercial value, is what makes the talking ass so worthy of derision for these reformers. But the orthodox church apparently didn’t get the joke. Such “dreams” were repeatedly performed in the liturgical calendar. Pageants like the *Prophetae et Stella* yoked Balaam’s speaking ass to the incarnated flesh of the newborn Messiah, and Palm Sunday processions tied Jesus and his donkey together into one life-sized, though dumb, wooden beast.

Luther and Melanchthon sought to desacralize the ass, yet they were also, perhaps unwittingly, translating it from a secular to a religious context. As Scribner explains, the depiction of the ass-headed pope was previously a “political satire” aimed at Pope Alexander VI for his “pretentions to be ‘head of the world’ at a time when Italy had suffered defeat at the hands of French invaders in 1494.”<sup>45</sup> More than a quarter-century later, Luther and Melanchthon asked Cranach to recreate the image, yet much of it was left unchanged, including the Roman landmarks associated with Alexander’s despotic reign: the tower of the papal prison as well as the castle where he had secluded himself. If we are to grasp Bottom’s translation on the London stage, we must first note that the “new” Popish Ass did not erase but *incorporated* its antecedent. Adapting the Popish Ass from political to religious purposes, the two reformers confer an ambiguous temporality on the “relic.”

An artifact of recent Roman politics, the Popish Ass is adopted by the Reformation and coded as “Catholic” and therefore a remnant of the old faith now superseded by the righteousness of the current Reformation enterprise. But this old object retains present efficacy; it remains a current threat. As Jonathan Gil Harris explains in his discussion of Renaissance theories of “untimely matter,” often “in order to perform the very difference between past and present, the matter of the past must be incorporated into the present.”<sup>46</sup> The 1523 pamphlet accomplishes this kind of temporal incorporation. John Crespin’s preface to the 1579 English edition reminds “ALL which fear the Lord” that the “Romish Antechrist” can be seen “at this day, yea, in his latter age farre out of modestie” (*Two Woonderful Popish Monsters*, sig. A3v). And to help readers grasp the immediacy of this threat, the images of the Popish Ass and Monkish Calf are materialized with full-page illustrations. Anticipating Melanchthon’s dramatic metaphors, Crespin describes two competing dramas in which the Popish Ass and Monkish Calf are subject and object, actor and prop, present and past:

Now for as much as the Moonkes are the principall proppes of that drunken and enchaunting harlot [i.e., the pope], very fitte is happened this other monster, in the likenesse of a Monkish Calfe, hauing on him a coole [cow], who will playe his part as well as the Popish Asse. Giuing all men to vnderstande what sanctitie hath chiefly blinded the eyes of the world: to wit, the holinesse of a disguised frocke and habite. (sig. A3v)

Monks are deceptive props in the pope’s grand show of holiness. But this drama is overthrown by God’s use of those very same props to admonish present-day believers with a morality play of past depravities. Luther and Melanchthon’s translation of the Popish Ass urges us to rethink our periodized view of sixteenth-century history. Whereas the traditional, diachronic model of secularization implies unremitting progressive succession, the Popish Ass performs in a complex theater of temporalities. As Catholic relic, it re-presents the past, and as Protestant portent, it forecasts God’s impending wrath. “Everyone should shudder as they take it to heart,” writes Luther.<sup>47</sup> The Popish Ass straddles the Reformation divide—and, as we’ll see, so too does the ass’s head fixed on Bottom.

Before turning to Shakespeare, however, I would first like to return to the Chester plays. In the wake of Reformation polemic, the ass was not only temporally ambivalent, but symbolically vexed as well. Chester audi-

ences in the late sixteenth century, therefore, might have viewed Balaam's ass quite differently from their grandparents had decades before. Both generations were keenly aware of the urban topography that, according to Robert Barrett, is underscored by the cappers' play as it mediates "the city's long transition from monastic to mercantile regimes of space-time."<sup>48</sup> On August 7, 1509, Barrett explains, Henry VIII's royal arbitrators handed the city corporation a jurisdictional victory over St. Werburgh's abbey such that "the abbot's tenants were redefined as citizens under the corporation's control," and "city sheriffs, coroners, and even ordinary Cestrians repairing the city walls were given direct access to the monastery precinct."<sup>49</sup> In the years immediately following this transformation of Chester's topography from monastic to urban space, therefore, it is possible that the rebuke of a religious figure like Balaam by a common, ordinary ass may have stung the monks looking on from the abbey walls. Noting that Balaam's speeches encode thinly veiled encomia of the local spaces of Chester, Barrett persuasively argues that later sixteenth-century performances of the mystery cycle signal "a shift from an *urbanitas* defined by immersion in exegetical and hagiographic practices to one in which the rites of *corpus Christi* and Pentecost are infused with, and appropriated by, the oligarchic ideology of the civic corporation." The transition was long and vexed for, as Barrett explains, "the transhistorical prophecies and typologies at work on the audience in [the cappers' play] are deeply implicated in the social and ideological struggles that same audience experiences in its daily life."<sup>50</sup> Thus when, as Clopper explains, the archbishop of York refused to allow the performance even of an amended text in 1575 because, according to a witness, he continued to associate "the popish plaies of Chester" with the outlawed doctrines and liturgies of the old faith, a recusant audience member may well have agreed with the archbishop and recalled (not without bitterness or reverie) when the cappers' pageant was part of the city's Corpus Christi celebrations before that feast was suppressed.<sup>51</sup>

A Cestrian with Protestant leanings, even if she or he found much of the vindictive polemic against the papacy distasteful, may have viewed the prophet Balaam as a personification of the contemporary Roman Church: a once faithful servant of God who is now regrettably wayward. In the hands of Reformation writers both on the Continent and in England, Balaam soon became the Old Testament type of Rome's modern-day simony. The Geneva Bible glossed 2 Peter 2's declamation of false prophets who "haue gone astray folowing the way of Balaam, the Sone of Bosor," by claiming that the passage "is evidently sene in the Pope and his Priests, which by lies and flatteries

sel mens soules, so that it is certeine that he is not the successour of Simon Peter, but of Simon Magus.”<sup>52</sup> Likewise a marginal gloss in John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* directs readers to a passage, by no means unique in this work, where “the pope [is] well compared to Balaam which was wont [to] curse Gods people for reward of money.”<sup>53</sup>

What must be emphasized, however, is that these typological readings of Balaam, like Luther’s own commentary on 2 Peter 2, are proceeded—and probably, if indirectly, inspired—by Melanchthon’s “Declaration of a Popish Ass” in the 1523 *Deutung der czwo grewlichen Figuren*.<sup>54</sup> It is significant that Melanchthon metonymically tethers the monstrous Popish Ass to the biblical figure of Balaam. Just as the Popish Ass displays its naked female breasts and belly, so the unashamed body of churchmen engages in unrestrained prodigality: “the belly and the stomacke, the which do resemble the belly and stomacke of a woeman, signifie the body of the Pope: That is to say the Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, Abbots, Moonkes, Priests. . . . these, without any shame, doe lead a dissolute and wanton lyfe, full of all filthinesse and wickednesse” (*Two Woonderful Popish Monsters*, sig. B4v). Summoning scripture to support his accusation, Melanchthon cites 2 Peter 2:10–19, including the allusion to Balaam, which he finds particularly apt as a gloss of the monster’s belly: “And truely this [passage] doth liuely sette out the Pope, and paynteth him in his right couloures, and vncovereth fullye the feminine bellye of the Popishe Ass” (sig. C1v). In sixteenth-century Protestant polemic, therefore, Balaam is a figure of Rome’s spiritual disobedience and greed. But he might also be metonymically associated with bestial appetites, as he is in Melanchthon’s description of the pope’s “bawdes, and fatte hogges, which haue none other care all their lyfe time but to feede and pamper their paunches with delycious wyne and delycate dishes: to seeke their ease and all the allurements and entisements to whoredome” (sig. B4v). So too for John Bale, the modern descendents of Balaam easily lure “carnal idyotes” like a “gorgious glittering whore”: “Folowinge hys wayes therefore, they haue alwayes for lucre sake, gloriously garnished theyr . . . proude sinagoge of Sathan, wyth golde, siluer, pearle, precious stone, veluets, silkes, miters, copes, crosses, cruetes, ceremonies, sensinges, blessinges, bablinges, brawlynges, processions, popetts, and such other madde mastryes.”<sup>55</sup> Like Balaam, the Popish Ass could be sexualized in order to criticize the wantonness of the papacy, as in a 1545 work by Luther referring to the Popish Ass and “attacking the ‘hermaphrodites and sodomites’ around the pope, and addressing the pope himself as the ‘maiden popess.’”<sup>56</sup> Ulinka Rublack notes that the Popish Ass’s sexual features were enhanced in later Reformation

woodcuts, such that the figure now “sport[ed] sexy legs, pointed breasts and a firm body.”<sup>57</sup> Consequently, a Reformed citizen of Chester may have looked on both characters in the cappers’ play as representations of the papacy’s “dissolute and wanton lyfe,” particularly if the two actors are joined together as ass and rider in the same bestial costume.

Regardless of audience interpretation, the ass was so popular that, as previously noted, it long outlived the play in which it first appeared. Popular in 1505 for its novelty, it was undoubtedly beloved by later audiences (reformed and recusant alike) for its familiarity: nostalgia may have trumped ideology for many onlookers. Beyond its religious polysemy, it must have continued to effectively advertise the handiwork of the Cappers’ Guild. For they still paraded it (without the context of the surrounding biblical narrative) through the streets of Chester in early seventeenth-century Midsummer processions.

### **The Shakespearean ass**

Like the craft guilds of provincial mystery drama, Shakespeare’s company also wished to showcase its acting skill as well as its properties. The very existence of careful, exhaustive records as may be found in REED documents and Henslowe’s *Diary* attest to the fact that both stages were tremendously invested in the storage, care, repair, and economic use of dramatic properties and costumes. In the public playhouses, however, it was the possession, rather than the manufacture, of properties that prompted the theater companies to feature them in plays.<sup>58</sup> The London stages often owned rather everyday items that could nevertheless occasion powerful dramatic scenes: a bed, a simple handkerchief, a ring. Yet the acting companies also possessed more unusual items—thrones, tents, skulls, and hell-mouths—which they valued as well, for these could become the stuff that dramatic dreams were made on. Perhaps none of these was more curious, or offered as much dream potential, as the ass’s head.

The 1623 Folio edition of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* specifically calls for the actor playing Bottom to enter “with the Asse head,” and the text of the play repeatedly highlights this prop.<sup>59</sup> Soon after sighting Bottom’s monstrous face, Snout exclaims, “O Bottom, thou art changed. What do I see on thee?” Bottom’s reply draws attention to his headgear: “What do you see? You see an ass-head of your own, do you?” (3.1.102–4). When Puck later informs Oberon of his mischievous prank, he not only states, “My mistress with a monster is in love” (3.2.6), but underscores the artificiality of the

“monster” he has created, saying, “An ass’s nolle I fixèd on his head” (3.2.17). Finally, when it comes time to “take this transformèd scalp / From off the head of this Athenian swain” (4.1.61–62), the text makes the prop conspicuous as it handles the difficult task of “magically” removing it from the actor’s head while the audience looks on. Modern editions like the *Norton Shakespeare* resolve this difficulty by editorially inserting a stage direction:

*Titania:* O, how mine eyes do loathe his visage now!  
*Oberon:* Silence a while. —Robin, take off this head.  
—Titania, music call, and strike more dead  
Than common sleep of all these five the sense.  
*Titania:* Music, ho—music such as charmeth sleep. *Still music.*  
*Robin:* [taking the ass-head off Bottom] Now when thou wak’st  
with thine own fool’s eyes peep. (4.1.76–81)

Early editions of the play give no indication of precisely when or how Robin is to remove the ass’s head.<sup>60</sup> But the on-stage removal of the headgear (with Puck carrying it off in his hands or on his own head) suggests that the text of *Dream* is trying to call our attention to its artificiality—as though, rather than apologizing for its awkwardness like the players of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, highlighting the clumsiness of the headgear will suffice for an excuse. It’s possible that Bottom wears a simple mask or pair of ears, yet the play’s repeated use of words like *head*, *nolle*, and *scalp* suggest a more substantial (and therefore clumsy) piece of headgear. Davidson compares Bottom to the miniature image of a mummer whose head is completely covered or “fixed with an ass’s head”—snout, fur, ears, and all—in the margin of a fourteenth-century manuscript.<sup>61</sup>

Quince’s famous ejaculation—“Bless thee, Bottom, bless thee. Thou art translated” (3.1.105)—though often glossed by editors as implying simple “transformation,” further highlights the materiality of the ass’s head. The *OED* notes that while *translate* could mean in Shakespeare’s time “to change in form, appearance, or substance,” it could also describe the actions of a tailor “to renovate, turn, or cut down” a garment, or “of a cobbler, to make new boots from the remains of (old ones).”<sup>62</sup> The latter definition would come naturally to a craftsman like Quince, but it also glimpses the restorative potential of the professional London stage and offers a clue as to where Shakespeare might have acquired this extraordinary prop. The material translation of the ass from Balaam to Bottom as a form of recycling or renovation is a far cry from textual translation in the sense of interpre-

tation. Yet it does resemble the allusive and acquisitive mechanism of one particular form of textual translation: typology. As quoted in the epigraph to this essay, Luther mocks the eucharistic typology of the Roman Breviary as a “dream” that is “patched together” by a “poor senseless idiot.”<sup>63</sup> His intention is to ridicule Catholic exegesis, but he uncovers the essential hermeneutic of typological reading: it creates new narratives by patching together older discursive threads.<sup>64</sup> *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, too, is a patchwork of older material: the textual matter of Ovid and Apuleius as well as the handcrafted matter of the mystery play guilds. *Dream* is the only play that survives from the Elizabethan-Jacobean stage (1580–1642) that specifically requires the property of an ass’s head.<sup>65</sup> The work of Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean on the touring of the Queen’s Men shows that Chester was a repeat destination for the London company, including the back-to-back seasons of 1590–91 and 1591–92.<sup>66</sup> This study has prompted Helen Cooper to suggest “it is possible that the cash-strapped [cappers] guild sold them the ass-head to raise a little money, or just to dispose of it, since the suppression of the cycle plays had rendered it redundant.”<sup>67</sup> If the cappers of Chester resembled their Coventry counterparts, then they retained their stage properties long after the prohibition of the plays. The Coventry cycle had last been performed in 1579, and yet a 1591 “Invitori of the Implments of the company of cappers” includes such sundry items as “pylates dublit,” “mary maudlyns gounne,” and a “hell mowth.” Considering the lack of performance opportunities, the guild’s preservation of more than a dozen “headpeses” — mostly wigs, but also masks and other headgear — is extraordinary: “one headpese . . . iij headpeses . . . pylates heade[,] fyve maries heades . . . gods head[,] the spirites heade. . . . The giandes head.”<sup>68</sup> Moreover, given the late appeal of Balaam’s talking ass, it is not unthinkable that the headgear may have still existed and that a professional London company might have been inspired by it, or acquired it outright from a craft guild that had once participated in this older, outlawed play tradition. As Richard Helgerson has noted, many of Shakespeare’s collaborators and competitors were first-generation actors, the sons of bricklayers and shoemakers, and many had been apprentice saddlers, joiners, and dyers with connections to tradesmen in London and the provinces.<sup>69</sup> Once acquired, this remarkable piece must have demanded a dramatic occasion. As Peter Stallybrass has stated regarding the famous props of *Hamlet*, “It would be pointless to write a play with a ghost appearing first in armor and then in a nightgown, with a young man wearing black, with the use of rapiers, and with a skull, unless the company already owned some of those props. The props themselves, then,

were stimulants to writing.”<sup>70</sup> Cooper speculates that the acquisition of the ass’s head by the Chamberlain’s Men gave “the cue to Shakespeare to work it into a play,” and concludes that “it shows the ease with which he himself could negotiate the two theatrical worlds, and turn one into the other.”<sup>71</sup> A dramatic craftsman, or playwright, Shakespeare translated mystery play remnants into contemporary commercial stage magic.

To suggest that Shakespeare’s stage may have borrowed, purchased, or imitated Balaam’s ass is not to suggest that we simply collapse his theater into that older play tradition, though I do wish to unsettle any absolute distinctions between the two. Rather, by surveying the late medieval and early modern history of the ass—from so-called donkey masses as well as Christmas and Easter interludes and processions, to the artisanal stages of the York *Nativity* and *Entry into Jerusalem* and the Chester *Moses and the Law* pageant, and to parodic Reformation discourses—we can better appreciate *Dream*’s contact with these earlier cultural manifestations, but also its distance and innovation. We might compare, for example, the song of the “donkey mass” at Beauvais, France with Bottom’s singing in the “flow’ry bed” of Titania. The former began with a Latin verse and French refrain roughly translated: “From the East / The Ass has come, / Beautiful and strong, / Ready to bear burdens. / Hey, sing, Sir Ass! / Open your fair maw. / You will have hay enough, and oats aplenty.”<sup>72</sup> While the ass may not have sung along, the congregation joined in a clamorous braying: “Hinham, hinham, hinham!” In *Dream*, the ass sings and is similarly attended with great ceremony and promises of plentiful food: “Or say, sweet love, what thou desir’st to eat. . . . Good hay, sweet hay, hath no fellow” (4.1.28, 31). Likewise, in both Shakespeare and the Christmas liturgy, the ass is praised for his beauty and urged to sing. The congregation at the “donkey mass” described him as “belle” and “pulcher” as they coaxed him into song (“Hez, Sire Asnes, car chantez”). Titania says to Bottom, “I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again. / Mine ear is much enamoured of thy note; / So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape” (3.1.121–23). But there are crucial differences as well. What had occasioned the “Song of the Ass” in Beauvais was the celebration of the Flight into Egypt. What prompts Bottom’s singing is the flight of his friends, which Puck will later compare to a flock of birds “rising and cawing at the gun’s report” (3.2.22). Left alone in the woods, he like any child sings in order to calm his fears: “I see their knavery. This is to make an ass of me, to fright me, if they could; but I will not stir from this place, do what they can. I will walk up and down here, and I will sing, that they shall hear I am not afraid” (3.1.106–9). More importantly, Shakespeare’s lovable ass is not a devotional

but a sexual object. During the liturgy, the ass was admired for its service to the infant Jesus. Bottom, however, is the object of Titania's erotic love. She confesses instantaneous love for Bottom "on the first view" of him (3.1.125), but he is more interested in other bodily appetites:

Monsieur Cobweb, good monsieur, get you your weapons in your hand and kill me a red-hipped humble-bee on the top of a thistle; and, good monsieur, bring me the honeybag. Do not fret yourself too much in the action, monsieur; and, good monsieur, have a care the honeybag break not. I would be loath to have you overflowen with a honeybag, signor. (4.1.10–15)

Sending Titania's fairies off on several errands, Bottom accepts service rather than lending it, as did the ass at Beauvais which was "ready to bear" the Virgin and child ("Pulcher et fortissimus / Sarcinis aptissimus"). So, while Bottom's singing is a reincarnation of a liturgical spectacle, it is also remembering with a difference, a commemoration nearly beyond recognition. The Reformation greatly facilitated the ass's translation by unmooring it from its previous cultural and religious affiliations. Melanchthon declared that the Popish Ass's female breasts and belly symbolized all the allurements and enticements of whoredome practiced by cardinals, bishops, monks, and priests. The feminine features of the Popish Ass were enhanced in later woodcut illustrations of the monster. Shakespeare, then, is not the first to eroticize the ass or associate it with bodily appetites, but his comic translation is far removed from religious invective. It has more in common with the Chester cappers' subtly misogynist gendering of Balaam's ass, where the female donkey's stubbornness is presented as a kind of shrewish resistance to male authority. In Shakespeare it is not the ass, but the fairy queen who is obstinate and wayward. By the late sixteenth century, therefore, the ass's head is remarkable not only for its monstrosity and theatrical potential, but also because this old prop is available for new interpretations that highlight, obscure, or merely hint at its religious and dramatic provenance.

Is *secularization* the correct term to describe the translation of the ass from mystery drama and liturgy to the London stage?<sup>73</sup> The answer is, at first, straightforward: Shakespeare "translates," in the sense of "transforms," a cultic object into a commercial one. But *translate* also means to renovate, to make "new" boots or clothes, or props, from "old" ones, in which case previous material is retained and preserved. The Popish Ass is, as we've seen, both a relic of the old religion and a present danger. I now want to sug-

gest that the ass's head in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is also temporally vexed: it is both the remnant of a bygone play tradition and the means by which Shakespeare's play claims to be innovative and advanced. Jan Kott has noted that the ass had long been a complex syncretic object that undermined dogma while simultaneously celebrating it: "In the Feast of Fools, or *festum asinorum*, the low clerics parodied the Holy Offices while disguising themselves with the masks of animals."<sup>74</sup> Of course Kott, like E. K. Chambers, is eager to underscore the importance of ancient folk rituals for the professional London stage. He insists that Shakespeare's indebtedness to carnival and *serio ludere* renders him not only a secular poet but also—and for that reason—a modern, not a medieval, one: "This encounter of Titania and Bottom, the ass and the mock-king of the carnival, is the very beginning of modern comedy and one of its glorious opening nights."<sup>75</sup> If, like Kott, we are eager to find "the very beginning" of ourselves in Shakespeare, we may miss the extent to which *Dream* is looking backwards rather than forward—moments such as "Bottom's Dream" where Shakespeare's play brings the religious history of the ass into closer proximity by retaining previous cultural affinities.<sup>76</sup> Restored to his everyday asininity, Bottom tries to recount his experience in Titania's bower:

I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was. Man is but an ass if he go about t'expound this dream. Methought I was—there is no man can tell what. Methought I was, and methought I had—but man is but a patched fool if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report what my dream was. (4.1.199–207)

Set in pagan, pre-Christian Athens, the play's allusion to the text of 1 Corinthians is extraneous. Yet given the sixteenth-century provenance of the ass, often as prayerful as it was parodic, the syncretism of *Dream* has precedent. Praised by the faithful in Palm Sunday processions, the ass was likewise a symbol for Reformers of the crude sorcery and blasphemous materialism of popish liturgy. Melancthon's derogation of the Popish Ass reads like a paraphrase of this same biblical passage: "for the Churche is a spirituall bodye and kingdome, assembled together in spirite. . . . Contrary vnto these thinges the Pope hath made himselfe the visible and outward heade of the Churche" (*Two Woonderful Popish Monsters*, sig. B1v). In the Chester mys-

tery plays, the talking ass incited laughter even as it served as God's mouth-piece to admonish moral waywardness. "Bottom's dream" achieves a comic effect, but mixed in with the laughter at Bottom's synesthetic jumbling of the biblical text is the pleasure of recognition: of the familiar passage itself, to be sure, but also, perhaps, of witnessing a talking ass situated in a biblical context for the first time since the mysteries staged the story of Balaam a generation before. At the same time, however, the mangled text of 1 Corinthians is also an opportunity for *Dream* to distinguish itself from the ass's previous religious manifestations. Bottom, after all, "will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream," and he "will sing it in the latter end of a play, before the Duke" (4.1.207–210). His aim is pure profit, not moral instruction. The same can be said for their performance of the "tedious brief scene of young Pyramus / And his love Thisbe" (5.1.56–57): "If our sport had gone forward," laments Snug before Bottom returns, "we had all been made men" (4.2.16–17). Shakespeare overlays "Bottom's dream" with a biblical passage, but the playful misquoting of 1 Corinthians lacks the didacticism of the cappers' play even as it shares the Chester guild's commercial motives. We can see, then, that there was never a moment when the ass underwent secularization; rather, its sacred and secular manifestations long coexisted. When *Dream* reached the boards of the Globe in the mid-1590s, the ass was still closely tethered to the material "trumperies," "shewes," and "appearances" of Roman liturgy and drama. Shakespeare may be teasing his audience with aspects of this history in order to differentiate his play from the mystery plays of the old faith.

The scholars alluded to at the beginning of this essay have offered persuasive reasons for reading the "rude mechanicals" of *Dream* as comic representations of the craftsmen-actors of the mystery tradition.<sup>77</sup> Without repeating their arguments, it must be admitted that the two strongest objections to such interpretations of Shakespeare's mechanicals concern, first of all, the cultural contact between London and the provinces, and, second, the topic matter of the *Pyramus and Thisbe* play. But as Helen Cooper argues, the enormous influx of immigrants from the provinces to London in the late sixteenth century meant that "the dominant living theatrical experience of the childhood and youth of a large number of the playgoers of the 1590s was religious drama carried forward from the Middle Ages."<sup>78</sup> That Shakespeare, one of those immigrants, shared with these playgoers a substantial theatrical vocabulary first learned in Coventry or elsewhere is, as Michael O'Connell explains, evident from verbal references to the theatrical practices of the mysteries such as Hamlet's famous warning to the players not to over-

act like the figure of Herod (3.2.12) and the description of Master Slender's "Cain-coloured beard" in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1.4.20). Still, Cooper notes, "verbal parallels between the two [stages] are rare. . . . [W]hat is at issue is not there in the words on the page or in specific sources for specific lines." Rather, she explains, the expectations of Elizabethan audiences lie in dramatic conventions carried over from the mysteries: "the dramaturgy of the cycle plays provided the core of Elizabethan dramatic practice."<sup>79</sup>

Next, while it is true that Bottom and company are staging a classical story whose subject matter is far removed from the mystery play tradition, this objection relies on a historical consciousness, an "ability to detect and avoid anachronism," that fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English culture did not share.<sup>80</sup> As the work of Patricia Parker has shown, the late medieval practice of moralizing Ovid through allegorical commentary "overlays the story [of Pyramus and Thisbe] from the *Metamorphoses* . . . with a rich network of biblical passages."<sup>81</sup> Classical and biblical stories are unhesitatingly wedded for moral and theological purposes as Ovid's ancient love story typologically anticipates medieval orthodox teachings about Christ's passion. Early modern English perceptions of classical drama are particularly anachronistic. "The old comedies," writes George Puttenham concerning ancient Greek drama, "were plaid in the broad streets vpon wagons or carts vncouered."<sup>82</sup> Similarly, Gilbert Hole's engraving on the title page of Ben Jonson's 1616 *Workes* also includes a *plaustrum*, or oxcart. Proclaiming Jonson's mastery of antique dramatic forms, the wagon is undoubtedly intended to signify ancient comedy; yet, like Puttenham's account, it glimpses the pageants of the mysteries, not to mention the troupes of vagabond players who predated the permanent theaters of London. According to Stephen Orgel, the *plaustrum* scene depicted in the plinth also encompasses Jonson's contemporary theater. It shows Thespis in his cart, "with the sacrificial goat, the tragedian's prize, tethered to it." But as he explains, "if we look carefully, we see that he is in Jacobean dress, a modern playwright—Jonson himself—and clearly one of us."<sup>83</sup> As a final example, the famous 1595 sketch attributed to Henry Peacham depicts a contemporary playhouse performance in which classical, medieval, and Renaissance costumes and props share the stage. Anachronism, the easy intermixture of objects, costumes—even persons—from various historical periods, is the rule rather than the exception for the professional London stage. If so, then neither the setting of ancient Athens nor the classical subject matter would necessarily preclude Shakespeare from adding contemporary rustic actors. Chronological difference is respected no more than the genre of Ovid's tragic tale:

“*The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe*” (1.2.9–10).

Appealing to a cosmopolitan audience’s sense of urbanity and sophistication even as it recycles well-worn dramatic customs, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* presents the guild drama of the previous generation as a bumbling, rustic form of theater preoccupied with material stage properties, and his own stage as ethereal and dreamlike. As Davidson explains, “Shakespeare’s negative view of such plays and players in provincial cities and towns is probably misleading in the extreme, for the spectacles . . . were surely not so rough and ‘amateurish’ as we might imagine.” Nevertheless, Davidson argues, *Dream*’s representation of provincial players “serves by its burlesque of amateur actors to set apart their play-within-a-play from the main actions of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and hence to provide a comment on the role of imagination in the theater itself.”<sup>84</sup> My purpose in the remainder of this essay will be to show how Shakespeare’s lighthearted parody of artisanal drama cleverly masks his own indebtedness to the mysteries and his own investment in the power of material props as sites of imaginary creation. Following O’Connell, I believe “the mysteries remained vital as an element of cultural memory, as something that bore relation to the practice of the succeeding theater.”<sup>85</sup> And so, when faced with his profound reliance on material stage props to address fundamental dramaturgical challenges—how indeed do you stage an animal like a lion or an ass? or moonshine? or a wall?—Shakespeare often turned to that older dramatic tradition. He might do so in earnest, as when his tragedy called for a ghost to spur a revenger into action by whispering of his purgatorial sufferings. But he might also turn to the mysteries in jest and laugh at their expense. I do not intend to reduce mystery drama to mechanical craft devoid of literary nuance and skill, yet I want to suggest that Shakespeare did so—for it is rather incredible to witness his play showcase a bulky material prop in order to contrast his supposedly airy, fantastic stage from the mechanics of the mysteries. I draw attention to the craftsmanship of the mysteries because I wish to see Shakespeare as something of a mechanical, or play-wright, himself.

It may have been economically and politically urgent that Shakespeare’s commercial theater distance itself from an obsolete yet still memorable dramatic tradition. Gone were the days of intermittent, itinerant playing, and the company of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, however successful, was under continual pressure to appear new and up-to-date in a crowded theater market. More importantly, the London stages were under attack from

Puritan antitheatricalists like William Crashaw, who drew no distinction between their plays and the popish plots of mystery and morality drama. “The vngodly Playes and Enterludes so rife in this nation,” fumed Crashaw in a 1607 sermon, “what are they but a Bastard of Babylon, a daughter of error and confusion, a hellish deuce . . . deliuered to the Heathen, from them to the Papists, and from them to vs?”<sup>86</sup>

What made the mysteries so objectionable for Puritans was, in part, their “hellish devices,” their physical means of representing godly things. We have noted the importance of handicraft to the craftsmen-actors of the mysteries like the Cappers of Chester whose wares and skills were dramatized by the talking ass. Audiences, too, were eager to behold the materiality of mystery play performance; Chester city officials command the waterleaders to see that “all poyntes” of Noah’s ark are properly constructed.<sup>87</sup> The carpenters are similarly instructed to bring forth a “well decked Caryage,” that may have included not one but two richly decorated platform stages that would have to be hauled through the narrow streets of the town.<sup>88</sup> In Shakespeare’s parodic translation, mystery drama’s fondness for staged crafts is compulsive. Confronted with a story that mentions moonlight and a wall, the mechanicals feel they “must” provide material analogues:

*Bottom:* Why, then may you leave a casement of the great chamber window where we play open, and the moon may shine in at the casement.

*Quince:* Ay, or else one must come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern and say he comes to disfigure, or to present, the person of Moonshine.

. . . . .

*Snout:* You can never bring in a wall. What say you, Bottom?

*Bottom:* Some man or other must present Wall; and let him have some plaster, or some loam, or some rough-cast about him, to signify “wall.” (3.1.48–53, 56–59)

Shakespeare’s rude mechanicals are not ignorant of rhetorical solutions to dramatic dilemmas—after all, they compose an apology to reassure their audience that the Lion means no harm. But these “hard-handed men” who “never laboured in their minds till now” (5.1.72–73) are as captivated by material stage properties as they are linguistically incompetent; they have no recourse but to props and costumes. Indeed Starveling, as Moonshine, is at a loss for words to explain anything more than his appearance: “All that I have

to say is to tell you that the lantern is the moon, I the man i'th' moon, this thorn bush my thorn bush, and this dog my dog" (5.1.247–49). The effect of stage properties on Pyramus is not reticence but repetitive loquacity. He is momentarily transfixed by the wall: "O wall, O sweet O lovely wall, / That stand'st between her father's ground and mine, / Thou wall, O wall, O sweet and lovely wall, / Show me thy chink" (5.1.172–75). Later the "gracious, golden, glittering gleams" of the sweet moon's "sunny beams" (5.1.261–63) charm him as well.

The denigration of craftsmen-actors and their material accoutrements is reflected in Theseus's aristocratic perspective on theater. Told that the tradesmen "can do nothing" when it comes to acting, Theseus responds with "noble respect":

The kinder we, to give them thanks for nothing,  
Our sport shall be to take what they mistake,  
And what poor duty cannot do,  
Noble respect takes it in might, not merit. (5.1.89–92)

What is important, according to Theseus, is not what actors do with their bodies but what nobles do with their minds. "The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst / Are no worse if imagination amend them," he later remonstrates (5.1.208–9). Drama is not entirely played-out in the clumsy, grossly material costumes, props, and bodily gestures (often as obscene as the Wall's "chink") of earthy tradesmen—these are "nothing" to him. Invested with "might" (in the sense of *potentia*, or ruling power), the noble spectator discerns between "merit" (what actually happens on stage) and "might" (what might have been if the actors had their desired ability). For the mechanicals, on the other hand, dramatized tales must be thoroughly fleshed out with props and costumes that leave little to the imagination. Bottom advises his companions:

Masters, you ought to consider with yourself, to bring in—God shield us—a lion among ladies is a most dreadful thing. . . . Nay, you must name his name, and half his face must be seen through the lion's neck, and he himself must speak through, saying thus or to the same defect: "ladies," or "fair ladies, I would wish you" or "I would request you" or "I would entreat you not to fear, not to tremble." (3.1.27–29, 32–36)

Theseus, (in the words of the same Pauline text that informs “Bottom’s dream”), trusts not to eye or ear, but to the imagination in order to grasp “all things, yea, the deep things” — which is to say, the bottom — of “poor” spectacle.<sup>89</sup>

The epilogue of the play is complicit in Theseus’s views; it, too, wants the “Gentles” in the audience to give “thanks for nothing” (5.1.89), albeit for commercial purposes:

If we shadows have offended,  
Think but this, and all is mended:  
That you have but slumbered here,  
While these visions did appear;  
And this weak and idle theme,  
No more yielding but a dream,  
Gentles, do not reprehend. (Epil. 1–7)

A mischievous game is being played here: like the Athenian mechanicals, Shakespeare relies on an apology for his play, and the epilogue undoes its own claim to being a dream of shadows once the actor breaks the illusion of fiction and reminds the spectators that they are an audience watching actors’ bodies move about on stage. Bottom and his fellows, who were so eager not to offend that they address the audience numerous times, would find this epilogue quite proper. In exchange for a supposedly ethereal, ineffectual experience, spectators must compensate in very material ways: the price of admission and audible applause. “Give me your hands, if we be friends, / And Robin shall restore amends” (Epil. 15–16). More importantly, Puck’s excuse that the play is no more than a dreamlike vision conveniently overlooks the extent to which his presence on stage has been defined by material stage properties: his character is important to the play because he must introduce the “little western flower” and the “ass’s nole.”<sup>90</sup> Indeed, for all of his mockery of the hard-handed Athenian craftsmen, the play associates Robin himself with country life and labor. When we first meet him, a fairy inquires about his rustic reputation:

Are not you he  
That frights the maidens of the villag’ry,  
Skim milk, and sometimes labour in the quern,  
And bootless make the breathless housewife churn,  
And sometime make the drink to bear no barm —  
. . . . .

Those that “hobgoblin” call you, and “sweet puck,”  
You do their work, and they shall have good luck. (2.1.34–38, 40–41)

Robin acknowledges this account of his “labour” and “work” and adds, “The wisest aunt telling the saddest tale / Sometime for three-foot stool mistaketh me; / Then slip I from her bum. Down topples she, / And ‘tailor’ cries” (2.1.51–54). By his own admission, the airy “sprite” (or “spirit”) Puck has been transformed into a bottom, a simple wooden stool upon which a rude village woman tries to rest her bum. When we last see him, he bears his traditional emblem, a broom, which he will use, perhaps, to spank a lazy housewife’s bum, or to help an industrious woman “To sweep the dust behind the door” (5.2.20).<sup>91</sup>

To have the actor playing Puck leaning on a broom while proclaiming himself and his fellow actors “shadows” in a mere “dream” is perhaps the last joke of all, and one that transports (or translates) the audience back to those middle acts where the play not only exploited an unavoidably material ass’s head in the fairy world of the forest, but repeatedly called attention to it as a prop. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* enacts structurally as well as thematically Shakespeare’s relationship to his sixteenth-century predecessors: acts three and four borrow a stage property from a mystery play tradition which, in act five, is derided for its perfunctory habit of exhibiting theatrical artifacts. Yet broom and head both unsettle Theseus’s attempt to locate drama in the mind as well as the Athenian audience’s mockery of the artisans’ compulsive use of props in *Pyramus and Thisbe*. As Hugh Grady states, “In the travesty that is the mechanicals’ play, [Shakespeare] presents us with the final truth of his own masterpiece—its made-ness, its materiality, its resistance to the artist’s shaping fantasies.”<sup>92</sup> Overthrowing the Pauline wisdom of 1 Corinthians 2:6–16, which embraces the spirit at the expense of the flesh, as well as Reformation discourses condemning popish “trumperies,” *Dream* wants to have it all: bodies and minds, props and imagination, old and new.<sup>93</sup> Once metonymic with the eucharistic transubstantiation of base matter into divine substance as well as the carnal excesses of popery, the ass’s head elevates and denigrates Bottom: he rises from the artisanal world of work to the airy world of magic, but also descends from dignified human labor to beastly appetites and sexual desires. And it is fitting that Robin Goodfellow, a spirit who “labours” and “works” in the “villag’ry,” is the agent of this double translation.

. . .

Contrary to Kott's view that sees *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as the "very beginning of modern comedy," Shakespeare's conspicuous use of staged properties like the ass's head underscores the proximity of his stage to the crafts of the mysteries—even as his play pretends to have transcended them. The ass's head of *Dream* no longer serves as a hallmark of the manufacturing skill or economic prestige of a craft guild but as a piece of raw material for the emerging craft of professional acting. Just as Luther and Melancthon's Popish Ass incorporates and therefore re-presents a Catholic past that it supposedly supersedes, Shakespeare's "translated" Bottom is a carryover from sixteenth-century drama, ritual, and craft, yet also a means of mocking "old-fashioned" artisanal performance. The ass's comic and complex reemergence urges us to reevaluate our critical assumptions about the relationship of the professional London stage to that of the mystery cycles. In this regard, my essay has tried to address what Michael O'Connell has called an "almost general disinclination . . . to see the previous theater as having any relationship to the public theater" yet, too, to be mindful of historical difference.<sup>94</sup> O'Connell and Beatrice Groves have made important claims about the histrionic conventions and incarnational aesthetics that Shakespeare inherited from the mystery plays.<sup>95</sup> Though sympathetic with those efforts, this essay has made a different claim. Following Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda's materialist account of stage properties, as well as the indispensable collection *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, I wish to further strive to see Shakespeare as "a *playwright*, a craftsman who, like a shipwright or cartwright, fashions his material for practical use."<sup>96</sup> Beyond the linguistic correlations and circumstantial overlaps noted by O'Connell, Groves, and others, I believe that material pieces from the mystery plays shaped the playwright joinery of Shakespeare. So, while the question of where Shakespeare acquired the ass's head is itself intriguing, much more is at stake. For if Balaam's ass inspired Bottom's translation, then we need to rethink the importance of sixteenth-century dramatic objects once sequestered from the preeminent Renaissance subject, William Shakespeare, by being labeled "medieval" and therefore irrelevant.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* derives pleasure, not from the foolishness of the rude mechanicals alone, but from theater's game of mixing old and new: how, that is, an object like the ass's head can be old yet in fact newly available precisely because it is old. To trace the genealogy of the ass's head is therefore to gain new purchase on the circulation of social energy whereby "a consecrated object is reclassified, assigned a cash value, transferred from a sacred to a profane setting, deemed suitable for the stage."<sup>97</sup>

For if *Dream* is, as Theseus and Puck claim, little more than a dream in the minds of the audience, then those imaginings are also given a local habitation within the wooden *O* of the Globe and the play's "strange and admirable" (5.1.27) props. The comedy relies upon—and may have been written when Shakespeare acquired—a very rude, mechanical prop with a very rich history. The play, therefore, is not "bodied forth" from "airy nothing," but from the material remnants of the mystery stage it has translated.



## Notes

Like the ass's head, this essay has undergone several translations. In gratitude to many keen and helpful readers, I wish to say "Thanks, courteous reader. Jove shield thee well for this."

- 1 Georg Brandes, "The Airy Dream," in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Judith M. and Richard F. Kennedy (New Brunswick, N.J.: Athlone Press, 1999), 341.
- 2 Clifford Davidson, "'What hempen home-spuns have we swagg'ring here?' Amateur Actors in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Coventry Civic Plays and Pageants," *Shakespeare Studies* 19 (1987): 87–99; Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 36.
- 3 Louis Montrose, *The Purpose of Playing: Shakespeare and the Cultural Politics of the Elizabethan Theatre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 180, 185. Montrose subsequently argues that Shakespeare places this medieval dramatic tradition in a "sharply comic" light in order to entertain his increasingly learned and courtly audience (185). Responding to Montrose, Michael O'Connell, "Vital Cultural Practices: Shakespeare and the Mysteries," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 29, no. 1 (1999): 149–68, defends the sophistication of the medieval stage.
- 4 John Parker, "What a Piece of Work Is Man: Shakespearean Drama as Marxian Fetish, the Fetish as Sacramental Sublime," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34, no. 3 (2004): 662–63.
- 5 Kenneth Muir, *The Sources of Shakespeare's Plays* (London: Methuen, 1977), 68. Geoffrey Bullough, in *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1957), is more open to Scot as a source but first suggests various classical sources: "The setting of an ass's head on Bottom recalls Circe's charms. It is a piece of poetic justice like the well-known story of Phoebus's revenge on King Midas which I give from Cooper's *Thesaurus Linguae*. . . . Midas has only his ears changed. Bottom's assification is more like that of the amorous Apuleius in *The Golden Ass*, translated by Adlington in 1566, but nearer still to Shakespeare is a version of witches' spells found in Scot." Joseph Rosenblum notes an intriguing affinity between Titania's obstinacy and the figure of "Ostinatione" carrying an ass's head in her hands in Cesare Ripa's 1593 *Iconologia*; see "Why an Ass? Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* as a Source for Bottom's Translation," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (1981): 357–59.

- 6 Richard K. Emmerson, "Dramatic History: On the Diachronic and Synchronic in the Study of Early English Drama," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 35, no. 1 (2005): 40, 54–57.
- 7 All citations of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are from Stephen Greenblatt et al., eds., *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 814–63.
- 8 According to Lawrence Clopper, "The History and Development of the Chester Cycle," *Modern Philology* 75, no. 3 (1978): 228. "The cappers must have gotten their play . . . sometime between 1505 and 1522."
- 9 R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, eds., *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, 2 vols., Early English Text Society supp. ser., vols. 3 and 9 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 1:88, lines 217–39. Unless otherwise indicated, further citations of the Chester mystery plays are given from this edition by line numbers. The translation of the stage direction is from *Moses and the Law: Balaack and Balaam*, trans. David Mills in *The Chester Mystery Cycle: A New Edition with Modernised Spelling* (East Lansing, Mich.: Colleagues Press, 1992), 91.
- 10 *The Bible and Holy Scriptures conteyned in the Olde and Newe Testament* (London, 1560), sig. s4v.
- 11 Elizabeth Baldwin, Lawrence M. Clopper, and David Mills, eds., *Records of Early English Drama: Cheshire including Chester*, 2 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 1:336; subsequently cited as *REED: Cheshire*.
- 12 See *REED: Cheshire*, 1:lxix, 356.
- 13 Richard Beadle, ed., *The York Plays* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), 128, lines 99–100, 104–5, 122–26.
- 14 Clopper, "History and Development of the Chester Cycle," 228.
- 15 *Chester Mystery Cycle*, ed. Lumiansky and Mills, 1:464, s.d. following line 260 in appendix 1A; trans. Mills, *Chester Mystery Cycle*, 60. Lumiansky and Mills consider this stage direction essential to the *Noah* play, though it is found only in British Library, Harley MS 2124 dated to 1607.
- 16 Mills, *Chester Mystery Cycle*, 50.
- 17 Lines 35–36 of *The Building of the Ark* in *York Plays*, ed. Beadle, 79.
- 18 Clifford Davidson, *Technology, Guilds, and Early English Drama* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1996), 1–2.
- 19 As Davidson states, "The sponsorship of the guild seems to have meant that whenever possible the craft involved would show off its workmanship." He then continues with the example of the Coventry smiths: "it is hard to know exactly how their use and display of metalwork was effected except in a few aspects such as the use of gold leaf[,] the evidence nevertheless suggests high visibility for the products produced by means of their technology. Blacksmiths had very good reason to want to improve their 'image' . . . since there appears to have been some suspicion about their way of life and also about the quality of their product" (*Technology, Guilds, and Early English Drama*, 38). Scholars have debated the extent and purpose of commercialism in the mysteries. John C. Coldewey argues that the handicraft exhibited by the pageants constitutes a kind of advertising; "Some Economic Aspects of the Late Medieval Drama," in *Contexts for Early English Drama*, ed. Marianne G. Briscoe and John C. Coldewey (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 87. J. W. Robinson critiques this

- account in *Studies in Fifteenth-Century Stagecraft* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), 63–64.
- 20 Parker, “What a Piece of Work Is Man,” 663.
  - 21 *Ibid.*, 662–63.
  - 22 Mills, *Chester Mystery Cycle*, 84.
  - 23 Mills notes the recent use of a two-man costume (*ibid.*).
  - 24 Clopper, “The History and Development of the Chester Cycle,” 231, 245–46.
  - 25 Theresa Coletti, “The Chester Cycle in Sixteenth-Century Religious Culture,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 37, no. 3 (2007): 543, 533.
  - 26 Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, ed. Montague Summers (New York: Dover Publications, 1989), 54–57. All the quotations below are from these pages.
  - 27 William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Gail Kern Paster and Skiles Howard (Boston: Bedford-St. Martin’s, 1999), 287.
  - 28 Stephen Greenblatt, “Remnants of the Sacred in Early Modern England,” in *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 343.
  - 29 Ulinka Rublack, *Reformation Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1–3.
  - 30 The titles of the German and English editions of Melanchthon and Luther’s pamphlet are, respectively, *Deutung der czwo grewlichen Figuren, Pabstesels zu Rom und Munchkalbs zu Frieberg in Meissen funden* (Wittenberg, 1523); and *Of Two Woonderful Popish Monsters to wyt, of a Popish Asse which was found at Rome in the riuer of Tyber, and of a Moonkish Calfe, calued at Friberge in Misne* (London, 1579). The English edition is cited hereafter by signatures. The woodcut image of the “Popish Asse” is on sig. A4v, and that of the “Moonkish Calfe” is on sig. D3v. For a critical edition, see *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Schriften*, vol. 11 (1900; repr. Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1966), 357–86.
  - 31 R. W. Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London: Hambledon Press, 1987), 284.
  - 32 The first chapter of Julie Crawford’s *Marvelous Protestantism: Monstrous Births in Post-Reformation England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005) “takes as its subject the complicated genealogy of the monk calf in the English popular press and imagination.” Crawford argues that the success of these monstrous tales and images often “relied on the use of discredited Catholic beliefs, particularly in the relationship between the material and divine” (28).
  - 33 John Barthlet, *The pedegrewe of heretiques* (London, 1566), sig. Y1v; Pierre Boaistuau, *Certaine secrete wonders of nature* (London, 1569), sig. 2M4r. Barthlet merely discusses the Popish Ass; Boaistuau adds a large woodcut illustration that differs in several minor details from that used in the 1579 pamphlet.
  - 34 R. W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 132. Also *Luthers Werke, Schriften*, 11:361–65. And Konrad Lange, *Der Papstesel: Ein Beitrag zur Kultur- und Kunstgeschichte des Reformationszeitalters* (Göttingen, 1891), 92–93.
  - 35 Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements*, 278. Scribner notes that some editions of the *Depiction* contain ten illustrations.

- 36 “Miniature drama” is a term that E. K. Chambers used to distinguish this scene from the previous monologues. See *The Mediaeval Stage*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903), 2:54.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 2:57 n. 1. And so, as in Chambers’s broader account, attempts by Christianity to squelch pagan folk culture ultimately translate into drama’s “spontaneous growth” and evolution.
- 38 There are several sources for the *asinaria feste* at Beauvais. Chambers cites the editors of Ducange, *Glossarium mediae et infimae Latinitatis* (Paris, 1733), who quote from a section of a thirteenth-century *Officium* with the heading *Conductus quando asinus adducitur* (see Chambers, *Mediaeval Stage*, 1:331). The name *donkey mass* is a seventeenth-century term cited by Henry Copley Greene, “The Song of the Ass,” *Speculum* 6, no. 4 (1931): 534 n. 5, and comes from a 1697 letter from Foy de Saint-Hilaire, a canon in Beauvais, to M. de Francastel, assistant librarian of the Bibliothèque Mazarine in Paris. According to Greene, Foy de Saint-Hilaire writes, “See what I heard said by my late father, who had seen the whole Donkey Mass, [of] which [the MS] was kept in our parish church of St. Stephen, and which a clerk of the Curé’s . . . seized and cruelly burned because of conscientious scruples.”
- 39 Just how irksome Luther found the Palmesel is illustrated by his repeated reference to it as a childish innovation that is “contrary to faith” in his 1530 *Exhortation to All Clergy Assembled at Augsburg*, in *Selected Writings of Martin Luther*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1967), 108, 111.
- 40 The Palmesels referenced by Chambers seem only to be those that include affixed statues (*Mediaeval Stage*, 1:334).
- 41 See Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400–c. 1580* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), 26–27. Also see Chambers, *Mediaeval Stage*, 1:334 n. 2.
- 42 *The New Testament of Jesus Christ, translated faithfully into English, out of the authentic Latin* (Rheims, 1582), sig. H3r; my emphasis.
- 43 Rheims 1582 *New Testament*, sig. H3r. The word *gratefull* here is to be understood in the sense of “pleasing . . . agreeable, acceptable, welcome” (*OED*, s.v. *grateful* [adj.] 1).
- 44 *The text of the New Testament . . . with a confutation of all such arguments, glosses, and annotations, as containe manifest impietie, of heresie, treason and slander, against the catholike Church of God* (London, 1589), sigs. K6v, Ll1r.
- 45 Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements*, 285.
- 46 Jonathan Gil Harris, *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 31.
- 47 Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements*, 285.
- 48 Robert Barrett, *Against All England: Regional Identity and Cheshire Writing, 1195–1656* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 61.
- 49 See the first chapter of Barrett’s *Against All England*, “From Cloister to Corporation,” esp. 47–49.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 61–62.
- 51 Clopper, “History and Development of the Chester Cycle,” 235. Also see *REED: Cheshire*, 161.
- 52 *The Bible and holy scriptures contained in the Olde and Newe Testament* (London, 1576),

sig. 5S2r–v. Curiously, this commentary is reiterated graphically in the 1576 edition by the fact that the decorative initial *S* in the name *Simon Peter* at the beginning of the epistle depicts a figure wearing a miter or triple-tiara seated beneath a canopy with his arms raised in benediction. Like Luther and Melancthon's Popish Ass, this pope seemingly wears large ass's ears that give him a rather Puckish appearance. Printer Christopher Barker does not appear to have reused the woodcut in subsequent editions of either the Geneva New Testament or complete Bible.

- 53 John Foxe, *Actes and monuments* (London, 1583), sig. 2G3v.
- 54 Luther's commentary on 2 Peter 2, published in a 1581 English translation, agrees with the Geneva Bible's interpretation: "Of this matter doeth saint Peter now here speake, meanyng that our greased Popelynges and Romishe route, with all their Disciples, Fauourers, Abettors, and Sectaries, are the verie children of this Balaam." He then glosses the meaning of the prophet's name: "Balaam, in the Hebrue tongue signifieth a Deuourer, or a Sweepstake, or a Supper vp, who with open mouthe deuoureth and gulleth vp all that commeth to hand. . . . The Sirname of this Prophete, is the Sonne of Bosor, whiche signifieth Fleshe, or as Moses calleth hym Beor, whiche signifieth Foolishe." Luther, *A commentarie or exposition vppon the two Epistles general of Sainct Peter, and that of Sainct Jude* (London, 1581), sig. 2P1r–v. First published in German the same year as the pamphlet depicting the Popish Ass (1523), Luther's commentary on the epistles of Peter and Jude draws upon the themes of Melancthon's interpretation of that monster, most significantly the ass's association with the fleshy Roman idolatry as opposed to the Godly spirituality of the reformers.
- 55 John Bale, *The image of both Churches* (London, 1570), sig. A8v.
- 56 Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements*, 285.
- 57 Rublack, *Reformation Europe*, 1–2.
- 58 For a discussion of stage properties as "tangible assets to a play-acting company," their construction, storage, and expense, see Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574–1642*, 3rd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 187–93. While noting the relatively small number of large properties required by Shakespeare's plays (as well as the fact that "stages themselves were colorful yet essentially bare"), Gurr nevertheless states that "given storage space, the wealthier and longer-lived companies could accumulate a good many standard properties" (193). If Henslowe's 1598 diary entry is any indication, several of these items would have been false (mostly bestial) heads and entire animals including "i lyone, ii lyone heads," "i blacke dogge," "i bulles head," "owld Mahemetes head," "i lyone skin; i beares skyne," and "Argosses head." See *Henslowe's Diary*, 2nd ed., ed. R. A. Foakes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 319–21.
- 59 See *The Norton Facsimile of The First Folio of Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., prepared by Charlton Hinman (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 170. Neither the first or second quartos (respectively, London, 1600, STC [2nd ed.] 22302; and London, 1600 [i.e., 1619], STC [2nd ed.] 22303) include this stage direction—or many others for that matter. In fact, this paucity has often prompted editors to say that the Folio edition was most likely the closest of the three to "a theatrical manuscript, probably a promptbook in the possession of Shakespeare's company." See Greenblatt's introduction to the play in the *Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Greenblatt et al., 812.

- 60 See First Quarto, sig. F4r; and Second Quarto, sig. F4r.
- 61 Davidson, "What hempen home-spuns have we swagg'ring here?" 94. The miniature image of the mummer is from Bodleian Library, Bodley MS 264, fol. 181v.
- 62 *OED*, s.v. *translate* (v.) III.4. On clothing and "translation," see Peter Stallybrass and Ann Rosalind Jones, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials Of Memory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 220–44.
- 63 *Luther's Works*, the American Edition, trans. and ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House; Philadelphia: Fortress-Muhlenberg Press, 1955–86), 36:182; original *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Schriften*, vol. 8 (1889; repr. Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1966), 523.
- 64 On the temporality of typology, see Harris, *Untimely Matter*, 36–39.
- 65 *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580–1642* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Alan Dessen's invaluable study of terms found in the stage directions of English professional plays, lists—under the entry for *head*—only the Folio text of *Dream* as calling for the head of an ass (112), though of course many other bestial heads were used, including those of a bull, a stag, a bear, a lion, and a dragon. As per the entry for "ass, mule," real asses appear onstage no more than five times in about sixty years (16). In addition, the entry for *ear* (as in Midas's ass's ears) produces similarly scarce entries—three, to be exact. Two caveats to the study of stage directions that Dessen has kindly brought to my attention are, first, that a play might stage an ass's head though its stage directions make no mention of it, and, second, that the texts which survive are deficient.
- 66 Scott McMillin and Sally-Beth MacLean, *The Queen's Men and Their Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 180, 182.
- 67 Helen Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2010), 220. Yet as I have noted, the records in *REED: Cheshire* testify that as late as 1610, the ass's head was by no means redundant but rather so popular as to be newly made for the city's annual Midsummer show.
- 68 R. W. Ingram, ed., *Records of Early English Drama: Coventry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 334. Meg Twycross and Sarah Carpenter have done important work explaining the ambiguity of the word *heade* in early English drama records: see "Masks in Medieval English Theatre: The Mystery Plays," *Medieval English Theatre* 3 (1981): 7–44, 69–113; and *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2002).
- 69 Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 197.
- 70 Peter Stallybrass, "Shakespeare's Desk: The Materiality of Authorship," paper delivered at the Shakespeare Association of America Conference in Philadelphia, April 15, 2006.
- 71 Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, 220.
- 72 The translation is my own; the original reads: "Orientis partibus / Adventavit Asinus / Pulcher et fortissimus / Sarcinis aptissimus. / Hez, Sire Asnes, car chantez, / Belle bouche rechignez, / Vous aurez du foin assez / Et de l'avoine a plantez." See Greene, "The Song of the Ass," 534 n. 5.

- 73 Compare Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 253, who raises the question of secularization regarding the cult of purgatory: "Does this mean that Shakespeare was participating in a secularization process . . . ? Perhaps. But the palpable effect is something like the reverse: *Hamlet* immeasurably intensifies a sense of the weirdness of the theater, its proximity to certain experiences that had been organized and exploited by religious institutions and rituals." He adds, "Plays can borrow, imitate, and reflect much of what passes for everyday reality without necessarily evacuating this reality or exposing it as made-up."
- 74 Jan Kott, *The Bottom Translation: Marlowe and Shakespeare and the Carnival Tradition*, trans. Daniela Miedzyrzeczka and Lillian Vallee (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1987), 50.
- 75 *Ibid.*, 52. Kott notes the importance of Paul's letter to the Corinthians to Shakespeare's play, yet it is not significant for him as a residue of Bible drama or even Christianity per se, but only as part of a larger "tradition, a system of interpretation, and a 'language'" of Neoplatonic or hermetic metaphysics that complements but contradicts the "code of carnival" or tradition of *serio ludere* which also informs the play (32–33). "Shakespeare," he later adds, "is a legatee of all myths" (61).
- 76 Most recently, Hugh Grady, in "Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics: The Case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2008): 301, argues that Shakespeare's *Dream* anticipates modernity with its "prescient" aesthetic theories, and in fact the play, he says, displays a rather postmodern ability to deconstruct those theories itself: "It is a play that presciently constructs a modern concept of the aesthetic and at the same time shows us the constructedness of this concept, its relation not only to imagination and the artistic past, but to desire and labor as well."
- 77 Other important works that have argued for the indebtedness of the London playhouses to the mystery pageants include Glynne Wickham, *Early English Stages, 1300 to 1660*, 4 vols. (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul; New York: Columbia University Press, 1958–81), John D. Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama: 1350–1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*.
- 78 Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Medieval World*, 55.
- 79 O'Connell, "Vital Cultural Practices," 157; Helen Cooper, "Shakespeare and the Mystery Plays," in *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Popular Culture*, ed. Stuart Gillespie and Neil Rhodes (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 24; and Cooper, *Shakespeare and the Middle Ages: Inaugural Lecture Delivered 29 April 2005* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 14.
- 80 On the aversion of anachronism as "the need to retain the 'cognitive distance' that is the very basis of our disciplinary knowledge," see Margreta de Grazia, "Anachronism," in *Cultural Reformations: Medieval and Renaissance in Literary History*, ed. Brian Cummings and James Simpson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 13–32.
- 81 Patricia Parker, "Teaching and Wordplay: The 'Wall' of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," in *Teaching with Shakespeare: Critics in the Classroom*, ed. Bruce McIver and Ruth Stevenson (Newark: University of Delaware Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1994), 209. Also see Robert Glendinning's insightful "Pyramus and Thisbe in the Medieval Classroom," *Speculum* 61, no. 1 (1986): 51–78.

- 82 George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (London, 1589), sig. F3r.
- 83 Stephen Orgel, "Shakespeare Imagines a Theater," *Poetics Today* 5, no. 3 (1984): 552, 561.
- 84 Davidson, "What hempen home-spuns have we swagg'ring here?" 94–95.
- 85 O'Connell, "Vital Cultural Practices," 159.
- 86 William Crashaw, "The sermon preached at the Crosse," (London, 1609), sig. Z1r.
- 87 REED: *Cheshire*, 335.
- 88 See REED: *Cheshire*, 336. As David Mills writes, "The 'well-decked carriage' of the Post-Reformation Banns may have carried two sets in close juxtaposition—the stable [of the *Nativity*] and the court [of the emperor Octavian]—since the Pre-Reformation Banns speak of 'your cariage of Marie, myld quene, and of Octavian'" (*Chester Mystery Cycle*, 101).
- 89 As Beatrice Groves has shown, the Tyndale and 1557 edition of the Geneva Bible use the word "bottome" rather than the phrase "deepe thinges" at 1 Cor. 2:9. Groves also notes several other interesting connections between Bottom's speech and the Pauline Epistles; "The Wittiest Partition': Bottom, Paul, and Comedic Resurrection," *Notes and Queries* 54, no. 3 (2007): 277–82.
- 90 According to Greenblatt, in *Dream Shakespeare* "split the theater between a magical, virtually nonhuman element, which he associated with the power of the imagination to lift itself away from the constraints of reality, and an all-too-human element, which he associated with the artisans' trades that actually made the material structures" and costumes of the stage (*Will in the World*, 53). In the discussion that follows, I am suggesting that this Cartesian "split" is not absolute—that the "magical" and "material" worlds in the play overlap in significant ways.
- 91 As the note for 5.2.20 in the *Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Greenblatt et al., explains, Robin "helped good housekeepers and punished lazy ones."
- 92 Grady, "Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics," 301.
- 93 As Greenblatt states, Shakespeare wanted his audience to grasp that "the theater had to have both, both the visionary flight and the solid ordinary earthiness" (*Will in the World*, 53.)
- 94 O'Connell, "Vital Cultural Practices," 152.
- 95 See Michael O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theater in Early-Modern England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); as well as O'Connell, "Vital Cultural Practices." Also see Beatrice Groves, *Texts and Traditions: Religion in Shakespeare, 1592–1604* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), especially chap. 2, "Shakespeare's Incarnational Aesthetic: The Mystery Plays and Catholicism," 26–59.
- 96 De Grazia, Quilligan, and Stallybrass, introduction to *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, 6. Also see Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda, "Introduction: Towards a Materialist Account of Stage Properties," in *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. Harris and Korda (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–31.
- 97 Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 113.

