

## The Stage Life of Props



# The Stage Life of Props

by Andrew Sofer

The University of Michigan Press  
Ann Arbor

Copyright © by the University of Michigan 2003  
All rights reserved  
Published in the United States of America by  
The University of Michigan Press  
Manufactured in the United States of America  
⊗ Printed on acid-free paper

2006 2005 2004 2003 4 3 2 1

No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form  
or by any means, electronic, mechanical, or otherwise,  
without the written permission of the publisher.

*A CIP catalog record for this book is available  
from the British Library.*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sofer, Andrew, 1964–

The stage life of props / Andrew Sofer.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-472-09839-X (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 0-472-06839-3  
(pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Theaters—Stage-setting and scenery. 2. Stage props.

3. European drama—History and criticism. I. Title.

PN2091.S8 S616 2003

792'.025—dc21

2002154228

## Preface: Appropriations

Physical objects have received short shrift in the study of drama. Ever since Aristotle, the analysis of plays has focused on subjects rather than objects, mimesis rather than the material stuff of the stage. Indeed, in what can be seen as the founding manifestation of the antitheatrical prejudice within dramatic criticism itself, Aristotle's *Poetics* divorces "the power of Tragedy" from theatrical representation entirely. Aristotle dismisses "spectacle" (which presumably includes such elements as props, setting, and mechanical effects) as the least important element of tragedy:

The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. For the power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors. Besides, the production of spectacular effects depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet.<sup>1</sup>

If spectacle, or *mise-en-scène*, "depends more on the art of the stage machinist than on that of the poet," one would expect to find more attention paid to props by theater practitioners than by literary critics. A survey confirms that most books that mention stage properties in their title are manuals aimed at the aspiring stage designer or technical director, rather than studies aimed at the actor, director, playwright, or scholar.<sup>2</sup> In the subject-oriented criticism inaugurated by Aristotle, stage objects either remain at the bottom of the hierarchy of theatrical elements deemed worthy of analysis (script, playwright, actor, director, lighting, design, etc.) or else drop out of critical sight altogether.

But while props may seem tangential to written drama, any regu-

lar theatergoer knows that objects are often central in performance. This is especially evident in the theater of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, whose absence of illusionistic scenery thrusts objects into unusual prominence. On the mostly bare stage of an Elizabethan playhouse, props are both searing visual emblems and vital participants in the stage action. A production of *Richard II* without the crown, or *Othello* without its handkerchief, or *Hamlet* without Yorick's skull, is virtually unthinkable. Such props are more than just three-dimensional symbols; they are part of the material fabric of the play in performance. Enlivened by the actor's touch, charged by the playwright's dialogue, and quickened in the spectator's imagination, they take on a life of their own as they weave in and out of the stage action. Often invisible on the page, props are vital on the stage. That vitality is the subject of this book.

Until fairly recently, little critical attention has been paid to how objects enliven actual theatrical performance. Part of the reason is that stage properties occupy an uneasy position between text and performance, the "fine abstraction" of reading championed by the notoriously antitheatrical Charles Lamb and the messily contingent business of putting on a play.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, props such as Desdemona's handkerchief and Yorick's skull are embedded in the text, where they exist in a kind of suspended animation, awaiting "concretization" by an individual reader.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, by mobilizing inanimate objects—literally putting them into play—actors translate these textual signifiers into physical properties that travel in concrete stage space and through linear stage time. As I will argue in more detail in my introduction, motion is the prop's defining feature. Yet motion is precisely what slips from view when the prop is considered as a static symbol, whose meaning is frozen once and for all on the page, rather than as an object that creates and sustains a dynamic relationship with the audience as a given performance unfolds. If we are to recover the stage life of objects, we must attend to how the prop moves on stage for both actor and audience.

Despite the critical tendency to ignore props as a vital component of the theatrical event, objects have not been entirely neglected by theater scholars. In the 1930s and 1940s, the Prague linguistic circle

## Preface

focused on the “dynamics of the sign” in the theater and paved the way for several important semiotic analyses in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> Since then, scholars with a variety of methodological and ideological commitments have addressed props. Bert O. States and Stanton B. Garner Jr. pursue a phenomenological approach to stage objects as a complement to purely semiotic analysis.<sup>6</sup> Performance-oriented Renaissance scholars such as David Bevington, Felix Bosonnet, Alan C. Dessen, Ann Slater, and Frances Teague treat the prop as an important element of the theatrical vocabulary exploited by Shakespeare and his contemporaries.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, scholars interested in material culture investigate how stage props and costumes embody what Lena Cowen Orlin calls “the cultural project of things.”<sup>8</sup> The role of the contemporary stage object within the postmodern “system of objects” has also received recent scrutiny.<sup>9</sup> Plainly, the stage property has come into its own as a legitimate object of critical analysis.

In this study, I wish to engage and refocus the emerging critical dialogue on the stage property by locating the prop squarely in the theatrical event. In a series of case studies, I will argue that in the hands of skilled playwrights, the prop becomes a concrete vehicle for confronting dramatic convention and revitalizing theatrical practice. By viewing the prop as an entity rather than as a symbol, tool as well as trope, I aim to make visible precisely what we as text-based critics are trained not to see: the temporal and spatial dimensions of the material prop in performance. As I claim in my introduction, these dimensions tend to vanish when the prop is considered primarily as a static symbol (as in traditional drama criticism), synchronic lexeme (as in theater semiotics), sensory image (as in theater phenomenology), neurotic symptom (as in psychoanalysis), or placeholder for a particular ideological configuration (as in new historicism). Taking up the questions that impel the editors of *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*—“What happens . . . once the object is brought into view? What new configurations will emerge when subject and object are kept in relation?”—I argue that we can parse the ideological ramifications of historical stage objects for their audience only once we have recovered their mobile, material life on the stage.<sup>10</sup>

By insisting on the prop’s “mobile, material life on the stage,” I

mean to emphasize two temporal processes that move in opposite directions simultaneously within a given performance. On the one hand, props are *unidirectional*: they are propelled through stage space and real time before historically specific audiences at a given performance event. At the same time, props are *retrospective*: in Marvin Carlson's apt expression, they are "ghosted" by their previous stage incarnations, and hence by a theatrical past they both embody and critique.<sup>11</sup> To borrow an example from chapter 2, in Beckett's *Endgame* (1957) Hamm's bloody handkerchief invokes a long line of stage cloths stretching back beyond Shakespeare's *Othello* (ca. 1603) and Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* (1587–92) all the way to the first known medieval liturgical drama, the tenth-century *Visitatio Sepulchri*. Just as we cannot account for the prop's vitality without reference to the bounded theatrical event that contains it, so too must we acknowledge the prop's intertextual resonance as one key to the uncanny pleasure—the shock of familiarity within the unfamiliar—that the prop provides in performance.

While useful in theory, a comprehensive poetics of the prop would no more convey the theatrical excitement of objects than a taxonomy of every joke known to humankind would explain humor. In the playhouse, as opposed to the study, we are seduced by the specific and concrete and not the abstract and the general. Rather than produce a treatise on propology, I have chosen to reconstruct the stage lives of five exemplary props drawn from five pivotal periods of stage history: the eucharistic wafer on the medieval stage; the bloody handkerchief on the Elizabethan stage; the skull on the Jacobean stage; the fan on the Restoration and early-eighteenth-century stage; and the gun on the modern stage. Each of these objects seized the imagination of playwrights in their time, and the freshness of their deployment opened up new theatrical terrain for subsequent dramatists.

It goes without saying that these objects' stage careers often stretched beyond the periods in which I have situated them. Nevertheless these props spoke especially to their particular era, and part of my aim is to explain the timeliness of their appeal. I shall argue that each prop I have chosen addresses a "semiotic crisis": a particu-

## Preface

lar issue or dilemma concerning theatrical representation faced by the drama of its period. Theater colonizes reality for its own ends, and in the case of the prop it does so by appropriating the object's *prior* symbolic life. As a result of this theatrical appropriation, each prop I discuss revises (or attempts to revise) the way objects signify for spectators.

My first three chapters explore three instances in which the medieval and early modern theater appropriated and transformed familiar religious symbols whose orthodox meaning was implicitly or explicitly contested in the wider culture of the time. In chapter 1, "Playing Host: The Prop as Temporal Contract on the Medieval Stage," I discuss what might be called the ur-prop of postclassical western European drama: the eucharistic wafer (oble) that, once consecrated by a priest, became the divine Host. In late-fifteenth-century England, laity and clergy struggled for control of sacred symbols such as the Bible and the Host itself. In the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, the Church's most sacred symbol is literally abducted from the Church by skeptical Jews—an action that mirrors the appropriation of the holy wafer by the lay miracle players who presumably performed the play. Despite the play's didactic purpose in shoring up belief in the real presence of Christ in the Host, its theatrical form implicitly undermines its doctrinal message. The use of the holy wafer as a stage property substitutes the contract of theatrical representation (whereby an unconsecrated wafer *represents* the presence of Christ in the Host) for the transubstantiation of the Mass (whereby Christ actually *resides in* the consecrated Host).

In short, whether the theatricalized Croxton wafer was understood as consecrated or unconsecrated, actual Host or stage property, seems to depend as much on the spectators' angle of vision—on what it was they thought they saw—as on the priest's unambiguous act of transubstantiation. I take the range of possible perceptions of the wafer by medieval spectators as models of recent critical understandings of the theatrical sign before concluding that the prop is best understood as embodying a volatile "temporal contract" established between actor and spectator for the duration of performance. Although the spectator is always free to take up a range of under-



standings of the prop's meaning, the prop's very fluidity as a theatrical sign encourages playwrights to use it as a concrete tool to subvert the symbolism previously embodied by the object it represents.

In chapter 2, "Absorbing Interests: The Bloody Handkerchief on the Elizabethan Stage," I take up the struggle of the Elizabethan public theaters to build an audience united not by common faith in the efficacy of devotional drama, but by the search for theatrical pleasure in an age that looked back on the rituals of the old religion with a mixture of suspicion and nostalgia. Inaugurated by Thomas Kyd's spectacularly successful *The Spanish Tragedy*, the theatrical vogue for bloody handkerchiefs illustrates how a newly commercial theater capitalized on the recent prohibition against placing images of holy objects, such as the Host, on the stage. I argue that sensational props such as Kyd's handkerchief promoted a voyeuristic "contract of sensation" designed to draw patrons to the public playhouses again and again. I thereby challenge the current argument that Elizabethan drama sought to demystify formerly sacred objects as spurious idols. If the Croxton play had celebrated Christ's real presence in the sacrament, even as it paradoxically converted that presence into representation by using a theatrical property to represent the Host, the Elizabethan stage appropriated the divinely efficacious magic of holy cloth and sacred blood for strictly commercial ends.

In chapter 3, "Dropping the Subject: The Skull on the Jacobean Stage," I turn to an iconic presence in the skeptical Jacobean theater: the memento mori skull. As part of the Christian technique of dying well (*ars moriendi*), this cultural symbol had once held out the promise of eternal reward and reassured the faithful that they lived sub specie aeternitatis. Long a staple of the visual arts, by the early seventeenth century the skull had been appropriated by prostitutes and fashionable young men as an ambiguous symbol with a more mordant and disturbing message. Developing a dramatic equivalent of the trick image performed by the anamorphic skull in Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*, Jacobean playwrights conveyed the skull's oscillation between live subject and dead object. In plays such as *Hamlet* and *The Revenger's Tragedy*, the ironized skull mocks the familiar symbolism readily assigned to it by the plays' protagonists.

## *Preface*

The skull hollows out the rhetoric of the men who presume to master its meaning and, in so doing, drains them of substance and threatens to turn them into its mouthpieces. By asserting its material presence on the stage, the Jacobean skull repeatedly refuses to settle for the role of passive emblem and insists on its active role in the stage event.

My last two studies reconstruct how two culturally prominent objects were pressed into service as props in order to address crises of theatrical representation (staging women) and dramatic form (ending plays). In chapter 4, “The Fan of Mode: Sexual Semaphore on the Restoration and Early-Eighteenth-Century Stage,” I analyze the relation of the property fan to the newly complex performance of gender on the licentious Restoration stage. Following the arrival of the professional actress, both male and female playwrights were compelled to decide how women play women—in other words, whether women would become sexual subjects or sexual objects on stage. I argue that the fan became a weapon in the theater’s struggle to establish the extent of female sexual agency. By analyzing key scenes in which a woman is instructed in the correct use of the fan, I show how Restoration and early-eighteenth-century playwrights attempted both to exploit and to constrain the thrilling but potentially subversive sexual semaphore wielded by actresses for the first time on the professional English stage.

In chapter 5, “Killing Time: Guns and the Play of Predictability on the Modern Stage,” I turn to a formal crisis faced by modern playwrights: the rigid dramatic closure of nineteenth-century melodrama epitomized by the climactic pistol-shot. On the modern stage, playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen, Samuel Beckett, and Maria Irene Fornes revisit the melodrama of female suicide only to subvert its temporal expectations. I demonstrate that on the modern stage, guns ironize, dislocate, and ultimately transcend stage time. By “killing time,” guns liberate the spectator from the restrictive contracts of psychological causality and dramatic closure posited by realism. The stage gun exemplifies how modern-day props continue a long tradition of rejuvenating dramatic form and theatrical practice.

Each of these case studies is designed to stand alone as an inde-

## Preface

pendent argument. While they appear in chronological order, there is no master narrative connecting them; my aim is not to posit an unfolding teleology or evolution of the prop, for these objects do not tell a single story. Rather, taken together these case studies illustrate a common mechanism of appropriation whereby props are enlisted to address a wider semiotic crisis in the theater (and often the culture) of the day.<sup>12</sup> In any given historical period, objects drift toward center stage when they no longer quite mean what they used to say or say what they used to mean. As fluid, material signs that establish a dynamic temporal contract with the spectator, stage objects revitalize theatrical tradition. By refusing to “prop up” conventional symbolism, the wafer, handkerchief, skull, fan, and gun insist on the prop’s ability to keep theatrical meaning in motion.

Why these props and not others? The potential range in a study of this kind is limitless, and I have been guided in my choice of props and periods by my own interest, familiarity, and curiosity. One of the most rewarding aspects of this project is that it has allowed me to venture beyond my own primary areas of research, Renaissance and modern drama, in order to explore other periods through the lens of the stage object. At the risk of making specialists impatient, I try to provide enough historical context to ground my argument and to make each chapter inviting and accessible to readers unfamiliar with the period in question. Certainly no chapter is intended as a balanced introduction to the drama of the period. Rather, I emphasize those aspects (such as the relation of Elizabethan theater to the discourse of iconoclasm, or the extent to which Restoration actresses put their own stamp on their roles) that illuminate the life of the prop at hand as I believe it was experienced in the playhouse of the time.

It may be objected that the view of the stage that opens out from the perspective of the object is necessarily partial, selective, even quixotic. No doubt too, some readers will feel that by placing the prop center stage, I have distorted crucial aspects of theatrical or cultural history. It may be that a certain degree of overgeneralization, even tunnel vision, is the price paid for such a broad historical study; my hope is that the prop has enabled me to say something fresh about drama in the periods I consider. In the spirit of keeping mean-

## Preface

ing in motion, I welcome attempts both to revise my account of how these props lived in their own time and to extend my inquiry to other, equally resonant objects.

Why the *stage* life of props—as opposed to their symbolic, psychological, ideological, cultural, or figurative lives? To no small degree, my aim in this book parallels the job of a theater director, which was indeed my occupation in a previous stage life of my own. In bringing dead words to life, the director’s task is necessarily selective. She must pick particular moments and “beats” for emphasis and move swiftly past many potentially fruitful diversions in pursuit of the spine of her particular interpretation. The director’s job is not to realize all possibilities latent in the script, but to *sculpt stage time so that it moves meaningfully for an audience*. I have tried to do something similar in the chapters that follow.

What I offer to the reader is therefore not *the* account of any one play, let alone any one prop. Like any contemporary production of a classic play, no matter how historically responsible, these case studies are reconstituted from a twenty-first-century perspective. While aiming toward as much accuracy as the evidence allows, my reconstructions of these props’ stage careers are colored by that perspective and can stake no claim to being definitive. Nevertheless, I hope that my study will encourage theater practitioners, cultural historians, and drama specialists alike to revisit these objects, and the plays that contain them, with a new appreciation for the temporal and spatial life embedded there.

## Acknowledgments

I have benefited from the help of many scholars in pursuing this project. I owe especial thanks to Enoch Brater, without whose guidance and encouragement this book would never have been completed. Bert Cardullo, Linda Gregerson, and P. A. Skantze each read early drafts and shaped the project in crucial ways. Andrew Von Hendy and Mary Thomas Crane offered comments on the entire manuscript. Others who have generously helped me think through the stage life of props include David Bevington, John Russell Brown, Marvin Carlson, Stanton B. Garner Jr., Stephen Greenblatt, Jan-Lüder Hagens, Jonathan Gil Harris, William Hutchings, William Ingram, Ann Rosalind Jones, Charles Lyons, Natasha Korda, John Mahoney, Judith Milhous, Steven Mullaney, Brian Richardson, Joseph Roach, Angela Rosenthal, Peter Stallybrass, Bert O. States, Karla Taylor, Frances Teague, Grace Tiffany, Theresa Tinkle, Valerie Traub, Elizabeth Kowaleski Wallace, Chris Wilson, James Winn, and Paul Yachnin. Friends, colleagues, and relatives whose voices informed this project include Gina Bloom, Elise Frasier, Sylvia Gimenez, Tobias Gregory, Atar Hadari, Kenneth Hodges, Judith Issroff, Robert Knopf, Steve and Ellen Levine, Joy Ochs, Mike Sell, Sondra Smith, Paul Sofer, Michael Sowder, Robert Stanton, and John Su. My editor at University of Michigan Press, LeAnn Fields, deserves special thanks, as do my anonymous readers for the Press.

I extend my thanks to the University of Michigan's Department of English and Rackham Graduate School for much needed financial and institutional support; to Boston College for a summer Research Incentive Grant; to the Mellon Foundation, with whose assistance major portions of the text were completed; and to my colleagues in Boston College's English Department, who have helped me in numerous ways. Annette Fern of the Harvard Theatre Collection and

## Acknowledgments

Lisa Cherin, Jackie Dallen, and Stephen Vedder of Boston College provided invaluable assistance with the photographs, as did student actors Christopher Crocetti and David Mawhinney.

My acting and directing teachers—Hilary Nicholls and Shai Bar Ya'akov at Hebrew University, Jacques Cartier and Sidney Friedman at Boston University, Zelda Fichandler at Arena Stage, Robert Moss at Playwrights Horizons Theater School, and Kaf Warman at Island Theatre Workshop—enabled me to explore theater in its many dimensions. I owe a special debt to the late Mary Payne of ITW, who bravely cast me as Hamlet and allowed me to inflict the results of my Beckett obsession on a paying audience. My mother, Elaine Sofer, immediately grasped what excited me about props; her love of theater informs much of what follows. Last, my most especial thanks to Bonnie Tenneriello, for her unflagging emotional support, intellectual engagement, and faith that the prop would eventually come to rest. This book is for her.

The Croxton *Play of the Sacrament* photograph is reproduced by permission of Tessa Musgrave; *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Hamlet* photographs by permission of Stephen Vedder; and *The Careless Husband* and *Happy Days* images by permission of the Harvard Theatre Collection, the Houghton Library. Earlier versions of chapters 2 and 3 originally appeared in *Comparative Drama* and *English Literary Renaissance*. I am grateful for the editors' permission to reprint this material.

# Contents

Introduction: Rematerializing the Prop 1

## 1 Playing Host

The Prop as Temporal Contract on  
the Medieval Stage 31

## 2 Absorbing Interests

The Bloody Handkerchief on the  
Elizabethan Stage 61

## 3 Dropping the Subject

The Skull on the Jacobean Stage 89

## 4 The Fan of Mode

Sexual Semaphore on the Restoration and  
Early-Eighteenth-Century Stage 117

## 5 Killing Time

Guns and the Play of Predictability on the  
Modern Stage 167

Notes 203

Bibliography 251

Index 269