



Introduction

Rematerializing the Prop

The fundamental concern of all theatre researchers is with the very “object” of theatre itself.

—Willmar Sauter

A chair on the stage is a theatre chair.

—Peter Handke

A consecrated wafer, stolen from a church by medieval Jews bent on disproving the real presence of Christ in the Host, bleeds when stabbed. A blood-soaked handkerchief mutates from a charmed talisman of love to a ghastly token of revenge as it passes from woman to man and from son to father. A dirt-encrusted skull, which inspires a Renaissance prince to strike a fashionable memento mori pose, suddenly invokes that prince’s beloved childhood companion and makes him gag. A fan that begins as an innocent birthday gift becomes devastating proof of infidelity. An unhappily married woman points her pistol offstage at her husband and shoots; defying logic, the bullet kills her onstage companion instead.

These five theatrical objects are stage properties, or “props” for short, defined by the *OED* as “[a]ny portable article, as an article of costume or furniture, used in acting a play: a stage requisite, appurtenance, or accessory.” Yet when we think of the props that have most etched themselves into our theatrical memory, we are hard-pressed to explain their grip on us in these terms. Is Yorick’s skull a “requisite,” an “appurtenance,” or a mere “accessory,” and from whose point of view? Could the graveyard scene in *Hamlet* take place without it? Does the skull’s theatrical power emanate from Shakespeare’s dialogue, the actor’s gesture, the audience’s imagina-

tion, or the material object itself? Is Yorick trope or fact, absent or present?

In this book I explore a peculiarly theatrical phenomenon: the power of stage objects to take on a life of their own in performance.¹ Text-based scholars, who tend to dismiss objects as at best embodied symbols or at worst as plot devices, have largely neglected this phenomenon—that is, when objects penetrate the critical radar at all.² Invisible on the page except as textual signifiers, props seduce our attention in the playhouse as they become drawn into the stage action and absorb complex and sometimes conflicting meanings. By definition, a prop is an object that goes on a journey; hence props trace spatial trajectories and create temporal narratives as they track through a given performance. My first aim in this study is to restore to the prop those performance dimensions that literary critics are trained not to see. These include not only the three-dimensionality of objects as material participants in the stage action, but the *spatial* dimension (how props move in concrete stage space) and the *temporal* dimension (how props move through linear stage time). Although these are the dimensions that allow the object to mean in performance, they are precisely those liable to drop out of sight when the prop is treated as a textual rather than as a theatrical phenomenon.

The stage life of props extends beyond their journey within a given play, moreover. As they move from play to play and from period to period, objects accrue intertextual resonance as they absorb and embody the theatrical past. When the title character of August Wilson's *King Hedley II* (1999) plants seeds in his backyard dirt, he not only expresses his yearning for roots. For the alert spectator, King's seeds invoke those famous seeds planted by doomed salesman Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's classic *Death of a Salesman* (1949). They may also recall Mama's feeble plant in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), dying for lack of sun but rescued, like Mama's family, from the Chicago slums at play's end. Last, King's seeds ironically memorialize those planted by the little girl, Raynell, in Wilson's own earlier drama *Fences* (1985). In *Fences*, which concludes in 1965, the seeds represented the possibility of a better future for an African-American community still struggling to emerge from

Introduction

the traumas of northern migration and institutionalized racism. For the embittered King, trapped in a Pittsburgh slum in the 1970s and seeing his hopes literally trampled in the dirt, the promise glimpsed by Raynell in the earlier play has proved hollow.

King's seeds thus work on two levels simultaneously: they enliven the dramatic action in the present and revive the dead symbols of the theatrical past, offering them what director Jonathan Miller aptly calls an "afterlife."³ Even as the seeds convey the aridity of King's hardscrabble existence, they embed Wilson's play in the fertile soil of American family drama and enrich its resonance for the dramatically literate spectator. My second aim in this study is to demonstrate that props such as these are not mere accessories, but time machines. As material ghosts, stage props become a concrete means for playwrights to animate stage action, interrogate theatrical practice, and revitalize dramatic form. Props are not static symbols but precision tools whose dramaturgical role in revising outmoded theatrical contracts with the audience has long been neglected.

In this sense, the function of the stage property duplicates that of theater itself: to bring dead images back to life—but with a twist. That is why playwrights return again and again to superannuated objects (no less than to obsolete words, stories, characters, and genres) that have outlived their dramatic usefulness. As Marvin Carlson points out through his highly suggestive concept of theatrical "ghosting," theater itself is a vast, self-reflexive recycling project. The same elements—stories, texts, actors, props, scenery, styles, even spectators—appear over and over again.⁴ Our pleasure in seeing the relic revived, the dead metaphor made to speak again, is the very reason we go to the theater to see a play we already know well. A prop exists textually only in a state of suspended animation. It demands actual embodiment and motion on the stage in order to spring to imaginative life.⁵

Production Analysis and the Case Study Approach

Thus the performance-oriented critic is faced with a paradox. If performance is necessary to animate the object, how can a text-based

The Stage Life of Props

study animate the prop for the reader—especially if the reader is not an inveterate theatergoer? The stage life of objects distant in time can only be recovered through a kind of *contextual reanimation*: a “thick description” of the stage event as best we can reconstruct it, using such cues as verbal and actual stage directions, visual records of historical performances, and (where available) eyewitness accounts. Recent productions of the plays can offer important, although never definitive, clues to original staging choices. They can also indicate when an ingenious interpretation is incommunicable to an audience.

Restoration theater historians Judith Milhous and Robert D. Hume label this critical approach “production analysis,” which they define as follows:

By this term we mean interpretation of the text specifically aimed at understanding it as a performance vehicle—“reading with a directorial eye,” if you like. While heavily grounded in textual analysis, such criticism will be undertaken on the principle that what should emerge is a sense of multiple possibilities in actual performance. Production analysis should draw freely on theatre history and drama history. Particular productions will be studied for what they can tell us about the potentialities of the script, but the critic is in no way limited to what has been staged. The results will sometimes resemble instructions for performance, but practically speaking they will be no more than a preliminary hint to the director, necessarily lacking the detail required for actual execution of a performance. *A production analysis is a series of architect’s sketches, not the blueprints that would be necessary to bring any one of them to actuality.* The object is to clarify possible meanings and effects, primarily for readers, critics, and theatergoers, secondarily for the interested director. The result should be improved understanding of the performance potentialities of the play at issue.⁶

Milhous and Hume distinguish production analysis, which concentrates on visualization of performance possibilities, from the analysis of actual, historical productions of particular plays, which they label

Introduction

“performance analysis.” Only fully fledged performance analysis requires “precise determination of audience comprehension and response,” since the production analyst is more interested in the horizon of performance possibilities generated by the text than in the realization of those possibilities within a given production.⁷

For Milhous and Hume, then, “Dramatic criticism comprises two basic activities: analysis of the script (production analysis) and analysis of actual performance of the script (performance analysis). . . . Performance analysis enjoys the distinct advantage of dealing with actuality, with a production complete in all its details, with the experience of the real thing. Of course, the advantage is also a disadvantage: the critic is stuck with what the performance gives him. The production analyst is far freer to pursue hypothesis and speculation, to envision interpretive possibilities.”⁸ While production analysis is inevitably more conjectural than performance analysis, we simply lack sufficient historical evidence to produce a thorough performance analysis of (say) an Elizabethan or Restoration production. Failing the discovery of more detailed historical evidence, production analysis—sensitive to textual cues and to historical staging practices insofar as we understand them—must suffice the text-based performance critic.

To put the prop imaginatively in motion once more, I have chosen a case study approach based on Milhous and Hume’s method of production analysis. In the chapters that follow, I reconstruct the stage careers of five singular props that haunt the western European theatrical imagination: the medieval eucharistic wafer, the Elizabethan handkerchief, the Jacobean skull, the Restoration and early-eighteenth-century fan, and the modern-day gun. I am keenly aware of the pitfalls of such an approach. When writing about a particular piece of stage business, it is sometimes hard to draw the line between reasonable supposition and armchair fantasy. This is especially so in the case of the Restoration fan, when so little hard evidence of just how the prop came alive in the hands of actresses survives. Thus chapter 4 relies heavily on evidence drawn from contemporary journalism, stage illustrations, and acting manuals, as well as on my own intuition as a theater practitioner and textual critic.

The Stage Life of Props

This book aims to show that, despite its limitations, the contextual reanimation of material stage objects is a legitimate exercise for scholars as well as students—and surely no less conjectural than an analysis, say, of Hamlet’s unconscious life or of Lady Macbeth’s past. Just as psychoanalysis is no less useful an approach to drama for the fact that it reifies imaginary beings, so production analysis is no less valuable for the fact that it materializes textual objects. The “cash value” of the production analysis of stage objects is that it offers new evidence of a vanished performance history even as it opens up a new field of inquiry. For by making visible what has been invisible in our readings of drama, we gain a much firmer sense of how a particular play moves in performance, as well as a tightly focused lens through which to examine the dramatic energies of a specific theatrical period. We can also expose a playwright’s particular stamp on a genre or period by comparing what his or her contemporaries made of the same object. Perhaps most important, by attuning us to the sheer material heft of what occupies the stage, together with its mobility in time and space, props invite us to read drama in five dimensions. The value of such an approach in the theater history or drama survey classroom as a method for enlivening the material (in both senses) goes without saying.

This introduction presents a broader theoretical context and conceptual framework within which my individual case studies can be positioned, with special attention paid to the three dominant theoretical approaches to the study of stage objects thus far: the semiotic, phenomenological, and materialist.⁹ I will argue that as a prelude to reanimating the prop, we must first rematerialize it—an approach that challenges perhaps the most fundamental tenet of theater semiotics, namely the dematerialization of the stage sign.

From Object to Sign: The Prague School Dilemma

From a semiotic perspective, it is hard to draw a firm distinction between subjects and objects on stage, since subject and object alike function as volatile theatrical signs. This has been a particular prob-

Introduction

lem for theorists who seek to isolate the stage object as a focus of semiotic inquiry, among them Shoshana Avigal and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Anne Ubersfeld, and Gay McAuley. These “second wave” theater semioticians build on the insights of the influential group of semioticians known as the Prague school. While much of the Prague school’s analysis focused on what it called “verbal art,” in the 1940s several members (some of whom were theater practitioners as well as critics) were drawn to the theater as a laboratory of analyzable signs and sign systems. The Prague critics’ analysis of the theatrical sign laid the theoretical foundation for subsequent work on theatrical objects and raised the fundamental questions with which any rigorous study of props must begin: what is a stage object, and how does it signify?¹⁰

Fundamental to the Prague critics’ analysis is the principle of semiotization, according to which “[a]ll that is on the stage is a sign.”¹¹ Simply by being placed on stage, a chair acquires an invisible set of quotation marks and becomes the sign “chair.” Umberto Eco calls this phenomenon ostension, which he defines as “de-realizing a given object in order to make it stand for an entire class.”¹² On stage, the object’s signifying function eclipses its practical function, so that in performance “things serve only to the extent that they mean.”¹³ Semiotization obtains even in cases of what Keir Elam calls “*iconic identity*,” in which the stage object is identical to what it represents.¹⁴

Prague school theorist Petr Bogatryev pushed the semiotization argument one step further by arguing that stage objects become “signs of a material object’s sign.”¹⁵ In performance, the material sign-vehicle absorbs the abstract connotations associated with the object it represents. These “real world” connotations (royalty, say, in the case of a throne) then *replace* that represented object in the mind of the spectator. For Bogatryev, the onstage throne is thus not merely the sign of an object (throne) but the “sign of the [represented] object’s sign” (royalty). Any stage chair is thus doubly abstracted from a real chair: first, as a representative of the class of chairs (Eco’s ostension), and second, as a sign of the material chair’s abstract connotations. As proof, Bogatryev claims that it does not matter to an audience whether a diamond necklace on stage is in fact fake, since

The Stage Life of Props

that audience will imaginatively leap over both the material sign-vehicle (fake necklace) and its denotation (genuine necklace) to the “sign of the object’s sign” (fabulous wealth). For Bogatryev, all stage objects are thus “signs of signs.”

In the late 1960s, theorist Tadeusz Kowzan extended the semiotization principle still further. Kowzan argues that each connotation (signified) accrued by the stage object may in turn become a signifier of a new connotation at the next level of meaning. Kowzan cites a famous prop, Chekhov’s eponymous seagull, as an example:

The stuffed sea-gull, an accessory in Chekhov’s play, is the sign, at the first degree, of a recently killed sea-gull; this is the sign, at the second degree (or symbol in the current language) of an abstract idea (failed aspiration to freedom) which is in turn the sign of the hero’s mood in the play. To be more precise, we can say that the *signifié* of the sign at the first degree, is linked to the *signifiant* of the sign at the second degree; the *signifié* of the latter is linked to the *signifiant* of the sign at the third degree and so on (the phenomenon of connotation).¹⁶

In this way, writes Kowzan, “a simple prop, passing through intermediate stages, becomes the sign of the master-idea of the play.”¹⁷ Whether one accepts Kowzan’s theory of what might be called semiotic bootstrapping, or even Bogatryev’s “signs of signs” argument, the principle of semiotization seems an unavoidable corollary of any theatrical event.

However, if all that is on stage is a sign, it becomes very difficult to decide what on stage *isn’t* an object. What about the body of the actor, for instance? What of a sound effect such as a doorbell, a visual effect such as fog, or an olfactory effect such as the smell of bacon? According to the Prague school principle of “dynamism,” a single material sign-vehicle can convey an unlimited number of meanings in the course of a given performance: an umbrella can become a weapon, a walking stick, a toy, an emblem of middle-class conformity, and so on.¹⁸ Conversely, any material object can “play” a given role. Chekhov’s gull might be represented by a real bird, an old boot,

Introduction

a cardboard cutout, or conceivably by the mimed gesture of the actor. Iconic resemblance is not a prerequisite for signification; in nonillusionistic traditions, such as the Chinese theater, “A real object may be substituted on the set by a symbol if this symbol is able to transfer the object’s own signs to itself.”¹⁹

Moreover, as Jindřich Honzl points out, any given signified may be passed along a chain of material signifiers, and even relayed from one theatrical sign-system to another, within a performance.²⁰ For example, a thunderstorm might be conveyed now by a prop umbrella, now by a lighting effect, now by a sound effect, now by a line of dialogue (“It’s raining cats and dogs out there”).²¹ But if anything on stage can in principle stand for anything else, and if any given signified can be conveyed by any sign-vehicle on stage, including light and sound, the distinction between object and nonobject dissolves into a free play of signs.

In his landmark article “Man and Object in the Theater,” Prague school theorist Jiří Veltruský acknowledged this difficulty of separating subject from object and instead posited a fluid continuum between subjects and objects on stage.²² In Elam’s gloss, objects are “promoted” up the scale “when they are raised from their ‘transparent’ functional roles to a position of unexpected prominence” and acquire “semiotic subjectivity” independent of the actor.²³ To use Veltruský’s own example, a stage dagger might move from being a passive emblem of the wearer’s status to participating in the action as an instrument of murder, and thence to a final independent association with the concept “murder.” Conversely, when the actor’s “action force” is reduced to zero, the actor takes on the status of a mere prop (e.g., a spear-carrier or corpse). Actor and prop are dynamic sign-vehicles that move up and down the subject-object continuum as they acquire and shed action force in the course of a given performance. For Veltruský, an object becomes a prop when it begins to take part in the action overtly as a tool; and when props acquire independent signifying force, “we perceive them as spontaneous subjects, equivalent to the figure of the actor.”²⁴

Veltruský’s intriguing concept of “action force” remains murky. If the dagger becomes a subject not when it directly participates in the

stage action (by stabbing somebody), but by signifying “murder,” then isn’t any object that conveys an abstract idea independent of an actor—the portrait of the general in *Hedda Gabler*, for instance, or the count’s boots in *Miss Julie*—a subject?²⁵ We recall that for Bogatryev, *all* theatrical “signs of signs” possess the connotative ability to stand for an abstract idea associated with the represented object rather than for the object itself. The “semiotic subjectivity,” or “action force,” of objects seems as universal as semiotization itself.²⁶ No sooner does an object arrogate attention to itself than it becomes a subject in its own right; thus Veltruský’s examples of “semiotic subjectivity” include a ticking clock on an empty stage. But can such an object truly be said to become a “subject” equivalent to the actor in the minds of the audience?

Second-wave theater semioticians, who rediscovered and extended the Prague circle’s work on the theatrical sign in the late 1960s and early 1970s, tended to explore the dynamics of signification outlined by Bogatryev and Honzl rather than to pursue Veltruský’s elusive concept of action force. Thus Kowzan developed his idea of levels of connotation, while Umberto Eco insisted that stage objects are not only signs of signs, but signs of the ideology *behind* the object’s sign.²⁷ Such theoretical refinements threatened a bottomless *mise-en-abîme* of theatrical signification (signs of signs of signs of . . .). The axiomatic leap from the stage object’s materiality to its sign function continued to risk theorizing the material object out of existence.

The attempt to pin down the “object” of semiotic inquiry reached a plateau in 1981, with the arrival of two studies that acknowledged the frustrations inherent in the Prague school account of the theatrical sign. In their ambitious attempt to outline a methodology for the semiotic study of theatrical objects, Shoshana Avigal and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan concede that “[t]he very word ‘object’ is problematic, since it designates both a ‘thing’ and the functioning of this ‘thing’ within a system of interrelations with other components of the system (‘object’ in relation to ‘subject’).”²⁸ Avigal and Rimmon-Kenan deal with this problem by provisionally locating the object solely through its function as a “lexeme,” a unit of theatrical meaning:

Introduction

In our opinion, a definition of an object as such cannot be given a priori, but only relative to its functioning as a lexeme, i.e., a sign which can be listed in the “dictionary” (lexicon) created by the specific performance. As a lexeme, the object can take part in “sentences” which can be analyzed linguistically, although they are not completely verbal.²⁹

A consequence of this functional approach is that, as the authors admit, the list of potential stage objects “runs the risk of being infinite.”³⁰

In a similar way, semiotician Anne Ubersfeld categorizes both textual and scenic items as theatrical “objects” that overlap as lexemes, even though they are not homologous.³¹ Ubersfeld argues that the theatrical object is “a crossroads, or rather a braiding (*tressage*) of semiotic functions, which is to say, properly speaking, a text.” Like Avigal and Rimmon-Kenan, Ubersfeld concedes that “from the moment a theatrical object is a text, it becomes hard to treat it as a discrete unit whose combinations can be studied.”³² By the early 1980s, the semiotic study of the theatrical object had reached an impasse. If “in the theater there are only objects,” as Ubersfeld proclaimed, how can we distinguish material things from other signifying “objects” such as actors, gestures, or lighting effects?³³

From Sign to Prop: (Re)materializing the Stage Object

The stage property offers a way to rescue the material object from the ocean of signs limned by theater semiotics, and indeed, to distinguish the prop from other material objects on stage. As we have seen, the *OED* defines a prop as “[a]ny portable article, as an article of costume or furniture, used in acting a play: a stage requisite, appurtenance, or accessory.” But such a capacious definition fails to distinguish between props and other onstage items. A prop can be more rigorously defined as a *discrete, material, inanimate object that is visibly manipulated by an actor in the course of performance*.

It follows that a stage object must be “triggered” by an actor in

order to become a prop (objects shifted by stagehands between scenes do not qualify). Thus a hat or sword remains an article of costume until an actor removes or adjusts it, and a chair remains an item of furniture unless an actor shifts its position.³⁴ When Lear sits on a stationary throne, the throne remains a set piece, but when Hamlet knocks over the chair on seeing his father's ghost in the "closet scene" (a piece of stage business invented by Thomas Betterton that became canonical in the seventeenth century), the chair becomes a prop. Such manipulation does not have to be manual; an actor might kick the chair, for example. If an actor stumbles over a chair unintentionally, the chair becomes for the nonce an unwitting prop.

The distinction between props and other kinds of stage object, then, is a matter neither of diminutive size nor potential portability but actual *motion*. The prop must physically move or alter in some way as a result of the actor's physical intervention.³⁵ Unlike other critics, I emphasize the criterion of *manipulation* rather than *portability* because for theater practitioners, stationary items such as radios become props once an actor turns them on or otherwise adjusts them.³⁶ The criterion of manipulation also clarifies the fuzzy distinction between props and stage furniture: large items that are actually shifted by an actor, such as Mother Courage's wagon, qualify as props whatever their size. Smaller items that are potentially portable but never manipulated by actors do not, even if they play a significant symbolic role (like the general's portrait in *Hedda Gabler*). To paraphrase British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott's famous remark about the baby, "[T]here is no such thing as a prop"; wherever a prop exists, an actor-object interaction exists. *Irrespective of its signifying function(s)*, a prop is something an object becomes, rather than something an object is.

In the most extensive analysis of Shakespeare's props to date, Frances Teague offers a functional rather than descriptive definition. Teague claims that props are defined by their "dislocated function":

A property is an object, mimed or tangible, that occurs onstage, where it functions differently from the way it functions offstage. At the moment when the audience notes its entry into the dra-

Introduction

matic action a property has meaning; it may also have meaning as one of a class of objects. A property can carry multiple meanings, which may sometimes conflict. Generally, a playwright uses a property to establish a character or to forward action. In production and analysis, properties specified by the playwright, rather than someone else, usually receive special attention.³⁷

As an example of dislocated function, Teague cites Dapper's gingerbread in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist*: "The gingerbread is either a magical substance invoked to bring the goodwill of the fairy queen or a gag employed to silence a fool, depending on one's point of view. It never functions as gingerbread usually does, however, as a substance one can eat for pleasure or nourishment."³⁸ Although Teague does not make this link explicit, her dislocated function is very close to the Russian formalist concept of *ostranenie* (making strange), which defines the "poetic" function of language. For the formalists, language becomes "poetic" when it draws attention to itself through devices such as meter and rhyme, rather than acting as a transparent referential medium. For Teague, props are defined by how they mean on stage, rather than what they are.³⁹

While Teague's claim that "[p]roperties do not operate in performance as they do in a nontheatrical context—they mean differently" does indeed suggest how props often estrange the quotidian behavior we come to expect from objects, at least one objection to Teague's position can be made.⁴⁰ Some props *do* fulfill a practical or normal function on stage: unlike Dapper's gingerbread, Algy's cucumber sandwiches in *The Importance of Being Earnest* are eaten, fencing foils are used to fence with, knives cut bread, and so on. Teague maintains that such props only *imitate* the object's normal function (the knife's "ordinary function of cutting is simply displaced onstage by the object's function in performance—to seem to cut, to suggest passion or violence").⁴¹ But this instance of "dislocation" relies upon semiotization, which as we have seen applies to everything on stage, so that the distinction between props and "undislocated" objects once more dissolves. If the function of all stage items is "dislocated" simply by virtue of semiotization, then "dislocated function" cannot distin-

guish props from other stage items such as costume and furniture.⁴²

The confusion between subject and object entailed by the Prague school's insistence on the "dematerialization" of the stage sign dissolves once we adopt a *descriptive* definition of the physical property rather than a *functional* definition of the signifying "stage object" (as dislocated function, lexeme, *tressage*, etc.). If the semiotic account of the theatrical sign foundered on two related points—locating the object, and distinguishing objects from subjects—the stage property's fundamental status as a material object rather than a lexical sign removes the difficulty. As a mobile, material fact, the prop enables us to develop the analysis of the theatrical sign begun by the Prague structuralists but largely shelved in the 1980s.⁴³

The prop's defining characteristic—its actual onstage motion—means that we must avoid the temptation to freeze or "spatialize" the theatrical sign as a synchronous lexeme that functions solely according to its difference from other onstage signs. As I will show in more detail in chapter 1, while the prop itself is defined as a discrete, material, inanimate object that is visibly manipulated by an actor, its meaning—those denotations and connotations for which it stands—is a *temporal contract* established between the actor and spectator for the duration of performance. In accordance with the "dynamism" of the material sign-vehicle first noted by the Prague school, this contract is tenuously constituted in time and subject to moment-by-moment renegotiation. More than any other factor, the dynamics of this temporal contract determine whether the object takes on a life of its own in performance.

Other scholars have protested the dematerialization of the stage sign entailed by the Prague school principle of semiotization. In an important rebuttal, Freddie Rokem insists that "the linguistic approach is not able to cope with the fact that even if the object becomes a sign, it never loses contact with its materiality as embodied by that particular object which is present on the stage."⁴⁴ Rokem reminds us that the material sign-vehicle does not disappear from the spectator's consciousness, even when it stands for something vastly different from itself:

Introduction

To return to the chair, one could say that it is not merely a chair when used on the stage. What enables us to grasp it as such though is that even if the chair is distanced from its identity and function—to sit at a certain height from the floor—we will always be able to say about it: “Look, this is no longer a chair: as opposed to ‘not a table’ or ‘not a man.’” The fact that even in negating its identity and function through language and its manipulations, the object in itself does not change, points at an important issue in the philosophy of language, because when we name the chair something else, it apparently seems to become two additional things: the object named and a non-chair.⁴⁵

Rokem restores the object’s affective physicality by arguing that “the palates of our mind are stimulated primarily by the chair as a material object and not only as some abstract linguistic food for thought.”⁴⁶

Rokem’s insistence on the object’s physicality echoes the position advanced by Bert O. States in his phenomenological study of theater, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms*. For States, “The problem with semiotics is that in addressing theater as a system of codes it necessarily dissects the perceptual impression theater makes on the spectator. . . . Thus the danger of the linguistic approach to theater is that one is apt to look past the site of our sensory engagement with its empirical objects.”⁴⁷ States instead proposes a “binocular vision,” which views the stage object simultaneously as representing something else (the semiotic attitude) and as a thing-in-itself (the phenomenological attitude). States’s attempt to translate signs back into affective images recalls Samuel Beckett’s interest in representing “nonlogical” phenomena before they have been “distorted into intelligibility” by the perceiver. Beckett’s theater insists on the nauseating “thereness” of such things as boots, trees, and carrots—items that flirt with but ultimately resist symbolism.⁴⁸

More recently, other critics have resisted reading the stage object as merely a unit of meaning or lexeme. Emphasizing the role of objects in grounding both actor and spectator in a spatial field, Stan-

ton B. Garner Jr. has demonstrated that a phenomenological approach illuminates the contemporary props of Shepard, Ionesco, Beckett, and Pinter.⁴⁹ In a broad theoretical study, Jean Alter posits a “performant function” in which objects serve as vehicles for actorial virtuosity and hence spectatorial pleasure. By this logic, objects such as juggling balls are enjoyed in their own right rather than as signs.⁵⁰ Although the debate over the extent to which semiotization obtains in the theater continues, in the light of these critiques it is hard to maintain that semiotics alone can fully account for the affective impact of props in performance. Props do “speak” in the theater—but they also perform.⁵¹

Like the play that contains it, then, the prop does not offer itself up to our gaze “all at once” as a digestible sign. The prop must mean in the moment, and that meaning is inextricably tied to such contingent circumstances as the physical dimensions of the performance space, the skill level of the individual actors, director, and designers, and the mood and makeup of the audience on a given night.⁵² As concrete synecdoches of that dynamic event we call performance, props remind us to keep theatrical meaning at once in our grasp and on the move.

The Cultural Project of Things: Materialism versus the Material

In addition to rescuing the material object from the dematerialized sign on the one hand, and restoring diachronic motion to spatialized meaning on the other, my rematerialization of the prop has a further heuristic use. In recent years, there has been growing critical interest in the “materialist” analysis of the stage property’s ideological life within the culture as well as its theatrical life within the playhouse.⁵³ Drawing variously on anthropology, new historicism, psychoanalysis, feminism, and cultural materialism, much important work has been done on what Lena Cowen Orlin has called “the cultural project of things.”⁵⁴ Early modern scholars in particular have trained their sights on the various ways in which such objects as hair, gloves, and handkerchiefs circulate within a larger framework of cultural anxi-

Introduction

eties, ideological fault lines, and symbolic economies.⁵⁵ Thus Stephen Greenblatt cites the traffic of vestments between church and stage as an example of “circulation of social energy” in the Elizabethan era, while Peter Stallybrass has linked the valence of stage costume to the “livery society” of early modern England.⁵⁶ Natasha Korda has uncovered hitherto invisible connections between Philip Henslowe’s costume and pawnbroker businesses, and Paul Yachnin has linked the fetishized handkerchief in *Othello* to England’s textile trade.⁵⁷ Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda’s collection, *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, highlights “the ways in which seemingly divergent materialisms can work together to broaden and deepen our understanding of stage properties, the plays in which they appear, the institutions and agents that own them, and the social, economic and cultural contexts in which they are embedded.”⁵⁸ Nor is interest in props’ ideological project limited to the early modern period. For example, W. B. Worthen finds complicity between the “transparent” objects of the contemporary stage and realism’s fetishization of bourgeois interiority.⁵⁹

These scholars remind us that no recognizable object arrives on stage innocent. Objects bring their own historical, cultural, and ideological baggage on stage with them. New historicism, materialist feminism, and cultural materialism have taught us that the playhouse cannot be artificially cordoned off from the symbolic economy of the culture that surrounds it.⁶⁰ Just like the offstage objects they represent, props are circulated, fetishized, and commodified. Indeed, since the public theater is a commercial enterprise, everything that appears on its stages is not only a theatrical sign but a commodity offered for the consumer’s visual consumption. Even in the devotional mystery plays of medieval England, each play in the cycle was presented to the community by a particular trade guild that displayed its latest wares for potential customers. Civic obligation, religious devotion, and what can only be called advertising are all bound up with the stage life of the object. At its most extreme—the chandelier in *The Phantom of the Opera* or the helicopter in *Miss Saigon*—the object displaces the actor as the star of the show.

Materialist approaches sensibly insist that any analysis that seeks

to comprehend the signifying impact of the stage object must take its historical and cultural contexts into account. However, a tension exists between the goals of restoring the prop's "specifically material [as opposed to functional and symbolic] dimensions" and recovering its social and economic "histories of production."⁶¹ There is a strong risk that the material presence of the onstage object—its movement in concrete stage space and through linear stage time for spectators—will dissolve into the materialist analysis of the anxieties, fault lines, and ideologies that the object may or may not have embodied for the culture. In short, the danger is that we will lose sight of how objects worked, and continue to work, on stage as part of a discrete theatrical event. The stage object is a theatrical as well as a textual entity, an actual thing as well as a nexus of competing ideological codes.⁶²

Moreover, we must remember that for actual spectators, objects (like plays) move in unidirectional stage time. There are no mental rewind, fast-forward, and pause buttons in the theater as there are in the study—a luxury that may tempt us, as text-based critics, to read more significance into a given object, moment, or gesture than a spectator could possibly have grasped consciously (and perhaps even unconsciously). For example, in his suggestive article on the ideological ramifications of Desdemona's handkerchief, Paul Yachnin's claim that *Othello's* "stake in the handkerchief registers the theatre's participation in English society's fetishized trade in textiles" raises urgent questions for the performance-oriented critic.⁶³ At what point(s) in the play does such "registering" take place? For whom does a connection between the handkerchief and England's textile trade register—the Jacobean spectator at the playhouse, or the contemporary materialist critic? Could such registering occur in the heat of theatrical performance? If not, does that fact negate Yachnin's claim?

If the five case studies that follow emphasize playhouse practice over cultural imagination, then, it is not to discount the latter as irrelevant or even separable. Rather, I seek to redress an imbalance in recent criticism. This imbalance stems, I believe, from the difficulty, for those who are not theater practitioners, of conceiving drama as a

Introduction

temporal event that takes place for audiences in real time, rather than as a spatialized field of meaning on the one hand or as a hermetic network of circulating social energy on the other. The phenomenon under scrutiny here—the power of stage properties to haunt the theatrical imagination of characters and audiences—can only be grasped once we shift our critical attention from flattened symbols on the page to mobile, three-dimensional objects on the stage.

Part of what we risk losing sight of is the sheer *charm* of stage objects—what I earlier called their seductive power in performance. We must remind ourselves that audiences pay for theatrical spectacle not because they wish to be interpellated, demystified, or decentered, but because they enjoy being entertained, titillated, and (occasionally) disturbed. As Bert O. States points out, we leave the study for the playhouse because we crave the sheer *messiness* of embodied theater. We want the mess along with the meaning, the thing along with the sign.⁶⁴ Even that most articulate advocate of “laying bare the device,” Bertolt Brecht, recognized that if the performance failed to grab the audience, its ideological demolition work would founder. Brecht’s analogy for the theatrical event was not a network of mutually deconstructing signs, but a boxing match.

I do not minimize the materialist insight that the object’s cultural and ideological life circulates within the walls of the playhouse as well as beyond it. Indeed, in my own readings, I have historicized the prop’s stage life whenever it has seemed relevant to my production analysis. Such contextualization can only enhance our understanding of these objects’ theatrical fascination. However, my analysis remains rooted in the *stage* life of props. Before we can hope to ascertain “the cultural project of [stage] things,” we must first recover their trajectories within the unfolding spatiotemporal event in the playhouse—even while acknowledging that such a reconstruction will always be provisional, if for no other reason than the fact that the historical spectator must to some extent remain a cipher.⁶⁵ Just as performance-oriented critics have much to learn from the materialist analysis of ideological formations and cultural anxieties, so too can such an analysis make room for the *material* stage event.

The Stage Life of Props: Unpacking the Metaphor

Thus far, I have defined the prop as a mobile physical object rather than as a functional lexeme or ideological symptom; located the prop in the concrete stage space and linear stage time of performance; and extended the Prague school's concept of the dynamism of the theatrical sign to suggest that the prop's semiotic life unfolds not as a static symbol whose meaning can be gleaned "all at once," but as an unstable *temporal contract* between actor and spectator. I now wish to examine the metaphor that gives rise to the title of this study. What do we actually mean when we say that an inanimate object "takes on a life of its own" in performance?

From one perspective, the metaphor is misleading, since it implies (a) that the inanimate object becomes truly animate and (b) that the object becomes a subject in its own right, independent of the human actor's manipulation of it. Neither implication is true. Although they can and do take on some of the functions and attributes of subjects, which accounts in part for their uncanny fascination on stage, props remain objects, not subjects.⁶⁶ Stage props are "motivated"—literally put into play—by actors but are not themselves animate, although they are often said to "animate" the plot (as the handkerchief does in *Othello*). Even those anthropomorphic figures defined by Frank Proschan as "performing objects," such as puppets and marionettes, are only figuratively alive, since they must be manipulated by a human presence either on or offstage.⁶⁷ As puppet theorist Steve Tillis argues, the actor is always the *producer*, but not necessarily the *site*, of signification.⁶⁸ We must therefore acknowledge the metaphor of the prop with a life of its own as a suggestive figure of speech and seek to unpack its figurative applications.

Objects take on a life of their own when they transcend their usual, "transparent" function and draw the spectator's attention in their own right. Props' most common function is to act as various kinds of *visual shorthand*. First, props signal the larger, offstage world beyond the playing space. A piano signifies "bourgeois drawing

Introduction

room,” while a striped towel and parasol indicate “beach.” Honzl calls such objects “scenic metonymies,” because they point to a larger scene with which they are conventionally associated.⁶⁹ (To the extent that they are parts standing for wholes, they are more accurately labeled synecdoches, as Elam points out.)⁷⁰ In addition to locale, props silently convey time period, socioeconomic milieu, time of day, and so on. In nonillusionistic theater (such as the Elizabethan stage), which largely dispenses with permanent scenery, props act as visual shorthand for a character’s occupation. Examples of some conventional “identity metonymies” include the soldier’s sword, the fop’s wig and snuffbox, the fool’s scepter and bauble, and (more recently) the chef’s hat and secret agent’s sunglasses.

But props do not just identify; they also *characterize*. The extravagant way that Capitano in the Italian *commedia* handles his sword tells us at once he is a puffed-up braggart; Osric’s fussiness over his hat conveys obsequiousness, and so on. Often props convey information of which the character himself may be unaware and become vehicles of dramatic irony. Brabantio’s nightgown reminds the early modern audience, watching the play in the middle of the afternoon, that act 1 of *Othello* takes place in the middle of the night (index of time), but the nightgown also serves to make the dyspeptic senator look ridiculous when he testifies against Othello in the witchcraft trial before the formally attired Venetian senate (index of character).⁷¹

All of these pointing (indexical) functions are metonymic. They suggest association between prop and referent through contiguity, or through conventional association, rather than through actual *resemblance* between object and referent. But props easily slide from metonymy to metaphor. Othello’s flickering taper metaphorically suggests Desdemona’s threatened life; Laura’s glass menagerie implies the fragility of her hold on reality; Treplev’s dead seagull conveys his penchant for melodrama. The most resonant props cement their identity through both metonymy and metaphor. Thus in Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, the central prop is associated with Lady Windermere both through contiguity (it is constantly in her

The Stage Life of Props

possession, a birthday gift from her husband, etc.) and through resemblance (it is a delicate, expensive trinket designed for public display, which is how Lord Windermere sees his wife).

Yet props function conventionally as more than visual shorthand, for they are also actorial aids. Mary Douglas has indicated the importance of a well-chosen rehearsal prop in releasing a blocked performer: "One day some prop is passed to him, a hat or green umbrella, and with this symbol suddenly knowledge and intention are realised in the flawless performance."⁷² Theater phenomenologist Stanton B. Garner Jr. emphasizes the role of props in grounding the actor's body in fictive stage space: "Props establish points of contact between actor/character and *mise-en-scène*; they localize dramatic activity and materialize it in scenic terms. By extending and physicalizing the body's operation on the material environment, props situate the body more firmly within it."⁷³ Props thus enable playwrights and directors to anchor a scene. For example, Emilia's undressing of Desdemona in *Othello* creates an extraordinary intimacy between the two women (even as it must have focused the audience's attention on the male body beneath the female apparel).

Beyond characterization, props become drawn into the stage action in several ways. A key prop, like the tent in David Storey's *The Contractor*, or the contents of Winnie's bag in Beckett's *Happy Days*, may even anchor an entire play.⁷⁴ In such cases, stage business becomes promoted to the status of dramatic action. "Speaking" props, such as letters, can relay information to an audience that would otherwise require the presence of an actor-messenger (the outrageously expository radio bulletins in Tom Stoppard's *The Real Inspector Hound* parody this function). Props are also devices for energizing a scene; more than one playwright has relied on the timely appearance of a gun to ratchet up the dramatic tension when the play threatens to sag. Props can pad a dramatic narrative: after the premature resolution of the main plot, the patent plot device of the lost rings motivates *The Merchant of Venice*'s entire fifth act. Conversely, the prop *ex machina*, such as the identifying token produced at the end of a Greek drama, is a convenient way to tie up loose ends.⁷⁵

As this brief survey of the prop's usual functions indicates, it is

Introduction

difficult, if not impossible, to pinpoint just when a prop ceases to be passive and becomes active. *Pace* Veltruský, there is no single criterion for determining when (and if) an object achieves “semiotic subjectivity.” To paraphrase Sir Toby Belch, some props are born lively; some achieve liveliness; and some have liveliness thrust upon ’em. When we claim that a prop takes on a life of its own in performance, then, we are not saying that a single phenomenon has occurred. Rather, we are probably making one or more of the following claims.

Props motivate the stage action. Like Hitchcock’s famous McGuffins (the microfilm, the suitcase full of cash), the prop is a convenient device for setting a plot in motion. While such usage is perhaps most evident in farce (Goldoni’s *The Fan*, Labiche’s *An Italian Straw Hat*), this plot device is adaptable to melodrama (*Lady Windermere’s Fan*), and tragedy (the handkerchief in *Othello*). Often a fateful object becomes an antagonist that threatens to expose some dreadful secret, as is true of my last two examples. Farce is the obvious example of a genre in which objects refuse to settle for a passive role and emerge to frustrate the character’s objectives.⁷⁶ This plot function is the most common, and hence perhaps the least interesting, manifestation of a prop’s ability to draw attention to itself in performance, which is why I introduce it first.

Props are transformational puppets. In the hands of a skilled actor, the same prop can take on many roles in a given performance. Contemporary performance artist Sarah Jones plays eight international characters in her show *Women Can’t Wait*, signaling her transition through the use of a single prop: a diaphanous shawl. When Jones covers her head with the shawl, she becomes a woman from India; when she ties the shawl around her neck, a *soignée* Frenchwoman. In one incarnation, the balled-up shawl becomes a child’s doll.⁷⁷ Jones’s transformation of the object illustrates that whenever the prop is unscripted by the playwright, the actor’s gesture alone breathes life into it. To this extent, the transformational prop becomes a puppet. In contrast, the playwright’s dialogue is a crucial element in the life of the textually embedded props I discuss in the chapters that follow. The same is true for Strindberg’s *A Dream Play* (1902), in which objects such as the doorkeeper’s shawl are recycled from scene to

scene, taking on new connotations each time. Transformational props like Jones's shawl, which are added in performance by actor or director, are a fascinating topic in their own right but lie outside the scope of my study.

Props appear to signify independently of the actor who handles them. For Gay McAuley, echoing Veltruský, objects take on a life of their own when they are “capable of expressing or representing something independent of the actor's activities.”⁷⁸ McAuley's own examples include the surreal props incorporated by contemporary playwright-directors Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson. Surreal or arbitrary objects have neither use-function nor construable plot function; they are just *there*, pointing to themselves rather than to an external referent. Found only on the stage (or in a museum exhibition), arbitrary objects sever the link between stage-world and real world. Because of this, they are semidecorative and often divorced from narrative altogether.

Another instance of the autonomy, or pseudoautonomy, of the object is when the prop goes awry and eludes (or seems to elude) the actor's control. Such “recalcitrant props” may be intentional (the various items that refuse to work properly in Beckett's plays) or unintentional (the gun that refuses to fire on cue). The actor who plays a Restoration fop must juggle a veritable arsenal of props that might include wig, snuffbox, cane, and sword. Playing a drunk or incompetent fop makes even more spectacular demands on the actor, since for the illusion to work, the actor can never signal his own incompetent grasp on things, merely the character's. The drunken fop example illustrates that recalcitrant props only *seem* to signify independently of the actor; their independent life is an illusion. As I have argued, an object that is *truly* independent of an actor's visible manipulation is not a prop.

Props absorb dramatic meaning and become complex symbols. In this mode of “semiotic subjectivity,” props transcend their customary roles as transparent scenic metonymies and expository signs. Objects like the eponymous lizard in Tennessee Williams's *The Night of the Iguana* and the skeleton in John Arden's *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* become poetic symbols that elude obvious denotation but suggest

Introduction

something larger about the world or theme of the play. The capacity of objects to absorb overdetermined meanings encourages some poetically minded playwrights to promote them to title characters: *The Seagull*, *The Glass Menagerie*, and so forth.

Props are defamiliarized. On February 22, 1892, Oscar Wilde scandalized the first-night audience at London's fashionable St. James' Theatre by appearing in front of the curtain to commend the spectators on their good taste in applauding *Lady Windermere's Fan*. Wilde brandished a lighted cigarette (an unforgivable solecism given that ladies were present) and wore a green carnation in his buttonhole. What was the meaning of this mysterious affectation? Cecil Graham, the play's dandy and presumed mouthpiece for Wilde, had worn an identical green carnation in the third act. When the puzzled spectators turned to their fellows, they were dealt another surprise: Wilde had planted impeccably dressed men throughout the audience, each of whom proudly sported a green carnation.⁷⁹

On occasions such as this, the prop's materiality as an object clashes with its conventional function as a sign or tool. When this happens, the tacit representational contract between performer and spectator may be threatened or even ruptured. "Look at this table," says the actor, pointing to a chair. Dissonant props, like Wilde's green carnation, thrust their own material strangeness at the audience. This phenomenon resembles the defamiliarization of the linguistic sign, in which a word's referential function is trumped by its formal, sensory qualities, such as meter and rhyme. A defamiliarized sign or object is one that points to itself rather to an external referent.

Instead of paralyzing the drama, defamiliarization often reinvigorates it. When Chekhov's Nina refuses to understand the dead seagull as a symbol and perceives a mere corpse, her refusal brings the tensions between her and Treplev to a head and paves the way for her relationship with Trigorin. The coin that always comes up heads in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* signals to the audience that the laws of causality are weirdly suspended. Removed from any context or history in which they make sense, the defamiliarized objects that appear in the plays of Beckett and Sam Shepard resist the characters' attempts to make them bloom as symbols.

The Stage Life of Props

The logical end-point of defamiliarization is the use of surreal objects discussed above, which jettison reference to objects outside the theater entirely. In Foreman's and Wilson's theaters of the mind, semiosis short-circuits: the "phenomenal" object is selected purely on aesthetic grounds (size, shape, texture, color, etc.) with an eye to its sensory impact as an image rather than as a decodable sign. These props are more like pictorial elements in a surrealist landscape, or the props used by such modern dance companies as Pilobolus or Momix, than participants in a dramatic action.

Props are fetishized. A fetishized prop is one endowed by the actor, character, or playwright with a special power and/or significance that thereafter seems to emanate from the object itself.⁸⁰ No longer a transparent sign, a fetish takes on inordinate significance and becomes the focus of a character's projected desire, fear, or anxiety. By extension (contagion?), the object then serves the same function for the audience. As we might expect, Shakespeare is the master of the fetishized prop. In *Richard II*, for instance, the crown is so invested with symbolic power that it makes the king rather than vice versa.

Fetishized props come in several varieties. They may be talismans (Mary Tyrone's wedding dress in *Long Day's Journey into Night*), neurotic symptoms (Hedda Gabler's pistols), or commodities (the check in *A Raisin in the Sun*, the piano in *The Piano Lesson*). Props may be fetishized through the actor's gesture alone (as when Krapp fondles his banana in *Krapp's Last Tape*), but more frequently the playwright's language endows the mundane prop with danger and excitement. Othello's "magic in the web" speech transforms a hitherto innocuous object into a magical charm and, in doing so, exposes theatrical fetishism in action. In Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*, a glass of water becomes a pawn in a game of sexual chess ("If you take the glass . . . I'll take you").⁸¹ Jean Genet's *The Maids* is surely the locus classicus of object fetishism on the modern stage.

Not only characters but actors themselves fetishize precious objects, especially those that transmit a theatrical lineage. On Broadway, the "gypsy coat" is passed from roving actor to actor, migrating between shows like the all-but-anonymous Gypsies themselves.

Introduction

Actor Rick Cluchey has described how Beckett's own slippers provided the precise shuffling sound needed for *Krapp's Last Tape*. As King Lear, Sir Donald Wolfit flamboyantly incorporated a cloak said to have belonged to Edmund Kean.⁸² In a profession devoted to the imaginative donning of others' lives, clothes, and habits, it is obvious why such theatrical talismans should prove so potent in rehearsal and even transmit some of that magic to audiences in performance.

Props are haunted mediums. Especially on the modern, technological stage, props are possessed by the voices of the past. August Wilson's piano in *The Piano Lesson*, Brian Friel's radio in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Krapp's tape recorder in *Krapp's Last Tape*, and Strindberg's speaking tube in *Miss Julie* all ventriloquize an absent, offstage subject, which is the reason I label such objects mediums. Such technological "channeling" has its roots in the theatrical phenomenon of *personification*, in which the prop is treated as a mute stand-in for the absent subject. In perhaps the most famous example in English drama, Yorick's skull is a mute object charged with dramatic meaning by Shakespeare's dialogue and the actor's gesture.

In their "felt absence," mediums are at once disturbing and fascinating on stage. They are uncanny in the Freudian sense: we (mis)perceive something alive in a dead object. Indeed, part of the ghostly fascination of theater as an art form is that it satisfies the audience's need for what performance theorist Joseph Roach calls "surrogation." According to Roach, surrogation is an omnipresent cultural drive to fill recently created voids, often traumatic to that culture, with substitutes that are in turn often destroyed once they prove unsatisfactory. Roach calls such scapegoat figures "effigies."⁸³ What I call the medium and Roach calls the effigy is central to the cultural work of performance, which Roach defines as "the process of trying out various candidates in different situations—the doomed search for originals by continuously auditioning stand-ins."⁸⁴

Itself a kind of medium in these terms, theater allows us to retrieve, if only temporarily, things lost but still cherished. Even if we no longer believe in the literal afterlife once promised by the *memento mori*, there is something consoling in the fact that we can (in theory) return to encounter Yorick's skull or Old Hamlet's ghost

night after night. There is an in-joke aspect to this game of theatrical recycling. Early modern spectators at the Globe must have enjoyed the reappearance of *The Spanish Tragedy*'s Spaniard costume in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (which includes a metatheatrical wink in the audience's direction). If surrogation is the urge that drives theatrical pleasure (and, for Roach, cultural performance as a whole), then the prop becomes a crucial vehicle of its expression.

Last, *props come to life on stage when they confound dramatic convention*. A prop takes on a life of its own, we might say, when it refuses to act proppily. By refusing to prop up the drama, the object capsizes audience expectation. I canvas this phenomenon in detail in my discussion of the stage gun in chapter 5, but this metadramatic (dys)function is shared by several of the props that I have chosen to examine. The eucharistic wafer in the Croxton *Play of the Sacrament*, among the earliest stage representations of the Host in English drama, becomes the object of knockabout farce as well as devotional attention to an extent that has puzzled contemporary scholars. The charmed handkerchiefs in *The Spanish Tragedy* and *Othello* go horribly awry and become death fetishes. The skull in *Hamlet* refuses its conventional memento mori function and, in so doing, threatens to dismantle the distinction between dead prop and live prince. Even the fan, that delightful flirtation device enshrined by Joseph Addison in the pages of *The Spectator*, becomes sexually electrified in alarming and potentially subversive ways on the Restoration stage.

From this brief survey of the various functions performed by theatrical objects it should be evident that no single overarching theory or underlying mechanism can fully account for the prop's stage life. As we shall see repeatedly, any or indeed all of these functions can overlap in performance. As a convenient analogy for summarizing this point, we can take the later Wittgenstein's revision of his earlier philosophy. In his *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein maintained that meaningful language has a single, denotative function: to picture the world of actual and possible facts. But Wittgenstein later came to view this position as hopelessly reductive, since language as it is actually used does many other things as well. Wittgenstein came to see language as a motley collection of simultaneously operating language-games,

Introduction

each with its own rules. Similarly, the language of props eschews a unitary syntax and grammar. There is no underlying logic of props, merely a variety of “object-games” in circulation at a given time from which dramatists pick, choose, and combine. No recipe or DNA exists for bringing a prop to life. Rather, in their ability to haunt the spectator’s imagination, enlivened props share what Wittgenstein called a family resemblance. We can generalize only by observing that every lively prop transcends the default function of stage objects: *to convey visual information about the world of the play in as unobtrusive a manner as possible*. Such transcendence is a necessary, but not sufficient, requirement for a prop to take on a life of its own in performance.

Props have many lives—practical, referential, rhetorical, phenomenological, psychological, ideological—but each begins when an object is plucked from the world and placed upon a stage, where it uncannily becomes at once itself and other than itself. It is to the earliest, and most alarming, instance of such theatrical appropriation in postclassical western European drama that I now turn.