Early Modern Literary Studies

Greenaway's Books

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"A good old text is always a blank for new things." Peter Greenaway, "TV Dante"

Introduction

1. Peter Greenaway's adaptation of *The Tempest* is titled *Prospero's Books*, renaming and representing Shakespeare's play as a work made of books. Prospero begins imagining, speaking and writing *The Tempest* in his bath while turning the pages of "The Book of Water." It and the other 23 books which inspire and empower him appear in Greenaway's version both as props in the narrative and as "real" documents located in a separate picture plane, where they are described by a donnish voice distinct from that of the protagonist-author. **[1]** **[Clip 1]**

2. This self-reflexive melange of fact and fiction, text and gloss, erudition and whimsy hearkens back to Humanist works "made of books" like *Utopia*, *The Shepheardes Calendar*, and *Don Quixote*. The film draws attention to its own bookish use of classical sources, but hides its debt to another tradition of allusion and self-reflexive textuality, that of the Bible.

3. "The Bible" is a title derived from the Greek word *biblia* signifying "books." Often referred to as "The Book," the Bible is made up of dozens of books written in three different languages over a period of 1300 years, each a palimpsest of quotations, glosses, and anachronistic foreshadowings. The Christian Bible represents the Old Testament as a set of 24 books which predict and prefigure their completion in the New. In Greenaway's new version of Shakespeare's play, the Bible is conspicuous for its absence from the 24 books out of which Prospero fashions *The Tempest*, but nevertheless remains a hidden presence.

4. In an earlier essay, I explored parallels between *Prospero's Books* and the book of Genesis centered on the processes of creation. **[2]** Here I sketch some parallels between Greenaway's work and the Bible's last book, The Revelation of St. John. *The Tempest* alludes to Revelation in Prospero's speech about the dissolution of the world (4.1.153-4) **[3]** and with other mirrorings, **[4]** but Greenaway's adaptation makes the connection unmistakeable. Greenaway's apocalyptic preoccupations with floods, fires, windstorms, political atrocities, monstrous births, rapes, his 28 variations on the dissolution of the masque (83.4), his sequences of books snapped shut (88.5), his multiple book immolations (91.3-27) and his descriptive account of "wholesale disappearance and destruction" (91.30-31) are modelled upon Revelation's unrelenting visions of catastrophe. **[5]** In a preface, Greenaway emphasises *The Tempest*'s finality as "reputedly, the last complete play [Shakespeare] wrote," especially in light of the fact that "The proposition...came from Sir John Gielgud and this filmscript was devised for his playing of Prospero...not insignificant perhaps when Gielgud's seventy year career on the stage is considered" (9). Another millennial dimension of *Prospero's Books* is attributable to its coded prophecy of the end of books at the beginning of the age of digital communication. **[6]**

Masque

5. Like those of the Book of Revelation, the literary conventions of *Prospero's Books* and of the whole of *The Tempest* are contained within the genre of masque. Masques are dream visions staged with illusory spectacles so overwhelming they challenge the reality of the waking world. **[7]** Sound effects, music and song, ritualised movement and dance, lavish costumes and kaleidescopically changing sets unfold more like a series of *tableaux vivants* or animated emblems than linear narrative or realistic imitation.

6. Like Revelation, *Prospero's Books* is set on an island of exile, where space and time curve in upon themselves, rendering both location and sequence ambiguous. These typical masque characteristics are intensified by the camera's movement of position, focal length and orientation. Instead of space and time, the world of a masque is oriented by apocalypses or unveilings--initiatory journeys into and out of mysteries, posing and answering questions. Prominent among masque themes is the ambiguous relation between illusion and reality. Masque devices include falling asleep and awakening, moving into or away from framed images and mirrors, opening and closing curtains and doors, and performances that start and break off.

7. After falling into a faint (1:17), the narrator of Revelation is transported into a heavenly court where he watches a series of framed pageants. On Prospero's island, Miranda, Ferdinand, Caliban and the lords repeatedly fall asleep, dream, and awaken to behold wondrous visions. John sees God sitting on a throne immediately flanked by "four beasts full of eyes" (4:6) **[8]** and surrounded by twenty-four crowned elders who fall down and worship Him. In Greenaway's description, at Prospero's first appearance as lord, "Four figures separate themselves from the crowd. They become Prospero's dancers-they mark out a four figured symmetrical pace around him-dancing in perfect unison" (13.13). **[Clip 2]**

8. In the theatrical space of Revelation's court, God holds a sealed book which is opened amidst fanfare by the Lamb. As each seal is removed, the audience of John and the elders regard a vivid enigmatic spectacle emerging from it: "And I saw and behold: a white horse: and he that sat on him...went forth conquering and to conquer" (6:2). Greenaway's 24 books surround Prospero in his palace on pedestals like thrones. Out of their pages spring symbols, visions and conquerors.

9. Masques include their own spectators and gloss their own symbols. The elders watch the pageant of the book with John and exchange interpretation: "And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? And whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:13-14). Greenaway glosses the film's symbols in the book version of the script, whose section-shot numbering resembles biblical chapter and verse. "This strategy [of making Prospero his own author and of adding the 24 books] is made especially significant in a project that celebrates the text as text, as the master material on which all the magic, illusion and deception of the play is based. Words making text and text making pages and pages making books from which knowledge is fabricated in pictorial form-these are consistently forefronted" (9). The Bible portrays God as its own author and abounds with self-mirroring book metaphors, especially in Revelation, where the saved are sealed on the forehead like books (7:3), the narrator eats a little book which tastes "sweet as honey" but makes his belly bitter (10:10), Word of God is the name of a warrior whose sword comes out of his mouth (19:13-15), those saved at the last judgment are "written in the book of life" (20:15), and God names himself "the Alpha and Omega" (1:8,11; 22:13)--literally the "master material" of the text which reveals him.

Character and plot

10. The God of Revelation is harsh. Those within his church he warns, "As many as I love, I rebuke

and chasten" (3:19). Those who are lukewarm, "I will spue thee out of my mouth" (3:16). Fourteen out of the book's twenty-two chapters are devoted to describing the cruel punishments he inflicts on those he regards as enemies. Prospero seems no kinder. He rebukes and chastens Miranda and Ferdinand, tortures his rebel subjects and slave, and threatens his servant Ariel: "If thou more murmur'st, I will rend an oak/And peg thee in his knotty entrails til/Thou hast howled away twelve winters" (1.2.294-6). **[Clip 3]**

11. Greenaway asks "what was it in those books, that made Prospero not only powerful but also a moralising scold and a petty revenger, a benevolent despot, a jealous father and also a master designer of song and dance?" (12). The books of the Old Testament and the Gospels provide ample response. Like the exasperated God of Isaiah 29:2,4, who says "I will distress Ariel...and thou shalt be brought down, and shalt speak out of the ground…and thy voice shall be, as of one that hath a familiar spirit, out of the ground," **[9]** Prospero has been abandoned by those he loves. Like the Jesus of Matthew 23:33,37, who says to his opponents "O serpents, the generation of vipers, how shall ye escape the damnation of Hell…Jerusalem, Jerusalem which killed the prophets…how often would I have gathered your children together and ye would not," Prospero has been betrayed by those he should rule. Gielgud's performance in the role makes the wrath terrifying and majestic rather than petty and cruel, and it also conveys the suffering and vulnerability out of which his cantankerousness arises.

12. The plotlines of Revelation and of *The Tempest* lead up to what Greenaway calls "a twist, a rearrrangement of events, a reversal" (9). This occurs at the moment of triumphant revenge, when all the ruler's enemies have been brought to heel or cast into the lake of fire, when "the sea gave up the dead which were in it" (20:13). At this juncture the old order passes away and a new one is born.

13. The God of Revelation descends from above with his holy city, presents it as a bride to his son, opens its bejewelled gates forever, promises to dwell within it together with his people, and invites them to feast on the water of life (21:1-22.5). Greenaway's Prospero relinquishes absolute control over his artistic, filial and political subjects, for the first time allows them their own voices, and reveals the bride and groom in the courtyard of the pyramid where he has earlier appeared from above to judge them. Its fruiting orange trees arranged in a "quincunx" suggest the holy city's 12-fruit bearing trees of life, and its painted blue circle suggests the river flowing through the city. **[Clip 4]** Prospero's subjects "walk forward and the spirits--the mythological host--encourage them to enter the now greatly expanded doors of the porticoed entry into the great pyramid--where inside--a great banquet is being prepared" (89.14). These parallel turning points--a kind of withering away of the state--fulfill the masque convention dissolving the separation between players and spectators, when even the sovereigns in the audience joined their subjects in dance. **[10]**

Epilogue

14. The whole of Revelation, *The Tempest* and *Prospero's Books* are about endings, and their lengthy endings concentrate this concern. Shakespeare prefigures the ending of the play with Prospero's meditation on the ending of his masque, "Our revels now are ended..." (4.1.148). Prospero ends his own plot by getting revenge, exposing the deceptions of his enemies, restoring his rightful rule, and creating a new dynasty. Having achieved this climax, he begins to unravel himself. Removing his magic cloak, breaking his staff and drowning his book, he abandons the roles of God, magus, monarch, and father.

15. Dissolution is intrinsic to the conclusion of any artistic performance--book, play or film. "The end" is always apocalyptic. Those words perfect, annihilate and frame the work. When the covers are closed, the curtain comes down or the final credits scroll, its grip on the imagination of the spectator is released. Once having bound the scattered leaves of the universe into a single volume, it sets the reader or viewer adrift and free. **[11]**

16. Like a funeral, an epilogue mitigates an annhilating ending with deliquescent anticlimax. It reopens what's been closed, but in an attenuated form that oscillates in and out of the fiction and bridges the gaps between work and world, text and reader, author or performer and audience. Revelation's epilogue, which is that of the whole Christian Bible, closes the utopian vision of the heavenly city with the narrator's account of his acceptance as an equal of the angels. Then it turns into his direct address to the reader, whose reality now supplants the eternal world of heaven left behind (22:8ff). The communion within the vision is replaced by a communion with us. Readers are invited to partake of the water of life and are included in a liturgical exchange with Jesus here on earth. He says "surely I come quickly" and they reply "Amen. Even so, come Lord Jesus." Using the second person pronoun, John concludes, "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen" (22:20-21).

17. "Please you draw near," says the figure on stage in the epilogue of *The Tempest*, shifting shape from fictional character to actor or author, inviting the audience's intimacy, just as Prospero had shifted shape from magic ruler of the island to Duke of Milan to get close to his lords. As fiction he claims to remain trapped on the island unable to fulfill his intention to return to Naples. As actor, he begs for indulgence and applause. When they accede, the spectators act on a belief in the fiction that transforms them from passive observers of the stage vision to active participants in it, but with their claps they make it disappear. During the final lines of the epilogue (331ff), the clapping hands which terminate the performance make the gesture of prayer. As they release the character and extend mercy to the actor-author, they beg for their own freedom and forgiveness. Persuaded as was Prospero to shift from a position of dominance to willing subordination, so those who pray can expect the same response from him who judges them: "prayer/Which pierces so, that it assaults/Mercy itself and frees all faults."

18. Greenaway's version of the epilogue enacts, extends and alters these Shakespearean and Biblical devices. Loosening the fictional role by removing most of the Duke of Milan's costume, the figure reverts back to Sir John Gielgud, the aged actor of the opening sequence, whose voice and face in close-up exude compassion, wisdom and ripeness. "He speaks to us intimately--on an individual one-to-one basis" (91.33). Then, as he recites the final words about prayer, Gielgud's receding presence is refictionalized into a biblical God who "shall dwell with men...and shall wipe away all tears from their eyes" (21:4). **[Clip 5]**

19. The speech ends with an explosion of fountains suggesting a glorious finale. Out of them spring the sound of applause, but also the playful and grotesque figure of an adult Ariel now freed from Prospero's control. This marks an oscillation back from the fictional realm into the world of the viewer, as Prospero's frozen image shrinks in size and yet remains conspicuously cropped at top and bottom. So does the discovery that the applause emanates from a filmed audience to which we belong by virtue of sitting in the blackened movie house rendered spatially continuous with the black framed screen image. **[Clip 6]**

20. The fiction fades further as we notice the audience on screen is distinct from us--in a theatre not a cinema, dressed in period costume. The fiction is then strengthened by Ariel's running toward us off the screen through the theatre at our faces--a sensation produced by the perspectival magic of the camera's backtracking while the figure expands in the frame. Illusion dissipates again as the figure of Ariel reverts from adult to youth to child, punctuated by shots of the fiery and watery elements to which he returns, while the film itself seems to slow down, go grainy and jerky, and the background image of Prospero shrinks to imperceptibility, "melted into air, into thin air." The epilogue eventually peters out with the sound of a splash and the image of a page whose lettering dissolves before our eyes--the Book of Water with which the film began. **[Clip 7]**

21. Finally, to backtrack. Greenaway's pervasive oxymoron of books and water controls the starting sequence of the epilogue in which Prospero and Ariel dump all his books into the sea, where they burn, dissolve and otherwise decompose. This iconoclastic disposal probably signifies liberation from the tyrannical domination of logocentricity and the Western Canon imposed on both its

masters and servants. **[Clip 8]** Such an enactment of "self-consuming artifacts" contrasts sharply with the canon-setting curse at the end of Revelation that "if any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book. And if any man shall take away from the words of the book...God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things, which are written in this book" (22:18-19).

22. Greenaway himself seems ambivalent about the avant-garde project of consigning books to water or flame, as suggested by this sequence's sinister echoes of Savonarola's bonfire of the vanities and Hitler's Kristalnacht, emphasized by sounds and images of breaking glass. His appreciation for old volumes in original form is restated at the end of the sequence, where Caliban rises out of the water to rescue the last two books from oblivion--a bound manuscript of *The Tempest* and a copy of the first Folio. **[Clip 9]** In Caliban's hand, those works might emerge someday as something resembling *Prospero's Books*. And despite its closing fundamentalist warning, the Bible too has remained a Book of Water, open to addition, subtraction and revision by the likes of Greenaway and Shakespeare.

Notes

1. Greenaway constructed the books as a separate project, exhibited them, and produced a catalog for the exhibit. He also wrote a book describing each of the creatures who appear as Prospero's spirits in the film and then covered the pages of this book with graphic designs and exhibited the composites. See Leon Steinmetz and Peter Greenaway, *The World of Peter Greenaway*. Boston: Journey Editions, 1995, 11-110.

2. Steven Marx, "Progeny: *Prospero's Books*, Genesis and *The Tempest*," *Renaissance Forum* 1.2 [http://www.hull.ac.uk/renforum/v1no2/marx.htm]

3. Peter S. Donaldson, "'All which it inherit': Shakespeare, Globes and Global Media," *Shakespeare Survey* 52 (1998), 189.

4. Steven Marx, "A Masque of Revelation: *The Tempest* as Apocalypse," *Shakespeare and the Bible*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, 125-147.

5. References are to the section/scene divisions in Greenaway's filmscript-book version, *Prospero's Books: A Film of Shakespeare's* The Tempest. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1991. The first and last referenced sequences are described in this book but left out of the film, the second is included in the film but left out of the book.

6. This dimension is the subject of Peter S. Donaldson's "Digital Archives and Sibylline Fragments: 'The Tempest' and the End of Books," *Postmodern Culture* [online to subscribers only at http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/pmc/v008/8.2donaldson.html] 8.2 (Jan.,1998) and "Shakespeare in the Age of Post-Mechanical Reproduction: Sexual and Electronic Magic in *Prospero's Books*," *Shakespeare, The Movie*, Ed. Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt. London: Routledge, 1997, 169-186.

7. The fact that *The Tempest* contains a masque staged by Prospero in Act 4 does not prevent the whole from being a masque. Stephen Orgel, *The Illusion of Power: Political Theatre in the English Renaissance*, Berkeley: UC Press, 1975, discusses the way masque conventions function to express the ideology of divine right kingship. See also David Aune, "The Influence of Roman Imperial Court Ceremonial on the Apocalypse of John," *Papers of the Chicago Society of Biblical Research*, 28 (1983), 5-26.

8. Citations are to the Authorised Version (King James translation) of 1611.

9. The Geneva Bible reads: "I will bring the altar into distress, and there shall be heaviness and sorrow…thy voice shall be out of the ground like him that hath a spirit of divination" and glosses, "The Hebrew word Ariel…signifieth the Altar…" The context implies that Ariel is another name for Jerusalem, "the city that David dwelt in," and by extension for the Israelite nation.

10. Enid Welsford, *The Court Masque: A Study in the Relationship between Poetry and the Revels*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1962, 340.

11. This closing image of a book comes from Dante's *Paradiso* 33.85-87.

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