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***Sejanus*, the King's Men Altar Scenes, and the Theatrical Production of Paganism**

*This article traces the lineage of the popular performance set-piece of the 'oracular altar scene' from its inception in Jonson's *Sejanus* through its frequent reuse by the King's Men and their imitators later in the century. By doing so, it demonstrates how material practices of reuse in the seventeenth-century theatre helped shape the production of popular knowledge about the nature of 'pagan' ritual and its practitioners in the Stuart era of intensified antiquarian discovery and colonial expansion.*

The fifth act of Ben Jonson's *Sejanus*, a Jacobean tragedy set in decadent imperial Rome, contains a striking moment of intersection between antiquarianism and performance, as the play's scheming, eponymous favourite agrees to propitiate a statue of the goddess Fortuna, grudgingly seeking divine advice about his political fortunes. Accompanied by the music of flutes and trumpets, a priest incants lines translated from Seneca while performing complex rituals of lustration (washing his hands), libation (eating and administering honey and milk to the participants), and propitiation (placing milk, honey, and burning poppy on the altar bearing Fortuna's statue), all as *Sejanus* looks on. Surprisingly, these distinctly alien, non-Christian religious rites produce true future knowledge: the hitherto sessile statue of the goddess (probably a company member in a statue costume) miraculously becomes animated and turns her face away. The prediction implied by this silent rejection — that *Sejanus* has lost her favour and his luck has run out — is quickly vindicated for the audience in the next scene, when the favourite's downfall begins.

Spectacular altar scenes much like the one in *Sejanus* became a staple of theatrical productions put on by the King's Men, the repertory company for whom Jonson wrote the play, in the early seventeenth century. The set-piece, which remained remarkably consistent in its basic outlines across plays, featured an act of propitiation in front of an altar property that subsequently generated prophetic

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knowledge through miraculous signals: smoke, doves, or the animation of a statue. Examining Jonson's spectacular altar scene and its legacy in the public theatre demonstrates two ways in which early modern theatrical practice responded to the boom of interest in religions beyond the Abrahamic triad of Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. On the one hand, Jonson's hyper-classicized, thoroughly-researched altar scene shows us the stage at its most acquisitive and outward-looking: the dramatist pillaged antiquarian texts and consulted recently excavated archaeological objects as he designed the set-piece, translating the boom of antiquarian scholarship about the religions of the ancient world into performance.

But Jonson's carefully-researched Roman spectacle, I argue, had an unexpected theatrical afterlife that reveals a second way in which English theatre engaged with the idea of paganism. Drawing on recent insights from theatre historians interested in the influence of playing companies on dramatic form, this article traces the reuse and transformation of the altar scene convention by the King's Men, showing the way that Jonson's set-piece, particularly its trick altar, would be reused in a variety of plays.¹ I argue that plays produced by the company abstracted this staging from its Rome-specific origins over time and used it to subsume multiple, heterogeneous religious sites ranging from mythic Thebes to ancient Britain to contemporary South America into a consistent, homogeneous idea of 'paganism'. Paganism, as intellectual historians have shown, was not a fixed or natural category, but rather a shifting conceptual framework adopted by early modern thinkers as they encountered a rush of new antiquarian and ethnographic information about religious practices past and present.² This case study of reuse and recycling, focused on altar scenes, thus provides one example of the way that the repertory system of the early modern English theatre, with its penchant for material conservatism and reuse, helped forge this conceptual category in seventeenth-century England.

Jonson Among the Antiquarians: *Sejanus* and the Recreation of Roman Ritual

The scene's ultimate origins lie in Ben Jonson's *Sejanus His Fall*, a tragedy that tells the story of the rise of its titular character, a corrupt favourite who schemes himself into the graces of the equally unsavoury emperor Tiberius.³ Through a combination of Machiavellian scheme-hatchery and relentless industry, Sejanus destroys a series of semi-sympathetic but passive political enemies before he is publicly disgraced and dismembered, offstage, by an enraged mob of Roman citizens. The Fortuna set-piece comes during the play's fifth act, at the seeming

height of Sejanus's political triumph, amid a slew of other inauspicious omens. Terentius and other counselors report smoke belching from the statue of Sejanus, erected earlier as part of his deification by Tiberius; when the head is removed, a serpent leaps out. His servants break their necks on the Gemonian stairs, and no auspicious birds appear at a key augury. Sejanus dismisses the priestly worry generated by these events as superstition, the product of interpretation and 'thy juggling mystery, religion' rather than the will of the gods. Despite this, he agrees to sacrifice to Fortuna, performing a complicated ritual to learn more about his political fortunes. The stage directions provided by Jonson describe these rites in great detail:

Tubicines, tibicines. While they sound again, the flamen takes of the honey with his finger, and tastes, then ministers to all the rest; so of the milk, in an earthen vessel, he deals about. Which done, he sprinkleth on the altar milk, then imposeth the honey, and kindleth his gums, and after censuring about the altar, placeth his censer thereon, into which they put several branches of poppy, and the music ceasing, say all. (5.1.184 sd)

These rites cause the statue of the goddess to 'stir' and become miraculously animated as she 'turns away' from Sejanus, a symbolic withdrawal of favour that the next scene vindicates (185).

Scholars have long been familiar with the connections between Jonson's play and his classical sources.⁴ Jonson himself loudly advertised his debt to contemporary antiquarian scholarship (as well as ancient authorities) in the playtext's extensive, unusual marginal notes, which source the theatrical effects in the Fortuna scene in recent Continental texts about ancient religious practices: Giraldi's *De Deis Gentium*, Stuckius's *Sacrorum, Sacrificiorumque Gentilium Brevis Et Accurata Descriptio*, Rosinus's *Antiquitates Romanae*, and Panvinius's *De Republica Romana*. These authors provided Jonson with concrete details about Roman religious praxis: the names of different classes of priests, the types of herbs used in their sacrifices, the nature of the feast days they celebrated. Jonson worked these details into the scene's design, borrowing the names of different types of musicians and religious functionaries ('tubicines', 'tibicines', and 'flamen'), the sacrifice of milk and honey, and the burning of poppy branches in a censer. The play quarto flags the antiquity of these practices through its unusual system of marginal references, making *Sejanus* look in print much like a text that could have been produced by any member of the circle of London antiquarians with whom Jonson associated at this point in his career.⁵ Indeed, Jonson probably wrote

Sejanus while consulting the library of the famed manuscript collector and antiquarian Robert Cotton, who was one of his former classmates at Westminster; the two had studied together under the prominent antiquarian William Camden. In 1603, at the probable time of *Sejanus*'s composition, Jonson spent several months at Cotton's estate in Huntingdonshire. Jonson may have worked on *Sejanus* during his time at Cotton's house; the text of the 1605 edition, wreathed in dozens of marginal citations referring to ancient works and commentaries by contemporary scholars, certainly indicates that he had access to a large library. One extant letter from Jonson to Cotton, which asks for a book on the geography of the Campania, reveals that the playwright was accustomed to using Cotton as a source for books, and the presence of the texts from Jonson's footnotes in a contemporary catalogue of the printed books in Cotton's library also strongly suggests that the playwright may have used the library during his stay and while composing *Sejanus*.⁶

Scholars have examined Jonson's debt to the literary models of antiquity more generally, and his use of ancient political theory and history writing in *Sejanus* particularly, but, as James Loxley has pointed out, they have traditionally construed this classical orientation as bibliophilic and opposed to the medium of performance.⁷ But if we revisit the circumstances of *Sejanus*'s composition and performance, we can see Jonson's interest not just in the texts of the ancient world, but in the materiality of ancient religious practice. At Robert Cotton's estate Jonson would have found more than just textual descriptions of the religious rituals of antiquity. In 1603, Cotton and William Camden had just returned from a long collecting trip; the two antiquarian enthusiasts scoured parts of England, especially the north, for ancient stones and monuments, amassing a collection of Roman altars, milestones, and other stonework that Cotton brought back to his house at Conington immediately before Jonson's arrival.⁸ David McKitterick has briefly speculated that Jonson may have drawn inspiration from this collection when he designed the inscription on the Roman altar that appears in the masque *Hymenaei*, which was performed the year after *Sejanus*. I would suggest it may have had a role in inspiring Jonson's construction of the altar scene in *Sejanus* as well. This claim seems even more probable because of the fact that, in addition to Cotton's physical collection of stones and inscriptions, Jonson would have found at Conington the antiquarian's 'lively draught' of an altar to the Roman goddess Fortuna that Camden and Cotton had discovered during their survey of Cumberland in 1599.⁹

Sejanus's reliance on the excavated artifacts and illustrations of the antiquarian enterprise demonstrate that Jonson's scholarly classicism was, at this early point in his career, assimilable to spectacular populist performance modes because of their

shared potential to reanimate ancient materiality. Jonson's other performance texts around this time bear the same marks of intense antiquarian research into the materiality of antiquity as *Sejanus* does, as we can see in the extensive marginal notations Jonson used to explain his staging choices in his masque *Hymenaei* (1606) and the royal entry he designed for James I (1604).¹⁰ This dedication to creating Roman-ness through the tangible reproduction of its rituals was visible to semi-contemporary observers as well: Dryden, writing later in the century, praises Jonson's facility at translation in *Sejanus* alongside his ability to 'represent old Rome to us, in its Rites, Ceremonies, and Customs', drawing attention to the playwright's ability to re-present the rituals of antiquity alongside its literary style and philosophical and political ideas.¹¹

I have dwelt at length on Jonson's sources in order to emphasize that the playwright's investment in the classical world was not merely textual. But attending to the antiquarian research behind the play also allows us to see the inadequacy of accounts that have tended to treat the play's altar scene as an entry in intra-Christian struggles. Williamson, in the best and most extended discussion of the scene, has linked it to a subgroup of plays that feature Christian altar scenes, arguing that the altar represents the persistence of the Catholic mass even into the early seventeenth century.¹² Williamson persuasively notes that by the 1630s authorities characterized a 'pagan' altar scene as linked to contemporary religio-political arguments over altars in English churches. Williamson and other scholars, in other words, have tended to focus on the way that the play's Roman setting — its characters, its rituals — might function as proxy for Christian concerns. These accounts tend to treat Jonson's command of antique detail as a smokescreen under which he smuggled in controversial political commentary, rather than focusing on the ancient rituals purportedly reanimated in the play, their origins, and their afterlives.

Theatrical audiences would have lacked the textual cues given to readers about the antiquity of the ritual in the statue scene, but attending to Jonson's sources allows us to see the way that the scene functioned as an experiment in populist antiquarianism that attempted to recreate historically alien ritual in performance and show it as supernaturally efficacious. This characterization of ancient religion is all the more remarkable given that other contemporary representations of the oracle as efficacious in drama tended to occlude the ritual practices used to produce prophecy as a way to render oracular prophecies more amenable to syncretic readings of them as Christian.¹³ *Sejanus* sharply diverges from these treatments by emphasizing ritual as the source of supernatural prophetic truth. Though many other plays of the period feature pagan prophecy that proves to be accurate,

they tend to either characterize these prophecies as acquired by direct revelation or to keep the rituals that produced these predictions offstage. *The Winter's Tale* provides a clear example. We first meet the minor characters Cleomenes and Dion in the third act, though we have learned beforehand that they are returning from the oracle at Delphos, sent there by the jealous Leontes for 'a greater confirmation' of his accusations against his wife Hermione's fidelity.¹⁴ The setting in which we encounter the two messengers is obscure; modern editions variously place it 'somewhere on the journey back to Sicilia' or 'in Sicily ... a stopping point'.¹⁵ These indeterminate settings reflect an ambiguity in the text; the messengers have not yet arrived home but are no longer at the oracle's temple, a site which remains unstaged. Cleomenes and Dion, stopped on the road back from Delphos, provide us with only one of several instances of unstaged or otherwise occluded oracles in early Stuart drama. In *Cymbeline*, Posthumus, after a dream of Jupiter, wakes to find an oracular 'label' (or letter) miraculously resting on his chest at the play's very end: no ritual required. Ford's *The Broken Heart* features a similar delivery from an absent oracular site: the scholar Tecnicus returns from the oracle to Sparta and (offstage) delivers a 'box' that must be 'unsealed' before the Delphic prophecy inside can be read (4.3.7–10). This device — the journey to an unstaged oracle or the delivery of a prophecy from one — recurs in other plays with pastoral and ancient settings, including Shirley's *Arcadia*; Brome's *The Lovesick Court*; Banks's *Cyrus the Great*; Shirley's *Contention of Ajax and Ulysses*; Heywood's *The Golden Age* and *The Iron Age*; Flecknoe's *Love's Dominion*; Daniel's *Hymen's Triumph*; Phineas Fletcher's *Sicelides: A Piscatory*; John Fletcher and Massinger's *The Prophetess*; and May's *Cleopatra*. All of these examples provided the audience with the idea of an oracle — an exterior source of knowledge and authority — without actually staging it, neatly eliding the non-Christian ritual practices involved in pagan prophecy and thus dodging theological questions that would arise from the direct (and possibly heretical) representation of their efficacy.

Occluding pagan ritual helped these dramatists to avoid challenging the uniqueness of Christianity's ritual access to the divine. If a play showed these forms of divination to be efficacious, it would have challenged the claim — essential to Christian exceptionalism — that the core institutional and ritual forms of the church had a unique divine mandate that was denied to pagan cultures. *The Winter's Tale* provides one example of how occluding these elements could be ideologically useful, and the play explicitly encourages a syncretic or proleptic method of reading paganism that treats it as a metaphor for Christianity. The scene in which the statue miraculously becomes the queen Hermione, for example, returns to this point again and again; Paulina worries that her act will

cause Leontes and Perdita to 'think — which I protest against — I am assisted by wicked powers' and assures them that her 'spell' is 'lawful' and that Hermione's 'actions shall be holy'. She asks those 'that think it is unlawful business' to leave, and later Leontes returns to similar language, stating 'if this be magic, let it be an art / Lawful as eating' (5.3.89–125). Even Hermione's request that the 'gods' (plural) bless her daughter is accompanied by the loaded Christian words 'sacred' and — even more so — 'graces'. In a play so anxious to render pagan magic in Christian terms, keeping the oracle itself — with its messy, alien, distinctly pagan ritual elements — offstage helps to transform the statue trick into just another aspect of allegorized Christianity. Here, syncretism depends on the occlusion of the messy materiality of 'pagan' religious ritual, and the play's portrayal of the oracle's efficacy serves only to reinforce a perception of the transhistorical power of a Christian god.

But Jonson neither conceals pagan prophetic rituals nor depicts them as inefficacious or false, instead treating us to a vision of the rites to Fortuna as an efficacious, holy reprieve from the politically-instrumental public rites of Rome depicted elsewhere in the play. Jonson subtly altered his source material to make it more palatable to Christian audiences in several ways. The author, for example, removed blood sacrifice from the ritual as recounted in the seventeenth chapter of his major source, Giraldus's *De Deis Gentium*, entitled 'De Sacrificis', which describes the elements used in Roman sacrifices to Pluto:

Et aras quidem inferorum, que plerunque geminae fuerunt & pares, quas nigris vitis aut caeruleis ornabant, & cupresso: cumque pecudes immolarent, spirantem cruorem in essosam terram mittere solebant, & vinum & lac & mel una infundebant, feu potius (ut dictum est) invertebant, visceraque caesae victimae ter circum aras ducebant, igne accenso.¹⁶

In Jonson's source, milk and honey are poured onto the altar along with blood and wine, two elements that Jonson removed from the Fortuna scene in *Sejanus*. This passage from Giraldus, part of a bigger story the author tells about the transition from human to animal sacrifice in Rome, is one of the author's many mentions of blood sacrifice, and Jonson would have found similar descriptions of animal sacrifice by other ancient authorities. Other characters in *Sejanus* mention the practice occurring in public amphitheatres, and in Jonson's second tragedy *Catiline*, the titular conspirator and his fellows drink a bowl of slave's blood mixed with wine to cement their vows. Jonson clearly knew about Roman blood sacrifice yet chose to leave it out of this scene: a choice designed to make the sacrifice to

Fortuna more palatable by editing out the more offensive or barbaric aspects of Roman ritual while still preserving the stranger details of the rite, particularly its use of milk and honey (unfamiliar to Christians as ritual elements).

Jonson designed other aspects of the scene to draw the audience into the unfamiliar ritual, as well, particularly the placement of the altar, which may have either been revealed in the discovery space (as it was in *Hengist*) or 'set forth' on the main stage (as it was in *The Faithful Friends*). Both of these staging options put the altar directly in front of the audience, which would face Fortuna head-on, an arrangement that would link the audience to the worshippers onstage through a shared line of perspective. At the same time, the use of incense — which the stage directions note is spread around the stage and presumably into the audience by 'censing' — worked to blur the line between the ritual onstage and the audience offstage as it flowed between the two spaces. Like the removal of blood sacrifice, these performance elements were designed to draw the audience in and interpellate them as participants in the ritual.

Most importantly, however, the sacrifice to Fortuna is efficacious: we see the statue turn her face away, an inauspicious prediction that bears fruit in the next scene. The magic of the Fortuna statue scene contrasts with the play's otherwise bleak portrayal of Roman religion in the era of Tiberius as empty, corrupt, and spectacle-dominated.¹⁷ Jonson spends a great deal of time in *Sejanus* satirizing the politically controlled public rites of Rome, and the play generally follows the outlines of the Sejanus story as told in Tacitus in its characterization of Tiberius as a ruthless and mercenary manipulator of the imperial cult. In Jonson's play, the emperor controls access to apotheosis, doling out the construction and dedication of religious monuments and statues to living politicians as a mark of political favour. The play portrays Roman crowds as mindless, vicious, and easily manipulated by hypocritical politicians acting in the name of religion and also satirizes Sejanus, who sees religion as merely an instrument to be exploited for political gain. At one point in the first act Sejanus even goes so far as to declare that 'the oracles are ceased, / That only Caesar, with their tongue, might speak', a pronouncement that the statue of Fortuna directly contradicts when it miraculously becomes mobile (1.1.503). But unlike these rites, the Fortuna set-piece comes, like the theatre dedicated to Pompey that is destroyed to make way for a monument to Sejanus, from a stratum of Rome's religious past that the play represents as purer. Sejanus claims that it had once belonged 'to a Roman king, / But [is] now call'd mine, as by the better style' (5.1.83–8). The statue thus stands as a symbol of an older Rome where religion was more than a tool of statecraft, and, when it turns

its face away after his offering, it signals its efficacy in comparison to the cynical religio-political machinations of the age of Tiberius.

After the Fortuna set-piece and the exposure of the villainies of Sejanus, we might expect that the characters of the play would return, chastened, to the worship of traditional deities: Tiberius, after all, stages his disavowal of Sejanus in Apollo's temple rather than the Roman Senate, and Macro attacks Sejanus by analogizing his hubris to the monstrous Titans and their blasphemous, mythical assault on the gods. The other senators respond to these cues, shrinking away from Sejanus and invoking the traditional gods of Rome — Phoebus, Mars, Diana, Pallas, Juno, Mercury — to protect the emperor. But rather than restoring the empire to the efficacious, ordered ancient religious practices so nostalgically represented as effectual in the Fortuna scene, the play characterizes Sejanus's fall as a dark, evacuated version of the earlier ritual. Jonson describes the mob as 'transported' in an ecstasy of quasi-Bacchic dismemberment, 'sprinkling themselves, their houses, and their friends' with the 'rent' pieces of the favourite's body, in a grim revision of the 'sprinkling' in the Fortuna altar scene (5.1.815–41). This moment, one of savagery and bloodlust, makes clear that the efficacious, wondrous ritual action of the Fortuna scene ultimately has no place in the public religion of Tiberius's Rome. And indeed, the brutal ritual of Sejanus's dismemberment, we learn in the play's final lines, does not seem to have healed Rome, awakened the gods, or ushered in a return to a purer era of religious practice. The text instead ends with the promise that the ouroboric entanglement between state politics and religious practice has not changed at all since Macro, a new favourite who has replaced Sejanus, will eventually become an even 'greater prodigy' for the people to worship. But despite the cynicism of the play's ending, the Fortuna set-piece nonetheless opened up a temporary space of populist antiquarian reconstruction, in which audiences could gaze in wonder at the miraculous statue as they waited for confirmation of whether its prophecy might come true.

Oracular Replication, 1603–20: Fletcher's *Bonduca*, the King's Men, and the Altar Scene

Sejanus's oracular altar scene shows us the theatre engaging with ancient ritual in a way that was thoroughly researched in an attempt at historical realism. Jonson seems to have devoted himself to the rhetorical performance of accuracy in his recreation of the gritty materiality of local, specific details of Roman religious practices for a popular audience. But his altar scene, so carefully located in ancient Rome, had a long and quite different afterlife in the public theatre as the King's

Men recycled versions of the scene using the same or similar properties across the next four decades. These reuses, which occurred in plays set in locations from ancient Britain to mythic Thebes to the new world, stripped the set-piece from its initial, carefully researched Roman context and transported it far afield. In retrospect, we may be tempted to see Jonson's learned and specific account of Roman religion as more 'true' than the anachronistic afterlives of *Sejanus's* ritual in other plays. But these reuses, too, provided a form of popular ethnology, however fictional and anachronistic, for contemporary audiences, drawing on pre-existing audience knowledge of the trope to present other sites as analogously 'pagan'. *Sejanus's* scene and its afterlives thus show us two distinct but related versions of the relationship between early modern theatre and the production of ethnological knowledge. In *Sejanus* we see the stage at its most acquisitive, curious, absorptive, and outward-looking, as a medium that plundered details of ritual and action from other media in order to materially recreate them for Londoners. But examining the reuses of Jonson's scene shows us something different: the way that the thrift and material conservatism of repertory playing generated new spectacles of religious difference from pre-existing properties and techniques, turning old theatrical knowledge into the semblance of new ethnological knowledge. Wrenched free from the historical specificity of its footnote-wreathed debut in *Sejanus*, the scene became instead a fungible, interchangeable marker of 'pagan' difference.

The effects generated in the altar scene in *Sejanus* could not have been cheap for the King's Men, as we can see when we examine the properties used in their production. Though it is tempting to attempt to reconstruct the appearance of the altar in *Sejanus* based on our knowledge of Cotton's altar collection, which can still be seen today at Cambridge, these artifacts are an unreliable source of knowledge about the appearance of the theatrical altar properties. We can, however, deduce some things about the altar property that was in the King's Men's possession from indications as to how the company used this property. The altar must have been large and strong enough to support a 'statue' and also must have had a solid front capable of concealing a company member orchestrating whatever effects it might generate. (Spontaneous smoke and flame rise from it in *Bonduca* and doves, a hind, and a rose tree in *Two Noble Kinsmen*.) For plays that featured a miraculously animate statue of a god or goddess, as many altar scenes did, it seems likely that the King's Men would have used an actor costumed as a statue rather than a mechanized prop. At least two other King's Men plays feature scenes in which actors are assumed to be statues by other characters onstage before they begin to move: Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* and Mr Plenty and Sir Maurice

Lacy in *The City Madam*. Even more compelling evidence for the costumed-actor thesis comes from a masque in which the King's Men performed in 1613, Beaumont's *Masque of the Inner Temple and Gray's Inn*. At one point, the text lyrically describes a dance of statues:

These statues were attired in cases of gold and silver close to their body, faces, hands and feet, nothing seen but gold and silver, as if they had been solid images of metals, tresses of hair as they had been of metal embossed, girdles and small aprons of oaken leaves, as if they likewise had been carved or moulded out of the metal: at their coming, the music changed from violins to hoboyes, cornets, etc. And the air of the music was utterly turned into a soft time, with drawing notes, excellently expressing their natures, and the measure likewise was fitted unto the same, and the Statues placed in such several postures, sometimes all together in the centre of the dance, and sometimes in the four utmost angles, as was very graceful besides the novelty.¹⁸

Lois Potter has suggested that it is possible that the King's Men were allowed to keep some of the costumes used in the antimasques during this performance, given that there is overlap between some of the costumes required by new plays in the company's repertory in 1613 (*The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale*) and those found in the masque. She suggests that perhaps the company may have eventually purchased them from Gray's Inn, which was scrambling to recoup its expenditures for the masque in the months that followed, chasing down unreturned costumes and punishing members who had not yet chipped in their share.¹⁹ The reverse possibility, however, seems just as likely: that the King's Men had provided at least some of the costumes for the antimasque —the part of the show professional actors, rather than courtly masquers, typically performed — from their own stock. At any rate, the dance of the statues indicates that the company was familiar by 1613 with producing moving-statue effects through the costuming of actors rather than mechanical means.²⁰ These effects (the trick altar and the statue costume) must have required a lavish outlay from the newly formed King's Men in 1603, and the company must have been inclined to maximize their investment through reuse.

One example of this reuse can be found in John Fletcher's *Bonduca*, a play that transports the Roman religious conventions of *Sejanus* to fifth-century Britain.²¹ The oracular altar set-piece occurs in the third act of the play, before a major battle. Bonduca, her daughters, and the general Caratach pray before an altar that has been piled high with incense, asking 'Andate' and 'Tiranes' for victory against the Romans and for a sign that their prayers have been answered. The altar is

silent during the first prayers by Bonduca and her daughters, who frame their need for victory in the terms of partisan vengeance, but the incense bursts into flames when Caratach asks that the gods give the victory to the most valiant side. The omen is ambiguous, and Bonduca demands to know more, but she is forestalled by Caratach who tells her their victory will come not from divine approval but from their 'own endeavours'. To construct this scene, Fletcher revisited many of the performance elements found in *Sejanus* but in more general terms. The poppies of *Sejanus* become the 'flowers' strewn before the druids in *Bonduca*, while the Rome-specific tibicines (flute-players) become instead a generalized call for the music of 'recorders'; recorder and flute referred to the same instrument in the period.²² Both plays use incense: *Sejanus* specifies a censer that is eventually placed on top of the altar, while in *Bonduca* characters speak of it being added to or piled atop the altar. Most importantly, however, Fletcher retains the basic, chief element present in Jonson's play: the central altar in front of which supplicants ask for and which delivers various divine signals or answers. In Jonson's play, the statue nods; in *Bonduca*, the altar emits smoke and flame. In these reuses, we can see Fletcher revisiting the basic trappings of Jonson's play — the flute music, the flowers, the incense, the signaling altar — but these performance elements marked as specifically Roman in *Sejanus* become in *Bonduca* abstracted or generalized. Fletcher's play, with its silent reuse of the Roman trappings of *Sejanus*, presented audiences with a visual argument for continuity across ancient pagan cultures, a claim about religious consanguinity that the play silently wrote as fact. As we know from looking at *Sejanus*, Fletcher's play, rather than 'realistically' reflecting a historical sense of British religious practice, borrowed and extended the stage devices used in the construction of Roman ritual, and by doing so created and homogenized an idea of the rituals that made up 'pagan' religiosity.²³

Fletcher's reuse of the set-piece from *Sejanus* becomes even more remarkable when we consider that he had access to antiquarian materials that could have enabled the creation of a much more detailed, local account of ancient British religious practices. The playwright took his inspiration and the bones of the Bonduca story from Holinshed as well as two new texts that reflected a flurry of interest in ancient Britain in the three years leading up to *Bonduca's* composition.²⁴ Two other sources for Fletcher's play had appeared in this short window: the first English translation of William Camden's massive *Britain, A Chorographical Description of the Most Flourishing Kingdomes, England, Scotland, and Ireland* in 1610, which was followed just two years later by Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion*. Fletcher borrowed the narrative outlines of the Bonduca story from these texts and Holinshed, as well as details like the unusually-named British god Tiranus,

whose name only appears in Camden (as 'Taranis').²⁵ This onomastic borrowing shows that Fletcher knew Camden's work, if not Drayton's, but his play does not reflect this familiarity in its scenes of ancient British religion. Both Camden and Drayton had professional links to Jonson, and they shared his enthusiasm for detailing the strange material practices of antique religions; Drayton dwelt at length on a practice described by Pliny in which druids cut mistletoe with golden sickles at midnight, while Camden revisited the allegations of Bonduca's enthusiasm for the human sacrifice of prisoners of war and the story of her artificial manipulation of a rabbit-based divination ritual originally recounted in Dio Cassius.²⁶ Even Holinshed's earlier account, which also mentions her manipulation of the rabbit omen, includes a slew of specific omens that appear to the Romans and that are missing from Fletcher's version: a blood-red tide appears that leaves 'shapes & figures of mens bodies' on the sand when it ebbs; a 'great weeping and lamentable howling' spontaneously erupts in the 'hall where the courts of justice were kept' when it is empty; women are 'rauished of their wits' and prophesize that 'destruction was at hand'. Most intriguing of these is Holinshed's account of the goddess Victoria in the Roman temple at 'Camelodunum' (present day Colchester), who 'slipping downe, turned hir backe ... to the enimies'.²⁷

Given Fletcher's demonstrable reliance on these sources, we might expect to see his play tap into some of these lurid, exciting religious elements: false omens, ritual mutilation, and human sacrifice. But Fletcher seems to have borrowed the names of these gods and not much else when writing *Bonduca*, and the play's scene of pagan prophecy is not indebted to antiquarian accounts but rather to contemporary dramatic tropes, and especially the ritual staging practices pioneered in *Sejanus*. In doing so, Fletcher's play demonstrates the way that the theatrical imperative for thrift and material conservatism — an imperative that was perhaps particularly sharp for the King's Men in 1613 in the aftermath of the burning of the Globe — could override or replace religious specificity, even when textured ethnographic information was directly available to playwrights. Fletcher may also have been attempting to clean up Britain's own history and make it appear similar to the rites of Rome, themselves sanitized by Jonson's removal of the blood sacrifice contained in his sources. In the process, he indirectly provided evidence for the ultimate Roman origins of Britain, as other writers of the period did in their circulations of the myth of Brutus of Troy. Many of these accounts aimed at 'rescuing' ancient Britain from the stain of primitivism by associating it with the Mediterranean civilizations of antiquity; Fletcher's play fits among these efforts even as it grapples with the material thrift demanded by the theatre.²⁸

Bonduca's altar scene exemplifies two things. First, it shows the way that the reuse of familiar theatrical forms could generate new religious homologies for audiences. Second, it shows that theatrical inertia around expensive and elaborate set-pieces often took priority over cultural specificity in scene design, even when authors had more specific information at their disposal. *Bonduca*, however, is just one example of this process and similar observations might be made of a whole slew of plays that recycled the altar set-piece in the next three decades. *Two Noble Kinsmen*, for example, which the King's Men premiered alongside *Bonduca* in 1613, uses an almost identical altar set-piece in its depiction of the religious practices of a mythically ancient Thebes. The effect created by this similarity, a silent visual homology between 'pagan' sites, would have been heightened by the plays' near-simultaneous premiere, and even more so by the fact that King's Men probably used the same altar property for both productions.²⁹ The King's Men, in fact, seem to have specialized in altar scenes, and the bulk of the plays that contain altars in the period were performed by the company. Alan Dessen lists a total of eighteen plays that contain named altars. This figure is almost certainly an underestimate given that at least two more plays indicate the use of an altar, though in speech rather than in stage directions, Shirley's *Saint Patrick for Ireland* and Fletcher's *The Mad Lover*.³⁰ Of this group of twenty plays, we definitively know fourteen to have been performed by the King's Men. Two more plays whose initial performance circumstances are unknown — *The Faithful Friends* and *The Jews' Tragedy* — might be included in this group because of their strong links to the King's Men, the former by strong aesthetic affinities with the Fletcherian canon and the latter by biographical connections with company personnel. (Its author, William Heminges, was the son of the noted, long-time King's Men actor John Heminges.) That fourteen, and perhaps sixteen, of these plays originated in a single repertory group indicates that the altar scene was an in-house specialty practiced predominately, almost to the point of exclusivity, by the King's Men.³¹ All of these altar plays post-date *Sejanus*, an indication of that play as a probable source, as well as further evidence of how iconic Jonson's scene eventually became.

The bulk of these plays, following *Sejanus*, use altar properties in ancient or contemporary 'pagan' settings that range from the mythical past of Greco-Roman mythology (the *Ages* plays) to Anglo-Saxon Britain (*Hengist*) to contemporary South America (*The Sea Voyage*).³² This group of King's Men plays can be broken into two eras, with an earlier subgroup that closely follows *Sejanus* and a slightly different set of plays, initiated by *The Sea Voyage* in 1622, distinguished by the presence of blood sacrifice and by the interruption of the prophetic ritual. The

first group, performed from 1603 through the early 1620s — *Sejanus*, *Bonduca*, *Two Noble Kinsmen*, *The Faithful Friends*, *Hengist King of Kent*, and *The Mad Lover* — all follow *Sejanus* with some variation.³³ In Fletcher's *Bonduca* and the Shakespeare/Fletcher collaboration *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, main characters perform complicated rites of propitiation strongly reminiscent of those in *Sejanus* in front of altars as they seek to know the outcome of important battles. In Middleton's *Hengist, King of Kent*, a statue of Fortuna atop an altar holds lots in her hand that are drawn to determine military assignments early in the play, and in the anonymous *The Faithful Friends* and Fletcher's *The Mad Lover* characters mock oracular pagan altars only to be punished and terrified when the altars suddenly demonstrate their supernatural power. These plays show clear lines of descent from *Sejanus* as they all display acts of 'pagan' propitiation that centre on the worship at an altar that tells the future: *Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Bonduca* recreate the ritual aspects of the Fortuna scene, relying on similar music, props, and costumes; *Hengist* combines an altar with a statue of Fortuna for fortune-telling purposes; and *The Faithful Friends* and *The Mad Lover* stage scornful altar worshippers who, like *Sejanus*, are subsequently punished.

A later group of plays in the King's Men repertory continued to recycle these altar scenes but with more significant differences, reintroducing the use of blood sacrifice but interrupting the sacrifice before it could be completed. These plays, which include *The Sea Voyage* (1622), *Amyntas* (1630), *2 Aviragus and Philicia* (1636), and *The Royal Slave* (1636), return to the model we saw in *The Winter's Tale* and related pastoral plays by refusing to stage the ritual practices that might generate prophecy. In all these examples, heroic characters initially believe that their gods demand payment in the form of a human sacrifice on an altar, only to have their minds changed at the last second and the sacrifice deferred. In these plays, altar scenes became not rituals that produce wondrous supernatural communication but sites of barbaric blood sacrifice that victims and celebrants avoid in the nick of time. These plays replace Jonson's radical depiction of efficacious pagan sacrifices with a polemic version of them as dependent on blood offerings and as inefficacious when compared with the direct revelations and commands provided by the voice of a god that is strongly implied to be Christian.³⁴ Whatever the proximate reasons for the shift in these scenes, they nonetheless preserve the altar and sacrifice upon it as the central feature of pagan religious practice, even when moving the core of Jonson's design to a setting as remote as the unidentified island off South America where *The Sea Voyage* takes place.³⁵

These plays are linked to each other and *Sejanus* not by authorship, though Fletcher figures largely in this group, nor by genre, as some are tragicomedies

and some are tragedies. The unifying thread here, instead, is repertory, as all of these plays can be linked either directly or indirectly to the King's Men. This run of reused ritual set-pieces demonstrates the way that the resources of the playing company, not authorship or genre, could dictate the content of plays. This provides us with another example showing that, as Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern have argued, early modern drama might be more fruitfully considered as a 'accumulation' of elements developed collaboratively by companies and playwrights rather than as a series of hermetically-sealed texts produced by single authors. Palfrey and Stern are talking about 'parts' — the individual roles that actors played — but here the relevant element is instead what we might call a performance set-piece, a combination of props and ritualized action that companies re-embedded into new plays regardless of author or genre.³⁶

Why does this history of recycling and reuse matter? Tracing the afterlife of the altar scene shows how England's theatres participated in the production of the illusion of 'knowledge' about what pagan ritual was and who practiced it. These suggested homologies between different pagan sites are only visible when we think across swathes of texts, as the theatre produced this knowledge not just within individual plays but also through accumulation and repetition across many plays. The fictional homologies created by these acts of theatrical reprisal, driven though they were by the imperatives of playing, could also be remarkably ideologically flexible. *Sejanus* and the initial reuses of its set-piece are part of a relatively positive, non-polemical portrayal of pagan religion forged in the early Jacobean period that could be used to either reanimate the glory of Rome for the curious or to rehabilitate ancient British practice by analogy to Rome. But later iterations of the set-piece, though reproducing its formal aspects, rework it for very different ideological ends. We can see this in the interrupted sacrifices briefly discussed above or the post-King's Men reuses of the set-piece found in plays like James Shirley's *Saint Patrick for Ireland* or Aphra Behn's *The Widow Ranter*. These plays, which model their stagecraft on the earlier forms of the set-piece, deploy it not to rehabilitate the religions of antiquity but rather to discredit indigenous Irish and Algonquian religious practices by analogizing them to the vanished rites of the ancient world, depicted in these performances as the false fruit of priestly chicanery. But though the political functions of these set-pieces could vary considerably across plays, their formal design displayed inertia, suggesting religious homologies between different geographical and temporal sites through the reprise of familiar theatrical forms. The medium's material practices, and especially its tendencies for material and generic conservatism at the repertory level and beyond, conditioned the contours of this knowledge.

Notes

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- 1 Scholars over the last two decades have demonstrated the importance of repertory context for understanding dramatic form; see especially Roslyn Knutson, *The Repertory of Shakespeare's Company, 1594–1613* (Fayetteville AR, 1991) and *Playing Companies and Commerce in Shakespeare's Time* (Cambridge, 2001) as well as Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* (Oxford, 1996); Mary Bly, *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queens on the Early Modern Stage* (Oxford, 2000); Sally-Beth MacLean and Scott McMillin, *The Queen's Men and Their Plays* (Cambridge, 1998); Sally-Beth MacLean and Lawrence Manley, *Lord Strange's Men and their Plays* (New Haven, 2014); and Lucy Munro, *Children of the Queen's Revels: A Jacobean Theatre Repertory* (Cambridge, 2005).
 - 2 For an overview of this historiography see Dmitri Levitin, 'From Sacred History to the History of Religion: Paganism, Judaism, and Christianity in European Historiography from Reformation to Enlightenment', *The Historical Journal* 55.4 (2012), 1117–60, as well as the introduction to Guy Stroumsa, *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (Cambridge MA, 2010).
 - 3 All in-text references to the play refer to the online version of Ben Jonson, *Sejanus*, Tom Cain (ed.), *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson* (Cambridge, 2012). *Sejanus*, as its title page in Jonson's 1616 folio *Workes* tells us, was first performed by the King's Men in 1603. This initial production probably took place at court. Scholars have speculated that at least one subsequent production took place at the Globe, citing two items of paratext — Jonson's dedication to Aubigny, which only appears in the 1616 folio and a dedicatory poem that appears in both Q and F — that describe the play's poor reception, respectively describing 'the people's beastly rage' and the 'violence from our people' that the performance incurred. Whatever its initial venues, *Sejanus* raised eyebrows, famously earning Jonson a summons to the Privy Council by the Earl of Northampton. Irritatingly, we have no evidence of the precise reason the play offended, though scholars have speculated that Northampton might have perceived similarities between the meteoric rise and recent fall of Raleigh, his close associate, and the career of *Sejanus* as Jonson depicts it.
 - 4 See Blair Worden, 'Jonson Among the Historians', Kevin Sharpe and Peter Lake (eds), *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England* (Stanford, 1993), 67–90 and Julie Sanders, *Ben Jonson's Theatrical Republics* (New York, 1998), 11–34. Both authors discuss the relationship between Jonson's Roman tragedy and classical history writing and political theory.

- 5 For an account of Jonson's biographical connections to antiquarians including Camden, see Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Oxford, 2011), 26–7.
- 6 A contemporary manuscript catalogue of Cotton's printed books, now in the British Library, lists works by Brisson, Stuckius, and Panvinius, as well as a sixteenth-century edition of Ovid's *Fasti*, all collected under two organizational headings that contain works on Roman festivals, triumphs, marriage ceremonies, and other religious rituals. Bound in British Library Additional MS 35213, ff 48, 70–71.
- 7 Scholarship on both *Sejanus* and *Catiline* tends to follow this line of argument by abstracting the play from its acting and repertory contexts, focusing instead on its connection to contemporary aristocratic politics (Philip Ayres, 'Introduction', Ben Jonson, *Sejanus His Fall*, [Manchester, 1998], 16–22), its links to classical histories written in other genres in the early seventeenth century (Worden, 'Jonson Among the Historians'), or its place in Jonson's development as a writer (Anne Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist* [Cambridge, 1984], 92–120). Such arguments uncritically accept Jonson's own advertisement of *Sejanus's* estrangement from the theatre: in prefatory material, the playwright described the play's failure at the Globe and stated he had removed the material originally provided by a collaborator. But despite these examples of Jonson's own loud, well-documented self-fashioning as a 'literary' rather than a theatrical writer, *Sejanus's* elaborate performance design and its long afterlives suggest the fruitfulness of restoring the play to its early Stuart performance contexts. See James Loxley, *The Complete Critical Guide to Ben Jonson* (London, 2002), 131–2.
- 8 For an account of Cotton's collection of the altars, see David McKitterick, 'From Camden to Cambridge: Sir Robert Cotton's Roman Inscriptions and Their Subsequent Treatment', Christopher Wright (ed.), *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector: Essays on an Early Stuart Courtier and His Legacy* (London, 1997), 105–28. For a catalogue of the stones, including photographs, see Glenys Davies, 'Sir Robert Cotton's Collection of Roman Stones: A Catalogue with Commentary', *Sir Robert Cotton as Collector*, 129–67.
- 9 William Camden first printed an image of the altar to Fortuna, based on an illustration by Cotton, in an early Latin edition of *Britannia Siue Florentissimorum Regnorum* (London, 1600; stc: 4507), 695. The relevant portion of the inscription as Camden illustrates it reads, 'GENIO LOCI / FORTUNAE REDUCI / ROMAE AETERNAE / ET FATO BONO'. Read as a series of datives, the best translation is probably: '[this altar is dedicated] to the genius of the place, to Fortune who leads us back, to eternal Rome, and to good fate'.
- 10 Like *Sejanus*, both of these texts use an unusual and extensive system of marginal notation; Jonson wreathed the main text in commentary and citations taken directly from ancient authorities and from scholarly intermediaries.

- 11 John Dryden, *An Essay of Dramatick Poesie* (London, 1668; Wing: D2327), 50–1.
- 12 Elizabeth Williamson, *The Materiality of Religion in Early Modern English Drama* (Farnham, 2009), 81–93. I am also indebted to Williamson for generously sharing in personal correspondence her list of plays featuring altar scenes.
- 13 Representations of oracles as inefficacious, in contrast, tended to dwell obsessively on the messy materiality of the ritual practices involved in the production of prophecy, in order to emphasize that these rituals were historically contingent, human creations and therefore susceptible to critique. Jonson's play, which represents pagan prophetic ritual as efficacious, sharply diverges from this tradition; a surprise, perhaps, given that the author, as Duncan has shown, was so deeply read in and influenced by Lucian, the author of the most noted ancient example of this strategy, *Alexander the Oracle-Monger*. See Douglas Duncan, *Ben Jonson and the Lucianic Tradition* (Cambridge, 1979), 197–9.
- 14 All in-text citations from *The Winter's Tale* reference William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, John Pitcher (ed.), Arden Third Series (London, 2010).
- 15 William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, Stephen Orgel (ed.), *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare* (New York, 2002), 219.
- 16 'And indeed they would adorn the altars to the infernal spirits, altars which were often doubled and equal, with black or blue ribbons and with cypress boughs: and whenever they sacrificed livestock, they would sprinkle the still-warm gore onto turned earth, and they would mingle into the same place wine and milk and honey, or, as it is sometimes said, they would instead pour these liquids out, and then would draw the viscera of the slaughtered sacrificial victim around the altar three times after the fire had been lit'. Translation mine. From Giglio Gregorio Giraldus, *De deis gentium varia & multiplex historia*, Google Books, Original in Lyon Public Library (Basel, 1548), 716.
- 17 Ann Barton, *Ben Jonson, Dramatist*, 94 characterizes the statue of Fortuna as of a piece with the play's satire of Rome and as 'dutifully included' from Jonson's source material. She compares Jonson's 'dutiful' scene to Shakespeare's need to 'force his own interpretation' on the marvels he found in Plutarch, thus perhaps unthinkingly tapping into a long critical tradition of unfavourably comparing Jonson's 'dutiful' classicism to Shakespeare's 'natural' creativity. Though Barton certainly makes Shakespeare's portent scenes come alive in her long description of them, she gives no evidence to show why these are 'credible and frightening' while Jonson's scene is simply comic. Philip Ayres makes a similar, also unsubstantiated, claim; 'Introduction', 12–13.
- 18 Reprinted in William Shakespeare, *Two Noble Kinsmen*, ed. Lois Potter (New York, 2015), 345.

- 19 For these administrative shenanigans see *The Pension Book of Gray's Inn*, ed. Reginald Fletcher (London, 1901).
- 20 Little to no evidence exists for the use of mechanized statues onstage, although some non-King's Men plays in the period seem to call for statues or 'images' that are manipulated in ways that suggest props rather than actors: one of the only examples comes in Dekker's *Virgin Martyr* when a pagan priest comes onstage 'with an image of Jupiter', presumably indicating that he was carrying it; Thomas Dekker and Philip Massinger, *The Virgin Martir* (London, 1622; stc: 17644), G1v.
- 21 In-text citations of *Bonduca* reference Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *Comedies and Tragedies* (London, 1647; Wing: B1581).
- 22 *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (OED), s.v. 'recorder'.
- 23 Though *Bonduca* is nominally set in the historical moment of the British campaigns fought by the Romans during the first century CE, scholars have shown the subtle ways in which Fletcher's history serves as an index of the seventeenth-century moment in which it was composed. None of these accounts, however, have paid much attention to the play's religious content, other than to note, as Curran and Crawford have, that Rome might have served as shorthand for modern Catholicism. See Julie Crawford, 'Fletcher's *The Tragedie of Bonduca* and the Anxieties of the Masculine Government of James I', *Studies in English Literature* 39.2 (1999), 357–81, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sel.1999.0013>; Claire Jowitt, 'Colonialism, Politics, and Romanization in John Fletcher's *Bonduca*', *Studies in English Literature* 43.2 (2003), 475–94, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/sel.2003.0022>; and John C. Curran, *Roman Invasions: British History, Protestant Anti-Romanism, and the Historical Imagination in England, 1530–1660* (Wilmington, 2002), 203–7.
- 24 Jodi Mikalachki has affirmed that Holinshed is Fletcher's major source in *The Legacy of Boadicea: Gender and Nation in Early Modern England* (New York, 2014), 103.
- 25 William Camden, *Britain* (London, 1610; stc: 4509), 17.
- 26 Michael Drayton, *Poly-Olbion* (London, 1612; stc: 7226), 152 and Camden, *Britain*, 457.
- 27 Raphael Holinshed, *The Firste Volume of the Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* (London, 1577; stc: 13568), 61.
- 28 For background and examples of this, see Graham Perry 'Ancient Britons and Early Stuarts', Robin Headlam Wells, Glenn Burgess, Rowland Wymer (eds), *Neo-historicism: Studies in Renaissance Literature, History, and Politics* (Cambridge, 2000), 155–78.
- 29 Few of these plays except *Two Noble Kinsmen* have attracted scholarly attention. When discussing *Two Noble Kinsmen*, however, critics have implied that its religious content is handled historically, accepting paganism as a fixed or natural category.

Lois Potter's statements in the introduction to her recent edition of the play exemplify this approach (39).

- 30 Dessen's list is as follows: *The Broken Heart*, *The Brazen Age*, *The Iron Age* (Parts 1 and 2), *Sophonisba*, *Bonduca*, *Amyntas*, *The Faithful Friends*, *Hengist*, *The Jews' Tragedy*, *Sejanus*, *Two Noble Kinsmen*, *Women Beware Women*, *A Game at Chess*, *Match Me in London*, *The Knight of Malta*, *The Pilgrim*, *The Sea Voyage*, and 2 *Arviragus and Philicia*. See Alan Dessen, *A Dictionary of Stage Directions in English Drama, 1580–1642* (Cambridge, 2001), 5–6. All of these were definitively performed by the King's Men except *Sophonisba* (Children of the Queen's Revels), *The Jews' Tragedy* (unknown; probably unstaged), *Match Me in London* (Queen Anne's), *The Faithful Friends* (initial performance circumstances unknown), and Randolph's *Amyntas* (King's Revels). The three Heywood *Age* plays that require altars were jointly staged by both the Queen's and King's Men.
- 31 This is not to say that other playing companies did not own altar properties. The 'Henslowe' prop list that Edmond Malone reproduced in 1790 records one 'little altar'. The smallness of the Admiral's Men altar and the fact that other non-King's Men altar scenes did not deploy the same elaborate special effects found in King's Men altar scenes both provide further evidence of the uniqueness of the King's Men's specialized — and probably expensive — trick altar property.
- 32 Only six of these twenty plays — *Women Beware Women*, *The Knight of Malta*, *Match Me in London*, *A Game at Chess*, *The Jews' Tragedy* and *The Pilgrim* — have Abrahamic (Christian or Jewish) settings.
- 33 The initial performance context of *The Faithful Friends* is unknown, and no external records connect this last play to the King's Men, but its strong affinities with the Fletcherian canon and its use of a very similar oracular altar scene suggest that it may have been a part of their repertory. See the Malone Society edition for a discussion of its parallels with the Fletcherian canon; *The Faithful Friends*, ed. G.M. Pinciss (Oxford, 1975). *Bonduca* (1613), *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (1613), and *The Mad Lover* (1617), on the other hand, can all be confidently attributed to Fletcher during the period he was working for the King's Men, with Shakespeare contributing parts of *Two Noble Kinsmen*. Dates are from Alfred Harbage, *Annals of English Drama, 975–1700* (New York, 1989), 9.
- 34 This shift in the company's use of altar scenes seems to begin with *The Sea Voyage* (1622) and may have been driven by the increasingly strident anti-pagan polemic tone taken by a major competing dramatic company, Queen Anne's Men, which peaked in their 1622 play *The Virgin Martyr*. It may also have been influenced by the Virginia Tidewater massacre of 1622, the first major slaughter of English settlers in the New World, an act that was reported in Edward Waterhouse, *The Declaration*

of the State of the Colony and Affaires in Virginia (London, 1622; sig. 25104). The conjunction of the arrival of news of the massacre with the sudden adoption of an anti-pagan tone in the company's altar scenes is somewhat suggestive.

- 35 The sacrifice scene in *The Sea Voyage* is a complex entry in this list. At first we are led to believe that the women of the unidentified South American island, who stage the interrupted sacrifice, are Amazons who have somehow replaced the native inhabitants, but later we learn they are Europeans who have adapted native habits. The altar works ambivalently in this setting; are we meant to believe it is an indigenous ritual the women have adopted as they have 'gone native'? Or is it a remnant of their European-ness? Fletcher's play does not ultimately make this clear.
- 36 Tiffany Stern and Simon Palfry, *Shakespeare in Parts* (Oxford, 2007), 6–9.