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The Book as Fearful Thing

Penny Fielding and Deidre Lynch

A Bad Book

The picture book is conveyed into the cozy bedroom. The mother, settling down at the bedside, raises the front cover, careful to hold the volume at the proper angle so that the child may still peer at the pages and even assist with their turning. We all know how this reading ritual is supposed to unfold. The book is to exercise a talismanic power: functioning as more than a prop, it will seem the source itself of the peaceful scene surrounding it. Jennifer Kent's 2014 horror film *The Babadook* taps that power in a black magic inversion of this domestic rite. The film tells the story of a home invasion perpetrated first by a very bad book, titled *Mister Babadook*, and then by the eponymous monster that springs (or seems to spring) to animated, three-dimensional life from its pages. The fearsome power ascribed to the book in *The Babadook* is not only a matter of its textual and pictorial contents. That frightfulness extends to the book's physical existence. This book-object possesses, for instance, the supernatural ability to teleport itself without the assistance of human agents. On the night of its first reading, nobody can say how it came to be shelved in the bookcase beside the boy's bed. Later, after the mother rips up the pages and throws it out, the book shows up again on the doorstep, mended with tape. In its capacity to harbor unseen menaces in its interior, the codex form itself becomes a player in the frightful phenomenology that is this film's topic. To open a book's cover is already to risk the escape of something scary into the reader's world. That said, an equal risk is that the reader might tumble into the book's world, since *Mister Babadook*'s awful power is manifested as well in its capacity to conscript and instrumentalize its readers. They are compelled to repeat the

motions -- lifting pages, tugging the paper levers that within the pop-up book open doors better kept closed -- that will ensure that *Mister Babadook* gets itself read. Against their wills, mother and son play active parts in animating the monster who will pop up out of the pages to persecute them.

Kent's exploration of this bookish phenomenology recapitulates themes from the supernatural fiction of the Romantic and Victorian eras -- whose significance for a theory and a politics of the book this essay will explore. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries plots turning on diabolical books transposed into the idiom of supernatural fiction contemporary concerns about how an expanding reading public might make use of their literacy or what they might suffer because of it.

The Letter Killeth: Magic Materiality

Mister Babadook descends, bibliographically speaking, from a tradition of imaginary books. In "Canon Alberic's Scrapbook," an 1895 story by M. R. James, for instance, an antiquarian book-hunter finds that his latest acquisition contains much more than he had bargained for: a disturbing illustration of a scene from the necromantic life of the Biblical King Solomon that turns out to be all too life-like. Late at night, leafing through his purchase, this reader spots beside his own hand on the table the hand of another -- "Good God! a hand like the hand in that picture!"¹ The demonic creature *in* the book has suddenly appeared behind the shoulders of the antiquary, sprung to ghastly life *out of* the book. In a later story of James's, "The Uncommon Prayer Book," rare, clandestinely printed copies of the Anglican Book of Common Prayer share *Mister Babadook's* powers of locomotion. On a regular timetable the books open themselves of their own accord to "the very savage" Psalm 109; at the story's end, acting out the vengeance the

Psalm describes, they kill the very book-dealer who thought that he would be making a killing from them.² Another, older ancestor of *Mister Babadook* can be found in James Hogg's *Three Perils of Man* (1822), where the medieval warlock Michael Scott says menacingly of his magic book: "If any one of you were to look but on one character . . . his brain would be seared to a cinder, his eyes would fly out of their sockets, and perhaps his whole frame might be changed into something unspeakable and monstrous."³ If by the eighteenth century a powerful Protestant narrative about the impact of printing linked salvation to a perfected distribution of the word (evangelization and conversion) and of reason (political enlightenment), this imaginative tradition inverts that bibliolatry. It mobilizes bad books as the dark counterparts of good books.

In this context, rather than benefactor, the book becomes a snare. The bad book's power begins prior to any individual act of reading. It can lie dormant for ages awaiting the one reader who is predestined to become its tool. It chooses its reader as *Mister Babadook* does -- rather than being chosen itself. This book's existence as a publication, an object which, according to a prevailing theology of print, has the potential to exist anywhere that the public exists, is thus offset by its capacity to single out its victim/addressee. "Natural philosophy is the genius that has regulated my fate," declares Shelley's Victor Frankenstein, tracing the origin of his mad science to a single, sinister book -- "a volume of . . . Cornelius Agrippa" -- that fell into his hands when he was a boy. Did he find the book, or, instigated by his evil "genius," did it find him? Reading it transforms Victor; the book disconnects him from his time, making him a "living disciple" of alchemy and occultism in an "enlightened and scientific age."⁴

Only in fiction (we hope) is it possible to have books that vault over the centuries to abrogate the freedom of their reader, taking him captive so that his fate may work itself out. Only in fiction can one have bad books whose evil is made manifest precisely in their having been

written or printed in an all but a-semantic, unintelligible language that repels all readings except by one reader exclusively. In the German Schauerroman (*terror novel*) by C. F. Kahlert that appeared in English in 1794 as *The Necromancer*, the practitioner of black arts identified by the title is first encountered seated near the roadside, “reading a large book,” “bewildered in profound meditation,” and so taking “no notice of the howling storm.” The first-person narrator’s queries about the book -- which a few pages on will be mobilized in a magical rite that raises the dead from their coffins -- are initially balked. He can tell us only that he ascertained that its “leaves were of yellow parchment, the characters large and of different colours.”⁵ Kahlert’s scene may be rewritten in an episode of Hogg’s *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), a novel presented as a nineteenth-century edition of a seventeenth-century autobiography composed and partly printed by a writer who is either insane or diabolically possessed. In this episode, when that writer, the eponymous sinner Robert Wringhim, encounters the mysterious stranger whom readers, more quickly than Robert, will suspect to be the Devil, that stranger is seen “intent on his book.” Robert says: “I looked on the book also, and still it seemed a Bible, having columns, chapters and verses, but it was in a language of which I was wholly ignorant, and all intersected with red lines, and verses. A sensation resembling a stroke of electricity came over me, on first casting my eyes on that mysterious book.”⁶ When later we learn of the near-destruction of the very book on which *we* have ourselves been intent -- when we learn that all copies of the memoir, save Wringhim’s proofs, have been burnt on the orders of the printer, we are once more invited to ponder what is paradoxical about a book that is one of a kind, which “does not circulate in an economy . . . does not constitute a culture.”⁷ All books are composites of multiplicity and singularity (*a* book is conceptually indistinguishable from *a copy*

of a book), as they are composites of matter and meaning. In the case of bad books, those compounds have become unstable and volatile.

As the hesitations of Kahlert's and Hogg's narrators suggest, bad books -- things to be seen, but not (for the uninitiated) to be opened or read -- leave the bystander unable to resolve the oppositions that define them. Semiotically opaque, they remain even so identifiable *as* books, inviting *and* resisting the reading which would subordinate their physical format to their immaterial content. Indeed, sometimes merely coming into physical proximity with these books will unleash their power. In their bibliolatry, the population of necromancers and devils in this fiction have to do with talismanic things more often than they have to do with texts.

In a 2012 polemic calling on literary studies to attend to the material medium that is its platform, Leah Price positions herself at the far end of a transition from "the hermeneutics of suspicion" to "a poetics of deflation." In Price's account, the practice of book history seems to demand a descent from textuality not only into materiality but also into banality: dethroning reading from its prestige in humanistic inquiry gets described, for instance, as a project of "drag[ging] ideas into the marketplace, the mind down to the level of the body."⁸ But there are certain cultures of the book in which the magic forms part of the materiality, rather than the materiality undoing the magic -- where a focus on books' objecthood occasions enchantment, not disenchantment. When the book is a fearful thing, its "intimate familiarity to the reader as a physical thing does not diminish its capacity to amaze and overwhelm as a metaphysical idea."⁹ The fallout of such amazement is most likely to be dramatized, as we've indicated, in literature, the supernatural tradition particularly: one reason why students of the material book ignore the imaginary book at their peril. Book historians ought to attend to how the idea of the book as a fearful thing has impacted real readers, conditioning the reception of actual volumes as well as

inspiring fictional ones. The idea figures in legal as well as literary discourse, migrating between those spheres in ways that the second half of this chapter illustrates. There, concentrating on writing from Scotland, “the fountainhead of Enlightenment books,”¹⁰ we dwell a bit longer on gothic fiction and zero in on an 1820 novel in which Walter Scott departed from his usual realist commitments and admitted the supernatural. Finally, we juxtapose that fiction with history, using the transcripts of actual sedition trials held in Scott’s native city of Edinburgh.

Print and the Power-Hungry Book

First, however, we want to elaborate on the mixed feelings books engender even among celebrants of the technologies that have extended their reach. As noted, that idea of the fearsome book vexes the schemes of progress and salvation that especially since the eighteenth century have organized prevailing understanding of the cultural revolutions in Western reading: both the Protestant Reformation -- associated as it came to be with the broadcasting of God’s Word through the printing of vernacular Scriptures -- and the Enlightenment, founded on the pledge that as vehicles of reason, books would break the magic spell that had kept the populace in thrall to church and king.

In 1797 the philosopher (and lapsed Calvinist minister) William Godwin praised ecstatically the difference that books had made to human history, taking as his central example the “divine” works of Shakespeare and Milton:

Every man who is changed from what he was by the perusal of their works, communicates a portion of the inspiration all around him. It passes from man to man, until it influences the whole mass. I cannot tell that the wisest mandarin now living in

China, is not indebted for part of his energy and sagacity to the writings of Milton and Shakespear, even though it should happen that he never heard of their names.¹¹

This description has its creepy side. In such hyperbolic and Eurocentric descriptions of the powers of printed word, the term that is central to the historiography that proposes an epochal break between manuscript and print culture -- *influence* -- takes on uncanny new meanings. Or old ones: *influence* originates in fact in astrological accounts of the powers that the stars have over human affairs. In Godwin's theology of print, influential writings are magically omnipresent.

The equivocal notes in this passage from an enlightenment philosopher suggest how demonic black books insinuate themselves into histories where they ought not to figure, how they can overshadow the books whose diffusion is supposed in post-Reformation schemes to portend the creation of a new world of truth. A curious feature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century histories of printing also exemplifies that overshadowing. These histories sometimes confused Johann Faust (sometimes Fust), now generally agreed to have been the business partner of the Mainz-based printer Johan Gutenberg, with Doctor Faustus, the man who learned from magic books how to barter with the Devil, and so tended to interlace their account of the Western advent of typography with legends of a sorcerer's damnation. On occasion in anti-clerical writing the confusion was itself traced to "lies circulated by monks, who hated anyone associated with the invention of printing."¹² In alternative versions of this history, those clerics figure as the dupes of *their own* superstitious credulity. In one, the uniformity and cheapness of the Bibles sold from Faust's workshop strike the monks of Paris, where printing was yet unknown, as something supernatural, and Faust is clapped into prison for sorcery.¹³ Another version reports the monks' belief that "the red ink with which [the Bibles] were embellished" "was actually

[Faust's] blood."¹⁴ Such legends effectually merge the Good Book with its demonic antitype. The merger registers a certain Protestant anxiety over the materiality of Scripture -- over the problem *embellishments* of the Word have presented for this text-centric but anti-object culture. The merger also bespeaks the ambivalent feelings that were stirred by books' circulation throughout the era that celebrated mass literacy and cheap print as crucibles of human salvation.

That uneasiness is a driving force behind the tradition of supernatural fiction, a genre which flouts cultural progress, promotes the revival of romance, and resurrects the archaic ("gothic") cultural materials that the modern novel as realist form was supposed to have left behind. In 1790s Britain supernatural fictions were themselves deemed bad books: not only because of those resurrections of preternatural *diablerie* -- "[t]ales of enchantments and witchcraft can never be *useful*," one critic sniffed in 1797¹⁵-- but also because of the role that the books' astonishing marketability and popularity played in fostering a mass readership: "the Gothic figures . . . a sublime of publishing, whereby the reading public becomes something obscure and incalculable."¹⁶ While it narrated the sorry fate of readers in thrall to dangerously absorbing volumes, this fictional tradition re-envisioned the dissemination that Godwin praised, presenting it as an uncanny power of self-replication and self-distribution that enabled books to invade minds everywhere. To worried commentators such fiction also appeared to manifest that power itself.

Scott's "Perilous Volume"

The magic book whose fearsome potency is a function of both its lexical content *and* its physical existence preoccupied Walter Scott through his career. His treatment of the topic begins in the early narrative poem *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1802), where, at the instigation of his "page,"

a certain Lord Cranstoun foolhardily retrieves from its place of concealment the Black Book of Michael Scott the warlock -- the same figure and same book spotlighted in Hogg's *Three Perils of Man*. Together these sixteenth-century characters reactivate the medieval volume's power to cast shape-changing spells: "It had much of glamour might, / Could make a lady seem a knight."¹⁷ The debate running through the *Lay* about the relationship between *glamour* (a Scots word for magic language) and *grammar* (the orderly language belonging to members of the literate classes), between *spells* and *spelling*, is revived in Scott's *The Monastery* (1820). As it traces the Protestant Reformation in bibliographic terms, *The Monastery* brings history and book history into mutual dependence. At the same time, it gothicizes both historiographical modes.

Set in the mid-sixteenth century, the novel tells the story of the land-owning Avenel family and their tenants, the Glendinnings, as they adjust to the Scottish Reformation in the shadow of the nearby Cistercian monastery. It also narrates a struggle for possession of a book and determination of its meaning. As a member of the Avenel household reports to the monks, the widowed Lady of Avenel has in her possession (we never learn how she came by it) a "thick black volume with silver clasps."¹⁸ Readers' view of the Lady's reading matter is mediated by an illiterate character, Elspet, for whom this book is illegible, an object to be described rather than a discourse to be paraphrased. When the monks hear Elspet's report, they suspect that the volume is an English translation of the Bible, a translation they consider heretical, and attempt its confiscation. They do not count, however, on the uncontainability of that book -- the magic materiality that comes to the fore thanks to the supernatural interventions of the ghostly White Lady, the tutelary spirit of the Avenel family, who seems both determined to keep the book in the family and committed to that family's Protestant future. She can appear and disappear, and once she takes an interest in it the Lady of Avenel's black book can as well -- travel from place

to place irrespective of the laws of physics, eluding thereby the grasp of the hostile clerics. “The black book hath won,” the spirit exults when it escapes capture.¹⁹ The book later survives a magical fire, as though possessing the power to protect itself -- like *Mister Babadook*, which magically mends itself following the mother’s attempts to dispose of it.

As a Protestant Bible (most likely a New Testament only, given its portability), this book supposedly exists to be read by anyone, without any need for the mediation of priests. The black book can even be annotated, in an act that physically extends the volume. Preparing it for her daughter’s future reading, the Lady of Avenel has interleaved the volume with slips of paper inscribed with her notes, some offering arguments against the “errors and human interventions” of Catholicism, and others described as “the simple effusions of a devout mind communing with itself.”²⁰ Her personalizing of the book establishes her as the antitype to the monastery’s sacristan, who warns that Scripture must be mediated through the institutional wisdom of the church: “the text alone, read with unskilled eye and unhallowed lips” is like medicine taken without the prescription of a doctor which will cause the sick to “perish by their own deed.”²¹

Much in *The Monastery* endorses the Reformation celebration of the reader’s independent access to scripture as a route to salvation. So, on the one hand, in its existence as a material thing, the Lady of Avenel’s Bible seems to permit and even encourage liberal notions of the use of literacy. Because the book can be treated as an object, it can be altered: interleaving the printed book with words in her own hand, this reader intervenes in its textual meaning and enacts her interpretive liberty. Yet one manifestation of this Bible’s magic materiality is that within the novel it remains obdurately singular. As though alternative reading matter were prohibited and only the literal reading of this one text were permitted, the black book turns out to be irreplaceable. It cannot be exchanged for any other book. The sub-prior of the monastery

attempts to gull the Glendinning children into exchanging the Lady's book for a missal, a devotional book of pictures illustrating Bible stories. (With the monk's boast about the "goodly shews" of the missal Scott plants a red flag for a Protestant readership mistrustful of fetishistic propensities supposedly defining Catholic worship.)²² In the event, though, the magical powers of the book prevent this exchange, ensuring its escape from the clerics and return to the Avenel household. Its singularity -- not so much a book for one reader only as a book for one aristocratic family -- belies the democratic promise of uniformity and unanimity contained within modernity's emergent theology of print.

The customizing of her printed reading matter the Lady of Avenel undertakes may in fact make this Protestant book a more unstable artefact. In keeping with Protestant doctrine, the Scriptures are supposed to yield their meaning without annotation. But in Scott's micronarrative of the Reformation, it appears that the masculine priestly authority that infringes on the independence of the reader has not so much been abolished as transferred to a female, domestic scene. Indeed, some aspects of the Lady's relationship with the black book might engender anxieties about reading similar to those that contemporary Gothic fiction was flagging when it spotlighted the sinister, singular book. There is something worryingly solipsistic about the reading practice which is recorded in those "effusions of a devout mind communing with itself" - a practice that removes the book from the world it was supposed to inform.

Scott reiterates, albeit in these equivocal terms, a central Protestant claim -- that the plain, literal meaning of Scripture lies self-enclosed within the book. But that claim is difficult to uphold. The "dark paradox" that James Simpson identifies in his study of sixteenth-century disputes over textual values challenges the conventional contrast between Protestant literalism and Catholic allegorizing: "Any reading culture that proposes that the meaning of the words is

wholly contained in the words themselves, unaided by the interpretive, unwritten assumptions of the interpretive community, will end up with authoritarian versions of interpretive authority.”²³ Scott also reiterates the familiar reduction of Catholic worship to idolatry that underwrote representations of Protestants as a reformed people of the book. In the contest between the potent black book and the multicolored “gay missal,” the word prevails, the image loses out. But, as Brian Cummings demonstrates, this division between word and image was difficult to sustain. Despite the evangelical bishops’ efforts to reduce the word to itself, it was impossible to reproduce the word without representation, to redeem holy books from unholy materiality: “an imageless language . . . would be like nothing. . . . A God without similitude is a cipher.”²⁴ The literal force of Protestant reading is undermined by the very thing that should guarantee it.

Far from distinguishing two forms of reading and two ontologies of the book, *The Monastery* collapses them into each other. Perhaps the Good Book is also a bad book? Scott’s spectral White Lady (who speaks in riddling rhyme, not the prose of Scott’s human characters) is less than straightforward about the meanings of the black book. It is last seen in the hands of Halbert Glendinning, who has already been castigated by the White Lady for his inattention to book-learning: “And thou hast loved the deer to track, / More than the lines and the letters black.”²⁵ Halbert, newly minted guardian of the Word, can pluck the book from a magic fire but cannot read it. As the novel ends and a new phase of Scotland’s religious history begins, the book retains the magical materiality that makes it more talisman than text.

Criminal Books and the Edinburgh Sedition Trials

The Monastery also recalls perilous volumes from a more recent era of political disruption. Books as fearful things had a high profile in the years immediately following the French

Revolution, thanks to the British Crown's attempts to prosecute radical printers, publishers, and others for sedition. The authorities in the 1790s often presented the influence of the "inflammatory writings" disseminated by proponents of democratic change in terms that evoked the bad books of contemporary supernatural fiction (at the same time, as noted above, this fiction seemed in its popularity a frightful harbinger of the pernicious effects that a democratization of taste would cause in the literary sphere). Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* in particular, a byword for radicalism, took on the qualities of a book of spells: "in loyalist demonology, the book is both cursed and a curse. Paine is a sorcerer, infecting, inflaming and contaminating anyone he contacts."²⁶ That demonizing transmogrifies the printed book. From the means by which enlightenment is to be advanced and "the information of the people" secured, as the parliamentary reformer Thomas Muir was in his 1793 trial reported to have put it, in the blink of an eye, the book becomes the vehicle for black magic that ensnares and conscripts readers for the book's own, nefarious ends.²⁷ At the same time, this demonology -- especially as played out in the political trials of the era -- collapses the antinomies that within *The Monastery* define the black book's magic materiality. In the era when "the works of Mr. Burke and Thomas Paine flew with a rapidity to every corner of the land," there was considerable alarm over the rapid, seemingly uncontrollable circulation of printed matter.²⁸ (Political controversy boosted sales: Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* was thought to have sold 19,000 copies in 1790 alone; Paine's riposte to *Reflections* in *Rights of Man*, published a year later, sold, Paine boasted, "four to five hundred thousand" by the decade's end.)²⁹ But the alarms borne of printed matter's runaway reproducibility engendered, as their mirror image, new horror stories about the power single, talismanic volumes had to find their destined victims. In the encounter between a

rapidly expanding press and the political will to identify and prosecute sedition all the elements of the volatile compound that is the fearful book came to be activated.

A number of trials for sedition took place in Edinburgh in 1793–94. Britons' liberty of conscience was believed to have been constitutionally guaranteed since the Revolution of 1688, likewise the freedom of the press. The illegality of seditious texts had under law to be identified instead with their influence, their capacity to foment acts of political resistance and episodes of public tumult. Influence, however, proved a difficult concept to pin down. To be seditious in law, a work had both to have been written with a felonious intent and to demonstrate a wicked "tendency" -- a designation for books' effects in the world. So far from providing a definition by which the seditious work might be infallibly identified, the law exposed how a book's identity is always delayed: either deferred to a future point -- the book must always have been in search of an ideal reader, the radical who, corrupted, will act just as its tendency directs -- or projected backward, beyond the words on the pages to the ideational content that defines a state of mind.

In the same 1797 essay presenting the far-reaching influence of Milton and Shakespeare, Godwin commented on the trickiness of this arrangement:

To ascertain the tendency of any work is a point of great difficulty. . . . It is by no means impossible, that the books most pernicious in their effects that ever were produced, were written with intentions uncommonly elevated and pure.

He proposed that tendency would depend on the "various tempers and habits of the persons by whom the work is considered."³⁰ Godwin's knowledge of the political trials of the previous five years might inform his insights here into the difficulty of determining just what is and what isn't intrinsic to a written work.³¹ But that difficulty had also been played out earlier; that texts do not coincide with themselves would have been a point driven home to Godwin when as aspiring

minister he learned about the attempts that the sixteenth-century evangelical bishops had made to safeguard the plain sense of the words on the Bible's page. Decades later, re-investigating the Edinburgh sedition trials, the liberal lawyer and reformer Henry Cockburn recast Godwin's hermeneutic challenge as a problem for the law:

The guilt of sedition is not contracted by the *mere* publication of language calculated to excite disaffection or disorder; for this may be done by a lunatic, or a clerk of court reading an indictment, or the speaking machine [one of the recently invented mechanical devices that simulated the human voice]. There must be a *criminal mind*. This state of mind is usually described by saying that the mischief for which the publication was calculated, must have been *intended*.³²

Two trials held in Edinburgh in 1793 cast into sharp relief the trouble that could be caused by attempts to square the concept of sedition with the unstable ontology of the book -- its perplexing ways of melding meaning and matter and singularity and multiplicity. In February and March 1793 Walter Berry and John Robertson were prosecuted for printing and publishing James Callender's *Political Progress of Britain* (Callender was likewise indicted but failed to appear in court). Berry and Robertson were accused in the libel (the term in Scots law for the indictment) of committing an act that was "wicked" and "felonious," more precisely, of committing some acts in the plural -- the libel names "publishing, circulating, and selling". But as Cockburn pointed out, exactly what that act might have been and why it would be criminal eluded the prosecution's attempts at specification. Cockburn notes that printing alone cannot be a crime -- one might copy out a potentially seditious text simply for one's own amusement.³³ Similarly, the act of publishing the pamphlet is not in itself seditious: "the jury here found nothing proved beyond the fact of publication, of which a steam engine might have been

guilty.”³⁴ At no point during the trial was the content of the *Political Progress of Britain* referenced. The trial thus seemed a response to the frightening potential of books in general: it ascribes to them that magic materiality that enabled *Mister Babadook*’s invasion of the family home. Cockburn’s references to a “steam engine” and a “speaking machine” capture this, evoking a printing press that disseminates its products mechanically through the population.

Berry and Robertson got off comparatively lightly, sentenced to three- and six-month prison terms. But the next of the sedition trials had graver consequences for the lawyer Thomas Muir, who in August 1793 was sentenced to fourteen years transportation. In this trial the story of malevolent criminality that the prosecution spun involved not so much publishing in general as it involved specific texts -- *The Works of Thomas Paine* particularly -- lodged in specific copies, some on “fine paper,” some on “coarse,” and handled by particular readers.³⁵ The prosecution evidently realized that Muir’s sedition could not reside in the act of the reading Paine’s writings or the other works at issue in the libel, since many in the courtroom -- lawyers and witnesses -- had done so without guilt. Muir’s crime was declared instead to be the *giving* and the *recommending* of “inflammatory writings” to *others*. The prosecution represented Muir’s book handling as if books could by their mere physical proximity confer guilt. Hence the copy of the pamphlet the Paisley “Declaration of Rights” that the prosecution presented as evidence in the trial -- evidently never read, since its pages remained uncut, yet deemed of seditious tendency nonetheless. Over the course of the *Account of the Trial of John Muir*, seditious books come increasingly to resemble *Mister Babadook* or the black book of *The Monastery*. In their case too it seems as though some occult force (perhaps the wizardry of “sorcerer” Paine) propelled them from place to place -- into the hands, for example, of the witness who declared that he “never

purchased any of Paine's pamphlets, but he got a copy of that pamphlet, he does not know from whom."³⁶

Acting as his own defence lawyer, Muir contested "the manner," as he put it, in which "criminality" had been "attached to [books] and to myself."³⁷ One section of his speech responds to testimony given about a copy of Paine's *Works* that, a witness asserted, Muir had said could be found in the pocket of the greatcoat that Muir had left in another room. Was making this statement about the book's location to the witness tantamount to circulating it, as the prosecution contended? The problem was that, as with Godwin's account of the influence of Milton and Shakespeare's books on a faraway Chinese mandarin, it was difficult to say where *Rights of Man* wasn't. Muir noted that Paine's works had been *flying* (as though of their own volition) "to every corner of the land" and that newspapers teemed with advertisements for them.³⁸ Where was the guilt in lending or gifting a book already in universal circulation? Muir forced his accusers to confront the difficulty of distinguishing the book as a particular thing from the book as the state of all printed texts generally available at a given moment.

The indictment against Muir began with citations (page numbers supplied) of the inflammatory passages contained within *The Works of Thomas Paine*. That the indictment itself anthologized sedition suggests something else important about the way all books -- not just bad ones -- exist in the world and make meaning. One of the challenges of attaching criminality to a book, Muir observed in his defence, is that what is *in* the book is, thanks to the book's pluriform nature and mutability, difficult to ascertain once and for all:

where is the book in which you cannot discover sedition, by dissecting its separate sentences and paragraphs. . . . if you proceed on in this manner, I do not know a more dangerous collection than the books of holy inspiration. Separate verse from verse, and

then combine them, according to your pleasure, and you may make the Bible one of the most seditious and treasonable books which ever was written.³⁹

Scott's *Monastery* sets up its Lady of Avenel as a precociously Protestant reader early on when it describes her reading to her family "small detached passages from a thick clasped volume," which volume formed, the narrator adds, "her whole library." Muir's statement makes one see this scene as something more than the sixteenth-century precursor to the rite of bedtime reading with which this chapter began. It reminds us of the fearful prospect that even the book with clasps is uncontainable; those clasps cannot delimit text from context, or content from form, or forestall a book from breaking out of bounds. Muir's vision of a rearranged, seditious Bible suggests one lesson of this chapter and its reckoning with magic materiality: there is no foolproof way of dividing unreal, imagined books from actual ones.

Further Reading

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¹ M. R. James, *Collected Ghost Stories*, ed. Darryl Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11.

² James, *Collected Ghost Stories*, 305.

³ James Hogg, *The Three Perils of Man*, ed. Judy King and Graham Tulloch (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 327.

⁴ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. Marilyn Butler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 22; 29.

⁵ Lawrence Flammenberg, *The Necromancer*, trans. Peter Teuthold (London: Robert Holden, 1927), 37.

⁶ James Hogg, *Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, ed. Peter Garside (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 85.

⁷ Ian Duncan, *Scott's Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 285.

⁸ Leah Price, *How to Do Things with Books in Victorian Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 24; 22.

⁹ Sarah Wall-Randell, *The Immaterial Book: Reading and Romance in Early Modern England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 8.

¹⁰ Richard B. Sher, *The Enlightenment and the Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 23.

¹¹ William Godwin, *The Enquirer* (London: G. C. and J. Robinson, 1797), 140.

¹² Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *Divine Art, Infernal Machine: The Reception of Printing in the West from First Impressions to the Sense of an Ending* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 1–2. See also Walter Scott’s 1816 novel *The Antiquary*: the title character derives his descent from a German Protestant printer, who during his apprenticeship served ““old Fust, whom popular tradition hath sent to the devil, under the name of Faustus”” (*The Antiquary*, ed. David Hewitt [London: Penguin, 1998], 86).

¹³ *The Printer’s Grammar* (London: L. Wayland, 1784), 5.

¹⁴ “Faust” in J. L. Blake, *The Family Encyclopedia* (New York: Peter Hill, 1834), 341.

¹⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Review of *The Monk* by M. G. Lewis, *Critical Review* 19 (Feb. 1797): 198.

¹⁶ E. J. Clery, *The Rise of Supernatural Fiction, 1762-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 138.

¹⁷ *The Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. J. Logie Robertson (London: Oxford University Press, 1906), 16.

¹⁸ Walter Scott, *The Monastery*, edited by Penny Fielding (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 59.

¹⁹ Scott, *Monastery*, 66.

²⁰ Scott, *Monastery*, 281.

²¹ Scott, *Monastery*, 61.

²² Scott, *Monastery*, 91.

²³ James Simpson, *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 107.

²⁴ Brian Cummings, "Iconoclasm and Bibliophobia in the English Reformations, 1521-1558," in *Images, Idolatry, and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval England*, ed. Jeremy Dimmick et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 197.

²⁵ Scott, *Monastery*, 114.

²⁶ Ian Hayward, *The Revolution in Popular Literature: Print, Politics and the People, 1790-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 22.

²⁷ *An Account of the Trial of Thomas Muir* (Edinburgh: J. Robertson, n.d. [1793]), 25.

²⁸ *Thomas Muir*, 100.

²⁹ Claire Grogan, "Introduction," in Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man*, ed. Grogan (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview, 2011), 5.

³⁰ Godwin, *Enquirer*, 138; 137.

³¹ Jon Mee, "Treason, Seditious Libel, and Literature in the Romantic Period," *Oxford Handbooks Online*,

<https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935338.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199935338-e-113>, accessed 27 October 2016.

³² Henry Cockburn, *An Examination of the Trials for Sedition which have hitherto occurred in Scotland*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1888), I:10.

³³ *Trials for Sedition*, I:130.

³⁴ *Trials for Sedition*, I:134.

³⁵ *Thomas Muir*, 45.

³⁶ *Thomas Muir*, 37.

³⁷ *Thomas Muir*, 106.

³⁸ *Thomas Muir*, 100; 99.

³⁹ *Thomas Muir*, 107.