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‘Not’ Funny?

Humour, Embarrassment, and the ‘Wicked Bible’

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Abstract

The 'Wicked Bible' of 1631 is a fascinating and rare book, made popular and amusing in modern times through its omission of the word 'not' from the seventh commandment, rendering it "Thou shalt commit adultery." (Exodus 20:14) However, the book is the subject of several historical misconceptions which overstate the harshness of the early seventeenth-century authorities towards both it and the printers responsible, giving the impression that the reaction was sulphurous religious outrage. There has been remarkably little historical work done on the edition. This dissertation seeks to remedy this in part by gaining insight into the emotional reactions of people at the time to the seemingly blasphemous misprint. Adultery, despite the social opprobrium it could generate, was a common topic of humour in the Early Modern period. Through analysis of popular comedic entertainment of the time, and engagement with scholarship on the roots and causes of humour in the period, this dissertation argues that the Wicked Bible would have been found funny then, just as it is today. Although the authorities expressed anger at the errors and poor quality of the edition, their words and actions suggest a greater focus on worldly prestige and economic competitiveness than spiritual danger. Through examination of court records and other primary source texts, it is shown that the authorities were more embarrassed than enraged. Their punishment of the printers was in reality more lenient than has often been stated, and shows that even when dealing with a threat to their image and authority, the authorities were able to find ways to advance their own agendas. Analysis of the Wicked Bible shows that early modern belief and emotion contained more nuance and variety than is often credited in popular understanding today, and demonstrates the power of books to uncover historical emotion.

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Introduction

“Thou shalt commit adultery.” (Exodus 20:14)¹ The alarmingly straightforward command issued by the so-called ‘Wicked Bible’ of 1631 has continued to pique the interest of writers and collectors down the centuries. Upon learning of the error, amusement is an overwhelmingly common modern reaction. Renewed excitement follows the discovery of a copy of the offending edition, such as greeted the authentication of a copy in Christchurch, New Zealand in 2022.² Media coverage from around the world in print, television, and radio demonstrates a continuing fascination with the incongruous commandment.³ It is an historical tale which survives via interest in objects made novel by their flaws. However, despite the attention given to these historical curiosities, little consideration has been given to how the people of early modern England themselves reacted to the edition, and it has been the subject of little specific historical examination.

A number of historical canards persist around the story, such as that the Bibles were ordered to be burned, or that the printers were stripped of their printing licences.⁴ This suggests a modern assumption that the reaction at the time was one of apoplectic religious outrage. The

¹ *The Holy Bible containing the Old Testament and the Neuu / newly translated out of the originall tongues, and with the former translations diligently compared and reuised, by His Maiesties speciall commandement ; appointed to be read in churches*, STC 2296 (London: By Robert Barker ..., and by the assignes of Iohn Bill, 1631).

² Eva Corlett, “Rare ‘Wicked Bible’ that encourages adultery discovered in New Zealand,” *The Guardian*, 2 May, 2022, accessed 2 June, 2022, URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/02/rare-wicked-bible-that-encourages-adultery-discovered-in-new-zealand>.

³ For some examples, see “Extremely rare Bible encouraging adultery found in New Zealand,” *Newshub*, 3 May, 2022, accessed 2 June, 2022, URL: <https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2022/05/extremely-rare-bible-encouraging-adultery-found-in-new-zealand.html>, and “The Wicked Bible – Nightlife with Suzanne Hill,” *ABC Radio*, 15 May, 2022, accessed 2 June, 2022, URL: <https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/nightlife/wicked-bible/13882496>, and “As it Happens with Helen Mann,” *CBC*, 3 May, 2022, accessed 2 June, 2022, URL: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-the-tuesday-edition-1.6439812/thou-shalt-commit-adultery-proclaims-rare-bible-found-in-new-zealand-1.6442854>.

⁴ Chris Jones, Sarah Askey, and Stephen Hardman, “UC Connect Lecture: The Adulterer’s Guide: Aotearoa’s Wicked Bible,” Public Lecture, 4 May, 2022, accessed 2 June, 2022, URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ih9m_uBV9E.

people of early modern England were not so one-dimensional, and the incident consisted of more than just the single commandment error; in fact, the printers were held responsible for a large range of errors and quality issues. A range of emotional responses to the errors were possible based on social position, religious affiliation, and ideological standpoint. This dissertation will explore the emotional reaction to the Wicked Bible.

At the outset, there is a point of terminology which requires clarification: that the phrase ‘Wicked Bible’ in this work does not refer to a collection of absolutely identical copies, all with ‘Thou shalt commit adultery’. The records of the time refer to the “Edition of 1631” as containing many faults, the most egregious of which were “Thou shalt commit adultery” (Exodus 20:14) and “The Lord hath shewed us his glory, and his great-asse” (Deuteronomy 5:24).⁵ However, these errors and quality issues were, as Chris Jones has noted,⁶ spread across a number of separate print runs or impressions made in 1631. Encountering a copy with the Exodus 20:14 ‘Thou shalt commit adultery’ error, and then turning to Deuteronomy 5:24 expecting to see ‘great-asse’ and not finding it can be confusing if one is not aware of this. Some have denied the existence of the ‘great-asse’ error altogether.⁷ A ‘Short Title Catalogue’ (STC) system is used to distinguish and track different impressions of printed books from the Early Modern period, including Bibles. While the 1631 Bible known today as STC 2296, 20 copies of which are currently known, does contain ‘Thou shalt commit adultery’ but not ‘great-asse’, three known copies of the 1631 octavo known as STC 2297.3 do not contain ‘Thou shalt commit adultery’, but do contain suspicious ink spots in precisely the position ‘great-asse’ would be.⁸ Conflating all the print runs of 1631 into a single version, all of which were thought to contain the famous commandment error, probably contributed to the confused idea that most must have been destroyed given the rarity of STC 2296 today. When I refer to the ‘Wicked Bible’ throughout this dissertation, I am referring to the collection of 1631 print runs, with their variety of errors and quality issues, not simply to the single print run of unknown size which contained the Exodus 20:14 error. While common

⁵ “Mr Barker, the printer,” *Reports of Cases in the Courts of Star Chamber and High Commission*, ed. Samuel Rawson Gardiner (Westminster: Nichols and Sons, 1886), 296-97, (8 May, 1632).

⁶ Jones, Askey, and Hardman, “Aotearoa’s Wicked Bible,” URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ih9m_uBV9E.

⁷ See Rob Ainsley, “Great Arse,” *London Review of Books*, Letters, vol. 31, no. 15, August 6, 2009, accessed 2 June, 2022, URL: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v31/n15/letters>.

⁸ With regard to this point, I am grateful to Dr. Chris Jones who shared information from his forthcoming catalogue of STC 2296 and other 1631 copies with me.

usage tends to associate ‘Wicked Bible’ solely with the Exodus error, my more inclusive usage is important to keep in mind as the issue at the time involved more than one single error. However, ‘Thou shalt commit adultery’ is certainly the most notable error in the edition, both at the time and through history.

Humour will be the lens through which the Wicked Bible will be explored in the first chapter. The error is a source of humour for many today; the study of early modern humour suggests many may have found it funny then. Laughter in the Early Modern period could be rooted in ridicule, incongruity, inversion, and more: studying these forms and applying them to the Wicked Bible can reveal multiple avenues along which laughter could arrive in response to the error. Examining the intersection of laughter with social realities such as religion and adultery can allow us to more confidently fit the Wicked Bible into social understandings of humour in the period. Building upon these understandings, the second chapter will examine both the factors which led to the creation of the Wicked Bible, and the reactions of the authorities to it, and what these reveal about their desire to maintain textual, monarchical, and religious authority in early modern England. The technology and commercial landscape of printing is a crucial factor to consider in forming this historical picture, particularly as the state and Church authorities took such a clear interest in controlling and guiding the print industry. Increasing literacy and text availability presented a growing problem for authorities: more and more ordinary people could engage with texts on their own terms, and as physical objects whose quality could be judged.⁹ This dissertation will argue that the anger of the authorities toward the Wicked Bible was as much rooted in embarrassment at the undermining of their worldly image and authority as it was in religious offence and outrage.

Historiography

In aiming to understand reactions to the Wicked Bible, this dissertation will engage with a variety of historiographical schools. As it seeks to access the shared experience of a people to a particular historical ‘event’, how the fabric of their society affected their perceptions of it, and the institutions of authority which attempted to control and guide their reaction, there is a

⁹ For the growth in literacy and changing attitudes toward texts, see Adam Fox, “Custom, Memory and the Authority of Writing,” in *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*, eds. Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox, and Steve Hindle (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1996), 89-116.

strand of social history in this work. However, with its focus on literary sources and attempts to use individual experience to inform about broader shared ones, particularly over the investigation of social categories or numbers, there is an even stronger thread of cultural history.¹⁰ This is particularly true of the first chapter, as I examine the literature and practices of early modern people in order to gain insight into their humour and beliefs, and attempt to capture their reactions to a particular cultural artefact in the form of the Wicked Bible. The tendency to focus on a smaller issue (the Wicked Bible) in order to uncover truths about wider issues (humour, attitudes to adultery and the King James Bible) is also something that has been associated with cultural history.¹¹

However, investigating the emotional reaction to the Wicked Bible from the perspectives of humour and embarrassment brings this work into the realm of the history of emotions. This field seeks to understand the change and continuity in the experience and expression of emotions over time, and how these have shaped communities and thought. It also seeks to get ‘beneath’ the outward actions of individuals in order to understand the emotions and feelings that drive those actions.¹² The study of laughter would once have been thought inappropriate for the historian, but over the last several decades there has been growing acknowledgment across many disciplines of the importance of feelings and emotions in shaping culture.¹³

Keith Thomas argues that when general patterns can be detected behind individual taste, it becomes the province of the historian.¹⁴ Humour is a universal of human society, and studying what a society found funny can also reveal what it found offensive and confronting. This paper will argue that emotions such as humour and embarrassment are indispensable elements in understanding the reaction of the Church and state authorities to a missing three-letter word.

An approach which privileges only the anger of the directly relevant court records without considering the wider context of belief and social realities risks forming an incomplete and

¹⁰ Paula S. Fass, “Cultural History/Social History: Some Reflections on a Continuing Dialogue,” *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1, Special Issue (2003): 39-41.

¹¹ Michael Bentley, *Modern Historiography: An Introduction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), 146.

¹² Susan J. Matt and Peter N. Stearns, “Introduction,” in *Doing Emotions History*, ed. Susan J. Matt and Peter N. Stearns (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 1.

¹³ Matt and Stearns, “Introduction,” 2.

¹⁴ Keith Thomas, “The place of laughter in Tudor and Stuart England,” *Times Literary Supplement*, 21 January, 1977, 77.

misleading view: that the recorded condemnation of officials necessarily translates into a universal anger. This is not to suggest that these sources are unimportant. In fact, examining these in a Von Rankean sense to establish as far as possible ‘what really happened’ will be important in forming a base upon which to build the analysis of the later chapters. However, it should be remembered that this approach to the primary sources is intended to clear away historical myth surrounding the Wicked Bible, and does not fully characterize my approach to the story as a whole, which allows for seeking out insight into motivation and feeling which might not be directly set down in the sources.

Little specific historical work has been done on the Wicked Bible. Occasionally it gets a mention in wider histories of the King James Bible, such as by David Norton and Gordon Campbell, usually in the context of the book’s print history.¹⁵ Phyllis Handover’s 1958 account of the Wicked Bible, perhaps the most well-known to focus on the work, in fact barely mentions it; the account mostly focusses on the conflict between the printers Robert Barker and Bonham Norton, in order to blame Norton for sabotage in the final paragraphs.¹⁶ My investigation will seek to approach it from a new perspective; that of emotion, and the seeking of deeper explanations for why the authorities condemned the work, but did not react as harshly as often assumed. While understanding the reactions of the King, Church, and state officials is important, this dissertation will also seek to uncover the possible reactions of those ‘average’ readers and listeners whose voices do not survive in print or manuscript, and have not been sought out with regard to the Wicked Bible, but which still formed a part of the turbulent clamour of early modern English society.

Methodology

As societies change and evolve, humour is particularly susceptible to age fast, and age poorly. Joy Wiltenburg argues that if scholars can no longer “get the joke,” the historical

¹⁵ See David Norton, *A Textual History of the King James Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 95-96 and Gordon Campbell, *Bible: The Story of the King James Version 1611-2011* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 109-11.

¹⁶ P. M. Handover, *The ‘Wicked’ Bible and the King’s Printing House Blackfriars* (London: Privately Printed at the office of ‘The Times’, 1958).

picture is unavoidably incomplete.¹⁷ This dissertation risks the opposite: projecting a modern source of humour backward onto the people of the past. However, drawing together the evidence of what constitutes humour and applying it to the Wicked Bible provides an enriched understanding of what prompted the early modern people to laugh. Wiltenburg notes that laughter is particularly elusive within the historical record.¹⁸ The litigation of adulterous matters in the courts would, even in the case of intentional jests, purge the material of any comic weight.¹⁹ This is particularly relevant to the case of the Wicked Bible, given that the contemporary accounts available to us are court reports. In a discussion of early modern jest-book humour, Derek Brewer notes the paradox inherent in judging a mostly oral form of communication using only written sources, which serve to decontextualize jests from the communal, “in-group” setting in which they were experienced.²⁰ Nevertheless, to get a sense of the humour prevalent in English popular culture in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, we must engage with that which survives in written form, be it poetry, plays, or jest-books. The topic of adultery is of particular relevance to an investigation of the Wicked Bible, particularly an attempt to understand the seeming contradiction between adultery as a powerful generator of social tension and opprobrium, but also a ubiquitous source of humour and laughter.

The first chapter will approach examples of surviving popular entertainment from the period as capable of revealing the complexity of social attitudes toward topics such as adultery, beyond a surface knowledge that its practice was considered immoral. The works of Tarlton, Shakespeare, Middleton, Donne, and others all engaged with themes of adultery to produce humour and were commonly experienced in performance or read aloud; what audiences laughed at together can help reveal the hard to access reality of what they laughed at in private. There is an element of ‘survival bias’ in the texts that have endured in written form and which I have chosen to analyse, but I am approaching my analysis in the belief that a major factor in these texts’ survival is *because* they were effective and appreciated for their humour, and thus more likely to survive through recording and replication.

¹⁷ Joy Wiltenburg, “Soundings of Laughter in Early Modern England: Women, Men, and Everyday Uses of Humor,” *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 10, no. 2 (2016): 22.

¹⁸ Joy Wiltenburg, “Soundings of Laughter,” 22.

¹⁹ Wiltenburg, 28.

²⁰ Derek Brewer, “Prose Jest-Books Mainly in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries in England,” in *A Cultural History of Humour*, ed. Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 91.

Combined with my analysis of literary texts will be an engagement with historical scholarship on the forms and roots of humour in the Early Modern period. These can include superiority, social reinforcement, inversion and subversion, as well as incongruity and ambiguity. The theories of historical thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant are valuable in that they provide a perspective closer to the period in question, and these will be considered alongside the work of modern scholars. It is also important to understand the contrast between the often harsh condemnation of adultery in practice and its popularity as a source of humour, and to aid in this I will consider recorded instances of adultery accusations from the period, including the cases of village rector Thomas Temple,²¹ and Archbishop Edwin Sandys.²²

The second chapter will involve much more direct engagement with primary sources related to the Wicked Bible and the words and actions of figures surrounding it. It will maintain an underpinning focus on emotion while seeking to understand what reactions to the Wicked Bible can reveal about the experience and assertion of monarchical, religious, and textual authority. The King James Bible was an English version intended to assert the power of the monarch and serve the Protestant religious destiny of the English people.²³ When the Bishop of London castigated the printers for the poor quality of the Wicked Bible, it is hard not to detect a note of embarrassment – he bemoans that even the Catholics print better Bibles.²⁴ According to Kenneth Fincham, the authority of the King James Bible was not yet firmly established and relied on increasing private and household use,²⁵ which made errors and poor quality all the more publicly visible. During the increasingly unsettled period, the sovereign's authority was intended to flow through the office of the 'King's Printer',²⁶ and religion was a

²¹ Christopher Haigh, "Dr. Temple's Pew: Sex and Clerical Status in the 1630's," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (2005): 497-516.

²² Sarah Bastow, "An Abortive Attempt to Defend an Episcopal Reputation: The Case of Archbishop Edwin Sandys and the Innkeeper's Wife," *History: The Journal of the Historical Association* 97, no. 327 (2012): 380-401.

²³ See Campbell, *The Story of the King James Version*, 34-7, and Dan G. Danner, "The Contribution of the Geneva Bible of 1560 to the English Protestant Tradition," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 12, no. 3 (1981): 11-18.

²⁴ "Mr Barker, the printer," *Reports of Cases*, 296-97, (8 May, 1632).

²⁵ Kenneth Fincham, "The King James Bible: Crown, Church and People," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 71, no. 1 (2020): 77-97.

²⁶ David Harvey, *The Law Emprynted and Englysshed: The Printing Press as an Agent of Change in Law and Legal Culture 1475-1642* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2015), 42.

more and more sensitive topic of humour.²⁷ That both are undermined in a single volume provides a nexus around which such power and its deflation can be investigated. Through engagement with existing historical scholarship, it will be important to establish the intentions and motivations behind both the creation of the King James Bible and the chief authority figures invested in its success, namely King Charles I and Archbishop William Laud. The chapter will then proceed in the belief that through combining this with analysis of the primary sources which record the words and actions of these figures, it will be possible to make judgements regarding both the emotional basis of and explanations for their actions with regard to the Wicked Bible. However, given the number of historical myths which circulate around the Wicked Bible, it will be worth going over the roots of some of these myths, and then stripping away these misconceptions through a more traditional assessment of the primary sources in order to establish ‘what really happened’. This will form a base on which to build further analysis, which will be particularly important when trying to more accurately capture emotional reactions to the faulty edition.

Myths surrounding the Wicked Bible

Much of what is commonly ‘known’ about the Wicked Bible is rooted in a series of misconceptions and assumptions stacked on top of one another to form a picture of how people today perceive people of the Early Modern period. These misconceptions are perhaps given sustenance by the fact that most today will likely encounter the Wicked Bible through media articles slanted toward titillation and ‘infotainment’ rather than scholarly work. However, the roots of these ideas significantly pre-date the modern media, showing the assumptions and inventions that can gather around an historical narrative as it journeys through the pens of writers on its way to the future. The story of the Wicked Bible has often been deployed for rhetorical ends.

The American Founding Father Benjamin Franklin cannily deployed the legend under the pseudonym ‘J. T.’ in 1730 to come to the defence of a typo he himself had made in one of his own articles in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, and in the process imply that a rival publisher was

²⁷ Wiltenburg, 24.

generally sloppier.²⁸ English politician and essayist Joseph Addison used it in 1714 to thunder against the supposed degeneracy of the youth of his time.²⁹ When Henry Stevens ‘rediscovered’ physical copies of the edition in 1855, confirming the existence of a text increasingly thought mythical and at the same time giving it the ‘Wicked’ title by which it is now inescapably known, it began the phase in which the edition became a rare and valuable novelty. This sparked more discoveries and identifications – Stevens noted with some regret that “few books remain ‘unique’ long, when their attractions have been once noised abroad.”³⁰ Unfortunately, the detritus of historical assumption lingers, and some scholarly works have repeated certain claims with less discernment than is warranted.

One example is the common and mistaken claim that the offending Bibles were ordered to be burned or otherwise destroyed by the authorities.³¹ Phyllis Handover claimed the Bibles were burnt in her 1958 account of the Wicked Bible, using this to explain the present rarity of known copies.³² The *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London* gives an account of Henry Stevens’s exhibition of his discovery in 1855, which describes the Bibles as having been destroyed.³³ As a purchaser of rare and valuable books for the wealthy bibliophile James Lenox, on whose behalf he had located and bought the volume,³⁴ Stevens certainly had an interest in creating an engaging narrative around the item in order to boost its mystique. He evocatively describes his copy as having “escaped the flames” in Amsterdam like some of the

²⁸ For Franklin’s letter as J.T., see Benjamin Franklin, “Printer’s Errors,” *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, 13 March, 1729/30, accessed 2 June, 2022, URL: <https://franklinpapers.org/framedVolumes.jsp?vol=1&page=169a>. Also see Walter Isaacson, *A Benjamin Franklin Reader* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2003), 50-51.

²⁹ Joseph Addison, “*Odora canum vis*,” *The Spectator*, 11 August, 1714, accessed 2 June, 2022, URL: www.gutenberg.org/files/12030/12030-h/SV3/Spectator3.html#section579.

³⁰ Henry Stevens, *Recollections of Mr James Lenox* (London: Henry Stevens & Son, 1886), 34-42.

³¹ Chris Jones points out the mistaken nature of this claim in Jones, Askey, and Hardman, “Aotearoa’s Wicked Bible,” URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ih9m_uBV9E. This claim is common in modern media articles about the Wicked Bible, for example Emma Green, “Thou Shalt Commit Adultery,” *The Atlantic*, 23 October, 2015, accessed 2 June 2022, URL: www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/thou-shalt-commit-adultery/412222/, or Rick Gekoski, “The Wicked Bible: the perfect gift for collectors, but not for William and Kate,” *The Guardian*, 25 November, 2010, accessed 2 June, 2022, URL: www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2010/nov/25/wicked-bible-gift-william-kate.

³² Handover, *The ‘Wicked’ Bible*, 16.

³³ Anonymous, “Thursday, June 21st, 1855,” *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of London* 3, issue 43 (1856): 213.

³⁴ Stevens, *Recollections*, 34-42.

early Bible translators.³⁵ There is however no evidence that the Bibles were ordered to be destroyed. In fact, the recorded fate of the stock of seized Bibles is that they were returned to the very printers who had been held responsible for the error: Robert Barker and Martin Lucas, who jointly held the position of the King's Printers, and who had been fined £300 for their part in the incident.³⁶ From the records of the Acts of the Court of High Commission, we learn that the King's Advocate argued on behalf of the printers that the Bibles should be returned to them for correction, and that

This mocōn the Court thought reasonable, and thought it meet & so ordred that they should haue all the said bibles redeliu'ed vnto them wth expresse charge that they see all the grosse faults thereof amended before they presume to vent the same.³⁷

As the King's Printers had first had charges brought against them for the corrupt printing in May 1632,³⁸ and the Bibles were ordered to be returned in June 1635,³⁹ it seems likely that the stock had been held from the printers as motivation to make progress on the establishment of a Greek press at the order of King Charles, in exchange for the respiting and eventual remitting of the fine set against them.⁴⁰ I will return to this topic in the second chapter. For now, it is particularly important to clarify that the stock of erroneous Bibles was not ordered destroyed. This is significant if any analysis of the event through an emotional lens is to be undertaken. The idea of destroying valuable books, particularly through such a destructive means as burning, which disallows the recovery of expensive paper, suggests a deep revulsion for which there is little evidence. The authorities were certainly angry at the

³⁵ Stevens, 41.

³⁶ "The King's Printers to Set Up a Greek Press," in *A Companion to Arber: Being a Calendar of Documents in Edward Arber's "Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London 1554-1640" with Text and Calendar of Supplementary Documents*, ed. W. W. Greg (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), section 68, item 4, 297-98, (February 1633/4).

³⁷ "Greek Press," *A Companion to Arber*, section 68, item 5, 298, (23 June, 1635).

³⁸ "Mr Barker, the printer," *Reports of Cases*, 296-97, (8 May, 1632).

³⁹ "Robert Barker and Martin Lucas, the King's printers," *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic – Charles I, 1635*, Acts of the Court of High Commission, ed. John Bruce (Nendeln: Kraus Reprint Ltd., 1967), vol. CCLXI, folio 249, 230, (23 June, 1635).

⁴⁰ For details of the correspondence between King Charles, Archbishop Laud, and the printers regarding the Greek press, see all items in section 68 of "Greek Press," *A Companion to Arber*, section 68, 294-98 (13 January 1633/4 – 23 June, 1635).

printers for allowing the errors, but their actions suggest they saw the Bibles themselves more as bargaining chips than blasphemies.

There is another oft-repeated common idea that the printers lost their printing licence or patents as part of their punishment for the errors.⁴¹ Benjamin Franklin even makes this claim, suggesting of the error that “[t]his material *Erratum* induc’d the Crown to take the Patent from them which is now held by the King’s Printer,”⁴² although it is not clear what he bases this on other than legend. That the printers did not lose their licence is made quite clear by both the fact that this is not recorded as part of their punishment,⁴³ and that they continued to print works after the incident, although for reasons of financial difficulty Barker was forced to lease his share in the King’s Printing Office in 1634,⁴⁴ and was eventually jailed for debt on November 27, 1635.⁴⁵ Another curiously repeated error is that the printers were tried in the court of Star Chamber,⁴⁶ when this is simply disproved by the court records of the incident being those of the ecclesiastical Court of High Commission.⁴⁷ Star Chamber has something of a historical reputation for severe and arbitrary injustice;⁴⁸ the roots of this assumption may lie alongside the belief that the Bibles had been burned and the printers severely censured.

⁴¹ For example, see Eva Corlett, “Rare ‘Wicked Bible’ that encourages adultery discovered in New Zealand,” *The Guardian*, 2 May, 2022, accessed 2 June, 2022, URL:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/02/rare-wicked-bible-that-encourages-adultery-discovered-in-new-zealand>, or “‘Thou shalt commit adultery’, proclaims rare bible found in New Zealand,” *CBC Radio*, 5 May, 2022, accessed 2 June, 2022, URL: <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-the-tuesday-edition-1.6439812/thou-shalt-commit-adultery-proclaims-rare-bible-found-in-new-zealand-1.6442854>.

⁴² Franklin, “Printer’s Errors.”

⁴³ See “Greek Press,” *A Companion to Arber*, section 68, item 4, 297-98, (February 1633/4).

⁴⁴ Cyprian Blagden, *The Stationer’s Company: a history, 1403-1959* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1960), 151.

⁴⁵ H. R. Tedder, “Barker, Robert (d. 1645),” *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 3, ed. Leslie Stephen (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1885), 207-08.

⁴⁶ For example, Addison (see n29), *The Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries* (see n33), and the Robert Barker’s entry in the 1885 *Dictionary of National Biography* (see n45) all make this error.

⁴⁷ See “Mr Barker, the printer,” *Reports of Cases*, 296-97, (8 May, 1632), and “The Printers,” *Reports of Cases in the Courts of Star Chamber and High Commission*, ed. Samuel Rawson Gardiner (Westminster: Nichols and Sons, 1886), 304-05, (14 June, 1632). This is another misconception pointed out by Chris Jones in Jones, Askey, and Hardman, “Aotearoa’s Wicked Bible,” URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ih9m_uBV9E.

⁴⁸ Edward P. Cheyney, “The Court of Star Chamber,” *The American Historical Review* 18, no. 4 (1913): 727.

These examples highlight the value of the traditional, ‘Von Rankean’ approach in establishing a grounded base of knowledge around an issue, particularly when the issue is as clouded with myth as the Wicked Bible. Once established, I can build upon this using other methods such as literary analysis and theorization about humour and emotion in order to form a picture of elements less susceptible to direct primary source analysis, such as laughter and emotional motivation. The application of these methods to the Wicked Bible will allow a better and broader understanding of how it was perceived and dealt with beyond previously held beliefs around its supposed fiery demise.

The Wicked Bible is a more interesting and complex tale than its previous historical treatment would suggest. While amused journalists might assume that in the supposedly dark and fearful days of old the reaction could only have been harsh intolerance, I will seek to explore if there is in fact some continuity between the humour found in it now, and humour found in it then. This is the aim of the first chapter, which will argue that laughter would have been a common and natural response to the Wicked Bible, provided, of course, you were not one of the authority figures who had a personal stake in its creation and dissemination.

The second chapter will approach the ‘Wicked Bible’ as both a conceptual and physical object which represented the binding together of official English political and religious ideology. In so doing, it threatened to undermine these very ideas with ridicule generated by puerile errors and shoddy quality. These authorities certainly expressed their upset at the errors, but in exploring their words and actions we can uncover the complexity of their motivation. Their treatment of the Wicked Bible suggests concerns more aligned with political and commercial motives than strictly religious ones. Ultimately, the Wicked Bible is a tale of worldly power, image, and material interest more than it is one of cataclysmic spiritual outrage. This dissertation will begin by exploring the Wicked Bible as a source of humour – one of the underlying reasons why the edition, instead of being a dignified source of power and authority, was in fact an embarrassment.

Chapter One

Misbegotten Merriment: Humour, Adultery, and the Wicked Bible

A quick Google search will yield many modern articles on the ‘Wicked Bible.’ They relay the story of the fateful misprint with a tone of gentle amusement, often because a copy of the now rare and valuable edition is up for auction. There is a focus on the outraged reaction of the authorities, often supplemented with the historically unsupported claim that the Bibles were ordered to be burned.⁴⁹ Less clear is the degree to which this outrage extended downward from the authorities to be shared by the English populace in general. Like a modern reader, would a seventeenth-century reader have been primed to find humour in the error? Adulterous humour is not as restricted to historical hindsight as modern articles might imply. By the same token, censorious attitudes toward adultery and sexual morality are not alien in modern secular Western society. Adultery continues to have legal, social, financial, and even political ramifications. No fault divorce only came into effect in the United Kingdom in April of 2022, allowing married couples to legally split without a ‘reason’ such as infidelity.⁵⁰ Accusations of adultery can still be wielded as a weapon against political opponents, as two recent United States presidents have found.⁵¹ The first part of this chapter will investigate several possible roots of humour and laughter prevalent in the Early Modern period. These include scorn and superiority, laughter as a social mechanism, subversion and inversion of power structures, and the humour of incongruity and ambiguity. By seeking to view the Wicked Bible through these various lenses, we can discover avenues along which humour can arise thanks to the seemingly blasphemous misprints. This will lead on to a

⁴⁹ For example: Alison Flood, “Extremely rare Wicked Bible goes on sale,” *The Guardian*, 21 October, 2015, accessed 2 June, 2022, URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/21/rare-sinners-bible-on-sale-bonhams-auction>, or DeNeen L. Brown, “The Bible Museum’s ‘Wicked Bible’: Thou Shalt Commit Adultery,” *The Washington Post*, 18 November, 2017, accessed 2 June, 2022, URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/11/17/the-new-bible-museums-wicked-bible-thou-shalt-commit-adultery/>.

⁵⁰ “‘Blame game’ ends as no-fault divorce comes into force,” 6 April, 2022, accessed 2 June, 2022, URL: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/blame-game-ends-as-no-fault-divorce-comes-into-force>.

⁵¹ Nick Bryant, “Bill Clinton acquittal: echoes of a sex scandal 20 years on,” *BBC News*, 8 February, 2019, accessed 2 June, 2022, URL: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-47164909>.

discussion of the amusement and laughter created by adulterous humour, despite the potency of adultery in the Early Modern period as a threat to personal reputation and social cohesion. While there has been undoubted change in social attitudes toward adultery, there are clear elements of continuity as well. If continuity can be found in attitudes of censure and disapproval stretching from the Early Modern period to today, it is not unreasonable to suggest that continuity in attitudes of amusement and humour might exist as well. There are even grounds to believe that the adulterous commandment of the Wicked Bible provoked laughter then, just as it does now.

At the outset, it must be acknowledged that humour in this period was neither static nor monolithic. As society evolved and diverged, so did humour, increasingly along lines of class. The initial divide between genteel and common humour in popular entertainment should not be overstated, however. Derek Brewer argues that the upper and lower strata of society shared much in the way of popular humour and entertainment, although growing divisions can be detected as the sixteenth century leads into the seventeenth. He compares the widely popular William Shakespeare with slightly later neoclassical writers such as Ben Jonson and John Milton, who tended to look down on Shakespeare's earthiness and supposed 'Gothic' style.⁵² Indira Ghose points out that the elite and lower classes shared a common pool of cultural and religious values which aligned much of their joys and pursuits up to the Early Modern period, such as a belief in customary rights, ideals of patriarchy, and Protestant nationalism.⁵³ However, in a process often termed by historians as a 'reformation of manners', the divide between perceptions of 'high' and 'low' culture began to become more sharply drawn and entrenched.⁵⁴ As a growing middle class began to blur social distinctions that once were taken for granted, attempts to reinforce hierarchies through firmer demarcation of social tastes and manners in turn gained momentum. Thomas argues that elites increasingly saw laughter and ridicule as threats to their authority and gravitas. In response, they revived classical ideas which scorned excessive laughter as an impairment to dignity and associated bodily control with social hierarchy.⁵⁵ The 'wit' of the superior

⁵² Brewer, "Prose Jest-Books," 99-100.

⁵³ Indira Ghose, *Shakespeare and Laughter: A Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 65.

⁵⁴ Ronald Hutton, *The Rise and Fall of Merry England: The Ritual Year 1400-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 111.

⁵⁵ Thomas, "The place of laughter," 80.

intellect was prized over inappropriate bodily laughter.⁵⁶ Among the lower classes, resentment at the injustices of authority and life's hardships certainly formed a strong element of their shared popular culture.⁵⁷ Peter Burke, in his history of early modern popular culture, suggests that an underlying fatalism and traditionalism, combined with limited social horizons, led to an 'imaginative poverty' which viewed the system as unchangeably zero-sum, in which only the relative position of people within it could change, not the system itself.⁵⁸ Thomas suggests that much lower-class humour was an expression of stoicism in the face of harsh conditions, and a way of reconciling themselves to a poor lot in life. Less reliance on stifling middle and upper-class propriety meant that such peasant tastes in humour could be seen as more honest and authentic to natural impulses of humour, but by the same token, remained reliant on the humour of cruelty and scorn.⁵⁹ A willingness to ridicule authority and an earthier humour less constrained by decorum may have primed the lower classes in particular to find humour in 'thou shalt commit adultery'. However, a lower level of literacy and still strongly oral culture would likely have reduced the chance peasants would be exposed to the error. While this dissertation does not focus on cross-class distinctions and similarities in early modern English humour, it should be kept in mind that social conditions were a constant factor shaping laughter and entertainment.

The interaction of humour and religion is also important to keep in mind, particularly given the biblical context of the errors. As early modern English society grew in complexity and saw increasing religious objection to older customs of entertainment and celebration, religion was increasingly viewed as a dangerous field for humour.⁶⁰ Ghose suggests that the reformed religion's rejection of old cultural practices led to a growing separation between secular entertainments and the heady realms of religion and politics.⁶¹ She quotes the statesman and philosopher Francis Bacon's 1597 essay *Of Discourse*: "As for jest, there be certain things, which ought to be privileged from it; namely, religion, matters of state, great persons, any man's present business of importance, and any case that deserveth pity."⁶² Daniel Derrin

⁵⁶ Wiltenburg, 31-32.

⁵⁷ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, revised reprint (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1994), 174-76.

⁵⁸ Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 174-76.

⁵⁹ Thomas, 80-81.

⁶⁰ Wiltenburg, 23-24.

⁶¹ Ghose, *Shakespeare and Laughter*, 133.

⁶² Francis Bacon, "Of Discourse", cited in Ghose, 133.

notes that preachers and sermon writers were keen to maintain a distinction between ‘light-hearted’ jests and the serious business of salvation.⁶³ However, he also notes many ways in which Protestant clergymen could deploy jests in the course of their preaching, showing that English religion was not totally devoid of humour.⁶⁴ Joseph Hall, bishop and satirist, mocked the Catholic belief in the real transformation of God in the Eucharist, incredulously ridiculing those who “fall downe upon their knees, and thump their brests; as beating the heart that will not enough believe in that pastry-deity.”⁶⁵ Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, one of the leading translators of the King James Bible, in a 1623 sermon before King James at Whitehall, aimed a jest at what he saw as the Puritan overemphasis on the hearing of sermons; in a mirror to the Catholic deformity of auricular confession, he joked that now there was in the English Church too much “auricular *profession*.”⁶⁶ The Puritans gained a reputation as mirthless killjoys even in their own time, at least according to stage representations; Brewer sees the type in figures such as Shakespeare’s Malvolio from *Twelfth Night* and Jonson’s Zeal-of-the-land Busy from *Bartholomew Fair*.⁶⁷ Ghose, however, points out that over the Early Modern period, the Puritan movement within the English Church encompassed a large and changing spectrum of belief about what was acceptable with regard to recreation, humour, and entertainment, and that the borders between different positions are often blurred.⁶⁸ This dissertation will not attempt to account for the reaction of different believers at every point along this spectrum, but will approach the question of the Wicked Bible’s humour from a more general perspective which considers the forms humour took, often using the elements of popular culture which have survived for analysis today. However, it should be remembered that, even when an early modern reader found the errors in the Wicked Bible funny, that humour perhaps came with a frisson of danger.

⁶³ Daniel Derrin, “Self-Referring Deformities: Humour in Early Modern Sermon Literature,” *Literature & Theology* 32, no. 3 (2018): 257-58.

⁶⁴ Derrin, “Self-Referring Deformities,” 255-69.

⁶⁵ Joseph Hall, *The Contemplations upon the History of the New Testament*, cited in Derrin, 259.

⁶⁶ Lancelot Andrewes, *XCIV Sermons*, cited in Derrin, 259.

⁶⁷ Brewer, 107.

⁶⁸ Ghose, 131.

Roots of early modern humour

A dominant view of humour in the seventeenth century was that it arose through an aggressive feeling of superiority over an object of ridicule.⁶⁹ Thomas describes early modern popular culture as harshly intolerant, where ridicule and derision were deployed to discipline the deviant by both law-enforcement and the general populace.⁷⁰ Brewer notes that almost all traditional jests were made at someone's expense, and tended to uphold popular prejudices targeted at ethnicity, gender, or disability. Social superiors or the agents of conventional morality could also be targets of scorn.⁷¹ Ghose argues that misogynist jokes, including ones regarding cuckoldry, had the particular purpose of teaching women the social mores they should take care not to flout if they sought to avoid punishment.⁷² Men, however, were the primary victims of cuckoldry humour, which tended to dwell on the victims' social humiliation and impotence.⁷³ John Overall, one of the translators of the King James Bible and also Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, fell victim to this.⁷⁴ John Aubrey records a mocking ditty which was allegedly sung at Overall's expense:

*The Deane of Paule's did search for his wife,
and where d'ee think he found her?
Even upon Sir John Selby's bed,
as flatte as any Flounder.*⁷⁵

Thomas Hobbes gives the most well-known articulation of the superiority theory of laughter.⁷⁶ He suggests in his 1650 work *Human Nature* that "the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in

⁶⁹ Robert Phiddian and Will Noonan, "History of Humor: Early Modern Europe," in *Encyclopedia of English Studies*, ed. Salvatore I. Attardo (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2014), 296.

⁷⁰ Thomas, 77.

⁷¹ Brewer, 90.

⁷² Ghose, 103.

⁷³ Pamela Allen Brown, *Better a Shrew than a Sheep: Women, Drama and the Culture of Jest in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 93.

⁷⁴ Nicholas W. Cranfield, "Overall, John (*bap.* 1561, *d.* 1619)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 42, eds. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 149-51.

⁷⁵ John Aubrey, *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, ed. Oliver Lawson Dick, 1949 (London: Mandarin Paperbacks, 1992), 226.

⁷⁶ Sheila Lintott, "Superiority in Humor Theory," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74, no. 4 (2016): 353.

ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly.”⁷⁷ This certainly accounts for scornful humour, and even allows for self-deprecation. However, Sheila Lintott correctly points out that while superiority is one way to create humour, it is not an essentialist theory which can explain all laughter.⁷⁸ If scornful humour was to be found in the Wicked Bible’s erroneous commandment, who would be the target? Perhaps the clergy, who were often the target of stereotypical mockery for hypocrisy and ignorance despite their intended role as moral authorities.⁷⁹ Perhaps the obvious error brought to mind certain arrogant learned men, overconfident in their books and textual mastery. Jacob Ladegaard describes the comedy present in the figure of Christopher Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, who is unshakeably certain of his spiritual knowledge despite foolish mis-readings of the scriptures an early modern audience would immediately notice.⁸⁰ Or perhaps the target was just the hapless printer, made the fool by either shoddy correction or a malicious prank.

Humour operates within social frameworks and finds strength when shared among a group. Scornful traditional jests against the targets described by Brewer had the function of delineating ‘outsiders’ whom it was acceptable to mock in certain situations.⁸¹ Not all shared humour need be scornful, but, according to Ghose, laughter can create a sense of superiority among a group through the reinforcement of shared values. This can help explain why men found cuckoldry humour funny: laughers see themselves as winners, and as Ghose notes, “Cuckolds are always other people.”⁸² Laughter signals a shared social frame and promotes group cohesion. When someone refuses to enter this frame, they are marked as ‘humourless’ and made a target for further mockery, like the pompous Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*.⁸³ Ghose points out that Malvolio’s refusal to see the humour of Feste the jester seals his fate as one of the play’s victims, as a lack of humour was unforgivable to a comedy’s audience.⁸⁴

Sympathy could exist for the victims of mockery, but this naturally lessened the humorous effect. Scholar Robert Burton (1577-1640) noted the malice which could exist in humour, and

⁷⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature*, cited in Lintott, “Superiority in Humor Theory,” 353.

⁷⁸ Lintott, “Superiority in Humor Theory,” 356.

⁷⁹ Thomas, 78.

⁸⁰ Jakob Ladegaard, “The comedy of terrors: ideology and comedy in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*,” *Textual Practice* 31, no. 1 (2017): 184-85.

⁸¹ Brewer, 90-1.

⁸² Ghose, 108.

⁸³ Ghose, 107.

⁸⁴ Ghose, 110.

the subsequent melancholy it caused. According to Brewer, Burton, while friendly, was not tremendously social, and likely spent much time alone acquiring his prodigious reading and writing. However, this may have blunted his comic sensibility: in describing a jest in which a cuckold comically fails to take his revenge against the man who has cuckolded him, he then praises the cuckold's restraint, apparently completely misunderstanding the joke.⁸⁵

Considering the importance of social settings in affecting the power and impact of humour is an important element in the analysis of humour as it relates to the Wicked Bible. Protestant England had a high level of literacy compared to many of its Catholic neighbours, as well as growing access to printed material and emphasis on personal religious instruction.⁸⁶ After the publication of the King James Bible in 1611, there was no general order for parishes to purchase it for public worship, as according to Kenneth Fincham, much institutional impetus behind its promotion died in 1610 alongside Archbishop Richard Bancroft, who had been a chief driving force behind the project.⁸⁷ Instead, the version cemented its place in English culture more slowly, through personal ownership and reading.⁸⁸ If a direct encounter with the erroneous commandment occurred during private reading, the reader's reaction would be highly individual. Of course, given the possibly small number of STC 2296 Bibles produced and their later recall, most would not encounter the error directly, but hear about it from others. If there was a danger of the humour growing as the tale spread from person to person, this could aid in explaining the attempts of the authorities to curb the spread of the edition and prevent the joke spreading too far.

To what extent did humour itself represent a subversive threat to social mores and authority? This continues to be debated. The 'Carnival,' a recurring period in which norms and social roles were inverted in an atmosphere of revelry and celebration, frames much discussion of humour and amusement in the period leading up to the Early Modern.⁸⁹ Peter Burke argues that built up tensions and frustrations needed periodic release through ritual reversal of expected behaviour and deference.⁹⁰ Through the Tudor and Stuart periods such traditions gradually declined, partially because of the echoes of paganism detected by Protestants in

⁸⁵ Brewer, 96-7.

⁸⁶ Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, 225-254.

⁸⁷ Fincham, "The King James Bible," 82.

⁸⁸ Fincham, 77-9.

⁸⁹ Burke, 178-204.

⁹⁰ Burke, 185-204.

such festivities, and partially because of the emergence of a middle-class which had no obvious polar opposite.⁹¹ Still, Rick Bowers argues that the ‘carnivalized assertions’ of radical comedy subversively confronted the assurance of authority.⁹² Ghose disagrees, arguing instead that such inversion ultimately reinforced the established order. Chaos and folly were meant to be laughed at, not taken seriously as a disruption of community solidarity.⁹³ The argument is complicated by the fact that the authorities could react both positively and negatively to inversive humour. Ghose points out that the elite often participated in festivity and games of inversion with enthusiasm, since they in fact shared many patriarchal, religious, and nationalist values.⁹⁴ But the Tudor period also saw the prohibition and denouncement of certain inversionary rituals such as boy bishops and lords of misrule.⁹⁵ The jester was the archetypal figure of inversion and licence. However, one named Archie Armstrong found himself going too far with Archbishop Laud – the very man who led the charge against the Wicked Bible – demonstrating that elite tolerance had its limits.⁹⁶ Armstrong had made a jest to Laud about the difficulties Laud was experiencing in trying to impose a new Book of Common Prayer on Scotland, a jest for which neither Laud nor apparently the King was in any mood, leading to Armstrong’s dismissal.⁹⁷ Thomas notes that in a time of growing religious and political discord, mockery which transgressed previously accepted hierarchies began to seem much more threatening.⁹⁸

Bowers argues that comedic theatre has “a power rooted in resistance to authority, assertion of unprivileged culture, and insistence on the endurance of human discourse.”⁹⁹ In contrast, Ghose describes attempts to link the early modern theatre with subversion and marginality a “strain of academic wishful thinking,” noting that its audience was composed of a broad

⁹¹ Thomas, 79.

⁹² Rick Bowers, *Radical Comedy in Early Modern England: Contexts, Cultures, Performances* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 3.

⁹³ Ghose, 64-5.

⁹⁴ Ghose, 65.

⁹⁵ Thomas, 79.

⁹⁶ Brewer, 104.

⁹⁷ Andrea Shannon, “‘Uncouth language to a Princes ears’: Archibald Armstrong, Court Jester, and Early Stuart Politics,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 42, no. 1 (2011): 99-100.

⁹⁸ Thomas, 79.

⁹⁹ Bowers, *Radical Comedy in Early Modern England*, 1.

cross-section of society, up to and including royalty.¹⁰⁰ However, there can be little denying Bowers' assertion that comedy brings institutions of authority and repression down to a 'human' level to be worked upon by comic clichés.¹⁰¹ From a linguistic perspective, the commandment error fits the theme of inversionary humour, in that it apparently reverses a well-known social and religious restriction. However, it would be a mistake to think that social mores regarding adultery were subverted by the words 'thou shalt commit adultery,' however much a reader might laugh. In fact, much of the humour likely came as a result of bringing the reality of the social prohibition against adultery to mind. This is not to suggest that the error was not subversive in another way, in that it directly countered a key pillar of the image King Charles worked to convey during his reign, that of chasteness and marital fidelity.¹⁰² Along with the other errors and overall poor quality, the Wicked Bible threatened the image and dignity of the Royal, Church, and state authorities the Bible was intended to represent. I will return to this in the second chapter.

Incongruity and ambiguity are two more lenses through which to view humour in the Wicked Bible. The importance of 'surprise' in generating laughter was discussed by some humanists in the sixteenth century,¹⁰³ although the 'incongruity' theory of laughter would not reach its full expression until the eighteenth.¹⁰⁴ Even Hobbes, famous for his superiority theory, emphasised that "whatsoever it be that moveth laughter, it must be new and unexpected".¹⁰⁵ Seen as a less aggressive alternative to the often derisive laughter of superiority, it was described by Immanuel Kant in his 1790 *Critique of Judgement* as springing from "the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing".¹⁰⁶ Certainly, someone wading through the moral strictures laid down in the book of Exodus would be surprised when given licence, in fact, positively *commanded* to go and copulate outside their marriage. Part of the incongruous effect may have come from a feeling of contradiction based on the word itself.

¹⁰⁰ Ghose, 68.

¹⁰¹ Bowers, 1.

¹⁰² Kevin Sharpe, *Criticism and Compliment: The politics of literature in the England of Charles I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 202-03.

¹⁰³ Ghose, 60.

¹⁰⁴ Phiddian and Noonan, "History of Humor: Early Modern Europe," 297-8.

¹⁰⁵ Hobbes, *Human Nature*, cited in Lintott, "Superiority in Humour Theory," 354.

¹⁰⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, cited in Phiddian and Noonan, 297.

‘Adultery’ implies misconduct; if all sexual behaviour both inside and outside marriage is given full sanction, then ‘adultery’ ceases to exist as a concept.

Ambiguity is also a mode in which humour can arise, particularly at the boundaries of propriety. According to Arthur Koestler, humour “compels the listener to perceive the situation in two self-consistent but incompatible frames of reference at the same time”.¹⁰⁷ A reader of the Wicked Bible is aware of the reality in which the misprint is entirely unintended on the part of the publishers, but finds humour in imagining the scenario in which sanction for adultery has *actually* been given. If a reader holds one or the other of these scenarios in their mind, but not both, they might feel joyous, or repressed – but are unlikely to experience humour. Some humour of the period took cover under the guise of the ‘false lapsus’. This ‘slip-of-the-tongue’ humour relied on wordplay and linguistic ambiguity to give a humorous veneer of deniability to potentially inappropriate jokes.¹⁰⁸ If the change in printing the seventh commandment was indeed an intentional prank, then the culprit no doubt relied on the deniability of a printing ‘mistake’ to avoid detection. A mismatch between intention and reception is often at the root of defences of jests as ‘harmless,’ particularly when they went wrong and led to litigation.¹⁰⁹ Much of the humour in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* lies in the farce of the confused lovers, or in Titania’s infatuation with the transformed Bottom. Although things never progress so far as to show actual adultery, in the final address to the audience, Puck slyly suggests that:

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended,
That you have but slumber’d here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend:
If you pardon, we will mend¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Arthur Koestler, “Humour and Wit,” cited in Ghose, 105.

¹⁰⁸ Dominique Brancher, ““When the tongue slips it tells the truth,”” *Renaissance Studies* 30, no. 1 (2016): 50-6.

¹⁰⁹ Wiltenburg, 29-31.

¹¹⁰ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ed. Cecil Watts (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2002), 5.1.408-15.

Ghose notes that Shakespeare seems conscious of the possibility of some taking offence at his flirtations with – and comical parody of – adulterous desire, so heads off such objections with an additional humorous invitation to imagination.¹¹¹ Puck gives concerned audience members permission to laugh by providing the cover of dreamlike ambiguity. The ambiguous unreality of a play, or the incongruous words of a misprinted Bible, might allow people to chuckle at things such as adultery, which in reality social mores would require them to denounce.

Adultery and Humour

Adultery, both real and imagined, provided an ever-present current of tension in early modern society. Ghose suggests that cuckoldry jokes “seem[ed] to mirror a cultural obsession.”¹¹² Two remarkably comparable instances of legal conflict prompted by accusations of adultery demonstrate the power such allegations could have in harming reputation and authority. During a struggle with local gentry over social precedence and prestige, Dr. Thomas Temple, rector of a small Gloucestershire village, denied accusations in 1634 that he had committed adultery with a lower-class village woman.¹¹³ Temple accused his enemies of falsely conspiring against him due to a dispute over tithing and the relative locations of family pews in his church, while they in turn accused him of being a violent bully. The case between them eventually reached Star Chamber in 1635, where all involved were acquitted of conspiracy. While technically he had escaped conviction for any wrongdoing, and even later managed to extract a sentence for malicious defamation against Mary Toms, the lower-class woman who had accused him, Temple’s reputation was shattered.¹¹⁴ He later lamented that he had become “a vessel of dishonour, neglected of all my friends and acquaintance”.¹¹⁵ In a similar case involving even more precariously high social standing, the Archbishop of York, Edwin Sandys, claimed that a 1581 incident in which he was supposedly discovered in bed with an innkeeper’s wife was maliciously arranged by the ambitious rival gentleman Sir Richard Stapleton in order to smear his reputation.¹¹⁶ The case also made its way to Star Chamber,

¹¹¹ Ghose, 84-85.

¹¹² Ghose, 102.

¹¹³ Haigh, “Dr. Temple’s Pew,” 497-516.

¹¹⁴ Haigh, 507-08.

¹¹⁵ Haigh, 508.

¹¹⁶ Bastow, “An Abortive Attempt,” 380-401.

where in 1583 Stapleton, the innkeeper Sisson, and their servants were found to have maliciously conspired against the archbishop, and Stapleton was made to issue a public apology to Sandys.¹¹⁷ Sir Walter Mildmay, one of the commissioners at the hearing, suggested that slander against the second highest prelate in the realm also slandered the monarch, realm, and Gospel.¹¹⁸ He also made clear the dangers of reputational damage, as while “the wound of a slander may bee cured, but ye scar will remain.”¹¹⁹ Sandys, in admonishing Stapleton, asserts that “you have greatly wronged and given a great wounde by your late ungodly practise, to your selfe, to me and especially to the church of God.”¹²⁰ However, in bringing so much attention to his case by insisting on Stapleton’s public apology, Sarah Bastow suggests that Sandys inadvertently caused damage to his own reputation by turning what could have been a relatively minor incident into a public spectacle.¹²¹

The similarities between these cases illuminate several important elements in how adultery was perceived. In both cases, the accused men were eventually exonerated from a legal standpoint, but nevertheless suffered significant and lasting damage to their reputations. The religious prohibition against adultery carried much power, and likely gave extra weight to the accusations given the accused’s clerical status. Christopher Haigh, writing about Temple, suggests that Temple’s actions as an all too common “pushy priest” prompted animosity among his parishioners.¹²² John Harrington, in writing an account of Sandys’s case for James I in 1608, suggests that the seeds of Stapleton’s grudge against Sandys had been planted when Sandys refused to bless his new house, instead implying that Stapleton was reaching above his station both financially and socially.¹²³ Resentment of moralizing and self-important clerics was not confined to the lower classes, and the immorality associated with adultery could make such accusations particularly damaging to them. It becomes clear in these accounts that the fact of whether ‘actual’ adultery took place became secondary to contests of social connection and prestige. This suggests that social elements of the stigma

¹¹⁷ Bastow, 398-99.

¹¹⁸ Bastow, 394.

¹¹⁹ Bastow, 394.

¹²⁰ Bastow, 399.

¹²¹ Bastow, 399.

¹²² Haigh, 515.

¹²³ Bastow, 389.

against adultery had a stronger impact on reputation than religious ones, which would be more concerned with whether adultery ‘actually’ took place and endangered souls. Despite such stigma, there are suggestions that attitudes toward adultery might prove flexible at the prospect of payment. In both cases, the accused men in turn accused their upper-class rivals of bribing lower-class couples to blight their own reputations by manufacturing false allegations of adultery. In Sandys’s case, the innkeeper Sisson and his wife were portrayed as having a history of using illicit sex for material gain.¹²⁴ Even if the two clerics were not strictly ‘cuckolded’, the loss of dignity and self-control associated with adultery was enough to bring shame.

How then, does adultery translate into such a popular topic of humour? It is worth noting that the rather humourless instances mentioned above focussed on male self-control, or lack thereof. When the focus turned to the sexual behaviour of women, and thus produced cuckoldry, laughter could more freely arise through the mechanism of ridicule. Thomas argues that marriage jokes confronted the reality of female insubordination within a male-dominated system. After all, it would have to be a particular fool who lost control of his wife’s behaviour within an arrangement as patriarchal and unequal as early modern marriage.¹²⁵ To be the subject of ridicule for cuckoldry was an ever-present male anxiety. Jokes are often seen as a method of coming to terms with social anxieties, which could help explain why men laughed at what they feared. Ghose describes the persistently popular Freudian ‘hydraulic release’ theory, whereby ‘nervous energy’ is released as laughter to relieve the tension built by inhibiting emotions associated with aggression and sexuality. However, she also cautions against forming opinions too firmly about early modern attitudes based solely on their jokes, noting that many jests were passed down from classical and medieval sources, and were often a cue for laughter through stock forms and figures. Lecherous priests, ignorant peasants, and the browbeaten husband all appear often.¹²⁶ Barbara Bowen notes the popularity and longevity of a jest recorded by Poggio Bracciolini in his *Facetiae* of 1470, in which a man is trudging upstream looking for the corpse of his wife who has drowned.¹²⁷ When informed by an observer that it would be more useful to search

¹²⁴ Bastow, 386-7.

¹²⁵ Thomas, 77.

¹²⁶ Ghose, 103-4.

¹²⁷ Barbara Bowen, *One Hundred Renaissance Jokes: An Anthology* (Birmingham: Summa Publications, Inc., 1988), 7.

downstream, the man says that she was so difficult and bad-tempered “that even after her death she could only go against the current.”¹²⁸ With regard to cuckold jokes, Pamela Allen Brown points out that unfaithful wives commonly come out on top over their jealous and foolish husbands, highlighting the men’s impotence and humiliation. She gives an example of a story in which the King of Naples and a rival gentleman make fools out of themselves in the process of mutually cuckolding one another, while their wives end up content and unpunished in their new arrangement.¹²⁹

Trying to understand early modern attitudes to adultery via jokes alone could leave one with the misleading impression that the general reaction to real instances of the act was rueful toleration or amusing hijinks rather than anger. In fact, jests themselves could lead to outrage and litigation. Wiltenburg describes several examples where ill-judged ‘jest’ led to accusations of slander. In 1589, Thomas Collins was brought to court in Oxford for claiming “merelie & in iest sorte” that he had enjoyed the attentions of James Warcopp’s wife, despite it apparently being a groundless boast during a drinking session.¹³⁰ In a similar occasion of drink-sodden merriment in 1687, Edward Peckett earned the ire of his cousin Thomas Peckett by jokingly implying that Thomas’s wife was unfaithful. Despite others agreeing that Edward was simply making light of Thomas’s baseless jealousy, the event led to protracted litigation.¹³¹ Importantly, Wiltenburg points out that the jests which reached the courts were ones which had ‘gone wrong’, and do not reflect those which may have engendered mutual laughter instead of insult.¹³² Still, the subject was clearly a precarious one. If ‘real’ social attitudes are not enough on their own to explain adulterous humour, it can be of benefit to explore why people continued to find it funny.

The shared awareness that there is a strong common desire for something so heavily restricted, namely sex, forms a strong basis for adulterous humour. Falstaff in Shakespeare’s *Merry Wives of Windsor* seeks unrestrained adulterous pleasure and generates much humour for the audience through his lecherous antics and pratfalls. There is a clear disconnect between the pride he takes in his girth as a source of power, and the reality of how he is

¹²⁸ Poggio Bracciolini, *Facetiae*, cited in Bowen, *One Hundred Renaissance Jokes*, 7.

¹²⁹ Brown, *Better a Shrew than a Sheep*, 93-94.

¹³⁰ Wiltenburg, 29-30.

¹³¹ Wiltenburg, 30.

¹³² Wiltenburg, 30-1.

perceived by those he targets for attempted sexual conquest.¹³³ His lack of ‘self-knowledge’ in this regard evokes Plato’s theory of the ridiculous as being those who mistakenly think themselves wise.¹³⁴ That his uncontrolled desire leads him to mockery and repentance at the end of the play suggests that excess was seen as something to be disciplined. There is a curiously paradoxical portrayal of adultery in Thomas Middleton’s popular 1630 play *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. The villainous Sir Walter Whorehound enjoys fornicating with the wife of the compliant Allwit. Lord and Lady Kix are unable to conceive a child, but when she is made pregnant by another man, Sir Walter is disinherited and condemned, while Lord Kix celebrates in triumph, even inviting the man who has impregnated his wife to live with them and continue his work. Thus, *villainous* adultery is brought low by apparently *heroic* adultery.¹³⁵ A key distinguishing factor appears to be uncontrolled desire: Sir Walter only cuckolds for pleasure, while the arrangement between Kix and the lower-class Touchwood Senior is intended for procreation. However, while Lord Kix revels in his victory, the bulk of the crowd perhaps saw Touchwood as the real winner: free lodging in a fine house and free license to another man’s wife might seem like a fine celebration of pleasure and desire.

Taken at face value, the words ‘thou shalt commit adultery’ are a straightforward expression of a tongue in cheek argument occasionally made: that adultery is in fact no sin. This could certainly go wrong; Wiltenburg gives an account of a 1581 court case in which Thomas Wormley was accused by Edward Taylor of attempting to seduce Taylor’s wife by persuading her that adultery and fornication were not sins.¹³⁶ Wiltenburg notes from court records that while Wormley denied that he had made such overtures to Taylor’s wife, he did admit that on a boat trip in mixed company, he may have uttered some “jeasting talk tending to that effect.”¹³⁷ Couching such talk in jest both exposes the reality of desire and gives a veneer of deniability to such thoughts. Couching it in poetry, as done by famed poet turned clergyman John Donne, shows how such personal experiences of feeling could enter popular culture. In “The Flea,” Donne’s protagonist attempts to coax a woman into his bed by

¹³³ Will Stockton, *Playing Dirty: Sexuality and Waste in Early Modern Comedy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 28-30.

¹³⁴ Lintott, 359-50.

¹³⁵ Bowers, 85.

¹³⁶ Wiltenburg, 30.

¹³⁷ Wiltenburg, 30.

convincing her that with their bodily fluids already mixed within the body of a biting flea, having sex would represent no escalation upon what already exists between them:

Confess it! This cannot be said
 A sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead
 Yet this enjoys before it woo
 And pampered swells with one blood made of two
 And this, alas, is more than we would do.¹³⁸

Apparently unimpressed by this logic, the woman crushes the flea, only for the would-be lover to deftly refocus his argument. Having killed the flea and suffered no ill effects, yielding to lust could do no more harm than doing that: “Just so much honour, when thou yield’st to me, / Will waste, as this flea’s death took life from thee.”¹³⁹ The proverbial tendency of amorous young men to ‘say anything’ to get into bed is parodied, perhaps self-consciously. That there is no indication of success only adds to the humour of the desperate young man’s plight. “The Indifferent” is another celebration of romantic freedom and variety: “I can love her and her, and you and you; / I can love any – so she be not true.”¹⁴⁰ However, this celebration is at the expense of the heart-sick lovers who wish to make the speaker their ‘fixed subject:’

Venus heard me sigh this song,
 And by love’s sweetest part, variety she swore,
 She heard not this till now; and it should be no more.
 She went, examined, and returned ere long,
 And said, ‘Alas, some two or three
 Poor heretics in love there be
 Which think t’establish dang’rous constancy,
 But I have told them, “Since you will be true,
 You shall be true to them who’re false to you.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ John Donne, “The Flea,” lines 5-9, in *The Poems of John Donne, Volume One: Epigrams, Verse Letters to Friends, Love-Lyrics, Love-Elegies, Satire*, ed. Robin Robbins (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2008), 189-90.

¹³⁹ Donne, “The Flea,” lines 26-27, 191.

¹⁴⁰ John Donne, “The Indifferent,” lines 8-9, in *The Poems of John Donne, Volume One: Epigrams, Verse Letters to Friends, Love-Lyrics, Love-Elegies, Satire*, ed. Robin Robbins (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2008), 203.

¹⁴¹ Donne, “The Indifferent,” lines 19-27, 203.

Donne uses the figure of Venus to affirm the protagonist's belief in sexual freedom, while the poor women who desire dedication from the protagonist are chided for their unrealistic expectations. Donne's poetry thus demonstrates that the disregarding of sexual restriction could be a ripe field for both humour and celebration. A man reading the Wicked Bible, newly printed in the year of Donne's death, might feel a flash of comic thrill as he imagines the permission granted to him by the altered seventh commandment, if only it were genuine. That thrill might gain a nervous tinge when he realises that the same permission would also be granted to his wife.

Discussions of humour in as patriarchal a society as Stuart England can lead to a highly male-centric account, but it should be kept in mind that women played a crucial role in producing adulterous laughter. Brown discusses how women created and participated in 'cuckoldy' laughter, particularly through 'horning' humour. Given the ways in which women were often harshly dominated in this period, she suggests that generating this humour was one of the few ways in which they could take hold of their situation and serve up a rejoinder to inadequate or abusive husbands.¹⁴² Mary Toms, who may have simply been a pawn in the struggle between the aforementioned Dr. Temple and his rivals, nonetheless seems to have maintained her sense of humour while exposing herself to charges of adultery, telling Temple while confronting him about their alleged tryst that "she thought she should send him a tithe child."¹⁴³ Temple had gained a reputation as well as some local resentment for aggressive tithe collection;¹⁴⁴ this may have been a reference to this alleged avarice. The reality of women's speech and laughter seems to be one of which men were all too aware. Wiltenburg notes that despite ideals that women should remain "chaste, silent, and obedient," they proverbially never stopped talking.¹⁴⁵ Likewise, marriage itself was both a blessed ideal and never-ending source of sexual anxiety.¹⁴⁶ While adultery jokes might still serve the ultimate purpose of warning against transgressing against social mores, women could still be the victors within jests made a male character's expense. A jest attributed to the famous clown Richard Tarlton has Tarlton offer his wife a crown of gold if she does not lie in response to his questioning if he is a cuckold. His wife remains silent, and having made no lie, keeps the

¹⁴² Brown, 85-88.

¹⁴³ Haigh, 510.

¹⁴⁴ Haigh, 498.

¹⁴⁵ Wiltenburg, 26.

¹⁴⁶ Bowers, 84.

crown. Tarlton rhymes: “As women can with speech revile a man, / So can they in silence beguile a man.”¹⁴⁷ Brown points out that Tarlton’s wife outwits him by parodically employing the very things women were supposed to embody: silence and obedience.¹⁴⁸ Tarlton is left no more enlightened about his possible status as cuckold. This demonstrates that society at large was highly aware of male anxiety around the loss of status that cuckoldry represented, and the power this granted women. Even female threats to make fake claims of cuckoldry against their husbands are shown in jests and plays to have real power, although Brown notes that the very real danger of actually carrying it out likely mitigated the impact of these threats in reality.¹⁴⁹ When adding the Wicked Bible to this mix of patriarchy and insecurity, jokes about which ‘version’ of the Bible the wife of a cuckolded man had been reading almost write themselves.

To be an unwitting or compliant cuckold was bad enough, but most foolish of all was the ‘horn-mad’ husband, whose jealousy and rage could attract both fear and contempt.¹⁵⁰ The horn-mad cuckold king whom Tarlton’s ghost encounters in Purgatory has arms which feature “the Asse, with a marvelous paire of long and large ears”.¹⁵¹ The analogy of cuckolds to asses has interesting relevance to the Wicked Bible. Until now, I have focussed on the Exodus commandment error as the most well-known of the errors in the ‘Wicked’ print runs of 1631. However, alongside the well-known ‘thou shalt commit adultery,’ the records of the Court of High Commission lists another change as among the Bible’s “two grossest errors.”¹⁵² Deuteronomy 5:24 supposedly contains the assertion that “The Lord hath shewed us his glory, and his great asse”, instead of “greatnesse”.¹⁵³ While there are several extant copies which contain the famous commandment error, there are no known copies which contain the ‘great asse’ error, although Gordon Campbell points out that there are three known editions which contain conspicuous ink spots in precisely the position the error would be.¹⁵⁴ Chris Jones has confirmed two of these three copies are STC 2297.3 and is presently

¹⁴⁷ *Tarlton’s Jests*, cited in Brown, 98.

¹⁴⁸ Brown, 98.

¹⁴⁹ Brown, 96.

¹⁵⁰ Brown, 95.

¹⁵¹ *Tarlton’s Newes out of Purgatory*, cited in Brown, 95.

¹⁵² “The Printers,” *Reports of Cases*, 305, (14 June, 1632).

¹⁵³ “Mr Barker, the printer,” *Reports of Cases*, 296-97, (May 8, 1632).

¹⁵⁴ Campbell, 109-11.

assessing the third copy.¹⁵⁵ If all three are confirmed, this further increases the likelihood they all contain the same obscured error. The uncertainty surrounding this specific error lends continuing uncertainty to the question of whether the more famous error was intentional or not. While the removal of ‘not’ certainly alters the meaning of the seventh commandment, it could still plausibly be argued to be a genuine mistake to miss it in setting and correction. The altering of ‘greatnesse’ to ‘great asse’ requires two specific characters to be changed while maintaining grammatical coherency and a logical meaning, which is certainly less likely to be accidental.

Despite a general consensus that ‘ass’ (meaning the animal) and ‘arse’ were not punnable until the nineteenth century, some literary critics have argued, primarily using *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, that a link can be detected.¹⁵⁶ If true, this would add a somewhat juvenile and scatological element to any humour found in the error – God as an impudent arse-flasher. More convincingly, Will Stockton argues in support of the linking of ‘ass’ to cuckoldry, noting several examples in Shakespeares *Merry Wives of Windsor* where naivety and a lack of vigilance regarding cuckoldry is likened to being an ‘ass’.¹⁵⁷ The linking of asses to cuckolds would therefore create a thematic link between the two most well-known errors in the Wicked Bible. Although the errors do not occur within the same copies of the Bible, two separate adultery jokes made in proximity to the Ten Commandments still increases the likelihood of deliberate sabotage or prank. Another possibility is that there was no intended link between ‘asse’ and either the body part or cuckoldry, and the joke turned on the somewhat more pedestrian image of God showing an animal alongside his glory. Whatever the taken meaning, the error was egregious enough to warrant specific mention in records of the printers’ punishment. Modern technology could help settle this question – it would be fascinating to know what forensic examination of the letters beneath the ink spots in the three marked copies could reveal.

¹⁵⁵ With regard to this point, I am grateful to Dr Chris Jones who shared information from his forthcoming catalogue of STC 2296, STC 2297.3, and other 1631 copies with me.

¹⁵⁶ Stockton, *Playing Dirty*, 26.

¹⁵⁷ Stockton, 33.

Examining various roots of early modern humour has revealed several ways in which the Wicked Bible, and particularly its famous error “Thou shalt commit adultery” (Exod. 20:14) could prompt mirth in the early seventeenth century. Scorn and superiority are often thought to be central to early modern humour – does the Wicked Bible allow for this? Adulterers and their victims were certainly scorned and mocked in the period, and the commandment error certainly fits the adultery theme, but it is not clear that they would be the ‘target’ of this specific error. Instead, the existence of the error itself, along with all the others in the edition, opens the path to scorn toward those represented by the faulty Bible, such as the King, the Church and its clergymen, or the ill-fated printers. This scornful humour could be magnified if the victim claimed some moral authority, or if the person laughing was predisposed to dislike them for some political, religious, or commercial reason. The power a joke can gain through being shared and spread can help explain why the authorities made efforts to suppress the Wicked Bible.

While the Wicked Bible may have had subversive power in that it exposed the authorities to ridicule, the error itself was not subversive in a religious or social sense. It is highly unlikely that many people had their fundamental beliefs about adultery threatened by the missing ‘not’. When the inverted meaning of the seventh commandment brought the general social disapproval of adultery to mind, readers could still laugh, particularly as humour can function to reinforce accepted social values. It was generally also accepted that the Bible should be a dignified and decorous text. The surprise at being suddenly and incongruously granted permission for sex out of wedlock, or of being shown God’s ‘great asse’, or of seeing any number of other, more pedestrian errors could be enough to bring forth chuckles. They could also arise from the shock value of seeing a strong social and religious principle suddenly and unexpectedly reversed.

The ambiguity inherent in knowing what the Bible ‘really’ says while seeing the contradictory words on the page could make one laugh through considering the contrast between the two incompatible scenarios. This may be linked to an awareness of the underlying but often unacknowledged reality of sexual desire, something adulterous humour brings to the surface in a way made ‘safe’ for laughter. The commandment error in particular could remind people of jokes made along the theme that adultery was in fact not a sin – they could humorously imagine that the Bible had finally given sanction to such thoughts. It is clear then, that the Wicked Bible would likely have sparked humour in a variety of ways. In fact, it was precisely this humour which made the Wicked Bible so threatening to the King

and Church. Examining their reaction and how the event undermined their image and authority is the purpose of the next chapter.

Chapter Two

Egg on the (type)Face: The Undermining of Authority and Image

The appearance of the phrase ‘thou shalt commit adultery’ in an early seventeenth-century printed religious work has left little mark in the historical record and appears to have caused little upset at the time. I refer of course to *A commentarie vpon the fourth booke of Moses, called Numbers* by Puritan divine William Attersoll, published in 1618, wherein Christ, advising a youngster on what is necessary to achieve eternal life, “saith vnto him, *Thou shalt not kil, thou shalt commit adultery, &c. thou shalt loue thy neighbour as thy selfe*”.¹⁵⁸ A rare incitement to free love perhaps? If anyone was upset by this error, their outrage does not survive in the historical record. Perhaps nobody even noticed. Set alongside the much more famous Wicked Bible error of 1631, although the errors are in theory identical, it is not surprising that the Bible error generated a more excited reaction both then and now. The errors were more than just a missing word on a page, which might briefly offend religious sensibility by apparently reversing the meaning of a single tenet. There is of course the broader context of *where* the error appeared, *how* it was allowed to happen, and most importantly, *who* felt they had a stake in the issue and how it was dealt with. Appearing as it did in an edition of the King James Bible, printed by the King’s Printing House, the 1631 error offended not just against religion. The Crown and state included the Bibles and other works printed on their behalf as a pillar of their authority and prestige, and errors threatened to undermine this with not only outrage, but even worse, mockery.

While the famous alteration of the seventh commandment consumes the most historical attention to the Wicked Bible, the error was used at the time to highlight much broader quality issues of which the 1631 editions stood accused. This is shown in the record of the case against King’s Printer Robert Barker in the Court of High Commission on the 8th of May, 1632:

¹⁵⁸ William Attersoll, *A commentarie vpon the fourth booke of Moses, called Numbers Containing, the foundation of the church and common-wealth of the Israelites, while they walked and wandered in the vildernesse. Laying before vs the vnchangeable loue of God promised and exhibited to this people ... Heerin also the reader shall finde more then fiue hundred theologicall questions, decided and determined by William Attersoll, minister of the word*, STC 893 (London: Printed by William Iaggard, 1618), 297.

There is a cause begunne against him for false printeing of the Bible in divers places of it, in the Edition of 1631, vizt., in the 20 of Exod[us], “Thou shalt committ adultery”; and in the fifte of Deut[eronomy], “The Lord hath shewed us his glory, and his great asse”; and for divers other faults; and that they had printed it in very bad paper.¹⁵⁹

Clearly the two headlining errors only represented a much larger issue. Considered on their own, the errors indeed appear blasphemous, perhaps enough to explain the Church’s anger? However, Bishop William Laud’s following comments are particularly revealing with regard to the source of their anger:

And the BISHOP OF LONDON shewed that this would undoe the trade, and was a most dishonorable thing; that they of the Church of Rome are soe carefull, that not a word or letter is to be found amisse in their Ladie’s Psalter and other superstitious bookes; and that we should not be soe carefull in printinge the sacred Scriptures; and that they in Holland, at Amsterdam, had gott up an English presse, and had printed the Bible in better paper, and with a better letter, and can undersell us 18*d.* in a bible.¹⁶⁰

Laud’s comments not only reveal a concern at the reactions of both Catholics and Puritans, they also tie together the undermining of both religious and commercial reputation. He clearly identifies the stake the Church and state authorities held in ensuring the King James Bible was a competitive, quality product. It is a mistake to characterize the response of the authorities as one of apocalyptic rage however, or to repeat the somewhat common canard that the Bibles were ordered destroyed. In fact, Laud’s focus on the image and economic factors involved smacks much more of embarrassment than rage. As mentioned above, the erroneous Bibles which had been seized were in fact returned for correction and resale, with the court ordering that the printers “should haue all the said [bookes] bibles redeliu’ed vnto them wth expresse charge that they see all the grosse faults thereof amended before they presume to vent the same.”¹⁶¹ The errors certainly embarrassed and upset the authorities; real importance was placed on the good production of the English Bible. The incident was not seen as unforgiveable, however. Laud, now Archbishop of Canterbury, even describes himself as “Yovr loving Frend” in a 1633 letter to the King’s Printers instructing them to print works in Greek and Latin at the behest of the King himself.¹⁶² The attitude of the State

¹⁵⁹ “Mr Barker, the printer,” *Reports of Cases*, 296-97, (8 May, 1632).

¹⁶⁰ “Mr Barker, the printer,” *Reports of Cases*, 296-97, (8 May, 1632).

¹⁶¹ “Greek Press,” *A Companion to Arber*, section 68, item 5, 298, (23 June, 1635).

¹⁶² “Greek Press,” *A Companion to Arber*, section 68, item 3, 296-97, (27 January, 1633/4).

and Church toward the faulty Bible edition was clearly more nuanced than has often been portrayed.

An understandable source of historical speculation is an explanation of how the famous errors came about: whether they were malicious sabotage, humorous pranks, or genuine errors caused by laziness and cost-cutting. Phyllis Handover argues in her well-known article on the Wicked Bible that the commandment error was the result of industrial sabotage on the orders of Bonham Norton, a former member of the King's Printing House and rival to Robert Barker.¹⁶³ It is certainly true that Norton held a grudge against Barker, having been removed from the office of King's Printer after a dispute heard in the Court of Chancery on October 20, 1629, and then confined to the Fleet prison on November 16 of the same year for refusing to accept this.¹⁶⁴ However, it should be noted, as Jones has highlighted, that the printers never attempted to advance sabotage as an explanation for the errors.¹⁶⁵ Given their acrimonious history with Norton, if they had an inkling he was somehow responsible from his prison cell, it is likely they would have immediately sought to accuse him. Interestingly, the printers do argue that the whole business had been "stirred up by the malice of one man against them",¹⁶⁶ but they appear to be referring to the attention drawn to the case after the errors had been discovered. Handover does not mention, or is perhaps not even aware of, the many other errors and issues of poor quality of which the edition stood accused, most of which were much more pedestrian and less scandalous than 'Thou shalt commit adultery' and were almost certainly the result of deficient quality control. Of course, these explanations are not mutually exclusive, and a deliberate commandment error could simply have brought attention to the wider issue of poor correction and paper quality. Anthony Grafton describes the environment of the printing house as one of stress and bustle, in which many hands are involved in the process of setting ink to paper.¹⁶⁷ While this might mean many chances for sabotage, it also means many chances to make a simple slip in setting or correction. My focus on the humour of the errors in the first chapter might lend weight to the possibility of a prank,

¹⁶³ Handover, 15-16.

¹⁶⁴ Maria Wakely, "Printing and Double-Dealing in Jacobean England: Robert Barker, John Bill, and Bonham Norton," *The Library* 8, no. 2 (2007): 138-39.

¹⁶⁵ Jones, Askey, and Hardman, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ih9m_uBV9E.

¹⁶⁶ "The Printers," *Reports of Cases*, 304-05, (14 June, 1632).

¹⁶⁷ Anthony Grafton, *Inky Fingers: The Making of Books in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2020), 30.

perhaps at the hands of overworked and underpaid pressmen. Indeed, the funnier the errors seemed to people at the time, the more strength is lent to the idea that they were deliberate jokes. However, due to its overall poor state and numerous mistakes, the Wicked Bible was a source of humour and embarrassment whether or not intention lay behind its one or two most famous errors.

Attempting to explain the embarrassing effect the Wicked Bible had, or threatened to have, on the reputation and image of the authorities is the purpose of this chapter. However, before I explore the events and reactions to the Wicked Bible, it is worth laying out the roots of the King James Bible and its ties to English royal power, and some of the motivations and goals of the two authority figures most associated with the Wicked Bible: Archbishop William Laud and King Charles I. Doing so will help make clear why the Wicked Bible was treated more as a threat to worldly power and prestige than religious morality.

The King James Version and what it represented

Regarding the link between royal, state, and religious authority, the preface of the King James Bible makes the ideological link clear in an address to King James himself. Describing a once held fear that upon the death of Queen Elizabeth the nation would be enveloped in “thick and palpable clouds of darkness”, it credits his guidance with dispelling such fears “especially when we beheld the government established in your Highness,” and states that his subjects bless him as the man who “under GOD, is the immediate author of their true happiness.”¹⁶⁸ The divine right of kings was the linchpin of the theory of royal power developed under James, and continuing into the reign of Charles.¹⁶⁹ The king was portrayed as an intercessor between the people and God, answerable to no man but the Lord. Elena Kiryanova suggests that the printing of sermons exalting the King in this way implied the existence of a political desire to spread these ideas to a wide audience.¹⁷⁰ If God-given guidance came to the people via the sovereign, there must exist the means for such guidance to be effectively communicated. According to David Harvey, the entrusting of a Royal

¹⁶⁸ David Norton, ed., *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible with Apocrypha: King James Version* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), xv.

¹⁶⁹ Elena Kiryanova, “Images of Kingship: Charles I, Accession Sermons, and the Theory of Divine Right,” *The Journal of the Historical Association* 100, no. 339 (2015): 23-24.

¹⁷⁰ Kiryanova, “Images of Kingship,” 24.

Printer with the promulgation of law within the kingdom relied on three main principles: that law provided a foundation for order; that law flowed from the authority of the King; and that the spreading of law promoted the common good.¹⁷¹ A 1583 commission to investigate the complaints of junior stationers likened printing to coinage in terms of its importance to the legitimacy of the state, claiming that printing “like vnto coining was such a speciall arte and so much importeth the state in the misuse thereof”.¹⁷² The written word has historically been viewed as a deep well of authority,¹⁷³ so it would be important for this programme of divine authority to link itself to the most exalted text in Christian society: the Bible.

The early seventeenth century saw competition between different English translations of the Bible, and the dominant status of the ‘Authorized’ version was not an immediate certainty. Despite the undeniable long-term success of the King James Version, according to Kenneth Fincham it was not an immediate hit; in fact, its supposed initial publication in 1611 appears to have come about with little fanfare. It is not even clear that it was ever officially ‘authorized’, despite its later moniker.¹⁷⁴ The King’s Printers even continued printing its main competitor, the popular Geneva version, until 1616.¹⁷⁵ At the Hampton Court Conference of 1604 where a new translation of the Bible was proposed, James expressed his displeasure at the popularity of the Geneva version for its many marginal notes which seemed to undermine the idea of absolute royal authority, and allow for civil disobedience.¹⁷⁶ While the Bishops at the conference were content with the ‘Bishops’ Bible’ largely used in English churches, James liked the idea of an authoritative version which stressed the divine right of kings. Its creation would also help solidify the idea of a ‘national’ Church with the monarch at its head.¹⁷⁷ Despite James’s distaste for the Geneva as the “worst of all” versions,¹⁷⁸ there were

¹⁷¹ Harvey, *The Law Emprynted and Englysshed*, 42.

¹⁷² “The Commission on Privileges,” *A Companion to Arber*, section 5, item 3, 132, (18 July, 1583).

¹⁷³ Adam Fox, “Custom, Memory and the Authority of Writing,” 89.

¹⁷⁴ Fincham, 77-78.

¹⁷⁵ Fincham, 78.

¹⁷⁶ Danner, “The Contribution of the Geneva Bible,” 5.

¹⁷⁷ Campbell, 34-37.

¹⁷⁸ William Barlow, *The summe and substance of the conference which, it pleased his excellent Maiestie to haue with the lords, bishops, and others of his clergie, (at vvhich most of the lords of the councell were present) in his Maiesties priuy-champer, at Hampton Court. January 14. 1603*, STC 1456.5 (London: Imprinted by Iohn Windet [and T. Creede] for Mathew Law, and are to be sold at his shop in Paules Churchyard, neare S. Austens Gate, 1604), 46.

some points of ideological similarity between the Geneva and King James translation efforts, such as an emphasis on personal knowledge of the scriptures, and the idea of the English as a people with a special national destiny tied to their particular form of Protestantism.¹⁷⁹ Even though the dedication to James in the Authorized Version claims that James “did never desist, to urge and excite those to whom it was commanded, that the worke might be hastened,”¹⁸⁰ Fincham argues that despite some initial enthusiasm, James quickly disappeared from any involvement with the translation project, apart from a curt 1608 letter instructing that the business ought to be concluded. He goes on to suggest that a key driving force behind the project was Archbishop of Canterbury Richard Bancroft, but that Bancroft’s death in 1610 likely resulted in the lack of any official order for parishes to purchase it.¹⁸¹ Many parishes were slow to upgrade their Church Bible, often due to cost, or the feeling that their current edition was adequate.¹⁸² The version which had tied itself so closely to the monarch and state would have to compete for a time with other versions for the attention of both the churchgoer and the private reader.

The authority of the translated text itself was not immediately secure, a fact of which the translators were only too aware. Gerald Hammond, in analysing the preface to the 1611 edition, notes that while the author defends the translation decisions made, they also insists on the distinction between the translated words of God laid down on the page and the Word of God itself.¹⁸³ They were grudgingly aware that their work would be criticised, as indeed it was. Puritan scholar Hugh Broughton, who had been sent the translation to critique, made his displeasure known in a 1611 pamphlet, stating that the translation had “bred in me a sadness that will greeve me while I breath. It is so ill done. Tell his Maiest. that I would rather be rent in pieces by wilde horses, than any such translation by my consent bee vrged vpon poore Churches.”¹⁸⁴ David Norton argues that ultimately, it was not the strength of its merits as a translation that led to the success of the Authorised Version, but reasons of commerce and

¹⁷⁹ Danner, 11-18.

¹⁸⁰ From “To the Most High and Mightie Prince, Iames,” in *The Holy Bible*, STC 2296.

¹⁸¹ Fincham, 78-82.

¹⁸² Fincham, 90-91.

¹⁸³ Gerald Hammond, “The Authority of the Translated Word of God: A Reading of the Preface to the 1611 Bible,” *Translation and Literature* 2 (1993): 30-32.

¹⁸⁴ Hugh Broughton, *A censure of the late translation for our churches sent vnto a right worshipfull knight, attendant vpon the king*, STC 3847 (Middelburg: R. Schilders, 1611).

politics.¹⁸⁵ According to the scholar and sometime politician John Selden, critique of translation choices was not just a gentlemanly pastime, but could also be the province of the common folk. Describing the dangers of keeping the phrase structures of the old language while using the words of the new, he notes: “As for example, [He uncover’d her Shame] which is well Enough, so long as Scholars have to do with it; but when it comes among the Common People, Lord, what Jeer do they make of it!”¹⁸⁶ Selden goes on to mention the Wicked Bible error in discussing how men should approach the reading of scripture:

When Men meddle with the literal Text, the Question is, where they should stop: In this Case, a Man must venture his Discretion and do his best to satisfie himself and others in those Places where he doubts, for although we call the Scripture the Word of God (as it is) yet it was writ by a Man, a mercenary Man, whose Copy, either might be false, or he might make it false: For Example, here were a thousand Bibles printed in *England* with the Text thus, [*Thou shalt commit Adultery*] the Word [*not*] left out; might not this Text be mended?¹⁸⁷

Selden is aware of the fallibility of human attempts to set down the word of God, and advocates the necessity of personal discretion in judging and correcting perceived errors. Perceived difficulties in interpreting the text of the Bible had led previous translators to provide guidance to readers; the Geneva version had provided annotations throughout providing explanations or the translators’ own gloss on the text.¹⁸⁸ However, King James had viewed the marginal notes of the Geneva version as hostile to royal power, describing some of its notes as “very partiall, vntrue, seditious, and savouring too much, of daungerous, and trayterous conceites”.¹⁸⁹ He thus instructed that his new version was to have no such notes except to simply explain difficult translations from Hebrew and Greek.¹⁹⁰ This meant that the text of the King’s version would have to stand on its own. Without the guidance of annotations, the individual reader’s discretion was all the more key in interpreting the text.

¹⁸⁵ David Norton, *The King James Bible: A Short History from Tyndale to Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 137-38.

¹⁸⁶ John Selden, *Table-talk, being discourse of John Seldon, Esq or his sense of various matters of weight and high consequence, relating especially to religion and state*, 2nd ed. Arber’s Term Cat. II / 596; Wing / S2438. (London: Printed for Jacob Tonson, at the Swan in Pater-Noster-Row, 1696), 7.

¹⁸⁷ Selden, *Table-talk*, 9-10.

¹⁸⁸ Hammond, “The Authority of the Translated Word of God,” 24-25.

¹⁸⁹ Barlow, *The summe and substance*, 47.

¹⁹⁰ Hammond, 26.

However, given greater licence to judge the text, a non-scholarly reader might feel increasingly confident in finding it wanting.

An embarrassed Archbishop and King

William Laud, directly involved in the case of the Wicked Bible as a primary representative of the Church of England, clearly saw the matter as a threat to the Church in which he had to take a direct hand, in order to “have the Church sett upright in her reputacion”.¹⁹¹ The issue was not simply an abstract court dispute for him; he held a personal stake in how the matter was dealt with. Laud’s ultimate goal during his time as Bishop of London, and after 1633 as Archbishop of Canterbury, was one of uniformity within the English Church along ceremonial lines, under an established hierarchy of bishops.¹⁹² In this he was seen as aligned with the King: Leonie James suggests that the Royal Prerogative was seen by both Laud and Charles as the true source of legitimacy in religion.¹⁹³ The King James Bible, with its emphasis on royal power, was to be the version around which English religion was based, in fact, Laud’s promotion of the King James Bible was a major factor leading to the demise of the Geneva version in England.¹⁹⁴ Laud and his allies were denounced by their Puritan opponents as ‘Rattleheads’ who professed Protestantism but whose heads were constantly turning toward the superstition and ceremony of Papistry.¹⁹⁵ The pressure of defending against attacks from both Catholics and Puritans led to the invocation of the image of ‘Scylla and Charibdis’ to describe attempts to find a balance between the dual onslaught.¹⁹⁶ This tension is clearly on Laud’s mind during the proceedings against the printers when he condemns the Wicked Bible as falling short of both the quality of Catholic Bibles and the cost-effectiveness of Puritan ones.¹⁹⁷ Defending his relocation of the communion table from the nave back to its pre-Reformation location at the far east end of the church, Laud argued

¹⁹¹ “The Printers,” *Reports of Cases*, 304-05, (June 14, 1632).

¹⁹² Leonie James, “‘I was no “master of this work” but a servant to it’? William Laud, Charles I and the making of Scottish ecclesiastical policy, 1634-6,” *Historical Research* 90, no. 249 (2017): 506.

¹⁹³ James, “No Master of this Work,” 508-16.

¹⁹⁴ Norton, *A Short History*, 137.

¹⁹⁵ Michael Gaudio, “Looking as a Scholar, Thinking like a Rattle Head: On William Laud, Little Gidding, the Law, and the Gospel,” *Oxford Art Journal* 36, no. 3 (2013): 345.

¹⁹⁶ Gaudio, “Looking as a Scholar,” 351.

¹⁹⁷ “Mr Barker, the printer,” *Reports of Cases*, 296-97, (May 8, 1632).

that the bodily sacrifice of Christ represented at the altar was of greater importance than the word of Christ at the pulpit, stating that “a greater reverence, no doubt, is due to the body than to the word of our Lord.”¹⁹⁸ These words would come to haunt Laud, when at his trial in 1644, his opponents used them to accuse him of popish idolatry.¹⁹⁹ The ongoing Puritan critique that Laud and his followers cared not for the Word of God but only for ritual and superstition must have particularly stung when the official version of those words, in the form of the Wicked Bible, was undermined by foolish errors and shoddy workmanship.

Laud in fact put great stock in the importance of words and their printing. The emphasis he placed on print communication is evidenced by his continual personal involvement in printing matters. He often intervened in disputes within the King’s Printing House and was seen as an authority to which personal appeals regarding print employment and management could be made; examples of this will be discussed below. He used his office to alter and censor texts before publication, for example, removing the word ‘sabbath’ from a sermon, or adding material hostile to strict Sunday observance to a work by Joseph Hall.²⁰⁰ Both these changes were intended to counter what he saw as the rising threat of Puritan Sabbatarianism.²⁰¹ Laud even employed his own printer in the person of Richard Badger, who had been elevated to the position of master printer at Laud’s endorsement, and in breach of a 1615 Star Chamber decree limiting the number of master printers.²⁰² Laud’s affinity for taking a personal hand in altering and managing the publication of texts in order to more closely align with his political and religious ideals would end up getting him into trouble, ultimately being a factor leading to his impeachment in 1641.²⁰³ In 1634, Charles I had instructed the Scottish bishops to prepare new canons for the Scottish Church, but after their publication in 1636, Laud faced accusations that he had unduly interfered in a ‘magisterial’ way over their preparation and publication.²⁰⁴ In his defence, Laud justified his alteration of the canons by stating that “when it came to be Perfected, I did nothing but as I was

¹⁹⁸ Gaudio, 351.

¹⁹⁹ Gaudio, 351-52.

²⁰⁰ Hutton, 193.

²⁰¹ Hutton, 193.

²⁰² Peter McCullough, “Print, Publication, and Religious Politics in Caroline England,” *The Historical Journal* 51, no. 2 (2008): 286.

²⁰³ James, “‘I was no “master of this work” but a servant to it’,” 513.

²⁰⁴ James, 512-13.

Commanded and Warranted by his *Majesty*.”²⁰⁵ James makes it clear that Laud viewed his right to interfere in such matters as stemming from the authority and prerogative of the King.²⁰⁶ Unfortunately for Laud, in the period leading up to the Civil War, not all were as convinced of the King’s unquestionable authority.

Charles I, the King in question, was highly conscious of the importance of his image and reputation. Kevin Sharpe suggests that Charles was more concerned with the projection of image than any other early modern monarch.²⁰⁷ While both he and King James I had both firmly believed in the divine right of Kings, Charles was certainly perceived as having a style distinct from his father. James was known for his relative informality, disregard of decorum, and somewhat bawdy tastes, but also for his scholarship and enjoyment of debate and exchange. Charles, by contrast, was seen as stiff and formal, not as appreciative of humour, and most importantly, not interested in debating what he saw as unarguable: the weight and authority of his word as King.²⁰⁸ While Sharpe argues that Charles was not as uncommunicative as his later reputation suggests, he notes that Charles’s ultimate downfall and end upon the executioner’s block in 1649 seem to prompt the conclusion that his efforts regarding royal power and image were conspicuous failures. While James had *argued* for royal power, Charles had relied on the silent representation of majesty.²⁰⁹ If the events, images, and objects representing royal authority are meant to stand alone, without further explanation or justification, they become open to ridicule if they do not live up to the standards of dignity expected of them. While it would not be true to suggest that the Wicked Bible *caused* Charles’s downfall, some of Charles’s interests and actions help make clear why it would represent enough of a threat for him to take personal interest.

In 1631, the same year as the Wicked Bible’s publication, Charles and his Queen, Henrietta Maria of France, began the custom of performing extravagant Shrovetide masques for one

²⁰⁵ William Laud, *The history of the troubles and trial of the Most Reverend Father in God and Blessed Martyr, William Laud, Lord Arch-Bishop of Canterbury*, Arber’s Term Cat. II / 521 (v. 2); Wing / H2188 (v. 1); Wing / L586 (v. 1); Wing / L596 (v. 2) (London: Rose and Crown, 1695), 98.

²⁰⁶ James, 513-15.

²⁰⁷ Kevin Sharpe, *Image Wars: Kings and Commonwealths in England, 1603-1660* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 137.

²⁰⁸ Kevin Sharpe, *Criticism and Compliment*, 188-89.

²⁰⁹ Sharpe, *Image Wars*, 137-89.

another.²¹⁰ Charles took these performances seriously and was heavily involved in their planning and execution.²¹¹ As well as celebrating royal power, piety, and hierarchy, the importance of chaste love and marriage was a recurring theme in Caroline masques. The Platonic love exalted in the masques represented the triumph of reason and control over lust and carnal appetites, and by directly associating these qualities with the monarchs, demonstrated their innate right to rule a society ordered through beauty and pious understanding.²¹² ‘Corrupt’ love is equated with corrupt government; Sharpe gives the example of Aurelian Townshend’s *Tempe Restored*, performed at Whitehall in 1632, wherein Cupid realises his flawed understanding of love and vows to reform his government:

My gentle reign,
So wronged with acting of a tyrant’s part,
I must restrain,
My pow’r abused, and right my injured train.²¹³

The virtue of marital devotion was given particular emphasis in the crafting of Charles’s image, including even in literal images. In Anthony van Dyck’s *The ‘Greate Peece’*, a 1632 portrait of Charles and Henrietta Maria with their children, the inclusion of greyhounds frolicking at their feet was to symbolise the royal couple’s fidelity, and by extension, the fidelity between the monarch and his subjects.²¹⁴ Marriage was already a sensitive topic due to Charles’s wedding of a Catholic; Ronald Hutton even suggests that an intensification of the celebration of the deceased Protestant Queen Elizabeth’s accession day was a calculated insult to the new Queen Henrietta Maria.²¹⁵ It is clear how a crude error denigrating the sanctity of marriage could personally offend and threaten the King. Not only did it associate him with base immorality, adultery was also characterized as a threat to the legitimacy of his governance as sovereign. Even more dangerous, it threatened to associate him with the mockery and impotence of cuckoldry. The King’s Bible should have been the centrepiece of a body of work representing dignity and authority. Instead, in its Wicked incarnation, it sent

²¹⁰ Hutton, 197.

²¹¹ Sharpe, *Criticism and Compliment*, 187-88.

²¹² Sharpe, *Criticism and Compliment*, 202-03.

²¹³ Aurelian Townshend, *Tempe Restored*, lines 269-72, cited in Sharpe, *Criticism and Compliment*, 203.

²¹⁴ Gudrun Raatschen, “Merely Ornamental? Van Dyck’s Portraits of Henrietta Maria,” in *Henrietta Maria: Piety, Politics and Patronage*, ed. Erin Griffey (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2008), 155.

²¹⁵ Hutton, 186.

precisely the wrong message to his subjects: that bawdy humour of asses and adultery could be associated with the image of the King.

The King's Printers and the errors of the Wicked Bible

Once the official text of the King's version had been decided, the responsibility for creating the new Bibles for sale to the English people was granted to the office of King's Printer. The first edition of the Bible was a stately folio edition, which used Gothic black-letter type to produce a sense of grandeur and authority.²¹⁶ Typographical errors were not alien to this splendid edition however,²¹⁷ showing that printing quality was an issue even at the beginning of the life of the King James Bible. Alongside Bibles, the King's Printing House produced a vast array of texts on behalf of the King and state authorities, including proclamations, religious texts, and state apologia.²¹⁸ Maria Wakely argues that the King's Printers were a key element in James's political and religious programme to create and promote an 'official' national culture.²¹⁹ Their title implied a connection to the King himself – as having been 'chosen' by his majesty for a key role in communicating Royal ideas and commands. Such exalted status perhaps obscures the more sober commercial reality that in the case of the King James version, Robert Barker paid £4,000 to Archbishop Bancroft for the right to print the new edition.²²⁰ This is not to say there were no 'real' connections to the King. Wakely suggests that John Bill, who had joined the office of King's Printer alongside Bonham Norton in 1615, held the favour of King James, in part because he had personally financed a well-crafted edition of James's collected *Workes* in 1616/17. Indeed, these Royal associations meant that Bill's presence on a work's colophon was a desirable way to enhance its prestige.²²¹ Other printers may have even tried to trade on the cachet of the King's Printers. Peter McCullough argues that Richard Badger, a printer who often worked for William Laud,

²¹⁶ Norton, *Textual History*, 46-47.

²¹⁷ Norton, *Textual History*, 54-61. Norton also provides a list of known errors in the first edition of the King James Bible in Appendix 1, pages 167-72 of *Textual History*.

²¹⁸ Wakely, "Printing and Double-Dealing," 121.

²¹⁹ Wakley, 121.

²²⁰ Fincham, 83.

²²¹ Wakley, 128-44.

used old King's Printing House ornaments and block-capitals he had acquired from John Bill in order to visually link his works to theirs.²²²

The office of King's Printer held genuine prestige, and King Charles I was highly displeased that the printers had tarnished this prestige, as well as that of the Crown and Church, with their "base and corrupt printing of the Bible".²²³ However, he saw in the incident an opportunity to advance his own agenda. Charles commanded that the £300 fine on Barker and his partner Martin Lucas (who held printing rights of the deceased John Bill) be remitted so long as they agreed to set up a Greek press at their own expense, and print works prepared by a certain Patrick Young "to the benefitt of the Church and to o^r great Hono^r".²²⁴ The printers responded that they were happy to oblige, although the fine and the stock of seized Bibles were dangled over their heads to ensure compliance.²²⁵ The fact that the King's Printers had to be commanded to set up a Greek press suggests that the market demand for such works was not particularly high, but the King certainly saw a benefit in propagating such texts. Increasing scholarly knowledge through the dissemination of learned texts was thought to serve the 'common weal', or overall good, of society and its functioning.²²⁶ Charles may have genuinely believed this, but also likely saw a personal benefit in associating himself, as an 'enlightened' monarch, with such pious and rational scholarship. Despite the troubles of their operation, Charles clearly still saw value in the King's Printers as a tool of propaganda, as in 1641, with civil war looming, he brought them to York alongside his army so they could continue to print at his behest.²²⁷ The growing political instability of Charles's reign placed increasing importance on the effective communication of ideas of royal authority and divine kingship. There was no place in his scheme for ribald and poor quality works printed in his name. It is likely the King's Printers would have agreed with this.

²²² McCullough, "Print, Publication, and Religious Politics in Caroline England," 296-7.

²²³ "Greek Press," *A Companion to Arber*, section 68, item 1, 294, (13 January, 1633/4).

²²⁴ "Greek Press," *A Companion to Arber*, section 68, item 1, 294, (13 January, 1633/4).

²²⁵ "Greek Press," *A Companion to Arber*, section 68, items 3 and 4, 297-98, (27 January, 1633/4 – February 1633/4).

²²⁶ Harvey, 113-16.

²²⁷ Henry R. Plomer, "The King's Printing House under the Stuarts," *The Library*, new series, 2 (1901): 369.

In his discussion of Laud and his personal printer Richard Badger, Peter McCullough demonstrates that printers were not always solely driven by profit but could also be ideologically committed to the programmes of their patrons.²²⁸ This could further help explain the King and Laud's relative lenience toward Barker and Lucas. Cyprian Blagden argues that both Robert Barker and the deceased John Bill had royalist sympathies,²²⁹ which is certainly not surprising given their station. Laud may have been unwilling to heavily punish people already on the side of the King and Church, and Barker and Lucas may have felt genuine dismay that their work had unintentionally threatened the cause. Barker and Lucas certainly expressed an eagerness to continue serving the King in the wake of their punishment, and for a chance to reduce their fine, stating to Laud that they "accompt it soe great a happines (after our troubles) that his Ma^{tie} is well pleased to comaund vs in the Greeke Impresse".²³⁰ Their obsequious language is not too revealing given who they were talking to, but given the embarrassment they had caused, they likely felt that doing a service was a quicker way back into the good graces of Laud and the King than simply paying a fine.

The prestige of the King's Printers was also linked in part to perceptions of commercial success. While admonishing the printers for their errors, Laud takes care to point out the profitable nature of their office: "And farther because the Patten w^{ch} you hold vnder him by his gracious favour, is a thinge of great profitt 'to you'."²³¹ In the reports of the Court of High Commision regarding the case, similar sentiments are attributed to the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Abbot: "THE ARCH BISHOP OF CANTERBURY saith, that the Printers who print for his Ma^{tie} have a very profitable place, and therefore should be more carefull."²³² The financial fortunes of Robert Barker might cast doubt on this. He was commonly in financial peril and spent the last ten years of his life in debtor's prison, where he died in 1645.²³³ However, this could simply be due to Barker's poor talents as a businessman. Barker, who had sold his stake in the King's Printing House in 1617, less than a year later sued to recover his claim, leading John Bill and Bonham Norton to claim that Barker only wanted back in because they had actually managed to make the business

²²⁸ McCullough, 285-313.

²²⁹ Blagden, *The Stationers Company*, 141.

²³⁰ "Greek Press," *A Companion to Arber*, section 68, item 3, 298 (27 January, 1633/4).

²³¹ "Greek Press," *A Companion to Arber*, section 68, item 2, 296 (18 January, 1633/4).

²³² "The Printers," *Reports of Cases*, 305 (14 June, 1632).

²³³ Wakely, "Printing and Double-Dealing in Jacobean England," 120.

profitable and increase its value.²³⁴ Barker, Bill, and Norton were continually at each other's throats in the courts over ownership stakes in the King's Printing patent.²³⁵ It is clear that there was a strong perception that the business of printing for the King *should* be both profitable and prestigious – and that the Wicked Bible threatened to expose a reality of shoddy commercialism. The financial collapse and failure of the King's Printers perhaps represented an even more embarrassing prospect than errors and poor quality. This could help explain why the stock of seized erroneous Bibles was returned to the printers for correction and resale, as a large stock of already printed books would represent a large investment of time and money.

Despite an ideal that the King's Printer should be a prosperous office, the printers found themselves navigating the fine line between profitability and the appearance of greed. In the Court of High Commission report, Abbot condemns printers who “look to gaine, gaine, gaine, nothing els”.²³⁶ As mentioned above, Laud bemoaned the fact that Amsterdam was producing higher quality Bibles and still undercutting the King's Printers, which presented a clear threat to the market position of the King's version. Barker and Lucas would certainly have felt the sting of this, as only two years earlier in 1630, they had complained to the Privy Council of the importation of illegal Bibles by the Puritan printer Michael Sparke.²³⁷ The authorities, having aided the King's Printers in attempts to eliminate the competition, were unimpressed that quality continued to decline. Laud also notes the higher standard of a Bible edition produced in Cambridge in 1629 when granted an exception to the King's Bible patent:

There was a great deale of doo betweene you of this Cittie and those of Cambridge heretofore about the priveledge of printeing the Bible and psalms which they of Cambridge claymed; then the Bible was exactlie printed, now you have forced the Cambridg printers to an agreement, now noe Bible is right printed.²³⁸

²³⁴ Wakely, 131-33.

²³⁵ Wakely's article in general is an exploration of this.

²³⁶ “The Printers,” *Reports of Cases*, 305 (14 June, 1632).

²³⁷ “Search for Bibles and other Church-Books illegally Printed and Imported, and Arrest of Michael Sparke,” *A Companion to Arber*, section 58, 261-65, (14 July 1630 – 17 February 1630/1). Chris Jones points this out in Jones, Askey, and Hardman, “Aotearoa's Wicked Bible,” URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ih9m_uBV9E.

²³⁸ “The Printers,” *Reports of Cases*, 305 (14 June, 1632).

The Cambridge edition had been noted for its quality compared to the output of the King's Printers,²³⁹ and Laud's frustration that the 'official' version does not live up to the same standard is evident. Cambridge had indeed demonstrated that quality Bible printing was still possible in the modern commercial environment. It is easy to interpret Laud's statement as a threat held over the heads of the King's Printers that their continued monopoly on the right to print English Bibles relied on improving their quality. This threat may have been futile.

David Harvey argues that monopolies reduce incentive to quality due to reduced competition and a greater ability to fix prices.²⁴⁰ Norton suggests that the monopoly system was largely to blame for the continuing decline of Bible quality from the King's Printers in the period leading to the English Civil War, even during the importation of cheaper and higher quality Bibles from Amsterdam.²⁴¹ Why then did the Crown continue with the King's Bible patent if it undermined quality in this way? Harvey suggests that while patents could function as rewards or guarantees of exclusivity, the ultimate purpose underlying them was control. While a patent could be very lucrative to a grantee, there was also the ever-present possibility of it being revoked. A grantee therefore would want to make sure not to print anything that might displease their patron.²⁴² However, it is clear that the King's Printers' attempts to maintain the profitability of their enterprise had finally resulted in an error their patrons could not ignore.

It is worth considering why the error in the seventh commandment made the issue of errors and poor quality unavoidable. This was perhaps due to the use of the Bible as a source of legal authority. The line drawn between matters of private conscience and matters deserving legal punishment was in a different place in the Early Modern period than where it might be drawn today. Adultery, to use a pertinent example, was seen as a social transgression subject to the authority of the law.²⁴³ The religious justifications for such laws clearly linked the Bible to secular systems of authority and punishment. Scholarly effort had taken place to separate the timeless moral laws of the Bible from laws more suited to the biblical Israelite

²³⁹ Norton, *Textual History*, 82-94.

²⁴⁰ Harvey, 46.

²⁴¹ Norton, *The King James Bible: A Short History*, 147.

²⁴² Harvey, 45.

²⁴³ Martin Ingram, "Reformation of Manners in Early Modern England," in *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*, eds. Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox, and Steve Hindle (Basingstoke: MacMillan Press Ltd, 1996), 47-48.

cultural milieu, and for which there was little desire or will to enforce. Michael Gaudio describes the creation of a Bible companion text delivered to William Laud entitled *The Whole Law of God as it is Delivered in the Fiue Bokes of Moyses Methodically Distributed into Three Great Classes Morall, Ceremoniall & Politicall* which separated the still-in-effect ‘Moral’ laws of the commandments from the ‘Ceremonial’ and ‘Political’ laws relating to Jewish cultural practice from which Christians had been freed by the sacrifice of Christ.²⁴⁴ It is hard to imagine that a hypothetical error such as “Thou shalt plow with an oxe or an asse together”²⁴⁵ would have provoked much consternation, although perhaps some amusement. Unfortunately for the King and his printers, the seventh commandment was among the pillars of Mosaic ‘Moral’ law, and its negation was a hard error to ignore. Adam Fox suggests that an increasingly literate culture in early modern England was changing in the ways it interacted with texts: where once they were treated with ‘reverence and fear’, attitudes were changing toward ‘respect and utilization.’²⁴⁶ While the Bible was still revered as the primary source of holy authority, people were increasingly aware of the corruptibility of individual texts. If the King and Church wished to tie their authority to their particular version, they ran the clear risk of readers seeing faults in that version as a reflection upon them. While it is unlikely that an early modern audience would assume that through the Wicked Bible the King and Church now wanted to legalise adultery, allowing such errors could open them to the charge that they did not treat their role as the source and custodians of such laws with the gravitas that they should. Such criticism may also be part of the reason the authorities went relatively easy on the printers – had they made a much larger fuss over the edition, and truly burnt books and revoked printing licences, it may have simply drawn more attention to the failures of the edition, failures that reflected in part on them.

Whatever systemic failures historians might identify as the underlying causes of the poor quality of the 1631 edition, those involved at the time had their own theories. The printers in defending themselves “moved the Court to passe by their oversights being the fault of the workemen”,²⁴⁷ but this did not absolve those in charge of their laziness and greed in Archbishop Abbot’s eyes:

²⁴⁴ Gaudio, 355-56.

²⁴⁵ Based on Deuteronomy 22:10, “Thou shalt not plow with an oxe or an asse together.” Translation of *The Holy Bible*, STC 2296.

²⁴⁶ Fox, 110.

²⁴⁷ “The Printers,” *Reports of Cases*, 304-05 (14 June, 1632).

I knew the tyme when greater care was had about printeing, the Bibles expeciallie, good compositors and the best correctors were gotten being grave and learned men, and the paper and letter rare and faire every way of the best; but now the paper is naught, the composers boys, and the correctors unlearned: There is a farmer and he makes the benefit, and careth nothing about it.²⁴⁸

Farmer in this case meant someone to whom the printing rights had been ‘farmed out’, the implication of course being that the serious duties of printing for the King were being traded around for gross profit. Interestingly, in long defence of his actions written in the Tower after his impeachment in 1641, Laud asserts that one of his accusers, a certain ‘Mr. Huntford’, had resented Laud’s rejection of an offer to dismiss a corrector who was “a Minister, and a well deserving Man” as a scapegoat for the Bible errors.²⁴⁹ It is not certain exactly who ‘Huntford’ was, but it seems likely he was a farmer or manager at the King’s Printing House, who either stood to save money by firing a corrector, or had taken some blame for allowing the errors to occur, even though it was the ultimate men in charge, Barker and Lucas, who had been taken to court. Regarding the corrector, Laud continues:

This *Corrector* was principally entertained for the *Latin* and *Greek* Press especially, which I had then not without great pains and some cost Erected. They were desirous to keep only one for the *English*, and him at the cheapest.²⁵⁰

In Laud’s mind, profit-driven greed was the clear underlying cause of the poor-quality Bibles. However, this excerpt also raises some interesting chronological issues.²⁵¹ Laud claims that the corrector at issue was employed primarily for the Latin and Greek press, however, this press was set up *after* and as a result of the Wicked Bible case.²⁵² Laud also takes credit for establishing the press, despite the fact that it was by the King’s command, and that the printers paid for it in exchange for the respiting of their fine.²⁵³ Laud continues:

²⁴⁸ “The Printers,” *Reports of Cases*, 304-05 (14 June, 1632).

²⁴⁹ Laud, *The history of the troubles and trial*, 289.

²⁵⁰ Laud, 289-90.

²⁵¹ I am grateful for the discussion with and points made by my supervisor, Dr. Chris Jones, regarding this excerpt.

²⁵² See “Greek Press,” *A Companion to Arber*, section 68, items 1-4, 294-8 (13 January 1633/4 – February 1633/4).

²⁵³ See “Greek Press,” *A Companion to Arber*, section 68, items 1 and 5, 294-8 (13 January 1633/4, 24 June, 1635).

Among them their negligence was such, as that there were found above a Thousand faults in two Editions of *the Bible and Common-Prayer Book*. And one which caused this search was, that in *Exod. 20*. Where they had shamefully Printed, *Thou shalt commit Adultery*.²⁵⁴

In the original case before the Court of High Commission, the record had referred to a singular “Edition of 1631”,²⁵⁵ whereas Laud now refers to *two* editions. Perhaps by this point he had become aware that the commandment error and the ‘great-asse’ error were in different print runs.

For this Masters of the Printing-House were called into the *High-Commision*, and Censured, as they well deserved it. As for this *Corrector* whom they would have heaved out, they never did so much as complain of him to any that had power over the Press, till this fell upon themselves for so gross an Abuse.²⁵⁶

It is worth noting the context in which Laud is making this accusation: he had been accused of refusing the printer’s offer to dismiss the corrector on the grounds “That no Man of their Rank should Meddle with Men in Holy Orders.”²⁵⁷ Laud denies that this was the reason he prevented the dismissal, but was feeling pressure to demonstrate that his actions did not “exempt the Clergy from the Civil Magistrate.”²⁵⁸ Laud goes on to suggest his accuser is motivated by a resentment of how the Wicked Bible incident was handled: “*Hunsford*, being bit in his Credit and Purse, and Friends, by that Censure, for so gross an abuse of the Church and Religion, labours to fasten his Fangs upon me in this way.”²⁵⁹ It is hard not to detect a note of humorously dismissive scorn on the part of Laud for his accuser, as he spells his name four different ways: variously “Huntford,” “Hunsford,” “Hunscot,” and “Hunscourt,” all with the unconvincing claim that “I took his Name uncertainly.”²⁶⁰ Since Laud encounters this man at least three times during his trial and remembers the specific grudge he held over the Wicked Bible incident, it seems unlikely Laud did not know his real name. Laud’s dismissiveness towards him serves the function of portraying him as unimportant, petty, and motivated by insubstantial bitterness. While Laud asserted that his own behaviour was

²⁵⁴ Laud, 290.

²⁵⁵ “Mr Barker, the printer,” *Reports of Cases*, 296-97, (May 8, 1632).

²⁵⁶ Laud, 290.

²⁵⁷ Laud, 289.

²⁵⁸ Laud, 289.

²⁵⁹ Laud, 290.

²⁶⁰ Laud, 289-90, 303, 309.

entirely correct, this exchange shows that he perhaps felt some insecurity over how his handling of the case would be perceived. The chronological difficulties raised by Laud's statements regarding the Greek press means a degree of scepticism is warranted in considering his claims. Given the relative lenience shown to Barker and Lucas, it would be fascinating to learn more of this "Hunscourt" and why he apparently felt so wronged by Laud in the matter.

If Laud's accusations about the printers' attempts to shift the blame to a single corrector are true, it certainly does not paint the printers in a good light with regard to professional integrity. Correctors in a printing house were responsible for checking printed 'proofs' to find and fix errors. Grafton argues that this work was often underpaid, unappreciated, and sometimes even resented.²⁶¹ Unacknowledged in success and castigated in failure, a corrector's role likely became most visible when things went wrong. A stingy print house operator could see the direct need for compositors and press-men, but having not yet been censured for errors, it is understandable how he might see the corrector as a role to fill on the cheap. The King's Printers' attempts to save money in this way did not end with the Wicked Bible, despite the censure they had received. Robert Barker had leased his share in the office of King's Printer in 1634 to the trio of printers Miles Flesher, John Haviland, and Robert Young,²⁶² but cost-cutting at the King's Printers continued apace. A 1634 petition of four correctors of the King's Printing House to Laud alleged that their pay and work had been steadily reduced despite an increasing workload, and that one of them had been dismissed when they had announced their intention to complain.²⁶³ Laud responded, requiring that "Mr. Young and the rest of the farmers of his Majesty's printing house" retain the correctors at their former pay until he could assess the issue.²⁶⁴ Robert Young's penny pinching reputation at the King's Printing House is again revealed in a March 22, 1635/6 letter from Laud instructing him to hear the petition of an out of work journeyman printer who accused him of hiring foreigners, and thereby breaking the rules of the Stationers' Company and keeping

²⁶¹ Grafton, *Inky Fingers*, 29-43.

²⁶² Blagden, 139.

²⁶³ "Petition of Henry Cooper, Robert Futter, Thomas Pakeman, and Thomas Bird, masters of arts, to Archbishop Laud," *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic – Charles I, 1634-1635*, ed. John Bruce (Nendeln: Kraus Reprint Ltd., 1967), vol. CCLXXX, item 17, 407, (undated 1634).

²⁶⁴ "Petition of Henry Cooper," *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic – Charles I, 1634-1635*, vol. CCLXXX, item 17, 407, (undated 1634).

qualified Englishmen in poverty. Interestingly, the petition also requests that Laud's letter be shown to Robert Barker (and the 'assignes' of the deceased John Bill, meaning Martin Lucas) so that the petitioner may be readmitted to his service.²⁶⁵ By this point Barker was in jail for debt, having been imprisoned at the King's Bench on November 27, 1635 (It should be noted that in this period the year ended in March, meaning March 22 was before November 27 in 1635.).²⁶⁶ However, despite his leasing of the office and imprisonment, Barker clearly retained some managerial power, and also responsibility, over the King's Printers and its output. These examples also demonstrate William Laud's continued involvement with the management of the King's Printers, even at middle and lower levels. His interest in the King's Printing House clearly gained him a reputation as an authority to whom lower-level print workers could appeal to 'over the heads' of their immediate superiors, and one who would cast a disapproving eye toward greedy cost-cutting.

Of course, cost-cutting practices introduced not just typographical errors, but compromised the physical quality of Bibles as objects. Poor paper quality seems to have been a particular bugbear of the critics of Bible printers. In 1645, polemicist John Vicars condemned those who sought after "filthy lucre" through the "*printing of our Bibles* in very course and extreme thin and bad *sinking-paper*."²⁶⁷ 'Sinking-paper' here refers to paper that had not been well treated with protective coating, causing water-based inks to blot into its fibres and preventing readers from adding their own annotations.²⁶⁸ Laud comments on the "very bad paper" used in the 1631 edition twice in the proceedings against the King's Printers.²⁶⁹ William Prynne, puritan author and enemy of Laud,²⁷⁰ nonetheless shared Laud's dismay at the declining standards of Bible production, saying of playbooks, of which he was a fierce critic, that "I cannot but with grieffe relate it, they are now new-printed in farre better paper than most Octavo or Quarto *Bibles*."²⁷¹ This perhaps reflected their position in the market: a fine folio

²⁶⁵ "Complaint Against the King's Printer for Employing 'Foreigners'," *A Companion to Arber*, section 84, 341-42, (22 March, 1635/6).

²⁶⁶ Tedder, "Barker, Robert (d. 1645)," 208.

²⁶⁷ John Vicars, *Unwholesome Henbane between Two Fragrant Roses*, cited in Joshua Calhoun, "The Word Made Flax: Cheap Bibles, Textual Corruption, and the Poetics of Paper," *PMLA* 126, no.2 (2011): 330.

²⁶⁸ Calhoun, "The Word Made Flax," 330.

²⁶⁹ "Mr Barker, the printer," *Reports of Cases*, 296 (8 May, 1632), and "The Printers," *Reports of Cases*, 305 (14 June, 1632).

²⁷⁰ Gaudio, 349.

²⁷¹ William Prynne, *Histrio-Mastix*, cited in Calhoun, "The Word Made Flax," 329.

playbook would be seen as a luxury purchased for desire and enjoyment. A Bible, while respected as a text, might be seen as more of a necessity for consumers of a variety of means, so a wider variety of qualities were offered to meet needs of demand and affordability.²⁷² Joshua Calhoun suggests that the poor paper and printing quality of Bibles in comparison to other texts had an inherently rhetorical effect suggesting that Bibles were valued less than other printed works, despite their religious importance. The Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*, which emphasised the importance of the Biblical text, had given rise to a greatly increased production of and access to cheaply made Bibles.²⁷³ Ironically, a principle which exalted the Bible had helped degrade it as an object.

If the cheapness of a Bible's production was not passed on as savings to the buyer, as asserted by dissident printer Michael Sparke while decrying the Bible-printing "Monopolists",²⁷⁴ and as confirmed by Laud in his fears of Amsterdam undercutting,²⁷⁵ this adds yet another layer of meaning to the object. A normal citizen, given little choice but to pay a high price for an item which society increasingly pressures him to own, might experience mixed feelings upon perusing its thin, error-prone pages. The small, octavo Wicked Bible as an object in itself may have been a source of humour to a seventeenth-century reader. Humour of incongruity and the unexpected may have arisen through the contrast between the holy Word of God being delivered in such a flawed package. More dangerously, the book might bring forth the humour of scorn: that the King's Printers, and by extension the King, State, and Church themselves should claim credit for such a disastrous object? Any chuckles would then be at their expense. Criticism of the translation could be dismissed as the mistaken views of religious opponents, but mockery of the Bible as an object – that would be harder to counter.

The King James version of the Bible was intended to be a dignified expression of the monarch's power, and his position as head of the Church and intercessor between God and the nation. Charles I was particularly keen to bolster this idea of monarchical power and combine it with an emphasis on moral virtues such as marital fidelity. Thus, an edition of the

²⁷² Calhoun, 329-31.

²⁷³ Calhoun, 329-31.

²⁷⁴ Michael Sparke, *Scintilla*, cited in Calhoun, 330.

²⁷⁵ "Mr Barker, the printer," *Reports of Cases*, 296 (8 May, 1632).

Bible printed in his name which contained humorous endorsements of adultery and silly references to asses threatened to undermine his image in a particularly meaningful way. Laud too was dismayed at the poor quality of the edition, as he saw promoting the King James Bible as an important element of his programme of religious uniformity across Britain. It is perhaps not surprising then that the reaction of these authorities does not revolve around religious outrage at the corruption of a sacred commandment and holy text, but instead around the worldly reputation of the Church and its books in the arena of commercial competition.

The King and Church were aware that readers might judge their version against others, and if their version was of laughably poor quality and riddled with errors, it could fare poorly in the comparison. However, despite the printer's failures, the authorities demonstrated little desire to harshly punish them beyond a moderate fine and the temporary seizure of the faulty Bibles. This too was even alleviated, as the King saw in the incident an opportunity to advance one of his own agendas in the promotion of Greek and Latin learning. The printers' royalist sympathies meant they were 'King's men' at heart; Laud and the King likely felt little desire to severely censure men of their own cause, particularly since they viewed the issue as an unintended one of print quality, not of ideological opposition. They may have wished to avoid the embarrassing collapse of an ideally prestigious business operating under the King's name. They may have also realised that drawing too much attention to the issue through harsh and exemplary punishment might work counter to preventing word, and therefore mockery, of the incident spreading. The King and Church clearly viewed the Wicked Bible as a threat more to sales than souls, which goes far toward explaining their harsh words but lenient actions. They still needed to sell their image and ideology to a not fully convinced England, which helps explain why the Bibles were returned; after all, burnt Bibles don't sell.

Conclusion

The Wicked Bible, with its scandalously misprinted seventh commandment, continues to fascinate and amuse as an object of historical novelty. The edition remains understudied, perhaps due to its rarity, or the belief that there is little more to say about it. This dissertation has attempted to approach the Wicked Bible through a new lens of understanding: that of emotions such as humour and embarrassment. In doing so, it has sought to demonstrate some of the complexities of the Wicked Bible story beyond an idea of simple religious outrage.

Exploring the collision between humour and attitudes toward adultery has revealed ways in which the Wicked Bible, particularly in its most well-known error, could in fact be funny to an early modern audience. This has involved the analysis of surviving works of early modern humour, as well as engagement with historical scholarship on both adultery and the roots of humour. Mocking humour could arise through scorn at the foolishness of those who allowed the errors, or at those who claimed the King James Bible as a cornerstone of their power and image. The surprise felt at suddenly being confronted with a puerile phrase in the holiest of books may have provoked mirth, as could the ambiguity inherent in considering a known reality of condemnation alongside an incongruous statement of permission. Humour arose through a shared awareness and insecurity regarding attitudes toward sexual desire, marriage, and patriarchy. In fact, shared adulterous humour may have reinforced social censure of the act, showing that humour and social disapproval are not incompatible.

Despite religion becoming an increasingly fraught subject in early seventeenth-century England, growing literacy and changes in the ways people engaged with texts meant that the Bible as a physical object and text could be a greater focus of critical judgement. Intended as an expression of royal power and the link between the monarch and God, the King James Bible represented a potent tool, but also a potential vulnerability. Upon the printing of the Wicked Bible, Charles and Laud understood all too well the threat the shoddy work posed to their image and programme of religious uniformity. In their eyes, the King's Printers had imperilled this through greed and laziness, but their errors were seen as an embarrassing undermining of worldly authority, not an unforgiveable blasphemy.

The printers navigated a tense divide between an ideal of high-quality and prestigious products printed in the name of the King, and the desire to turn a profit in a commercial market. Threatened by better quality editions from other printers both in England and from across the sea, those managing the King's Printing House appear to have leant toward the

pursuit of profit through cost-cutting, to a point where dropping quality became impossible to ignore. While it is possible the most-well known errors may or may not have been deliberate, they simply drew attention to wider quality control issues. The exposure of this reality was an embarrassment to the printers, who were happy for a chance to both remain in the good graces of the King and Church through an act of service via printing. However, the holding of the fine and book stock over their heads showed that the full trust of the authorities would need to be re-earned through demonstrated effort.

Print and textual communication were clearly important to the King and Laud, and their reaction to the edition shows a desire to manage and make the best of the situation rather than harshly punish. In spying an opportunity to advance his own printing agenda, Charles may have even experienced a glimmer of satisfaction in the outcome of the incident. The relative lenience of the authorities may have stemmed from a desire not to draw too much attention to the incident through harsh punishment; given the strength humour can find in large groups, this was particularly important if the book was the subject of mockery. They could also have simply wished to avoid the embarrassment associated with the potential collapse of an institution associated with the King, and likely desired to keep the office of King's Printer in the hands of those they knew to be sympathetic and loyal.

There is more nuance to the story of the Wicked Bible than is commonly portrayed today. Rather than a simple story of fiery spiritual doom, this dissertation has portrayed a much earthier story of greed, embarrassment, and image consciousness. My examination of the humour to be found in the Wicked Bible has shown that in attitudes toward 'thou shalt commit adultery', there are more elements of continuity to be found between the Early Modern and today than many might credit. There are of course more directions scholars could travel while investigating the Wicked Bible. Further primary source analysis could help clear some mysteries, such as whether the ink blots on STC 2297.3 do in fact hide 'great-asse'. This dissertation has focused on humour and the embarrassed reaction of the authorities, but, for example, there is potential to investigate harsh condemnation and anger that might have existed toward the edition, particularly in those outside the relevant institutions of authority at the time.

More than just an historical novelty, studying the Wicked Bible can be a valuable contribution to uncovering early modern minds, and their attitudes toward humour, adultery, authority, and print. It demonstrates how books can exist not only as simple sources of

information, but also as potent reservoirs of authority and legitimacy. Even the conditions of a book's production could affect and even threaten such legitimacy; a reality of which the authorities were only too aware. The emotional resonance of books, both as abstract texts and physical objects, can provide an entry point into discovering the emotional complexity of past societies, a complexity that is often muted in surviving sources and modern popular belief. Just as the story of the Wicked Bible resonates with people today, so too did it resonate with people in early modern England, in ways this dissertation has only begun to uncover.

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