The Tablets of the Law
Reading Hamlet with Scriptural Technologies

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I Scenes of writing

Last time there was this much excitement about a tablet, it had some commandments written on it.

Wall Street Journal (30 December 2009)

This chapter considers how material inscriptions become transcendental scripture in iconic scenes of writing in Hamlet, Exodus, and, to begin with, a more recent episode involving a tablet. When Steve Jobs presented the Apple iPad to the world in a rollout event in January of 2010, he and his new device entered a long iconographic tradition of reading, writing, and memory. Consider the coincidental symbolism as we observe Jobs’s performance: a lone figure in black on a nearly bare stage, enthralling an audience with the disclosure of a closely guarded secret, simulating private acts of reading while self-consciously under the scrutiny of others (“words, words, words”), and brandishing a tablet that serves as symbol of, and prosthesis for, one’s innermost memories. If Jobs may unintentionally evoke Hamlet at this moment, it is because the play has proven especially amenable to the themes of memory and mediation, along the lines of adaptations such as Michael Almereyda’s 2000 film. But the iPad rollout made even more pointed use of scriptural symbolism. On the screen behind Jobs at the presentation’s opening appeared the Wall Street Journal quotation above, accompanied by Gustave Doré’s engraving of Moses holding the Tablets of the Law (see Figure 1). With that image, the Apple demo gave us a Moses drawn like a literary illustration: not the cinematic Moses of the twentieth century but a bookish Moses of the nineteenth. The Doré image stands within a tradition populated by his other illustrations for works like Coleridge’s Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Poe’s The Raven, and Shakespeare’s The Tempest. Given the rich intertextuality of this performance, Jobs’s offhand comment on

2 The rollout video may be viewed at http://www.apple.com/apple-events/january-2010/ and downloaded from the Apple Keynotes podcast on iTunes (accessed 31 July 2010).
4 The Holy Bible, with Illustrations by Gustav Doré, London: Cassell, Petter, and Galpin, ca. 1866.
the Moses comparison, “I chuckled when I saw this,” belies the intensity of the cultural coding of this demonstration of a new reading technology. What does it mean to read Hamlet, or the Bible for that matter, on a digital device that could be presented to the world as a symbolic descendent of the Tablets of the Law?

The Biblical episode of Moses and the tablets, one of writing’s iconic scenes, emblematizes continuity in the transmission of texts. The brief timeline of Apple devices that follows the Moses reference in the iPad rollout implicitly places all these technological advances in a progression whose originary moment is specifically Biblical. The trope of Biblical chronology lends itself to representations of technology and writing, as Michael Joyce echoes when he comments that orthodox accounts of the development of hypertext “take on the old testamentary feel of the Book of Numbers,” as the technological advances of Vannevar Bush beget those of Douglas Engelbart, which beget those of Ted Nelson, and so on.  

appears on the title page of Frank Adams and Robert Triplet’s 1584 Writing Tables with a Kalender for xxiiii. yeeres, with sundry necessarie rules, a kind of early modern paper computer which bound an almanac together with erasable writing surfaces.⁶ It would seem that not only technologies of writing, but also the ways we talk about them, tend to evoke the scriptural.

That scriptural trope for new technologies runs through Shakespeare as well. As suggested by the title of one self-help book for the always-on generation, Hamlet’s BlackBerry, Shakespeare’s depiction of writing tables serves as an imaginative early-modern forerunner of the present’s mobile devices.⁷ This book draws its analogy to the BlackBerry from act 1, scene 5, in which Hamlet responds to the Ghost’s commands:

HAMLET [...] Remember thee?
Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe. Remember thee?
Yea, from the table of my memory
I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
That youth and observation copied there,
And thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain,
Unmix’d with baser matter. Yes, by heaven!
O most pernicious woman!
O villain, villain, smiling damned villain!
My tables. Meet it is I set it down
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain—
At least I am sure it may be so in Denmark.
[Writes.]
So, uncle, there you are. Now to my word.
It is “Adieu, adieu, remember me.”
I have sworn’t. (1.5.95–112)⁸

Hamlet’s motific connection to documents throughout the play begins with this speech, as does the perceived problem of Hamlet’s delayed revenge. Hamlet himself repeatedly circles back to this moment of realization, and critics have similarly circled around what may or may not have happened on Shakespeare’s stage in early productions. There is at least one ambiguous embedded stage direction, in lines 107–10 where Hamlet appears to manipulate writing materials on stage, calling for a prop to physicalize a complex metaphor for the operation of memory. As we shall see, Hamlet’s speech on memory

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⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all Hamlet quotations come from Harold Jenkins’s Arden 2 edition; Walton-on-Thames, UK: Thomas Nelson, 1997.
coordinates a complex set of desires and apprehensions about memory, writing, and the reproducibility of texts.

Hamlet’s avowal that the Ghost’s words alone shall be inscribed within the “book and volume” of his brain and Hamlet’s choice of the words “tablet” and “commandment” tie his speech back to the Tablets of the Law. The symbolic link between the tablets of Hamlet and Moses has been noted before, and this chapter contributes to a discussion already begun by others including Marjorie Garber, P.K. Ayers, and most recently Peter Stallybrass, Roger Chartier, J. Franklin Mowrey, and Heather Wolfe in an article on “Hamlet’s Tables and the Technologies of Writing in Renaissance England.”9 As the authors of the latter article point out, Hamlet’s writing tables may well have been real inscription technologies, not just a metaphor, to the play’s first audiences. In their investigation into the kinds of writing tables Shakespeare may have had in mind for Hamlet’s speech, Stallybrass and his co-authors offer a valuable account of the erasable writing surfaces that generally use a stylus rather than ink to record signs on paper, parchment, or wax. Used in tandem with commonplace books—themselves often organized according to the topoi of rhetorical training that have much in common with mnemonic systems—writing tables were a normal part of early modern information management.10 Stallybrass and his co-authors cite Philip Melanchthon’s advice that writing tables should be used to record information to be organized later and sifted by recopying into a commonplace book. The division of the system into erasable table and permanent book would help prevent the “mere accumulation” and “copia [that] can actually threaten memory.”11

An awareness of the duality of memory and forgetting, materialized in erasable writing tables of the kind published by Adams and Triplet, changes the way we read Hamlet’s speech, as Stallybrass and his co-authors have demonstrated in their widely cited article (which appears to have inspired the title and central conceit of Hamlet’s BlackBerry). As they point out, “It is surely because there could be no less suitable technology than erasable tables for a permanent remembrance that Hamlet metamorphoses the ‘Table of . . . Memory’ into the quite different ‘Booke and Volume’ of his brain, which he imagines as a place of indelible writing.”12 The opposition seems stable enough, but the paradoxical condition of all substrates becomes evident in their reading: “Hamlet first imagines the tables as figuring a mind from which the past can be erased so as to store a present memory. But the present memory is in turn vulnerable to the material form on which it is inscribed: an erasable surface, from which the present ‘command’ can be wiped out as easily as the trivial records of the past.”13 Inscription and erasure are often dual operations within the same system, both technically and symbolically.

It is worth emphasizing the importance of this type of observation in recent scholarship that deals with memory and the materiality of texts in the Renaissance.


12 Ibid., p. 415.

13 Ibid., p. 416.
Although the argument made by Stallybrass et al. may be expressed in simple terms—“A technology of memory, [. . .] tables are also a technology of erasure”\textsuperscript{14}—the acknowledgement of erasure as an active, constitutive presence distinguishes their work from most studies of memory that came before. Frances Yates, by contrast, limits her scope to the history of ideas, omitting the material history of documents and the cultural practices that attended them, with the result that her otherwise exhaustive study in \textit{The Art of Memory} envisions only how memory systems work productively, not how they fail productively.\textsuperscript{15} With that idea in mind, I suggest that any discussion of Hamlet’s tables is incomplete without serious consideration of how writing technologies signify in the present, and how the fears and desires associated with digital texts permeate the topic unavoidably. In that light, this chapter uses e-books to triangulate the relationship between memory and writing in \textit{Hamlet} and Exodus, since all of these elements are part of the discourse about the transmission of culture and its material forms.

This chapter turns first to a discussion of the Mosaic tablets and their connection to concepts of scripture, inscription and erasure. It then considers Hamlet’s speech in connection with the closest Shakespearean counterpart to the Mosaic tables, the 1623 First Folio. In a physical “book and volume” that deploys strong archival connotations of its own, the images of erasure and inscription in \textit{Hamlet} carry a force in the Folio they would not have in another book. The Folio enables the fantasy of texts inscribed, as it were, by the finger of Shakespeare, and have functioned in some traditions of reception as though they form what Gary Taylor has called “an autonomous unit of bibliographical production,” which he distinguishes from the heterogeneous disunity of its texts.\textsuperscript{16} Put another way, the Folio’s illusion of scriptural unity represents what Wilfred Cantwell Smith describes as “a widespread tendency to treat texts in a ‘scripture-like’ way: a human propensity to scripturalize,” a phenomenon made possible by the belief that “being scripture is not a quality inherent in any given text, or type of text, so much as an interpretive relation between that text and a community of persons.”\textsuperscript{17} Like the received Bible, the cultural and material contexts of reading construct Shakespeare’s gathered plays as a scriptural unity corresponding to the codicological unit of the Folio itself. Scriptural technologies are those which enable the fantasy that human writing can aspire to permanence, and the example of the iPad as a Mosaic tablet computer suggests that scriptural tropes have lost none of their imaginative power with digital textuality. With these contexts in mind, the chapter concludes by considering how the metaphor of the scriptural Shakespeare text translates to the reading device at the center of Steve Jobs’s performance.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 417.


II Scripture, inscription, and erasure

The former Tables of the Law were broken,
And left no Monuments of themselves, no token
No signe that ever such things were: But marke,
The later were kept holy in the Arke.

Francis Quarles, “On the old and new tables”

Let us begin by reviewing the story from Exodus. Moses first receives the tablets bearing the ten commandments directly from God in Exodus 31:18 as a divine inscription, “written with the finger of God,” unmediated by anything except the tablets themselves: “The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tables” (32:16). Moses descends from Mount Sinai and, upon seeing his people worshipping a false idol, destroys the tablets and must go back and ask God for another copy. Seeking atonement, Moses continues the theme of writing when he says to God, “blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written,” if God will not forgive him (32:32). In a significant act of repetition—but with a difference—God instructs Moses to fashion tablets from the local stone and to transcribe the commandments from dictation (34:1). Moses then returns with the renewed tablets, after which an Ark is constructed (38:1–5) and the Tablets placed inside them (40:20).

Doré illustrated Moses with the tablets twice, the first time returning from the mountain with the tablets in his arms, and the second time with his arms upraised to destroy the tablets as described in 32:15–19. The first image would have made a better complement to the Wall Street Journal quotation and the comical subtext of Jobs as a digital-age Moses—the leader of a chosen people known for giving commandments from on high (thou shalt not support Flash). Curiously, the image used in the iPad demo is the second one, depicting the moment of the tablets’ destruction, which means that the iPad presentation begins with an image not of transmission, but of erasure. This possibly unintentional but revealing choice of image in the demo reminds us that the questions of permanence and loss that inevitably shadow digital media are old indeed.

For example, in their discussion of the 1584 Writing Tables volume mentioned above, Stallybrass and his co-authors read the Mosaic tablets and the printed volume that depicts them as examples of permanent inscription to early modern eyes, set against the erasable tables that were bound with the book. Despite having been recopied by God’s “amanuensis,” Moses, “the second tables that God gave to Moses not only endured, but their endurance also came to signify the permanence of the Father’s ‘command.’” Yet, as Francis Quarles implies in his epigram “On the old and new

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19 All quotations are from Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (eds) The Bible: Authorized King James Version with Apocrypha, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997; original italics indicating non-Hebrew interpolations have been removed.

20 On the metaphor of blotting one’s name from the book of life, see Schofield’s chapter in this volume, pp. 49–53.

21 In the edition in which Doré’s images appear, they illustrate the subsequent recounting of the story in Deuteronomy 9–10 (see Figure 5.1).

tables” (quoted above), the victory of permanent inscription in the Exodus story nevertheless carries with it the shadow of loss, since the original tablets “left no Monuments of themselves, [ . . . ] No signe that ever such things were.” The Mosaic tablets can be at best a conflicted symbol of permanence since they are always doubled images: in any given depiction of Moses and the tablets, such as the title page of Writing Tables, how are we to know which set Moses is holding, the (destroyed) originals or the (preserved) copy? Doré’s Bible helpfully disambiguates by illustrating both in separate images, but as a generalized symbol the tablets always harbor this irreducible ambiguity.

In this sense the Mosaic tablets represent what Jacques Derrida in Archive Fever calls the archiviolithic tendency, the informatic death drive that archives conceal within themselves. As he explains, archiviolithism depends upon the link between inscription and repetition:

if there is no archive without consignation in an external place which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression, then we must also remember that repetition itself, the logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive. And thus from destruction.  

The tablets survived because they were copied, but they survived only as copies that were a further remove from their divine origin: Moses’s writing on stone cut from the mountain rather than God’s writing on material presumably not of this earth. This is the crux formed by the terms inscription and scripture.

The former term, inscription, has become a keyword in fields such as critical theory, media studies, and science and technology studies, through the work of N. Katherine Hayles, Lisa Gitelman, and Bruno Latour in particular. Inscription serves to distinguish categories of media in both their actual and imagined operations. Hayles offers a useful definition of the category: “to count as an inscription technology, a device must initiate material changes that can be read as marks”; examples would include both printed books (presumably letterpress and photo-offset) and computers. Notably, Hayles and other practitioners of media-specific analysis emphasize inscription not to separate out devices like the iPad from traditional writing technologies, as many hypertext theorists have done, but rather to point out continuities. As Hayles explains, a digital computer depends upon inscriptions “because it changes electric polarities and correlates these changes with binary code, higher-level languages such as C++ and Java, and the phosphor gleams of the cathode ray tube.” In this sense an iPad is no less an inscription technology than a stone tablet, though the inscriptions may work in different ways.

What matters in contexts like the iPad demo, however, is the symbolic function of inscription. Gitelman elaborates:

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25 Ibid.
Like other media, inscriptive media represent, but the representations they entail and circulate are crucially material as well as semiotic. Unlike radio signals, for instance, inscriptions are stable and savable. [... ] The difference seems obvious, but it is important to note that the stability and savability of inscriptions are qualities that arise socially as well as perceptually.26

Gitelman’s emphasis on the social nature and function of inscription echoes Cantwell Smith’s point, quoted above, that scripture—that is, the small-s kind—derives not from inherent technical qualities so much as socially determined ones. In both cases, the task of interpretation takes on a material component, as Hayles describes: “The implication for studies of technology and literature is that the materiality of inscription thoroughly interpenetrates the represented world. Even when technology does not appear as a theme, it is woven into the fictional world through the processes that produce the literary work as a material artifact.”27 This is not to deny that technologies function in determinable ways whether people understand them or not, nor to deny that capital-S Scripture may have an origin independent from human beliefs about it. Rather, the social focus of both definitions simply means that to the extent we can know about such things at all, we know them through interpretation—that is, through representations whose imaginative power we share (or do not share) with others, and whose meaning depends in no small part on how those representations work. Like data, inscriptions do not speak for themselves; someone always speaks for them, whether a Moses, a Hamlet, or a Steve Jobs.

Whether or not capital-S Scripture speaks for itself is a matter of faith, but there is no question that the written nature of Biblical Scripture influences how we think about the written and the writable. As Cantwell Smith notes, “the matter of writing [is] something that our word ‘scripture’ quietly posits, or presumes,” a fact borne out by scripture’s cognates in other European languages and in its antecedents in Greek (“he graphe, hai graphai”) and Hebrew (“ketuvim”).28 Yet the division between written and oral texts is not always absolute. Even in Shakespeare’s time the textual identity of Scripture was a hybrid one, split between the Bible Shakespeare likely read (the Geneva) and the Bible he likely heard from the pulpit (the Bishops’).29 Multiple texts open the question of competing textual authority, and the scenario of competing Scriptures goes right back to the two sets of Mosaic tablets. Though we have no way of knowing whether the texts of the two sets of tablets were identical or revised—one imagines an exasperated God moving the commandment against idolatry to the top of the list—the account in Exodus does make clear that the form of textual transmission changes, as mentioned above. With the first set of tablets, God writes (Exodus 32:16); with the second, He dictates to Moses, who writes (34:1).

27 Hayles, Writing, p. 130.
28 Cantwell Smith, Scripture, p. 7.
29 See Scott Schofield’s chapter in this volume, pp. 50–1.
A traditional interpretation would emphasize the sameness of the text in both versions, since the Hebrew and Christian God is one who renews covenants throughout the Bible (renewal being a trope distinct from repetition). But the idea of a divine power that guarantees this sameness between versions cast the idea of human inscription in a new light. Bruno Latour, for example, emphasizes the sameness and permanence of inscriptions in scientific contexts, particularly in his notion of science as a social field enabled by the circulation of “immutable mobiles.”

Latour has been challenged on the “immutable” part of his theory by book historian Adrian Johns. His study *The Nature of the Book* advances a thesis much like Hayles’s and Gitelman’s, that the trustworthiness of inscriptions—printed ones specifically, in Johns’s study—is an evolving and socialized process that is intertwined with, rather than driven by, the nature of the technologies. As Johns puts it, fixity is not so much an “inherent” property as a “transitive” one, created and changed in part by social perceptions. One consequence of Johns’s argument is that representations of inscription, like those in *Exodus* and *Hamlet*, take on a role largely omitted in Latour’s account of inscription. In that sense, how writing technologies are thought to work, and how they are depicted as working, are at least as important as how they actually work.

What then makes a writing technology scriptural, then, as distinct from merely inscriptive? One factor I will discuss in relation to *Hamlet* is a cultural investment in, and struggle to reckon with, the mysterious aspects of inscription. As the cultural reception of the iPad reminds us, digital technologies in particular expose these unknowable—or at least generally unknown—qualities due to their relatively recent entry into the cultural imagination. As Gitelman points out, “Digital media inscribe too, and they do so in what are mysterious new ways. (Mysterious to me, at least, and anyone else without an engineering background.) [. . . ] I execute commands to save my data files—texts, graphics, sounds—but in saving them, I have no absolute sense of digital savability as a quality that is familiarly material.”

Derrida relates the same experience in an oft-quoted passage from *Archive Fever*:

> [W]hile tinkling away on my computer[,] I asked myself what is the moment *proper* to the archive, [. . . ] the instant of archivization strictly speaking, which is not [. . . ] so-called live or spontaneous memory (*mnēmē* [or] *anamnēsis*), but rather a certain hypomnesic and prosthetic experience of the technical substrate. Was it not at this very instant that, having written something or other on the screen, the letters remaining as if suspended and floating yet at the surface of a liquid element, I pushed a certain key to “save” a text undamaged, in a hard and lasting way, to protect marks from being erased, [. . . ] to stock, to accumulate, and [. . . ] to make the sentence available in this way for printing and reprinting, for reproduction?

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One can only imagine what Derrida would have made of an iPad, whose tablet design enhances the illusion of unity between screen and inscription-bearing substrate. In this light, the mundane reflex of hitting the keystroke Command- or CTRL-s while typing becomes a cultural investment, an act of trusting to an agency beyond oneself. Derrida’s emphasis on the word save, echoed by Gitelman above, points to the theological connotations the word still carries. Scripture is that which transcends the vagaries of textual transmission, and whose meaning is underwritten by divine authority.

III The scriptural Folio

The single most consequential act of saving Shakespeare’s texts “undamaged, in a hard and lasting way,” as Derrida describes inscription above, was the publishing of the book now known as the Shakespeare First Folio in 1623. Like the iPad, the Folio’s physical design provoked conflicting responses in its own time. One of the most well known is William Prynne’s Histrio-Mastix (1633), which condemned Jonson’s and Shakespeare’s folio collections for usurping what Prynne regarded as Biblical materiality:

Some Play-books since I first undertooke this subject, are growne from Quarto into Folio; which yet beare so good a price and sale, that I cannot but with griefe relate it, they are now new-printed in farre better paper than most Octavo or Quarto Bibles, which hardly finde such vent as they [ . . . ].

Following Prynne’s identification of certain markers—the folio format; high quality paper; ubiquity in the book market—it has become a critical commonplace to equate the 1623 Shakespeare First Folio with the Bible. Indeed, Prynne complains of the Folio’s excess in what may be the first shot in the debate over the materiality of Shakespeare’s texts (a debate continued in Edward Pechter’s chapter in this volume). As Prynne puts it in his printed marginalium to the quotation above, “Shackspeers Plaies are printed in the best Crowne paper, far better than most Bibles”. Whatever we might make of Prynne’s fears, he bases his own case on the ability of material substrates to affect the meaning and power of the inscriptions they carry.

There is some basis for the generalization that the folio format made Jonson’s and Shakespeare’s collected works seem somehow Biblical. The folio format was indeed used for important books thought to deserve a place in history, unlike the smaller and more ephemeral quarto and octavo formats. Although early modern Bibles were printed in nearly every format imaginable, from large folios to tiny thirty-twomos, the folio format regularly provided Bibles with the most monumental of book forms. According to A.S. Herbert, T.H. Darlow, and H.F. Moule’s bibliography of printed English Bibles, folio was the standard format for every major translation in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries; that is, whatever additional small formats might have been used to give a particular Bible greater marketability or portability (such as the 1560

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Geneva Bible in quarto), practically all translations were printed in folio at least once, and usually on their first appearance.\textsuperscript{36}

However, while there is a clear connection between the 1623 Shakespeare Folio as an archival format and the reception of Shakespeare’s texts, the relation between the Folio’s form and content may be more complicated than an implicit analogue to folio Bibles. Charlton Hinman’s monumental study of the 1623 Shakespeare Folio acknowledges the symbolism of the book’s format, but asserts that the publishers’ choice of format was also determined by practical considerations having to do with volume and encyclopedic scope—an ambition reflected in the Folio’s (inaccurate) claim, in its prefatory materials, to be “absolute in its numbers.” As Hinman describes,

many factors must have been considered when the Folio was planned, but the format adopted was in large measure pre-determined by the number and length of the plays to be printed and by the desire to set them forth “all in one volume.” Here, to be sure, were the collected works of Shakespeare; and it has been plausibly suggested that the publishers wished to confer upon these works the dignity customarily associated with reproduction “in folio.” No doubt they did. Yet they can have had no real choice as to format—or at least [ . . . ] no choice that we can suppose based on the nature rather than on the extent of the material to be printed.\textsuperscript{37}

Here Hinman offers an important and easily overlooked point about the Folio’s symbolic status as an archive. As obvious as the Folio’s symbolic link to the Bible and other books of cultural heritage may seem to be, that status is conferred upon the Folio not entirely by design, but also by the Folio’s encyclopedic scope. Folio was a format for completists.

Hinman’s points about the connection between the folio format, on one hand, and the information management problem presented by Shakespeare’s texts, on the other, prompts us to see new implications in the Folio/Bible homology that seems so obvious in Prynne. His preoccupation throughout the part of Histrio-Mastix where he mentions Shakespeare is specifically the size of books and the scale of texts. Prynne’s preface to his own book twice expresses anxiety about books impudently swelling from quarto format to folio, first in the passage quoted above mentioning the alarming growth of playbooks in size and number, and again when he excuses his own omission of some Scriptural and patristic quotations for fear of “augment[ing] this Quarto Treatise into many Folio Volumes.”\textsuperscript{38} Prynne’s fears about his readers becoming lost

\textsuperscript{36} Major folio Bibles include: the Coverdale Bible (1535, the first folio Bible in the English language; the 1537 edition was the first folio Bible printed in England), the Matthew Bible (1537), Taverner’s Bible (1539), the Great Bible (1539, and especially frequently in folio thereafter), the Geneva Bible (1562), the Bishops’ Bible (1568; folio editions were printed in 1584–5 specifically so that English churches would be equipped with their own Bibles), and the King James version (1611). The King James Bible was printed five times in folio between 1611 and 1623. See Arthur Sumner Herbert, Historical Catalogue of Printed Editions of the English Bible, 1525–1961: Revised and Expanded from the Edition of T.H. Darlow and H.F. Moule, 1903, New York: American Bible Society, 1968.


\textsuperscript{38} Prynne, Histrio-Mastix, sig.***2’.
among book-based navigational aids for Scripture are of a piece with the long history of bibliographical anxiety over the Shakespeare Folio as a textual archive—the specter of lostness haunts both. It is not the case, then, that Shakespeare’s Folio simply appears Biblical, but rather that both books in folio format become scriptural technologies that restructure originary acts of writing within a new archival form.

The folio format thus raises and assuages anxieties about accuracy, completeness, memory, and substitution. All of these themes appear in Heminges and Condell’s epistle to the Folio’s readers, but they also return us to Hamlet’s reference to writing tables and its connection to the Mosaic Tablets. For example, Marjorie Garber notes that the conjunction of “tables” and Hamlet’s ghostly father’s “commandment” evokes the parallel moment in Exodus, but the evocation unsettles rather than stabilizes the play’s representation of memory and textual transmission. As Garber puts it, “we can see the operation of substitution here through erasure, the inscription on the tables of ‘thy commandment,’ which is—to revenge? to remember? to do the one through the agency of the other?”

Emphasizing the importance of the first and second sets of the tablets in Exodus, she sees erasure and substitution operating throughout Hamlet in other moments, such as Hamlet’s unidentified revisions to The Mousetrap or his substitution of the forged commission that leads to Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s deaths (in place of his own); of these examples she notes, “Hamlet’s writing is [. . .] already a copy, a substitution, a revision of an original that does not show its face in the text.”

One could go further to link Garber’s insights to what Paul Werstine aptly terms the textual mystery of Hamlet, since that mystery embodies the very ambivalence and disunity she describes in Hamlet’s writing. Hamlet stands on one hand as a literary inheritance, Shakespeare’s greatest writing preserved by the archive, but on the other as a complex textual network of what may be substitutions, imperfect copies, and revisions. Even the staging of Hamlet as a writer and reviser of texts depends partly upon the interventions of others into Shakespeare’s texts. For example, Hamlet’s reference to writing tables points not just to technologies of prosthetic memory, but also to a “prosthesis of the inside,” as Derrida calls the substrate in Archive Fever. Derrida’s phrase in part explains how Hamlet’s speech can be performed without any actual writing tables present as a prop, with the result that Hamlet’s reinscription of the Ghost’s words becomes entirely psychological and apparently unmediated. The explicit stage direction in line 109 that Hamlet “writes” does not appear in any of the authoritative early editions (F, Q2, and Q1). It was added in 1709 by Nicholas Rowe, and subsequent editors have moved it around in the speech. (Harold Jenkins’s collation, for example, notes that John Dover Wilson’s edition inserts the stage direction after line 107, a placement that would make Hamlet’s uttering of the commonplace idea “That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain” simultaneous with his writing of it.) Rowe’s

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39 Garber, Ghost Writers, p. 152.
40 Ibid., p. 153.
42 Derrida, Archive, p. 19.
emendation makes this speech on writing and memory that much more the product of the inscription technology of the Shakespeare edition. Similarly, Leah Marcus’s reading of Hamlet’s speech shows that the play itself enacts the ambivalence that textual scholars collectively feel about the reliability of its texts. She brings up Hamlet’s tables as a detail to support her larger thesis that F manages the text of Hamlet with an eye to its presentation in print, pointing out an apparently minor textual crux in Hamlet’s speech regarding the number of ghostly adieus that may, depending on how an editor handles it, affect the interpretation of Hamlet’s mnemonic efforts. In all three sources, Hamlet himself quotes the Ghost as saying “adieu” twice before “remember me,” but in Q1 and Q2 the Ghost himself says “adieu” three times, rendering Hamlet a faulty remembrancer of the Ghost’s words from only a moment before. Marcus notes the significance that F’s Ghost says “adieu” only twice, which makes F-Hamlet’s memory accurate, and which supplies a two-adieu reading for modern editors who wish memory to tally with experience, “so that Hamlet’s writing has the precision we expect of a ‘copy.’” Jenkins, for example, does not emend from F, leaving his Ghost with three adieus and his Hamlet with an error.

The material mediations and editorial interventions possible in this speech, read in light of Garber’s and Marcus’s points, make it impossible to consider the representation of memory in this scene without facing the question of the presence or absence of Rowe’s stage direction, or of the accuracy of Hamlet’s quotation of the Ghost, and thus of the material mediation of Shakespeare’s text. Hamlet’s speech thus serves as a test case for the representational stakes of inscriptive media, old and new. Those representational stakes are indivisible from the forms of imaginative engagement that scriptural technologies enable. Put simply, faith in the text begins with the form of the book.

IV Hamlet’s iPad (and the iPad’s Hamlet)

“Ah!” cried the old man, brightening up, “now I know. Look,” turning the leaves forward and back, till all the Old Testament lay flat on one side, and all the New Testament flat on the other, while in his fingers he supported vertically the portion between, “look, sir, all this to the right is certain truth, and all this to the left is certain truth, but all I hold in my hand here is apocrypha.”

“Apocrypha?”

“Yes; and there’s the word in black and white,” pointing to it.

“And what says the word? It says as much as ‘not warranted;’ for

45 The more recent Arden editions of Hamlet (edited by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor), following a multiple-text approach with three different editions based on Q1, Q2, and F, are consequently more conservative in their stage directions than Jenkins and omit any stage direction that Hamlet writes. Their Q2 text’s annotation to line 107, however, says in no uncertain terms that “Hamlet now produces a literal writing tablet or notebook,” enabling the editors to intervene in the Q2 text without seeming to.
what do college men say of anything of that sort? They say it is apocryphal. The word itself, I’ve heard from the pulpit, implies something of uncertain credit. So if your disturbance be raised from aught in this apocrypha,” again taking up the pages, “in that case, think no more of it, for it’s apocrypha.”

Herman Melville, The Confidence-Man

Like the old man in Melville’s novel, pinching the pages of the Biblical Apocrypha between his fingers and letting the “certain truth” of the Old and New Testaments fall to either side in the volume before him, readers of codex books may experience textual faith and material form in perfect alignment. The gesture transfers naturally to Shakespeare, and it is even possible to imitate Melville’s bibliographic symbolism with the Shakespearean apocrypha added to the second impression of the 1664 Third Folio. Since the plays Pericles, The London Prodigal, Thomas Cromwell, Sir John Oldcastle, The Puritan, A Yorkshire Tragedy, and Locrine were bound in sequence at the end of the volume, following Cymbeline, a reader with a modern sense of Shakespeare’s canon can physically isolate the plays that modern scholars deem “not warranted.” (Now, of course, the reader would need to let the leaves of Pericles fall gently away to join the accepted canonical plays.)

The desire for a perfect textual archive has articulated itself through similar bibliographic metaphors based on what Gary Taylor calls the Folio’s “massive authority,” literally an authority derived from material properties of the Folio as a book. According to Taylor, this authority

has tended to impose an autonomous model [of textual production]—despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, both within the Shakespeare canon itself, and in literary history generally. Attempts to identify collaborators in the Shakespeare canon have been characterized as “disintegration”—another spatial metaphor, which takes the sheer physical oneness of the many bound copies of the 1623 volume as an accurate reification of an ideal authorial wholeness.”

A parallel explanation of the effect Taylor describes may be found by shifting contexts to Northrop Frye’s discussion of the Bible in The Great Code. In what amounts to Frye’s note on the texts, he begins by conceding that

the Bible is more like a small library than a real book: it almost seems that it has come to be thought of as a book only because it is contained for convenience within two covers. In fact what the word “Bible” itself primarily means is ta biblia, the little books. Perhaps, then, there is no such entity as “the Bible,” and what is called “the Bible” may be only a confused and inconsistent jumble of badly established texts.”

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Frye immediately answers his own objection: “However, all this, even if true, does not matter. What matters is that ‘the Bible’ has traditionally been read as a unity, and has influenced Western imagination as a unity. It exists if only because it has been compelled to exist.” However, for Frye it is not so simple, and he makes room for the possibility of an aesthetic unity that transcends historical contingency: “Yet, whatever the external reasons, there has to be some internal basis even for a compulsory existence” (emphasis added). In this configuration of objections to and rationales for treating the Bible as a textual unity, Frye succinctly lays out the stakes of the same problem that Taylor identifies in Shakespeare’s texts. Even when presented with bibliographical evidence about the far-from-ideal textual process that resulted in the Folio, many Shakespeareans would still give some version of Frye’s answer. There can be little question of the book’s role in compelling these kinds of textual unities to exist, as Frye notes, but the role of the e-book in this process is less certain.

With Taylor’s and Frye’s points about bibliographical and textual unity in mind, it is worth noting that the old man in Melville’s story also employs the original form of digital reading, using his fingers to manipulate and mark divisions in the text he reads. Scriptural writing tropes, along with the metaphor of the book as archive, have reentered the cultural imagination through hand-held, tablet-style reading devices, with consequences for how Shakespeare will be read and imagined in years to come. Amazon.com, for example, markets a “Kindle Edition” of Hamlet as it does for all its public domain texts, applying a label which conflates the bibliographical categories of edition and format, and which echoes the First Folio’s enabling fiction of the unity of received text and material format. More than other e-reading devices, however, the iPad stands in direct connection to this symbolic tradition of reading and writing in its emphasis on human hands. Hamlet likely used a stylus with his writing tables, but the God of Exodus writes digitally, with divine finger on divine substrate (at least with the first set of tablets). Let us conclude, then, by taking Hamlet’s speech as a test case for the symbolic and material stakes of reading Shakespeare on an iPad.

As of December 2010, nearly a year after Steve Jobs’s iPad rollout, a search for “Shakespeare” in the Apple iPad App Store returns about 100 results, many of which are only tangentially related to Shakespeare by accidents of metadata. The most highly rated Shakespeare app, and the one appearing first in the order of results, is one simply titled Shakespeare, published by the company Readdle. The app offers a complete set of Shakespeare’s plays and poems along with supplementary materials, such as several Shakespeare portraits, and tools such as a glossary and concordance, accessible through a straightforward and usable interface. Like Adams and Triplet’s Writing Tables, the app bundles together tools and references in a package for a specific device, emphasizing their grouping as a single object in a way that a website cannot. The symbolic value of the concordance is especially worth noting, since it was the publication of that particular tool that famously prompted the Saturday Review in 1863 to call Shakespeare the “Englishman’s secular Bible,” now that both works had concordances of their own. Like the nineteenth-century Folio facsimile which David Scott Kastan calls “an edition proudly sounding the sola scriptura theme, like that which had marked the

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Protestantism of the time of its writing,” the *Shakespeare* app also promises Shakespeare texts detached from the messy histories of their transmission.\(^{50}\)

The source for the app’s texts, a website called PlayShakespeare.com, notes that its texts are not scholarly editions, but like many free Shakespeare sites it offers corrected texts derived primarily from those of the Folio and the 1866 Globe edition.\(^{51}\) PlayShakespeare.com says more about its texts than most other free sites of its kind, but still remains part of a pseudo-editorial tradition that retreats to the authority of the Folio and the Globe edition instead of engaging with each of Shakespeare’s texts case by case and working through the complex transmission questions that each one presents.\(^{52}\) Oddly enough, the Shakespeare canon the app represents includes plays which did not appear in the Folio, and which have at various times been considered “not warranted”: *Pericles, Edward III*, and *Sir Thomas More*—here they are symbolically restored to the archive which the iPad app takes the Folio to embody and authorize. This early and evidently successful app deals with Shakespeare’s texts not as inscriptions—as material texts with histories—but rather as a unified and downloadable body of Shakespearean scripture, whose precise origins and chain of transmission remain mystified but nonetheless accessible to readers.

However, the text of *Hamlet* resists easy translation, which may explain why it is such a fascinating play to encounter in new media. What Gitelman calls the “savability” of written inscriptions and their counterparts in memory is precisely what *Hamlet* calls into question.\(^{53}\) The scriptural authority of the Folio, even when translated to digital forms, must always exist in paradoxical tension with the erasability represented by Hamlet’s writing tables. Reading *Hamlet* on the iPad, then, also means reading the iPad through *Hamlet*. As much as the iPad might seem like perfection of the wax writing tablets of antiquity—instantly and infinitely erasable and rewritable—our acts of reading and writing on the iPad are nonetheless regulated by the kind of authority that governs inscriptions. That authority manifests itself in Digital Rights Management systems and iTunes, the centralized approval and distribution system of Apple’s App Store, Apple’s refusal to support Firefox and Flash on the device, and the deliberate lack of direct access to a file system or command-line interface. What may or may not be inscribed in an iPad’s local memory and screen is governed by rules nearly as complex and intractable as Mosaic law or the rules that seem to bind Old Hamlet’s ghost. In this light, the device that Jobs presented to the world that morning was both a blank slate, ready to receive the future, and an inscribed list of rules constituting a social order.

Readdle’s *Shakespeare* will certainly not be the only major Shakespeare app created for the iPad, but it provides a telling counterpoint to the imagery of the rollout event described in this chapter’s introduction. Like Apple’s ironic choice of a Moses image that stands for erasure, not permanence, the textual simplicity of this first major Shakespeare app forgets the nature of Shakespeare’s texts in order to represent them. Using the app requires an act of faith in the noiseless transmission of texts, but it

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remains to be seen whether that faith will eventually be troubled by the kind of doubt that has made the print editing of Shakespeare so exciting and contentious in recent decades. Predictions about the liberating or disintegrating effects of hypertext on Shakespeare’s corpus were rampant in the first decade of digital editions on the Web, but my purpose here has been to show that it is different with e-books for tablets. The old continuities of scriptural symbols are not so easy to escape. As those of us who study the history and materiality of literary texts become app designers ourselves, not merely the audiences of tech demos, we need to understand the symbolic as well as bibliographical implications of the stage direction that appears (without square brackets) in the Readdle Shakespeare app’s version of Hamlet’s speech, next to his reference to memory tables: “He writes.”