‘Enter HAMLET reading on a book’. \(^1\) What Shakespeare’s Prince might be reading in 2.2 of Hamlet, so ‘sadly’ and ‘like a wretch’ (2.2.169–70), has long been the subject of critical curiosity. Scholarly speculation ranges from the satires of Juvenal to the Essays of Montaigne, while just as plausibly Hamlet could be ruminating on his own ‘tables’ (if, that is, the actor playing the Prince produces a notebook of some kind in the soliloquy of 1.5).\(^2\) Yet, what if Hamlet were holding neither a work of philosophy nor a florilegium, but a Bible? Might we read the character, and the tragedy, of Prince Hamlet differently if his book were the Book? The purpose of this essay is not, of course, to attempt to prove that Hamlet’s prop in 2.2 is a copy of the Bible or its representational equivalent. More simply, my aim is to ask what it might mean for any character to read the Bible on the early modern stage, and what the ramifications of such an act might be. Reading the Bible as an object of drama – as an artefact of the material and spiritual cultures of early modern England – is our starting point. It is through the Book’s physical presence on the early modern stage that the performance of Bible-reading – a performance rooted in questions of authority and power of various kinds – will be explored via two plays in particular: Christopher Marlowe’s Dr Faustus and Thomas Heywood’s If You Know Not Me, You Know Nobody. We will return to the implications of imagining Hamlet’s book as the Book, but we must begin with a brief survey of the Bible’s place in early modern England, and how its unusual appearance on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage might have been both figured and understood.

I

The Bible had, it seems, an almost unequalled material and cultural presence in England during the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I. Even as
a ‘modest estimate’, David Daniell suggests, ‘over two million’ vernacular Bibles must have been printed during the period from 1525 to 1640 for an English population of around six million, ‘a total of 211 English Bibles or New Testaments’ being ‘freshly edited and produced in the fifty-two years in which Shakespeare was alive’ (Daniell, 2003, 120–1; 129). Following the Reformation, the English Bible would be ‘the text that was read the most, heard the most, and discussed the most at all levels of society’, becoming ‘the ubiquitous standard of culture and authority’ (Katz, 2004, 41; 43). As Christopher Hill has asserted, the Bible was ‘central to the whole life of society’ during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, functioning as the ‘source of virtually all ideas’ – political, literary, scientific – yet remaining present too ‘in everyday speech’, being visible almost ‘everywhere in the lives of men, women, and children’ (Hill, 1993, 4; 31–4; 38). With the Bible being purchased in England ‘on a larger scale by more people than in any other protestant country’, this period was, Patrick Collinson avers, ‘the age par excellence of Bible-reading’ (Collinson, 1995, 84; 87–8).

If there were one factor, then, that would lead us to expect to see the Book being brought onto the early modern stage with some frequency it would be its ubiquity elsewhere. Yet that universal symbol of English Protestant culture, the Book, is largely missing – materially at least – from early modern drama: it is hard to find more than a few instances where characters appear with a book that can be identified definitively as a Bible. But why? Why would players parade certain items of religious culture in early modern theatres, such as crosses and prayer books, clerical garb and Catholic vestments (Greenblatt, 1988; Williamson, 2009b), but not the Book? To answer such questions we need to look not just to theatrical censorship (Scott, 2007, 104 n. 4; Williamson, 2009b, 16–23) but, more importantly, to the formidable cultural position commanded by the Bible in early modern England. Although one effect of the Reformation and of the printing of vast quantities of the Bible in English was the demystification of the Book (the vernacular Bible being, as Hill observes, ‘no longer the secret sacred book […] accessible only to University-educated Latin speakers’ (Hill, 1993, 39)), nevertheless its status as a holy object remained undiminished. ‘As the word of God, as the fundamental text of Protestant Christendom,’ David Cressy has noted, ‘the Bible enjoyed a special reverence that no other book could claim’, its ‘special religious significance’ making it serviceable ‘for swearing oaths, registering births, curing the sick, making decisions, predicting the future, and warding off devils’: when ‘held aloft’ an English printed Bible could serve ‘as an inspirational emblem and as a weapon, even without the necessity of being opened’ (Cressy, 1986, 93–4). The Bible was, in other words, ‘[v]alued for its content, as Holy