

of canvase, a book in *decimo sexto*, containing three treatises bound up in one,” which are reprinted soon thereafter, prefaced by images of the fish, a short foray into the emerging field of ichthyology and a thorough working through and over of the possible veracity of what the book names the “Book-Fish.” The treatises that the fish carried in its mouth, and that had returned from their uncertain fate in the sea, were attributed to English reformer John Frith, who was martyred in 1533. And within the world of 1620s Cambridge and the changing fates of religion and political affairs at the Caroline court, the appearance of a talking fish who spat out a series of untimely or only too timely treatises that held within them a critical appraisal of issues still alive and kicking seems, as Alexandra Walsham puts it rather wittily, reprising G. R. Elton but in a more thoroughly fishy context, “a piece of piscatorial politics.”⁷⁴

What remains striking about the prefatory materials to the reprinted treatises, though, is the description they yield of the quasi-forensic parsing of oddities that emerged from the sea in the period. Bywords for such chance or providential appearances include “accident,” “wonder,” “marvel,” “and miracle,” indicating the potential for revealing noise effects to orchestrate signs of the righteous or wrongful conduct of the world and state. Indeed, as the anonymous author of the volume cautions, “all miracles are marvellous things, but all marvellous things are not miracles” (11). It pays to keep your “*Mimuda*” straight from your “*minuculas*.”⁷⁵ And so, plucked by chance from a scene of fish buying, the “Booke . . . being much soyled and defaced, and couered ouer with a kinde of slime & Congealed matter” (9) was taken to Daniel Boys, a bookbinder, who “carefully washed” (10) the “leaves.” The books it contains are identified, which provokes a series of further questions, not least of which includes why it might be that a fish, the creature chosen to illustrate the Latin proverb, “*Tam matius quam piscis*, as dumb as a fish” should suddenly become so vocal (4)?

Given the Christian associations to the sign of the fish, its appearance as backing to a set of lost books of topical importance seemed both convenient and miraculous. In effect, this hybrid book-fish or fish-book comes to serve as an instance of Lammings’s radio, constituting a writing machine that restores lost things, that speaks with the inhuman cast to Providence, and that does so, as it were, in the person of “nobody.” Prospero’s book or its like comes back, then, but when it does, it returns as a strange, hybrid, zoo/bio/bibliographical entity that fishifies the rhetorical complexity of *protopoieia* (the giving of faces or voices to things).

Figure 4.1 depicts the fish and its contents—though it has been cut open so that the book may be properly revealed, having migrated from its mouth to its belly.

Inquiring further into the circumstances that might have led to such a strange reappearance of these books, the author of the treatise writes that “it seemeth most probable that vpon some wrack this booke lying (perhaps manie years) in the pocket of some man, that was cast away, was swallowed by the God, and that it lay for a good space of time in the fishes belly. For the booke was much consumed by lying there, the leather cover being melted and dissolved and much of the edges of the leaves abraded and consumed, and the rest very thin and brittle

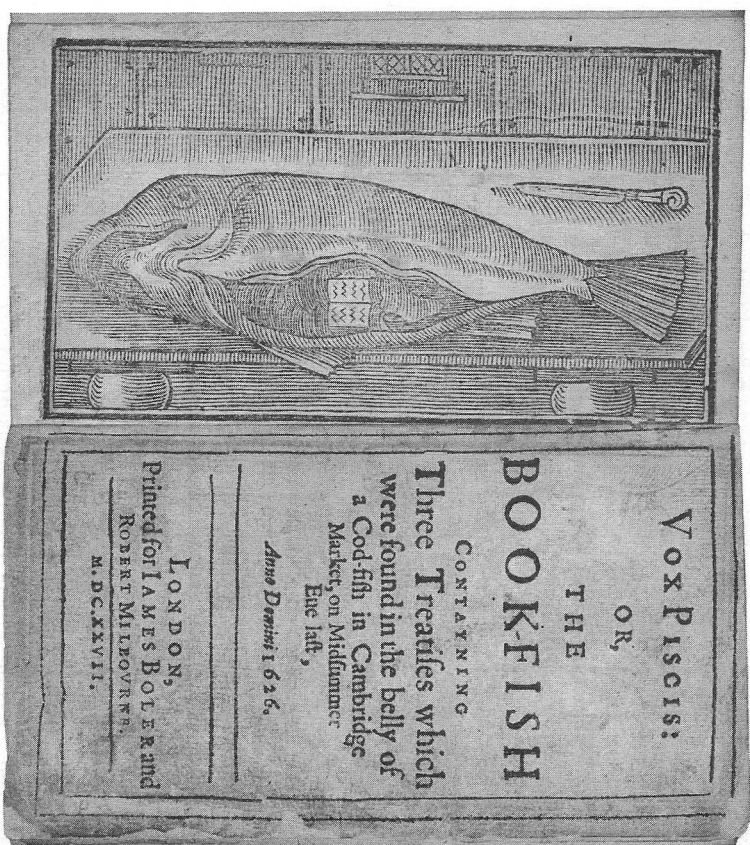


Figure 4.1 Title page to *Vox Piscis: or The Book Fish Containing Three Treatises Which Were Found in the Belly of a Cod-Fish in Cambridge Market on Midsummer Eve Last, Anno Domini 1626* (London 1627) STC 11395 copy 3. By Permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

having bene deepe parboiled by the heat of the fishes mawe” (13–14). The scenario narrativizes the condition of the “book” whose condition might best be described as “cooked”—not drowned so much as “parboiled” in the oven that is a fish’s belly. But no virtue has been gleaned from this nondigestion. The cod in question has not fared too well either, being very underweight from having its mouth blocked and so unlikely to fetch a good price at market. The fish itself seems to have “been cast into a surfet or consumption” (14). It takes no “profit” from the encounter. Instead it becomes a mode of conveyance, a condition by which the book that was lost goes mobile once more.

When the *Vox Piscis* announces the identity of the treatises, prefacing them with a prayer to preserve its readers from storms and shipwreck, it presents the following rhetorical question, hoping that by reading it, by decoupling the fish from the contents of its mouth, severing bibliography from ichthyology, we can “fish out the reason why these treatises should bee so strangely preserved in a living dumbe speaking library in the sea” (17). The metaphorical transcoding offered by the *vox piscis* offers an almost irresistible set of rhetorical resources, as here comes through in the almost involuntary or winking invitation to “fish [the truth] out.” Aside from the difficulty posed in separating the book-fish from its