Shakespeare and the Bible

“It is but natural for an Englishman, whether he believes in the full inspiration of the Bible or not, to couple it and Shakespeare’s works together; for these books are the two which have most influenced the English mind.”

-- F. J. Furnivall, 1880

“Do you know who William Shakespeare was? He was the fella who wrote the King James Bible.”

-- Walter “Monk” McGinn in Gangs of New York

As recently as June of 2000, writing in the Times Literary Supplement, Jonathan Bate could remark that Shakespeare studies lacked a comprehensive examination of the imaginative impact of the English Bible on Shakespeare’s work. Two terms are important for Bate’s point: “comprehensive” and “imaginative”. Though comments on Shakespeare’s use of the Bible are recorded from the early eighteenth century on, and extensive studies of Shakespeare’s relation to the Bible appeared in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the scope and usefulness of some were limited by a scattershot approach, of others by a desire to show how Shakespeare was a Biblical (even occasionally a Messianic) writer, rather than to analyse how Shakespeare responded to the Bible as a writer reading another powerful and influential body of language. Since the turn of the last century, numerous publications, both large and local, have explored the profound residence of Biblical language in Shakespeare’s ear. But commentary had yet to produce a full and detailed analysis within the modern critical tradition of how the Bible informed Shakespeare’s imagination. Fifteen years after Bate’s remarks, this lack has begun to be remedied, in particular in a recent book by Hannibal Hamlin. But the reasons for its longevity are worth considering if we are to approach the question of Shakespeare and the Bible.
There are, as this history suggests, difficulties here. Not only does the question require a deep and sympathetic acquaintance with two immense fields, since these are the two most widely-read and voluminously commented texts in English, but there are some real methodological problems in any discussion that does not simply set quotations side by side with a bare “Voila!” The nature of the implication of the Bible’s language within and through Shakespeare’s is a key issue, and to address that needs a well-developed account of the possible relations between any two pieces of writing. Take the question of whether the Bible is one of Shakespeare’s “sources”. Shakespeare wrote no plays directly based on Biblical material, like Baptistes by George Buchanan (1506-1582) or Esther by Jean Racine (1639-1699). Such plays on the public stage were effectively illegal during his career. The great cycle-plays of Biblical history, performed since the fourteenth century in towns around England, had been dismantled or suppressed during Shakespeare’s youth (he may have seen the final Coventry performance in 1579), though Paul Whitfield White has argued that smaller plays continued for some time after to be presented around the country. The Bible itself does not even appear on stage in any of Shakespeare’s plays, unlike in some of his contemporaries, most famously Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, who reads from Jerome’s Vulgate. The closest we get is a prayer book or two.

So, while it is clear that the Bible was a major source of language, image and thought for Shakespeare, fully equal to Ovid or Holinshed in terms of impact on his work as a whole, Biblical material had to be used in his plays by more sidelong means than by direct staging, inwoven into the textures of what he wrote. And this leads to inevitable complexities. The task of identifying and delimiting a “use” of Biblical language or story in highly allusive work such as
Shakespeare’s, which delights in contaminating, overlapping and fusing registers, is not a simple one. Reference, citation, allusion, recollection, undertone, echo are words that might apply, but even these may not exhaust the possibilities. Does Shakespeare use the Bible in all of these ways, or only in some? Does he use different relations for different purposes? How much overlap in word or thought, and of what kinds, do we need to show a link? What even counts as “the Bible” for such purposes?

Which Bible?

Though it is a presumption both useful and true that almost all Elizabethans had a close and large acquaintance with the English Bible, a much smaller group with Scriptures in Latin and even a few with Greek and Hebrew, the modes of encounter and awareness could vary very widely, and different sorts of encounter derive from different contexts. To take only the, admittedly complex, example of the Psalms, there was one translation, Coverdale’s, attached to the Prayer Book in use for services, one version (the “Whole Book of Psalms” also known as “Sternhold and Hopkins”) adapted for singing, and others circulating in the various overlapping and competing English translations for reading, some of them also thickly annotated. The “Bishops” Bible and the “Geneva” Bible were for public and private use, and there was even a secret Roman Catholic competitor, the “Rheims-Douay” text. This lavish provision of versions, which Bishops Parker and Grindal thought would “do much good”, was unprecedented, and later largely forgotten with the rise of the “Authorized” (or “King James”) Version. But it makes the task of accurately grasping Shakespeare’s particular Biblical knowledge that much more difficult. Added to this, there were also Biblical phrases, terms and
subjects infused through a multitude of contemporary oral and written and visual materials, in sermons, ballads, catechisms, popular divinity and controversy, tapestries, frescoes, statues and emblems, and also in the memories of older people who could still recall a world of Catholic culture destroyed. Biblical language, story, parable, maxim and image saturated Elizabethan England in ways that make it hard to speak of “the Bible” without meaning something like most of contemporary culture. The Bible was, as James Kugel has put it, an “interpreted text”, but in Shakespeare’s day that interpretation was unconfined, continuous and ubiquitous. A reference or allusion to “Herod” for instance, might filiate to reading of the Bible, to published commentary, to a sermon, to a visual image, to a popular song or poem, or to the image of a ranting actor from an old Biblical pageant-play. And all of these are in some sense, for this period, “the Bible”.

Some of these issues are discussed by Naseeb Shaheen in the introductory material to his crucial compilation, *Biblical References in Shakespeare’s Plays*, a work that, like less comprehensive precursors by Thomas Carter (1897) and Richmond Noble (1935), seeks to catalogue all clear instances of allusive borrowing or citation from Scripture. In identifying what constitutes a “biblical reference”, Shaheen chooses to look for a kind of absolute verbal similarity between striking phrases or ideas. For balder allusions, this works well enough. The difficulty is that identifying subtler recollections in a play, which can indicate the deeper presence of a Biblical text or set of texts, may sometimes depend upon no more than a single charged word of Biblical origin. Broadly empirical criteria such as Shaheen lays out, reasonable though they are, may overlook or exclude such clues. And again, it is not even easy to determine what should constitute “the Bible” for these purposes. Does a marginal gloss count?
Is Biblical language embedded or paraphrased in another text, such as the *Book of Common Prayer* or one of the Elizabethan *Homilies*, still a “Biblical reference”? To attend to “the Bible” means attending not merely to a book, but also to the wider uses of that book. Shaheen is aware of this, and includes less certain and “para-Biblical” references as he deems appropriate, but they are questions that need careful and continual considering.

**Allusion: The Bible in Shakespeare**

Obvious instances of allusions to Biblical language are loud markers that direct the audience’s or reader’s sense of a play’s immediate relation to Biblical topics and materials, bringing in a whole line of argument by a figurative comparison. But apparently obvious gestures of this kind can open into more complex agendas. The title of *Measure for Measure*, for instance, boldly lays a claim to a subject: Justice and Judgement. Yet the case is not so simple. The immediate allusion is to *Matthew* 7:1-2, in the “Sermon on the Mount”: “Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.” (KJV) Yet when the phrase appears in the play itself, as “like doth quit like, and measure answers measure” (5.1.411) it is bent instead towards the Mosaic *lex talionis* of “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” (*Leviticus* 24:20). The allusion points both ways, and so outlines not a stabilizing, but a complicating relation, not an answer but a problem.

It is frequently so with Shakespeare. Biblical allusion that appears straightforward often turns out not to be so. An echo can allow an audience not only to place a character in relation to a set of familiar analogues, but can also invite attention to how a character is
asserting, evaluating or locating himself. King Claudius the fratricide is straightforwardly like Cain, as he himself laments, laboring under “the primal eldest curse”, and joining himself to a pattern in Hamlet of references to and evocations of the Fall. But is the persecuted King Richard II like Christ, as he himself asserts -- or does he merely prefer to think he is? Some characters, like Falstaff, use Biblical allusion with deliberate rhetorical strategy, in his case often in complex irony. Others encounter the language of the Bible in ways and to ends that we recognize, but that they do not or cannot. Julius Caesar and King Lear, as pagans, must be presumed to stumble into a patch of Biblical allusion unintentionally, though with highly illuminating consequences: Caesar as Christ, Lear as Job. Other allusive activity of Shakespeare’s Biblical language seems even more diffuse, buried deeper within what we might call the inner imaginative design of his plays to form a sort of private “undersong” or supporting network, like the warp threads of a tapestry.

The whole question of Biblical allusion is taken up in a comprehensive fashion by Hannibal Hamlin, the title of whose book, The Bible in Shakespeare, suggests his perspective. “In” is the key word here. Shakespeare is an envelope within which Biblical materials are in some sort contained. But the schemes and purposes of envelopment are many and highly various, as Hamlin demonstrates, working carefully along several lines of enquiry. Hamlin shows how the early chapters of Genesis exert different kinds of pressure in different Shakespearean genres: tragedy, history, comedy and late romance. He explores Biblical allusion as anachronism in classical plays, as the strategy of a single character – Falstaff -- over several plays, and as a network of topic or commentary in single plays: apocalypse in Macbeth, and Job in King Lear. What emerges most of all is the continuous richness and density of Shakespeare’s practice of
Biblical allusion, an exemplary instance of what Stanley Cavell has referred to as “the saturation of the Shakespearean text.”

This saturated allusiveness can lead the way from single words to a play’s largest design. When Iago says of Othello “The food that to him now is as luscious as locusts, shall be to him shortly as bitter as the coloquintida.” (1.3.347-49, Folio reading), Shaheen rightly notes that the wording recalls the description of John the Baptist at Matthew 3.4 who ate “locusts and wild honey”, while the phrasing evokes Revelation 10.10: “It was then in my mouth as sweet as honey: but when I had eaten it, my bellie was bitter”. In addition, however, the strange and striking word “coloquintida” may also be “Biblical”, from 2 Kings 4.39 in the Geneva Bible, where it appears not in the text proper, but as a gloss on the “wilde gourdes” that Elisha makes edible for the sons of the prophets. It is hard to imagine a likelier place for Shakespeare to have encountered the word. If so, it joins a complex web of Biblical references in the play that draws together images of exilic wandering and diatribes against whoredom. At a powerful moment later in the play, for instance, Othello laments his sense of betrayal by Desdemona:

Had it pleased heaven  
To try me with affliction; had they rain'd  
All kinds of sores and shames on my bare head.  
Steep'd me in poverty to the very lips,  
Given to captivity me and my utmost hopes,  
I should have found in some place of my soul  
A drop of patience: but, alas, to make me  
A fixed figure for the time of scorn  
To point his slow unmoving finger at!  
Yet could I bear that too; well, very well:  
But there, where I have garner'd up my heart,  
Where either I must live, or bear no life;  
The fountain from the which my current runs,  
Or else dries up; to be discarded thence!  
Or keep it as a cistern for foul toads  
To knot and gender in! Turn thy complexion there,
Patience, thou young and rose-lipp'd cherubin,--
Ay, there, look grim as hell!

(4.2.48-65)

These lines may well be the densest cluster of Biblical allusions in Shakespeare, bringing together in a mere eighteen lines references to Job, Daniel, Exodus, Proverbs, Jeremiah, and Hebrews, as well as the generally Biblical “cherubin”. Even “Patience” is a strongly Pauline word, especially notable in Romans. Surely Othello does not “intend” -- whatever we may mean by that vexed word here -- this density of evocation. And yet the particular pattern of Biblical references sheds a powerful light on Othello’s being, both his agonizing suspicion of Desdemona, and his deeper and more lasting condition as an outsider, an exile, and perhaps a convert.

The point is not to heap up the pile of citations, or to criticize critics like Shaheen for having over-narrow principles. Rather, it is to suggest that identification of an allusion is usually only a starting-point. The interfusion of Biblical language in Shakespeare’s poetry is very deep and deeply structural. To explore Othello’s personality, his experience and his state, Shakespeare here gives him a speech woven complexly together of Biblical traces, which also intersect with related language at other moments in the play. This half-secret network of interplaying citations gives the portrait of Othello a particular texture and pressure, a characteristically Shakespearean sense of development, so that a full account of the play would need to be able to spell out what this pattern of recourses to a particular area of the Bible signifies. Further, it would have to revisit the resonance of the Biblical text itself viewed from the vantage point of this powerful later fiction. That is to say, Shakespeare’s deployment of the imagery of prophecy and exile in Othello can also comment powerfully on the uses to which
that language is put in the Bible itself. The resulting interaction between Bible and play may disclose less a borrowing or a dependency than a complicated, if paradoxical, negotiation between the two, as much “Shakespeare in the Bible” as “the Bible in Shakespeare”.

The Bible beside Shakespeare

This last point opens a different, though related angle of investigation from that so sensitively pursued by Hamlin: in what relation do Shakespeare’s work and the cultural work, as it were, of the Bible stand to one another more largely. The epigraph from Furnivall points to the brute fact, at least for him, of their dual preeminence as sources of cultural authority. But how are we to assess their mutual authority and the lines of force between them, both as Shakespeare was writing and now.

Stephen Marx, in his *Shakespeare and the Bible*, offered to cut this knot by bringing Shakespeare’s *Works* and the Bible together very directly. The volume’s origin in undergraduate teaching appears in its method, and it clearly owes a great deal to the contemporary practice of teaching “The Bible as Literature”. Marx treats Shakespeare and the Bible, in effect, as two thick canonical books, each containing a largish number of sub-books, sometimes even writing as though the 1623 First Folio were itself a kind of canonical Scripture designed to respond in format to its great exemplar, or, at least, as though Marx were a kabbalist meditating on such secret correspondences. Each of his chapters pairs a play with a book of the Bible -- except that *The Tempest* is compared in both the first and last chapters, respectively to *Genesis* and *Revelation*, “partly because of its double position as the first play in the Folio and the last play Shakespeare wrote in its entirety” (p. 17). Shakespeare himself, of course, could not have
known of the first of these circumstances of canonization, since he was dead seven years when
the Folio was published.

Sometimes, as in Marx’s chapter of *Job* and *King Lear*, the two texts are scanned
point by point, in this case through the assumption that both are “tragedies” amenable to
discussion in Aristotle’s terms. At other times, it is as though Marx is reinterpreting the Bible
through Shakespeare, rather than exploring Shakespeare’s reading of the Bible. But this is a
very modern way of proceeding. It cannot much illuminate the truly striking, even shocking, fact
about Shakespeare’s poetic activity “in the shadow of a great rock”, as Harold Bloom has put it,
which is that Shakespeare should have in fact treated “the Bible as literature” at all. What was
in place or at stake for this to have become possible -- that is, what real effort did it take in
Shakespeare and his contemporaries to wrest to their own modern and literary uses a group of
writings of such immense and constantly-asserted authority? “Typology” and “midrash” -- two
strategies Marx uses as names for Shakespeare’s responses to the Bible -- are not quite fine-
grained enough to catch this intimate and charged interplay in its historical originality.

More attentive to the force of the Bible for Shakespeare is Harold Fisch on *The
Biblical Presence in Shakespeare, Milton and Blake*. In his chapters on Shakespeare, Fisch
tries to measure the impact of Biblical models on the structural patterning of tragedy. He
treats only four plays -- *Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, Hamlet* and *King Lear* -- exploring
each for the varying degrees to which Biblical materials and modes of discourse offer schemes
and themes for, or even “counterplots” within, the plays’ action. The results vary in density from
play to play. In *Julius Caesar*, Fisch focuses on Shakespeare’s interest in the pagan ritual made
of political murder, and then complicates the picture by connecting the impact of Caesar’s
Ghost to a particular passage in Job, the Biblical allusion importing a sudden new perspective into the Roman action and throwing the rest into an imaginative relief which challenges the Roman world and frames a competitive struggle or “agon” between the two. The Clown in *Antony and Cleopatra* does much the same thing, in a way reminiscent of Eric Auerbach’s discussions of Christian style, in his masterpiece *Mimesis*, as a radical affront to classical decorum. Even more starkly, in *King Lear*, Fisch sees the pagan and the Christian contradicting one another so that they form between them a framework of what he calls an “organized incoherence” deliberately holding the drama in fracture against itself. In *Hamlet*, Fisch takes a slightly different tack, comparing Hamlet’s “covenant” with the Ghost to various Biblical examples, and pointing to the importance of memory in the play, a concern he links to Christian patterns of thought derived from Biblical notions of “covenant”. He also draws attention to the connection between Hamlet’s patterns of speech and thought and the contemporary, especially Catholic, traditions of spiritual meditation.

The Bible vs. Shakespeare

Fisch’s book has a strong and useful sense of the presence of Biblical materials motivating not merely local details, but patterns and currents of action set forcefully in tension with others, so that the deep vigour of the drama stems from a contest of sources of imaginative energy and investment. Fisch calls Shakespeare’s poetic personality in this respect “centrifugal”, which is perhaps another version of the notion of his “negative capability” championed by Keats. Fisch also offers some very suggestive remarks on the “wit” disclosed by the practice of dramatic form by Shakespeare as he so isolates it. This wit is “the quality
whereby different sources are nimbly combined with, and set off against, one another ...[and] which determines the total freedom of action which the author implicitly claims.” His synonym for this is, more provocatively, “irresponsibility”. Thus “If Shakespeare has appropriated the power of a Biblical paradigm, he has also discarded it” (153-54). The daring of this picture of poetic freedom is bracing and makes one wish Fisch had developed further why and how he thought this became possible for Shakespeare, aside from the simply being “a mark of his greatness”. “Greatness” and “irresponsibility” make an oddly asymmetric pair, especially in the field occupied so powerfully by the “great rock” of the Bible.

Following up the idea of Shakespeare’s “freedom” in this way, especially in relation to a sense of the Bible as a text imposing – or at least frequently used to impose -- constraints, may lead us to deeper questions about the derivation and departure of Shakespeare’s typical practices of language and design from Biblical models. Might Shakespeare have received the Bible as a “world of words”, in John Florio’s phrase, rather than the single Word of God? In the earliest published version of Shakespeare’s tragedy that bears his name, King Richard II pictures himself in meditation as setting “the word it selfe/ Against the word” (5.5.13-14). The metrical enjambment heightens the tension of such an act of dangerous midrash. But the phrasing was strategically altered in the later Folio printing of 1623 to “the Faith it selfe/ Against the Faith”. The stark challenge of word against word (or even Word against Word) seems to have worried someone. One could dispute faiths or creeds, but the Word was supposed, even by different creeds, to be single. The image of “word against word” resonates strongly, not only for the divided fretfulness of Richard’s mind in his fatal prison, but for Shakespeare’s own deep attraction to contaminating and contrasting, indeed to wrenching, his sources and his poetic
forebears, including the text of the Word. Richard’s conundrum of Biblical synthesis has implications also for Shakespeare’s own approach to a multiplying Word.

Or take that notorious “lowest form of humour”, the pun, which Samuel Johnson famously designated as Shakespeare’s “fatal Cleopatra”, implying that his attraction to it was a damaging blot on his poetic strength. Despite Johnson’s distaste, puns do fundamental poetic work in Shakespeare’s plays, fusing several lines of meaning in a single compact, sometimes explosive, utterance. When Lady Macbeth says of Duncan’s blood “I’ll gild the faces of the grooms withal/ For it must seem their guilt” she knots together in the sound “gilt/guilt” notions of surface trace and of criminal depth, a knot which will later work itself out for her with terrible irony in her own indelibly stained hands. Shakespeare’s sense of language is deeply invested in how local tangles of Gordian meaning can set deep truths loose in this way to run where they will. But his usage in this respect contrasts sharply with the language of the Bible, which can be elusive, difficult, even oracular, but is not usually punning (at least, not in translation, which strips away many of the resources of punning, especially in the Jahwist’s Hebrew, in favour of “clarifications). To the sixteenth century, figurative language in Biblical rhetoric was the subject less of celebration than of deep anxiety and suspicion. Luther tried to deny that Biblical rhetoric could be figurative. And where figures were, much energy was taken up in fierce dispute over how best to contain them. One need only consider the period’s agonies over the sentence “Hoc est corpus meus” [“Τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ σῶμα μου”, Luke 22:19] to see what might be at stake in managing the Word. Shakespeare does not show this sort of queasiness. Indeed, his delight in proliferating figures suggests a profane refusal of the kind of straitening discipline that theology wished everywhere, if variously, to bring to the Word of
God. For Shakespeare, metaphor was the heart of life and certainly the heart of his plays. As his characters choose their metaphors, so they live, and suffer, their lives. In relation to the Bible’s relative circumscription of diction -- about an eight thousand word vocabulary in the King James version --, Shakespeare’s use of over twenty-one thousand words, many of them likely coinages of his own, presents itself as an ever-expanding universe of immense creative energy. The characters of the English Bible all sound more or less the same, as Harold Bloom also points out, yet even minor walk-ons in Shakespeare may carry their own distinctive world of words with them. The Bible wishes to be (that is, the Church presumes it must be) centripetal and responsible; Shakespeare’s practice -- “centrifugal” and “irresponsible” -- is, in this respect, profoundly anti-Biblical.

Shakespeare and Conversion

Yet in one respect, the Christian Bible has always been irreducibly figurative, so that not even the most committed literalist among Reformed theologians could, or would wish to, drive the figure from the deep structure of the book, reflecting as it did a structure of the faith outlined as early as St. Paul and confirmed by Anselm at the heart of the Christian revelation: “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.” The bipartite character of the Christian Word requires that the text of the “Old Testament” be a complex network of figurative markers pointing forward to their eventual closure and fulfilment by a second, answering testament. Christianity is impossible without this interpretive violence, that both fractures and sutures the earlier text into a revised eschatology. The pressure and counter-pressure between local and longer-range meanings on the words that make up this network are
what give the Christian Bible its specific bifocal and oscillating character. The pattern of conversion which articulates the theology of Christianity and the life history of its believers also organizes the understanding of its scriptures.

Conversion -- the logic of the Christian Bible and the principal testimony of its most important witness, St. Paul -- is also a strikingly central element in Shakespeare’s writings, from literal and compulsory instances, such as Shylock’s, to the historic “reformation” of Prince Hal into King Henry V, to more subtle instances, such as Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*, who leaves his anti-feminist polemics to be “converted” to matrimony, or the long agony of Othello, violently perverted to Iago’s creed of cynical misogyny. But a key difference is that Shakespeare’s narratives of temporal transformation, the fundamental burden of his work, are not closed by eschatology. It is as though, one might say, he read the Bible as a book called “The Metamorphoses of Jahweh.” Conversion, change, reorientation, metamorphosis -- a pattern of life made stable in Christian experience by the embrace of Christ as Saviour --, display instead in Shakespeare a radical wildness, even as they are internalized as tropes of spiritual and psychological process, rather than being rendered bodily, as in Ovid. The figurative trajectories of Shakespeare’s individual characters are conceived not so much as closed in conversion, as exposed to continual transformation by pressures coming from unknown, unexpected or unwelcome sources. For Dante, as Auerbach showed, the *figurae* of individual souls were perfected by their eschatological fate, fixed forever in their postures of damnation or beatitude. But Shakespeare’s characters are figures of earth, not of heaven or hell. Even when eschatological pressure bears down remorselessly on them, as with Macbeth, surrounded as he is by supernatural portents and apocalyptic language, Shakespeare’s dramatization looks
above all to the *process* of their transformation, rather than to its end. To ask about the *change* of the Macbeths into what their successor calls “this dead butcher and his fiendlike queen” is to ask a question prompted by the Bible. But to explore the process of that selfhood of change from within, in its own terms and pressures, as the play so relentlessly does is to liberate the thought of process from the constraints that otherwise confine a Biblical intimation within a doctrinally Christian framework.

Shakespeare’s Bible, in setting the experience of conversion at the centre of its form of life, contained for him the seeds of its own deposition as a final authority on what conversion could come to mean. Fisch’s “irresponsibility” seems too casual a term for this process if we recall the dignity and authority with which the Bible was invested by early modern England. Even while Shakespeare’s alarming parables of spiritual change were being written for the stage, the great team of translators who would produce the “Authorised Version” of Scripture were busy with their royally-appointed task. Instead, borrowing a term from Giorgio Agamben, we might do better to speak, as polemicists against the stage so insistently did throughout the period, of a “profanation” of the Bible, that is, as Agamben puts it, of a re-positioning of sacred materials beyond the ambit of the sacred (“pro-fanum”, before the temple) “by means of an entirely inappropriate use (or, rather, re-use) of the sacred: namely, play.” While Shakespeare’s use of the Bible shows across the full range of possibilities, at its most radical his response to the Scriptures as occasions of play and transformation is more charged and transgressive than has sometimes been allowed. He is not a simple quarrier of allusive material whose handling is not charged with doubt, hesitation, and the potential for radical inquiry, even overturning.
As a final example of this playful but also highly original and productive profanation of sacred materials, we might consider this famous passage from one of Shakespeare’s earlier plays, *A Midsummer Nights Dream*, that displays with beguiling clarity the direction and force of his imaginative commitments, and how they both incorporate and transfigure Biblical language to his own ends. Here is Nick Bottom the weaver, waking from a night spent in the arms of Titania, the Fairy Queen – an experience he now understands as a strange and mysterious dream:

I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was: man is but an ass, if he go about to expound this dream. Methought I was—there is no man can tell what. Methought I was --, and methought I had --, but man is but a patched fool, if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was. I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream: it shall be called Bottom's Dream, because it hath no bottom.

Bottom’s characteristic habit of error, his ass-headedness, mangles his quotation, surely at best only half-conscious, of St Paul (I Corinthians 2: 9: “The eye hath not seen, & the ear hath not heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.” Bishop’s Bible, 1568). But at the same time, and startlingly, Paul’s evocation of “the bottom of God's secrets” (I Corinthians 2: 10, Geneva New Testament, 1557) gives the weaver’s dream a strange topsy-turvy dignity and authority. More, the grotesquerie of the hearing eye and seeing ear suggest an enriched power of spiritual perception that reflects not only the synaesthetic wonder of Bottom’s Dream, but casts an odd transfiguring light back on the gospel’s own sublimity. It is as if Paul himself might not have gone far enough in explaining how far beyond human comprehension were the mysteries of God. As attentive
listeners may already have grasped, Bottom’s Dream – a figure for Shakespeare’s play and its
deepest poetic work -- turns out to be a metamorphic place where settled decorums may be
suddenly inverted by startling effects of innovation that are no less resonant than playful. If the
Fairy Queen can love an ass, then the sacred itself in Shakespeare’s hands – or perhaps
anyone’s hands -- may hardly be safe from transfiguration by and into the profane, so that, as
Titania herself asserts “the mazèd world/ Now knows not which is which.”

Shakespeare’s conversation with the Bible was one of the two deepest and most
pervasive encounters of his life as a poet. No other work had such an abiding residence in his
ear. He uses the Bible – in several of its versions -- throughout his career and at all levels of his
writing, from ordinary and conscious quotation to deeper forms of allusion and provocation.
Biblical language haunts many of his speeches, Biblical example structures or nerves many of
his plots, Biblical concepts provide an essential component of his thinking. But that thinking is
not merely set by Biblical precedent. It also engages it in a profound and often transgressive
way, one that interrogates the poetic and exemplary force of the Bible as often as it defers to it.
If Shakespeare has now, for the contemporary world, become something like a secular
scripture, the roots of that process lie in part in Shakespeare’s own complex, forceful and
continuous wrestling with the Bible.

References


Further Reading


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