

Reviews

Biblical References in Shakespeare's Comedies

by Naseeb Shaheen (U. of Delaware Press, 1993)

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The third in Naseeb Shaheen's series on Biblical references in Shakespeare not only supplies a complement to previous studies of the Tragedies (1987) and the Histories (1989), but also marks an advance in the sophisticated treatment of complex interpretative problems that were neglected in the two previous books. Here one detects a heightened awareness of the need to balance strictness in distinguishing influential sources from illusory ones, combined with a guiding vision which seeks to explicate the "spirit in which all the relevant passages are used" (28). Shaheen's appreciation of the complex associative processes of Shakespeare's "extremely retentive and associative mind" (Hankins *infra*) emerges more here than in his previous books. For the first time, for example, we find reference to "composite readings" evidently based on more than one translation of key texts, such as Genesis 25:25 (57). Such advances are the fruit of many years patient labor in the vineyards of bibliographical source studies by someone who has done more this century than any other scholar to advance an awareness of the many salient details of Shakespeare's Biblical knowledge.

The empirical method of charting Biblical references as they occur in sequence through act, scene and line of each play, first applied by Shaheen in his study of Biblical references in the *Faerie Queene* (1976) and used in his two previous books on Shakespeare, is both the great strength and, potentially, a weakness of his approach. Although he develops a more comprehensive and detailed treatment than any previous scholar, Shaheen's methodology originates with Carter's 1905 attempt to establish the priority of the Geneva Bible (f.p. 1560) as Shakespeare's primary English Bible. Carter was the first to systematically tabulate Shakespeare's references against the lexical variation in different translations of the English Bible. Carter concluded that the Geneva Bible, prepared by William Whittingham and other Calvinist exiles from the reign of Mary Tudor (1553-1558) and first published in Geneva in 1560, was Shakespeare's preferred translation. In his landmark 1935 study, *Shakespeare's*

Biblical Knowledge, Richmond Noble refined Carter's methodology and modified his conclusions regarding Shakespeare's sole reliance on the Geneva translation. In that study, Noble showed that although Carter was probably correct in asserting the priority of the Geneva translation in Shakespeare's Biblical imagination, he was also familiar with other translations, especially the 1568 Bishop's Bible. The key to this method lies in distinguishing among influences which can be demonstrated at the lexical level: coordinate ideas, image-clusters, rhythmic or other figurative influences can play little role in distinguishing among variant sources.

Shaheen prefaces each of his books with a chapter on variant Bibles ("Which Version Shakespeare Used?") which summarizes and evaluates the evidence for Shakespeare's knowledge of each of the major English Translations. In order of roughly declining influence, these include The Geneva (f.p. 1560), The Bishop's (f.p. 1568), Thomson's New Testament (f.p. 1576), The Great Bible (f.p. 1539), The Coverdale (f.p. 1529, 1535), The Matthew—largely a reprint of Tyndale and Coverdale (f.p. 1537), Taverner's (f.p. 1539), and Tyndale's (f.p. 1526, 1530) New Testament. In his previous books, Shaheen found a clear preference for readings from the Geneva translation: 10 Geneva readings in the Histories and 14 in the Tragedies, with only 11 from all other translations combined in both genres. In the Comedies, the Geneva is, perhaps, not quite so preponderant: Shaheen finds four readings from the Geneva, four from the Bishop's—three of them to Romans 13:10—and five from other translations combined. The Geneva still seems to predominate, particularly if all three references to the Bishop's Romans 13:10 are treated, as they well might be for comparative purposes, as a single reference. More significantly, Shaheen omits—as I shall demonstrate—one vital Geneva reading which decisively tips the balance in favor of the predominance of that translation for the Comedies as well as the Tragedies and Histories.

In this book, Shaheen devotes a chapter to each of the Comedies, and each chapters begins with an analysis of alternative sources which addresses the all-important question of "false positives." A false positive would be an apparent Biblical reference which could be traced to an acknowledged secular source of the play. Shaheen's survey establishes an extremely significant negative foundation for future research. "Shakespeare seldom borrows Biblical references from his [secular] sources, even when those sources contain many [Biblical] references" (40). The low number of religious references carried over from secular sources is strong evidence for the original character of the author's religious thought. His Biblical references seem clearly to result from his own religious study and to manifest a distinctive theological vision. They are not a reflex of some hypothetical generic Elizabethan or Renaissance "Biblical culture." Although Shaheen finds some passages inspired by Cramer's Book of

Common Prayer (f.p. 1545) or the Homilies—these references constitute only a small portion of the total religious references found in Shakespeare. These findings supply some teeth to Roland Mushat Frye's 1963 conclusion that Shakespeare shows almost no influence of contemporary theological texts, either English or Continental, and that his theological usage "seems to have been familiarly and almost instinctively drawn from intimate awareness" (13) cultivated through reading the Bible, particularly the Geneva translation:

I...have found no demonstrable influences of Shakespeare's indebtedness, even to Augustine or Aquinas...on the basis of [extensive study of all major and many minor theological tracts influential during the 16th c.]¹ *I must report my inability to establish Shakespeare's theological affinities or to discover even a single unquestionable instance of indebtedness of the kind which can so frequently be found in the history plays or of the kind which so unequivocally demonstrates Shakespeare's extensive use of the Geneva Bible....* (Frye 1963, 11-12, my emphasis)

More than any other single study, Shaheen's trilogy supplies the evidence to confirm Peter Milward's conclusion that the "deepest inspiration in Shakespeare's plays is both religious and Christian" (1973, 274). Shakespeare texts—though secular in orientation (see Frye 19-42)²—are "charged with religious overtones, largely in virtue of their frequent, though unobtrusive, Biblical references" (Milward 87). Notice of such "frequent though unobtrusive" allusions to scriptural sources goes back to Walter Whiter's seminal 1794 study of Shakespearean compositional dynamics,³ which found that

Our Poet frequently alludes to the narratives of scripture, and often employs its language in a remote and peculiar language. (254)

Moreover, states Whiter:

Traces of so subtle an influence will often be invisible to the hasty glance of a superficial observer, though they will be apparent to a more careful view in distinct and unequivocal characters. (76)

Shaheen has done more than any other scholar to track down and list for future reference all, or at any rate, most, of this *frequent* though often *remote and peculiar* scriptural influence in Shakespeare. The staggering dimension of this influence may be evaluated by considering some raw numbers from Shaheen's trilogy. In his three books, Shaheen finds more than 1,300 Biblical references—an average of almost 40 per play. In the 12 Comedies, Shaheen finds 371 Biblical or liturgical references. These references are established by locating key phrases or idioms of a distinctively Biblical origin. Because such phrases often recur in more than one Biblical verse, the references yield a total of 1,202 potential source listings in Shaheen's appendices.

On average, then, there are more than three possible Biblical "origins" for each reference. Although we may be reasonably certain that a given Shakespeare

phrase reflects a Biblical influence, the precise local origin of the influence frequently remains indeterminate. Although the 1:3 ratio found in the Comedies holds reasonably constant in plays studied by Shaheen, this average conceals considerable variance in the degree of certainty with which individual references can be tagged to specific Biblical verses. Although many references list six or more possible sites of Biblical origin in Shaheen's appendices, other can be identified as originating in the language of a specific Biblical verse, sometimes even from a specific translation of the Bible. These examples become litmus-markers for the specific verse and perhaps even the edition preserved in Shakespeare's mind during the compositional process: with them we can pinpoint the Biblical or liturgical source of Shakespeare's language. One striking example of such a Biblical reference occurs in Portia's stirring moral from *The Merchant of Venice*:

How far that little candle throws his beam!

So shines a good deed in a naughty world. (V.ii.61-2)

This passage marks one of the few instances in which it can positively be stated that Richmond Noble, in his landmark 1935 study, *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge*, misidentified the Biblical origin of a Shakespearean phrase. Noble mistakenly attributed Portia's words as a reference to Matthew 5:16, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good workes, and glorify your father which is in heaven." The actual reference, however, is to a parallel but lexically distinctive verse, Philippians 2:15:

That ye may be blameless, and pure, & the sonnes of God without rebuke in the middes of a *naughtie* and crooked nation, among whome ye shine as lights in the *worlde*. (1570 Genevan, italics supplied)

In *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Comedies* (1993, 130-1), Shaheen corrects Noble's misattribution. This correction, based on the conjunction of the Biblical commonplace of virtue shining like a candle with the idiosyncratic phrase *naughty world*, echoing the *naughty nation...world* of Philippians 2:15, demonstrates the reliability of Noble and Shaheen's methodology, when practiced with the most scrupulous regard for investigative method, for self-correction. When a particular collocation of words occurs in both the Bible and Shakespeare, preferably in conjunction with a shared moral or image, as in this case, it becomes possible to pinpoint the local origin of Shakespeare's language in a specific Biblical verse.

Fortunately, Shaheen's bibliographical conservatism saves him from falling prey to a trendy preoccupation with the supposed instability of the Shakespeare corpus. When John Cox faults Shaheen's 1989 study of the Histories for unwarranted assumption of "textual stability," and urges that "the various 'Shakespeares' ought to be included in a reference work like this just as much as various translations of the Bible" (1992, 487-9), one can only applaud

Shaheen's conservatism in preserving the reasonable assumption—easily susceptible of proof, if necessary—that textual variation in the Shakespeare canon has practically nil consequences for a study such as his.

Indeed, the limitations of Shaheen's methodology, if such they are, lie in a contrasting direction. Shaheen's painstaking attention to lexical detail obscures the significance of structural identity or permutation. Appreciation of transformational grammar, even of an intuitive sort—which finds genetic relationships between two *texta* which preserve a common "deep structure" underneath lexical variation in surface structure—is nowhere in evidence in Shaheen's books. Hog-tied to the lexical level, he overlooks a number of unmistakable Biblical influences which show themselves beneath lexical variation, which mirrors, in some cases clearly by authorial intent, the deep structure of the Biblical original. In *Biblical References in the Tragedies* (1989), for example, Shaheen fails to note that the Biblical source of Hamlet's apologia to Laertes (V.ii.226-239) is Romans 7:20—a verse also of great though subtle influence in *Measure for Measure* and other texts. Milward (1987, 57), for his part, catches Hamlet's sly reference to the Pauline doctrine of sin as an alien force.

By using lexical identity as the only criterion for textual relationship, Shaheen misses numerous instances of such *second order patterning* between source and primary text and consequently slights the powerful unity which pervades the Shakespeare canon. When, for example, Horatio recalls the awful era of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts...

...and in the upshot, *purposes mistook,*
Fall'n on th'inventor's heads

the italicized phrase clearly belongs by association to Shaheen's well-acknowledged series of references of I Kings 2:32 (or related passages) which declares that "the Lorde shal bring his blood upon his owne head." Shaheen, however, omits this reference in his 1987 book on the Tragedies—presumably because of the absence of a direct lexical link tying the passage to the Biblical verses expressing the same idea.

Other missing references, some of surprising prominence, can be detected in the present study of the Comedies. For instance, Speed and Proteus' lengthy comical interlude (*Two Gentlemen of Verona*, I.i.73-100) about the sheep which "follows the shepherd for food" is based within Ezekiel 34. In this case, even the lexical echoes are distinct and unequivocal.

In one light, stressing such *addenda* to a work of this magnificent scope and crafted detail might seem like counting the number of angels on the head of pin, or even be compared to the Scottish vice of skepticism. I include them in the present review only to counter the mistakes of previous reviewers. John Cox incorrectly claims that Shaheen's study of the Histories (1989) "quotes every Shakespearean passage that has a Biblical origin." This is simply not true. Nor

is it true of Shaheen's present study of the Comedies. What is true—and it certainly deserves recognition—is that Shaheen has assembled the most comprehensive and accurate collection, destined to remain a standard reference work for many decades, of the numerous Biblical references in three quarters of the Shakespeare plays. For the first time, students of Shakespeare's Biblical references and influences have the equivalent of a mental map charting the major coordinates of these influences.

A more serious objection to Shaheen's approach is that his particulate and empiricist methodology tends to preclude any serious consideration of the theological motives of the author. Like the post-WWII "documentary" biographical tradition espoused by Professor Samuel Schoenbaum, in opposition to the phenomenological biographies of Frank Harris or Oxfordians such as Looney (1920), Shaheen's method leads resolutely *away from* psychology and literary criticism, which make use of concepts such as analogy, motive, allegory, irony and theme, and *towards* the mechanical accumulation of information for information's sake. For instance, there is no consideration in Shaheen's work of whether the author ever cites scripture with the intention of creating specific literary effects or of reinforcing his own ethical or theological principles. If, as Antonio declares, even "*the devil* can cite scripture for his purpose" (*Merchant of Venice*, I.iii.98), then surely Shakespeare's characters can cite it for their, or their author's, rhetorical purposes.

Just as it would be unjust to lay too much emphasis on such sins of omission or possible alternative methodologies, it would also be a mistake to think that Shaheen has written the last word on Shakespeare and the Bible. The empiricism which is so bothersome at times is also what makes Shaheen's series destined to remain an important reference tool for many decades to come. Now that Shaheen has assembled a reasonably comprehensive catalogue of Shakespeare's Biblical references, other students are free to make use of his data to explore the phenomenological implications. One thinks especially of Hankins's 1953 study of Shakespeare's use of images and ideas derived from Palingenius's *Zodiacke Vitae*, a study which begins not with a bibliographical survey designed to impress the reader with his comprehensive knowledge of bibliographical variation, but with a thoughtful phenomenology of Shakespeare's "extremely retentive and associative mind" (10). It organizes its conclusions around a series of predominating metaphors—Dusty Death, Brief Candle, Mental Sickness, The Painted Walls, The Golden World, etc.—by which Shakespeare organized his reading and the symbolic cosmos created through the fusion of life with his literary materials.

In constructing a phenomenology of Shakespeare's compositional practice, Hankins turned to John Livingston Howe's classic study of Coleridge, *The Road to Xanadu*, which demonstrated, making use of Coleridge's own original

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notes, that “Coleridge possessed this retentive and associative power to an imminent degree and demonstrated how varied images coalesced and fused in the ‘deep well’ of his subconscious mind” (10). This model of such a retentive and associative mental process, argued Hankins, has implications for understanding Shakespeare’s use of sources. It may consequently, he wrote

be inaccurate to speak of *the* source of a Shakespeare image when there were several possible sources. *More than likely all of them were recalled together*, and it is our task *to separate the primary sources from the secondary ones*. The multiplicity of sources does not alter the fact that Shakespeare has adapted the image and not invented it. (10; emphasis added)

Hankins’s distinction between *primary* and *secondary* sources and his emphasis on the dynamic psychology of composition—the recollection, fusion or recombination of derived imagery—allows for a more supple and phenomenological reading of the source-text question than Shaheen’s empiricist categories of *reference*, *parallel*, and *see also*. Thus, while Shaheen’s empiricism is perhaps fitted to the task of mapping the progression of Biblical references within each play, it would be a mistake to regard his work as the final word on Biblical references in Shakespeare. Shaheen’s own data exhibit some powerful structural implications which are not—nor should they necessarily be—addressed in his analysis. Hankins, for example, finds that the image of the “brief candle” from Macbeth’s memorable speech “is traceable to the Scriptures; but, through its association with other sources in Shakespeare’s mind it comes to have a significance far beyond that of mere verbal reminiscence” (43). Tracing the symbolism of the candle through two chapters of commentary Hankins discovers that

the “light of life”... is the bond between man and God. It refers to that “godlike reason” which makes us capable of desiring union with God. But that reason may be misdirected by an error of the will and may be turned against God. In such case, the reason is a candle or torch which no longer shines and cannot until man’s will is once more in harmony with God’s...the awakening of conscience is symbolised by the desire for light. (61-2)

Shaheen, like Hankins, writes in a tradition in which light is shed on the events of the present by considering the inheritance of the past. In assessing the relative contribution of these previous scholars to the sum impression of *Biblical References in Shakespeare’s Comedies*, one begins to feel slightly uneasy that Shaheen’s empirical strictness does not extend to the historical dimension of his study. Because Shaheen does not cite Carter or Noble, except for the purposes of refutation, it is not easy to know when the postulated sources have been identified by Shaheen himself, and when he has taken a tip from prior

scholars or students. It is scarcely a discredit to Shaheen that many of the references he cites were first identified by prior workers in the vineyard, but it does detract from the force of his conclusions when readers are not made aware that different scholars have independently arrived at conclusions in some cases identical to, or substantiative of, his own.

In concluding this review it may then be pertinent, without seeming to appear ungracious for the enormous labors which contributed to this third volume in Professor Shaheen's important study, to remark on one further lacuna which somewhat perplexes the present reviewer. Although Professor Shaheen, as noted above, has correctly identified the primary source of Portia's "little candle" (*MVV*.i.91) as Philippians 2:15, he failed to include Philippians 2:15 in his preliminary discussion titled, "Which Version Shakespeare Used" (22-27). As in his other books, one presumes that Professor Shaheen prefers to delineate such generic bibliographical matters before proceeding to discuss specifics. In this case, however, the correction of Noble's error may have been an afterthought: the Shakespeare phrase, *naughty world*, can be derived only from the Geneva edition—not from the Bishop's or, so far as I am aware, any other translation. However, although the citation *belongs* in Professor Shaheen's list of strong evidence for the Geneva translation, it fails to appear there.

This lacuna, one is obliged to remark, may prove of some interest to future historians of Shakespeare scholarship.

Notes

1. For the details of Frye's thorough survey of all the conceivably relevant literature, see Frye, 10-16.
2. Frye rightly warns, in my estimation, against reducing the plays to conventional religious allegories "because the plays are themselves primarily concerned with the secular realm" (7). Nevertheless, Shaheen's data demonstrate a pervasive undercurrent of theological concepts and language in the plays which cannot be lightly dismissed. Although Shakespeare is surely a secular thinker in Frye's terms, he often explores theological conundrums within the context of the secular drama. Above all he is interested, in my judgment, in promoting a dialogue between theological or christological philosophical concepts and those proper to the pagan or secular domain. Thus, it is not coincidental that Hamlet cites Romans 7:20—a Biblical verse which seems to flatly contradict the Aristotelian notion of tragic action as a consequence of the hero's *hamartia*, in Shakespeare's most autobiographical, and in some ways most political, drama.
3. The forerunner, according to Whiter's modern editors, Over and Bell, of all 20th century studies of Shakespeare's imagination, among them Spurgeon

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(1935), Armstrong (1946), Clemen (1951) and Hankins (1958).

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The Man Who Was Shakespeare by Charlton Ogburn, Jr. 1995

Reviewed by Gary Goldstein.

This is a serious though not scholarly publication that attempts to synopsise Mr. Ogburn's much larger, 892-page book, also recently published by EPM Publications in McLean, Virginia. While the present 94-page pamphlet lays out the essence of Mr. Ogburn's argument, it contains many of the same drawbacks as the book from which it is derived.

To start, Ogburn has not included full references for his sources. His attributions sometimes include an author, at other times only the title of a book or article (without distinguishing between the two) and rarely a publisher or year. Nor does he differentiate between private manuscripts or published works. In fact, Ogburn often dispenses with evidence altogether and advances mere assertions as arguments. For example:

The play *Edward the Second* was, it seems clear, derived from a draft by