

# SACRED PEARLS

## *In the machinery of Hamlet*

Carl Caruso

---



Hamlet: Let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them, for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the mean time some necessary question of the play be then considered.

*Hamlet Act III Scene 2*



O says Prince Hamlet in his conversation upon the arrival of the traveling-players' troupe at Elsinore. Indeed, all the comic scenes in *Hamlet* involve "some necessary question of the play." In the final act the playwright will set the stage for the play's far-reaching conclusion by using the two grave-diggers to good effect in the graveyard scene. After a humorous but incisive discussion about what may or may not constitute justifiable homicide in the language of the law, First Clown concludes:

Come, my spade! There is no ancient gentlemen but gardeners, ditchers, and grave-makers. They hold up Adam's profession.

- Other Clown: Was he a gentleman?
- First Clown: 'A was the first that ever bore arms.
- Other Clown: Why, he had none.
- First Clown: What? Art a heathen? How dost thou understand the Scripture? The Scripture says, Adam digged; could he dig without arms? I'll put another question to thee. If thou answerest me not to the purpose, confess thyself.
- Other Clown: Go to.
- First Clown: What is he that builds stronger than either the mason, the shipwright, or the carpenter?
- Other Clown: The gallows-maker; for that frame outlives a thousand tenants.
- First Clown: I like thy wit well. In good faith, the gallows does well, but

- how does it well? It does well to those that do ill. Now thou dost ill to say the gallows is built stronger than the church. Argal, the gallows may do well to thee. To't again; come!
- Other Clown: Who builds stronger: a mason, a shipwright, or a carpenter?
- First Clown: Ah, tell me that, and unyoke.
- Other Clown: Marry, now I can tell.
- First Clown: To't.
- Other Clown: Mass, I cannot tell.
- First Clown: Cudgel thy brains no more about it, for your dull ass will not mend his pace with beating; and when you are asked this question next, say, "a grave-maker." The houses he makes last till doomsday. (5.1 26-55)

Has the other Clown actually said that the gallows is built stronger than the church? Not really, but apparently that "absolute" First Clown is considering how churches are built by masons and carpenters and so the wisecracking solution to the original riddle must be amended.

Why would the second Clown "do ill to say that the gallows is built stronger than the church"? Because in the scriptural paradigm the church is built by Christ to save humanity from both gallows and grave, the true deserts of sin. This, then, is the playwright's way of recalling Christ's words to Peter: "Upon this rock, I will build my Church . . . and the gates of hell (death) shall not prevail against it." Shakespeare recalls the scripture and its essential meaning, but he does so in characteristically subtle fashion, never openly calling the Bible to mind. The audience will get their dose of piety without ever seeing it coming, or even remembering it afterwards, as has also been the case with generations of literary critics ever since.

The banter between the two grave-diggers helps to emphasize in the mind of the audience the relevance of "things that last." "There are three things that last," wrote St. Paul: "faith, hope, and love," going on to define "love" or "charity" as the greatest of these, on the basis of the fact that it outlasts even the other two—durable though they may be. So it is with the author of *Hamlet*, we think, who—though it be through the mouths of grave-digging clowns—takes special pains to acknowledge the excellence of things that endure uncorrupted through time. From the distance of four centuries since their inception, we might even accord some kind

---

*Carl Caruso graduated from the College of Georgetown University in Washington, DC, with an AB Classical Degree including a major in English Literature and a minor in Philosophy (and one graduate course in Chaucer at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.) Scholarly publications include articles in the Oxfordian newsletter, Shakespeare Matters, and The Journal of the Marie Stuart Society (UK) Caruso has received a first place national award for poetry from the Catholic Poetry Society of America. Born in Boston, he now lives in New Hampshire.*

of prophetic inspiration to the poet's own expectation that both his works would live on to a kind of literary immortality, as they have done.

In the seemingly-gratuitous pun about Adam being "the first to bear arms," the playwright is explicitly calling to mind the fall of mankind as related in Genesis. More immediately, the allusion also refers the audience back to the soliloquy in Act III Scene 3 in which the King bemoans his own sin, the second of the great biblical sins: "O my offence is rank, it smells to heaven! It hath the primal eldest curse upon't—A brother's murder . . ." As twentieth-century Shakespeare scholar Peter Milward has observed, the problem of original sin and its consequences is probably the most central issue of the play. It is an idea that would likely have been easier to grasp by Reformation Elizabethans than by readers today, but it is a question which can scarcely be addressed at all without recourse to the actual biblical story. Did Shakespeare blunder into this cosmic metaphor by happenstance? Surely he knew what he was about.

### **A history of redemption**

Oddly enough, the question of the greatest English playwright's biblical roots was not even asked until the end of the eighteenth century. Since then the process of providing a definitive answer has been playing itself out as a kind of intellectual "Journey of Discovery." This journey, as it turns out, has made steady progress, which, in our opinion, has proved far more fruitful than any historical research into the character and life experience of the man usually credited with writing *Hamlet*, *Prince of Denmark*.

Whereas ordinary inquiry into the life of the Stratford man dependably produces a detailed picture of the Elizabethan Age in general, the actual biographical portrait of William of Stratford is either a blank or compiled of speculative detail—more historical fiction than genuine biography. By way of contrast, research into the great playwright's knowledge and use of the Bible has made slow but steady progress, yielding some new objective fruit in almost every generation—a process we hope to summarize here.

Outside of the Bible itself, *Hamlet*, *Prince of Denmark*, is by far the most written-about literary work in the English language, and one which relies upon sacred Scripture to an unprecedented degree. The play is virtually crammed with scriptural parallels, but implicitly so, so that audience members who are not especially familiar with the Bible may not even be aware that such biblical material constitutes the integral literary-foundation of the entire drama.

Even in this the author reflects the temper of his age marvelously well. Although only some ten to twenty percent of the Elizabethan audience may have been able to read, passages from the Bible were heard on a regular basis by almost everyone in England through attendance at Anglican church services, which was mandatory on at least one Sunday a month throughout the reign of Queen Elizabeth. From that fact, and from certain indications within the plays themselves, we project that biblical parallels had penetrated the language of everyday people—such as the two grave-diggers in *Hamlet*—to a degree which has never been equaled before or since. The consequences of the Guttenberg revolution had spread throughout Europe by the mid-sixteenth century, and then as now, the Bible was the number one best-seller. In England, this had been the case only since King Henry VIII, breaking with Roman Catholic practice, authorized

the printing of the Bible in the vernacular, which is to say, in English. Up until that time, the Bible had been available, legally, only in Latin.

### **“How absolute the knave is!”**

To be sure, the sacred Scripture may have been misquoted on occasion, but if Hamlet does not hesitate to enter into conversation with the grave-digging clowns, neither should we question the realism of their conversation. Though lawyers have been quicker to point out those questions based on points of Law<sup>1</sup> many, perhaps more, are based on the moral Law as laid down in the Bible. In any case, if one looks carefully, in Shakespeare, “some necessary question of the play” is almost always at the heart of the matter, even amongst the clowns, for the most-analyzed play in English literature cannot be fully understood without recourse to scripture.

The discovery of Shakespeare's biblical roots is said to have begun in 1794 with Walter Whitier's essay on mental associations in the Shakespeare canon. In 1812, Capel Lloft would note that Shakespeare had “deeply imbibed the Scriptures” and that he was “habitually conversant” with the same. Some fifty years later, the Most Reverend Charles Wordsworth, Bishop of St. Andrew's in Scotland and a Fellow of Winchester College, would recall Lloft and other commentators in the introduction to his book, *Shakespeare's Knowledge and Use of the Bible*, first published in 1864. Regarding Shakespeare's sources, Bishop Wordsworth poses the question: “whether or no he made use of his knowledge of the Bible to guide and assist him in the production of his immortal works.” His well-documented conclusion was that the Bard was “in a more than ordinary degree, a diligent and a devout reader of the Word of God” (1864 ix.2 161).

Both Capel Lloft and Bishop Wordsworth can be said to have been far ahead of their times in detecting an extraordinary reliance on sacred scripture in the Shakespeare canon, for by middle of the nineteenth century, this devout reading of the Shakespeare plays would surely have come as a surprise to most people.

### **Bowdlerizing the Bard**

In 1818, English physician Thomas Bowdler had introduced a popular ten-volume edition of Shakespeare's works “in which nothing is added to the original text; but those words and expressions are omitted which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family” (Benet 126). Bowdler was obviously a great Shakespeare enthusiast, but the implication of his “Bowdlerizing” is also obvious: Shakespeare, taken on his own terms, was not compatible with what we are wont to call “family values.” Yet, Bishop Wordsworth stood his ground, citing venerable authorities such as Dr. John Sharp, writing in the reign of Queen Anne, who claimed that “The Bible and Shakespeare have made me Archbishop of York” (1880 161). As to whether secular playwrights could enjoy the respect of the spiritually elect, Wordsworth noted that the ribald Greek dramatist Aristophanes was a favorite author of that favorite of the reform community, the fourth-century Patriarch of Constantinople, St. John Chrysostom (1864 ix).

Bishop Wordsworth is very much on Shakespeare's side in this matter, saying that, as the Bible is the Word of God, so Shakespeare's works are a preeminent example of “the Word of Man” (207). Nor was the bishop looking to St. Augustine's contrast of “The City of God” with

“The City of Man” in awarding Shakespeare this title. Rather, we see him drawing his inspiration from that title by which Christ so often referred to himself, “the Son of Man.” Some twenty years later, in *Shakespeare and the Bible*, C.Q. Coulton would echo Wordsworth’s sentiments: “Next to the Bible, Shakespeare is the book of books. It is a mine of intellectual wealth where giants may delve for ages, and then leave it unexplored” (qtd. in Wordsworth 1880, 207).

### **Keeping Shakespeare Anglican**

One reason why the commentators of the nineteenth century and earlier may have wished to keep Shakespeare separate from questions of religion may have been that as soon as they began to look more closely into the life of the purported Stratford author, they found undeniable traces of a Catholic background. As an Anglican clergyman, Bishop Wordsworth, anxious to discount suggestions that Shakespeare may have been a Catholic, ignored the Stratford citizen’s obvious ties to the Old Faith through the families of his mother and his wife. Instead Wordsworth focused on the forged “Romanist” will exhibited “not many years ago” in the Shakespeare “relics” room at Stratford. The authentic will, of course, was on deposit in Doctor’s Commons, while this apparent forgery with its long preamble, was quite different in tone and expression, “the differences being mostly such as to leave no doubt that the forger’s design was to claim our poet for the Romish Church” (72).

To bolster his case, Bishop Wordsworth refers the reader to such works as the *Preface to Religious and Moral Sentences from Shakespeare*, published by the Shakespearean Society in 1843. There it was speculated that the spurious will might owe its origin to a similar will of a John Shakespeare discovered “about 1770,” even more plainly a Catholic document. The inquiring reader is then directed to a discussion of the discovery of the Shakespeare will in Drake’s *Shakespeare and His Times* (1819). Malone’s *Life* concludes that the will was that of another John Shakespeare, no relation to the poet and his father. Dyce’s *Life* mentions the tradition that Shakespeare died a Catholic, but no weight is given to the contention. Finally, in the 1880 edition of his own book, the Bishop cites the *Edinburgh Review* of 1866 which agrees with and confirms his personal conclusions on the subject (207).

Bishop Wordsworth would apparently stop short at recommending Shakespeare for canonization, yet in his book, the only hint of criticism of the Bard on moral grounds comes, not from him but from Samuel Johnson. Commenting on the fact that Hamlet refuses to kill Claudius at his prayers and thus promote the cause of his salvation, Dr. Johnson admits that, while Hamlet’s ensuing speech comes from a “virtuous character,” it is “too horrible to be read or uttered”—no doubt because it calls for the eternal damnation of a soul for whom Christ died. The Bishop is quick to follow up on Johnson’s observation by quoting Rev. M. Mason’s very cogent comment that “yet some moral may be extracted from it, as all subsequent calamities were owing to this savage refinement of revenge” (207).

Although clearly embarrassed by Hamlet’s lust for vengeance, Bishop Wordsworth explains that vengeance was considered a sacred obligation during feudal times, quoting P.F. Tytler’s *History of Scotland* which states that revenge was “almost . . . the pulse of feudal life.” Although neither Wordsworth nor Reverend Mason identify the exact scriptural source of Hamlet’s

ultimate moral, it's clear they both suspect that it can be found in the Bible. Perhaps they were put off from searching in or quoting from its actual source in Ecclesiasticus, for, although Ecclesiasticus was included in Tudor bibles and thus was available to Shakespeare, it came to be considered apocryphal by the Anglican church. (The Greek text, though not the Hebrew which was discovered later, is accepted as canonical by Catholics.)

Regarding the bishop's discussion of the "Romanist" will, it seems most likely that he was reporting on a document which he, himself, never saw, as it seems he had the date of the discovery wrong, and some other facts as well. During the 1580s, William of Stratford's father is named on at least one recusant list, although his absence from Sunday services is noted as being "for feare of process for debt," which tends to allay suspicions that he was being persecuted for his religious beliefs (Halliday 218).

Far more significant is the fact that, sometime around 1580, John Shakspeare had received a copy of *The Spiritual Testament of St. Charles Borremeo* that was being distributed through the auspices of the Jesuit missionary, Fr. Edmund Campion (Fraser *Faith* 39, 115). As Park Honan tells it in *Shakespeare, A Life*: in April of 1757 a bricklayer working on the Shakspeare house in Henley Street found a six-leafed booklet tucked out of sight between the roof rafters and tiles. Consisting of an authentic formulary for a Catholic profession of faith which follows Borremeo's *Last Will of the Soul*, a text used by Jesuit missionaries in 1581, it was inscribed with the name "John Shakspear" (39).

Whatever the difference in their titles, it is most unlikely that the book distributed by Campion was anything other than Borremeo's *Last Will of the Soul*. In any case, it is difficult to imagine more conclusive evidence that John Shakspeare was, in fact, a professed, if necessarily secret, Catholic than this "spiritual last will and testament." It may be worth mentioning that the book could have been acquired by the elder Shakspeare in 1580 directly from Campion himself, while he was staying at Lapworth, the home of Sir William Catesby, twelve miles from Stratford, shortly before his arrest by government officials (Fraser *Faith* 91, 115).<sup>2</sup>

We have no evidence at all about the supposedly-Catholic second will of John's son William, which Bishop Wordsworth claims was on display in the Shakespeare Room at Stratford-on-Avon, apparently in the middle years of the nineteenth century. As a likely forgery, the Bishop is probably quite right when he conjectures that it may have been inspired by the discovery of the elder Shakspeare's spiritual testament which, as we have seen, was almost certainly exactly what it proposed to be. If authentic, a second will signed by William Shakspeare would surely have made a much greater impression on the world.

As for William of Stratford's own faith, as opposed to that of his father or his family, we have no evidence one way or the other. Since we find it unlikely that his beliefs had any effect on the works that, for reasons of politics and authorial privacy, were ascribed to him by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, the only importance to be found in William's Catholic background is the likelihood that it steered most Anglican scholars of the nineteenth century away from a close examination of Shakespeare's biblical sources.



### Wordsworth to Carter to Noble

Following Wordsworth, in 1905 Dr. Thomas Carter published a more extensive comparison of the plays with the Geneva Bible in particular, wherein he correctly asserted that “no writer assimilated the thoughts and reproduced the words of Holy Scripture more copiously than Shakespeare. . . . Whatever else the poet had or lacked, he must have brought to his work a mind richly stored with the thoughts and words of the English Bible” (Noble 18).

It would seem that Dr. Carter’s book laid the groundwork for twentieth-century scholar, Richmond Noble, in the framing of his own book: *Shakespeare’s Biblical Knowledge and Use of the Book of Common Prayer*, first published in 1935. Noble’s knowledge of Anglican texts and custom is extensive. A reading of the general considerations with which he opens his book is certainly worthwhile to anyone interested in the influence of the Bible on the plays.

In searching through the Shakespeare canon for biblical references, Noble claims to have rejected most of the examples advanced by his predecessors, Wordsworth and Carter. Even so, he acknowledges a debt to earlier commentators, admitting that “so many have interested themselves in detecting Scriptural reminiscences in Shakespeare’s plays, that it may seem surprising that it has been possible to add anything new” (vi). Noble estimates that only about a quarter of the instances recorded in his own book are appearing in print for the first time, meaning that about seventy-five percent had been cited previously by other writers.

For the sake of convenience, Noble divides his citations into three classes: *certain*, *probable*, and *possible*, a fact which might lead us to expect that he would include almost any possible parallel reading, but, as a matter of fact, he rejects so many texts that Peter Milward will later speak of Noble as “minimizing” the scriptural influence. In fact, his sensitivity to the possibility of being criticized for reading too much religion into Shakespeare was prescient; for in spite of his caution, both he and his successors would be severely criticized by a determined cadre of post-war literary critics for their alleged “theologizing” of the Bard.

Noble defends himself against the coming critical onslaught in two ways. For one thing, he is careful to quote those whose approach to the subject ultimately agrees with his own viewpoint, noting that his predecessor Dr. Carter specifically extended permission for Noble to use his own work in any way he saw fit (Noble vi). He also quotes a Dr. Christian Ginsberg, whom he identifies as “one of the most respected Biblical scholars of the day,” whose long letter in the April 28, 1883, edition of *The Athenaeum* expressed the view that Shakespeare exhibited a “more than ordinary” knowledge of the Bible in some particulars, and that he was a “most original interpreter” of scripture as well. According to Ginsberg’s contemporary, Bishop Wordsworth, Ginsberg had ascribed to Shakespeare “in some particulars a more than ordinary knowledge, having regard to the version available to him at the time” (Wordsworth 1864 18).

In point of fact, Christian Ginsberg was one of the great biblical scholars of the nineteenth century. It is impossible to know precisely what versions he had in mind here, but he was probably unaware of undeniable influences from the Latin Vulgate, and even from some private unpublished translations, clear and convincing evidence of which Prof. Roger Stritmatter has demonstrated in his work on the Earl of Oxford’s Geneva Bible annotations. In any case, we believe that the very best twentieth-century research, including Richmond Noble’s, has done

much to confirm Dr. Ginsberg's early appraisal of Shakespeare's biblical knowledge as both extensive and extraordinarily original.

Quite on the other hand, Noble cites in some detail a long and apparently unsigned article which appeared in *The Observer* on January 25, 1925, in which the author denied Shakespeare either special knowledge of the scriptures or even the least vestige of conventional piety. If nothing else, it is instructive to see just how much articulate people can disagree about the Bard. The article asserts that "Shakespeare was often a metaphysician, never a theologian, nor, for that matter, a Christian," and that "the figures of Christian mythology and their significance seem utterly to have passed him by. He never refers to them on his own, hardly ever makes mention of them even in the mouths of characters who might be supposed to feel them most strongly. He is alternately believer in Fate, pagan, or agnostic, never for a moment a believer in Christ" (19).

Interestingly, Noble does not use the anonymous writer as a "straw man" whereby to refute his subjective impressions. Piety, like Beauty, must be at least partly in the eye of the beholder, for it may be said that Shakespeare's dramatic mirror is so finely tuned that viewers of all kinds are likely to come away with images of themselves, or at least of their own preconceptions. If we expect to find the author of *Hamlet* pious, we shall be able to do so; if, on the other hand, we expect an agnostic or an existentialist, we shall perhaps find evidence of that as well. In the words of *The Observer* writer, it is difficult to say for certain how a playwright can say anything "on his own," since his hand is necessarily hidden "behind the scenes"—which is to say, behind the curtain of the dramatic action and the masks of his numerous *dramatis personae*. Nonetheless, people perceive as they will, and the perceptions of the *Observer* writer cannot be completely discounted—nor does Noble attempt to do so.

He does go into more depth in discussing a somewhat similar observation about Shakespeare to be found in Sir Walter Raleigh's *Life of William Shakespeare* (1907) in which the author points to "references to Pilate washing his hands; to the Prodigal Son; to Jacob and Laban, to Lazarus and Dives and the like," adding, however, that "it cannot be inferred from this that he was a deep student of the Bible. The phraseology of his age, like that of later ages, was saturated with Biblical reminiscences" (qtd in Noble 19). At first glance, this statement seems very much at odds with Noble's thesis, yet rather than argue with the venerable Raleigh, he merely uses this observation as a starting-point for a number of related discussions.

The first thing that should be noted is that Sir Walter is talking here primarily about allusions where proper names from the Bible are used. Noble has already placed such references in the "certain" category, and, admittedly, they are comparatively few in number. Indeed, "the Bible was the commonest and most discussed book of the day," Noble observes at one point. It would certainly be quite surprising if any dramatist did not occasionally make such references, and possibly Shakespeare's use of them is not so pronounced as to distinguish him from other dramatists of the period. But Noble goes on to cite Sir Sidney Lee's observation in his own *Life of Shakespeare*: "References to scriptural characters and incidents are not conspicuous in Shakespeare's plays, but, such as they are, they are drawn from all parts of the Bible. . . ." Which brings up two important points in Noble's interpretation of Shakespeare's biblical references, both involving the cumulative effect of the evidence. First:



It is only when we assemble all the references to Adam and Eve that we realize how intimately he knew that narrative; the isolated references do not impress at all, but when they are gathered together it is borne in on the collector that there is hardly a phrase of the story as narrated in the first three chapters of Genesis that has been missed. (42)

The second observation involves parallels of language and thought that entail neither proper names nor other certain references to biblical material. Although, taken one by one, such instances are only “probable” or “possible” examples of biblical influence, their cumulative effect is undeniable. Regarding the numbers of such parallels with passages in the same biblical book, Noble observes: “we might be entitled to regard such an aggregation as evidence that Shakespeare derived them from reading the book in question.” The drily ironic tone of his comment might suggest the extent of the opposition to such ideas that Noble was facing.

The fact is, as Noble and all who have studied the matter are aware, no one familiar with the linguistic and ideological content of Job, Ecclesiasticus, and First and Second Samuel, can immerse themselves in the plays of the Shakespeare canon without realizing that these biblical scriptures were so familiar to Shakespeare that they would come to mind almost without forethought as he generated the language of his plays—a condition that he shared with his audience and the other writers of the day, one endemic in a society fed to the bursting point on biblical language and Bible stories.

In fact, the Bible was so popular with Elizabethans that everyday speech was peppered with biblical language to an extent difficult to imagine today. So it may be that, as good writers will often do when seeking a voice of their own, Shakespeare made a conscious effort to steer clear of obvious bible language. One has only to read the letters written by clients to patrons like Lord Burghley to hear this kind of language, which was, of course, intended to display the piety and consequently the goodness, trustworthiness, and right-thinking of the writer. To a great creative writer, such language would soon become trite and meaningless.

Scholars have pointed to language in places in the Douay and the King James Bibles that seems to match Shakespeare’s, but this does not necessarily point to an “uncanny prescience” on the playwright’s part; there are other possible explanations. It is Noble himself who tells us of an abundance of independent renderings or free translations of biblical texts which were to be heard in the sermons of the day:

Many preachers used Genevan texts for their sermons and while the Homilies abounded in independent renderings it can be realized that if Elizabethan churchgoers heard plenty of the Bible, they also heard it in plenty of forms—perhaps the same text in three or four different ways. (16)

It is certainly possible that those forty-seven clergymen who prepared the texts of the Authorized Version for King James had heard some of the same preaching as the playwright, unconsciously calling forth the words and phrases in their own translations. Or perhaps the similarities are due to figures of speech common enough in the spoken parlance of the day, though slower to make it into print. It is equally possible that the translators, mere human beings like ourselves, had heard the playwright’s own renderings of biblical echoes while attending his plays at

the Globe theater, unintentionally adopting them later as people do when they hear something said well. None of these explanations is impossible, nor even especially unlikely. Once again, we think such explanations are to be preferred to raw coincidence or unidentified mystical agency. How, after all, did Shakespeare spread his vocabulary and syntax to the English-speaking world? It was the Stage that was the bully pulpit in Elizabethan times.

Lest we think questions of biblical scholarship beyond the interest of the average playgoer in Shakespeare's day, Noble notes:

How great the interest was may be gathered from the fact that Ben Jonson was able in *The Alchemist* to parody Hugh Broughton's *Consent of Scripture* in such a way as to argue that the name, style and matter of this distinguished Hebrew scholar and merciless critic of the Bishops' version were familiar to the audience. (17)

How different from today, when we would be hard-pressed even to name a single distinguished Hebrew scholar, never mind to recognize his style.

As for actual allusions to the Bible, Noble comments that even Shakespeare's more specific references can be quite subtle. To some extent this was necessary so that the allusion would not slow or obscure the action (so often the case with Jonson). "If the audience caught the allusion, so much the greater their enjoyment, but if they failed, they yet had something . . .":

Allusions to biblical incidents are more numerous than might appear at first sight. Shakespeare clearly made use of scriptural incidents to enrich his language and to provide himself with additional figures. Wisely he abstained from any further emphasis of the incident in view than was strictly necessary for his purpose. . . . Often his allusion or quotation takes on the color of its context so that it lies undetected even by the eyes of experts. . . . When all this is understood then there is no wonder that it is a subject on which it is unsafe to express any opinion unless special study has been devoted to it. (22)

It is precisely this kind of specialized study to which Noble, Milward, Shaheen and, most recently, Oxfordian Roger Stritmatter have devoted themselves in examining the corpus of Shakespeare's drama. In addition to a familiarity with sacred scripture, each has brought an impressive arsenal of scholarly expertise to the effort. Although there is a good deal of overlap in their observations, each makes a contribution which is both unique and invaluable to anyone seeking an understanding of this finely-focused, but fundamental, field of study.

**“One that was a woman, Sir, but, rest her soul, she's dead.”**

Of special importance in considering the Hamlet mystery is Noble's knowledge, not only of the Anglican Prayer Book, but also of Anglican usage generally. In particular, we are thinking of questions which arise, both in the play and outside of it, concerning Ophelia's supposed suicide and the abbreviated funeral which followed. Keeping in mind that Shakespeare was portraying a period in Danish history when everyone was Catholic, how far did he go in revealing the beliefs and laws that were current in his own time?

On this head, Noble makes these detailed observations:

Although the Elizabethan liturgy, like its Edwardian predecessors, made no provision for refusal of Church benefit to suicides . . . , custom prescribed the refusal. The Canon of 1604 would suggest this, although it made no provision for doubtful cases. . . . “Maimed rites” (not provided for in the Prayer Book and contrary to the Act of Uniformity) in a case where death is doubtful (as Ophelia’s was said to be) are provided for by the Roman rite, as reference to Canon 1240, par. 2, in the *Codex Juris Canonici* would show. “*Occurrente Praedictis in casibus aliquo dubio, consultatur, si tempus sinat, Ordinarius; permanente dubio, cadaver sepulturae ecclesiasticae tradatur, ita tamen ut removeatur scandalum*” (85) [“If there is some doubt in the above mentioned cases, the Ordinary (Bishop) is to be informed if time allows; but if the doubt cannot be resolved, the body is to be buried in consecrated ground, in such a manner as to avoid any scandal.”] This latter is exactly the procedure followed in Ophelia’s case and the suggestion is very strong that Shakespeare, as he did elsewhere, took extraordinary pains to be accurately informed. If we hold this view we shall not be inclined to consider that the Doctor is using the word “requiem” in other than its strict sense. . . . The Prayer Book makes no provision for a requiem mass . . . the refusal of a requiem would point clearly to Roman Usage. (85)

In the course of a personal letter, a friend of Noble’s—Dr. G.A. Michell of St. Stephen’s House, Oxford—makes the following observations on the same subject:

There is a possible analogy in modern R.C. practice in cases where a dispensation is given to marry a non-R.C. partner. In such cases a service is held, but no nuptial mass is allowed and there may be some minor restrictions. The principle seems to be the same in either case—i.e. the marriage or burial is not wholly satisfactory, but yet not wholly unsatisfactory, the most sacred item in the ideally complete rite is withheld, but what is necessary for Christian marriage or burial is allowed. If the marriage or burial is wholly unsatisfactory, no rites at all are allowed. (85)

Neither the Second Quarto nor the Folio gives any direction as to the entrance of a priest, while the 1603 Quarto indicates only one priest. It has been said that the term *Doctor* was meant to be a costume-direction to distinguish his rank (85). Presumably he would not be in full canonicals. Dr. Michell asks, then, if “the hypothesis of Shakespeare’s curiously accurate (almost recondite) knowledge of medieval custom is correct, may not the description “Doctor” mean or hint at canonist—*doctor legis canonici*? and if hostile be aimed at pettifogging distinctions?” A Doctor of Divinity would appear to have been intended, although Michell’s suggestion is very interesting. Michell only advances Shakespeare’s “curiously accurate” and “almost recondite” knowledge of mediaeval custom as a hypothesis, but the import of his speculation illustrates the depth of Shakespeare’s knowledge.

In the Anglican framework of Shakespeare’s England, the priest at Ophelia’s funeral would have been a Doctor of Divinity, nor would the rites of burial have been “maimed” in the sense that a requiem mass had been refused. They would merely have been an abbreviated version of the regular ceremony—although, as Noble points out, even this would have been an aberration of Anglican custom and English law.

On the other hand, if, in the medieval milieu of the play itself, the Doctor does indeed stand for a *doctor legis canonici*, or doctor of canon law, refusing a requiem mass on account of the doubtful nature of Ophelia's death would be in perfect accord with Roman usage. Hence, the "churlish priest" could be dressed as a "doctor" or man of learning, as the costume direction evidently suggests. Or, on the contrary, he might be dressed as a priest in full canonicals according to the Roman Catholic custom—for Laertes calls him "priest," while the general tenor of his conversation indicates that he is learned, possibly even a doctor of canon law as Michel suggests.

Interestingly enough, our current usage of the word *requiem* can indicate either the actual mass for the dead or merely the music appropriate for such a service, so that by his choice of words the playwright frees us to interpret the priest's words in any context we feel appropriate. With the multitude of such ambiguities in Shakespeare, it's small wonder that modern directors of stage and screen feel free to take liberties with his works. As perfectly as the plays function in their original Classical, Medieval, Renaissance, or Elizabethan settings, the author has so perfectly identified the more universal elements and patterns of meaning in every scene, that, without losing sight of his original purpose, he has made each of his dramas a kind of "movable feast," capable of being applied to almost any time, place, or social venue. If this was partly due to the caution he was forced to use with regard to religious or political beliefs, both he and posterity have profited by the constraint.

With regard to the funeral of Ophelia, given the playwright's knowledge of Catholicism, and the fact that the Catholic custom in cases of suicide would still have been common knowledge in England, we can assume a knowledge accurate enough to be termed "recondite," yet straightforward enough in application to be immediately understandable by the simplest and least learned person in the audience.

Whether the "doctor" in question is medieval or Elizabethan in origin, Laertes is quite right to resent the insinuations of "this churlish priest." As described by Gertrude in Act IV Scene 7, it seems clear that Ophelia's death was a case of accidental rather than intentional drowning. Although her plight is occasioned and complicated by her madness, there is no objective evidence of suicidal intent. Were it not for the doubts raised by "the great command" of the King and the pettifogging distinctions of the priest, it is doubtful whether we would think of Ophelia as a suicide at all. But as long as the question has been raised, the comment that "We should profane the service of the dead to sing a requiem" does seem to recall, without actually specifying, the Roman Catholic practice, especially since the Anglican Act of Uniformity would have prevented a church official from altering the service in the way that the priest suggests was done. Thus the scene, in whatever historical context it is produced, is never quite an anachronism. Hamlet remains an early Christian, which is to say an adherent of the Old Faith, the Roman Catholic, in whatever milieu he happens to find himself.

### **Mid-twentieth century: Milward and Shaheen**

Peter Milward's *Biblical Influences in Shakespeare's Great Tragedies*, published in 1987, is valuable for its broad scope, and also for the overview it provides of critical trends in the field. Milward, a Jesuit priest, notes that the study of biblical influence in Shakespeare's tragedies is

nothing new “though in current Shakespeare scholarship, it receives relatively little attention” (vii). He goes on to note the previous work of Bishop Wordsworth, Dr. Carter, and, finally, Richmond Noble, but concludes that “all these books, however, belong to a more or less distant past; and with the passing of time various defects in them have come to light” (viii).

In Milward’s view, Wordsworth provides a general survey of the subject at hand with an emphasis on demonstrating Shakespeare’s linguistic indebtedness to the Bible, while Carter contents himself with listing the biblical echoes he finds in the plays, one by one. Both writers have shortcomings, but Milward reserves his most specific criticism for Noble whom he characterizes as “more interested [than the others] in determining which version [of the Bible] Shakespeare used (the Bishops more often in the earlier plays, the Geneva more often in the later)” (vii). He observes that Noble is also “more critical in his admission of Biblical echoes,” adding:

Being the most recent and the most critical of these authors, Noble is the most frequently cited in recent editions of the plays, such as the New Arden Shakespeare. Yet he is by no means without defects, not only in his minimizing attitude to the Biblical influence, but also in his failure to draw any general conclusions from the wealth of evidence that still remains after all his minimization. (vii)

While disturbed by what he terms the “minimization of biblical influence” in this earlier period, Milward finds an even more disturbing trend in post World War II scholarship:

Since the war . . . not a few Shakespeare scholars—such as John Vyvyan, Paul Siegal, Irving Ribner and Roy Battenhouse—have offered their interpretations of Shakespearean tragedy in the light of the biblical influence; but their studies have been spurned by Roland Frye and his many followers as “theologizing” versions of the plays. (viii)

Properly mindful of the subjective element which is ever-present in the process of identifying biblical echoes in the plays, Milward continues:

In their interpretations those scholars may, indeed, have presented a somewhat personal and one-sided view of their myriad-minded object, and so they may have exposed themselves to the imputation of “reductionism” that has been made against them. But the subsequent course of Shakespearean scholarship has been no less one-sided in adopting an impersonal, objective, academic approach to the plays, with emphasis on their secular aspects—their staging and dramatic technique, their composition and use of sources, their characterization and psychological insight, their poetic imagery and rhetorical devices. All this may seem many-sided in its diversity; but in the exclusion of the religious, Biblical dimension, it may well be called one-sided in its rigid secularity. (viii)

Although Milward himself is somewhat critical of his predecessors in the field, he seems most genuinely grieved by those writers who label as “reductionism” any honest examination of biblical influence. In his view, Shakespeare’s plays, and especially his four great tragedies, are:

charged with an almost endless variety of meaning according to the myriad-mindedness of the dramatist. Only, I am saddened at the comparative neglect into which one aspect, and that (it seems to me) the most fundamental—namely, the biblical aspect—has fallen on

account of the chorus of anti-reductionism that has sprung up among Shakespeare scholars since the publication of Frye's book.<sup>3</sup> (ix)

Although Milward is impressed by the "myriad-minded view" of Shakespeare's plays, he does not propose to combine religious and secular approaches in what he envisions as "a new and higher synthesis":

I am merely proposing a return to the old idea of the "theologizers," with a yet more thoroughgoing form of biblical interpretation; and I may well expect a renewed outburst of anti-reductionism to greet the publication of this book.

Despite the self-imposed limitations, Milward's purpose is ambitious enough to present:

as comprehensively as possible—with details of chapter and verse—the full extent of biblical influence. With this purpose in mind, I have gone through each of the four plays [the four great tragedies] from act to act, scene to scene, and at times from line to line to keep my ear open for all kinds of biblical echoes, allusions, references, parallels; images, ideas and themes, in so far as they may have had some impact on the dramatist's mind in the moment of composition. (ix)

Milward admits to being more interested in the mind of the dramatist than in the understanding of the audience "whether Elizabethan or modern." Yet neither audience nor reader is left out altogether, for, if Milward detects a biblical echo, it is likely that it would have been recognized by many in the Elizabethan audience and "more than likely to have been noticed and intended by the dramatist" (x).

This last step in the intuitive process—that of projecting into the mind of the dramatist and his creative act—is where our own knowledge of scripture, is necessarily conjectural. We may be forgiven for doubting if it will ever be amenable to the process of establishing it as objective proof. Those whose familiarity with the scriptures is superficial or limited in scope will no doubt continue to attribute most biblical influences to the minds of what they regard as the "theologizers" of the Bard. Nevertheless, for those whose knowledge of the Bible is commensurate with the playwright's or at least the equal of that of the average member of the Elizabethan audience, we think the last logical step in identifying biblical influences is one which they will willingly take. For them and for us, it is not so much a question of accumulating and cataloguing possible biblical echoes and making line-by-line, verse-by-verse, judgments on whether the source was scriptural or not. It is far more a question of becoming one with the creative process of the dramatist, making contact "mind-to-mind," both with both the dramatist and with the sacred authors. As for present-day readers, Milward adds:

I have no doubt that not a few of my readers will discover many more similarities that I have passed over, either through inadvertence or because they failed to convince me. For though I have followed a principle of generosity in admitting such similarities, I have not been entirely uncritical. . . . Other readers, however, especially those more familiar with Shakespeare than the Bible, may fail to be convinced by some of the similarities I have recorded. (x)



Like Noble before him, Milward here invokes the principle of cumulative effect: "I may also add that few of the items I have included stand or fall by themselves. They are rarely isolated echoes, but they are mostly supported by other echoes and often by a chorus of echoes from the same book or the same passage or the same story of the Bible" (x-xi).

Milward finds several such choruses in *Hamlet*, and the biblical books he finds most frequently represented are noteworthy. Each of them relates, he says, to:

the predicament of Man in this world . . . [which is] most vividly portrayed among the Biblical writings in the Book of Job, whose echoes, while scattered throughout the play come as it were to a head in Hamlet's central soliloquy of "To be or not to be." The same predicament is reflected in the Prophecy of Jeremiah, in many of the sapiential Psalms and in the Book of Ecclesiastes, which all have their respective parts to play in the drama; while what comfort may be afforded in terms of human wisdom seem to come largely from the later Book of Ecclesiasticus. (1-2)

As a priest, Milward is not at all hesitant to give the human predicament an even more theological turn, and speak of the closely related "problem of sin." Here is a problem whose full treatment is presented, among the writings of the Bible, not so much in the OT Book of Job as in the NT Epistle to the Romans, whose influence (it may be added) pervades the play of *Hamlet* no less than that of Job.

That Milward found so much of Romans in the play is a significant endorsement of our own reading. For, having found an implicit moral of the play in the passage in Ecclesiasticus that deals with vengeance, the marginal note in the playwright's Geneva edition would have referred the author, not only backwards to the Mosaic Law, but also forward specifically to Romans. Since the Mosaic Law was itself fundamental to "the problem," it is not surprising that in Romans he found many aspects of the "solution"; although, as Milward quite rightly points out, the problem of sin is by no means one which the protagonist of *Hamlet* can actually resolve: "Nor does he, or the dramatist behind him, come to any real solution of it. . . . For the only solution, as envisaged by Paul in Romans, is 'the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ', which remains hidden, if implicit, in the end of the play" (4).

Significantly, Milward adds:

At the same time, there is an intermediary solution suggested by Hamlet in terms of "conscience," when he proposes to "catch the conscience of the king," and the queen as well, by means of the play-within-the-play. By showing them what they have done, according to the dramatic theory of *mimesis*, he aims at awakening them to what they have really done. . . . At the same time, something in Hamlet's conscience is awakened, not by his own contrivance of a play-within-a-play but by the burial of Ophelia, which is arranged for him by divine providence. This experience, which takes place at the beginning of the last Act, may well be what leads him to reflect more deeply on the "divinity that shapes our ends" in his words to Horatio, moreover leading us to believe that his soul after death is borne by angels to his everlasting rest, according to the echo of that old Catholic antiphon, *In paradisum deducant te angeli*. And so perhaps in the end we return to the

beginning of the play, to that cryptic allusion of Marcellus to “that season wherein our Saviour’s birth is celebrated”—a season which is characterized by holiness and grace. (xiii)

Thus does Milward conclude “the Argument” which precedes his extensive collection of biblical and religious references from *Hamlet*; an introductory piece which is meant to indicate “the general direction in which the Biblical echoes seem to be pointing” (xiii).

### **A visit with Shaheen**

By this time it will come as no surprise to the reader that we have found Naeef Shaheen’s collection of biblical parallels as given in his book, *Biblical References in Shakespeare’s Tragedies*, indispensable to our present work. Though fewer in number than Milward’s, they offer another writer’s insights and are introduced and backed up by some impeccable scholarship. Like Noble and Milward before him, Shaheen is careful to anticipate critics of a biblical approach to the subject. If anything, he is even more eloquent in making their arguments for them:

Scholars with varying degrees of religious commitment are generally the ones who find an excess of biblical analogies and meanings in Shakespeare’s every word, and who try to justify their conclusions by tenuous and contrived arguments. But we must be careful not to read into Shakespeare something that is not there, nor to discover our own religious meanings in Shakespeare rather than [his]. These critics could have eliminated many of the misleading similarities they have pointed out between Shakespeare and Scripture had they simply checked Shakespeare’s secular sources to ascertain if the material actually came from those sources rather than from Scripture. Other faulty parallels could have been eliminated simply by weighing the similarities against the differences. If the differences far outweigh the similarities, and Shakespeare’s context does not lend itself to such a comparison, then the comparison is clearly without merit and contrived. (*Plays* 74)

Again, like Noble and Milward, Shaheen does not hesitate to recognize the subjective nature of the work at hand, although in his case, the emphasis is not so much on the cumulative nature of the evidence—since he gives less of that—as on the well-tempered influence of the person doing the selecting:

Although I have sought the opinions of others regarding the validity of some of the biblical references, particularly the less certain ones, in the final analysis the responsibility for the choice of passages that appears in this volume is mine. And although the decision on the validity of any reference is necessarily subjective, it has been tempered, I hope, by a thorough knowledge of Shakespeare, Shakespeare’s sources, Scripture, and the Anglican liturgy. (75)

In fact, Shaheen sometimes comes to seemingly arbitrary conclusions about the evidence he has uncovered. Nevertheless, he is such a conscientious scholar that he usually provides readers with enough information to make their own, even if contrary, judgments. Both Noble, and to a lesser extent, Milward, have expressed opinions on which version of the Bible was the one used by Shakespeare, although it is generally agreed that, if he relied more upon the Bishops’ in his

early work, he came to rely upon the Geneva even more in later years. Shaheen's approach is different from that of his predecessors, giving due notice to the similarity of all Tudor Bibles, and to the relatively small number of instances where a single version can be positively detected:

Which of these versions did Shakespeare use? The vast majority of Shakespeare's biblical references cannot be traced to any one version, since the many Tudor Bibles are often too similar to be differentiated. But of the more than 1,040 references that are listed in this volume (excluding 120 references to the Psalms, which will be discussed separately), there are 80 instances in which Shakespeare is closer to one version, or to several related versions, than to others. (*Plays* 38-9)

He continues:

Shakespeare's references are closer to the Geneva Bible than to any other version. It was the most popular version of the day, and it is only natural to assume that he owned a copy. There are 30 passages in the 38 plays in which Shakespeare clearly refers to the Geneva Bible, or in which he is closer to that version than to others. (39)

Shaheen admits, then, a certain pre-eminence to the Geneva, but the number of passages—fourteen in eleven tragedies—which he is actually willing to bring forth as evidence of a reliance on the Geneva is, to say the least, quite scant. This could easily lead to a supposition that whichever version the playwright relied upon was largely a matter of chance, and that he relied more upon his memory and whatever version happened to be handy—often enough, the Geneva. This supposition—though never actually stated by Shaheen—becomes quite relevant when discussing whether the playwright ever relied upon the Catholic Bible, the Rheims:

Arguments by a few Catholic scholars that Shakespeare was an adherent of the Old Faith and was acquainted with the Rheims are too far-fetched and contrived to be taken seriously. Whenever a biblical reference in Shakespeare appears to be closest to both the Rheims and the Geneva versions and least like the authorized versions of the day, it is not because Shakespeare possessed a copy of the Rheims, as a few scholars claim, but because the translators of the Rheims frequently borrowed Geneva readings in their translation. . . . Possession of a Rheims New Testament in Elizabeth's day was suspect. Priests found with copies of it were imprisoned; those who circulated it were often tortured. . . . (35)

Nevertheless, the few instances where Shakespeare seems to be relying on a Rheims translation and that of no other Bible (not even the Geneva) continue to be a problem. Perhaps without meaning to—since he is adverse to recognizing any kind of Rheims influence at all—Shaheen points the way to the most probable solution:

The Rheims New Testament was known in Shakespeare's day primarily by means of Fulke's refutation of the Rheims. In 1589, William Fulke published his *Confutation*, which printed the Rheims and Bishops' New Testaments in parallel columns with Fulke's refutation of the Rheims text and its annotations. . . . His *Confutation* proved fairly popular and was reprinted in 1601, 1617, and 1633. In this way the Rheims New Testament received wider circulation than it otherwise would have had. (36)

Because of its controversial nature, Shakespeare may not have owned a copy of the Rheims by itself, but since Fulke's *Confutation* was printed in 1589 and again in 1601, it is certainly possible that the playwright had access to it. As a reference work, he would have found the Bishops' and Rheims New Testaments printed side-by-side almost as useful as the Geneva.

It is in cases like these that the value of honest scholarship, as opposed to merely polemical exposition, becomes apparent. Without Bishop Wordsworth, for example, most of us would know nothing of Shakespeare's allegedly Catholic will, nor perhaps of his father's "spiritual testament" either. Without Shaheen, most of us would know nothing of Fulke's *Confutation*.

One example of what, at first glance, seems to be a Rheims influence is the "cockle of rebellion" in *Coriolanus* Act III Scene 1, where Shakespeare's phrasing seems to follow the Rheims New Testament reading of Matthew 13: 24-25. In this case, however, Shaheen is able to point out a probable secular source: namely, North's translation of Plutarch. At this point, we feel we should interject that, even if Shaheen and other scholars had found only one biblical reference or parallel which matches the Rheims and no other contemporary English Bible, it would constitute evidence of access to the Rheims translation which could hardly be completely ignored. Like Shakespeare's rare reliance on Rheims readings, such examples, however few, argue the OGB annotator's access to unexpected and esoteric sources. Such readings and renderings cannot have been made up out of thin air.

#### **"Purposes mistook fall'n on th'inventors heads"**

To the summation of the Hamlet story made by Horatio at the very end of the play (5.2.373-374), Shaheen relates Psalm 7: 17 in the Prayer Book (Psalm 7:16 in the Geneva): "For his travaile shal come upon his owne head, and his wickenesse shal fal upon his owne pate . . . ." But the secular source he uncovers is quite surprising:

Shakespeare's primary source . . . may have been Belleforest, who used this expression twice. When recounting how Hamlet changed the letter ordering his death, the 1608 translation of Belleforest says that Hamlet was able "to turne the death they had devised against him upon their owne neckes" (7.102). Belleforest's French, however, has "heads": "*Tourner sur eux la mort ordonnee pour sa teste.*" When the execution order was carried out against Hamlet's companions, Belleforest's marginal comment is: "*Trahison tome sur la teste de celuy qui la veut faire,*" which translates as: "Treachery falls on the head of him who wishes to perform it" (7.107 n3). (*Plays* 534).

The Belleforest version of the Hamlet story was included in the fifth volume of his *Histoires Tragiques*, published in Paris in 1570 and, according to F.E. Halliday, "probably translated into English shortly thereafter" (Honan 280). If William of Stratford was the author of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, we can assume that this early translation used the words *head* and *heads*—the literal translations. Still, the qualifier *probably*, used by Halliday, is important. It suggests that he is referring to a private translation, one not published by a recognized printer nor legally registered. The existence of such a translation is a necessary assumption for anyone who believes that William of Stratford, who is not known to have been conversant in French, was the author of

*Hamlet*. On the other hand, if one postulates an author well-versed in French—one, say, such as the Earl of Oxford—no such translation is required.

Here again, though, Shaheen's conclusion may not be entirely warranted by the facts. There is no doubt that Shakespeare relied on Belleforest as a primary source for a number of his plots, but Belleforest himself may have been influenced by the sacred scriptures. In fact, it seems both probable and likely that Belleforest, like Shakespeare, searched the scriptures for a lesson to extract from the story of the Danish prince's revenge. The tradition of blood vengeance, after all, would have been as much a problem for the French Christian as for the English.

In any case, there is little doubt that the concept of "evil falling on the perpetrator's head from above" struck a responsive chord in *Hamlet's* author. It reminded him of what he had heard on that score in Psalms and Ecclesiasticus, while, conversely, they would have reminded him of the nearly identical phrasing in Belleforest. Moreover, there is little doubt that Belleforest, from his own usage of "*pour sa teste*" and "*sur sa teste*," found and meditated upon exactly the same texts that caught the playwright's ear. Thus, the Bible may or may not have been Shakespeare's first inspiration here, but it certainly made its contribution, as it must have in the many other dramatic moments when good and evil confront each other in the plays.

Evil rebounding upon the evil-doer—although not necessarily upon his head—is a common theme in Scripture. Shaheen might have cited a great number of Psalms here, certainly both: "as a man sows, so shall he reap" and the *lex talionis* itself are essentially variants of the same idea. But if Psalm 6 (or 7) comes closest to the thought of Belleforest, the stone thrown in the air in Ecclesiasticus comes just as close. Moreover, it is clear in our reading that the playwright drew abundant inspiration for *Hamlet* from verses of the book of Ecclesiasticus just before and after this one and, from the vicinity of the nearly identical verse in Proverbs, the verses just before and after that one. (Compare Ecclesiasticus 27: 25-27 to Proverbs 26: 27.) If *Hamlet's* author found the basics of the Hamlet story in Belleforest, it was to Ecclesiasticus and to the parallel section in Proverbs that he resorted for its meaning.

Whatever else he may have been doing, we feel certain that the playwright was teaching catechism in his own dramatic way.



The Great Bible of 1539, so called because of its great size, prepared by Myles Coverdale and published by Richard Grafton, the King's printer.



### 2001: Enter Stritmatter and Oxford

Long before embarking upon the detailed study of the annotations in the Earl of Oxford's personal Geneva Bible provided by Prof. Roger Stritmatter in his ground-breaking book, we were familiar with his antecedents, from Bishop Wordsworth to Naseeb Shaheen, and also with what traces of the Bible are to be found in *Hamlet*. We had perhaps even recognized such ultimately self-evident facts as that the story of King David is the fundamental model of Hamlet's character as it is presented to us upon the stage. We were likewise well aware that the playwright had necessarily scoured the scriptures for whatever wisdom they might impart on the subject of revenge and had already located the five annotated verses in Ecclesiasticus 28: 1-5 as the simple moral of the drama, the one towards which the entirety of the dramatic action points. What had not yet occurred to us, however, was the parallel importance of the history of King David's predecessor, Israel's first king, Saul, or the similar and fundamental significance of two relatively minor characters from early in the OT canon: namely, Lamech, the father of Noah, and Amalek, the King, whom God had marked out, along with his people, for divine retribution at the hands of Israel.

Although *Amalek* is named in the books of Kings and Samuel, he was hardly so major a figure as to come to mind when we read that the name *Hamlet* had been rendered *Amalthus* in the original Latin of Saxo Grammaticus—and *Amleth* in its shortened form.<sup>4</sup> Nor do we think that the similarity of sounds is mere coincidence, for even after learning of the importance of Amalek to the annotator, it was only after becoming familiar with the shortened form that we realized that by putting the final letter first, *Hamlet* becomes a perfect anagram for *Amleth*. Considering the fascination that puns and wordplay held for this author, this is unlikely a coincidence.

Although we are still unable to define an historically rational connection between the *Amalek* of the ancient Holy Land, c.1,200-1,500 BC, and the *Amleth* of second-century Denmark, it was not so long after learning from Stritmatter that First Book of Samuel is the most heavily annotated book in Oxford's Geneva Bible that we began to see the importance of including the story of Saul and Amalek in any discussion of Hamlet's biblical roots. Like Saul, Hamlet was specifically ordered to exact divine justice upon an evil-doer. Unlike Saul, however, who complied with the divine order only in a manner which would be most beneficial to himself, Hamlet finally acts, not only without self-interest, but quite literally against his own interest, in fact, at the cost of his life. And yet, in both cases (despite Hamlet's initial concern over the messenger's legitimacy) the "mandate" was essentially the same. In the upshot, Hamlet adopts the strategy of David, who found a way to be faithful to God's requirements that Saul, despite his many virtues, could never do.

Hamlet does ultimately execute justice on Claudius and in a way more fitting for a Christian than a pagan. Even if not literally in defense of his own life, Hamlet has at least struck the fatal blow in defense of his nation and his people. It may even be said that *se defendendo* (self-defense), the one justifiable homicide under English common law, was implicitly the foundation of all of the bloody action of the drama's final scene. Had the poison which killed Hamlet been less effective (not fatal), the elimination of the bogus king would have been Hamlet's only hope of preserving his own life.

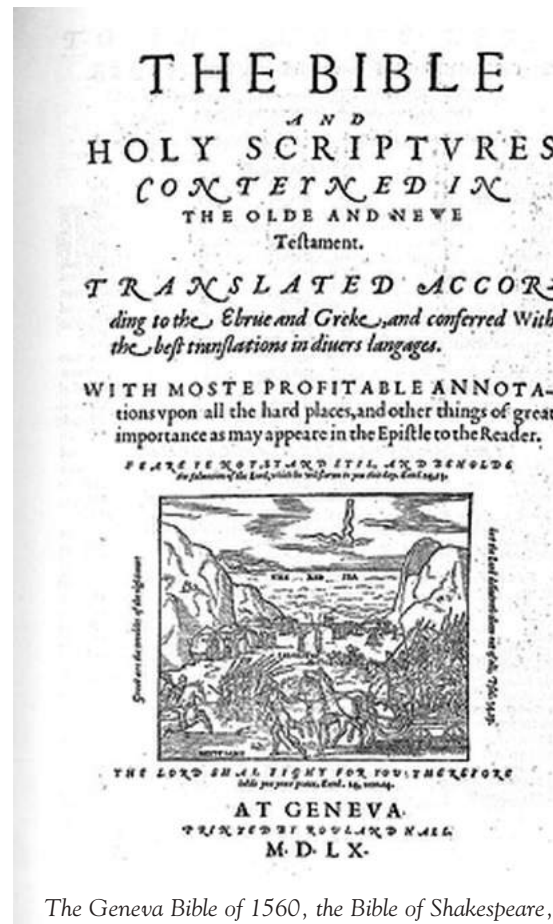


Which brings us to that other minor character of Scripture: Lamech, the father of Noah. Lamech speaks only once in Genesis, and then perhaps only to underline how far humanity has strayed from the primeval harmony of Eden: “Seven-fold vengeance for Cain, but seven times sevenfold vengeance for Lamech.”

In the gospels, Jesus replies to Peter’s query, “How many times must I forgive my brother? Seven times?” with “not seven times, but seven times seventy-seven times”; but Hamlet, albeit a Christian, must stand also in the place of one of these Old Testament kings, either Saul or David. And if there was one thing that the time spent underlining Old Testament verses with scarlet ink taught Oxford, it was that the God of Moses and Aaron was thoroughly realistic about what could and could not be expected of human kings, even kings of Israel.

Claudius had killed Hamlet’s father, nor had he asked either Hamlet or Heaven for forgiveness, yet the “sevenfold vengeance” by which God extended his protection to Cain, the first murderer, has apparently been applied to Claudius as well. Heaven and the heavenly guardians (the angels) have apparently allowed that divine retribution be delivered by Hamlet, but only at the cost of his own life, and ultimately, the lives of six others as well. Figuratively speaking, the bodies of Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Gertrude, Laertes, and of Hamlet himself all litter the stage by the end of the denouement—implicitly the “sevenfold vengeance for Cain.”

As previously indicated, not all of this actually occurred to us until we had an opportunity to read for ourselves the 1,000 annotations in Oxford’s Geneva Bible, which was only possible with the publication in February of 2001 of Stritmatter’s doctoral dissertation: *The Marginalia of Edward de Vere’s Geneva Bible*. Thanks to Prof. Stritmatter we now find, of the thousand annotations, literally dozens upon dozens pertain, some indirectly, but most directly, to *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Yet on the occasion of first hearing Stritmatter speak in Cambridge (Massachusetts) at the first general meeting of the Shakespeare Fellowship, we were anxious to ask him in person just one question: namely, “Is Ecclesiasticus 28: 1-5 annotated or not?” For I had already satisfied myself long since that these five verses, taken together with verses before and after, are the Bible’s core teaching on revenge, and as such, suitable for extended application in



The Geneva Bible of 1560, the Bible of Shakespeare, John Knox, John Donne, John Bunyan, and the Earl of Oxford.

both Old and New Testaments. As it turned out, we never had to ask, because, in the course of his lecture, Stritmatter himself noted these same five verses from Ecclesiasticus which constitute the Bible's core teaching on revenge. To our way of thinking, the implication is that the author of *Hamlet* had not only noticed the verses, but most probably had them in mind when he sat down to write the most famous revenge play of the Elizabethan age, and possibly of all time.

Thus, having the actual Geneva annotations available to us in the 83-page Appendix G of Stritmatter's book (345-428) has opened for us an entirely new dimension on those biblical parallels noted and discussed by various commentators over the last 150 years. Earlier writers had chronicled the sacred texts which the playwright relied upon, but Stritmatter's work has opened a window on how the author actually felt about the biblical texts with which he was most familiar. To be sure, the fields of comparison—the plays of the dramatic canon on one hand, and the sacred texts on the other—are huge, maybe so huge as to be forbiddingly unwieldy, but the potential light that the two fields can shed upon each other should certainly be worth the effort.

Take Milward's citation of Psalm 8: 15-16 (7: 15-16 in the Jerusalem Bible) with its verses 10-14 which are introductory to the same thought:

- 10: God is the shield that protects me, he preserves upright hearts,  
 11: God the righteous judge is slow to show his anger, but he is a God who is always  
       enraged by those who refuse to repent.  
 12: The enemy may sharpen his sword, he may bend his bow and take aim,  
 13: but the weapons he prepares will kill himself and his arrows turn into firbrands.  
 14: Look at him, pregnant with wickedness, conceiving Spite, he gives birth to Mishap.
- 15: He dug a pit, hollowed it out, only to fall into his own trap!  
 16: His spite recoils on his own head, his brutality falls back on his own skull.

These verses marked by Milward as instances of God's anger upon the unrepentant murderer with special relevance to *Hamlet* are not marked in Oxford's Bible, though he did mark one with essentially the same message: "13: Because of the foolish devices of their wickedness, where-with they were deceived, yet they might know that wherewith a man sinneth, by the same also that he be punished." (Stritmatter 399)

As Stritmatter points out, only one verse is actually marked in the Psalms of Oxford's Geneva Bible, namely: "18: 20: The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness" (378). Yet two verses earlier, in the Genevan Psalm 18: 18, there occurs the unmarked verse, "The Lorde was my stay." Stritmatter notes that in Act II Scene 3 (24-6) of *Henry VI Part 2* Shakespeare uses the wording of the Geneva Bible: "and God shall be my hope, my stay, my guide and lantern to my feet," rather than that of the Sternhold and Hopkins psalter (378).<sup>6</sup>

The second and third of the three annotations in the Geneva Psalms are both marginal notes by the editor relating to Psalm 37: "c: As the hope of the dailight causeth us not to be offended with the darkness of ye neight: so oght we paciently to trust that God wil cleare our cause and restore us to our right"; and "t: These three points are required of the faithful, yet they shal be godlie, that Gods law be in their heart & that their life be upright." Stritmatter notes

that the first of these Geneva notations: “is the first instance of a theme which will emerge with particular emphasis as one continues with verses marked in the prophets and the apocrypha of Oxford’s Geneva Bible: that God will clear or—as Micah 7: 9 puts it—‘bring to light’ the just but suffering servant who trusts patiently to his will” (378). As noted by other Oxfordians, these passages are to be found in the “secret works” collection of marked texts. Especially relevant verses can be found in Ecclesiasticus, Matthew, Colossians, Hebrews and Revelation.<sup>7</sup>

Even the oft-repeated theme of evil recoiling on the evil-doer gains color from a perusal of the Oxford annotations. Consider Ecclesiasticus 27: 10 which is, in fact, marked in Oxford’s Geneva Bible, demonstrating that de Vere paid close attention to this entire section of Scripture: “As the lyon waiteth for the beast, so doth sin sinne upon them that do evil.”<sup>5</sup>

Although Oxford did not mark Luke 16:17 (compare to Matthew 5:17-18: “It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one little jot to fall off the law,” it could certainly have been applied to Hamlet, who, as he himself claims, “can accuse me of such things that it were better my mother had not borne me” (3.1.124). There is no doubt that throughout the action leading up to the denouement, the carnage of the final, bloody scene seems to wait upon him “like a lion,” yet, paradoxically, through his own downfall and defeat, Hamlet’s goals are achieved. As in his comment to Horatio as the crisis bears down upon him:

Hamlet:       Our indiscretion sometime serves us well  
                   When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us  
                   There’s a divinity that shapes our ends,  
                   Rough hew them how we will . . . (5.2.8-11)

In the end, every jot of the *lex talionis* and the rest of the Mosaic Law has been preserved through the dramatic action in *Hamlet*. The prince himself has achieved the vengeance which was both his responsibility and his curse, yet, as God promised Cain, the first murderer, “seven-fold vengeance” has been taken in the process of achieving his revenge, for not Hamlet alone but Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Gertrude, and Laertes (seven altogether) have paid the ultimate price for bringing the wicked King to justice. Surely, this strict fulfillment of Old Testament strictures and precepts is at least part of the reason why a haunting sense of spiritual mystery has always been associated with this play, and probably will continue to be until the final trumpet closes the book on all human endeavor.

It can be no accident that Ecclesiasticus—evidently one of the annotator’s favorite books of the Bible—plays such a prominent part in the construction of *Hamlet*. Just one verse after the second reference to the avenging “lyon,” there follow ten verses which constitute the longest discourse on vengeance in the entire Old Testament. These include the five verses at the core of the teaching—verses underlined in Oxford’s Geneva Bible—that these scholars have cited as inspiring six passages in six different Shakespeare plays: *Merchant of Venice* and *Richard II*, as noted by Carter (1905); and *Henry V*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Henry VIII*, and *2 Henry VI* as noted by Noble (1935) and Shaheen (1989 and 1993). To these, Stritmatter adds two examples of his own, both from *The Tempest* (406-07).

Historically speaking, the biblical connections that commentators have most frequently

discovered have been actual verbal parallels between the Geneva wording and that of the plays. However, as Stritmatter points out, some connections may not involve specific words or phrases so much as a significant parallel of themes. For example, while King Saul is in the field with his army seeking the life of David, it happens twice that—serendipitously—David is given the opportunity to take Saul unawares while sleeping, opportunities that David is too noble to take advantage of. While David’s reasons are different from Hamlet’s, it is important to note how closely the basic situation parallels Hamlet’s when he catches Claudius alone at his prayers in Act III Scene 3. Both incidents: 24:3-5 and 26:12, are underlined in Oxford’s Geneva Bible, evidence of I Samuel as a source for this crucial scene.

### “Mad in craft”

Almost as soon as Hamlet learns from the Ghost the truth about Claudius and that his own life is in danger, he resolves to feign madness, swearing his comrades to secrecy lest they betray the fact that he is but “mad in craft.” This too mirrors David’s strategy. When David learns that King Saul is seeking his life, David, after fleeing from Nob to Achish, counterfeits madness. as told in these verses from I Samuel, underlined in Oxford’s Bible:

12: And David considered these wordes, & was sore afraid of Achish the King of Gath

13: And he changed his behaviour before them, and fained him selfe mad in their hands, & scribbled on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle fall down upon his beard.

These citations constitute but a sampling of some forty-four instances, pointed out by Prof. Stritmatter, myself, and others, in which significant scriptural parallels connect *Hamlet*, *Prince of Denmark* with annotations in Edward de Vere’s Geneva Bible.

In his appendices, Stritmatter takes pains to demonstrate that the hand-written notes in the Oxford Geneva Bible are consistent with de Vere’s somewhat unique Italic handwriting and inconsistent with that of other writers of the period. Although the good Professor is understandably cautious, holding that this analysis does not absolutely prove that Edward de Vere is the annotator of his Geneva Bible, when every implication of the verbal and thematic parallels linking the annotations with the works of Shakespeare has been considered, his book begins to assume the weight of the proverbial smoking gun—or, if the reader will kindly pardon the pun, the *smoking canon*. \_\_\_\_\_ 🍷

## Notes

1 As numerous commentators have shown, the case of Hales vs. Petit which dealt with the legal questions surrounding a suicide, also lies at the heart of the Clowns' dialogue.

2 Correlated with the date of Campion's arrest, we suspect it is 1581 in the New Style of dating. If one year is subtracted to give us the Old Style of dating, we can have Fr. Campion distributing copies before his arrest which is consistent with the other facts in this matter. He was already in custody when Queen Elizabeth's proclamation calling for stricter measures against recusants and priests was issued on January 11, 1581.

3 Milward apparently refers to Frye's 314-page *Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine*, first published in 1963 by the Oxford University Press, and republished by the Princeton University Press in 1965. Milward's own book having the same title was published in Tokyo by the Shakespeare Society of Japan, also in 1965.

4 Stephen Vincent Benet cites the name as Amleth, in his *Readers Encyclopedia* (901) the earliest use of the shortened form in English of which I am aware.

5 Interestingly, an edition of the 1569 Sternhold and Hopkins Psalms was bound with the Earl of Oxford's Geneva Bible (STC 2440a). We project that Oxford received the unbound gilt-edged bible separately from the Sternhold & Hopkins Psalms, but in the same year, 1569, since the Geneva appears on a list together with other books purchased by his guardian on his behalf (Stritmatter 430). The leather bindings with their silver latches were apparently added later. Oxford was nineteen years old at the time.

6 The word order in Oxford's Geneva Bible seems to differ in some ways from that of the Geneva Bible referenced by Milward. We do not know the exact date of the Geneva portion of STC 2440a, only that it dates from 1569 or earlier. The first version in English was published in 1560. Shaheen mentions three editions: 1561, 1562, and 1570, but these were printed on the Continent. The Geneva New Testament was first printed in England in 1575, while a complete Old and New Testament was first published in 1576 (Shaheen *Plays* 27-28).

7 Prof. Stritmatter offers an interesting interpretation of Hamlet as a "lapsed Catholic aristocrat, nostalgic for the rituals of the Church and the idea of salvation through great works." Supporting his view by the marked texts dealing with the necessity of good works in the OGB, Stritmatter feels these notations reveal an annotator unsympathetic to the Protestant doctrine that faith alone is necessary for salvation. A significant pattern of annotated verses mentioned previously suggests Oxford's concern for the importance of a "good name," along with his confidence that good deeds—especially if they are done in secret—will one day be rewarded:

I will bear the wrath of the Lord because I have sinned against him, until he plead my cause, and execute judgment for me: then will he bring me forth to the light, and I shall see righteousness (Micah 7: 9).

But when thou doest thine alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth. That thine alms may be in secret, and thy Father that seeth in secret, he will reward thee openly. (Matthew 6: 3-4)

For God is not unrighteous that he should forget your work and labor of love, which you showed toward his name, in that you have ministered unto the saints and yet minister. (Hebrews 5:10, OGB)

## Works Cited

## ABBREVIATIONS

- NT New Testament  
 OT Old Testament  
 OGB Oxford's Geneva Bible

## BOOKS AND ARTICLES

- Benet, William Rose. *The Reader's Encyclopedia*. (1965). 2nd ed. New York: Crowell, 1965.
- Carter, Thomas. *Shakespeare and Holy Scripture*. London: Hodder, 1905.
- Cross, Wilbur L. and Tucker Brooke, eds. *The Yale Shakespeare*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1993.
- Farnham, Williard, ed. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. New York: Penguin, 1957.
- Fraser, Antonia. *Mary Queen of Scots*. London: Widenfeld, 1969.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Faith and Treason*. Garden City: Doubleday, 1996.
- Halliday, F. E. *Shakespeare in his Age*. (1956). New York: Yoseloff, 1964.
- Honan, Park. *Shakespeare, A Life*. Oxford: OUP, 1998.
- Kittredge, George Lyman, ed. *Sixteen Plays of Shakespeare*. Boston: Ginn, 1946.
- Milward, Peter. *Biblical Influences in Shakespeare's Great Tragedies*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987.
- Noble, Richmond. *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge and Use of the Book of Common Prayer*. (1935). New York: Octagon, 1970.
- Rolfe, William, ed. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. New York: Harper Brothers, 1888.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Shakespeare's Comedy of "A Midsummer Night's Dream."* (1877). New York: American Book, 1905.
- Shaheen, Naseeb. *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Tragedies*. Newark: U Delaware P, 1987.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays*. Newark: U Delaware P, 1999.
- Stritmatter, Roger A. *The Marginalia of Edward de Vere's Geneva Bible: Providential Discovery, Literary Reasoning, and Historical Consequence*. Northampton, MA: Oxenford, 2001.
- Thorndike, Ashley H. *Shakespeare's Theater*. New York: Macmillan, 1925.
- Usher, Peter D., Ph.D. "Hamlet and the Infinite Universe." *Bulletin of the American Astronomical Society* 28 (1996): 1305.
- Ward, B.M. *The Seventeenth Earl of Oxford*. London: John Murray, 1928.
- Wordsworth, Charles. *Shakespeare's Knowledge and Use of the Bible*. (1864). 3rd ed. London: Smith, Elder, 1880.