

9. The Importance of Oxford's Geneva Bible

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Perhaps the most valuable recent work on the Shakespeare-Oxford connection is Roger Stritmatter's unpublished PhD dissertation (University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 2001), available in a limited online version.¹ Stritmatter compares Oxford's hand-annotated bible with well-known (and some not so well known) biblical allusions in Shakespeare. He finds a significantly high correlation: of 1,043 passages marked by De Vere, 246 or 23.6 percent are cited or referred to in the Works.

This is the kind of confirmatory evidence Looney predicted, and of course precisely what we would expect if the Oxfordian hypothesis is correct. We may have—probably do have—Shakespeare's personal bible, with his own annotations in his own hand. Among the unhappiest features of current Stratfordian scholarship is the total lack of interest in this document. This is one illustration of our claim that the Oxfordian hypothesis opens up Shakespeare studies rather than (as is routinely claimed) closing them down.



Geneva Bible, 1560

As noted above, among the most successful recent interventions in the so-called Authorship Debate is Roger Stritmatter's unpublished PhD dissertation examining De Vere's personal bible. Stritmatter argues at length that Oxford was Shakespeare, a case we need not recapitulate here, and that therefore the notes and underlinings we find in his well-

¹ <http://shake-speares-bible.com/dissertation/> Stritmatter's appendices, including tabulated data, are unfortunately missing. According to his website, they include Table A: Marked bible verses previously cited as definite or probable influences on Shakespeare (Carter 1905; Noble 1935; Milward 1976; Milward 1987; Shaheen 1987; Shaheen 1989; Shaheen 1993); Table B: Direct and unambiguous cross-references to verses cited by prior students; Table C: Marked verses which influenced Shakespeare; Table D: Marked Psalms previously recorded as influencing Shakespeare. Biblical references in Marlowe, Spenser, Rabelais, Montaigne are compiled in appendices E and F. "While the De Vere Bible annotations show a 42% correspondence with Shakespeare, all other English writers approach zero and never more than 7%."

Stritmatter's website states: "I am an Associate Professor of Humanities at Coppin State University, a founding member and officer of The Shakespeare Fellowship, and the General Editor of *Brief Chronicles: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Authorship Studies*. My first book, *Shakespeare's Tempest: A Movable Feast*, co-written with critically acclaimed young adult fiction writer Lynne Kositsky, will be published this year by McFarland Press. A second book on Herman Melville may temporarily preempt the Shakespeare's Bible project — but that book will eventually, I promise, be written and published."

read bible should throw some light on the Works generally and the authorship question in particular.

It turns out that Stritmatter is right on both counts, suggesting that he is also right about Shakespeare's true identity—the primary purpose of his argument. The bible in question, dated 1560 and now in the Folger collection, unquestionably belonged to the seventeenth earl. So the connection is not just general, as has always been argued in the case of “Shakespeare,” whose reliance on just such a bible is a critical commonplace, but persuasively particular. Stritmatter presents the history of the volume's purchase and decoration with De Vere's heraldic arms—the records exist. Textually and bibliographically it is a second-quarto “Geneva Bible,” prepared in Switzerland during the 1550s by William Whittingham and other Protestant exiles fleeing Mary Tudor.² According to Stritmatter, the margins contain “over a thousand marked and underlined Bible passages in the fine italic handwriting of Edward de Vere, the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford” in four different inks: scarlet, orange, brown-black and grey, suggesting repeated visits over time.

What's interesting is that there is a very high correlation between these passages (often emphasized by a swiftly drawn manicule or hand with a pointing index finger) and their echo in the play's and poems of Shakespeare. Stritmatter notes that

One hundred and forty-one of these verses have been designated as influential for Shakespeare—either as source or parallel—by prior scholars (Noble 1935; Shaheen 1987, 1989, 1993; Milward 1987). The remaining number exhibit various degrees or types of significance within the Shakespeare canon, from minor examples which exhibit only a probable or subtle influence, to those which display definite or even pervasive influences in the canon... One hundred and thirty-seven more marked verses exhibit an influence previously undocumented by scholars of Shakespeare's Bible knowledge.

It's not only a question of phrasing or imagery, though these are statistically present at rates far higher than chance. Two hundred of the marked verses contain more than six hundred allusions in Shakespeare, an average of almost three per marked verse. Thematically too there are significant reverberations, especially between passages dealing with the divine right of kings and *vindictia contra tyrannos*,³ major themes of course, especially in the history plays.

Some passages have been interestingly edited: *Ecclesiasticus* 14.13, for instance, which exhorts giving alms to “thy friend,” has been altered to “unto the poore,” reflecting the wording of the Vulgate, “da pauperi” (*Gramatica* 1913). This suggests that the annotator was both a thinking man and a biblical scholar, qualities evident in “Shakespeare.”

Among Stritmatter's striking examples is the marking of Numbers 20.7-8. He notes that Stratfordian scholars like Peter Milward (1973, 93) and Nasseb Shaheen (1993) have previously identified these verses as the source of

² “The Geneva Bible is one of the most historically significant translations of the Bible into English, preceding the King James translation by 51 years. It was the primary Bible of 16th-century Protestantism and was the Bible used by William Shakespeare, Oliver Cromwell, John Knox, John Donne, and John Bunyan.” (Wikipedia). Since news of Stritmatter's work leaked out Stratfordians have been hastily back-pedaling on the “used by William Shakespeare” part.

³ An influential Huguenot tract published in Basel in 1579.

Helena: Great floods have flown
From simple sources, and great seas have dried
When miracles have by the greatest been denied.

—*All's Well that Ends Well*, II.i.139-141

A second instance comes from the apocryphal book of *Ecclesiasticus*, where De Vere has marked a whole series of verses about reciprocal forgiveness. Their multiple influence upon Shakespeare is a matter of scholarly consensus. Carter (1905) cites:

For, as thou urgest justice, be assured
Thou shalt have justice more than thou desirest

—*Merchant of Venice*, IV.iii.316

And

Bol. I pardon him, as God shall pardon me.
Dutch. O happy vantage of a kneeling knee!
Yet I am sick with fear, speak it again,
Twice saying 'pardon' doth not pardon twain
But makes one pardon strong.

—*Richard II*, V.iii.131-136.

Noble (1935) and Shaheen (1989, 1993) also note:

The mercy that was quick in us but late,
By your own counsel is suppress'd and kill'd.
You must not dare, for shame, to talk of mercy.

—*Henry V*, 2.2.79-83

We do pray for mercy,
And that same prayer doth teach us all to render
The deeds of mercy.

—*Merchant of Venice*, IV.i.198-200

A second level of evidence, which Stritmatter calls "verification with extension," includes marked verses with more influence in the canon than previously suspected. An instance is the Pauline doctrine of the alien nature of the agency of sin (Romans 7.15-20), which appears repeatedly in the plays and poems, most notably perhaps in Sonnet 151.⁴

Stritmatter's third level of evidence, "prediction from new data," goes from the marked passages to the Works, rather than, as conventionally, the other way around. The results consist of a number of previously unrecognized Shakespeare Biblical references, 137 in all. They include "whore of Babylon" (*Henry V* II.iii.38-39) and the phrase "laughed to scorn," *Ecclus.* 6.4, which occurs three times in Shakespeare.⁵

A fourth evidentiary level involves the convergence of two or more biblical references upon a single Shakespearean source. A good example is Sonnet 94, "They that have power to hurt and will do none," which "filters the moral of Wisdom 12.18...through the formulaic

⁴ See Stritmatter, *Notes and Queries* (December 1997).

⁵ Stritmatter is careful not to overstate his claims here as both instances also occur unmarked in the Bible.

structure of the beatitudes,” as Stritmatter puts it. Another is Macbeth’s uniting of the Pauline doctrine of the body as the temple of the soul with the Old Testament theology of the anointed king. The principal references are II Samuel 1.14 and I Corinthians 6.19, both marked by De Vere:

Most sacrilegious murder hath broke
Ope the Lord’s anointed Temple and Stole thence

The life o’th’ building.

—*Macbeth*, II.iii.63

Stritmatter’s fifth level of evidence, *Correction*, is his “most impressive.” It occurs when the researcher with De Vere’s bible in hand is able to correct the misprisions of earlier scholars who have mistaken the true biblical source. An example is Portia’s

How far that little candle throws his beam!
So shines a good deed in a naughty world.

—*Merchant of Venice*, V.ii.61-62

This was incorrectly identified by Richmond Noble (1935) as an echo of 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.” In fact it is Philippians 2.15, “That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world.” Following a correspondence with Stritmatter, Shaheen altered his citation in *Biblical References in Shakespeare’s Comedies* (1993).

Additionally, many of the verses marked in the De Vere Bible are under-represented in the studies of Carter, Noble and Shaheen, despite their profound philosophical and theological import for Shakespeare. Examples include the verses of the Platonic cluster (I Sam. 16.7 *et al.*), Romans 7.20, Revelations 3.5 and associated verses, all of which, says Stritmatter, yield a great number of “verifications with extension.”

De Vere’s annotations take in relatively obscure biblical Books, including the apocryphal Tobit, Judith, II Esdras, II Macabees, the later prophets Daniel, Hosea, Malachi, Joel, Amos, Esther, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zechariah, and Zephaniah, and James in the New Testament. The Books not marked seem also to be the ones that interested Shakespeare least: Ruth, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Obadiah, Jonah and Haggai in the Old Testament, Song of the Three Children, Susanna, and I Macabees in the Apocrypha, and Galatians, I Timothy, Philemon, James, II Peter and Jude in the New Testament.

On the other hand, quoting the bible came easily to De Vere, confirming that he read it frequently and not always with a pen in hand. The most famous example, and the one which, in our opinion ties him and Shakespeare together forever, is his use of “I am that I am” (Exodus 3: 14). This reference shows up only twice in Elizabethan literature: Shakespeare’s Sonnet 121 and in an angry letter from Edward De Vere to Lord Burghley. If the phrase “Lillies that fester smell far worse than weeds” was enough to link *Edward III* to Shakespeare, why not this equally striking convergence?

A second telling example is the “beam in the eye” in Matthew 7.3, not marked but used by De Vere in another letter to Burghley (the Lord Treasurer of England) following the St. Bartholomew Day’s massacre, 1572:

And think if the admiral in France was a<n> eyesore or a beam in the eyes of the Papists, that the Lord Treasurer of England is a block and a crossbar in their way; whose remove they will never stick to attempt, seeing they have prevailed so well in others... (Fowler, 1986, 55.)

Shakespeare also liked the phrase and used it at least three times:

The King your mote did see, but I a beam
Do find in each of three. (*Love’s Labor’s Lost*, IV.iii.162)

None, but to lose your eyes.
O heaven! That were but a mote in yours. (*King John*, IV.i.90-91)

A mote it is to trouble the mind’s eye. (*Hamlet*, I.i.112)

Professor Stritmatter’s web site promises that his dissertation, with supporting data, is being actively prepared for hard-copy publication. Our view is that it is likely to transform the terms of the debate.