Biblical allusions seem to abound in Shakespeare, writes **David Crystal**, but things are not so clear on closer inspection. And the Bard's lexical inventiveness doesn't help.

CITING SCRIPTURE FOR MY PURPOSE

One of the more unusual linguistic requests I received in early 2011 came from a correspondent who wanted to organize a Shakespeare play reading that would most fittingly acknowledge the 400th anniversary year of the King James Bible. His question: Which Shakespeare play contains most biblical allusions?

It is a difficult question to answer, because it is often unclear whether a piece of text that seems to have a scriptural origin is a genuine biblical reference or simply reflects a common experience, a piece of proverbial wisdom, a phrasing used in one of Shakespeare's non-biblical sources, or an instance of personal linguistic creativity which echoes something found in the Bible. For example, how are we to analyse *everlasting* in this reflection (*Hamlet* 1.2.131)?

Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter!

Is this a (conscious or unconscious) reference to the frequent occurrence of this word in various biblical translations (such as 'everlasting Father') or is it a usage based on the adjective and noun in the general sense of 'endless' or 'eternal' which had been in English since the 14th century?

Fortunately, this is the kind of question already addressed by Naseeb Shaheen in his impressive *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays* (1999). After a judicious discussion of the issues, he cautiously identifies 1604 instances in the canon where he thinks there is a case of some kind to be made. Here is a frequency table based on his commentary:

Play	**Number of biblical references**
Richard II	77
Hamlet	76
Richard III	68
Henry VI Part 2	67
Henry IV Part 2	66
The Merchant of Venice	64
Henry V	64
Othello	64
Love's Labour's Lost	62
Henry VIII	61
Macbeth	59
Henry IV Part 1	55
Cymbeline	53
Henry VI Part 1	51
Measure for Measure	44
King John	41
All's Well That Ends Well	39
King Lear	39
Henry VI Part 3	38
As You Like It	36
Antony and Cleopatra	36
The Merry Wives of Windsor	35
Troilus and Cressida	35
The Comedy of Errors	34
Coriolanus	32
Twelfth Night	31
Titus Andronicus	31
The Winter's Tale	31
Romeo and Juliet	30
Much Ado About Nothing	28
Timon of Athens	28
Julius Caesar	25
The Tempest	25
A Midsummer Night's Dream	17
The Taming of the Shrew	16
Pericles	14
The Two Gentlemen of Verona	12
Sir Thomas More	11
The Two Noble Kinsmen	9
	1604

The preponderance of English history plays towards the top of the list is striking. But leaving aside the original context of the enquiry, I wasn't expecting to find some Williamisms (first recorded instances of words in the *Oxford English Dictionary*) in Shaheen's list of quotations.

The reasoning seems straightforward. If Shakespeare is alluding to a biblical text, then the words his characters use will be found in that text. Ergo, they won't be Williamisms. But the issue turns out not to be so simple, as the *Hamlet* quotation

Illustration Belle Mellor

illustrates. First, there is no clear biblical text: there is no explicit prohibition of suicide in the Bible; the act of suicide is usually subsumed under the sixth commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill'. And second, the word *suicide* hadn't arrived in English at that time (its first recorded use is 1656). The *OED Thesaurus* tells us that *self-murder* and *self-destruction* were both available by the time Shakespeare was writing *Hamlet* (c.1600). He uses *self-killed* in Sonnet 6, so presumably *self-killing* would also have been an option (though not recorded in the *OED* until 1619). But we can immediately see the poetic advantages of *self-slaughter* over the others – the greater ferocity suggested by *slaughter* in this context of high emotion (Hamlet's first soliloquy), metrically apt (by contrast with *destruction*), and phonetically reinforced by the repeated [s] and [l].

Several other biblical allusions prompted imaginative lexical innovation. In *Troilus and Cressida* (2.3.175), Ulysses comments:

Kingdom'd Achilles in commotion rages,
And batters down himself.

This sounds like an allusion to *Mark* (3.24), 'If a kingdom be divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand'. The innovation is the functional shift of noun to verb (used here adjectivally) – a well-known Shakespearean stylistic feature (*childed, friended, dowered*...), adding the dynamic qualities of a verb to an otherwise static notion.

A similar effect can be seen in Horatio's use of *sheeted* ('covered with a sheet') in his account of the fall of Julius Caesar (*Hamlet* 1.1.115), when 'The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead / Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets'. The allusion here is thought to be to *Matthew* 27, when 'The graves did open themselves, and many bodies of the Saints which slept, arose'. Shakespeare would use *sheet* as a verb again (in *Antony and Cleopatra* 1.4.65, 'when snow the pasture sheets'), but his use of *sheeted* here is original.

There are many biblically motivated Williamisms in *Hamlet*, such as *overleaven* and *plausive* in Hamlet's descripton of the Danes.

As is *tenantless*. There were several options for expressing the notion of 'being empty' in 1600 – 'empty', 'unoccupied', 'vacant', and 'void' are all recorded – but none of these can match the impact of collocating *graves* with a term from property law. Here too, the ending is a typical Shakespearean coinage: there are over 50 Williamisms ending in *-less* (*aidless, characterless, dowerless, languageless*...), and there may even be another biblical allusion with one of them, *graveless* (Shaheen suggests *Revelation* 11, 'And shall not suffer their carcasses to be put in graves').

There are other biblically motivated Williamisms in *Hamlet*, such as *overleaven* and *plausive* in Hamlet's descripton of the Danes (*Hamlet* 1.4.29):

Or by some habit that too much o'er-leavens
The form of plausive manners...

Leaven appears several times in the Bible as a symbol of spreading corruption. It had begun to be used figuratively as a verb in the mid-16th century, but to *overleaven* is another typical Shakespearean coinage. There are 35 Williamisms in which *over-* is added to an existing verb (*overcanopy, overcount, overteem*...).

Hamlet stands out among the history plays at the top of Shaheen's list. Very appropriate, then, that it forms part of this year's Globe programme. My correspondent would presumably be delighted.

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