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The Bard and The Word: The Influence of the Bible on the Writings of William Shakespeare

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Introduction

Widely hailed as the single greatest writer and poet of the English language, William Shakespeare is credited with authorship of approximately 38 theatrical works, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems, and several shorter pieces of verse. Shakespeare is not only revered for the sheer quantity and wide-ranging genres of his writing, but also the exceptional written quality, well-executed thematic diversity, and ability to explore the timelessness of the human experience. It is precisely these qualities that have compelled literary scholars to study Shakespeare's numerous works, particularly his plays, for centuries. With the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible occurring in 2011 and the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death following in 2016, scholarship on Shakespeare's use of biblical material underwent a significant resurgence. The focus of much of this scholarship has been on simply identifying the numerous references rather than on attempting to determine why Shakespeare chose to include these specific references and, more importantly, what larger purpose they serve within the plays. As the plays written between 1600 and 1606 are widely recognized by critics as Shakespeare's most biblical, they are ideal for studying his motivations and the different effects his biblical borrowings have on both his original and modern audiences. By examining *Othello* (1602) and *Measure for Measure* (1603), it becomes clear that Shakespeare intentionally employed biblical elements in his plays to add deeper levels of meaning and implications for audience members, thus making a thorough knowledge of biblical material essential to fully enjoying the richness of Shakespeare's dramatic works. As modern audiences have grown increasingly biblically illiterate, the moral and emotional significances of the biblical elements Shakespeare employs are often overlooked or misinterpreted, causing contemporary audiences to be unable to fully grasp the additional levels of meaning these passages add to his plays. Only

when these plays are viewed with careful attention being paid to the biblical elements can the full weight of Shakespeare's intended message be felt.

With Shakespeare doing the bulk of his known writing between 1589 and 1613, both his comedies and tragedies were heavily influenced by the overwhelmingly biblical culture that pervaded sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. As Hannibal Hamlin points out, Shakespeare's immersion in biblical culture began at birth. Born in 1564, Shakespeare and the rest of his generation were the first group accustomed to having the Bible readily available in English. Of the many circulating English translations, the Geneva was both the most recent to Shakespeare's birth and the most influential on his writings. First published in 1560, the Geneva Bible became the most popular English version of the Bible for much of the next century. (Hamlin 9, 12). As a result of both its widespread popularity and undeniable linguistic evidence within the plays, most authorities agree that the Geneva Bible was the translation most often studied and quoted by Shakespeare (*Marx General Note*). Knowing the version Shakespeare used is important for modern audiences trying to identify references that hinge upon language unique to a specific translation. For example, Shakespeare is alluding directly to the Geneva Version when Othello accosts Desdemona for her alleged adultery:

Yet could I bear that too, well, very well.
But there where I have garnered up my heart,
Where either I must live or bear no life,
The *fountain* from the which my current runs
Or else dries up—to be discarded thence,
Or keep it as a *cistern* for foul toads
To knot and gender in (4.2.66-71, italics mine)

Here, the use of both "fountain" and "cistern" as metaphors for marriage is found solely in the Geneva translation of Proverbs 5:15-18,

Drinke the water of thy cisterne, and of the rivers out of the midst of thine owne well. Let thy fountaines flowe forthe, and the rivers of waters in the streets. But

let them be thine, even thine onely, and not the strangers with thee. Let thy fountaine be blessed, and rejoyce with the wife of thy youth.

The textual and thematic links between Shakespeare's tragedy and the Geneva version of Proverbs is further strengthened by the presence of a marginal note found only in the Geneva Bible. The note informs readers that the fifth chapter of Proverbs is about "an harlot which giveth herself to another then to her husband." Although Shakespeare's accused adulteress is innocent of any such crime, the connection between this distinct marginalia and the play's themes of jealousy and perceived adultery is indisputable (Hamlin 10).

While the Geneva is the most commonly referenced translation, it is not the only version with which Shakespeare demonstrates familiarity. He also makes identifiable reference to the Bishops' Bible (1568) and other translations, although far less frequently than the Geneva (Noble 69-76). Regardless of the version used, there are roughly 1,350 total identifiable instances where Shakespeare references or quotes directly from the Bible found throughout his plays (Bragg 142). This astoundingly high figure clearly illustrates the pervasive influence the Bible had over both the thematic and linguistic content Shakespeare incorporated into his plays. It also represents the over 1,000 opportunities modern audiences have to delve deeper into Shakespeare's works if they have the necessary scriptural grounding.

In conjunction with the numerous versions of the English Bible being read during Shakespeare's lifetime, biblical knowledge was easily acquired through mandatory church attendance. During the Elizabethan era, liturgical education was of such importance that all residents were required by Recusancy Laws to attend church services every Sunday and on all major holidays (Hamlin 13). Those who failed to submit to the authority of the Church by not attending the required services, namely Roman Catholics, were listed as recusants and were subject to subsequent fines or imprisonment. Being named a recusant was equivalent to being

labeled a criminal in this highly religious climate (Alchin). For Shakespeare, this meant he would have regularly attended services, each Sunday and every holiday, from the time he was old enough to be brought to church until he left Stratford-upon-Avon to make a name for himself as a dramatist in London (Hamlin 13). Like Shakespeare, his audience members would have attended hundreds, if not thousands, of church services over the course of their lifetimes. In accordance with the Reformation principle of *sola scriptum*, or “by scripture alone,” the Bible would have been found at the center of each of these services. Because there was no mandate that all churches use the same version of the Bible, each diocese could use whichever version they preferred, allowing churches to preach from the Geneva Bible, the Great Bible (1539), and other contemporary translations (Hamlin 15). This lack of an official version provided Shakespeare and his audiences with exposure to a wide range of biblical language and imagery that modern audiences simply cannot access. The combination of enforced mandatory church attendance and familiarity with multiple translations of the Bible endowed Shakespeare’s audiences with the ability to quickly identify biblical references and language from numerous versions, a skill that most contemporary scholars lack. It also provided Shakespeare with an exceptionally fruitful and accessible body of texts he could use to enhance his own writings.

In addition to the biblical knowledge Shakespeare undoubtedly gained through regular church attendance, there is compelling evidence in his plays that he continued studying the Bible independently outside of the required church services. As the Bible was the “commonest and most discussed book of the day,” this is not entirely surprising; however, it does explain Shakespeare’s especially masterful manipulation and artful employment of biblical material in his own writings (Noble 22). Rather than merely alluding to biblical stories or historical episodes, Shakespeare far more frequently “quotes or adapts biblical phrases” with the specific

purpose of strengthening the audiences' emotional reaction and deepening their investment in the dramatic storylines, making extensive biblical knowledge crucial to experiencing the emotional and thematic richness of his works (Noble 20). Evidence to support Shakespeare's continued reading of the Bible into adulthood can be found in both the number and nature of the references found in his plays. This same evidence can be used to determine which texts modern audiences need to be familiar with to strengthen their reading of Shakespeare's plays.

Over the course of his 38 plays, Shakespeare made identifiable allusions to or quotations from a total of 42 books of the Bible. These 42 books include 18 from the Old Testament, 18 from the New Testament, and 6 from the Apocrypha, which was originally included in the Geneva translation (Noble 20). As the Apocrypha is no longer printed in many versions of the Bible, these references are especially hard for modern audiences to comprehend, thereby affecting their overall interpretation of Shakespeare's work. While impressive, this list only takes into consideration references for which scholars can definitively identify a biblical source and excludes Shakespeare's non-dramatic works. This allows for the argument to be made that the true number of books to which Shakespeare alludes is substantially higher, requiring audiences to be familiar with an even lengthier list of biblical texts (Noble 20). Regardless of whether he viewed the biblical stories like any other works of secular literature or as divinely inspired Holy Writ, Shakespeare could have only acquired such an extensive mental library of reference material from thoroughly reading and studying the Bible well into his adult life. While there is no consensus among scholars about Shakespeare's personal religious beliefs, his plays serve as indisputable evidence that he was well-versed in the stories, language, and themes of the Bible.

In addition to these 42 books of the Bible with traceable borrowings that audiences must be able to recognize, Shakespeare makes numerous references to the *Book of Common Prayer*. A

defining feature of the *Book of Common Prayer* liturgy was the congregation reciting Psalms according to a set schedule, allowing them to complete the entire book each month. One particularly well-liked version of the Psalms at the time was the Coverdale Psalter. Here again, the idea that Shakespeare was a life-long reader of the Bible is strengthened by his linguistic choices when referencing this book. Shakespeare references the Psalms more often than any other book of the Bible or religious text, making a familiarity with this book essential if the audience wishes to grasp all levels of a play's meaning (Hamlin 17). In fact, there is not a single play in the First Folio entirely devoid of likely reference to the Psalms (Noble 47). Moreover, whenever a specific version of the Psalms can be identified for Shakespeare's references, the overwhelming majority trace back to the Coverdale Psalter (Shaheen 20). One example of this can be found in *Othello* concerning a man's life. The iconic characterization of human life from Psalms 39 is written as: "Behold, thou hast made my days as it were a span long, and mine age is even as nothing in respect of thee" (verse 6). Similarly, Iago states that "a man's life / O, a man's life's but a span" (2.3.74-75). Shakespeare certainly had the Coverdale in mind when he wrote these lines as both the Geneva and Bishops' Psalters describe man's life as a "hand breadth" instead of a "span" (Hamlin 18). Without a wide-ranging exposure to the Bible, this specific allusion and its accompanying implications are unintelligible to audience members, causing them to be unable to access the enriched reading experience recognizing these allusions provides.

In addition to the Psalms, Shakespeare also demonstrates a fondness for the Apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus. Although it is known by only a few today, it was once eagerly read by many in search of "shrewd observations on life and manners" (Noble 36). It is reasonable to assume that Shakespeare was drawn to the knowledge and ways of living advocated for in Ecclesiasticus because he not only quotes directly from it as he does the Psalms and other books,

but he also recurrently expresses thoughts and morals aligned with those found in this text. For instance, Ecclesiasticus comments extensively on the popularity of the rich and the corresponding unpopularity of the poor. In verses 3 and 4, chapter 13 of Ecclesiasticus warns that:

The rich man hath done wrong, and yet he threateneth withal: the poor is wronged, and he must intreat also.
If thou be for his profit, he will use thee: but if thou have nothing, he will forsake thee.

This sentiment is echoed by Achilles in *Troilus and Cressida* when his unreliable friends pass him by:

What, am I poor of late?
'Tis certain, greatness, once fall'n out with Fortune,
Must fall out with men too. (3.3.77-79)

Clearly, Shakespeare had the spirit of Ecclesiasticus in mind when he penned these words. As similar instances regularly appear in Shakespeare's other plays, such as *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Hamlet*, it is obvious that Shakespeare had read and studied Ecclesiasticus at length, thereby adding another religious text to the list of sources audiences need to be familiar with if they are to actively and insightfully interpret his works (Noble 36-37). As the study of the Apocryphal books has become increasingly rare, important elements of Shakespeare's plays that hinge upon the audience's ability to recognize these texts have become nearly indecipherable for contemporary audiences.

Shakespeare's repeated practice of alluding to or otherwise weaving biblical incidents into his own writing without including any proper names exemplifies the need for audience members to be well-versed in Scripture to fully comprehend the significance of these moments (Noble 21). Although this can make identifying the biblical references difficult for modern scholars and readers, this habit suggests that Shakespeare believed his audience was capable of

filling in the blanks using their own reservoir of biblical knowledge. While this daunting task may prove nearly impossible today, Shakespeare was able to exploit the similarities in experience between hearing the Bible read aloud in the church and hearing the Bible referenced in the theater. While Shakespeare's audience would have heard countless preachers explicate these passages, they were also involved in the process themselves. Whether it was by making notes of biblical references and their meanings, looking up confusing passages at home, or discussing the service's mentioned references with friends, Shakespeare's audiences were well-conditioned to quickly recognize biblical allusions on the stage from their experience of hearing the Bible read aloud during worship (Hamlin 41). As the practice of attending church has declined over time, today's audiences cannot rely on the experience of hearing sermons to help them recognize and interpret these same references. In the same way that writers today are aware that their audiences can quickly hear and recognize references from shows like *Saturday Night Live* or *The Big Bang Theory*, Shakespeare was aware of his audiences' ability to do the same with biblical material and frequently capitalized on this in his plays. However, as audiences have become farther removed from the scriptural sources he references, this same technique Shakespeare uses to make his plays more relatable to his contemporary audience makes them harder for modern audiences without a strong biblical foundation to fully engage with.

Shakespeare uses biblical material in very distinctive ways with the single definitive purpose of enhancing the content of his plays. Based on previous scholarship and my own research, it is clear Shakespeare intentionally employs biblical references in his plays. The idea that Shakespeare's over 1,300 identifiable biblical allusions (Bragg 142) are simply the byproduct of the surrounding biblical culture or were unintentionally included is undercut by the presence of biblical references and quotations in every one of Shakespeare's plays (Sims 1). The

sheer number and persistent employment of references in his works indicates that Shakespeare was undoubtedly selecting biblical material consciously that would best serve his desired purpose of contributing additional levels of ethical and emotional meaning to the plays that require biblical literacy to comprehend. For this reason, it is critical for audience members to have extensive biblical knowledge of their own so as to discern what his intentions were with these allusions and how the presence of these references enriches their understanding of the plays.

The idea that Shakespeare's use of biblical material was deliberate is strengthened by the evident progression of references over the course of his plays identified by Richmond Noble. In Shakespeare's earlier plays, the biblical borrowings are relatively easy to recognize and understand, even with the most basic exposure to contemporary biblical texts (Noble 47). For instance, *Love's Labor's Lost* (1597), one of Shakespeare's early plays, is saturated with overt liturgical references. The most prominent of these borrowings is the repeated reference to the Homily 7 "Against Swearing and Perjury" from *The First Book of Homilies*. As the play repeatedly comments on King Ferdinand's excessively strict and likely to be broken vows, it would be logical for Shakespeare to make use of the homily warning that should a man swear "to doe any thing which is...not in his power to performe: let him take it for an unlawfull and ungodly oath" ("The Homilies" 67). This close relationship between the central message of the homily and the content of Shakespeare's play is reinforced by the repeated appearance of the words "swear," "forswear," and "oath," just as they occur in the liturgical text (Shaheen 118-119). For instance, the Princess's warning of "Peace, peace, forbear! / Your *oath* once broke, you force not to *forswear*" echoes the principle tenet of this homily concerning false oaths (5.2.481, italics mine). Likewise, Katherine's command of "Yet *swear* not, lest you be *forsworn* again"

reiterates the importance of upholding oaths and not entering into vows that cannot be honored (5.2.904, italics mine). Since his play stresses oath-taking and the consequences of oath-breaking, it is natural that Shakespeare would have selected this familiar homily to deepen the moral implications of his characters' actions for audiences capable of recalling this liturgical message. Without some level of interaction with this homily, audiences can only take these ladies' words at face value and lose the deeper moral implications of oath-breaking that come directly from the homily teachings.

While the biblical references in the early plays were easily recognizable and straightforward, they become increasingly idiomatic and interwoven into the text as the plays progress, requiring a more extensive biblical background to identify and interpret of them (Noble 47). Consequently, it is more difficult for current scholars and audiences to detect these moments of liturgical allusion without possessing an inherent familiarity with the biblical text, like that of Shakespeare's audience members. As a result, contemporary audiences who are not grounded in the Scriptures may overlook these more complex allusions, making their meanings seem even more obscure and causing audiences to miss out on the added levels of significance provided by these moments that enhance Shakespeare's plays. This phenomenon can be best observed in one of Shakespeare's last plays.

Commonly dated to 1611, *The Tempest* comes towards the end of Shakespeare's writing career. While Gonzalo contemplates what he would do if he were to become king of the island, he states that there would be "no use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil" (2.1.168). Although the immediate source of this reference is said to be John Florio's 1603 translation of Montaigne's "Of the Cannibales," which has "no use of wine, corne, or mettelle," Shakespeare's manipulation of this passage transforms it into a subtle biblical reference. His ordering of the words with

“corn” being first and “oil” added at the end can be traced to the pattern of Psalms 4:8 (Shaheen 743). Here, the Geneva Psalter states that “their corne and wine and oyle increased” when the author metaphorically describes the joy found in God’s favor. As the Psalter was said monthly in the Church of England, it is most likely from this source that both Shakespeare and his contemporaries would have gained their familiarity with this specific phrase (Shaheen 744). Due to the practice of saying the entire Psalter falling out of fashion and the wide range of possible sources for this reference, modern audiences and scholars are often perplexed by this line and unable to grasp the implications of this biblical moment. As the scriptural source is referring to the blessings bestowed upon God’s chosen people, Gonzalo’s statement that he would have no use for these items establishes his view of being self-sufficient in his own salvation. The evolution of Shakespeare’s biblical references from explicit quotations and overarching thematic borrowings to manipulations and combinations of sources intermingled within the text illustrates his advanced mastery of liturgical material and intentional employment of biblical content. This same evolution makes it increasingly necessary for audiences to have a firm foundation in the Scriptures if they are to glean more than the surface level of meaning presented in the plays.

Another potentially puzzling characteristic of Shakespeare’s use of biblical material is the difference in the dramatic effects achieved by these Scriptural citations in his comedies versus his tragedies. While Shakespeare has the singular underlying goal of “communicat[ing], complicat[ing], and enrich[ing] the meanings of his plays by manipulating allusions to biblical texts, characters, narratives, and images,” this added dimension manifests itself differently in the comedies than in the tragedies and vice versa (Hamlin 42). Because of these differences in both use and type of reference, audiences must possess an intimate understanding of the scriptural sources and narratives being referenced in order to access these enriched and complicated

meanings. As the following examples will show, Shakespeare tailors the biblical material from which he borrows to best achieve his overarching purpose of enriching the content of his plays, making the understanding of his allusions critical for truly insightful interpretation.

The employment of biblical material to add depth to certain pivotal characters is the most prominent way Shakespeare uses Scriptures in his comedies. The persistent biblical resonances would have made the audience acutely aware of both the moral and spiritual implications of the world in which the play takes place by providing them insight into a particular character's motivations (Sims 29). These critical insights are contingent upon the audience's ability to recognize the biblical narratives being invoked. In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare repeatedly uses liturgical references to explore the issues of human nature such as hypocrisy, sin, and the abuse of power. He does this primarily through the character of Angelo and the biblical references spoken both by and about him. Angelo's virtue, and by extension that of mankind, is first addressed by the Duke, who says:

Heaven doth with us as we with torches do,
Not light them for themselves; for if our virtues
Did not go forth of us 'twere all alike
As if we had them not. (1.1.35-38)

The Duke's assertion that Angelo cannot claim his virtue to be true until it has been tested and proven to emanate from him is echoed in Matthew 5, which states that "neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house" (Matt. 5:15). These words spoken by Jesus reiterate the need for a person's virtue to be reflected and seen by others in order to be authentic. They also exemplify the Duke's purpose for leaving Angelo in charge: to provide him with the chance to test his virtue by granting him completely unchecked power over his fellow man. Angelo's miserable failure of the Duke's test reveals his hypocrisy not only to the world, but also to himself (Sims 40-41). Like Angelo, the

biblically familiar audience would be made more aware of their own fallible human nature by watching his story play out on stage, providing them with a fuller depiction of the human experience that complements the experience found in the Bible. The enlightenment supplied by the play is punctuated by references to the Bible that would have kept the eternal moral repercussions of Angelo's actions at the forefront of their minds.

Shakespeare primarily uses biblical allusions to emphasize the underlying themes and enhance the dramatic effect in his tragedies. (Sims 46). The treatment of Desdemona as an innocent victim in *Othello* exemplifies Shakespeare's use of biblical material to sympathetically characterize tragic figures. As these enhanced characterizations are only available through the recognition and contextualization of biblical content, contemporary audiences may be unable to grasp this level of meaning, causing them to miss out on information crucial to the play's overall message. The perception of Desdemona as blameless is established principally through biblical references, mainly those said by her husband. In fact, Desdemona herself utters but a single scriptural allusion throughout the entire play. When Othello first accuses her of adultery, Desdemona emphatically defends herself by saying "No, as I am a Christian! / If to preserve this vessel for my lord / From any other foul unlawful touch / But not to be a strumpet, I am none" (4.2.95-98). Here, Desdemona aptly references a passage from 1 Thessalonians charging Christians to uphold sexual purity: "ye should absteine from fornication...everyone of you shoulde knowe howe to possess his vessel in holiness and honour" (4:3-4). As Desdemona has in fact remained faithful to her marriage vows, the invocation of this specific biblical episode places her Christian purity in stark contrast with the darkness of Othello's suspicion and unholy accusations. This allusion enhances the tragic elements of the play by increasing the audience's sympathy for her if they are able to recognize the significance of the biblical references. By

creating this portrait of Othello's wife, the religious borrowings also contribute to the play's central theme by emphasizing the "blackness of a sin" and the wickedness of the sinner (Sims 48-49, 68). As both Desdemona's characterization and the reiteration of the play's theme are strengthened by the recognition of biblical borrowings, the scriptural awareness of the audience is vital to the heightened interpretation of the play that biblical familiarity affords viewers.

Review of Current Scholarship

Despite the recent resurgence in the twentieth-century of scholarship on Shakespeare's biblical references, a satisfactory comprehensive study of his use of the Bible has yet to be produced. While it may prove difficult to determine why something does not exist, a brief summary on the history of Shakespearean and Biblical criticism may provide a few explanations. Shakespeare's earliest critics largely ignored his biblical references for two reasons. Firstly, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, critics focused on Shakespeare's larger character and moral value rather than doing close readings of the plays. Secondly, because biblical knowledge was so ingrained in both the culture and people of this time, it may not have seemed necessary to spill ink over what was obvious to most readers and audience members. One exception to this rule was eighteenth-century critic Lewis Theobald who repeatedly noted Shakespeare's biblical allusions in the margins of the plays (Hamlin 43-45).

Increased interest in Shakespeare's use of liturgical references developed alongside what George Bernard Shaw dubbed Bardolatry. According to Hannibal Hamlin, Shaw was referring to the "almost cultish" elevation of Shakespeare from the greatest writer in English to a source of moral and spiritual wisdom and advice. Although the seeds for this branch of scholarship were planted in the late eighteenth century, it was not until the nineteenth century that Shakespeare's place as both ethical and spiritual authority was secured (Hamlin 46-47). It was during this time that clergymen began contributing to the Shakespearean scholarship concerning his use and knowledge of the Bible (Hamlin 51). As Hamlin points out, most writers to this point were not interested in analyzing Shakespeare's use of scriptural allusions. They were either content to simply identify references throughout the plays or were motivated by a religious agenda to prove Shakespeare's adherence to their own form of faith (56).

It is only in the last hundred or so years that scholars have begun to explore both the motivations and effects of Shakespeare's use of the Bible in his plays. With such notable contributors as Hannibal Hamlin, Naseeb Shaheen, Richmond Noble, Robert Alter, and Steven Marx, the conversation surrounding Shakespeare's biblical references has increased greatly. Despite the emergence of these new voices, the scholarship on the subject is still largely restricted to cataloguing references encountered throughout Shakespeare's works, with these men often only citing one another. My thesis attempts to fill a gap in the literature by analyzing how the biblical borrowings function within the plays and what they contribute to the overall meaning. It also examines the need for audiences to have extensive biblical knowledge in order to recognize and understand Shakespeare's chosen references and the richness they add to the plays.

Shakespeare's characteristic use and manipulation of scriptural material manifests itself primarily in the repeated establishment of biblical character types within his plays. Two of these recurring character types are Christ-figures and Devil-figures. Examining Shakespeare's creation and use of these particular character types is especially effective because they are based on the principal actors within the Christian faith, thereby making it beneficial for audiences to be familiar with this narrative. Shakespeare's characters mirror their biblical counterparts in both word, with direct quotations and invocations of Scripture, and in deed, with parallel plots and attributes. This twofold resemblance between Shakespeare's characters and those of the Bible can be traced throughout his works, demonstrating his continued thoughtful and intentional exploration of biblical material to enhance his works. Explicating the biblical references underpinning select archetypal characters in *Measure for Measure* and *Othello* will demonstrate

the additional levels of meaning and moral implications that audiences can access through their own biblical familiarity.

Isabella and Desdemona as Christ-Figures

In both *Measure for Measure* and *Othello*, Shakespeare explores the flawed human condition by addressing moral themes and dilemmas such as justice, sin, jealousy, temptation, and dishonesty. He accomplishes this primarily through the characters he creates, specifically the biblical archetypes that are present throughout these two works. Interestingly, in both plays Shakespeare provides Christ-figures in the form of women through the characters of Isabella and Desdemona. Despite their commonality in gender, these two female Christ-figures represent Shakespeare's different treatment and variations on the same biblical archetype. For the purposes of this study, Christ-figures are characters whose attributes and actions mirror those of Jesus—specifically sexual purity, innocence of any wrongdoing, and upholding honesty—as established through biblical references spoken both by and about them. While Isabella is initially depicted as a blameless and wholesome woman turning away from sin, she eventually gives in to her sinful nature, thereby making her a flawed Christ-figure. Desdemona, on the other hand, remains blameless for the entirety of the play; however, this is not enough to preserve either her own life or that of her husband, making her an ineffective savior. Despite these differences, the two women exemplify Shakespeare's employment of the Christ-figure with the underlying goal of emphasizing the humanness of the characters through their failures and providing a potentially redeeming mortal figure in plays where God remains completely silent. In the absence of divine justice or intervention, these Christ-figures serve as the only possible avenues for salvation and righteousness within the works, increasing the biblically-aware audience's emotional investment in their success.

Measure for Measure is established as extensively influenced by the Scriptures before the action of the play begins, making the ability to recognize the present biblical sources crucial for

audience members wanting to strengthen their interpretation of the play. Shakespeare takes the play's title directly from Christ's admonition of harsh judgement in the book of Matthew, which says "for with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged, and with what *measure* ye mete, it shall be *measured* to you again," thus establishing the play's central themes of judgement and justice (7:2, italics mine). In such an overtly biblical play centered on the practice of evaluating others' actions and handing down appropriate and equitable punishment, it is unsurprising that Shakespeare establishes a Christ-figure to presumably serve as the moral compass and aspirational pillar of holiness for the other characters. As a young "yet unsworn" nun who wishes the monastery were even more restrictive of its inhabitants, Isabella is singled out as the most closely aligned with religion and a strict adherence to morality, first distinguishing her from the play's other sinful characters (1.4.10). As Stephen Marx points out, even her name carries religious connotations that strengthen the reading of her as the Christ-figure. Isabella can mean either "consecrated to God" or "beautiful soul" (Marx 79). Although Marx does not extend the significance of her name this far, the idea of consecration is primarily an Old Testament concept; however, the Geneva Bible uses the term in Hebrews to describe Jesus and his role as the Son of God. Verse 28 of Chapter 7 reads: "For the Law maketh men high Priests, which have infirmity, but the word of the oath that was since the Law, *maketh* the Son, who is consecrated for evermore." In addition to the linguistic link provided by the word "consecrate" to describe Christ, there is a thematic link between this verse about fallible mortal judges and Shakespeare's play about corrupt and hypocritical authorities that foreshadows the play's coming action and Isabella's potential part in its resolution for audiences capable of recognizing the biblical echoes.

Often ignored by other critics, Lucio's greeting to Isabella of "hail, virgin" and "gentle and fair" further establishes her as pure and free from the play's primary sins of adultery and lust (1.4.17, 25). Lucio goes on to explicitly extol Isabella's virtue and holiness when he says:

I hold you as a thing enskied and sainted,
By your renouncement an immortal spirit,
And to be talked with in sincerity
As with a saint. (1.4.36-39)

Here, Shakespeare directly introduces the connection between Isabella and Christ by likening her to something placed in Heaven, a saint, and an "immortal spirit" as all three descriptors are easily applicable to the biblical character of Jesus post-Resurrection. This crucial aspect of her characterization relies heavily on the audience being well-versed enough in Scripture to recognize her Messianic qualities and description without directly invoking a particular biblical reference. Though not introduced until the end of Scene 1, Isabella is quickly and effectively established as the Christ-figure through Shakespeare's deliberate mirroring of the qualities of Jesus in her name, her own actions, and her exchanges with the other characters.

Despite being excluded from current scholarship on Shakespeare's creation of Christ-figures, the strongest evidence for Isabella as the play's Christ-figure comes in her role as her brother's would-be savior. When her brother, Claudio, is sentenced to death for committing sin by impregnating his fiancée, he sends Lucio to plead with his sister to intercede with Angelo on his behalf. The helplessness of Claudio's situation and his dependence on Isabella for salvation are underscored by Lucio's assertion that "All hope is gone / Unless you have the grace by your fair prayer / To soften Angelo" (1.4.72-75). The sinful state and punishment of Claudio presented to Isabella mirrors that of mankind depicted in Romans. Chapter 6 of this book states: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life, through Jesus Christ our Lord" (6:23). Although he does not directly reference this verse in Lucio's speech, Shakespeare's

depiction of Claudio's situation is made more significant by the audience's ability to use their biblical knowledge to recognize the allegorical implications of Claudio's sin and subsequent inability to save himself and connect Isabella's role as mediator with that of Christ.

Although she is initially set up as the ideal Christ-figure capable of delivering Claudio from death, Isabella's perceived holiness begins to falter during her conversation with Angelo about her brother's fate. She begins her plea for her brother's life by stating:

There is a vice that most I do abhor,
 And most desire should meet the blow of justice,
 For which I would not plead, but that I must;
 For which I must not plead, but that I am
 At war 'twixt will and will not. (2.2.42-46)

The opening lines of this speech are in keeping with her Christly image as they express her disdain for sinful vices and desire that these should be rightfully judged; however, she immediately reveals her internal conflict between what she has been taught to be Scripturally right and what she feels compelled to do because of her earthly relationship with her brother. Shakespeare borrows this struggle between divine knowledge and human desire directly from the writings of Paul to the church in Rome (Noble 222-223). In one of his letters, Paul expresses this battle between following Christ's teachings and satisfying his sinful nature by stating: "For I allow not that which I do, for what I would, that do I not, but what I hate, that do I" (Romans 7:15). Like Paul, Isabella's moral dilemma stems from "the laws of her affection conflict(ing) with the law of her mind and inclination" (Noble 223). Without a grounding in the Scriptures, audiences may potentially miss the added significance of this pivotal moment of internal conflict. By using a biblical allusion to show Isabella's difficulty in choosing between her loyalty to the religious teachings on punishing sin and her loyalty to her brother, Shakespeare elevates the seriousness of her choice for audience members capable of recognizing this reference. Her

decision to intercede on Claudio's behalf shows her inherent humanness as she is swayed to beg for undeserved mercy by her emotional connection to her brother. Although she retains her original Christ-like qualities, scripturally-knowledgeable audiences are able to recognize the significance of her indecision because of Shakespeare's chosen reference to Paul found in Romans.

Shakespeare uses an elaborate biblical parallel further into her speech to reestablish the link between Isabella and the sinless Christ-figure. In arguably her most effective persuasive moment, Isabella tells Angelo:

Go to your bosom,
 Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know
 That's like my brother's fault. If it confess
 A natural guiltiness such as is his,
 Let it not sound a thought upon your tongue
 Against my brother's life. (2.2.166-171)

As Noble points out, this appeal to Angelo's conscience and his own sinful nature is reminiscent of the account of Jesus and the adulterous woman found in the book of John (224). Although he identifies the biblical source for this speech, Noble provides no explanation as to its significance or contribution to the play. While Jesus is teaching in the Temple, the Scribes and Pharisees bring in a woman they have caught "in the very act" of adultery and present her to Jesus for judgement (8:4). Like Angelo with Claudio, the Scribes and Pharisees state that the woman is condemned to death by stoning under Mosaic Law. Jesus does not deny that this is the prescribed penalty by the law, but simply states "let him that is among you without sin cast the first stone at her" (8:7). Isabella, likewise, never disputes that her brother's punishment is not in keeping with the new law of Vienna. She, like Christ, reminds Angelo that he, too, is human and therefore guilty of sin. This appeal is effective for Isabella for the same reason it is effective for Jesus: both these characters are truly without the sin that is being prosecuted. Here again, Shakespeare

provides a dual linguistic and thematic link between Isabella's speech and its context within the play and the scriptural account being invoked. Without being familiar with the narrative from John 8, audiences can only appreciate the rhetorical effectiveness of Isabella's appeal on a surface level and cannot fully grasp the moral implications of her speech that work to enhance their experience with the play. If the audience members are able to recognize the connection between Isabella's words and those of Christ, they, like Angelo and the Pharisees, would be reminded of their own fallible moral condition and tendency to indulge their sinful nature, causing them to reevaluate the fairness of the situation presented on the stage. In this moment, Shakespeare capitalizes on his audiences' assumed biblical familiarity to firmly establish Isabella as a Christ-figure and to increase their investment in the play's conclusion.

Despite the potency of this instance, it is the last time Isabella can be viewed as wholly blameless and innocent, a perfect Christ-figure. In this same speech, Isabella, with the indecent encouragement of Lucio, undermines her wholesome and moral pleas for her brother's life with "unconsciously seductive language" (Marx 84). Her appeals to the Christian principles of grace and redemption are undercut by the inherent sensuality in "go to your bosom...and ask your heart what it doth know" (2.2.166-67). Although Isabella means these words to cause Angelo to become introspective of his own sin, they can also imply hidden desires and impure secrets. The questionable undertones of Isabella's speech are made overt in her exclamation of "hark, how I'll bribe you" (2.2.177). Isabella's accidental employment of thinly veiled sexual innuendo stands in stark contrast with her earlier Christly characterization by emphasizing her very human ability to appeal to Angelo's carnal appetite, even if this is not her intention. Her inadvertently sexually charged claims liken her to the rest of postlapsarian mankind incapable of fully masking their inner sinful nature, thus underscoring her relatable humanness. Despite being accidental,

Isabella's verbal slips are nonetheless indicative of an underlyingly sinful state. Although she has not yet acted upon her sinful human nature, the sexual undertones of her speech show that she has not completely overcome her human default to sin. In her attempts to persuade Angelo to spare her brother's life, Isabella's success lies not in her Messianic qualities and appeals to his conscience, but in her seductive speech and physical allure.

The conflict between her two natures comes to a head when Isabella knowingly participates in deceiving Angelo and facilitating a premarital sexual encounter between him and his spurned fiancée, Mariana, at the urging of the long-absent Duke. Despite the utter moral depravity of this action, it results in a semblance of justice and reinforces the status quo. As the Duke explains to Isabella, the bed trick saves her brother, allows her honor to remain intact, advantages Mariana, and gives the corrupt Angelo what he deserves (3.2.280-82). Traditionally the more studied and perfect Christ-figure, the Duke's act of judging Isabella along with the other characters solidifies her imperfect human aspects. As marriage is used as a punishment for her fellow conspirators, the Duke's proposal can be seen as a penalty for her involvement in Angelo's deception. Ultimately, the characterization of Isabella exemplifies the role of biblical knowledge in interpreting Shakespeare's practice of enhancing his plays by creating Christ-figures that underscore the humanness of the characters and cause the audience to critically examine the moral situation within the play.

Unlike *Measure for Measure*, the biblical influences in *Othello* are not instantly identifiable from the title alone. Even to the most biblically knowledgeable person of Shakespeare's time, there is nothing in the name of the play to suggest its underlying biblical nature. This lack of immediate and overt biblical references in the version of *Othello* found in the Folio edition can partially be attributed to the passing of the *Acte to Restraine Abuses of Players*

by Parliament in May of 1606. The act was intended to prevent and avoid “the greate abuse of the holy Name of God” by fining any person who “iestingly and prophanely speake, or vse the holy Name of God, or of Christ Iesus, or of the holy Ghoste, or of the Trinitie” ten pounds for each offense (Shaheen 580-581). In a play as biblically saturated as *Measure for Measure*, the fines imposed by these profanity laws could quickly bankrupt a playwright. To avoid suspicion of violating this order, Shakespeare takes from Scripture the play’s primary themes rather than its title or characters’ names, making biblical knowledge even more necessary if audiences are to interpret the various levels of meaning hidden within the play. Another theme crucial to the play’s action taken from Scripture is the idea of racial differences indicating unchangeable moral conditions. Jeremiah poses the question: “Can the black More change his skin? or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil” (13:23). As Othello is also known as “the Moor of Venice” as indicated by the play’s full title, this further demonstrates the rampant immorality found in Shakespeare’s tragedy. Although Naseeb Shaheen argues that this verse is unrelated to the play’s action and therefore not a true biblical reference, the significance and relevance of the connection is too substantial to overlook. In a play where sin abounds, Shakespeare’s creation of a Christ-figure in the naïve, young Desdemona serves as the only potential avenue for redemption and salvation from these human vices.

As previously stated, the majority of biblical references used to characterize Desdemona as a Christ-figure are spoken by other characters within the play. Despite the majority of these being spoken by Othello, it is the references spoken by Cassio about Desdemona that are the most compelling. In Act 2, Scene 1, Cassio describes her as:

...a maid
 That paragon description and wild fame,
 One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens,

And in th' essential vesture of creation
Does tire the ingener. (67-71)

Although agreement upon a “tolerable reading” for these lines has proven difficult for critics, the significance of this description cannot be ignored (Noble 216). Clearly, Cassio intends to praise Desdemona’s exceptional character by likening her to the epitome of creation. Though the connection is not acknowledged in the existing scholarship, the assertion that Desdemona is the most morally upright and virtuous of the characters presented in the play is a subtle nod to the description of Jesus found in the New Testament. In 1 Timothy, Christ is said to be “blessed” and is referred to as “the King of kings and Lord of lords” to indicate His superiority over those found on Earth (6:15). Although not explicitly stated in this way, Cassio’s metaphoric description of Desdemona’s goodness is the equivalent of calling her the maid of maids and wife of wives, thereby cementing her position as the play’s most viable Messianic figure. As the biblical allusion here is more in the spirit of Cassio’s words than the content, audiences would need extensive scriptural familiarity to pick up on this similarity between the descriptions of Desdemona and Christ that enriches their overall understanding of the work.

Although Cassio intends this characterization of Othello’s young wife to be sincere, it is saturated with dramatic irony. His use of the word “vesture” has caused one critic to link this passage with Psalms 102:26, which says: “They shall perish, but thou shalt endure: even they all shall wax old as doeth a garment: as a *vesture* shalt thou change them, and they shall be changed” (Noble 216, italics mine). Despite naming this possible biblical link, the critic Richmond Noble identifies offers no further explanation about the implications of this allusion; however, the linguistic link to the latter part of the verse initially appears to foreshadow the effect of Desdemona’s pure heart on her fellow Venetians. This effect further links her to Christ by mirroring the influence He has over His disciples, thereby amplifying the biblically familiar

audiences' interpretation of the play. When viewed with the narrative of Christ in mind, audiences would have expected the influence of Desdemona's virtuous presence to change her sinful peers' mindsets, causing them to turn from their vices and seek morality in order to be more like her. Although this would be the logical assumption based on the scriptural link, it is not what happens. The deepest irony of the connection between Desdemona and this biblical passage lies in its opening statement, as she is one who shall perish; however, this cannot be discovered until the end of the play, increasing its dramatic impact by reversing the audiences' expectations and enriching their interpretive experience. The scriptural claim that the unrighteous will die but the righteous person will survive is directly challenged by the action Shakespeare presents in this play, thus adding another level of meaning to the tragedy by emphasizing the hopelessness of the audience's moral condition for those with sufficient biblical knowledge to recognize these resonances. Despite hinging on a single word, this biblical reference used to illustrate Desdemona's admirable and ethical qualities both strengthens the argument for her as a Christ-figure and offers the first hints at the play's tragic conclusion.

Previously unremarked upon by other scholars, Cassio provides another biblically fruitful description of Desdemona later in this same conversation. While continuing to exalt Desdemona's perfection and purity, Cassio claims that:

Tempests themselves, high seas, and howling winds,
 The guttered rocks and congregated sands
 (Traitors ensteeped to clog the guiltless keel),
 As having sense of beauty, do omit
 Their mortal natures, letting go safely by
 The divine Desdemona. (2.1.75-80, italics mine)

Cassio's hyperbolic description of the power of Desdemona's influence over others is taken directly from the New Testament Gospels. In order to clearly express her purity and deepen the connection between her and Christ, Cassio uses both language and imagery from the accounts of

Christ calming the Sea of Galilee found in the books of Matthew and Mark. Although both men are describing the same event, they each use distinct terminology and language that appears in Cassio's elaborate characterization. In the Geneva, Matthew begins setting the scene for Christ's show of power by saying: "And behold, there arose a great *tempest* in the sea, so that the ship was covered with waves" (8:24, italics mine). Similarly, Mark opens by stating: "And there arose a great *storm of wind*, and the waves dashed into the ship, so that it was now full" (4:37, italics mine). The blending of diction from the two biblical accounts in Cassio's lines demonstrates that Shakespeare was using more than a single source, thereby maximizing his ability to strike not only a thematic, but also a linguistic chord with his biblically knowledgeable audience. Although Cassio uses the term "high seas" where Matthew and Mark use "waves," this image is clearly taken from these stories and provides the same effect by painting a scene of nature's great and unrestrained power. Just as Jesus exerts control over the raging elements by "rebuk(ing) the winds and the sea" (Matthew 8:26, Mark 4:39), Cassio claims that Desdemona's simplicity and goodness overpower "[the wind and sea's] mortal natures," allowing her to pass by unharmed (2.1.79). In case these similarities in circumstance and language were somehow overlooked, Shakespeare drives home the idea of Desdemona as Christ-like by having Cassio refer to her as "divine" at the end of this passage, making the connection explicit (2.1.80). In the same way that the biblical accounts of Jesus's power over nature are part of a sequence of miracle stories designed to prove that He is the foretold Messiah, this description of Desdemona is one in a series of enriching characterizations intended to illustrate her Christ-like qualities, establishing her as the play's only potential redeemer for those able to recognize the biblical references and echoes.

The strongest and most dramatically significant relationship between Desdemona and Christ is found in the circumstances surrounding her death. Perhaps one of the most biblically aligned events in all of Shakespeare's plays, the death of Desdemona is modeled after the death of Christ and includes scriptural language from both the Old and New Testaments concerning the event. The jealousy-fueled lies and treacherous acts that propel the play forward culminate in Othello's fatal confrontation with Desdemona in Act 5. Similarly, the biblical story of mankind's fall from grace, the resulting tribulations, and the Old Testament Messianic prophecies converge at the Crucifixion. Convinced by Iago's deceptive trickery that his wife has been unfaithful, Othello has resolved to kill her after forcing her to confess to the crime. Desdemona's response of "Why I should fear I know / not, / Since guiltiness I know not" to Othello's talk about preparing her spirit for death has a biblical source (5.2.45-47). When prophesying how Jesus would be falsely accused, Psalms 35 says: "Cruel witnesses did rise up: they asked of me things that I knew not. They rewarded me evil for good, to have spoiled my soul" (11-12). By echoing this passage of Psalms in Desdemona's confusion at Othello's accusations, Shakespeare begins preparing the audience to recognize the significance of her eventual murder and its effects on the play; however, the effectiveness of this preparation is dependent upon the audience's own foundational biblical familiarity. By having both Desdemona's highest admiration and strictest judgement come in the form of biblical language (Sims 49), Shakespeare juxtaposes the different descriptions of Desdemona given by Cassio and Othello to show their stark contrast, thereby enriching the experience for biblically aware audience members. While this contrast is evident to audiences without scriptural knowledge, it becomes more significant when they can recognize and understand the associated biblical narratives. As shown here, Shakespeare extensively makes use of biblical language and storylines to lay the groundwork for Desdemona's death, allowing

audiences with a background in the Scriptures to fully grasp the additional levels of meaning provided by these characterizations.

Iago and Angelo as Devil-Figures

Another character type Shakespeare frequently employs to enhance his dramatic exploration of humanity's moral struggle are Devil-figures. Modeled after the scriptural character of Satan, these figures demonstrate the level of malicious wrongdoing and depravity in which humankind is capable of engaging for their own benefit or enjoyment. Like their theological counterpart, Shakespeare's villainous characters are directly opposed to the female Christ-figures in both plays and actively work to undermine and exploit them using deceit and trickery, causing several of the play's other characters to fall into sin in the process. While his treatment of Isabella and Desdemona as failed and humanized Christ-figures incapable of providing redemption represents the variation on a single archetype, Shakespeare's development of Iago and Angelo as successful Devil-figures illustrates his development of the fallen angel motif that is integral to the biblical account of Satan. As these characterizations rely heavily on scriptural parallels, references, and reversals, the audience must be extensively familiar with the biblical narrative of Satan to fully grasp the added seriousness of Shakespeare's choices and engage in enriched interpretations of the plays.

In *Othello*, the audience is made aware from the beginning of the play that Iago's motives are purely self-serving and that his actions are driven wholly by jealousy towards Cassio and a subsequent hatred of Othello. As the play opens with Iago already consumed by anger at Othello promoting Cassio to lieutenant over him, Shakespeare introduces this Devil-figure after he has fallen from grace and solidified himself as the obvious villain. Since *Othello* was written a year prior to *Measure for Measure*, it is easy, as Noble suggests, to view Iago as the prototype in Shakespeare's fallen-angel study (54). In *Measure for Measure*, Shakespeare perfects the Devil-figure archetype and forces the audience to watch Angelo's descent from moral uprightness to

ethical corruption and attempted sexual exploitation. Shakespeare's depiction of Devil-figures at various stages in their fall from grace and their abandonment of human decency adds an additional level of moral significance to the action of the plot by introducing completely corrupt and irreversibly evil characters into plays where the Christ-figures are presented as unsuccessful avenues to salvation. Shakespeare uses his Devil-figures to underscore the possible spiritual implications of his characters' actions within the Christian context of both the plays themselves and the larger Elizabethan worldview. As eternal damnation and a loss of salvation were seen as very real possibilities during Shakespeare's time, the presence of Devil-figures in plays where deliverance seems unlikely or impossible raises the stakes of the action being presented. Rather than simply succeeding in tricking their fellow characters, Angelo and Iago's respective actions, when viewed within the context of the Christian salvation narrative, amount to robbing them of their heavenly reward and causing them to commit grievous sins.

While the search for his motives has famously been dubbed "motive-hunting of motiveless Malignity" by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the character of Iago is widely regarded as Shakespeare's most irrecoverably Satanic villain. As Sims puts it, there is "no flavor of sweetness nor spark of light" to diminish the "Stygian blackness" of Iago's wickedness (Sims 59-60). This harsh characterization of Iago is due in part to Shakespeare's beginning the play with Iago having already fallen from grace and embraced his role of devilish antagonist. Despite these aptly damning assertions, Iago gives voice to a large number of the biblical references present in *Othello*. In the play's first four acts, Iago speaks around 41% of the identifiable biblical echoes, far more than the play's eponymous protagonist (Shaheen 581). Shakespeare uses these biblical references to provide insight into the character of Iago in much the same way he did for Isabella and Desdemona. However, not all of the scriptural invocations are direct

allusions; Shakespeare characterizes Iago primarily through biblical reversals that demonstrate his corruption and further align him with Satan (Sims 60). One particularly noteworthy biblical reversal appears in Iago's opening speech to Roderigo. While explaining his abhorrence of Othello and desire to have a hand in his suffering, Iago concludes by stating "I am not what I am" (1.1.71). The significance of this choice of phrase is two-fold. First, it is directly counter to Paul's assertion in 1 Corinthians about the transformative power of God's grace (Sims 60). Here, Paul states:

But by the grace of God *I am that I am*, and his grace which is in me, was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which is with me. (1 Cor. 15:10, italics mine)

By having Iago negate the same sentiment that Paul uses to describe the power of God's grace to change him from sinner into instrument of salvation, Shakespeare makes it explicitly clear to the biblically well-versed audience that Iago is not in the same spiritual camp as Paul and that his motivations are far from pure. Rather than helping those around him seek salvation as Paul has done, Iago is focused on destroying Othello by dissolving his marriage and causing him to give in to his sinful nature. Whereas Paul is consumed and motivated by the grace of God within him, Iago is likewise possessed by his own jealousy, hatred, and devilish nature. Through the simple inclusion of the word "not," Shakespeare turns Paul's characterization of his new self filled with the grace of God on its head, thus enhancing the interpretive experience of audiences capable of distinguishing the significance of this negation by ascribing the undesirable and unholy opposite to Iago.

The second, and largely uncommented on, level of significance in this phrase lies in Iago's denial of an epithet for God found throughout the Scriptures. In Exodus, God appears to Moses in the form of a burning bush and identifies Himself by saying "I AM THAT I AM"

(3:14). Although this source is identified by Shaheen, he offers no further commentary other than saying that Iago's lines "may be patterned on Scripture" (582). In this case, Iago's use of the word "not" amounts to a radical assertion of lack of integrity, in contrast with God's perfect integrity and, by extension, everything that is pure and holy when read through the lens of Christianity. With God and Satan serving as the two figureheads in the Christian binary of damnation and salvation, Iago is left with only the Devil, Hell, and all other evil and sinful traits to claim as his own as a result of this statement. As God is often referred to as "The Great I Am," Iago characterizes himself as the Satan-figure by stating that he is the opposite of I Am. As the effectiveness of biblical reversals such as this one in enriching the plays' content is contingent upon the audience's ability to correctly identify the scriptural source and then determine the ramifications of reversing the narrative, the biblical knowledge of the audience is of the utmost importance. Without a strong biblical background these reversals lose their significance, thereby causing viewers to be unable to access the secondary levels of intensified meaning they create. Through this revealing biblical reversal, Iago overtly establishes his role as the play's Devil-figure, thereby setting the stage for his malevolent acts of deception and their potential eternal consequences.

In addition to the scriptural resonances and mortal implications of Iago's chosen diction, the meaning of the phrase itself further likens Iago to Satan for those familiar with the Devil's defining traits. His assertion that he is not what he is can be interpreted to literally mean that Iago is not what he appears to be. Like the biblical accounts of Satan, Iago is capable of changing or masking his true form in order to cause the other characters in the play to act on false information or sinful impulses. Frequently described by other characters, particularly Othello, as "Honest Iago," Iago would seem to be a trustworthy and upright man whose word would hold

true (3.1.336, 2.3.189). However, the audience is aware that he is anything but honest and upright, making this characterization of Iago particularly ironic and poignant. This description of Iago's ability to camouflage himself as a reliable counselor and bringer of truth mirrors the description of Satan's ability to disguise himself found in 2 Corinthians. While describing the rampant corruption and immorality confronting the church at Corinth, Paul notes that "...Satan himself is transformed into an Angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14). By echoing the biblical description of Satan's skill at masking his deceptive nature and appearing to be as holy as one of God's angels, Shakespeare solidifies the bond between Iago and Satan.

Shakespeare also uses an extended comparison to the biblical description of Satan as a master deceiver as the basis for Iago's dishonest character that requires the audience be familiar with several different biblical passages to fully enrich their understanding of his character. Several of Iago's lies can be found in the form of scriptural reversals intended to increase Othello's faith in him. One such fraudulent reversal appears in Iago's conversation with Othello concerning killing men in battle and his supposedly weak constitution (Sims 60). To gain Othello's favor, Iago asserts that he encountered a man in his latest duel that blasphemed Othello's well-deserved honor. Iago's claim "that with the little godliness I have, I did full hard forbear him" (1.2.10-11) is a reference to the commandment towards Christians in Paul's letters to both the Ephesians and the Colossians (Sims 60). In Colossians, Paul's directive for the new church describes Christian behavior as "Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel to another; even as Christ forgave you, even so do ye" (3:13). It is clear from both the linguistic echoes and contextual similarities that Iago has this passage concerning Christian conduct in mind when speaking to Othello. Although Iago does not reverse the quoted scripture in his speech, this can be considered a biblical reversal because his actions are in

blatant opposition to the verse even as he says it. By claiming to have acted in accordance with Christian doctrine, Iago is both lying about his previous actions and attempting to gain a position of trust with Othello that will allow him to plant destructive seeds of doubt about Desdemona's fidelity, neither of which are in line with Paul's directives. Rather than ending his quarrel with Othello as Paul commands, Iago invokes this passage to allow him to more easily undermine his enemy's marriage and sanity. For audiences familiar with Paul's teachings, Iago's deceitful and manipulative actions provide a clear and telling insight into his character. While audiences less familiar with Scripture may realize that Iago is lying, they cannot fully grasp the additional significance of the contrast between his words and his actions without knowing Paul's instructions. Iago's barefaced disregard for the message of the biblical text he is quoting and his willingness to turn a constructive Christian directive into a false measure of sincerity demonstrates both his exceptional ability to lie and deceive and the enrichment of understanding that being familiar with the scriptural texts at hand provides the audience.

Perhaps the most iconic form of Satan's deception, his ability to trick and persuade mankind with false truths, is fully expressed in the episode of the serpent in the Garden of Eden found in Genesis (Sims 61). Described as "more subtil than any beast of the field," it is in the form of the serpent that Satan tricks Eve into eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (3:1). It is to this symbol of Satanic dishonesty that Iago's own wife, Emilia, likens him towards the end of the play, making it essential for audience members to be familiar with this narrative (Sims 61). At this point, the full force of Iago's trickery has taken hold of Othello, causing him to believe that Desdemona has violated her marriage vows with Cassio. While interrogating Emilia in the hopes of proving his suspicions, she asserts:

I durst, my lord, to wager she is honest,
Lay down my soul at stake. If you think other,

Remove your thought. It doth abuse your bosom.
 If any wretch have put this in your head,
 Let heaven requite it with the serpent's curse! (4.2.13-17)

Unbeknownst to Emilia, it is her husband who has caused such a disgraceful thought to enter Othello's mind; however, her analogy is no less appropriate. Through his lying and clever rhetorical devices, Satan succeeds in deceiving Eve and introducing sin into the world, thus plunging mankind into a state of inherent corruption in desperate need of a savior. Similarly, Iago succeeds in driving Othello to insanity and murder through manipulation and deceit, causing him to enter a state of grief-fueled madness that makes him dependent upon an outside force for deliverance. Audiences can recognize the significance of Emilia's words only if they are conversant with the Genesis storyline, making the impact of this pivotal moment reliant upon their biblical background. This recognition of Iago's wickedness and Satanic motivations on the part of the audience but not by Emilia or Othello creates a sense of hopelessness within the play and increases the audience's sympathetic response to what has and will unfold.

The portrayal of Iago as the play's Devil-figure culminates in the unravelling of his plan following Desdemona's murder. Arguably the most Satanic action in a play full of evil deeds, Iago succeeds in forcing Othello to forsake his baptism prior to his suicide, thereby ensuring his eternal damnation (Sims 73). Iago first proposes the idea when he states that corrupting Othello's perception of Desdemona will be the means by which he causes him "to renounce his baptism, all seals and symbols of redeemed sin" (2.3.363-4). In the eyes of a Christian-influenced audience, the act of renouncing one's baptism amounts to sacrilege, rather punishable by eternity in Hell. This is exactly the posthumous destination Othello describes. Upon realizing that he has unjustly slain his wife, Othello exclaims that her glance will "hurl [his] soul from Heaven" and that "fiends will snatch at it" (5.2.325-6). He further describes Hell by invoking devils to "blow

[him] about in winds, wash [him] in sulfur, wash [him] in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire” (5.2.330-1). This graphic imagery aligns with the Christian perception of Hell biblically-conversant audiences would be familiar with, likely evoking an intense emotional response at Othello’s final judgement and enriching their overall understanding of the play (Sims 73). Like the description of Satan in the Bible, Shakespeare’s use of Iago to intentionally and maliciously attack Othello’s sanity and salvation, ultimately causing him to be damned, serves to remind biblically-aware viewers of the moral consequences present in their own world. Despite knowing Iago’s villainous nature from the onset, the audience is incapable of intervening and must watch the tragic events take place unaltered, forcing them to grapple with the eternal implications of the characters’ earthly actions. Because of their powerlessness, the audience may be aware of the scriptural repercussions but must watch as evil overcomes good and all innocent characters die with no hope of salvation, a complete reversal of the biblical narrative. Through the creation of a Devil-figure prototype in Iago, Shakespeare taps into the Christian idea of eternity and Hell to emphasize the moral consequences present in the real world, thereby increasing the emotional force of the play’s action for biblically literate viewers.

As potent as his portrayal of Iago as a Devil-figure is in *Othello*, it pales in comparison to Shakespeare’s fleshed-out depiction of Angelo as the epitome of the fallen angel motif in *Measure for Measure* (Noble 54). Whereas the audience knew Iago was motivated by ill intentions from the opening act, Shakespeare more closely mirrors the story of Satan’s fall from grace in his characterization of Angelo, making his descent into evil even more impactful in a play concerned with justice and judgement. As with the other characters in this study, Shakespeare chiefly provides insight into the character of Angelo through biblical allusions, both those said by Angelo himself and those used by other characters throughout the play. Since the

insightful descriptions of Angelo are couched in biblical references, the depth of his corruption and significance of his character can be most fully discerned by those with a background in biblical content. Though he is no angel himself, Lucio first acknowledges Angelo's virtue when he describes him as "a man whose blood / is very snow-broth; one who never feels / the wanton stings and motions of the sense" (1.4.61-63). Although previous critics have not made this connection, the use of the phrase "snow-broth" to describe Angelo's seemingly sinless nature can reasonably be read as an allusion to the description of biblically redeemed people found in Isaiah. This Old Testament passage states that "though your sins were as crimson, they shall be made white as snow" through the people's belief in the sacrifice of Jesus (18:1). Lucio's choice to apply this descriptor to Angelo's normally scarlet blood strengthens the connection between Shakespeare's character and the scriptural verse as it makes the similarities more apparent to viewers familiar with the Scriptures. This hyperbolic description of Angelo's snow-like blood implies that he has somehow transcended his human nature as signified by the cleansing of his blood. However, the fact that Angelo's righteousness appears to be self-created is the first indication to a Christian audience that it is potentially flawed, thereby enriching their interpretation of his character. Although Angelo's perceived purity is of his own making rather than through biblical salvation and grace, the link between Lucio's characterization of him as morally upright and this biblical account cannot be overlooked if audience members are to understand the meaning behind his descent into darkness.

Angelo's perfect façade begins to crack during his encounter with Isabella, signaling the beginning of his transformation from sinless angel to depraved Devil-figure. In Act 2, Shakespeare uses a scriptural reversal to introduce Angelo's devilish intentions. Angelo's response of "Amen. For that I am going to temptation where prayers cross" (2.2.191-3) in

response to Isabella's wish for his honor to be protected is a reversal of the Lord's Prayer found in the book of Matthew (Noble 224). Intended to be the model for Christian prayer, the Lord's Prayer says, "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil" (Matt. 6:13). Angelo's perversion of this verse and blatant acknowledgement of his intent to pursue his sinful desires is the first indication to biblically-familiar viewers of his internal hypocrisy and eventual corruption. Angelo's ability to recognize that his desires are in contrast with the Lord's Prayer shows that he is consciously choosing to go against Christian doctrine, making his coming actions ever more sinister. Rather than requesting the strength to resist temptation or removing himself from tempting situations as Christians are taught, Angelo consciously chooses to see Isabella the following day, thereby "encounter(ing) temptation anew" (Noble 224). To the scripturally knowledgeable audience, Angelo's behavior is in direct opposition to the directive provided in the Lord's Prayer, deepening the portrayal of him as a true Devil-figure.

Angelo's failure in securing Isabella's body and his eventual punishment for his misdeeds resembles that of Satan found in Revelation. According to this biblical account, Satan "shall go out to deceive the people...whose number is as the sand of the sea" (Rev. 20:8). Like Satan, Angelo's dishonesty and deceptions have caused even the play's most innocent characters to become complicit in facilitating sinful activities, even if they did not participate in the sin themselves. Though they may not be as numerous as the grains of sand on the beach, by the end of the play, the entire population of Vienna is guilty of some form of sinful behavior, largely thanks to Angelo's hypocritical sexual demands and severe punishments. The account in Revelations goes on to say, "And the devil that deceived them, was cast into a lake of fire and brimstone...and shall be tormented even day and night for evermore" (20:10). Biblically-knowledgeable audiences can see this exact punishment playing out in Angelo's forced marriage

to Marianna once his evil deeds have been uncovered. The Duke's command to Angelo of "go take [Marianna] hence and marry her instantly" guarantees that he will suffer by being reminded of his crimes daily by the sight of his new wife (5.1.426). Though less gruesome and physically torturous than Satan's punishment in Revelation, Shakespeare's penalty for Angelo is particularly apt as it denies him Isabella, the woman he has desired for the entirety of the play, and causes him to confront both his current and previous misdeeds in a single act. Through the characterization of Angelo, Shakespeare presents a Devil-figure the audience can follow through each stage of the fall from angel to defeated demon to demonstrate just how far into evil man is capable of descending using the easily recognizable biblical structure of Satan's fall. By depicting Angelo as fallibly human and guilty of common sinful vices, Shakespeare creates a relatable Devil-figure, thereby increasing the stakes of the fictional characters' actions and deepening the impact of the play's tragic undertones for the biblically knowledgeable audience.

Conclusion

Through his careful creation of scripturally-based character types and deliberate use of biblical references, Shakespeare adds an entire level of significance to each of his plays that are largely contingent upon the audience's biblical knowledge. His choice to utilize the Christ-figure and Devil-figure archetypes in his own characters elevates the conflicts presented in the plays to embody the constant struggle between good and evil, light and dark that is central to the biblical narrative, with all of humanity at the center. His characteristic manipulation of these theological archetypes adds enlightening moral and spiritual significances to the plays that are only discoverable when audience members view them through the lens of Christian doctrine.

This added level of enriched understanding is available only to those with the biblical familiarity necessary to pick up on the underlying scriptural influences and their implications. As Shakespeare's original audience was deeply immersed in biblical culture in their daily lives, they would have easily understood the significance and ramifications of his chosen scriptural allusions. This ability to quickly identify the biblical origins of Shakespeare's sources enriches the audience's emotional responses, eliciting deeper laughs, sharper irony, richer sarcasm, or a more profound feeling of loss and despair depending on the context (Hamlin 335). As modern audiences have become less familiar with the Bible, they have largely lost the ability to recognize these same references. This decline in biblical literacy has caused the full impacts and enriched meanings of Shakespeare's plays to become as elusive as the biblical narratives from which he borrowed. Without the ability to identify and process the biblical material in each work, contemporary audiences are unable to access this second layer of significance that contributes to their understanding the play and its message. In Matthew, Jesus explains to His disciples why He speaks in parables by saying, "It is given unto you to know the secrets of the

kingdom of Heaven, but to them it is not given” (13:11). Just as the disciples were capable of knowing the secrets of Heaven because of their knowledge of Christ’s teachings, Shakespeare’s audience is only capable of fully unlocking the richness and secrets of his plays through their own biblical knowledge and familiarity.

By examining the reasons behind his choices and their effects on viewers able to recognize the biblical source material, contemporary audiences and critics gain a more complete understanding of the impact these biblical resonances have on the overall message of each play. Being cognizant of the biblical underpinnings of both his characters and content allows readers to engage in “strong readings” of Shakespeare’s plays. The term “strong readings” refers to interpretations that are illuminated by an awareness and understanding of the scriptural significance of each reference both within the context of the play and the greater context of a Christian world. It is precisely this level of biblical awareness that contemporary audiences must acquire in order to make sense of previously incomprehensible or misinterpreted scriptural references that are crucial to fully understanding the impact of Shakespeare’s plays. Without the ability to recognize biblical narratives and character types within these works, audiences can merely scratch the surface of Shakespeare’s rich and enlightening plays.

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