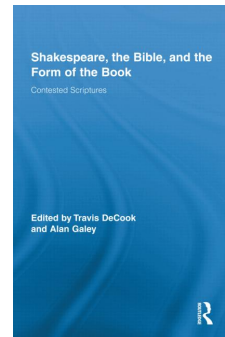


*Shakespeare, the Bible, and the Form of the Book:
Contested Scriptures*, edited by Travis DeCook
and Alan Galey

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Why do Shakespeare and the English Bible seem to have an inherent relationship with each other? How have these two monumental traditions in the history of the book functioned as mutually reinforcing sources of cultural authority? How do material books and related reading practices serve as specific sites of intersection between these two textual traditions? This collection, stemming from simultaneous



post-doctoral fellowships held by the editors in 2006–7 at the University of Alberta, makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Shakespeare, the Bible, and the role of textual materiality in the construction of cultural authority. Departing from conventional source study, it questions the often-naturalized links between the Shakespearean and biblical corpora, examining instead the historically contingent ways these links have been forged. The volume brings together leading scholars in Shakespeare, book history, and the Bible as literature, whose essays converge on the question of scripture as source versus scripture as process—whether that scripture is biblical or Shakespearean. They explore themes such as cultural authority, pedagogy, secularism, textual scholarship, and the materiality of texts. Covering an historical span from Shakespeare’s post-Reformation era to present-day Northern Ireland, the volume uncovers how Shakespeare and the Bible’s intertwined histories illuminate the enduring tensions between materiality and transcendence in the history of the book.

The merit of this collection is to develop the implications of the fact that Shakespeare and the Bible are not binary, stable, and unproblematic texts. The essays in the collection consider the period’s conflicting Bible versions in the context of theological, political and social meanings and the effects of “Scripture’s contested status as a material and historical artifact on Shakespeare’s literary production” (9). The instability of the text is clear: we have no autographs for Shakespeare’s plays or any of the books of the Bible. In Shakespeare’s lifetime, a number of translations of the Bible were in circulation. Not only is the canonization of the Bible itself a disputed process, but the Bible was also frequently translated and interpreted and it was vulnerable to the corruptions of transmission. Thus, if word-choices Shakespeare makes in his plays do not match the printed text of the Great Bible (1538), the Geneva Bible (1560), the Bishop’s Bible (1568), or the King James Bible (1611), gimlet-eyed readers would do well to consult marginal glosses in all texts as well as contemporary commentaries, liturgical texts, devotional materials, and sermons on the texts themselves. Indeed, some of Shakespeare’s allusions derive from the Book of Common Prayer (1549). Such readings attest to the wide and deep impact of these Bible translations so soon after their genesis. These intersections encourage us to ask how Shakespeare’s writings “negotiate the increasingly diverse material forms through which Scripture was mediated and accessed in his era” (11).

By the end of the study we can see something of the contours of the interaction between these two collections, both material and metaphorical. The

particular material forms of these two works shape the texts' cultural authority as well as intersecting histories of transmission. (A review such as this cannot do justice to all the essays.) In her essay, "Shakespeare reads the Geneva Bible," Barbara Mowat writes on the effect of the Geneva Bible's paratextual meditations for Shakespeare's adaptations of biblical material, particularly the Cain and Abel story of Gen 4:1-16. She argues that not only does Shakespeare draw on marginal glosses that go beyond and even fix the text, but his dramaturgy also depends on the intertextual cross-referencing system of the Geneva Bible. A marginal gloss to Gen 4, "the dignity of the firstborn is given over to Cain over Abel" surprisingly interprets the fratricide as a matter of inheritance and blessing (rather than murder, for example). And this is the way Shakespeare uses the story of the two brothers. In another case, Mowat argues that marginal glosses at Exod 21:23-25 (the *lex talionis*) to the Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5 may be reflected in *Measure for Measure* in the Duke's phrase in a dialogue with Isabella, wherein "the very mercy of the law" is a reminder that she respond not just with justice but also with forgiveness.

Scott Schofield's essay, "Cain's Crime of Secrecy and the Unknowable Book of Life: The Complexities of Biblical Referencing in *Richard II*," demonstrates how Shakespeare's biblical references need to be considered in light of contemporary commentaries, exegetical texts, liturgical materials, sermons, polemics, and other paratextual materials surrounding Bibles.

In the nineteenth century, Andrew Murphy argues in his essay, "'Stick to Shakespeare and the Bible. They're the roots of civilisation': Nineteenth-Century Readers in Context," working class people across professions and geography "registered a deep identification between the two texts," perhaps the result of the newly generated educational curriculum and the book market. Early educational institutions were run by churches and after memorization and extensive reading of the Bible, Shakespeare's cultural status made his plays a natural choice and the language accessible. Such an affinity he characterizes as parasitic and symbiotic. It continues to the present: think of the BBC radio program, *Desert Island Discs* in which famous people imagine music choices that might accompany them to a desert island. They are always given the Bible and Shakespeare.

This collection of essays is rich and stimulating. I commend it highly to those interested in the contested material and cultural intersections of Shakespeare and the Bible. David Daniell's assessment (cited on page 36) is a fitting conclusion: he says that "the Bible for the Tudors ... was the life-blood,

the daily, even hourly, nourishment of the nation and of ordinary men and women. It was known with a thoroughness that is, simply, astonishing.”

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