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 SCRIETURE FOR MY PURPOSE

O ne 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Number of biblical references</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Richard II</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hamlet</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard III</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry VI Part 2</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry IV Part 2</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Merchant of Venice</td>
<td>64</td>
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<tr>
<td>Henry V</td>
<td>64</td>
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<tr>
<td>Othello</td>
<td>64</td>
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<tr>
<td>Love's Labour's Lost</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry VIII</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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                              |

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
There are many biblically motivated Williamisms in Hamlet, such as overleaven and plausible in Hamlet’s description 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 plausible in Hamlet’s description of the Danes (Hamlet 1.4.29):

Or by some habit that too much o’er-leavens
The form of plausible 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, overtrem...). 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.

David Crystal is Honorary Professor of Linguistics at the University of Wales, Bangor, and the author with Ben Crystal of Shakespeare’s Words (and its accompanying website www.shakespeareswords.com) and of Think on My Words: Exploring Shakespeare’s Language. His most recent book, Begat: The King James Bible and the English Language, is published by Oxford University Press (2010).