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Review of *The Bible in Shakespeare* by Hannibal Hamlin. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

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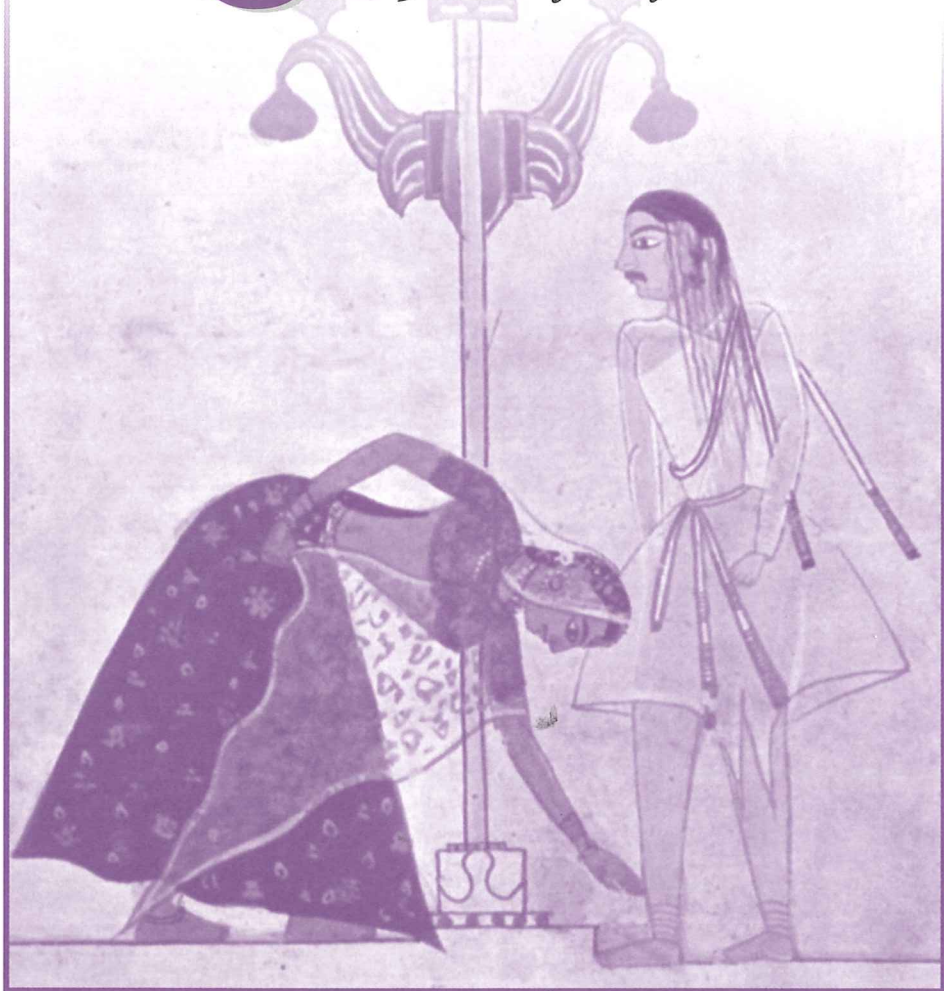
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The Bible in Shakespeare. Hannibal Hamlin.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. 378 pp. \$99.00. ISBN 978-0-19-967761-0.

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Hannibal Hamlin's study is one of several that Oxford University Press has published recently about religion, religious texts, and their allusive presence in the dramatic literature of the early modern era, all valuable fruits of the current scholarly epoch of New Historicism. Hamlin claims that this is the first full-length study of Shakespeare's biblical allusions, bringing much of all previous research on this topic together. Hamlin goes on to assert in the introductory chapter that this study is also significant because the Bible was the most important text in early modern England and Shakespeare (one of the towering geniuses of western culture) alluded to it in his dramas quite frequently. The book includes numerous black-and-white illustrations, an exhaustive bibliography, an excellent index, and copious footnotes—both source citations and content notes. While Shakespeare scholars have thoroughly combed over the “secular” sources—Ovid, Holinshed, and Plutarch—that Shakespeare tended to draw upon for his dramas, Hamlin reminds us with this study that Shakespeare's use of biblical language and ideas is no less important as a source.

The body of the text divides its content into two sections. The first section discusses Shakespeare's allusive practice and provides cultural context about the Bible in early modern England. In chapter 1 Hamlin establishes the omnipresence of the Bible in early modern decorative arts, popular ballads, psalm singing, historical writing, and boys' education. (The author's choice of illustrations enhances this discussion very effectively.) The general population, including William Shakespeare, had the Bible drilled into its psyche, so when an allusion to the Bible occurred (in dramas, poetry, sermons, literature, or songs), everyone made the connection. He continues to make interesting parallels between the practice of preaching and theatrical production; both activities occurred outdoors, both involved speakers who used practiced gestures, and both drew large audiences, including aristocrats who attended in order to be seen. Hamlin goes on to assert that these similarities caused audience members to make subconscious connections between the two experiences. Hence, Shakespeare cleverly exploited “this thick biblical culture” in his dramas (42). In chapter 2 the author provides an exhaustive review of the scholarly literature concerning the presence of the Bible and religious ideas in Shakespeare's dramas. This chapter represents a very useful reference guide for any researcher whose interests might be remotely connected to this topic. Hamlin does a superb job of analyzing the various threads of several centuries of scholarly interpretation of Shakespeare's biblical allusions. He observes that most scholars pursue this topic of investigation because they want to theorize about Shakespeare's personal religious beliefs. Hamlin eschews this approach, and he reminds us that Shakespeare, the theatrical craftsman, used the Bible as a dynamic dramatic tool—one of many in his arsenal of writing skills.

The second section discusses biblical allusions in Shakespeare's dramas. Hamlin observes that Shakespeare drew allusions from every single book in the Bible, and all his dramas included biblical allusions. His discussion, however, focuses on Shakespeare's histories and tragedies, where most of his biblical allusions appear. Hamlin notes that Shakespeare alluded most frequently to certain books in the Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Samuel, Job, the four gospels, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, and the apostolic epistles. The themes in these books tended to align with the dominant elements in

Shakespeare's plots—love, marriage, kingship, suffering, and persecution. The author gives particular attention to Shakespeare's many allusions to the Genesis, Job, and prodigal son stories. As Hamlin so thoroughly documents, these were widely pervasive tropes in early modern English culture, so it is no surprise that Shakespeare mined them so often. In its analysis of the tragedies and histories, this study illuminates Shakespeare's highly effective writing techniques. He explains how Shakespeare embedded biblical allusions within classically based plot frameworks (as in *Julius Caesar*) and he asserts that where Shakespeare was evoking audience awareness of contemporary political events in England (as in *Coriolanus* or *Antony and Cleopatra*) the biblical allusions lift Shakespeare's message to a more universal level. Hamlin provides a thorough and compelling discussion of *MacBeth* and its many allusions to Apocalypse and Revelations—books of the Bible that were “cultural obsession[s]” in early modern England (272). He expertly weaves together textual, cultural, historical, sensual, and biblical threads to demonstrate that Shakespeare was creating a very nihilistic drama for his audiences, one without hope for restoration of order, morality, virtue, or grace. Hamlin's discussion of Shakespeare's biblical allusions in the comedies (and “romances”) is spread thinly throughout the text. Hamlin briefly notes that Shakespeare often generated laughter through his buffoon characters' biblical malapropisms. He gives good attention to Shakespeare's use of allusions to the prodigal son story in *As You Like It* and the dramas that included Falstaff. His detailed discussion of Falstaff addresses the dilemma that this character poses to actors. Should he be played as a cowardly, selfish, wicked reprobate or an exuberant, prudent, logic-splitter? Shakespeare's biblical allusions offer guidance in resolving this theatrical problem.

In the concluding chapter, Hamlin calls for exploration of biblical allusions in Shakespeare's sonnets and in the literary works of his contemporaries, so that we may gain a greater understanding of the power of the Bible in early modern England. He also earnestly commends his study to K-12 and university level educators with the hope that the content herein can enrich the study of Shakespeare in the classroom. No doubt Hamlin's study will inspire budding Shakespeare scholars in our many universities to dig more deeply into this rich vein of Shakespearean analysis that Hamlin admits can still yield more valuable discoveries. It would take a courageous high school language arts teacher, however, to venture into discussion of biblical material in an American K-12 classroom today. That teacher dreads professional shipwreck on either the Scylla of those who believe in the literal inerrancy of the Bible or the Charybdis of those who believe religion has no place whatsoever in the curriculum.

