

A MYTH ABOUT THE BARD

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"Hidden Bard" by Richard Lederer in the May 1994 **Word Ways** perpetuates what is almost certainly a myth, that Shakespeare assisted in the translation of the King James Bible (KJV) and encoded his name in the text. Mr. Lederer correctly points out an astonishing fact, known for many years, that in Psalm 46, the 46th words from beginning and ending, respectively, are **shake** and **speare** (if the final word **Selah** is omitted). Born in April 1564, Shakespeare was 46 years old in 1610 when the KJV was being prepared for the press. (A more tidy numerical correlation can be found using the date of the KJV's publication, 1611. In that year, Shakespeare was both 46 and 47: **shake** is the 46th word from the beginning, **speare** the 47th word from the end, including **Selah**.)

But this amazing correspondence is almost assuredly not an intentional cryptonym, but rather, evidence of the long arm of coincidence. Among the many English translations of the Bible that appeared before the KJV, including many psalters, Richard Taverner's 1539 version of Psalm 46 has **shake** and **speare** in exactly the same positions as in the KJV. In other versions, words appear in nearly the same positions: in the Bishop's Bible of 1568, for instance, they are the 46th and 48th words, respectively.

Mr. Lederer also notes the appearance of the words **will** and **I am** in the psalm, presumably spelling **Will-I-am** and also suggesting **I am Will**, yet another allusion to the playwright. The numerical locations of these words likewise total 46--that is, if the numerical position of **I** is used, that of **am** ignored, and the word **Selah** included (inconsistent with the earlier approach). The same correlation appears in Taverner's Bible, **will** as the 14th word from the beginning, **I am** the 32nd and 31st words from the end, even though the wording of the two versions is not identical.

So far as is known, Shakespeare had no connection with Biblical translation: no association with the KJV translators, no scholastic bend of mind, no scholarly training in Hebrew or Latin, and little Greek. Nor did he have time for non-dramatic projects during the period of translation, 1605-1610, when he was hard at work on the great tragedies and final romances; while the translators were at their task, Shakespeare composed ten plays before retiring to Stratford in 1610. But finally, his own reverence for the Bible, so evident in his works, surely precludes his manipulating it for self aggrandizement: using part of the phrase "I am God" as a cryptonym referring to himself seems, at the very least, audacious.