

SHAKESPEARE AND PSALM 46, ONCE MORE

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In the 1961 Dover reprint of C.C. Bombaugh's *Oddities and Curiosities of Words and Literature*, Martin Gardner comments in his Notes (page 263):

The close affinity of Shakespeare and the King James Bible is suggested by the following fantastic fact. The 46th word of the 46th Psalm is "shake," and the 46th word from the end of the same Psalm (ignoring the final "selah" which is not part of the Psalm) is "spear." Why 46? Because when the King James Authorized Version was completed, in 1610, Will was exactly 46 years old!

I quoted this in a brief essay in the Central State University campus publication, *The Gold Torch*, on 28 Feb 1969. Louis Marder, the editor of the publication *The Shakespeare Newsletter*, replied to my comment in a note on page 46 (!) in the 1969 volume, "The 46th Psalm and the Phoenix [sic] and the Turtle." He claimed that he had earlier noted the affiliation of "Shake-speare's affinity with the Bible, or Shakespeare's possible share in translating it" and downplayed the affinity by claiming "those that have not yet heard the story ... haven't missed much."

This topic was recently revisited by David R. Kaye in "Shake-speare and Psalm 46" in Volume 16 (2003) of *ANQ*. He challenged a 1977 note on the subject by J. Karl Franson in the same journal entitled "Shakespeare in the King James Bible," which tried to point out that the "46" effect of the psalm's wordplay occurred well before Shakespeare's birth! Kaye, finding Franson's evidence not at all satisfactory, concluded "The basis for the 1977 note seems even more mysterious than the intentions of King James's translators" of the Bible.

Also memorable is Maurice J. O'Sullivan's article "Shakespeare's Other Lives" in Volume 38 (1987) of *Shakespeare Quarterly*, which cited Anthony Burgess as having written a story, "Will and Testament," which had Will Shakespeare revise the new translation of the 46th Psalm during his 46th year by substituting "shake" for "tremble" as the 46th word from the beginning and "spear" for "sword" as the 46th word from the end. This story, originally published in 1976, became the prologue to his *Enderby's Dark Lady* in 1984. Burgess makes a serious issue of this fascinating business in his biographical book *Shakespeare* (pages 233-4):

A short story by Rudyard Kipling—"Proofs of Holy Writ"—presents Shakespeare and Ben Jonson discussing a problem of language brought to them by one of the translators of the Bible. There is no reason, one feels, why this should not have happened. They were the greatest poets of their age; the Bible was to be a work of literature as well as piety ... Whether he had anything to do with [Psalm 46] or not, he is in it ... If this is mere chance, fancy must allow us to think that it is happy chance. The greatest prose-writer of all time has the name of the greatest poet set cunningly in it.

I sent my essay to the Renaissance specialist Alastair Fowler of the University of Edinburgh; his reply of 19 Oct 1971 is well worth considering:

[The Shakespeare-Bible pattern] is a curious one, and by itself might be regarded as coincidental. But it ties in so well with two other facts that the cumulative effect is strong: (1) Shakespeare used

the Psalms very extensively indeed in structuring his Sonnets (as Hotson argues well enough... in *Mr. W.H.*), (2) the Psalms were traditionally used for numerological purposes, as Maren-Sofie Rostvig shows in her piece in *Silent Poetry*, for example.

A number of good scholarly minds seem reluctant to pursue the matter further, apparently preferring to regard it as mere coincidence. But if Shakespeare was not *personally* involved in all this, could there not easily have been a hidden resonance of his name infused by the translators? After all, his last play, "The Tempest", which he was working on in 1610, has been often called "the playwright's personal farewell to the stage," thus providing an incentive for the play on his name upon going into retirement.