

**Shakespeare's *Henry V* & the Geneva Bible****John Knoepfle**

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Shakespeare in *Henry V* sculpts the character of the king, the French nobles, and the London rascals in terms of strictures from the prophet Isaiah. It has long been established that Shakespeare's favorite biblical sources were the Bishops' Bible and the Geneva Bible.<sup>1</sup> The Geneva, as distinguished from the Bishops', is heavily glossed, and as will be seen below, these glosses are as important as the verses from Isaiah in terms of the light they cast on the text of Shakespeare's Renaissance play about a medieval king. The Geneva Bible, with 122 editions between 1560 and 1611, was by far the most popular Bible in Elizabethan England. Its nearest competitor was the Bishops' Bible, with twenty-two editions. The Geneva was issued in a handy quarto; it was also the first Bible to be fully numbered by chapter and verse, and the first to be printed in roman and italic type.<sup>2</sup> Although in its many editions the Geneva varied considerably in terms of its glosses and other editorial accoutrements, for the purposes of this paper the text and glosses in the Genevan-Tomson 1595 edition--identified as the edition used by Shakespeare are the same as in the original edition of 1560.<sup>3</sup>

In *Henry V* the biblical references establish the king as lion, the French nobles as victims of pride and false confidence, the rascals as blind and opportunistic in the pursuit of success, and the king, once more, as the good watchman on the eve of the battle of Agincourt.

In Act IV the French herald, Montjoy, seeks out Henry and offers him the option of taking his battered army from the field at the cost of a ransom rather than suffering certain defeat at the hands of the French.<sup>4</sup> Henry replies in terms of a fable:

Bid them achieve me, and then sell my bones.  
 Good God, why should they mock poor fellows thus?  
 The man that once did sell the lion's skin  
 While the beast liv'd, was kill'd with hunting him. (IV. iii.91-94)

But the fable that Henry cites concerns a bear and not a lion,<sup>5</sup> a significant change which reinforces the king-lion reference made earlier by Canterbury as he exhorts the young Henry to take the field against the French and make good his birthright. Canterbury recalls the exploits of

Edward III and the Black Prince when they fought the French:

Making defeat on the full power of France,  
 Whiles his most mighty father on a hill  
 Stood smiling to behold his lion's whelp  
 Forge in blood of French nobility. (I.ii.107-10)

Henry himself, as Prince Hal, has been called the lion's whelp by Falstaff: "Why, Hal! thou knowest, as thou art but man, I dare, but as thou art Prince, I fear thee as I fear the roaring of the lion's whelp" (*1 Henry IV* III.iii.145-47).

Clearly, there is a method here on Shakespeare's part: the lion and the lion's whelp are spoken of in Isaiah 31:4 also: "For thus hath the Lorde spoken vnto me, As the lion or lions whelpe roareth vpon his praie, against whome if a multitude of shepherds be called, he wil not be afraide at their voice, nether will humble him self at their noise: so shal the Lord of hostes come downe to fight for mount Zion, and for the hill thereof."

Shakespeare identifies the English king as the lion of Isaiah and the French nobles as the Egyptian forces. They are the ones, as Isaiah says, that "stay vpon horses, and trust in charettes, because they are manie, and in horsemen, because they be very strong: but thei loke not vnto the holie one of Israel, nor seke vnto the Lord" (31:1). Isaiah's wrath is directed against those Israelites who wanted to league with Egypt, but the Geneva Bible gloss widens the application: "Meaning, that thei forsake the Lord, that put their trust in worldelie things: for thei can not trust in bothe." And the French are cast into this mold of Isaiah. The nobles posture among themselves on the eve of the battle of Agincourt. Most of their talk is about horses. The Constable acknowledges that Orleans has the best horse in Europe. The Dauphin's horse is a very Pegasus. He has written sonnets to this beast as if the horse were his mistress, and so on. The conversation occupys some fifty lines of III.vii. And this follows on Henry's words which help to close III.vi: "We are in God's hand, brother, not in theirs" (1. 169). Again, as the battle is joined, after some twelve more lines given to horses, the Dauphin shouts: "Mount them, and make incision in their hides, / That their hot blood may spin in English eyes" (IV. ii.9-10).

The French pay a price for their arrogance. Isaiah tells what will happen to those who consort with Egypt: "They shalbe all ashamed of the people that can not profite them, nor helpe nor do them good, but shalbe a shame and also a reproche" (30:5). The French in disarray take these strictures on themselves:

*Dol. Mort Dieu, ma vie!* all is confounded, all!  
Reproach and everlasting shame

Sits mocking in our plumes.

*Dol.* O perdurable shame! let's stab ourselves.  
Be these the wretches that we play'd at dice for?

*Bout.* Shame and eternal shame, nothing but shame!

*Bour.* The devil take order now! I'll to the throng:  
Let life be short, else shame will be too long. (IV.v.3-23)

When the battle is conceded, the herald comes again. This time Montjoy petitions King Henry for leave to list and bury the French dead:

To sort our nobles from our common men.  
For many of our princes (woe the while!)  
Lie drown'd and soak'd in mercenary blood;  
So do our vulgar drench their peasant limbs  
In blood of princes, and [their] wounded steeds  
Fret fetlock deep in gore, and with wild rage  
Yerk out their armed heels at their dead masters,  
Killing them twice. (IV. vii.74-81)

This gruesome description has its parallel in Isaiah 31:3, the verse that leads into the lion and lion's whelp passage: "Now the Egyptians are men, & not God, and their horses flesh and not spirit: and when the Lord shal stretche out his hand, the helper shal fall, and he that is holpen shal fall, and thei shal altogether faile." This is what has to be read into the words of the herald, according to Isaiah. The blood of the helper, mercenary and peasant, mingles with the blood of the nobles, all failed together, and the horses are real and brutal, not at all the airy spirit of Pegasus.

As for the London rascals, Pistol, Nym, Bardolph, and Mistress Quickly, they are realized in terms of another set of precepts from Isaiah. And by way of getting to this, it might be noted that in a play scattered with references to dogs--apocalyptic hounds or hunters or border marauders or greyhounds, wolves, or mastiffs that will charge a bear--there is a duster of such references in the scene when the rascals are first on stage (II.i). Pistol calls Nym a base tyke, an Iceland dog, a prick-ear'd cur of Iceland, an egregious dog; and when Bardolph momentarily reconciles them, Pistol

offers to shake hands, asking Nym to give him his forefoot, only to call him a hound of Crete when the argument breaks out again. The Iceland lapdogs were known for quarreling; tyke is also a word for villain; and Crete suggests thieving and falsehood.<sup>6</sup> This indicates that Shakespeare may have the blind watchmen passage from Isaiah in mind as he allows the rascals their strut:

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Their watchmen are all blinde: they haue no knowledge: thei are all domme doggs: thei can not barke: thei lie & slepe and delite in sleping.

And these gredie doggs can neuer haue ynough: and these shepherds can not vnderstand: for they all loke to their owne way, euerie one for his aduantage, & for his owne purpose.

Come, I will bring wine, and we wil fil our selues with strong drinke, and to morowe shalbe as this daie, and touche more abundant. (56:10-12)

The gloss for verse 12 is helpful: "We are wel yet, and tomorowe shal be better: therefore let vs not fearn the plagues before they come."

These verses provide an insight into Nym's famous humour, his fatalistic torpor as he waits for his advantage, perhaps to cut Pistol's throat when he catches Pistol asleep:

For my part, I care not; I say little; but when time shall serve, there shall be smiles--but that shall be as it may...

Faith, I will live so long as I may, that's the certain of it; and when I cannot live any longer, I will do as I may: that is my rest, that is the rendezvous of it ....

I cannot tell; things must be as they may. Men may sleep, and they may have their throats about them at the time, and some say knives have edges. It must be as it may; though patience be a tir'd [mare], yet she will plod--there must be conclusions--well, I cannot tell. (II.i.5-7, 14-16, 20-25)

Isaiah's verse 12 with its wine and more abundant tomorrow gives substance to Pistol's promises when he and Nym are finally reconciled:

And liquor likewise will I give to thee  
And friendship shall combine, and brotherhood.  
I'll live by Nym, and Nym shall live by me.  
Is not this just? For I shall sutler be  
Unto the camp, and profits will accrue. (II. 108-12)

And the gloss "We are well yet... let us not fear the plagues before they come" is certainly woven into Mistress Quickly's comfort as Falstaff, having picked at his bed covers, sinks into death:

"How now, Sir John?" quoth I, "what, man? be a' good cheer." So 'a [he] cried out "God, God, God!" three or four times. Now I, to comfort him, bid him 'a should not think of God; I hop'd there was no need to trouble himself with any such thoughts yet. (II. iii.17-22)

Pistol earlier, on hearing of the impending death of Falstaff, had called to his companions: "Let us condole the knight, for, lambkins, we

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will live" (II.i.127). But Pistol is not a very good prophet. By the time Henry has won his victory at Agincourt both Nym and Bardolph have been executed for stealing, Mistress Quickly (confused with Doll Tearsheet in the text) has died of syphilis, and even the boy that Prince Hal had once given for a page to Falstaff has been slain with the other boys gathered at the king's tent. Of the London band, only Pistol remains. And he is beaten to distraction by Captain Fluellen and forced to devour a leek because he mocked the Welsh for wearing leeks in their hats on St. David's Day. These are his words as he stands alone on the stage after the boating:

Doth Fortune play the huswife with me now?

News have I that my Doll is dead i' th' spittle  
 Of a malady of France,  
 And there my rendezvous is quite cut off.  
 Old I do wax, and from my weary limbs  
 Honor is cudgell'd. Well, bawd I'll turn  
 And something lean to cutpurse of quick hand.  
 To England will I steal, and there I'll steal;  
 And patches will I get unto these cudgell'd scars,  
 And [swear] I got them in the Gallia wars. (V.i.80-89)

The parallels from Isaiah are from 57:10: "Thou weariedst thy self in thy manifold iourneis, yet saidest thou not, There is no hope: thou hast founde life by thine hand, therefore thou wast not griued." Now Pistol will make another journey, this one back to England, taking his weary bones with him, and he will find a new life there with his quick hand. The gloss for verse 10 is instructive: "Although you sawest all thy labours to be in vaine, yet woldest you neuer acknowledge thy faute & leaue of." This tough survivor who is without remorse is mocked by the wisdom voice of Isaiah, as the gloss for the phrase "thou hast founde life by thine hand" indicates: "He derideth their vnprofitable diligence which thoght to haue made all sure, & yet were deceiued." And finally, in verse 13, the desolation is pointed: "When thou cryest, let them that thou hast gathered together deliuer thee: but the winde shal take them all away: vanitie shal pul them awaie." So this is the end of Pistol, his little troop scattered and he returning to try his luck in the stews of England.

In contrast to Pistol and his friends, King Henry is anything but a blind watchman. Indeed, the English camp itself is awake and alert. The Chorus opening Act IV is preoccupied with keeping watch: "the fix'd sentinels almost receive / The secret whispers of each other's watch" (II. 6-7); the English sit "Like sacrifices, by their watchful fires" (1.23); King Henry is "Walking from watch to watch" (1. 30); he is turning a cheerful face "Unto the weary and all-watched night" (1.38). And Henry himself

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toward the conclusion of the long scene which follows observes that the king in his office must be a watchman: "gross brain little wots / What watch the King keeps to maintain the peace, / Whose hours the peasant best advantages" (II. 282-84).

Two passages which stand at the opening and the conclusion of this scene have a relationship to passages in Isaiah. Both are marked by the appearance of Sir Thomas Erpingham. In the first Henry has just been speaking to Bedford and Gloucester. Given the proximity of the French, Henry has observed: "they are our outward consciences / And preachers to us all, admonishing / That we should dress us fairly for our end" (II. 8-10). In Isaiah 62:6, under the headnote "Watchemans duetie" one reads: "I haue set watche men vpon thy walles, o Ierusalem, which all the daie and all the night continually shal not cease: ye that are mindful of the Lord, kepe not silence," for which the gloss is simply "Prophets, pastors, and ministers." Henry follows the instruction of Isaiah here, preaching a sermon, making "a moral of the devil himself," as he says (I. 12).

At this point Erpingham enters, the old and white-haired knight who tells Henry that he is happy to sleep on the ground because then he can say "Now lie I like a king." This cheers the king, who delivers a homily on the theme of privation and hardship:

'Tis good for men to love their present pains  
 Upon example; so the spirit is eased;  
 And when the mind is quick'ned, out of doubt,  
 The organs, though defunct and dead before,  
 Break up their drowsy grave, and newly move  
 With casted slough and fresh legerity. (II. 18-23)

Then the king turns to Erpingham and says, "Lend me thy cloak, Sir Thomas." But why this bit of stage business? Why should the king, just after he has moralized upon the good that comes from using pain well, suddenly want the

knight's cloak? Probably the cloak was the only protection the old man had, the only wrapping to shield him from the ground. There is a due in Isaiah 59:17: "For he put on righteousness, as an habergeon, and an helmet of saluacion vpon his head, and he put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, & was clad with zeale as a doke." In the sense of Isaiah, then, Henry has put on the zeal of Erpingham and so dressed "fairly" for the day to come.

At the close of this scene, as Henry meditates on the watch a king must keep, Erpingham comes to him and says, "My lord, your nobles, jealous of your absence, / Seek through the camp to find you" (11.285-86). This is a nice touch, as "jealous" here can mean "zealous."<sup>7</sup> Whatever, after Erpingham exits, Henry makes his prayer to the God of battles. He begs that the hearts of his soldiers will be steeled despite the great

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numbers of the French and that God will overlook the fault of Henry IV:

O, not to-day, think not upon the fault  
My father made in compassing the crown!  
I Richard's body have interred new,  
And on it have bestowed more contrite tears,  
Than from it issued forced drops of blood. (II. 293-97)

The key word in Henry's prayer is "contrite." It has a counterpart in Isaiah 57:15: "I dwell in the hie & holie place: with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit to reuiue the spirit of the humble, and to giue life to them that are of a contrite heart." In context the word is of the first importance because life is given to those of a contrite heart. Against this may be set Pistol's "Iambkins, we will live" or his attempt to find life with a quick hand; or the exchange between Grandpré and Constable as they view the English forces in the moment before the battle is joined at Agincourt:

Description cannot suit itself in words  
To demonstrate the life of such a battle,br> In life so lifeless as it shows itself.  
Con. They have said their prayers, and they stay for death. (W. ii.53-56)

Or consider the cry of the Dauphin when the French are beaten off: "*Mort Dieu, ma vie!*" As for the English, it is as King Henry said: "He that outlives this day, and comes safe home, / Will stand a' tiptoe when this day is named" (IV. iii.41-42).

Taking into account the many echoes from Isaiah, it appears that Shakespeare is using the text of the Geneva Isaiah and its glosses to create a medieval backdrop for his Renaissance drama. Certainly the references to Isaiah indicate that Henry's prayer has been answered, the contrite heart has been given the promised life and a great victory. Seen against this backdrop, "the warlike Harry" described by the Prologue to Act I (1. 5) is indeed "the mirror of all Christian kings" that the Chorus for Act II (1.6) says he is. Nevertheless, in Shakespeare's earlier play of *3 Henry VI*<sup>8</sup> the warlike Harry's son takes his measure. This is the devout but ineffective Henry VI, who will cry out as he receives his death at the hands of Gloucester in the Tower of London: "O God forgive my sins, and pardon thee!" (V. vi.60). In a previous scene, Henry tells Lord Clifford of the inheritance that he would wish to leave Prince Edward, his son:

I'll leave my virtuous deeds behind,  
And would my father had left me no more!  
For all the rest is held at such a rate

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As brings a thousandfold more care to keep  
Than in possession any jot of pleasure. (II.ii.49-53)

This speech also has a parallel in Isaiah. It is found in the opening verse of Chapter 56, the same chapter which ends with the rebuke for the blind watchmen: "Thus saith the Lord, Kepe iudgement & do iustice: for my saluacion is at hand to come & my righteousness to be reueiled." The gloss explains how this is to be accomplished: "God sheweth what he requireth of them after he hath deliuered them: to wit, the workes of charitie whereby true faith is declared." Evidently Shakespeare has used texts from Isaiah to define Henry V, but also, in terms of his son, Henry VI, to

indicate his limit. Perhaps it is the difference between the mirror of the Christian king as conqueror and hero and the mirror of the Christian king as saint.

Notes

1. Richmond Noble, *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge and Use of the Book of Common Prayer as Exemplified in the Plays of the First Folio* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1935), pp. 64-69.
2. *The Geneva Bible: A Facsimile of the 1560 Edition*, introduction by Lloyd E. Berry (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), p. 12.
3. Noble, *Shakespeare's Biblical Knowledge*, p. 64.
4. Henry V. All textual references are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974).
5. "Sell not the Bear's skin before you have caught him," in Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs of England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950), pp. 32-33.
6. The dogs are kenneled in the *OED*.
7. The king is using Erpingham's cloak as a disguise as he wanders the camp in the morning dark before the battle, but he is clad with the zeal of the knight. Also, for "jealous," see the *OED*, 2nd ed., 3rd definition: "Zealous or solicitous for the preservation or well-being of something possessed or esteemed; vigilant or careful in guarding; suspiciously careful or watchful."
8. Quarto edition for *Henry VI, Part 3* is dated 1595, for *Henry V*, 1600.