

Half a Miracle: A Response to William Harmon*

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Although William Harmon's article is ingenious and stimulating on the whole, I should like to take issue with his most spectacular example, the (admittedly tentative) suggestion that the translation of Psalm 46 in the Authorized Version was written or at least revised by William Shakespeare. It is, indeed, a remarkable coincidence that in this forty-sixth Psalm the forty-sixth word from the beginning should be "shake," the forty-sixth word from the end "speare"; and that it is at least plausible that the Authorized Version may have been in the process of revision when Shakespeare was either in his forty-sixth year or forty-six years old. But does that prove, or at least make it likely, that Shakespeare as it were left his signature in the text of the Psalm as it now stands? At first sight, the coincidence is indeed so miraculous that we must assume that Shakespeare really did have a hand in it. As I will show, however, it really is a coincidence, and only half a miracle.

Before we come to that, however, there is another striking coincidence to be got out of the way: the fact that, long before Harmon, almost the identical theory about Psalm 46 had been proposed not just once, but twice, by Anthony Burgess, who first put forward his theory in his Shakespeare biography.¹ Like Harmon, Burgess notes the appearance of the words "shake" and "speare" at numerologically significant positions in the text, as well as the fact that Shakespeare was forty-six in 1610, the year before the "King James" Bible came out. Like Harmon, Burgess presents Shakespearean authorship or revision of the Psalm as a possibility, though not as an established fact, and again, like Harmon,

*Reference: William Harmon, "Paronomastics: The Name of the Poet from Shakespeare and Donne to Glück and Morgan," *Connotations* 2.2 (1992): 115-25.

he refers to Kipling's story about Jonson and Shakespeare contributing their poetic expertise to the Authorized Version.

Later, Burgess used his theory as the basis of a story patently inspired by Kipling's portrayal of Jonson and Shakespeare revising the Bible. The story is part of Burgess' novel, *Enderby's Dark Lady*,² and it is presented as one of two comic tales about Shakespeare written by the hero of the book, the poet Enderby. Shakespeare is offered a share in the revision of the poetic parts of the new Bible translation by his friend Ben Jonson. Initially reluctant, Shakespeare travels home to Stratford, where his shrewish and puritanical wife Anne begins to scold him for his ungodly profession. In defiance of her and the rest of his bigoted family, Shakespeare asserts the dignity of poetry by leaving his mark on the galley proofs of the Psalms that Jonson has entrusted to him for revision. He picks the forty-sixth Psalm (corresponding with his age) and replaces the forty-sixth word, "tremble," by "shake," and the forty-sixth word counting from the end, "sword," by "speare." Thus he gives the psalm its present form, with his name enshrined in the enduring monument of the Authorized Version.

The resemblance between Burgess' theory and Harmon's is indeed striking, and one might be forgiven for regarding Harmon as a victim of the sort of subliminal influence that we may all find hard to escape from time to time, when some idea we once overheard in a conversation or read about in a half-forgotten book pops into our head and presents itself as the fruit of our own brain. Still, it may have been a mere coincidence; in fact, that seems more plausible than it may appear at first sight. After all, the miraculous appearance of Shakespeare's name in Psalm 46 exists independently of Burgess and Harmon; it has, in fact, been around since 1611, waiting for someone interested in word-games to discover it.

The resemblance in their theories, therefore, is only half a miracle: the other half had already taken place, the coincidence of the Psalm's wording. In probability theory, the likelihood of each individual occurrence in a series is independent of preceding occurrences: for example, if we go to the casino to play roulette it is rather unlikely that the same colour will come up ten times in a row, but that does not affect the outcome of each individual spinning of the wheel. Once the ball has

lighted on the black nine times in a row, the chances of black coming up again, completing the unlikely total of 10, is no smaller or bigger than that of red coming up: half the miracle has already happened. So it is with the similarity between the theories of Burgess and Harmon; there, too, it is really the facts as such that are so unlikely that their discovery by two independent observers is not so astounding any more.

Unfortunately for Harmon and for Burgess, the very same principle can be applied to their theory itself. Unlikely as the coincidence of all these forty-sixes may be, half the miracle had already taken place before the scholars who composed the Authorized Version set about their work of translating. Their work simply completed the miracle rather than creating it. Burgess' account of Shakespeare changing two words in the text of the Psalm to embroider his name into it may make for an amusing story, but it is highly implausible. So far as we can determine, the words "shake" and "speare" were already present in the text from which the translators started out. Whereas the Vulgate and versions based on it, such as the Catholic Rheims/Douai Bible, spoke of the mountains being "trubled," and of "weapons" in general being broken by God rather than spears in particular,³ already in Coverdale's translation we find the corresponding words to be "shoke" and "speare."⁴ More significantly, in the Bishops' Bible the forms are identical with those of the Authorized Version: "shake" and "speare."⁵ The Bishops' Bible is particularly relevant in this context: as Charles C. Butterworth has shown in his painstaking study of the genesis of the Authorized Version, the King's translators had been specifically instructed to treat the Bishops' Bible as a sort of working model which they had to revise. As the instructions had it,

The ordinary Bible read in the Church, commonly called the *Bishops Bible*, [is] to be followed, and as little altered as the truth of the original will permit.⁶

Admittedly, as far as Psalm 46 is concerned, the "King James" text does differ somewhat from this model, in which the word "shake" is in forty-seventh position and the word "speare" in forty-eighth counting from the end; so there is some coincidence in both these words ending up in precisely the forty-sixth position in the Authorized Version. Yet that

coincidence seems less than miraculous when we realize that all it took for this to happen was a shift of one position for “shake,” of two for “speare.” A similar picture emerges when we investigate the Geneva Bible, which according to the instructions issued to the translators of the Authorized Version was one of the earlier “translations to be used when they agree better with the Text than the Bishops Bible” (Butterworth 212): the forty-seventh word is “shake,” the forty-fourth word from the end is “speare.”⁷ Half the miracle had already happened long before the Authorized Version was commissioned. In the absence of the least shred of corroborative evidence, Shakespeare’s involvement in or authorship of part of the Authorized Version seems extremely unlikely.

And thereby hangs a methodical tale. Coincidences will happen; as with all ambiguities, the yardstick in telling the intentional from the purely coincidental must be whether there are other more plausible explanations, and whether there is any corroborative evidence: a series of two coincidences may carry more conviction than just a single case. For instance, in the example from *Doktor Faustus* quoted by Harmon, the appearance of the word “Mann” all by itself might very well be fortuitous; but the intentionality is made more plausible by the juxtaposition with what seems like a play on the name of the narrator, Zeitblom: “gebrochen von den Schrecknissen der Zeit . . .” Here an interpretation of the narrator’s name seems to be suggested: a flower (“Blom” for “Blume”) broken by Time.

Also an author’s known tendency to play such word-games may be seen as circumstantial evidence: Anthony Burgess, e.g., is known to be fond of playing with language, and for that reason it may not be too fanciful to read the title of one of his novels, *Abba Abba*, as at least in part (though by no means exclusively) a fourfold allusion to the author’s initials. When Burgess ascribes a similar tendency to Shakespeare, we must remember that Burgess often tends to project himself and his own concerns and preferences onto other writers, particularly Shakespeare. In Shakespeare’s own works, as far as I know, such onomastic games seem to be limited to puns on “will” in the sonnets; unless, of course, we follow the over-ingenuous theories of the Anti-Stratfordians, who find puns and anagrams scattered throughout the Shakespeare canon.

Only, from their perspective, the Psalm should not have spoken of "shake" and "speare," but of "bacon"; that, in the Old Testament, would have been remarkable indeed!

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NOTES

¹Anthony Burgess, *Shakespeare* (New York: Knopf, 1970) 233-34.

²Anthony Burgess, *Enderby's Dark Lady: Or No End to Enderby* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), in particular 24-34.

³*The Holie Bible Faithfully Translated into English, out of the Avthenticall Latin . . . by the English Colledge of Doway* (Douai, 1610), s.v. Psalm 45.

⁴*The Holie Scriptures, Faithfully and truly translated by Myles Coverdale, Bishop of Exeter* (1535; rpt. London, 1838), s.v. Psalm 45.

⁵*The Holie Byble, Containing the Olde Testament and the Newe. Authorized and appointed to be read in Churches* (London, 1585).

⁶Charles C. Butterworth, *The Literary Lineage of the King James Bible: 1340-1611* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1941) 212.

⁷*The Bible, That Is, the holy Scriptures contained in the Old and New Testament* (London: Robert Barker, 1602).