Abstract: Recent scholarship has seen a spate of interest in the intertwined interpretation histories of Shakespeare and the Bible, especially in how Biblical hermeneutics shaped Shakespeare’s reception. This article inverts that trend by investigating the presence of Shakespeare as an analogy, reference and model in Biblical Studies at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century. It demonstrates how Shakespeare has provided a set of images around authority and performance on which Biblical scholars have drawn to frame and articulate their ideas about the Bible, and it suggests future possibilities for interdisciplinary work.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Bible; performance; textual authority; Biblical Studies; reception history
At the beginning of Shakespeare’s most famous play is a prince’s encounter with a ghost. The appearance of this figure animates the rest of the action, as the ghost poses an interpretative puzzle in itself, and makes claims on the loyalty of characters in ways that affect the future. Shakespeare himself has become a ghost in the machine of modern culture in a number of ways, and it is my contention that Shakespeare haunts a portion of late twentieth-century Biblical studies. Where we might expect Biblical scholarship to regard Shakespeare as a rival claimant, as a collection of texts which exerts great cultural and social authority and which therefore should be downplayed or dismissed, in fact he and his works make surprising appearances within the discussion of the Bible in this period. In this article, my concerns are twofold. Firstly, to elucidate the ways in which the world of Shakespeare texts and Shakespearean performance provided a resource for thinking about the Bible in the late twentieth (and early twenty-first) century, as exemplified by the work of the scholars discussed below. This constituted a significant but submerged intellectual current which has shaped the way arguments about the Bible were presented and developed in the public sphere. As I will show, this has particularly been the case around questions of authority and performance. Secondly, examining this influence will allow more explicit and deliberate exchange between the fields of Shakespeare and the Bible to occur. Revealing where Shakespeare has been useful as an ad hoc metaphor or model will permit a more thoroughgoing theoretical connection, opening up the possibility of future work which draws on these themes as developed in Shakespeare studies. Thus this article looks back to recent past in order to break new ground for the future, allowing a more articulate dialogue to develop between scholars of Shakespeare and the Bible.

I have chosen to discuss the appearance of Shakespeare in works by six scholars: James Barr, John J. Collins, N.T. Wright, John Barton, Henry Wansbrough and Christopher Bryan. The choice to focus on them does not imply that their work is the most important
theologically, or that this group represents the diversity of perspectives on the Bible expressed in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. They are significant in that they each have scholarly expertise in Biblical Studies and have considerable experience in communicating their ideas beyond the academy. It is in their more popular work that the Shakespeare metaphors appear to be most frequent, often as a medium for expressing concepts which might be communicated more technically in academic papers. By placing these scholars and their work next to each other, I am able to draw out the uses to which Shakespeare is put, highlight the assumptions visible in those uses, and sketch the arcs of development between them. My concern is thus not with a consciously articulated “Shakespeare theology” expressed by Barton or Wansbrough, but with the patterns observable in their casual and instrumental references to Shakespeare, and the interplay between ideas of Shakespeare and of the Bible which those patterns can demonstrate. Individually such references often have a limited and specific function, and “Shakespeare” can stand in for a number of different ideas depending on when and how it is invoked. I will therefore be scrutinising particular examples closely, as well as drawing connections within and between the work of these scholars. The arc of the works I discuss below stretches across forty years, from James Barr’s 1973 The Bible in the Modern World to Christopher Bryan’s 2013 Listening to the Bible. An overall sense of development in ideas and approaches can be discerned at this long range, but I will not be taking the examples in chronological order. Since this is a submerged strand in thinking about the Bible, as I argue, there is not the kind of explicit and direct building on previous ideas which we would expect in Biblical scholarship. Rather, there are cross-currents and eddies which push ideas along and around, and I follow the ideas rather than the onward movement of dates within this period.
Critical themes

The two major themes which emerge from my scrutiny of Shakespeare’s appearance in the work of these Biblical scholars are those of authority and performance. Before looking at the case studies in detail, I would like to sketch these themes briefly. A concern with authority, and specifically the notion of a “crisis of authority”, in discussion of the Bible is certainly not new. The first edition of C.H. Dodd’s 1928 classic *The Authority of the Bible* contained a preface in which the general editor, Sir James Marchant, declared “the time has gone by when apologetics could be of any great value” since it depended upon “a defence of propositions already accepted on authority”, and the problems facing the current generation involved “a spiritual crisis” which constituted “a questioning of authority if not a revolt against it”.1 Going further back, many accounts of the rise of Biblical Criticism – whether tracing the damage it has done or insisting on the need for it to be carried out rigorously – locate its origins in the questions about authority and epistemology which arose out of the Enlightenment, or the conflicts over intellectual and ecclesiastical authority which took place during the Reformation.2 One of the favourite candidates for the first volume of modern Biblical Criticism, Richard Simon’s 1678 *Histoire Critique de la Vieux Testament*, ostensibly applied critical principles to Biblical texts in order to demonstrate that the Protestant reliance on Scripture alone was unsustainable, and that Christianity required the buttressing of Catholic sources of authority. The crisis of authority might be described as the natural state of Biblical Criticism, the condition which brought it into being and the problem it is called upon to solve.

The historical and social upheavals of the twentieth century were not calculated to restore the belief in authority which Marchant looked back to in the quotation above, and in the late 1970s James Barr noted that

There appears to be a general crisis of authority at the present time, or at least the
notion of authority is different. Authority is no longer conceded a priori, but is
accepted only where it actually proves itself as such. Accordingly, it becomes
increasingly difficult to assert biblical authority in a general way.³

Whilst this crisis was taking place, after the social revolution of the 1960s and during the
intellectual ferment of the “theory decades” in the academy, the idea of Shakespeare offered a
surprising prop to concepts of authority. Shakespeare’s own authority had undergone a series
of major shifts in the period since his death in the early seventeenth century. Michael
Dobson’s The Making of the National Poet and Gary Taylor’s Reinventing Shakespeare give
detailed accounts of these processes, but here it is sufficient to say that “Shakespeare” had
gone from being the name of a member of a disreputable entertainment industry in London to
a signifier of elite culture, British cultural identity and establishment power.⁴ Shakespeare’s
presence in syllabi, speeches and souvenirs attested to the privileged position he occupied in
the Anglo-American imagination of the twentieth century.

Performance is a critical theme less obviously embedded in the history of Biblical
criticism, but still nonetheless present. As a topic of philosophical and critical study its roots
are most evident in anthropological interest in myth and ritual in the late nineteenth and early
twentieth centuries, displayed for example by J.G. Frazer and the group who became known
as the Cambridge Ritualists. “Performance” in both anthropology and drama studies became
associated with societies enacting their deepest beliefs, with physical symbols which
embodied and articulated shared meanings. The language philosophy of J.L. Austin
contributed to these ideas, when his How To Do Things With Words developed the idea of
“speech acts”, such as vows, bets, curses or oaths. These categories of speech enacted the

⁴ Michael Dobson, The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship (Oxford: OUP,
1992), Gary Taylor, Reinventing Shakespeare: A Cultural History From the Restoration to the Present (London:
social actions to which they referred, bolstering the idea that “performance” was a profound and overlooked stratum of societies’ functioning. After Austin the concept became central to the work of thinkers as various as Judith Butler, Stanley Fish and Jacques Derrida. Before the late twentieth century it was not obviously involved in scholarship about the Bible, but there are conceptual connections. An intellectual concern with “performance” when thinking about a text emphasizes the multiplicity of meanings and the release (or creation) of those meanings in the moment of interpretation. This chimes with the emphasis in the Christian tradition on the active quality of the Bible, and on its transformative potential. At the same time the historicist focus of much nineteenth-century Biblical scholarship encouraged the reading of Biblical texts in the context of their cultural and social background, thus suggesting that their meanings could speak differently to different eras. Here too “performance” found common conceptual ground, since the performances of a text across time bring out different aspects of it. The intersection of these two critical themes is evident in the uses of Shakespeare within Biblical scholarship which I will explore below. As a preliminary, it is worth examining recent scholarship on the relationships between Shakespeare and the Bible, to set the critical scene and situate my own work within the stages of the field’s development in the long term.

**Recent scholarship**

The academic study of the relationships between Shakespeare and the Bible has been entering a new phase in recent years. The last couple of centuries saw a series of approaches to the subject, some of which were visibly partisan in their cultural agenda. These would include scholars and critics such as Thomas Carter, who wished to claim Shakespeare for a religious and literary tradition by emphasizing the playwright’s Biblical literacy and, by implication,
the level of Biblical knowledge necessary to fully appreciate his works.\textsuperscript{5} They would also include critics, like Sidney Lee, who stressed the patchy and ambient quality of the Biblical allusions in the plays, with the intention of liberating a cultural icon from the particularity, and even narrowness, of a religious worldview.\textsuperscript{6} Lee’s declaration that Shakespeare’s acquaintance with, and quotation from, the Bible never went beyond what a bright schoolboy might pick up on Sundays was more than a biographical note. It was a statement about the contingent and unnecessary quality of religion to the imagination of a world-famous artist, who had become central to British national identity and a touchstone of cultural value.

Hannibal Hamlin, in his \textit{The Bible in Shakespeare}, has called for the abandonment of any such political and cultural agendas.\textsuperscript{7} For him the tracing of Shakespeare’s Biblical allusions is a question of cultural-historical interest, which should be followed up with dispassionate and scientific scruple. In putting these principles into action, Hamlin has made a point of not declaring his own religious background and tradition – or lack of it – in order to direct attention to the neutral discussion of textual and historical details. Other scholars share Hamlin’s concerns about scholarly objectivity, but approach the subject with more interest in historical trends and the blending of religious and literary practices over time. For instance, Beatrice Groves’ \textit{Texts and Traditions}, approaches Shakespearean Biblical allusion as a matrix of Protestant interpretative and textual practice with Catholic dramatic and sacramental tradition.\textsuperscript{8} She has elsewhere suggested that the political valence of the plays produced on the late sixteenth-century stage owed much to audiences accustomed to listening for hours at a time to expository sermons about how Biblical narratives were relevant to the contemporary situation.\textsuperscript{9} The recent collection \textit{The Bible on the Shakespearean Stage}, edited

\textsuperscript{5} Thomas Carter, \textit{Shakespeare and Holy Scripture, with the version he used} (London; Hodder and Stoughton, 1905).
\textsuperscript{6} Sidney Lee, \textit{A Life of William Shakespeare} (London: Macmillan, 1898).
\textsuperscript{7} Hannibal Hamlin, \textit{The Bible in Shakespeare} (Oxford: OUP, 2010).
\textsuperscript{9} During a speech at the Modern Church Conference at High Leigh in 2016.
by Kristen Poole and Thomas Fulton, frames Shakespeare’s Biblical engagement in terms of the explosion of hermeneutic models and modes in Reformation-era Europe, then goes on to deploy such interpretative tools as sacramental theology and a history of the Bible as a book.\(^{10}\) Whilst in no sense partisan, like Carter or Lee, these critics are keener than Hamlin to investigate the longer-term religious and hermeneutic traditions, rather than bracketing them out.

Another phase of critical development is represented by Travis DeCook and Alan Galey’s collection *Shakespeare, the Bible and the form of the Book: Contested Scriptures*. This volume explores the hermeneutic crossovers between the production and reception histories Shakespeare and the Bible, calling attention to the ongoing relationship between the two sets of texts, their material forms and the reading practices which surround them.\(^{11}\) It constitutes a productive and variant strand of scholarship on the topic, by explicitly considering the intertwined way in which they are produced and interpreted. The particular focus of the collection is the relationship between the material and transcendent aspects of these histories, and it makes a major contribution to reframing what we mean by “Shakespeare and the Bible” in scholarly terms. Part of that contribution is the assumption the volume appears to make that the relationship between Shakespeare and the Bible is historically accidental (if heavily determined) and that the histories of production and reception are a large proportion of what makes up “Shakespeare” and “the Bible”.

The critical trends I have sketched are not mutually exclusive, nor do they progress along a teleological arc, except insofar as they move away from attempting to claim Shakespeare for the Bible or vice versa. There is nothing in Hamlin’s principles which would rule Fulton and Poole’s approach as invalid, nor does the historicist focus of their collection

\(^{10}\) Thomas Fulton and Kristen Poole, eds. *The Bible on the Shakespearean Stage: Cultures of Interpretation in Reformation England* (Cambridge: CUP, 2018).

\(^{11}\) Travis DeCook and Alan Galey, eds. *Shakespeare, the Bible and the Form of the Book: Contested Scriptures* (London: Palgrave, 2012).
cast doubt on the legitimacy of Contested Scriptures. Nonetheless, a distinct strand of critical analysis can be seen in the work I cited above, which I will pull together here. It is relatively sparse in Hamlin, noticeable mostly in a suggestion he makes that the German Higher Criticism instituted a cultural mood which fed into textual Bardoltary.\textsuperscript{12} It becomes more evident in Kristen Poole’s own chapter in her collection, in which she examines attitudes to puns in the sixteenth century and the Victorian period, suggesting that the nineteenth-century disapproval of them has obscured important aspects of them in Reformation thought and literature.\textsuperscript{13} It is part of the declared project of DeCook and Galey, with their interest in the intertwined and reinforcing forms of cultural authority produced by Shakespeare and the Bible. A review of that same book by Lori Ferrell envisages this critical trend being taken further, as she notes that the contributors display a livelier sense of the diversity and complexity of Shakespeare than the Bible, and that the scholarly borrowing takes place by Shakespeareans from Biblical Studies. She “would like some day to see a collection on this same topic with a multi-disciplinary roster of essayists” and warns that she “would nearly perish from the excitement were she ever to encounter a volume of essays on Shakespeare and the Bible written entirely by notable professors of biblical studies.”\textsuperscript{14}

In this article I would like to develop the interdisciplinary study of Shakespeare and the Bible further, taking bearings from the scholars mentioned above. I cannot claim to be a notable Biblical scholar and thus fulfil Ferrell’s dream, but I will break new ground by examining how Shakespeare appears in some works of Biblical scholarship. Given the chronological (and for some centuries cultural) priority of the Bible over Shakespeare, it makes sense that a lot of previous work has focused on the influence of Biblical models, conceptions and hermeneutics on the use and interpretation of the Shakespearean texts.

\textsuperscript{12} Hamlin, Bible, 56.
\textsuperscript{13} Kirsten Poole, “Words of Diverse Significations: Hamlet’s Puns, Amphibology and Allegorical Hermeneutics”, in Fulton and Poole, eds. Shakespearean Stage, 69-86.
\textsuperscript{14} Lori Anne Ferrell. “Review: Shakespeare, the Bible and the Form of the Book: Contested Scriptures”. Shakespeare Quarterly, 64, 3, Fall 2013, 385.
However, by the end of the twentieth century we can see instances of Biblical scholars and commentators looking to the Shakespearean tradition to frame and articulate ideas about the Bible. My interest lies in two main aspects: the use to which Shakespeare is put in their individual arguments, and the patterns of what concepts Shakespeare represents for Biblical scholars. To this end, I will examine below in a little detail the appearance of Shakespeare as an analogy or a symbol in the writings of several Biblical scholars at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, setting them in the context of their concerns with two critical keywords – “authority” and “performance” – which emerged from that scrutiny. I have deliberately limited my scope to relatively popular works by scholars, where Shakespeare is likely to be doing more critical work (since there is less opportunity to refer to established but abstruse theoretical constructs). I have also excluded instances where Shakespeare is simply mentioned as either an example of a famous writer or where individual characters are mentioned to illustrate an idea or trait (Hamlet’s melancholy, for example, or Othello’s jealousy). This is because I am not concerned with surveying all the uses of Shakespeare in Biblical criticism, nor in writing a reception history of Shakespeare in the field, but rather in those moments when analogy brings with it some implicit theoretical charge. The apparent naturalness of referring to Shakespeare in works written for a reasonably educated English-speaking late-twentieth-century audience allows ideas and assumptions to pass between the two fields in revealing ways. It is these moments where the concern with authority and performance can be demonstrated, and the cultural and intellectual work which Shakespeare is carrying out can be seen. After the examples, I will outline the areas of Shakespeare Studies from which these critical ideas seem to stem, and suggest possible future connections between the two fields.

Authority and the Ghost of Shakespeare: James Barr
James Barr’s *The Bible in the Modern World* uses Shakespeare’s exalted status as part of a discussion about the problems he has with the slogan “the Bible as literature.” He begins by considering the claims of such an approach, and agrees that there has been an unhelpful split made in the past between the theological and literary uses of the Bible, assuming “that the latter stood on a much lower level than the former”\(^{15}\). He suggests that there is enormous value in the literary aspects of the Bible, especially for their role in worship, and notes that the resistance to “the Bible as literature” has come from the culture outside the church as well as the faithful within it. “If the Bible is not read, this is paradoxically because it is supposed to be ‘true’, i.e. to be true in the referential sense in which Homer or *Hamlet* is not true”.\(^{16}\)

Barr’s comments on the Bible’s literary qualities can be illuminated by considering the various currents of Biblical criticism he found himself writing within and against. The long perspective is provided by Benjamin Jowett’s call in the nineteenth century to read the Bible “like any other book”: to seek to understand the meaning which the authors would have intended by their words, to avoid undue mystification, over-allegorising or the assumption that whatever is found at any point in the text must necessarily agree with the religious preconceptions of the reader. In the process attention has to be paid to the generic forms of the books which make up the Bible, and Barr laid stress on this in his own criticism. Particularly in his work criticising Protestant fundamentalism, Barr sought to release the Biblical texts from an interpretative frame which classified every document in terms of propositional belief, as if history, poetry and pastoral advice alike should be scrutinised for supernatural facts being imparted or theological principles to be believed.\(^{17}\) Part of reading the Bible like “any other book” was recognising the wide variety of forms in which other books might appear, and applying some of those insights to the process of interpreting the Christian documents. However, this is complicated by the rise of the notion of “the Bible as


\(^{16}\) Barr, *Modern*, 63.

“literature” in two opposed groups – secularising readers and religious conservatives – whom Barr felt he needed to defend the Bible’s distinctive aspects against, whilst still applying a mode of reading informed by the insights of literary study.

A non-religious approach to the Bible as literature would evacuate it of the spiritual significance which Barr, as an evangelical critic, felt was its main value. It would cut the Bible off from anything but a purely historical and aesthetic frame, which implicitly assumed that certain people in the past had expressed their incorrect ideas in beautiful and complex ways, leaving an aesthetic deposit which could be appreciated by those who no longer shared their metaphysics or their ethics. This was obviously unacceptable for Barr, since it not only put the text temporarily within the wrong hermeneutical structure, but actually ruled out any kerygmatic function whatsoever. It failed to allow for a vertical “elsewhere” from which revelation could happen, trapping the text within a purely horizontal reading plane.

However, literary-style readings could also appeal to the opposite wing of the discussion, religious conservatives. The literary approaches which appeared in the work of Robert Alter, Frank Kermode and others were attractive to conservatives because they placed the text in the present moment and emphasized the production of meaning at that moment.\textsuperscript{18} This contrasted favourably with the process of historical criticism, which many conservative scholars felt fragmented the text and consigned it to a past from which it could not speak to the present. In Brevard Childs’ phrase, the historical-critical tradition risked reducing the Bible to “inert sherds”\textsuperscript{19}. Though readings informed by literary theory could have deconstructive tendencies, they focussed attention on the Bible’s synchronic existence and its potential to address the modern reader. They could thus be mobilised to sideline concerns about redactions, editors, sources and issues of transmission which were perceived to cluster


\textsuperscript{19} Though this characterisation of the historical-critical tradition has been strongly contested, most notably by John Barton, whose \textit{The Nature of Biblical Criticism} denies that historical criticism even exists as a coherent project or process in the way described by Childs and his colleagues.
around the historical-critical scholarly enterprise, and to imperil the coherence of the Bible. Barr resisted this movement because of its potential to isolate the Bible from the events and even the God of which it spoke. For the text to bear witness not only to a transcendent God but also divine intervention in history (whether via miracles, inspiration or incarnation) it needed to be open to that history, at whatever risk. His criticisms of Childs’ “canonical” mode, in a review of *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, include the memorable statement that 'there is no question that Jesus "canonically" rose from the dead, but it is the extrinsic resurrection that matters for faith'.

Thus Barr’s Biblical criticism drew on the insights of literary study whilst positioning itself against any collapsing of the boundaries between Biblical and literary criticism, or indeed between the Bible and literature. In *The Bible in the Modern World*, he argues that we cannot simply treat the Bible as literature, for two major and interlinked reasons. Firstly, the “poor level of theological articulateness” which would result, and secondly the way it would turn the Bible into a closed system of symbols. Literary analysis, for Barr, can enhance our appreciation and pleasure when reading the Bible, but it can only encourage a circular return to reading instead of prompting questions about what the Bible points towards. A purely literary approach would foreclose questions such as

> Is there really a God? Did Jesus come from him? Granted that the Resurrection is the central symbol of a Gospel, does it have existence only within the text of the Gospels, as Setebos has existence only within the text of The Tempest, or does it also stand for something in the outside world?  

For Barr, Shakespeare lacks the ability to point us anywhere but himself. He might enable us to achieve insight into ourselves, and lead to a rich and multi-layered experience which takes

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in the ethical and the social as well as the aesthetic, but the plays remain a closed system. It is not simply that their status as fiction marks them out as making different “truth claims”, but that those claims operate on the reader in entirely different spheres (and from entirely different spheres.)

All of this rests on the issue of how far the Bible should be read as literature, so theoretically any other literary example could have been part of Barr’s argument. Shakespeare, like Homer, is a stand-in for all the literary works and imaginative worlds which fiction can supply. However, I would suggest that Barr chooses this particular example because Shakespeare is the one author who some people genuinely treat as if he possesses equivalent authority to the Bible. He is the only name which can provides an initial acceptance – that it might make sense to read the Bible in the way we read Shakespeare - against which Barr can make his argument. The space Shakespeare occupies in modern culture, somewhere between great literature and divine oracle, makes him peculiarly useful for Barr’s argument that there is a definite distinction between those categories, despite how similar they might seem.

**Jonson’s Tribute: John J. Collins**

An even more spectral presence of Shakespeare comes in John J. Collins’ *The Bible After Babel*. As an academic Biblical scholar working in the wake of the “theory decades” Collins sets out to give an account of how far he feels the new “diversity of approaches” which postmodernism has brought can enrich Biblical interpretation, though noting that “my brain has not incubated in the languages of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, or Stanley Fish (if indeed incubation is what happens to a brain in these environments)”.

23 He is open to possibility of new insights, but – as that sideswipe suggests – sceptical of their overall

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tendency and their claims to totally reconstruct the critical landscape: “it also seems to me that there are some valid concerns and insignificant insights in the welter of new approaches”. Amongst these approaches is deconstruction, and whilst discussing Yvonne Sherwood’s work on the Book of Hosea, Collins remarks:

Perhaps the most fundamental challenge posed by deconstruction to traditional Biblical exegesis, however, is expressed by Sherwood in a summary comment on Derrida’s essay on the tower of Babel: “Derrida treats Yhwh, as most literary critics do, not as an entity but as a construct of the text.” Again, there is no reason why a historical critic should object. The whole drift of historical criticism has been away from the view that the Bible is a timeless revelation of God, and an insistence that its writings are time-conditioned products of human authors, and that its wisdom, to adapt a phrase of Stanley Fish, is ‘of an age and not for all time’, at least not in all cases.

The phrase Collins borrows from Fish is, of course, itself a version of Ben Jonson’s praise of Shakespeare. The first posthumous collection of Shakespeare’s works contained an elegy by Jonson, ‘To the Memory of my Beloved Master William Shakespeare, and What He Hath Left Us’, in which he famously declares:

Triumph, my Britain, thou hast one to show,
To whom all Scenes of Europe homage owe.

He was not of an age but for all time!

Thus behind the complexities of Biblical criticism, and the discussion over whether some sections of Hosea’s writings are more timebound and contingent than others, stands the figure of Shakespeare. The playwright from Stratford serves an unexpected purpose here, acting as

24 Collins, Babel, 3.
25 Collins, Babel, 22.
a symbol of the stability and fixity of meaning which the Book of Hosea is unable to
guarantee. Collins’ rhetorical flourish, suggesting that this work is “not for all time” but “of
an age”, manages to imply that some books are for all time, and inevitably summons up
Shakespeare by his phrasing.

This may be unexpected, but it fits with some uses of Shakespeare we can see
elsewhere in this article. John J. Collins’ implication that Shakespeare’s poetry is not limited
to the historical, social or material conditions of production, but is valid with its full force
across the gulfs of space and time, is the same kind of suggestion as is made by Wright or
Barton. This idea also plays a particular role in the critical manoeuvres he is trying to make
within this discussion. The Bible After Babel declares its intention to give a fair hearing the
new modes of literary criticism which became prominent in the 1970s and 80s – such as
deconstruction, queer theory and post-structuralism – whilst pushing back against the idea
that they have rendered traditional Biblical criticism obsolete. Collins’ book is performing a
tricky critical balance, bringing together the radical modes of late twentieth-century theory
with the older understandings provided by historical and textual scholarship.

Thus Shakespeare has a particular function in this passage. His echo (the playwright
is never actually named) is heard as Collins is wrestling to find an equilibrium between the
subversive energies of deconstruction, which may threaten to annihilate the authority of the
text even as they investigate it, and the processes of historical criticism which assume that a
text means something, at least. To hold these forces in tension, to allow space for the
discussion to happen, Collins seems to vaguely invoke the fixed point of Shakespeare, to
gesture towards the ghost of authority. Whilst denying that these texts can reproduce the
authority they claim, his writing cites the spectral icon of a meaning stably present for all
time. The hedging of “to adapt...at least not in all cases” (which is footnoted “Fish would
not, I think, accept the qualification ‘not in all cases’”) requires an imagined simple authority
in order not to collapse in upon itself, which is represented – at however many removes – by Shakespeare.27

Players and Parts: N.T. Wright

My next case study comes from a more popular sphere, when compared with Collins’ theoretical work, though it is also concerned with how far new approaches to the Biblical material can be assimilated within an orthodox and Christian reading. *Who Was Jesus?* by N.T. Wright is an attempt to intervene in the debate known as the Quest for the Historical Jesus which had entered a new phase in the 1980s and 1990s. Specifically, Wright addresses three books which he believes badly misunderstand Jesus, and drastically misinterpret the Bible in order to do so: A.N. Wilson’s *Jesus*, Barbara Thiering’s *Jesus the Man: A New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls* and John Shelby Spong’s *Born of a Woman*.

Wright’s book sets out to outline the various phases of the “Quest” to understand the figure of Jesus from a historical point of view, from the eighteenth century to the modern day, whilst making clear why he feels these recent books do not qualify as valid parts of that endeavour. As Wright takes on Wilson, Thiering and Spong’s very different portraits of Jesus, Shakespeare appears at various moments to supply an analogy which appears to clinch his point. Two particular moments are worth considering in depth, one in his critique of Wilson’s historical accuracy and one in his strictures on Thiering’s method of interpreting the Gospels.

Whilst demolishing Wilson’s claims to be working in a scholarly tradition which brings historical evidence together with textual analysis, Wright attacks a particular passage which he feels discredits the book. In it, Wilson suggests that Jesus’ teachings borrow the image of the mustard-seed from the Palestinian Talmud. Wright argues that this is so ludicrous as to call Wilson’s overall scholarship into doubt:

The Talmud is basically a commentary on the Mishnah, which was itself... written in about AD 200. The Talmud itself wasn’t written down until about AD 400. If Wilson is worried about the Jesus of history not being able to do the extraordinary things credited to him by Christianity, I think we are entitled to ask Wilson whether his historical Jesus was capable of reading a book written four hundred years after his own day. It is like suggesting Shakespeare got his ideas from Tom Stoppard.28

On the face of it, this is a simple point of chronology, and one which Wright finishes off with a flourish intended to make the reader smirk. Since Who Was Jesus? is intended for a non-scholarly audience, who might not see the inherent hilarity of suggesting Jesus’ image was gleaned from the Palestinian Talmud, Wright builds a analogy with Shakespeare in order to bring home just how damaging this flaw in Wilson’s work should be. However, there is another other assumptions smuggled in along with the point about time traditionally moving in only one direction. There is the related implication of authority. The widespread citing of Shakespeare’s words by (amongst others) judges, politicians, bishops and business leaders, means they are associated with discourses of power. Bringing Shakespeare in at this point, when a particular poetic image is being discussed, borrows the heft attributed to Shakespeare’s words. It might seem ridiculous to suggest that Shakespeare’s cultural clout is propping up a saying of Jesus, but that is more or less what happens in this analogy.

Shakespeare appears at the point where this argument seeks to close off speculation, lending his weight to the ridicule which attempts to discredit Wilson. Thirdly, there is the close relationship between Shakespeare’s works and Shakespeare’s words. The Works of Shakespeare are popularly believed to contain the precise words which he wrote, an assumption made explicit in the John Barton quotation discussed above. The name of Shakespeare can thus carry the implication of textual accuracy, which is particularly relevant

given the tendency of the “third quest” to focus on separating out sayings merely ascribed to Jesus from those which he is most likely to have uttered himself.

Wright’s comparison of Jesus to Shakespeare (and the Palestinian Talmud to Stoppard, which carries less cultural baggage) brings a lot more to bear on Wilson than a simple point about chronology. The assumptions tied up with Shakespeare’s image help bolster the orthodox position which Wright is arguing for. An even more striking rhetorical use of the playwright appears in the comments on Barbara Thiering’s *Jesus the Man: A New Interpretation from the Dead Sea Scrolls*. He elaborates her argument, which involves reading the Gospels as allegorical narratives about the internal politics of a religious community, so that the crucifixion represents the toppling of one leader and the resurrection their return to power. This interpretative scheme is based on the Jewish interpretative practices contained within the notion of “pesher”, which Wright believes Thiering has totally misunderstood, and he subjects her appropriation of the principle to lengthy critique. He also attacks the fact that in her reading of the Gospels, various characters are “actually” the same people in different allegorical guises: that Mary is also Dorcas the widow, John Mark is also the Beloved Disciple and Simon Magus is Lazarus and Ananias, as well as himself. In dismissing this interpretative method, Wright reaches for another Shakespeare metaphor:

The net effect of all this fantastic name-swapping is rather like the effect you’ll get if you try to stage a Shakespeare play with a cast of five actors. The same people keep reappearing in different identities. If the audience get confused that’s just too bad. Thiering’s readers might feel the same way.29

The work Shakespeare does in this quotation is more obvious, if only because Wright’s analogy does not really work in the way the passage seems to intend. It is perfectly possible to stage a Shakespeare play with five actors, as modern productions have demonstrated.

More damagingly for Wright’s analogy, doubling was a regular feature of the original performance of Shakespeare’s plays. Actors frequently “ke[pt] reappearing in different identities” in a performance convention which, far from confusing the audience, allowed the company to capitalise on the necessity of reusing performers by drawing links between characters.

This analysis of Wright’s rhetorical technique does not undermine his reading of the Gospels, or suggest that Thiering’s interpretation is in fact more probable. But this use of Shakespeare is so revealing of the assumptions which cluster around his name because it does not match up with the historical facts. The cultural freight of the Bankside playwright becomes more evident in this case, and we can see more clearly the work he is being called upon to perform. In a rhetorical move which will surprise a lot of people who have watched Shakespeare performed on the modern stage, Wright brings him in as an image of meanings which are transmitted securely through time. In contrast to Thiering’s allegedly fanciful scheme of allegory and disguise, the production of Shakespeare plays is a straightforward matter in which the text is accurately and effectively acted out, the characters match up with the performers, and the audience are able to grasp the meanings produced in a clear and unambiguous way. The baffling – and dazzling – array of meanings which actors produce from Shakespeare every year undermines this model, and makes clear just how far “Shakespeare” the high-culture icon is from either the scholarship on his works or the experience people continue to have of his plays. 30 The name works here to summon up the image of a text whose meaning remains clear and unarguable across the centuries, able to speak to a contemporary audience with undiminished impact.

These two examples show Shakespeare being brought into different arguments, but there is a similarity in the way they imagine the playwright which can be read as part of

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30 Searching scholarly examinations of Shakespeare’s development and status as a cultural icon can be found in Michael Dobson’s The Making of the National Poet, Gary Taylor’s Reinventing Shakespeare, footnoted above, and Michael D. Bristol, Big Time Shakespeare (London: Routledge, 2005).
Wright’s rhetorical strategy in *Who Was Jesus?* In both cases Shakespeare is cited as a stable source of authentic meaning. Having argued that Shakespeare has been raised to the status of the Gospels in Wright’s work (if only at single moments via analogy), there is even a paradoxical tendency for *Who Was Jesus?* to frame Shakespeare’s plays as more reliable than the Bible. Throughout his book Wright covers a considerable quantity of Biblical scholarship which is not necessarily general knowledge, and which does not support the orthodox view at first glance. Tracing the various developments of the Quest for the Historical Jesus involves highlighting the sceptical and critical work which has been done on the Gospels to produce what Wright considers reasonable areas of uncertainty and debate. Wilson, Thiering and Spong can then be shown to have moved beyond these areas into pure speculation or Jesus-themed fantasias on the text. In the meantime, Wright has to diminish the authority which the Bible has in the eyes of some non-specialists by parading the various interpretative issues which are acceptable to disagree about, and the places in which the Biblical texts must be treated with suspicion and read in ways which run counter to its surface meaning. The appearance of Shakespeare seems to underwrite the idea of authority in an obscure way, even to act as a place-holder for a supremely authoritative text whilst the Bible is potentially diminished in the eyes of the general reader. Just as John J. Collins invokes the echo of Shakespeare when admitting that sections of Hosea cannot be treated as transcendent and timeless, there is a suggestion in *Who Was Jesus?* that Shakespeare acts as an imagined point of authority. The overall argument of the book restores a broadly orthodox reading of the Gospels, but in the meantime another authority hovers at the margins, guaranteeing that fixed and stable meanings do persist across time and that texts can be trusted.

**Scripture and the Idea of Performance: John Barton and Henry Wansbrough**
Wright’s use of stage performance as an analogy leads me on to discuss the other motif which surrounds Shakespeare in the critics I have chosen. If the concerns with textual authority above circle around the idea of meaning being stable and present in a text, performance is a way of approaching that meaning’s potential to be made manifest in the world. Henry Wansbrough’s use of Shakespeare in *The Use and Abuse of the Bible* appears during more general reflections on the nature of performance. His book is a study of the ways in which famous figures have used the Bible, including Jesus, Origen, Julian of Norwich, John Wesley and Cardinal John Henry Newman. The intellectual structure of the book appears to be provided by two themes: “performance” of classic works like Shakespeare, and the ideas of Newman about the development of doctrine through time. Wansbrough begins *The Use and Abuse of the Bible* by considering the analogy made by Frances Young which “likens the Scripture to a musical score which can be faithfully performed in a number of ways”. This raises the question “what is an authentic performance of a great classic?” A version of the Messiah which uses period instruments? What about the various alterations Handel later made to the score? He continues:

Frances Young writes of a 1986 performance of Romeo and Juliet in modern dress, with Montagues and Capulets as rival street gangs. What would be the criteria for deciding whether this was an authentic performance? Is Jean Anouilh’s reading of the Antigone myth more authentic than that of Sophocles, or is each of them equally valid? Wansbrough clearly believes that the majority of the “uses” of Scripture in his book are valid and authentic (if only because he highlights some as specifically invalid) and “performance” is a model for justifying the variety of results. The idea of musical and theatrical performance, bolstered by the names of great artists like Handel and Shakespeare, provides a

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32 Wansbrough, *Use*, ix.
basis to explore various interpretations and readings of the Bible without an exclusive sense that one being acceptable automatically invalidates others. Individual interpreters – or performers – stand within history making their use of the text, without encroaching on each other’s creative freedom or simply using the Bible to ventriloquise their own attitudes. The issue of performance reappears in the same work when he turns to consider Origen:

> With the next figure to be studied we enter a new era, which would become of enormous significance for the understanding and use – the ‘performance’ – of Scripture in the Church, ‘a figure crucial to the whole development of Christian thought’, says Pope Benedict XVI, who occasioned an ‘irreversible change of direction’ in all Christian thought.³³

Here performance is linked to “understanding” as well as “use”, a stronger justification of the variety of interpretations. Wansbrough’s use of “understanding” implies that these figures have not simply applied bits of the Bible to their own time, but that their uses have revealed something about the text itself. A dialectic is set up, where historical readers, hymn-writers, theologians and teachers use the Bible to illuminate their own situation, and in turn they produce new insights about the text which are valid for other periods as well. Interpretation is not just a relative matter, a skill in matching up the book with a changing world, but produces greater appreciation and understanding for later readers. This is made more explicit by Benedict XVI’s reference to an “irreversible change of direction”, emphasizing the fact that this model assumes one interpretation influences later readings (even when they differ), that the “performance of Scripture” has an overall direction and is not simply reset in every changed circumstance. Performance is conceived of as a historical phenomenon, in which there are both moments of reinterpretation and a tradition which makes previous performances available to the present in ways which will shape future versions.

³³ Wansbrough, *Use*, 35.
This concern with performance blends powerfully with the influence of John Henry Newman on Wansbrough’s book, though Newman is not the endpoint or the destination of the case studies: he is not the moment of insight to which this series of “uses” of the Bible by significant thinkers has been leading. To place him last as some sort of final thesis, would stress the importance of his theology, whilst rhetorically undermining the use made of it. Newman’s insistence on the potential of doctrine to develop, creatively yet faithfully, means that the most rhetorically powerful place for him is the midst of the book. Had he been the final chapter, his ideas would have been foreclosed for the reader by a structure which articulated a theory of development, but then failed to validate it by showing developments which took place after the theorist himself. This might have made sense if Newman’s theory involved a relativistic assumption that different eras took different things from the Bible, which were valid for that particular place and time. But his notion of development assumed that genuinely new insights took place over time: that it was possible to say, with humility and qualifiers, that the modern doctrine of the Trinity was closer to the truth than the equivalent ideas held in the second century. It is this association of development with improvement, or at least clearer insight, which ties it to the historical process. There would be an irony, after all, in suggesting that the final phase of thinking about the Bible involved deciding that there had been no final phase and never would be.

Thus for Wansbrough, Shakespeare can provide a vocabulary for discussing the insights into the use of Scripture and the development of Christian thought. The assumptions which underpin reviews and public discussion of Shakespeare plays have much in common with the elements Wansbrough points to in the thought of both Newman and Young, but crucially sidestep questions of religious authority and the forms of “truth” which different groups may locate in Biblical texts. To present the more dynamic, historically involved and tradition-based vision of Scripture which his book both assumes and implicitly argues for, he
borrows people’s intuitions about Shakespeare productions, appealing to their own experiences and the shared language of classical theatre to build a model for approaching the Bible.

The Oxford professor John Barton’s use of Shakespeare touches on similar topics to Barr and Wansborough in *People of the Book?* as he discusses the use of the Bible in liturgy. Barton deprecates the “declamatory” use made of it by reactionary Christians and argues that the variety in genre and subject of the readings should make us aware of the creative tension between the present situation and the past contexts of the words. To “say that the usefulness of the Bible, for liturgical practice means that we need never ask critical questions about it, is rather like suggesting that performing Shakespeare is a sovereign remedy against Shakespeare criticism”.34 Intriguingly, he argues that some productions are too careful to obscure the historical distance between the modern audience and the text, which means that “all critical questioning is forcibly blocked”, whilst other productions are so “authentic” that they mean nothing for the present day and become “incomprehensible”.35

But the interesting cases lie in between, or rather, when the performance is so authentic that it is also modern, so modern that it is also authentic. And the audience at such a performance is not lulled into complacency, but electrified by a charge that leaps the centuries, and leaves the theatre buzzing with questions, alert and full of wonder.36

Shakespearean performance is imagined here as the site where past and present can encounter each other dynamically, and new – but “authentic” – meanings can be produced from an ancient text. Unlike N.T. Wright, Barton does not use the Shakespearean stage as an example of the static reproduction of what the author intended. His analogy is much closer to Wansbrough’s, proposing theatrical performance as a space for experiment, elaboration and

35 Barton, *People*, 78.
36 Barton, *People*, 78.
embodiment. He appears to lack the sense of development which is implied by Wansbrough, but there is definitely an insistence on the stage creating new meanings which are authentic to the text, if not intended by the authors. Barton draws on the same notion of performance as Wansbrough, but directs attention slightly more to the dramatic moment in which the meanings emerge. Where Shakespearean performance in *The Use and Abuse of the Bible* is borrowed as a model for considering development and the problems of determining what qualifies as an authentic interpretation, Barton gestures more towards the individual occasion in which a new or striking meaning appears.

**The Stage a School of Holiness: Christopher Bryan**

The next step in using the theatrical moment to think about the meanings of Scripture can be seen in *Listening to the Bible* by the priest, novelist and scholar Christopher Bryan. His book, subtitled *The Art of Faithful Biblical Interpretation*, addresses a question which has provoked a lot of discussion in the “post-theoretical” years of the early twenty-first century: the correct location for Biblical interpretation. If the theoretical systems which John J. Collins discusses were concerned with the processes by which to read the text, many authors in recent years have debated over the institutional situations (churches and universities) within which interpretation should take place. This discussion arises partially from the perceived failure of critical theory to provide a principle to distinguish between the various readings it can enable (a task which many theorists would regard as beside the point), and partially from a feeling amongst some authors that the Bible has been taken over by the academy and needs to be returned to the community of the faithful. This discussion is
reflected in titles such as *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church, Whose Bible is it Anyway?* and *Faithful Interpretation.*

Bryan, like others who criticize literary-critical and historical-critical approaches, suggests that they have been too concerned to fragment the Biblical texts and read them against their own grain. He argues for a criticism which pays more attention to what the texts were apparently intended for, using literary examples to elaborate his point. Whereas critical readings might elucidate particular details about the author's biography or conditions in the culture at the time:

I would insist that if one really wants to get to grips with Shakespeare’s work, then at some point one has to take it for what it is and was clearly intended to be, poetry and drama. One must finally make the effort to treat his plays as plays, as texts whose home is in the theater and whose true life is in performance. Similarly, if one really wants to get to grips with Austen, one must be willing to read her novels as novels: which means opening oneself to entering the world of her characters, to living with Elizabeth Bennett and Emma Woodhouse as they experience their lives, growing and changing in that experience.

The Shakespeare metaphor goes on to become a major part of Bryan’s proposed programme to reclaim the Bible. Shakespeare analogies work through the book to construct a concept of “performance” which can go beyond genre and offer a practical way to bridge the gap between the text and the world. For him, Prospero’s final speech provides an example of just such a moment, in which the character “steps out of the imagined past into a present and future hope that are also our present and future hope: we leave the theater imaginatively

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aware that we are linked with him in a common destiny that points to all our futures”. 39
Performance here is not only a critical concept, but an activity which regularly takes place in
particular institutions. The “listening” of his title neatly turns a conceptual metaphor into a
literal activity, implying that sincere and pious attention can be a physical act. Bryan makes
the analogy explicit when he declares that “with Shakespeare we must go to the theatre” and
with the Scriptures we must go to the synagogue or church”. 40 In his account, unless “we are
prepared to be serious” about the public performance of the texts, “we can claim to be no
more than partially serious in our desire to encounter Scripture”. 41 His solution to this
problem includes a Biblical scholarship which is much more deferential to the priorities of
the church community, and a much closer attention to the situations in which the Bible is
performed, including the potential training of a generation of lectors accustomed to the
techniques of Shakespearean verse-speaking. The sizeable appendix to his book is provided
by the theatre academic David Landon, and contains practical instructions for performing
passages of the Bible in this way. Bryan sees the best chance of the Scriptural words
reaching their full potential within the living community of the church, and in the mouths of
those attempting to perform them, respectfully but whole-heartedly.

Thus Bryan provides the next link in the connections I have been tracing,
concentrating even more precisely than the previous critics on performance as an actual
physical event. This is more than a conceptual category with which to account for the
different meanings attributed to a text across time, or a way of understanding the dialectic
between past and present which a text can provoke: it is a recognition of performance as a
regular, institutionally situated event, at which the community of faith produces and receives
religious meanings. This stress on the particular in performing the Bible intersects with many

39 Bryan, Listening, 99.
40 Bryan, Listening, 124.
41 Bryan, Listening, 124.
of the ways in which theologies of the Incarnation and the Eucharist have been articulated.

This is particularly clear in the book’s major exposition of the idea of performance:

This is the problem of written text. But is it also the opportunity for performers for by allowing written words to be again “formed through” them (which is essentially what “performance” means), performers can restore to past words some – perhaps all – of that participatory quality which is natural to words in their original oral state, and which being confined to writing denies them. Words from the past, which have been bereft of much of their power through disembodiment, are re-embodied, made incarnate, through the person of the performer. And that re-embodiment can enable those words to live again and involve us as much as if we were now hearing them for the first time, or even as if they were being said for the first time. Every actor worth his or her salt knows this, and every actor worth his or her salt seeks to achieve it in performance.42

The value he places upon the repeated event of performance in its physical specificity, on the embodied quality of language, and upon carrying out that event with skill and awareness of tradition, meshes his notion of Biblical performance with the liturgical and sacramental richness of worship. The techniques which were developed to get Shakespeare across the footlights are persuasively offered to recover the vigor and power of Bible reading, when suitably deployed within the church and – presumably – ordered by the lectionary.

Next Stages

The appearances of Shakespeare I have traced above are various, and manifest themselves in different ways for different argumentative purposes, but two themes have emerged across these cases: a crisis in authority and a turn towards performance. These are the moments

42 Bryan, Listening, 118-9.
where we have seen Shakespeare entering the conversation around Biblical criticism, and
where he offers Biblical critics resources to draw on. Shakespeare’s appearance as a figure of
authority (particularly in the passages cited from Collins, Barr and Wright) might reflect on
one level the general secularizing of public discourse. Where in the past, discussions over
art, politics and social life would have been more infused with the language of Biblical
quotation, these days the discussion of the Bible refers to the work of a playwright to phrase
some of its ideas. However, there is a more productive connection taking place than simple
analogy or the attempt to score a rhetorical point via a familiar notion. Shakespeare appears
to provide an imagined fixed point, a symbol of authority transmitted securely and clearly via
a text and the practices which surround that text. This need not be read as a bait-and-switch
in which the audience’s attention is directed elsewhere whilst a crucial concept is smuggled
past them in a ruff and hose. Instead it can be seen as part of the discussion around authority,
textual origins and the meeting of past and present. Shakespeare offers both another way of
phrasing points and a parallel system of textual history and authority with which to think
about these questions.

The other theme which has emerged – that of performance – draws more explicitly on
the practices which surround Shakespeare, and which might contribute to understanding the
uses of the Bible. From Wright’s reference to confused audiences to discredit Thiering’s
theories, through Barton’s and Wansbrough’s sense of performance as the production of new
but authentic meanings across time, to Bryan’s demand for a new generation of Shakespeare-
literate Biblical performers we have seen the attraction and power of performance as an
explanatory category. Shakespearean performance has moved from an analogy to a genuine
source of theoretical insights and practical opportunities. The combination of Shakespeare’s
towering status in Anglophone culture and the rich range of meanings which are produced by
his works in performance means that Biblical critics can use the Shakespeare system both as comparison and contrast.

This concern with performance, and with Shakespearean performance as a model, has a great deal to offer Biblical Studies. It reveals the moment of enactment, in a particular time and place in front of particular people, as the site where meaning is made. It suggests that texts must be inhabited rather than mined for their abstract meanings, and that inhabiting them allows a complex dialectic between the past and present to take place. It can encompass radically different understandings of a text as authentic, whilst maintaining a sense of the traditions which have shaped and guided the emergence of those meanings. I believe there is the potential for a truly creative dialogue between Shakespeare Studies and Biblical Studies, which develops the lines of thought I have identified above as half-submerged in the work of Biblical scholars already using Shakespeare to think about issues in their own field. I would suggest that fruitful avenues for new work would involve drawing on the more recent wave of work in Shakespearean performance studies. The conception of performance which has emerged above is roughly equivalent to the “stage-centred criticism” in Shakespeare Studies. This movement, with its roots in the nineteenth century, emphasized the stage as the true site for Shakespearean meanings to emerge, and the value of performing the plays in conditions as close as possible to those of Shakespeare’s own theatre. It was perhaps summed up best in J.L. Styan’s *The Shakespeare Revolution*, and has a more physical monument in Shakespeare’s Globe in London.43 It remains the dominant orthodoxy in much theatre reviewing and school teaching of Shakespeare.

The “stage-centred criticism”, with its faith in the emergence of authentic meanings via historically accurate staging conditions, has been challenged and critiqued by the

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advances in performance studies which have taken place over the last thirty years. Another wave of scholarship on Shakespearean performance, carried out by critics such as William B. Worthen, Carol Chillington Rutter, and Roberta Barker, casts doubt on the stability and innocence of the previous wave’s assumptions. Drawing on the thinking done on performance by Richard Schechner, Marvin Carlson and others, these critics point to the ideological work carried out by the apparently natural emergence of meaning from plays on the stage. For example, the voice training often required of actors in Shakespearean roles presents itself as releasing the inner potential of the body and the verse, but under the critical lens of William Worthen it is shown to be freighted with ideological presuppositions about the nature of the self and the disciplines which need to be applied to bodies to enable them to act “naturally”. Performance studies refocused attention on the ideological structures which shaped the plays and which they reproduced in performance. It also sought to dethrone the text as the repository of pre-existing meanings which were “discovered” during performance, in favour of an awareness of how performance creates meanings and what forces it brings to bear in doing so. The concerns and tools of this branch of Shakespeare Studies could produce an even more productive dialogue with Biblical Studies, developing the conceptual borrowing I have demonstrated above, and enriching both scholarly and popular attitudes to the Bible and its performance.

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Having explored these intersections between the Bible and Shakespeare, I think it is worth offering some hypotheses for what I have found. Shakespeare has offered an imagined fixed point for Biblical scholars in the case studies above, an idea of authority whose mediation and recognition is less troubled and contested than that of the Bible. I would suggest that this is due to Shakespeare’s position as a public cultural influence – I institutionalised in various ways from state theatres, school syllabi and community theatre – during a period when religion is increasingly “privatised” and seen as a matter for personal conscience. Similarly, Shakespeare is regularly spoken of (in popular discussions) as “universal” and grounded on “human nature”, in an era when religion is often bracketed with elements which constitute a cultural identity, in a liberal public discourse which values cultural diversity but is uncomfortable with universal claims. Shakespeare displays some of the features which distinguished Christianity in Anglo-American public culture for many centuries, and thus I suggest it provides a model for discussions of the meaning, transmission, performance and interpretation of the Bible which feels natural and meaningful in the changed and contested public sphere.

These explanations give some account of why Shakespeare has constituted a submerged strand in thinking about the Bible in this period. I would also like to offer some ways in which it can be productive in future discussions. It strikes me that Shakespearean performance has given Biblical scholars an image of people who all hold a text in high regard, who experiment with ways of interpreting that text whilst agreeing roughly on their aims, and agreeing on the value and coherence of the text. (I do not say that this is the case in the Shakespeare industry of the early twenty-first century, only that it is the image seen by these scholars.) Performance more generally has been the subject of critical interest in theology and Biblical studies over recent decades, from Nicholas Lash’s “Performing the Scriptures” to Stephen Barton’s “New Testament Interpretation as Performance” and Kevin J.
Vanhooker’s *The Drama of Doctrine*, and this is a valuable development.\(^{47}\) I do not, however, think that the use of Shakespeare in Biblical studies need be abstracted into performance as a critical category, as if Shakespeare were only an accidental instance of performance. Indeed, a large part of the value of the Shakespeare tradition for Biblical studies lies in its specific history, with all the weight of traditions, internal revolutions and hopeful dead ends which that involves. The Shakespeare tradition is the result of actors and directors grappling with a text which does not obviously speak to the modern world in its own language, and which is subjected to widely differing interpretations. In order to interpret this text, they do not use or produce any obvious artefact beyond themselves; the process involves neither a musical instrument on which the art is played, nor does it result in a painting or sculpture at the end. The performance requires intense training and rehearsal, yet the intention is often to result in the immediacy of a dramatic moment. The reasons I have sketched the development of “performance” as an idea in Shakespeare Studies above is because these seem to me the more productive avenues for future work on this topic in Biblical criticism. The emphasis on embodiment, the querying of the ideological constructions of an apparently “natural” bodily expression, and the attention to how performances construct, rather than reproduce, meanings all offer a critical vocabulary for future interdisciplinary work. Perhaps the most significant value of the Shakespeare tradition for Biblical Studies, however, is the very aspect I have been tracing in this article: its ghostly doubling of the other field, its persistent and even uncanny likeness in unlikeness which prompts questions about what seems inevitable or immutable.