

CHAPTER 12.

GOD LOOKS ON THE INWARD HEART: OXFORD'S NEO-PLATONISM AND HIS BIBLE

I am not as I seem to be
For when I smile I am not glad
A thrall although you count me free,
When most in mirth, most pensive sad.

--Edward de Vere

Each of three prominent ideas of Renaissance neo-Platonism represented in Shakespeare are also marked in the text or notes of de Vere's Geneva Bible: belief in the ethical and aesthetic superiority of an inner invisible substance contrasted to the outward world of fallen appearances (I Samuel 16.7; I Corinthians 6.19-21; II Corinthians 4.16-18), belief in the ontological and aesthetic primacy of certain things or events which form the "pattern" or "precedent" for all other subsequent happenings which represent mere recapitulations of

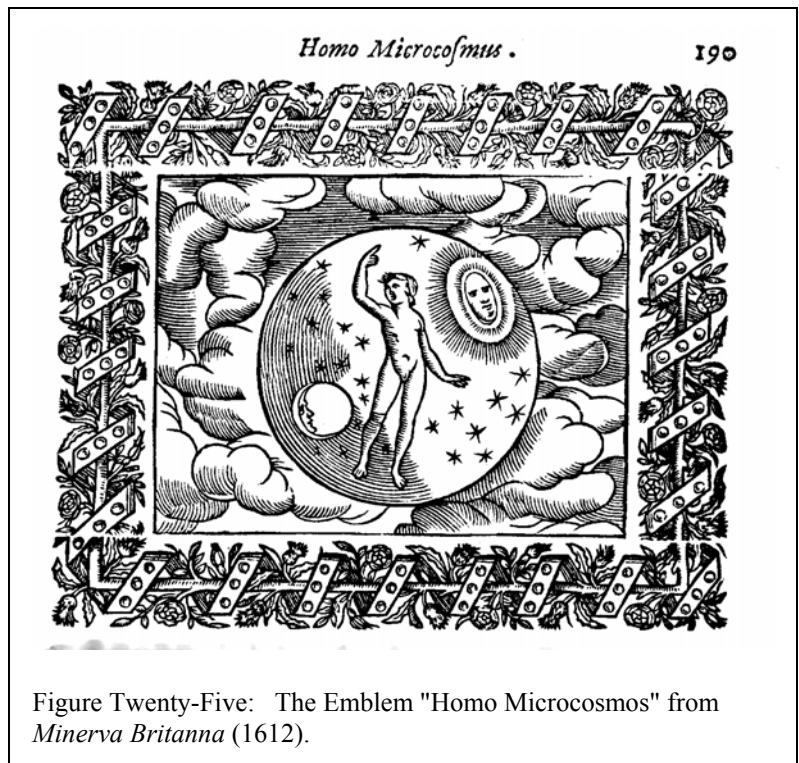


Figure Twenty-Five: The Emblem "Homo Microcosmos" from *Minerva Britanna* (1612).

them (Arguments to I and II Samuel; note (c) at I Samuel 12.3)¹, and belief that the essential components of the universe are mirrored in the smallest part of it, so that for example the body of man represented a *homo microcosmos*, "a little world" (figure twenty-five) containing all the essentials of the universe in microcosm (Wisdom 1.11). This chapter will discuss the first of

¹ Sartre, writing about the 17th century, captures this state of mind as perceptively as any literary historian with whom I am familiar when he writes that the pre-modern writer "conçoit l'histoire comme une série d'accidents qui affectent l'homme éternel en surface sans le modifier profondément et s'il devait assigner un sens à la durée historique il y verrait à la fois une éternelle répétition, telle que les événements antérieurs puissent et doivent fournir des leçons à ses contemporains, et, à la fois, un processus de légère involution, puisque les événements capitaux de l'histoire sont passées depuis longtemps et puisque, la perfection dans les lettres ayant été atteinte dès l'Antiquité, ses modèles anciens lui paraissent inégales" (118).

these three propositions; the second will be discussed in chapter Thirteen, "King David, Orpheus and the Pattern of the Poet," and the third in chapter Eighteen, "Smallest Things in *Measure for Measure*."

Herbert J. Coursen, in his *Christian Ritual and the World of Shakespeare's Tragedies* (1976), has identified the discrepancy between appearance and reality as "Shakespeare's great theme" (150). In a recently published work, *Shakespeare and Ocular Proof* (1995), Alex Aronson not only agrees but examines in detail the centrality of the concept in Shakespeare. Aronson argues that the distinction between the merely visible and the actual is fundamental to Shakespeare's conception of the nature of good and evil. Shakespearean characters, enmeshed in webs of language of their own weaving, fall into error when they fail to distinguish the actual from the merely visible. Evil is the consequence of representation which does not correspond to the hidden laws of nature but only places an illusory gloss on phenomena. Shakespeare's tragic figures fall into believing that

what they see is a 'true' image of life, even when what they see is manifestly impossible. Accepting the most absurd ocular proof at its face value, they choose the illusory reality of a fool's paradise where 'nothing is but what is not' (3)...The contrast established between the two kinds of truth resulting either from studying books (through the mind) or from looking at beauty (through the eyes) is significant: for it introduces the archetype, the evil of blindness, into a universe where man's proudest attribute is his eyesight, a universe of eternal daylight where happiness is granted to those alone who 'keep their eyes open'.

(4)

Peter Milward concurs, finding that "the prevailing tendency in the plays of Shakespeare, from first to last, is an insistence on truth behind the deceptiveness of ornament. This is his aim in every question -- whether of the political order, as in the histories, and tragedies, or of romantic love and honor, as in the comedies and Roman plays" (1973 242). This thematic preoccupation is very thoroughly reflected in Shakespeare's Bible references. Of the top eighty-one Shakespearean Bible verses identified in my SD list (see chapter appendices A-B for details), no fewer than five of them -- I Samuel 16.7, Matthew 7.15, I Corinthians 6.19, II Corinthians 4.16-18 and II Corinthians 11.14 -- are variations on this neo-Platonic theme of the apprehension of a hidden, higher spiritual reality which can only be approached through "insight" which goes beyond mere physical perception. These verses, including Shakespeare's single most frequently cited verse II, Corinthians 11.14, account for forty-four (almost ten percent) of the some five hundred direct hits in the Shakespeare Diagnostics list (see appendices A-B for details). Reference to II Corinthians 11.14 alone occurs as many as eighteen times in Shakespeare, according to prior scholars². Shakespeare even refers to this verse (Shaheen 1993 121) as

² See SD #72. Milward considers it "one of Shakespeare's favorite texts from the Bible" (19).

grounds for skepticism of positions taken by Professors of Divinity, in Bassanio's speech prefiguring his correct solution to the casket guessing game:

The world is still deceived with ornament.
 In law, what plea so tainted and corrupt
 But, being season'd with a gracious voice,
 Obscures the show of evil? In religion
 What damned error, but some sober brow
 Will bless it, and approve it with a text,
 Hiding the grossness with fair ornament?
in a word,
 The seeming truth, which cunning times put on
 To entrap the wisest.

(Merchant 3.2.74-100)

Shakespeare's own skepticism of the "seeming truth" which "cunning times put on," and his conviction that God looks not on the outward man but "on the heart," are manifest in numerous similar passages. The frequent application of this verse substantiates the functional nature of the patterns of Biblical allusion in the oeuvre and illustrates how such allusion functions to reinforce thematic preoccupations such as the discrepancy between deceptive external circumstance and disguised truth. Bassanio's creator, like Bassanio himself, wrestled with an unshakable conviction that things were not "as they seemed to be."

By the testimony of his own annotated Geneva Bible, not to mention extant verses published under his own name, Edward de Vere wrestled with the same philosophical problem. Of the five related items in the Shakespeare Diagnostics list which pertain to the question of ocular truth, no fewer than three of them have been marked by the annotator of de Vere's Bible (figure twenty-six).

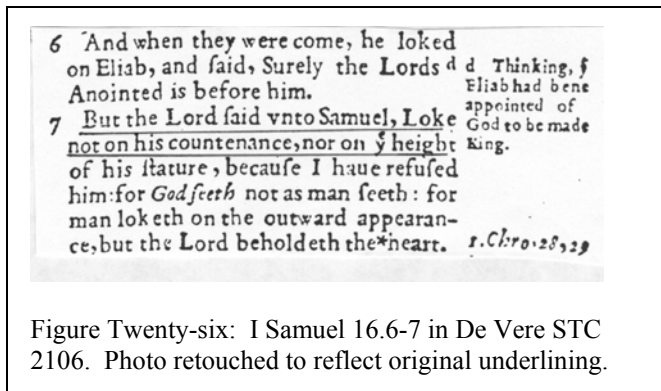


Figure Twenty-six: I Samuel 16.6-7 in De Vere STC 2106. Photo retouched to reflect original underlining.

The leitmotif, derived from the marked passage in I Samuel 16.7, contrasting the "outward form" with the "inward heart" threads through the Shakespeare canon, becoming a characteristic Shakespearean Bible reference. Shaheen (1989) cites three references in the histories:

- When Falstaff lectures Shallow on how to choose a fit recruit for battle:

Will you tell me, Master Shallow, how to choose a man?
 Care I for the limb, the thews, the stature, bulk and big
 Assemblage of a man? Give me *the spirit*....
 3.2.257-60) (II Henry IV

- When Gloucester admonishes the Prince of Wales:

No more can you distinguish of a man,
Than of *his outward show*, which, God he knows,
Seldom or never jumpeth³ with *the heart*.
11)

(*Richard III* 3.1.9-

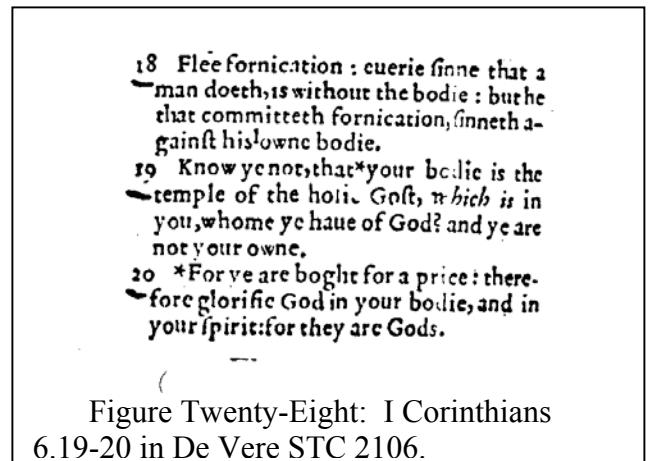
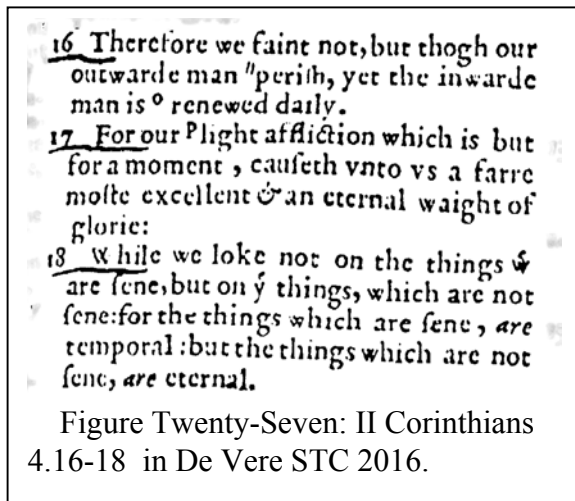
- And when Katherine of Aragon skeptically declares of her English affines⁴:

Ye have Angel's *faces*, but heaven knows your *hearts*.
3.1.145)

(*Henry VIII*

Carter (1905) had previously detected three additional references, Milward (1987) cites two others from the tragedies; the present study documents (see SD list #13) five more from the plays and at least three from the Sonnets -- in which the motif appears to be particularly prominent. These sixteen references to I Samuel 16.7 make it one of the most prominent of Shakespeare's Bible topics.

Two further "neo-platonic" verses of great significance in Shakespeare are also marked in the de Vere Bible (figures twenty-seven and twenty eight):



Carter, for example, cites *II Corinthians 4.16-18* as the source of Simonides' comment on Pericles in his "dejected state":

³ Agrees.

⁴ The wording, in this context, curiously recalls Bede's account in *Historia Ecclesia* of Pope Gregory's response at the sight of a young English boy brought back to Rome. Gregory asked the boy's origins and was told that his people where called "Angles." "Bene," responded the Pope, "nam et angelicam habent faciem et tale angelorum in caelis decet esse cohaeredes [Good, for they have the faces of angels, and such angels ought to be the coheirs of the heavenly kingdom]."

Opinion's but a fool, that makes us scan
The outward habit by the inward man.

(2.2.56)

Milward (1987) and Booth (1977) add three more references between them, and as many as four additional ones are cited in the attached SD lists (69 and 72). At least one of these additions, *Troilus and Cressida* 3.2.196, shows definite evidence "from sign" of its origin in II Corinthians 4.16-18. When Troilus thinks of his lover as one "*outliving beauty's outward,* with a mind that doth *renew* swifter than blood decays" the verb "renew" has been retained from the marked thought in II Corinthians, "yet the *inward man* is *renewed* daily" (emphasis added).

Likewise, the analogy of the body as the temple of the soul, found in the verses marked at I Corinthians 6.19, seems to have impressed itself deeply into Shakespeare's conception: two references are cited by Carter, and one more each by Milward (1987) and Shaheen (1987). Applying the same criteria implicitly employed by these students of the question, five additional references to the thought can without straining be added to the full list.

In other words, de Vere has marked three out of five neo-Platonic items on the Shakespeare Diagnostics List.

The importance of such findings cannot, of course, be adequately communicated by numerical symbolism. It is not difficult to see how this neo-Platonic skepticism towards outward appearances would have functioned as philosophical consolation for a writer suffering from the political deception of the imposition of a *nom de plume* as the condition of his authorship. How can even the most dedicated orthodox scholar, confronted with such a reality, fail to observe, like the befuddled Duke in *Comedy of Errors* considering the confusion of identities between the twinned servants and their masters: "One of these men is Genius to the other....." and hence to wonder: "Which is the natural man,/And which the spirit? Who deciphers them?" (5.1.333-34).

Critics are of course free to point out that Shakespeare's most prominent Bible verse (both in the neo-Platonism cluster and in the Bible itself) -- II Corinthians 11.14 -- is not marked in the de Vere Bible. But this would be to commit the very fallacy which the entire cluster of neo-Platonic verses warns against. The verses which *are* marked point unmistakably to the hidden reality of de Vere's affinity for the thought expressed in II Corinthians 11.14.

Neo-Platonic themes, furthermore, are prominent not only in the de Vere Bible annotations and in allusions to the annotator by writers such as Edmund Spenser and Tom Nashe, but in his extant correspondence as well. In his June 9 1595 tin-mining memoranda to Lord Burghley, Oxford complains about "truth smothered up rather by false appearance" (Chiljan 1998 106). His July 1581 letter, also written to Burghley just after his release from the Tower after Anne

Vavasour had given birth to his illegitimate son Edward Vere, vividly illustrates this same characteristic neo-Platonic *mentalité*:

...the world is so cunning, as *of a shadow* they can make *a substance*, and of a likelihood a truth. And these fellows, if they be those which I suppose, I do not doubt but so to *decipher* them to the world, as easily your Lordship shall look into their lewdness and unfaithfulness.

(Fowler 284: emphasis added)

De Vere's antagonists are apparently Ann Vavasour's relatives, who accused him of being the father of her new child and hence from a mere "likelihood" invoked a "truth"⁵. De Vere perceives them as "Angels of light" who like the false prophets of I Corinthians 11.14 must be "deciphered" in their true colors. While the Duke in *Comedy of Errors*, confronted by identical twins each mistaken for the other, wondered who would "decipher" the natural man from the genius, in De Vere's letter it is quite clear who will be doing the "deciphering." It is almost as though we are reading some plot notes for *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Although the antithetical distinction between the "shadow" of accident and the "substance" of realia invoked in de Vere's letter does not correspond to any specific Bible verse, it does constitute a characteristic neo-Platonic phrasing of Shakespeare's, recurring more than seventeen times in the canon, according to Fowler's study of the de Vere letters. The shadow/substance antithesis "is a favorite of Shakespeare's, unfolded again and again, in the repeated portrayal of what Dr. Herbert R. Coursen, Jr., terms 'Shakespeare's great theme'" (285), viz.:

King Richard	O Ratcliff! I fear, I fear...
Ratcliff.	Nay, good my lord, be not afraid of shadows.
King Richard.	By the Apostle Paul, <i>shadows</i> tonight Have struck more terror to the soul of Richard than can <i>the substance</i> of ten thousand soldiers. (5.3.214-18)

Richard III, in a history play with a pronounced Lancastrian, not to say "Oxfordian"⁶ bias, fears the shadows of the ghosts of his victims. These have been, as it were, conjured up like spirits from underground, to haunt posterity with an image of Richard "deciphered." Thus we may perceive that de Vere's threat to decipher his own enemies -- not to mention the enemies of his ancestors in his historical dramas -- was no idle one.

⁵ Note the implicit pun on "Vere."

⁶ On the pronounced "Oxfordian" character of the Shakespeare history plays, see Daniel Wright, "'Vere-Y Interesting': An Examination of the Author's Treatment of the Earls of Oxford in the History Plays," forthcoming in *The Oxfordian*.