

Further Biblical Allusions to John the Baptist in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

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In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Alexas says: "Good majesty, / Herod of Jewry dare not look upon you / But when you are well pleased." To which Cleopatra responds: "That Herod's head / I'll have" (3.3.2-5). According to Naseeb Shaheen, the name "Herod" in this passage appears to make reference to Herod the Tetrarch (193), the ruler of Galilee responsible for the death of John the Baptist. The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 14, recounts the beheading of the itinerant preacher. Herod had John arrested after he criticized Herod's marriage to Herodias, his brother's wife. Shaheen quotes Matt. 14.6,8: "The daughter of Herodias danced before them, and pleased Herode. And she . . . said, Giue me here Iohn Baptists head in a platter" (647).

In a previous article titled *Echoes of John the Baptist in William Shakespeare's Hamlet*, I made mention of the marginal note of Matthew 14: 1 as recorded in the 1599 Geneva Bible. A closer look at the biblical text may suggest that Shakespeare may have been aware of another marginal note found in the 1560 Geneva Bible. The note of Matthew 14: 4 reads: "As well because *nature abhors* such *horrible incest*, as also that he had taken her by force from his brother" (spellings have been modernized, my emphasis). Before proceeding, it should be kept in mind that "Shakespeare's references are often closer to the Geneva Bible than to any other version. It was the most popular version of the day, and it is only natural to assume that he owned a copy" (Shaheen 39).

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In *Hamlet*, King Claudius marries his brother's wife. The ghost of Hamlet's father says to his son: "O *horrible*, O *horrible*, most *horrible*! / If thou hast *nature* in thee, bear it not. / Let not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damnèd *incest*" (1.5.80-83, my emphasis). In *Cymbeline*, Caius Lucius finds a *headless* body and cries: "Soft, ho, what trunk is here / Without his top? The ruin speaks that sometime / It was a worthy building. How, a page? / Or dead or sleeping on him? But dead rather, / For *nature* doth *abhor* to make his bed / With the defunct, or sleep upon the dead. / Let's see the boy' face" (4.2.355-361, my emphasis). Hence, it appears that these passages may have borrowed biblical material from the aforementioned marginal note.

Works Cited

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