

# The Biblical Covenant in Shakespeare

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*“Now when Jacob was left himself alone, there wrestled a man with him  
unto the breaking of the day.” (Gen. 32:24)  
This book is dedicated to the wrestler*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My intense study of the Hebrew Bible along with Reformation commentaries and Midrashic compilations began in 2010, nested within an extremely complicated human relationship. The desire to understand that relationship and make it bear fruit was the engine that drove my reading and made each new insight feel necessarily redemptive. This book ultimately became my path to freedom—one that clarified the nature of the Beauty I was begetting in all along. If you pick up oversounds in the play of ideas—tones of meaning without words—they, doubtless, originated in the crossing of voices between two people in one little room (call them Adam and Eve) that echoed father and daughter voices “in the dark backward and abysm of time.” Both gardens—of friendship masking abuse and of childhood cut short by death—like the original Eden, were, in some way, always already lost.

While I was studying the Bible, I continued to teach Shakespeare and began to apprehend biblical presences in the plays that seemed interpretively significant. What alerted me to these presences were ostensibly discrete biblical quotations, allusions, or echoes that related to covenant in the patriarchal, prophetic, and historical books of the Bible. When I dwelt with and worked on a particular allusion, it resonated beyond its immediate theatrical context, and I discovered that the biblical narrative was, itself, in deep ethical relationship to the action of the play. Biblical literacy opened up readings that made sense of resonances that had always seemed crucial yet had eluded my understanding: the villain Aaron’s conversion by his infant son, Shylock’s power to elicit sympathy, Falstaff’s iteration of scripture, and the madness of kingship. At times during the study phase of

the project, it felt like I was reading the Bible with Shakespeare or apprehending the plays with the interpretive horizon of an original audience member for whom the Hebrew Bible was also a new experience—one that offered a treasure trove of stories with covenant as the unifying idea.

My husband, Paul Gifford, has supported and aided my research into the theological and political histories of covenant in the early-modern period. An historian of Scottish ancestry, he knew all about the significance of covenant to the Scots and has been persuaded all along by the “historical logic” of the book’s argument. Not only did he suggest fruitful avenues of research, but he has helped tirelessly with the bibliography, indexing, and proofreading, not to mention cooking and child-rearing.

The University of Michigan-Flint has been a wonderful place to test ideas in the classroom. I was able to offer several classes that allowed me to present and hone my developing ideas: *Shakespeare Reads the Old Testament*, *Shakespeare as Historian: the Henriad*, and a seminar on *Shakespeare and Religion*. Students were persuaded that covenant was a significant idea and excited by the parallels to biblical narratives, but their provocative questions and determination to test their own insights provided a refining crucible for my thinking. Special thanks to Brian Gebhart, Kristen Machuk, Andrea Edwards, Susan Osborne, Morgan Troxell, Lauren Davis, Jeannie Edwards, Hannah Griffin, Maggie Hudkins, Amy Hartwig, Kristopher Price, Joshua Shank, Lucas Savoie, and Nolan Moore.

I am also grateful to the anonymous reader for *ELH* who offered trenchant criticism of an early version of an essay that was finally published as “*The Merchant of Venice: Shylock and Covenantal Interplay*” in the Summer 2017 edition of the journal. *ELH* kindly granted permission to publish a somewhat altered version of that essay in this book. Julia Reinhard Lupton was a generous reader of the same essay, which I first submitted to another journal, and she graciously invited me to present my argument on *Merchant* as part of a panel at the 2015 annual meeting of the Modern Language Association along with herself, Ken Jackson, and Brian Cummings. At that meeting, I was pleasantly surprised by and grateful for the supportive and helpful comments of Jeffrey Knapp, Arthur Marotti, Daniel Ritchie, and Cynthia Scheinberg.

Mary Thomas Crane is in a category all her own. She directed my dissertation at Boston College many years ago and has continued to support my work. Despite her initial skepticism of a “religious” Shakespeare, I am honored that she finds the readings I have shared “good enough” to

persuade her. I am blessed to have had a woman of such intelligence, humor, and good sense in my corner for so many years.

Finally, for their kindness and emotional support, I must acknowledge my friend Wanda Needleman for keeping covenant through regular emails, my mentor Susan Leitman for gently reminding me to let my feelings guide my search for truth, my corgi Panda for insisting on long walks, and my daughter Katya Gifford, for fun. Katya's love of drama infuses everything with intensity, and her sharp wit is a welcome distraction and daily cause for joy, reminding me that it is time to close the books and enter life ... "Better once than never, for never too late."

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