

14.19

Shakespeare and 1 Corinthians

The plays of William Shakespeare are filled with allusions and near-quotations of the Bible. The Bard appears to have been especially fond of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians.

Direct Quotes

First there are direct quotations (or at least attempts at direct quotation).

A Midsummer Night's Dream: Bottom says, "The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was" (4.1.203–209).

Paul writes, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him—these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:9–10).

Bottom (a character who often plays "the fool") is apparently trying to quote Paul, albeit in a garbled, nonsensical way. Paul himself was quoting from, or at least alluding to, Isaiah 64:4.

A Winter's Tale: Paulina (female Paul?) restores the supposedly dead Hermione to life, observing that "in every wink of an eye, some new grace will be born" (5.2.112–13).

Paul writes, "We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye" (1 Cor. 15:51–52).

As You Like It: Touchstone says, “I do now remember a saying. ‘The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool’” (5.1.34–35).

Paul writes, “If you think that you are wise in this age, you should become fools so that you may become wise” (1 Cor. 3:18).

Marital Ethic

Second, there are instances in which the romantic or sexual foibles of Shakespeare’s characters are played out against that marital ethic of 1 Corinthians 7. Shakespeare scholars suggest the Pauline teaching of 1 Corinthians 7 formed part of the “cultural repertoire” of Elizabethan audiences, such that biblical passages would have immediately come to mind when characters said or did certain things.

The Merchant of Venice: When Shylock’s Jewish daughter decides to marry her Christian lover she proclaims, “I shall end this strife, become a Christian and thy loving wife.”

Paul writes, “The unbelieving wife is made holy through her husband” (1 Cor. 7:14).

Henry IV, Part 1: Hotspur’s wife, Lady Percy (aka Kate), openly wonders why her husband no longer comes to her at night: “For what offence have I this fortnight been / A banish’d woman from my Harry’s bed?” (2.3.896)

Paul writes, “The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband.” (1 Cor. 7:3).