

Introduction

We often find “the Bible and Shakespeare” grouped together in popular discussions, as if they form a central core of human (or at least Anglo-Saxon) civilisation. The long-running BBC radio programme *Desert Island Discs* famously asks celebrities what records they would want to take if they were being marooned alone, along with a single book and a luxury item to cheer their solitude and make the castaway life a bit more worth living. The only two books that guests are not permitted to choose are the Bible and the complete works of Shakespeare, since these are assumed to have been already deposited on the island by some enterprising (and vaguely heterodox) branch of the Gideon Society. Behind this stricture lies, perhaps, the assumption that so many celebrities would choose either one or other of these volumes that the programme would become tediously predictable. But there is also a suggestion, in the image of the castaway with their neatly bound copies of the Bible and Shakespeare, that these are the books that can provide a complete life in themselves, that they can either replace the society of other people, or provide the individual with the potted results of previous centuries of culture. Indeed, as I was working on this book, the National Secular Society started a campaign to persuade the BBC to remove this aspect of the programme, which was duly followed by a counterblast from right wing newspapers at the abandonment of “our Bible” and “our Christian culture”.¹ Whatever practicalities of radio format caused the Bible to first appear on *Desert Island Discs*, its potential removal is seen – by both sides – as a statement about the beliefs of Anglophone culture.

There are a number of other possible echoes in the couplet of “the Bible and Shakespeare”. They might be read as a *hendiadys*, the rhetorical device that Shakespeare himself frequently employed,

1. e.g. Allan Massie’s column, “We Can’t Cast Away Our Bible”, *The Telegraph*, 11th August 2013.

and which brackets together two similar terms whose overlapping meanings cannot quite be distinguished from each other in the final phrase, such as “law and order” or “house and home”. Particularly in the nineteenth century, “the Bible and Shakespeare” might be seen as a hendiadys, a joint repository of authority whose internal borders were somewhat blurry but whose external clout was tremendous. Or the two terms might mark out the two medieval spheres of power: the spiritual and temporal. Phrased slightly differently, they might designate two areas of knowledge or wisdom: the sacred and the secular. In Britain – given the importance of the Church of England and the King James Bible in the history of its politics and culture, as well as the enshrining of Shakespeare as the “national poet” – they might be read as the twin pillars of the establishment.

Sacred Texts?

The works of Shakespeare and the Bible are both “sacred texts” in their different ways.¹ I use that category not to suggest that they have equivalent value, or to make suggestions about the origins of their texts or their potential to affect people. I simply mean to point out the striking parallels in the ways they have been regarded and treated by certain groups. The Biblical critic John Barton defines “scriptural status” as a function of how a text is read. He identifies a number of related ways in which a book is treated distinctively by readers once it has been called “Scripture”, focusing on the assumptions which this label brings *prior* to each individual reading. A Scripture is “a text that matters and which contains no trivialities, nothing ephemeral” (135). He gives the example of Paul’s interpretation of Deuteronomy 25:4, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the corn”. Paul did not care about animal rights, and therefore read this as an

1. Throughout this book, I will be discussing the Bible and its reading within a specifically Christian tradition, and using the terms “New Testament” and “Old Testament” as designations of the way these collections of texts function in that tradition. I have not attempted to discuss the rich and varied traditions of Jewish interpretation of the same texts, except when these impinge obviously on the Christian reading. This is not intended in any way as a slight, or a suggestion that other interpretative traditions – especially those of Judaism – are wrong, but simply to define the scope of this particular book. In the chapters on textual criticism and the canon, I will also be focusing on the New Testament, as a collection of consciously Christian works that built on an existing set of Scriptures.

allegory for the right of religious teachers to be paid for the work they carry out. The other possibility – that the verse means nothing of importance – is ignored because of the book’s scriptural status. In fact, Barton makes an explicit comparison with Shakespeare whilst proposing this idea, suggesting that in English literature there is “a taboo” against reading the books considered to be vaguely “scriptural” in a way that assumes them to be trivial (135).

It is not acceptable to think Shakespeare is deeply uninteresting, that he wrote on silly and boring themes, that his plots are inconsequential. And if such thoughts do strike the reader, the “canonical” status of Shakespeare usually eliminates them before they can gain a hold. Dislocations of plot become clues to deeper unities, long and tedious speeches are seen as brilliant characterization. Shakespeare’s authority lays on the reader the hermeneutical imperative: Read this play as important.

(135)

It is certainly true that any exam question or essay assignment that asks “Discuss Shakespeare’s use of metaphor” or “Investigate the way magic functions in the later plays” has the implicit final clause *and explain why this proves Shakespeare’s greatness*. Many school students with a facility for getting high marks in English Lit classes realise that they are being marked partly on their skill at picking apart rhyme schemes and imagery, but also partly on their ability to relate these satisfactorily to the larger ideology of literary value. It is not enough to trace a pattern of metaphors through a poem; this must then be used as proof that the work is “effective”, “emotional”, “organic”, or another term that implies a value judgement. A lot of students, teachers and readers find themselves instinctively making this move from describing features of the text to praising the work and its author. Even without explicit comments of this kind, it could be argued that the analysis itself bolsters the canonical position of the author, particularly when it happens within an educational setting that awards marks and qualifications for demonstrating the non-triviality of these texts. This often becomes visible only when it is done “badly”; when it is carried out in a way that fails to abide by the implied rules effectively enough, and thus highlights the switch between modes when an essay moves from analysis to ideology.

With Shakespeare the stakes are even higher: the process of literary discussion often seems set on proving Shakespeare not only

great but greater than all others. Stephen Greenblatt's phrase "the conventional pieties of source study" sums this up well, pointing to the tendency to investigate the earlier texts Shakespeare drew upon only in the service of his status as a transcendent literary icon (94). "As a freestanding, self-sufficient, disinterested art work produced by a solitary genius, *King Lear* has only an accidental relationship to its sources," remarks Greenblatt ironically, "they provide a glimpse of the 'raw material' that the artist fashioned" (95). His comment underlines the way in which even rigorous and "factual" scholarship, such as the apparently dry issue of sources and textual influences, is often directed by assumptions about the relative value of the authors involved. The point about significance holds true in a broader sense: even in academia, where there are plenty of scholars who will argue Shakespeare's plots are banal, his ideas racist and his works potentially toxic, it is rare to find someone arguing that he is trivial and irrelevant.

According to Barton's second observation, Scripture is also assumed to have "contemporary relevance . . . to every generation, to all people at all times" (137). This is also a major feature of the way Shakespeare is discussed. Just as "Biblical characters were seen as typical of various human virtues or vices", many people are used to mentally categorising Othello as "jealousy" or Macbeth as "ambition" (137). Whether it is framed as "human nature" or "psychological accuracy", Shakespeare is believed to have produced narratives, figures and insights that will not cease to be relevant as social customs change. Shakespeare provides some sort of blueprint or deep code which remains the same through the centuries. Even when it is not spelled out in terms of timeless emotions, archetypes or wisdom, our society continually treats Shakespeare's works as a body of writing with "contemporary relevance". A good example is provided by the 2012 production of *Timon of Athens* at the National Theatre in London. The advertising material for this production called it a "strange fable of conspicuous consumption, debt and ruin", tying it to the recent economic crash, and featured a photograph of the actor playing Timon (Simon Russell Beale) at a party with figures clearly intended to be the footballer David Beckham, the former Prime Minister Tony Blair and the Mayor of London Boris Johnson. Reviews in the press accepted this claim to "relevance" as a central feature of their approval, declaring it "an urgent play for today", "a lacerating parable for our troubled

times”, “so relevant” and praising the director for “seizing the cynical disillusioned day. He hurls *Timon of Athens* into the 21st century and finds it lands there almost perfectly”.¹

However analogically “relevant” the sight of an Athenian nobleman sitting in the wilderness railing about sexually transmitted diseases might feel to reviewers in the middle of an economic crisis, there are plays from Shakespeare’s period that are much more apt in a literal sense. *The Alchemist* and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* depict the commodifying of relationships and *The Witch of Edmonton* illustrates the way poor people are used as a scapegoat for a community’s fears and economic insecurity. Indeed, the whole early modern genre known as “city comedy” spends its time attacking the money-obsessed, status-grubbing, debt-ridden world of London society. In other words, there are a handful of plays from the early seventeenth century which are literally about the city of which Boris Johnson is mayor, and where the National Theatre staged their production of *Timon*.

But the question of “relevance” in modern productions of drama from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is not simply a matter of matching up topics and themes. It is affected by prior assumptions about which playwrights are “relevant” or able to speak to our modern concerns (Shakespeare) and those who are of “historical” interest and can only speak about the period in which they lived (everyone else). The idea that the play has modern relevance is not solely based on recognising specific elements that have parallels in modern life, or that show unexpected continuities between the Elizabethan era and our own. It is based on a framework of interpretation that precedes the actual comparison of a play to modern life, one that has already positioned the work as a “sacred text” which will have something to say. As Barton points out, once a text has been designated as Scripture, readers are not continually subjecting it to tests in order to determine whether it qualifies. They are much more likely to read it in distinctively different ways from other books, without stopping after every paragraph to wonder whether they have read something in a non-sacred text that would fulfil the requirements just as well. Thus modern producers of Shakespeare do not trawl through the early modern theatre looking for works that might be “a lacerating parable

1. These reviews appeared on the National Theatre’s own website, suggesting that they represented the kind of praise the theatre wanted associated with the show: the reviewers had understood and approved the production’s intended meaning.

for our troubled times”. They already assume that Shakespeare will fulfil that function, and performing *Timon* perpetuates that belief. It is not, after all, mainly a belief about the power of literature to reflect our lives today. That would be equally well served by staging the other plays I mentioned, and rather more specific insights might result. It is a belief that *Shakespeare* is always relevant, and will always be relevant. Putting on *Timon* after an economic crash caused by dubious lending practices amongst multinational finance corporations means that audiences and reviewers will be keenly watching for contemporary relevance even though the majority of them probably did not know the story, and perhaps had never heard of the play before. When that relevance was found, it fulfilled their expectations (and it is difficult to talk about this function of Shakespeare without straying into the language of prophecy) and is taken as “proof” of his universal relevance, strengthening the assumptions that led them to look for contemporary parallels in the first place.

“Relevance” also requires that the parallels produce an acceptable message, of course. Causing the audience to draw comparisons with the modern world is not enough, they must be drawn in a way that reflects positively on Shakespeare. For example, there is a play in the Shakespeare canon that arguably has a better claim than *Timon* to contemporary relevance in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crash. It involves the lending and re-lending of money, the commodification of people’s bodies and romances in monetary terms, a parade of rich cosmopolitan characters from the multinational elite and the idea that one’s self can be an investment project that will attract more capital. There is even an economic crash that leaves one character stranded when his debts are foreclosed. Thankfully, no major theatre (or any theatre that I am aware of) staged *The Merchant of Venice* in order to draw parallels with the unscrupulous lending in the sub-prime mortgage market, the implosion of over-leveraged merchant banks or the disaster of foreclosures for people who did not have the resources to adjust to the “credit crunch” as banks stopped lending. There was certainly plenty of extreme right-wing sentiment in the aftermath of the economic crisis, manifesting itself in anti-immigrant rhetoric in the popular press, conspiracy theories and street violence. However, the modern relevance that the audience at a cultural institution like the National Theatre expects to find in Shakespeare is not an Elizabethan concoction of racism, the scapegoating of minorities or anti-Semitic insinuations

about the role of Jewish people in financial institutions. That kind of uncomfortable parallel is far more likely to be explained away as the result of Shakespeare's own time, rather than as part of his true message. Once again, the interpretation of Shakespeare, and what he has to say to us, is determined much more by the prior assumptions held about the "Scriptural" nature of his texts than by continually holding them up against those assumptions. Shakespeare is always relevant, but he is relevant in a way that fits our veneration of him.

The third aspect of treating texts as "Scripture" that John Barton identifies is an assumption of consistency. This is less striking for Shakespeare, since his plays are rarely used to produce explicit guidance or rules for life, unlike the Bible. Inconsistencies are less of an immediate problem if a reviewer does not feel it appropriate to cite lines from another Shakespeare play in order to prove that a certain production is inauthentic or missed Shakespeare's meaning. We do not tend to see controversies over Shakespeare in the same way that Christians debate the issue of female leadership in church or same-sex marriage, citing particular passages that support their view and call into question the other side's position. Nonetheless, the idea that Shakespeare is basically consistent underpins the way in which his plays are staged. The groundbreaking 1963/4 season of the Histories at the Royal Shakespeare Company has inspired a number of similar projects such as *Rose Rage* (an adaptation of the Henry VI plays into a sequential trilogy) and the BBC's history play sequence for the Cultural Olympiad which ran alongside the London Olympics in 2012. The subject matter, the plays' progress through vital moments of English history, and the fact that some characters reappear in different plays, make this an apparently obvious way to arrange performances. The panoramic vistas of English history, coupled with the struggles as a ruling house emerges, have captivated the audiences of these sequences.

This seems an obviously logical way to perform the history plays, at least it seems so once the Shakespeare canon is closed, printed and identified as a secular "Scripture". However, this involves imposing an order on the plays that is contradicted by our knowledge of Shakespeare's career. The first play to be written was the second *Henry VI*, followed by the third *Henry VI* which continues the story, and then the first *Henry VI*, which loops back in time to relate the events which preceded the other two. *Richard III*, which deals with the narrative after 3 *Henry VI*, was the fourth to appear, after which Shakespeare jumped even further back to produce a chronological

run of four plays about events that pre-dated all of the previous histories: *Richard II*, the two *Henry IV*'s and *Henry V*. If the historical events of the Histories run 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8, the composition order runs 6-7-5-8-1-2-3-4. The contents page of the First Folio arranges the plays in order of their events, imposing a consistency on their somewhat haphazard composition. This involves crossing genre boundaries: *The Tragedie of King Richard the third. Containing His treacherous Plots against his brother Clarence: the pittiefull murther of his innocent nephews: his tyrannicall usurpation: with the whole course of his detested life, and most deserved death* becomes the "History" play we recognise as *Richard III*. The tragic arc of rise, triumph and downfall, which finds parallels in *Macbeth* or Marlowe's tyrant epic *Tamburlaine*, is plugged into the canon of the Histories. That canon is interpreted via the tighter dramaturgy and historical vision of the second tetralogy (*Richard II*, the two *Henry IV*'s and *Henry V*), whilst the diffuser and more picaresque *Henry VI* plays are shuffled within the sequence and brought under the scheme established by the later works. Given this interpretative labour, it comes as no surprise that staging "the Histories" usually involves a considerable quantity of cuts, adjustment and general adaptation of the text. During preparations for the 1963/4 season, for example, the RSC's artistic director found he needed to write a certain amount of cod-Shakespearean dialogue to paper over the cracks. Shakespeare's vision of history is smoothed into a coherent unity, demonstrating Barton's principle of "consistency" against the evidence both of the texts and the historical facts.

The final principle is the idea that the Scriptural text contains an excess of meaning, a "vision of the text as full of mysteries, with many layers of meaning below the surface sense" (142). It is not exhausted by a literal reading which spells out what the words apparently refer to in a simple sense, but has the potential to release a host of hidden meanings if it is studied for long enough. This approach ranges from the idea that there are allegorical and symbolic meanings within the Bible – which almost no-one would argue against – to methods of reading that seek hidden codes and connections. The examples Barton gives include the exegesis of Genesis 3:16 by Paul, in which he argues that the fact that God made promises to Abraham "and his seed" in the collective singular instead of using the plural means that a single individual is meant, and that Jesus is that individual. The grammatical detail, which does not affect the meaning of the original line ("seed" is not an unusual form of words in Hebrew), is

read as if it carried a secret meaning that is only visible in retrospect. This secret meaning is almost parasitic on the first, existing as a code within the structure of the language. Likewise, Barton points out the practice of the Masoretes, a group of medieval Jewish scholars who demonstrated an enormous concern with the exact graphical form of the Scriptures – the precise letters and symbols used to write it – along with what sometimes appears to be indifference towards the meaning. “Meaning does not lie at the heart of the Masoretic text: what matters is the precise set of graphical forms given to Israel by God” (132).

Again, this may seem very far from any way that Shakespeare has been treated. However, there are examples of people seeking a coded meaning in the precise form of the plays, rather than their characters or meanings. James Shapiro has related the ingenious readings conspiracy theorists in the nineteenth century came up with to argue that “Shakespeare” was actually the pseudonym of Francis Bacon. In one version of this theory, Bacon had written the plays as a way of expressing his political discontent, and that of a small group of plotters around him. In order to reward those who were keen enough to sniff out his meaning, Bacon had allegedly encoded secret messages in the plays identifying himself and explaining his reasons. To reveal these messages, conspiracists treated Shakespeare’s works like the Christian numerologists of Bacon’s own time treated the Bible: assigning numbers to letters and words, seeking mathematical patterns that would point to the “true” meaning of the lines. Some sought the truth more laterally, and cut the collected works into long strips of paper to be wound round movable metal wheels, thinking that coherent sentences would emerge if the letters were read across the grain, if only the right combination of the wheels could be managed. Their failure was sometimes blamed on the way printers or editors had typeset the works: just like the Masoretes, these conspiracy theorists believed that the “true” meaning of Shakespeare was to be sought in the precise sequence of letters and punctuation marks, not in what those individual graphical characters meant when they were combined into words. This attitude even brings Shakespeare and the Bible together, in the urban legend that Psalm 46 in the King James Version was translated by Shakespeare. People have deduced this because you can find his name “hidden” in the text by counting forty-six words from the beginning and forty-six from the end, which correlate to the age he would have been when the KJV was translated. The story makes no attempt to explain how

on earth the translators appointed by King James knew Shakespeare, or why a member of the entertainment industry which was viewed with suspicion by many clergy would have been asked to contribute to a religious project. This is not a historical theory at all, but a near-magical way of reading the text, which assumes that there are obscure codes hidden in it, running against the grain of its apparent meaning.

The concept of Scripture as a text with an excess of meaning is echoed and expanded in Rowan Williams' definition of a sacred text: "one for which the context is more than the social-ideological matrix" (224). He explains that approaching it involves

a reading context that assumes a continuity between the world of the text and the world of the reader, and also assumes that reader and text are responding to a gift, an address or summons not derived from the totality of the empirical environment.
(224)

In other words, a sacred text is one that points beyond itself and the situations in which it is written and read. We can explain and investigate the conditions that gave rise to it, and account for individual writers or the churches where it was produced, but the effect of the work as a whole is to call on the reader from outside their situation. The sacred text, in this view, speaks from elsewhere, disrupting the closed relationship between writer, reader and text. For Williams, we read Scripture "alert for 'deeper meanings'" because there is always more meaning to be unfolded (227). Just as there is more to a sacred text than the context of the writer, there is more to it than the situation of the reader: "the hearing of God at any one point does not exhaust God's speaking" and the text is "unresolved, unfinished, self-reflexive", pointing towards things it cannot contain (227).

We might expect this to be a claim specific to Biblical scholars, but similar statements can be found in comments on Shakespeare. Allan Bloom has stated that "Men may live more truly and fully in reading Plato and Shakespeare than at any other time, because then they are participating in essential being and forgetting their accidental lives" (380). The distinction between "accidental" parts of life, which are specific to time and circumstances, and the "essential being" which can be accessed by reading Shakespeare and Plato lifts the works out of historical contingency and places them amongst the eternal forms, allying these writers with the original source of reality that our world can only dimly reflect. The

regular statements heard in newspapers and press releases about Shakespeare's "universality" slip past easily, but are making equally strong, apparently metaphysical, claims about him. Indeed, it is unclear whether "him" is the right pronoun for the Shakespeare that such statements imagine. They clearly cannot be referring to the historical person William Shakespeare who is designated by the will, property deeds and other legal documents that remain from the seventeenth century. Nor can "Shakespeare" in this sense mean a book of plays. Such assertions are about what the plays – whether read or performed – give us access to. Whether we call that creative imagination, a shared human nature, a transcendent genius, or simply a fiction (in either sense), they also invoke the "excess" beyond the social-historical-ideological context of reading and writing. Thus, both the way Shakespeare is treated and the way it is described seem to frame it as a sacred text or Scripture.

Reading (and Reading Reading)

In my discussion of Shakespeare and the Bible so far I have hurried over the word that precedes them in the title: *reading*. This word is central to the approach that *Words of Power* will take. In everyday life we use it in a variety of forms, as a noun and verb, with various shades of meaning in different contexts. Someone may announce from the lectern during a church service "A reading from the prophet Isaiah . . .", or an actor might explain "I'm reading for the part of Macbeth". An academic might praise "a particularly striking reading of *Henry V*" in a recent book – or might refer their class to "this week's reading". The activity of reading is often imagined as private and silent, but can equally be public and declarative. "Reading" can mean a set text, an interpretation of that text, an activity, a demonstration of skill or a legal intervention. The uses I have mentioned stress the ways in which reading can involve unlocking the meanings in a written text, but can also involve interpreting them, or even constructing meaning in dialogue with what is written. As we will see in later chapters, the process of reading also helps to construct the canon, to identify certain books as authoritative and to weave coherence between apparently disparate texts. When we come to an obscure or difficult passage, we are forced to confront our own activity as readers in making sense from what has been written. Unless we are willing to throw up our hands and assign the text no meaning whatsoever, we have to decide what a disputed or confusing line might mean. This

is simply a more noticeable example of our continual involvement in the making of meaning, which takes place on a collective as well as an individual level. Reading is an active matter, and one of the concerns of this book is to trace how both Shakespeare and the Bible are read into the forms with which we are familiar.

In *Words of Power*, I will explore the history and use of the Bible and Shakespeare via this idea of reading the text into shape. The first two chapters are concerned with the canon and text: which books are included in the authoritative collections of the Bible and the works of Shakespeare, and which precise words are contained within those books. These might sound like issues that precede reading. After all, it is necessary to determine which plays are in the works of Shakespeare, and which words are in those plays, before beginning to read them. However, as I will show, both questions are tied up with how we read the books. Canonical and textual scholarship both involve intense reading of manuscripts: comparing, speculating, trying to make sense of the sources we possess. Textual criticism even uses the term “a reading” to refer to a particular variant of a text. These disciplines do not suspend the question of meaning until they have established in neutral and scientific terms which books are authentic and which versions of those books are to be accepted. They make decisions partly based upon the different meanings which those decisions would produce when the texts are read, and they test their theories against the resulting readings. Reading is an integral part of the search for the right list of books and the correct wording of their contents.

The third chapter looks at the different methods of interpretation that are applied to both collections, from spiritual allegory to feminist theory, and from character analysis to performance criticism. The huge variety of ways of reading these books highlights both the richness and depth that people have found in them, and the way meaning emerges as a co-operation between text and reader. Whilst it is not true that readers can find absolutely anything they want in Shakespeare or the Bible, using the reading tools of Marxist theory will produce a drastically different interpretation from the one arrived at with the reading tools of rhetorical criticism.

The fourth chapter looks at reading in a more practical sense, concentrating on the differences between public performance and private silent reading. As with theories of interpretation, the way the texts are performed can shape the sorts of meanings which emerge. Public and private performance suppose different intentions on the

part of those engaging with the books, and history is full of writers who harboured suspicions about those who performed them in the “wrong” ways. Some extreme examples are included, in order to tease out why people thought the way they did, notably Charles Lamb’s insistence in the nineteenth century that Shakespeare cannot really be performed on stage without ruining it, and St. Augustine’s passive-aggressive justification of St. Ambrose reading the Bible to himself, despite how suspicious such an activity might appear.

The fifth and sixth chapters expand the scope of “reading” to consider some examples of the ways in which Shakespeare and the Bible are used in non-theatrical and non-religious contexts. Adverts, state ceremonies and novels are only a few of the contexts in which the words of these books appear. These all constitute “readings” in that they impose a certain interpretation on the words. A judge, a general or a politician quoting Shakespeare is doing so because they believe the words have a particular meaning, and one that serves their purpose. A poet who embeds Biblical echoes in their writing does so to pick up certain resonances and draw out certain implications. Both these examples involve assigning a meaning to the words, thus reflecting back upon the original text. They are interpretations that can add another layer of meaning to the work from which they come. How much of our understanding of both books is built up from hearing them quoted and adapted in other contexts? Shakespeare’s works and the Bible both hold associations in our public culture that sometimes have very little to do with the actual words contained within them.

As those summaries might suggest, a considerable part of this book’s exploration of the reading of Shakespeare and the Bible will involve looking at the past. This is not entirely because we cannot understand our current ways of reading without first learning about hundreds of years of history – although that can give us a firmer grasp of what we do and why we do it – but because history can provide useful surprises. These two texts are such an established part of our cultural landscape that it is easy to take them for granted, and assume that the ways we treat them are natural and inevitable. Noticing a monk who mused on the four different meanings enclosed in one word, or a sixteenth-century playwright who rewrote *King Lear* to give it a happy ending, can bring us up with a salutary shock. It forces us to deal with the fact that our own attitudes to these sacred texts are particular and time-bound. They are the result of historical and social conditions which we

cannot always see, but which have a deep influence on us. The Russian literary critic Viktor Shlovsky described the potential for “defamiliarisation” in literature, meaning its capacity to show us the world in arresting and startling ways.¹ For him it was part of art’s function to stop us taking the world around us for granted, to make it strange and striking by forcing us to break our automatic habits of perception and confront the weirdness that surrounded us. History can function in a similar way, jolting us out of our ruts and bringing us face to face with people who also thought theirs was the only natural way to do things. Part of the purpose of *Words of Power* is to help us look again at our own religious and literary reading, and to see it as bizarre, outrageous, eccentric and obscure.

With that in mind, it is inevitable that my own historical and social situation will affect the way I have written this work. As a British academic specialising in literature, and a member of the Church of England, my approach to these texts will be deeply informed by my education, the institutions I have worked within, and all my experiences of Shakespeare and the Bible, from convivial weekends in Stratford-upon-Avon to taking part in the Liturgy of the Word in an eight-hundred-year-old parish church. The examples I have selected, and the way in which I have discussed them, will be tinged by my own outlook and the influences that have shaped me.² Nonetheless, I hope that I have drawn widely enough that most readers in Britain and the US will recognise the general outlines of the literary and religious cultures I have sketched, and find something valuable in examining their history and diversity, even if their own specific situation is rather different in detail. In fact, those readers whose experiences differ might find it easiest to see the oddness and particularity of the modern reading worlds I mention.

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1. A good account of the term is given in Makaryk, p. 528.
 2. Whilst consulting a certain edition of the works of Irenaeus of Lyons, the second-century bishop and theologian, I was amused to find a note from the editor describing the way in which Irenaeus appeals to all parts of the Christian church, and is thus claimed as a forerunner by Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists and so on. This was particularly amusing to me, as the briefest perusal of Irenaeus’ theological writings will show clearly that he was an Anglican, probably educated at an independent school in the south of England, and most likely with an appreciation of cricket, bitter ale and the novels of Dorothy L. Sayers.