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David in English Drama

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Summary: This study attempts to trace the use of the David material in English drama. It turns out that an independent tradition could not develop; on the one hand, the religious-ideological disputes in English history and, on the other hand, the effects of censorship prevented this. The plays by George Peele (published 1599), Hannah More (1782), Stephen Phillips (1904), and D.H. Lawrence (1926) are used to show how episodes from David's story are used to represent ideological concerns.

The story of David is a myth, a story that is told over and over again, that helps us to explain who we are, where we come from and where we are going, a story that offers us patterns of interpretation for our experiences and enables us to embed them in a supra-temporal order. The multifaceted nature of the figure—David as a shepherd, as a wise monarch, as a servant of God, as an adulterer, as a repentant sinner, as a friend, as an implacable adversary—makes it possible for it to be used for a variety of purposes. This can be impressively demonstrated by its use in English dramatic literature; but it also shows which roles of David could hardly be portrayed for religious and political reasons.

Two complications should be mentioned right away. The first arises from the general familiarity of David[1] and its use in the context of a changing structure of political and religious beliefs, beliefs that moved apart and came into fierce conflict with each other, especially in England, in the course of the modern era.[2] This means that an actual tradition in the use of the material could not develop.

[1] After 1544, the Bible was regularly read in Anglican services, the 2nd Book of Samuel between 24 April and 5 May. The Psalms, of which David was considered the author, were read once each month in the service.

[2] This is a topic that cannot be addressed here with the precision that might be desirable. A broad overview of the use of King David in the religious-political discourse of the 17th century is given by Metzger 1998.

The second complication concerns censorship. Drama and theatre differ from other literary genres not only in the form of presentation.[3] As a presentation of plot patterns to an audience reacting as a group, drama in the theatre has always aroused the fears of those concerned about public peace. Where religious dissent was an important problem in the public order, religious, and even more so biblical, drama was particularly affected by it. In addition, in England, theatre was considered an immoral and reprehensible institution by Puritan-minded people.

Theatre censorship played its role zealously in England.[4] Thus, in the sixteenth century, the medieval tradition of mystery plays was suppressed; it was considered by the reformers to be a vestige of medieval piety. In Shakespeare's time there was a regular censor, the *Master of the Revels,* to whom all plays had to be submitted before being performed. In 1737, mainly to curb political satires. An actual Censorship Act was introduced, which was recast in 1843. Nowhere do these laws say anything specific about how to deal with biblical material in the theatre, but they gave the *Lord Chamberlain* broad powers. The custom developed—an exact date for which is not known—that no play dealing with biblical material should receive permission for public performance. Theatre censorship was abolished in England only in 1968, in connection with the debate about Rolf Hochhuth's *The Representative*. One way of circumventing censorship, however, was to found clubs where plays could be performed "privately". At the box office, instead of buying a theatre ticket, one simply purchased a club membership for one evening.

Both complications mean that it is not possible to trace an independent tradition of dealing with the David material. The self-evident and the dangerous are kept silent, for different reasons.

1.

The medieval mystery plays, which were performed in some places in England until the second half of the 16th century,[5] are about the story of sin and redemption. Their scenes mainly concern the life and death of Christ; those from the Old Testament are only included if they fit into the thematic context (such as the Fall of Man) or point

[3] Cf. Engler 1997.
[4] Cf. Dawson 1997.
[5] Shakespeare could still have seen the cycle in Coventry as a child!

prophetically or typologically to Christ (such as the stories of Noah or Abraham and Isaac). David does not play a narrow role as a person, but only as an ancestor of Christ. Accordingly, this traditional shaping of the figure did not play an important role in George Peele's first significant treatment of the David theme.[6] In *The Love of David and Fair Bersabe, with the Tragedie of Absolon* (published 1599), Peele brings the sections of David's life mentioned in the title to the stage in a series of loosely connected episodes.[7] The structure of the play has been compared to that of Shakespeare's history plays, with the difference that here the Old Testament is used as the source instead of Raphael Holinshed's *The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland.* In fact, the play follows its source very closely.[8] But a relationship to salvation history is not thematized.

The main emphasis of the design is on the sensual. Inga-Stina Ekeblad has shown that the tradition of Ovid's erotic poetry is just as important as the biblical text. She shows how all the senses are used in the plot and goes as far as to assume that the scene of Bathsheba in the bath (with which the play begins) inspired Peele to deal with the material in the first place.[8]

In keeping with the moment in his biography, David is shown in all aspects of his existence: as the preserver of his dynasty, as a lover, as a singer, as a ruler and as an army commander. David is shown as a Renaissance prince, as a powerful man who has his weaknesses, who suffers blows of fate, but who hardly sees them (except for the death of Bathsheba's child) as God's punishment. Unlike in Marlowe, where the actors want to be completely on their own, Peele's David always knows that God is on his side.

Peele makes use of the possibilities his material offers him and creates conflicts between public duty and private life. The guilt David incurs through his adultery with Bathsheba is atoned for in a straightforward way through the death of their child; after that, there is no more talk of her. The ruler's suffering as a father is at the centre, the rape of his daughter

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[6] Peele 1951-70, 175: "*David and Bethsabe* stands alone in the Elizabethan period as an extant play based entirely on the Bible". In his search for possible sources, Blistein also gives a useful overview of David in drama before 1600, not only in England (pp. 165-76).

[7] The text is poorly preserved. For details see Peele 1951-70, 135-290. See Ekeblad 1958. Possible sources, on the other hand, can be found in French literature; cf. the contribution by Millet and de Robert in this volume.

[8] Ekeblad 1958, 61.

by her brother Amnon, his killing by Absalon, Absalon's rebellion and his death. For him, the focus is always on his male offspring, who are to be preserved.

2.

The eighteenth century provides us with two quite different images of David.[9] One is characterised by a rationalism that questions a naïve belief in the truth of the biblical accounts in their consistency, but above all the models that were derived from them. The other tries to counteract this tendency and to extract emotionally comprehensible aspects from the models of biblical history. For the first, the anonymous text *The Life of David: or, the History of the Man after God's Heart* (1772), which Voltaire, according to himself, used as a source for his play *Saul et David.*[10][11]

The title can only be meant ironically.[12] The story of David is retold in such a way that everything that was admirable or considered a sign of God's intervention turns out to be a sign of ambition and deceitfulness. This begins with Samuel's designation of David as king:

> The death of Saul facilitated his advancement to a sovereignty to which he had no pretension, either by the right of inheritance [...] nor by popular election [...]: but by the clandestine appointment of an old prophet, which inspired him with hopes, of which,

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[9] Two important non-dramatic adaptations of the David material should probably also be mentioned here, although there is no indication that they belong to the same tradition: Abraham Cowley's biblical epic *Davideis, a Sacred Poem of the Troubles of David,* (1656), which deals in four of twelve planned parts with the life of David up to his triumph over the Philistines. Cowley's main concern here is to prove that true (biblical or historical) material is entirely suitable for epic treatment. In the satire *Absalom and Achitophel (*1681), in which John Dryden deals with intrigues at court, King Charles II appears as David. This, however, does not give us any important additional material on David as a ruler; Thomas 1978, 18, is convinced that the comparison is made because of the many children, fathered with several wives, common to both.

[10] Voltaire 1768.

[11] The formula "a man after God's own heart" comes from the Bible, 1 Samuel, 13, 14, where Samuel says to Saul (in the King James Version): "thy kingdom shall not continue: the Lord hath sought him a man after his own heart."

[12] The starting point is the fact that King George II, who like David had ruled for 33 years, was compared to him after his death in 1760 as a wise ruler—which the author finds completely misguided as praise.

> by arms and intrigue, he at length enjoyed the fruition. (79)

Voltaire turned it into a burlesque,[13] which tells of life at David's court in rapidly changing scenes, in a way that is astonishingly reminiscent of a play like Dürrenmatt's *Frank the Fifth.* It tells of his eighteen wives who quarrel among themselves, of how he sends her husband to his death in the full knowledge of Bathsheba, and of his death, which Bathsheba acknowledges with the words: "Dieu merci, nous en voilà défaits."[14] (now we are rid of him). Voltaire's David is aptly characterised in the play by Abigail when she learns that the rebel Absalom, to legitimise his claim to the throne, slept with all eighteen of David's wives:

> O ciel! how n'étais-je là! J'aurais bien mieux aimé coucher avec ton fils Absalon qu'avec toi, vilain, voleur, que j'abandonne à jamais : [...] il est jeune, il est aimable, et tu n'es qu'un barbare débauché, qui te moques de Dieu, des hommes, et des femmes : [15]

3.

How different David looks in Hannah More's *David and Goliath*, which appeared as part of her *Sacred Dramas: Chiefly intended for young persons: the subjects taken from the Bible* (1782).[16] The play is obviously a closet drama; its five parts are significantly not called *Acts*, but *Parts.* It therefore does not fall under the difficulties that censorship could have caused.

The verse drama selects a part of David's early history without trying to transform it into a closed whole. It shows him singing to his sheep, his father sending him to the war

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[13] The content makes this dependence clear. The chronology, however, is more difficult to establish, since Voltaire, as elsewhere, conceals or even invents his sources. Voltaire probably wrote his *Saul* in 1762 and claims that it is "Traduit de l'anglais de M. Hut", an invention on his part. In his *Dictionnaire philosophique,* he himself gives 1761 as the date of the anonymous original, but only a new edition from 1772 is available in English libraries.

[14] Voltaire 1877, 611.

[15] Voltaire 1877, 600.

[16] The other plays are entitled: *Moses in the Bulrushes*, *Belshazzar*, *Daniel*. Hannah More was a prolific poet and writer, who also contributed to women's education in many writings and as the founder of a school. In the theatre she had success with the tragedies *Percy* (1777) and *The Fatal Falsehood* (1779). Afterwards, however, following the death of her patron David Garrick (1779), she turned her back on public theatre.

camp with food for his brothers, warning him against the temptations of war and instead praising modesty as a virtue. David accepts all this advice as a good son. Only when David has left the scene does Jesse describe in a monologue that Samuel has chosen David to be king. The second and third parts depict David's arrival at the camp, his brothers' resentment, and his acceptance of Goliath's challenge. Saul complains in a long monologue that his son Jonathan has become too popular. In the fourth part, David and Goliath face each other in a long debate. Their fight is not shown but only reported in the fifth part. Saul praises David but is envious of him. The play ends with a chorus of women praising Israel's victory.

All this hardly deviates from the biblical account. Hannah More is obviously not concerned with recreating a biblical material.
In the attached "Advertisement", she emphasises that she has retained as much as possible of the biblical text, and that she has been more concerned with moral instruction than with correct dramatic form.[17] Rather, she wants to bring the material in dialogue form to an audience[18] that is beginning to turn away from it. In doing so, she chooses a relatively narrow thematic area. It is about David, whose firm belief that he is the instrument of God gives him the courage to defeat the enemy of Israel.

> [...] inborn courage,
> The gen'rous child of Fortitude and Faith,
> Holds its firm empire in the constant soul,
> And, like the steadfast pole-star, never once
> From the same fix'd and faithful point declines.[19]

As More's biographer notes of the *Sacred Dramas*: "In each group of verses, God chooses nobly simple outsiders, like Hannah More, to alert royalty and their subjects to the evils of epicene and selfish courtiers."[20]

Perhaps closest to More we find another adaptation of the material; of all those discussed here, it is the poorest: John Bentley's *The Royal Penitent* (1803).[21] This prose play, whose language evidences no understanding of the conditions of a performance, treats David's relationship with Bathsheba as a crude moral admonition, but also as a promise of forgiveness. It begins with a long monologue by

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[17] Quoted in Ford 1996, 55 ("aspired after moral instruction [more] than the purity of dramatic composition").
[18] Ford 1996, 54.
[19] More 1782, 108-109.
[20] Ford 1996, 56.
[21] Bentley 1803.

David in which he laments that he has succumbed to the temptation of adultery. His soliloquy ends with the words, and these may also serve as an example for the style of the whole play:

> May all take warning by David's sad example, and turn away their faces from the first allurements of temptation, which presents a golden cup, pleasing to the sight; but its contents once tasted, the deadly poison flows rapidly through every vein, and fills the whole vitiated frame with excruciating pains and fearful horrors, known to those only who have been deceived by the enchanted lure.[22]

Bentley uses the story of Bathsheba's pregnancy to build Uriah as a counterpoint to David. He does not play along with David's plan to make him appear as the father, because he feels more committed to his military honour than to his domestic well-being—thus, he does not sleep at home. The first act ends with a monologue by David, in which he again warns of the dangers of temptation, and in which he recognises Uriah's sense of honour and duty as something he himself lacks.

After that, the play takes a surprising turn: When David confesses his guilt to the prophet Nathan, the latter tells him that God forgives the repentant sinner everything. With that, everything bad is averted, David takes up the harp and sings an "Ode to Mercy". When he meets Bathsheba, he says to her:

> Greatly is it to be wished, that those who have swerved from the ways of duty, or are endangered by circumstances which may tempt them to forsake the paths of virtue, would more frequently fly for council to those whose office it is, by their advice and exhortation, to guard them against despondent obstinacy or bold presumption [...] (the sentence continues for seven lines).[23]

David publicly repents for his deed, as reported to Bathsheba by her faithful friend Rachel. The death of their common child does not lead to any reflections by the two on possible guilt, but to a philosophical dialogue on life after death. In the third act, a celebration takes place in which Nathan prophesies the birth of the Saviour from David's family; and the play concludes oratorio-like with an apotheosis of David, which also makes clear the intended ecclesiastical character of the play:

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[22] Bentley 1803, 2.
[23] Bentley 1803, 26/27.

Symphony-Grand Chorus, accompanied by all the Congregation.
Eternal goodness, hail!
Thy mercies never fail![24]

Much more strongly than in More, the announcement of redemption comes to the fore as a motif here.[25]

4.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, we find David in two plays which, although their authors were of quite different origins and different persuasions, have some things in common: Stephen Phillips, *The Sin of David* (1904), and D.H. Lawrence's *David.*

Stephen Phillips[26] transfers his play to English history, obviously an attempt to circumvent the problems with censorship mentioned at the beginning, but also to bring the material closer to its English audience and to criticise those who make the treatment of biblical material on stage so difficult.

The play is set in the English Civil War, 1643, among members of the Parliamentary, Protestant (often called Puritan) forces. It begins with the trial of a young officer who has violated a woman. The court is undecided about his punishment. But the incoming commander, Sir Hubert Lisle (David), has no hesitation in sentencing him to death, the sinlessness of the troops being important to the success of their cause. Colonel Mardyke (Uriah), a bearded man, has raised Miriam (Bathsheba), the daughter of a fellow officer who died in the French religious wars, and made her his wife. She falls in love with the new commander, woos him, and he falls in love with her too. When the opportunity

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[24] Bentley 1803, 43-44

[25] As a curiosity, another *sacred operetta* should be mentioned here: Brooks' and Ellsworth's (1888) *David, the son of Jesse, or. The Peasant, the Princess and the Prophet,* Part 1: "The Spoiling of Goliath", Part 2 "The Winning of Michal." The preface confirms what the subtitles imply: The romantic aspects of the David story are to be treated. The piece ends with a prophecy of Samuel: a curtain opens and the Christ Child in the stable is shown as a tableau; then another curtain opens to show "The Tableau of Christian Centuries". At the end, the whole cast sings Psalm 117 together.

[26] Stephen Phillips (1864-1915) was successful as a poet and playwright in the first decade of the twentieth century. Today he is forgotten. S. Davis and Weaver 1927, 435. The play was first performed on 30.9.1905.

[30] Phillips 1904, 76

arises to send someone to die a hero's death for the good cause, he sends her husband.

The third act takes place five years later. Lisle and Miriam are spouses and have a small child. The child develops an inexplicable illness and dies. Miriam sees this as punishment for her careless sensuality.

> I rushed into thy arms
> In headlong passion and in frenzied blood,
> And recked not of my husband, nor of law.
> This is my punishment!

But Lisle now confesses to her what he has done. She rejects him. In the end, however, they both see that the death of their child has only made them truly a couple.

> Marriage at last of spirit, not of sense,
> Whose ritual is memory and repentance,
> Whose sacrament this deep and mutual wound,
> Whose covenant the all that might have been. [...]
> We by bereavement henceforth are betrothed,
> Folded by aspirations unfulfilled,
> And clasped by irrecoverable dreams:

Phillips emphasises the closeness to the Bible—Lisle also reads the relevant passages from it himself in the second act.[27] But the distance from the source-at least partially enforced by censorship also makes it possible to bring out certain elements more clearly. The time of the action, but above all the courtroom scenes at the beginning, emphasise the moral strictness against which the later actions are to be measured. At the same time, elements of Nathan's warning to David can thus be integrated into a play set in a time when God no longer speaks to this world through prophets, but to the inner being of each individual, and in which conflicts are psychologically motivated.

As in other dramas of the time, the woman plays a very active, almost fateful role; it is probably no coincidence that she is called Miriam, like the woman who danced before God after the people of Israel crossed the Red Sea[28] --a motif that had gained importance in the Victorian era in its combination of religiosity and sensuality.

The play does not try to convey a Christian message, a fact that is highlighted by, of all things, the place and time of the action. Rather, for Mardyke and Miriam, it is about accepting their own story, which has become their fate.

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[27] Phillips 1904, 45-48. " *A sallow gleam of dawn falls on the Book, as Lisle opens and reads* "And it came to pass in the morning, that David wrote a letter [...]" (Samuel 2, 11, 14ff.).
[28] Cf. Exodus, 15, 20-21.

What Phillips expresses in terms of psychology, Lawrence uses for a religious—though by no means Christian—concern. *David* is his last play.[29] It was performed in May 1927, for reasons of censorship within the framework of the "300 Club and Stage Society". In fifteen scenes, it deals with the David story from Saul's rejection by Samuel, or God, to David's flight from him, including the fight with Goliath and the marriage to Michal, but not the relationship with Bathsheba-which can only surprise people who know Lawrence only superficially. Two aspects are emphasised: the conflict between Saul and David and the friendship between David and Jonathan.

Without going into the fascinating and complex question of D.H. Lawrence's religiosity, this much may be suggested: Lawrence was convinced that a profound transformation of human beings had to take place, one that would abolish the separation of body and intellect. This separation goes back in many ways to Christian doctrine, whose founder came from the tribe of David, a fact that is not without significance for Lawrence's play.

Why does Lawrence draw on the David material? The confrontation between Saul and David represents an important moment in the history of humankind, the one in which the era begins that Lawrence sees coming to an end. Saul is the representative of a religion that is primitive in the good sense, for which the divine is inherent in everything,[30] and in which man's goal is to merge into it. It is striking that, especially at the beginning of the play, the name "God" (which would presuppose a person) is avoided; instead, God is compared to the depth of the sea, the wind and the fire.[31] David's relationship to the divine, on the other hand, is to a counterpart seen as a person.[3236] Samuel draws David's attention to this difference:

> Thou seest thy God in thine own likeness, afar off, or as a brother beyond thee, who fulfils thy desire. - Saul yearneth for the flame: thou for thy tomorrow's

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[29] Lawrence 1926. Quoted here after Lawrence 1999.

[30] Lawrence wrote the play during his time in the south-west of the US. He was impressed by Native American religions and saw these, together with other, also European, religions as models.

[31] An accumulation of such alternative mentions can be found on p. 442.

[32] Lawrence 1999, lxx: "The play creates Saul as the last of the old civilization, as one of the believers in the old relationship between man and the cosmos, whereas David is by comparison modern man, living through his wits and his intelligence, and believing in a personal relationship with a personal God, which is all that his intelligence permits him."

> glory. The God of Saul has no face. But thou wilt bargain with thy God.[33]

David's approach to things is rational, calculating, clever, the way he takes down Goliath is a first example of this. He sees *two* forces that move the world: human will and God, and he knows that things can only go well if man follows God.[34]

The women see through him: "I do not like his brow, it is too studied", says Michal. And Saul, who becomes suspicious of David, thinks he is "smooth-faced and soft-footed", and adds: "I don't like this weasel".[35] But he also knows that the days of his own world are numbered, and says in a prophetic speech:

> Yea, by cunning shall Israel prosper, in the days of the seed of David [...] the Lord of Glory will have drawn far off, and gods shall be pitiful, and men shall be as locusts.[36]

The picture that is sketched here of David is astonishingly, but not surprisingly, like that sketched in the eighteenth-century pamphlet quoted above.

At the the turning point in history, Jonathan becomes important, who as Saul's son and David's friend stands between them and their worlds: on the one hand, his relationship with David, which brings the two worlds together, has something utopian about it that transcends David's world.[37] But then Jonathan, who is given the last words in the play, is also the person who foresees the end of David's time and most likely to bring about the new union of intellect and body.

> thy wisdom is the wisdom of the subtle, and behind thy passion lies prudence. And naked thou wilt not go into the fire.-- Yea, go thou forth, and let me die. For thy virtue is in thy wit and thy shrewdness. But in Saul have I known the splendour and the magnanimity of a man.— Yea, thou art a smiter down of giants, with a smart stone! Great men and magnanimous, men of the faceless flame, shall fall from Strength, fall before thee, thou David, shrewd whelp of the lion of Judah! [...] In the flames of death where Strength is, I will wait and watch till the day of David at last shall be finished, and

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[33] Lawrence 1999, xxx.
[34] Lawrence 1999, 460.
[35] Lawrence 1999, 483, 485.
[36] Lawrence 1999, 520.
[37] Cf. also: Brunsdale 1983, 129.

wisdom no more be fox-faced, and the blood gets back its flame.[38]

5.

Can general conclusions be drawn from this overview of more than three centuries of English drama? Caution is advised.

The first thing to note is the sparseness of the material, which certainly has to do with the conditions mentioned at the beginning. However, the fact that the censors were particularly strict with biblical material has to do with the history of England, in which political conflicts were also formulated to a particular extent in the terms of Christian religion and were carried out with a fierceness that led to a civil war and the execution of the king in the seventeenth century.

The fact that biblical material such as the story of David was so seldom treated meant that no dramatic tradition could develop in dealing with it. In any case, the text of the Bible is used and, depending on the often very specific concerns of the playwrights, it is reshaped. In this way, the ideological preconditions and intentions become more clearly visible than would otherwise be the case. This is particularly evident in the examples cited from the eighteenth and twentieth centuries.[39]

As for the character of David in particular, it is striking that he plays only a minor role as a good ruler in English drama, except in Peele's work. This, too, can be well understood from English history: David, who as ruler received his commission from God through Samuel, must ideologically be of interest to monarchs who claim divine grace. However, the unsuccessful attempt of the Stuarts in the seventeenth century to renew and assert this claim was one of the reasons that led to the English Civil War. It is therefore not surprising that David as a good ruler hardly plays a role in the English tradition after the early seventeenth century. Where he does appear as a ruler, he is shown as a human being with his weaknesses.

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[38] Lawrence, 524.

[39] I could not locate the text of Ch.W. Winne, *David and Bathshua* (1903).

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