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A.G. van den Broek
Dalhousie University

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SHAKESPEAREAN ALLUSIONS IN 'JANET'S REPENTANCE'

by A. G. van den Broek of Dalhousie University,
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

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This paper is part of a comprehensive survey of Shakespeare's influence on George Eliot's writing, an influence widely recognised by critics but rarely given the detailed analysis it deserves. It seems to me that a study of this sort is needed because Shakespeare belongs to that enormous "choir" of philosophers, theologians, writers, poets, dramatists and scientists on whom Eliot drew when shaping her philosophy of life and art; a "choir" which with "mild persistence urge man's search/ To vaster issues."¹ I offer this critique of "Janet's Repentance", therefore, as something to be compared with studies that show other influences from the above "choir", as further proof of Eliot's enormous scholarship, and because there is intrinsic value in glimpsing an understanding of Shakespeare by one of the greatest novelists of the Victorian period.

On the surface of it, "Janet's Repentance" is not a promising work for discussing Shakespeare's influence. There are no epigraphs from any source; Eliot's "Commonplace Book", with entries from 1855 to 1876, contains notes relating to all the novels except Scenes of Clerical Life; and, David Lodge, in the Penguin English Library edition (1973), and Thomas A. Noble, in the Clarendon edition (1985), identify only two allusions to Shakespeare. In the first, Mr. Dempster says of Mr. Tryan and other Evangelicals, "they're all bad ones by the sly; smooth-faced, drawling, hypocritical fellows, who pretend ginger isn't hot in their mouths" (Clarendon edition, p. 194), which recalls a drunken Sir Toby Belch who says to Malvolio, "Dost thou think because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" to which the Clown adds, "Yes,

by Saint Anne, and ginger shall be hot i' th' mouth too" (Twelfth Night, II, iii, 113-7); and in the second allusion, Mr. Dempster's remark, "Tryan's as soft as a sucking dove -- one of your honey-mouthed hypocrites" (p. 236), echoes Bottom's "But I will aggravate my voice so, that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove; I will roar you an 'twere any nightingale" (A Midsummer Night's Dream, I, ii, 76-7).

Two allusions seems slender ground on which to build a case for Shakespeare's influence. However, the nature of the allusions, and the context in which they appear, make them significant inasmuch as they allow Eliot to make the sort of moral distinctions which she felt were necessary to a sympathetic understanding of people. My point will become clearer after briefly putting the whole of Scenes into historical perspective.

In October 1855, the Westminster Review published Eliot's article, "Evangelical Teaching: Dr. Cumming". In it she attacked not only Dr. Cumming but all Evangelicals responsible for uncharitable and distorted teachings of Christianity:

Pleasant to the clerical flesh... is the arrival of Sunday! Somewhat at a disadvantage during the week, in the presence of working-day interests and lay splendours, on Sunday the preacher becomes the cynosure of a thousand eyes, and predominates at once over the Amphitryon with whom he dines, and the most captious member of his church or vestry. ²

One of the things she objected to was the moral divide that existed between Evangelical preaching and practice, which is suggested in the above reference to "working-day interests". In As You Like It, Rosalind, oppressed by the unfair and immoral life at Duke Frederick's Court, which stands in contrast to the "golden world" of Arden, says: "O how full of briers is this working-day world!" (I, iii, 12). Although by this time Eliot was an agnostic, she always recognised that religion was of fundamental importance to most people. Hence she deplored Evangelical preachers who not only failed to give their congregations any spiritual comfort but also taught doctrines which discouraged all sympathy for human failings. In Scenes,

she is concerned with the nature of religious comfort and examines the conditions for it by comparing the "working-day interests" of Amos Barton, Mr. Gilfil, and Mr. Tryan, with what they preach.

In November, 1856, when George Lewes sent the manuscript of "Amos Barton" to John Blackwood, he wrote:

This is what I am commissioned to say to you about the proposed series. It will consist of tales and sketches illustrative of the actual life of our country clergy about a quarter of a century ago; but solely in its Human and not at all in its theological aspect; the object being to do what has never yet been done in our Literature, for we have had abundant religious stories polemical and doctrinal, but since the "Vicar (of Wakefield)" and Miss (Jane) Austen, no stories representing the clergy like any other class with the humours, sorrows, and troubles of other men. He (Eliot) begged me particularly to add that -- as the specimen sent will sufficiently prove -- the tone throughout will be sympathetic and not at all antagonistic. (Letters, II, 269)

Thus Scenes was to conform to Eliot's understanding of art's function: to arouse sympathy for people honestly portrayed in all their "coarse apathy" and "suspicious selfishness", as she put it in "The Natural History of German Life: Riehl". And in chapter 7 of "Amos Barton" we are told that that is precisely the narrator's intention:

... my only merit must lie in the truth with which I represent to you the humble experience of ordinary fellow-mortals. I wish to stir your sympathy with commonplace troubles -- to win your tears for real sorrow; sorrow such as may live next door to you -- such as walks neither in rags nor in velvet, but in very ordinary decent apparel. (p. 56)

At the heart of Eliot's humanist religion is her insistence on sympathy for others; and the different problems of humanity depicted in the novel succeed in bringing that about. The Shakespearean allusions in all three

stories come into play here: they help us to avoid kneejerk assessments of people and situations, and so pave the way towards a sympathetic understanding of others.

In "Janet's Repentance", Eliot makes us aware of the good that Evangelicalism can do by comparing its efficacy with the charges of hypocrisy brought against it by Dempster and his followers. She discourages simplistic evaluations of Evangelicalism - without endorsing its religious doctrines. Hence it is more a study of a theme than character, and although this theme also applies to "Amos Barton" and "Mr. Gilfil's Love Story", I will restrict myself to a discussion of the last of Scenes's three stories.

When Mr. Tryan arrives in Milby, the community is split into two religious camps, and at first Eliot leaves us in some doubt as to where our sympathies should lie. As soon as we learn about the "distinguished triad", which represents "the intellect, morality, and wealth of Milby" (p. 207), and which is led by the loud-mouthed Dempster, we know enough to avoid siding with the anti-Tryanite camp. But where Mr. Crewel's flock is insincere because they suddenly rallied round him, convinced that he "was the model of a parish priest, and his sermons the soundest and most edifying that had ever remained unheard by a church-going population" (p. 207), the other camp is also suspect. The vanity that has inspired Miss Pratt to produce "Six Stanzas, addressed to the Rev. Edgar Tryan, printed on glazed paper with a neat border, and beginning, 'Forward, young wrestler for the truth!'" (p. 211) speaks for itself, and it is probably true that Mrs. Linnet is not the only one with a keen, albeit limited, interest in Evangelicalism:

Mrs Linnet had become a reader of religious books since Mr. Tryan's advent... On taking up the biography of a celebrated preacher, she immediately turned to the end to see what disease he died of; and if his legs swelled, as her own occasionally did, she felt a stronger interest in ascertaining any earlier facts in the history of the dropsical divine - whether

he had ever fallen off a stage coach, whether he had married more than one wife, and, in general, any adventures or repartees recorded of him previous to the epoch of his conversion. (p. 212)

Thus, by way of mild irony, Eliot indicates that neither High nor Low Church should be judged by its followers, even though there are people like Mrs. Crewe and Mr. Jerome who put their different faiths into practice. Instead she wants us to pay particular attention to the way religion is applied in the community. Only then is it seen that Mr. Tryan's Evangelicalism is preferable to Mr. Crewe's "avarice in comfort", or the earlier "lax and indifferent kind" of Dissent found in the "Independent chapel, known as Salem..." (p. 201).

Janet begins to repent her attitude towards Mr. Tryan when she overhears his words of comfort to the dying Sally Martin, because "There was none of the self-satisfied unction of the teacher, quoting, or exhorting, or expounding, for the benefit of the hearer, but a simple appeal for help, a confession of weakness" (p. 265). And his later confession to her about Lucy, prompted by her confession about her marital problems, brings about her full repentance and conversion to his faith. The narrator says, "The Tale of the Divine Pity was never yet believed from the lips that were not felt to be moved by human pity" (p. 288), and since Mr. Tryan has also suffered he is capable of "human pity" and sympathy. His love for Janet as a fellow-creature, that is his humanism, makes her religious conversion possible. When she confesses her temptation to drink the brandy found in her husband's bureau, we read:

The act of confiding in human sympathy, the consciousness that a fellow-being was listening to her with patient pity, prepared her soul for that stronger leap by which faith grasps the idea of the Divine sympathy. (p. 321)

That, briefly, summarises Mr. Tryan's (humanist) religion. In "Scenes of Clerical Life: The Diagram and the Picture", Derek and Sybil Oldfield argue that Eliot learned this humanist philosophy from Feuerbach

and her own Evangelical experience. From Feuerbach, they say, she learned that "Love is the recognition of our human brotherhood", that there is a necessary relationship between sympathy and suffering, and that we are "insignificant parts of a wonderful whole."³ It is true that Eliot closely follows Feuerbach's teachings in implying that religious impulses are founded on our essential humanity. Feuerbach's influence, for example, is felt in the following:

The blessed work of helping the world forward, happily does not wait to be done by perfect men... The real heroes, of God's making, are quite different: they have their natural heritage of love and conscience which they drew in with their mother's milk; they know one or two of those deep spiritual truths which are only to be won by long wrestling with their own sins and their own sorrows; they have earned faith and strength so far as they have done genuine work: but the rest is dry barren theory, blank prejudice, vague hearsay. (pp. 256-7)

However, important aspects of the story are also suggested in Dempster's Shakespearean allusions, and therefore it is not quite true to say that Feuerbach's philosophy "dominates" the intellectual substructure of Scenes.⁴ To Sara Hennell she wrote, "With the ideas of Feuerbach I everywhere agree..." (Letters, II, 153), but she would not have wanted them to be the only creed for a "sympathetic" study of religious people - especially when one of Feuerbach's claims is that all immortality is an idle dream.

When Dempster holds forth against Evangelicals in the bar of the Red Lion, he accuses them of sedition, hypocrisy, and ambition (p. 194). Lodge points out that to accuse Mr. Tryan of Jesuitical tendencies "is a rather wild insult addressed to a Protestant clergyman", even if it is proverbial.⁵ But as a lawyer, Dempster would know that an argumentum ad hominem can be very effective. He cleverly likens Mr. Tryan to Shakespeare's Malvolio when he says of Evangelicals, "ginger isn't hot in their mouths". Despite what we may think about Malvolio's treatment in the "dark house", he deserves

the ridicule he gets from Maria, Sir Toby Belch, Fabian, Sir Andrew Aguecheek, and the Clown because he is an ambitious hypocrite. Maria says of him, "Marry sir, sometimes he is a kind of Puritan" (Twelfth Night, II, iii, 140), and she is right, because as soon as it suits him he turns "heathen, a very renegado" (II, iii, 67) by presenting himself in cross-gartered yellow stockings. The brandy-and-water loving Dempster, no doubt, sees a clear parallel between himself and the fun-loving Sir Toby, and feels fully justified in playing a trick on Mr. Tryan - which he tries to do with the play-bill.⁶

To a large extent, the ridiculing of Malvolio is genuinely funny, but commentators who are uneasy about the "dark-house" episode have a valid point. Maria's letter is justified because it exposes his vanity and presumptuousness; the "dark house" is not because in addition to his unjust confinement it allows for an extended attack on Puritanism. In his nonsensical dialogue with Malvolio, the Clown (as Sir Topas the curate) refers to the "hyperbolical fiend", "satan", "darkness", "ignorance", and the heavens restoring Malvolio's wits. These are deliberate barbs aimed at Puritanism, rather than Malvolio. It should go without saying that the latter's religious inconsistency ^{do we not} warrant an attack on Puritanism, but Shakespeare plays with the audience's prejudices in this scene. It is clear that he does not share the prejudice himself, because Sir Andrew is the main spokesman against Puritanism, and whatever he says is more a reflection of his own stupidity than anything else (cf. II, iii, 140-5 and III, ii, 30-1). Hence, when Malvolio stalks off with "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!", Olivia rightly says, "He hath been most notoriously abus'd" (V, i, 377-8). At this point, I think, Shakespeare wants us to realise that the joke against Malvolio has gone too far: if we have laughed heartily during the "dark house" scene, then, like Sir Andrew, that says something about our prejudices, and, like most of the characters in the play, we need to discover who we are and what we really think.⁷

To laugh at Malvolio is one thing; to laugh at Puritanism another, and Eliot wants us to make the same distinction in "Janet's Repentance". Dempster is right in saying

that some Evangelicals are "sly; smooth-faced, drawling, hypocritical fellows, who pretend ginger isn't hot in their mouths". But that does not necessarily apply to all Evangelicals, and, more to the point, it does not apply to Mr. Tryan. Dempster's remark, therefore, reveals more about him than about Mr. Tryan. In this way, Eliot combats our possible hostility towards Evangelicalism, or, if not hostility, our willingness to ridicule it. Her concern with people's tendency to demean anything finds clear expression in the chapter, "Debasing the Moral Currency", of Theophrastus Such:

The world seems to me well supplied with what is genuinely ridiculous: wit and humour may play as harmlessly or beneficently round the changing facets of egoism, absurdity, and vice, as the sunshine over the rippling sea or the dewy meadows. Why should we make our delicious sense of the ludicrous, with its invigorating shocks of laughter and its irrepressible smiles which are the outglow of an inward radiation as gentle and cheering as the warmth of morning, flourish like a brigand on the robbery of our mental wealth? - or let it take its exercise as a madman might, if allowed a free nightly promenade, by drawing the populace with bonfires which leave some venerable structure a blackened ruin or send a scorching smoke across the portraits of the past, at which we once looked with a loving recognition of fellowship, and disfigure them into butts of mockery? - nay, worse, - use it to degrade the healthy appetites and affections of our nature as they are seen to be degraded in insane patients whose system, all out of joint, finds matter for screaming laughter in mere topsy-turvy, makes every passion preposterous or obscene, and turns the hard-won order of life into a second chaos hideous enough to make one wail that the first was ever thrilled with light?

This is what I call debasing the moral currency: lowering the value of every inspiring fact and tradition so that it will command less and less of the spiritual products, the generous motives which sustain the charm and elevation of our social

existence - the something besides bread by which man saves his soul alive.⁸

Even a fundamentally good woman like Janet is guilty of "debas[ing] the moral currency". She helps her husband with the play-bill because she desperately tries to remain close to him, but also because she is amused by the idea. Miss Pratt is heard to say that Janet is "too much given to satire" (p.215), and the narrator tells us, "... she really did like to laugh at the Tryanites" (p.236), even though there is nothing to laugh at. She tells Dempster:

"I've got Tryan's sermons up-stairs, but I don't think there's anything in them we can use. I've only just looked into them; they're not at all what I expected - dull, stupid things - nothing of the roaring fire-and-brimstone sort that I expected." (p.236)

At this point Dempster compares Mr. Tryan with Bottom from A Midsummer Night's Dream. "Roaring? No; Tryan's as soft as a sucking dove - one of your honey-mouthed hypocrites" (p.236). Bottom is told by his fellow actors that if he plays the part of the lion and roars too loudly, he will frighten the women in the audience, and that will result in the actors being hanged. He replies:

I grant you, friends, if you should fright the ladies out of their wits, they would have no more discretion but to hang us. But I will aggravate my voice so, that I will roar you as gently as any sucking dove; I will roar you an 'twere any nightingale.
(I, ii, 74-8)

But just as Dempster ridicules himself in suggesting that Mr. Tryan resembles Malvolio, because, if the analogy holds, Dempster resembles a completely besotted Sir Toby - with none of that reveller's wit - so here too he casts himself in another unflattering part. For immediately after the remark, he roars as gently as any sucking dove to his mother to accompany him into the lush garden, where attention is drawn to his "heavy long-limbed steps" (p.236). The temptation to see a parallel between this picture and the play's

forest scene, in which the spellbound Titania dotes on Bottom with his long ass's ears, is irresistible. If anyone is an ass it is Dempster, who enjoys more adulation from his wife and mother than Mr. Tryan can lay claim to.

But Eliot implies even more. Oberon's "love-juice" is used to "make or man or woman dote/ Upon the next live creature that it sees" (II, ii, 171-2), and that is how Titania comes to "love" Bottom, who seems to her to be like a sucking dove and more. Harold Brooks, in his introduction to the play, thinks that the love-juice ploy is meant to make us realise that "the eyes, traditional initiator of love, are liable to see false under its irrational power," and that only when seeing is coupled with reason can love be possible, like the love between Hermia and Lysander, for example.⁹ Even in his metamorphoses, Bottom never loses his sight or his reason. He is one of the most constant people in the play, and therefore he is much more than a mere laughing-stock. All in all, his vanity and malapropisms are minor, even endearing, faults, because there is nothing false in his character. Moreover, as Brooks says:

He makes one of the most sensible speeches in the play, epitomising half its critique of love: "To say the truth, reason and love keep little company together nowadays. The more the pity, that some honest neighbours will not make them friends." (III, i, 138-41)¹⁰

Thus, there is more irony than Dempster realises when he intimates that Mr. Tryan is like Bottom. We are told that according to some, the curate's "intellectual culture was too limited", and that he also makes mistakes: "identifying Christianity with a too narrow doctrinal system", seeking "God's work too exclusively in antagonism to the world, the flesh and the devil". But for all that, Mr. Tryan has a "true knowledge of our fellow-man . . . (and a) love that sees in all forms of human thought and work, the life and death struggles of separate human beings" (p. 257).

The other Bottom, Dempster, presents quite a different picture. The sight of him walking in the garden with his "Titania" brings to mind someone like Macbeth:

It was rather sad, yet pretty, to see that little group passing out of the shadow into the sunshine, and out of the sunshine into the shadow again: sad, because this tenderness of the son for the mother was hardly more than a nucleus of healthy life in an organ hardened by disease, because the man who was linked in this way with an innocent past, had become callous in worldliness, fevered by sensuality, enslaved by chance impulses; pretty because it showed how hard it is to kill the deep-down fibrous roots of human love and goodness - how the man from whom we make it our pride to shrink, has yet a close brotherhood with us through some of our most sacred feelings. (p. 237)

On that day he is in a good humour; "doubtless due to those stirrings of the more kindly, healthy sap of human feeling, by which goodness tries to get the upper hand in us whenever it seems to have the slightest chance..." (p. 233). But, like Macbeth, his "way of life/ is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf," and he dies a shattered man when his "sap of human feeling" is replaced by the sap of his vice. Therein lies tragedy, because, like Macbeth, Dempster is not just a monster. He once had a promising future, and we are told that he and Janet were happy to start with.

Eliot's reply to Blackwood, who had said, "Dempster is rather too barefaced a brute", and had asked: "When are you going to give us a really good active working clergyman, neither absurdly evangelical nor absurdly High Church?" (Letters, II, 344-5), best sums up the story:

The collision in the drama is not at all between "bigotted churchmanship" and evangelicalism, but between irreligion and religion. Religion in this case happens to be represented by evangelicalism... I thought that I had made it apparent in my sketch of Milby feelings on the advent of Mr. Tryan that the conflict lay between immorality and morality - irreligion and religion. Mr. Tryan will carry the reader's sympathy. It is

through him that Janet is brought to repentance. Dempster's vices have their natural evolution in deeper and deeper moral deterioration (though not without softening touches) and death from intemperance. Everything is softened from the fact, so far as art is permitted to soften and yet remain essentially true... (Letters, II, 347)

"Everything is softened" with Dempster's moral deterioration and death because these allow religion to triumph over irreligion. Mr. Tryan may die prematurely, but his "memorial" (p. 334), Janet, lives on to a ripe old age. We expect her to pass on the legacy of "human feeling" to her adopted family, just as we expect Duke Orsino, et al., not to forget their acquired wisdom when they leave Arden and return to the life at Court. Like Duke Orsino, Eliot cautiously looks forward to when the "golden time convents" (Twelfth Night, V, i, 381).

The "moral effect of the stories" which Eliot referred to in a letter to Blackwood (II, 362), is thus produced, in part, with the help of seemingly straightforward allusions to Shakespeare's plays. But a complex web of meaning is discovered when these are compared with the particular passages in which they appear. We are reminded that if in Shakespeare's plays it is difficult to generalise about heroes, heroines, or imaginary characters like Malvolio and Bottom, the same is true of Eliot's ordinary but realistic people. Moreover, if we sympathise with someone like Macbeth - and we do, despite his crimes - then we should also be sympathetic to Mr. Tryan and Janet who have none of Macbeth's excesses. In this way, we are made to feel the force of life amid what appears to be the sound and fury of insignificance.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The line is from Eliot's poem "O May I Join the Choir Invisible".
- 2 Thomas Pinney, ed., Essays of George Eliot (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 161.
- 3 Derek and Sybil Oldfield, "Scenes of Clerical Life: The Diagram and the Picture", in Critical Essays on George Eliot, ed. Barbara Hardy (1970; rpt. London, Boston and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 5-9.
- 4 Derek and Sybil Oldfield, p. 17.
- 5 Lodge, ed., Scenes, Penguin ed., p. 422n.
- 6 Eliot explained that the play-bill was based on fact, as was most of the story: "In the real persecution, a play-bill of an equally insulting kind was printed and circulated and thought the finest joke imaginable" (Letters, II, 361-2). Nevertheless, what Lewes told Bracebridge about Eliot's characters also applies to her plots: they "are creations out of combinations of varied experience... the materials in each case being of course suggested, but only suggested, not given, as in biography or portrait painting." (Letters, III, 158-60).
- 7 It is interesting to note that in 1857 Twelfth Night was produced in London, with Samuel Phelps playing Malvolio. The Arden Shakespeare editors cite Henry Morley's The Journal of a London Playgoer from 1851-1866 (1891 ed.), pp. 139-40, for the following:
(Phelps) emphasized the steward's "self-love" by regarding the world through eyes "very nearly covered with their heavy lids"; his thoughts were turned inward. "Walled up in his own temple of flesh, he is his own adorer..."
(He) played the (dark house) scene somewhat phlegmatically, "sustained by his self-content, and by the honest certainty that he had been notoriously abused" (and he delivered his last line) with an "expression of undented pride".
(J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik, eds., Introd., Twelfth Night (1975; rpt. London and New York: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1981), pp. xci, xcvi-xcviii).
- I have not been able to find out whether the Leweses saw this production, but in view of their playgoing habits at the time it is likely that they did.
- 8 Eliot, Theophrastus Such, pp. 180-1. The reference to "insane patients whose system, all out of joint, finds matter for screaming laughter" itself contains a Shakespearean echo. Hamlet says: "The time is out of joint, O cursed spite/ That ever I was born to set it right" (I, v, 196-7).
- 9 Harold F. Brooks, ed., Introd., A Midsummer Night's Dream (London and New York: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1979), pp. xcii-xciii.
- 10 Brooks, Introd., pp. cxiv-cxv.