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# Covenant Orthopraxy and Shakespeare's Idea of the Nation

Mary Jo Kietzman, *University of Michigan – Flint*

It is commonplace to note that Shakespeare wrote during a time of great religious tumult when sectarian violence against Catholics and Puritans was deployed to secure the Elizabethan religious settlement, which settled little; and it is also widely acknowledged that it is impossible to parse religion and politics in early-modern England. Did this religiously-motivated violence of a state church cause Shakespeare to be skeptical of all confessional faiths? Did it lead him to question his own faith? Scholars interested in Shakespeare and Religion have, for the most part, sensibly dropped the question of whether the playwright was Protestant or Catholic (the labels paper over the complexities of lived-experience); they now prefer to see his work as deliberately non-sectarian or, as Thomas Betteridge writes, “deeply concerned about confessionalization and the kind of communities its discourses and practices produced; ones ... often marked by a violent desire to label, order, and exclude.”<sup>1</sup> While I agree that the plays seem to be nonsectarian or anti-confessional, these descriptions still do not account fully for the presence of dense networks of reference to religious traditions and allusions to the Geneva Bible that function like doors which open into the central ethical and affective issues of any given play.

I locate my work alongside historians like Peter Lake who study the way theater helped to constitute a protestant nation and enabled audiences process different “takes” on the current “religio-political conjuncture.”<sup>2</sup> My work shares common cause with literary critics who describe a Shakespearean religion of the playwright’s own making. Jeffrey Knapp (2011) posits a ministerial function for plays that preach inclusivity, humility, and accommodation. Ken Jackson extrapolates from frequent references to Abraham’s binding of Isaac to suggest that the “strange religion of Shakespearean drama is constituted by a desire to give oneself to the other we cannot know.”<sup>3</sup> And Thomas Betteridge stresses Shakespeare’s interest in ethos that “embraces the conversion of life into story” and sees story as the ground of a religious life.<sup>4</sup> While I am indebted to each of these thinkers, my own view of Shakespearean “religion” begins

with its bibliocentricity. He used the one book audiences had in common to build community, to talk about revolutionary ideas (since biblical reference was a coded form of political speech), and to prepare subjects into would-be citizens by writing scripts that demanded independent, exegetical work (Hill, 49). Because the plays made auditors wrestle with biblical concepts and apply biblical stories to secular situations, they enabled audiences to work through the dilemmas of post-Reformation religious experience. My own work (Kietzman, 2018) demonstrates the way Shakespeare uses stories from the Hebrew Bible in the subtexts of his plays to build an ethics on the cornerstone of biblical covenant, and to appeal, as Peter Lake writes, “to the wider protestant political nation.”<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew Bible and the Hebrew language were newly important at the Reformation; Protestant theologians trained in Humanist methodology rallied for a return to original texts and sources to access original religious inspirations that predate canonical Christianity and Judaism. Covenant became central to Protestant theology and ecclesiology because it provided a way to salvation distinct from the Catholic sacramental path (Guibbory, 33). In Shakespeare’s plays, the covenant idea provides a framework for an orthopraxic religion that kicks in not when we sign on the dotted line of some confessional faith, but when we “bind ourselves over” (re-ligare) to something other, which means something other than ourselves: to God, to neighbor, to an idea or even an ideology.

In the Bible, binding over happens in dramatic events in which God calls man into covenant with him. It is significant that God calls (he doesn’t command) because covenant requires a free choice to commit, to believe in the impossible, rendered in metaphor: descendants as numerous as stars, a land flowing with milk and honey. What is more, the God of the Hebrew Bible wants and rewards full engagement: Abraham argues, Jacob wrestles, Moses demurs and pleads. From its inception in the patriarchal narratives of Genesis, the covenant idea is completely theo-political. What this means is that the bi-lateral relationship forged between God and man must be lived laterally between human beings and their neighbors—even when those neighbors are Others (racial/ethnic Others or socio-economic Others). This is nowhere clearer than the way Puritans used the covenant idea to revise their understanding of marriage, the purpose of which was to promote the mutual happiness of “evenly matched companions,” imagined as “friends” and “fellow citizens,” each of whom must give

consent and discharge reciprocal duties (Johnson, 111). As a result, covenant provided a blueprint for marriage, characterized by John Milton, as “a meet and happie conversation,” for society as plural, and for politics as federal.<sup>6</sup> By establishing covenant bonds with Others, the Hebrews transformed themselves from a tribal society into a nation: and the name of the Hebrew nation, Israel, which means “he who struggles with God,” suggests that it is the practice of covenant-“othering” which is the defining characteristic of a plural, open society.<sup>7</sup>

Sociologist Philip Gorski has documented the phenomenon of “Hebrew nationalism” and its impact on a whole range of polities in northern Europe during the early-modern period, especially those strongly influenced by Calvinism.<sup>8</sup> The radical politics of Hebraism with its power-sharing God came to England with the Reformation: “The right way, yea, and the only way, to understand the scripture unto salvation,” declared William Tyndale, is to seek in it, “chiefly and above all, the covenants made between God and us.”<sup>9</sup> For the Henrician heresiarch, the key to the reforming of England was the bible in translation, and the key to the bible was the idea of covenant that could rebuild relations of trust between men. By the time of Elizabeth I, following the Marian exile—an event that further radicalized English Protestants—England was increasingly viewed as an elect nation like little Israel, and covenantal approaches to church organization and politics gained more of a foothold.<sup>10</sup> Even Elizabeth’s own counselors covenanted with one another when they formed “bonds of association,” that involved oaths sworn to protect and perpetuate the English nation as Protestant in the event of the queen’s assassination in a Catholic plot (Vallance, 21).

That Shakespeare helped to spread the Hebraic idiom along with ideas about covenant is clear when we pick up on and follow out the implications of plot lines that weave together secular scenarios with biblical allusions and echoes. Shakespeare lifts covenant out of strictly religious registers to create an orthopraxic “religion without Religion” that is also a revolutionary social ethics: doing Justice, doing Love, doing Mercy, practicing not preaching. What I am calling “religion without Religion” is what Philip Gorski and his mentor, Robert Bellah, refer to as “civil religion” (“that religious dimension found in the life of every people, through which it interprets its historical experience”), and it is key to the emergence of national identity.<sup>11</sup> Marshalling persuasive documentary

evidence, Philip Gorski argues that early-modern polities, most significantly, the Dutch Republic and the Puritan Revolution in England, had what he calls a “Mosaic moment,” meaning that symbols and key ideas from Hebrew scriptures such as the elect nation and covenant were deployed in official symbolism and political writing to forge a national identity and consciousness (Gorski, *Mosaic Moment*, 1452). But England’s “Mosaic moment,” in my view, did not depend solely on the exodus narrative or on any single founding myth or epic but grew into revolutionary expression gradually through dramatic praxis that modelled and spread ideas about covenant. Shakespeare patterns a whole host of characters through allusions to biblical analogues; and, most importantly, these characters demonstrate the social and political applications of covenant orthopraxy and invite the audiences to follow their examples.<sup>12</sup> In this way England’s identity as a covenanted and covenanting nation was seeded, and this national identity grew under the increasingly oppressive Stuart state and emerged during the English Civil War in such documents as *The Protestation Oath* (1641) and the *Solemn League and Covenant* (1643) which were the first national covenants “against Popery and arbitrary government.”

To test the claim that covenant acts as the binding agent of a plural society, *summoning subjects into new forms of accountability and trust*, I will examine a couple of key scenes from two plays—*Titus Andronicus* and *The Merchant of Venice*. The societies of these plays, Rome and Venice, are “wildernesses” of “tigers” and “monkeys” due to the strains caused when Goths, Moors, Jews all strive to gain access to cultures that have Religions but no true ethics. (*Titus* 3.1.55; *Merchant* 3.1.122-23).<sup>13</sup> The marginal Others, Aaron and Shylock, are victimized by the “cruel irreligious piety” of Roman Pagans and Venetian Catholics, who ritually scapegoat and expunge them (*Titus* 1.1.130).

Significantly, both victims have Hebrew identities: Shylock is a diasporic Jew and Aaron is named for the biblical Aaron, Moses’ brother and partner in the exodus out of Egypt.<sup>14</sup> Forced into the role of Vice by racist societies that call them “black dog” and “dog Jew,” scriptural allusions deepen their characters, giving them inner lives, validating their rage, and helping us to impute motives other than malice to them (5.1.124; 2.8.14). Significantly, each also engages the Other in covenantal dramas: Aaron when he sacrifices self-interest to preserve his newborn son and

Shylock when he offers the Christians an interest-free loan and then breaks his own dietary rule to dine with them. These encounters provide surprising moments of light in otherwise dark plays, and they are allusively patterned on biblical models: the near-sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22) and the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 16).

Much of the violence in the Rome of *Titus Andronicus* is committed in the name of Religion. Shakespeare uses words like idol, bauble, martyrdom, conscience, monastery, to link Roman paganism (with its ritual sacrifice, honor killing and textual violence) to the bloody sectarian controversies of sixteenth-century Christianity (Moschovakis 461). What is more, he brings an a-religious “clown” on stage in Act 4 to suggest that it might be more sensible to do without the gods and Religion altogether.<sup>15</sup> The simple man appears just after the “mad” Titus has fired off messages (wrapped around arrows) to every god in the traditional Roman pantheon; when Titus sees him, he believes he’s a messenger from Jupiter. “Alas, sir, I know not Jubiter,” responds the clown (taken aback), “I never drank with him in all my life” (4.3.87-88). The pleb recognizes no god and has no desire to go to “Heaven.” He simply wants to facilitate the mending of a quarrel, and so takes his offering of doves to the Emperor. Elites, Titus and Marcus, get the man hanged when they use him as a bit player in their revenge plot, but the clown’s prioritizing of relationship bonds over gods resonates long after he finishes his short scene.

In *Titus* Shakespeare juxtaposes patterns of classical and biblical reference as an iconoclastic strategy to stress the value of life over art, orthopraxy over orthodoxy. Marcus’s stoic self-possession, for example, is challenged by Titus’s biblically-inspired lamentation (Streete, 2018). Titus discovers a new religion when he listens to Lavinia (and attempts to interpret her signs); and he pledges to become as perfect his new religion, through “practice,” as “begging hermits in their holy prayers.” Granted, Titus’s moral regeneration is short-lived. But it is so because he falls back on the classical stories (of Philomele and Lucrece) to discover the rapists and plot revenge that involves honor-killing his daughter, the victim. It’s left for Aaron—the atheist Vice-figure shadowed by a biblical identity—to replace Roman idols with ethics. Aaron’s name keeps the Bible in our ears; and it should be stressed that he is the only major Shakespearean character with a biblical name. Aaron terrorizes the Andronici out of anger for his former slave status just as the biblical Aaron unleashes plagues on the

hardened Pharaoh to liberate the Hebrew slaves. But Aaron the Moor is not truly liberated until he finds himself face to face with his infant son in the middle of a biblical drama that reprises Gen. 22 (the near-sacrifice of Isaac)—a story in which Abraham is called to offer his only son as a burnt offering. Unlike Ovid's tale of Philomele's rape that led only to imitative violence, the biblical story provides a dramatic framework in which Aaron is given a choice to act in his own self-interest or bind himself over in a covenantal relationship with his son.

When the nurse enters "with a blackamoor child in her arms" and asks for Aaron, he responds, "Here Aaron is" (4.2.53, 56). In Gen. 22, "Here I am" is Abraham's signature response, and it is repeated three times (to God, to Isaac, to the angel), and the verbatim repetition signals Abraham's commitment to sustain his covenant bonds to both God and his son as he struggles to believe that God "will provide him a sheep for a burnt offering" (Gen. 22:8). When Aaron playing Abraham is told he must "christen it [the child] upon [his] dagger's point," he knows immediately and instinctively that no one—"not Enceladus, nor great Alcides, or the god of war / Shall seize this prey out of his father's hands" (4.2.82, 96-100). Aaron claims that he will challenge the gods, and maybe even God to defend the bond with his son. In the very same speech, he confronts the racial hatred of the Goth brothers with the same image Jesus used in Matthew 23:27-28 to criticize the Pharisees' ritualistic religion—"whited tombs, which appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and all filthiness." Shakespeare's Aaron calls out hypocrisy in similar terms: "What, what, you sanguine, shallow-hearted boys, / You white-limed walls, you alehouse-painted signs! / Coal black is better than another hue / In that it scorns to bear another hue" (4.2.101-104). Aaron goes on to remind Chiron and Demetrius that this black infant is their brother, and, in doing so, applies Jesus' ethic of loving across ethnic, racial, and confessional lines. Beneath the allusions to Old Testament and New Testament religion is the drama of the covenant encounter that begins with a predisposition to exchange with an Other and unfolds reciprocally, requiring the self-sacrifices of nurture. In a play that represents the brutalities of civilization and its religious institutions, there is a new emblem of holiness: Aaron talking to his crying child is apprehended beneath the wall of a ruin'd monastery (5.1.21). The buildings may collapse

and institutions decay, but holiness, as Calvin and others wrote, is found in the world and in the heart.

The divisiveness of confessional Religion is even more starkly displayed in *The Merchant of Venice*, a play in which scions of brother faiths (Judaism and Christianity) are pitted, one against the Other. Shakespeare demonstrates how easily confessional faith can stultify into caricature (Judaism=Law / Christianity=Love or Mercy) when proponents blind themselves to all that they share. They share scripture, yet Antonio scoffs at Shylock's effort to hash out their disagreement over usury by discussing the story of Jacob's thrifty management of Laban's sheep. They also share the character of Jacob, but each group identifies with a different story in Jacob's long narrative (Kietzman, 101-02). The Christians, following St. Paul, identify with Jacob the thief who steals his brother's blessing. Every Christian or would-be Christian uses the theft story to deceive a father or father figure; Launcelot, who would be "Master Launcelot" (2.2.48), pulls his hair over his own eyes to deceive blind Gobbo; Jessica, in "the lovely garnish of a boy" (2.6.45), robs her father to buy her way into Christian culture; and the cross-dressed Portia, who has already manipulated her "holy" (1.2.27) father's lottery, strips Shylock of his living, his values, and, finally, his religion. But Shylock identifies with Jacob the wrestler, mature and repentant, who learns in exile to contend with all manner of others. Finally, in Gen. 32, on the eve of the reunion with the brother he wronged, a mysterious man accosts him. They wrestle all night, and at the end of the match, there is no winner. God calls the contest and gives Jacob the new name of Israel—he who struggles with God. Israel is, of course, the name of the Hebrew nation. Even though Shylock speaks of "our sacred nation" (1.3.48), his eagerness to contend with the Christians demonstrates that his is a potentially expansive notion of "nation" (open to anyone who enters into covenant), and covenant, if taken seriously and practiced, is the way to mend tears in the social fabric.

To break down the difference between Christian and Jew, Shakespeare gives us not one but two "Hebrews" in the play—a Hebrew Jew and a Christian Hebrew (Shylock and Portia) both of whom deploy covenant as a means of rapprochement when face to face with an Other. Consider the way Portia negotiates her marriage as a covenant relationship when she tests Bassanio's capacity to listen and seals his election with a conditional promise to submit if he never gives away her ring. In

Reformation theology, covenant was a mediating idea. Magisterial reformers wrote about the single covenant linking old and new testaments (McCoy and Baker, 1991). And English theologians invented “double covenant theology” to capture the idea that human beings need both the moral law and mercy (McGiffert, *From Moses to Adam*, 145). Shakespeare makes a similar move in his play: he demonstrates the contractual and affective dimensions of covenant in Shylock’s reach across the religious aisle and he sounds the note of graceful inclusion at the beginning of Portia’s cross-dressed performance, when she acknowledges the Jewish roots of mercy.

The contractual dimensions of covenant is apparent in Shylock’s initial engagement with the Christians. He extends the offer of an interest-free loan “to buy [Antonio’s] favor” so as to improve the business climate on the Rialto and maybe even win the respect he craves—for a separate but equal status (1.3.168). His only stipulation is that Antonio sign a contract with a pound of his own flesh as collateral. The terms are symbolic: they “say” that the signatory is a “good” man who will keep his word, expressed in the bargain; and the terms also echo the sign of the Abrahamic covenant—circumcision which Julia Lupton describes as a “nation marking sign” that privileges conformance to religious principle over genealogy.<sup>16</sup> Antonio is thrilled (not frightened) by such serious terms because he is eager to lay down his life, but for Bassanio, not Shylock. Shylock, on the other hand, takes the covenant very seriously. He dramatizes its crucial affective dimension when he breaks his own dietary rule to dine with his new partners, even though he knows that he is not “bid for love” (2.5.13). “By Jacob’s staff I have no mind of feasting forth tonight,” he says to Jessica, “But I will go” (2.5.36-37). Shylock comforts and reassures himself by remembering Jacob’s anxiety the night before he had to face his brother—the night he was accosted by the divine wrestler. And he hopes the risk he undertakes will yield blessing. Tragically, on this very night when Shylock attempts to love his neighbor, the cabal of Christian playboys steal his daughter, Jessica, who, in turn, steals his ducats, diamonds, and the turquoise he had of Leah, the treasured sign of another covenant.

To broker a settlement between Shylock and Antonio, Portia puts on a jurist’s robe and the polyvalent biblical name, Balthazar. Balthazar is the Babylonian king who oppressed the Jews and whose dreams are

interpreted by the prophet Daniel, who is called Belteshezzar. Balthazar is also one of the three wise men who worship the infant Jesus. The complex referentiality of the name signals Portia's desire, initially, to break down binaries and pitch a synthesis of law and mercy, old and new covenants. At the start of her "Mercy" speech, she echoes Moses' Song from Deuteronomy 32—"My doctrine shall drop as the rain, and my speech shall still as the dew"—to awaken Shylock to his own Jewish ethics. Because "Doctor Balthazar" treats him with respect, locating the source of Christian values in Jewish texts, and because he upholds the law, Shylock calls him "a Daniel," a secret Jew (4.1.223). By this point in the play, however, Shylock has sacrificed his ethics to play a Jewish caricature, clinging to his bond, calling for judgement and law, refusing mercy as something soft and Christian. He has scales ready to weigh the flesh but refuses to have a surgeon by to stop Antonio's wounds. It is Shylock's hyper literalism that inspires Portia's legal loophole which, in turn, results in epiphany: Shylock knows in an instant that he cannot take flesh without blood, cannot kill Antonio and remain alive himself, and so drops the knife and asks only for his principal. But Portia refuses him mercy three times, breaking her covenant to judicially crucify a man she no longer calls by name but refers to as "the Jew" (4.1.321, 346).

Both Shylock and Portia have a chance to heal wounds caused by religious antipathy and violence. But both characters harden into malicious revengers to cover pain and gain power: Shylock seeks Antonio's life because he can't face his daughter's betrayal. Portia "kills" the Jew to reclaim power when faced with Bassanio's faithlessness. In choosing revenge, they betray the covenant ethics that undergird their faiths. Somehow Portia's hypocrisy is more glaring. Shylock drops his knife, but Portia refuses to practice mercy. Not only does she strip him of his living and religious identity, she absconds with his values to Belmont. There, she plays Shylock's former part: she forces Antonio to pledge his soul that Bassanio will never more break faith and drops monetary "manna" for Lorenzo, Jessica, and Antonio (5.1.293). When she plays God—only for certain chosen people—she confirms a sad reality she'd formerly worked against ... that those whose souls do bear "an egall yoke of love" "must needs be like" each other (3.3.13, 18).

But Shakespeare goes on, from play to play, criticizing Religion and dramatizing religion without Religion. A deed without a name. A how

rather than a what—covenanting that involves commitment, self-sacrifice, going beyond the stipulations of a contract. It is Aaron’s instinctive passion to save his son. It is Shylock’s daring risk to dine with his enemies. But it is not Portia’s calculated synthesis of law and love which, without deeds of mercy, is merely a bunch of “good sentences, and well pronounc’d” (1.2.10). It’s true that all three monotheisms share the foundational ethic of covenant—do unto others, love your neighbor as yourself and relieve the stranger—but covenant can never be monologic. It is the movement toward the neighbor Other. It is the practice of mutuality with that Other. It is essentially dramatic. And it is this orthopraxis of covenant othering, rather than Religion or Law, which is the only hope for the foundation of a plural society where “justice [will] roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Betteridge, "Shakespeare and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Church," 6.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Lake, *How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage*, 24.

<sup>3</sup> Ken Jackson, *Shakespeare and Abraham*, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Betteridge, "Shakespeare and the Elizabethan and Jacobean Church," 16.

<sup>5</sup> Lake does not work on the biblical subtext or Shakespeare's use of Hebraic images and ideas, but he does see English theater at the fin de siècle as working to call into being and mobilize a Protestant political nation. Peter Lake, *How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage: Power and Succession in the History Plays* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2016), 21.

<sup>6</sup> John Milton, "The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce," *John Milton, Selected Prose*, ed. C.A. Patrides, 131.

<sup>7</sup> I adopt Walter Brueggemann's understanding of covenant "othering" as "the ongoing process of life" which is "to come to terms with this other who will practice mutuality with us, but who at the same time stands in an incommensurate relation to us." Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self*, 2. George Mendenhall stresses that covenant was not necessary to establish unity among a kin-bound group, but was key to forming a community (nation) among a "mixed multitude" that was based on common obligation rather than common interest. *The Tenth Generation*, 21-22.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Gorski, “The Mosaic Moment: An Early Modernist Critique of Modernist Theories of Nationalism,” 1433.

<sup>9</sup> Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises*, 403; McGiffert, “William Tyndale’s Conception of Covenant,” 167.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Helgerson notes that the Elizabethan authors who set out to represent the English nation were “transitional men”—“men uprooted by education and ambition from familiar associations and local structures, men who were free—and compelled by their freedom—to imagine a new identity based on the kingdom or nation.” Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Bellah *The Broken Covenant*, 3; Philip Gorski, *American Covenant*, 14; John Caputo, *On Religion*, 135.

<sup>12</sup> Ted Hughes refers to Shakespeare’s work as creating “a nation of selves,” and I am struck by Hughes’s stress on the hendiadys (Shakespeare’s “device”)—a rhetorical figure that uses two nouns instead of one—as a form of democratizing accommodation. Shakespeare’s frequent use of the figure leads Hughes to refer to his language as “the language of the common bond,” and Neil Corcoran notes that it conveys a “powerfully covenantal” or even “quasi-religious” significance. Hughes, *A Choice of Shakespeare’s Verse* (1971 edn), 198. Neil Corcoran, “A Nation of Selves,” 195, 197. Willy Malley notes that “Falconbridge” in both *Merchant* and *King John*, who are made emblematic of the nation, are also “a figure of the heterogenous mix or gallymafrey ... that will be gathered around the figure of the English king in *Henry V* and that will be described as “but bastard Normans, Norman bastards” (*Henry V*, 3.5.10)” Malley, “To England Send Him,” 11-12.

<sup>13</sup> Quotations from *Titus Andronicus* are from the Folger Library edition of the play, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, 2005; and quotations from *The Merchant of Venice* are from the Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 1980.

<sup>14</sup> Julia Reinhard Lupton argues that Shakespeare’s “saints” (characters who represent heterodox limit points in their respective cultures) must sacrifice native particularity to become citizens of something like a modern “Pauline” state. However, Hebraic nationalism works conversely to highlight the contributions of marginal “saints.” In *Titus* and *Merchant*, it is the slaves and ghettoized marginals within imperial regimes that proffer covenant as an alternative social praxis. See Reinhard Lupton, *Citizen Saints*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Lake cites this as one among many moments that elide the Roman past with the Elizabethan present. Since Elizabeth I was frequently identified with Astraea, the whole scene could conjure up the sort of civil strife, disputed succession and vengeful religious war that it was widely feared would follow Elizabeth’s death. But another reading uses the Astraea reference to criticize policies of violent state persecution. Peter Lake, *How Shakespeare Put Politics on the Stage*, 173.

<sup>16</sup> Julia Lupton, *Citizen-Saints*, 33.