**The Influence of Shakespeare on *The Vow Breaker***

The two Shakespeare plays that probably had the most influence on Sampson are *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*. In his 1914 dissertation the German scholar Hans Wallrath refers to Sampson and the influence of Shakespeare on *The Vow Breaker* by suggesting that Sampson had learned to admire the ‘admirable dramatick poet’. Wallrath is of the opinion that Sampson had read Shakespeare’s works so ‘assiduously’ that many of his words found their way into *The Vow Breaker*.[[1]](#footnote-1) I shall discuss the influence of Shakespeare on Sampson, citing Hans Wallrath where appropriate.

*The Vow Breaker* takes as its main theme the legend of the maid of Clifton, where similarities may clearly be seen with Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, but this play was not, of course, Shakespeare’s original idea and the story may not have been unfamiliar to Sampson. In her Introduction to *Romeo and Juliet*,Roma Gill points out that the earlier story was well-known:

For the source of his play Shakespeare relies almost entirely on a narrative poem, *The Tragicall History of Romeus and Juliet*, by Arthur Brooke, which was published in 1562 and is itself a translation of a popular prose fiction by Bandello (published 1554) – which in turn derives from even earlier Italian stories.[[2]](#footnote-2)

There are several incidents in both plays that are, indisputably, similar. Juliet warns Romeo that he should be careful in his pursuit of her, reminding him that he would be killed ‘considering who thou art, / If any of my kinsmen find thee here’ (R&J 2.2.64-6) and, when Bateman tries to embrace Anne on his return from Leith, she advises, ‘’Twere best you travelled from my father’s ground / Lest he indict you’ (2.2.84-5). Wallrath compares as similar the state of ‘lovesickness’ of the men as they dream under the trees but, in my view, there are some clear differences in the two plays as Sampson is closer to the legend than Shakespeare’s play. Juliet always remains faithful to Romeo whereas Anne breaks her vows with apparent ease and marries an alternative suitor. Romeo kills himself only because he believes that Juliet has already died and he cannot face life without her, whereas Bateman commits suicide swearing that if he is unable to have Anne, no-one else will and his ghost will seek revenge for her unfaithfulness.

With the hanging of Bateman, we see that both he and Juliet liken their grave to their wedding bed:

One twitch will do’t, and then I shall be wed

As firm unto my grave as to her bed. (2.4.40-1).

(Juliet) If he be married

My grave is like to be my wedding bed. (R&J 1.5.138-9).

We again see similarity between the plays after the deaths of the young couples: in both plays we see the warring fathers united in their grief, and the final words of *Romeo and Juliet* and the legend of *The Vow Breaker*, as Wallrath points out, remind the audience of the tragedies enacted before them.

(Prince) For never was a story of more woe

Than this of Juliet and her Romeo. (R&J 5.3.309-10).

(Old Bateman) For never was a story of more ruth,

Than this of him and her, yet nought but truth. (4.3.318-9).

According to Wallrath, ‘*Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* seem to have been Sampson’s favourites of Shakespeare’s plays. No other of Shakespeare’s plays has left their mark so clearly as these two on Sampson’s *Vow Breaker*’. Wallrath regards Shakespeare’s influence on Sampson as ‘unmistakable but only superficial’, and criticises Sampson for not ‘delving’ deeper into Shakespeare’s work, ‘as seen particularly in the ghost scenes, where he takes Hamlet as his model’.

It is the opinion of Wallrath that ‘the exactly parallel development’ of the scenes in *Hamlet* and *The Vow Breaker* in relation to the appearance of the ghost ‘clearly shows that Sampson was influenced by Shakespeare. Bateman’s ghost, Anne’s guilty conscience, appears to her essentially as the royal apparition from Hamlet, adapted to a bourgeois milieu’.

In *The Vow Breaker* Bateman’s ghost haunts Anne everywhere, at all times, even during the daytime and has to return to the underworld when the cock crows. We may see similarities with reference to the ghost in Hamlet:

(Anne) It haunts me as my shadow or a vision

It will not let me rest, sleep, nor eat. (3.1.4-5).

(Ghost) I have a time limited to walk

Until the morning cock shall summon me

For to retire to misty Erebus. (3.1.66-8).

(Horatio) The cock, that is the trumpet to the morn,

Doth with his lofty and shrill-sounding throat

Awake the god of day; and at his warning, . . .

The extravagant and erring spirit hies

To his confine. (Ham. 1.1.150-5).

Wallrath believes that ‘the whole thing is a mechanical imitation’ of *Hamlet*, Act 1, scene 5, and that the development of the scene is ‘pre-determined by Shakespeare, hence the inconsequential nature of Sampson’s conception of the ghost’, and the horror and terror felt by its appearance. Wallrath says that the ‘paralysed’ Anne’s description of her feelings as having ‘frozen up’ is ‘certainly’ borrowed from Shakespeare:

(Anne) Distraction, like an ague, seizes me.

I know not whether I see, hear, or speak:

My intellectual parts are frozen up

At sight of thee, thou fiery effigies

Of my wrongèd Bateman. (3.1.80-4).

(Ghost) I could a tale unfold whose lightest word

Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,

Make two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres

Thy knotted and combined locks to part,

And each particular hair to stand an end,

Like quills upon the fretful porpentine: (Ham. 1.5.15-20).

In *The Vow Breaker* only Anne sees the phantom, and her father and Ursula (who are with her) do not. Wallrath suggests that this is ‘just as only Hamlet sees his father’s ghost in Act 3, but his mother, to whom he is talking, does not’. It should be mentioned, however, that in the opening scene of *Hamlet* Horatio and the soldiers also see the ghost, of course, whereas in *The Vow Breaker* I believe thatit is clear that only Anne ever sees it. Further similarity may be seen in these plays in the references to the ghost as it is realised that it looks exactly like the person represented:

(Anne) Young Bateman’s visage;

In every limb as perfect as he lived. (3.1.105-6).

(Hamlet) Why, look you there! Look, how it steals away;

My father, in his habit as he liv’d. (Ham. 3.4.132-4).

Wallrath expresses the view that ‘Anne’s father also claims to have seen the ghost on one occasion’, comparing this experience with that of Hamlet:

(Boote) Art thou of air, of earth, heaven or hell

Or art thou of some incubus’s breed? (5.2.93-4).

(Hamlet) Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn’d,

Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell (Ham. 1.4.40-1)

In this scene Ursula rebuffs the attention of Miles who is intent upon declaring his love for her. She quickly takes the opportunity to distract him when she hears her uncle calling her; the old man is suffering from grief at Anne’s death. Ursula tells Miles to pretend to be a ghost, to enable them to have a joke at Old Boote’s expense; she ‘quakes, shakes, trembles and shivers’ for effect. ‘Ha! Ha! No fool to th’old one! says Miles gleefully in an aside; ‘He takes me for a ghost!’ Boote appears to be taken in at first by the deception and then becomes annoyed with Miles and Ursula, when the ‘ghost’s’ identity is revealed. He packs off Miles and orders his niece, ‘Mistress, wait you on me!’ It may be that Old Boote ‘claims’ to have seen Bateman’s ghost, but this is not made clear in the play and I remain unconvinced that Wallrath is correct in his interpretation of this scene.

Regarding Shakespeare’s other plays, there are several with which to illustrate points of similarity. The introduction of Joshua’s cat into Sampson’s play seems rather incongruous (1.2.88-98) but he may be compared with Launce’s dog in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.Tibert, like Crab, also causes his master a great deal of trouble and is to be hanged as a punishment, although both animals escape this fate. (3.2.1-80; Gent. 2.3.-). It may also be seen that both Joshua and Launce have conversations with their animals (Gent. 4.4.1-44).

Wallrath expresses the view that Sampson has ‘only adopted some individual situation, images or short sentences’ from Shakespeare’s other plays, ‘not whole passages as was the case with *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*’. Wallrath suggests that Anne, at the beginning of *The Vow Breaker*,and Helena, of *All’s Well That Ends Well*, ‘reproach’ their loves over a farewell kiss although, in my opinion, the kisses between Anne and Bateman appear to give them shared enjoyment (1.1.43; AWW 2.5.85-92).

The manner in which Anne expresses her preference for an older man may be compared to a similar assertion in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*:

(Anne) In nat’ral things we see that herbs and plants

In autumn ever do receive perfection;

As they, so man never attains his height

Till in the autumn of his growing age. (1.4.10-13).

(Lysander) Things growing are not ripe until their season;

So I, being young, till now ripe not to reason (MND 2.2.117-8).

In the opening scene of *Macbeth* we are introduced to the witches chanting, ‘Fair is foul, and foul is fair’ – a phrase repeated later by Macbeth, ‘So foul and fair a day I have not seen’ (Mac. 1.1.11; 1.3.38). There is a very similar phrase in *The Vow Breaker*,in the scene where Anne welcomes Jermane as her husband and justifies her choice to Ursula: ‘Gold, like a second nature, can elixate, Make the deformed fair, the fair seem foul’ (1.4.52-53).

Another example from *Macbeth* may be seen after Anne has given birth to her baby and the ghost appears to her saying, ‘Awake, fond mortal, ne’er to sleep again!’ (4.3.192). Macbeth, too, hears a voice cry ‘Sleep no more!’ (Mac. 2.2.36).

It is only to be expected that when discussing the Siege of Leith in relation to Shakespeare, examples may be found in the history plays. When the French are preparing to ambush the English, Martigues comments:

They now are healthing and carousing deep.

Now is our time to work a stratagem

Gaining these trenches that oppress the town. (2.1.2-4).

In Part One of *Henry the Sixth*, similar lines are given to an Englishmen to describe the behaviour of the French:

(Talbot) This happy night the Frenchmen are secure,

Having all day carous’d and banqueted;

Embrace we then this opportunity,

As fitting best to quittance their deceit

Contriv’d by art and baleful sorcery. (1H6 11-15).

When Miles knows that Bateman is to return home, he asks him to tell Ursula:

I fight for her sake and will live as long as I can, die

when I can no longer live; (2.1.63-4).

In *Henry the Fifth*, we see that Nym says something similar to Bardolph:

I will live so long as I may, that’s the certain of it; and

when I cannot live any longer, I will do as I may; (H5 2.1.15-17).

When Bateman returns home from Leith and is surprised by the ‘heavy glances’ he receives from friends and the tears from his father, he dismisses these omens, telling himself, ‘Heaven has a hand in all things’ (2.2.33). This phrase may be compared with the Duke of York’s explanation of the reaction of the people to Richard, ‘But heaven hath a hand in these events’ (R2 5.2.37).

Wallrath points out further phrases that are almost exactly the same in Shakespeare as those written by Sampson. For example, lines from *Venus and* Adonis may be compared with those from *The Vow Breaker.* Bateman suddenly realises why Anne is wearing a ring, and Venus instantly recognises the meaning of what Adonis is saying:

(Bateman) And like the deadly bullet from a gun

Thy meaning kills me, ere thy words get vent. (2.2.110-11).

Or, like the deadly bullet of a gun,

His meaning struck her ere his words began (VA lines 461-2).

‘Sampson is almost certainly thinking of Henry VI’s words’ says Wallrath, when both Bateman and Henry are expressing their misery at the circumstances affecting them:

(Bateman) . . . such an overture and flood of woes

Surrounds me that they almost drowned

My understanding. (2.2.133-5).

(Henry) . . . my heart is drown’d with grief,

Whose flood begins to flow within my eye

My body round engirt with misery (2H6 198-200).

After his son’s death Old Bateman wants to hang up his picture so that he can talk to his son.[[3]](#footnote-3) Similarly, Proteus wants a picture of Silvia for his room:

(Old Bateman) I’ll have thy picture hung up in my chamber

And, when I want thee, I will weep to that (2.4.134-5).

(Proteus) Madam, if your heart be so obdurate,

Vouchsafe me yet your picture for my love,

The picture that is hanging in your chamber:

To that I’ll speak, to that I’ll sigh and weep. (Gent. 4.2.122-5).

It may be that both Sampson and Shakespeare were aware of the biblical reference in the following scenes – Wallrath considers this likely. In *The Vow Breaker* the ghost speaks to the pregnant Anne telling her that it is not yet carrying her off to the underworld, because ‘Thy time is not yet come’ (3.1.102); in *Henry the Sixth, Part One*, Joan fights with Talbot and then leaves him, saying ‘thy hour is not yet come’ (6H1 1.5.13). The passage from the Bible reads: ‘Then they sought to take Him: but no man laid hands on him, because his hour was not yet come’ (John 7.30).

*The Merchant of Venice* may be the source of Sampson’s characterisation of Anne, suggesting that she is as hard as Shylock. When Anne goes to Old Bateman to ask forgiveness, he is suspicious that she is truly penitent:

(Old Bateman) . . . to gain

Relenting tears from thy obdurate heart

’Tis impossible as to force fire from snow,

Water from flint, say the sun shall not shine

As well upon the beggar as the king,

That is alike in different to all. (3.3.38-43).

(Antonio) You may as well go stand upon the beach,

And bid the main flood bate his usual height;

You may as well use question with the wolf,

Why he hath made the ewe bleat for the lamb;

You may as well forbid the mountain pines

To wag their high tops, and to make no noise

When they are fretted with the gusts of heaven;

You may as well do anything most hard,

As seek to soften that – than which what’s harder? –

His Jewish heart: (MerVen. 4.1.71-80).

Ursula begs Old Bateman to forgive Anne, ‘Forgiveness is an attribute of heaven’ (4.3.44) and in a similar manner Portia reminds Shylock, ‘mercy is above this sceptre sway . . . It is an attribute to God himself’ (MerVen. 193; 195).

Wallrath is of the opinion that there is only one place in the fifth act that is reminiscent of Shakespeare although he considers that the four preceding acts offer a varied selection from his works. In Act Five, Scene Two, Old Boote is tricked into believing that Miles is a ghost (Wallrath believes that Boote thinks he is actually looking at the ghost of Bateman):

. . . I will beat thy carcass into a form

That is full substantial and has feeling;

Seeing, hearing, smelling and sweet-tasting ghost (5.2.96-8).

We may see in *The Tempest* that Miranda thinks that Ferdinand is a ghost when she first

sees him:

(Miranda) What is’t? a spirit? / . . .

It carries a brave form: - but ’is a spirit.

(Prospero) No wench; it eats and sleeps, and hath such senses

As we have, such (Temp. 1.2.406; 408-10).

Wallrath concludes that ‘there would be little room for echoes of Shakespeare [in the rest of Act Five] since the first scene is taken almost verbatim from Holinshed’.

It is evident that the influence of Shakespeare is seen throughout *The Vow Breaker* - not only in the scenes that remind us of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* but also in the many examples where Sampson has used ideas and phrases that come from Shakespeare’s plays. It may be assumed that Sampson moved in literary circles: he had worked collaboratively with Gervase Markham, his employer was a patron of the arts, and Phineas Fletcher also lived in the household. Sampson had, no doubt, watched many dramatic performances and remembered many speeches: he may even have acted in the plays himself. We do not know. What we do know is that Sampson was unashamed of poaching the words of others – it is only necessary to take a cursory glance at Holinshed to see this.[[4]](#footnote-4) While I do not dispute that Shakespeare’s words are to be found in *The Vow Breaker* (and, no doubt, in the works of Sampson’s contemporaries), most of the themes used by Shakespeare, and others, are well known and well used and it is unsurprising that Sampson also availed himself of them.

1. Wallrath, Hans. ‘Literary influences: Shakespeare’, pp. 35 – 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Shakespeare, William. (ed. Roma Gill). *Romeo and Juliet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

   p. xxxi. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is also closely paralleled in Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See ‘The story of a siege’ for quotations from Holinshed. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)