DOI: 10.46585/absa.2024.17.2576

Secular Shakespeare: Robert Green Ingersoll in the Context of American Bardolatry

Colin Cavendish-Jones

Abstract

As American Literature began to depart from European models in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Shakespeare came to be venerated with increasing enthusiasm, and was often regarded in quasi-religious terms, even as other British writers fell out of favor. This "Bardolatry" culminated in the late nineteenth century with the critical and appreciative writings of Robert Green Ingersoll, who was both the most prolific writer on Shakespeare and the most celebrated atheist and secularist of his age. Ingersoll's appropriation of Shakespeare, as both a sceptic whose political and religious opinions reflected his own and an object of religious veneration to resemble and challenge the figure of Christ, exercised a strong influence on later writers, both popular and academic. This influence shaped the way in which Shakespeare is now widely regarded in America as the one indispensable secular writer and the center of a world canon.

Keywords

Shakespeare, Ingersoll, Atheism, Secular, World Canon

Shakespeare may be the only Western writer to have temples, as opposed to monuments or memorials, erected in his honor. David Garrick built his Temple to Shakespeare at Hampton on the north bank of the Thames in 1756 and used it to house his collection of Shakespearean relics, which was so large that it took ten days to auction off after Garrick's death. These objects included a glove, a dagger and a signet ring that had belonged to Shakespeare, as well as a chair made from the wood of a mulberry tree supposed to have been planted by Shakespeare in the grounds of New Place. Such quasi-religious veneration, in which Shakespeare is regarded not only as a great writer, but as a messianic figure, has a long history and was particularly intense in nineteenth-century America, nowhere more than in the writing of Robert Green Ingersoll.

Ingersoll was one of the most celebrated American orators and writers of the nineteenth century, whose fame faded in the twentieth and has partially revived in the twenty-first due to the resurgence of the God debate and a renewed interest in atheist and secularist thought. He is now remembered principally by the title of Susan Jacoby's 2013 biography, *The Great Agnostic,* as "one of the two most important champions of reason and secular government in American history – the other being Thomas Paine".[1] Ingersoll's collected works, which ran to twelve large volumes in the Dresden Edition of 1902, are out of print, with recent selected editions tending to focus on his political speeches and attacks on religion, rather than on literary and critical writings.

Ingersoll's biographical approach to literary criticism, and his determination to enlist Shakespeare in particular as a spokesman for his own political and religious views, is clearly at odds with modern academic writing. This is true in terms of both intention and, usually, tone, though Harold Bloom, who has written even more extensively on Shakespeare than Ingersoll did, replicates his attitude of fervent admiration. Bloom also agrees with Ingersoll in treating

1 Susan Jacoby, *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 1.

Shakespeare as superhuman and his texts as sacred. In *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Bloom's longest work on Shakespeare and the one in which he makes the most extensive claims for his subject, Bloom remarks that "Shakespeare has had the status of a secular Bible for the last two centuries."[2] Bloom goes on to suggest that this status may even be augmented in the future:

> If the world indeed can have a universal and unifying culture, to any degree worthy of notice, such a culture cannot emanate from religion. Judaism, Christianity and Islam have a common root, but are more diverse than similar, and the other great religious traditions, centred upon China and India, are very remote from the children of Abraham… English already is the world language, and presumably will become even more so in the twenty-first century. Shakespeare, the best and central writer in English, already is the only universal writer, staged and read everywhere.[3]

Four years earlier, Bloom had already described Shakespeare as the center of the Western canon.[4] Now he claims the central writer in English as the only universal writer, the center of an emerging world canon, and the founding father of a secular faith. Bloom contends that our ideas "as to what makes the self authentically human owe more to Shakespeare than ought to be possible, but then he has become a Scripture"[5] and that the propensity of Shakespeare's characters to explore their inner lives, to reflect on their own rhetoric and change as a result of sustained introspection, is a new invention that has more in common with divine creation than with literary talent.

It is to this last point that the atheist philosopher A.C. Grayling takes the greatest exception in his review of Bloom's book for *Prospect Magazine*, simply entitled "Bardolatry." Grayling begins by describing himself as a bardolator and continues:

> I love Shakespeare. I go to every production of any of his plays which comes my way. I read him almost constantly. I review books about him frequently, even those absurd books which claim he was Bacon or Marlowe or a whole committee of playwrights. I thrill with admiration for his genius, for he is undeniably one of the greatest geniuses ever. His achievement is staggering.[6]

However, even given this degree of admiration for Shakespeare, Grayling finds Bloom's language hyperbolic. Grayling insists on the difference "between seeing Shakespeare as the articulator of inner life, as the first and most powerful portrayer of personal and individual subjectivity as a moral fact in the world, and its actual inventor."[7] To say, as Bloom does, that "Shakespeare did not merely portray human nature in all its variety and complexity, but actually invented it, giving us the categories and the patterns of different selfhoods which, before and without him, it was not so much as possible for us to think about"[8] is for Grayling a religious stance that has its origins in nineteenth-century Bardolatry.

2 Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), 716.

3 Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 717-718.

4 Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York, Harcourt Brace, 1994), 45.

5 Bloom, *Shakespeare*, 17.

6 A.C. Grayling, "Bardolatry," *Prospect Magazine*, 20 April 1999. <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/bardolatry-ac-grayling-shakespeare-harold-bloom>.

7 Grayling, "Bardolatry".

8 Grayling, "Bardolatry".

The term "Bardolatry" for the idolization of Shakespeare was coined in 1901 by George Bernard Shaw in the preface to *Three Plays for Puritans*. Although the word belongs to the twentieth century, Shaw traces back the practice of Shakespeare-worship to the eighteenth-century actor managers, particularly David Garrick and Colley Cibber, whom he also accuses of misunderstanding Shakespeare and butchering his plays, remarking:

> It is a significant fact that the mutilators of Shakespear [sic], who never could be persuaded that Shakespear knew his business better than they, have ever been the most fanatical of his worshippers.[9]

Shaw goes on to castigate Victorian actor-managers such as Sir Henry Irving for the same double fault of Bardolatry and butchery, and contrasts serious Shakespeare criticism, like that of William Morris, which is sometimes hostile, with the raptures of the Romantics and their intellectual heirs. The most influential English Shakespeare critics of the nineteenth century from Coleridge through Carlyle to Swinburne were not merely admiring in their tone but anticipated Ingersoll in adopting an attitude of religious awe towards their subject. Swinburne's book *A Study of Shakespeare* shows a particular tendency to describe Shakespeare as a divine being, with language such as "the sovereign lord and incarnate god of pity and terror"[10] and the "godlike equity of Shakespeare's judgment, his implacable and impeccable righteousness of instinct"[11] Swinburne has recently been neglected as a Shakespeare critic, a neglect perhaps partly due to the hostile treatment of his work by T.S. Eliot, followed by similar dismissiveness in the work of later critics such as Kenneth Muir and Harry Levin.[12] Swinburne's book on Shakespeare, however, was highly influential in the late nineteenth century, going through two editions upon its first publication in 1880 and another four before 1910.

Contemporary reviewers of Swinburne in periodicals such as the *Examiner*, the *Saturday Review* and the *Spectator*, noticed the similarity between his Shakespeare criticism and that of Coleridge and even Dryden before him. The *Saturday Review* couched its approbation in particularly religious terms, referring to "the sensible and conservative criticism of a poet whose insight teaches him to revere the old traditions and venerable canons of Shakespearian faith."[13] Coleridge and Carlyle had rendered Bardolatry a conservative attitude by 1880, so much so that Swinburne's reviewers, who had not come to expect anything in the nature of conservatism from him, were unanimous in recognizing this aspect of his work.

In opposition to Swinburne's Bardolatry was the Darwinian style of Shakespeare criticism pioneered by Frederick James Furnivall, the philologist and lexicographer and founder of the New Shakspere [sic] Society. Terence Hawkes describes the Society, founded in 1873, as "the very model of Victorian scientism," since its object was to trace the evolution of Shakespeare's works to "get his life and times straight, his plays accurately edited and classified, to align the one exactly with the other, to fix the shape of both irretrievably, and to weld them together forever as a single,

9 George Bernard Shaw, *Three Plays for Puritans* (Chicago and New York: Herbert S. Stone, 1901), 23.

10 Algernon Swinburne, *A Study of Shakespeare* (New York: AMS Press, 1965), 175.

11 Swinburne, *A Study of Shakespeare*, 113.

12 For a discussion of the reception of Swinburne's Shakespeare criticism, see Robert Sawyer, *Victorian Appropriations of Shakespeare* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), 76-83.

13 *Saturday Review*, 1880, Volume 50.

comprehensible and coherent unity."[14] This approach is parodied in an appendix to Swinburne's *Study of Shakespeare* entitled "Report of the Proceedings on the First Anniversary Session of the Newest Shakespeare Society," in which the syllable-counting and tabulated statements of scientific criticism provide a pointed contrast to Swinburne's own rhapsodies.

Swinburne's combination of a conservative critical stance with high-flown religious rhetoric recalls Carlyle's chapter on Shakespeare and Dante in his book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History.* Carlyle's attitude to Shakespeare at first appears something of a paradox, veering between veneration and condescension. As Grayling observes, Carlyle insists on referring to Shakespeare as "the peasant from Warwickshire"[15] while simultaneously describing him as "the greatest intellect who, in our recorded world, has left record of himself in the way of Literature.[16] Carlyle even anticipates both Ingersoll and Bloom in his insistence on Shakespeare's universality and quasi-scriptural authority, declaring:

> Even in Arabia, as I compute, Mahomet will have exhausted himself and become obsolete, while this Shakspeare [sic], this Dante, may still be young; while this Shakspeare may still pretend to be a Priest of Mankind, of Arabia as of other places, for unlimited periods to come![17]

This juxtaposition of humble origins and superhuman powers is a familiar paradox in the biographies of religious leaders, including Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. However, such religious veneration of Shakespeare was by no means universal in England in the centuries immediately following his death. Shakespeare's American admirers often remarked that the land of his birth did not deserve such a genius. When John Adams and Thomas Jefferson made the pilgrimage to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1786, they were shocked at the negligence with which Shakespeare's birthplace was treated by the English.[18] The two future Presidents showed no such indifference. Jefferson fell upon the ground before Shakespeare's house and kissed it, a pilgrim prostrating himself before a shrine. Adams carried home a sliver of wood from Shakespeare's chair, a relic which the family preserved until at least 1815.[19] A year later, in 1787, Peter Markoe, a Philadelphia poet, published his ode to Shakespeare, in which he apostrophized Shakespeare as a universal genius "Scorning the narrow bounds of space and time." Markoe asserted that the spirit of Shakespeare's writing was much more compatible with America than it was with Britain:

> Monopolizing Britain! Boast no more
> His genius to your narrow bounds confined;
> Shakespeare's bold spirit seeks our western shore,
> A gen'ral blessing for the world designed,
> And emulous to form the rising age,
> The noblest Bard demands the noblest Stage.[20]

14 Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare in the Present* (London: Routledge, 2002), 119.

15 Grayling, "Bardolatry"

16 Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London: Frederick A. Stokes, 1888), 115.

17 Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History,* 125.

18 Michael D. Bristol, *Shakespeare's America, America's Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2013), 53.

19 Alden T. and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 62.

20 Peter Markoe, "The Tragic Genius of Shakespeare: An Ode" in *Miscellaneous Poems* (Philadelphia: Pritchard and Hall, 1787), 27.

Eight years later, in his preface to the first American edition of Shakespeare's *Complete Works*, Joseph Hopkinson chauvinistically remarked of the First Folio:

> How wretched must have been the state of English literature in the days of Shakspeare [sic], when six years elapsed after his decease, before his friends found it worth their trouble to print his plays! This did not arise from poverty, but the total want of taste in the English nation…[21]

A reverence for the works of Shakespeare in eighteenth and nineteenth-century America was not necessarily or even often an expression of Anglophilia. In the cases cited above, it represented an appropriation, a challenge to the mother country's assumptions of cultural superiority. In the nineteenth century, major American writers such as James Fennimore Cooper, William Cullen Bryant and, most significantly, Ralph Waldo Emerson consistently referred to Shakespeare as an American writer so that, as Kim C. Sturgess remarks:

> During the nineteenth century Americans learnt to use the possessive pronoun 'our' when referring to Shakespeare, something not done with other foreign writers.[22]

Emerson, however, also uses the possessive pronoun to refer to Chaucer and other English writers who preceded Shakespeare, since he regards all writers predating the British colonization of America as part of American literature. In this respect, Shakespeare lived at just the right time to be co-opted into the American canon. John Milton, had he so wished, could have become an American, like his Cambridge contemporaries John Harvard and Roger Williams, who tutored Milton in Dutch. Milton's career takes place in parallel with colonial American literature. Anne Bradstreet's poems were published before *Paradise Lost*. Shakespeare, however, lived at a time before American literature, when only a few adventurers, farmers and tradesmen were beginning to cross the Atlantic. He was well into middle age, and nearing the end of his career as a dramatist, by the time Jamestown was founded in 1607. Shakespeare might, therefore, reasonably be regarded as the last major figure in English literature before American literature came into being.[23]

In America as in England, however, Shakespeare's dramas were plays before they were works, regarded as entertainment first and literature second. The first professional American performance of a Shakespeare play took place in New York on 5 March 1750, 45 years before the first American Edition of his works was published. The play chosen was *Richard III*, which might be regarded by a republican such as Ingersoll as a condemnation of the corruption and arrogance of the British monarchy. Lawrence W. Levine remarks that Shakespeare "*was* popular entertainment in nineteenth-century America"[24] and that it was only in the early twentieth century that he made the transition "from popular culture to polite culture."[25] In the infamous Astor Place Riot of 1849,

21 Kim C. Sturgess, *Shakespeare and the American Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 65.

22 Sturgess, *Shakespeare and the American Nation,* 4.

23 It may be objected that Shakespeare had plenty of contemporaries such as Jonson, Webster, Massinger, Fletcher and Middleton who lived well into the seventeenth century and could theoretically have emigrated to America, or that English literature does not simply stop between *The Tempest* and *The Tenth Muse*. While both of these propositions are true, no other Renaissance playwright exerted anything close to the influence of Shakespeare in American literature.

24 Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/lowbrow: the emergence of cultural hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988), 21.

25 Levine, *Highbrow/lowbrow: the emergence of cultural hierarchy in America*, 56.

at least 23 people were killed and over 100 injured in clashes between the supporters of Edwin Forrest, a leading American actor, and William Charles Macready, a similarly eminent actor on tour from England, both of whom were acting the part of Macbeth in competing Broadway theatres a few blocks away from each other. This dispute over rival interpretations of Shakespeare grew into a 15,000-strong riot which marked the first occasion that a State militia fired into a crowd of citizens and which led directly to American police forces being issued with firearms.[26] Forrest, as the American champion, had by far the larger following, crowds of whom gathered outside the Astor Place Opera House where Macready was due to perform on 10 May 1849. Three days before the riots, when Forrest was performing at the larger and more popular Broadway Theatre and spoke Macbeth's lines: "What rhubarb, senna or what purgative drug/Would scour these English hence?" the entire crowd rose and cheered for several minutes.[27]

Shakespeare was thus not only excepted from the general American disdain for the English in the nineteenth century but enlisted on the American side as an honorary citizen of the Republic. His plays were acted beside campfires during the California Gold Rush. Ulysses S. Grant dressed in drag to play Desdemona in a U.S. Army production of *Othello* in Corpus Christi, Texas just before the outbreak of the Mexican-American War. Shakespeare's plays inspired poetry by Emily Dickinson, fiction by Nathanial Hawthorne and critical essays by a whole range of writers from Walt Whitman to Mary Preston, who famously wrote that Othello was a white man. Henry Cabot Lodge replied to English critics who complained about the debased form of their language spoken across the Atlantic with an essay on "Shakespeare's Americanisms." Phineas Taylor Barnum, who followed in the steps of Jefferson, Adams and Irving by visiting Shakespeare's birthplace in 1844, attempted to buy the house and ship it to New York.

In *Shakespeare in America*, his 2014 anthology for the Library of America, James Shapiro charts the history of Shakespeare's reception in America and includes seventy American writers whose works were inspired by Shakespeare, ranging from an anonymous parodist who used *Hamlet* to comment on the Declaration of Independence early in 1776 ("To sign, or not to sign? That is the question…") to the contemporary poet, Jen Bervin, whose 2004 collection, *Nets*, highlights a few words from sixty of Shakespeare's sonnets to find new poems and new meanings. In their 2012 book, also called *Shakespeare in America*, Alden T. Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan explore the American fascination with and appropriation of Shakespeare in a series of essays. Both books are symptomatic of the twenty-first-century interest in the reception and appropriation of Shakespeare in America. Neither, however, so much as mentions the name of the most prolific and enthusiastic of nineteenth-century American Shakespeareans; Robert Green Ingersoll.

Ingersoll, however, was, if not the greatest American Shakespeare critic of the nineteenth century, certainly the greatest Shakespeare enthusiast. He wrote more about Shakespeare than Emerson, Hawthorne and Melville, the other great bardolators of nineteenth-century America, combined. His writing on Shakespeare should perhaps be described as appreciative and popularizing rather than critical. He emphasizes the biography and what he takes to be the personal qualities of his favourite writer, as well as the effect Shakespeare's writing has on him. In an after-dinner

26 Nigel Cliff, *The Shakespeare Riots: Revenge, Drama and Death in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Random House, 2007), 241.

27 Levine, *Highbrow/lowbrow: the emergence of cultural hierarchy in America,* 63.

speech given in 1895, towards the end of his life and at the height of his fame, Ingersoll described his first adolescent encounter with Shakespeare's work:

> I was raised respectably. Certain books were not thought to be good for the young person; only such books as would start you in the narrow road for the New Jerusalem. But one night I stopped at a little hotel in Illinois, many years ago, when we were not quite civilized, when the footsteps of the red man were still in the prairies. While I was waiting for supper an old man was reading from a book, and among others who were listening was myself. I was filled with wonder. I had never heard anything like it. I was ashamed to ask him what he was reading; I supposed that an intelligent boy ought to know. So I waited, and when the little bell rang for supper I hung back and they went out. I picked up the book; it was Sam Johnson's edition of Shakespeare. The next day I bought a copy for four dollars… For days, for nights, for months, for years, I read those books, two volumes, and I commenced with the introduction. I haven't read that introduction for nearly fifty years, certainly forty-five, but I remember it still. Other writers are like a garden diligently planted and watered, but Shakespeare is a forest where the oaks and elms toss their branches to the storm, where the pine towers, where the vine bursts into blossom at its foot. That book opened to me a new world, another nature. While Burns was the valley, here was a range of mountains with thousands of such valleys; while Burns was as sweet a star as ever rose into the horizon, here was a heaven filled with constellations. That book has been a source of perpetual joy to me from that day to this; and whenever I read Shakespeare—if it ever happens that I fail to find some new beauty, some new presentation of some wonderful truth, or another word that bursts into blossom, I shall make up my mind that my mental faculties are failing, that it is not the fault of the book.[28]

This passage is worth quoting at length because it provides not only a vivid account of the young Ingersoll's fervent reaction to his first encounter with Shakespeare, but also an equally clear picture of the contrasting atmosphere in which he was raised. Shakespeare, far from being the center of the canon, is contrasted with the Bible and other devotional works, which furnished the education of the preacher's son. The writer who was to be ladled down the throats of future generations as a compulsory element of their education was, for Ingersoll, something close to a forbidden pleasure. Yet, to balance this, Ingersoll suggests that even as a boy he was aware of the narrowness of a respectable culture that excluded Shakespeare. He was ashamed of not knowing what the old man was reading, and describes himself and the society from which he comes as "not quite civilized", a land of one book in which sophisticated literary culture was as out of place as popular entertainment. Then there is the familiar language of the bardolator contrasting Shakespeare with all other writers, here represented by Robert Burns, one of Ingersoll's favorite poets and the subject of some of his most eloquent literary appreciations. Burns and the other great writers of the past, however, are single stars. Shakespeare is a heaven filled with constellations. It is a difference, not merely in quality, but in kind; the difference between mortality and all-comprehending divinity.[29] Finally, Ingersoll places the works of Shakespeare above question and criticism in the same way as a sacred text. If he ever fails to appreciate Shakespeare, it will be his own fault, not Shakespeare's. No critical appraisal is permitted, only gratitude for the sublime gift of the word.

28 Robert Green Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 12. (New York: Dresden Publishing Company, 1902), 172–173.

29 Ralph Waldo Emerson makes the same point in *Representative Men*: "Shakespeare is as much out of the category of eminent authors as he is out of the crowd. He is inconceivably wise; the others, conceivably."

In his longest and most detailed essay on Shakespeare, however, Ingersoll begins by explicitly disclaiming any suggestion of a divine origin for Shakespeare's genius:

> More than three centuries ago, the most intellectual of the human race was born. He was not of supernatural origin. At his birth there were no celestial pyrotechnics. His father and mother were both English, and both had the cheerful habit of living in this world. The cradle in which he was rocked was canopied by neither myth nor miracle, and in his veins there was no drop of royal blood.[30]

As is so often the case in Ingersoll's work, gods and kings are yoked together as objects of disdain. Ingersoll is constantly concerned to point out that the God his Puritan compatriots revere is drawn after the same pattern as the aristocrats they despise and he is determined on these ideological grounds (rather than through any scholarly investigation) to refute the claims of Anti-Stratfordians that the works of Shakespeare must have been written by a nobleman. Early on in the essay, Ingersoll declares that "there never sat on any throne a king, queen, or emperor who could have honored William Shakespeare,"[31] and thereafter his dislike of kings and aristocrats is evident on every page, alongside his excoriation of Puritanism and other forms of organized religion. Noting that Shakespeare makes no direct mention of any contemporary figure in any of his plays, Ingersoll remarks:

> Some have insisted that the paragraph ending with the lines: "The imperial votress passed on in maiden meditation fancy-free," referred to Queen Elizabeth; but it is impossible for me to believe that the daubed and wrinkled face, the small black eyes, the cruel nose, the thin lips, the bad teeth, and the red wig of Queen Elizabeth could by any possibility have inspired these marvelous lines.
>
> It is perfectly apparent from Shakespeare's writings that he knew but little of the nobility, little of kings and queens. He gives to these supposed great people great thoughts, and puts great words in their mouths and makes them speak—not as they really did—but as Shakespeare thought such people should. This demonstrates that he did not know them personally.[32]

The phrasing in the first paragraph is revealing. It is certainly impossible for Ingersoll to believe that the hideous face he calls to mind when he thinks of Queen Elizabeth I could have inspired any of Shakespeare's verse, but this is political prejudice and republican rhetoric rather than literary scholarship; a demonstration of the type of thing Ingersoll is predisposed to believe. Ingersoll does not want to admit that Shakespeare could easily have referred to Queen Elizabeth without having been 'inspired' by her, or that Shakespeare's view of aristocracy and royalty might have been different from that of a nineteenth-century American. The second paragraph displays a circularity quite at odds with Ingersoll's claim invariably to be guided by reason. He assumes that Shakespeare did not know any of the nobility because his interpretation of their characters differs from that of Ingersoll, who certainly does not know them. In fact, Shakespeare's kings and nobles, from Roman Emperors to English Dukes, often behave contemptibly. How much drama would be lost if they did not? The weak and perfidious Emperor Saturninus, the incestuous murderer

30 Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 3, 4.

31 Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 3, 5.

32 Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 3, 14. The passage is in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* II.i.148. Earlier in the lecture, Ingersoll recalls that Henry Chettle took Shakespeare to task because he wrote nothing which directly refers to the death of Queen Elizabeth.

King Claudius, the uxorious regicide Macbeth and, of course, the gleefully monstrous Richard of Gloucester who was the star of America's first professional Shakespeare performance, are scarcely shining examples of any possible connection between noble birth and noble behavior. Ingersoll's argument here is based on nothing but an assumption that Shakespeare must have thought as he did himself.

Ingersoll's assertions become even more tenuous when he sets out to rebut the specific candidacy of Francis Bacon, the leading Anti-Stratfordian contender for authorship in 1891, when Ingersoll's essay was first delivered in the form of a lecture. The Francis Bacon Society had been founded in England to promote this theory in 1886, employing similar analytical techniques to those of Furnivall's New Shakspere Society, and over 250 books making this claim had been published, many of them in America. Ingersoll's fellow Antitheists Friedrich Nietzsche and Mark Twain took up the Baconian theory and defended it in print. Ingersoll therefore had none of the temptation of twenty-first century Stratfordians to dismiss his opponents as mere cranks, and he exerts considerable time and energy in countering Bacon's claim. First, he describes Bacon in unflattering terms as "a scheming politician, a courtier, a time-server of church and king, and a corrupt judge,"[33] whereas "It seems certain that the author of the wondrous Plays was one of the noblest of men."[34] Next he is concerned to point out Bacon's inadequacy both as a philosopher and as a scientist. Bacon, Ingersoll remarks, never admitted the truth of the Copernican model of the solar system. He flattered King James I as the most learned monarch since the birth of Christ. He appears to have believed in witches and in alchemy. His writings on biology and medicine contain a great deal of superstition.

It is important for Ingersoll's rhetoric that, when discussing Bacon's ignorance and superstition, he never compares him directly with what little is known of Shakespeare. Admittedly, differences in genre work in Shakespeare's favor when the expression of a positive belief is at issue, since *Macbeth* is no more proof that Shakespeare believed in witches than *Dracula* is proof that Bram Stoker believed in vampires, whereas Bacon discusses such superstitions in scholarly terms. However, Ingersoll never makes any attempt to show that Shakespeare would not have shared every one of Bacon's superstitions and scientific misapprehensions, and the reader is left with the impression that he is making a claim of divine infallibility for Shakespeare. First comes the moral contrast. Shakespeare must have been a nobler man than Bacon (though no evidence is adduced for this), then the attack on Bacon's intellect. The implication is obvious: Shakespeare was Bacon's intellectual superior. And since the attack on Bacon really comes down to the point that he was born in the sixteenth century, and was therefore scientifically ignorant by nineteenth-century standards, to claim, even obliquely, that the same is not true of Shakespeare is to imply some superhuman quality in Shakespeare's intellect, as well as claiming that his views, unlike Bacon's, were essentially the same as those of a Victorian scientist and secularist. This reciprocal reinforcement of authority appropriates Shakespeare, not just for American Republicans, but for all secularists and free-thinkers.

33 Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 3, 22.

34 Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 3, 28.

Given this insistence on Shakespeare's exceptional intellect, it is inevitable that Ingersoll finds authority for his own Antitheist opinions in both the life and works of Shakespeare. He begins before Shakespeare's birth with his father, insisting that almost the only thing we know of John Shakespeare, apart from his profession and his illiteracy, is that he refused to listen to Puritan sermons:

> Shakespeare's father seems to have been an ordinary man of his time and class. About the only thing we know of him is that he was officially reported for not coming monthly to church. This is good as far as it goes. We can hardly blame him, because at that time Richard Bifield was the minister at Stratford, and an extreme Puritan… It is greatly to the honor of John Shakespeare that he refused to listen to the "tidings of great joy" as delivered by the Puritan Bifield.[35]

Ingersoll expresses his enthusiastic approval of John Shakespeare's supposed stand against organized religion, but does not mention that the Church commissioners of the time thought his non-attendance was adequately explained by fear of being arrested for debt, or that an alternative explanation, less congenial to Ingersoll, is that the family were clandestine Catholics.[36] Ingersoll disingenuously asserts that nothing is known of Mary Arden, Shakespeare's mother, "except her beautiful name."[37] In fact, the Ardens were one of the most prominent Catholic families in England, and a great deal is known about them. Two family members, Robert and Edward Arden, were even martyred for the faith. Edward Arden, the son of Mary's second cousin and head of the family at the time, was hanged, drawn and quartered at Smithfield on 20th December 1583 and his head stuck on a spike on London Bridge, an event that can scarcely have failed to make an impression on the nineteen-year-old William Shakespeare.

Ingersoll claims that "all great men have had great mothers" and we can therefore be sure that Mary Arden was "without doubt, one of the greatest of women."[38] This circular logic is typical of the rhetorical style of Ingersoll's lecture, but it is interesting how closely his assertions about Shakespeare parallel the Biblical narrative of Jesus's life and qualities: the humble birth beneath a "roof of straw";[39] the quasi-Catholic tone of veneration for his mother, conveniently also named Mary; the insistence that Shakespeare was despised and rejected by his contemporaries who were "unconscious of the immortal child."[40] Ingersoll describes the people of sixteenth-century England, like those of nineteenth-century America, as "half-civilized", incapable of appreciating the genius in their midst.[41] He does not mention the fame and financial success which attended Shakespeare's later years. Ingersoll is grateful, however, for the mystery that continues to surround Shakespeare's life, the elucidation of which, he feels, could only damage Shakespeare's posthumous reputation.

35 Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 3, 28.

36 H. Mutschmann, and K. Wentersdorf. *Shakespeare and Catholicism* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952), 401.

37 Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 3, 6-7.

38 Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 3, 7.

39 Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 3, 7.

40 Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 3, 8.

41 Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 3, 8.

> He might have been belittled by friendly fools. What silly stories, what idiotic personal reminiscences, would have been remembered by those who scarcely saw him! We have his best—his sublimest—and we have probably lost only the trivial and the worthless.[42]

The comments already noted on Shakespeare's presumed character compared with Bacon's demonstrate that Ingersoll's literary appreciation is liberally mingled with hero-worship, the essence of Bardolatry. He ends the first section of the lecture with a wholly conjectural story that the pious people of Stratford objected to the burial of an actor in the church, regarding it as a profanation of holy ground, and wanted to remove Shakespeare's body from its tomb. According to Ingersoll's account, Dr. John Hall, Shakespeare's son-in-law, then added the epitaph:

> Good friend, for Jesus' sake forbeare
> To digg the dust enclosed heare:
> Blest be ye man yt spares thes stones,
> And curst be he yt moves my bones.[43]

This enjoinder convinced "the ignorant people of that day" that it would be unlucky to invade the tomb, and Shakespeare's corpse was left to rest in peace. Ingersoll says that he was standing beside Shakespeare's tomb (like a pilgrim, and also like Jefferson, Adams, Irving, Barnum and many thousands of other American tourists who had been flocking to Stratford for over a century) when this insight flashed upon him with all the force of an epiphany. It explains (and, for Ingersoll, conveniently explains away) not only the doggerel verse but also the references to Jesus, blessings and curses, which Ingersoll was as reluctant to attribute to Shakespeare as bad poetry.

Ingersoll's rhapsodies over Shakespeare's genius are unique in his *oeuvre* and are unusually intense even by the immoderate standards of nineteenth-century Shakespeare criticism for their insistence on the superhuman nature of Shakespeare's achievement. He claims, for instance:

> Not all the poetry written before his time would make his sum—not all that has been written since, added to all that was written before, would equal his.[44]

Even Carlyle, suggesting that Shakespeare will eventually be worshipped in Arabia, yokes his name with that of Dante. Ingersoll claims not only that Shakespeare is the greatest poet who ever lived, but that he was greater than all the other poets of all ages put together. This is the same point that Ingersoll makes when he describes Burns as a bright star, but Shakespeare as a heaven filled with constellations. It is these impossibly grandiose claims, similar to the claims of perfection and infallibility made by the devout for their holy books, that make the appropriation of Shakespeare such an important enterprise for Ingersoll, who, like Swinburne, seeks to further a radical political and social agenda through the ostensibly conservative activity of Shakespeare appreciation. This is complicated in Ingersoll's case by the fact that he has to insist on Shakespeare's classic status in a country where he had lately been regarded primarily as a purveyor of popular

42 Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 3, 9.

43 Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 3, 10.

44 Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 3, 20.

entertainment, so that the grandiosity of Ingersoll's rhetoric serves a dual purpose, canonizing Shakespeare in two senses.

In the final section, Ingersoll expands upon his theme that Shakespeare "lived the life of all."[45]

> He lived all lives, and through his blood and brain there crept the shadow and the chill of every death, and his soul, like Mazeppa, was lashed naked to the wild horse of every fear and love and hate.[46]

The image of Mazeppa, the eponymous hero of Byron's poem, tied to a galloping horse, has a more dynamic effect than Christ on his cross, though with the same evocation of sympathy and suffering. Ingersoll links Shakespeare with the mythic figure of Memnon, with Socrates, with Julius Caesar and even, in one of his most lyrical passages, with the Buddha:

> He sat beneath the bo-tree's contemplative shade, wrapped in Buddha's mighty thought, and dreamed all dreams that light, the alchemist, has wrought from dust and dew, and stored within the slumberous poppy's subtle blood.[47]

It seems that there is only one Messianic figure Ingersoll is going out of his way not to mention. The name of Christ appears thousands of times in his published works, but in his extensive writing on Shakespeare, it occurs only twice, in both cases used purely as a matter of form to mark the historical division of classical antiquity from the Common Era. Even the personal name 'Jesus' is mentioned more than 400 times in Ingersoll's writings, but never once in conjunction with Shakespeare.

Shakespeare never appears alongside Christ in Ingersoll's works because he is the secular substitute for Christ. In the writings of Emerson (and Oscar Wilde in *De Profundis*, echoing Emerson) the alignment between Christ and Shakespeare is explicit, but Ingersoll continually hints at the comparison without ever drawing it explicitly. The substitution of Shakespeare for both God the Father and God the Son is, for the Great Agnostic, so complete that the latter figures do not need to be mentioned at all.

When Ingersoll died in 1899, the obituary-writers noted his advocacy of Shakespeare alongside his opposition to organized religion. The *Sacramento Record-Union* went so far as to remark that in recent years "Colonel Ingersoll has been best known by a thoughtful lecture on Shakespeare"[48] and in a lengthy obituary the *New York Times* referred directly to Ingersoll's substitution of Bardolatry for Christianity:

> He was a constant student of Shakespeare, whose works occupied the place in his home where in most homes in this country the Bible rests.[49]

Ingersoll's appropriation of Shakespeare for the causes of free thought, agnosticism and secularism may not have been subtle, but it was highly influential in the years that followed his death and persisted even as Ingersoll's own renown faded. At the dedication of the Folger Shakespeare

45 Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 3, 70.

46 Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 3, 72.

47 Ingersoll, *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll*. Vol. 3, 72.

48 "Robert Ingersoll Crosses the River," *Sacramento Record-Union*, 22 July 1899, 12.

49 "Robert G. Ingersoll Dead," *New York Times* 22 July 1899, 16.

Library in 1932, Joseph Quincy Adams, the library's first director, gave a speech entitled "Shakespeare and American Culture," in which he described the Puritanical atmosphere of America in the early nineteenth century before Shakespeare was popularized by such writers as Ingersoll. In this society, Adams remarks, all secular amusements were regarded as an interference with spiritual progress:

> Accordingly, worldly pleasures were frowned upon, and a release of the aesthetic emotions, when such did not relate to righteousness, was curbed . . . yet these same Americans realized that in their secular culture they were deficient, that their provincial civilization lacked elements of beauty which in the Old World made for a richer and more fruitful existence. Possessed thus with a sense of inferiority, they were pathetically eager to acquire some part of the refinement which cast a glamor over life in countries beyond the Atlantic.[50]

This clearly echoes Ingersoll's description of his attitude when confronted with Shakespeare for the first time, and Adams continues, like the obituary-writer of the *New York Times*, to make explicit the comparison that is always implicit in Ingersoll's writing on Shakespeare:

> Believing thus, it is not surprising that Americans, learned and lay, North, South, and West began to give to the sweet Swan of Avon a place of eminence equal to that of the Holy Scriptures themselves, holding the one to be supreme in the field of spiritual, the other in the field of secular culture. "Shakespeare and the Bible" – so the common phrase ran, linking the two in a superlative evaluation...[51]

Much of America, in the terms popularized by Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*, continued to Hebraize, to privilege the religious spirit of Israel over the aesthetic spirit of Greece. The invention of the human was and is still commonly held to be the preserve of deities rather than playwrights. It is not clear what Bloom's notion of a secular culture based around the works of Shakespeare would mean in practice. It might mean nothing more than the fabrication of myths around the life and person of Shakespeare or the construction of more shrines like Garrick's temple on the Thames. In this case, the resulting culture would be no more genuinely secular than a culture which revered the Authorised Version of the Bible for its literary qualities could be called religious. Ingersoll's placing of the Bible and Shakespeare in opposition, however, persists in Harold Bloom's paradigm, suggesting that the true bardolator cannot serve both God and Shakespeare. Ingersoll's appropriation of the bard not just for America, but more specifically for its secularists and free-thinkers has been more successful than the recent critical neglect of Ingersoll's own writings on the subject would suggest.

Bibliography

Adams, Joseph Quincy. "Shakespeare and American Culture." *The Spinning Wheel,* June-July 1932.
Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human.* New York: Riverhead, 1998.
Bloom, Harold. *The Western Canon.* New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994.
Bristol, Michael D. *Shakespeare's America, America's Shakespeare*. London: Routledge, 2013.
Carlyle, Thomas. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. London: Frederick A. Stokes, 1888.

50 Joseph Quincy Adams, "Shakespeare and American Culture," *The Spinning Wheel*, June-July 1932, 230.
51 Adams, "Shakespeare and American Culture," 231.

Cliff, Nigel. *The Shakespeare Riots: Revenge, Drama and Death in Nineteenth-Century America.* New York: Random House, 2007.

Grayling, A.C. "Bardolatry." *Prospect Magazine* 20 April 1999.

Hawkes, Terence. *Shakespeare in the Present.* London: Routledge, 2002

Ingersoll, Robert Green. *The Works of Robert G. Ingersoll.* 12 vols. New York: Dresden Publishing Company, 1902.

Jacoby, Susan. *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

Levine, Lawrence W. *Highbrow/lowbrow: the emergence of cultural hierarchy in America.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988.

Markoe, Peter. *Miscellaneous Poems.* Philadelphia: Pritchard and Hall, 1787.

Mutschmann, H., and K. Wentersdorf. *Shakespeare and Catholicism*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952.

Sawyer, Robert. *Victorian Appropriations of Shakespeare*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003.

Shapiro, James, ed. *Shakespeare in America*. New York: The Library of America, 2014.

Shaw, George Bernard. *Three Plays for Puritans*. Chicago and New York: Herbert S. Stone, 1901.

Sturgess, Kim C. *Shakespeare and the American Nation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Swinburne, Algernon. *A Study of Shakespeare*. New York: AMS Press, 1965.

Vaughan, Alden T., and Virginia Mason Vaughan. *Shakespeare in America.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Colin Cavendish-Jones's principal research interests are European Nihilism, the Victorian religious unsettlement, the Romantic, Aesthetic and Modernist movements, the reception of Classical literature, and connections between literature and philosophy, particularly in the nineteenth century. He has written on a variety of nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers, including Pater, Wilde, Trollope, Hardy, Chesterton and Proust. Dr. Cavendish-Jones studied Classics at Magdalen College, Oxford and subsequently practiced as an international lawyer in London, Dubai and the U.S.A. After working as a teacher, lecturer, journalist and theatre director in numerous countries throughout Europe, Asia and the Americas, he returned to academia to complete a PhD. at the University of St. Andrews on Art as a counterforce to Nihilism in the works of Oscar Wilde. He is currently an Assistant Professor of Literature at Xiamen University Malaysia.