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## THE BARD, THE BIBLE, AND THE VICTORIAN SHAKESPEARE QUESTION

BY CHARLES LAPORTE

Nineteenth-century criticism of William Shakespeare provides the foremost example of the romantic and Victorian habit of conflating literary enthusiasm with genuine religious feeling. Panegyrics upon Shakespeare proliferate during this period, and they invoke his “divine” inspiration so regularly as to make this idea come to seem unexceptional. At the same time, the nineteenth-century idea of Shakespeare’s inspiration was rarely divorced from religious and reverential connotations. The excesses of romantic and Victorian Shakespeare enthusiasm—or “bardolatry,” as we now call it—suggest the profound extent to which religious discourses have shaped our ideas about literature, for bardolatry and Christianity functioned as models for one another in ways that go beyond analogy.<sup>1</sup> Many examples of this exist, but none are more salient than popular debates about the historical identity of Shakespeare that emerged 150 years ago in connection to related doubts about the historical identity of Jesus.

Shortly after 1850 and before the emergence of English as an academic discipline, a great number of writers and scholars on both sides of the Atlantic came to question whether the works of Shakespeare could actually have been written by the humble actor from Stratford-upon-Avon to whom we normally ascribe them. The ensuing debate over Shakespeare’s identity came to be called “The Shakespeare Question,” “The Shakespeare Myth,” “The Shakespeare-Bacon Controversy,” and, perhaps most pointedly, “The Baconian Heresy”—these final two after Sir Francis Bacon, who headed most nineteenth-century lists of alternative Shakespeare identities.<sup>2</sup> The mid-century Victorians had no less information about Shakespeare’s life than their predecessors, of course, but the dearth of reliable particulars became a critical problem for them in a way that it had not been for preceding generations. In this work, I wish to show how the Shakespeare Question arose at an important moment in the history of hermeneutics, when the confluence of romantic literary enthusiasm and historical Biblical scholarship had established the right cultural atmosphere for widespread speculation about how such inspired texts as Shakespeare’s come into being.

More specifically, this question arose when the English translation of David Friedrich Strauss's *Das Leben Jesu* (1835; trans., *The Life of Jesus* [1846]) had provoked extensive debate about the similarly sparse historical record of Jesus. My first section below addresses the textual emphases of Victorian bardolatry to show how it differs from the romantic enthusiasm that produces it. Section two addresses the Shakespeare Question itself and depicts the Victorian religious and scholarly context in which it arose. Section three expands briefly upon the romantic roots of such interpretation, and section four upon the way that the Shakespeare Question forms an important literary element of what we describe more broadly as the Victorian religious crisis.

#### I. THE BIBLIOLATRY OF BARDOLATRY

To make sense of the Shakespeare Question, it is helpful to recall that romantic enthusiasm for Shakespeare generated an astonishing momentum during the latter half of the eighteenth century, when a national interest initially associated with the actor David Garrick blossomed into a literary cult. This highly national bardolatry subsequently inherited the sanction of German critics such as Johann Wolfgang Goethe and Johann Gottfried Herder, for whom Shakespeare served as a helpful alternative to neoclassical French drama. In the early years of the nineteenth century, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Carlyle used the authority of these continental figures to bolster their defense of Shakespeare's universal genius. In doing so, they fanned the flames of Shakespeare enthusiasm so successfully that by mid-century it was a ubiquitous part of the British literary imagination. Matthew Arnold merely rehearses romantic truisms in his 1849 sonnet "Shakespeare" when he compares Shakespeare to a mountain of which we cannot conceive the summit. His fellow Victorians took their bardolatry to further extremes. Many seriously advocated treating Shakespeare's works as a secular, national Bible: a "Bible of Humanity" or a "Bible of Genius."<sup>3</sup> Others hypothesized (against all evidence) that Shakespeare must have had a key role in the inspired translation of the King James Bible.<sup>4</sup> And on his deathbed, the laureate Alfred Tennyson demanded his Shakespeare after Job and St. Matthew: "Where is my Shakespeare? I must have my Shakespeare."<sup>5</sup>

As these examples suggest, bardolatry develops a peculiarly scriptural emphasis in the Victorian period, one that instructs us in how to consider the religious implications of the Shakespeare Question. Such an emphasis appears very plainly in the emergence of moral

instruction books like Frederic D. Huntington's *Religious and Moral Sentences culled from the Works of Shakespeare, compared with Sacred Passages drawn from Holy Writ* (1859), J. B. Selkirk's *Bible Truths with Shakespearean Parallels* (1862), W. H. Malcolm's *Shakespeare and Holy Writ* (1881), J. F. Timmins's *The Poet-Priest: Shakespearean Sermons Compiled for the Use of Students and Public Readers* (1884), Charles Alfred Swinburne's *Sacred and Shakespearean Affinities, being analogies between the writings of the Psalmists and of Shakespeare* (1890), and Charles Ellis's *Shakespeare and the Bible: Fifty Sonnets with their Scriptural Harmonies* (1896). These texts reprint lines of Shakespeare in conjunction with (and sometimes directly alongside) parallel quotations from the Bible as though to imply their equivalence, often organizing them by thematic rubrics such as "The Compensations of Adversity," "The Dangers of Idleness," and "The Value of a Good Name."<sup>6</sup> Their introductions specify that Shakespeare is not sacred as are the Holy Scriptures, and yet they suggest that Shakespeare is inspired in a manner that clearly echoes the Bible. In other words, a small critical subgenre arises in mid-century to imply that Shakespeare more or less answers for the Bible and vice versa. One impulse governing the emergence of such collections may be found in studies like T. R. Eaton's *Shakespeare and the Bible* (1858), which aspires to show that Shakespeare was familiar with the Bible, and thus, presumably, that he was an earnest Christian. But Huntington, Selkirk, Malcolm, Timmins, C. A. Swinburne, and Ellis take Eaton's religious project to startling new levels when they suggest that the genius of Shakespeare's poetry actually corresponds to the genius of the Bible.

Such Victorian bardolatry surpasses that of earlier enthusiasm from Garrick to Carlyle. Carlyle's famous "Hero as Poet" lectures, for instance, afford but a timid prelude to the Biblical parallels that would be featured in popular collections like Huntington's throughout the second half of the century:

We may say without offense, that there rises a kind of universal Psalm out of this Shakspeare too; not unfit to make itself heard among the still more sacred Psalms. Not in disharmony with these, if we understood them, but in harmony!<sup>7</sup>

Here in Carlyle's 1840 lecture, we first see Shakespeare set (or imagined) alongside a Bible that was increasingly appreciated for its literary value as well as for its inspired nature. Carlyle deliberately selects the most conspicuously literary part of the Bible, "the still more sacred"

Book of Psalms, in order to make his comparison “without offense”: he dares to believe that the literary aspect of the Bible prepares an audience for appreciation of the inspired genius of secular literature. But that Shakespeare actually came to be set beside the Bible in facing-page volumes is a triumph of Victorian piety that outstrips the audaciousness of romantic critics. Carlyle’s own great mid-century influence must have gone a long way toward reconciling the two for the age that followed him. It is difficult to imagine Coleridge on his deathbed in 1834 demanding his Shakespeare as Tennyson would do in 1892. Neither can we imagine most twenty-first-century Christians agreeing with pious Victorians that Shakespeare presents an admirable surrogate for the Gospels.

Victorian bardolatry was practiced at both ends of the religious and political spectrum: by Christian apologists and by freethinking iconoclasts alike. The religious sought to enlist Shakespeare in the cause of Christianity, and the nonreligious sought to adopt his texts as a replacement for the Bible, which they perceived to be inadequate at best. Algernon Charles Swinburne offers an instance of the latter group. Swinburne begins his *Shakespeare* (1909) with a telling hyperbole:

There is one book in the world of which it might be affirmed and argued, without fear of derision from any but the supreme and crowning fools among the foolishness of mankind, that it would be better for the world to lose all others and keep this one than to lose this and keep all other treasures bequeathed by human genius to all that we can conceive of eternity—to all that we can imagine of immortality. That book is best known, and best described for all of us, simply by the simple English name of its author. The word Shakespeare connotes more than any other man’s name that was ever written or spoken upon earth.<sup>8</sup>

This passage encapsulates what the Victorians would see as the most unobjectionable of literary enthusiasms (that Shakespeare is the greatest author ever) with the most scandalous iconoclasm (that Shakespeare’s is the most inspired book we have). Swinburne seems to propose “one book” whose value is such that “it would be better for the world to lose all others” expressly in order to disturb those who would assume that “one book” to be the Bible. For by the mid-century, the supremacy of the Bible was presumed to extend even to its literary value. Thomas Macaulay had famously claimed of the authorized translation that “if everything else in our language should perish, [it] would alone suffice to show the whole extent of its beauty and power.”<sup>9</sup> Swinburne turns Macaulay’s truism on its head, advocating Shakespeare on religious as

well as literary grounds, and arguing that he alone provides “all that we can imagine of immortality.” Swinburne implicitly depicts the Bible’s advocates as “the supreme and crowning fools among the foolishness of mankind.” Most shockingly, he insists that it is Shakespeare’s name—and not, for instance, Jesus’s—that “connotes more than any other man’s name that was ever written or spoken upon earth.”<sup>10</sup> Such gestures represent Swinburne’s usual desire to *épater la bourgeoisie*. But it is Shakespeare’s sacredness that made him the ideal stick with which to beat the conventionally religious public. The force of Swinburne’s irony depends upon his readers’ real devotion to Shakespeare.

Paradoxically, the quasi-religious canonization of Shakespeare upon which Swinburne depends could only occur when the Bible was at the center of a hermeneutic and religious crisis, and when the scriptures were being broadly reconceived as inspired in a literary way—not as a divine catalogue of divine historical events, but as a human catalogue of poetic intimations about the nature of the divine. Historical Biblical scholarship, usually called the “higher criticism,” brought this point of view to the fore. In Britain, such criticism was slower to develop than bardolatry, so it was in still larger measure a German contribution to the anglophone world. For English readers, the higher criticism made its first big splash with George Eliot’s translation of Strauss’s *Life of Jesus*.<sup>11</sup> In many ways, the higher criticism and *Sturm und Drang* bardolatry came from the same scholarly nexus of early romantic historicism. Yet when these two strains of thought reunited—or, rather, collided—in the mid-Victorian period, questions about the authorship of Shakespeare would echo through the world.

## II. THE HIGHER CRITICAL SHAKESPEARE

Given the German provenance of much bardolatry and of most historical Biblical criticism, it is fitting that among the earliest records of the Shakespeare Question is an 1853 letter from Carlyle to his brother containing the following remark:

For the present, we have (occasionally) a Yankee Lady, sent by Emerson, who has discovered that the “*Man Shakespear*” is a *Myth*, & did *not* write those Plays that bear his name, *whh* were on the contrary written by a “Secret Associate” (names *unknown*): she has actually come to England for the purposes of exam[in]ing that, and if possible, proving it, from the British Museum and other sources of evidence. *Ach Gott!*— —<sup>12</sup>

The “Yankee Lady” of Carlyle’s letter was Delia Salter Bacon, a native of Ohio, who became widely credited with having initiated the controversy about whether Shakespeare’s *œuvre* was actually written by the man from Stratford or by one of his gifted contemporaries, alone or in combination with one another. (Delia Bacon was not a known relation of the more famous Francis, though their shared surname had the unfortunate consequence of making her scholarship seem motivated by family pride.) For his part, Carlyle frowned upon Bacon’s radical theory. He found it ridiculous that any scholar (or, as it were, “Lady”) would question Shakespeare’s authorship, and we can imagine his horror in the ensuing decades as intellectuals all over the world began to rehearse versions of her argument. He dismisses this female American parvenue with all the scholarly and cultural authority of his beloved Germans: “*Ach Gott!*”

Yet it was the scholarly tendencies of Carlyle’s beloved Germans that raised the Shakespeare question in the first place. German Classical philology and Biblical criticism had provided the theoretical foundation for this reexamination of Shakespeare, and this is why the terms in which Shakespeare was discussed often reflect contemporary anxieties about the Bible.<sup>13</sup> This was clearly seen by one of the few anglophone critics whose influence could compare to Carlyle’s in the early 1850s: his fellow Scot, the Reverend George Gilfillan. Gilfillan was much quicker than Carlyle to realize the potential connection between the works of Shakespeare and the methodologies of the higher critics, whose conclusions Gilfillan also drew upon in his own scholarship. As Gilfillan puts it:

Indeed, so deep still are the uncertainties surrounding the history of Shakspeare, that I sometimes wonder that the process applied by Strauss to the Life of our Saviour has not been extended to his. A Life of Shakspeare, on this worthy model, would be a capital exercise for some aspiring sprig of Straussism!<sup>14</sup>

In this lecture, Gilfillan identifies the manner in which Shakespeare’s circumstances mirror those of Jesus, “our Saviour,” and he suggests that they might lead to similar uncertainties about the limits of our historical understanding. Gilfillan’s avuncular tone towards “aspiring sprig[s] of Straussism” should not disguise the extent to which Strauss had unsettled the conclusions of many orthodox Victorians. Conservative Victorian scholars debated Strauss’s claims with a well-documented ferocity, and their debate helps make sense of the high pitch of fury to which the Shakespeare Question quickly escalated.

The religious nature of the Shakespeare Question was thus by no means lost on its mid-century contemporaries. It would be pastiched by Mark Twain, a professed convert to Bacon's skeptical hypothesis, whose *Is Shakespeare Dead?* (1909) reminisces ironically about his youthful battles with the champions of Stratfordian orthodoxy. Twain acknowledges the quasi-religious tenor of these debates:

I was welded to my faith, I was theoretically ready to die for it, and I looked down with compassion not unmingled with scorn, upon everybody else's faith that didn't tally with mine. That faith, imposed upon me by self-interest in that ancient day, remains my faith to-day, and in it I find comfort, solace, peace, and never-failing joy. You see how curiously theological it is.<sup>15</sup>

Clearly, Carlyle's *Gott* is very much at issue. And surely this helps explain why Ralph Waldo Emerson, an enthusiast of the German higher criticism, sent Bacon to the Carlyles in the first place. Emerson knew that the Carlyles were likely to recognize—if not fully endorse—the logic and power of the mythic argument that Bacon was posing about Shakespeare, for they appreciated how successfully German philologists and higher critics had applied this argument to the works of classical authors and to the Bible. Emerson himself openly questioned the consistency of our records of Shakespeare and wondered that “it must even go into the world's history, that the best poet led an obscure and profane life, using his genius for the public amusement.”<sup>16</sup> Emerson implies that Shakespeare could not live a life profane: etymologically, “*profanus*,” or outside the sphere of the sacred temple. This is a repetition of Goethe's idea (robustly echoed by Arnold) that Shakespeare was not really a playwright by nature, but a poet who simply happened to have written plays.<sup>17</sup> The perverseness of this logic aside, its provenance is German, rather than British or American.

Nor was it only Bacon who had begun to apply the methods of German scholars to Shakespeare in the early 1850s. A third Scot, Robert W. Jameson, had published some version of the question even before Bacon had obtained her letter of introduction from Emerson to Carlyle. In *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal* of 1852, Jameson asked:

Who wrote Shakspeare? a question, we humbly think, which might be made the theme for as much critical sagacity, pertinacity, and pugnacity, as the almost equally interesting question, who wrote Homer? In the former case, the question is certainly in one respect more simple for the recognized plays and poems that go by Shakspeare's name are—at





The Biblical analogy to Homer was reflexive because neither Homer nor the Bible offers compelling evidence about its own authorship. Just as it was questionable whether Homer wrote the works attributed to him, it was questionable whether Moses had written those parts of the Bible attributed to him. This idea quickly took hold in German scholarship. As Strauss wrote four decades later in the *Leben Jesu*, “In the so-called books of Moses mention is made of his death and burial: but who now supposes that this was written beforehand in the form of prophecy?”<sup>20</sup> Now, as it happens, when it was first posed, the answer to Strauss’s offhand query (“who now supposes . . .?”) was obvious: most of the Christian world. Indeed, it is only Strauss’s looming presence that explains why Wolf’s thesis was still shocking to Aurora a half-century after it was initially published, and why she condemns him as an atheist. By the 1850s, Wolf was old hat, but Strauss was still shockingly new, and few of his claims were more unnerving to believers than the following one about authorship: “It is an incontrovertible position of modern criticism that the titles of the Biblical books represent nothing more than the design of their author, or the opinion of Jewish and Christian antiquity respecting their origin.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, Strauss’s work avers that Moses did not write the Books of Moses, nor did David write many of his psalms, nor Solomon the Song of Solomon, nor Isaiah Isaiah, Amos Amos, Habakkuk Habakkuk, and so on. This logic was particularly disconcerting to believing Christians when extended to the Christian scriptures, or New Testament, and it was Strauss’s signal contribution to the higher criticism that he was willing to apply it to the likes of Luke, John, Acts, and the Epistles.

In light of such controversy over Biblical hermeneutics, and particularly the way that Strauss’s questions of authorship resonated in the mid-Victorian religious atmosphere, I wish to suggest that it was virtually inevitable that the Shakespeare Question would come to be raised as it was. It was independently developed, in fact, by several scholars in the immediate wake of Strauss—not just by the Scot Jameson and the American Bacon, but also by the Englishman William Henry Smith in his 1856 pamphlet entitled “Was Lord Bacon the Author of Shakspeare’s Plays?”<sup>22</sup> These three scholars seemed to be ignorant of one another’s inquiries. Even Smith, the last of them to publish his findings, claimed not to know that Shakespeare’s authorship had ever been contested in that way. (He was compelled to say so in response to Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose preface to Bacon’s book smears him as an unchivalrous plagiarist.)<sup>23</sup> It has sometimes been argued that a disproportionate number of the early anti-Stratfordians were American

and that this number suggests an American need to reconfigure the cultural legacy of their former colonizer. Given the number of Scottish critics, it would be truer to say that these early scholars tended not to be English. The post-colonial argument applies equally to Scotland, however, and here the Shakespeare Question also coincides with the mid-century controversy on Spasmodic poetry, in which working-class Scots poets were ferociously denounced for their pretensions to a religiously nuanced form of poetic inspiration.<sup>24</sup> The claim that working-class poets must not aspire to Shakespearean inspiration fits perfectly with the idea that Shakespeare's works must have been secretly written by a more respectable author.

In Scotland, England, and America, common elements of the Victorian religious atmosphere also accounted for the continued reiteration of the importance of myth and explain why the so-called mythology of Shakespeare attained so prominent a role in debate about the Shakespeare Question. As Carlyle and Hawthorne both saw it, the most important part of Bacon's claim was "that the '*Man Shakespear*' is a *Myth*." This is what Strauss had so famously called the mythic point of view. To Bacon herself, the significance of her case did not lie in who did not write the plays, but rather in a secret association of luminaries who did write them and in a radical proto-Enlightenment philosophy that this group encoded there. Her sizable book is devoted mostly to decoding this philosophy. Given her timing, however, it is not surprising that it was Bacon's incidental use of myth that caught the eyes of her contemporaries and set the tone for much of the discussion that followed. A parallel instance of this can be found in *The Romance of Yachting* (1848), an eclectic and jingoistic collection of essays by the American Joseph C. Hart that variously challenges Shakespeare's morals, taste, and authorship.<sup>25</sup> Hart would have been surprised to find himself leagued with Strauss, since he never addresses myth as the higher critics do. Nonetheless, Hart's work also came to be read as a form of the higher criticism: when it was next reprinted, Hart's Shakespearean argument was entitled *Was the Shakespeare after all a myth?*<sup>9</sup> (1888).

Even Walt Whitman adopted Strauss's mythic point of view for Shakespeare. As he wrote in *November Boughs* (1888):

We all know how much *mythus* there is in the Shakespeare question as it stands to-day. Beneath a few foundations of proved facts are certainly engulf'd far more dim and elusive ones, of deepest importance—tantalizing and half suspected—suggesting explanations that one dare not put in plain statement.<sup>26</sup>

Following Carlyle and Hawthorne, Whitman here reproduces the logic of the higher critics (especially Strauss) by identifying Shakespeare as a figure best seen through the lens of myth: one dares not put into plain statement guesses about his “real” authorship. These would invariably come short of the mythology, and the real authorship is probably unknowable anyway. It is essential to see that Whitman’s “Straussism” comes to present a radically different point of view from that which advocates an actual author for the plays, whether that author be Francis Bacon, the Earl of Oxford, or the Stratfordian actor who is usually given credit. It is also essential that were one to take Whitman’s statement and replace “the Shakespeare question” with “the Gospel,” the entire passage would be equally characteristic of the anxieties of the nineteenth century.

### III. ROMANTIC HERMENEUTICS

The Shakespeare Question generated fervent levels of controversy in the mid-century in large part because poetic inspiration was given a particularly religious resonance by the higher critics at the same time that Shakespeare was being universally hailed as the most inspired genius of English letters. For literary scholars today, the primary import of the higher criticism is that it makes it possible to view the Bible (and, by extension, other sacred texts) as a work of literature. For many nineteenth-century critics, the more striking implication was that secular literature might attain a similarly sacred character to that of the Scriptures. Put simply, to believe that texts can attain a sacred character is to raise the stakes of literature; it is this romantic conviction that produces the Victorian Shakespeare. Coleridge, one of the earliest and most influential English proponents of the higher criticism, held not only that “Shakspeare was the most universal genius that ever lived” but, accordingly, that “[a]ssuredly that criticism of Shakspeare will alone be genial which is reverential.”<sup>27</sup> It helped that Shakespeare’s sacred genius won the reverence of critics abroad exactly as the literary genius of scripture won aesthetic approval from those at home.<sup>28</sup> Carlyle defers to German critics in the “Hero as Poet” lectures cited above:

Of this Shakspeare of ours, perhaps the opinion one sometimes hears a little idolatrously expressed is, in fact, the right one; I think the best judgment not of this country only, but of Europe at large, is slowly pointing to the conclusion, That Shakspeare is the chief of all Poets hitherto; the greatest intellect who, in our recorded world, has left record of himself in the way of Literature.<sup>29</sup>

In similar passages, Carlyle even uses the Germans' enthusiasm for Shakespeare as evidence that their other ideas were similarly right-minded and worthy of attention. He was anxious to share that Herder, one of the fathers of the higher criticism, had celebrated Shakespeare as *the* literary genius of the modern era, calling him "ein poetisches Genie, wie ich nur einen Homer, und einen Ossian kenne" [a poetical genius equaled only by Homer and Ossian].<sup>30</sup> And yet Herder's fulsome praise suggests not only the naïve, rugged, originative genius that he found in Shakespeare; it also suggests the awkward repercussions of this kind of romantic ideal. For Ossian would soon be discovered to be James MacPherson's fraud, and Homer, as we have seen, to be nobody in particular.

It was partly to remove Shakespeare from the shadow of such circumstances that British scholars as early as the 1790s were already adopting something like the methodology of the higher critics. The critic Walter Whiter, for instance, went to great lengths to convince his countrymen that recognition of Shakespeare's timeless genius ought not to preclude study of topical elements in his plays. Whiter argued that the fervently-held universality of Shakespeare's genius kept scholars from asking about the local influences of the text, and thus from learning more about its origins. This is exactly the argument that Eichhorn applied to the religiously-held universality of the Bible when he first employed the term "higher criticism": that is, that the Bible's inspired nature should not preclude it from being the subject of historical analysis. Herder puts this still more clearly in his *Theologische Schriften*, writing:

Menschlich muß man die Bibel lesen: denn sie ist ein Buch durch Menschen für Menschen geschrieben: menschlich ist die Sprache, menschlich die äußern Hilfsmittel, mit denen sie geschrieben und aufbehalten ist; menschlich endlich ist ja der Sinn, mit dem sie gefaßt werden kann, jedes Hilfsmittel, das sie erläutert, so wie der ganze Zweck und Nutzen, zu dem sie angewandt werden soll [We must read the Bible in a human way, since it is a book written by humans, for humans: the language is human, and human are the external resources by which it was written and preserved; finally, human is the sense with which it can be grasped, every resource that explains it, as well as the entire purpose and use to which it is to be applied].<sup>31</sup>

Just as we saw that Whitman's remarks on Shakespeare could be applied to describe Strauss's effect on the Victorian view of the Bible, so here Herder's apology for the local, human, and increasingly secular

sense of the Bible advocated by the higher critics represents exactly Whiter's design in convincing his nation of the value of a local reading of Shakespeare to separate the wheat of, say, *Macbeth* from the chaff of the apocryphal lyrics or the multiply-authored *Pericles*. Critiquing the authorship of Shakespeare entailed a real theological risk, however, which helps explain why the idea was so tenaciously contested and why Shakespeare's sole authorship has been maintained even for such obviously hybrid plays as *Sir Thomas More*, the very manuscript of which presents the handwriting of several contemporary dramatists.<sup>32</sup> The analogy between Eichhorn and Whitman, or between Bacon and Strauss, works so well in part because nineteenth-century conservatives learned to denounce the hermeneutic in either of its forms.

#### IV. SHAKESPEARE'S VICTORIAN RELIGIOUS CRISIS

The religious—perhaps the irreligious—thrust of the higher critical method provides the best context for the profound theological anxiety that surrounded the Shakespeare Question for the ensuing half-century or more. Thus Charles Dickens writes apprehensively of Shakespeare's personal obscurity, "It is a Great comfort, to my thinking, that so little is known concerning the poet. It is a fine mystery; and I tremble every day lest something should come out."<sup>33</sup> Tennyson confessed similar feelings to Julia Margaret Cameron: "[H]e thanked God Almighty with his whole heart and soul that he knew nothing, and that the world knew nothing, of Shakespeare but his writings."<sup>34</sup> Henry James took a skeptical view of the same uncertainty:

I am "a sort of" haunted by the conviction that the divine William is the biggest and most successful fraud ever practiced on a patient world. The more I turn him round and round the more he so affects me. But that is all—I am not pretending to treat the question or to carry it further. It bristles with difficulties, and I can only express my general sense by saying that I find it *almost* as impossible to conceive that Bacon wrote the plays as to conceive that the man from Stratford, as we know the man from Stratford, did.<sup>35</sup>

Dickens's trembling and James's haunting, like Tennyson's distaste for biographical history and Twain's mock readiness to die for his faith, all reflect an enormous Victorian anxiety about the ways in which the basis for Christianity, and, in turn, of culture, depended upon the uncertain ground of myth. The haunting that James describes existed in a very limited way before Strauss had contested the authorship of

the Evangelists, but Strauss made his romantic hermeneutic a ubiquitous literary problem. And if many Victorians shared James's terror that Shakespeare was "the biggest and most successful fraud ever practiced on a patient world," innumerable others felt anxiety that "the divine William" in this role took a distant second place to the divine Jesus. Coming in second place to Jesus normally represents a real achievement, but here it mostly speaks to the pervasive religious anxiety governing post-romantic culture.

Victorian difficulty with romantic Biblical hermeneutics, finally, explains why Hawthorne saw fit to reprint Bacon's dire prophecies about her own work's reception in the preface that he wrote for it: "It seemed better, that the world should acquire [Bacon's theory] also in the form of criticism, instead of being stupefied and overpowered with the mere force of an irresistible, external, historical proof."<sup>36</sup> From Hawthorne, such caution about stupefaction and overpowerment might seem exaggerated or ironic. But if we are to conclude anything from the innumerable Victorian diaries and novels of "Faith and Doubt," it is surely that such a reaction was the risk of heterodoxy for many pious Victorian minds. As the secularist Annie Besant put it in her *Autobiographical Sketches* (1885): "No one who has not felt it knows the fearful agony caused by doubt to the earnestly religious mind. There is in life no other pain so horrible."<sup>37</sup> What is remarkable about Hawthorne's cautionary note is that it on some level endorses Bacon's sense of how her stupefying and overpowering hermeneutic could be extended from religious freethinking to Shakespearean freethinking.

The charged religious context of the Shakespeare Question endured into the *fin de siècle*, when the tenets of the higher criticism became widely accepted even among the religious, so that they no longer assumed so threatening an aspect. Oscar Wilde's *Portrait of Mr. W. H.* (1889), for instance, celebrates its own theory of the sonnets as inspired dogma, worthy of the martyrs that it creates. And even in the twentieth century, James would critique the Shakespeare cult as a real feature of the contemporary religious landscape. His short story "The Birthplace" (1903) tells the story of Morris Gedge, a hapless curator of Shakespeare's childhood home. (James never explicitly identifies his poet as Shakespeare, but the conspicuous veneration surrounding him could be modeled upon no lesser figure.) Gedge, upon taking his position at the tourist site, takes care to inculcate himself in the "reverential" attitude that Coleridge identifies as the essential prerequisite for understanding Shakespeare. Since this is a narrative of Faith and Doubt, Gedge and his wife are appropriately filled with religious zeal:

“He speedily became more than their author—their personal friend, their universal light, their final authority and divinity. Where in the world, they were already asking themselves, would they have been without Him?”<sup>38</sup> It is hardly necessary to point out that the description of a “personal friend . . . universal light . . . final authority and divinity” is designed to evoke an evangelical relationship between Gedge and Shakespeare, his poetic savior. The capitalized “He” and “Him,” normally reserved for the Deity in late nineteenth-century practice, are here used throughout.

As the genre demands, Gedge eventually loses his faith in the bard as he becomes unsettled by the paucity of historical evidence that he has to marshal on “His” behalf. When Gedge’s still-believing wife finally demands, “Do you consider it’s *all* a fraud?” he is forced by his conscience to hedge: “Well, I grant you there was somebody. But the details are naught. The links are missing. The evidence—in particular about that room upstairs, in itself our Casa Santa—is *nil*. It was so awfully long ago.”<sup>39</sup> The point is not that Gedge becomes a rebellious apostate, exactly, but that he becomes a Shakespearean agnostic. “[T]he details,” as he puts it, “are naught.” This passage, and indeed the whole story, is designed to remind readers of post-Straussian novels from James Anthony Froude’s *Nemesis of Faith* (1849) to Mary Augusta Ward’s *Robert Elsmere* (1888). And this passage, too, could be transposed wholesale to any number of nineteenth-century narratives or applied to Christ’s birth instead of Shakespeare’s. Gedge’s final insistence upon “evidence” above all recalls the central crisis of Ward’s religious novel, for instance, when the eponymous hero comes to see that the Evangelists’ notion of evidence (upon which Christianity might be judged to depend) could differ from that of the modern scholar. As *Elsmere*’s skeptical antagonist puts it at the crisis of the novel: “[T]he great want of modern [Biblical] scholarship . . . is a History of Evidence, or rather, more strictly, ‘A History of *Testimony*.’”<sup>40</sup> Reading “The Birthplace” from the context of such Faith and Doubt fiction brings home the breadth of Victorian anxiety about narratives of religious origins.

It may seem excessive to imply, as James does, that Shakespearean zealots actually enjoyed a sort of evangelical relationship with him, or that doubters underwent the kind of faith crises that we believe many Victorian clergy did in the wake of the higher criticism. Yet James’s Gedge is clearly modeled on the real figure of Joseph Skipsey, a Northumberland-born working-class poet whose position as curator of the Shakespeare house in Stratford was apparently secured for him



by the influence of Edward Burne-Jones. Skipsey resigned this post in 1891, later citing that

I had gradually lost faith in the so-called relics which it was the duty of the custodian to show. . . . This loss of faith was the result of a long and severe inquiry into which I was driven by questions from time to time put to my wife and me by intelligent visitors; and the effect of it on myself was such as almost to cause a paralysis of the brain.<sup>41</sup>

Skipsey represents a classic case of the famous Victorian “loss of faith,” and by 1891 this ailment was so well established as a literary and cultural trope that one could hardly expect him to describe his disillusionment in any other terms. To say so is not to make light of Skipsey’s Shakespearean religious crisis. Nor is it to suggest that his “paralysis of the brain” was any less real for its resemblance to numerous Victorian fictional heroes. It is rather to show that bardolatry had a religious weight with its Victorian practitioners and that this weight could be heavy indeed. And on no one did the burden of Shakespearean heterodoxy hang heavier than on Bacon. Like Strauss before her, she was vilified for her iconoclasm nearly as soon as her theories appeared in print. For her, the pressure was such that her mind gave way, and she was institutionalized for the remaining two years of her life.<sup>42</sup> To borrow the expression of her rival Jameson, the controversy made her “open [her] bewildered and bewildering eyes upon the realities of another world.”

Clearly, Victorian religious controversy established many of the terms in which the Shakespeare Question was debated, including its existence in the first place. And the life of Bacon’s controversy outlives her still; it has lasted much longer than its nineteenth-century doubters imagined could be the case. This is perhaps the final way in which it mirrors Victorian Biblical controversies. Mainstream nineteenth-century Shakespeare scholars generally presumed that Bacon’s doubts about Shakespeare’s identity would be quickly put to rest, just as conservative Christians hoped that the higher criticism would be exploded. On the other hand, Victorian Baconians felt confident that Shakespeare’s long-held disguise was crumbling, just as liberal adherents to the higher criticism assumed that the literal interpretation of the Bible would soon disappear altogether. None of these disappearances have taken place, and the Victorian drama continues to shape both Biblical and Shakespearean interpretation for enormous numbers of people. Twenty-first-century doubters of Shakespeare’s history, such as

those associated with the Oxford Shakespeare Society, tend no longer to feel the heterodox religious zeal evidenced by earlier proponents of the Shakespeare Question. (Even twentieth-century pioneers of the Oxford hypothesis claimed to have written at the “urge of some higher power.”)<sup>43</sup> Yet anti-Stratfordians still regularly depict university English faculty as a sort of morally-bankrupted clergy determined to defend their Stratford bard against extensive evidence of his inauthenticity. Such mistrust of an academic clerisy derives from a religious history that predates English departments. The Victorian religious atmosphere, in other words, brought to life problems of historical and literary hermeneutics that are not easily dispelled. And the translation of Strauss’s *Life of Jesus* stands as an important monument in this religious history. It became the model for the type of romantic hermeneutics that made speculation about authorship a necessary part of understanding sacred texts. It deeply unnerved the Victorians, and the Shakespeare Question arose quickly in its wake.

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#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert Witbeck Babcock, *The Genesis of Shakespeare Idolatry: 1766–1799* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964); Péter Dávidházi, *The Romantic Cult of Shakespeare* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998); Howard Felperin, “Bardolatry Then and Now,” in *The Appropriation of Shakespeare*, ed. Jean I. Marsden (New York: Harvester, 1992), 129–44; Graham Holderness, “Bardolatry; or, the Cultural Materialist’s Guide to Stratford-Upon-Avon,” in *The Shakespeare Myth*, ed. Holderness (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1988), 2–15; Louis Marder, *His Exits and His Entrances: The Story of Shakespeare’s Reputation* (New York: J. B. Lippincott, 1963); and S. Schoenbaum, *Shakespeare’s Lives* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Other popular candidates include Christopher Marlowe, Sir Walter Raleigh, Edmund Spenser, the Earl of Rutland, the Earl of Derby, and, later, the Earl of Oxford. The best summaries of the Shakespeare Question are in Marder; Schoenbaum; and Frank W. Wadsworth, *The Poacher from Stratford* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1958).

<sup>3</sup> Joss Marsh, *Word Crimes: Blasphemy, Culture, and Literature in Nineteenth-Century England* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), 112. See also Marder, 18–19.

<sup>4</sup> See David Norton, *A History of the English Bible as Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 405–6.

<sup>5</sup> This pious gesture is cited approvingly by his son in *The Works of Tennyson*, ed. Hallam Tennyson (New York: MacMillan, 1913), lvii. For more on this episode, see

Christopher Decker, "Shakespeare and the Death of Tennyson," in *Victorian Shakespeare*, ed. Gail Marshall and Adrian Poole (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 131–49.

<sup>6</sup> J. B. Selkirk, *Bible Truths with Shakespearean Parallels* (London: Whittaker and Co., 1862), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1897), 111.

<sup>8</sup> Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Shakespeare* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1909), 5–6.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Macaulay, quoted in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979), 323.

<sup>10</sup> This line seems calculated to contradict favorite Scripture passages among Evangelicals, for example Philippians 2:9–10: "Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: / That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth" (KJV).

<sup>11</sup> There was, of course, a parallel higher critical tradition in Britain, but on a much smaller scale. Strauss's translation generated far more discussion than had the higher criticism of native writers like Charles Christian Hennell.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Carlyle to John A. Carlyle, 13 June 1853, in *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. Kenneth J. Fielding and others, 34 vols. (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2000), 28:171–72. Thanks to the authors of *The Shakespeare Controversy* for calling this and some of the following quotations to my attention. See Warren Hope and Kim Holston, *The Shakespeare Controversy* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Felperin remarks that "the heretical historicism and textualism [the Baconians] practise actually parallel and parody those forms of critical attention focused on the Bible itself in the same period. The rise of anti-Stratfordian speculation in the later nineteenth century coincides with the rise of what has been termed 'critical history' in the New Testament" (136). It seems a mistake to view the relationship between anti-Stratfordians and Biblical critics as one of parody, though, since the criticism of both schools was primarily amateur throughout the mid-century in both Britain and America.

<sup>14</sup> George Gilfillan, "Shakespeare—a Lecture," in *A Third Gallery of Portraits* (New York: Sheldon, Lampport and Blakeman, 1955), 439.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Twain, *1601, and Is Shakespeare Dead?*<sup>2</sup> ed. Shelley Fisher Fishkin (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996), 11–12.

<sup>16</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Representative Men*, in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Richard Poirier (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1990), 342.

<sup>17</sup> See Matthew Arnold, *Essays Religious and Mixed*, in *Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1960), 245.

<sup>18</sup> [Robert W. Jameson], "Who Wrote Shakspeare?" *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, n.s., no. 449 (1852): 87.

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds (New York: Norton, 1996), book 5, lines 1246–49, 1254–57.

<sup>20</sup> David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*, trans. George Eliot, 3 vols. (1846; repr., Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1998), 1:56.

<sup>21</sup> Strauss, 1:56–57.

<sup>22</sup> See William Henry Smith, "Was Lord Bacon the Author of Shakspeare's Plays? A Letter to Lord Ellesmere," *The Panorama of Life and Literature* (January 1857): 12–16.

<sup>23</sup> "An English writer . . . has thought it not inconsistent with fair-play, on which his country prides itself, to take to himself this lady's theory, and favor the public with it as his own original conception, without allusion to the author's prior claim" (Nathaniel Hawthorne, preface to *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakspeare Unfolded*, by Delia Bacon [London: Groombridge and Sons, 1857], xii–xiii).

<sup>24</sup> Gilfillan, for instance, was deeply invested in the prospects of the Spasmodic poets in addition to being among the first to articulate the Shakespeare Question. See Richard Cronin, "The Spasmodics," in *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*, ed. Alison Chapman, Cronin, and Antony Harrison (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 290–304; and Charles LaPorte and Jason R. Rudy, ed., *Spasmodic Poetry and Poetics*, special issue, *Victorian Poetry* 42.4 (2004).

<sup>25</sup> Kim C. Sturgess identifies Hart as the initiator of the Shakespeare Question, but Hart's is an entirely different sort of thesis from the one proposed by Gilfillan, Bacon, Jameson, and Smith. Hart maintains only that Shakespeare of Stratford stole his principal plots and characters, whereas his critical contemporaries from Bacon onward conceive of Shakespeare's name as itself an alias or allonym. Further, and crucially, Bacon's theory circulated far more widely than Hart's, which is why the Shakespeare Question is nearly always first associated with her. See Joseph C. Hart, *The Romance of Yachting: Voyage the First* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1848); and Kim C. Sturgess, *Shakespeare and the American Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004), 168.

<sup>26</sup> Walt Whitman, *November Boughs*, in *The Works of Walt Whitman*, ed. Malcolm Cowley, 2 vols. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1948), 2:404.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Shakspeare a poet generally," in *The Literary Remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge, 4 vols. (London: William Pickering, 1836), 2:62.

<sup>28</sup> Norton maintains that it is the prestige of Shakespeare, in fact, that raises the literary opinion of the King James translation to the bibliolatrous levels that it attains during the nineteenth century. See Norton, 302–3.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes*, 103.

<sup>30</sup> Johann Gottfried Herder, "Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek," in *Shakespeare in Germany: 1740–1815*, ed. R. Pascal (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1937), 73; my translation.

<sup>31</sup> Herder, *Theologische Schriften*, in *Johann Gottfried Herder Werke*, ed. Christoph Bultmann and Thomas Zippert (Frankfurt: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994), 145; my translation. Thanks to Daniel Wiedner and Stephan Jaeger for directing me to this text, and to Andreea Boboc for help with my translation.

<sup>32</sup> Brian Vickers offers a startlingly recent instance of this in relation to a stylometrist trained in the scholarly tradition of the higher critic F. C. Baur. See Vickers, *Shakespeare, Co-Author* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> Charles Dickens to William Sandys, 13 June 184[3], in *The Pilgrim Edition: The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. Graham Storey and K. J. Fielding, 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 3:512. The date of Dickens's letter poses a scholarly question. The MS is lost, and the 1880 *Letters* dates it 13 June 1847. See Georgina Hogarth and Mamie Dickens, ed., *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: Chapman and Hall, 1880), 1:178–79. More recently, the editors of the Oxford *Pilgrim Edition* have decided upon internal evidence that "1847" seems to be a misreading

of "1843." Thanks to Margaret Brown, Associate Editor of the Oxford *Letters*, for her correspondence on this matter.

<sup>34</sup> Julia Margaret Cameron to Sir Henry Taylor, ca. 29 November 1862, in *Letters of Alfred, Lord Tennyson*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), 2:319.

<sup>35</sup> Henry James to Violet Hunt, 26 August 1903, in *Letters of Henry James*, ed. Percy Lubbock, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1920), 1:424. For unexplained reasons, Leon Edel reproduces this quotation only partially, and in a footnote. See Edel, ed., *Henry James Letters*, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), 4:281.

<sup>36</sup> Hawthorne, viii.

<sup>37</sup> Annie Besant, *Autobiographical Sketches* (London: Freethought Publishing, 1885), 54.

<sup>38</sup> James, "The Birthplace," in *The Aspern Papers and Other Stories* (Köln: Köne-mann, 1998), 344.

<sup>39</sup> James, "The Birthplace," 362.

<sup>40</sup> Mrs. Humphry Ward, *Robert Elsmere*, ed. Clyde de L. Ryals (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1967), 314. James wrote Ward to express his admiration of this particular novel, calling it "a beautiful book" (quoted in Ward, vii).

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Skipsey, quoted in J. Cuming Walters, "The Shakespeare Relics at Stratford," *London Times*, 8 September 1903, 5.

<sup>42</sup> See Wadsworth, 34–35. For Hawthorne's account, see Martin Pares, *A Pioneer: In Memory of Delia Bacon* (London: Rydall Press, 1958), 47–49.

<sup>43</sup> Percy Allen, quoted in Marder, 167.