

Article

# “I Knew Him, Horatio”: Shakespeare’s Beliefs, Early Textual Editing, and Nineteenth-Century Phrenology

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Received: 31 December 2018; Accepted: 26 March 2019; Published: 30 March 2019



**Abstract:** As Hamlet gazes into Yorick’s skull, he reassembles the quirks of the jester’s personhood and also imagines a self that he used to be, in relation to Yorick. Partially through the lens of *Hamlet*, characterized by A.C. Bradley as Shakespeare’s most “religious” play, this essay interrogates how several eighteenth-century textual editors, and some nineteenth-century scholars and popular admirers, imagine and construct Shakespeare’s beliefs: the first, through their efforts to reassemble the textual “bones” of Shakespeare’s works; and the second, through the rising pseudoscience of phrenology, operating in the background in the national debate to exhume and examine Shakespeare’s skull.

**Keywords:** Hamlet; Yorick; Shakespeare’s religion; phrenology; Shakespeare’s skull; textual-editing; C.M. Ingleby

Hamlet’s *contemptus mundi*—that we are the “beauty of the world,” noble in action and godlike in reason, yet little more than a “quintessence of dust” (2.2.273–74) unable to escape rotting in the grave a few feet below the surface—must have been keenly felt in a period that thought intently and intentionally about death.<sup>1</sup> That meditation drove some to foster a yearning for eternal things, and was instrumental in preparing the soul for its journey heavenward, as Jeremy Taylor admonishes: “Since we stay not here, being a people but of a dayes abode, and our age is like that of a flie, and contemporary with a gourd, we must look some where else for an abiding city, a place in another countrey to fix our house in, whose walls and foundation is God, where we must find rest, or else be restless forever” (Taylor 1651, p. 20). Discerning what Shakespeare himself believed regarding life in this world and the possibility of an afterlife is unresolvable.<sup>2</sup> At first glance, the poet’s will seems promising. Drawn up in January 1616 and revised in March to accommodate the recent marriage of his daughter Judith, Shakespeare begins with what appears to be a clear expression of faith: “ffirst [sic] I Comend my Soule into the handes of god my Creator, hoping & assuredlie beleeving through thonelie merittes of Jesus Christ my Saviour to be made partaker of lyfe everlastinge” (Chambers 1930, vol. 2, p. 170). The certainty of the expression is checked, however, by the formulaic character of the genre of preambles to last wills and testaments in the early modern period.<sup>3</sup> Michael Wood notes that biographers have depicted Shakespeare variously as “an outward conformist but with inward regrets; a reverent agnostic;

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from *Hamlet* throughout are from (Shakespeare 2006a). Lockerd (2019) explores Hamlet’s prevailing attitude of disgust for the body in the context of the dualistic Albigensian heresy, and suggests that after Hamlet’s sea journey, the prince returns to some measure of orthodox belief.

<sup>2</sup> For a useful survey of recent work on Shakespeare’s religious beliefs, see (Cox 2006). Cox (2018) reiterates that Shakespeare’s own beliefs are impossible to ascertain, and addresses how scholars in the last decade have particularly moved away from arguing for Shakespeare’s Catholic identity while maintaining an interest in the cross-currents of belief, atheism, and denominational tensions in the plays.

<sup>3</sup> On the circumstances of the will, see (Chambers 1930, vol. 2, pp. 174–80). A facsimile of the will, and discussion of its contents, are found in (Schoenbaum 1975, pp. 242–50).

[or] a humanist who found greatest solace in the pagans.” Wood characterizes him as a Christian, but urges that like many of his contemporaries, he was one who “probably eschewed certainties and no longer held any deep sectarian conviction” (Wood 2003, p. 340). Shakespeare’s characters certainly demonstrate a full range of belief, what Alison Shell terms “heterocosms” (Shell 2010, p. 15): from mixed nihilism (*Macbeth*) to skepticism (*Hamlet*); from a conviction in the rhetorical utility of the language of faith for political gain (*Henry V*) to the manipulation of language in the service of the exaltation of self-autonomy (*Iago* and *Edmund*); from belief in the gods’ cruelty or indifference (*Titus Andronicus* and *Gloucester*) to God’s sovereign Judgment of souls (*Henry V*, *Othello*, and, again, *Hamlet*). As David Scott Kastan puts it, “Shakespeare declines to tell us what to believe, or to tell us what he believed. But this is not the familiar claim of his disinterested secularism”; Shakespeare was, instead, supremely interested in representing the “experience of belief” rather than confirming “the truth of what was believed” (Kastan 2014, p. 7). Religion, for Shakespeare, was thus primarily aesthetic.<sup>4</sup>

That may be a judicious assessment for twenty-first century scholars, but the early history of Bardophilia is littered with the conflation of the one (belief as represented in the plays) with the other (Shakespeare’s own beliefs). As Kastan describes, “in the absence of an archive of biographical evidence, we make the work an allegory to fill in what we wish we had” (Kastan 2014, p. 40). In this essay, I hope to put some pressure on that “wishing” by examining how some prominent eighteenth- and nineteenth-century admirers, biographers, and textual editors of Shakespeare—zealous for any detail that would illumine the dramatist’s elusive life and mind—fell into the trap that Samuel Schoenbaum describes: “[t]hus does each man convert Shakespeare to his own belief or infidelity . . . ” (Schoenbaum 1970, p. 459). In other words, I mean to interrogate how the “religion in Shakespeare” was translated into the “religion of Shakespeare,” tracing this tendency through the lens of *Hamlet*, a play which the eminent late-Victorian critic A. C. Bradley asserted was the nearest that Shakespeare approached to a “religious drama” (Bradley 1991, p. 166). The heterocosms of belief in *Hamlet* led many to speculate on Shakespeare’s own beliefs, culminating in a national debate to exhume his skull—Yorick-like—in order to ascertain them.

## 1. 18th Century Circumlocution and Certainty Regarding Shakespeare’s Beliefs

Editorial attempts in the eighteenth century to address Shakespeare’s beliefs about the “undiscovered country,” either through biography or editorial emendation, tend to avoid direct speculation about his doctrinal affiliation. But they were, nonetheless, trying to “dig up” the authentic Shakespeare through his textual bones. The early biographer and editor, Nicholas Rowe, began his six volume *The Works of Mr. William Shakespear* with his *Some Account of the Life &c. of Mr. William Shakespear* (Rowe 1709), asserting that there is a vital relationship between biography and bibliography. When it comes to considering “Men of Letters . . . the knowledge of an Author may sometimes conduce to the better understanding his Book” (Rowe 1709, vol. 1, p. ii). Rowe’s early assumption that the life is a lens to view the works set the agenda for some later critics, even though his particular portrait of Shakespeare as being “a good-natur’d Man, of great sweetness of his Manners, and a most agreeable Companion” or a “Man Excellent on most Occasions” seems, in the end, not to have much bearing on how Rowe understands the plays (Rowe 1709, vol. 1, pp. vii, xv). At the conclusion of his brief *Account*, perhaps discouraged by the lack of biographical material that might reveal how Shakespeare’s life impinges on the plays, he concedes, “This is what I could learn of any Note, either relating to himself or Family: The Character of the Man is best seen in his writings” (Rowe 1709, vol. 1, p. xxxvii). Here, Rowe seems to reverse the initial formulation: in the relative absence of biographical details, we

<sup>4</sup> For recent challenges to this assumption, see (Lockerd 2019; Tiffany 2018). In this special issue, Smith (2018) explores the experience of religion in *Measure for Measure*, and how religion is paradoxically both the problem and the solution for the dilemmas of the play. Garrison (2018) and Clegg (2019) address how differently Shakespeare’s characters think about the afterlife.

discern the playwright's life through the work—a powerful assumption that governed biography and textual analysis well into the nineteenth century. Moreover, even though he has shifted to privileging the works over the life, Rowe is not altogether specific in his *Account* about what precisely we can know about Shakespeare's "character" through his works.

In Rowe's short biography of Shakespeare, which became the unaltered standard for much of the century, he does not make any explicit statements about the playwright's personal beliefs regarding the afterlife, except to note his uncanny ability to represent the otherworldly. Shakespeare's imagination "raises his Fancy to a flight above Mankind and the Limits of the visible World" (Rowe 1709, vol. 1, p. xxiii) in plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *The Tempest*. But Rowe makes an implicit comment about Shakespeare's religious inclinations by way of circumlocution in the dedicatory epistle to Charles Seymour, sixth Duke of Somerset. Somerset's ancestor Edward Seymour, first Duke of Somerset, was the brother of Jane Seymour and the uncle of Edward VI, "whose Piety and Zeal for the true Religion [i.e., Protestant Church of England], will preserve his Name Dear and Sacred to our Church forever" (Rowe 1709, vol. 1, n.p.). When Henry VIII died, Somerset was appointed Lord Protector and he played an initial role in young Edward's transition, though he himself lacked the heavy-handedness required of an effective ruler. Rowe compliments this ancestor of the current Somerset for standing strong against "those wicked and ambitious Men, who design'd the Subversion of Church and State" and who "could not propose to have brought about those fatal Designs, till they had first remov'd the Duke of Somerset" (Rowe 1709, vol. 1, n.p.). Whatever the personal religious beliefs of the first Duke, he aligned himself with the reforming party's politics.<sup>5</sup> Rowe's praise of Somerset's descendant thus places his guardianship of his own *Works of Mr. William Shakespear* within that Reformation context. Just as the first Somerset protected the "Establish'd Church, the Crown, and Your Country" from the "pernicious Councils" who threatened to bring in a "religion equally destructive to the Church and State," the sixth Somerset will safeguard England's established poet against the forces that conspire against him. Rowe laments that the "Present Age is indeed an unfortunate one for *Dramatick Poetry*; she has been persecuted by Fanaticism, forsaken by her Friends," and in the midst of "such perillous Times, I know no Protection for *Shakespear*, more Safe nor more Honourable than Your Grace's" (Rowe 1709, vol. 1, n.p.). The forces of "Fanaticism" that Rowe mentions are not clarified, but he may be referring to the recently renewed barrage of antitheatrical attacks led by the theologian Jeremy Collier in his *A Short View of the Immorality, and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698).<sup>6</sup> Collier, later consecrated as a non-jurist bishop with some distinctly Catholic pretensions in the eucharist, including prayers for the dead, was motivated in Rowe's day by the same religious fervor against blasphemy and poorly drawn morality on the Restoration stage, as that exercised by early puritans against the renaissance stage in the previous century. Rowe's analogy may function as no more than obligatory patronage to a man known by contemporaries as "The Proud Duke." But insofar as the analogy works, Rowe suggests that Shakespeare is like the true "Establish'd Church" that must be protected from "wicked and ambitious" designs seeking to subvert his cultural prominence and (perhaps) religious orthodoxy.

If Rowe implies something about Shakespeare's beliefs by circumlocution, Lewis Theobald offers the first explicit comments about them in *Shakespeare restor'd* (1726), a bold intervention against the perceived flaws of Alexander Pope's Shakespeare edition published the previous year.<sup>7</sup> Peter

<sup>5</sup> Rowe makes Somerset out to be the last bulwark against the "wicked" Catholic forces that would eventually marshal around Mary Tudor. But such praise is better directed towards John Dudley, first Duke of Northumberland, who worked behind the scenes to discredit and oust Somerset through the Regency Council, badly engineered the ascendancy of his daughter-in-law Jane Grey when the young king died, and then unexpectedly reconverted to Catholicism (earning Rowe's disdain) on the eve of his execution under Mary I. See (Bush 1975; MacCullough 2001).

<sup>6</sup> The cultural impact of this pamphlet and an assessment of its contents are addressed in (Beljame 1948, pp. 230–42).

<sup>7</sup> *Shakespeare restor'd* led to Theobald's seven-volume edition in 1733, which performed the real systematized work of collation, emendation, and commentary on the plays that characterizes modern textual editing, and theorized the selection of criteria for the Shakespearean canon, from whole works down to individual words (Depledge and Kirwan 2017, p. 150).

Shillingsburg recounts that the goal of early editorial practice was “to search out those words that the editor either does not understand or does not like and replace them with words which he does” ([Shillingsburg 1996](#), p. 21). *Shakespeare restor'd* provides several such examples, for Theobald proclaims that “SHAKESPEARE'S Works have always appear'd to me like what he makes his HAMLET compare the World to, an *unweeded Garden grown to seed*” ([Theobald 1726](#), p. ii). Theobald took his pruners first and most vigorously to tidying *Hamlet* by comparing the same textual moments in the copies available to him. Generally, he brings together the best of resources—dictionaries, commentaries, grammars, collated copies—and makes sound, scholarly judgments. Theobald's shrewd editorial eye was shaped by his extensive experience with the London theater and wide reading in English drama, his training as a lawyer and his practice as a classical translator, as well as familiarity with the pitfalls of the publication process. In treating *Hamlet*, Theobald places Shakespeare's beliefs in the afterlife most comfortably among the pagans, as we will see in a moment.

On occasion, Theobald is driven by the aesthetic approach that Shillingsburg describes, intuiting what Shakespeare really meant to convey in certain textual moments that bother him. Theobald is puzzled, for instance, when the ghost, “Doom'd … to walk the night,” is “confin'd to fast in fires” during the day (1.5.10–11); while he understands the sentiment that fasting is assigned as a penance by the church, he wonders how fasting, even in fire, would be a punishment for an immaterial being ([Theobald 1726](#), p. 45). While he admits that all the current copies of the play retain the reference to the ghost's fasting in flames, Theobald argues that the phrase should be emended to communicate what Shakespeare really intends: the ghost is “*confin'd to ROAST in fires*” ([Theobald 1726](#), p. 45). Defaulting to his classicist orientation, Theobald explains that the playwright deliberately echoes *Aeneid* VI when the ghost of Anchises explains to his son that souls must burn in the underworld for their crimes before being sent to Elysium ([Theobald 1726](#), p. 47; see [Vergil 1964](#), VI.713–51). Theobald returns to Virgil again to offer commentary on the apparent contradiction in the “To be or not to be” speech (3.1.55–87): Hamlet surmises that no one has ever returned from the “undiscovered country” (3.1.78) despite the evidence of his father's ghost testifying to the contrary. In Theobald's reckoning, we are to understand that the ghost has come from a “middle state or local purgatory” where he was “doom'd for a Term only, to expiate his Sins of Nature” ([Theobald 1726](#), p. 83). Shakespeare possibly avoids the contradiction because “tho' he admits the Possibility of a Spirit returning from the Dead, he yet holds that the State of the Dead cannot be communicated, and with that Allowance, it remains still an *undiscover'd Country*” ([Theobald 1726](#), p. 84). Theobald implies something about the dramatist's own religious beliefs when he emends *Hamlet*, asserting that Shakespeare shares with “the Antients” the “same Notions of our abstruse and twilight Knowledge of an *After-being*,” noting that Virgil must pause in the narrative to pray to the gods of the underworld to reveal their mysteries ([Theobald 1726](#), p. 84; [Vergil 1964](#), VI.264–67), a piety that Theobald notes is echoed in Gaius Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica* in the next generation of Roman poets ([Theobald 1726](#), p. 84; [Flaccus 1913](#), III.399).

It would be prudent not to extrapolate too much from these two examples. But as Marcus Walsh asserts, the “tendency of eighteenth-century editors to conjectural emendation needs also to be understood in the light of their editorial orientations” ([Walsh 1997](#), pp. 118–20). Theobald's classicist orientation causes his emendation in the first instance and his commentary in the second to paganize the ghost's origins, as no sense of the Catholic purgatory is even entertained. Shakespeare seemingly has blended both the pagan and Catholic senses, for the Ghost comments that his story should inspire Hamlet's revenge, else he be “duller … than the fat weed/That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf” (1.5.32–33), an allusion to Charon's underworld ferry. Theobald's placing Shakespeare comfortably in the company of Virgil and the Roman poets on these points, though small, creates larger interpretive problems. The effect is to minimize or negate the ambiguity of Hamlet's Catholic-Protestant spiritual exercise in discerning whether the ghost is “a spirit of health or goblin damned” who brings “with

thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell” and an intention that may be either “wicked or charitable” (1.4.40–42)—the very act of deliberation that is part of the root of his delay for revenge.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps because of instances such as these, Samuel Johnson characterizes Theobald as “a man of narrow comprehension and small acquisitions, with no native and intrinsick splendor of genius” (Johnson 1765, vol. 1, p. D1v). In the *Preface* to his eight-volume *The Plays of William Shakespeare* (1765), Johnson generally commends Theobald’s corrections to Pope’s edition and gives him his due for his zeal in small things. But Johnson castigates the “exuberant excrescence of his diction,” Theobald’s “triumphant exultations over Pope and Rowe,” and his “contemptible ostentation” when praising himself for inserting a comma (Johnson 1765, vol. 1, p. D1r).

Johnson’s own early encounter with *Hamlet* ended in terror. As his friend Hester Lynch Piozzi recalled, “I have heard him relate . . . how, when he was about nine years old, having got the play of Hamlet in his hand, and reading it quietly in his father’s kitchen, he kept on steadily enough, till coming to the Ghost scene, he suddenly hurried up the stairs to the street door that he might see people about him” (Piozzi 1786, pp. 19–20). Johnson asserts in the *Preface* that the strength of Shakespeare’s rendering of his characters is that they think in and react to situations—natural or supernatural—in ways that the reader imagines he or she similarly would if placed in the circumstances (Johnson 1765, vol. 1, p. A4r). So, when he assesses Hamlet’s prodigious fright and amazement at this most “dreadful operation of supernatural agency” (Johnson 1765, vol. 8, p. 161), Johnson surely must have in mind his own childhood encounter with the play.

Like Rowe, Johnson tends to avoid direct speculation about Shakespeare’s religious convictions. But he himself was a reverent man, and James Boswell characterized him as “a sincere and zealous Christian, of high-Church-of-England and monarchical principles” (Boswell 1936, p. 6) and his diary entries demonstrate his awe for the power of the sacraments, honoring the authority of the institutional church, and his repeated personal habits of examining the state of his soul (Kaminski 2012, pp. 27–30).<sup>9</sup> Because of his own Christian humanist orientation, Johnson is bothered by what appears in his eyes to be too much moral neutrality in Shakespeare:

His first defect is that to which may be imputed most of the evil in books or in men. He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than to instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose. From his writings . . . he makes no just distribution of good or evil, nor is always careful to shew in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked; he carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong, and at the close dismisses them without further care, and leaves their examples to operate by chance. (Johnson 1765, vol. 1, p. B1v)

Johnson falls short of calling Shakespeare irreligious here; it may be that the assessment he offers best regards issues of dramatic style. But given his pieties, it is difficult to separate Johnson’s notions of a work’s distinctly moral purposes from the perceived religious beliefs and practices to which the writer may subscribe. Johnson’s complaining of Shakespeare’s habitual leave-taking in moral instruction is demonstrated in his commentary on Hamlet’s first instinct to slay Claudius when he kneels to pray (3.3.73–75). Even though Hamlet is representative of the “virtuous character,” Johnson loathes that he is “not content with taking blood for blood,” and Hamlet’s desire to punish the king with “damnation . . . is too horrible to be read or to be uttered” (Johnson 1765, vol. 8, p. 236). In all the notes and commentary on *Hamlet* that Johnson’s edition provides, this one is the most revealingly

<sup>8</sup> By 1563, Article XXII of the Church of England’s *Thirty-Nine Articles* had clearly rejected the doctrine of purgatory: “The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory . . . is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.” For Protestants, spiritual apparitions were either good angels visiting on behalf of heaven, or evil angels masquerading as such and tempting the living to despair and destruction; ghostly appearances of the dead would be evidence of the latter. (West 1955) presents the early modern Catholic and Protestant views of ghosts and argues that the pneumatology in *Hamlet* is deliberately ambiguous.

<sup>9</sup> For more on Johnson’s religious commitments, see (Quinlan 1964; Chapin 1968).

personal. *Hamlet* remains an imperfect play for Johnson: as a revenger, Hamlet largely fails to bring about what he had promised to do of his own accord, and Claudius' death comes about by an accidental turn of events; and, finally, our satisfying feelings of justice upon the death of the murderous and usurping king are cut short by the drowning of Ophelia, "the young, the beautiful, the harmless, and the pious" (Johnson 1765, vol. 8, p. 311).

If Johnson was uncomfortable with the thought of an irreligious or insufficiently pious Shakespeare, William Richardson and Maurice Morgann praised Shakespeare for the malleability of his belief. Richardson and Morgann represent a shift in the later eighteenth century towards character criticism that became more popular with Romantic writers like William Hazlitt and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. In his quirky *A Philosophical Analysis and Illustration of Some of Shakespeare's Remarkable Characters* (1774), Richardson remarks that the perfection of dramatic representation is "effectuated" only when "the poet in some measure becomes the person he represents" and is able to "retire from himself, become insensible of his actual condition, and regardless of external circumstances, feel the very incidents he invents" (Richardson 1774, p. 26). This protean ability of Shakespeare to dwell in his characters, to feel what they feel and to believe what they believe, is similarly applauded in Morgann's influential *An Essay on the Dramatic Character of John Falstaff* (1777). For Morgann, the dramatist's great characters—Falstaff, Lear, Hamlet, Othello—are but "different modifications of Shakespeare's thought" and being (Morgann 1825, p. 16). His characters differ qualitatively from those of his contemporary playwrights because of his "wonderful facility of compressing, as it were, his own spirit into those images, and of giving alternate animation to those forms" with such depth and scope that "he must have *felt* every varied situation, and have spoken through the organ he had formed" (Morgann 1825, p. 64; emphasis Morgann's). Consequently, Shakespeare's interest in writing the "heterocosms" of belief, to borrow Alison Shell's phrase again, goes beyond simply representing them: Shakespeare believes all things.

When *Hamlet* returns from his ghostly interview, he calls together Horatio and Marcellus, who may or may not hear the Ghost's command to keep silence. The ghost's interjection causes Hamlet to startle, "*Hic et ubique?* Then we'll shift our ground" (1.5.155–56). For Richardson and Morgann, and the generation of Romantic essayists after them, Shakespeare's beliefs are "here and everywhere." As we will see shortly, Shakespeare's skull, that once entertained so many beliefs "bounded in a nutshell" (F 2.2.252), inspired a national debate on the viability of shifting a few feet of precious ground, in order to ascertain more precisely the poet's beliefs and proclivities in a more "scientific" way.

## 2. 19th Century Bone Grubbing and the Religion of Shakespeare's Skull

The identification of Yorick's skull by the gravedigger in 5.1, amid the several anonymous skulls tossed haphazardly out of the grave he is preparing, has always seemed mysterious: *How* did the gravedigger know that *that* was Yorick's skull? Kenneth Branagh's 1996 film production addresses the issue with a skull that features prominent protruding front teeth; as Hamlet gazes at its distinctive grin, Branagh smash cuts to Yorick alive and well, smiling and playing with young Hamlet, and then cuts back to the graveyard (Branagh 1996). In the play text, Hamlet gazes upon the singularity of Yorick's skull, enfleshing it with the memory of his kisses, imbuing it with his jokes, songs, and "flashes of merriment" (5.1.178–81), but he also constructs in the bare relic a picture of his own past and his own younger self in relation, as much as he sees the end to which he himself will come. Michael Neill remarks that a skull "is at once the most eloquent and empty of human signs," for it both summons and shuns the self it once contained, and "acts as a peculiar and sinisterly attractive mirror for the gazer, drawing endless narratives into itself only to cancel them" (Neill 1997, pp. 234–35). As will become clear, just as Hamlet reconstructs Yorick's self—and thus himself—while gazing into that skull, Shakespeare's own skull is as much an external object for consideration as it is a looking glass.

While many antiquarians and Shakespearean specialists of the nineteenth century seemed largely uninterested in uncovering Shakespeare's beliefs, admirers and enthusiasts continued to conjecture. Charles Knight published a popularized edition of the plays, *Pictorial Shakspeare* (1838–1841), in an

attempt to wrest the playwright from the hands of specialists, accompanied by a new near-hagiographic biography, *William Shakspere: A Biography* (1843). In full confidence he declared that Shakespeare died a Christian, “full of tranquility and hope” and the “assured belief which the opening of his will has expressed with far more than formal solemnity” ([Knight \[1843\] 1851](#), p. 317).<sup>10</sup> Knight’s biography was speculative and occasionally fictionalizing in the absence of many facts concerning Shakespeare’s life, but it set a popular precedent.<sup>11</sup> The century saw many admirers sometimes turning Shakespeare into versions of themselves, including Shakespeare the shrewd businessman; Shakespeare the champion of Victorian morals; Shakespeare the Catholic, Shakespeare the puritan and recusant, and Shakespeare the skeptic or atheist ([Kewes 2002](#), p. 78; [Schoenbaum 1970](#), pp. 459–63).

This latter view led W.J. Birch in 1848 to claim Hamlet as Shakespeare’s greatest skeptic, a “censurer of mankind—the type generally of unbelievers who criticize the world, and from its anomalies, censure religion” ([Birch 1848](#), p. 133). Birch’s view of the poet’s essential cynicism is seconded by his contemporary Walter Bagehot. In a personal moment, Bagehot confesses that coming across a “certain religionist is like striking the corner of a wall”: their rigid ideas about human behavior or thinking leave one bruised. In his assessment, Shakespeare’s skepticism of ideas, voiced through many of his finest characters, renders him the perfect champion against inflexible religionists: he was a dramatist given to the protean and mundane “religion of the week-days” rather than the doctrinaire religion of Sundays, and thus “qualified to administer a rebuke to people of the prevalent religion” ([Bagehot \[1853\] 1915](#), vol. 1, pp. 258–59). For Birch in particular, Hamlet’s skepticism is also Shakespeare’s, for whom “all explanations of religion were deemed unsatisfactory,” and the play demonstrates that religion works not to “alleviate all the ills,” but functions instead “as something that makes weak the will” ([Birch 1848](#), pp. 150, 154). In this play, Shakespeare is “more personally objective” ([Birch 1848](#), p. 134) than elsewhere; that is, Hamlet is Shakespeare. Horatio’s faith, characterized by Birch as echoing “popular prejudices,” is the foil to Hamlet’s unbelief, characterized as “reason” ([Birch 1848](#), p. 171), and for Birch it is obvious towards which of the two the poet was inclined. To bolster the side of reason against faith, the skeptical prince finds his greatest allies in the gravediggers, who treat death with ridicule and “make a burlesque of everything sacred” ([Birch 1848](#), p. 166). In their successive banter “there is no mention of a future state . . . ; no hint of more equal justice hereafter, and we may say of Shakespeare, as Hamlet says of the gravedigger, he had no feeling for the business” ([Birch 1848](#), p. 167). Throughout Birch’s treatise, it becomes clear that just as Yorick’s skull becomes the looking glass for Hamlet, *Hamlet* becomes the looking-glass for Birch’s own skepticism, such that Hamlet = Shakespeare = Birch.

This is precisely the kind of cultural conversion of Shakespeare that Samuel Schoenbaum and David Scott Kastan described, as I mentioned earlier. By the nineteenth century, the “religion in Shakespeare” was being translated into the “religion of Shakespeare.” As we will see in a moment, the grounds for completing that task shifted from scouring the plays to fingering the material remains of the poet. And for some, the playwright himself became an institutionalized object of secular devotion in the “religion of Shakespeare,” the impulses of which may still be discernable.

In an intriguing use of the word, Birch observes that Hamlet’s/Shakespeare’s skeptical musings on morality and existence are “phrenological” ([Birch 1848](#), p. 156): the pseudoscience of phrenology which gained popular ascendancy in the early nineteenth century, despite its widespread rejection by most in the scientific community (“bumpology” was the derogatory term; *schädellehre*, or “the doctrine of the skull,” was the exalted, preferred term by its earliest practitioners).<sup>12</sup> Phrenology assigned personality,

<sup>10</sup> On Knight’s efforts to popularize Shakespeare against perceived pedantic efforts by editors like John Payne Collier to make him available mostly to specialists and scholars, see ([Lesser 2015](#), pp. 40–56).

<sup>11</sup> For more on the history of Shakespearean biography, see ([Gilvary 2018](#)).

<sup>12</sup> For more on this disjunction and the various attacks on phrenology as a legitimate science, see ([Parssinen 1974](#), pp. 1–20; [De Giustino 1975](#)). In England, phrenology was popularized by George Combe, one of the founders of the Edinburgh Phrenological Society; see ([Combe 1828](#)).

character, behavioral tendencies, sentiments, and temperament to twenty-seven, and perhaps up to forty, parts of the brain that were topographically located and “measureable” by the phrenologist’s delicate fingering of protuberances, dips, and other variations in the patient’s skull. It was the perfect uniting of the material and the immaterial, the calibrated physical attributes predicting and governing the invisible aspects of human behavior and belief. Secretiveness or mirthfulness, veneration or combativeness, introspection or garrulity, reverence and spirituality, wit and wonder—the physical features of the skull confirmed these and other intangible propensities. As Franz Joseph Gall, the forefather of phrenology, summed up, “each particular cerebral part, according to its development, may modify, in some degree, the manifestation of a particular moral quality or intellectual faculty” ([Gall 1835](#), vol. 2, p. 224). What Birch seems to indicate here is that just as Hamlet discerns the “bumps” in the moral landscape within Elsinore castle to determine the hidden reality of circumstance, Shakespeare’s play can be interpreted in the same way that a phrenologist reads a skull, thereby determining and fixing the essence of the person who owned it, or in this case, the writer who wrote it. Nineteenth-century phrenology became the new key to unlocking Shakespeare’s beliefs, religious or otherwise.

But digging up his skull was required. In 1794, the “wild, rather dashing young fellow” Frank Chambers did just that; or so relates the 1879 narrative of his midnight caper, *How Shakespeare’s Skull Was Stolen* ([Warwickshire 1879](#), p. 268). The narrative’s anonymous publication in *The Argosy* literary magazine, complete with three titled chapters by “a Warwickshire Man,” nurtured a blustery national debate on whether or not England ought to disinter the remains of its favorite son for inspection, to ascertain what might be revealed about the accuracy of the Bard’s portraiture, about his personality, his religious inclinations, his habits of thinking, if not also to satisfy the impulse towards literary idolatry.

The Warwickshire Man begins by describing the means of transmission for the story, as well as the origins of Frank Chambers’s motivation for sneaking into Holy Trinity Church at midnight in the autumn of 1794. Chambers’s nephew, the recently deceased and unidentified “Mr. M.” kept notes, letters, and memoranda of various conversations between them over the years, which had fallen into the provenance of the narrative’s author and now editor and transcriber, identified as Reverend Charles Jones Langston, living in the rectory of Sevington when the story was published. Apprenticed to a surgeon in the sleepy village of Alcester in 1787, Chambers had fallen into the company of Lord Francis Seymour-Conway, newly-created Marquess of Hertford, and occasionally attended dinner parties at his manor, Ragley Hall. During one of these parties, a guest mentioned an old challenge issued by the quirky aristocrat Sir Horace Walpole to his close friend, the M.P. George Selwyn, during the 1769 Jubilee: an offer of 300 guineas for Shakespeare’s skull (about £315 pounds at the time, equivalent to about £40,000 today). “If he cudth theal away hith brainth, that were theap to him [Walpole], thir,” lisped the schoolmaster and minister Reverend Samuel Parr ([Warwickshire 1879](#), p. 270). In the hopes of filling his “scantily-furnished pocket” from the ready funds of Walpole, Frank Chambers hatched his plan ([Warwickshire 1879](#), p. 275).

Chambers promised £3 apiece to Jim Hawtin, Harry Cull, and Tom Dyer if they helped him steal the prize. Having broken the lock of the church door, and with the recently white-washed Stratford Bust of Shakespeare grinning above them, Dyer and Cull began scraping the mortar along the edges of the gravestone. The slab was cautiously raised and set aside: the doorway to the illustrious dead had been opened. The men dug with shovels to a depth of three feet. Chambers felt a surge of adrenaline as he watched the darker earth turn upwards and he noticed the peculiar damp smell of decay that caused Hamlet’s own gorge to rise as he gazed upon poor Yorick. Cull was the first to finger something “fine and heavy,” but it was a stone. And then Dyer found it. But the skull was two feet away, not in the location they had guessed, judging from the position of the slab. Reenacting, however briefly, Hamlet’s meditative study of Yorick’s skull, Chambers notes, “I handled Shakespeare’s skull at last, and gazed at it only for a moment, for time was precious.” Chambers remarks, “It was smaller than I expected, and in formation not much like what I remembered of the effigy above our heads” ([Warwickshire 1879](#),

p. 274). But he had his prize, and after paying the men their due, he celebrated that night with the lads over nine quarts of ale at a tavern, auspiciously called the “Globe.”

Following celebrations, Chambers wrote to Sir Horace Walpole detailing the upshot of his risky labors. The aristocrat assured him that he “would give all the skulls of his living relatives . . . to possess that of the deceased bard” ([Warwickshire 1879](#), p. 274). But in the end, Walpole’s assistant reneged on the original terms of the wager. Instead of paying 300 guineas for the precious skull, he bargained to extract one of the loose front teeth. Chambers walked out. In a last ditch effort to sell the skull, Chambers sought Rev. Samuel Parr, knowing the minister’s fondness for Shakespeare. Chambers found the minister and schoolmaster that evening entertaining a mutual acquaintance, John Bartlam. While the timing of Bartlam’s visit was inconvenient, Chambers took the risk anyway and broached the old subject. He tepidly sounded Parr out with the hypothetical scenario of his being offered the skull for purchase. The reverend, however, was scandalized that anyone would desecrate Shakespeare’s grave: “I would have any man whipt at the cart’s tail who violated the thanctity of that grave: it would be worthe than . . . thacrilege” ([Warwickshire 1879](#), p. 276).<sup>13</sup> Chambers hastily dropped the conversation piece. The next morning, Bartlam privately accosted him, having correctly intuited that the skull was in Chambers’s possession, and he coaxed assurances from Chambers to return it. The curse etched into Shakespeare’s gravestone seemed to come alive: “GOOD FREND FOR IESUS SAKE FORBEARE,/TO DIGG THE DVST ENCLOASED HEARE./BLESTE BE Y<sup>E</sup> MAN Y<sup>T</sup> SPARES THES STONES,/AND CVRST BE HE Y<sup>T</sup> MOVES MY BONES.” Chambers did seem to be “curst” with its possession—a literary artifact of immeasurable worth, taken with considerable risk at the charge of sacrilege against the church, with no prospective buyers, and now the dawning possibility of blackmail if he did not keep his gentlemanly promise to reinter it.

Langston’s narrative concludes with Chambers’s resolution to rebury the skull. Tom Dyer assured him that he could do the business himself, and Chambers handed over the skull. But when Chambers inspected the slab after Sunday services he spotted “an ominous crack right across the slab, about two feet from the end near the communion rails” ([Warwickshire 1879](#), p. 277). Panicked, Chambers confronted Dyer at the Four Alls tavern, where the man admitted that, as he was lifting it, the slab had snapped. But Dyer solemnly pledged, “the old chap was there beneath, as safe as a door nail” ([Warwickshire 1879](#), p. 277). But *was* he? C.J. Langston’s account closes with a short conversation between the aging Frank Chambers and his nephew, the unidentified “Mr. M.” who had entrusted Langston with their correspondence. Curious, the nephew had asked his Uncle Frank directly whether Dyer actually returned the skull. Echoing Horatio’s words to Hamlet, when the prince asks if it is possible that the remains of Alexander the Great could stop the hole for a casket, Chambers responds: “Twere to consider too curiously to consider so” ([Warwickshire 1879](#), p. 277; [Shakespeare 2006a](#), pp. 5.1.192–95).<sup>14</sup>

It is entirely plausible that the account by the “Warwickshire Man” Rev. C.J. Langston is nothing more than a “lurid fiction,” as Samuel Schoenbaum characterizes it, with many scholars agreeing ([Schoenbaum 1970](#), p. 471). It reads like a nineteenth-century popular ghost story crossing wires with emergent Victorian detective fiction, populated by some stock characters. Regardless of its historical veracity, its publication in 1879 dramatized an ongoing national conversation, one that reached American shores as well, among enthusiasts and experts on the subject of whether or not the bones of William Shakespeare ought to be exhumed in spite of the curse and, presumably, the playwright’s own wishes. Just as Yorick’s skull had allowed Hamlet to reconstruct the clown’s personhood, advocates for disinterment argued that Shakespeare’s skull would potentially tell the stories that had eluded biographers and portrait artists for centuries.

<sup>13</sup> Here, the account drops the lisp of Rev. Parr in this second episode involving his character. I have inserted the lisp to maintain consistency with that detail, which Langston seemed to think of importance to preserve in the first episode.

<sup>14</sup> A sequel appeared a few years later, detailing the lengthier story of Dyer’s attempts to return the skull; see ([Warwickshire 1884](#)).

The lawyer and American aficionado for Shakespeariana, Joseph Parker Norris, was among the first to champion the possibility of digging up Shakespeare's body, even before the publication of Langston's account in *The Argosy*. He edited a bi-monthly column in *The American Bibliopolist* called "Shakespearean Gossip." Dissatisfied with the Stratford Bust in Holy Trinity, and critical of the well-known Droeshout portrait that accompanies the *First Folio*, he advocated photographing Shakespeare's skull in the interests of making "a better portrait of him than we now possess" (Norris 1876, p. 38). Resorting to Hamlet's remark about seeing the ghost of his departed father in Gertrude's chamber, Norris asserted that such a photo of him "in his habit as he lived" (3.4.133) would "a relic be of inestimable value to the world . . . what would not be given for such a treasure?" (Norris 1884, p. 71).

Norris's intentions may indeed have been driven in part by the aesthetics of portraiture. But given the popularity of phrenology in the day—even Queen Victoria subjected her children to the phrenologist George Combe's agile fingers—there is good reason to believe that his motives were influenced by the pseudoscience. In fact, in 1875 Norris had republished for private circulation E.T. Craig's short pamphlet, *Shakespeare's Portraits Phrenologically Considered* (1864). Craig had looked approvingly upon the high frontal lobe and prominent eyes depicted in the Droeshout portrait, but his assessment of the Stratford Bust is dismissive because it does not fit the phrenological profile one would expect of a universal genius, as Shakespeare must surely have been. "I have examined many thousands of heads," Craig explains, "and never met with such a heavy-looking figure associated with a man of capacity, culture, and mental power . . . Destructiveness, secretiveness, alimentiveness [appetite or hunger], and acquisitiveness [desire for accumulation] are all large; while ideality and wit are scarcely indicated" (Craig 1864, pp. 2–4). What might Shakespeare's actual skull reveal about him, wondered Norris? About human possibility? One anonymous article, published in the Cincinnati *Commercial Gazette*, argued that Shakespeare's skull ought to be housed in a position of honor in the Royal College of Surgeons "as the apex of the climbing series of skeletons, from the microscopic to the divine" (reprinted in Ingleby 1883, p. 48). It is not clear what "the divine" would look like on such an ascending chart, but apparently the gap between Shakespeare as dramatist and God as Creator of the human drama itself is negligible.

With some sting, Norris was dubbed a "bone-grubber" by the London *Evening Telegraph*, and he describes the hurt and isolation he felt among his fellow friends and Shakespeareans as a result of the bad press (Autograph Letters, 27 August 1883). But his efforts found their advocate in the well-credentialed academic and Life Trustee of Shakespeare's Birthplace, Dr. Clement Mansfield Ingleby, who fueled the conversation in his short book *Shakespeare's Bones: The Proposal to Disinter Them, Considered in Relation to Their Possible Bearing on His Portraiture* (1883). When Ingleby sets out his reasons for exhuming the bones of Shakespeare, with the kind of academic clout that Norris lacked, he states his intentions are "to find such evidences as time may not have wholly destroyed, of his personal appearance, including the size and shape of his head, and the special characteristics of his living face" (Ingleby 1883, p. 2). Ingleby hated the Stratford Bust even more than Norris, but his objections are more than aesthetic. He, too, was a proponent of phrenology, having been examined by the prominent phrenologist James Quilter Rumball on three separate occasions, at ages 18, 23, and 44, the latter just eleven years before the publication of Langston's 1879 account in *The Argosy* (Rumball 1842–1868). Consequently, his argument for establishing the accuracy of Shakespearean portraiture aside, we must understand Ingleby's motivation as driven in part by the pseudo-science. From Norris's and Ingleby's positions, phrenology could help recover the authentic Shakespeare: not just the natural grace of his external features (which must surely contradict, in their opinion, the goggle-eyed, marble-headed tradesman depicted by the Stratford Bust), but also the divine mold of Shakespeare's internal dispositions and religious or skeptical proclivities—illuminating that which had been as elusive as quicksilver, as hidden as dreams. Phrenology was an even more intimate book

to read and discern the true soul of the man from his material remains. Like Norris, Ingleby was a “bone-grubber.”<sup>15</sup>

As a result of the publication of Ingleby’s book, the prominent antiquarian and Shakespeare scholar J.O. Halliwell-Phillipps wrote to the Mayor of Stratford Sir Arthur Hodgson on 1 September 1883 advocating that they respect the wishes of the epitaph as “the only possible manner” in which a nation’s “gratitude can now be expressed.” If the skull were found, he argued, “and its formation corresponded to the monumental bust, there would merely be a confirmation of our present knowledge.” On the other hand, if the skull did not match the bust, “the inference would naturally be that it was not Shakespeare’s, the evidence of the bust altogether outweighing that of a particular skull found in a grave” (Halliwell-Phillipps 1883, n.p.). His plea was successful. The Town Council of Stratford met in October 1883 and passed an unambiguous resolution:

That a record be made upon the minutes of this meeting of the most entire and emphatic disapproval of this Corporation to any proposition or project for interfering in any way with, or disturbance of, the grave, tombstone, and monument of Shakespeare in the Chancel of Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-on-Avon. (reprinted in King 1884, p. 7)

In his short book *Shall We Open Shakespeare’s Grave?* (1884), the Canadian Shakespearean scholar Thomas Davies King hailed the decision of the Town Council and likened Ingleby’s absurd agenda to “a pious Jew of the Tribe of Levi searching for the grave of Moses, and if found, exhuming the body to satisfy himself whether the immortal and incomparable master piece of Michael Angelo [sic], on the tomb of Julius II, is a correct interpretation of the great Law Giver.” As Joseph’s bones were a “sacred deposit by the children of Israel” (Gen. 50:25–26), so “the bones of Shakespeare have been considered as a sacred deposit by the English people during three centuries” (King 1884, pp. 13–14). Since 1883 the Stratford Town Council’s deliberations against Shakespeare’s disinterment have been honored.

So have the wishes expressed on Shakespeare’s gravestone, that the “GOOD FREND” pass by without digging up the remains. Most biographers remark on the exceptionally unexceptional quality of the epitaph, and we cannot be certain whether Shakespeare wrote it (Kastan 2014, p. 28). Regardless, it may be worth asking about the imagined identity of the “GOOD FREND”: Whom did the writer have in mind? Samuel Schoenbaum suggests that it is not the generations of passers-by at which the curse in these verses is aimed, but the church sexton, the parish officer often charged with ringing the bells in a church tower and digging graves (Schoenbaum 1970, p. 4). On occasion the sexton would have to remove bones from one grave, placing them in a great anonymous charnel house, or bury multiple bodies in the same grave, in order to make room for others, especially during times of plague. If Schoenbaum’s assumption is correct, then the epitaph appears to express some measure of burial anxiety. Shakespeare hyperbolically dramatized a crowded burial in *Hamlet*, even if he himself had no anxiety about the possible removal of his bones. When the funeral party arrives and Ophelia’s body is placed in the grave shortly after Hamlet’s conversation with the gravedigger, Laertes declares, “Hold off the earth a while,/Till I have caught her once more in mine arms” (5.1.238–39) and he leaps into the grave. Not to be outdone in grief, Hamlet follows imploring that he “Be buried quick with her” (5.1.268), even if it is with Laertes, with whom he is grappling.<sup>16</sup> Both men are claiming to be the more faithful lover and possessor of Ophelia’s body—a situation analogously recapitulated in the cultural forces embodied by Ingleby and Halliwell-Phillipps as they grappled for proprietorship of

<sup>15</sup> C. M. Ingleby’s book did indeed create some “hub bub,” and letters to him following its publication indicate that the reactions were both sympathetic and hostile; see (*Autograph Letters 1883–1884*). For a provocative study on the representational afterlife of Shakespeare, see the essays in (Marsden 1991).

<sup>16</sup> Q1 is explicit that “Hamlet leaps in after Laertes” (*Shakespeare 2006b*, scene 16, line 145); Q2 and F are silent, but modern editors supply a similar stage direction because Claudius’ command—that the two grappling men be separated (5.1.253)—implies that Hamlet has jumped into the grave. For more on both the stage history of this direction, and how editors have handled it, see (Zitner 1985, pp. 139–48).

Shakespeare's body. The former was driven by a quasi-religious devotion to glean the poet's secrets from a relic, and the latter was determined to preserve mystery, orthodoxy, and pious restraint.

The burial anxiety expressed in the epitaph—by or on behalf of Shakespeare—had been unfounded. Shakespeare's bones would not be relegated to the anonymous charnel house that was adjacent to Holy Trinity Church.<sup>17</sup> Nor would his skull be exhumed and subjected to phrenological analysis. Instead, the poet would be venerated himself in the Religion of Humanity headquartered in Newcastle-on-Tyne, which arose near-contemporaneously with the nineteenth-century national debate. Here his plays were his praises and humanists were his priests. Effigies of Shakespeare decorated their chapel; prayers of commemoration were offered in his name; pilgrimages were made to his birthplace; a new calendar was instituted featuring a month of reflection and meditation on Shakespeare as a champion of human promise and progress.<sup>18</sup> Rather than recovering the “*religion of Shakespeare*,” the sect invented the “*religion of Shakespeare*” by arrogating some of the aesthetics and practices of Catholicism. Arguably, a similar secular devotion to Shakespeare remains active even if not institutionalized. As Lynda E. Boose characterizes that reverence in contemporary critical circles, “Shakespearean scholarship effectively constitutes the equivalent of a cultural Rorschach inscribing the issues, the ideologies, the tensions, and the terms of debate that define the preoccupying investments for any given historical moment . . . ” (Boose 2004, p. 607). In other words, we figuratively look into the empty eye sockets of his skull and see ourselves. The poet *did* have an afterlife, with admirers and scholars resurrecting his selfhood over and over again, even if heaven did not.<sup>19</sup>

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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<sup>17</sup> Writing in 1694 to his friend Edward Thwaites, William Hall noted that the Stratford charnel house was “a repository for all bones they dig up; which are so many that they would load a great number of waggons” (Schoenbaum 1975, p. 251). According to (Bloom 1902, pp. 10–11), the charnel house was pulled down in 1801, after years of disrepair.

<sup>18</sup> The Religion of Humanity became the Church of Humanity under the direction of Richard Congreve. At his death, the sect followed J. T. Looney, one of the central figures associated with the Oxfordian theory of authorship. For more on this, see (Shapiro 2010, pp. 164–82).

<sup>19</sup> See (Utsi and Colls 2017) and (Harris 2016). In 2010, a team of scientists from the Centre of Archaeology at Staffordshire University was given permission by the vicar of Holy Trinity Church, Reverend Patrick Taylor, to use non-invasive Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) to investigate the subsurface conditions in the Shakespeare family gravesites. The survey results did determine that despite the epitaphs's curse, Shakespeare's grave was in fact opened at least once, likely in order to make repairs to a sinking chancel floor. The GPR survey, however, was unable to verify if Shakespeare's skull is comfortably resting there, under the slab or not, as the data is unable to discriminate between the minute electromagnetic differences of soil and bones after so many centuries of decay and intermixture.

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