

**Lars Engle**

*The University of Tulsa*

*Tulsa, United States of America*

### **Shakespeare in the Alley: the role of a hypercanonical world artist after 1989**

Secular modernity in the European West may have arisen, and been enshrined in various ways in the founding documents of new or remade nations (e.g. The U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, or the various French constitutions, or the post – WWII constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany, or the various quasi – constitutional documents of the United Nations and the European Union) as peace – oriented responses to the cruelty of recent war and the necessity of free exchange of ideas to undermine monological tyranny, whether founded on religion or on statism. One cultural response in the English speaking world to secularization in the 19th century was the attempt to enshrine high culture, specifically a canon of the high humanities (literature, art, music) alongside a robust development of public education, as a substitute for a national religion. The Arnoldian hope was that the best that has been thought and said, made available to a broader educated public, might sustain a thoughtful, moral national and international conversation around values that would lead to peace and orderly development. Shakespeare held a central place in this secular scripture for English speaking people. The idea in its developed form embraced academic freedom for a humanities professoriate (a secular priesthood) thereby protected to constitute an oasis of informed and relatively disinterested commentary and perspective on the worlds of commerce and technology and politics that surrounded but also sustained the universities. To a considerable extent, this model of the university humanities has spread throughout the world, interacting with the various contemplative practices and privileged textual traditions of non – European cultures, though national commitments to the academic freedom of professors vary alongside commitments to individual freedoms for citizens.

The world wars of the twentieth century obviously cast doubt on the efficacy of this Arnoldian plan as a recipe for Eurocentric peace, but belief in the high humanities continued to shape the gigantic expansion of university humanities education in the period that followed allied victory in the Second World War. One could, generalizing recklessly, characterize the so – called Pax Americana (with its awful but local wars in Korea, Vietnam, and elsewhere) as, from this viewpoint, a struggle between a more monological and statist form of secularism (Communism), and a less monological and statist form of secularism (American capitalism). Meanwhile, conflicts based on religious nationalism in, for instance, India and the Middle East showed that secular rationality was by no means dominant everywhere. The Cold War was good for world universities and their humanities departments.

We seem now to be undergoing what Simon Durning has called a second secularization, in which the high humanities no longer enjoy a semi – sacred special place as suppliers of a stabilizing vocabulary by which to measure and judge innovations in the political or technological sphere. Professors of literature feel residual, and attempt in various ways to engage with what feels emergent: critical race theory, intersectionality, digital humanities, post – coloniality, gender politics, and (as we are doing) globalization, in so doing trying sometimes to demonstrate that their authors can be hip. While such attempts risk pathos, they also signal will – to – innovate and a continued commitment to the high value of the texts now engaging with others on others' terms, rather than standing tall as objects to be engaged with on their own terms. As Bob Dylan puts it in Subterranean

Homesick Blues, "Shakespeare's in the alley, with his pointy shoes and his bells, talking with some French girl who says she knows me well."

While a paper can only sketch such a claim, I will suggest that, in the US and the English – speaking world generally, the end of the Cold War in 1989 established a new uneasy "peace" of the kind other papers on this panel discuss, and I will discuss how this "peace" has influenced Shakespeare studies.