

Introduction

“He that receiveth a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward.”

Matthew 10:41, as cited in “Shakespeare, the Prophet,”
 a sermon preached by the Reverend Robert S. de Courcy
 Laffan, Stratford-upon-Avon, 1894¹

“[B]oth in effect and in character, real Religion is in striking accord with true poetry.”

John Keble, *Lecture on Poetry* (1832)²

I Bardolatry

In 1900, George Bernard Shaw memorably scorned his contemporaries for what he called “Bardolatry”: that is, for their religious attitudes to Shakespeare.³ Shaw was right to notice. His *fin-de-siècle* generation shared a number of deeply and explicitly religious notions about poetry generally and about Shakespeare in particular. For Shaw, as for most who have borrowed his term, any literary taste that grows into religious devotion becomes absurd: a kind of category mistake. Nonetheless, Shaw’s coinage may have proven so enduring precisely because the line between fitting admiration and undue reverence has never been easy to affix.⁴ Historically, at least, the Shakespeare enthusiasm shown by Shaw’s contemporaries served to promote theatrical art and to propagate the study of modern literature throughout the *fin de siècle* and early twentieth century when English became widely established as a university discipline.⁵ Kate McLuskie and Kate Rumbold point out that even “the powerful anti-bardolatrous thrust of academic literary criticism in the late twentieth century” has done remarkably little to tarnish Shakespeare’s literary authority or to diminish such institutions.⁶

As we reconsider the value of the humanities today, then, we might hesitate to adopt either conventional attitudes of reverence for Shakespeare

or conventional attitudes of cynicism, since neither seems sufficient to express the unruly power of art. By contrast, it remains well worth revisiting the devotional orientation of nineteenth-century Shakespeare criticism. The Victorians maintained a lively, historically significant, religiously inflected tradition of Shakespeare interpretation at a time when Christianity itself was in an ongoing state of crisis and grappling with the effect of modern Biblical criticism, including the so-called Higher Criticism, and new scientific ideas such as Darwinian evolution. Partly for this reason, Victorian literary culture remains conspicuous for its religious idioms, paradigms, and lenses. By this, I do not mean merely that most nineteenth-century critics were religious in ways that may now seem foreign; I mean that sharply contested religious ideas animate their very frames of reference.

Take something like Walt Whitman's prophecy that "the problem of humanity all over the civilized world is social and religious, and is to be finally met and treated by literature."⁷ Such expressions are characteristic of Whitman, but they are also characteristic of his epoch: they can be found coming from contemporaries both famous and obscure. His prophecy may seem absurd on its face, but we miss out on something important if we dismiss it as merely idiosyncratic or delusional. To the contrary, it represents a vein of Victorian literary theory that treated poetry as a solution to religious problems. "What the Victorians value in Shakespeare," explains W. David Shaw, "is the sense of wonder, the horizon seen through and beyond the dome of belief."⁸

Many scholars in our own day have acknowledged that the literary study practiced in the academy retains a genealogical kinship to this religious idea. Former Modern Language Association president Robert Scholes scorns literature professors as "a clergy without a dogma, teaching sacred texts without a god."⁹ Franco Moretti goes so far as to condemn *close reading*, the most basic activity of the literary scholar, as in essence "a theological exercise," a secularized version of *lectio divina*.¹⁰ A half-century ago, Roland Barthes rejected the very concept of authorship as theological: *théologique*.¹¹ And this line of thinking extends straight back to T. E. Hulme's arch early twentieth-century assessment of literary Romanticism as "spilt religion."¹² For most of the nineteenth century, by contrast, a religious approach to literature seemed natural. (This is Hulme's complaint.) During that period, sacred texts were generally allowed to do honor to divinities, literary deities among them.¹³

The following volume proposes that by now even the most *outré* Victorian devotional approaches to Shakespeare may be studied profitably,

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without special embarrassment or disapprobation, and that this study can teach us about both literary art and religious movements in the modern era. We know that Biblical hermeneutics and literary analysis have evolved in conjunction with one another for centuries. And the history of literary scholarship often reduplicates devotional attitudes even in criticism that strives to disavow or to debunk them. In what follows, then, I wish to expand upon the kernel of insight that makes Shaw's sneer so resonant and memorable. But I pull the whole question inside out. For to follow Shaw's logic *all the way* – that is, to take Scholes, Moretti, and Barthes at their word – is to accept that secular professional English literary study has always been to some degree an outgrowth of religious culture. That scandal being acknowledged, we might begin afresh by granting the admirable richness of its archive. That is, we might grant literary criticism to be a big mess of “spilt religion” *à la* Hulme and yet nonetheless admire what an enormous, complex, far-reaching, and artistically ingenious spill it is. By the same token, any observer who values secular literary study must grant religion – if only in such guises – to be likewise worthy of inquiry.

If we agree that the literary and humanistic studies of the kind represented by English departments remain a legacy worth preserving, it follows that we ought to take more seriously the kinds of interpretation that helped to fuel their creation, or at least (since causation remains elusive) that prevailed at the time of their creation. If we wish to understand Shakespeare's long-standing status as the foremost deity of the English canon, we ought to study artifacts like Victorian “Shakespeare sermons” as part of the nineteenth-century religious climate, or even as comprising a new religious movement. We ought to study devotional volumes of quotations that conjoin the texts of the Bible and Shakespeare, to study the religious atmosphere of nineteenth-century Shakespeare societies.

I elect here to discuss such works, from Shakespeare sermons to Shakespeare societies, as examples of Victorian “bard-ology” (my own term) rather than of “bard-olatry” (Shaw's famous term). My new term, bardology, signifies approximately what Shaw's does but without the disapprobation built into his suffix: that is, without its implications of idolatry and misplaced devotion. One finds this contrast, for instance, in the history surrounding “Mariology” as a description of Catholic devotion *versus* “Mariolatry” as a Protestant sneer at the same thing. I aspire to discuss our secular literary age as a realm in which diverse kinds of more or less legitimate meanings and worldviews remain in tension or in play with one another. If the religious crises of the nineteenth century drove many

Victorians to read Shakespeare in fantastic ways, even as a secondary Bible, surely those of us who can draw salaries as university-level instructors of poetry or drama ought to be the last to quibble with them for it.

II After God, Shakespeare

It would be difficult to overstate the centrality of my two central texts (Shakespeare's oeuvre and the Bible) to Victorian literary culture. Hannibal Hamlin's *The Bible in Shakespeare* (2013) begins with a brilliant metaphor for the pervasiveness of Biblical literature in Shakespeare's own early modern culture:

Imagine a television program that everyone in the country has been watching every week, sometimes more than once, for their entire lives, having seen some episodes dozens of times. Suppose your parents and grandparents had watched all the same episodes, and suppose further that [those in] neighboring countries had watched these episodes too, dubbed into their own languages. Suppose people had actually been watching this show, in still other languages, for over a thousand years, and that vast libraries had accumulated over the centuries full of books about how best to interpret the show. Suppose that it was illegal not to watch this show and, moreover, that your eternal salvation was understood to depend on it. Suppose that this TV show was the basis for your country's literature and art, its political theory, its history, its philosophy, its understanding of the natural world. . . . In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, the Bible was that show: it was always in reruns, and it never went off the air.¹⁴

As this metaphor makes evident, scholars today must resort to a measure of fancy if we hope to capture the Bible's central place in historical anglo-phone literature. We no longer have any practical analogues. In our own time, the Bible is no longer ubiquitous and neither is anything else. Additionally, Hamlin separates any question of the Bible's spiritual value from the mundane fact of its historical pervasiveness; he urges that this pervasiveness must ground our endless, unanswerable speculations about Shakespeare's religion. He reminds us of what the great twentieth-century critic Northrop Frye, following William Blake, meant in calling the Bible "the Great Code" for understanding Western literature.¹⁵ But the best part about Hamlin's metaphor is that it has a far longer life than he cares to claim for it. For the Bible remained a ubiquitous cultural presence long past the early modern era: right through the self-consciously modern, steam-powered, train-riding, electric-telegraphing nineteenth century of Charles Darwin.¹⁶

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I too begin with Hamlin's ingenious metaphor, therefore, although my study concerns the later world of nineteenth-century literary interpretation. I start from the extraordinary fact that we can so easily recycle Hamlin's entire quotation as an illustration of nineteenth-century culture if we only strike the clause about it being illegal "not to watch this show" and add "traditional" to "understanding of the natural world." With these caveats, the whole paragraph functions as an illustration of the Bible's ubiquity in *Victorian* Britain. Repurposed in this way, it makes a salutary introduction to the literature of the Brontës and the Brownings, to Alfred Tennyson and Charles Dickens, to the Pre-Raphaelites and the New Woman novelists of the 1890s. Even our concessions amount to less than meets the eye. Statistics show the mid-Victorians to have been remarkably dutiful about religious services; they required no special laws to compel church or chapel attendance.¹⁷ Likewise, the great revolutions of nineteenth-century science (geological, astronomical, biological, and so on) engender new forms of "understanding of the natural world" without diminishing anyone's memory of the old familiar Biblical worldview.¹⁸ Something like Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) reframes without effacing the story of Noah's flood, which serves George Eliot in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) and *Middlemarch* (1872) much as it had served Dickens in *Bleak House* (1852–1853). And flood is the right metaphor: the Victorian world remained awash in Biblical stories, Biblical frames of reference, Biblical idioms and turns of phrase, and even Biblically inspired models of history. Working-class literacy, centered upon the Bible, reached all-time highs. In short, Hamlin's imaginary Biblical television show was still playing centuries later: "it was [still] always in reruns, and it never went off the air." In this respect, literary culture of the nineteenth century has more in common with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than either of these epochs has in common with the present day.

A still more remarkable feature of nineteenth-century literacy, perhaps, is that Shakespeare's oeuvre also comes to enjoy the circulation and religious cachet that it does right alongside the Bible. For Shakespeare, too, becomes universally recognized and universally quoted. He, too, is read devoutly, to the extent that his oeuvre comes to be upheld in many quarters as another Bible: a secular "Bible of Humanity" or a "Bible of Genius."¹⁹ His Victorian critics reflexively look to him for what Adrian Poole calls a "figure of supreme authority [and] the dream of triumphant near-divinity."²⁰ What Shaw calls "Bardolatry," Péter Dávidházi a "Cult of Shakespeare," and Peter Holland "the Shakespeare religion" has roots in the eighteenth century but becomes entirely unexceptional (and thus,

paradoxically, less frequently studied) in the nineteenth.²¹ Thomas Carlyle does far more than Samuel Taylor Coleridge to promote the former's view of Shakespeare as a prophet or, in Carlyle's peculiar idiom, "a blessed heaven-sent Bringer of Light." Alexandre Dumas maintained (in terms that the *Revue Suisse* calls "légèrement [slightly] risqué") that "After God, Shakespeare has created the most."²² The evangelical Elizabeth Barrett Browning professed herself to "believe reverently in the miracle" of Shakespeare's poetic range; her husband Robert Browning treated his name as a sort of incantation, second only to God's.²³ Victor Hugo communed with Shakespeare in spiritualist *séances* of 1855 shortly before meeting Jesus as well.²⁴ Algernon Charles Swinburne affirmed that "without him, day were night on earth."²⁵ One could go on and on with such examples.

Although Shakespeare's cultural authority never swells altogether to the stature of the Bible's in most Victorian contexts, therefore, it remains significant that he puts to shame whoever might be said to come in third. His influence subtends the most significant innovation in Victorian poetics, the dramatic monologue.²⁶ His esteem extends throughout working-class readerships, whose use of the King James Bible (KJB) as an English primer served to make Shakespeare's language more accessible.²⁷ By turn, Shakespearean English made the late-Victorian revision of the Bible appear more iconoclastic than it might otherwise have done. As David Norton puts it, "The KJB's reputation probably did little for Shakespeare's, but his certainly helped the KJB's."²⁸

The Victorian popularization of Romantic views of Shakespeare, in short, amounts to something far grander in scale than the campy devotions presided over by David Garrick back in the 1760s. As Linda Rozmovits notes,

it is, in fact, only from about the 1860s onward that bardolatry *literally* assumes religious or quasi-religious forms ... [B]y 1869 assertions of Shakespeare's unique status had not only acquired a fiercely moral inflection (conspicuously absent in the profane celebrations of a century earlier) but, indeed, had come to inhabit forms of discussion, celebration, and worship which belonged not to any mortal man however accomplished but to God alone. [*italics original*]²⁹

Reasonable minds can disagree over what religion "*literally*" entails, but Rozmovits points to something important.³⁰ There can be no doubt that the reverence expressed by the generation of Coleridge, Charles Lamb, and William Hazlitt evolves during the course of the nineteenth century into

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a pervasive consensus: an orthodoxy as common as air. Looking retrospectively, it is easy to lose track of the fact that for this generation of Coleridge, Lamb, and Hazlitt, it was actually John Milton who represented the gold standard of English poetics.³¹ For by midcentury, Shakespeare had come to reign supreme, the consummate instance of modern literary inspiration, whom Matthew Arnold calls “the greatest perhaps of all poetical names, a name never to be mentioned without reverence”: “Perfection and Infallibility,” as Shaw acidly describes it (lv).

We might even venture so far as to repurpose Hamlin’s paragraph one final time: rereading that whole scenario not just as applied to the nineteenth century in lieu of the seventeenth, but also as applied to *Shakespeare’s* œuvre in lieu of the Bible. During the Victorian era, Shakespeare, too, was “a television program that everyone in the country ha[d] been watching . . . for their entire lives.” Parents and grandparents knew it, as did those in neighboring countries. And – significantly – “vast libraries [were] accumul[at]ing full of books about how best to interpret the show.” Our metaphor here does begin to fray somewhat. Among other things, it risks giving the misimpression that Shakespeare was chiefly being *staged*, whereas, just like the Bible, he was still more often read, studied, and recited in private homes, often from anthologies and quotation books.³² Then, too, our clause about “vast libraries” now requires a different tense. Still, vast libraries *were* beginning to accumulate on Shakespearean interpretation because his transcendence went without saying in most Victorian contexts. And although Western culture’s deep conversancy with Shakespeare has faded of late, those vast libraries are accumulating still.

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Shakespeare’s incursions into Victorian religious culture derive from his singular place at the head of nineteenth-century literary culture, rather than vice versa. Travis De Cook’s and Alan Galey’s now-routine observation that “Shakespeare and the Bible seem unable to escape each other” might have sounded absurd to an early eighteenth-century reader, whereas it comes to serve as a basic tenet of Victorian literary culture.³³ He stands at the fore of a cult of literature that gave birth to university English departments all over the north Atlantic world.³⁴ When Gerald Graff ties the establishment of the discipline of English in the United States to “cultural tradition in the Matthew Arnold sense,” he means not just Arnold the champion of Shakespeare and the English poetic tradition, but also Arnold

the Biblical critic of *Literature and Dogma* (1873) and *God and the Bible* (1875).³⁵ When Arnold compared Shakespeare's work to the Thirty-Nine Articles, it was partly because he saw the former as the more inspired product of sixteenth-century culture – in a certain sense the more *religious* product.³⁶ Literary interpretation in the Victorian era cannot be grasped without some sense for such elements, although these have rarely been exposed to sustained investigation because it has always seemed more compelling to view Romantic promotion of modern literature as itself a form of secularization: the substitution of a religious literary body with a secular one.³⁷ The present study seeks to complicate our narratives about the nineteenth-century rise of literature as a replacement for religion by reconsidering Shakespeare enthusiasm as a more or less respectable *form* of religion.

To take seriously the vitality of both Victorian literary and religious cultures, this work strives to engage with now-disregarded forms of Victorian literary criticism, the strange cousins or crazy uncles of today's scholarly practices. In doing so, it seeks among other things to rearrange our sense of the prehistory of university English departments. Scholars have always granted the presence of an era of Shakespeare-worship that existed at the dawn of academic criticism, but our vision of it has been circumscribed by the embarrassment and contempt with which it has subsequently been regarded. Following Shaw, we have treated "bardolatry" as an unfortunate by-product of literary Romanticism, and this habit has minimized our interest in its significance even as it has driven scholars to identify their aims by explicit contrast to it.³⁸ "The reverential attitude, a legacy of romantic aestheticism, is the most natural in literary interpretation as we have practiced it," writes Scholes, "It is the attitude of the exegete before the sacred text; whereas, what is needed is a judicious attitude."³⁹

Today we can study bardology more seriously partly because we are learning to study the rest of religion more seriously. During most of the twentieth century, the humanities and social sciences were circumscribed by a secularization narrative that understood religion's disappearance to be a central and inevitable feature of modernity. In the twenty-first century this narrative has been reevaluated, owing chiefly to the fact that religion has never actually disappeared and indeed remains robust in many parts of the modern world. The sociologist Peter Berger, once among the prominent champions of the old secularization hypothesis, anticipates our present reversal in *The Desecularization of the World* (1999). "The assumption that we live in a secularized world is false," Berger concludes with self-deprecating humor: "The difficult-to-understand phenomenon is not

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Iranian mullahs but American university professors” (2–3). This complication of the old secularization narrative, by turn, has opened up a much larger, less settled, and far more interesting conversation among sociologists, historians, and philosophers about what exactly religion is and does.⁴⁰ Literary scholars have been slow to embrace the implications of this shift because the prior narrative placed us in the vanguard of history and, as Tracy Fessenden points out, furnished English departments with so satisfying a *raison d'être*.⁴¹ But literary scholars ought to be at the forefront of the new conversation precisely because we speak to religion's power as a set of discursive practices rather than a set of philosophical propositions. Everyone, for instance, will agree that religion pertains to the meaning of *Hamlet*, but nobody who knows anything about art would conclude that the meaning of *Hamlet* can be reduced to a set of theological positions. To imagine so would be to miss the point.

Literature must remain central to the new conversations about secularization, then. This is doubtless why the most influential reconsideration of the secularization narrative, the philosopher Charles Taylor's magisterial 2007 study, *A Secular Age*, so often reads like a high-speed survey of Western literature. So do Terry Eagleton's *Culture and the Death of God* (2014), the philosopher of science Michael Ruse's *Darwinism as Religion* (2016), and other such recent attempts to understand the contours of our secular moment.⁴² And there are other, more subtle reasons, having to do with the diverse indirect ways that imaginative literature speaks to us: “Poetry is like prayer for agnostics,” explains the American poet Rae Armantrout.⁴³ But poetry is like prayer for everybody in some respects. And even were this not so, the religious uses to which literature has been put throughout history ought to merit our attention.

Today's large-scale reevaluation of secularization, in turn, has also begun to drive us back to the topic of the meaning of literature, or rather to the meaning of literature as it has been understood in the North Atlantic world for the past two centuries, since the Romantics elevated its associations from a culture's textual record into what Thomas De Quincey, thinking of Shakespeare and Milton, called books of “*power*.”⁴⁴ “Literature” in this respect remains a modern invention. This study charts connections between high Romantic theory as an expansive kind of theology and Victorian religious practice. My archive offers conspicuous transversals with arguments for the religious tenor of Shakespeare's work such as those framed by Regina Schwartz, Piero Boitani, and Jem Bloomfield, as well as with critics like Richard McCoy and Claire McEachern who explore in different ways what Coleridge calls “poetic faith” in Shakespeare's

work.⁴⁵ Its more outlandish elements also share a kinship with wilder sorts of speculation, such as the poet Ted Hughes's eccentric *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992).⁴⁶

Shakespeare served throughout the nineteenth century as an index of value and a shibboleth of cultural literacy akin to the Bible itself. "Shakespeare one gets acquainted with without knowing how," muses Henry Crawford in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), "It is a part of an Englishman's constitution. His thoughts and beauties are so spread abroad that one touches them everywhere; one is intimate with him by instinct."⁴⁷ A century later, P. G. Wodehouse mines this idea for laughs in the character of Bertie Wooster from *My Man Jeeves* (1919): "I rather fancy it's Shakespeare – or, if not, it's some equally brainy lad – who says that it's always just when a chappie is feeling particularly top-hole . . . that Fate sneaks up behind him with a bit of lead piping."⁴⁸ Bertie paraphrases Proverbs 16:18 ("Pride goeth before destruction, and a high mind before the fall") or perhaps Shakespeare's rendition in *Richard II*: "Since Pride must have a fall" (5.5.88), but his version of Crawford's "Englishman's constitution" and "instinct" clearly does not extend to chapter and verse of anything.⁴⁹ Indeed, for Bertie, the distance between Shakespeare and Solomon may be inconsequential, since both fall into a dimly-perceived category of *auctoritas*: the works of "equally brainy lad[s]."

Such comic misquotation of Shakespeare becomes a regular feature of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and derives its force from the fact that to mistake Shakespeare is by this point to commit a kind of literary heresy. His power lends an iconoclastic charge to staged lampoon and burlesque.⁵⁰ But in fiction, too, the cultural expectation of reverence for Shakespeare makes him into comic gold for authors who remove his words from context or attribute to him someone else's. Consider Mr. Deasy the schoolmaster in James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922): "what does Shakespeare say? *Put but money in thy purse.*"⁵¹ Or consider Emily Eden's *The Semi-Detached House* (1859):

Rachel seemed to be in a fit of absence . . . "Well, as you say, aunt, I believe Shakspeare gets too much into my head; I am always quoting him without rhyme or reason."

"That you certainly are," said the Baroness, sharply. "However, I adore Shakspeare myself, and only wish I had time to read him. Indeed, I went once to see his *School for Scandal* . . ."⁵²

Among Eden's jokes is the fact that Richard Brinsley Sheridan's *School for Scandal* (1777) includes a ridiculous parody of *Othello*, yet the Baroness