

THE VICTORIAN CULT OF SHAKESPEARE

In the Victorian era, William Shakespeare's work was often celebrated as a sacred text: a sort of secular English Bible. Even today, Shakespeare remains a uniquely important literary figure. Yet Victorian criticism took on religious dimensions that now seem outlandish in retrospect. Ministers wrote sermons based upon Shakespearean texts and delivered them from pulpits in Christian churches. Some scholars crafted devotional volumes to compare his texts directly with the Bible's. Still others created Shakespearean societies in the faith that his inspiration was not like that of other playwrights. Charles LaPorte uses such examples from the Victorian cult of Shakespeare to illustrate the complex relationship between religion, literature, and secularization. His work helps to illuminate a curious but crucial chapter in the history of modern literary studies in the West, as well as its connections with Biblical scholarship and textual criticism.

CHARLES LAPORTE is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Washington. His *Victorian Poets and the Changing Bible* (2011) was awarded the Sonya Rudikoff Prize for the best first book in Victorian studies.

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THE VICTORIAN CULT
OF SHAKESPEARE

Bardology in the Nineteenth Century

CHARLES LAPORTE

University of Washington



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To Joel Moore, 1946–2016

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Preface

The following volume explores the religious orientation of nineteenth-century Shakespeare criticism in Britain and North America and considers the cultural fortunes of a figure that Tricia Lootens has called, not altogether facetiously, “St. Shakespeare.” It attempts nothing like a general summary of Shakespeare in the Victorian era, especially since admirable summaries already exist. For instance, there are at least three different books entitled *Shakespeare and the Victorians*, most recently by Adrian Poole (2004) and Stuart Sillars (2013).² My book complements such general studies by focusing upon Shakespeare’s unlikely place in religious contexts such as sermons and upon the devotional aspects of Victorian literary study.

It may be helpful to state in advance that the Victorian cult of Shakespeare does funny things to the playwright’s textual legacy and often removes it from the world of stagecraft (where we tend to look for Shakespeare). Sillars signals this circumstance by addressing “the cult of ‘Shakespeare the man,’” a formulation also adopted by Clara Calvo and Coppélia Kahn, yet this phrase risks misrepresenting the situation in another way, since Shakespeare’s cachet cannot be reduced to his manhood any more than to his oeuvre.³ Michael Dobson’s vague “‘Shakespeare’ as an idea” may serve better because of how it removes the question from the realms of dramatic performance and even text.⁴ Thus, for instance, Alexander C. Y. Huang writes in *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange* (2009) that “One of the most intriguing cases of nineteenth-century Asian encounters with Western culture is the Chinese reception of ‘Shakespeare’ as an idea for half a century before he was a text or performance event.”⁵ My religious archive offers a different “intriguing case,” and I hope to contribute to the rush of exciting new scholarship being written on Shakespeare in various nineteenth-century contexts, both in the anglophone world and beyond it. While this book is not about Shakespearean performance, then, still it helps to clarify the

cultural conditions that help to secure Shakespeare's singular place in Western culture.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge up front that religion is a challenging topic to write about with balance and respect. For instance, the term *cult* itself sometimes carries strongly negative associations. But it derives from *cultus*, the Latin word for veneration, and this undergirds scholarly usages such as those mentioned above. I employ the term in a positive and nonpejorative way, as sociologists of religion do when writing of various cultic practices, or as scholars (including believers) address the cult of Mary or the cult of saints. (Contrariwise, the French use *culte* for Protestant religion and worship more generally: “le culte protestant.”) After some hesitation, I retain it because no other term so succinctly brings home the religious tenor of Victorian ideas about Shakespeare.

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