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Shakespeare du jour

by [John Simon](#)

A review of *Shakespeare and Modern Culture*, by Marjorie Garber (Pantheon).

The thesis of Harvard professor Marjorie Garber's *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* is a chiasmic one: "Shakespeare makes modern culture; modern culture makes Shakespeare." Chiasmus, as Garber explains, is Greek for crosswise placing, a trope that reverses the order in adjacent phrases. Thus, for example, Hamlet's "What's Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?" Garber expatiates: "The doubling effect is a *doubling back* that also becomes a *doubletake*." The book asserts that much of our thinking, saying, and doing can be traced to Shakespeare, while, reciprocally and chiasmically, our age, like all others, creates a Shakespeare in its own image of him. This strikes me as verging on the obvious, but worth an essay, if not an entire book.

In her magnum opus, the thousand-page *Shakespeare After All* (2004), Garber offered critical discussions of all Shakespeare's plays; now she has chosen ten for further examination. For each play she has a "keyword," which represents its epitome—a consciousness-coloring bequest to posterity that posterity periodically reinterprets, and so creates the Shakespeare of the moment. Does this idea require 350 pages?

Yes, it does, since it is also Garber's object to display her polymathy, her knowledge of many areas of both high and low, or popular, culture. Thus she segues easefully from a *New Yorker* cartoon (high culture) to a *New York Post* article (low culture). In her long Introduction alone, she quotes extensively Wittgenstein, Lévi-Strauss, and Walter Benjamin, and no less informedly a Cole Porter lyric and an "ad for Hard Candy cosmetics ... offering not only the 'Out Damned Spot' concealer pencil ... but also a coordinated line of makeup called 'Macbare' and 'Macbuff.'"

But back to the keywords. They are: *The Tempest*: Man; *Romeo and Juliet*: Youth; *Coriolanus*: Estrangement; *Macbeth*: Interpretation; *Richard III*: Fact; *The Merchant of Venice*: Intention; *Othello*: Difference; *Henry V*: Exemplarity; *Hamlet*: Character; *King Lear*: Sublimity. Some of these are perspicuous enough: *Coriolanus* prominently involves estrangement, and *Henry V* is presented as an exemplary monarch and warrior. Others, however, are debatable; so "Intention," for *The Merchant of Venice*, or "Fact" for *Richard III*. Leave it, though, to our polyhistor to find the political or historical relevance.

To be sure, by the time we reach the actual chapter headings, the keywords expand. For *Romeo and Juliet*, we get "The Untimeliness of Youth"; for *King Lear*, "The Dream of Sublimity," elaborations somewhat more complex than the bare, unadorned keywords.

There is shrewdness here. First, in picking ten plays. That number is mystical (think Commandments) or at the very least commercial (think various Ten Best lists). Ten has oomph.

Next, the cunning pick of plays that can, however tenuously or even reductively, be viewed in terms of a main theme. The comedies, which Garber bypasses, unlike the tragedies and problem plays, resist key words. What, for instance, would be the keyword for *As You Like It*: Cross-dressing? Exile? Pastoral? Woods?

Moreover, there is opportunism at work here. In the Introduction, we read:

One of my objectives has been to pair each play with a different modern genre insofar that is possible: a novel, a poem, a play, a detective story, a ballet, a dialogue, a rehearsal, a Broadway musical, a cartoon, a set of case studies for business executives. In many cases, perhaps most, there is more than one such genre, more than one cultural interlocutor, but the range itself has been both intriguing and instructive.

Note, by the way, the loose language. Garber does not mean “modern genre”—“poem” and “play” are not modern genres—but a modern specimen of different genres, or perhaps a counterpart. As for her use of “intriguing,” though many would approve, I do not.

So, yes. For *Romeo and Juliet*, there is *West Side Story* as well as three movie versions. For *Coriolanus*, Brecht’s *Coriolan* and Günter Grass’s *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising* (though that is a play, not a rehearsal, which Garber curiously lists among her genres). For *Henry V*, there are antithetical movie versions, by Laurence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh, some years apart. For *Hamlet*, aside from different movie versions, there is the lengthy discussion at the library in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and Tom Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. And so on.

Sometimes our author goes off. With, for instance, Jan Kott’s strained notion, in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, that Beckett’s *Endgame* is a modern *King Lear*, who but Peter Brook would agree? And if Nahum Tate’s bowdlerized version of *King Lear*, with a happy ending, was performed in England for one-hundred-fifty years doesn’t that imply a certain foolish consistency rather than constant change? And shouldn’t there be some discussion of Shakespeare on the opera stage? Furthermore, whereas for *Coriolanus* we get two modern German plays, for her other choices she has only English-language counterparts. (I would have dearly loved to see her tackle Jules Laforgue’s *Hamlet*.) But then, Garber and inconsistency are by no means strangers to each other.

Throughout the book we are bombarded with grandiose statements. Take:

We might say that Shakespeare is already not modern but postmodern: a simulacrum, a replicant, a montage, a bricolage. A collection of found objects repurposed as art.

Again: *The Tempest*

is not only a parable of colonial appropriation and dispossession, but also, equally crucially, the story of art and science at a crossroads, of the aesthetic and the instrumental, the psychological, the biological, the creative imperatives and the death drive, all “bound up,” to use Ferdinand’s wondering phrase, “as in a dream.”

Why not? As long as the keyword is Man, anything can be squeezed out of or into the play.

Especially interesting is how political correctness works in academia:

Critics began to rebel against Prospero. If one generation of professors thought of themselves as Prosperos, the next generation would people the academy with Calibans and with resistant and rebellious Mirandas.

And so:

Caliban became the Prospero of the twentieth century. It remains to be seen who will

hold the staff and the book, and wear the magic robe of art, in the twenty-first.

That, I suppose, depends entirely on whether the rappers take over the academy.

Or consider this, under the chapter title “The Untimeliness of Youth”:

Play, ballet, film, musical, rock song, cartoon, advertisement: *Romeo and Juliet*, a play that anticipated, documented, and to a certain extent scripted the concept of “youth culture,” has consistently found new genres, pertinent and impertinent, in which to stage the fraught dialogue between maturity and immaturity, experience and instinct, “we” and “you,” “now” and “then.”

Reflect for a moment: Who in the play is mature? The foolish families persisting in some ancient feud? And who is immature? The young couple who love and marry and will be guided by the church? Is the draconian Capulet an example of experience? Or is the silly old Nurse? Are Mercutio and Tybalt instinctual or experienced? The lovers may indeed be instinctual, but is the Friar experienced? And what is the “certain extent” to which the play has “scripted youth culture”? To the extent that swords are drawn quickly and murderously?

Garber is full of grand assertions that do not bear scrutiny. Concerning *Coriolanus*: “Shakespeare’s powerful play about failed eloquence and eloquent failure turns on a number of performatives.” Ah, there’s the chiasmus all right, but what makes failure eloquent and just what are performatives? She also loves big words, often jargonistic, obscure, or self-fabricated. So we get “abjected partner,” “partialed trust,” “performativity,” “the mise en abyme and the theatrical enfilade,” “rhetoric adequation,” “contestatory problems” and the like. What is “cultural Q value” or “a ‘need’ measure,” what “speech-act theory” or “three-wave longitudinal investigation,” which she herself puts in quotation marks? And what kind of French is a “*sujet supposé savoir*”? And why the affectation of repeatedly using “upon” where “on” would logically and rhythmically do as well or better?

In her chapter on *Richard III*, keyword Fact, Garber runs on at great length about how Richard was neither the physical cripple nor moral creep Shakespeare turned him into and how fiction can prevail over fact. But that is not what the play was about then or now. And the historic truth is old news. Still, when she gives us a typical aside by adducing scholarly opinions about why the Chandos portrait can’t be the real Shakespeare—too foreign, too Jewish, too coarsely sensual—she is both informative and interesting.

But then she gets facts wrong. She states that “romeo” and “shylock” are the only Shakespearean character names to become dictionary words. (But what about Benedick, who turned into a benedict?) And she goes on: “Between those two lies the story of modern culture.” A sorry culture that, hardly worth a book.

There are simpler, more obvious mistakes. The famous actress Lynn Fontanne was not “Fontaine.” Aimé Césaire is known as poet, not as playwright. Shaw wished to be known as Bernard, without the George, and, unlike Garber, responsible scholarship has obliged him. A play can have only one protagonist. “Time periods” and “inner thoughts” are manifest pleonasms. The date 1996 for *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966/7) must be a typo, but one that could easily have been avoided.

It is genuinely instructive to learn that modern manuals on business management use *King Henry V* as model, but do we need seven pages on this? It is worth learning that the *Hamlet* discussed in Joyce’s *Ulysses* is based on Mallarmé, and that D. H. Lawrence considered Hamlet “a creeping, unclean thing.” But then again, what, apropos *Hamlet*, is the meaning of “The ghostly negative becomes a theme as well as a character without character. This we might say is the move of postmodernism”? And what, apropos Stoppard’s play, does this mean: “*Real actors*. A contradiction

in terms—a postmodern parable. The very embodiment of a simulacrum.” Now unriddle the following:

In his advice to the players Hamlet says that the purpose of playing is to hold “the mirror up to nature. . . .” But the metadrama of modernity does, in a way, the opposite. It holds nature up to a mirror [ah, delayed chiasmus!], and it believes the mirror. Never more than when it juxtaposes stage death and real death on the stage—and stage death wins.

Learnedly, Garber invokes the mathematician-philosopher Brian Rotman’s *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*, and concludes (or does Rotman?) that the introduction of zero into Western maths and thought corresponds to Cordelia’s—and later, the Fool’s—“Nothing” to Lear. So the zero’s 0 corresponds, in its circular shape, to infinity, and “Cordelia’s ‘Nothing, my Lord’ is a powerful affirmation, if only Lear could hear it as such.”

This sounds like hocus pocus to me, especially when Garber brings in as parallel “the new attention to vanishing perspective in painting and architecture.” Yet she does have a point in her Afterword, when she proposes that

The Merchant of Venice is not the same play that [sic] it was before the Holocaust, even though the text may remain exactly as it was. The experience of reading Shakespeare is as timely and time-inflected as it is timeless and universal.

Timeless, too, is the delightful author’s photo on the book’s jacket, showing us a Marjorie Garber of at least thirty years ago. Seated, she embraces one of her two golden retrievers with her right arm, while her shapely bare left leg encircles the other one (dog, not arm). Garber is, after all, also the author of *Dog Love*, as well as of *Sex and Real Estate* and *Vice Versa: Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*, the next books by Harvard’s Professor of English and American Literature and Language and Chair of the Department of Visual and Environmental Studies I shall hasten to seek out.

John Simon's collections of film, theater, and music criticism are available from Applause.

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