Shakespeare After All  
MARJORIE GARBER  
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Will in the World  
How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare  
STEPHEN GREENBLATT  

B e assured, gentle Reader: These plump volumes, with Shakespeare’s name on their comely covers, are not schoolbooks. Stephen Greenblatt and Marjorie Garber, scholars of vast reputation in the academy, have apparently decided that the Shakespeare biz—wherein critics write for critics—plays to a smaller audience than their man deserves. For all their differences, Greenblatt’s Will in the World and Garber’s Shakespeare After All both acknowledge the general enthusiast, the reader who loves the work, not the work about the work. Both writers draw on their years of reading, explicating, writing about, and teaching Shakespeare’s plays, but they wear their learning lightly, constructing confident narratives that engage and often thrill, without intrusive footnotes.

Garber’s is the more conventional text, a sort of “reader’s guide” that recalls an earlier, less contentious, period in Shakespeare studies. Her introduction argues gently, since most of her points hardly need debate; nonetheless, it is useful to be reminded of how tightly Shakespeare’s works are bound into our culture and our consciousness. We may not be surprised when she tells us that

Shakespeare is part of our common culture: “Shakespeare” is one of the ways we communicate with one another today on issues of cultural seriousness—political, moral, ethical, social.

But then she explores the use (especially in political and corporate discourse) of Shakespearean taglines, quotations ripped from their dramatic context for “decorative” or “enforcing” purposes. “This habit of disembodied quotation,” Garber tells us, “tends to make Shakespeare into an all-purpose sage, a single author representing the totality of the world’s wisdom.” Surely we have all heard Shakespearean fragments woven into speeches and wondered whether the speaker knew that Iago or Don John or Richard III was dissembling.

Unlike Greenblatt’s Will, which reads like a breathless coming-of-age novel, Garber’s Shakespeare is for more leisurely consumption. Her chapters on individual plays have the rhythm of the classroom and the voice of the master teacher who still marvels at her subject. On Hamlet, for example, Garber helps us to move beyond the familiarity of the “To be, or not to be” soliloquy:

The diction—the single string of relentless monosyllables, the repetition of the infinitive “to be”—draws a verbal picture of the anguish of thought. And this almost unbearable moment of full consciousness—too full consciousness—is what we think of as the condition and the tragedy of modernity. Actors have tried to find new ways to pronounce this speech. In his film of Hamlet, Kenneth Branagh speaks it while looking in a mirror.

Her analyses admit various, sometimes opposing, readings of the plays; she sees criticism as “inevitably contrapuntal,” with claim and counterclaim enlarging our understanding of these works. The Tempest, for example, has been read “as a fable of art and creation, and as a colonialist allegory,” and Garber explores both narratives. Though she finds “something troubling” about the first, “this idealized picture of a Renaissance man accommodated with arts and crafts, dominance and power, in a little world, a little island, that he takes and makes his own,” she does not dismiss it out of hand. She mentors us through the plays, providing historical details that flesh out the dramatic situations, asking questions, exhorting us to consider these characters for ourselves.

While Garber’s book can serve as a vade mecum for Shakespeare’s audience, Will in the World compels reading all at once. Garber’s analysis begins and ends within the plays, with biographical, historical, and critical information interwoven when it serves the argument. Greenblatt, as might be expected, opens with history. His narrative constructs the early modern English world into which the playwright was born and moves from the world to the man to the work. His design is bold and clever: He entwines the known facts with the speculative, hedging his assertions with qualifiers—“perhaps,” “it is possible.” Then, once we’ve acquiesced to the possibilities he sketches out, Greenblatt argues causation, and we’re hard-pressed to disagree.

Of Queen Elizabeth’s 1575 progress to Kenilworth, for example, Greenblatt finds echoes in A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Twelfth Night. Kenilworth, the home of Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester, “is located some twelve miles northeast of Stratford, which would have been caught up, like the entire region, in the feverish preparations for the visit.” For the Queen’s amusement, Leicester staged extravagant theatricals, including one that involved the marine ascent of a 24-foot mechanical dolphin with Arion on its back. Perhaps the boy Shakespeare was in the audience at Kenilworth, Greenblatt proposes, and watched the Queen watching the dolphin:

If a wide-eyed young boy from Stratford did see her, arrayed in one of her famously elaborate dresses, carried in a litter on the shoulders of guards specially picked for their good looks, accompanied by her gorgeously arrayed courtiers, he would in effect have witnessed the greatest theatrical spectacle of the age.

In Twelfth Night, Viola hears that her brother braved the shipwreck “like Arion on the dolphin’s back,” Shakespeare’s recollection of “this luminous spectacle.” A more extended memory presents itself in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, when Oberon speaks of “a mermaid on a dolphin’s back.” But Greenblatt’s method is not just to cite lines; he wants us to go with him into the poet’s imagination: “The glimpse of the dolphin’s back,” he tells us, is just a “decorative flourish. But
the lines about the mermaid’s song, though irrelevant to the plot, speak to something deeply important.” The events of Kenilworth—the mercurial Queen, the lavish displays, the spectators—profoundly affected the boy and the man:

The memory of Kenilworth served to evoke the power that song has to create hushed order and to excite an almost frenzied attention. This paradox—art as the source both of settled calm and of deep disturbance—was central to Shakespeare’s entire career.

Greenblatt takes on the large questions about Will—his religious beliefs, the nature of his marriage, his sexuality—and his conclusions, though woven from threads of supposition, hold up remarkably well. His extended discussion of the sonnets to Southampton traces Shakespeare’s path from commissioned poet to besotted lover. His charge, to persuade (the Earl of) Southampton to marry, goes missing as the series develops:

Something happened to the poet, the sonnets imply, when he undertook to persuade the beautiful youth to marry: he became aware that he was longing for the youth himself.

When Greenblatt then declares that “he is in love with him,” we find his claim unimpeachable, since he has overwhelmed us with evidence, however speculative.

Of these books, Greenblatt’s Will is edgier, bolder, perhaps even reckless at times when he veers close to psychohistory. Clearly Greenblatt knows his Will, and sometimes he even speaks in his voice. Garber leaves the man’s mystery intact; the plays concern her more than their maker. Best not to choose one or the other; if Shakespeare means more to you than a few quotations, both of these fine books belong on your shelf.

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