



This Rough Magic

A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online Journal

Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval and Renaissance Literature



Shakespeare and Modern Culture by Marjorie Garber. New York: Anchor Books, 2008. Pp. 366.

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Source: *This Rough Magic*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (December, 2015), pp. 24-29.

Published by: www.thisroughmagic.org

Stable URL: <http://www.thisroughmagic.org/caputo%20review.html>

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By Dr. Richard Caputo, Suffolk County Community College

The central premise of Marjorie Garber's 2008 book, *Shakespeare and Modern Culture*, is deceptively simple. Quite early on, Garber states that "Shakespeare makes modern culture, and modern culture makes Shakespeare." I say this is a deceptively simple premise for two reasons. First, as Garber warns the reader, it is often tempting to simply equate modern culture with popular culture. However, Shakespeare's influence on modernity and the modern world extends far beyond Shakespearean plots and characters infiltrating and inspiring contemporary films, comic books and television shows. Of course, they have, and Garber spends ample time discussing Shakespeare's impact on these bastions of popular culture, but she also points out how Shakespeare's impact on modern culture extends far beyond that. Garber offers rich and varied examples of Shakespeare's influence on modern culture in unexpected ways, ranging from *Henry V* being used to teach corporate executives about business strategy and ethics to plays such as *Titus Andronicus* and *The Tempest* being used as part of prisoner rehabilitation in Kentucky. Shakespeare has even bled into a myriad other academic disciplines, as "psychology, sociology, political theory, business, medicine

and law all have welcomed and recognized Shakespeare as the founder, authorizer and forerunner of important categories and practices in their fields.” In her chapter on *Hamlet*, Garber calls attention to the claim of British psychoanalyst Ernest Jones that Shakespeare invented psychoanalysis before the concept itself was invented due to his skill with the soliloquy. At the United States Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, California a computer program called Integrated Asymmetric Goal Organization was written to model terrorist behavior. The connection to Shakespeare? The acronym for Integrated Asymmetric Goal Organization is IAGO, a reference made even more loaded by the character’s origins in *Othello*. Garber’s point is that since Shakespeare’s works are artistic productions it is tempting to only examine other artistic productions (highbrow, lowbrow and everything in between) to find Shakespeare’s influence in our world. However modern culture in its entirety extends far beyond the traditional arts, as does Shakespeare’s impact.

The second reason I say Garber’s central point deceptively simple is because, as Garber points out, the second “Shakespeare” in the phrase “Shakespeare makes modern culture and modern culture makes Shakespeare” could be in quotation marks. This is because a disconnect has evolved between what is actually Shakespearean and what modern culture considers Shakespearean. The term “Shakespearean” has taken on a life and definition of its own, often only marginally related to the words initial and true definition, specifically having to do with William Shakespeare and his works. As a

Classicist I have witnessed a similar phenomenon with the term "epic." I typically begin my course on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* explaining that in its truest sense the word "epic" does not mean something amazing, awesome and/or spectacular. I mention that while the Homeric epics are certainly those things (which usually elicits a groan from my class) the word "epic" has a very specific definition - in much the same way the media has described the dynamic and vivid personalities of figures such as Richard Nixon and William Randolph Hearst as being of "Shakespearean dimensions" or "Shakespearean proportions." Similarly, the falls from grace are betrayals that involve such public figures, or the cataclysms and atrocities that are all too common in today's world, are "Shakespearean in their tragedy," to cite just a few of the examples Garber provides. In these contexts, "Shakespearean" can mean anything from larger than life, well-plotted or simply astonishing. These are descriptions that can certainly be applied to Shakespeare and his plays, but are by no means solely applicable to them.

Just as the term "Shakespearean" has undergone a sort of metamorphosis within modern culture, so have some of his most famous characters. For example, in terms of modern culture, calling a male a "Romeo" implies that they are a faithless romancer or a "player" in modern parlance. However, the whole point of *Romeo and Juliet* is that Romeo *is* incredibly devoted to Juliet, and faithful unto death. While the name "Romeo" certainly connotes Shakespeare to most people, the modern association of the name with a philanderer is decidedly *not* Shakespearean with respect to the content and plot

of *Romeo and Juliet*. What this means for Garber is that in today's world, while one is almost certain to encounter "Shakespeare," often before any formal classroom introduction, modern culture's version of "Shakespeare" will likely be at least a little disconnected from a stricter, more academic version of Shakespeare.

By calling attention to these two concepts, the expansiveness of what defines modern culture and what renders something Shakespearean, Marjorie Garber crafts a much more nuanced and relevant thesis than "Shakespeare has a tremendous influence on contemporary popular culture," which is what this text could have been in the hands of a different academic and author. However, because of the nuanced distinctions she makes, I believe *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* can be a valuable resource for novice and veteran instructors alike.

Garber's book can certainly be of use in a course examining Shakespeare's plays in depth; she explores the varying cultural responses over time with respect to each of the ten plays she focuses on, specifically how each relates to "the central concepts and topics of literary and cultural investigation for the past hundred-plus years." For example, *Hamlet* is discussed through the lens of changing ideas about "character," both literary, psychologically, and beyond. Part of this involves exploring the evolution of how the play was interpreted, received and staged, which is why Garber's book could easily find a home in an upper-division or even graduate level class on Shakespeare. However, for an instructor such as me, who teaches less involved, more

panoramic courses on Shakespeare, this book could be a valuable resource as well. For example, I recently taught a course on Shakespeare and contemporary film, in which the class read a Shakespeare play and then viewed a contemporary film based on or inspired by Shakespeare's work. *Othello* and "O," as well as *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Ten Things I Hate About You* were just two of the pairings dealt with in my class. I would have loved to have had access to Garber's book when I taught this class. Perhaps the whole book would not have been required reading, but I could certainly have photocopied individual chapters and distributed them in conjunction with the relevant play/film combinations, in an effort to push classroom discussion beyond mere surface comparisons and toward more in depth discussion of how similarities and differences in the play and film reflect changing cultural values and mores, especially since the filmic versions selected were most definitely products of modern culture as defined by Garber.

All in all, Marjorie Garber's *Shakespeare and Modern Culture* is extremely well-conceived and well-researched, firmly grounded in the necessary theoretical forbearers of Shakespearean studies. It is, without a doubt, a scholarly text. However, Garber's prose is clearly written and not awash in technical jargon to the point that her text would be inaccessible to a more casual reader interested in either Shakespeare or the roots of modern culture. The way Garber organizes her text makes sense as well; there is a chapter devoted to each play she examines. My only major issue or question has to

do with why Garber chose only one comedy for inclusion in her study. Even that one comedy, *The Merchant of Venice*, with its overt anti-Semitism, is far from a festival of hilarity. Perhaps, though, there is a second volume forthcoming which will focus more on Shakespeare's comedies.