
Marjorie Garber. *Profiling Shakespeare*. New York: Routledge, 2008. 349p.

ANDREW D. MCCARTHY
WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

Reviewing a work by Marjorie Garber is a formidable task. Not only is she William R. Kenan, Jr., Professor of English and American Literature and Language at Harvard University, but her recent study *Shakespeare After All* (Pantheon, 2004) was named one of the ten best nonfiction books of the year by *Newsweek*. Indeed, the task becomes even more daunting when the job is practically done for you—the back of her newest book, *Profiling Shakespeare*, serves as a veritable who's who of Shakespearean criticism. With six prominent scholars offering effusive praise for the work, it might be tempting (and some may say wise) to let these expert evaluations stand. Yet, adding one more voice to the discussion is exactly something Garber encourages in the final paragraph of *Profiling*, stating, “The more we read, interpret, produce, discuss, and argue over Shakespeare, the better this Globe we live in is likely to be” (301). While the suggestion that reading and arguing over Shakespeare will make the world a better place is somewhat suspect, not to mention strange, considering many of Garber's own claims, the punning on “Globe” is representative of the humor that colors her work and adds sharp wit to already smart scholarship.

In *Profiling Shakespeare*, a collection of Garber's thirteen finest and two new essays on Shakespeare, the author reveals the attributes that have made her one of the most respected critics of our time. Combining equal helpings of humor and thought-provoking research it is likely that something in one of the essays will strike the reader as amusing while also providing new insights into familiar conversations. Take, for instance, Garber's observation that if Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, is in fact the author of Shakespeare's plays, then Stanley Wells, editor of *The Oxford Shakespeare* would find himself at the helm of “*The Oxford Oxford*” (5). Or perhaps her account of coming across an ad featuring two golden retriever puppies named Goneril and Regan, to which she notes, parenthetically, “okay, little bitches” (186). In a chapter discussing the critical controversy surrounding Shakespeare's second-best bed, the one he infamously left for his wife, Garber relates an anecdote about altering the meaning of fortune cookies by adding “in bed” to the end of their prophecies. *Profiling Shakespeare* is full of such jokes, little winks in the direction of the attentive reader—amusing, but not so inside or erudite as to be exclusive or off-putting.

In her introductory chapter, Garber provides an explanation for assembling these essays which range in date from the late 1980s through to the present. Noting the difficulty and perhaps futility of attempting to assemble a full biographical picture

of a man who left few personal clues behind, Garber insists that she is interested instead in the “traces, inadvertencies, odd emphases and significant repetitions that have characterized the quest for Shakespeare” (1). These seemingly disparate pieces, which range from misquotations to scholarly controversies, combine to create a lively and vibrant picture of both Shakespeare and the culture that continues to seek him.

Witty word play and frequent ironic observations certainly add a layer of nuance and enjoyment to the collection, though this is not to say the work is entirely accessible. The first three chapters, which compose over one third of the book, were all initially published in *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers* (1987) and, as such, bear a heavy trace of psychoanalytic theory. Indeed, some passages in these opening chapters feel needlessly esoteric as they draw significantly from Freud and Lacan. Take for instance this sentence, pulled from the essay “Hamlet: Giving Up the Ghost”: “The litany of doubt here is an invitation to put things in question, at the same time that it puts in question the whole procedure of putting something in question” (36). This is certainly not to say these essays or even the aforementioned quotation are without value—far from it. Multiple close and careful readings are undoubtedly rewarded. Garber’s analysis of the Ghost in *Hamlet* and the transgressive nature of *Macbeth* are both sophisticated examples of the potentially fruitful observations to be made through the juxtaposition of theory, history, and literature. The essay which opens the collection and shares the name of her 1987 study is a fairly balanced account of the Shakespeare authorship controversy, which ends with the provocative suggestion, “The search for an author, like any other quest for parentage, reveals more about the searcher than about the sought” (28). What is most striking then about these essays is the way Garber manages to tell us a great deal about ourselves as well as Shakespeare.

Discussion of the ongoing quest for self through Shakespeare resurfaces throughout Garber’s collection. In her essay “Shakespeare as Fetish” she describes the desire to rebuild the Globe by sardonically noting, “Naturally it would have been an American who longed for this, who made it his dream” (113). For Garber, the American search for Shakespeare is also a search for patriotic parentage, an aspect of complicated Anglophilia and the desire to recreate and reclaim. Later, in the essay “Character Assassination,” she remarks on the “time-honored trick of American public oratory” (121)—the knack for quoting Shakespeare out of context, a topic to which she returns in her final essay. Readers of “Character Assassination,” are treated to a fortuitous moment that reveals Garber’s continued relevance as both a cultural and Shakespearean critic. Discussing certain politicians’ proclivity to quote willy-nilly from Shakespeare, Garber relates an incident in which Senator

Joe Biden misattributed a quote to Shakespeare and was then promptly corrected. This moment will resonate with all who are watching the progress of the current Presidential campaigns, but also serves to highlight the pervasiveness of Shakespeare in American culture—for better or worse.

In terms of academic culture, Garber is equally perceptive. In “Shakespeare’s Laundry List” she discusses the literary-critical trend of New-Historicism and makes an audacious and persuasive claim for the importance of anachronism, suggesting moments like the clock in *Julius Caesar* serve a very particular literary purpose that is lost amongst claims for historical correctness. In “Shakespeare’s Faces” and “McGuffin Shakespeare” Garber examines two infamous scholarly controversies, one over the possibility of a newly discovered Shakespeare portrait and the other over the way editorial emendations of Shakespeare’s plays are often based simply on guesswork. Both essays provide intelligent analysis of these two very specific moments, but also continue the project of looking for Shakespeare by looking at what these moments tell us about our quest for origin. One of the shortest and most interesting essays in the collection is titled simply “Roman Numerals.” Here Garber looks at the way a certain degree of cultural capital has been attached to Roman numerals, noting that they have become a site for nostalgia—a longing “for something that never was” (152). While early 18th-century editors of Shakespeare’s plays used Roman numerals to mark act and scene, they are not used in the First Folio of 1623, despite the tendency to think there is something “Shakespearean” about them.

The final two essays of the collection are the most recent, but continue in the critical vein as those preceding. The first, “What Did Shakespeare Invent?” was originally a paper presented before the Shakespeare Association of America in 2004. As such, it lacks a certain force of the other, traditionally published pieces, though the exploration of the term “invention” is typical of her ability to develop new meaning from something that initially appears simple. Finally, “Bartlett’s Familiar Shakespeare” is quintessential Garber. In this essay, she notes the tendency to quote from Shakespeare as if it is somehow his actual point of view, linking this tendency to the development of the commonplace book. In the end, Garber cautions us against looking for a single voice that is Shakespeare, insisting, “we have a much better chance of approaching his views by looking at the complex interplay of voices in his plays than by appropriating any one voice, or any particularly resounding utterance and calling it ‘Shakespeare’” (301). Garber’s analysis of the plays and the culture that surrounds both works and author is so rich, so nuanced, and so learned, it is hard to disagree—even “in bed.” ✱