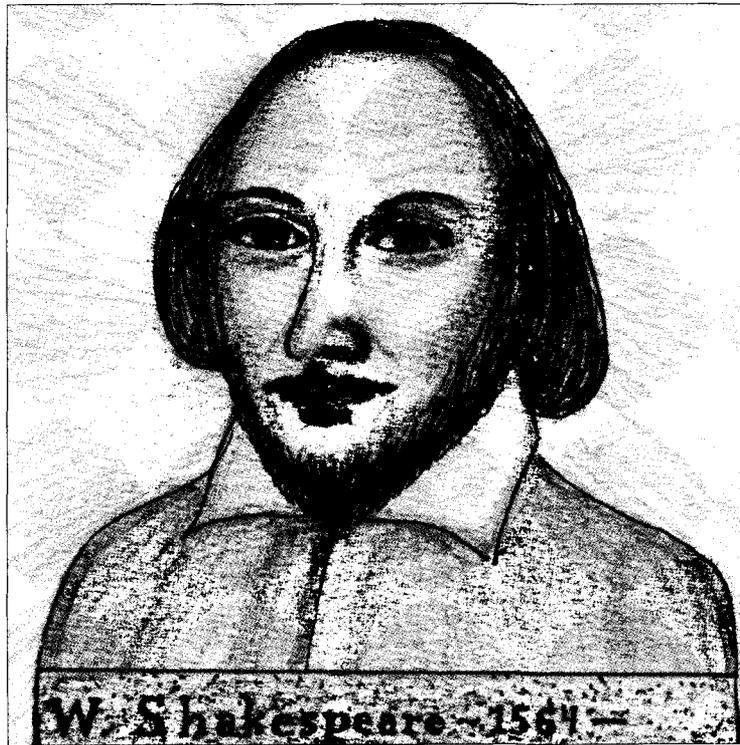


The Portable Shakespeare

by George Garrett



Stephen Anderson

Nothing new here, really. Nothing that hasn't been hashed and rehashed by my betters, the true scholars and critics whose faithful quest for knowledge has sometimes ended in earned wisdom for all of us. Sometimes not. . . . Anyway, some things, old and new, are worth saying again (and again), indeed must be said even at the risk of repetition and redundancy. Shakespeare can take it, will survive it as his art has survived his own age and the ages afterward during which, each according to his own limits and follies, our ghostly forefathers have managed to misread and to misperform and to misinterpret his works and words without doing, even at their worst, more than denting damage.

Worst of all, of course, are our own. We have been able, thanks to theoretical trickery, to ignore the substance of his work in favor of the comforting assumption that neither the author's text nor his intent and meaning mean anything or matter much, if at all. Fuss and fume and argue as they will, in Fish ponds or at the Gates of Harvard, they cannot quite get around the undeniable fact that he is still what he has been—our language's leading poet. But what is a poet, major or minor, when compared to any run-of-the-mill, end-of-the-century theorist eager to expound the latest, tedious, simpleminded theories of race, sex, gender, class, ethnicity and . . . whatever? Still, Shakespeare lived on, basically unharmed, through the revolutionary 17th century, the savage rationality of the 18th, survived Darwin and Marx and Freud in the 19th, and gives every indication

of outlasting the manifestos of Stanley Fish or Richard Rorty or Norman O. Brown or . . . *whoever*.

And there is much that we need to be reminded of and to consider. That (to borrow from Mark Van Doren) it cannot have been difficult for him to write his plays. It was easy for him or he would not have done it and done it so well. That, as he wrote his plays and, more important for him, produced and acted in them, he couldn't possibly have believed that he was writing for future ages. True, he had high hopes for his sonnets and the other literary poems, hoped and may have believed, as he seems to, that they would last a while, maybe even outlast him. But the plays were, with all due respect, expendable. That others thought otherwise and after his death went to the expense and trouble to collect his work in the first folio only serves to emphasize the ephemerality of plays in the literary scene. He seems to have written his plays (and, oh yes, he wrote them, nobody else, no serious question about that) to help the company of players of which he was an important stockholder and a player of distinction. The money, the real money that he was after and earned, the money that allowed him to be, even in a free-wheeling age, astonishingly "upwardly mobile," moving (as the myth has it and is probably accurate enough) from the raggedy fringes of things, to player and shareholder and, finally, able to call himself a certified gentleman, crest and all, able to be a landowner in and around Stratford, owner, among other things, of the best house in town, New Place, with its gardens and its ten taxable fireplaces. Lived simply and cheaply in London, as best we can tell from this and that, clearly saving his money, as much as he could (and at times it was very good money, indeed) for the goal that he realized, coming home to Stratford to live under one roof with his wife and children and kinfolk. And

George Garrett is Henry Hoyns Professor of English at the University of Virginia and author, most recently, of the novel The King of Babylon Shall Not Come Against You (Harcourt Brace & Company).

he accomplished that.

That others in the game of making plays—Marlowe and Kyd and Greene, for example, even Ben Jonson, though he was luckier than he had any right to be—flared brightly as talents and many came to bad and sad ends. Their lives are more interesting to think about because they are perfectly imaginable, then or now. The good deal that we do know about Shakespeare's life tells us that it was a quiet, sober life, first to last. All his great adventures, in that age of adventuring, are there in his words and works, the creatures of his imagination, the power and glory of which is beyond imagining.

That from his works there are clues and keys to the man. That he is the perfect Elizabethan of the second generation of Elizabeth's reign. That he shares the same education that his audience did, and that it was a good one, too. He was spared the pains and pleasures of the university. Just look what happened to "the university wits." (Marlowe dead on the floor, murdered in a barroom brawl.) That Shakespeare so exactly shared the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of his audience that he is almost anonymous, at least in the conventional contemporary sense of "personality." He earned an enviable reputation, but in no way could be called (then or now) a celebrity. That he was not a rebel, either. The best fiction about him (so far) is Anthony Burgess's *Nothing Like the Sun* (1964). But Burgess had to cheat, making Shakespeare, albeit in his "lost" years, a modern artist full of rage and rebellion, an angry young hippie of 1964. Not bloody likely. It seems pretty clear that Shakespeare as we know him, in his work, was in no way subversive, though, like everybody else in his time, he had mixed feelings about many things.

The remarkable thing for us to remember is how free he was, how free *they* were to consider any and all aspects of the human condition, social and political complexities ancient and modern, without benefit of what we call "freedom of

speech." In fact, it was a time when you could be whipped or branded or even lose a hand or two for certain kinds of subjects and libels. None of that seems to have inhibited Shakespeare much. What is missing in his plays? Well, maybe modern pornography which is certainly absent. Instead he can be and is bawdy even in surprising places like the love scenes of *Romeo and Juliet*. Think about it: how very few of our writers, popular or "literary," can handle the language and drama of simultaneous, mixed, or contrary feelings. Think, precious First Amendment or not, how many topics and subjects are dutifully avoided by our writers, as unacceptable, unthinkable, self-destructive. The day before the Earl of Essex rebelled against his Queen, he treated his rebels to a special production of Shakespeare's *Richard the Second*, most likely, it is believed, for the sake of the deposition scene. The Queen was not amused but never for a moment held it against Shakespeare or his company. Days later they were performing for her at Court. It taxes credulity to imagine any modern head of state doing the same thing.

Shakespeare lives on in our time, finally, because he lived fully in the right time and at the right place and was not only a good and decent man but also one who earned repute in his lifetime (and in memory) for being so. He lived well and quietly and lives on most richly in his works. Those riches most likely will outlast all our own. A safe bet. Meantime, in its wisdom, the *New York Times Magazine* (Barry Singer, "All Shakespeare, All the Time: The Bard has never been this popular in America—on stage, soaps and bubble gum wrappers," June 16, 1996) tells us: "It's wondrous and strange how often, and where, Shakespeare turns up across America, his characters infinitely malleable, his themes permanently pertinent." We learn that, among many things headed for us, at us, like it or not, is another film of *Hamlet*, this one directed by Kenneth Branagh and starring Billy Crystal and Robin Williams.

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On the Bach St. Matthew Passion

Holy Saturday 1995

by Frederick Turner

Again a god goes underground,
Showing a world that never learns to see
That all authority is bought and bound
By blood unspeakable and agony.

Pity all kings and presidents.
If they've not paid already, they will pay.
Forgive their arrogance, incompetence,
And till it is a sin, you must obey.

Myth bought by wounding of the tongue
Threads with its muteness all the pearls of words;
A spear thrust through the vessel of the lung
Breaks silence into most miraculous sherds.

Soul of the world, smashed to your tomb,
How do you bear that monstrous weight of guilt?
Ah, king, who now endure your never-ending doom,
How do you bear the world that it has built?

Across one hemisphere the flowers
Blush through the continents in white and red:
Tongues of the earth, fed with the freshening showers
Of white blood from a god-king who is dead.