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**C- Circle (and define) at least 3 words you don’t know.**

**A- Ask level 1, 2, and 3 questions (2 or more)**

**T- Talk to the text. Make connections to the novel. Add commentary (3 or more)**

**C- Summarize once at the end**

**H- Highlight/underline the most important lines**

**What's Shakespeare to Us, and We to Him? Plenty**

**By Janet Maslin**

*Published in the Arts section on December 11, 2008.*

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If you gave typewriters to an infinite number of monkeys, one of them would eventually quote Shakespeare. That was an oft-repeated theory, but it has now been supplanted by a timelier model. Give search-engine capability to an infinite number of Shakespeare scholars, one of them will eventually discover factoids like the following:

Macbare, Macbuff, and Out Damn Spot are the Macbeth-inspired names of makeup products.

In popular films that have slight debts to “The Tempest,” Ariel has variously been played by Robby the Robot (*Forbidden Planet*) and Wilson the Volleyball (*Cast Away*).

It’s easier to sing about Romeo and Juliet like Taylor Swift did than about Troilus and Cressida.

Motivational speakers who provide Shakespeare-inspired lessons to captains of industry have described the Welsh forests of “Henry V” as the Silicon Valley of their day. And “while Henry doesn’t have the luxury of a policy-planning staff and off-site strategizing meetings,” a firm called Movers & Shakespeares instructs, “he proves himself a great leader in identifying and then pursuing a clear vision.”

These and many other such nuggets have been strung together by Marjorie Garber, an esteemed and apparently unstoppable scholar, in “Shakespeare and Modern Culture,” the latest of her many Shakespeare-centric academic treatises. She has already written “Shakespeare After All,” not to mention “Profiling Shakespeare,” “Dream in Shakespeare,” “Coming of Age in Shakespeare,” “Shakespeare’s Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality” and at least one essay about Shakespeare and dogs that manages to mention two St. Bernards featured in “Beethoven’s 2nd,” the movie about cute canines.

Now Ms. Garber singles out a new aspect of Shakespeare’s versatility. As her latest title indicates, she is out to assert that “Shakespeare makes modern culture, and modern culture makes Shakespeare.” In true academic fashion Ms. Garber loves that kind of commutative construction, the chiasmus. Shakespeare loved this too, and Ms. Garber has the chiasmi to prove it, straight from the source. (“What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba?,” “Fair is foul and foul is fair,” etc.) She is happy to compound her book’s facile inversions by calling her method, at one point, “as much pedagogical as heuristic (and as much heuristic as pedagogical.)”

Why, then, should readers follow Ms. Garber’s frequently glib trail through Shakespeare’s body of work? Because her sometimes-preposterous book mixes specious points with sharply incisive ones, and her good ideas are worth the trouble. If some of her associations are far more tenuous than others, she does bind them together with an overarching idea.

Shakespeare’s work, in her opinion, is so constantly mutable that it always exists in the present, whatever that present might be. The ways in which Shakespeare is interpreted in different eras say as much about those time periods as they do about the writing itself.

With modernity as her hook this time, Ms. Garber makes “Romeo and Juliet” her most cogent topic point. Her focus here is on youth and romantic love, but Ms. Garber traces their evolution insightfully. In past times the world has seen a 44-year-old male Romeo (Charles Kemble in 1819) and a heavy-set, middle-aged 19th-century female Romeo (Charlotte Cushman) who played opposite her own sister. The very impossibility of such casting today makes Ms. Garber’s point about the play’s evolution.

Although “Romeo and Juliet” is now treated as teen-centric (this book reprints Roz Chast’s hilarious New Yorker cartoon charting Romeo and Juliet’s instant messages to one another: “xoxoxo bye see u tmw”), it can confer youth as well as convey it.

Ms. Garber describes the way artists like Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn were reinvigorated by the ballet version of this story. And she talks about how its depictions of youthful rebelliousness have changed over time. If “West Side Story” was a “Romeo and Juliet” geared to social conflict, it came too early to make drug taking and teenage suicide the central issues they could be now. Along her winding way Ms. Garber wonders how the name Romeo got to be shorthand for ladies’ man, “with a meaning pretty much opposite to that of Shakespeare’s fatally faithful wooer.”

Ms. Garber merrily illustrates how modern culture can miss Shakespeare’s original points. References to “Othello” in general, and to Iago’s mocking mention of preserving one’s good name in particular, tend to be particularly flat-footed. So do comparisons of any ambitious woman to Lady Macbeth. Still, the layman’s temptation to invoke Shakespeare is irresistible: “The commentator sounds profound and witty; the reader, listener or audience feels gratified and flattered to ‘get’ the reference, and Shakespeare is reconfirmed as the most trenchant and trusted observer of contemporary events since Walter Cronkite.”

No one who reads Ms. Garber will ever call anything a tragedy of Shakespearean proportions again. “A Shakespearean tragedy played out on a Long Island street where a boozed-up young woman unknowingly dragged her boyfriend under her car for more than a block as he tried to stop her from driving drunk,” from The New York Post, is the most egregious example to be found here.

So Ms. Garber, with her impeccable credentials as William R. Kenan Jr. professor of English and American literature and language at Harvard, where she is also chairwoman of the department of visual and environmental studies, again declares open season on Shakespeare-powered idiocy. She might have delivered more cogent, less free-associative thinking had she not already written so frequently and variedly about her subject. But her book credibly demonstrates that the ever-changing timeliness of Shakespeare’s thoughts is what makes them timeless. Refreshingly, when she says that, Ms. Garber is not valuing a facile truism over the truth.

*Published in the Arts section on December 11, 2008.*

1. What are some references to Shakespeare that have made their way into product naming, popular films and music?

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1. What does Marjorie Garber believe is revealed about each era when references, treatment and interpretations of Shakespeare are evaluated?

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1. How has the interpretation of “Romeo and Juliet” changed over time? Why?

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1. What does Ms. Garber mean by “Shakespeare makes modern culture, and modern culture makes Shakespeare”?

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