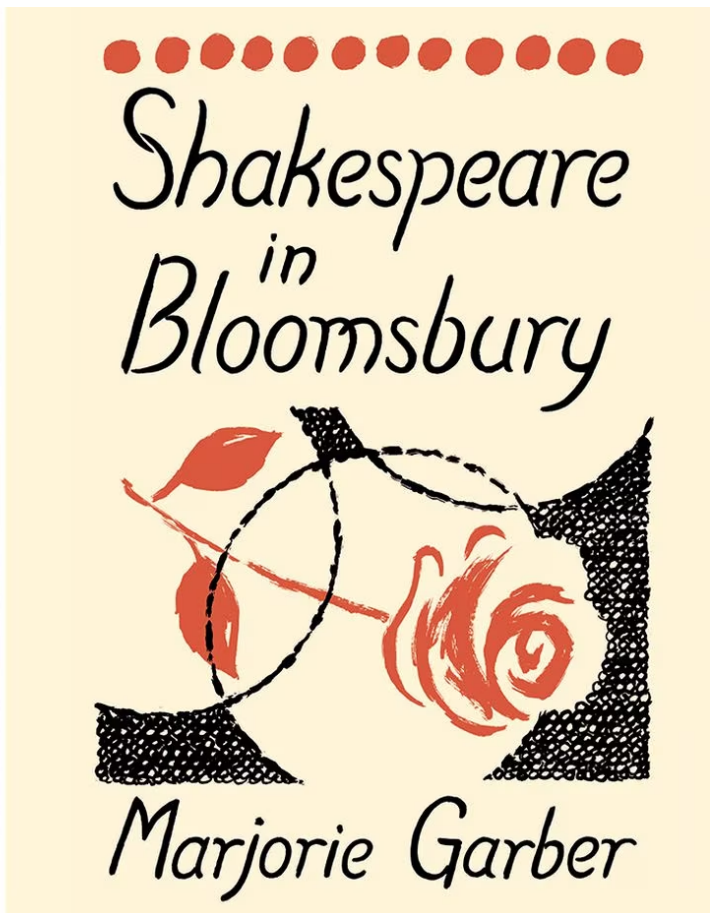


BOOK REVIEW

In 'Shakespeare in Bloomsbury,' a meeting of minds in the throughlines of verse

Marjorie Garber's new book traces Shakespeare as an animating influence for Virginia Woolf and other members of the Bloomsbury Group

By **Chris Vognar** Updated September 18, 2023, 4:39 p.m.



Marjorie Garber pictured with her new book, "Shakespeare in Bloomsbury." JULIANA JOHNSON/YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Bloomsbury Group, that culturally and intellectually eminent collective of English writers, artists, and thinkers most often associated with Virginia Woolf, was largely a 20th-century phenomenon with roots in the Victorian period. But the man who served as their spiritual lodestar, who strode with purpose through their dreams and desires, operated in the Elizabethan years. He was a playwright and poet, going bald, of such humble origins that some still insist he couldn't have written what he wrote. Woolf, who worshiped this man's work, often abbreviated his name in her diaries to "Shre."

The trailblazing Harvard Shakespeare scholar Marjorie Garber's new book, "Shakespeare in Bloomsbury," is very much a niche project, a study of a single writer's outsized influence on a group of writers who walked in his footsteps hundreds of years after his death. But what a tasty niche. Garber, whose works include the comprehensive and incisive "Shakespeare After All" and the forward-thinking "Shakespeare and Modern Culture," attacks her subject with the vigor of Woolf poring through "Hamlet" for the umpteenth time. This is a spirited dance of minds, from an academic who writes with the same verve as she thinks. It's also a worthy reminder that to know Shakespeare is to know what it means to be human.

The major Bloomsbury players are well known outside academic circles. They include Woolf, the great modernist writer ("Mrs. Dalloway") and feminist thinker ("A Room of One's Own"); Lytton Strachey, best known for skewering some of his era's sacred cows in the group biography "Eminent Victorians"; and E.M. Forster, most familiar to today's generation for his novels adapted into elegant Merchant Ivory films ("A Passage to India," "Howards End").

But Garber is also interested in names that might not ring as many bells. There's the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, whose evocative Shakespearean images, as well as a haunting portrait of the proto-Bloomsbury poet Alfred Lord Tennyson, give tangible life to the book's opening pages. There's the actress Ellen Terry, a major stage interpreter of Shakespearean heroines, including Ophelia and Desdemona.

All represented the Bard's Bloomsbury influence, an influence that seeped into the community's collective bones. As Garber writes, "The 'Shakespeare' of such vital importance to the members of the Bloomsbury Group was certainly not an edition, a text, or even a set of favorite passages. Nor was it a mode of exegesis or a school of interpretation — ways of thinking about literature that were far from their own experience and inimical to their instincts. Bloomsbury's Shakespeare might rather be described, in terms more amenable to the people most closely involved, as an *attitude*, a *reading practice*, and a *style* both of writing and of thought."

To which one might reply: well, yes, of course. Shakespeare's shadow looms large over every subsequent literary movement worth its salt. But not every movement has as dogged a researcher as Garber at its service, nor as singular and visionary a figure as Woolf at its core. It's this combination that makes "Shakespeare in Bloomsbury" sing. Garber's work with Woolf's novels and diaries is a model of criticism, a high-wire act in which she places Shakespeare and Woolf in passionate conversation with each other, separated by centuries but joined at the hip. Her close readings of books including "Mrs. Dalloway," "To the Lighthouse," "The Voyage Out," and "Orlando" are particularly inspired, reminding us not merely that Woolf referenced Shakespeare at every opportunity, but that she, like her literary hero, was capable of enfolding what seems like all of humanity into her work.

A small but lovely example can be found in Garber's tenacious study of the throughline between one of the most famous passages in "Othello" — "If it were now to die/ 'Twere now to be most happy" — and the majestic everydayness of Woolf's masterpiece, "Mrs. Dalloway."

In the blink of an eye, Woolf connects Shakespeare's words with joy, longing, and grief, as Clarissa Dalloway, in the midst of her grand party, thinks of both her youthful love for Sally Seaton and the death of the shellshocked Septimus Warren Smith: "But this young man who had killed himself — had he plunged holding his treasure? 'If it were now to die, 'twere now to be most happy,' she had said to herself once, coming down in white."

Garber points out that the passage is actually a callback to an earlier memory in the novel: “Going downstairs, and feeling as she crossed the hall ‘if it were now ‘twere now to be most happy.’ That was her feeling — Othello’s feeling, and she felt it, as she was convinced, as strongly as Shakespeare meant Othello to feel it, all because she was coming down to dinner in a white frock to meet Sally Seaton!”

In such sublime confluences the beautiful minds of Shakespeare and Woolf are joined by a third, belonging to Garber, who does this kind of thing as well as anyone. Even in a passion project such as this — a niche project, if you will — Garber’s love of language and of her subject, and her ability to render that love contagious, is enough to make you want to devour the works of the playwright, the novelist, and the critic together in one fell swoop.

SHAKESPEARE IN BLOOMSBURY

by Marjorie Garber

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