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ME AND SHAKESPEARE: Adventures with the Bard

By Herman Gollob

Doubleday. 341 pp. \$26

In 1995, an English poet inspired Herman Gollob to undertake at 67 that most American of projects: “a reinvention of myself.”

After retiring from a distinguished editing career with some of our most prestigious publishing houses, Gollob saw Ralph Fiennes in *Hamlet*, and the experience transformed him into a “bardomaniac.” He became “an old man made mad by a love of Shakespeare.”

He plunged into the plays and Shakespeare criticism, fortunately the good kind, written by scholars with an intelligence complemented by the same warm humanity that infuses Shakespeare’s plays: Harold C. Goddard, Maynard Mack, Caroline Spurgeon, Marvin Rosenberg.

Former editor of Donald Barthelme, James Clavell, Dan Jenkins and Bill Moyers, Gollob knew the best way to learn is to teach, and he both teaches and learns throughout this affably engrossing book.

Gollob braids biographical detail—a Texas A&M degree, Air Force service in Korea, agent to writers like James Jones, hospice volunteer—with his insights into the plays, which he reveals by describing what he taught to senior citizens in a college non-degree program near his Montclair, N.J. home.

At an age almost two decades beyond any Shakespeare ever reached, Gollob shares more with the Stratford poet than he realizes. Just as the supposed disadvantage of less education left Shakespeare’s genius unconfined by the “rules” his university-trained colleagues observed, so does Gollob with diffident modesty lament a lack of Ph.D. training which actually proves a great advantage.

Had he emerged from the academy in what Harold Bloom calls “these bad times for literary criticism,” Gollob too might catch just the faddish tune of the times, which for 30 years has meant to be a social engineer in critic’s clothing, to twist a text into a pretzel and pursue some political position through the holes.

Instead, Gollob brings a life of reading and erudition, deepened by Eliot, Dostoevsky, Jung and Eliade rather than stunted by dogma. With a swelling library of cogent scholars by his side, he travels to Oxford, the restored Globe and Washington D.C.’s magnificent Folger Library where the few exclusive registered readers enjoy high tea each afternoon. The result is a wealth of fresh literary appreciation I look forward to borrowing for my own classroom.

The freshest arises from Gollob's concurrent return to his native Judaism, which he brings to bear on his reading of *King Lear*. As the world's greatest literary work—on this I will brook no argument—*Lear* teases us out of thought and becomes a Rorschach we each see through the deepest spiritual thing within us, which for Gollob is the lens of Hebraic ethics.

Gollob mixes curmudgeonly moments, such as his inability to tolerate *Shakespeare in Love*, with endearing moments, like his ebullience at discovering Old Speckled Hen ale in Oxford or his discomforting mix of awe and pique at seeing Frank Sinatra possibly flirt at a party with Gollob's wife of 38 years, Barbara. Like Cordelia, Barbara is seldom on stage here yet everpresent, her Sancho Panza practicality keeping Gollob's more romantic feet in some contact with the ground.

Anyone who loves Shakespeare, who feels at midlife that some work of noble note may yet be done, will find *Me and Shakespeare* a stimulating and agreeable companion.

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