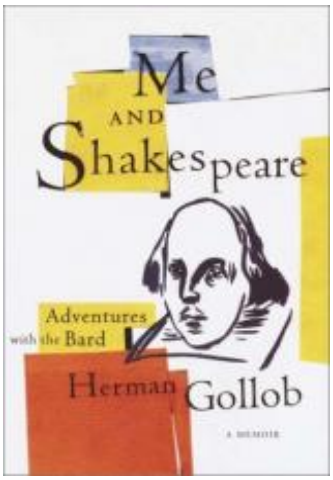
Me and Shakespeare: Adventures With the Bard

by Herman Gollob



About the Book

One man's post-retirement passion for the works of history's greatest literary genius becomes an inspiring intellectual and spiritual adventure--and a lesson in the ageless wisdom to be found in literature.

In the twilight of a successful career as a book editor, Herman Gollob attended a superb Broadway production of *Hamlet* with Ralph Fiennes. The experience proved so galvanizing that it ignited a latent passion for literary scholarship and for all things Shakespearean. Shedding the drudgery of fixing halt and lame manuscripts, he engaged in a fever of self-education via a vast array of books, videotapes, performances, and lectures--becoming, as he put it, "an old man made mad by love of Shakespeare." In short order, he became so well versed that he began teaching a popular Shakespeare course for seniors at a small local college in New Jersey. He then made a visit to the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C.; sought out encounters with great actors and directors--including Olympia Dukakis, Michael Kahn, David Suchet, John Barton, and Cicely Berry; took a summer course on Shakespeare at Oxford; and made a pilgrimage to the Globe Theatre in London to see, of course, *Hamlet*. This late-blooming Bardomania even enriched the growth of his Jewish identity, resulting in a uniquely Hebraic theory about *King Lear*.

In relating this tale of an autodidact's progress, Gollob interweaves his rich family history, personal experience, and past meetings with the great and notorious, including Orson Welles, James Jones, Lee Marvin, Frank Sinatra, Donald Barthelme, James Clavell, Dan Jenkins, Willie Morris, and a host of others. Like **Great Books** by David Denby, **Me and Shakespeare** is a memoir that attests to the lifelong power of literature to enrich, enlarge, and exalt. It is, as well, one of the most entertaining and unusual books on Shakespeare ever written.

Discussion Guide

1. Only by allowing the impulses of the heart to hold sway over "Reason,...our...most tragic illusion" will we achieve "radical amazement," that state in which "the darker the mystery, the more we are illumined by it." (pp. 20, 21, 24)

Quoting Jung, Heschel, Caussade, and others, Gollob carefully persuades his readers of this idea's significance throughout the works of Shakespeare, in particular its preeminence in the tragedies and histories. What's more, Gollob finds in the idea not only a human truth but an imperative. Equating art with the heart, and science with reason, he suggests that empiricism is, in fact, a threat to the individual and by extrapolation, to humankind.

Keeping in mind Darwin's awe upon his first visit to the Galápagos, Watson and Crick's profound excitement over discovery of the double helix, and Stephen Hawking's contemplation of time, ask what Shakespeare himself might say about science and its practitioners' capacity for radical amazement. Is the empirical thinker as blind to "the darker...mysteries" as Gollob seems to believe? Might Shakespeare have been eager, had he had the chance, to lyricize string theory? Now, giving thought to what Gollob calls "the who of me, the why of me," (p. 6) devise a couplet for the Bard's thoughts on cloning.

2. In the Comedies and Romances, questions of identity are acted out via cross-dressing, bed tricks, gender confusion, and artful subterfuge. But in the Histories and Tragedies, such inquiries take place via painful excursions into the nature of self, dramatizing the gaps between public and private personnae. Discuss the antithesis between the darker meditations and their mischievous counterparts. By what methods do the comedic moments serve the playwright's need to prepare his audience, setting the stage for far more treacherous, unnerving crises of identity?

3. Amy Freed's play *The Beard of Avon*, in which the humble Will Shakspeare serves as a front for Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, and Michael Rubbo's new documentary film, *Much Ado About Something*, which examines the case for Christopher Marlowe as the Bard, are in one instance a bawdy and in the other a sobering take on what is proving to be an enduring scholarly debate. Would you feel differently about the works of Shakespeare if you learned that they were indeed penned by someone other than the Stratfordian? In what way? Why?

4. Agree on a play and then, as a group, cast it for a film. Selecting costumes and sets, discuss your thoughts about Gollob's objection to the imposition of "?timely' sociopolitical meanings," and debate your answer to his question, "Isn't it patronizing to assume that audiences can't make these connections unaided by directorial inventiveness in updating time and place?" (pp. 66 and 125)

5.) Recalling Ralph Fiennes's delivery of Hamlet's "To be or not to be, that is the question," Gollob enthuses about the actor's unconventional emphasis on the word *is*, explaining that the choice "implied that Hamlet had been wrestling with an existential question for God knows how long, had at last found an answer, and was desperately eager to share his thought processes with us." (p. 10)

Pose an imagined, introspective debate leading Hamlet to his discovery. If, for instance, "to be or not to be" were not the question, what would be the question?

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6. Discuss your response to Gollob's frequently made equation of Shakespeare with God, as in his reference to "the man who like God created a world and all its creatures with his word" (p. 179), his description of the Folger as "a holy temple. . . a shrine in which sacred writings were preserved,." and his reference to John Barton as "Shakespeare's prophet." (p. 233) Do you think the author goes too far in his near-deification of Shakespeare? If not, are there any other people, dead or alive, who merit similar classification? Who? Why?

While considering the above, ask whether it would be appropriate to include a still-living person in such a group. If the answer is no, why might the answer differ with regard to an historical figure?

7. Look at John Barton's instructions for reading a sonnet on p. 237, making special note of "The last two lines are always the most important. You need to create suspense as you move toward those lines." Now, compose a sonnet about Gollob's first meeting with Barbara, his wife-to-be, and his lightning quick decision to pursue her despite his friend's relationship with her. Include the phrase "wisdom of heart" from Exodus.

8. Describe what you feel is Barbara's role in Gollob's life, and her function in ME AND SHAKESPEARE.

9. What does Auden's Prospero mean when he says "Magic is the enchantment that comes from disillusion." (p. 108)

10. Shakespeare's fools, in Gollob's words, are "those loyal right-hand men, those truth-tellers, total realists. . . They speak their minds to their commanders, in fact to everyone. . . . Men of common sense and earthy humor." (p. 120) Who plays the role of the fool in your life? And why has our common usage of the term come to indicate someone who overlooks the consequences of his or her behavior and likely suffers for it? Is it an indignity to be the loyal truth-teller?

11. If you were asked to stage *Anthony and Cleopatra* using just three props, what would they be?

12. "The Macbeths. . . are truly an unholy couple," Gollob finds, yet of course one of the reasons for the endurance of the play is our identification with the pair. Is it one of the aspects of great theater that we humble ourselves? Discuss in light of other of your favorite works of art. Which influence you the most profoundly? Those that put you in the company of the flawed, the destroyed? Or those that put you in the company of the redeemed?

13. Drawing from your own experience as a theatergoer, and from what you've read in this book about The Globe, discuss what you consider to be the most significant differences between a theater in the round, and a forward-facing arrangement. How might the effect on the audience differ, between one and another? And how might the design affect the play, itself? Keep in mind Gollob's many discussions about community, and the notion of theater as universe.

14. David Suchet played Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice* as someone who "was an outsider because he was Jew," while Patrick Stewart played Shylock "as an outsider who happens to be a Jew." (p. 13) Clearly, in his analysis of Lear from an Old Testament perspective, Gollob hopes to bring what has to date been an "outside" reading closer to the inside. What are some of the other effects of Gollob's newfound Judaism on his treatment of his subject?

15. "Because he's guilty, and he is not guilty./He knows I am no maid, and he'll swear to't,/ I'll swear I am a maid, and he

knows not./Great King, I am no strumpet, by my life;/ I am either maid, or else this old man's wife." So speaks Diana, of *All's Well That Ends Well*. First, identify the many instances of antithesis in this passage. Then, in an effort to understand the way the technique works, replace the opposing words with less succinct words and phrases, such as "I'll swear I'm a decent women, he just doesn't believe it./ Your Highness, I'm not a careless lady, take my word;/ Either I'm telling the truth, or I'm married to the old guy." Do the same with other passages from other plays, noting how the contrast becomes less apparent, and the message dimmed, when the economy of the language is compromised.

16. "The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb;/What is her burying grave, that is her womb." (Friar Lawrence, *Romeo and Juliet*) Many scholars would agree, as does Gollob, with author Caroline Spurgeon's assertion that "the imagery in the plays illuminates Shakespeare's personality, temperament, and thought." (p. 27) What do you glean of Shakespeare from the friar's words?

17. We learn much about acting from Gollob's book, from Ciceley Berry and John Barton's "Don't try to act. Let the words carry you along with the emotion," to David Suchet's "Rather than ask myself ?How do I play that role?' I take my part completely out, I read the play without me in it at all." (p. 277?278) In addition to what such statements teach us about theater, what might they also teach us about how to live our lives?

18. Do you agree with Polixine's "This is an art/which doth mend nature?change it rather?but/the art itself is nature"?

19. Imagine that on your retirement, you, too, might set out to reinvent yourself the way Gollob did. What do you suppose might be your passion, your pursuit?

Author Bio

Herman Gollob is a graduate of Texas A&M University. After serving in the U.S. Air Force in Korea, he worked as a theatrical agent for the MCA Artists Agency and a literary agent for the William Morris Agency before finding his calling as an editor with Little, Brown. He has been editor in chief of Atheneum, *Harper's* Magazine Press, the Literary Guild, and Doubleday, and a senior editor at Simon & Schuster. He lives in Montclair, New Jersey, with his wife, Barbara, and teaches Shakespeare at the Lifelong Learning Institute of Caldwell College.

Critical Praise

"How refreshing to have a study of Shakespeare that avoids the flatulent portentousness of the 'higher' criticism and that sets off immediately in an authentic human voice--the voice of a cantankerous, obsessed Texan, rattling and skidding over the landscape, a sort of dirty-mouthed Lionel Trilling lobbing improprieties at us. Among his many felicities, we should all especially applaud Gollob's saving Shakespeare for the Jews, or rather for the Judeo-Christian tradition, in which Shakespeare--despite the claptrap from some critics about his being a nihilistic existentialist--is as securely planted as an everlasting oak."

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Publication Date: April 30, 2002

Genres: Literature

Hardcover: 352 pages

Publisher: Doubleday

ISBN-10: 0385498179

ISBN-13: 9780385498173