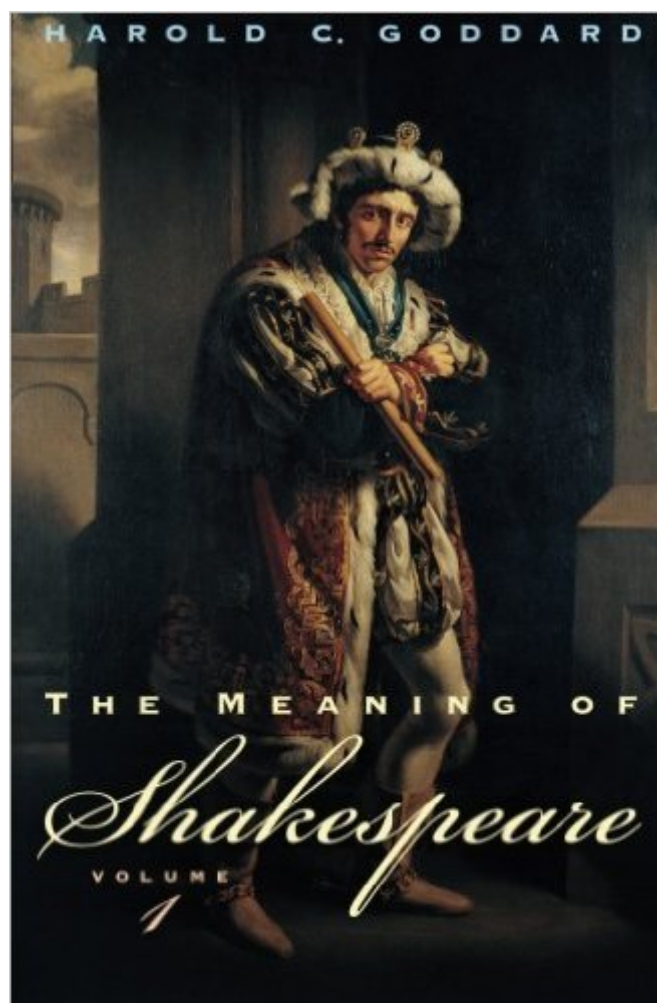


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The Meaning Of Shakespeare, Volume 1 (Phoenix Books)



Synopsis

In two magnificent and authoritative volumes, Harold C. Goddard takes readers on a tour through the works of William Shakespeare, celebrating his incomparable plays and unsurpassed literary genius.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Other writers about Shakespeare have tried to equal Goddard's labor of love, most recently Harold Bloom's Shakespeare: The Art of the Human. None come close, although Jan Kott's Shakespeare Our Contemporary is also great, as is Allan Bloom's Shakespeare's Politics. In fact, Goddard makes Harold Bloom's effort look like it was written by a boy. Goddard writes thoughtful, highly readable, analytic essays about each of the plays. His interpretations are the most original, but well-argued I've ever seen. Yet they frequently deviate from traditional interpretations. For example, Goddard makes a case against the much-loved, jingoistic interpretation of Henry V; Goddard reads much darker implications. In his essay about Romeo and Juliet, Goddard argues that the play is not about star-crossed lovers, but about Romeo's inability to match Juliet's love, which is the real source of tragedy. It's hard to disagree once you've read Goddard's interpretations, but even when you do, you'll be richer for the experience. For those of you interested in "old-fashioned" literary criticism, when writers considered it their duty, not to obscure the text or to deconstruct it, but to make difficult works more accessible, than this is for you. This is a purchase you will never regret.

This first volume covers Shakespeare up to Hamlet. For later plays, see volume two. In my opinion, Goddard is by far the best critic of Shakespeare's plays. He far outranks Bloom, who seems to be the popular Shakespeare critic these days. Goddard gets to the heart of the characters and stories without being sidetracked by modern ideologies and -isms. He doesn't try to distort the plays for something they are not. I particularly love the comedies of Shakespeare and Goddard gives them the attention they deserve that other critics don't. His insight into these lighter works are quite interesting. If you are more interested in Shakespeare's tragedies rather than his comedies or histories, you should get volume two instead, however I recommend getting both. As for the writing style, it is very enjoyable and not at all scholarly or incomprehensible. Actually I've read both volumes over and over, and I consider them to be a few of the best books in my library. They are a must have for Shakespeare fans.

It can be put quite simply--this book must be considered within the tradition of Wisdom Literature. It stands on its own apart from the plays it interprets and analyses. It is a pleasure and joy to read on its own merits. Goddard speaks and you must listen. You may hold contrary opinions about certain plays and characters, but you will not disagree with him. His essays are full of his 40 odd years of teaching but his voice is that of an intimate, not one of the classroom. Buy both volumes and keep them on your bedside table.

Professor Goddard provides a fresh understanding of the Shakespeare plays, sonnets and poems that you will not find in most college courses or in other books of Shakespeare criticism. Don't miss this! Here is a man who taught, read and reflected on the Shakespeare plays, sonnets and poems for years and years and came to some global conclusions as to what they all mean. He even concludes that the meaning of all of Shakespeare is summarized in two lines from one of the sonnets (I'll let you discover this for yourself!). Be sure to notice that there are two paperbacks, volume one and volume two. The current publisher has split the original hardback edition into the two paperback volumes, so you really need both of these volumes. Different plays and poems are covered in each volume.

I once knew a young man who thought Polonius was a wise and noble character. He had taken Polonius's advice, such as "brevity is the soul of wit," at face value without noticing the irony that Polonius is not brief himself, and is in fact a meddling old fool. Reading Goddard makes me feel like

that young man; he shows that Shakespeare's subtle irony is far more extensive than most theater-goers and readers realize. For example, whereas conventional wisdom holds Henry V to be Shakespeare's ideal king, Goddard interprets Henry V as the portrait of a hypocritical strongman. If Goddard has a fault, he is too contemptuous of the theater. He sees the audience as an unthinking mob that laps up surface effects. His Shakespeare gave the groundlings the cheap thrills they crave so he could make money, but used irony to tell a poetic truth that was sometimes the opposite of what is seen on the stage. I think Shakespeare loved the theater more than Goddard did. Without the brilliant drama and comedy, his plays would be read as much as "The Rape of Lucrece," which is to say, only by scholars and devotees of Renaissance poetry. Even so, Goddard's insights are a revelation. After reading this book, you will have a greater appreciation of Shakespeare's artistic integrity.

There's not much praise I can add to that offered by earlier reviewers. Goddard is, for me, one of the premier Shakespeare critics -- up there with Johnson, Coleridge, Bradley, and Frye. I much prefer his work to that of the two popularist contemporary critics, Bloom and Garber. Goddard lacks, thankfully, the self-aggrandizement of Bloom and Garber; his criticism is insightful and brilliant while remaining extremely accessible and enjoyable to read. The two volumes of *The Meaning of Shakespeare* should be on the reading table (don't let them linger on the shelves) of every reader who respects and wants to enjoy Shakespeare.

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