



Prefaces to Shakespeare

Harley Granville-Barker

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Harley Granville-Barker's Prefaces to Shakespeare originally published in five series between 1927 and 1947 covering ten plays are collected in four volumes: Volume I (Hamlet), Volume II (King Lear, Cymbeline, Julius Caesar), Volume III (Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus) and Volume IV (Love's Labour's Lost, Romeo and Juliet, The Merchant of Venice, Othello). An actor, dramatist, producer and a profound Shakespearean scholar, Granville-Barker brought about a revolution in his Shakespearean productions in the first decade of the twentieth century by recapturing, with his experience and expertise, the spirit and vitality of the plays as they were produced on the Elizabethan stage. He saw Shakespeare as a man of the theatre and gave a lie to Lamb that the plays of Shakespeare 'were less calculated for performance on a stage than those of any dramatist whatsoever.' About the productions G.B. Harrison remarks that they were 'the most important productions for a hundred years not only because they were beautiful in themselves, but because for the first time since the seventeenth century Shakespeare's plays were played just as they were written, and not cut and rearranged to suit the scene-shifter.' The Prefaces are elaborate explications of what shape the productions, and how and why Granville-Barker's alert attention to the minutiae of a text and threadbare discussions of various aspects of the plays reveal the dramatic wealth of a Shakespearean play. The Prefaces with their focus on the integrity and vitality of a play have become a landmark in Shakespearean criticism. T.S. Eliot has rightly remarked: 'Perhaps more than any other single writer, H. Granville-Barker by his prefaces, illuminating the plays with the understanding of the producer, has suggested the need for a synthesis of the several points of view from which Shakespeare can be studied.' Any teacher and student of Shakespeare will find these books immensely valuable.

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