

On Reading Shakespeare

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Too many people consider the reading of Shakespeare a monotonous task to be undertaken only at the instigation of a teacher, or for the sake of "culture." This attitude is to be strongly deprecated. In such a frame of mind a person may hurry through two or three of the plays, and then, finding them, on the surface, tedious and uninteresting, lay the volume aside in disgust.

To read Shakespeare in such a way as to profit thereby is a task, but not a monotonous one. Each play should be read with the assistance of a reliable set of notes. This is necessary, for the works are replete with words now obsolete, and with obscure metaphors. The choice of the first play to be read is important. The great tragedies might well be avoided until a good foundation in the author's style has been acquired. "The Merchant of Venice," or "Henry IV" are admirably suited to the purpose, as both are products of his flowering genius, and have plots of sufficient interest to hold the attention of the beginner. After familiarizing himself with these plays, the reader will find great enjoyment in reading the others in chronological order. As he follows the sequence of the works he will recognize the growth of the author's genius, and attain a true appreciation of the merits of the "Immortal Bard."

The plays abound with splendid poetry, which, though present in the earlier works, attains its full power first in "A Midsummer Night's Dream." This poetry pleases the mind as well as the ear, and appeals also to the other senses, in the lines:

*"I know a bank whereon the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk roses, and with eglantine:"*

which produce in the mind not only a delightful visual image of the scene, but even suggest the scent of deep woods and wild flowers.

And what could be more pleasing to the ear than:

*"Over hill, over dale,
Thorough bush, thorough brier,
Over park, over pale,
Thorough flood, thorough fire,
I do wander everywhere,
Swifter than the moone's sphere;
And I serve the fairy queen,
To dew her orbs upon the green:
The cowslips tall her pensioners be;
In their gold coats spots you see:
Those be rubies, fairy favours,
In those freckles live their savours:"*

Notice how skillfully the author secures a melodic effect by the changes of meter.

These few lines are not put forward as a final proof of the genius of Shakespeare, but they will afford the reader some idea of what may be expected upon reading the works in their entirety.

Up to this point but one manifestation of the author's abilities has been considered. Now we shall examine briefly another and perhaps more important feature of his works; that is, character portrayal. In this he is supreme. Some of his creations are as well known as the author himself, throughout the English-speaking world. Hamlet, Falstaff, Macbeth, Romeo, Puck, are names familiar even to those who have never read the plays in which they appear.

To fully appreciate the value of Shakespeare's characters, the reader must realize that no attempt was made by the author to represent normal men and women under normal conditions. Trifling foibles of human nature are greatly exaggerated in some of his portrayals. But this exaggeration is not a fault in the drama, for if it were not present, the characters and plot would, in all likelihood, be lost on the reader or spectator. All abnormalities pass unnoticed in the setting in which Shakespeare has placed them. They are interwoven with the story so skillfully that they appear to the reader only as a part of the whole.

This is most evident when we consider that ambition, a trait common to nearly all men, drives Macbeth to the most terrible crimes. Such a course, though not unheard of, is nevertheless a departure from the normal. But it is vital to the plot.

Again, the improbabilities of Falstaff are woven into the story of "Henry IV" in such a way as not to be evident until they are examined apart from the accompanying text. And what a poor Falstaff would we find, if he were not the hard-drinking, lying, swearing, likable old gourmand so familiar to all.

On the other hand, characters such as Ariel, Caliban, Puck, Titania, must not be charged with unnaturalness of conduct or motive, for we have no standard by which to judge them. They are creatures of another world; products of Shakespeare's vivid imagination. It is this type of character that makes "A Midsummer Night's Dream" the masterpiece that it is. The unearthly forms and fantasy, brought out in exquisite poetry, stimulate the reader's sense of the preternatural.

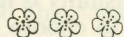
Another well known class of character portrayals may be mentioned at this point. The most notable examples of this type are Bottom, in "A Midsummer Night's Dream;" the Nurse, in "Romeo and Juliet;" and the gravediggers in "Hamlet." They are fine examples of the numerous coarse, ignorant people with whom Shakespeare must have come in contact. The skill with which they are drawn makes it evident that the author was a close observer of human nature, and quick to see its petty flaws. In general, these people are introduced into the plays in order to counterbalance the seriousness of the plot, or to bring out more vividly the delicacy and nobility of the leading characters. How light and airy do the fairies seem, in contrast with the ignorant, self-satisfied Bottom. How steadfast and pure is the character of Juliet, as compared with that of the Nurse.

Now, character portrayal and poetry alone could never make a great play. Action is necessary; deft handling of complex plots and unusual situations. Shakespeare's works give ample proof of his enormous abilities along these lines. In the first part of "Henry IV" we find three separate plots woven together to form a concrete whole. They are, the conspiracy of the Percys; the differences between the king and the prince; and the action involving the prince and Falstaff. The prince is the connecting link between the three. No awkwardness can be noticed in the author's treatment of these three distinct stories.

Other facets of Shakespeare's many-sided genius will become evident to the reader following the sequence of

these plays so redundant with wit, tragedy, philosophy, fantasy, romance, and pathos. So masterfully are they handled that they are enjoyed more on each rereading.

A new world awaits those who will take the trouble to seek it, and once found, it is never relinquished. Shakespeare has pictured in a thousand ways the ambitions, fears, jealousies, courage, frivolity, stupidity, hatreds, and loves of mankind, contrasting the one with the other because he saw clearly the confusion and contrasts of life. The beginner, at first wary and unenthusiastic, soon finds himself steeped in the atmosphere of the plays, seeking hidden motives behind the actions of the characters, suffering with them, rejoicing with them, shuddering at the horrors of "Macbeth," chuckling at the bald quips of Falstaff, sympathizing with Timon in his downfall, delighted with the fantasy of the fairies, and gradually coming to a full appreciation of the versatility, intensity, and comprehensiveness of the genius of Shakespeare.



I think that saving a little child
And bringing him to his own,
Is a derved sight better business
Than loafing around the throne.

—Hay.

Ambition

Is like the sea wave, which the more you drink
The more you thirst—you drink too much, as men
Have done on rafts of wreck—it drives you mad.

—Tennyson.

