

Shakespeare's Style

It is found that, among English writers, Shakespeare used the largest number of words, nearly twenty-one thousand. The Shakespeare Concordances and Dictionaries help us to appreciate this wealth and also the divergent meanings that words had in his time. Shakespeare did not believe in eating paper and drinking ink. But his English is far removed from contemporary English because words had different meanings then. A character speaks of a 'humorous' night in 'Romeo and Juliet'. Here 'humorous' does not mean a night on which a romantic comedy is staged, but a damp night. Similarly in "it is nipping and an eager air", the word 'eager' means 'sharp' and refers to the cold wind on a wintry night. Shakespeare's language is not well understood even in the

Public Schools in the United Kingdom today. A public school student is said to have written in an examination script, "Shakespeare was a polite gentleman. He said 'go to', but never completed his sentence". Abbot and other grammarians have written interestingly on the grammar of Elizabethan English, the shift of parts of speech, the 'nonce' words and so on.

Careful studies have been made of Shakespeare's style. It has been shown by Middleton Murrey and others how words like 'honest' and 'royal' can be regarded as keys to the play in which they figure, Othello, Antony and Cleopatra. All the important characters speak in their own individual idiom. Hamlet has the habit of repeating a word three times and Claudius indulges in rhetoric in order to conceal his insincerity.

But the defects of Shakespeare's style have also attracted attention. Shakespeare's rhetoric and bombast and his mixed metaphors as in "taking arms against the sea of troubles" have been pleasantly glanced at. Dr. Johnson had already pointed out to the reader how a quibble or pun influenced Shakespeare like fatal Cleopatra. More significant work has been done on Shakespeare's symbolism and imagery. Wilson Knight, Middleton Murrey, Miss Spurgeon and Cherman have made remarkable contributions in this field. Wilson Knight showed how each play could be viewed as an extended metaphor and how, in both the tragedies and the romances, three figures of the villain, the hero and the heroine as redeemer are found. Even celebrated characters like Falstaff, Hamlet or Prospero are as

Symbolic as they are individual and typical, in the play in which they figure. But too exclusive a concentration on imagery and symbolism leads to a fermentation of Shakespeare's plays. It is better to study them comprehensively in all their aspects rather than isolate their imagery and try to see the whole in a part, as it were. Shakespeare's use of prose and verse and of the transition from the one to the other have been carefully studied even the characteristics of the blank-verse of Shakespeare as handled by him at different times in his career have been fixed and the proportion of end stopped lines to run on lines has been used to determine the chronology of plays. But a detailed metrical analysis of at least the great passages in Shakespeare does not

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Seem to have claimed the attention of critics as yet. A line like "Blow, winds! and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!" is as dramatic as it is lyrical.

The end

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