

SHAKESPEARE'S POETICS – NOTE

Reading Shakespeare's works (and about them), reflecting on and discussing them with friends, for over forty years, has convinced me of this: Shakespeare's own words about the poet or dramatist, his art and works, are in remarkable harmony with our own experience of those works. This harmony suggests that a general understanding of those works (which must come from a long experience of them) can be usefully brought together with the words of Shakespeare, which touch upon these matters. The usefulness of such a bringing together lies not only in the possible confirmation of one's own understanding of Shakespeare's works and the relevance of Shakespeare's words for the same, but also in the mutual help and stimulus each gives to the penetration of the other.

Shakespeare, of course, did not write an ordered treatise on his art and works. His words on them are scattered through the plays and other works. And we should not expect completeness in those words even if they are brought together in an orderly way. But we can weave an ordered treatment of his art and works around his words, beginning with those words, unfolding them, and filling them out from our experience and reflection on those words.

Granted that Shakespeare did not write an ordered book about his art and the products of that art, yet his scattered remarks both confirm and stimulate the understanding of those works, which must come from a long experience of them. The usefulness of such a study does not depend upon the exhaustive nature of Shakespeare's observations. For that matter, no study of Shakespeare could be exhaustive of the subject. Nor is it only the authority of Shakespeare's own observations about his art and works that is important here - significant as that may be - but the harmony of those remarks with our own experience of those works. Further, although the study of Shakespeare's works does not stop with what he has explicitly noticed about them in passing, yet it may be that the latter, especially when it fits our experience, may be a kind of cornerstone of our general understanding of those works.

Anyone who wants to make use of Shakespeare's scattered remarks for the above purpose must begin by ordering them. The natural way of doing this is to consider first his general remarks on the poet, his art and works; and then those observations, which are particular and lead to an understanding of the different kinds of his works. But since Shakespeare also has many general remarks or

observations on the poet, his art and works, we must also order them. And we cannot order them without finding where to begin - for this will determine the order in which we consider them.

Shakespeare is above all a dramatist or playwright. We must begin then with what Shakespeare thinks about the play and its purpose. Perhaps the most basic texts are in Hamlet's remarks to the players. Yet that passage, as we shall see, must be supplemented by a number of other passages which are necessary, not only to fill it out, but also to avoid some possible serious misunderstandings and omissions.

When reading and interpreting Shakespeare's own words, we must remember that he writes as a poet. He often speaks figuratively and sometimes we shall put his meaning in plain language. And although he is a very accurate writer, we must be aware that his choice of words is somewhat governed by the requirements of sound and style. This could mislead some who do not have a sufficient experience of his works or who do not compare different passages on the same or complementary matters.

We shall post eventually some papers in which I have tried to express Shakespeare's understanding of a play in his words from my experience of those plays. They are all about the same words, more or less, of Shakespeare and therefore cover somewhat the same ground. But those words need to be examined more than once. And although this involves some repetition, the freshness and flavor of each consideration is better preserved by not combining them. After that, we can post a paper on the division of his plays into particular kinds. Papers on particular kinds of play or on individual plays can be reasonably ordered next.

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