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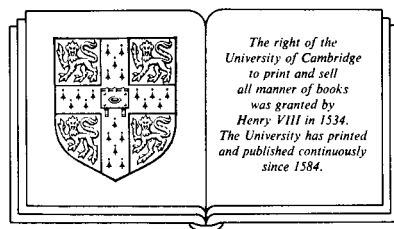
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EKBERT FAAS



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Introduction

I remember, the Players have often mentioned it as an honour to *Shakespeare*, that in his writing, (whatesoever he penn'd) hee never blotted out line. My answer hath beene, Would he had blotted a thousand. Which they thought a malevolent speech . . . Hee was (indeed) honest, and of an open, and free nature: had an excellent *Phantsie*; brave notions, and gentle expressions: wherein hee flow'd with that facility, that sometime it was necessary he should be stop'd. *Sufflaminandus erat*; as *Augustus* said of *Haterius*. His wit was in his owne power; would the rule of it had beene so too.

"[H]ee never blotted out line:" Ben Jonson's complaint is as familiar as his saying that Shakespeare "wanted *Arte*" and had "small *Latine*, and lesse *Greeke*." "[T]o powre forth Verses, such as they are, (*ex tempore*)," to Ben Jonson, was typical of poets who, "presuming on their owne *Naturals*," derided diligence and understanding;¹ and he would not condone such vices even where he was convinced of a poet's greatness, as in Shakespeare's case. On the other hand, his rival showed at least a minimal concern with his art. In his 1623 poem on Shakespeare, Ben Jonson tries to make the most of this effort. In addition to the hundreds of lines he should have blotted, Shakespeare wrote others that were "well torned and true-filed." But in his eulogistic effort, Jonson simply ends up fitting his fellow-playwright into the Prokrustes bed of his own theories:

Yet must I not giue Nature all: Thy Art,
 My gentle *Shakespeare*, must enioy a part.
 For though the *Poets* matter, Nature be,
 His Art doth giue the fashion. And, that he,
 Who casts to write a liuing line, must sweat,
 (Such as thine are) and strike the second heat
 Vpon the *Muses* anuile.

More than anything else, such reservations confirm Ben Jonson's view of Shakespeare as essentially the poet of nature.

Nature her selfe was proud of his designs,
 And ioy'd to weare the dressing of his lines!²

There are few other contemporary comments on Shakespeare's artistry, and none as illuminating as Ben Jonson's. But most of them, whether eulogistic or critical, reflect an obvious consensus. Shakespeare, for better or worse, is the poet, not of art, but of nature. To the admiring Beaumont he sets an example of how far a poet might progress by trusting his natural instinct. Shakespeare's lack of erudite craftsmanship, which Jonson criticizes, becomes a goal for future generations which Beaumont, at least temporarily, embraces as his own. Characteristically, the lines are from his epistle to Ben Jonson:

... heere would I let slippe
 (If I had any in mee) schollershippe,
 And from all Learninge keepe these lines as cleere
 as Shakespeares best are, which our heires shall heare
 Preachers apte to their auditors to shoue
 how farr sometimes a mortall man may goe
 by the dimme light of Nature.³

By 1647, the notion has already turned into a commonplace. John Denham's prefatory verses to the first Beaumont and Fletcher folio of that year compare Ben Jonson's laborious efforts with "what more easie nature did bestow / On Shakespeares gentler Muse."⁴ "Nature was all his Art," comments William Cartwright disapprovingly in the same volume.⁵ A little later, in Richard Flecknoe's 1664 *Short Discourse of the English Stage*, the consensus attitude of Shakespeare's contemporaries or immediate followers has become part of an historical assessment crediting Fletcher with wit, Jonson with "Gravity and ponderousness of Style," and Shakespeare with excelling "in a natural Vein." Comparing Shakespeare with Ben Jonson, Flecknoe writes, "you shall see the difference betwixt Nature and Art."⁶

How did Shakespeare respond to being viewed as the poet of nature and what did he have to say about his art himself? To give an answer to this question is far from easy. Unlike Lope de Vega

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or Sidney, Shakespeare wrote neither a "New Art of Making Comedies" nor a "Defence of Poesie," and the attempt to deduce such a poetics from what his plays and poems seem to imply about it is beset with considerable problems. Most kindred studies chart the outer precincts of this territory, while few venture into the actual center.

Most strikingly, there is no single book to date assessing Shakespeare's sense of his craft and creativity in their multiple aspects. Instead, we have several studies dealing with Shakespeare and music, the fine arts, and other areas marginal to his actual poetics.

The man that hath no music in himself,
 Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,
 Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils.

Words such as these from *The Merchant of Venice* (V, 1) have rightly earned Shakespeare the reputation of a music enthusiast, and much has been written about it.⁷ Less enthusiastic, perhaps, but no less well-informed, are the playwright's references to painting and the fine arts. Again, there are several studies on the subject.⁸ Scholars have also analyzed Shakespeare's awareness of the *ut pictura poesis* concept, his use of emblems, as well as less obvious connections between, say, Elizabethan painting and "ways of seeing" in his plays.⁹ Similar attention has been given to Shakespeare's use of traditional rhetoric,¹⁰ his concepts of language,¹¹ his imagery,¹² his imagination,¹³ the five-act structure of his plays,¹⁴ and his sense of decorum.¹⁵

By contrast to such book-length studies, analyses of Shakespeare's conception of poetry, such as E. C. Pettet's,¹⁶ and of Shakespeare's poets, like Kenneth Muir's,¹⁷ are usually limited to under two dozen pages. No wonder that their scope is somewhat narrow. E. C. Pettet's essay, however brilliant, is mainly concerned with the concepts of poetic frenzy and "feigning." Kenneth Muir's, though equally insightful, focuses on the various poet-characters in Shakespeare's work, while only commenting on individual concepts of his poetics in passing. Even more selective is Alvin B. Kernan's "Shakespeare's Essays on Dramatic Poesy: The Nature and Function of Theater within the

Sonnets and the Plays," or his more recent *The Playwright as Magician: Shakespeare's Image of the Poet in the English Public Theater*. As these titles suggest, Kernan is concerned with Shakespeare's self-image as poet amidst the conflicting demands of aristocratic patronage and the popular stage, rather than with the playwright's attitude towards the individual aspects of his craft and creativity. The most thorough discussion of Shakespeare's implied poetics to date, then, remains J. W. H. Atkins's, in his history of English literary criticism during the Renaissance.¹⁸

This is not to ignore the many recent studies in dramatic reflexivity, role-playing, the play-within-the-play, or what is often summarily referred to as metadramatic criticism. What is metatheatre? Since Lionel Abel first used the term on the cover of his *Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form* (1963), similar studies, each with its own terminology, have appeared in great number. Abel himself speaks of plays that are "theatre pieces about life seen as already theatricalized."¹⁹ James L. Calderwood, subsuming Abel's "metatheatre" under his "metadrama," pursues the Shakespearean "metaphor of life-as-drama" towards the playwright's "evolving conceptions of art."²⁰ More recent studies simply speak of the theatre turning to itself,²¹ or define "metadramatic" as "the proposition that plays are in part at least about themselves, some aspect of dramatic or theatrical art, or the responses of spectators."²²

Useful in the face of such terminological proliferation has been Michael Shapiro's attempt to subsume the whole matter under the related concept of dramatic reflexivity and its various functions. These involve "the audience's degree of involvement in the stage illusion" (an area studied by Doris Fenton, Maynard Mack, Eugene Paul Nassar and others),²³ the "interplay between different planes of illusion"²⁴ (as discussed in Robert Weimann's monumental *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater*), the "spectators' responses to any given dramatic illusion,"²⁵ the topos "that life too is a play,"²⁶ and finally the fact that many plays tend to comment in one way or another upon themselves.²⁷ Studies of this last type include Anne Richter's pioneering *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*, J. L. Calderwood's two books on metadrama, Robert Egan's argument that Shakespeare's

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"dramas within drama," with their often undeclared audiences, serve as models for the offstage audience, Anthony B. Dawson's *Indirections. Shakespeare and the Art of Illusion*, and Alvin B. Kernan's investigations into Shakespearean self-portrayal as poet in the English public theatre. Another category that might be added to all these concerns the reflexivity derived from an onstage producer-playwright like Iago or Prospero, a field explored in various recent articles.²⁸

Yet, as much as the present study is indebted to all these, it by no means fits the same labels. Metadramatic or reflexive criticism deals largely with such themes as the idea of the play, the world as stage, the art of illusion and man as a role-playing animal – all important, but by no means central to our concerns. Of course there is overlap, but it tends to be in areas – such as Shakespeare's understanding of language – which are important, yet not central, to both approaches. While metadramatic criticism emphasizes the interpretation of individual plays in terms of their self-reflexive statements, the present study focuses on the specific concepts of a poetics implied in individual works, as well as in Shakespeare's oeuvre at large.

Such, at least, is its methodological thrust. In practical terms, things turn out to be somewhat different. It would be easy enough, of course, to give lists of the various statements in which Shakespeare, through one of his characters or the speaker-narrator of his poems, comments on such matters as poetic imagination, *furor poeticus*, art and nature, dramatic mimesis, acting, the audience, meter, rhyme, and rhetoric.²⁹ Most of these comments are contained in a handful of *loci classici* familiar to any reader of Shakespeare (e.g., Theseus' speech on the imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V, 1); the rest are easily located with the help of a concordance.

But such mere cataloguing, obviously, would distort rather than reveal what we are after. In Sonnet 105, for instance, we read: "'Fair, kind, and true' is all my argument." Does such a seemingly straightforward statement tell us anything concrete about the author's idealistic intentions in the Sonnets or perhaps in his work in general? It would be naive to make such a claim. Even if we assume that Will, the speaker of the sequence, stands

for William Shakespeare, rather than some persona, there is sufficient reason for distrust or at least caution. Will has already told us that the beauty of his friend's mind, which he proposes to praise, is tainted by "the rank smell of weeds" (69). Rather than celebrate the kind and true, he tends to whitewash his friend's sinfulness –

Authorizing thy trespass with compare,
 Myself corrupting, salving thy amiss. (35)

Is such inconsistency meant to dramatize Will's sinful fall from grace into mental and linguistic confusion, as Margreta de Grazia assumes?³⁰ Or is Shakespeare juxtaposing two contradictory poetics, a serious, orderly, tragic one with another, playful, dissociative, tragicomic, as R. A. Lanham proposes?³¹ Whatever the case, we are cautioned against trying to establish Shakespeare's poetics from quoting random lines out of context.

As one might expect, matters in the plays are even more complex. Theseus' speech about lunatic, lover, and poet is spoken in a tone of ironic dismissal of everything poetic, including "antique fables" and "fairy toys:"

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
 And as imagination bodies forth
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
 Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
 A local habitation and a name.³²

Does Shakespeare identify with Theseus' irony? The consistently negative portrayal of poets in his work might suggest such an attitude. But Theseus' speech, as will be shown in more detail later, is undercut by the context in which it appears. "Poor Theseus," as one critic puts it. "In the play's terms, there are such things as fairies, and, by extension, there is truth in antique fables and fairy toys, in the shaping fantasies of lovers, poets, and madmen. Moreover, to claim to be on the side of reason, as Lysander's case illustrated, is dangerous. Theseus has conveniently forgotten what we remember hearing in the first act: that he, like the lovers, like Bottom, was once a fairy victim too, led 'through the glimmering night' by Titania herself, who has

followed his fortunes and come to bless his wedding."³³ For these and other reasons it seems appropriate to conclude with Kenneth Muir that what "Theseus intends as a gibe against poetry is a precise account of Shakespeare's method in this play."³⁴

Of course, not all the evidence to be drawn on for this study is thus refracted by multiple ironies and perspectives. Much, particularly regarding Shakespeare's awareness of specific Renaissance critical concepts, can be gathered from his vocabulary and phrasing. Here the various Shakespeare concordances are of great help. But word-field analyses by and large reveal little regarding the more complex issues. What were Shakespeare's views of the general purposes of drama or of the art of acting? What of theatrical illusion and the role of the audience? What of language in general and poetic language in particular? What was his understanding of the imagination, of creativity, and especially of the creation of supernatural agencies? What, finally, of the relation of art to nature? The answers to most of these questions, which in that order mark our general argument, have to be gathered either by analyzing statements made by individual *dramatis personae* (e.g., Theseus on the imagination) or by interpreting themes in specific works (e.g., the dismantling of essentialist discourse in *Troilus and Cressida*). The problems and fallacies in either case are the usual ones of interpretation. For even where we analyze no more than a few lines spoken by a specific character we ought to do it, at least ideally, by interpreting the whole play.

Needless to say, no *dramatis persona*, not even the speaker of the Sonnets, should be identified with Shakespeare. To be precise, the mere possibility of such identification remains forever elusive. For who is thus identified with, say, Theseus or Holofernes? All we are able to reconstruct within the hermeneutic vicious circles is, as W. C. Booth has taught us long ago, the "implied author." Our sense of this complex creature, Booth writes,

includes, in short, the intuitive apprehension of a completed artistic whole; the chief value to which this implied author is committed, regardless of what party his creator belongs to in real life, is that which is expressed by the total form.³⁵

A more appropriate title than "Shakespeare's Poetics," then, would have been "The Poetics of the Implied Author in the Works Attributed to Shakespeare." If, here and elsewhere, we nonetheless allow ourselves to speak of "Shakespeare" instead, we really mean this "implied author." In the absence of such documents as diaries and letters, this fictive construct is the closest we shall ever get to the author himself.

In other words, our findings towards Shakespeare's poetics (e.g., his dismantling of essentialist discourse in *Troilus and Cressida* or his inverted Platonism in *Love's Labour's Lost*) largely depend on an interpretative understanding of individual works. Hence, they are open to all the disagreements interpretations are likely to incur. Though to a lesser extent, this is also true of how the implied author stands in relation to the various characters – Berowne, Holofernes, the Will of the Sonnets, Theseus, Hamlet, Cleopatra, the Poet in *Timon*, Prospero, Polixenes – who are made to articulate the more complex concerns of Shakespeare's poetics. Two of these, Will and Theseus, as well as the ironies surrounding them, have already been mentioned. The others, though they will be discussed in more detail later, should at least be introduced at this point.

Berowne and Prospero probably offer the fewest problems. Granted, the plays in which they appear occasionally put us on our guard against them: *Love's Labour's Lost* largely through mocking good humor; *The Tempest* mainly by making us see the protagonist, say, fly into a temper or temporarily lose control of the situation. But such touches serve the purpose of characterization rather than a radical dissociation from the implied author. As protagonists, Prospero and Berowne act, to a considerable extent, as informing intelligences of their plays. Of course, there are limits to this, particularly in the case of Berowne and the penance imposed upon him at the end of *Love's Labour's Lost*; but by and large, their ideas or actions are made to prevail like those of author substitutes built into the plays. There is little reason, then, why we should not take their comments on creativity as essentially "Shakespeare's."

Irony, similar in complexity to that surrounding Theseus' comments on the imagination, refracts the well-known art–

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nature dispute between Polixenes and Perdita.³⁶ All this, of course, has been discussed in various places. Polixenes, while determined to prevent Florizel, his "bud of nobler race," from marrying Perdita, "a bark of baser kind," advocates horticultural grafting as "an art / That nature makes;" Perdita, convinced of being a real shepherdess who is about to marry a prince, seems to oppose the idea. But the debate is a specious one; in fact, there is no genuine dissent. After listening to Polixenes' argument, she simply murmurs assent: "So it is."

The reasons she gives for continuing to dislike the "streak'd gillyvors" merely shift the debate onto different ground. While endorsing Polixenes' advocacy of an art which is itself nature, Perdita now treats these bastard flowers as symbolic of an excessive use of artifice. Her imagery here –

I'll not put
 The dibble in earth to set one slip of them;
 No more than were I painted I would wish
 This youth should say 'twere well, and only therefore
 Desire to breed by me –

introduces an issue as familiar from Shakespeare's other works as his "art / That nature makes." Invectives against "painted rhetoric" or the "painted flourish" of eulogistic praise are found in *Love's Labour's Lost* (IV, 3; II, 1), while Will, in the Sonnets, inveighs against an unnamed rival poet who is "Stirr'd by a painted beauty to his verse" (21). We shall see from the songs concluding *Love's Labour's Lost* what type of "painting" Shakespeare favors instead. To use an apt phrase from the Sonnets, it is the kind "with Nature's own hand painted" (20), a notion well in tune with Polixenes' basic argument.

A more difficult case is that of the Poet in *Timon* who, like his friend the Painter, turns out to be a flattering opportunist. But we know nothing of that in the opening scene, where he makes his crucial statement about poetry oozing like a gum "From whence 'tis nourish'd." This in itself, of course, would not be sufficient cause for agreeing with E. C. Pettet that the words read "like the self-analysis of a practitioner" like Shakespeare, who "admits the subconscious nature of poetic composition."³⁷ What may be sufficient, however, is the fact, noted by Kenneth Muir, that

there is little reason for doubting the Poet's sincerity at this point.³⁸ Though to a lesser extent than Prospero or Berowne, the Poet too, at least here at the beginning, is an agent in the play's underlying thematic dynamics. His allegorical poem dedicated to Timon, which shows Fortune in her fickleness towards her favorites, will come true at a later point. It is only towards the end that we are made to lose trust in his role as part of the play's informing intelligence.

The opposite is true of Cleopatra. Given her general readiness for lying and blackmail, we have good reason to distrust her words on most occasions. But by the time she utters her crucial words on the mythopoeic imagination (V, 2), the Queen, now full of longings to join her "husband" Antony in Elysium, has transcended these limitations. In turn, there is something almost superfluous about her prolix comments on her dream of Antony. To a greater or lesser extent, most related statements made by Theseus, Berowne, Polixenes, or the Poet strike us as similarly gratuitous. Were one to omit them, the works in which they occur would hardly suffer as poetic artefacts. We know that Theseus' words on the poet are probably due to marginal addition to an already completed text. At least metaphorically speaking, there is a similarly marginal feel about most comparable statements by Berowne, Polixenes, the Poet, and Cleopatra.

But to return to the various implied-author-persona relationships, there is, in fact, little controversy in the cases discussed so far. Most critics, for good reason, argue that Theseus, Will, Berowne, Prospero, Polixenes, Perdita, the Poet, and Cleopatra, in what they say about poetry and art, stand, in one form or another, for the implied author of the work in question; just as few would disagree that what Holofernes tells us about similar concerns is for the most part to be laughed at like the pedant himself. The only major mouthpiece of Shakespeare's poetics who has caused fundamental disagreement, then, is Hamlet. Readers to whom the Prince's views on drama and acting should be either linked with or dissociated from those of the implied author fall into neatly opposed groups.

For a long time critics simply identified the protagonist with Shakespeare. Roy Battenhouse, in 1970, listed over half a dozen

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such, and there have been more since.³⁹ Others, more recently, have put us on our guard against such simplistic equation. As S. L. Bethell wrote in 1944,

Hamlet is praising a type of dramatic composition in favour among the aristocratic dilettanti, but never successful on the popular stage; and it is difficult to believe that Shakespeare would wholeheartedly approve a mode of construction which he must himself have deliberately avoided. Hamlet, on the other hand, the aristocratic amateur, might well have shared Sidney's preference for the neo-classical. This would confirm my conclusion that the passage is meant to be taken as a serious expression of Hamlet's opinion, but not of Shakespeare's.⁴⁰

Other critics, more convincingly, have associated Hamlet's theories with those of Ben Jonson.⁴¹ But we have more than such external evidence for establishing the distance between Shakespeare and his *dramatis persona*.

As in Theseus' case, Hamlet's words are undercut by the context in which they appear. The Prince advises the players not to overstep "the modesty of nature" (III, 2) in their acting. But how would the player acting Hamlet acquit himself on the many occasions in which the protagonist vows to eat a crocodile, hems and haws, rants and raves, and all in ways repeatedly commented on by other characters? If ever the playwright wrote a part suggesting that its impersonator "tear a passion to tatters" and "split the ears of the groundlings" (III, 2), it was that of Hamlet. The irony speaks for itself.

But all this only begs another question. If Hamlet's theories of drama and acting seem to be like Ben Jonson's rather than the author's, what, then, were Shakespeare's own ideas about such matters? Needless to say, we shall never attain the complete answers we crave. But a lot that might bring us closer to them still lies unexplored in the vast regions of Shakespeare's work as a whole. What, for instance, were the playwright's favored modes of acting? As Daniel Seltzer notes, critics have strong opinions about the original Shakespeare productions as having been either highly "formal" or downright "realistic," even "naturalistic." But few attempts have been made to back up such claims by researching, say the printed and "implicit" stage directions in the texts themselves, or the various, though hardly numerous, comments

on acting in commendatory poems, eulogies, and similar contemporary materials. Seltzer's 1971 conclusion, that the body of that evidence has not been collected and published,⁴² remains true to date, despite his own efforts in sifting through over two hundred texts, from the earliest interludes to late Jacobean drama. In addition, there are Barbara Mowat's brilliant though controversial analyses on "Stage-Gesture in Shakespeare," as well as sporadic comments on the subject in various places.⁴³ But matters such as these are easily smothered under the researcher's theorizing and need to be documented in ways which will allow the reader to draw his own conclusions. After Seltzer's and Mowat's pioneering efforts, a volume on this subject remains to be written. Whatever is said about Shakespeare's concepts of acting in the second chapter makes no claim to fill this gap; rather, it needs to be tested by just such future research.

The same applies to much else in this volume. The task I have set myself is a near-impossible one, even in terms of the approach to be adopted in its pursuit. To discuss briefly one further example, the purpose of playing, in Hamlet's view, "is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (III, 2). Interpreting similar statements in the context of the entire play, we have to be on our guard against simply taking the protagonist's words as Shakespeare's.⁴⁴ But a look into Elizabethan and Renaissance criticism can show that Hamlet, while not necessarily voicing the implied author's opinion, echoes a commonplace of the period. The Latin "*Comoedia est imitatio vitae, speculum consuetudinis, et imago veritatis*," which Donatus attributes to Cicero, was widely quoted by writers in England and abroad. Particularly fond of it among Shakespeare's contemporaries was Ben Jonson, who repeatedly used the image of the stage as a mirror of life in his own plays. But what was Shakespeare's own opinion on the matter? After all, the fact that the play undercuts Hamlet's comments on acting does not necessarily mean a similar inversion regarding his views on the purpose of dramatic art in general. In the absence of further evidence for establishing

Shakespeare's attitude to his character from the play itself, we are sent back to the playwright's oeuvre at large.

The area entered at this point, of course, must be explored with great caution. But, depending on the appropriateness of the questions raised in this pursuit, not all will be mere speculation. Does Shakespeare show preference for Hamlet's mirror-play analogy elsewhere? Does he tend to use the terminology of mimetic imitation wherever else he comments on similar matters? If not, what other terms does he prefer? Required at this point, then, are extensive word-field analyses, another area which has begun to attract systematic interest only more recently.⁴⁵ What is more, Hamlet, in stating that dramatic art should "show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (III, 2), can be compared with other advocates of didacticism and satire (e.g., Jaques in *As You Like It* and the Poet in *Timon of Athens*) whom Shakespeare presents in more directly ironical fashion.⁴⁶

In sum, the attempt to deduce Shakespeare's poetics from the statements put into the mouths of his characters, follows a three-step approach. Each such statement is to be interpreted (1) within the context of the work in which it occurs, (2) within the context of Shakespeare's oeuvre in general, and (3) against the background of comparable non-Shakespearean writing of the period. Not each interpretation, of course, will proceed precisely according to that sequence. To add to the critical analogues scholars have found for the art-nature debate in *The Winter's Tale* (IV, 4), for instance, would be like carrying owls to Athens. Similar attention has been given to parallel instances in Shakespeare's works in general. But what is the result of all this research? The common assumption is that the Perdita-Polixenes debate simply repeats the current commonplaces of the time. And, *prima facie*, this is indeed the case. Even if it is assumed that Shakespeare upholds Polixenes' "an art / That nature makes" as his artistic credo, there is enough from other sources which seems to express the same idea. "Nature is more noble than Matter or Forme," we read in Palingenius' highly popular *Zodiacke of Life*.⁴⁷ Here as elsewhere, then, Shakespeare's "ideas," as one critic puts it, seem to "belong to the common thought of his age."⁴⁸

But is this really true in our case? *The Zodiacke of Life*, while promoting the superiority of nature over art, tells us on the very same page, that nature is “nothing els but the law of God.” The reason for ranking nature above art, in other words, is that “nature” was equated with the “order of the vniuerse” (J. Huarte),⁴⁹ which itself was commonly thought of in teleological or Christian providential terms. As will be shown in more detail later, this, then, was the overriding conviction of the age: the laws of art simply derive from the cosmic laws of nature, the *ministra et factura dei*. Would Shakespeare differ from that norm? The general answer is “no”; but simply, I think, because critics take for granted that Shakespeare’s use of “nature” in the Polixenes–Perdita debate conforms to the teleological understanding of the word prevalent during the Renaissance. For a fresh look at this matter, we shall therefore – as step one of our approach – try to establish the meaning of “nature” from an interpretation of the entire play. Time, the Chorus, from the opening of Act IV, offers the best access to such an analysis.

But before dealing with these perhaps most comprehensive issues of Shakespeare’s poetics in the last chapter, this study will have to come to grips with more mundane matters. Its first part starts by assessing Shakespeare’s awareness of general critical issues against the background of related Renaissance writing. Here already, we see the playwright evolve his ideas in partial opposition to the consensus of his time. While Renaissance critics drew sharp distinctions between invention and delivery (alias imagination and composition), Shakespeare emphasizes the spontaneous simultaneity of both (Chapter 1). Similar discrepancies are found by comparing Shakespeare’s attitudes towards acting and drama with their mimetic and satirical counterparts in Ben Jonson (Chapter 11). But most idiosyncratic regarding the actual theatre, perhaps, is the playwright’s attitude towards his audience. The apologists of the three unities were divided in their demands for either coercing spectators into believing that what they saw was real, or for arguing that they could not but be aware of the signifier–signified nature of theatrical events at all times. Shakespeare, by contrast, not only ignored the unities, but also prompted his spectators to range over a far-reaching spectrum

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between the extremes of a nearly alienation-effect-type self-awareness and a complete absorption in the illusion of the spectacle (Chapter III).

It should be obvious even from this first part that "poetics," in the sense in which the word is used here, is by no means limited to concerns of mere craftsmanship. The second part will cast the net even wider. Here we shall explore Shakespeare's sense of language in general (Chapter V) and of poetic language in particular (Chapter VI); his ideas of creativity and the imagination (Chapters VI and VII); his theories regarding mythopoeic dramatizations of the supernatural (Chapter VIII); and, finally, his views on nature, art and artifice (Chapter IX). Except for his mythopoeic creativity, in which he seems to rely on some of the basic beliefs of his age, Shakespeare, as regards most of these issues, strikes a highly original, idiosyncratic, and sometimes surprisingly "modern" note. But for all its dissent from mainstream Renaissance theorizing, his poetics is by no means an isolated phenomenon. Many of its specific aspects, and, more importantly, its basic underlying assumptions, are also found with the two perhaps most eminent philosophers of his age, Montaigne and Bacon. It is only natural, then, that a separate chapter on the ideas which they shared should preface the more philosophically oriented second part of this book (Chapter IV). A few hints and examples as to these affinities between Shakespeare, Montaigne, and Bacon must suffice in this introduction.

Most crucial here, as will be shown in detail later, is their common antiessentialism or radical empiricism. Poetry, as a result, no longer serves the bidding of metaphysics or theology in expressing absolute "truths," as it ought to do according to most Renaissance theorizing. For, at least to Bacon and Montaigne, such metaphysical concepts are to be counted among the self-delusions of the human mind and hence have lost their validity. Bacon classifies them among the idols of the mind. Montaigne, in less systematic fashion, writes: "We say indeed 'power,' 'truth,' 'justice'; they are words that mean something great; but that something we neither see nor conceive at all."⁵⁰ Yet, however different in their wording, the two philosophers agree that "the inquisition of man," as Bacon puts it, "is not competent to find

out *essential forms*”;⁵¹ that “there cannot be first principles for men,” in Montaigne’s words, “unless the Divinity has revealed them.”⁵² The last words, perhaps, that Shakespeare wrote for the stage sound a strikingly similar note:

O you heavenly charmers,
 What things you make of us! For what we lack,
 We laugh; for what we have, are sorry; still
 Are children in some kind. Let us be thankful
 For that which is, and with you leave dispute
 That are above our question. Let’s go off,
 And bear us like the time.⁵³

More specific evidence of Shakespeare’s basic antiessentialism and of how it permeates his poetics is found throughout the canon.

Whereas Neoplatonists, for instance, viewed creativity in terms of an ascent towards ideational absolutes, Shakespeare reverses this trajectory for the sake of a hypersensitivity of sensory perception which

... gives to every power a double power
 Above their functions and their offices.⁵⁴

While averse to metaphysical speculation, this radical empiricism of quasi-supernatural intensity is open to the world of myth, or in Shakespeare’s words, of “antique fables” and “fairy toys.”⁵⁵ Linguistically, it avoids the apodictic tone of essentialist discourse in propounding its absolute “truths”; indeed, it rarely loses sight of language’s limitations in trying to capture the ever-elusive flux of experience. Its ideal but unrealizable medium would be a language of silence, or the “dumb thoughts, speaking in effect,” evoked by Shakespeare’s Sonnet 85.

Similarly, Renaissance apologists of the *furor poeticus* went out of their way to emphasize, like Pontus, that such frenzy had nothing to do with either “bodily maladies” or any “folly and corruption of the brain.” Instead, it is engendered by a “secret divine power, which illuminates the spirit of reason.”⁵⁶ Even where they advocated a seemingly infinite freedom of “inexcogitable” invention, theorists from Fracastoro to Puttenham were equally intent on dissociating artists who make use of the imagin-

ation in the right way (*euphantasioti*) from those who abuse that power in delirium or ecstasy (*phantastici*).⁵⁷ In any case, whatever the poet has poured forth in this so-called divine frenzy, has to be revised and given a proper shape under the auspices of cold reason.⁵⁸

Shakespeare's dissent from such ideas, as manifest in Theseus' lunatic-lover-and-poet speech, for instance, is borne out by Ben Jonson, who criticizes his fellow-playwright for his all too free-flowing fantasy and for his reluctance to revise.⁵⁹ Here again, Montaigne would probably have sided with Shakespeare. The essayist's self-declared task was to explore the "chimeras and fantastic monsters"⁶⁰ of his mind in defiance of all Renaissance prohibitions. As to Theseus' lunatic poet, who sees "more devils than vast hell can hold,"⁶¹ the imagination to him has, and perhaps should have, semi-psychotic potential, just as the poet's fury is a genuinely pathological impulse.⁶² True to his basic assumptions, Montaigne let the contents dictate his style rather than the reverse. Written spontaneously, without much revision, his essays, at least in the author's view, came to look much like the chimeras and monsters of his mind – "grotesque and monstrous bodies, pieced together of divers members."⁶³

Behind all this is a radical new understanding of the artistic imagination. Bacon's severance of poetry from philosophy and, concomitantly, of the poet's imagination from the philosopher's speculations – for which again we find parallels in both Shakespeare and Montaigne – is surely not the mere repetition of a Renaissance commonplace as has been claimed.⁶⁴ Freed from reason's overrule, the imagination, despite Horace's injunctions to the contrary,⁶⁵ now "may at pleasure join that which nature hath severed, and sever that which nature hath joined." For the metaphysical restrictions that Fracastoro, Puttenham and Sidney, for example, imposed upon such phantasmagoric imaginings no longer apply. Poetry has been liberated from such bondage. It "wanders forth, and feigns what it pleases."⁶⁶ Such words are innovative in more senses than that of introducing a new concept of poetry that "ceases to be knowledge and becomes fiction and play."⁶⁷ Bacon, who also had an unprecedented understanding of myth, not only freed the poetic imagination

from its traditional subservience to philosophy, but was prepared to elevate it beyond reason. This happens when the poet, with his “similitudes, types, parables, visions, dreams,” assumes his role as a purveyor of supernatural inspiration.⁶⁸

All these more rarefied aspects of a poetics, most of which Shakespeare shared with Bacon and Montaigne, will be explored in the second part of this study. But first some of the more immediate of the poet's concerns as craftsman and playwright must claim our attention.