

Shakespeare's Language

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Plumbing the sweet mysteries of Shakespeare's "language," the author argues that the Bard's tragedies were probably difficult even for his contemporaries to understand and identifies a shift in Shakespeare's use of language around 1600.

Among our greatest contemporary critics, Sir Frank Kermode is the author of such classics as *The Sense of an Ending*, and his recent memoir, *Not Entitled*, vividly captured a life in letters. It's no surprise, then, that *Shakespeare's Language* is a deeply significant publication. Reflecting many decades of writing and thinking about the Bard, it meets and often exceeds the reader's expectations.

The author begins by lamenting the fact that general readers have not "been well served by modern critics, who on the whole seem to have little time for [Shakespeare's] language." However, rather than launching into a diatribe against current literary fashions, he proceeds to offer an elegant and detailed account of how his subject transformed him into "a different kind of poet." For Kermode, the rich complexities of *Hamlet* or "The Phoenix and the Turtle" (an allegorical poem in which Shakespeare juggles love and Thomistic jargon like rhetorical ninepins) mark a whole new level of accomplishment. How to define the change? Kermode notes "the pace of the speech, its sudden turns, its backtrackings, its metaphors flashing before us and disappearing before we can consider them. This is new: the representation of excited, anxious thought; the weighing of confused possibilities and dubious motives."

This before-and-after scenario breaks the book into two parts. In the first, Kermode deals with the plays up to 1600, controversially putting the kibosh on such warhorses as *As You Like It*. The second part offers 15 detailed chapters on the tragedies, problem plays, and romances. This is classic criticism, written in the mold of Johnson and Coleridge. And while Kermode never pays short shrift to the difficulties of Shakespeare's language, he's even more attuned to its prodigal, inexhaustible pleasures. -- Jerry Brotton

Frank Kermode has written and edited many works, among them *Forms of Attention* and a memoir, *Not Entitled*. He lived in Cambridge, England, and frequently taught in the United States.

Other Books

William Shakespeare's *Henry V*, Spine title: *Henry V*. A collection of seven critical essays discussing Shakespeare's "Henry V."

Trickson, Peter B. "The Fault / My Father's Made': The Anxious Pursuit of Heroic Fame in Shakespeare's *Henry V*." *Modern Language Studies* 10, no. 1 (1975): 1-15.