

Northrop Frye on Shakespeare
Ed. Robert Sandler. Markham, ON: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1986

Selected reviews by John S. Baxter, John Bemrose, Dennis Duffy, Stephen Greenblatt, and S. Schoenbaum

Additional reviews are listed at the end.

1. Baxter, John S. "Northwind the Prophet: Critic as Hypocrite." *Whig-Standard Magazine* [Kingston, ON] 20 December 1986): 19–20.

When I began my doctoral program longer ago than I care to remember, I took a course in Edmund Spenser from Northrop Frye. This was just a few years after *Fearful Symmetry*, his study of William Blake, had begun its triumphal march through the fields of Academe, and the class was crowded. All of us had read *Fearful Symmetry* and none of us had understood it, particularly the parts that seemed most important. But we all felt we should not leave Toronto without at least exposing ourselves to this apparently extraordinary scholar and critic.

I don't remember much of what Frye had to say about Spenser, but my recollections of his performance in the classroom are still vivid. I recall him drawing huge circles on the blackboard to represent what he called the verbal, mathematical and physical universes. Over a dot at the centre of the verbal universe he wrote, "Poet's Consciousness," around the circumference he wrote, "Unifying Word;" and on the empty space beyond the circle he wrote the impressive term, "Logos." (The capitals are quite essential.) Since we were to imagine the whole structure as spinning like Ptolemaic spheres, a great complex of centrifugal and centripetal forces came into play. A daunting web of lines connected item within each circle and across the three. Some of us found wandering in this labyrinth to be a thrilling experience, a totally new way of looking at literature; others were convinced that there was nothing but a bull at the bottom. But it certainly was exciting, even if its connection with Spenser was, shall we say, tangential.

For Frye, images are important in literature, and I have some indelible images of Frye. His voice was at the same time flat and beautifully cadenced. His lectures were not written out, but his sentences were elegant, full and rolling, impeccable in their grammar. Definitely the noble style. Every so often he would drop down to slang and localisms, like an archbishop being one of the boys. He paced slowly in magnificent isolation back and forth across the front of the room, looking anywhere but at us, soliloquizing to the door or whatever might be outside the window. And every so often a strong dramatic moment would come when what appeared to be a new thought struck him, usually unrelated to the line of his discourse, and he would deliver it directly to us. Once when he was tying some point in *The Faerie Queene* to Greek mythology and Middle-Eastern folklore, he broke off in mid-sentence, turned full upon us, and said: "Of course, as you know, *The Tempest* takes place under water." He then turned back to the window, began to pace again, and as if nothing had happened resumed his talk on Spenser.

It was all superbly theatrical. We were encountering a speculative mind in the very process of speculating, possibly a great mind. In a pub afterward we wrangled for about an hour over what that sudden explosion of perception could possibly have meant, nothing at all or everything. I have no idea whether Frye intended any or all of this reaction. But his charisma was such that we were forced to declare ourselves either Phrygians or anti-Phrygians, as we said at the time. He created disciples or opponents; there was little room for a middle reaction.

I bring in all this nostalgia because Frye's new book is a record of his performance in the classroom. Evidently the idea for the book came from Robert Sandler, who over several years taped

Frye's lectures in an undergraduate course in Shakespeare that he shared with other instructors and then got the publisher interested in the project. Although Sandler is listed on the title page as editor of the volume, Frye himself did the main editorial work, modifying the transcripts to make them more suitable for reading but retaining the tone and manner of the classroom. The book is, therefore, an important mirror of one aspect of a major critic's activity, a snapshot taken as Frye's career as a lecturer draws to a close. Many people who have studied under him over the years will want to see whether what he now does checks out against their memories, just as I did. And others who know him from the printed page will be curious to see how his classes are conducted.

As a study of Shakespeare, this book is frequently erratic, whimsical and distorting. Again and again Frye makes statements that are either in distinct contradiction of the text or have no warrant in it. As an example of the first, consider his remark that Falstaff in *Henry IV, Part 1* "takes bribes to let the good recruits off and conscript[s] only worthless ones." The situation is the exact reverse. Falstaff first calls to service those people who have grown fat and Pharisical in a peace-time world but are too cowardly to put themselves at risk in time of war to defend the state that guarantees their security. Falstaff is an old soldier and shows his old soldier's scorn for these representatives of the *unco guid* when he calls them "a commodity of warm slaves . . . such toasts-and-butter, with hearts in their bellies no bigger than pins' heads." What good captain would want men like these standing beside him in the push of battle? On the other hand, those whom he actually enrolls under the king's banner—most brought out of prison for debt—are "ancients, corporals, lieutenants, gentlemen of companies." That is, they are the old, experienced soldiers, his brother veterans whom society scorns in peace-time but depends upon in war. And some of those "gentlemen" no doubt, like Sir John, have blue blood in their veins and no money in their purses, the frequent problem of younger sons. Yes, Falstaff has "misused the king's press damnably," we can be fairly confident that little of the money he has collected will ever see the king's treasury to defray the costs of the campaign. But he has got together just the men the king requires to do the dirty jobs of the war, the slogging in the mud and the confused, bloody sword-play, the men who will be beggars for life if they lose a leg in battle and whose deaths nobody will notice if they die.

As an example of conclusions drawn with absolutely no warrant in the text I would cite Frye's statement that the law "making fornication a capital offence is the only law the abdicating Duke [*Measure for Measure*] seems to be interested in." It is true that the Duke is much concerned in the opening scenes of the play with the general lawlessness of Vienna, but at no time prior to the arrest of Claudio does he even mention the specific law against adultery, much less show a consuming interest in it.

These issues are not trifling slips in otherwise strong interpretations of *Henry IV, Part 1* and *Measure for Measure*. Frye tends in all his work on Shakespeare to dissolve the particular and concrete "meanings" of his text in large, generalized issues of genre, myth, and archetype. It is fairly basic to his understanding of *Henry IV, Part 1* that Falstaff be considered a "time-blocking figure, someone who gets in the way of the movement of history." To listen closely, however, to what Falstaff actually says in the scene in question is to become involved in some specific and painful social ironies, to see Falstaff not as block [The rest of this review, alas, has disappeared from my files and I've been unable to track down the missing page. —RD]

2. Bemrose, John, "The Joy of Shakespeare." *Maclean's* 99 (6 October 1986): 86.

The critical writings of Northrop Frye have justly earned him an internal reputation. His best-known books (*Fearful Symmetry*, on English poet William Blake, and *Anatomy of Criticism*, which

analysed the principles of criticism) have become essential texts for students of literature. But around his home campus, the University of Toronto, many also know Frye as an extraordinary teacher. In recent years Frye's lectures on William Shakespeare have been among his most popular. But until the publication of *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, based on lecture transcripts edited by a former graduate student, Robert Sandler, his wider audience has had little chance to savor Frye's rigorous teaching style. The book reflects Frye's vast erudition and talent for succinct generalization. More importantly, it reveals his acute sensitivity to the dramatic qualities of Shakespeare. *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare* can be read with pleasure by theatre-goers, actors, directors—anyone, in fact, interested in the titan of world drama.

In his introduction, Frye instructs readers of Shakespeare to “assume you're directing the play and have to think of what kind of people you would choose to act what parts.” It is good advice—but surprising coming from Frye. In his more formal works, he often writes as if he were floating five miles above the world of literature, elegantly discussing themes and patterns but seldom descending to the level of most people's responses. But in preparing the lectures collected here, he comes down to earth to give a pithy, scene-by-scene interpretation of eleven of Shakespeare's most celebrated plays. His language is often humorous and colloquial, and he displays a lively familiarity with Shakespeare's characters, as if they were living just across the street. Most impressively, he again demonstrates his remarkable critical gifts by continuously exposing Shakespeare's own greatness—the playwright's ability to touch the very core of what it means to be human.

Frye first turns his penetrating gaze on *Romeo and Juliet*. The tale of two young lovers driven to suicide has been performed so often that theatre directors often go to absurd lengths to make it seem fresh. But by paying close attention to its characters and language, Frye opens up new veins of meaning. He shows how Romeo's choice of words changes to mirror his growing seriousness, and how Shakespeare sketches Juliet's childhood with brilliant economy. Frye also supplies fascinating background material on the conventions of courtly love that helps to explain Romeo's behavior. But ultimately, Frye says, such tragedies as *Romeo and Juliet* “represent something bigger in the total scheme of things than all possible explanations combined.” In other words, the most the critic can achieve—and Frye does it superbly in his lecture's eloquent conclusion—is to point toward an area of mystery where great drama has the inexplicable force of revelation.

Frye makes similar claims throughout the book, and they are among the most impassioned and moving passages he has ever written. In his lecture on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he ruminates on the experience of Bottom, the weaver who magically acquires an ass's head and then wanders through an enchanted forest. Frye notes that Bottom's utter bafflement over his adventure—he thinks it is all a dream—anticipates by three centuries a remark by the great Viennese psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, who wrote, “Every dream has a point at which it is unfathomable.” By descending so deeply into his bizarre nighttime fantasy, Bottom, Frye adds, “has been closer than any other character to the centre of this wonderful and mysterious play.”

Frye's reference to Freud underlines another of his aims: to show how the protean genius of Shakespeare foreshadowed the concerns of future ages. *Hamlet*, for one, has remained relevant through generations of social change. In the 19th century the play helped spark the romantic movement, with its emphasis on doomed youth and tragic love. And it had a profound influence on the works of such writers as Russian novelist Feodor Dostoevsky. As for the future, Frye writes that the power politics of *Antony and Cleopatra*, reflect “the kind of world we seem to be moving into.” He argues that Cleopatra is, above all, a self-dramatizing woman who brings tragedy upon herself and Antony simply out of her childish desire to be the centre of attention. The parallel with modern political leaders obsessed with public images could not be clearer.

Frye's concluding essays on *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* are less satisfying. He indulges in tedious schematic descriptions that have the effect of oversimplifying enormously complex plays. But

those are minor flaws in an otherwise fine performance. It is Frye's fundamental and humble conviction that "whatever we don't like in Shakespeare we probably don't fully understand." Readers of *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare* may forget the content of Frye's apt observations and his canny arguments. But the memory of his tireless curiosity and his respect for Shakespeare's art is enduring.

3. Duffy, Dennis. "A New Excitement with Shakespeare." *Globe and Mail*, 4 October 1986, E21.

Anyone who read the excerpts published recently by *The Globe and Mail* from this book was surely delighted by Northrop Frye's wit, fluency and insight, so there's no need to call attention to that.

Reading these edited transcripts of Frye's lectures on Shakespeare to undergraduates sends the reader back to the playwright with renewed excitement and a sense of having missed a few things in college and on trips to Stratford. What greater praise can one extend to a critic?

My own reading of the book raises two interesting thoughts. First, someone once wrote of Lord Byron that had he thrown pottery or bred pigeons, his genius would have stamped these humbler items with the same ineffaceable mark that individuated his verse. In terms of critical powers, Frye possesses that same shaping gift, creating a typically Frygean structure out of the diversities of the Shakespeare canon.

Thus such motifs as the four-fold mode of interpretation, the self-referencing qualities of a work of art and the creative imagination's ceaseless yearnings for a nobler world that reflects and encompasses this one, appear here even as they do in Frye's other works. To his detractors, all this indicates an intellectual sausage machine grinding beef, bone and old boots into a homogenous product. To his supporters, Frye's system-building offers gloves thick enough to pick up a porcupine safely, and yet still realize that the porcupine has needles.

I suspect that alert undergraduates came out of those lectures excited by the range of reflections on Shakespeare that they had just beheld. That audience would have been far less excited by Frye's system than by the fact that someone within their hearing found coherent patterns in artistic experience. Education is more about showing that something might be done than in actually doing it.

A second thought springs from Frye's commentary on the history plays. His critics have accused him of taking a stance that divorces literature from the historical realities in which it is produced. David Cook's sprightly *Northrop Frye: A Vision of the New World* has put paid to the myth of the critic's apolitical nature. Cook's identification of the specifically Canadian variety of liberalism that lies behind Frye is borne out by that commentary.

Here surfaces an offshoot of a political discourse marked by a suspicion of a dramatic, passionate and power-minded political culture. Such an attitude rests upon a deep faith in the educated intelligence's power to endure complexity rather than pounce upon the deceptively simple. Such a belief produces people who derive greater satisfaction from rationality than from its opposite. It is a faith in the word deriving ultimately from a Protestant Christianity that has domesticated its radical fringes. As a widespread habit of social thought it flourishes today only in special, protected places. Like here. Such a faith has shaped this country's finest rulers, even when they have not been Protestant. It keeps us the unexciting, decent folk -- hobbits in a world of wargs—that we like to think that we are.

If this seems to be at some distance from Shakespeare, I can only state that an attentive reader can find in Frye's lectures to undergraduates the same hum of implication that marks his more

sophisticated works. He has never cheated any of his many audiences. Once a reader has made it past the bizarre book jacket (a design as appropriate as finding Bo Derek on the cover of *The Watchtower*), a stimulating time lies ahead.

4. Greenblatt, Stephen. "As They Like It." *New Republic*, 10 November 1986, 42, 44–7.

Last April, like one of the madly peripatetic professors in David Lodge's *Small World*, I flew from the West Coast to West Berlin for the World Shakespeare Congress. It was a ridiculously long flight, but I did not set the distance record: there were Japanese, Indians, Chinese, Malaysians, Australians—all equally jet-lagged, bleary-eyed, genially disoriented. At odd hours of night, lights burned in hotel rooms, less, I suspect, to illuminate erotic adventures than to shine on worn copies of *Pericles*, *Prince of Tyre* or *Henry VI, Part Three* clutched in quiet desperation by sleepless academics. By day the delegates wandered, Complete Works in hand, in and out of hotel lobbies, dining halls, formal receptions, seminar rooms, lecture theaters. Russians chatted with Americans about the "bad quarto" of *Hamlet*; Israelis exchanged views with Saudi Arabians about the two texts of *King Lear*; West Germans and East Germans discussed the "vile wall" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

What does this extraordinary anthropological ritual, repeated every four years, mean? The answer that springs most quickly to mind is Ben Jonson's tribute to his "beloved" rival Shakespeare: "He was not of an age, but for all time." And for all places, too, judging from the global participation in Berlin. During his own lifetime, Shakespeare's plays were performed not only in London, but in darkest Yorkshire, on shipboard off Sierra Leone, in eastern Europe. In the centuries that followed they seemed to find their way everywhere: Swiss cantons, Zulu townships, Brazilian settlements. As Lawrence Levine has recently shown, 19th-century America alone mounted thousands of Shakespeare performances. In towns with names like *Cherokee Flat*, *Red Dog*, and *Fiddletown*, miners watched productions of *Othello* or *Hamlet*, then the actors would wipe off the stage blood, change costume, and conclude the evening with a rousing farce like *Nick of the Woods* or *Did You Ever Send Your Wife to San Jose?*

Before we launch into the time-honored, pious celebrations of the Bard's universality, we might ask ourselves exactly what it is that we are celebrating as universal. Shakespearean productions in Mark Twain's America were themselves often close to farce; the Duke's travesty of Hamlet in *Huck Finn* is an exaggeration: "To be, or not to be, that is the bare bodkin." And this license was not the consequence of the gaucherie of the young republic but the sign of its continuity with a vital tradition of theatrical practice extending back to Shakespeare's own time. The plays have from the outset been heavily cut, revised, translated, transformed; they are reset in other countries and times, characters' names are changed, new characters are introduced; opening scenes are dropped, songs and dances are added, plots (most of them borrowed to begin with) are drastically revised. These are not the perversities of modern producers. From the late 16th century on they have been standard, and entirely appropriate, theatrical procedures. Indeed, without this extreme flexibility there could be no widespread cult, no massive academic priesthood, no World Shakespeare Congress. But what do we imagine survives these metamorphoses? What is the aesthetic essence that we profess to celebrate? And what if we are forced to conclude that there is no essence?

Shakespeare, writes the celebrated Canadian critic Northrop Frye in a book entitled simply *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, "has two sides to him." One is the "historical side," the London playwright who had to worry about censorship, keep a close eye on box-office receipts, calculate what would please both king and apprentice. The other is someone Frye calls "the poet." It is important to acquaint ourselves with the historical Shakespeare because an encounter with the different values,

beliefs, and customs of another culture is one of the rewards of a liberal education; it is important to study the poet Shakespeare because in doing so we can “look into the greatest mystery of literature, the mystery of how someone can communicate with times and spaces and cultures so far removed from his own.”

As the reference to liberal education suggests, Frye’s Shakespeare is closely bound up with the goals of the modern university. Frye insists upon the centrality of the theater—“in every play Shakespeare wrote, the hero or central character is the theatre itself”—but the theatre invoked here is not a particular social institution embedded in a given time and place; it is a transcendent idea, an organizing principle, a prophetic vision of life. The social space that actually makes itself powerfully felt in Frye’s book is less the theater than the classroom. The chapters retain many of the phrases of the lecture hall: “Resist the temptation,” he tells his readers, “to talk in your essays” about Shakespeare’s own personal beliefs or psychic vicissitudes; “For all the rest of the plays in this course we have the Folio text only.” These are lecture notes for “Shakespeare IA.”

The students in Frye’s course are not taught to ignore history altogether, but they are instructed to keep in mind that the greatest mystery lies elsewhere. Hence it is not surprising that both the social and the literary history they learn is neat, clear-cut, and curiously beside the point. Shakespeare “didn’t use the drama for anything”; “there is never anything outside his plays that he wants to ‘say’ or talk about in the plays”; with “the instincts of a born courtier,” he safely mirrored the “deeply conservative” attitudes of his audience, but the power of his plays derives from a different instinct, an instinct for the dramatic that is “little short of infallible.” Frye takes as his principal task the elucidation of that infallibility through introductory readings of ten of the major plays. Each of the readings, shaped no doubt by the demands of the lecture hall, is careful, clear, and judicious, sensitive to the nuances of language and plot, gracefully wide-ranging while at the same time attentive to detail. Occasionally, Frye ventures further: *Romeo and Juliet* as “sacrificial victims” in an ancient, archetypal story; the supernatural in *Hamlet* as “the clicking and whirring of a sacramental machine”; Cleopatra as the “White Goddess” chronicled by Robert Graves.

But these are brief flashes. There is little in this book to recall the startling architectonic power of Frye’s famous *Anatomy of Criticism*, or the daring investigation of the archetypal structure of Shakespearean tragedy and romance in his *The Fools of Time* and *A Natural Perspective*. Frye feels, I imagine, that students must grasp home truths before they can proceed to the higher wisdom. But while Frye’s individual readings are shrewd, his home truths often seem to me profoundly misleading, and they cast a disturbing light on the assumptions that would appear to underlie his more sophisticated writing.

Most of the powerful work done over the past decade in both Shakespeare criticism and literary theory has demolished the cozy distinction between the historical and the poetic. In part this demolition has involved the re-embedding of poetry in its social and cultural situation, an assault upon the autonomy of the literary. The assault has had particular force in Renaissance studies, because 16th- and 17th-century European culture had so little sense of literary autonomy, least of all in the theater. At the same time the historical, once understood to be a privileged realm of neutral facts, has been reconceived as intimately bound up with symbolic practices, conflicting strategies of interpretation, armed mythologies. Moreover, the notion of a mysterious communication with the past, an access through literature to a timeless realm of archetypes, has been greatly unsettled. Close analyses of reception—that is, of the particular strategies of interpretation and experiences of pleasure that shape responses to works of art—have called into question the whole idea of a transcendent archetypal repertory that artistic geniuses somehow make available to all men and women. Those analyses have directed attention instead to the ways in which specific cultures constitute systems of meaning and hence to the shifting interests encoded in any given conception of the past.

Frye clearly opposes these critical tendencies, sometimes loosely grouped together as “the new historicism.” It would have been fascinating to see him make a strong case against them, but instead he simply ignores the challenge. He speaks of the “priority of mythology to ideology,” as if he could burrow down beneath the contingent pleasures, anxieties, and interests of particular places and times, but in this book at least he succeeds only in marginalizing the “historical Shakespeare” and making the “poetic Shakespeare” seem at once infallible and bloodless. History here is reduced to a carefully painted diorama before which the critic has placed an impeccable stuffed figure of the Poet.

5. Schoenbaum, S. “Up the Wall with Hamlet.” *New York Times Book Review*, 30 November 1986, 15.

Although Northrop Frye has never stayed for long from his native Canada during his academic career, intellectually he has always been fabulous voyager. Born in Quebec 74 years ago, Mr. Frye took his first degree at the University of Toronto and (following three years of theology, and a stint at the University of Oxford) chose to join the faculty of his alma mater, which he has served with extraordinary distinction and devotion for almost half a century, as, among other things, principal and then chancellor of Victoria College. For a while he edited *Canadian Forum*, and from 1950 to 1960 he wrote an annual critical and bibliographical survey of Canadian poetry. But the whole literary imagination is Mr. Frye’s turf. Mythical, anthropological critical strategies engage him; he is concerned with the social context of literary criticism.

The most celebrated of his many books is *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), often characterized as seminal—properly so, I think. It deals with Shakespeare, Milton’s epics, Blake’s “fearful symmetry,” English Romanticism and T.S. Eliot; but early and late Mr. Frye returns to Shakespeare. For the great anatomizer of criticism, the pattern of Shakespearean comedy reenacts rituals of death and revival. In *A Natural Perspective* he wrote, “Each play of Shakespeare is a world in itself, so complete and satisfying a world that it is easy and profitable to get lost in it.” Now, more than twenty years later, Mr. Frye happily gets lost in Shakespeare again. As Edgar says to his blinded father in the fierce last act of *King Lear* “Ripeness is all.”

Mr. Frye tells us his undergraduate Shakespeare lectures were taped by Robert Sandler for years. Mr. Frye has altered the fifty-minute lecture format to come up with a continuous discussion of each play. He mainly keeps his eye on the big numbers. For him these are *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Bolingbroke plays (*Richard II* and the two parts of *Henry IV*), *Measure for Measure*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*. I am glad to see *Antony and Cleopatra* in this select company. The play has always been one of my own favorites (maybe my favorite, if such an election is possible), but students and playgoers don’t encounter it often. Mr. Frye sees *King Lear*, quite properly, as the central Shakespeare play for our time, just as *Hamlet* was for the 19th and early 20th centuries, “when so many cultural factors revolved around the difficulties of uniting action and the consciousness of action.” To him *Antony and Cleopatra* is “the play that looks most like the kind of world we seem to be moving into now.” If the theater is the central character in all of Shakespeare’s plays, *Cleopatra* is “the essence of theatre.” Although the odds favor Antony on land in the disastrous engagement at Actium, she insists on a seafight, “because there would be nowhere to see her in a land operation.”

Now and then Mr. Frye touches passingly on other plays. “If we were Shakespeare,” he writes, “we may feel, we wouldn’t write an anti-Semitic play like *The Merchant of Venice*, or a sexist play like *Taming of the Shrew*, or a knockabout farce like *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, or a brutal melodrama like *Titus Andronicus*. But—as Mr. Frye well knows—the *Merchant* is more than a brutal melodrama. The

Shrew on stage continues to appeal mightily to spectators of both sexes, who laugh heartily without pangs of remorse or outbursts of male-chauvinist bravado.

In the 18th century, a contemporary reports, the actor Charles Macklin gave Shylock “such an iron-visaged look, such a relentless, savage cast of manners, that the audience seemed to shrink from the character, nor could they recover the true tone of their feelings till the merchant was liberated from the fangs of such a merciless creditor.” Early in the next century Heinrich Heine, himself a Christian but born of Jewish parents, saw the *Merchant* at Drury Lane when he visited London and never got over the experience. “There stood behind me in the box,” he recalled afterward, “a pale, fair Briton, who at the end of the Fourth Act, fell to weeping passionately, several times exclaiming, ‘The poor man is wronged! . . . I have never been able to forget those large and black eyes that wept for Shylock!’” Which is Shakespeare’s Jew? Both, of course—the Jew of the play’s main voice, expressive of the status quo, and the Jew of the subversive opposing voice. (I use, in a somewhat different sense, Maynard Mack’s pregnant terminology.) Now the opposing voice has become the dominant, sometimes the exclusive, voice on the stage. I hear that *Merchant of Venice* is the most popular of Shakespeare’s plays in performance in the State of Israel.

The tone of *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare* is informal; the vocabulary includes “big deal,” “gimmick” and “O.K.” In *Romeo and Juliet* Capulet is “corny”; Hamlet’s mother drives her son “up the wall.” Of Octavia, for whom Antony abandons Cleopatra transiently for a politic marriage, Mr. Frye says, “Octavia, now, is the kind of woman who does exactly what she should do in a man’s world, and bores the hell out of Antony.” There are other telltale signs of the book’s lecture-hall genesis. Like the good lecturer he undoubtedly is, Mr. Frye sets before his class the hierarchy of the universe in four categories and, as a follow-up, another four for the order of the world. When he turns to Shakespeare’s history plays, he provides a handy table of intermarriages among royalty from the reign of Edward III to that of Henry VII.

The author doesn’t take very much for granted. He tells his students that a “tetralogy” is a group of four plays and that “miles gloriosus” signifies a braggart soldier—after all, not everybody in Toronto can be expected to have seen *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. Mr. Frye allows that the Shakespeare apocrypha are “a very interesting collection of plays” and invites his audience to take a look at some of them, especially *A Yorkshire Tragedy*. (While they’re at it, they’d do well to look also at *Arden of Feversham*, an anonymous humdinger of a play.) He tells them that the sheets of Elizabethan quartos are folded twice, those of folios once, and that there are good quartos and bad quartos. He anticipates nonspecialist impatience in an ironic aside: “I expect you to be following this with bated breath.”

Occasionally he has been overtaken by events. He says Shakespeare’s three early Henry VI plays, dramatizing the Wars of the Roses (not, as here, the War of the Roses) can still be “marvellously effective dramas” when shortened and skillfully edited, “as they were recently.” I gather he is referring to the freewheeling Peter Hall-John Barton adaptation presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1964. But the un-Bartonized plays have since been revived by the same company with reasonably full texts—to considerable artistic and commercial success. These productions Mr. Frye seems to have missed altogether; at least they receive no mention in his pages.

He also appears to be unaware of where the action is these days on the western Shakespearean front. *King Lear* has come down in two authentic early texts, the 1608 quarto edition and the First Folio of 1623. These versions differ from each other strikingly: almost 300 lines found in the quarto are not present in the Folio, and the Folio has 100 lines not in the quarto. Since the 18th century, editors have traditionally conflated the two texts. The new view, first seriously put forth in a public forum ten years ago, maintains that the two texts represent two versions of a play that haunted Shakespeare sufficiently for him to return to it: the Folio text is Shakespeare’s considered modification of his earlier script. Thus the conflated version almost all students read today is a play that never

existed. The new Oxford University Press edition of the complete works of Shakespeare has *King Lear* followed by—you guessed it—*King Lear*.

But *Frye on Shakespeare* has plenty of good things unfussily set forth. Mr. Frye is surely right when he says that when catching a play on the stage or on film, we have to listen as carefully as we do to music, for themes may be introduced with seeming casualness and developed later on. Thus in *Romeo and Juliet* Friar Laurence discourses on herbs, some of them poisonous. After Tybalt is killed and Romeo banished, Lady Capulet tells Juliet not to worry, Romeo can be put out of the way with poison. And in the last act the poisoning theme becomes, as Mr. Frye puts it, fortissimo. He looks closely at three constantly repeated words in *King Lear*—"nature," "nothing" and "fool." He talks about images of useless sacrifice and of the continuous fertilizing power of nature in *The Winter's Tale*, as well as the effects wrought by the words "wonder," "grace" and "faith." A map, accompanied by a proposal to carve up a country, is a dreaded visual image Shakespeare used to powerful effect in *Henry IV, Part One*, and *King Lear*. Mr. Frye sees *Hamlet* as the most stifling and claustrophobic of plays and Hamlet as "perhaps the most impressive example in literature of a titanic spirit thrashing around in the prison of what it is." Caliban—the "savage and deformed slave" in the list of characters of *The Tempest* given in the First Folio—is human, and the ability to grasp his humanity is something of a test of character in the observer. It is a test that not all observers, even professional Shakespeareans, would pass.

Undergraduate lectures these may be, but the sensibility and wisdom informing the book make it a delight for the expert too. I suppose I like Mr. Frye's discussions of *Antony and Cleopatra* and *King Lear* best. I was moved by his last paragraph on the latter. "In the final scenes particularly," Mr. Frye says, "we see both what's in front of us, where 'all's cheerless, dark and deadly,' and the power of language that will not stop expanding, even when it starts to press into the mystery that's blocked off from us by death. We don't know the answers; we don't know that there are no answers. Tragedy forces on us a response of acceptance: we have to say, 'Yes, this kind of thing is human life too.' But by making that response we've accepted something much deeper: that what is defined or made finite by words becomes infinite through the power of words."

Lucky undergraduates! Ripeness indeed is all, and of ripeness there is no shortage in *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*.

Other Reviews

Adams, Robert Martin. "New Bards for Old." *New York Review of Books*, 6 November 1986, 50–1.

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