



PHILOSOPHICAL
PEARLS *OF THE*
SHAKESPEAREAN DEEP

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Rembrandt van Rijn, *Aristotle with Bust of Homer*, 1653.

Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

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For Irma B. Jaffe

*“‘Fair, kind, and true,’ is all my argument.
‘Fair, kind, and true,’ have often lived alone,
Which three till now, never kept seat in one.”*

—Shakespeare (SON 105)



“Poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature of universals, whereas those of history are singular.”

—Aristotle, *Poetics*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

My introduction to Shakespeare was through *Macbeth*, which I read in a Persian translation in 1934 when I was a sixteen-year-old student in Tehran, my native city. Excited, I found in our school library other plays by this author in English, which I read nonstop over and over again. However, at the University of California at Berkeley, where I arrived fourteen years later, studied philosophy, and eventually received a PhD, my studies and my academic career left little time to read outside of my field (the most frequent of academic complaints!) until as a professor of philosophy at Roosevelt University in Chicago I was able to offer a course in the philosophy of literature. Thus, Shakespeare came back into my life and I have been absorbed in the plays and poems ever since.

I wish to thank my dear friend Professor Irma B. Jaffe for her tireless efforts in editing my book, and Steven L. Mitchell, editor in chief of Prometheus Books, for his constructive criticism.

ABBREVIATIONS OF SHAKESPEAREAN TITLES

ADO	<i>Much Ado about Nothing</i>
ANT	<i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>
AWW	<i>All's Well that Ends Well</i>
AYL	<i>As You Like It</i>
COR	<i>Coriolanus</i>
CYM	<i>Cymbeline</i>
ERR	<i>The Comedy of Errors</i>
F1	<i>First Folio ed. (1623)</i>
F2	<i>Second Folio ed. (1632)</i>
HAM	<i>Hamlet</i>
1H4	<i>Henry IV, Part 1</i>
2H4	<i>Henry IV, Part 2</i>
H5	<i>Henry V</i>
1H6	<i>Henry VI, Part 1</i>
2H6	<i>Henry VI, Part 2</i>
3H6	<i>Henry VI, Part 3</i>
H8	<i>Henry VIII</i>
JC	<i>Julius Caesar</i>
JN	<i>King John</i>
LC	<i>A Lover's Complaint</i>
LLL	<i>Love's Labour Lost</i>
LR	<i>King Lear</i>
LUC	<i>The Rape of Lucrece</i>
MAC	<i>Macbeth</i>
MM	<i>Measure for Measure</i>
MND	<i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
MV	<i>The Merchant of Venice</i>
OTH	<i>Othello</i>
PHT	<i>The Phoenix and the Turtle</i>
PP	<i>The Passionate Pilgrim</i>

Q	<i>Quarto ed.</i>
R2	<i>Richard II</i>
R3	<i>Richard III</i>
ROM	<i>Romeo and Juliet</i>
SHR	<i>The Taming of the Shrew</i>
SON	<i>Sonnets</i>
TGV	<i>Two Gentlemen of Verona</i>
TIM	<i>Timon of Athens</i>
TIT	<i>Titus Andronicus</i>
TMP	<i>The Tempest</i>
TN	<i>Twelfth Night</i>
TNK	<i>The Two Noble Kinsmen</i>
TRO	<i>Troilus and Cressida</i>
VEN	<i>Venus and Adonis</i>
WIV	<i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i>
WT	<i>The Winter's Tale</i>

PREFACE

The presence of philosophical thought in Shakespeare has been acknowledged by many literary critics from William Richardson, *A Philosophical Analysis of Shakespeare* (1774); W. J. Birch, *An Inquiry into the Philosophy and Religions of Shakespeare* (1848); and K. J. Spalding, *The Philosophy of Shakespeare* (1963); to Wyndham Lewis, *The Lion and the Fox. The Role of the Hero in the Plays of Shakespeare* (1930). However, this aspect of Shakespeare's plays and poems has been denied by a number of writers including Bernard Shaw, *Epistle Didactory to Man and Superman* (1903); André Gide, *Letters-Preface* (the translation of *Hamlet*); George Santayana, *Interpretation of Poetry and Religion* (1900); and T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (1964). In recent times the issue has been revived largely due to the linguistic turn in philosophy by literary critics such as A. D. Nuttall in his *Shakespeare the Thinker* and by Colin McGinn, a philosopher by profession who discusses six plays in his *Shakespeare's Philosophy* in the context of his perception that doubt and uncertainty are evident in the characters throughout the plays. Those critics have contributed valuable insights in their investigations of philosophy in Shakespeare's works.

Like McGinn, I am also a philosopher by profession. My aim in this book is to reveal Shakespeare's use of the heritage of rich thoughts he acquired and expanded upon, not in a few quotations, as others have done, but to string the many philosophical pearls, the conceptual inventions, from the Shakespearean deep on strands of the *philosophical issues* that have preoccupied Western philosophy since ancient times so as to present to the reader a necklace of rare beauty. Thus, I have considered philosophy in the Bard's works through the use of such philosophical issues as universals and particulars; time: objective, subjective, and personal; reason, will, and passion; sign, sense, and denotation (semantics); and moral and political values (pragmatics) as they appear throughout his entire oeuvre rather than point them out as they are found in various plays.¹

My approach reveals the clear and evident relationship of Shakespeare's thought, as expressed through the characters in the plays as well as by the speaker of the sonnets, to the expression of similar ideas found in the writings of the ancient classical philosophers and the Renaissance humanists. We may take as examples, among many, Hamlet's eulogy of the human being as a paragon of animals compared with Pico della Mirandola's oration on the dignity of man, which we quote in [chapter 1](#), and Richard III, for whom, as for Thrasymachus in the *Republic*, justice is in the interest of the stronger. "Conscience is but a word that cowards use devised at first to keep the strong in awe. Our strong arm be our conscience, sword, or laws." In the *Prince* Machiavelli argues that the prince may violate all moral principles in the interest of the state.

The presence of these philosophical concepts, the detailed depiction of the glories and miseries of humankind, the "invention of the human" (according to Harold

Bloom), the conception of art, and the exultation of nature as God all speak of Shakespeare as a secular humanist. He was a humanist such as were his contemporaries Erasmus, Thomas More, and Francis Bacon, the notable figures of the northern Renaissance, which followed the Italian Renaissance minus its religious context; his philosophical views resemble particularly the naturalistic ideas of Bacon. Shakespeare was aware of the writing of some Italian Renaissance writers such as Pico della Mirandola and Castiglione, and shared their antischolastic views although not their Neo-Platonism.

Shakespeare's erudition is celebrated in a Latin inscription on the monument at his grave site: JUDICIO PYLUM, GENIO SOCRATUM ARTE MARONNEM, TERRA TEGIT, POPULUS MAERET, OLYMPUS HABET (A Nestor in judgment, a Socrates in intellect, a Virgil in art: the earth covers him, the people mourn him, and Olympus has him). Readers of this book will doubtless be surprised and delighted, as I was, when I first encountered the extraordinary echoes from Homer, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Lucretius, Ovid, Horace, Virgil, and from Dante to Machiavelli, Montaigne, Erasmus, and others, most of which have never been discussed heretofore.

I hope that this book will delight, inform, and enrich its readers as it provides the clasp that holds together the pearls that make the necklace—Shakespeare's gift, which, with his substantial heritage, he has bequeathed to "ages hence . . . and states unborn." It has been said that each age discovers something new in the great works of art of the past unrecognized by previous generations.

As M. M. Bakhtin observed of the Bard, "He has grown because of that which actually has been and continues to be found in his work but that neither himself nor his contemporaries could consciously perceive and evaluate in the context of the culture of their epoch."²

Let us, then, not lose sight of the philosophical pearls of the Shakespearian deep while we are still under the spell of the poet's enchanting songs and the wonder of his stage.

INTRODUCTION

“Poetry is more philosophic and of graver import than history.”

—Aristotle, *Poetics*

According to Cicero, Socrates “brought down from heaven to the cities and homes of men” the enduring philosophical issues that, acknowledged or not, determine human behavior. These are the issues that drive the actions of the characters in Shakespeare’s plays and their presence in the plays doubtless explains why audiences as well as scholars and general readers have for centuries and over vast continents continue to meditate and ponder over what they see and hear and read in his works.¹

A cursory look at the folio and the poems reveals without question the Bard’s keen awareness of the vast literature of philosophical thought that was available in Elizabethan culture, both in the original texts and in translations. Shakespeare’s treatment of various philosophical issues is drawn from many sources, beginning with Socrates’ conversation in the *Apology*, the *Ion*, and the *Phaedo* (the “Socratic dialogues”), in which Plato records his master’s voice, and to Plato’s dialogues, in particular the *Republic* and the *Symposium*. Plato’s dialogues constitute one of the main sources of philosophical ideas in this book. Consider the following examples:

On beauty, the good, and truth:

“Fair, kind, and true is all my argument.”

On love and lust:

“O, powerful love! that in some respects make a beast a man and in some others make a man a beast.”

On art mirroring nature:

“There is an art which in their piedness shares with great creating nature.”

On seeing in the same light the lunatic, the lover and the poet:

“[they] are of imagination all compact and dissimilar in their words and actions.”

On time—objective, subjective, and personal:

“Time’s thievish progress to eternity”

On time:

“that goes slow and swift and short in folly and in sport.” On time that “must have a stop by death”

On intimations of immortality:

“the dread of something after death, the undiscovered country.”

On pricks of conscience:

“this deity in my bosom.”

On inwardness:

“I have that within which passeth the show.”

On the problem of others' minds:

“There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face.”

On the role of reason:

“as physician to love, not his counselor.”

On values: “what is aught but as 'tis valu'd.”

On language:

“They have been at great feat of languages.”

On words:

“Words are very rascals since bonds disgrace them.”

On the ideal of the commonwealth—the Republic:

“I would with such perfection govern

To excel the golden age.”

Aristotle, it hardly has to be said, was another highly important source for Shakespeare, especially his *Poetics* on the concept of tragedy and the tragic hero as universal persona as well as his *Nicomachean Ethics* on virtue, happiness, and on the contrasting values of active and contemplative ways of life.

The inquiry into the nature of language is an ancient philosophical enterprise. Socrates begins his critical inquiry into the ordinary language used by the common folk about such concepts as justice, piety, and beauty, and ends with his demand for a precise definition of words that convey such values. Shakespeare, too, like Socrates, sharpened our awareness of words, as A. J. Austin observed, to sharpen our perception of the phenomena. The poet indeed is an alchemist who, like the poet in *Timon of Athens*, has turned the base metal of the world into his golden words. We are reminded of Nietzsche who thanked Socrates for casting enough light to make his own thoughts visible. That saying *mutatis mutandis* applies to Shakespeare. Although the Socratic concern was purely philosophical and his method was dialectical, the outcome was similar. The philosopher and the poet both sharpen our perception of the world, so we may rise above it, unlike the animals that exist only in the world according to their perceptions, as Schopenhauer observed.

Shakespeare knew intuitively what the Stoic philosophers had written theoretically about the nature of language. The Stoics' views on signs, denotation, sense, and connotations that were recently discovered² are reflected often in connection with the meaning of words and the black magic of names (Romeo and Juliet, Clarence, Rosalind, and Cinna). One player (Biondella) complains that “his master has left [him] behind to expound the meaning and the morals of his signs and tokens”; another (Juliet), laments, “'Tis but thy name that is my enemy; O! be some other name. What's in a name?”³

Stoic cosmology, which places the microhuman within the macrouniverse, and its moral prescription of the triumph of the will on facing death and disasters, along with the semantics of the old Stoics, appears in many of Shakespeare's plays and poems, as well as Epicurean materialism with its belief in pleasure as the ultimate good, and on death as utter annihilation. There are allusions to Pyrrhonic skepticism that “modest doubt [is] the beacon of the wise”; to Machiavellian power politics, “policy sits above conscience”; to egocentric psychology; to Montaigne's prescriptivism and his criticism of rational theology and to moral absolutism; and Erasmus's humanism in *Praise of*

Folly and his rejection of slavery.

We hear the mockery of mediaeval beliefs in miracles; of judicial astrology; of the efficacy of final causes—that barren vestal virgin of natural philosophy—of mystics of titles, names, and numerals; of the divine right of anointed kings and the laws of primogeniture. We hear one player (clown) saying, “I say there is no darkness but ignorance, in which thou art more puzzled than the Egyptians in their fog.” Here Shakespeare repeats the second line of the character Machiavelli in Marlowe’s *The Jew of Malta*, “I count religion but a childish toy . . . and hold there’s no sin but ignorance,” but cautiously changes “sin” to “darkness.” In *The Merchant of Venice*, Bassano says, “The world is still deceived with ornament . . . in religion, what damned error but some sober brow will bless it and approve it with text, hiding the grossness with fair ornament.” In *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, we hear Berowne’s skeptical remarks about reading and learning “from base authority,” and other books, and his mockery of astrology:

These earthly godfathers of heaven’s lights
That give a name to every fixed star
Have no more profit of their shining nights
Than those that walk and wo’t not what they are.

The “base authority from others’ books” is an allusion to Aristotle whose authority was constantly invoked by the scholastics. The very criticism appears in a poem by John Dryden (1631–1700) who, after mocking scholasticism, then expressed his admiration for Columbus “who was the first who shook Aristotle’s throne,” and boasts of the English contributions to science such as Francis Bacon who explained that heat is caused by motion, and Robert Boyle’s contribution to chemistry, William Harvey’s discovery of the circulation of the blood, and William Gilbert’s explanation of magnetic power. John Dryden’s poem “His Learned and Useful Words” is dedicated to his learned friend Dr. Charleton. Dryden wrote,

The longest tyranny that ever sway’d
Was that wherein our ancestors betrayed
Their free-born reason to the Stagirete,
And made his torch their universal light.⁴

The same admirer of science and new discoveries and debunker of scholasticism speaks of Shakespeare as “The man who of all modern and perhaps ancient poets had the largest and most comprehensive soul.” Dryden, who became the poet laureate of King Charles II and was an erudite scholar and poet, defends Shakespeare against the charge of lacking classical education, “small Latin and less Greek” with his sharp remark that “He needed not the spectacles of Books to read Nature.”

Francis Bacon (1561–1626), who is called by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822) “the poet of science,” sharply criticized the scholastic education at Oxford, where he studied. Thus he argued that education at Oxford was a waste whereas the study of natural philosophy is of the greatest benefit to humankind. He proposed that students should use their “sovereign reason” in search of efficient causes of events and read the

Book of Nature. Bacon held that new discoveries and recent inventions in Europe such as the printing press, gunpowder, and the compass had changed the course of civilization. In his book *Novum Organum* he writes of “the Idols of Theater,” that is, the uncritical acceptance of the received systems of thought.⁵ Idols are his symbols of scholastic dogma, and there are many kinds of idols. He argues that knowledge is power not only over ourselves, as in Socrates’ injunction “Know thyself,” but also over nature. He compared natural philosophers to King Solomon in his great quest for truth—as if God were playing hide and seek with man. “Solomon the king although he excelled in the glory of treasure and magnificent building—yet he maketh no claim to any of these glories, but only to the glory of inquiring after truth, for he saith expressly ‘the glory of God is to conceal a thing but the glory of the king is to find it out,’ as if according to the innocent play of children, the Divine Majesty took delight in hiding his secrets to the end of having them find them out.”⁶

Shakespeare used almost the same metaphor when in *King Lear*, Lear says,

so we’ll live, And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
at gilded butterflies . . .
And take upon’s the mystery of things
As if we were God’s spies. (LR,V:3)

In *Antony and Cleopatra* the same metaphor is expressed by Charmian:

Cha.: “Is this the man? Is’t you sir that knows things?”

The Soothsayer answers,

“in nature’s infinite book of secrecy/
A little I can read.” (ANT, I:2)

Note the revolutionary Baconian ideas expressed by Lafeu in *All’s Well that Ends Well*:

They say miracles are past;
and we have our philosophical persons,
to make modern and familiar, things
supernatural and causeless.

Par.: Why ’tis the rarest argument of wonder that hath shot out in our latter times.

Laf.: To be relinquished of the artists, of all learned and authentic fellows?

Par.: Right, so I say.

Laf.: I may truly say it is a novelty to the world. (AWW, II:3)

Shakespeare makes frequent references to mathematics and to science, which in his time was called Natural Philosophy. These references reveal his deep knowledge of the beliefs, predilections, and understandings of his contemporaries.⁷ In *Troilus and Cressida* Ulysses refers to the parallel axiom,

That's done; —as near as the extremest ends.
Of parallels (TRO, I:3)

In *King Lear* the Fool tells Lear,

Thou wast a pretty fellow . . . now thou art an O without a figure . . . thou art nothing [zero]. (LR, I:4)

In *Two Gentlemen of Verona* a player reveals the progress in popular knowledge when he refers to his earlier belief in the Ptolemaic universe saying,

At first I did adore a twinkling star
But now I worship a celestial sun. (TGV, III:6)

In *Troilus and Cressida* Ulysses makes an analogy between the solar system and the early kingdom ruled by a king.

And therefore is the glorious planet Sol
In noble eminence enthron'd and spher'd
Amidst the others; whose medicinal eye
Corrects the ill aspects of planets evil,
And posts, like the commandments of a king
Sans check, to good and bad. (TRO, I:3)

In *Midsummer Night's Dream* a player refers to the moon's gravity, "The moon, the governor of floods" (MND, II:3) and in *Hamlet* Horatio speaks of the eclipses of the sun that occurred in Rome before the mighty Julius fell (HAM, I:1). Shakespeare's admiration for science is evident where he lets the enlightened Duke of Burgundy in *Henry V* speak of the importance of science in the education of children who were acting like savages.

And as our vineyards, fallows, meads, and hedges,
Defective in their natures, grow to wildness,
Even so our houses and ourselves and children
Have lost, or do not learn for want of time,
The sciences that should become our country
But grow like savages,— (H5, V:2)

In *All's Well that Ends Well* the king of France is presented as somewhat of a fool who believes in the magical power of his ring as superior to the science of medicine.

Plutus himself
That knows the tinct and multiplying medicine,
Hath not in nature's mystery more science
Than I have in this ring (AWW, V:3)

Again, in *Love's Labour's Lost* there are certain allusions to the virtue of knowledge, and the importance of language and philosophy, albeit with a caveat that there is no true learning without true love. When the king of Navarre in imitation of the Renaissance practice of establishing academies for the pursuit of knowledge says,

Navarre shall be the wonder of the world;
Our court shall be a little academe
Still and contemplative in living art.

Dumaine (one of the king's councilors), speaks like a Stoic philosopher:

My loving lord, Dumaine is mortified;
The grosser manner of these world's delights
He throws upon the gross world's baser slaves:
To wealth, to wealth, to pomp, I pine and die;
With all those living in philosophy. (LLL, I:1)

However, Browne qualifies the king's command for pursuit of knowledge without love saying,

From women's eyes this doctrine I derive:
They sparkle still the right Promethean fire.
They are the books, the arts, the academes
That show, contain and nourish all the world. (LLL, IV:3)

There are other references to "academe," cultural institutions that developed in Italy beginning in the fifteenth century, called such after Plato's academy, which was located in the sacred grove of the demigod Academus outside the walls of Athens.

Shakespeare's command of language and his creative power of imagination have been extolled by many writers. Nietzsche admired Shakespeare's evident knowledge and intellectual imagination when he alludes to Hamlet's comment:

There are more things in Heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy. (HAM, I:5)

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, the speaker says, "Alas, there are so many things between heaven and earth, of which only the poets have dreamed."⁸ It is not Shakespeare's imagination alone that Nietzsche admired, but the overwhelming power of his language that served his imagination. The Bard's love for his native language is well known and evident in his use of a vast vocabulary. "There is no other writer like Shakespeare for condensing ideas and feelings into memorable words and phrases," wrote Jonathan Bate in *The Genius of Shakespeare*.⁹

Ben Jonson, his most rigorous critic and admirer, is not alone in eulogizing the poet. Printed on the first page of Jonson's First Folio he wrote:

Sweet swan of Avon! Soul of the Age!

The applause! Delight! The wonder of our stage.¹⁰

The poet himself makes insightful predictions about the significance of his artistic achievement and the future performance of his play. He lets Cassius speak for him:

How many ages hence
Shall this our lofty scene be acted o'er
In states unborn and accents yet unknown! (JC, III:4)

So, too, says the Speaker of the sonnets:

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see
So long live this and this gives life to thee (SON 18)

and

When tyrant's crests and tombs of brass are spent
And thou in this shall find thy monument. (SON 1-7)

Shakespeare's astonishing prediction about performances of his play through the ages in states unborn and accents yet unknown (for example America and India) was as accurate as the predictions of his contemporary natural scientists (Galileo, who was born in the same year)—astonishing because there is more predictability in the course of heavenly bodies than there is within the cultural world.

The richness of Shakespeare's tragedies has been compared by some critics to the simplicity of his comedies; however, the seeming simplicity of those compressed ideas in his comedies and the brief philosophical utterances of the players and the speaker of the sonnets are deceptive: "But all noble things," as Spinoza reworded Plato, "are as difficult as they are rare." Shakespeare's most difficult and intended paradoxical and enigmatic language and oblique allusions to antiquity and the biblical literature were a challenge to his audience, the courtiers, lawyers, and university fellows and have continued to be through the centuries; in our own times Helen Vendler, Stephen Greenblatt, and other Shakespeare scholars have commented on certain difficulties in the language.

There were also common folk among the audience who were familiar with their legends and morality plays and who were rewarded by merely watching the plays while standing through the performance. Hamlet, who directs the players in the "mouse-trap," referred to those "groundlings" when he says, "to split the ears of groundlings who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise." Coriolanus's mother, Volumnia, says the same thing about the ignorant citizens: "action is eloquent, and the eyes of the ignorant more learned than their ears" (COR, III:2). The ears of groundlings hearing less and the eyes of the ignorant learning more tells us something about the presence of theater-loving, ordinary English citizens.

Notwithstanding the presence of philosophical thoughts and the humanist ideas and values of the English Renaissance in the text, we shall avoid making unwarranted