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## The Elizabethan Review

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That was word-perfect in your head. In anger,  
You tell me to be silent. 'Still, how strange  
That you should sing the same strange song I'm dreaming.  
Perhaps I hummed or drummed it? and you heard.'

No, music, I've no natural explanations.  
You did not sing—but I have mocked your song  
In broken accents, for my own amusement.  
One day with a true voice I'd like to tell  
How sometimes we catch breath and sing together  
The same strange song, knowing we need no other.

Fiction is a way of understanding life and the world and offering that understanding to others. The dramatic monologue of Robert Nye's *Mrs. Shakespeare* dresses abstractions in lively Elizabethan clothes and tells of the uneasy marriage between truth and poetry in a voice that is marked by uncommon sense, frankness, and vitality. It is a thought-provoking entertainment that should not be missed.



## Books in Brief

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### Shylock

by John Gross. Simon and Schuster, 1993.

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John Gross's book does double duty for readers by looking at the dramatic character of Shylock from Elizabethan through modern times, delineating four centuries of theatrical performances, audience responses, and critical theories throughout the world. Equally important, Gross limns the play's background—and foreground—viz-a-viz Renaissance literature and social events. Finally, he provides readers with the most wide-ranging and knowledgeable examination of the play's legal underpinnings this reviewer has encountered. This *Shylock Variorum* may be the forerunner of a new type of scholarship, one that peers at dramatic characters through time and across the grain of source material, theater performance, and critical theory.

Aside from being an excellent read, *Shylock* allows us to look at this Shakespearean archetype from a myriad of perspectives; in fact, as many as the imagination can bear. Occasionally, the sheer number that Mr. Gross thrusts upon us breaks up the narrative with the multi-colored light of a very

large prism. While a neutral presentation of evidence is rare and valuable in an age of ideological hostility, the author's refusal to present his own views until the final pages detracts slightly from an otherwise exemplary achievement. —GBG

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**The Essential Shakespeare**

by Ted Hughes. The Ecco Press, 1991.

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Mr. Hughes has produced, to my mind, the best study on how Shakespeare composed his plays, surgically laying out the technical and cultural mechanism of Shakespeare's dramatic poetry. To start, Hughes argues that Shakespeare's dependence on the Court and the aristocracy was political, his dependence on the masses, financial. As a result, what the dramatist had to discover at every level—in theme, action, and word—was “a language of the common bond.” The common language of a profoundly articulated, esoteric, spiritual vision that also incorporated a language of dramatic, popular, tragic melodrama.

In forming this language, Shakespeare had to devise a method that could assimilate his uniquely large vocabulary of 25,000 words, most of which had never been heard by his audience. One of Shakespeare's solutions was to balance two nouns or two adjectives on either side of an “and”—and direct their combined and contrasted meanings to qualify a third word, always a noun. For instance, from *Richard III*, “a beauty-waning and distressed widow.” The deliberate interplay of the two qualifiers presents the widow from two points of view: the objective, “beauty-waning,” and the subjective, “distressed.” The new word is thus balanced in meaning with its well-known counterpart, thereby allowing the play-going audience to provide the necessary closure instantly.

Hughes presents in lucid detail how the problem of using new and sophisticated language in a dramatic context was successfully solved and refined by Shakespeare throughout his career. I believe that Hughes's 44-page introduction (to a large selection of Shakespeare's poetry) should henceforth serve as the standard general introduction for future editions of the Collected Works. Among scholarly overviews, only Hughes's monograph fully describes the playwright's working method of dramatic poetic composition. Until now, the subject seems to have been neglected by academics due to their lack of technical knowledge. With Mr. Hughes's contribution, however, general *and* academic readers can be offered the kind of in-depth knowledge that sustains a lifetime of reading and listening pleasure.

—GBG