

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

The Essential Shakespeare

by Ted Hughes. The Ecco Press, 1991.

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