which the dramatic spirit is capable; the conventional and melodramatic endings, the inconsistencies of action and even of character, the emotional confusions of tragicomedy, the com­plications of plot and subplot, the marring of the give-and-take of dialogue by superfluities of description and of argument, the jest and bombast lightly thrown in to suit the taste of the groundlings, all the flecks that to an instructed modern criticism are only too apparent upon the Shakespearian sun. It perhaps follows from this that the most fruitful way of approaching Shakespeare is by an analysis of his work rather as a process than as a completed whole. His outstanding positive quality is a vast comprehensiveness, a capacity for growth and assimilation, which leaves no aspect of life unexplored, and allows of no finality in the nature of his judgments upon life. It is the real and sufficient explanation and justification of the pains taken to determine the chronological order of his plays, that the secret of his genius lies in its power of development and that only by the study of its development can he be known. He was nearly thirty when, so far as we can tell, his career as a dramatist began; and already there lay behind him those six or seven unaccounted-for years since his marriage, passed no one knows where, and filled no one knows with what experience, but assuredly in that strenuous Elizabethan life with some experience kindling to his intellect and formative of his character. To the woodcraft and the familiarity with country sights and sounds which he brought with him from Stratford, and which mingle so oddly in his plays with a purely imaginary and euphuistic natural history, and to the book-learning of a provincial grammar-school boy, and perhaps, if Aubrey is right, also of a provincial school- master, he had somehow added, as he continued to add through- out his life, that curious store of acquaintance with the details of the most diverse occupations which has so often perplexed and so often misled his commentators. It was the same faculty of acquisition that gave him his enormous vocabulary, so far exceeding in range and variety that of any other English writer.

His first group of plays is largely made up of adaptations and revisions of existing work, or at the best of essays in the con­ventions of stage-writing which had already achieved popularity. In the Yorkist trilogy he takes up the burden of the chronicle play, in *The Comedy of Errors* that of the classical school drama and of the page-humour of Lyly, in *Titus Andronicus* that of the crude revenge tragedy of Kyd, and in *Richard III.* that of the Nemesis motive and the exaltation of the Machiavellian superman which properly belong to Marlowe. But in *Richard III.* be begins to come to his own with the subtle study of the actor’s temperament which betrays the working of a profound interest in the technique of his chosen profession. The style of the earliest plays is essentially rhetorical; the blank verse is stiff and little varied in rhythm; and the periods are built up of parallel and antithetic sentences, and punctuated with devices of iterations, plays upon words, and other methods of securing emphasis, that derive from the bad tradition of a popular stage, upon which the players are bound to rant and force the note in order to hold the attention of a dull-witted audience. During the plague-vacations of 1592 to 1594, Shakespeare tried his hand at the ornate descriptive poetry of *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece;* and the influence of this exercise, and possibly also of Italian travel, is apparent in the next group of plays, with their lyric notes, their tendency to warm southern colouring, their wealth of decorative imagery, and their elaborate and not rarely frigid conceits. Rhymed couplets make their appearance, side by side with blank verse, as a medium of dramatic dialogue. It is a period of experiment, in farce with *The Taming of the Shrew,* in satirical comedy with *Love’s Labour’s Lost,* in lyrical comedy with *A Midsummer Night’s Dream,* in lyrical tragedy with *Romeo and Juliet,* in lyrical history with *Richard II.,* and finally in romantic tragicomedy with *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and with the masterpiece of this singular genre, *The Merchant of Venice.* It is also the period of the sonnets, which have their echoes both in the phrasing and in the themes of the plays; in the black-browed Rosaline of *Love’s Labour’s Lost,* and in the issue between friendship and love which is variously

set in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and in *The Merchant of Venice.* But in the latter play the sentiment is already one of retrospection; the tempest of spirit has given way to the tender melancholy of renunciation. The sonnets seem to bear witness, not only to the personal upheaval of passion, but also to some despondency at the spite of fate and the disgrace of the actor’s calling. This mood too may have cleared away in the sunshine of growing popularity, of financial success, and of the possibly long-delayed return to Stratford. Certainly the series of plays written next after the travels of 1597 are light-hearted plays, less occupied with profound or vexatious searchings of spirit than with the delightful externalities of things. The histories from *King John to Henry V.* form a continuous study of the conditions of kingship, carrying on the political speculations begun in *Richard II.* and culminating in the brilliant picture of triumphant efficiency, the Henry of Agincourt. Meanwhile Shakespeare develops the astonishing faculty of humorous delineation of which he had given foretastes in Jack Cade, in Bottom the weaver, and in Juliet’s nurse; sets the creation of Falstaff in front of his vivid pictures of contemporary England; and passes through the half-comedy, half melodrama, of *Much Ado About Nothing* to the joyous farce of *The Merry Wives of Windsor,* and to his two perfectly sunny comedies the sylvan comedy of *You Like It* and the urban comedy of *Twelfth Night.*

Then there comes a change of mood, already heralded by *Julius Caesar,* which stands beside *Henry V.* as a reminder that efficiency has its seamy as well as its brilliant side. The tragedy of political idealism in Brutus is followed by the tragedy of intellectual idealism in *Hamlet',* and this in its turn by the three bitter and cynical pseudo-comedies, *All’s Well That Ends Well,* in which the creator of Portia, Beatrice, Rosalind and Viola drags the honour of womanhood in the dust—*Troilusand Cressida,* in which the ideals of heroism and of romance are confounded in the portraits of a wanton and a poltroon—and *Measure for Measure,* in which the searchlight of irony is thrown upon the paths of Providence itself. Upon the causes of this new perturbation in the soul of Shakespeare it is perhaps idle to speculate. The evidence of his profound disillusion and discouragement of spirit is plain enough; and for some years the tide of his pessi- mistic thought advances, swelling through the pathetic tragedy of *Othello* to the cosmic tragedies of *Macbeth* and *King Lear,* with their Titan-like indictments not of man alone, but of the heavens by whom man was made. Meanwhile Shakespeare’s style undergoes changes no less notable than those of his subject- matter. The ease and lucidity characteristic of the histories and comedies of his middle period give way to a more troubled beauty, and the phrasing and rhythm often tend to become elliptic and obscure, as if the thoughts were hurrying faster than speech can give them utterance. The period closes with *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus,* in which the ideals of the love of woman and the honour of man are once more stripped bare to display the skeletons of lust and egoism, and in the latter of which signs of exhaustion are already perceptible; and with *Timon of Athens,* in which the dramatist whips himself to an almost incoherent expression of a general loathing and detestation of humanity. Then the stretched cord suddenly snaps. *Timοn* is apparently unfinished, and the next play, *Pericles,* is in an entirely different vein, and is apparently finished but not begun. At this point only in the whole course of Shakespeare’s development there is a complete breach of continuity. One can only conjecture the occurrence of some spiritual crisis, an illness perhaps, or some process akin to what in the language of religion is called conversion, which left him a new man, with the fever of pessimism behind him, and at peace once more with Heaven and the world.

The final group of plays, the Shakespearian part of *Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter’s Tale, The Tempest,* all belong to the class of what may be called idyllic romances. They are happy dreams, in which all troubles and sorrows are ultimately resolved into fortunate endings, and which stand therefore as so many symbols of an optimistic faith in the beneficent dispositions of an ordering