students balance the princess and her three ladies, and there is a symmetrical play of incident between the two groups. The arrangement is obviously more artificial than spontaneous, more mechanical than vital and organic. But towards the close of the first period Shakespeare had fully realized his own power and was able to dispense with these artificial supports. Indeed, having rapidly gained knowledge and experience, he had before the close written plays of a far higher character than any which even the ablest of his contemporaries had produced. He had firmly laid the foundation of his future fame in the direction both of comedy and tragedy, for, besides the comedies already referred to, the first sketches of *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet,* and the tragedy of *Richard III.,* may probably be referred to this period.

Another mark of early work belonging to these dramas is the lyrical and elegiac tone and treatment associated with the use of rhyme, of rhyming couplets and stanzas. Spenser’s musical verse had for the time elevated the character of rhyming metres by identifying them with the highest kinds of poetry, and Shakespeare was evidently at first affected by this powerful impulse. He rhymed with great facility, and delighted in the gratification of his lyrical fancy and feeling which the more musical rhyming metres afforded. Rhyme accordingly has a considerable and not inappropriate place in the earlier romantic comedies. The *Comedy of Errors* has indeed been de­scribed as a kind of lyrical farce in which the opposite qualities of elegiac beauty and comic effect are happily blended. Rhyme, however, at this period of the poet’s work is not restricted to the comedies. It is largely used in the tragedies and histories as well, and plays even an important part in historical drama so late as *Richard II.* Shakespeare appears, however, to have worked out this favourite vein, and very much taken leave of it, by the publication of his descriptive and narrative poems, the *Venus and Adonis* and the *Lucrece,* although the enormous popularity of these poems might almost have tempted him to return again to the abandoned metrical form. The only considerable exception to the disuse of rhyming metres and lyrical treatment is supplied by the *Sonnets,* which, though not published till 1609, were probably begun early, soon after the poems, and written at intervals during eight or ten of the intervening years. Into the many vexed questions connected with the history and meaning of these poems it is impossible to enter. The attempts recently made by the Rev. W. A. Harrison and Mr T. Tyler to identify the “ dark lady ” of the later sonnets, while of some historical interest, cannot be regarded as successful. And the identification, even if rendered more probable by the discovery of fresh evidence, would not clear up) the difficulties, biographical, literary, and historical, con­nected with these exquisite poems. It is perhaps enough to say with Prof. Dowden that in Shakespeare’s case the most natural interpretation is the best, and that, so far as they throw light on his personal character, the sonnets show that “he was capable of measureless personal devotion; that he was tenderly sensitive, sensitive above all to every diminution or alteration of that love his heart so eagerly craved ; and that, when wronged, although he suffered anguish, he transcended his private injury and learned to forgive.”

Whatever question may be raised with regard to the superiority of some of the plays belonging to the first period of Shakespeare’s dramatic career, there can be no question at all as to any of the pieces belonging to the second period, which extends to the end of the century. During these years Shakespeare works as a master, having complete command over the materials and resources of the most mature and flexible dramatic art. “ To this stage,”

says Mr Swinburne, “ belongs the special faculty of fault­less, joyous, facile command upon each faculty required of the presiding genius for service or for sport. It is in the middle period of his work that the language of Shake­speare is most limpid in its fulness, the style most pure, the thought most transparent through the close and luminous raiment of perfect expression.” This period includes the magnificent series of historical plays—*Richard II.,* the two parts of *Henry IV.,* and *Henry* *V*.—and a double series of brilliant comedies. The *Midsummer Night's Dream, All's Well that ends Well,* and the *Mer­chant of Venice* were produced before 1598, and during the next three years there appeared a still more complete and characteristic group including *Much ado about No­thing, As you Like it,* and *Twelfth Night.* These comedies and historical plays are all marked by a rare harmony of reflective and imaginative insight, perfection of creative art, and completeness of dramatic effect. Before the close of this period, in 1598, Francis Meres paid his cele­brated tribute to Shakespeare’s superiority in lyrical, descriptive, and dramatic poetry, emphasizing his un­rivalled distinction in the three main departments of the drama,—comedy, tragedy, and historical play. And from this time onwards the contemporary recognitions of Shakespeare’s eminence as a poet and dramatist rapidly multiply, the critics and eulogists being in most cases well entitled to speak with authority on the subject.

In the third period of Shakespeare’s dramatic career years had evidently brought enlarged vision, wider thoughts, and deeper experiences. While the old mastery of art remains, the works belonging to this period seem to bear traces of more intense moral struggles, larger and less joyous views of human life, more troubled, complex, and profound conceptions and emotions. Comparatively few marks of the lightness and animation of the earlier works remain, but at the same time the dramas of this period display an unrivalled power of piercing the deepest mysteries and sounding the most tremendous and perplex­ing problems of human life and human destiny. To this period belong the four great tragedies—*Hamlet, Macbeth, Othello, Lear ;* the three Roman plays—*Coriolanus, Julius Cæsar, Anthony and Cleopatra* ; the two singular plays whose scene and personages are Greek but whose action and meaning are wider and deeper than either Greek or Roman life—*Troilus and Cressida* and *Timon of Athens ;* and one comedy—*Measure for Measure,* which is almost tragic in the depth and intensity of its characters and incidents. The four great tragedies represent the highest reach of Shakespeare’s dramatic power, and they sufficiently illustrate the range and complexity of the deeper problems that now occupied his mind. *Timon* and *Measure for Measure,* however, exemplify the same tendency to brood with meditative intensity over the wrongs and miseries that afflict humanity. These works sufficiently prove that during this period Shakespeare gained a disturbing insight into the deeper evils of the world, arising from the darker passions, such as treachery and revenge. But it is also clear that, with the larger vision of a noble, well-poised nature, he at the same time gained a fuller perception of the deeper springs of goodness in human nature, of the great virtues of invincible fidelity and unwearied love, and he evidently received not only consolation and calm but new stimulus and power from the fuller realization of these virtues. The typical plays of this period thus embody Shakespeare’s ripest experience of the great issues of life. In the four grand tragedies the central problem is a profoundly moral one. It is the supreme internal conflict of good and evil amongst the central forces and higher elements of human nature, as appealed to and developed by sudden and powerful temptation, smitten by accumu-