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## A life's wisdom

### The Age of Shakespeare

Frank Kermode

Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 194pp, £12.99

Frank Kermode's *Shakespeare's Language* (2000) gave new life to a subject that had suffered decades of neglect. But the book was not only about language. Adopting a characteristically mixed approach, Kermode combined detailed textual analysis with a more general discussion of the plays. I recall the glum reflection of a Shakespeare scholar after hearing Kermode interviewed by Richard Eyre at the 2000 Hay Festival: "How on earth do you follow that?"

Well, how you follow that, is that you do it again, but on a different theme. This time, Kermode concentrates not on Shakespeare's language, but on the political, religious, social and economic environment in which he wrote. The essays in *The Age of Shakespeare* are even shorter than those in *Shakespeare's Language*. But Kermode can pack more illumination into a sentence than most people can pack into a paragraph.

He is a master at opening a sentence with a remark that makes you think nothing especially important is being said, then turning your expectations upside down by adding a pointed reflection. For example, in the course of a discussion of the comedies, he says of *Much Ado About Nothing*: "All ends well, but the title looks awry if one considers the ordeal of Hero". True enough – but the sentence does not end there. It continues: "unless, as some believe, it is a sexual double entendre, 'nothing' being an Elizabethan slang word for the female genitals".

Throughout, Kermode draws our attention to the close connection between text and age. The age is described in five short chapters which place the development of professional drama within the context of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Kermode outlines the two big political issues of the day: the royal succession and the Reformation. Subsequent chapters deal with Shakespeare's move to London and the nature of the theatrical world he found there; his early works; the building and

use of the (outdoor) Globe theatre; and the consequences of the (indoor) theatre at Blackfriars becoming available.

For such a small book, *The Age of Shakespeare* is packed with information. Did you know, for example, that from 1586–95 the University of Wittenberg had two students on its rolls called Rosenkrantz and Gyldenstjerne? From time to time, Kermode's brevity is the soul of wit. Of Simon Forman, the astrologer-physician who recorded a visit to see *Macbeth* in 1611, he writes: "He correctly forecast the date of his own death – not a difficult trick if you don't mind committing suicide."

Brevity has its downside, however. Various topics that one might expect to be included are missing. For instance, *King Edward III* earns only a brief mention, although it is now included in the *Cambridge Shakespeare*. One or two of Kermode's judgements are questionable. He seems to approve of W H Auden's dismissal of *Merry Wives of Windsor* as "a very dull play indeed", yet surely he (and Auden) would have changed their minds had they seen Greg Hicks's portrayal of Dr Caius at Stratford a year or so ago, which had audiences in hysterics. I was also uncomfortable with Kermode's use of the term "dialect". Discussing *Othello*, he mentions "the inventiveness of its dialects"; he writes also of the "variety of dialects" used in *Love's Labour's Lost*. By "dialect", Kermode does not mean regional variation (the normal sense of the word); he means "the modes of speech appropriate to individual characters" – what stylisticians would call a "variety" or "style". Kermode's usage could be quite misleading, given that Shakespeare's plays hardly ever include regional dialects.

The book ends very abruptly. Having taken 60 pages to describe the start of Shakespeare's age, Kermode devotes only a couple to the end. A chapter on the political and social climate of the first half of the 17th century would have rounded things off nicely. Still, this is an excellent book, a distillation of a lifetime's critical reflection into a few pages. Kermode will be 85 this November. How does he keep it up?

*David Crystal's The Stories of English is published by Allen Lane, the Penguin Press*