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## Between the lines of Shakespeare's philosophy

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Review: A.[n]thony D.[avid] Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker*, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 2007, 428 pp.

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### 1. Subject, structure, contents, language and style

*Shakespeare the Thinker* is a literary walk through Shakespeare's world of drama from the philosophical perspective — and an attempt to map Shakespeare's original thought throughout his plays. Among the abundance of Shakespearean monographs, Professor A.D. Nuttall's book is unique in its personal tone, and, as expressively put in the preface — in its *not* being about Shakespeare's "essential Englishness" (Nuttall: XI), but rather "about the distinctiveness of Shakespeare's genius" (IX). Its style impressively combines familiarity with erudition, which guarantees the book a strong position on the readers' market, among Shakespearean scholars and connoisseurs alike. The text is disciplined, linear, symmetrical, and pragmatic. It consists of 428 pages: nine chapters preceded by an introduction and preface in the form of heartfelt acknowledgements, and concluded by a consistent coda. The book includes bibliographical references and alphabetical index.

In the Introduction the author draws a minute picture of the reality of Shakespeare's world, the sixteenth-century microcosm of Stratford-on-Avon, and presents Shakespeare as a man of his time. He analyses in detail the existing records of the events that might have inspired Shakespeare's characters, especially the case of Katherine Hamlett, who most likely served as a prototype of Ophelia, and perhaps Hamlet's namesake. He also presents evidence of Shakespeare's long-doubted Catholicism, and links it to some of his characters and the way the microcosm of his plays functions — he emphasizes Shakespeare's internal quality that makes him transcend any "tunnel visions" and "conducts us from the narrow passage of immediate causation into the vertiginous world of overdetermination" (24).

Chapter 1 “probes the nature of historical causation” (138) within Shakespeare’s invention of the history play. In *Henry VI* Nuttall examines Shakespeare’s “sense of historical process” (29) and the realism of political discussion in his language. In a vivid dialog with Tania Demetrious, the author analyses Shakespeare’s use of imagery and artifact in a *mise-en-scène*-like manner in order to lure his audiences via the historical context of the Wars of the Roses — and his not-so-politically-correct references to the publically persecuted Catholicism (and Frenchness) of Joan of Arc.

Nuttall follows with a close reading of *Richard III*, which he classifies as “a barnstormer” (45) and a play “hovering between comedy and horror” (46); a play of “puzzling response” (50) and twisted sexual games. Nuttall scrutinizes the way Shakespeare constructs Richard’s loneliness and juxtaposes his genius with minute legacies of other giants of literature (Aristotle, Milton, Marlowe).

The author closes Chapter I with his thoughts on the early comedies: *The Comedy of Errors*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *The Taming of the Shrew* — and expresses his appreciation of Shakespeare’s Latin education, unpretentiously incorporated into the plays “like the one who can afford not to show off” (57). He analyzes Shakespeare’s artistic dialog with Plautus, Ovid and Petrarca, respectively — and emphasizes the dramatist’s original juxtapositions of character and their extreme life choices: the joyful tensions between monasticism and marriage, the unprecedented power of forgiveness, and the dynamics of the marital “taming”.

Chapter 2 deals with “hysteria of style” (88) in *Titus Andronicus*, “when bad taste is as extreme as this it becomes something else” (87) — and *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, which is seen as a feast of language in service of sexual exploits reversely initiated by women. It continues with the author’s analysis of language in *Romeo and Juliet*, “the sheer cleverness of (this) interlacing of images” (101) — juxtaposed with the notion of pacing, pausing and the reality of the language vs. action. In *Midsummer Night’s Dream* Nuttall postulates Shakespeare’s ontological comfort created by his language, and its novelty that lays foundation for the twentieth-century coherence theory of truth — as well as traces his allusions to the language of St. Paul.

The theme of “the Major Histories” (133) returns in Chapter 3. In *Richard II* Nuttall probes the interplay of “role-playing and introspection” (134) and Shakespeare’s consequence in showing the double-nature of the hero as “a fantasist and a realist” (139) — and sets it in the context of Shakespeare’s own political circumstance as Queen Elizabeth’s dramatist. Nuttall acknowledges Shakespeare’s “discovery of human interiority”, and compares Richard II to an actor.

As a dramatic technique, the characters’ split-identity acting mode is continued in *Henry IV* and *Henry V*. Nuttall discusses parallels between what he calls “invisible acting” (150) and Machiavellian cunning, as well as Nominalism.

Chapter 4 is devoted to the Roman themes in Shakespeare. Nuttall analyses Shakespeare’s stand on ideology and democracy, reason and passion, eth-

ics and rhetoric persuasion in *Julius Caesar*, and sets it against Shakespeare's stoicism. He draws parallels between *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet* and concludes that stoicism is challenged by skepticism in the latter, and that Shakespeare was a pioneer of what later echoed in Locke's and Hume's philosophies of the Mind (195), as well as the theories of perception and disjunction of the will (202). "In *Hamlet* the concern with acting and identity [...] reaches a climax" (196).

Continuing his hermeneutical spiral, Nuttall sees *Troilus and Cressida* as a Hamlet's play where "the whole world is sick with intelligence" or "libidinal disorder" (207), and structurally classifies the play as a discourse, "a philosophical play that deals with the foundation of ethical judgements" (255).

In Chapter 5, Nuttall returns to the comedies, and to his pursuits of the language. *Much Ado About Nothing* he sees as a play in which the stylish language acts "as a screen, cutting us off from reality" (225), and *As You Like It* — as a semantic word-game, based on a "certain philosophical potency" (228). In *Twelfth Night* "Shakespeare has used the pivotal character of the word to bathe comedy in the light of transcendence" (241), and *All's Well That Ends Well* is "a strange fusion of cynicism and idealism" (249).

Chapter 6 — featuring *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure* — spins around "the application ethical principles" (255) and the notions of atonement, mercy and merciful love in the Christian sense, which Nuttall, in a bravura style opposes to the attempted Gnostic interpretations of Shakespeare's time.

Chapter 7 examines character formation in tragedies of passion: "outside-in" causation and the central conflict — against the Aristotle's rule of "un-obvious decisions" (283). The key to Othello's fall he sees in his gullibility (279). Macbeth's — in the ontological trigger, his ambition that "clearly pre-exists the moment of external activation" (284), and Coriolanus's — in his preconditioned identity (the fetishized blood-letting of a soldier).

In Chapter 8, Nuttall analyses *King Lear*'s "preoccupation with mathematics" (301) — verbal and structural — as well as the play's "mythic resonance" (306) within the Christian thought, and especially the notion of grace and its lack (ingratitude). He develops his references to Christianity in the subsequent close reading of *Timon of Athens*, and eventually, *Antony and Cleopatra* — which he considers Shakespeare's metaphysical statement on the pre-Christian world (Rome) trying to escape its own masculine, one-dimensional harshness by seeking love in a marriage to the passion of the East (Egypt).

Chapter 9 discusses the Last Plays, "the romances", perceived as "allegories of resurrection" (375). *Pericles* and *Cymbeline* Nuttall examines as "thought suspended" and "joyous Christian charity shining in a dark place" (335), *The Winter's Tale* — as "arcadia revisited" (345), and *The Tempest* — as a "Brave New World" clashed with the Christian philosophy of eternal life.

Nuttall's *Coda* brings the monograph to an emphatic closure with an identity quest. The author sees Shakespeare as a courageous philosopher "in the land of empiricism" (379). Bibliographical references, grouped by the chapter, and alphabetical index, close the book — providing great tools of referential clarity.

## 2. General remarks

Nuttall's monograph is a work of art. The author reveals the hermeneutical spiral of Shakespeare-the-Thinker's mind, and he orchestrates it as a symphony in eleven moves of emotional-intellectual structure. In a vivid dialog with Shakespearean authorities, Nuttall consequently solidifies his own unique scientific identity. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the monograph is its quite unprecedented discourse on Shakespeare's Catholicism. In a bravura-style, he straightens the anti-Catholicism we commonly apply to Shakespeare, in a way — catholicizes Shakespeare.

I bow, and wholeheartedly commend *Shakespeare the Thinker* to your attention. Bravo!