

A. D. Nuttall. *Shakespeare the Thinker*.

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Anthony D. Nuttall, professor of English at Oxford University, died last January just three months before Yale University Press published his *Shakespeare the Thinker* along with reissues of his *Two Concepts of Allegory: A Study of Shakespeare's "The Tempest"* (1967) and *A New Mimesis: Shakespeare and the Representation of Reality* (1983). This new book can rightly be considered a *summa* of the author's lifetime teaching and scholarship on Shakespeare. But it is also more. Besides reprising some of his influential ideas about individual plays while refining others in the light of recent criticism, Nuttall surveys most of the canon, reflects upon texts he had not written about before, traces relationships among these texts, and situates them in a context of theoretical frameworks for literary study. The result is a learned, urbane, wonderfully illuminating appreciation of intellectual power radiating from Shakespeare's drama.

Nuttall's argument holds that "the artistic achievement of our best playwright is *internally* generated. It is the product, not of his time, but of his own, unrelenting, creative intelligence" (25–26). From this argument extend several claims. One is that, *pace* New Historicist assumptions about cultural construction, Shakespeare's thought is not historically determined. Though "the major question" of his era concerns religious belief, Shakespeare "disquietingly interrogates" both Old Catholic and newly Reformed versions of belief (26). Another is that, *pace* Poststructuralist assumptions about externally constituted identity, Shakespeare "excels at characterization" based upon an essential core selfhood (46). A third is

that, with respect to brand-name ideas, “it is remarkably hard to think of anything Shakespeare has not thought of first, somewhere. Marxian, Freudian, feminist, Structuralist, Existentialist, materialist ideas are all there” (265). Ultimately, Nuttall’s respect for these modern systems of thought prevents him from applying them indiscriminately to the plays. Shakespeare is everywhere — well, Shakespeare, neither entirely of his own time nor of ours, but somehow relevant to both.

Beginning with the three parts of *Henry VI*, Nuttall detects great sophistication in representing the lateral effects of “group motivation,” whereby individuals find themselves acting and reacting strongly because others around them are behaving in a certain way (31). Such representation “outside-in” would become a feature of the playwright’s mature comedies and tragedies, signaling a dominant motif of his thought about human motivation. Another feature, this time detected in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* and other early comedies, concerns a certain “Nominalist fear that verbal abstractions refer to nothing at all,” or, better, that people “can, by a trick of the mind, focus on the formal expression, and so lose full engagement” (99). This feature, too, would pervade his mature work.

In *Richard II*, the playwright fuses history with tragedy as he runs two stories concurrently: a “supernatural” one about divinely appointed royal absolutism thwarted by usurpation, and a “naturalist” one about a not-entirely-competent king in difficulties (144). As such, he begins to evolve thoughts about history and tragedy in the *Henry IV* plays and *Henry V*, where the character of Hal develops as a “white Machiavel” (151); in *Julius Caesar*, which depicts the repressive effects of Brutus’s Stoic rhetoric and the likewise disastrous effects of Marc Antony’s Asiatic rhetoric; in *Hamlet* (accorded surprisingly cursory attention), where the prince is a kind of Machiavel who plots revenge in a world controlled by God; and in *Troilus and Cressida*, which turns the “substance” of identity into a set of accidental relations that prove “obscurely chilling” (213).

Disposing of chronological order, Nuttall considers the comedies from *Much Ado about Nothing* to *All’s Well that Ends Well*, where fears about verbal abstraction in the early plays materialize as “impediments of wit” exercised by strong women as well as weaker men, from Beatrice to Parolles (221). He examines *The Merchant of Venice* and *Measure for Measure*, where Shylock in the first, and Angelo in the second, test the workings of Christian mercy in a fallen world. In the book’s most unusual reading, one based upon a Gnostic “readiness to merge the Devil with Christ,” the “demonized” Angelo functions as a Christ figure who must himself suffer in order to serve as a bearer of justice (274). Nuttall returns to the idea of lateral motivation in the tragedies from *Othello* to *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus*, and in a fine study of *King Lear* he argues movingly about the “savage nihilism” of the play’s action which nonetheless leaves us with an anything-but-nihilist “sharpened sense of the difference between good and evil” (309).

In the late plays, Nuttall traces a movement “away from the tense engagement with Christian doctrine . . . and toward a naturalized version” (341). Oddly, he draws inconclusive attention to a repressed homosexuality affecting Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale*. Against the current fashion of arguing for multiple authorship, he

holds that even contested scenes in *Pericles* are “unmistakably” Shakespeare’s (333). The book makes no significant mention of Shakespeare’s contributions to *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, nor does it explore his lyric and narrative poetry as distinct achievements of intellection. But, given the energy, wit, and often uncommon good sense of Nuttall’s overall presentation, it would seem churlish to counter such predilections. We are instead grateful for his insights about the scope of Shakespeare’s thinking and its enactment in the canonical plays.

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