



## Shakespeare the Thinker

*A.D. Nuttall*

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A. D. Nuttall's study of Shakespeare's intellectual preoccupations is a literary tour de force and comes to crown the distinguished career of a Shakespeare scholar. Certain questions engross Shakespeare from his early plays to the late romances: the nature of motive, cause, personal identity and relation, the proper status of imagination, ethics and subjectivity, language and its capacity to occlude and to communicate. Yet Shakespeare's thought, Nuttall demonstrates, is anything but static. The plays keep returning to, modifying, and complicating his creative preoccupations. Nuttall allows us to hear and appreciate the emergent cathedral choir of play speaking to play. By the later stages of Nuttall's book this choir is nearly overwhelming in its power and dimensions. The author does not limit discussion to moments of crucial intellection but gives himself ample space in which to get at the distinctive *essence* of each work.

Much recent historicist criticism has tended to "flatten" Shakespeare by confining him to the thought-clichés of his time, and this in its turn has led to an implicitly patronizing view of him as unthinkingly racist, sexist, and so on. Nuttall shows us that, on the contrary, Shakespeare proves again and again to be more intelligent and perceptive than his 21st-century readers. This book challenges us to reconsider the relation of great literature to its social and historical matrix. It is also, perhaps, the best guide to Shakespeare's plays available in English.

## Shakespeare the Thinker Details

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## From Reader Review Shakespeare the Thinker for online ebook

### Ed says

As his birth/death day approacheth, my thoughts turneth to the mysterious Mr. Shake-speare. This book holds great promise.

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### Jon Marc Smith says

Wonderful. The best book I've read in months.

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### Matthew Flowers says

This is an in depth examination about the way Shakespeare's mind moved throughout his life by examining the best guessed order of his plays. If you can read between the lines you'll find good evidence as to why Shakespeare has lasted and will continue to last. My personal favorite is the examination of The Tempest and how Shakespeare wrote himself in that play. definitely worth reading if you are a Shakespeare fan.

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### John Fredrickson says

This book was a long read, but was well worth it. Nuttall is (was) clearly a strongly philosophical thinker whose knowledge of, and sensitivity to, Shakespeare, was vast. In theory, the book is an attempt to explore what or how Shakespeare thought, based upon a close reading of his plays; this is an admittedly doomed effort, but is an exploration that is worth performing.

The book explores individual plays in a roughly chronological order. Close attention is paid to the words and phrasing employed by Shakespeare, with numerous asides directing the reader to differences in word usage in Shakespearian times, and how meaning often escapes modern readers. The author weaves the individual plays into a framework that shows Shakespeare exploring similar themes through different sequential plays, but from different perspectives and with different results. In reading this book, one learns not only about the individual plays, but also a lot about the contexts of the plays when considered as a whole.

There were a few times when I felt myself struggling with what the author was saying. This was true during his discussion of Richard II, where I found myself disagreeing with him, but also with his discussion of The Tempest, which I found somewhat incomprehensible and far-fetched. Nonetheless, the book was quite good.

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### Mark Valentine says

Nuttall's study works as an academic course in Shakespeare and his plays. He moves through each play, makes incredibly rich connections between them and works from the era, and interprets with insight and wisdom.

His premise, as the title states, traces most of the modern discoveries in psychology, art, drama, sociology, religion and politics first moved through Shakespeare's mind and pen. I am inspired from the slow, deliberate reading and now wish to read all of Shakespeare's plays and then back again.

If you read one book on Shakespeare, read this one.

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### **Richard Martin says**

Due to its length (app. 700 pgs.), this would best considered a reference tool. An excellent index gives explicit detail to each work. I chose five favorite plays rather than the entire book. Nuttall provides copious cross-references among the plays. His choice of topics is unique. For example: "King Lear"-- nothingness and redemption; "Taming of the Shrew" -- "breaking" (as in horses or Falcons) as opposed to "taming" and an alliance of Katherine and Petruchio; "MacBeth" -- the weird sisters as a trigger to bring inner thoughts into actions. Best Quote: "Whatever you think of, Shakespeare will have thought of it first."

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### **Hollis says**

A good guide to Shakespeare.

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### **Kay Kirkpatrick says**

I loved this book--it was a wonderful supplement to my Shakespeare kick last spring. More at: <http://www.amazon.com/review/R7HI1FSN...>

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### **Jack Graham says**

Very thought provoking. I came away feeling educated, with my views on at least one play profoundly changed. On the whole, however, I am unconvinced by Nuttall's perspective. Still, it was beautifully written and valuable.

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### **Sammy says**

What utter silliness. (I realise this view will be seen as - at best - naive, and - at worst - idiotic.) The late A.D. Nuttall was clearly a brilliant man, but this is a scatterbrained examination of the plays, that offers very little in the way of substantive thought.

Nuttall is at his best when examining Shakespeare the man. He comes out fighting fit when examining character, and particularly the middle tragedies, such as "Julius Caesar". Perhaps the most interesting parts are in the opening chapters, when Nuttall descants on older methods of Shakespearean criticism.

However, clearly, the aged Nuttall never enjoyed a direct answer when the more complex would do. Perhaps

I'm just not as intelligent as I thought, but much of this book struck me as reaching. Certainly not a book for the general public (as someone born and raised very much in the Bardolatry tradition, I still struggled), "Shakespeare the Thinker" is almost a parody of academia. It is an endless spiral of beautifully worded emptiness. (Whenever I read non-fiction, I use sticky-notes to mark important passages, so I can transcribe them into a computer file later. When I finished this book, I realised that 90% of my sticky notes referred to fascinating turns of phrase from Nuttall's generation that I wanted to remember, rather than insights!)

Perhaps my dismissiveness really is naive. This is clearly a book written for academics - and philosophers, at that. Nuttall is overly fond of the phrase "everyone knows" or "Everyone remembers" when discussing elements of Shakespeare's plays. It's painful, whether he's recalling events from the rarer plays or putting forth an opinion. There probably is an audience out there for this particular brand of criticism. Probably. I have a bookshelf groaning under the weight of Shakespeare criticism. At this point, "Shakespeare the Thinker" will probably find its place as one of the least.

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### **Jake Maguire says**

It didn't make the right connections for me in terms of the authorship question. I still feel the writer of the plays was not the actor/business man from Stratford. Having said that, this book is actually very intellectually packed, and ultimately worth reading. I found much of the information very helpful, even with my "Oxfordian" views.

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### **Stephen Selbst says**

Nuttall's elegantly written book provides an analysis of the major philosophical and theological issues he believes are posed by the body of Shakespeare's plays. Some of the themes are obvious: the history plays deal with the legitimacy of royal authority, and when subjects may and should depose failed kings. Other plays, Nuttall argues, are also driven by Christian themes, including the resurrection, the nature of Christ, and his relationship to the trinity. Yet other themes are more conventionally philosophic. This is not an easy book; to follow all of Nuttall's arguments, you have to be comfortable enough with the underlying philosophic arguments, and some of the theological themes are so old that they matter more as historical curiosities. Given those parameters, readers familiar with some or all of Shakespeare's plays, will find this a valuable and engaging work, which reveals still more layers of meaning beyond common critical observations.

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### **Steven says**

an amazing and beautiful study of the Shakespeare the philosopher

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### **Michael says**

The best book about Shakespeare I've read. Six stars.

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(Though I haven't read that crazy Hughes book yet!)

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## **laura says**

interesting view.

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## **Richard says**

Unfinished. Notes so far.

Excellent discussion of *The Taming of the Shrew*

**p. 71:** If one asks a reasonably literate person, "Who in the plays of Shakespeare binds a woman, strikes her, and makes her cry?" the chances are that you will get the answer "Petruccio". The correct answer is "Katherina". She does all this to Bianca at Act II, Scene i, lines 1-24. ... Petruccio never strikes Katherina. There is one moment when *she* strikes *him* and he responds "I swear I'll cuff you, if you strike again" (II.i.220).

Contrast with his near-peer Christopher Marlowe:

**p. 82:** We have reached 1593. In May of that year Marlowe was killed in a scuffle in a tavern. He and Shakespeare were born in the same year, 1564. Before his death, Marlowe had written *Dido, Tamburlaine*, parts 1 and 2, *The Jew of Malta*, *Edward II*, *The Massacre At Paris*, and *Doctor Faustus*. Shakespeare has written *King Henry IV*, Parts 1, 2, and 3, *Richard III*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Seven plays each.

Compare to Ovid:

**p. 87:** *Titus Andronicus*, Marcus's long speech as he gazes at the mutilated Lavinia (II.iv.11-57). ... Ovid is the genius of this mode. The myth of Tereus and Philomel (*Metamorphoses*, vi) is a chillingly playful tale of rape and dismemberment. At lines 559 to 560 Ovid describes, in dapper hexameters, how Philomel's severed tongue skipped like a tail cut from a snake and tried, pathetically, to rejoin its bleeding mistress.

Ties E.M. Forster to *Love's Labour's Lost*:

**p. 89:** *The Longest Journey* (1907) gives us an analogous moment at a later period in history. Cambridge — the academy — is first established in the novel as a site of innocence and intelligence, where men love one another. Then "ladies" invade. The bubble bursts and nothing can ever be the same again.  
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## **Kelly says**

The title is too grandiose; this isn't so much an examination of Shakespeare's thoughts as it is an unspooling of A. D. Nuttall's thoughts. He was a philosopher who was familiar with Shakespeare and had some ideas. Some were good while others, unfortunately, were speculative fancy. Time and again, while reading this, I thought that Nuttall's views would've been irrevocably changed by simply mounting an actual production of the play under discussion—they simply couldn't survive the rehearsal process intact. Approaching the plays as a philosopher is akin to approaching them as purely literary events; it can be interesting and occasionally

helpful, but mounting the plays is really the best interdisciplinary approach. That said, I enjoyed his take on *Measure for Measure*, precisely because it was based on theological history, his own subjective impressions, and a brilliant little nod to one of my favorite stories by Jorge Luis Borges. Literary criticism has its place, and this was not a bad example of that genre by any metric.

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### **sologdin says**

professional philosopher reads most of the plays, with something of a popularizer's style.

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