
A.D. Nuttall. *Shakespeare the Thinker*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. 428p.

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The nicest thing about A.D. Nuttall's book is its lack of an insistence on dogma. Nuttall grabs whatever works best about each play, what he supposes must have concerned Shakespeare most as he wrote it, and pursues it in its historical and social context. He resists the temptation many critics feel artificially to twist a play to fit some modern critical or theoretical preconception, as too many critics have done with *Hamlet*, for instance. He follows what has become the generally accepted timeline of Shakespeare's plays, but not strictly. When it is useful he skips over some plays before returning to lump them into discussable portions, since they share discussable characteristics.

The second nicest thing is that Nuttall does not waste time defending Shakespeare as the sole author of the works. As he points out, among other things the consistency of the treatments of issues, the reluctance to reach judgments, and the fact that certainly "within the lifetime of Shakespeare, the public had certainly caught on to the fact that Shakespeare was the mind behind the plays" (378) all are sufficient to allow him to set aside the question of authorship and move forward to analyze, dissect, interpret, and illuminate the plays.

Shakespeare is "the philosopher of human possibility" (381) who "finds no terminus to his thought" (383-383). Nuttall postulates a "law" that says, "whatever you think of, Shakespeare will have thought of it first" (307), and then proceeds to prove it by taking modern applications of Shakespeare's thought and showing how Shakespeare not only thought of those applications but dealt with their ramifications in the plays, such that his thinking remains relevant today. But Nuttall will not allow us to believe that Shakespeare offered up any final answers to the issues/questions raised in the plays: "he is not a philosopher; he is a dramatist" (378), who "will question anything" (379). He gives answers, of course (what would be the point of reading/watching a Shakespeare who merely posed questions? Might as well read Socrates), but inevitably those answers open up vistas of other possible answers.

A case in point is Cordelia's death: is it anti-Christian, as Nuttall long thought and taught, or is the view we have of Lear holding the dead Cordelia in his arms a form of *pieta*, as Stephen Medcalf points out in "Dreaming, Looking, and Seeing: Shakespeare and the Myth of Resurrection"—his contribution to *Thinking with Shakespeare*, edited by William Poole and Richard Scholar (Oxford, 2007)—suggesting something profoundly Christian? Does Shakespeare exploit the New Testament—"I must go about my father's business" (Luke 2:49)—when he has Cordelia say, "It is

thy [my father's] business I go about" (4.4.24)? Or is that too far a reach? Nuttall is willing to explore options, even to change his mind. *King Lear* presents a notion of "providence," a concept so prominent in Christianity, and proceeds to "explode" it; yet Nuttall finds it "possible that a mind still open to diffuse religious resonance—a mind such as Bradley's or Medcalf's—will perceive things in the play that are actually there" (308).

Among the issues he raises in his discussions of the plays are identity, motive, ethics, relationships, exteriority and interiority, Freudian and Marxist interpretations, causation, imagination, wit, same-sex love in conflict with heterosexual relationships, social observation, innocence, and shifts in Shakespeare's language that when made artificial and "stylish" (as in his early plays) can act as a screen, cutting off reality. And there are more. Nuttall tailors his discussion of each play to what will best sort out the themes Shakespeare may have been thinking of as he wrote.

One of the more interesting ones he labels a kind of "Outside-In" pressure on the tragic protagonist to act, as manifested by the Ghost in *Hamlet*, Iago in *Othello*, *Macbeth's* Weird Sisters and Lady Macbeth, *Coriolanus's* "mother-figure" Volumnia, even in a fashion Edgar in *King Lear* who resorts to proclaiming himself of "demi-devil" status to restore his father Gloucester's wits. Nuttall calls them "prompters," inciters, re-makers, "conditioners," impellers of the tragic action, who exploit a weakness in the character of the tragic figure to manipulate his "fall" and subsequent annihilation. Nuttall finds it doubtful that any of Shakespeare's tragic protagonists would pursue the course of action that destroys them without some malignant force urging them on from without.

Not everything Nuttall says will meet with favor from everyone. Such is to be expected, even hoped for, in any volume that offers close readings of the plays. For instance, Kate's final speech in *The Taming of the Shrew* today is almost universally personated ironically, "if the audience is not to break out in its own open rebellion" (79). Nuttall cites Harold Goddard's assumption that Kate is "controlling" Petruchio by the play's end and "that part of the fun is that she should keep up the public pretense that it is he who is in charge" (79-80). This "speech of submission," as Nuttall labels it, however, "is entirely un-ironic... Katherine and Shakespeare mean every word. To turn Katherine into a sly manipulator of her husband, as Goddard did, is to turn Katherine into Bianca. There could be no greater insult" (80).

Nuttall defends this interpretation by pointing out that women of Katherine's class had few options in a patriarchal world beyond marriage, that they are "utterly dependent" on their husbands, and that even if Petruchio is rich and does not have to suffer physically to provide for her, he still fulfills the protector's role. Katherine's assertion in the speech that a husband is his wife's sole protector in a world without

much protection and no real police force “may cease to seem wholly absurd” (80). Make of it what you will, it offers a perhaps more Shakespearean way into dealing with an uncomfortable aspect of the play.

There is a lecture-like quality to the essays (for each discussion of a play is a sort of essay that might have grown out of a lecture, or at least a draft for a published article). Nuttall assumes we have an excellent familiarity with the play under consideration but he does not descend into a formal “sage on the stage” pose. His prose is accessible and friendly, but not conciliatory even to the beginning reader of Shakespeare. It is as if we are sitting in a pub talking about what’s near and dear, each of us coming from a position of our own strong understanding of the plays, and letting Nuttall increase our understanding exponentially.

There is nothing dry in the discussions except his wit. Regarding *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, he says that “usually it is only a philosopher who can contrive to lose so large a thing as the real universe” (225), in reference to the cadence of language in the play which begins to defeat truth. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, “it is hard to make complicated jokes and to kiss at the same time” (226), referring to what is the crux of the play, Beatrice and Benedict’s love, not their caustic and biting wit. Describing Shakespeare’s elusiveness, he notes that “we find ourselves wanting to explain to a resistant Ockham that actually the philosopher looks better with a full beard” (380).

On the back cover of the hardbound edition, Harold Bloom is quoted as saying, “Tony Nuttall is my hero!...Nuttall’s gifts all come together here: wisdom, sheer intelligence, immense learning, and a lifelong descent into the Shakespeare abyss.” Amen to that. This is a book that should be in your library. ✱