

Shakespearean Thinking

4. Whose / Who's Thinking?

... in which I set about identifying Shakespeare's voice and thinking as they emerge in his works, with thanks to the 'What Literature Knows About Your Brain' contributors ...

A. Other Authors / Disavowable Speakers

It seems easier to recognise where other some other authors find their voices. However, this should not be oversimplified. There may be a trap – a kind of idealised sterility – in refusing such emergences to Shakespeare. But it's easier to find characters pronouncing things he can't just 'think', than to find ones he can.

So now he rangeth through the world again,
And rageth sore in each degree and state;
Ne any is, that may him now restrain,
He growen is so great and strong of late,
Barking and biting all that him doe bate,
Albe they worthy blame, or clear of crime:
Ne spareth he most learned wits to rate,
Ne spareth he the gentle Poet's rhyme,
But rends without regard of person or of time. (Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, Book 6)

JUSTICE I invite you home with me to my House to supper: I will have none fear to go along, for my intents are *Ad correctionem, non ad destructionem; ad ædificandum, non ad diruendum*: So lead on. (Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*)

'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy'

'There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will'

'There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all: since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?'

'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so' (*Hamlet*)

PORTIA The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:
'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
His sceptre shows the force of temporal power,
The attribute to awe and majesty,
Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of kings;
But mercy is above this sceptred sway;
It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,
It is an attribute to God himself;
And earthly power doth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice. (*Merchant of Venice*)

B. Nuttall on Shakespeare The Thinker

Worth registering the place that Nuttall ends up as he tries to pin down Shakespeare's intellectual contribution. NB the emphasis on possibility / 'can' [ability as well as possibility]; Shakespearean thinking has a mood. Note the 'major philosophical importance' of two rather inward / individual topics. In these lectures I think I have proposed a more interactive, even ecological rationale for thinking in characters and beyond.

Shakespeare is fascinated by what could (just) be the case. Motives *can* be (not are) constructed from outside the human subject (*Othello*, *Coriolanus*); the human subject, meanwhile, *can*, through behaviour and a kind of introverted rhetoric, create passions and desires, 'from the outside in', in his or her own breast (*Hamlet*) [...] human identity *can* persist even when the public apparatus of function, conditioning and negotiable relations is withdrawn (*Richard II*, *Coriolanus*). All these exercises at the edge of human possibility are *positive* additions to the stock of both wisdom and knowledge. They are much more like answers than questions. They alert us to the *range* both of public reality and of the human spirit in relation to that reality. The list of 'can's I have just given does not, however, include what I still believe to be the moments of major philosophical importance in the plays: the exploration of the ontological status of the imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, and the analysis of identity and the ethical subjectivism in *Troilus and Cressida*. (A.D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare The Thinker* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2007), 382).

C. Forms In Which To Make Your Point

Portia's speech was a form in which an author might do some public thinking: its extractability might seem to give it more chance of reflecting an authorial point of view, but in Shakespeare the reverse seems to be true. Touchstone seems as likely a vehicle as Prospero? In the following Lucrece extract a proverbial tone offers and thwarts similar possibilities. And then dialogue – can the interaction of voices, the creation of a gradient between them (as in the MND passage below), provide a sense of tangible intervention?

Those that much covet are with gain so fond
That what they have not – that which they possess – 135
They scatter and unloose it from their bond,
And so by hoping more they have but less,
Or gaining more, the profit of excess

Is but to surfeit, and such griefs sustain,
That they prove bankrupt in this poor-rich gain. 140

The aim of all is but to nurse the life
With honour, wealth and ease in waning age;
And in this aim there is such thwarting strife,
That one for all, or all for one we gage,
As life for honour, in fell battle's rage, 145
Honour for wealth, and oft that wealth doth cost
The death of all, and altogether lost.

So that, in vent'ring ill, we leave to be
 The things we are, for that which we expect;
 And this ambitious foul infirmity, 150
 In having much, torments us with defect
 Of that we have; so then we do neglect
 The thing we have and, all for want of wit,
 Make something nothing, by augmenting it.

Such hazard now must doting Tarquin make, 155
 Pawning his honour to obtain his lust,
 And for himself himself he must forsake.
 Then where is truth if there be no self-trust?
 When shall he think to find a stranger just,
 When he himself himself confounds, betrays 160
 To sland'rous tongues and wretched hateful days?

HIPPOLYTA 'Tis strange my Theseus, that these lovers speak of.
 THESEUS More strange than true: I never may believe
 These antique fables, nor these fairy toys.
 Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
 Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
 More than cool reason ever comprehends.
 * The lunatic, the lover and the poet
 * Are of imagination all compact:
 One sees more devils than vast hell can hold,
 That is, the madman: the lover, all as frantic,
 Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:
 * The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,
 * Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
 * And as imagination bodies forth
 * The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
 * Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
 * A local habitation and a name.
 Such tricks hath strong imagination,
 That if it would but apprehend some joy,
 It comprehends some bringer of that joy;
 Or in the night, imagining some fear,
 How easy is a bush supposed a bear!
 HIPPOLYTA But all the story of the night told over,
 And all their minds transfigured so together,
 More witnesseth than fancy's images
 And grows to something of great constancy;
 But, howsoever, strange and admirable.
 THESEUS Here come the lovers, full of joy and mirth. (*MND*, 5.1)

D. Revision; and Creative Process

In the preceding MND passage, asterisked lines may have been added at a later date (see Grace Ioppollo, Revising Shakespeare; there is some suggestive mislineation in the Quarto). This is another sort of Shakespearean thinking: the palpability of the second thought. And then, as in Sonnet 18, we might see a performance / vestige of the as-if-first thought.

Fool This is a brave night to cool a courtezan.
 I'll speak a prophecy ere I go:
 When priests are more in word than matter;
 When brewers mar their malt with water;
 When nobles are their tailors' tutors;
 No heretics burn'd, but wenches' suitors;
 When every case in law is right;
 No squire in debt, nor no poor knight;
 When slanders do not live in tongues;
 Nor cutpurses come not to throngs;
 When usurers tell their gold i' the field;
 And bawds and whores do churches build;
 Then shall the realm of Albion
 Come to great confusion:
 Then comes the time, who lives to see't,
 That going shall be used with feet.
 This prophecy Merlin shall make; for I live before his time. (*King Lear*)

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:
 So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
 So long lives this and this gives life to thee. (Sonnet 18)