

## Shakespeare's "Philosophy": Looking or Thinking?

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Colin McGinn. *Shakespeare's Philosophy: Discovering the Meaning Behind the Plays*. New York: Harper Collins, 2006. 230 pp, HB \$24.95, ISBN 9780060856151; PB \$13.95, ISBN 9780060856168.

A.D. Nuttall. *Shakespeare the Thinker*. New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2007. 428 pp, HB \$30.00, ISBN 9780300119282; PB \$19.00, ISBN 9780300136296.

*Shakespeare's Philosophy* is a popular book, intended for the non-academic reader acquainted with Shakespeare who may also be intrigued by the thought that the playwright was also a philosopher. Everything about the book—its subtitle, layout, tone, and choice of plays—signals this appeal. The subtitle, for example, "Discovering the Meaning Behind the Plays," does a perfectly good marketing job in piquing the ordinary reader's interest. But to anyone seriously concerned with the question of "meaning," it is a howler. Meaning doesn't lie "behind" things, whether they are gestures, words, utterances, or plays. Furthermore, Colin McGinn knows this, since he is a significant contributor to recent debates in the philosophy of language that has put paid to the idea that meaning lies in a domain separate from what is said or done.

How, then, should we judge the philosophy of language or meaning implied by the subtitle, and therefore attributed to Shakespeare? Do we ignore it as so much marketing puff, or do we read it as a symptom of a refusal to think seriously about literary scholarship because, well, it's just literary, and literary scholars don't know much about philosophy anyway? The "depth" of Shakespeare's plays, McGinn tells us, lies in their "*underlying philosophical concerns ... We feel large themes at work in the plays, shaping the poetry and the drama*" (emphasis added).

Until McGinn turned his attention to Shakespeare in an idle moment at the end of a sabbatical, however, no one had been able to account for this depth. “Little attempt has been made to identify and articulate these philosophical themes in any systematic way ... the philosophical ideas suffusing them receive only passing mention.” Literary critics have not felt brave enough to move beyond “issues of character, plot, and diction [and] social and political context” because “philosophy, perhaps, makes them nervous” (1).

Anyone who has read even a smattering of the Shakespeare scholarship and criticism from the past three decades would find these claims as outrageous as they are ignorant. The last thirty years of Shakespearean scholarship has been obsessed with issues that, though deeply philosophical, have, however, been engaged by the name “theory.” They may, however, not seem philosophical to McGinn, because analytical philosophers tend not to count Marx, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, Bakhtin, and Lacan as philosophers at all. McGinn’s account makes Shakespeare an epistemologist, deeply embroiled in the disputes at the center of skepticism concerning the difference between dream and real worlds, the inscrutability of other minds, and the stability and continuity of personal identity. If Descartes and Hume may be used to illuminate Shakespeare’s philosophical preoccupations it, is their sixteenth-century precursor, Michel de Montaigne, who is Shakespeare’s guiding light.

There is nothing essentially wrong with these claims in the broadest sense. But McGinn seems not to have noticed that Shakespeareans have embraced Montaigne with no hint of nerves, although they have been circumspect about the precise historical relation between the two writers. It is uncertain exactly when Shakespeare may have had access to Montaigne’s *Essais*, although the matter is complicated by the theoretical (or philosophical) difference between the intertextual circulation of ideas and direct influence as a necessarily antecedent source. McGinn doesn’t address these problems central to literary debates about influence. He merely juxtaposes passages from Montaigne with a philosophical idea or theme culled from each of five plays (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *The Tempest*), in the assumption that the statement of a philosophical idea in an essay

corresponds to, or is caused by, the “deep” thesis that lies “behind” the play’s dramatic dialogue and action.

That McGinn ignores the large body of scholarship within Shakespeare studies for which the relationship between Montaigne and Shakespeare is as complex and uncertain as it is compelling should not be of serious concern. Scholarship is not his aim: he is, after all, not a literary scholar by training. But literary criticism should perhaps have made him just a little nervous. For the readings of the plays that he does offer are not so much wrong, or misguided, as banal: he tells us little that has not been the stock-in-trade of literary criticism at some point in the past fifty years or been subjected to trenchant critique in the past twenty. It is hardly illuminating to be told by a professional philosopher that “appearance and reality” is a major theme in Shakespeare (4, 22, 24–25, 42, 62–64, 67–71, 72–75, 92, 102–104, 162–164); or that Shakespeare “excels at giving us a portrait of human vices and failings” (174); that “his genius lies in flawless imitations of imaginary characters” (202); or that the effect of his art is “to upset the apple cart, to shake us up” (200). More seriously debilitating than a penchant for cliché<sup>1</sup> is McGinn’s unwillingness to engage with the theatrical or dialogical quality of Shakespeare’s work, despite his lip-service to the fact that we should not make assumptions about what Shakespeare thought from what individual characters say.

A.D. Nuttall’s contemporaneous book, *Shakespeare the Thinker*, engages in a different way with Shakespeare’s philosophy. Far more wide-ranging than McGinn’s (Nuttall includes a discussion of almost all the plays, by and large in chronological order), Nuttall also addresses an informed popular audience, and many of his philosophical concerns overlap with McGinn’s. Nuttall and McGinn share a similar Anglo-Saxon tradition, in which the key philosophical questions concern the certainty of our knowledge of reality, the self, and the power of language either to represent or shape each of these supposed entities. But that makes the difference between *Shakespeare’s Philosophy* and *Shakespeare the Thinker* all the more striking. McGinn is a philosopher who regards the big philosophical questions as templates that give Shakespeare’s more local, theatrical concerns their real depth. Since the philosopher claims that no one before him has given these questions

in Shakespeare any systematic attention, he is implying that his book reveals the true depth of Shakespeare's work for the first time. As a literary scholar by profession, Nuttall has a wide-ranging interest in philosophy, but he regards the dialogism of theatrical interaction in Shakespeare as the chief vehicle for the representation, not of the meaning *behind* the plays, but rather of conflicting conceptions of self and the world *in* the plays. Whatever philosophy is embedded in them speaks through the formal arrangement of the plays as an essentially dramatic medium. For Nuttall, Shakespeare thinks through the embodied interaction of his characters; for McGinn, Shakespeare shapes play and character in order to express an *underlying* philosophical theme. Even if they recognise similar philosophical preoccupations in the plays, their respective approaches to philosophy or thinking yield different results.

### The Construction of Character

Character is the driving force of *Shakespeare's Philosophy*, but its treatment is beset by a curious contradiction between McGinn's conception of Shakespeare's philosophy of character and selfhood as an essentially unfixed kind of performance, and his own tendency to write as if the way into the plays were via the "intrinsic nature" of particular characters. The former position is derived from the passage in Montaigne's essay, "On the inconstancy of our actions," that there is no fixed self, but rather an ever-changing series of self-perspectives. For McGinn, *Hamlet* is the classic exemplum of the notion that, beneath the display of "outward show," the mystery of the real self (which "knows not seems") is a void. Following William Empson on Hamlet's "self" (although he makes no reference to Empson), McGinn claims that "to speak of Hamlet's 'character' is already to misrepresent him. Hamlet is not so much a human being as a universe" (41). Empson's argument is that—in relation to the peculiar literary representation that we call Hamlet—it makes no sense to search for any motives for his action or inaction. McGinn, however, goes on to generalize Hamlet's inscrutability into a philosophical statement about the essence of human selfhood: it prompts us to ask "whether we are all mysteries ... a gap where the simple self ought to be—a kind of throbbing nothingness" (43).

This however contradicts McGinn's general, and much more interest-

ing claim that to talk of human beings or their mimetic counterparts is necessarily to talk of “traits that have a moral dimension ... Virtues and vices are qualities that people intrinsically have” (179). In the same breath as he proposes the overriding Shakespearean philosophy of the emptiness of personal identity, McGinn talks of character as if it does have a hard, intrinsic, core or nature. “As with many Shakespearean characters, Hamlet’s first words in the play are revealing of his *nature*” (41, emphasis added), he states, writing elsewhere that Edmund is a “hard-headed realist” (119), Iago “an adventurer, an enthusiast of extreme sports, and a risk taker—as well as being *intrinsically* nasty” (85, emphasis added), and of “Lear’s *true, intrinsic nature*” (117, emphasis added). McGinn’s instinctive recourse to the language of intrinsic selfhood stems from a compelling but undeveloped argument in the chapter “Shakespeare and Ethics” that to speak of human beings or their representations is to talk of moral qualities: “In witnessing a Shakespeare play our consciousness is engaged morally in an intense and unavoidable way” (178). Human character is defined by moral concepts: asked to describe a friend or colleague, politician or family member we will “list traits that have a moral dimension”; an account of a person which used no moral terms would be “thin and uninformative.” The evaluative description of moral qualities is intrinsic to the concept of a human being—part of its nature, not above or behind it (179). This goes some way towards explaining why neither character nor ethics can be abandoned or displaced if we are to do justice to Shakespeare’s mimetic art, although it would be good to see this argument developed in a more philosophically rigorous context.

If McGinn is all too ready to see a postmodern notion of subjective flux in Shakespeare’s representation, Nuttall retains a sense, itself relatively well-established within historicist criticism, that Shakespeare’s great discovery or creation is precisely the notion of incorrigible interiority that subtends the actions that a man might play. McGinn believes that Shakespeare has a single, philosophical position on selfhood, that we all forge our selves through play. Nuttall offers a more nuanced reading of Shakespeare’s developing notion of self and action. He suggests that Shakespeare begins with a notion of human causality as something sociologically conceived in his early history plays, but

that in *Richard III*, *Richard II* and *Hamlet*, he produces a notion of “core identity” that contradicts both his contemporary Montaigne and the postmodern conviction that selfhood is a fluctuating construct. There is no final answer to these questions. The self-reflexivity of Shakespeare’s theatrical practice represents character as something invented and enacted, but the same theatrical technology enables Shakespeare to suggest an interior self with nothing more than the trappings of “outward show.”

Nuttall’s approach to Shakespeare’s thinking differs most radically from McGinn’s insofar as he refuses to attribute to Shakespeare any single, identifiable philosophical position:

[Shakespeare] never falls into that easy universalization of the idea that rendered so much of late twentieth-century “constructionism” so vulnerable, philosophically. He never says “*All* is externally constituted; there is *no* ‘core self’” ... The truth is that when Shakespeare wrote the notion of a publicly constituted identity was readily available. The new, exciting thing was the inner, truly originaive self. (298)

Shakespeare’s theatrical situation rendered him alive to the fact that the uses and effects of language are not reduced or limited by the fact that they are spoken by an actor. The monstrosity of the player’s passion before a character who has declared that he has “that within that passes show” applies to Hamlet himself, who *as actor* has nothing within to sustain his earlier claim to an inscrutable interiority. But the practical circumstances of Shakespeare’s profession led him to recognize that language can operate without any essentially informing core being.<sup>2</sup> This does not, however, destroy the need for a retrospective conception of interiority as the sustaining ground for concepts like personal integrity, truthfulness, and ethical reliability: the very things that for McGinn are an integral or natural aspect of our very notion of humanity, and which Hamlet tries to sustain in the face of society in which such integrity has been dissolved by the corrosive transformation of all private life into the glare of controlling publicity.

McGinn’s attribution of performative existentialism to Shakespeare comes from his taking Shakespeare’s medium for this message. He confuses the theatrical nature of Shakespeare’s representation of character for his *personal* philosophy of the nature of human selfhood. Moreover,

a literary scholar who has grappled with the theoretical and historical problem of influence and intertextuality would know that citing isolated passages from Montaigne as a signal of what Shakespeare thought is misleading. Montaigne may indeed reflect on the flux of the self when he subjects it to introspection, but at other times he assumes a stable self as the basis of ethical action. Had McGinn asked more nuanced philosophical questions about how utterances interact in Shakespeare, he may have noticed the Shakespearean insight that for speech acts fundamental to the negotiation of love and political allegiance—such as oaths, vows and promises—a unitary self is indispensable. The practice of these language-games depends upon the fact that people's core identities do not change from moment to moment.

### **Cosmic Tragedy**

Shakespeareans of the past two decades have allowed overly reductive accounts of the relationship between text and history and a virulently anti-humanist elevation of ideological structure over local agency to skew our sense *within academia* of Shakespeare's richness. Nonetheless, there is something peculiarly bloodless about an account of *King Lear* or *Othello* that focuses so completely on the "big" or "deep" problems of cosmology, causality and other minds that it ignores the fact that these plays are about people struggling over power and love in concrete, material circumstances: that they are concerned with actions for which human beings, not some inscrutable, blind force, are ultimately accountable. *King Lear* may well "reflect the irrational, random, unjust nature of causation," but to claim that therein lies the "deeper meaning of the play" (121) is to rob it of its concern with the ways in which people construct the possibilities of personal and social relations. McGinn conforms to an orthodox position in literary criticism in his claim that "Shakespeare is inclined to a non-teleological view of causation" (15). It is one thing to argue that such a position implies a secular, non-rationalist rejection of the idea of "cosmic justice," but unless one spells out the human consequences of that perspective, it threatens to mystify relations of power between human agents by turning them into the effects of an overarching, random cosmic force. McGinn may have learned something (if only as the object of focused critique) from the

philosophical analysis of Marx and Adorno, Althusser and Raymond Williams about human agency in its relation to transformable material conditions.

Neither McGinn nor Nuttall show that philosophy has much to add to our sense of the distinctively human horror and mystery of the great tragedies. Knowingly or not, McGinn recycles Stanley Cavell's analysis of the terrors of skepticism in *Othello* and *Lear*, but without the latter's insights into the local failures of the paradoxical human need for and peculiar revulsion from love and acknowledgement. McGinn offers no more than a single, glancing reference to this philosopher, who has engaged consistently and deeply, over a long period, with Shakespeare's relation to the very issue that McGinn regards as central to philosophy and Shakespeare alike: skepticism or the problem of other minds. Stanley Cavell has made this terrain his own, in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays by Shakespeare* (2007) and a lengthy disquisition on *Othello* in *The Claim of Reason* (1999). The latter is primarily a work of critical philosophy rather than literary criticism, so it is surprising that McGinn ignores it. Instead he blithely writes, the self-deprecation barely hiding the claim to originality: "*In my view*, then, *Othello* is predicated upon the problem of other minds, with all its ramifications—moral, personal, and metaphysical" (67, emphasis added).

### Looking, Thinking and Saying

*The Tempest*, McGinn claims, is essentially "about the power of language" (135). This is again no news to Shakespeareans and literary scholars, who may be said to have been obsessed over the last thirty years with the constructive capacity of language to shape self and world. But McGinn represents that power in such broad—indeed, after Saussure, Barthes, Lacan, Foucault, Wittgenstein, Austin and Derrida, *banal*—terms as to empty his general claim of real critical significance. It needs no philosopher come from across the corridor to tell literary critics that language is able to "create its own world" and "human nature as we experience it" (137), or that Shakespeare may have had a sense of such power. Indeed, claims to the power of language have become such a debilitating, thoughtless shibboleth of contemporary literary theory that McGinn would have done us a service if he had ap-



plied some sharp critical analysis to the *limits* and *limitations* of linguistic constructivism. McGinn offers a word of caution when he writes, "I don't think Shakespeare is offering us any very definite thesis about language in this play," but his conception of its representation of our burdened, conflicted relation to words offers neither genuinely illuminating analysis nor coherent philosophy: "We are trapped in language, formed by it, slaves to it; we feel a desire to break its bounds and distance ourselves from it. It is both marvellous and corrupting, sublime and base (and at its most ostensibly sublime it can be basest)" (142).

Nuttall is more precise and careful. His method of finding (often contradictory) philosophical positions in the utterances of individual characters is both more faithful to the theatrical nature of Shakespeare's genre and more circumspect about attributing monolithic philosophical doctrines to the mind behind the plays. He is also more attentive to shifting philosophical positions between plays, as they occupy various positions in theater history, inhabit different genres, and embrace or distance themselves from various forms of social, political and cultural history. I have mentioned his analysis of the move from social causality in political action in the early history plays (a brilliant piece of analysis) to the forging of core interiority in some of the later work. *Shakespeare the Thinker* is more true to Shakespeare's dialogue with history and understanding of human interaction when Nuttall suggests, for example, that Hippolyta and Theseus engage in an *argument* about coherence and correspondence theories of truth in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (in contrast to McGinn's argument that the play as a whole questions the distinction between dream and real worlds); that Shakespeare can simultaneously consider Brutus to be an honorable man and a representative of the pathological withdrawal of Stoicism from "an over-rich and hurtful universe" (184), and, in another especially illuminating analysis, that the "feast of language" in *Love's Labour's Lost* represents the playwright's ambivalence about his own seductively dazzling linguistic facility.

Despite the fact that Nuttall declares, against current literary fashion, that "there is a human being behind these plays, but the man himself is elusive, endlessly mobile ... not a systematic philosopher ... a dramatist" (387), he takes no refuge in the notion that Shakespeare perfected

the philosopher's art of asking questions to which he knew there are no final answers. If he claims that "we do not know what he thought—finally—about anything" (380), Nuttall nevertheless argues that the substantial outcome of Shakespeare's dialogical engagement with the questions of philosophy lies in his capacity, as "the philosopher of human possibility" (381), to "join verisimilitude to wonder" (383). That's nicely put. It indicates the precise difference between Nuttall and McGinn's sometimes overlapping conceptions of Shakespeare's engagement with or anticipation of the modes of philosophy. Compare McGinn:

Part of my aim in this book is to work out exactly what [Shakespeare's] view was, insofar as it is represented in the plays. If I were to award him a single label, it would be "naturalist," in somewhat the sense that one speaks of a student of natural history: he is a clear-eyed observer and recorder, sensitive to the facts before his eyes, not swayed by dogma or tradition ... He is simply saying, *This is the way things are, like it or not*. He is a detached, supremely sane student of human beings and their world, intent on descriptive accuracy. (15)

The lack of philosophical self-consciousness in McGinn's bardolatry is especially surprising. Absent from this formulation of Shakespeare's philosophy are any of the complicated difficulties that philosophy itself has always strewn in the path of claims to purely descriptive knowledge. These are in fact the central preoccupations of *Shakespeare's Philosophy* itself: the corrosive doubts of skepticism; the struggle between coherence and correspondence theories of truth; the uncertainty of causality; the place of language in constructing the human world; and the fluctuating nature of the observing and representing self. To these we might add problems from the so-called "Continental" tradition, systematically ignored by McGinn, but which have been central to Shakespeare critics' interrogation of the possibility of value-free knowledge: the *historical* situatedness of the observer; his or her formation by ideological and social forces; and the hermeneutic problems of matching the reader's "horizon of expectation" with the "past significance" of a literary text, on the one hand, and the impossibility of fixing a context absolutely, on the other. McGinn argues that Shakespeare encompasses and even endorses forms of skepticism that blur the dis-

inction between dreaming and waking, call into question the stability of personal identity, and the very possibility of disinterested observation. Yet Shakespeare nevertheless stands above them as the impartial, objective, and stable recorder of human nature: the genius who transcends the messy flux not merely of human ideology and presupposition but also of the vagaries of our epistemological instruments.

### **The Limits of Philosophy**

No matter how subtle or brilliant the identification of a philosophical position in Shakespeare's work or an organizing metaphysical preoccupation in his mind, it is in danger of missing the distinctiveness of his theatrical situation and practice.

Brilliant and path-breaking as Cavell is in his analysis of the lived costs of skepticism in Shakespeare's texts, he also signals the dangers of a philosophical approach to Shakespeare that, for all its caveats about avoiding generalization and encompassing variety, tends to miss more local questions that may in their own way be called philosophical. Thus, in his pursuit of the social and personal costs of skepticism, Cavell fails to investigate the relations among and differences between the similar but not identical concepts of "skepticism," "doubt," "suspicion," and "uncertainty." McGinn likewise shows no interest in this kind of conceptual discrimination. This is strange, because Wittgenstein does, and both Cavell and McGinn have written extensively and perceptively on precisely this aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophy. Shakespeare, on the other hand, is fully alive to such conceptual differences, and the relations among the concepts clustered around doubt and uncertainty could be traced simply by attending to the way in which they are embodied and put to work in the various worlds of his plays. Nuttall hints at the root of the conceptual differences that Cavell misses when he writes that *Much Ado about Nothing* is "innocent of epistemological implications": that in this play, "Shakespeare had chosen not to think hard" (226). Despite its apparent concern with "knowing the mind's construction in the face" the play is in fact not troubled with the "deep" metaphysical problem of skepticism about other minds, but rather with what McGinn would presumably consider the "shallow" ideological and personal problems of local suspicion and uncertainty.

But if *Much Ado about Nothing* “looks hard at social practice” (225), does that mean that in focusing on such “looking” Shakespeare had given up “thinking”?

Looking hard at social practice is a subtly elusive kind of hard thinking. It’s something Shakespeare does especially well. He is uncannily good at showing how concepts at the center of social life work their way through the determining conditions—gender, class and personal education and experience—from which the forms of life that give them their meanings are constituted. This kind of conceptual analysis, which pays close attention to the embodied place of words in social practice, is as philosophical as any of the grander queries about the causes of the universe or the certainty that I can know only what is in my own mind. This is the philosophy that Shakespeare does best. Not because he was an avid reader of the *Philosophical Investigations* or *How to Do Things with Words*, or failed to take an interest in historical doctrines of Stoicism or Pyrrhonism, but because his mimetic practice as a man of the theater enabled him to represent fully the interaction through which language engages with and is resisted by the social and material world. This is the philosophy at the heart of all creative mimesis. In this sense, then, McGinn is correct to declare Shakespeare a superb observer—not as someone untouched by dogma, tradition or the insanities of social tensions and affection, but rather as a dramatist deeply rooted in and creatively attentive to the hurly-burly of activities from which concepts are shaped.

Despite the depth and wisdom of his engagement with Shakespeare as thinking dramatist, Nuttall goes too far in separating thinking hard from looking hard at social practice. McGinn, on the other hand, is too uncritical about both the philosophical and historically specific, ideological complexities that inform Shakespeare’s observation. He might have written a better book, even for popular consumption, if he had allowed himself an attack of philosophical nerves about the very philosophizing that he attributes to Shakespeare. That is to say, if he had considered more carefully, before he watched the DVDs or picked up the text of a play, what exactly it means to attribute philosophy to a dramatist.

## Notes

1. A few examples: Hamlet is a “born performer” (46); he “suffers from weakness of the will” (49); the idea that we may be dead but only dreaming that we are alive is “a vertiginous thought” (55); Hamlet is not a “model of discretion” but he is a “master of irony” (56); Iago “lies through his teeth” (66); Othello cannot see the “distinction between appearance and reality” (74); Iago is a “creative genius, in his own depraved way” (86); Macbeth is “an absolute bastard” (92) but he is human, “tragically so” (93); he is “all too ready to be taken in by his imagination” (99) and a “victim of his own mystery” (103); Regan is a “beady-eyed realist” (131)—a quality she shares with Shakespeare, “who had a remarkably beady eye” (166); King Lear is “in need of a complete cognitive overhaul,” but “by the end he has shaped up, epistemologically” (131); and at the end of *Othello* Emilia “gives [Iago] a mouthful” (177).
2. Compare Wittgenstein 1982, 38: “[T]he best example for a sentence with a particular meaning is a quotation in a play. And whoever asks a person in a play what he’s experiencing when he’s speaking?” (1982, §38).

## References

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