

sterile visitors' center. Inside, a theater loops through an orientation film. Security cameras monitor all who enter. Speakers broadcast constant announcements ("Your safety is our primary concern. . . . A heart defibrillator is located in the visitors' center") and warnings that an alarm will sound if visitors step off the rubber walking guides. Worst of all are the robotic Smoky the Bear-garbed guides, their voices flattened by the boredom of reciting the same memorized material day after day, who rattle off their speeches so mechanically that they lose all power of inflection and say things

like "We *are* now in the parlor."

Andrew Ferguson is a writer with perfect pitch and flawless timing who can go from hilarity to poignancy without missing a beat. Whether he is describing the seedy glories of Route 66 or the Holocaust survivor who believed Lincoln came to him in a dream, his reporter's powers of observation and his instinctive understanding of the human condition produce the satisfying blend of entertainment and instruction he delivers in this marvelous book.

FLORENCE KING writes a column, "The Bent Pin," for *National Review*.

IN BRIEF

ARTS & LETTERS

A Man of Ideas

SHAKESPEARE THE THINKER

begins and ends with a reminiscence about a meditative walk to the English village of Shottery. Late one afternoon, A. D. Nuttall flees the tedium of the biennial International Shakespeare Conference in Stratford to go off on his own, wandering down a country lane "looking for the boy who would grow up to become the author of *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *As You Like It*, and all the other amazing plays that bear his name." The anecdote nicely captures the spirit of the author, a beloved Oxford don who considered himself a maverick, an independent reader impatient with the triviality and dead ends of academic squabbles. Nuttall died suddenly in his rooms at New College this past January, and *Shakespeare the Thinker* stands as a fitting tribute to his learning, his humane values, and his pedagogical talents.

SHAKESPEARE THE THINKER.

By A. D. Nuttall.
Yale Univ. Press.
428 pp. \$30



William Shakespeare, c. 1610

Nuttall permits himself a few preliminary and marginal swipes at current (and by now not-so-current) fashions in literary theory, especially the solipsism of poststructuralism

and the “absurd” New Historicist view that “Shakespeare was locked into an undeveloped, savagely hierarchical political philosophy by the period in which he lived.” Leaving these sterile ideas and methods to those “in the airless lecture-room,” Nuttall sets out to help readers find their way into the plays (he does not consider the sonnets or narrative poems) and to account for their distinctive intellectual power after four centuries. To this task he brings exceptional learning (especially in the Greek and Latin literary traditions), a grounding in European philosophy, a lifetime of studying and teaching the plays, and an accessible prose style.

Explaining his title, Nuttall properly distinguishes between, on the one hand, what Shakespeare thought—which, given the medium of drama, we cannot know—and, on the other, what he thought about and how he thought about it, which we can know. He advances more or less chronologically through the canon, devoting some 10 pages to almost every play, identifying and exploring the dramatist’s treatment of such central human concerns as love, death, politics, religious doubt, nature, art, and language. Scrutiny of these topics generates Nuttall’s fundamental insight, that Shakespeare “shows an uncanny ability to anticipate almost every kind of counter-feeling.” In other words, the playwright routinely complicates or subverts any important statement or position he dramatizes by considering the virtues of its opposite. Villains talk sense; heroes behave badly; audiences cannot make up their minds.

This tension between opposing points of view is indisputably central to Shakespearean thought and theater. *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, for instance, raises ethical concerns about words, offering a “juxtaposition of verbal gymnastics and an anti-verbal message.” *Richard II* presents a “horror at the substitution of an idea of reality for reality itself.” In *Hamlet*, “less guilty than most of evading the central mystery of

un-being . . . , Shakespeare propels us into a more fundamental bewilderment.” Late in his career, “the dramatist may have been visited by a kind of nausea as he contemplated the obscene power of his own manipulative art.” Judicious source study, poetic sensitivity, historical context, linguistic scholarship, acquaintance with, among other philosophers, Locke, Wittgenstein, Hegel, and Popkin—all these tools are employed to illuminate the competing ideas that animate play after play.

If the book displays the benefits of lifelong study, it also suffers, regrettably, from some of the mild corrosions academic eminence can bring. Years of autonomy and admiration made the author a little too Olympian. He dismisses the critical establishment as if he were not a product and a perpetuator of it. (His central theory, for example, resembles arguments made by unmentioned critics such as Helen Vendler and Norman Rabkin.) And when he does occasionally linger over a stimulating essay or argument, these almost invariably turn out to have been written either by his own students or by critics dead for several decades. Too many paragraphs begin with some form of the phrase “Several years ago I wrote that. . . .”

But a little tolerance will lessen the irritation. Nuttall’s voice will be missed. And the reader—whether general or professional—will find much to enjoy in this posthumous volume—and much, well, to think about.

—Russ McDonald

The Professor of Desire

THE CHIEF IMPRESSION ONE takes from *The Life of Kingsley Amis* is of a man who loved pleasure. Indeed, few men have matched Amis’s

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