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## Book Review: Thinking with Shakespeare: Essays on Politics and Life

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*Thinking With Shakespeare: Essays on Politics and Life*, by Julia Reinhard Lupton. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2011. 312 pp.

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Political theorists who pick up *Thinking With Shakespeare: Essays on Politics and Life* naturally will assume the book to be first and foremost about Shakespeare, but those who read it may find its most important contributions to lie in its first and last words: thinking and life.

Lupton is at the forefront of contemporary Shakespeare scholars who read his plays not primarily through an historical lens (contextualizing their meaning in early modern England, seeking prior influences in Ovid, Plutarch, and Elizabethan theater) nor from a cultural-aesthetic perspective (pursuing how the plays function as dramatic works), but as open-ended texts waiting to be given contemporary valence. *Thinking with Shakespeare* is expansive: its central ideas, Lupton signals in the introduction, are “election, consent, hospitality, sociability, and personhood” (18)—diverse concepts whose exploration leads Lupton to incorporate an equally variegated cadre of thinkers, including Aristotle, biblical sources, Gervase Markham, John Locke, Carl Schmitt, Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, and above all Hannah Arendt. Lupton’s effort to link Shakespeare’s dramatization of politics with its theorization in such authors is no easy task. But her book is a feat of interdisciplinarity, reflecting an erudition of Shakespeare scholarship, literary theory, and political theory that is profound and deeply impressive, and written with artful prose that is playful and smart.

If some critics will wish *Thinking With Shakespeare* possessed sharper focus, and was less tentative with regard to its conclusions, it is a virtue of the book that it is self-aware about its circumambulation. Appealing to the technical sense of the term employed by Arendt, Lupton identifies her book as an exercise in *thinking*. Arendt, herself developing the Kantian distinction between understanding (*verstand*) and reason in its spontaneous, speculative function (*vernunft*), differentiated *knowing* (the passive accumulation of facts in the name of truth) from *thinking* (the active, necessarily dialogic process of interpretation in the name of meaning). Lupton alerts her reader to the conversational quality of *Thinking With Shakespeare*, likening the book to a dinner discussion with herself, Shakespeare, Arendt, and other guests engaged in convivial discourse.

Lupton's self-description as a thinker helps to justify her ahistorical reading of Shakespeare's plays. As Lupton explains, referencing Arendt's own act of thinking with Shakespeare, the thinker's search for meaning often proceeds by wresting "thought fragments" from the original tradition in which they were initially employed. Riffing off of "Ariel's Song" from the *The Tempest*, Arendt says that what motivates such excavation is not the historical desire to retrieve knowledge of the past, but "the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization . . . [so that] some things 'suffer a sea change,' and survive . . . as 'thought fragments,' as something 'rich and strange.'"<sup>1</sup> While students of political thought continue to debate the propriety of extrahistorical readings of philosophical works, when it comes to literary texts like those of Shakespeare, whose intentions were never provided in the form of discursive arguments due both to their poetic quality and the remarkably undidactic nature of his plays, it seems creative, fragmentary appropriations along the lines defended by Arendt and Lupton are inescapable and beyond reproach.

Of course thinking is not without risks—chief among these is the tendency for thought, precisely because it travels beyond the knowable, to end up in aporia and incompleteness, leading its practitioners to wonder what the discussion was all about. Socrates, the paradigmatic thinker for Arendt, ends virtually all the early Platonic dialogues with a confession that he and his interlocutors have failed to discover the meaning of the concept they were examining.<sup>2</sup> To some extent, *Thinking With Shakespeare* bears this Socratic legacy. Chapter two carefully distinguishes numerous meanings of "election" occurring in *Hamlet*, but the ultimate effect is more one of disaggregation than comprehension. Similarly, chapter three differentiates contract, covenant, and consent—and then goes on to distinguish various forms of consent (medical, marital, sexual, and so forth) in *All's Well That Ends Well*—in a way that is insightful and undeniably thoughtful (indeed, part of what thinking does is make distinctions<sup>3</sup>), but still feels preliminary.

In general, though, *Thinking With Shakespeare* satisfies the criterion Arendt suggested would need to guide any thinking process: *consistency*—a criterion that in this context should be read not just as the logical requirement of noncontradiction but in terms of two additional factors: that there be some genuine conceptual connection between the texts being brought into conversation and that the various thoughts, speculations, and interpretations be integrated into an internal harmony regarding the thinker's overarching purpose. With respect to the first of these, *Thinking With Shakespeare* is clearly successful. Chapter four's reading of *Timon of Athens* in conversation with the Book of Job, for example, seems entirely justified not merely because

there are clear allusions to Job in the play but because both works document parallel scenarios of basically good men being brought to ruin. Likewise, reading *The Tempest* in juxtaposition with Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, in chapter six, wonderfully illuminates both works, with Lockean categories of paternal, political, master–servant, and master–slave relations helping to untangle the play's diffuse power dynamics (and Prospero's claim to be a “prince of power”), while, from the other side, *The Tempest*, with its setting on a virtually uninhabited island, renders vivid and surprisingly relevant Lockean arguments about natural law.

With regard to the other criterion of consistency—the internal consistency of the book's various thought-trains—*Thinking With Shakespeare*, because of its essayistic quality, reads differently from some of the most outstanding recent efforts of contemporary philosophers to mine Shakespeare for a specific philosophical purpose, whether Stanley Cavell's *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven of Shakespeare's Plays* (which treats Shakespeare as responding to modern skepticism) or René Girard's *Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare* (which, in an analysis of nearly all of Shakespeare's plays, explores the phenomenon of “mimetic desire”). Nonetheless, the book does continually return to the theme of *life*—the human being in its raw biotic form and the relation of the biotic to politics—and in doing so, suggests a fresh perspective within the burgeoning literature on such issues. The central idiom Lupton employs in this regard is “creaturely life,” a term she shares with Eric Santner, whose book, *On Creaturely Life*, was itself influenced by Lupton's earlier work on Caliban and exerts its own influence in *Thinking With Shakespeare*. If I understand Lupton, creaturely life has at least two key implications. First, it stands for a particular kind of intersection between politics and the life processes, one that does not elicit the usual saturnine insistence on pathology. Whereas Arendt places life outside of authentic politics, and whereas Foucault and Agamben speak of biopolitics as the bureaucratic regulation of life, the perspective Lupton pursues recognizes the life processes as essential contexts for the political animal's political functioning. As she explains, “My aim is not to distinguish politics and life, but to dramatize their essential interrelation” (9). Lupton is perhaps most effective in realizing this aim in her chapter on *The Winter's Tale*, where she treats hospitality as a form of politics, grounded in the needs of the body and the household, yet at the same time making possible seemingly political relations of speech with strangers and the self-disclosure thereby enabled.

Second (and what makes Lupton's account different from more familiar feminist rehabilitations of domesticity), creaturely life also refers to the nature of the life process itself. A creature, Lupton explains, implies both a creator

(whether divine or natural-historical) and the possibility that the creative process will continue and further transform the creature. Conceived as creaturely, life no longer is “bare” (Agamben), nor fixed in dumb repetition (Arendt), nor reduced to the animalic will-to-power (Nietzsche), but becomes imbued with the sublimity of an Other that both reveals itself to us and is the shifting setting of our own future self-revelations. This alternate bearing toward life is best summarized, as Lupton herself suggests, in Prospero’s anagnorisis regarding Caliban, the strange creature with whom he has shared the island in *The Tempest*—“This thing of darkness, I acknowledge mine”—where darkness ought to signify not so much the evil or perversion of creaturely life but its mysterious, veiled, evolving aspect.

Life, as Lupton acknowledges, is a “definitional conundrum” (8), and if her book will certainly help advance our conception of it, more perhaps could be said about the precise relation between these two forms of creaturely life. Why should the creaturely quality of the human life process necessarily implicate us in politics, as Lupton seems to say? The biopolitical mechanics of creatureliness might have been elaborated with “more matter,” which is not to say “less art.”

It should not be forgotten, of course, that it is Shakespeare who continually propels Lupton’s thinking about politics and life. Lupton persuasively claims that it is precisely in the plays’ potent, trans-generational ability to elicit thought that any claim to Shakespeare’s universality as an artist must rest: “The universality of Shakespeare’s plays . . . [consists] not as a thesaurus of eternal messages but in their capacity to establish real connections with successive worlds shared and sustained by actors and audiences over time” (18). If Lupton is right about this universality, and I would wager she is, then her book must be read not only as a leading scholar’s expert interpretation of Shakespeare but an invitation to political theorists of all types to find sustenance in the Bard.

## Notes

1. Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968), 205-6.
2. Plato *Lysis*, 223a; *Republic*, I, 605b; *Theaetetus*, 210b; *Euthyphro*, 15c; also see, *Meno*, 71a.
3. See, e.g., Immanuel Kant, “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, eds. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4-6.