

Interpretation

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In 1994, David Lowenthal, then professor of political philosophy at Boston College, published *Shakespeare and the Good Life: Ethics and Politics in Dramatic Form*, a study of seven plays by William Shakespeare (*Tempest*, *King Lear*, *Julius Caesar*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Macbeth*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Midsummer Night's Dream*). More than just a commentary on these dramas, this book sought to explore the philosopher-poet's thoughts "on moral, political, religious, philosophical matters, on the things that mean the most to men, on [the] art itself that animates the plays" (ix). By doing so, Lowenthal endeavored to recover the human and political wisdom of Shakespeare against contemporary academic trends that would historicize his work, bury his insights into nature and the human condition under an avalanche of prejudices about race, class, and gender, and turn that "mirror of nature" found in his dramatic poetry by centuries of his best readers into a reflection of the modern scholarly preoccupation with cultural materialism.

At the time of this earlier publication, I happened to be an undergraduate student of Professor Lowenthal, and thus a novice reader of Shakespeare largely uninitiated in the broader trends characterizing the massive secondary literature on the Bard. But over the next twenty years, as my experience with Shakespeare and Shakespearean scholarship deepened as a reader, a student, and ultimately a professor of political science, I came to appreciate the genuine contribution that *Shakespeare and the Good Life* made to an understanding Shakespeare's philosophic depths. Fortunately, the recent republication of this work, now titled *Shakespeare's Thought: Unobserved*

Details and Unsuspected Depths in Thirteen Plays, makes available to a new generation of students the virtues of Lowenthal's earlier and, to my mind, insufficiently appreciated book. And with additional chapters on *Romeo and Juliet*, *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, *Henry V*, *Coriolanus*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, it offers further evidence that David Lowenthal, now professor emeritus, is among the best readers of Shakespeare to emerge in the last hundred years.

Lowenthal's approach to reading Shakespeare might best be described as a naive openness to both the coherence of Shakespeare's dramatic work, the belief that "absolutely nothing in a Shakespearean play is there by accident" (ix), and the possibility that Shakespeare has something fundamentally important to teach us about human life. For Lowenthal, the method and the message of Shakespeare's dramas are united by the effort to deepen and refine our understanding of the challenges facing all reasoned efforts to live the good life. Such an approach issues in a reading of the plays that supports the argument, originally advanced by Allan Bloom and Harry Jaffa nearly sixty years ago (and thus long before Stephen Greenblatt "discovered" politics in Shakespeare), that Shakespeare was a political thinker of the first rank. It also presents a powerful rebuttal to the view of one of Shakespeare's greatest critics, A. C. Nuttall, that "denied Shakespeare was essentially a man of reason rather than imagination" (ix), a view which has been taken as an unquestionable and unquestioned verity by generations of scholars working on Shakespeare. Lowenthal thus argues for an approach to the wisdom of Shakespeare's plays that is at once new and old, immediate and venerable. It is immediate because it is available to human beings wherever and whenever they might be found. And it is venerable insofar as it is the approach largely adopted by Shakespeare's readers for most of the four hundred years following his death.

It is to a recovery of this older approach to reading Shakespeare that Lowenthal dedicates his original preface and his opening chapter. Drawing extensively upon the artistic judgment of Ben Jonson, John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson, Thomas De Quincey, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, among others, Lowenthal shows that Shakespeare's earliest and most sensitive readers understood him to hold "up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life" (9), and thus "to be not only a poet of the greatest genius but a teacher, a philosopher, a wise man" (287). Lowenthal thus illustrates the cost to reading Shakespeare that comes from the more recent scholarly efforts to divorce "the artist from the goal of understanding the nature of things" (13). "The work of the poet," he writes, "is now set adrift

on a subjective sea, with nothing that it must try to mirror or understand 'out there,' and hence no means of judging its adequacy qua truth.... Our critics bring to the study of Shakespeare assumptions that are not his" (13).

To be fair to the cultural materialists among Shakespeare scholars, Lowenthal does not address contemporary academic trends in detail. In fact, he hardly addresses any texts on Shakespeare, contemporary or otherwise. Instead, he takes his cue from "two classics of Shakespearean interpretation—A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* and Harold C. Goddard's *The Meaning of Shakespeare*—both of which are also quite niggardly in citing others" (xvii). While Lowenthal's reading of the plays would benefit from an engagement with select works on Shakespeare (more on this below), the oblique treatment of academic trends that he offers here does not lessen the power of his criticism. The classic judgments on Shakespeare amassed in the work's opening pages constitute a formidable backdrop against which the historicist rendering of Shakespeare so prevalent today will be found shallow, rigidly ideological, and, perhaps most unforgivably, boring.

Of course, the proof of the pudding always lies in its eating. If Shakespeare's plays do indeed hold up a mirror to nature, as Lowenthal so confidently contends, then he has to show how and that they do. As the new title of his work suggests, his commentary on thirteen plays, most of which originally appeared in print as journal articles and chapters in edited volumes, is not tightly organized around a single theme; there is no simple thesis or argument that he tries to prove. This might explain why his book does not conclude so much as just end. And his inclusion of six new chapters is guided as much by considerations of genre (the original work did not cover any of the histories or comedies) as anything else. So while the chapters on the plays are placed "in an order best calculated to convey the content and manner of [Shakespeare's] philosophy," each "is treated as a universe of its own" (xvi) and can thus be read independently of the rest of the book.

What then ties together these thirteen chapters? By trying to convey the playwright's "philosophy," Lowenthal does not attribute to Shakespeare a doctrinal or systematic view of man meant to be parroted by his audience. On the contrary, Lowenthal, anticipating the approach taken by David Bevington in *Shakespeare's Ideas* (2008), cautions that there is "no easy or direct way to learn Shakespeare's own views, and thus his overall philosophy, if he had one" (4). The "plays are not written in such a way as to suggest plainly that they constitute intellectual inquiries or demonstrations" (4). To the extent that Shakespeare teaches his audience, he does so to make them reflect on

the political significance of the claim to rule by the wise, to think about the natural or conventional basis of justice, to explore contending views of the best regime, to consider the biblical alternative to classical philosophy, and, in light of all of this, to order their passions, especially love and anger, accordingly. But if this is true, then what Lowenthal states about “the political art” in his treatment of *The Tempest*—that it is “the art of getting men to do what reason dictates, whether by nourishing reason within them...or by providing their souls with motives and habits other than reason that bring out the outcome that reason requires” (44)—suggests that Shakespeare exercises the political art at the highest level available to man. The fundamental aim of *Shakespeare’s Thought* is to show how the philosopher-poet displays in the selected plays the “classical inspiration and esoteric presentation” (xvi) of what one is tempted to call his “political science.”

On the character of that political science, Lowenthal declares that Shakespeare is “an independently thinking follower of classical philosophy—of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle—whose understanding of their teaching and that of their pre-Socratic predecessors was profound” (xvi). This does not lead him to engage in laborious speculation about which classical Greek and Roman texts (and their translations) Shakespeare had available to him, which ones he might have read, and what he might have understood from them; for that difficult task one must look elsewhere (see for instance Colin Burrow, *Shakespeare and Classical Antiquity*, 2013). For better or worse, the positions of the ancient Greek philosophers that Lowenthal posits here are not argued for so much as simply asserted and treated as if the views of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were simply univocal. But for Lowenthal, who was surely aware of these difficulties, such concerns are beside the point. For the purposes of his book, it is sufficient to understand classical philosophy to offer an alternative to a world whose views on God, the nature of the universe, moral and intellectual virtue, and political life have been decisively shaped by Christianity, a world whose foundations were beginning to feel the effects of both the Protestant Reformation and the early stirrings of the Enlightenment. To what extent then can Shakespeare’s plays be understood to reflect and point to a classical alternative to Christian and early modern thought?

Of all the plays, *The Tempest* presents Shakespeare’s most direct or overt engagement with *the* classic text of Greek political philosophy, Plato’s *Republic*, and the claim for which that work is most famous, namely, that there will be no end to injustices in political life until philosophers become kings or kings are made to philosophize. In the figure of Prospero, one finds a ruler

in total control of both the material and human subjects of his island “kingdom,” a man whose claim to rule is based on his superior intellectual and, ultimately, moral virtue. It is thus from neither divine right nor customary practice (i.e., hereditary succession or popular consent) but from his naturally superior ability to educate, and thus serve the genuine benefit of those he commands, that Prospero’s just authority derives.

But, as Lowenthal points out, the wisdom that grounds Prospero’s rule is not fully mature at the beginning of the play; *The Tempest* reveals the basis of Prospero’s own education as much as it shows his ability to educate and moderate the passions of Miranda, Ferdinand, Caliban, and his erstwhile enemy Alonso. According to Lowenthal, a careful viewing of the play shows us Prospero *becoming* wise, a wisdom that is humane because it is rooted in, among other things, an awareness of both his passionate attachment to other human beings and the necessity of an engagement in politics. Such an education necessarily entails an awareness of the limits of his political art (humans being mortal after all) and the influence and role that the rule of the wise can have on human and political life, as the recalcitrant Antonio and Sebastian indicate. The superior humanity that Prospero achieves by the end of the play therefore stands in stark contrast to the technocratic mastery that has allowed him to rule his island despotically for twelve years. A wise man whose continued intellectual and political pursuits are now moderated by these insights, the restored duke of Milan will be neither Christian saint nor Baconian scientist.

In the subsequent chapters, Lowenthal explores the need for and challenges to the life dedicated to wisdom with its superior claim to political rule. Thus, the next chapter, on the issue of succession in *King Lear*, takes up the question of the origins of natural right. Lear’s complex and subtle scheme to place royal succession in England on a new footing raises the question “whether human justice and political life have a foundation in nature or are merely conventional” (65), a question with implications for “the relationship of gods to nature” (66) and thus for what “the fundamental causes of things really” are (72). Despite *Lear*’s tragic ending, Lowenthal concludes that “far from demonstrating the meaninglessness of the universe, and its resistance to justice, the play shows why justice must have a lasting and secure place in the minds and hearts of men. Founded in the social nature of man, justice is conventional only in its forms, while its substance remains fixed and universal” (80). The basis of natural right then is located in an enduring human nature. And its chief expression is not to be found in the changing laws and

ordinances of a political community, but in the art of Shakespeare that renders the world intelligible and proves that life is not a “tale told by an idiot signifying nothing.”

It is in *Julius Caesar*, however, according to Lowenthal, that Shakespeare most directly explores the challenge posed to philosophy by the life of political practice at its highest level. He argues that Shakespeare’s Caesar secures for himself a kind of apotheosis by deliberately engineering his own martyrdom, a glory achieved by no other historical figure. But it is Shakespeare, through his art, and Shakespeare’s Cicero, through his political philosophy, who achieve more fully the rest and order that characterize the different ends sought by both theory and practice. While Caesar’s glory depends on the changing judgments of men, the knowledge that Shakespeare and his Cicero “pursue links the mind to the eternal, lifting it above the flux of things, uniting it with other minds, and proving (as Plato showed) that in the universe the last word belongs to peace and order rather than to war and disorder” (118). Shakespeare’s view of honor, however, is not simply negative. The criticism of political ambition and the pursuit of public honor that is implicit in his *Caesar* and which gets developed more fully in the chapters on *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *Henry V*, and *Coriolanus* helps channel man’s spirited nature towards the conditions necessary for a healthy and free politics.

The redirection of *thumos* to a more natural fulfillment in republican politics finds its counterpart in Shakespeare’s treatment of *eros* in the dramas dedicated to sex and love. Whether in the “pagan” forests of Athens and Arden or the Christianized cities of Verona, Venice, and Vienna, Shakespeare navigates the lovers in his audience between the extremes towards which they are driven by the body’s sexual urges and the soul’s longing for an idealized transcendence. Lowenthal argues that for Shakespeare, “the only prospect for overcoming these divisions and differences lies in [a] rational cosmology,” such as is supplied by Portia of Belmont at the end of *Merchant of Venice*, one which accepts “all lovers, whatever their origin, in their natural admixture of body and soul” (141). As with his treatment of justice, Shakespeare, according to Lowenthal, offers a qualified and nonsacramental defense of the custom of marriage.

Shakespeare’s Thought plumbs the unsuspected depths of Shakespeare’s “political art” and finds its ground in philosophic reflection on the human condition, an activity rooted in man’s “abstract urge to know” (2). To be sure, Shakespeare’s dramas do not explicitly reveal these grounds (287). Lowenthal must make great efforts to explicate the hidden political and pedagogical

rationale for such an indirect presentation, efforts that constitute one of the work's many highlights. But he can reach such depths because he tends with an unrivaled care to the details of Shakespeare's dramas, "which are usually passed by as merely incidental, but which are in fact subtle contributions to the theme under development" (xv). Whether observing Duncan's plan for Scottish succession (154ff.) or Ross's consummate opportunism (168–71) in *Macbeth*, Cleopatra's letter-writing "campaign" (chap. 14) or Caesar's "suicide by conspiracy" (chap. 4), Prospero's papal-political project (26–27) or the movement of midsummer marriages (222), to name just a few examples, Lowenthal's intrepid reading prepares new vistas for those interested in exploring the coherence of Shakespeare's dramas.

Of course, any reading of Shakespeare that offers a unifying theory for the details of his dramas will open itself to charges of overreading. Lowenthal could parry this charge more easily had he shown how his readings build and improve upon the scholars who have come before and after his earlier work. Nevertheless, his interpretations tend to unfold in such an honest and dialectical manner as to defuse such criticism. Where Lowenthal runs into the most difficulty is in his treatment of the biblical alternative to the classical position that he attributes to the Bard. While he is no doubt correct to argue that Shakespeare's plays are often centrally concerned with the impact on politics and man's civic character of both Christian moral teaching and the Catholic Church, he overstates Shakespeare's critical view here. And he overstates his case because he misrepresents Christianity, effectively reducing its moral and political teaching to the Sermon on the Mount, a point that our author makes at least four times (227, 242, 244, and 265).

In Lowenthal's hands, Christianity's injunction to turn the other cheek becomes absolute pacifism (227, 252, and chap. 10) and the call to serve others before oneself turns into a radical, and contradictory, self-abnegation (131, 139, 203). "Christian politics" is therefore an oxymoron (166, 242, 243, 244, 252, and 263). To effect such a caricature, Lowenthal knowingly sets aside the writings of the early church fathers, St. Augustine chief among them, in favor of a hyperliteral reading of the Gospels (265). But as a human text believed to be inspired by God, one cannot treat the Christian scriptures as a Muslim must treat the Koran. The Gospels require interpretation and thus the deliberation that Lowenthal would deny to it (263). Instead of a list of absolute commandments, Christian teaching offers a moral vocabulary or grammar whose application demands the very prudence that Lowenthal attributes to *Shakespeare's* political science. To appreciate this aspect of Christianity is not

to say that Shakespeare was a believer or that his plays sought to endorse Christian belief. It is rather to call into question the sharp divide between Shakespeare's presumably classical view of the world and the Christianity that Lowenthal argues so stridently against. After all, are not the bellicosity and lust that Christianity tries to suppress (266) the same passions that classical philosophy tried to tame? And when Lowenthal decries the gap between Christian ideals and the harsh realities of our fallen condition, does he not thereby imprecate the gap between truth and life that Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle knew would always frustrate the wise governance of human affairs? One might well wonder how such observations can constitute a refutation of Christianity when they simply confirm what all practicing Christians already know to be true about the world.

Such a reductionist view does not necessarily result in Lowenthal mishandling Shakespeare's texts. When he treats the problems posed by Antonio's extreme selflessness (139), the paralysis caused by Hamlet's Christian conscience (264), the dangers of Macduff's pious hopefulness (161, 163), or Friar Lawrence's tragic meddling (228), Lowenthal is not imposing on the texts burdens they cannot bear. But the entirely critical *judgment* of Christianity that Lowenthal attributes to Shakespeare prevents the reader from appreciating, for example, Henry V's respect for the limits embodied in a Christian order or the civilizing effects that Christianity might have on the England of *Cymbeline* and *King John*. Indeed, while Shakespeare's history plays illustrate the political consequences of a corrupt and meddling clergy, they also show the disasters that befall a community utterly bereft of Christian virtue. One could even argue that Shakespeare's Roman plays show us not only the virtues of classical politics, but how the exhaustion of those virtues eventuates in the demand for an articulation of the soul and its longings to which Christianity aspires to do justice.

This view, that Shakespeare appreciated the benefits and not just the deleterious political consequences of Christianity, at any rate seems less dogmatic and more consistent with the traditional notion that his dramas mirror nature in all of its marvelous complexity. It even seems more consistent with that view of the world so beautifully stated by Lowenthal at the end of his chapter on *Macbeth*. Despite that play's grim overtones, the world, for Shakespeare,

is not the dark place it seems, and certainly not unintelligible. It is intelligible because the natures of the things in it are, and must be, intelligible. With its amazing array of beings, culminating in man, it is

even the kind of world reason would choose, given what is possible. It contains ugliness because it also contains beauty, baseness because it also contains nobility, evil because it also contains good.... He seems to have concluded, as a general matter, that good is more fundamental than evil in the world, whatever the practical difficulties in the way of realizing it, and however great the predominance of evil. (193)

If this is correct, then the necessity of the interplay between good and evil in human affairs should offer a sobering insight into our condition. But such sobriety might also explain why *Shakespeare's Thought* can inspire the joy and wonder that comes with learning how to live well from Shakespeare, a learning for which his best students, among whom we must count David Lowenthal, prepare us.