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ave for his baptismal day, the date of his death, and that he bequeathed his “second best bed” to his wife, we know enticingly little about the life of William Shakespeare. Recognizing that the plays are as elusive as the playwright, T. S. Eliot once observed: “About anyone so great as Shakespeare, it is probable that we can never be right; and if we can never be right, it is better that we should from time to time change our way of being wrong.” The past few years have seen a flurry of publications that propose daring new ways of being wrong about our most familiar yet obscure author.

Maggie O’Farrell offers a profound meditation on marriage, motherhood, loss, grief, and the theater in her elegant novel *Hamnet* (Knopf 2021), and the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams dramatizes what a young, Catholic Shakespeare might say about life and art, faith and words in a series of intimate conversations with the soon to be martyred Edmund Campion in the title play of *Shakeshafte and Other Plays* (Slant 2021). In anticipation of the 2020 election, James Shapiro’s *Shakespeare in a Divided America* (Penguin 2020) traces the Bard’s influence on the American political landscape from the Revolution to today, and Emma Smith’s *This is Shakespeare* (Pantheon 2020) homes in on the meaningful ambiguity of the plays, the way meaning is directed by casting, delivery, and staging.

The interesting scenarios and clever arguments in these texts necessarily rely on speculation, which makes for exciting reading. The sheer absence of speculation, however, is part of what makes Scott Newstok’s excellent new book *How to Think Like Shakespeare: Lessons from a Renaissance Education* stand out. With crisp, lapidary prose, Newstok writes authoritatively about the educational norms and practices that helped shape Shakespeare’s mind.

Thankfully, the worst part of Newstok’s book is the title. It is not a flimsy contribution to the burgeoning self-help-made-parasitic-on-a-canonical-author niche: nowhere will you find the claim that Shakespeare will save your life. Nor does Newstok attempt to reduce Shakespeare to milky platitudes—though he playfully cites a management book that repackages Polonius into vapid business...
maxims. Here, Polonius’ “This above all: to thine own self be true, / And it must follow as the night the day / Thou canst not then be false to any man” is dumbed down into an actionable principle: “Trust and integrity are critical in business . . . once one’s reputation for integrity is lost, one’s effectiveness is lost.” Embarrassing—but measure what matters.

With a wink and a nod, Newstok offers nothing of this ilk. How to Think Like Shakespeare is very much not a “how-to” book. You’ll find no easy answers, no paradigms, and no five-step-methods here. Instead, Newstok approaches his task indirectly. Ultimately, this makes Newstok’s argument more persuasive, even if more off-putting to those Gradgrind administrators who will feel duped by a book seemingly advertised as a Shakespeare-on-teaching how-to complete with lesson plans, learning outcomes, and ideas for exit tickets. O, brave new world that has such teachers in it—Huxley’s premonition has, somehow, usurped Miranda’s vision.

In short, the book centers on thinking. Because Shakespeare’s habits of mind were forged in the classroom, the book is more broadly about how education might cultivate or hinder one’s ability to think. Though primarily concerned with Renaissance education, Newstok doesn’t shy away from critiquing our “just plain wrong” contemporary approaches to the classroom, learning, and pedagogy.

Each of the fourteen, “deliberately short” chapters centers on a unifying topic but frequently breaks off, like Hamlet’s soliloquies and thought itself, in any number of directions. This accounts for the book’s energetic pace and mercurial nature—it is, by turns, learned and personal, colloquial and academic. The chapter headings echo Montaigne—“Of Thinking,” “Of Fit,” “Of Stock”—and range from topics as diverse as craft, place, attention, conversation, and freedom. That each chapter is an essay—that is, etymologically, an “attempt” or “trial”—is another nod to Montaigne: Each essay seeks to offer “not only an exploration of thinking, but an enactment of it.” As Newstok essays the contours of a Renaissance education, he demonstrates with verve the effect it’s had on his own thinking. Put otherwise, the book is Newstok’s essay at thinking—and it’s a sterling attempt.

Perhaps the most prominent feature of Newstok’s writing, of his attempt at thinking, is his prolific use of quotation. Indeed, “quotations come ‘quick as thought’ as Homer used to say”—perhaps a rococo way to get at Homer by way of Hannah Arendt. But the quotations aren’t mere flourishes. Because he wants to think like Shakespeare, Newstok thinks alongside other thinkers. The way the book proceeds invites the reader to do the same.

You’ll find yourself thinking with the likes of Aristotle and Augustine, Matthew Arnold and W. H. Auden, Francis Bacon and Niels Bohr, C. S. Lewis and Claude Lévi-Strauss, chapter by chapter. Moving freely between historical periods and across educational disciplines, Newstok constantly engages a dizzying array of thinkers. No surprise, perhaps, as Shakespeare was himself a literal Renaissance man, but given the hyperspecialization academia now requires, it has become
increasingly rare to find living Renaissance men. In the introduction alone, Newstok makes amiable bedfellows of Einstein, Mary Wollstonecraft, Heraclitus, Alfred North Whitehead, Gwendolyn Brooks, Goethe, Theodor Adorno, Mary Oliver, and, of course, Shakespeare. This achievement, in no small part, stems from a Renaissance practice.

The first chapter, “On Thinking,” introduces commonplace books, ubiquitous in Shakespeare’s day, where students made a habit of transcribing moving or important passages. The value here, beyond the obvious, is that “[b]y compounding commonplace thoughts of others, we can better shape our own words to become, well, less commonplace.” Interestingly, Newstok reveals that in the first quarto—the so-called “bad quarto” of 1603—Polonius’ bromides appear as suggested entries for readers’ commonplace books. Set off by quotation marks, they’re proffered as choice bits to be copied and memorized. This all helps contextualize Newstok’s impressive use of quotation. In a certain way, How to Think Like Shakespeare almost is a commonplace book itself. The writing itself demonstrates the results of a well-kept commonplace book. Regardless, it’s clear that Newstok can think with and through the thoughts of Shakespeare, et al., in part because he’s adopted this practice himself.

While we haven’t found any of Shakespeare’s commonplace books, Newstok quotes lines from Sonnet 77 that evidence Shakespeare was well-versed in the practice:

Look what thy memory cannot contain,
Commit to these waste blanks, and thou shalt find
Those children nursed, delivered from thy brain,
To take a new acquaintance of thy mind.

You don’t have to look far in the poems or plays to see that Shakespeare’s writing is littered with borrowings, playmates or children nursed from others. He and his characters often think through the thoughts and words of others.

By way of example, at the start of chapter eight, “Of Imitation,” Newstok challenges the reader to identify which lines come from Shakespeare: Ye elves of hills, of brooks, of woods alone, of standing lakes or Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes and groves. A nigh impossible task. The first comes from Arthur Golding’s rendering of Ovid, the translation Shakespeare knew; the second from The Tempest. So while commonplacing helps him think and write with others, Newstok also shows us how the exercise helped Shakespeare do the same. Though creative writing teachers obsessed with all things new and ill-defined notions of “originality” would either disallow this as plagiarism or lambast it as stifling “creativity,” thinkers in the Renaissance would have agreed with Voltaire’s formulation: “originality is nothing but judicious imitation.” Eliot goes further: “Immature
poets imitate; mature poets steal; bad poets deface what they take, and good poets make it into something better, or at least something different.”

Another Renaissance practice Newstok discusses in “Of Imitation” is called double translation. Here, students were tasked with translating a passage from Latin into English only to be asked to carry it back into Latin at a later time. The goal was not merely to capture the thrust of the passage but, importantly, to retain the unique style and voice and diction and cadence of the original author. A successful double translation exercise becomes all the more impressive, then, because even when Catullus and Cicero and Caesar reflect on the same topic, they sound so very different. How to render that into English? And how to render that back into a Latin recognizable as Ciceronian? While students today could perform double translation in foreign language classes, it could also be done in English.

Imagine the value of students learning to sound like Shakespeare, Dickens, and Yeats. Better yet, imagine poets took precedence over top forty and playlist algorithms in shaping what our students think about and how they sound. They’d begin to notice how form and content reinforce or undermine each other. They’d search for and delight in the mot juste, recognizing that language isn’t merely a tool for expressing ideas but the very means of discovering them. Most importantly, students would learn to inhabit and love their own language. They would learn how to think through language by carefully imitating the language and thought of others. How vastly superior to anything contemporary pedagogues have on offer.

Ultimately, Newstok claims that by submitting to the educational disciplines and exercises common in the Renaissance, Shakespeare achieved the freedom to think. Perhaps, that’s why Shakespeare has assisted so many others into thought, in contradistinction to the Common Core’s essential questions about grade-level appropriate readings which inevitably quash thought and the desire to know. In the midst of this meditation on freedom through submission, Newstok sets forth James Baldwin’s relationship with Shakespeare’s language as recounted in Notes of a Native Son and “Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare.”

Though the young Baldwin bucked at Shakespeare, considering him “one of the authors and architects of my oppression,” Baldwin the writer recognized the sobering fact that Shakespeare helped create and free him, enabling him to come to possess his own language and thus his own experiences.

My quarrel with the English language has been that the language reflected none of my experience. But now I began to see the matter in quite another way. If the language was not my own, it might be the fault of the language; but it might also be my fault. Perhaps the language was not my own because I had never attempted to use it, had only learned to imitate it.

While living in France, Baldwin moved from imitating his native tongue to inhabiting it. Thus it comes as no surprise that Baldwin began to find himself
in and through Shakespeare. This is where Renaissance education leaves the page and incarnates itself into life. Though Newstok refrains from articulating it, the implication is that the careful study of Shakespeare combined with the willingness to submit yourself to the right kind of educational practices has the potential to liberate the reader in a similar way. I daresay _How to Think Like Shakespeare_ testifies to the fact that it liberated Newstok. So maybe it’s not such a bad title after all.

The book explores assumptions about education, recounts practices of a by-gone age, and calls on Shakespeare’s plays throughout. It will be of interest to any reader or teacher of Shakespeare—and it should be of interest to any serious reader or teacher. Watching Newstok think with Shakespeare is inspiring, and he proves an amiable guide. In addition to the well-crafted arguments and expositions of various educational exercises, Newstok points the reader in numerous profitable directions. I’ve not been so excited to talk about footnotes since reading David Foster Wallace. One unexpected gem led me to Paul Lockhart’s _A Mathematician’s Lament_, a potent critique of how math is taught in schools, which I heartily recommend to anyone interested in the topic. Unlike Wallace, Newstok didn’t put everything in the footnotes. Instead, he appends a further reading list called “Kinsmen of the Shelf,” because though _How to Think Like Shakespeare_ has to end, learning how to think never does. The book moves at a clip, is short enough to read in a weekend and dense enough to be worth many rereadings. Newstok will help you learn how to think, and he certainly offers you any number of new ways to be wrong about Shakespeare.