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To have consideration for the claims upon your time, I have appended . . . a table of contents of the several books, and have taken very careful precautions to prevent your having to read the books. You by these means will secure for others that they will not need to read right through them either, but only look for the particular point that each of them wants, and will know where to find it.

—Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* (c. 77 CE)



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1

OF THINKING

“I will not cease from mental fight,” Blake wrote. Mental fight means thinking against the current, not with it.

—Virginia Woolf, “Thoughts on Peace
in an Air Raid” (1940)



Thinking’s tough. We all want shortcuts; you probably picked up this book because you thought it would give you shortcuts. Thinking taxes us, because *our brains are designed not for thought but for the avoidance of thought*.¹ No wonder we dodge it! But don’t take my word for it:

- *Nothing pains some people more than having to think.*
—Martin Luther King Jr. (1963)
- *Most people would die sooner than think—in fact they do so.*
—Bertrand Russell (1925)
- *Remember how many pass their whole lives and hardly once think and never learned themselves to think.*
—Walt Whitman (1855)
- *What is the hardest task in the world? To think.*
—Ralph Waldo Emerson (1841)
- *the very painful Effort of really thinking*
—Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1811)

¹ Daniel Willingham, *Why Don’t Students Like School?* (Jossey-Bass, 2009), 4.

2 • Chapter 1

- *A provision of endless apparatus, a bustle of infinite enquiry and research, or even the mere mechanical labour of copying, may be employed, to evade and shuffle off real labour,—the real labour of thinking.*

—Sir Joshua Reynolds (1784)²

Thinking about thinking might be easier to caricature than to capture, whether in iconic images of Rodin's *Thinker* or Hamlet holding Yorick's skull. The novelist William Golding relates how he was chastised as a delinquent student:

“Don't you ever think at all?”

No, I didn't think, wasn't thinking, couldn't think—I was simply waiting in anguish for the interview to stop.

“Then you'd better learn—hadn't you?”

On one occasion the headmaster leaped to his feet, reached up and plonked Rodin's masterpiece on the desk before me.

“That's what a man looks like when he's really thinking.”

I surveyed the gentleman without interest or comprehension.³

Lewis Carroll mocks the faith that a mere pose will induce insight: when the Dodo can't answer a question

without a great deal of thought . . . it stood for a long time with one finger pressed upon its forehead (the position in which you usually see Shakespeare, in the pictures of him), while the rest waited in silence.⁴

Even Plato failed to settle upon one apt image for thinking, calling forth, in turn, the sting of a gadfly; the midwifing of a notion; the

² King, *Strength to Love* (Harper & Rowe, 1963), 2; Russell, *The ABC of Relativity* (George Allen and Unwin, 1925), 166; Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, vol. 3, ed. Oscar Lovell Triggs (Putnam's, 1902), 269; Emerson, “The Intellect,” in *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 2 (Harvard University Press, 1980), 196; Coleridge, *Lectures on Shakespeare (1811–1819)*, ed. Adam Roberts (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 1:187; Reynolds, *Discourses XII*, in *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, vol. 1 (1797), 247.

³ “Party of One: Thinking as a Hobby,” *Holiday* 30 (August 1961): 8.

⁴ *The Annotated Alice*, ed. Martin Gardner (Norton, 2015), 36.

paralysis induced by an electric ray; an inward conversation; a sudden, invisible wind.

Yet like the famous judge faced with obscenity, we claim to know *thinking* when we see it, despite the difficulty of definition. And if we believe cultivating it is a good thing, then we are often perverse. We've imposed educational programs that kill the capacity to think independently, or even the desire to do so. While we point to thinkers—Leonardo, Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Curie—who model the disciplined, independent, questing intellect we claim to revere, we enforce systems ensuring that our own young people could never emulate them.

Shakespeare earned his place in our pantheon of minds by staging thought in action. Across his works, terms like “think,” “thinking,” or “thought” outnumber “feel,” “feeling,” or “felt,” by a nearly 10:1 ratio. He raises ideas *into a quasi-physical reality*,⁵ vivifying their dynamic power as a palpable force. When staging thinking, Shakespeare adopts images from a craft workshop, whether as thoughts *whirléd like a potter's wheel, or the quick forge and working-house of thought*—as if one were *hammering* mental metal on an anvil.

He even coins an adjective for thinking, “forgetive.” “Forgetive” looks as though it ought to mean something like, well, “*forgetful*.” But the emphasis is instead on the kinetic activity in that root “forge”: to make or grasp. We must be ready to *fly like thought* to catch it in the act, *for nimble thought can jump both sea and land*.⁶ (When Helen Keller placed her hands on Merce Cunningham to feel him leap, she marveled: *How like thought. How like the mind it is.*)⁷

As Shakespeare's contemporary Michel de Montaigne put it,

⁵ Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (Faber and Faber, 1992), 153.

⁶ *1 Henry VI* (1.6.19); *Henry V* (5.0.23); *Richard II* (5.5.5); *2 Henry IV* (4.2.91); *King John* (4.2.175); sonnet 44, line 7.

⁷ As recounted in Martha Graham's memoir *Blood Memory* (Doubleday, 1991), 98.

thinking about thinking is *a thorny undertaking, and more so than it seems, to follow a movement so wandering as that of our mind.*⁸

Here's a recent example of *not* thinking about Shakespearean thinking.

Ken Robinson's "Do Schools Kill Creativity?" is a popular TED talk, with more than sixty million views. The title primes your answer: *yes—yes, of course schools kill creativity.* And Robinson's pitch follows his self-confirming template:

schools are _____ [hierarchical/industrialist/outdated];
this is a _____ [crisis/crime/catastrophe];
and the answer is _____ [creativity/innovation/technology].

Yet his diagnoses and his prescriptions don't line up, right from his disarming opening joke:

... you don't think of Shakespeare being a child, do you?
Shakespeare being seven?
I never thought of it.
I mean, he was seven at some point.
He was in somebody's English class, wasn't he?
How annoying would that be?
"Must try harder."

Sir Ken gets the laughs. But Shakespeare never studied in an "English class"; no such class would exist until centuries after his time. Instead, his Stratford grammar school was conducted in Latin. And his regimented Latin curriculum proved to be the crucible for his creative achievement—in English.

Robinson is right about one thing: Shakespeare would have been enrolled at around the age of seven—long considered a pivotal developmental stage for children, as lasting patterns of thinking take hold. Aristotle held that children should leave home and enter school when they turned seven. At seven, medieval pages

⁸ "Of Practice," in *The Complete Essays of Montaigne*, trans. Donald Frame (Stanford University Press, 1958), 273.

would enter the household of a knight. It's the age that Michael Apter's *Seven Up* documentary commences its remarkable chronicle of the life-determining effects of social class, summoning the motto attributed to Loyola: *Give me the child for the first seven years, and I will give you the man.*

In 2016, I was invited to address my college's incoming students. My summer was consumed with fretting that the last thing they'd want to hear would be a lecture from some forty-three-year-old white man.

Indeed, my microdemographic had just become a reverse meme! An irritated millennial journalist had replaced the word "millennials" in magazine headlines with the phrase "43-Year-Old White Men,"⁹ exposing fatuous generational generalizations:

"How 43-Year-Old White Men Are Ruining the Workforce"

"Why Are So Many 43-Year-Old White Men Having Zero Sex?"

"The Hot New 43-Year-Old White Men Trend Is Hating 43-Year-Old White Men"

and my favorite:

"Martha Stewart Still Confused about What 43-Year-Old White Men Are Exactly"

So I was cautious about being the cranky old prof hectoring the youth.

But it dawned on me: *these students would have been seven years old* just around the moment that our obsession with shallow forms of evaluation was kicking into high gear. Their cohort was the first to have been marched through their entire primary and secondary schooling under a testing-obsessed regime. (While I concentrate here on the American system, this is a global phenomenon, as fellow teachers from South Korea to Kurdistan have recounted to me.)

⁹ Amanda Rosenberg, "I Replaced the Word 'Millennials' with '43-Year-Old White Men' and Now These Headlines Are *Italian Chef Kissing Fingers Gesture,*" *SlackJaw*, August 24, 2016.

In December 2001, just as I was stumbling to the close of my first semester of full-time teaching, the No Child Left Behind Act passed Congress with support from both parties as well as educational entrepreneurs—yet with scant input from actual *teachers*. We were promised the act would close the achievement gap, to make all students proficient in reading and math by the year 2014. Perversely, its so-called “skills”-driven focus on literacy and numeracy did *not* lead to greater literacy and numeracy. Instead, the achievement gap widened, as draconian reforms sapped scarce time and resources from course offerings in art, drama, music, history, languages, and even the sciences.

Teachers’ autonomy was eroded by external curricular mandates, often directed by corporate vendors eager to advance Bill Gates’s vision of standardizing education as if it were *an electrical plug* or *railroad width* [*sic!*].¹⁰ This disempowerment of teachers makes them little more than paraprofessionals. They’re present not to model thinking, just to help the machines Hoover up a child’s “data exhaust” and monitor *learnification*.¹¹

Yet the wealthier you are, the more likely you will be to insist that *your* child’s school, nanny, and other caretakers *not* expose them to attention-splintering digital fora. John Dewey’s exhortation still ought to ring true:

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy.¹²

Worse, high-stakes exams narrowed not only *what’s* taught, but *how* it’s taught. The open-ended joy of reading has too often withered to a soulless dissection of *content* without *context*; the joy of

¹⁰ See Stephanie Simon, “Bill Gates Plugs Common Core,” *Politico*, September 24, 2014. *Sic* is the Latin for “thus,” as in “Yeah, I can’t believe he actually said that, but he really did.” But I also like that it’s pronounced the same as *sick!*

¹¹ Gert Biesta’s caustic term for the attack on teachers’ active role in our classrooms.

¹² *The School and Society* (University of Chicago Press, 1900), 19.

mathematics to arbitrary exercises, drained of the delightful pattern making that generates conjecture in the first place.¹³ We've forgotten Mark Twain's insight: *Intellectual "work" is misnamed; it is a pleasure, a dissipation, and is its own highest reward.*¹⁴

I was a math geek before I finally determined to study literature. I'll never forget how my college calculus professor, renowned for his intimidating personality, would stop in the midst of a proof. He'd step back from the chalkboard. He'd stare, and ponder: "Look at that. Do you see that? We could have done this proof in eleven steps, but we found a more elegant way—we got there in just seven. That's . . . that's *beautiful*." His awe at the grace-filled solution was contagious: *A mathematician, like a painter or a poet, is a maker of patterns.*¹⁵

All intellectual pursuits are more *qualitative* than any bubble sheet can ever gauge. We ought not to be surprised that in recent decades children have become

less emotionally expressive, less energetic, less talkative and verbally expressive, less humorous, less imaginative, less unconventional, less lively and passionate, less perceptive, less apt to connect seemingly irrelevant things, less synthesizing, and less likely to see things from a different angle.¹⁶

This is the real creativity-killer.

Let's return now to seven-year-old Shakespeare, and consider not "how annoying" he might have been to his instructor, but

¹³ I commend Paul Lockhart's "A Mathematician's Lament" (2009): https://www.maa.org/external_archive/devlin/LockhartsLament.pdf.

¹⁴ *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889), ed. Bernard L. Stein (University of California Press, 2010), 279.

¹⁵ British mathematician G. H. Hardy, cited in Karen Olsson, "The Aesthetic Beauty of Math," *Paris Review* blog, July 22, 2019: <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2019/07/22/the-aesthetic-beauty-of-math/>.

¹⁶ Kyung-Hee Kim, summarizing the data from the 2011 Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking, cited in Peter Gray, "The Play Deficit," *Aeon*, September 18, 2013. Writing is *not* a matter of filling in blanks in workbooks, but rather a joyful form of expression. Helen Vendler, "Reading Is Elemental," *Harvard Magazine*, September, 2011.

rather how we might reclaim some of the best aspects of his education.

Now, I know what you're thinking: *of course* a Shakespeare professor would say that—we all tend to think the thing that *we* do is right, as in Alexander Pope's observation:

'Tis with our judgments as our watches, none
Go just alike, yet each believes his own.¹⁷

Shakespeare's contemporary Philip Sidney jested that all people praise their own line of work as essential. Before he defends his own hobbyhorse (poetry), Sidney recounts another man's affection for horsemanship:

He exercised his speech in the praise of his faculty. He said soldiers were the noblest estate of mankind, and horsemen the noblest of soldiers . . . [and that] no earthly thing bred such wonder to a prince as to be a good horseman. . . . [he nearly] persuaded me to have wished myself a horse.¹⁸

I don't wish you were a horse! or even another Shakespeare, who *will never be made by the study of Shakespeare*.¹⁹

Yet Shakespeare was once seven; he did have teachers; and they taught him something about thinking. In turn, our own power of understanding can *expand and become conscious of itself as we watch it at work in Shakespeare*.²⁰

I'm not talking about *what* Shakespeare thought. Every word onstage is said through the voice of a character, so wrenching quotations out of context won't reveal how he felt about law or love or leadership. This hasn't prevented management consultants from

¹⁷ *An Essay on Criticism* (1709), lines 9–10.

¹⁸ *The Defense of Poesy* (1595), in *Selected Writings*, ed. Richard Dutton (Routledge, 2002), 102.

¹⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" (1841), in *The Prose Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1 (1870), 259.

²⁰ John Middleton Murry, "The Process of Creative Style," in *The Problem of Style* (Oxford University Press, 1922), 116.

claiming that they can derive lessons from the plays. Here's a familiar example:

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.²¹

One book glosses these lines thus: *Trust and integrity are critical in business. . . . once one's reputation for integrity is lost, one's effectiveness is lost.*²²

The blandness is obvious. And I have to confess: I'm guilty of this kind of misguided projection. My high school yearbook from three decades ago includes my pimpled portrait, nerdy activities, and classmates' scribbles. For my motto, I selected this same passage from *Hamlet*. And I attributed those words to . . . "Shakespeare."

But the quotation comes from a sententious father reciting a cascade of tepid proverbs to his departing son. So *what* "Shakespeare said" (here, a trite truism) is far less suggestive than *how* it was said (through the voice of a toadying functionary). This character satirizes moral entrepreneurship!²³

Look at the peculiar way this speech was first printed in 1603. Why does the left margin insert a series of quotation marks? The punctuation flags you to *stop, look, notice* these sententious phrases; *transcribe* them in your commonplace book. Here you might jot down new words, favorite phrases, ideas caught in passing. Anything that *your memory cannot contain / Commit to these waste blanks* (sonnet 77).

Thomas Hobbes always carried *a Note-book in his pocket, and as soon as a notion darted, he presently entered it into his Booke, or els*

²¹ *Hamlet* (1.3.77–79).

²² Jay M. Shafritz, *Shakespeare on Management* (Carol Publishing, 1992), 95.

²³ Jeffrey R. Wilson, "What Shakespeare Says about Sending Our Children Off to College," *Academe* 102, no. 3 (May/June 2016).

The winde fits in the shoulder of your saile,
And you are staid for, there my blessing with thee
And these few precepts in thy memory.
“ Be thou familiar, but by no meanes vulgare;
“ Those friends thou hast, and their adoptions tried,
“ Graple them to thee with a hoope of Steele,
“ But do not dull the palme with entertaine,
“ Of euery new vnfleg’d courage,
“ Beware of entrance into a quarrell; but being in,
“ Beare it that the opposed may beware of thee,
“ Costly thy apparrell, as thy purse can buy.
“ But not exprest in fashion,
“ For the apparrell oft proclaimes the man.
And they of *France* of the chiefe rancke and station
Are of a most select and generall chiefe in that:
“ This aboue all, to thy owne selfe be true,
And it must follow as the night the day,

Page from *Hamlet* (1603). Courtesy of Henry E. Huntington Library. Rare Book number 69304.

*he should perhaps have lost it.*²⁴ In such a notebook, an aspiring young thinker archives choice thoughts for later reflection, and eventual action.²⁵ According to one Renaissance treatise,

it is singular good, to have some pretie sprinkled judgement in the common places and practizes of all the liberall sciences, chopt up in hotchpot together, out of the whiche we may still help ourselves in talke.²⁶

By compiling commonplace thoughts of others, we can better shape our own words to become, well, less commonplace.

Books about what Shakespeare “thought” about love also strip

²⁴ John Aubrey, *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, ed. Oliver Lawson Dick (David Godine, 1999), 351.

²⁵ Augustine: *discitur ut agatur*—“it is learned, so that it may be done,” *On Christian Doctrine* (4.13.29).

²⁶ Philibert de Viennne, *The Philosopher of the Court* (1547), translated by George North (1575).

quotations of their situational meaning. Sonnets are often contorted to fit sexual conventions. You might hear sonnet 18 or 116 recited at a wedding between a man and a woman:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.

Or

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds.

Yet they're in the voice of an older man addressing his younger male intimate. And once again, the *how*—sonnet 18's jaunty query, or sonnet 116's defiant negations (*not . . . not*)—is far more intriguing here than the *what* of the love lyric, which often amounts to little more than *I need you, you need me, yum, yum*.²⁷

I'm suggesting that *to think like Shakespeare*, we need to reconsider the habits that shaped his mind, including practices as simple as transcribing quotations, or working with a tradition. Doing these things doesn't mean that you will become "the next Shakespeare"; neither you nor I have the same alchemy of talents and circumstances as anyone else. And as Desiderius Erasmus insisted: even Cicero wouldn't write like Cicero if he were alive today.²⁸

But Shakespearean thinking does demand a deliberate engagement with the past to help you make up your mind in the present. In the words of Ralph Ellison: *Some people are your relatives but others are your ancestors, and you choose the ones you want to have as ancestors. You create yourself out of those values.*²⁹

²⁷ Frank O'Hara, "Blocks," cited by Helen Vendler in *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 14.

²⁸ *we speak fittingly only when our speech is consistent with the persons and conditions of present day life.*

Ciceronianus, or, A Dialogue on the Best Style of Speaking (1528), trans. Izora Scott (Teachers College, 1908), 61. As Emrys Jones puts it: *without Erasmus, no Shakespeare. The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 13.

²⁹ *Time* 83, no. 13 (March 27, 1964): 67.

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An Author ought to make the Index to his book, whereas
the book itself may be written by any person else.

—Nicolás Antonio, *Bibliotheca Hispana sive Hispanorum* (1672)



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