

Scott L. Newstok, editor. *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Parlor Press, 2007.

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In the mid-1970s, when Kenneth Burke was approaching King Lear's age, I had the pleasure of inviting him to spend one week a month for a semester with the faculty and students at the Center for the Psychological Study of the Arts at SUNY/ Buffalo. "KB," as we came to call him, would lecture informally in the mornings, usually on Shakespeare, and then meet with students through lunch, when his steady sips of vodka would take him off for an afternoon nap. In the evenings, we would have dinner together, and he would then often play his own compositions on the piano and sing for us. (To understand his singular way of thinking, it helps to remember his love of music. He was the music critic for *The Dial* from 1927 to 1929.)

It was not KB's playful penchant for neologistic critical terms, nor his jazz-like ability to display quicksilver associations among realms of experience that impressed us most. What engaged us most was his intact skill as a teacher, the specificity of his responsiveness to each text, each student. Unlike some other "mavericks" of the time (but more like our resident maverick, Leslie Fiedler), KB was not seeking disciples, and his methods could be adapted to almost any intellectual pursuit. As in his writings, he was impervious to easy summation; his was a mind unbound, open. He delighted in curiosity and fruitful ways of asking questions, and we delighted in his endlessly suggestive possibilities for evoking symbolic meanings drawn from the Borgesian library of his mind. I have been re-reading him ever since, returning often to the essays on Freud and on Hitler, to his "Definition of Man," and, of course, to the

varied essays on Shakespeare. I am always tempted, as he was by Freud's works, and as many of his readers are, to "take representative excerpts from his work, copy them out, and write glosses upon them" (*The Philosophy of Literary Form*, p. 221). KB invites dialogue, and he has provoked valuable interplay with just about every academic field in the humanities and social sciences.

Scott L. Newstok has now given us, in a superbly edited collection, all of Burke's writings on Shakespeare. *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare* brings together fourteen essays, including the classic studies of *Othello* (1951), *Antony and Cleopatra* (1964), *Timon of Athens* (1963), *Coriolanus* (1966), and *King Lear* (1969), along with the earlier essays on *Venus and Adonis* (1950), "Antony in Behalf of the Play" (1935), "Trial Translation (from *Twelfth Night*)" (1933), and the seminal essay "Psychology and Form" (1925). He adds three previously unpublished papers, "Shakespeare Was What?" (1964), "Notes on *Troilus and Cressida*" (1970-71) and "Notes on *Macbeth*" (1970s and 1980s), and a fifty-page compendium of all the other references to Shakespeare in Burke's works. A 1972 lecture on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is also included to represent Burke's lesser interest in comic form ("... I must break down and admit that, with regard to this play, I am still in the woods," he wrote (181)). The volume is an important and timely contribution to Shakespeare scholarship, now that the wave of theory-dominated approaches seems to be subsiding in favor of a more exploratory commentary that is amplified by the technological revolution in communication and publication.

Burke began writing about Shakespeare when America and Europe had recently embraced the rhetorical forms of "public relations" and the techniques of modern propaganda (not yet a negative term) in mass culture. "Proposition: The hypertrophy of the psychology of information is accompanied by the corresponding atrophy of the psychology of form," (24) he wrote in 1925. From the outset, he

sought to encompass the full range of “symbolic actions” that gave meaning to and enabled the manipulation of public discourse. Shakespeare became for Burke a central instance of the “dramatistic” formal designs that could generate and fulfill an audience’s expectations. Like Shakespeare’s, Burke’s was an “anticipatory mentality” (14), almost instantly recognizing the extensive ramifications of his historical moment. Burke and Shakespeare share a diagnostic drive; they want to generate awareness of the functions of symbolic acts even as they participate in them, to craft their work and show how they are working simultaneously. In Shakespeare, this is the metatheatrical dimension; in Burke’s writings, there is the practice of “thinking out loud,” the many ways in which he includes his thought processes in his rhetorical strategies. To be sure, this penchant can make his essays difficult reading. Sometimes, as in his “Notes of *Macbeth*,” he can riff his way from one text to another before returning to his theme of regicide. But if we are steadily attentive, the seeming deflections usually come to function as dilations on his central idea, even when he pauses to engage in a skirmish with another interpreter (as with Clifford Geertz on pp. 189-190).

One pleasure of Newstok’s collection is that the editor retains all of Burke’s notes and comments on his own thought and composition. Much of this material would likely succumb to the computer’s delete button these days, lost forever. Phrases like, “Let us propose,” and “Let us assume” initiate provisional thoughts, trial interpretations, ways of seeing and hearing Shakespeare that “awaken in us the satisfactions of authorship,” (44), both Burke’s and Shakespeare’s. We even read of Burke’s own dreams as he contemplates Timon’s “verbal filth” (108) and links Shakespeare’s symbolic structures with his own unconscious forms of thinking. “I tinker tentatively with an experimental procedure which I call ‘onei-romantic criticism,’” he writes, as he speculates about the interpenetration of his

dreaming mind and the cathartic process in drama. No critic has made better conscious use of what the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott called the “potential space” of culture, the area of experience that permits the free interplay of inner and outer realities. It is rare these days to see a critical mind so clearly in dialogue and debate with itself, and making use of an enormous range of knowledge, from the Greeks to the present. (I wonder which Shakespeare journal would publish this kind of uncensored material today.)

Burke’s general project was to identify the “ingredients” and the “recipes” of symbolic actions and the ways in which aesthetic form creates “arrows of expectation” in its audience. In the drama of symbolic acts, relations among characters invite distributions of attitudes and feelings in the experience of an audience. Burke’s interest is primarily in the functions of characters’ roles in the play as a whole. Though a drama may exploit some external tension, such as the idea of property in *Othello*, or the dilemmas of abdication in *King Lear* (he calls these tensions “psychoses,” his most unfortunate term), Burke wants to coax out the authorizing dynamic of the play’s action by “prophesying after the fact.” The critical act, then, is reconstructive (not deconstructive), an account of the drama that justifies its form by passing its rhetoric through the “appetites” of its audience. (Burke is remarkably interested in both ends of the alimentary canal as metaphors of speech acts.) He is especially preoccupied with the ways audiences’ appetites require sacrifice or victimage, hence his focus on the excesses of tragedy. Tragic form, in its poise and rhythm, “perfects” a sacrificial process that is, in a sense, inherent in all symbolic action. (As the symbol-using animal, we humans must “invent the negative” to use and misuse symbolic forms in the first place. The symbol substitutes for the thing symbolized, as the scapegoat substitutes for the sins of the community.)

Burke explored the trajectories of symbolic action in a brilliant array of critical strategies. He assumes the voice of Antony to describe the force and structure of his rhetoric in his funeral oration for Caesar. In the *Othello* essay, he adopts the position of the playwright to map “the ideal paradigm for a Shakespearean tragedy” (70). At times, he plays the historian reflecting on the difference between Renaissance and twentieth century dictatorships. He is intensely engaged with a host of other important Shakespearean critics of his time. But his most consistent and enduring stance is as the anthropologist of dramatic and poetic forms. Like Huizinga in *Homo Ludens*, Burke explicates Shakespeare against the background of the aesthetic element in human culture as a whole. For Burke, the music of form, its “eloquence,” defines the “truth” of art in an “emotional rightness” that transcends both science and religion in its humanistic logocentricity. (We can see him as America’s answer to Jacques Derrida.)

As a student of both Shakespeare and psychoanalysis, I am particularly struck by two related features of the essays collected by Newstok. The first is Burke’s argument with the representations of character exemplified by A. C. Bradley, and the second his sensitivity to the bodily basis of symbols and metaphors. For Burke, Bradley’s “novelistic” approach to Shakespeare leads to “sheer portraiture, and done in a way that conceals the functioning of the play” (81). Burke’s opposition to Bradley’s character analysis is fundamental:

For, in contrast with the novelistic ‘portrait gallery’ approach to Shakespeare’s characters . . . one should here proceed not from character-analysis to the view of character in action, but from the logic of the *action as a whole*, to the analysis of the character as a recipe fitting him for his proper place in the action. . . . (80)

To my mind, Burke is both accurate and unnecessarily limiting. Bradley's style of character analysis is not the only possibility. The psychoanalyst Roy Schafer, for example, developed an "action language" for describing the dynamics of character in both art and life that can serve Burke's purposes well.¹ In drama, the dynamics of character can create the illusion of real persons *and* place characters in the functional roles of the drama, even when, like Hamlet, their role involves constant tension with their "proper place in the action." Burke discounts this possibility too quickly. Part of Shakespeare's genius was the realization that we are both characters *and* functions of one another in social life as well as art (all the world *is* a stage). I think this is one reason that his plays endure so powerfully through historical changes. By narrowing his view of character analysis to nineteenth century portraits, Burke diminishes the significance of his own attentiveness to the language of individual characters in Shakespeare.

Ironically, Burke could be very good at a different kind of character analysis, and here his close readings of individual roles are revealing. By following the language of the Porter in *Macbeth*, for example, or Orsino at the opening of *Twelfth Night*, Burke evokes the movement of consciousness in time, and it is this movement, with its shifts of focus and its recurrent idioms that actually reveals the performative dimension of character. By using his own associations to Orsino's lines, Burke recreates the infantile basis for the character's passive-receptive position:

If music be the food of love, play on (1)

As cells absorbing sunlight, as the fetus basking in its womb-heaven, receiving nutriment; not venturing forth aggressively, predaciously, as with those jungle animals that stalk, leap, and capture before they eat, and thus must do hating and injuring—but simply as larvae feed, let me take in gentle music. (33)

The “arrow of expectation” is here linked to both character development and dramatic function. By playing along with Orsino, Burke is representing the manifestations of a character’s consciousness as it moves through “a discreet synaesthesia” from the nourishment of sound to the scent of violets and then to the awakening of an aggressive awareness. Orsino’s “pure receptivity is ripped by ambition”:

Enough, no more,

‘Tis not so sweet now as it was before. (7-8)

And then Orsino awakens to his desire for Olivia. “So, the Duke has gone complete from larval thought to the predatory (they are both in our tissues)—and is now critical, diagnostic, in quest . . .” (37). “Will you go hunt, my lord?” says Curio.

In less than four pages, Burke has mirrored the elements of Orsino’s character that will define his role in the play. The interplay of passivity and aggression weaves through his character *and* announces the elements of social life that must be brought into balance for the comedy as a whole to succeed. Written in 1933, this brief sketch anticipates a psychological understanding of consciousness, bodily sensation, and infantile experience that would not be systematically studied by scientific means for decades.² My point is—When Burke engages in close reading of character, he gives us a dimension of “dramatism” that can be integrated into his understanding of dramatic form. This is a potential of his critical project that remains to be fully realized.

The pleasure and importance of having all of Burke’s writings on Shakespeare in one volume is that it can send any Shakespearean into dialogic thoughts and speculations like mine. As Newstok points out in his fine introduction, Burke has had such inspirational effects on countless critics, including those most widely admired today. He is pro-vocative in the sheer restless energy of his mind.

Newstok has presented Burke's Shakespeare in a most meticulously edited volume. In addition to his introductory essay—itsself one of the most brilliantly economic overviews of Burke's style, methods, terminology, and historical position in twentieth-century criticism that can be found in any collection of Burke's essays—Newstok provides excellent notes and references, leaving no stone unturned. (He realizes that some will find him excessive or deficient, and this has been the case with reviewers.) His compendium of references to Shakespeare throughout Burke's writings contains gems of insight that invite elaboration in many directions. His list of Works Cited would make a good library for any student of Shakespeare. His volume is designed to appeal to several audiences, from beginners to those who return to Burke over a lifetime.

Indeed, Newstok's aim is not only to present Burke as perfectly as possible, but to celebrate and promote him simultaneously. His editorial labors are themselves marked by various forms of excess. If my count is accurate, he lists 213 works in his Introduction. His acknowledgements list about 250 names, including the SHAKSPER listserv. The back cover contains no fewer than six blurbs from luminous contemporary Shakespearean elders. One can easily find a host of admiring journal reviews online, including ten five-star substantial statements at the Amazon.com site for the book. Noticing this pattern of excess, I began to wonder whether Nestock had come to praise Burke or to kill him with kindness? But the lasting result, for me, has been to welcome the abundance and to agree that these essays "still merit a wider audience" (xxxiv). Burke is at least as relevant to the Shakespearean world in the twenty-first century, now literally global, as he was in the twentieth. Bravo to Scott L. Newstok!

NOTES

¹Roy Schafer. *A New Language for Psychoanalysis*. New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1976.

² See, for example, Daniel Stern. *The Interpersonal World of the Infant: A View from Psychoanalysis and Developmental Psychology*. New York: Basic Books, 1985.