

maintaining adequate conceptual distance between a Butlerian notion of performativity that is concerned with processes of identity formation and the more spontaneous performative possibilities that take place onstage. On Butler's terms, at least, the performance of a play is scarcely analogous to the continual and often coercive performance of cultural norms that give stability to an identity category like gender or, as Lamb's book would have it, childhood. While the book is less self-conscious about such theoretical distinctions than might be desired, it does at least identify a similar conflation precisely where early modern discourses on childhood development and theatrical performance intersect. If insights into early modern subject formation are not among the book's strong points, *Performing Childhood* more than makes up for any lapses with the new critical avenues it opens for exploring just how deeply invested early modern children's theatre companies were in thinking about and rearticulating early modern ideas about childhood.

THEODORE F. KAOUK

Scott Newstok (ed). *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare*. Indiana: Parlor Press, 2007. Pp lv, 307.

In his thoroughly informative introduction to *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare*, its editor Scott Newstok observes that 'it's self-evident ... how influential Burke has been for a particular field, yet paradoxically the field does not seem to recognize fully this influence' (xxi). He doesn't specify the field. Burke's range was considerable, from a general philosophy of language that has affinities with Ludwig Wittgenstein and J.L. Austin to poetics (or 'theory' as we would now term it), rhetoric, religion, sociology, history and music. Newstok's comment is as appropriate to the field of Shakespeare Studies as to any other.

Ignored by critics and scholars outside the USA and passed over by 'American intellectuals' unwilling to 'come to terms with their native theoretical roots' (xxi), Burke should have been quite easy to follow or imitate. His 'dramatistic' theory of language as 'symbolic action' should certainly have offered a fruitful framework for Shakespeare criticism, and there is a deceptive simplicity about his way into a Shakespeare play through a bold sum-

ming up of the relationships of plot and character that might have prompted a certain discipleship. Perhaps Burke's differences from his contemporaries like Cleanth Brooks and René Wellek placed him on the sidelines during the era of high formalism, while his deep concern with literary form meant that he was bound to be marginalized by later poststructuralist and Marxist currents. Certainly, although negativity is (brilliantly) given a central place in his theory of language, often in serious dialogue with Freud, his framing philosophy of symbolic action and a poetics that considered the literary text as the active working out of form would have estranged him both from the devotees of the Saussurean revolution and from those apt to begin with the historical conditions of production rather than the formal properties of the text.

Yet reading Burke's observations on *Othello* or *Lear*, *Coriolanus* or *Timon of Athens* is almost always an experience of *déjà vu*. The 1951 essay, 'Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method', elaborates the notion of sexual love as property or (Burke's favourite word) *engrossment*, by using the Enclosure Acts as a social and political analogue. The brief piece on *Timon of Athens* combines thoughts on invective as the expression of a desire that is 'intrinsic to the nature of language' (109), the Marxist notion that 'private property severs one's bond to others, while putting a person in constant jeopardy of loss' (110), and a brief Maussian/Derridean reflection on the paradox of 'potlatch' (111). "'Socio-anagogic" Interpretation of *Venus and Adonis*' offers an analysis of the poem in terms of the hierarchy of social class with the observation that 'we would not let the brilliance of the erotic imagery blind us to the underlying pattern here, a pattern in which the erotic enigmatically figures, but which "in principle" is not erotic at all, at least in the narrowly sexual sense of the term' (60). And 'Coriolanus—the Delights of Faction' argues that 'fundamentally ... the play exploits to the ends of dramatic entertainment, with corresponding catharsis, the tension intrinsic to a kind of social division, or divisiveness, particularly characteristic of complex societies, but present to some degree in even the simplest modes of living' (138).

If, as they are blandly represented here, some of these insights appear less than earth-shattering we should remind ourselves that they derive their familiarity from work done *after* Burke. His brilliant coaxing of the transformation of kinds of desire from Orsino's opening lines is equal to any new-critical close reading; the unpacking of the oratory of Antony's funeral speech is as fine a piece of rhetorical analysis as may be encountered anywhere; the drawing out of the internal logic or *entelechy* of *King Lear* would satisfy the most

exacting Aristotelian; and Burke's deep understanding of dramatic form in essay after essay should pacify the most ardent formalist. Indeed, what is striking about Burke's approach is the way in which politics and history are treated simply as the air in which Shakespeare breathes, rather than singled out as a special realm deserving of special focus. Burke accounts for Shakespeare's immersion in his historical moment in terms of Heidegger's notion of '*Gewasenheit*', 'in which, for all the freedom of his workmanship, there was also the sheer contingency of his being "thrown" among precisely those conditions as with the throw of the dice' (7). Although Burke regards our response to tragic form as psychologically transhistorical, he is quick to distance himself from attempts to render Shakespeare 'relevant'. He cautions, for example, that 'the attempt to present *Coriolanus* in the light of modern conditions can never quite succeed, since these conditions tend rather to conceal than to point up the cultural trends underlying its purgative use of the tension between upper and lower class' (139).

Burke's well-known essay on *Othello* is subtitled 'An Essay to Illustrate a Method'. In this 'method' and its deep concern with dramatic form and the psychology of drama lies Burke's most distinctive difference from both twenty-first century historicism and twentieth-century formalism. His differences from someone like Cleanth Brooks, for example, are spelled out in an illuminating essay not included in *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare* (because it focuses on William Faulkner). There, Burke subjects pure formalism to a *reductio ad absurdum* by arguing that that no formalist who draws on any knowledge of the social circumstances of a literary text or the personal circumstances of the author is being true to his or her first principles: 'Absolutely no biographical reference would be admissible. History itself would be inadmissible only in the sense that the meaning (or allusiveness) of a term will change through the centuries'.¹ By the same token, no Historicist or Materialist who ignored the pressures and workings of literary form could adequately account for the workings of the literary text as such.

The quotation above from the essay on *Coriolanus* shows the basics of Burke's approach to literary form. First, the paradox of his subtitle, 'the delights of faction', encapsulates the difference between the literary and the real insofar as it is a formal property of tragedy (in this case) to turn violence and suffering into delight or entertainment. But such delight will arise only through the perfection that lies in the capacity of form to turn social tension into psychological pleasure. All Burke's writing on Shakespeare deals with the ways in which form — from the grandest plot design through the most

intense interaction of character, the force of rhetoric and metaphor, and even the finest grain of rhythm — both shapes and fulfils the pleasurable expectations of the audience.

Burke's superb theoretical essay, 'Psychology and Form', shows how in literary texts the 'psychology of information' is 'replaced by a psychology of form', in which expectation and desire, surprise and suspense are the central motors. Form has an *entelechy*; it is the full or perfect working out of the potential of a situation or idea. Shakespeare achieves this 'perfection' by increasingly pointing and narrowing audience expectation as the drama unfolds, like the pointing of an arm or the flight of an arrow. As a component of this unfolding of action, character should be regarded not as realistic 'portraiture' but rather as the agent required to develop the potential of a situation. Our sense of a character is a retrospective construct. Character is derived from the demands of the situation and of interaction with other characters, who all follow the same formal law of interactive purpose; a character is not a figure that exists before the action. Agents in the drama should therefore be analysed in terms of what Burke calls the 'agent-act ratio': the relationships among characters whose natures spring from the requirements of the situation and its development.

This kind of character criticism takes issue with A.C. Bradley's notorious notion of a character as a fully-fledged human being from whom action flows. But it also avoids the postmodern reaction, which insists that 'characters' are no more than signifiers in a text. Burke accounts for the ethics of choice and action while insisting upon the demands of dramatic form as the overriding determinants of role. He aptly illustrates his approach when he shows how, in *Othello*, Emilia assumes the burdens of the play in the transfiguration of her character's role at the end: 'she is in the best position to take over the vindictive role we eagerly require from *someone* at this point' (81). By the same token, Burke suggests that instead of viewing Coriolanus as 'an offspring of his mother' (135) we should see her role as a function of his, which is itself the product of a specific tension between social classes at an historical moment. *King Lear*, play and character, embody most clearly what Burke calls the 'paradox of substance', whereby the substance of a character turns out to be the function of his or her relations to others. The paradox works especially well in this play because the dramatic principle is united with a philosophical insight into the nature of what we would today call 'subjectivity': Lear's desire to be loved for himself alone shows both why such a desire

is philosophically empty and how it perfects the loyalty (Burke might have written 'love') of Cordelia and Kent.

I have been able to do no more than sketch the 'method' of Burke's criticism of Shakespeare, with nothing of its detail. His detailed analyses contain infinite riches, always shaped by the directness with which he is able to reveal the heart and workings of a play merely by giving a systematic account of the relations of situation, character, and expectation that constitute its plot. These essays need to be read and savoured 'in the small', as it were. What is not at all small is the editor's extraordinary achievement in putting together this collection with such exemplary thoroughness and devotion. So concerned has Scott Newstok been that Shakespeareans should not miss a jot of Burke's thought on the bard that he has collected some 55 pages of 'Additional References to Shakespeare' culled from all of Burke's other work. This is admirably thorough but perhaps a little pointless — unless these nuggets are meant to act as bait. For no one should be happy to read these remarks out of the context of their author's broader disquisitions elsewhere. *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare* is such a fine and rich collection that it should spur its readers to track down the works from which these fragmentary remarks on Shakespeare have come, to feed further on Burke's compendious, brilliant, and wise considerations of things beyond Shakespeare.

DAVID SCHALKWYK

Notes

- 1 Kenneth Burke, 'Formalist Criticism: Its Principles and Limits', *Language As Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley, 1968), 497. Elsewhere Burke adds, 'If you want to eliminate psychological and sociological kinds of speculation, you must not introduce *any* reference to the relation between the author and his work, or between his work and its possible reflection of his cultural situation' (503–4).