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Kenneth Burke and Shakespeare

KENNETH BURKE WAS A LITERARY CRITIC whose influence on mid-twentieth-century American letters was comparable to that of Edmund Wilson and Malcolm Cowley on the one hand (the left) and Allen Tate and T. S. Eliot on the other. His own political affiliations were complex, and he interacted with a wide range of literary figures, sometimes living in Greenwich Village, sometimes hidden away on a New Jersey farm. His joint concern with politics and literature is of a piece with his lifelong fascination with rhetoric; when he is remembered now (not often enough) he is invoked as a rhetorical critic. Typically, in essays devoted to the close reading of a text, Burke asks what effects the play or novel or poem will have on the expectations of its audience as it unfolds, and by what means the author has planned and carried out those effects. And for the most part this is how he reads Shakespeare, with Aristotle in hand.

Scott L. Newstok has collected all of Kenneth Burke's important writings on Shakespeare in a volume unsurprisingly entitled *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare*.¹ The very first essay, "Shakespeare Was What?" has remained up till now unpublished, and is a fine editorial discovery. Two of the most interesting studies originally appeared in *The Hudson Review*: "Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method,"² and "Coriolanus—and the Delights of Faction."³ (In fact, between 1948 and 1966, Burke published eight essays and reviews in *The Hudson Review*.) The companion-piece to the Coriolanus essay is "King Lear: Its Form and Psychosis," a version of which I heard Burke deliver at the University of Chicago in 1968. He sometimes came there to visit his old friend Richard McKeon who invented my major, Ideas and Methods, in order to institutionalize his quarrel with the philosophy department. Ideas and Methods was also the program of Robert Pirsig (*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*) and Eugene Garver (*For the Sake of Argument*). While leaving his intellectual habits indelibly on our work, McKeon scared all of us to death, though apparently he did not scare Kenneth Burke.

Between 1972 and 1986, Burke also corresponded with Wayne Booth whose book titles confess his indebtedness to Burke; their letters are held in the Special Collections at Penn State, where I teach. My

¹ KENNETH BURKE ON SHAKESPEARE, ed. by Scott L. Newstok. Parlor Press. \$32.00.

² Vol. IV, No. 2 (Summer 1951), pp. 165–203.

³ Vol. XIX, No. 2 (Summer 1966), pp. 185–202.

colleague in the English Department, Jack Selzer, is the author of *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village* and co-author (with Ann George) of *Kenneth Burke in the 1930s*, two lively and often poignant accounts of Burke's wayward literary career.⁴ So Burke has come to seem to me like an inescapable influence.

In the first, up till now uncollected, essay (delivered as a lecture in 1964), Burke gives a useful account of his method: "How approach the plays? Well, here's my notion: First ask 'What kind of tension is [Shakespeare] exploiting this time? And for what kind of effects?' Next, 'What kind of situation (and development) does the play use for the exploiting of this tension?' Next, 'What kind of prime character is best adapted to this particular kind of excess?' Next: 'If that character, what subsidiary characters are needed, to fit the total recipe?' And, finally, 'If all that, what kind of images best lend themselves to this particular enterprise?' Following along those lines, and in keeping with what we have already discussed with regard to topics in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, one approaches a text thus . . ." Burke hastens to explain that when he talks about the poet's resources for creating effects he is not talking about mere dramatic surprise (which can only burst upon the spectator once), but about the setting up and fulfillment of expectations, a cognitive and felt rhythm that can be experienced time after time.

If this were all there were to it, poetry would only be music. Shakespeare's plays however are *about* complex characters who are morally charged: they both express the social conflicts of a time "when feudal thinking was being transformed into nationalism," and more universal judgments about people who are excessive in Aristotle's sense of departing from the mean, from measured and rationally chosen action. "But if you have a character who carries something to excess, and who gets into trouble accordingly (and, I repeat, that's just about basic for playwriting), look what you have set up. In effect you have set up a play with a 'moral.' For you have in effect 'warned against' this excess by showing how it got someone into trouble." Yet Burke doesn't want to read Shakespeare as delivering moral information about a tragic hero who refers literally to a historic figure, as one might read the Chronicle plays or the Greek and Roman plays as chronicles in disguise.

Such a reading would not do justice to Shakespeare either as a playwright or as a moralist, he concludes: "[Shakespeare] spontaneously knew how to translate some typical tension or conflict of his society into terms of variously interrelated personalities—and his function as a dramatist was to let that whole complexity act itself out, by endowing each personality with the appropriate ideas, images, attitudes, actions, situations, relationships, and fatality. The true essence of his 'beliefs' was thus embodied in the vision of that complexity itself . . ." This way of reading Shakespeare informs the three essays just mentioned, and others in the book; it is guided by a poetic insight

⁴ Jack Selzer, *Kenneth Burke in Greenwich Village* (Madison, 1996). KENNETH BURKE IN THE 1930S, by Jack Selzer and Ann George. University of South Carolina Press. \$49.95.

(character is molded by and subordinate to the poet's shaping of audience expectation, that is, by plot understood rhetorically) and a moral insight (character is subject to the paradox of substance). The paradox of substance is a problem: "When one is placed in a particular social order, to what extent is his conduct to be judged in the absolute, and to what extent in terms of his particular place in the order? And though Shakespeare beyond all doubt believed in the ubiquitous reality of a social order, or ladder, or hierarchy, he seems to have believed more in its *inevitability* than in its *desirability*." After I heard Burke lecture on *Lear* forty years ago, I remembered this term as the "paradox of office," for reasons given below. The poetic insight is quite Aristotelian and, I will argue, arguable; the moral insight is by contrast correct, but it does not entail the poetic insight.

Character and Plot

In the middle of "*Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method*," Burke writes, "Shakespeare is making a play, not people. And as a dramatist he must know that the illusion of a well-rounded character is produced, not by piling on traits of character until all the scruples of an academic scholar are taken care of, but by *so building a character-recipe in accord with the demands of action that every trait the character does have is saliently expressed in action or through action . . .*" He adds that a poet is only a poet, not God; a character, even a Shakespearean character, is no more than what we learn about him or her from the plot. I will take issue with this claim, but as a one-sided approach it yields a compelling reading of *Othello*.

Burke argues that the playwright must implicate the audience. This can be done by making sure that the audience knows more than the characters on stage, and in virtue of this mismatch must do quite a bit of interpretive work to understand how the characters (with their faulty knowledge) are understanding each other. It can be done by giving a character the role of liar or deceiver (Iago) or magical impresario (Prospero), or sometimes by managing theatrical time and space (the appearances of Hamlet's father's ghost or the handkerchief of Desdemona). The playwright can also implicate the audience by staging a play within a play: the masque in *The Tempest*, the play in *Hamlet*, the court proceedings in *The Merchant of Venice*, or the "bullfight" in Act III, Scene III of *Othello*, when Iago first sinks a number of *banderillos* into the flanks of Othello's soul. For then the audience joins some of the characters as witness to a further "illusion" (which makes the characters more real), and the "illusion" of the play itself is made thematic and universal (which makes the world more constructed). In Aristotelian terms, the implication may also be achieved by following the *Rhetoric*, where there are recipes for the kinds of statements, actions, and attitudes that lead people to anger, fear, pity, and fellow feeling.

Thus Burke gives us a line-by-line reading of *Othello*, Act III, Scene III, showing how Shakespeare transforms promises, potentialities, foreshadowings into fulfillments, shapes our evaluations of Iago and Othello by rhetorical devices, and in sum creates the characters of both as consequences of the unfolding of the plot and its effects upon us, the audience. At the scene's beginning, Othello has never even imagined that Desdemona might be unfaithful to him. Desdemona is talking to Cassio, who then leaves; Iago mutters "Ha! I like not that" and refuses to explain his outburst to Othello. "Thus, by his stutterings, Iago has taken an incident actually neutral and made it grim for Othello. The audience now has a pattern for creating vigorously: (the inducement to an audience's self-persuasion that resides in the use of dramatic irony)." Desdemona pleads Cassio's suit, and after she has left, Iago launches his barbs. He is non-committal, echoing Othello's words, and thus forces Othello to utter the false imputations himself, to say the very words that will ultimately damn him; once they are uttered they cannot be cancelled out—they hang in the air.

When Othello finally offers stronger resistance ("otherwise, this bullfight would not be spectacle enough"), Iago is ready for him: he is merely offering his services to help clear up this serious question and would be very glad indeed if their mutual suspicions proved unfounded. After Desdemona helpfully loses her handkerchief and Iago gets it in his possession, Othello utters his great speech, "O, now, for ever / Farewell the tranquil mind, farewell content" which oddly enough is a list of his military achievements that Desdemona has come to symbolize, so that by losing her he loses the whole world, his world: "Farewell! Othello's occupation's gone." Such annihilation almost leads him to turn his fury on Iago, who, perceiving the danger, describes in bright colors (red spiraled before the bull's eyes and of course also the eyes of the excited and horrified crowd) the details of infidelity and finally an outright lie, that Cassio has been talking in his sleep. Then the lie materializes in the handkerchief, and the bull is down on his knees, next to Iago, "swearing vengeance and loyalty in vengeance." Iago need do nothing more; throughout the scene, as Burke points out, his part diminishes as Othello's engagement increases: their wills become one.

Burke announced his intentions two pages earlier: he is trying to explain how, by the few traits and actions that are used for the actualizing of a role, the playwright can produce the illusion of a rounded character. Criticizing the early twentieth-century Shakespeare scholar A. C. Bradley for treating Othello, Iago and Desdemona as if they were real people, he writes, "The stress upon character as an intrinsic property, rather than as an illusion arising functionally from the context, leads towards a non-dramatic explanation. And one can end by attributing to a character certain traits, or trends of thought, for which no line of text can be directly adduced as evidence." However, I would argue, we readers of Shakespeare constantly attribute to his characters a life beyond the text; and there are a number of good reasons why we do this.

Character off the Page

First, just as Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* arises from tales about two or more historical characters named Faustus who showed up in German towns in the late Middle Ages and won renown and mistrust for themselves on account of their special powers, so the figure of Othello may be based on historical precedent. This is a question for the historian and the textual scholar, who can thus supply "extra" content in the most straightforward way for the figure of Othello. As Aristotle observes, when a historian treats an historical figure, he tries to fill in as much detail as possible, to re-create that figure in its concrete particularity, while a poet is more interested in its universal features. Still, the dramatic treatment of a once-real person can range from the detailed presentation of Shaw's *Saint Joan*, in which the author makes use of a trial transcript, to the mythic evocation of Homer's Agamemnon, lost in the mists of time.

Second, Othello is a type; in fact, he personifies two important types. On the one hand, he is the cultural Other in a Venice of the imagination that is in certain respects open (it is a seaport) and in certain respects closed (it is an aristocratic oligarchy). In the role of Other, he shares our consideration with Shylock, and with Portia as long as she is dressed like a lawyer. On the other hand, he is the Jealous Husband, driven mad by his unfounded fears, and so shares our imagination with Leontes, King of Sicilia in *The Winter's Tale*. In thinking about both types, since they are universals, we may also supply ourselves, for we all have first-, second- and third-person experience of otherness and of jealousy. We can supply "extra" content to the figure of Othello from our own experience, which is also the basis on which we understand the tragedy, the source of its pity and fear. Moreover, these types brought to life in a great work of art go on to live another life, not just in the imagination of an individual, but as a public feature of our social world. Thus we all know what it means to call someone an Iago, or to compare a public figure to Othello. Such personages (to use Martine de Gaudemar's philosophically developed term), neither historical figures nor abstract concepts, walk among us provided with a story and a character that is a pattern of strengths and weaknesses; they are known objectively insofar as they constitute part of a shared cultural heritage, they have real effects on our lives, and they attract other, further stories.

Third, Othello as a figure in a compelling tragedy has choices to make and makes them badly, but because we feel sympathy for him we rue those choices. At every turn, Shakespeare indicates dramatically the "what if . . .," the "if only . . .," the contrary-to-fact conditionals that exist (metaphysically) adjacent to the events of the plot line and give it meaning. We might say, the course of a plot is not a single bole growing linearly upwards, but a tree whose ghostly branches are the actions not taken, actions still potent because of the way in which they affect the meaning of the whole. Thus, we imagine Othello in a different possible world, where he unmasks "honest" Iago, or where Emilia gives him the

information that allows him to see through her husband sooner, or where his love for Desdemona tips him back from the edge of madness. So we imagine him as the play unfolds, and so we imagine him in retrospect, and thus supply “extra” content to the figure of Othello. This habit of imagining the ghostly branches, or re-imagining the bole of Othello’s life-tree, can also precipitate other plays and novels. Because Othello is a personage, he may also be taken up by other writers, who pursue the “what if . . . ?” by generating further stories about him; and we are able to identify him across stories, like that of Verdi’s great opera.

Fourth, Shakespeare’s Venice was a clear analogue to Shakespeare’s London then and we can read it as an analogue to e.g., contemporary New York City. The dialectic of citizen and Other is central to any political community, all the more so when that political identity includes some criterion of being open; and the political dialectic filters down to inform and distort the lives of the people living within it. So Shakespeare’s Venice is in that sense generic, though the force of its example stems from its unique geographical and historical position in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance as the European threshold, across which the treasures of the Middle East (itself the crossroads of China, India and Africa) were transmitted. Thus audiences from generation to generation can read their own political and social travails in the vexed fates of Othello and Shylock.

Fifth, and finally, Cavell reminds us in *The Claim of Reason* that every utterance is embedded in a language game; all the disparate language games we engage in are embedded in a “form of life” (to use one of Wittgenstein’s more mysterious phrases); and that embeddedness involves our sociable mutuality, our corporeal life in space and on the earth, as well as our natality/mortality in time. So when Shylock asks, “Hath not a Jew eyes?,” and when Portia exclaims, “The quality of mercy is not strained,” and when Othello says of Desdemona’s handkerchief, “There’s magic in the web of it,” we must hear Shakespeare’s voice. And this is the case even if when Prospero utters the great final speeches of *The Tempest* we hear Shakespeare’s voice most clearly and directly, speaking for himself as a poet. So too we must also hear the actor’s voice, and our own voice, *sotto voce*, quietly seconding Othello as he speaks. There is a chord of voices speaking in every word, and it produces something like Bach’s canons as the speeches are rolled out, as the poet’s voice comes to the fore and recedes, as the actor obtrudes or vanishes behind her character, as our own self-consciousness rises and ebbs.

The Paradox of Substance

Even Kenneth Burke, were he still with us, should admit these points because otherwise his second insight, “the paradox of substance,” along

with the moral issues it raises, would be unmotivated. Poetry as algebra (whose subject is “an illusion arising functionally from the context”) cannot have moral bearing; poetry is about human action, and thus its characters must engage the world in a variety of ways, refer to its people, and so come to live a life beyond the texts that give rise to them.

What is the paradox of substance? In “*King Lear: Its Form and Psychosis*,” Burke explains, “By the ‘paradox of substance’ I refer to the quandaries whereby one’s personal identity becomes indistinguishably woven into the things, situations, relationships with which one happens to be identified. . . . It gets down to this: What is a king without a kingdom, a sea captain without a ship, a general without an army, a politician out of office, a job-holder without his job? Insofar as a man’s person gains substance from social powers which are not intrinsic to him yet with which, by reason of his vocation or role in life, he becomes associated, what can he essentially be, once these extrinsic underpinnings are removed?” The question is clearly raised by Shakespeare’s *King Lear*.

Burke points out that the opening of the play sacrifices verisimilitude for the stark intensity of a morality play (the two sisters are too evil, Lear’s judgments are too abrupt): “*it is precisely by straining our credulity to the limits that this tragedy can produce in us an attitude of complete surrender. And I take it for granted that, the more nearly complete our surrender to its unfoldings may be, the more profound will be its effects upon us.*” Thus the unlikelihood of the play’s premises are a positive factor in the play’s success. Because we are presented with a morality play, moreover, the play is not about the idiosyncrasies of Lear, but rather about a metaphysical and thus universal topic. “The play is about *abdication*. It is not about ‘abdication’ in the sense that it is designed to tell us *why* men abdicate. It is about abdication in the sense that the theme of abdication presents rich dramatic possibilities. . . . And, a fortiori, might it not overlap upon such relinquishing of authority as has nothing to do with old age as such, but ultimately involves the psychosis of authority pure and simple? In this respect, might not the appeal of the work even overlap upon such motivational quandaries as are implicit in thoughts of retreat or surrender, with no reference whatever to parents and their offspring?”

Finally, Burke points out, the pace of the first few acts is precipitous: all the major consequences of the situation pile up in rapid succession. Lear disinherits his loyal daughter Cordelia and exiles his loyal follower Kent; he surrenders his kingdom to the two evil daughters who straightway reduce his retinue; another loyal follower (Gloucester) and his legitimate son become dupes of the bastard Edmund; Kent returns in disguise; and Lear’s interchanges with the Fool prefigure his madness. The plot is all there at once, and the characters are functional or allegorical types.

But does this mean that the character of Lear is merely a function of the plot, that there is no more to Lear than to be a placeholder who

does not justify any extrapolation? One can grant Burke's reading of the play, and still deny the claim. Dramatic characters are sometimes more like historical people and sometimes more like concepts. Indeed, there is a continuum along which we can locate the referents of dramatic characters: real people, historical figures, specific social types, personages, allegorical figures, mythical figures, concepts. Sometimes a character migrates from real person to concept, as Hermione does in *The Winter's Tale*; sometimes the playwright achieves special effects by juxtaposing conceptual characters with rather more historical characters, as Shakespeare does in the first scene of *Hamlet*, and as Dante does in the *Inferno*. A ghost is a kind of précis of a life, and thus conceptual. Sometimes a character is clearly the author, alive while he was writing and a living voice still in those immortal lines which are not ghostly; the example I cited earlier is Prospero abjuring his magic. If Burke were still here, I'd argue with him that any great drama, tragic or comic, must have the ballast of some characters with a degree or layer of referentiality that is historical. Moreover, even conceptual characters may lead us beyond a play, as Venus takes on a life of her own beyond the stories of Hesiod and Homer (see Vergil) and Ariel beyond *The Tempest* (see Auden). Concepts live in arguments as well as narratives, and the philosophical reflection that we human beings carry on about eros will transcend any given series of stories that give it a body and motive.