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Main content

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Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare. Edited by Scott L. Newstok. West Lafayette, Indiana: Parlor Press, 2007. Pp. 1, 308.

This book, published in 2007, has already gained wide recognition and praise coming from such luminaries of American literary criticism as Harold Bloom and Stephen Greenblatt. It is the result of the editor's, that is Scott L. Newstok's, work consisting in bringing together and editing Kenneth Burke's numerous and important contributions to Shakespeare criticism. Burke wanted apparently to produce a volume of this kind himself, but died without achieving this purpose. Thus the book may be thought of as a fulfillment of Kenneth Burke's intention, and a volume that all students of Burke's thought will have to take into account because Shakespeare criticism is an important part of the legacy he has left behind. Kenneth Duva Burke (1897-1993) (1) was an important American philosopher and critic much influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, Siegmund Freud, and Karl Marx, but, at the same time, very original.

The book in question contains all of the Shakespeare criticism by Kenneth Burke, both published and previously unpublished, together with even short notes and passing remarks, and provides all this material with carefully formulated and very useful notes, comments, and cross-references. Burke's life and ideas, particularly those relating to Shakespeare, are lucidly exposed in the very handy and informative "Editor's introduction". Altogether, we shall find here many thought-provoking comments, by this slightly neglected American thinker, which concern the following works and topics: Hamlet, Twelfth night, Julius Caesar, Venus and Adonis, Othello, Timon of Athens, Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus, King Lear, Troilus and Cressida, A midsummer night's dream, Macbeth, The Merchant of Venice, The tempest, the character of Falstaff, the Sonnets, and Shakespeare's imagery.

Kenneth Burke is often classified as belonging to the so called New Criticism, together with such well known American critics and writers as J. C. Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, W. K. Wimsatt, or Robert Penn Warren. At the same time, it is already an established tradition to emphasize the differences between Burke's approach to literature and what might be called the mainstream of New Criticism. (2) This is why we should not be surprised seeing that Newstok (2007: xxiii) talks about Burke as "mistakenly grouped among more solidly formalist New Critics". If anybody associates the New Criticism with a rather dogmatic and blinkered concentration on the "text itself" or "the verbal icon", then he or she should not shy away from reading Kenneth Burke, since he, while appreciating the value of the so called "close reading", never avoids taking into account a broader cultural, social, historical, or biographical context whenever he feels like doing so, or the occasion arises, and this happens often enough. Indeed, in The Norton anthology of theory of criticism, we read about Burke's "Whitmanesque embrace of everything" (Leitch 2001: 1271), which may sound a note of warning for those who do not like very eclectic approaches to literature, and who might appreciate the narrowing of both the subject matter and methods...

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White, Robert. / Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare. In: Notes and Queries. 2008 ; Vol. 55. pp. 386-387.

@article{155912ebc4614b25b8e965fac0620856, title = "Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare", author = "Robert White", year = "2008"

Research output: Contribution to journal › Book/Film/Article review. Ty - jour. T1 - Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare. AU - White, Robert. PY - 2008. Kenneth Duva Burke (May 5, 1897 – November 19, 1993) was an American literary theorist, as well as poet, essayist, and novelist, who wrote on 20th-century philosophy, aesthetics, criticism, and rhetorical theory. As a literary theorist, Burke was best known for his analyses based on the nature of knowledge. Furthermore, he was one of the first individuals to stray away from more traditional rhetoric and view literature as "symbolic action.". Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare. West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2007. Iv + 308 pp. Reviewed by Andrew Battista, University of Kentucky. In a recent Times Literary Supplement commentary, Peter Holbrook speculates why Kenneth Burke, once a "hip literary intellectual," has since been removed from academia's tightly-policed list of influential critics. Nonetheless, Burke scholars will find Newstok's compilation of additional references to Shakespeare invaluable. While the sections that Newstok provides can't possibly offer full context, the well-versed Burkean will certainly have the texts in question (A Grammar of Motives, Attitudes Toward History, and so on) at hand. Poet, essayist, novelist, and literary theorist Kenneth Burke was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He attended the Ohio State University and Columbia... Best known for his volumes on literary theory, Burke is considered one of the founders of the New Criticism. His most famous theory, dramatism, emphasized how literature and semiotics influence human moral capacity. He also asserted that art takes precedence over politics and has an obligation to engage society. Burke's volumes of criticism include Philosophy of Literary Form (1941), A Grammar of Motives (1945), and Language as Symbolic Action (1966). Though Burke is most widely known for his contributions to modern literary critical theory, he also published several short stories and works of Scott Newstok, editor of Kenneth Burke On Shakespeare, asked if I would review his book. This would be a challenge, and I said as much. I'm no academic, I'm a computer geek. To put it simply, I have no idea who Kenneth Burke was. His wikipedia page contains only a single passing reference to Shakespeare (as "lifelong interpreter", whatever that means), and all the other reviews on Amazon I found said things like "I learned who he was when my roommate in graduate school introduced me to him." No help there! But with that understanding I agreed to take a look at Scott's book.