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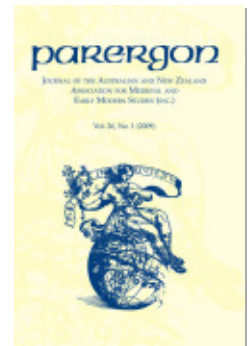
Rhetoric , and: Why Shakespeare? (review)

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Richards, Jennifer, *Rhetoric* (The New Critical Idiom), London and New York, Routledge, 2008; hardback; pp. 208; R.R.P. US\$95.00; ISBN 9780415314367.

Belsey, Catherine, *Why Shakespeare?*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; hardback; pp. 208; R.R.P. £42.50; ISBN 9781403993199.

These two books are brief but not at all slight, both important in very different ways.

Jennifer Richards' *Rhetoric* is a volume in the New Critical Idiom series. The original series was aimed at students and was very limited in scope, each short volume confined to terminology and historical survey of a concept. The 'New' version encourages authors to develop a sustained argument, interrogating afresh a term from literary or cultural analysis in the widest sense, incorporating recent, theory-driven advances. As a result we have distinctive and expert contributions that do not shirk the difficult aspects of their subjects, such as Linda Anderson's *Autobiography* with its context of women's studies and John Frow's *Genre* with a philosophical and cultural studies emphasis. *Rhetoric* is a worthy addition, standing up as a significant and original monograph.

Richards begins where one would expect, with 'The Classical Art', essentially stemming from oratory and propelled by Aristotle and Cicero. The analysis develops into the more literary applications of 'Rhetoric Renewed' by Sidney and Puttenham through to the Enlightenment, and thence to 'Rhetoricity' in the twentieth century, another powerful 'renewal' as descriptive literary criticism and theory took over the functions of earlier, prescriptive receptions of rhetoric.

Adam Smith is an interesting pivotal figure. His *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, delivered in 1748-51, indicate that his equivalent today might not be known for an economic theorist but a literary one. Tom Paine, though Richards does not deal with his *Rights of Man*, would have provided an equally instructive application of rhetoric in the 1790s, in the service of influential and populist, political polemic.

Kenneth Burke is rediscovered and given credit for extending the implicature of rhetoric into complex, 'double-edged' social and philosophical fields. He demonstrates one of Richards' conclusions, that rhetoric's 'most valuable endowment lies in its flexible process of argument, which insists on the reversibility of all positions', so that rhetoric is not so much a mode of

expression but the root of critical thinking. Postmodernism, through writings like those of de Man and Derrida, is seen as building upon the concepts of 'old' rhetoric, yet at the same time paradoxically challenging its traditional assumptions and making them obsolete.

But the book does far more than mapping the field. Richards engages with the different usages, critiquing them within their own historical context and also from the perspective of the present day, showing acutely not only survivals and continuities but changes and ruptures to 'the art of persuasion' through time. Rhetoric emerges like Heraclitus' river, something which has always flowed but is never the same. Just as it is in danger of ossifying into a set of prescriptive rules, it is reinvented to meet the needs and purposes of new generations who forge an appropriate language for expressing ideas. Richards' analytical history shows that rhetoric can incorporate differences and even opposites, ranging 'from traditional art to postmodern play'. It can be used to produce an air of certainty or to undermine it, to assert a logical thought process and yet also underpins, for example, 'the false starts, the ramblings, the contradictions, the lateral rather than logical connections' in Montaigne's thought process.

At all stages, Richards allows the past to illuminate the present, while the present can recall the past, so a speech by Tony Blair justifying the war on Iraq becomes an example of Aristotelian rhetoric built upon a 'missing premise' that 'war safeguards peace'. Already President Obama's speeches are being combed through for the rhetorical structures of their language, their affective intentions, and their subliminal links with earlier and other cultural contexts (does his slogan 'Yes we can' owe anything to Australia's *Bob the Builder*, I wonder?). Richards' fresh and lively approach encourages such playful speculations, while the overall effect of her challenging book is one of rigorous and sustained argument, written with the elegant momentum of intellectual and historical engagement. It is as important for scholars for its originality, as for students who will welcome its lucidity in dealing with complex ideas – a successful example of fresh, academic rhetoric in its own right.

Meanwhile, Catherine Belsey's *Why Shakespeare?* is expansive and personal in tone, its irresistible sense of apparently innocent (but in fact artful) questioning captured in the musing title. It is a book that feels more like a friendly and evocative invitation to share thoughts than a debate or a systematic argument.

In its own way, the interrogative title itself is a sign of the open-endedness of Keatsian 'speculation', since it can and does raise so many possibilities. Why is Shakespeare still important? What is the secret to his plays' cultural adaptability? Why do we endlessly put his plays on the stage and read his words? Why is he apparently useful to new generations when his works are so old?

Belsey decides that language is not enough to provide answers and that appeals to 'universal significance are nowadays rightly treated with deep suspicion'. Instead, she uncovers a level of Shakespeare's narratives variously described as 'fairy stories', 'fireside tales' (classified as such in the Bibliography), 'traditional fables', 'old wives' tales' and other nomenclature. Belsey's preference is for the shorthand 'fairy stories' whereas I prefer 'folk tales' but a footnote indicates that she is not interested in the taxonomical debates.

What she means, more connotatively and allusively than denotatively, is that Shakespeare chose to dramatize stories already familiar to us from childhood. Patterns showing socially climbing females, rites of passage from childhood to adulthood, ghostly manifestations and magical events mirroring our fears and wish-fulfilment – an elfin beauty can fall in love with a beast who is disturbingly close to being 'one of us' – impersonations and disguises, and so on, Belsey argues, all ring bells for us as though we have already encountered Shakespeare's stories, as in a curious sense we have. Shakespeare adds to such narratives memorable and complex glosses, but the basis, the structural spine, is in each case a simple, recycled tale that we can recall from childhood in one variant or another.

Each chapter begins in a disconcerting and almost naïve way, describing the *donnée* of some unlikely folk tale or riddle in such a way that, to our surprise, we find ourselves pitched straight into the opening of a play like *As You Like It*, *King Lear*, or *Hamlet*. In meta-narrative fashion, the plays even announce allusions to such 'winter's tales'; 'I could match this beginning with an old tale', Celia tells Monsieur le Beau, as if Shakespeare is engaged in quite conscious folklore explication. He is even daring enough to risk subverting the plot by including a character sceptical of such 'antique fables ... fairy toys' as the very story in which Duke Theseus ungratefully resides. So compelling are the examples that willing readers will be instantly beguiled into assenting to the analogy.

The analysis then goes on to open up ways in which Shakespeare rings changes, exploring the initiatory situation until the play may become a murky

exploration of emergent themes concerning issues like adult sexuality, identity, gender confusion, spiritual exile, racism, and others that come to mind when we think of thematic criticism of plays like *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*. One of the differences that emerges between comedy and tragedy is not their generic origin, which remains constant, but the fact that tragedy refuses the clear definition between good and evil which operates in comedy.

Not a source-study but a book *about* primal sources, not an analysis of narrative but a book *about* both the simple and complex nature of narrative, *Why Shakespeare?* is hard to categorize. There are only tangential similarities to the work of Auerbach, Frye and Barber, and the host of rather solemn folklorists and students of mythology who followed in their wake, and Belsey is suspicious of ideas of universal archetypes mined from a Jungian collective unconscious. Her topic is 'tales' pure and simple, and the ways Shakespeare adumbrates, embellishes, and all but conceals them.

The true presiders, though ones not mentioned by Belsey, are such *raconteurs* as old Gower in *Pericles* and the teller of tales in Sidney's *Defence of Poetry* who keeps children from play and old men from the chimney corner. Katharine Briggs' *British Folk-Tales and Legends* and Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* are the true sources.

Considering Belsey's other works, which draw on the likes of Lacan, Derrida and all the contemporary theorists, we may realize how one may go along a very long and winding intellectual path to end up more or less where we began, in a state of suspending disbelief in stories half-remembered from childhood. Bettelheim's word is the right one. Partly due to Belsey's wondering tone and to her invitingly informal style, *Why Shakespeare?* is an enchanting and even, in some way, enchanted book.

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