Neil Corcoran. 2018. *Reading Shakespeare's Soliloquies: Text, Theatre, Film*. Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare. London: Bloomsbury Publishing

Efertpi Mitsi, ed. 2019. *Troilus and Cressida. A Critical Reader.* The Arden Shakespeare. London: Bloomsbury Publishing

Jonathan P. A. Sell
Universidad de Alcalá de Henares, Spain

The Arden production line continues to roll unabated. Neil Corcoran's Reading Shakespeare's Soliloquies: Text, Theatre, Film is a useful guide to what for many are the very essence of Shakespeare's dramatic achievement, the heart of the mystery and, in consequence, Shakespeare being Shakespeare, the holiest of Western literary holies. As Corcoran leads us to the inner sanctum, his hand remains commendably steady, his head admirably lucid and our path uncluttered by thronging theorists (except for the occasional Freudian visitation). Corcoran's book is a minor monument of common-sense with a methodology no more sophisticated than an objective marshalling of the facts coupled with sensitive close-reading and the absence of any axe to grind. For that reason, it has a slightly outmoded feel to it, unless, of course, down-to-earth practical criticism is coming back into fashion. Even the title has a reactionary ring in its initial, Charles Lamb-like prioritizing of reading over performing or viewing in performance; the subtitle, "Text, Theatre, Film" is tagged on rather awkwardly, although Corcoran's book is generous—and perhaps most rewarding—in its attention to theatre and film. It is, then, a study which, unfazed by the cultural magnitude of its subject, eschews the ecstatic and, unimpressed by the -isms of academe, shuns the "theoric." As such, it is ideal for its intended audience of general readers and university and drama-school students.

Part I, "Soliloquies in Practice," is divided into two chapters. The first gives us a feel for what a Shakespearean soliloquy is by walking us through Macbeth's "Is this a dagger?" speech. Although Corcoran doesn't make the point explicitly, his implication is that the trick of the soliloquies lies in their language and in our sympathy with their

speakers, in connection with which he quotes Thomas de Quincey's famous distinction between "a sympathy of comprehension" (which we feel) and "a sympathy of pity or approbation" (which we do not). Corcoran's take, stretching back via eighteenth-century British ethics and the crucial, psychological-moral systems of Edmund Burke and David Hume, to Philip Sidney and Sebastian Minturno, and, ultimately, to the mutual speaker-audience psychopathologies stimulated by affective rhetoric, is time-honored and traditional. The second chapter emulates Henry Reed's war-time poem, "Naming of parts," in attempting to identify the different attributes of a Shakespearean soliloquy. This anatomical exercise is the least satisfying section of the book: a Shakespearean soliloquy is not an Enfield rifle and some of Corcoran's attributes fail to convince, few are actually common to all the soliloquies, while many are not intrinsic attributes but contingent accidents ("Some soliloquies […] are exceptionally well-known [… which] makes them particularly difficult for actors to perform" [48] or "Sometimes we may value a particular soliloquy […] because it contains an intensely memorable line or two" [(51]).

Part II, "Soliloquies in Theory," is more satisfactory. The first of its six (brief) chapters explores the critical (Restoration, Romantic, Victorian) and literary (from Jane Austen's "free indirect speech" to Krapp's Last Tape) reception of the Shakespearean soliloquy. The second sketches the origins of the Shakespearean soliloquy in classical, medieval and Renaissance drama, with particular emphasis on Marlowe (predictably) and Montaigne (less so), who earns a place on the strength of his notion of "the fluctuating self." How early modern authors and audience conceived of the self is treated very summarily in Chapter 3, as well as how Shakespeare's representations of the self have been understood humanistically (Harold Bloom), politically (Stephen Greenblatt, Raymond Williams, Catherine Belsey) and religiously (Brian Cummings). Chapter 4 provides a useful account of how soliloquies have been staged over the centuries. Chapter 5 illustrates three kinds of soliloquy, "choral," "political" and those to do with matters of sexuality or gender: the conceptual problems involved in categorizing according to different criteria (form, interpretations and contents) are overridden by persuasive readings and compelling references to theatrical and cinematic performances. Chapter 6 draws on Erving Goffman—although Thomas Hobbes and others beat him to it by three hundred years—to

reflect cursorily on the performative nature of identity as it transpires through Shakespeare's characters and their soliloquies.

Corcoran's book is always more gripping when it gives theory and history a breather and takes off for the theatre or cinema. Not surprisingly, therefore, Part III, "Soliloquies in Performance," is the most satisfying, consisting as it does of edited interviews with eight contemporary Shakespearean actors. Here we sense the passion, the excitement, the thrill of the soliloquies which Corcoran's measured criticism tends to mute or silence. These are the pages that will have the more bookish academics (like this reviewer) shamefacedly acknowledging with Diderot that we'd be pretty dull and inept creatures indeed if we only knew what we had read. Corcoran's interviewees have been on the rack with Shakespeare's characters, have bared themselves to their audiences with only Shakespeare's words to protect them: they know, they have experienced, the soliloquies like nobody else. What emerges most strikingly is the paradoxically communal nature of soliloquy: Mariah Gale explains how when the actor is most alone, she/he most needs other people; Pippa Nixon highlights the actor-audience togetherness achieved and required by soliloquy; Jonjo O'Neill, Jonathan Slinger and Alex Waldmann are fascinating on using the audience as a sounding-board, on interacting with it, or on "dip[ping] in and out of your awareness of the audience" (153). Part III alone makes Corcoran's book worth reading.

Part IV, "Soliloquies in Play," offers interpretations of soliloquies as they "work in concert" ([169]) within four plays: Richard III and 3 Henry VI, Romeo and Juliet, and Othello. Corcoran's analyses are thorough and sound, work into the discussion theatrical and film versions, and refer back illuminatingly to some of his actors' comments from Part III. Given the book's compartmentalized organization and disparate material, a conclusion which reinforced main ideas and offered a final synthesis would have been helpful. Overall, Corcoran's Reading Shakespeare's Soliloquies will, one would like to think, be of great value to its intended audience in its demonstration of what can be done with all those speeches—how they can be read or performed. It is just the kind of work this reviewer would have welcomed in his undergraduate days, although that might be uncertain praise as those were the days before social media, Internet and mobile phones, days when British summers were

occasionally warm, winters always cold and snowy, the welfare state was still (just) something to be proud of and the trade unions still (just) had some muscle. Only time will tell whether Corcoran's book is in tune with the current zeitgeist—one hopes it is, fears it may not be.

A recent addition to the Arden Early Modern Drama Guides series, Efterpi Mitsi's edited collection of essays, Troilus and Cressida: A Critical Reader, is assuredly a child of its times. Its contributors—from Hungary, Wales, Scotland, Greece (four) and Portugal—attest to the geographical decentering of English Studies and are all earnestly professional. But there is no passion, no fire, nothing that might incite new readers to take on a notoriously intractable, inhospitable and difficult work. Troilus and Cressida is a great play, but no one's favorite: like an Almerian desert-scape or a Bruckner symphony, it is very impressive but no place for a picnic, no soundtrack for loving memories—or at least, it would take a very great critic to have readers unpacking their sandwiches or reaching for Spotify. Unfortunately, readers of this volume will carry on their journeys elsewhere, listen to the same music as always.

To be fair, the first ten pages of Mitsi's introduction are an exemplary synthesis of some of the play's main themes, its performance and reception history, and its place in the Elizabethan appropriation of the Trojan matter. To be fair, too, Chapter's 1–3 fulfil their respective briefs competently and exhaustively, providing the sort of material to which the Arden editions of the plays have long accustomed us. Kinga Földváry traces in great detail "The Critical Backstory" of the play from John Dryden's 1679 adaptation, through its eighteenth-century editors and nineteenth-century moralizers and psychologizers, to the war-torn twentieth-century's inevitable engagements. Francesca Rayner offers a comprehensive survey of this self-consciously theatrical play's performance history, its three-century-long absence (1609–1912) from the stage permitting in-depth accounts of most major modern and contemporary performances: not surprisingly, productions tend to highlight issues of sexuality, gender and war. Johann Gregory sketches the interpretative "state of the art" in a series of cameos of current critical perspectives on the play: historical, linguistic and metatheatrical, psychological, feminist and gender criticism, presentism and ecocriticism.

Chapters 4–7, "New Directions," comprise what the series editors, Andrew Hiscock and Lisa Hopkins, describe in their general

introduction as "cutting-edge scholarly debate." In the context of the deeply equivocal Elizabethan reception of the Trojan matter, Rob Maslen reads the play as a critique of the exemplarity on which humanist conceptions of literary art depended—predictably enough in a play which rips up all notion of value. Miklós Pető's piece on the play's interrogation of Greekness adds little to Spencer (1962) and Nuttall (2004), both cited here, and is sometimes contradictory: "there is […] no cosmic background […] the characters' insistence on the divine motivation […] exposes the large scheme in which these actions receive their significance" (139). Vassiliki Markidou explores how the play uses the topic of relics to "critique early modern configurations of gender, religion and nation" ([147]): Cressida is figured as a relic, Thersites as an anti-relic protestant, and Troy prefigures morally ruinous London. Noticeably absent, especially given the chapter devoted to him elsewhere by this volume's editor (Mitsi 2017, 119–50), is Thomas Coryat's lament for Troy from amidst what he mistakenly took to be its rubble and his prayer that the new Troy of London, "as much polluted and contaminated with extravagant lusts" (1776:3.277), might avoid a similarly tragic end. Absent, too, is Walter Benjamin, whose ruminations on ruins are highly pertinent to Markidou's discussion and to Maslen's, which contemplates Shelley's Ozymandias in its final paragraph. Paschalis Nikolau's analysis of Greek translations and performances of the play will be of limited interest to most readers; what is missing is any sustained exploration, on the one hand, of the particular challenges posed by Shakespeare's language and, on the other, of the constraints imposed on the translators by the target culture, whether in the form of expectations, conceptual frames or ideologies. In Chapter 8, Richard Stacey suggests ways of teaching the play to undergraduates, chiefly through close textual/lexicographical analysis or through comparison of different performance choices. He appends a list of "Theatre Resources."

The overall quality of the essays is disappointing; none is startling in its newness. Several are vitiated by poor editing: there are a number of prepositional errors, occasional problems with word choice, and even "Achilleus" and "Aias" (130, 139) step out of the margins. There is a very heavy Greek slant—off-stage, the Turks might be muttering, "What about us?"

References

Coryat, Thomas. 1776. Coryat's Crudities; Reprinted from the Edition of 1611. To which are now added his letters from India, &c […] 3 vols. Vol. 3. London: W. Cater.

Mitsi, Efterpi. 2017. Greece in Early English Travel Writing, 1592-1682. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Nuttall, A. D. 2004. "Action at a Distance. Shakespeare and the Greeks." In Shakespeare and the Classics, edited by Charles Martindale and A.B. Taylor, 209–24. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Spencer, T.J.B. 1962. "'Greeks' and 'Merrygreeks': A Background to Timon of Athens and Troilus and Cressida." In Essays on Shakespeare and Elizabethan Drama in Honor of Hardin Craig, edited by Richard Hosley, 223–33. Columbia, MI: University of Missouri Press.

How to cite this review:

Sell, Jonathan P. A. Review of Neil Corcoran, Reading Shakespeare's Soliloquies: Text, Theatre, Film (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018); and Efertpi Mitsi, ed., Troilus and Cressida. A Critical Reader (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019). SEDERI 30 (2020): 145–50.

Author's contact: jonathan.sell@uah.es

Postal address: Facultad de Educación, 4ª planta, 24 – Universidad de Alcalá – Calle Madrid 1 –19001 Guadalajara, Spain