

SBReview_17:

Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. ix-261pp. \$102. ISBN 978-0-521-51475-0

Reviewed by Alison Findlay, Professor of Renaissance Drama, Lancaster University (UK)

This book has a dual aim: it offers new perspectives on four Shakespearean plays, and, more importantly, it makes a sustained argument for a new direction in Shakespearean criticism via “impure aesthetics.” Grady is as much concerned with theoretical and philosophical approaches as he is with the Shakespeare texts, re-reading a dazzling range of critical writing from German and British Romanticism, Kant, Hegel, Lukács, Benjamin, Ariès, Derrida, to work by Shakespeareans like Wilson-Knight, Jan Kott, Stephen Greenblatt, Coppelia Kahn, Margaret Ferguson, Susan Zimmerman, and the more recent “ecocritical” and “presentist” approaches. One great strength of the book is the way it situates its own approach within a broad critical tradition and, at the same time, brilliantly re-focuses our attention on close reading, including, at one point, a powerful argument against an editorial tradition of emendation dating back centuries.

Grady’s goal is to move on from the anti-aesthetic bias of politicised new historicist criticism of the last twenty-five years which has suffered “not from a weakness of commission, but one of omission” (65). Simultaneously, the book seeks to re-invigorate our appreciation of modernist examples of aesthetic theory. Readers may take issue with Grady’s definition of the aesthetic emerging “in a capitalist and post-mythological” and secular culture (91) as one which fails to take account of the complex ways in which capitalism co-exists with, appropriates and recycles religious and mythological discourse. However, the discussions of Shakespeare’s texts tease out a rich hybridity of intersecting discourses that demonstrate more elasticity than is suggested by the broad starting points. The opening chapter’s job is to patiently trace a history of aesthetics from “pure” and “impure” aesthetics in Kant and

Schiller, the way in which Hegel proposed a historically contingent definition of aesthetics, and how Marx's other priorities meant he did not develop a systematic theory of aesthetics, leaving the next major developments to Lukács, Benjamin, and Adorno. The chapter clearly explains the book's own rationale for understanding aesthetics in social terms as "intrinsically 'impure,'" a "place-holder for what is repressed elsewhere in the system." Aesthetics for Grady is an "autonomous practice" that nevertheless participates in social and economic processes in both communities and private, individual experiences. Intellectual curiosity is excited by a further paradox in the aesthetic, which is defined as simultaneously linked to creativity and death.

Shakespeare's proto-aestheticism is seen most clearly in *Dream* and Grady's first case study puts in practice his determination to pursue "ideology-critique and aesthetic analysis simultaneously" (54). He summarises earlier feminist and historicist concerns with Elizabethan royalist politics, ideologies relating to gender, sexuality and hierarchy, as "impurities" which inevitably complicate any reading of the play's aesthetics. This revisits some familiar critical territory from a new perspective. The forest is simultaneously utopia and dystopia "an idealized but momentarily disturbed aesthetic realm" and "a jungle of dangerous sexual desire" (76). The play's Ovidian or supernatural figures are aesthetic images which evoke a "privileged desired, but non-existing harmony between the human and natural worlds" (63). Opposite these, Bottom and the mechanicals testify to the usefulness of the ugly as a means which, according to Adorno, violates and confirms aesthetic unity. Although, initially, this sounds like a re-working of the subversion-containment model, Grady seeks to identify something more subtle and unstable: a "dynamic tension" (82) which animates the artwork. The text's ability to re-produce within itself aspects of nature which surpass rational conceptual thought and ideology are, Grady argues, foregrounded in the motif of the dream "as a surrogate for the unnamed concept of the aesthetic" (77).

Grady thus offers us a new way of understanding the play's self-conscious artifice which "presciently constructs a modern concept of the aesthetic" (88) constantly fissured by the text's concerns with dissonant politicised elements. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is, thus, he argues, "Shakespeare's paean to, and anatomy of, impure aesthetics" (89).

The second case study of Shakespeare and Middleton's *Timon of Athens* is perhaps the strongest in the book. Concentrating on the aesthetic as a modern concept that emerged from capitalist and post-mythological, post-religious culture, Grady reads *Timon* as a "thought-experiment" that interrogates the relationship of art to commodity production, monetary and aesthetic value, patronage, and, most interestingly, usury. A highly persuasive close reading of the conversation between the Poet, Painter, Jeweller, and Merchant argues that the staged debates in this opening scene prefigure the twentieth-century aesthetic theories of Benjamin and Adorno over the relation between the two kinds of value associated with an artwork: its status as a commodity and its non-use value as an artwork. Particularly striking is Grady's groundbreaking analysis of the poet's obscure definition of his own craft:

Our poesy is as a gown which uses
From whence t'is nourished. The fire i'th' flint
Shows not till it be struck.

(1.1.22-4)

Grady points out that the Poet's earlier line about the world "It wares sir, as it grows" (1.1.3) suggests that "uses" can be similarly construed to mean either use up or to "grow" in terms of a usurious loan's self growth" (109). Poetry, according to this interpretation, is a sort of "interest-bearing loan" which has a kind of monetary value, in gaining value of itself. Grady's incisive reading of the obscure Folio lines provides editors and critics alike with a far superior alternative to the emendations made by editors

since Pope and Johnson who have altered the definition of poetry to “a gum which oozes / From whence 'tis nourished” (108). Grady traces Timon’s journey from misanthropy to suicide as an aesthetic act, arguing that the play achieves a remarkable balancing act between recognising the efficacy of pragmatic politics, and the need for art to “encompass a fuller vision of human reality and possibility” (128). Possibility is a key word for the book itself. Grady’s analysis makes suggestive reference across to *Merchant of Venice* and complements Don Hedrick’s work on the commodity values of commercial plays. It is characteristic of the book’s generosity that its models of analysis are accompanied throughout by suggestions for further research. Hugh Grady’s own paper on *Antony and Cleopatra* at this year’s World Shakespeare Congress demonstrated how, in one way, this book’s innovative outline of “impure aesthetics” in practice is just the beginning.

Part Two of the book, on the aesthetics of death and mourning, begins by reading *Hamlet* as a *trauerspiel*, an approach inspired by Benjamin’s 1928 book *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*. Grady unpacks Benjamin’s work in depth as “both formalist and historicist – with a strong “presentist” dimension as well” (153), explaining *trauerspiel* as a dramatic form of tragedy that was distinctly different from Greek tragedy and linked closely to the baroque. *Hamlet* is read as a play of mourning that is both early modern, modern and postmodern in its dramatisation of a profound split between subject and object and the search for meaning in a world where “the conventions of a linguistic structure” using signifiers or symbols which gesture towards a real that they can never represent (146). Dislocation is signified explicitly in the baroque on-stage performance of “The Mousetrap” and in Ophelia’s madness as an aestheticizing of mourning. The ghost figures the lost world of immanent meaning, idealised in the recognition of its absence and Hamlet’s mourning structures the aesthetic space of the play. Grady writes interestingly on the connected images, stage effects and props as a

“chain of deferrals or substitutions” (160), the skull being the most significant of these. In spite of the play’s preoccupation with mortality, loss, and mourning, and the succession (with Hamlet’s approval) of the pragmatic Fortinbras, Hamlet’s unquenchable desire that “the immanent world might somehow be restored” (187) gives the conclusion a redemptive quality figured in the image of his transcendence with the angels.

The book’s celebration of impure aesthetics in Shakespeare reaches its climax, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, in a final chapter on *Romeo and Juliet*, which Grady argues is “a nearly unique synthesis of comedy and *Trauerspiel*” (221). While carefully charting previous work by Kristeva, Dollimore, and De Rougement on *Liebestod*, the connection of love and death in the play, Grady focuses (following Dollimore) on loss as the factor that “creates a kind of mourning within the audience, creative of a sense of beauty and longing” (204). The play’s tendency towards comedy is evidenced in the possibilities it offers for civic and communal renewal, he argues, before concentrating on its technique of aesthetic heightening at moments of loss like Mercutio’s Queen Mab speech, the balcony scene, Juliet’s soliloquy of sexual anticipation “gallop apace you fiery footed steeds,” and the tomb scene. Although the social and the natural are diametrically opposed through the play, in such moments, the mediation of art succeeds in bringing them briefly together. By playing out fantasies of what might (nearly) have been, the text thus evokes a complex emotional state “divided between mourning and a sense of fulfillment” for spectators or readers, Grady argues (218).

Grady’s powerful advocacy of a return to aesthetics, and his re-reading of modernist aesthetics as hospitable to the “impurities” of the texts’ political and ideological engagements will make a telling impact on the future direction of Shakespeare criticism. The intelligent readings are brimming over with possibilities. If I have a criticism, it is that the book is not long enough to realise all these, but I

look forward to reading more by Hugh Grady, and others inspired by this manifesto to use ‘impure aesthetics’ to read Shakespeare.