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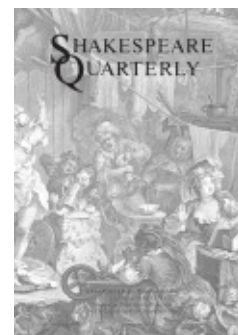
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Theory “After Theory”: Christopher Pye’s Reading of “Othello”

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Shakespeare Quarterly, Volume 60, Number 4, Winter 2009, pp.
453-459 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/shq.0.0119



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us to play the distracted, spontaneous, and fundamentally mixed character of Othello and Desdemona's republic of two against more official accounts of legal personhood in the psychic economies of liberalism. The citizen-subject that would emerge from such an encounter just might generate a more flexible, more expansive, and more spontaneous vision of citizenship than that allowed in much contemporary writing. Such a citizenship would encompass not only the inscriptional cuts of castration and circumcision, but also those moments of underground economy, erotic experiment, and informal place-making that enabled new styles of association and assembly in the squares, piazzas, and liberties of the Renaissance, and that continue to offer chances for civic renewal today. Distracting our gaze from more official discourses of citizenship in order to recovenant the city via forms of social contract that open unto unexpected vistas of universality, Shakespeare's citizen-subject is not only a model of tragic eclipse, but also the bearer of comic potentiality.

Theory "After Theory": Christopher Pye's Reading of "*Othello*"

HUGH GRADY

Ten years ago, noted Shakespeare critic David Scott Kastan reported that the field of Shakespeare (and literary studies generally) had entered a "post-theoretical moment" and stated flatly that "the great age of theory is over." The field can only advance, he continued, "not by producing more theory but more facts, however value-laden they will necessarily be."¹

Kastan himself has always been careful to credit and indeed utilize many of the ideas and outcomes of critical theory—essentially calling for a historicizing continuation of theory's critique of positivist historicism and the New Criticism (or "liberal humanism") of the period from 1930 to 1970, rather than an outright return to the old days.² But others in the field have been less scrupulous, and it is evident that in some circles in Shakespeare studies there is a feeling that positivist scholarship has been vindicated and that the age of theory was an unaccountable and regrettable lapse in a now-restored, facts-laden tradition. Since Kastan's announcement of an imminent paradigm shift, a

¹ David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare after Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 31.

² Kastan, 28–42 *passim*. "Liberal humanism" is the term widely used in British cultural materialism of the 1980s to characterize the previously prevailing method of F. R. Leavis and associated British and American New Critics. For a discussion of the term and its associated concepts, see Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, 3d ed. (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2009), 11–37.

whole new fact-oriented scholarship has indeed developed along the very lines he recommended: in textual editing, the nature of the book trade, the practices of theatrical companies, and (this last already pretty well covered by cultural materialism and the new historicism, but it continues) the relation of the theater to the larger culture and political structures which formed its context.³

However, the new, more empirical critical writing is by no means the only innovation in contemporary Shakespeare studies, nor has it simply replaced already existing—and continuing—critical methods. Instead of one dominant method, there are many competing (and complementary) ones, including the kind of scholarly production of facts advocated by Kastan, but also such relatively new developments in theory as ecocriticism, animal studies, presentism, the new aestheticism, the new formalism, queer and gender studies, performance studies, postcolonialism, and other, as-yet-unlabeled trends, like the large body of work drawing on Jacques Derrida's later writings. In addition, established critical methods such as feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, cultural materialism, and new historicism continue, often rejuvenated by conversing with some of the newer trends named above. An examination of journals and bookstalls in the field will show a preponderance of studies grounded in the concerns of post-1980s literary and cultural theory, with its emphases on deconstructing gender, race, class, sexuality, and colonialism. There is perhaps a certain resurgence of more "traditional" scholarly methods (they had never really disappeared), but much—indeed, probably most—of the profession is still working the terrain opened up by the critical revolutions of twenty to thirty years ago. In short, theory has not ended but instead developed—and moved in new directions.⁴

A very interesting case in point is the essay by Christopher Pye appearing in this issue, "'To throw out our eyes for brave Othello': Shakespeare and Aesthetic Ideology." Pye has produced an excellent example of one of the many kinds of theory that continue to flourish at the end of the first decade of the new millennium. Pye's essay is rooted in his previous Lacanian work but engages in interesting syntheses as well with Marxism, race theory, gender theory, and other instances of contemporary cultural theory. It is work that engages in the play's historicity, defining a series of crucial cultural differentiations that helped define the emerging modernity of Shakespeare's age. But it does so primarily through a theoretically motivated close reading and analysis of themes and

³ Kastan writes, "But this book would restore Shakespeare's artistry to the earliest conditions of its realization and intelligibility: to the collaborations of the theater in which the plays were acted, to the practices of the book trade in which they were published, to the unstable political world of late Tudor and early Stuart England in which the plays were engaged by their various publics" (16).

⁴ Barry (287–317) makes this case in detail.

structuring motifs of *Othello*, rather than through a new historicist examination of documents of the play's contextual culture. The essay is an impressive contribution to contemporary Shakespeare studies, with any number of specific insights into *Othello* and its singular historical moment, and is a sophisticated example of a broadly Lacanian critical methodology extended to meet other contemporary critical-theoretical strands. It will reward the close study it demands of its readers. Here, I want to quickly summarize what I see as some of its salient qualities and to engage in a dialogue, based on my own critical concepts and practices, with some of its ideas.

In a convergence of deconstruction and Lacanian ideas of language, the essay identifies a number of binary oppositions forming an intricate textuality in the play, both through various dialectical negations or differentiations and through a pattern of metonymic "substitution" or deferral—showing affinities, as well, with the Hegelian and Marxist traditions, as I argue below. The linked terms include an idea of the aesthetic (seen as self-constituting fictionality); the political (as established by a universalizing law creative of an unspecific citizen-subject); masculine, objectifying gaze versus feminine distraction (the opposition alluded to in the essay's title); orality and writing; speech versus gesture; self-begotten jealousy as a parallel to the self-begotten aesthetic "groundlessness" of the play; and finally the unnamed category of "race" in the play, as an anachronistic, yet-to-be concept made perceptible in the mode of the visible rather than the conceptual. All of these terms, Pye argues, show the same structure of "groundlessness": the play manifests a world that is purely a self-constituting aesthetic space, and its textuality includes any number of terms and oppositions which mirror that groundlessness or lack of connection to larger, more inclusive structures of signification. In effect, as Pye notes in passing, the play constitutes the historically new condition of "modernity" in which a number of groundless, reified concepts make up a new world with a permanent crisis of meaning.⁵ It is a bravura critical performance, and one which also manages to dialogue with a large number of the critical essays on the play of the last thirty years, mobilizing several of them in support of its own reading, rather than dutifully rehearsing items of a literature search. Pye opens our eyes to the continuing relevance of readings of Shakespeare, grounded not only in a knowledge of its historical context, but also in our own age's retrospective, theorized concepts of the past in which Shakespeare and his contemporaries participated—and participated without, of course, benefit of our own historical "presentist" hindsight or the theories that illuminate the text of *Othello* in Pye's reading.

⁵ Full disclosure: I make this case in Marxist and Frankfurt School terms in Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1996).

As someone who has worked for the last several years on the critical relevance of the Hegel- and Marx-influenced aesthetic theories of Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin to Shakespeare, I find most interesting Pye's exploration of a concept of the aesthetic and its links with several other motifs of modernity, and I want to focus on that theme in what follows in an attempt to extend this notion of the aesthetic with one that partially overlaps with, but also goes beyond, what Pye asserts here.⁶ All critical methods have their own foci and limitations, but my sense is that the one Pye develops here is, beyond many others, open to linkages with other currently emerging theoretical developments.

Pye defines the aesthetic primarily through what I see as only one of its several dimensions, but it is a crucial one: its quality of autonomy from the "real" world in which it is located and which imprints it, the quality identified by Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno as coming fully into effect only in the beginnings of modernity, in the work of writers such as Shakespeare.⁷ Thus, Pye emphasizes how *Othello* seems to foreground this notion, becoming meta-aesthetic especially in the "empty" quality of its tragic protagonist as a hero from nowhere, entrapped in a fit of jealousy based on nothing, analogous to the autonomous relation of aesthetic space to its surroundings. Following Michael McKeon, Pye sees the autonomy of the aesthetic as part of a larger cultural differentiation constructing some of the "groundless" qualities of merging aesthetics from a medieval past. Pye emphasizes especially the hidden dialectical link between the creation of the idea of a universal, "empty" citizen in the aesthetic space of the play's fictional / historical Venetian republic and, at other points, its differentiation from the imperializing claims of developing modern science to monopolize the production of truth.

In addition to their resemblance to Adorno's aesthetic theory, these ideas are quite reminiscent as well of the definition of an early modern form of allegory (in a special sense of the term) by Walter Benjamin, Adorno's great friend and intellectual partner. Benjamin saw Shakespearean tragedy as better described

⁶ See Hugh Grady, "Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics: The Case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59 (2008): 274–302, and Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009).

⁷ The idea of premodern art as not yet fully art because the aesthetic is essentially secular is so fundamental to Frankfurt School theory that it is alluded to, rather than spelled out, in Adorno's great posthumous compilation of his ideas on aesthetics; see Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentnor (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 1–4, 16–45. I discuss this aspect of Frankfurt School aesthetics in *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics*, 16–22 and 28–31. See also Mark Robson, "Defending Poetry, or, Is There an Early Modern Aesthetic?" in *The New Aestheticism*, ed. John J. Joughin and Simon Malpas (Manchester: U of Manchester P, 2003), 119–30, esp. 120–27, for a cogent argument that the development of aesthetic theory is dependent on the larger cultural development of modernity.

generically by the baroque German form called the *Trauerspiel* (mourning play), an allegorical form he thought was made possible by the emptied world of modernity creating an aesthetic space in which, as Benjamin says, "Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else."⁸ This encompasses traditional extended metaphors but is a principle which has several other dimensions as well. In addition and importantly, while the precondition for the allegory of the *Trauerspiel* is the sense of a meaningless world, the artwork anchored in this world and re-producing its negative evaluations also and crucially produces a profligate, meaningful aesthetic space of multiple significations. As Benjamin writes, "Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both elevated and devalued."⁹

Benjamin's later, more Marxist work incorporated his theory of the allegory (and extended it as applicable, as well, to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature in Baudelaire and Brecht) and connected it explicitly to Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism as creative of a world in which the ascendance of the "empty" commodity money becomes the ruling measure of the value of everything.¹⁰ The mourning play for Benjamin not only is based formally on the emptied world, but also thematizes it in its preoccupations with death and violence. At the same time, however, in the implicit act of mourning which is an inextricable part of these plays (and Benjamin saw Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as one of the consummate examples of the form) is registered a sense of loss of something valued. In that sense, these plays project a utopian possibility at the same time that they mark and define loss. It is that utopian dimension, I think, that is missing in Pye's stimulating and otherwise complementary reading of *Othello*, for *Othello*, like *Hamlet*, fits well under Benjamin's concept of the *Trauerspiel*.

What a Benjaminian reading would insist on—and I think Benjamin is defining a crucial dimension of all the great Shakespearean tragedies—is the ambiguity at the end of *Othello*, similar to the ambiguity at the end of *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Timon of Athens*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and several

⁸ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), 175.

⁹ Benjamin, *Origin*, 175.

¹⁰ Benjamin wrote in 1938: "The allegorical mode of apprehension is always built on a devalued world of appearances. The specific devaluation of the world of things, as manifested in the commodity, is the foundation of Baudelaire's allegorical intention"; see Walter Benjamin, "The Study Begins with Some Reflections on the Influences of *Les fleurs du mal*," in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott and others (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2003), 95–98; esp. 96. For a lucid discussion of the connection of the theory of allegory in the *Origin* to Benjamin's later Marxist work on Baudelaire, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 177–85.

other plays.¹¹ The tragic or *Trauerspiel* world is an empty one that ends in individual death, an inexorable quality of the human condition. But there is always an “and yet,” in these plays, usually signaled in their very endings. In *Othello*, the “and yet” centers around Desdemona and her heroic resistance to hate and the narrowing of her social being to ideological femininity, but it extends, tragically, to Othello’s heroic resistance to racism in the play’s first half and asserts itself again, briefly and painfully, at the moment of his death, with Othello’s regaining of agency and acceptance of guilt in the wake of his failure to resist Iago’s manipulation. Pye defines wonderfully the groundlessness of the world of the play, but I think there is also something else inscribed in the empty space created in the modern aesthetic that Benjamin saw, and it is a utopian insistence that the world can and ought to be other, that its emptiness creates the possibility of new forms of meaning and value.¹² To speak more technically, this utopian dimension of art is related as well to the ability of the modern subject to resist the ideologies, the “mind-forg’d manacles,” that would imprison it. Even in the debris at the end of *Othello*—perhaps Shakespeare’s most painful and uncompromising look at the susceptibility of a malleable human nature to self-destruction—a kind of utopian otherness is still visible. In short, what Adorno and Benjamin can contribute to this kind of analysis is one last dialectical move, the glimpse of a utopian mission of art in its figuring for us imaginary solutions to real problems, including its implicit defense of subjectivity against the imperializing tendencies of reified modernity and the reductive mentalities of commodification and instrumental reason.

Years ago, Carol Thomas Neely divided the numerous lists of *Othello* critics into two broad categories: “*Othello* critics,” who take the self-evaluations of the play’s protagonist as more or less justified and who see him as heroic, if tragically deluded; and “*Iago* critics,” who agree with Iago’s diagnoses of the play’s protagonist as an “erring barbarian” (*Othello*, 1.3.355–56), an empty, bombastic character caught up in his own grandiosity and easily duped by his mental superior.¹³ Neely went on to advocate a third, more feminist path of “*Emilia* critics,” who would dare to take up the woman’s part of the play, and in fact helped to inaugurate an important new line of critical interpretations.¹⁴ But the

¹¹ I explicate and develop Benjamin’s theory of the allegory and apply it in a detailed reading of *Hamlet* in Hugh Grady, “*Hamlet* as Mourning-Play: A Benjaminesque Interpretation,” *Shakespeare Studies* 36 (2008): 135–65. An expanded and recontextualized version is in Grady, *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics*, 133–92.

¹² Benjamin, *Origin*, 112–13.

¹³ *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2d ed., gen. ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

¹⁴ Carol Thomas Neely, *Broken Nuptials in Shakespeare’s Plays* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985), 106–8.

play is so large and so complex that I want here to bracket those issues for the moment and use Neely's insight to situate Pye's reading of the play as belonging to the line of "Iago critics." One symptom of this, ironically, is that Pye says very little directly about Iago's point of view in the play, instead incorporating aspects of it in his own analysis. As a character, Iago is oddly underrepresented in the essay, because the focus on "emptiness" in effect gives Iago the determining vision of the play; it is he who sees the world as empty of any significance other than the possibilities of ego pleasure and monetary aggrandizement. "Put money in thy purse," he keeps repeating to Roderigo (1.3), and it is a neat encapsulation of how he constructs reality—an interiorization of the logic of commodification that Benjamin saw as the main generator of the empty world of the *Trauerspiel*. It is a vision that continues to dominate the society that developed out of this world into our own vastly commodified—and failing—social structure. And it is a point of view that *Othello* represents as dominating its world, even as it mobilizes a burning desire among its consumers to change it.