



Hugh Grady. *Shakespeare's Dialectic of Hope: From the Political to the Utopian.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. 280 pp. ISBN 9781009098090. \$99.99 hardback.

The title of Hugh Grady's *Shakespeare's Dialectic of Hope: From the Political to the Utopian*, is an accurate description of this fine monograph, which does indeed chart what Grady himself describes as “a trajectory from plays largely focused on political issues to late tragicomedies that focus on the necessity of utopian vision in worlds of injustice, violence, madness, and death” (4). This is not to suggest that the title (or indeed a review) can entirely summarize the nature of this well-informed and deeply theoretical piece of work, not least because, for Grady, the “political” in Shakespeare is seldom without some sense of the utopian, and the “utopian” can never be entirely free of the political circumstances out of which it arises, since, as Grady writes, “the element of hope does not do away with recognitions of suffering and death” (4).

As will be clear to anyone familiar with Grady's previous works, the monograph continues his interest in questions of power, especially the kind of power for power's sake that operates, as he explains in *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf: Studies in Early*

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Modern Reification (1996), “according to an autonomous self-perpetuating instrumental logic which defies human intentionality and control”.¹ Grady has long argued that this “reified power,” which comes to dominate Western thinking in later ages, emerges around Shakespeare’s lifetime and is challenged in various ways by Shakespeare and many of his contemporaries. However, *Shakespeare’s Dialectic of Hope* also unites the political aspect of Grady’s past research with his interest in philosophical Aesthetics – most clearly expressed in his *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics* (2009) – since the utopian emerges as a force associated with aesthetic principles, over and against a political realm associated with the real.

Of course, even while dedicated to the analysis of instrumental power, the “Universal Wolf” in the plays, Grady has never considered Shakespeare as subscribing to a completely pessimistic worldview, never seeing art as complicit with repression or instrumental power. Instead, Grady reads art as a cultural force that can both reflect and critique power, hence his adherence to the Frankfurt School over the French Poststructuralism more popular in the heyday of theory. Grady has always seen in the darkest moments a potential for a better, utopian world, as in his reading of *King Lear* in *Shakespeare’s Universal Wolf* demonstrates, and which concludes that there is “the persistence of utopian longing in the community which survives individual deaths, as a base human reality from which might be constructed a world to follow this devastated one,”² or his reading of *Hamlet* in *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne* (2002), in which he discerns that “in the fierceness of Hamlet’s depression burns a sense that the world need not be the way it is”.³ Ever finding in Shakespeare’s plays a compassion for the weak who suffer most in an instrumental world, *Shakespeare’s Dialectic of Hope* may be the book in which this utopian aspect of Grady’s reading of Shakespeare comes through the strongest.

The book is clearly structured, starting with the political in the form of *Julius Caesar*, a play that Grady regards as being motivated by the impersonal force of reified power. It then moves on to *Macbeth*, which Grady argues contains the glimmers of the utopian in its presentation of the weird sisters, even as it continues to be dominated largely by the force of instrumental, political power. The book then considers *Antony and Cleopatra*, which is treated as a transitional play in which the forces of the political

¹ Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare’s Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 159.

² *Shakespeare’s Universal Wolf*, 178.

³ Hugh Grady, *Shakespeare, Machiavelli, and Montaigne: Power and Subjectivity from Richard II to Hamlet* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 264.

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and the utopian vie against one another, or at other times even work in conjunction with one another, through the political and romantic maneuvers of the central couple. Finally, Grady covers two of Shakespeare's later plays, namely *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* to argue that in these works, the utopian comes through as the stronger force against the political. Crucially, however, this utopian force remains in the realm of representational art, so that hope is fulfilled not in the real world but on an aesthetic level "representing to us the fulfilment of natural and social longings [...] while it calls attention to the existing world's emptiness and lacks" (184). In this reading, the utopian remains an unfulfilled representation of fulfilment, a hope rather than a reality.

Once again, a summary of this kind risks simplifying the subtlety of Grady's thinking, the intricacy of the close textual analysis involved in making the argument, and the theory mobilized in defense of such a thesis, even as it makes evident the clarity of Grady's overall view of his subject. One of Grady's many strengths is his deep knowledge of Shakespeare criticism over the last century, which comes from years of consistent engagement with old and new criticism alike. Grady summarizes, quotes, and responds freely and effortlessly to a wide range of critical material, including many very recent publications, showing that his commitment to theory does not leave him in the past. Indeed, as befits a well-known champion of presentism, Grady's readings blend his past research with interests that arise out of what are at times very present issues, including his own situation in America during the Trump presidency and the COVID-19 pandemic, and which add an urgency to the need to look to art for utopian hope.

It is important to note, however, that Grady's utopianism – in this book and elsewhere – is not of a naïve kind. The word "dialectic" in the title might be off-putting to those who have struggled with Hegel or Adorno, but it is an accurate descriptor for Grady's approach and is used in a way that signals the complexity of his understanding of Shakespeare's "Dialectic of Hope". The term signals the complex way in which Grady understands this progression: not as a simple development, but in the Adornian sense that a dialectical progression does not necessarily fully resolve the opposition between two states, some remainder of which complicates the resolution. Especially in the context of Grady's argument, this is an apt metaphor, since it captures the fact that there is often a sense at the end of Shakespeare's plays that the end is not a full resolution, even as it solves many of the issues raised by the play.

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Shakespeare's Dialectic of Hope is not quite a return to old theory, but a development of the style that shows subtly what the best of theory-inflected close reading can contribute to our understanding of Shakespeare. The strength of Grady's approach to this method is the soundness of his theoretical knowledge, based in many years of close work with Frankfurt School thinkers, but also the fact that his own ideas and voice are not drowned out by the technicalities and jargon that have haunted many philosophical readings. An engagement with the theoretical material is apparently entirely optional, since, for instance, Grady notes that Walter Benjamin's sense of the "term 'Baroque' will be helpful to some readers, but it can remain merely a stylistic marker for others" (6). Given that it is not entirely necessary to his readings, one might wonder why Grady chooses to retain the somewhat obscure language of the philosophers who have influenced his arguments instead of using terms that may be less alienating to those who are not interested in the Frankfurt School but may nevertheless benefit from Grady's perspectives. Terminology has often led to misunderstandings of the philosophical texts themselves: a problem that might be carried into books like Grady's that use (for instance) Benjamin's terminology. As quoted above, it no doubt helps those for whom this is familiar material, and one might also defend Grady's choice to retain philosophical terms as being a humble and commendable acknowledgement of his sources. It is also to Grady's credit that he takes time to explain with great care and clarity the often convoluted notions that underpin his thinking, giving an expert crash-course in the philosophical ideas referenced in his own book for the benefit of those who do not have a background in philosophy or a knowledge of Frankfurt School thinkers.

A mature and deep late career work that argues for a trajectory in Shakespeare's own thinking about power and politics, *Shakespeare's Dialectic of Hope* is a powerful example of a theoretical way of reading still relevant in our time. As Grady has done many times in the past, he once more offers a way of thinking about Shakespeare and ourselves as readers of Shakespeare in the present through an examination of the issues incipient in Shakespeare's time that still plague us today. Multifaceted and complex, Grady's approach to Shakespeare does not simplify the plays in favor of easy solutions, but captures something of why these plays remain interesting because of their tension, difficulty, and multiplicity of potential meanings that seem to present themselves all at once. It may be true that critics in their criticism end up revealing as much about themselves as about Shakespeare, not least because one's subject matter

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can disclose one's most ardent interests and passions. If this is so, then Grady's unsentimental focus on hope shows a beautiful mind that combines rational clarity with optimistic warmth. The book argues that "Shakespeare ends his career investigating hope" (7). It is fitting that so eminent a Shakespeare scholar as Grady should have done so too.

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