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The Late Work of Sam Shepard

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The Late Work of Sam Shepard. Shannon Blake Skelton. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016; Pp. 256.

The Late Work of Sam Shepard, by Shannon Blake Skelton, brings necessary attention to the later phase of Sam Shepard's works, including his short prose, plays, acting performances, and screenplays. Previously published scholarship has tended to focus on Shepard's most prolific period, roughly categorized as 1965 to 1985, as well as his family plays, such as *Curse of the Starving Class* (1976), *Buried Child* (1979), *True West* (1980), *Fool for Love* (1980), and *A Lie of the Mind* (1985). Skelton argues that with Shepard's 1988 directorial debut in *Far North* and 1991 play *States of Shock*, Shepard transitioned to a "Late Style" that mixed genres and "resisted the clichéd notions that an aged artist in their autumnal period will offer gentle reflection" (3, 5). In the introduction, Skelton maps out the main points of the project from Shepard's personality to the gender dynamics of his works. Each chapter corresponds with each key point, creating a thematically organized structure to the book.

The first chapter studies the Shepard persona. Since Shepard was an actor, a writer, and even a celebrity, his image circulated widely during the height of his fame in the 1980s. Skelton argues that during his Late Style, Shepard adopted a paternal character due to his acting roles as well as his "status as an elder statesman of American theatre" (72). This new persona began to emerge when he was cast as law professor Thomas Callahan in the movie *The Pelican Brief* (1993) and was solidified in his role as father and husband Patrick Singer in the movie *Safe Passage* (1994). These father figure roles continued in subsequent films: Allie's father Frank Calhoun in *The Notebook* (2004) and the elder mentor Tom in *Mud* (2012). This Late Style identity showed an artist who may have passed beyond his most popular period but stayed active in a variety of art forms. Skelton writes, "From acting and directing to writing, Shepard has seemingly made peace with himself, his art, his legacy, and his persona" (72).

In the next chapter, Skelton examines Shepard's self-reflexive exploration of authenticity and the artist in American culture. Much of Shepard's earlier work probed how artists struggle with authenticity, trying to remain true to the art or the artistic self while facing a world of capitalism, which tries to change art to make it more commercially popular. Some plays such as *Cowboy Mouth* (1964), *Angel City* (1976), and *True West* may have represented this struggle, but they did not offer resolutions. During his Late Style, Shepard positioned the artist as older and wiser. Using close reading, Skelton focuses on two specific works and two solutions. Howard in the film *Don't Come Knocking* (2005) achieves authenticity by forming relationships with others. For Hobart in the play *Kicking a Dead Horse* (2007), authenticity is ultimately unobtainable in life, so he finds it by embracing death.

Chapter three explores the relationship between memory and trauma as demonstrated in the plays *Sympatico* (1993), *The Late Henry Moss* (2000), and *When the World Was Green* (1996), the latter of which was co-written with Joseph Chaikin. As with many of his earlier works, Shepard never offered easy answers but revealed characters struggling to comprehend a "past that consistently informs the present" (13). For instance, *Buried Child* and *A Lie of the Mind* address the personal dynamics of remembering and forgetting traumatic events in families' pasts. But it was not until the Late Style works when Shepard revealed ways of "grappling with the past and its memories to transform the individual" (135). *Sympatico* demonstrates that one can achieve peace through confronting and then letting go of painful histories. *Late Henry Moss* and *When the World Was Green* show that one can reconcile with a past trauma by reenacting the event.

Focusing on the two plays *States of Shock* (1991) and *The God of Hell* (2004), the fourth chapter addresses the politics of Shepard's work during the Gulf War and the War on Terror. These two plays, unlike earlier ones, "unabashedly engage with political issues and offer commentary on broader concerns of the contemporary world" (137). Skelton argues that both plays show masculine, political conservatives attempting to change the minds of the other (potentially subversive) characters who question the supremacy of patriarchal narratives. Through these plays, Shepard suggests that "conservative ideology can be defeated through (1) direct action (*States of Shock*) (2) resistance by women (*The God of Hell*) and (3) the responsibility of one to be politically aware and engaged" (161).

In the final chapters, Skelton analyzes how Shepard engages with the legacy of colonialism as well as gender dynamics. While the body of Shepard's work has focused on the mystique of the American cowboy, his Late Style showcased the perspective of indigenous people, as in the plays *Silent Tongue* (1994) and *Eyes for Consuela* (1998). Shepard tried to move past romanticized notions of the Native American figure, showing instead more in-depth characters. Much of Shepard's early work has been criticized for its lack of women and glorification of masculinity. However, during the Late Style, Shepard used the homosocial space in plays such as *Ages of the Moon* (2009) and *Heartless* (2012) to challenge patriarchal assumptions, tackle the collapse of masculine expectations, and address same-sex desire.

Skelton's book is an important contribution to the critical studies of Sam Shepard, offering discussion of Shepard's major themes, stylistic changes, and late works. The book builds upon previous publications such as Stephen J. Bottoms's *The Theatre of Sam Shepard: States of Crisis* (1998) and Matthew Roudané's *The Cambridge Companion to Sam Shepard* (2002). Roudané's collection does offer two essays that address Shepard's Late Style, but the essays do not provide the comprehensive insight of Skelton's monograph. Skelton gives a personal touch to the striking impact that Shepard has had on American culture.

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