Theodor Adorno once famously opined that philosophy continues to exist because the moment for its abolition was missed. In an ironic parallel, the same might be said of Marxist literary and cultural theory. It continues because the moment for its abolition was missed, when the old mole of history decided to assert itself instead of subsiding into the hibernation predicted in the famous post-1989 edict of Francis Fukuyama: the end of history. Instead of the steady-state, stable capitalist societies envisioned by Fukuyama, we have witnessed the near-collapse of the global capitalist financial infrastructure with resulting social and political turmoil, including the revival of anti-immigrant and anti-Keynesian forces, and the imposition of austerity and no-end-in-sight high unemployment in both Europe and the United States. This is on top of a slightly older resistance to capitalist globalization manifested in the various religious fundamentalisms and other political movements of our time. And even more recently and unexpectedly, something like both 1848 and 1989 seems to have occurred again in the Middle East. As a result, post-modernist culture begins to have and will hereafter develop different features than it did in the 1990s, and Shakespeare accordingly, in a seemingly endless process of permanent renewal, shows and will show new features as well.

In earlier discussions of post-modernist art—relevant here because the contemporary aesthetic environment always has profound impact on the way a literary classic like Shakespeare is constructed by contemporary critics—fears were often expressed that the contemporary production of a media-saturated society, with the commodified images...
of media culture constituting larger and larger segments of the life-world of post-modern citizens, absorbed and commodified art in a way that threatened its crucial modern distance from the society on which it reflected and which it could critique. Nevertheless, contemporary art, including productions of and writings about Shakespeare, by and large resisted this, precisely by inserting the plays into the contemporary world (or its simulacrum) so that, thus recontextualized, they emerged as reflections on twentieth- and twenty-first-century power, capital, and hatred out of control, like Darko Treenjak’s brilliant 2011 production of *The Merchant of Venice* in New York.

Today, after the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York, we can see coming into clearer perspective a demarcation within our post-modern period. In the wake of this attack, modernity seems less menacing, precisely because it is clearly under threat in a way that seemed impossible in the 1990s, and, if we are lucky, may seem impossible again in the not too distant future. However, pre-modern belief structures have reasserted their influence not only in the Islamic world, but all too palpably in the United States, where only a minority of adults accepts the theory of biological evolution, and where the racism many thought swept away by the election of Barack Obama has reemerged precisely in the ferocious and largely irrational attacks on him and his centrist policies from a rejuvenated and empowered Right. In this context, modernity seems well worth defending, along with one of its essential categories, a differentiated, secular concept and practice of the aesthetic. In the first wave of political, Marxist-influenced criticism of the Shakespeare studies of the 1980s and 1990s—represented by post-modernist theory, Cultural Materialism, New Historicism, and important segments of feminism—the aesthetic was seen as part of the problem, as a merely formalist, implicitly apolitical mode of analysis. Yet today, we can see emerging a new aestheticism, taking the necessity for art as a reflection on and critique of empirical society. In this development the aesthetic—the category produced by modernity as a built-in critical and utopian mechanism, constantly endangered but constantly renewed—is relevant again. That is, as I argued in my 2009 monograph *Shakespeare and Impure Aesthetics*, art and the aesthetic can and should be spoken of positively in contemporary critical culture; and, contrary to an influential thesis of Carl Schmitt’s, the modern aesthetic can be seen to