

Sean Lawrence. *Forgiving the Gift: The Philosophy of Generosity in Shakespeare and Marlowe*.

Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2012. xxiii + 244 pp. \$58. ISBN: 978-0-8207-0448-7.

Scholars in a broad range of social and humanistic disciplines have in recent years shown a renewed interest in theories of gift-giving that go back to anthropological traditions and especially to Marcel Mauss, whose wide-ranging study *The Gift* (1925; English translation, 1990) posited the centrality of gift exchange — giving that obliges the receiver to reciprocate — in human ties and interactions. Mauss's influential study has been subject to varied criticisms, most prominently advanced by Continental philosophers Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, whose thinking started with an opposite supposition, namely, that generosity — giving that anticipates no reward in return — was the governing principle of human relations. As Sean Lawrence explicates Levinas's criticism in his discussion of these issues in the opening chapter of *Forgiving the Gift*, "one does not give to the other to assert oneself; on the contrary, the other's call to generosity allows the self to achieve self-awareness initially" (16).

The book offers an interpretation of several plays by Shakespeare and Marlowe, through which Lawrence emphatically advances an approach based on the philosophy of Levinas against current interpretations that pin down the circulation of gifts as

the leitmotif and driving force of early modern drama. The book proceeds with chapters that uncover the theme of generosity in the plays. In *The Merchant of Venice* generosity emerges in Antonio's love and affection for Bassanio, while in *King Lear* it is achieved in the final and tragic ruin of Gloucester and Lear. Marlowe's *Edward II* is explored as a play that makes an "extraordinary claim" (142) for love and donations that go well beyond calculations of material or political rewards. Even in *Titus Andronicus*, with its horrifying brutality and atrocities, the characters' responses to the suffering of Lavinia express generosity that "serves as an ethical imperative, one which, like Levinas's Saying, precedes signs and exchanges" (144). Finally, in his treatment of *The Tempest*, Lawrence construes Prospero's return from the island to the world — against critics who argue that the act was a mask to his own ambition and ruthlessness — as a generous renunciation of power in its most exemplary form.

Lawrence's treatment of Mauss's wide-ranging study occasionally strikes one as too crude. For all its limitations, Mauss's theory was elaborate and imbued with insight into diverse human relations, dependencies, and obligations, which in his tendency to equate gift-giving with blatant self-interest, commercial exchange or political calculation devoid of morality — Lawrence overlooks. His embrace of Levinas's philosophy as an alternative not only for interpreting Renaissance drama but also for probing more broadly the early modern world and even that of "our own" (164) poses some difficulty, given the limited scope of a study that focuses on several plays and does not delve into social practice and interactions elsewhere. Nor do the plays in Lawrence's reading render themselves to a full-fledged philosophy of generosity. While generosity, as Lawrence rightly points out, underpinned Protestant theology with its radical departure from the traditional understanding of the reciprocity between man and God, and in its casting of an entire system of salvation on notions of gratuitous giving, the plays go well beyond these novel notions of religiosity. They highlight pervasive understanding, conceptions, and practices of exchange, with sacrificial offering appearing at times marginal, or as an option that reveals failures and lapses of gifts and exchange; or else it is a challenge and critique of excessive ambition, greed or egotism. All this suggests fissures and tensions between alternative perceptions and discourses, both traditional and new, and, no less critically, it points to pronounced gaps between ideal (Protestant or otherwise) and actual practice. It by no means indicates the primacy of a principle of generosity for elucidating early modern sensibilities or human affairs.

For all this, the book still provides a corrective and perceptive reading of the plays through the lens of Levinas's suppositions that allow the author to explore themes of generosity in the plays, revealing hitherto neglected displays of giving with no thoughts of recompense and expectations for binding commitments and exchange. The book urges us to pay due attention to sacrificial modes that govern human relations alongside exchange, being subsumed in the circulation of gifts and reflecting on its boundaries and limitations. It encourages us to think through a more nuanced understanding of gift-giving itself, one that incorporates both gift

exchange and altruistic gifts in all their forms, in Renaissance drama or in cultural practices and human interactions of the early modern era and elsewhere.

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