
Holly Faith Nelson
Trinity Western University
Holly.Nelson@twu.ca

Sean Lawrence’s *Forgiving the Gift: The Philosophy of Generosity in Shakespeare and Marlowe* is a critical breath of fresh air. Lawrence calls on scholars to ‘swerve’ from Stephen Greenblatt’s theory of self-interested exchange that has come to dominate much of the scholarship on early modern drama. Lawrence does not deny that Greenblatt’s theory has led to insightful readings of early modern plays; in fact, he demonstrates that many Marlovian and Shakespearean characters and societies are incapable of operating outside an economy of ‘reciprocal exchange’ (p. xiii). However, Lawrence claims that readings that only attend to this dimension of dramatic works of the period fail to take into account the early modern understanding of true generosity, informed by the Reformed doctrine of salvation, according to which an unmerited and unreciprocated gift can be given by one being to another: a gift that some of Marlowe’s and Shakespeare’s characters cannot ‘forgive’ but that others insist on giving.

Lawrence contends that modern criticism has failed to take notice of moments of radical generosity in the plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare because of a deeply rooted skepticism that denies the possibility of the pure or selfless gift and thus settles for an exchange economy alone. Lawrence cautions that such skepticism has led to a distorted reading of early modern literature, preventing us from understanding the rich complexity of what it means to be human.
Whereas Greenblatt’s reading of early modern drama shares the social vision of the anthropologist Marcel Mauss, well known for his theory of gift giving as a ‘system of exchange’ (p. 14), Lawrence relies on the thought of the Continental philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (among others) in his interpretation of Marlowe and Shakespeare. He is chiefly drawn to the Levinasian idea that radical generosity is possible and can occur before its material expression. The ‘true gift’, for Levinas, occurs in the Saying, ‘an address prior to linguistic systems’, rather than the Said, which is shaped by ‘social conventions and semiotic structures’ (pp. 62, 25, 27).

In the prologue to Forgiving the Gift, Lawrence discusses Marlowe’s Faustus as the most obvious example of an early modern dramatic character incapable of accepting a ‘pure gift’ (p. 14). It is, ironically, easier for Faustus to remain committed to a contract or exchange system that will lead to his damnation and dismemberment than it is for him to ‘forgive the gift’ of an undeserved divine grace that cannot and will not be repaid.

Lawrence finds a similar, if less intense, impulse to reject or sidestep ‘true generosity’ in Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice and King Lear (p. 42). For Lawrence, the former play ‘illustrates the cost of a model of social life in which love becomes competition and mercy is traded for money’ (p. 41). ‘The logic of exchange’, Lawrence contends, ‘has a death grip’ on both Christian and Jewish characters in The Merchant of Venice (p. 47). For example, while Antonio and Portia initially express an ‘absolute generosity’, their pure gifts are ultimately diminished when competition for the same object (Bassanio) thrusts them into a world of ‘adjudication, power struggles, and social norms’ (p. 125). Though the so-called Christians in the play are familiar with Reformed notions of grace and ‘the call to charity’, when faced with the tension between the conservative ‘requirements of a commercial and law-bound society’ and the revolutionary ‘claims of Reformation soteriology’, they choose to maintain the social order and abandon ‘countercultural’ generosity (pp. 66, 63). Lawrence insists, however, that this ultimate abandonment of the gift freely given does not erase ‘the exorbitant demand of an excessive generosity’ that surfaces earlier in the play (p. 125).

In King Lear, the relation of countercultural generosity to reciprocal exchange is reversed, according to Lawrence (p. 105). Early on in the play, Lear clearly rejects the possibility of the true gift, pretending to give an ‘absolute gift’ to his daughters when he is really demanding ‘an absolute obligation’ (p. 92). For him, all ‘offers of affection and kindness’ are embedded in reciprocal exchange and, like his daughters Regan and Goneril, every
relationship works within a network of ‘power and property’ (pp. 83–84). In fact, the idea of a ‘pure generosity’ produces terrible anxiety in Lear since it undermines his ability to negotiate his world: ‘an arena of power’ (pp. 83, 105). Thus, Lear fears Cordelia’s resistance to situating her love in ‘an economy, exchangeable for wealth and power’ (p. 94). However, when he and Gloucester, who shares his flaws, are stripped of their authority and possessions and reside on the margins of society, they are able to ‘abandon the assumption of exchange’, ‘express a generous concern for others and accept charity for themselves’ (p. 85). Lawrence wonders, in this context, whether an authentic generosity can only occur in those living on the social edge.

In Marlowe’s Edward II and Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus and The Tempest, Lawrence discovers characters most capable of comprehending and practicing a generosity that transcends and thus undercuts Maussian structures of exchange. Lawrence maintains that Edward’s love for Gaveston represents ‘the radicality of love prior to cultural convention, reciprocal obligation, or even the language in which it takes expression’ (p. 129). Gaveston’s station in life means that he does not ‘merit’ Edward’s excessive generosity. However, Lawrence explains that it is precisely this fact that makes the king’s free gift, or ‘commitment to an Other’, ‘extreme and subversive’, since it refuses to ‘subjugate itself to the regulation of justice or the state’ (pp. 142, 137, 142). What Lawrence believes many critics overlook is that the play is radical not only because it interrogates the nature of the political system and the heteronormative status quo, but also because it calls into question the very ‘assumptions of exchange that govern politics’ and the ‘social order’ (p. 142).

Lawrence identifies in Titus Andronicus, one of the most brutal of Shakespeare’s plays, a radical generosity displayed by Titus and Marcus in the midst of violence and affliction. Lawrence asserts that in a world in which the Maussian ‘gift economy’ has broken down ‘ethical concern persists and moreover renews itself” through these two Romans (p. 53, 164). It is the raped, mutilated, and silenced Lavinia, now without agency or value in the socio-economic system of ‘exchanges, negotiations, and circulations’, who prompts ‘an ethical response’ or true gift from her father and uncle, who demonstrate ongoing concern for, and dedication to, their afflicted loved one (pp. 164, 150).

In the final chapter of Forgiving the Gift, Lawrence hails The Tempest’s Prospero as one who is radically generous in ‘inviting his own death as the price of his child’s maturation’ and marriage (p. 166). For Lawrence, Prospero abandons metaphysics and magic, sources of his otherworldly power, to grant Miranda a place within the socio-economic order.
Lawrence believes that Prospero chooses to hide the depth of his sacrifice by mystifying ‘gratuitous forgiveness’ with the language of reciprocal exchange, notably in his agreement to the union of Miranda and Ferdinand (p. 182). Paradoxically, in re-entering the world of reciprocal exchange, Lawrence argues, Prospero displays pure generosity. For in leaving the island, Prospero sacrifices his ‘life’s work’ (p. 184).

Lawrence’s Forgiving the Gift concludes that the plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare reveal that those ‘who overly-rely on mechanisms of exchange’ find themselves on a life-negating path that leads to dehumanizing cruelty and tragedy (p. 187). Though he focuses on the fictive lives of the characters in these imaginative worlds rather than on the intentions of their authors, Lawrence suggests that these two Renaissance playwrights offer ‘a positive claim for relationships that exceed and violate the structures of exchange’, as expressed, for example, in the Reformation doctrine of salvation (p. 188). It is such excesses and violations that Lawrence argues (post) modern critics should attend to if they are to avoid yielding to the worldview of the likes of Faustus or Goneril. However, Lawrence, like Levinas, does recognize that, while countercultural generosity that altruistically recognizes and attends to the Other can and does exist, it ‘betrays itself in the Said’ when it ‘finds expression’ in ‘the social and economic systems…to which it gives rise’ (pp. 146, 188).

Lawrence’s Levinasian readings of two of Marlowe’s plays and four of Shakespeare’s are markedly original and provocative, and his call for scholarly optimism is both daring and heartening. His chapters on the plays might have been organized differently. The discussion of King Lear in chapter 3 interrupts the analysis of The Merchant of Venice in chapters 1, 2 and 4, which briefly disoriented this reader. However, there are clearly reasons for Lawrence’s choice: he moves from an absolute refusal of the gift in the book’s prologue to absolute generosity in the final chapter. And this organizational method in no way diminishes the quality and importance of the theory of unconditional generosity in early modern drama forged by Lawrence in Forgiving the Gift.