Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011). 228pp. ISBN 978 0 8014 4978 9.

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Sarah Beckwith's *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* examines how Shakespeare's late, 'post-tragic' plays - *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* - embody new forms of forgiveness, of reconciliation, and of community in response to the transformation of the sacrament of penance during the English Reformation (p. 1). For the Catholic culture of late medieval England, the language of forgiveness was intertwined with the practice of compulsory auricular confession and the priestly office of absolution. Consequently, when the Reformers denied the necessity of confession and rejected the coherency of absolution, they not only replaced one religious doctrine with another, but effected a crisis in the culture's broader understanding of forgiveness. Beckwith argues that Shakespeare's late tragicomedies create from the materials of this crisis a 'grammar of forgiveness' that is new to his own culture and continues—or should continue—to inform our own.

Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness is divided into three parts. The first part of the book charts the transformations undergone by the traditional Catholic grammar of forgiveness as a result of the abolishment of the sacrament of penance. The second part (containing only one chapter) reads *Measure for Measure* as registering, but failing to overcome, the confusions and fears produced by these transformations, thus bringing to an end the 'comic tradition in Shakespeare' (p. 10). The third and longest part of the book reads Shakespeare's tragicomedies as reconstituting a grammar of forgiveness through the staging of reconciliation, recognition, and acknowledgment in their final scenes.

Beckwith identifies her critical practice as indebted to ordinary language philosophy, understood as an attunement to the revelatory capacity of ordinary words, their uses, and

their interrelations. Citing J. L. Austin's claim in 'A Plea for Excuses' that '[o]ur common stock of words embodies all the distinctions men have found worth drawing, and the connections they have found worth making,' Beckwith argues that paying attention to the language of forgiveness in Shakespeare's last plays 'affords us a nuanced and precise account...of the relation between the inherited ritual languages of the Middle Ages and their transformation in post-Reformation England[.]' (pp. 7, 8). Such an approach will enable us to 'break with the conventional accounts of periodization, whether those are subsumed under the description of "The Renaissance" or "early modernity"' (p. 8). Moreover, because both theater and 'ordinary language philosophy' understand 'language as act, as event in the world,' they require us to 'extend our conception of the work of language beyond the work of representation, the chief focus of historicism old and new' (p. 8).

On the whole, Beckwith's book succeeds in achieving these goals. The first part of her book finely juxtaposes medieval and Reformation theologies of forgiveness, penance, and repentance, and shows how these theologies involve incompatible accounts of the nature and efficacy of language. Moreover, Beckwith's readings of the tragicomedies are themselves interspersed with fresh analyses of late medieval texts. *The Castle of Perseverance* and *Mankind* figure heavily in her chapter on *Cymbeline*, as do *The Towneley Plays* in her chapter on *The Winter's Tale*. Although Beckwith's claims about Shakespeare's own 'grammar of forgiveness' in the later plays are - as I will argue - not always persuasive, her book substantially contributes to our understanding of the religious dimension of these plays and models a critical method whose historical approach to Shakespeare reveals the relevance of his ethical and aesthetic vision for the present. It is to be recommended on both counts.

To her credit, Beckwith refuses to reduce the rules of Shakespeare's 'grammar of forgiveness' to a question of his religious identity, the current fascination with which, she rightly notes, 'can short-circuit and even preempt the density of the embodied world of the plays and the sheer complexity of that historical, social, and linguistic inheritance' (p. 11). Nonetheless, she sometimes presents Shakespearean forgiveness as occupying a conceptual space somewhere between the polarities of Catholic and Reformed theology. Early in the introduction Beckwith contrasts Shakespeare's view of the relation between human language and the act of forgiveness with two other views: the Catholic sacramental view, which holds that human language may effect forgiveness 'magically outside of my particular contribution,' (or *ex opere operato*); and the Reformed view, which severs the act of forgiveness from any form of human expression, since 'it was only by eradicating all

human mediations that we could be sure of the God-sidedness of grace' (p. 6). Shakespeare, by contrast, recognizes that it is '*human* speech' itself which 'makes or breaks the bonds between people' (p. 11. Emphasis in original). So Shakespeare retains the Catholic emphasis upon human agency (but rejects grounding it in an intrinsically efficacious sacramental form), even as he rejects the Reformers' insistence upon 'an unmediated relation with God' (while retaining their disavowal of the priest's official mediating function).

But what separates the implied theology of Beckwith's Shakespeare from, say, the *via media* of E. M. W. Tillyard's High Anglican Shakespeare, is the former's conviction that, as Beckwith puts it, 'nothing but language secures or grounds human relations,' with the result that 'the relation of word to world has to be established and re-established through our own voicing of it' (p. 5). These formulations capture the disorienting upheavals of sixteenth-century England, in which long-standing social practices were reduced to nothing through an act of speech, only to be just as rapidly restored, before being emptied out yet again. At the same time, though, these formulations may be taken to express the broader claim that the bonds created or severed between human beings in any culture reflect, in every case, nothing more than our decision to speak or to remain silent, to acknowledge (and so bring into being) or ignore (and so annihilate). It is both a virtue and limitation of Beckwith's book that she never addresses this distinction and its implications for her argument in any sustained way.

The ambiguous scope of Beckwith's argument is, first of all, a virtue, in that it enables her to pursue a historicist reading of Shakespeare's tragicomedies that at the same time reveals their ethical and aesthetic relevance for the present. More precisely, Beckwith's exploration of the history of 'acknowledgment,' whose verb form 'acknowe' is 'intimately bound up' with the traditional sacrament of penance, offers wonderful contextualization and support for Stanley Cavell's reliance upon the concept in his own investigations of Shakespearean ethics (p. 2). (Indeed, the first part of *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* is required reading for anybody wishing to engage Cavell's Shakespeare.) Beckwith demonstrates how the skeptical 'picture of inner and outer' that pervades the worlds of Shakespeare's major tragedies is one that 'evolves through the languages of reformed Christianity' (p. 19). The Elizabethan and Jacobean oaths of allegiance, the Book of Common Prayer's enforcement of uniformity of worship, the reformers' standard polemical reduction of Catholic rite to a 'theatricalized' and 'empty formalism,' all these contribute to an 'intrinsic denigration of expressive culture and of the human voice' (p. 20). The

consequences of such denigration, so Beckwith claims, are mercilessly laid bare by *King Lear*, the play whose dramatized 'failures of acknowledgment' must be themselves acknowledged by the tragicomedies if they are to succeed in their project of ethical renewal (p. 6).[1]

The limitation of Beckwith's approach, though, is that it too closely aligns the concerns of the tragicomedies with Cavell's, and so at times distorts the plays in two related ways. First, Beckwith is committed to a picture of Shakespeare's development that is nearly identical to the picture of the rise of skepticism informing Cavell's work on the plays. According to this picture, the philosophical, scientific, and religious controversies of the early modern period demonstrate the inadequacy of earlier attempts to ground interpersonal relations within an encompassing metaphysical system. Modern skepticism rightly affirms the inadequacy of this system but wrongly concludes that, absent the construction of a new methodologically secure system, human beings are cut off from each other and the world. This, of course, is the historical moment that Cavell sees as staged by Shakespeare's major tragedies. For Beckwith, similarly, Shakespeare's comedies are associated with a confidence in the grounds of human relationships, the collapse of which is marked by *Measure for Measure*. Like Cavell, Beckwith sees the late tragedies as determined by a skeptical problematic in which the failure of acknowledgment leads to devastating alienation and loss; and she correspondingly reads the tragicomedies as resolving the fundamental issue of the tragedies in much the same way that Cavell understands Wittgenstein to dissolve the modern temptation to skepticism. But to what extent does this picture suggest that Shakespeare's tragicomedies already anticipate Cavell's post-metaphysical approach to the tragedies? Although Beckwith's approach is far removed from the secularizing narrative of Stephen Greenblatt—which holds that Shakespeare's theater negates religious belief only to appropriate its forms in service of drama—there are moments in her book when she attributes to the tragicomedies a similar theatricalization of the religious. (For Beckwith, though, this theatricalization involves primarily an appropriation of religious ethics, rather than, as with Greenblatt, religious spectacle.)

Secondly, Beckwith's commitment to the unprecedented nature of the tragicomedies sets an extremely high bar of success for the plays to meet. And her desire to show that these plays do embody a 'renewed possibility of mutual acknowledgment' sometimes leads her to

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[1] Beckwith's account of these phenomena should be read alongside John D. Cox's broader analysis in *Seeming Knowledge: Shakespeare and Skeptical Faith* (Waco, Tx: Baylor University Press, 2007). Beckwith does cite Cox in her discussion of the *Tempest*.

minimize the complexity of their final scenes (p. 6). Her reading of *Pericles*, for instance, argues that in this play Shakespeare develops 'a new form of romance in which a community is re-created through the recovery of voice' (p. 86). Beckwith focuses on the recognition scene between Marina and Pericles in Act 5, which she interprets as staging the two characters' recovery of voice in relation to one another, thereby bringing about a recreation of the fragile community they had lost. But Pericles' response to his daughter's voice in this scene is marked by the same lack of patience that, in large part, has been the occasion of his family's suffering throughout the play; and Marina's fate in their recreated community is to be impulsively married off by her newly recovered father to the lord Lysimachus, whose vainglory is such that he still cannot admit the real purpose of his visit to Marina's brothel. Beckwith suggests that Marina's refusal to reveal her true identity in Mytilene is due to the fact that there 'is no one to hear [her story] and therefore nothing to say,' when it is rather occasioned by Marina's (correct) suspicion that, were Lysimachus to learn her true identity, he would try to marry her (p. 99). And this is exactly what happens. For Marina, then, Pericles' recovery of his voice arguably signals the loss of her own, as the recreation of the royal community marks the destruction of Marina's quasi-religious form of life.

Likewise, Beckwith argues that in *Cymbeline*, the 'burden of confession in the last scene' of the play is 'to redeem language itself' (p. 125). But at least one of the last scene's confessions - Giacomo's - collapses under this burden. Though Beckwith interprets Giacomo's confession as instantiating the dictates of 'medieval confessional manuals,' in that he relates the 'occasion, the circumstances, the motivation of his actions,' the fact remains that his account of the wager between himself and Posthumus is false (p. 125). Moreover, Cymbeline's equivocal acknowledgment of his faulty faultlessness to Imogen, as well as his repeated retreat into his tyrannous disposition during the same scene, tell against Beckwith's assertion that, in *Cymbeline*, 'language returns as gift through the offerings of truthful speech, speech animated by the realizations, the making real of each to each in remorse' (p. 126). Finally, what do we make of Pisanio's exclusion from this whole process? When do Imogen and Posthumus ever confess the wrongs they have done him?

Beckwith's chapters on *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* are more persuasive. Her reading of *The Winter's Tale* brilliantly compares Hermione's reappearance to Leontes to Christ's reappearance to the disciples in the Gospel narratives; in order to see Hermione, Leontes must acknowledge himself as her past betrayer, and, like the disciple Peter, he must accept that 'there is no new identity without the redemption of that memory of

betrayal' (p. 136). I note in support of Beckwith's reading of the play that this separates Leontes from both Pericles and Cymbeline, neither of whom really confronts the extent of his past betrayals. Hence *The Winter's Tale* does more nearly approach the achievement that Beckwith ascribes to all three plays—notwithstanding Mamillius's death and Hermione's final silence.

Finally, Beckwith's chapter on *The Tempest*, unlike those on the other tragicomedies, admits that an 'air of disappointment hangs over the ending of the play' (p. 171). For Beckwith, the play is disappointing not just 'because it is so unresolved,' but because 'it returns us to inescapably human horizons, and we long for more than these' (p. 171). I am not certain, though, that *The Tempest*'s conclusion is significantly more ambivalent than are the conclusions of most of Shakespeare's other plays, which similarly underscore the human horizons of their represented action. Nor am I certain that by underscoring the human horizons of his drama Shakespeare intends to correct our desire for something beyond the human. And so I find myself resisting the inference that Beckwith seems to draw from Prospero's epilogue to the play. I quote her moving conclusion in full:

> In the last few sublime lines of the play, actor, character and audience
> meet in the speech of prayer.
>
> > Now I want
> > Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;
> > And my ending is despair,
> > Unless I be reliev'd by prayer,
> > Which pierces so, that it assaults
> > Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
> > As you from your crimes would pardon'd be
> > Let your indulgence set me free.
> > > (Epilogue 13-20).
>
> The words of the actor pass over to the prayers of the audience and the
> mutual longing for a mercy necessary to all. Pardon comes not from a
> sovereign will but is granted from sinner to sinner in mutual
> acknowledgment, forgiving as we are forgiven. Only in this way, without
> enforcement, without enchantment, can art yield its good works. (pp. 171-72)

Beckwith notes that, in this passage, 'the words of the actor pass over to the prayers of the audience and the mutual longing for a mercy necessary to all.' However, she then claims that pardon 'comes not from a sovereign will' but 'is granted from sinner to sinner in mutual acknowledgment.' Yet Prospero's escape from an illusory belief in his own sovereign will is coincident with his recognition of another ('Mercy itself')—a will, moreover, which is moved not only by Prospero's own prayer but by those offered for him by the human community he has only just reentered. For Prospero, then, pardon is perhaps not so much 'granted' from sinner to sinner so much as it is bequeathed by a Mercy who responds to their mutually intercessory appeals.

Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness is an important work that engages several issues of recent interest to early modern scholarship, including periodization, religious practice, ethics, and aesthetics. Even when its readings do not persuade, they always provoke, and I suspect that Beckwith's general approach to the tragicomedies will prove influential over the coming years.

Work Cited

Cox, John D., *Seeming Knowledge: Shakespeare and Skeptical Faith* (Waco, Tx: Baylor University Press, 2007).