Book Review — *On the Threshold: Hospitality in Shakespeare's Drama*, by Sophie E. Battell.

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On the Threshold offers a nuanced investigation of hospitality in five of Shakespeare's plays, namely *The Comedy of Errors* (1623), *The Merchant of Venice* (1600), *Troilus and Cressida* (1609), *Timons of Athens* (1623—co-authored with Thomas Middleton) and *Pericles* (1609—co-authored with George Wilkins). Hospitality appears to constitute different (changeable) material and discursive forces that could be political, social, economic and even environmental. The tension between these forces shapes hospitality and (re)produces it as a site of violence and vulnerability. This could also be a book about loss as an aspect that would relate hospitality in Shakespeare's plays to our contemporary moment of climate change, political upheavals and ongoing genocides. As indicated by the author, the book demonstrates how protagonists and antagonists in the selected plays approach hospitality in ways that can foreshadow violent practices adopted by governments toward other countries, asylum seekers and the environment.

As an interdisciplinary project, the book draws on literary scholarship in general and Shakespeare studies in particular, while Battell also makes great use of research from fields such as apothecary, medieval romance, eco-feminism, posthumanism, ethnography and more. The book's argument that hospitality in Shakespeare's plays is a "relationship [that] can go spectacularly wrong" (p. 1) is theoretically framed by many thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, Emmanuel Levinas, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Georgio Agamben, Sara Ahmed and Mikhail Bakhtin, among others. Capitalism and the ethos of marketplace is a common concern that recurs throughout its chapters and is demonstrated in events where the loss of money, life, and even identity becomes possible. The first chapter, for instance, discusses *The Comedy of Errors*, exploring the interplay of

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politics, economy, law and hospitality. Loss of life is a threat associated with Egeon's entering a foreign country and being unable to afford the "thousand marks" (p. 18) fine. Battell argues that unknowability and "opacity" (p. 13) haunt hospitality as a relationship between guest and host. Interestingly, the nation, house and body are all perceived as sites of physical and spiritual hospitality that place the guest and the host on two separate planes. One is "dark, diseased, and invisible" (p. 15) and the other is "clean, healthy, and visible" (p. 15). The supernatural elements deployed in the play through scenes of exorcism and witchcraft further unsettle the host's confidence in the laws governing intruders.

Focusing on the sensory experience as a determinant of hospitality and assimilation, Battell links loss to the ability to hear in *The Merchant of Venice*. Modes of hearing voices through eavesdropping, blocking noises, footsteps, music and salutations shape hospitality and carry ethical implications. Ears, Battell (p. 60) explains, are "thresholds" whose anatomy bears similarities to the architecture of a house. As Battell (p. 67) points out, the law in Venice "encodes silence and omissions", as well as what is voiced and written. Comparing Shylock to asylum seekers or refugees, Battell argues that Shylock's inability to execute the conditions of his contract and obtain his pound of flesh represents a problem of translation faced by many asylum seekers and refugees where:

> violence against the stranger begins with the problem of translation, […] inevitably [putting them] […] at a disadvantage when […] confronting the legal system. (p. 86)

I am not fully convinced that Shylock's defeat in court results from a confused translation of what Venetian law "implies but leaves unsaid" (p. 67) or that this constitutes a weakness that Portia takes advantage of. While Shylock "uses the law to silence moral obligations to his bonds" (p. 89), as Battell rightly suggests, Portia's argument "reinforces a kind of virtue ethics that underlies her conception of law throughout" (Michaelson, 2005, p. 25). Harold Bloom (1999) gives an explanation that considers Shylock's character from a political and settler-colonial perspective, rather than framing him as analogous to an asylum seeker based on his violent demand. Bloom writes that:

> the ontological weight of Shylock […] places him as a representation of reality […] [making him] our best clue for tracing the process by which Shakespeare […] invented or reinvented the human. (Bloom, 1999, p. 182)

This perspective allows us to consider Shylock in light of the imperialism and capitalism that constitute the Western conception of the 'human' and occlude the pathos implied by considering Shylock's defeat in court a translation mishap. Shylock's loss, thus, is the product of his insistence on his inhumane demand, despite being offered twice or ten times the repayment of Antonio's debt by Bassanio, and his refusal to listen to the other and admit other people's appeals for mercy, making him unable to move or "be moved by the entreaties of others" (p. 92).

Understandably, in the following three chapters, Battell links hospitality to the guest's behaviour by exploring conditional versus unconditional forms of hospitality. Chapter three shows how hospitality in *Troilus and Cressida* is expressed as a militarised environment by focusing on the body. (Dis)armament, vulnerability, retaliation and reciprocity are relevant aspects that shape the battlefield as a site of hospitality. Chapter four explores the parasitic aspect that haunts hospitality in *Timon of Athens*. Battell (p. 135) points out how images of "cannibalism and ritual sacrifice" complicate Timon's hospitality and invoke the danger of excess, betrayal, mourning and revenge. Loss of friends and life through "economic martyrdom" (p. 142) is a high possibility in hospitality. Battell (p. 158) "blurs the categories of guest, host, and parasite" to affirm Derrida's assumption that "Man is the universal parasite" (p. 158). This aspect is further explored in chapter five when discussing *Pericles*. Battell (p. 189) shows how hospitality and environmental ethics appear to be entangled in a way that sees our dependence on the earth as making us all refugees. A dehumanised Pericles, likened to a "poor worm" (p. 191), becomes a model of the dehumanised refugee by contemporary western politics. Loss marks asylum seekers who, by losing their homes, become disarmed and deemed a threat and human waste.

On the Threshold would be useful for readers and researchers interested in posthuman theories, literature, politics, law and Anthropocene discourses. Indeed, this book presents a strong argument that, for this reviewer, centres loss at the heart of hospitality. Through Battell's careful

and nuanced discussion of hospitality in Shakespeare's plays, anthropocentrism is unsettled along with its hierarchical attachment to Western aspirations to superiority and domination of the other.

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