

## Renaissance and Reformation Renaissance et Réforme



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

Trevor Cook

Volume 35, numéro 1, hiver 2012

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1105904ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i1.19093>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Cook, T. (2012). Compte rendu de [Lawrence, Sean. Forgiving the Gift: The Philosophy of Generosity in Shakespeare and Marlowe]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 35(1), 215–217.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v35i1.19093>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2012

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

é  
rudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

**Lawrence, Sean.**

***Forgiving the Gift: The Philosophy of Generosity in Shakespeare and Marlowe.*** Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2012. Pp. xxiii, 244. ISBN 978-0-8207-0448-7 (hardcover) \$58.

The argument of this title would have one believe that, as a reviewer who received the book for free (one might say as a gift), I do not owe the author anything. “In fact,” the author states in the acknowledgements, “every reader’s attention is more than I have earned” (x). Lawrence refuses to name names in the acknowledgements for fear, as he explains, of perpetuating the exchange economy for which he wishes to propose an alternate model. In so doing, he also gives no hints as to the genesis of the project or its principal influences. As much as Lawrence advocates for the non-reciprocity of gifts, he nonetheless holds himself to the highest standards of citation — he does not forgive plagiarism in his sources (68–69) — frequently citing authors quoting other authors, both of whom are always named in the main body of the text: “as, in words Dollimore quotes from Michael Walzer” (xiii), for example, or “John Cunningham and Stephen Slimp quote Lawrence Danson” (73). These citations constitute one of the book’s greatest strengths. *Forgiving the Gift* is a supremely well-organized and researched survey of theories of the gift from Marcel Mauss to Emmanuel Levinas, and of the scholars who comment upon similar themes in Shakespeare’s plays. The author excels at *inventio* and *dispositio*, finding and arranging his sources into a highly readable narrative that exemplifies his wide reading and mastery of the field. Readers coming to the philosophy of the gift for the first time, readers who know the literature but have had difficulty understanding it, and readers looking for source material related to their own purposes would all do well to begin with Lawrence’s study.

The abundance of these citations, however, constitutes the study’s only real weakness, since the author’s attention to *inventio* and *dispositio* has left little room for *eloquutio*, or what for the present purposes one might call authorial voice. The author’s theses typically come at the end of paragraphs, as though concluding a literature review, rather than in the topic sentences, preceding an argument. Readers might excuse this as a stylistic preference or a commitment to inductive rather than deductive argument. However, these theses tend to be so articulate and insightful that one would rather see each applied to a close reading of the play under discussion instead of supported by reference to other

authors. The paragraph beginning on page 153 is but one example. The author's paragraph style is also indicative of the book's relationship to critical theory. Theory is not used to elucidate the plays under discussion; the plays are cited to help illustrate points in the theory. This is by no means a fault, especially given the author's stated aim to document an alternative to the persuasive belief that politics precede the gift and that gifts demand reciprocity, *pace* Greenblatt's circulation of social energy and Mauss's ethnology of archaic societies, respectively. It is, in fact, a worthwhile and praiseworthy endeavour.

The author's true aims are somewhat obscured by the way the book has been marketed. *Forgiving the Gift* is more of an intervention — or what Levinas might call an “interruption” — in critical theory than a contribution to Shakespearean studies, a fact that by no means detracts from its merit. This title should be attractive to non-Renaissance specialists. Renaissance specialists, however, should be prepared to accept that Lawrence is more concerned with the differences between two modern philosophers of the gift than with the similarities between two Renaissance dramatists. Shakespeare is rightly granted the status of a philosopher and a theorist, as is Marlowe to a lesser extent, but discussions of Levinas predominate, sometimes at the expense of other more relevant theorists. A more suitable sub-title might have been *The Philosophy of Generosity in Mauss and Levinas* or, to borrow a heading from the author, *Levinas and Literature* (23). Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricour, who are highlighted in the publisher's description, figure only as touch points at crucial moments in the text. Readers should also be alert to the fact that of the seven chapters only one examines Marlowe at length and three are dedicated to readings of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*; the remaining chapters take up *King Lear*, *Titus Andronicus* (in a chapter previously published), and *The Tempest*. There is no mention at all of *Timon of Athens*, which will strike those who know Shakespeare's play as bizarre. Instead, *The Merchant of Venice* serves as “Shakespeare's most extended meditation on debt and obligation” (37). There is similarly little attention paid to prodigality and none at all to the importance of the parable of the rich man's son in the period. What Lawrence identifies as “overwhelmingly large” gifts in *Lear* (91) and “[e]xcessive generosity” in *Merchant* (125) is apparently not the same as prodigality in *Timon* or elsewhere. Peter F. Grav's chapter on *Timon in Shakespeare and the Economic Imperative* (Routledge, 2008) is a useful supplement here.

If any of the comments above seem critical, it is because the aims of this book are so ambitious that one wishes nothing to get in the author's way. "A literary criticism adequate to how we live in the world must recognize," according to Lawrence, "an obligation beyond that imposed by circulations of social energy. [...] Moving beyond the misanthropy that characterizes much of contemporary criticism requires that we recognize in the gift a violation of, rather than an extension to, the ubiquity of exchange. We must learn not only to accept or repay but, more importantly, to forgive the gift" (193–94). We must also learn to forgive authors their faults, as we would wish to be forgiven. Lawrence has offered us a gift.

TREVOR COOK, *Trent University*

**Monnas, Lisa.**

***Merchants, Princes and Painters: Silk Fabrics in Italian and Northern Paintings, 1300–1550.***

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. Pp. xi, 408. ISBN 978-0-300-11117-0 (hardcover) n.p.

The relationships between Renaissance paintings and textiles are considerable; even the casual observer of Renaissance art would not fail to note the attentive renderings of complex fabric designs, a characteristic that is sometimes considered with respect to the importance of the early modern textile market. The centrality of fabric in Renaissance art is further revealed in contemporary texts of art theory, where several authors give instructions on the representation of draped fabric. As such, art historians will welcome the illuminating analysis provided in Lisa Monnas's *Merchants, Princes and Painters: Silk Fabrics in Italian and Northern Painting 1300–1550*, which presents detailed research on the inter-relationships between the taste for silk textiles and the representations of such fabrics in early modern European art. The book examines the painting techniques used to represent textiles, and contextualizes these images within the Renaissance production and sale of fabrics more broadly.

The introductory chapter comprises a useful overview of the cultural value of silk in early modern Europe, including an account of the history of the