

10-2012

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Repository Citation

Fischer, M. (2012). Forgiveness and literature. *Philosophy and Literature*, 36(2), 504-512. doi: 10.1353/phl.2012.0039

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Developing Lines

FORGIVENESS AND LITERATURE

by MICHAEL FISCHER

IMAGINE A COMMUNITY WHERE constructive dialogue across political, class, and other differences is rare. Threatened by disagreement, individuals cluster together with like-minded believers, often egging one another on into taking even more extreme positions, usually against their ideological opponents. Sources of information are selected to ratify existing views instead of challenging them. Shielded from external perspectives, individuals stay stuck in anger, opposition, and resentment, recycling grievances against their enemies and spinning out fantasies of revenge.

Fresh insight into this not-so-hypothetical scenario comes from an unlikely source: recent studies of forgiveness, starting with Sarah Beckwith's excellent *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*. Resentment and the longing for revenge are definitively studied in Shakespeare's tragedies. Beckwith shows that the anguish in these tragedies runs even more deeply than feeling wronged, wanting to get even, and doubting that justice will be done unless one takes matters into one's own hands. Hamlet, for example, feels not just outraged by his father's murder but abandoned, trapped inside himself and radically on his own, unable to have his grief and sense of injustice heard by his mother, who joins her new husband in thinking Hamlet has mourned enough. When she asks Hamlet why grief "seems . . . so particular with thee," her lack of sympathy triggers Hamlet's angry response that he knows not "seems," that he has "that within which passes show" (1.2.75–76, 85). Drawing

on the work of Stanley Cavell and J. L. Austen, Beckwith argues that such thoroughgoing loss of confidence in making oneself intelligible to others impoverishes the inner life it might seem at first to protect. Despairing of being heard, we end up feeling we have nothing to say, nothing, at any rate, that will matter.

Feeling betrayed by his mother thus pushes Hamlet to the conclusion that his words and actions cannot reach others. But this conclusion exerts its own pull on him because it exempts him from what Beckwith calls “the terrible responsibility of having to account for yourself.”¹ If incomprehension is a foregone conclusion, then there is no need to try making oneself clear to others and no obligation to find the right words. The pressure to explain oneself can feel “terrible” because of “the relentless exposure to others [it] entails” (p. 19): others who can ask more or less helpful questions, misunderstand, and be influenced for better or for worse by what you tell them. As Beckwith shows, Shakespeare’s tragic heroes in different ways flee this exposure and seek some measure of control over the give-and-take of human relationships—at great cost to themselves and others. Othello is the clearest case of a man trying to wrench reality into his private fantasy, specifically his conviction that Desdemona is unfaithful and deserves death, which overrides anything she might do or say.

Forgiveness enters Beckwith’s account as a possibility that these tragic heroes resist granting or seeking. They balk at seeking forgiveness because it puts them at the mercy of unpredictable, independent others. These heroes find it difficult to grant forgiveness for much the same reason. Offering forgiveness exposes these tragic figures to the possibility of change, in this case the change that can result from creating new relationships no longer structured around the roles of avenger and wrongdoer. Beckwith cites Hannah Arendt’s view that forgiveness frees us from “the predicament of irreversibility”: “without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we would never recover” (p. 2). Forgiveness, in other words, breaks the hold of the past and allows a different future to emerge for both parties. Shakespeare’s tragedies show how the open-endedness of that future, its dependency on uncertain ongoing interactions with others, can be experienced as a terrifying loss of autonomy and control.

Beckwith focuses on how four late Shakespeare plays—*Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *The Tempest*—embrace forgiveness while acknowledging the ongoing lure of resentment and revenge. She deftly

explores the cultural underpinnings of these plays, in particular the Reformation reframing of confession and forgiveness as an individual's relation to God unmediated by the intervention of priests or by participation in a public sacrament. Protestant skepticism about the efficacy of rituals and religious authorities put individuals on their own, accountable to one another as well as to their personal sense of God. Shakespeare's late plays explore individuals newly exposed and answerable to one another. These "post-tragic" (p. 4) characters refashion relationships and communities by accepting the reciprocity with others that earlier tragic heroes avoid.

These characters are "post-tragic," not because they bypass the bitterness and disappointment that define tragedy but because they work their way through them. Pericles's grief at the loss of his wife and daughter, for example, locks him into silence and isolation. He stifles his words because he cannot imagine any listener grasping his pain. His despair of being heard recalls Hamlet's, but Pericles goes on to recover his voice in his reunion with his daughter Marina. More exactly, he and Marina recover their voices together, in conversation with one another, each one acknowledging the grief of the other. Like any relationship, this one will remain vulnerable to misunderstanding, mutual recrimination, and suspicion, but the reunion of Pericles and Marina shows how these darker possibilities can be counteracted, if not vanquished once and for all.

More generally, Beckwith demonstrates how Shakespeare's theater enacts "a search for community, a community neither given nor possessed but in constant formation and deformation" (p. 5). Forging "paths to forgiveness" (p. 4) is essential to that search because forgiveness turns our finally unavoidable interdependence into mutual growth. "The restoration of each person to him or herself" ends up being "inseparable from, intimate with" (p. 105) the restoration of broken personal and social relationships facilitated by forgiveness.

As someone who values the distinctive contributions of philosophy and literature, I am gratified by how this account of forgiveness in Shakespeare's plays dovetails with Charles Griswold's *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*, a remarkably thorough and insightful analysis of the subject. Although Beckwith does not cite Griswold, had she done so she would have found reinforcement for her key claims about forgiveness in Shakespeare, in particular the emphasis on the reciprocity that characterizes forgiveness and the transformational possibilities that forgiveness can unleash.

Griswold's account centers on interpersonal forgiveness, which for him grows out of a dialogue between a wrongdoer and his victim. The offender can initiate this dialogue by meeting several conditions: by taking responsibility for his damaging actions or words; by regretting the harm he has done; by seeing his wrongdoing from the point of view of the victim and the larger community and accepting their condemnation; by apologizing, asking for forgiveness, and vowing to learn from his misdeeds and not repeat them. These conditions are not discrete items on a checklist but interrelated steps that the offender must take. Crucially, the offender must express to the victim his remorse, his acknowledgment of the victim's suffering, and his commitment to change. The obligation to communicate with the victim underscores the offender's respect for the victim as someone owed an honest explanation, and puts the offender at the mercy of the victim's unconstrained response. By asking for forgiveness, the offender is seeking to rejoin the larger moral community and acknowledging his need for the victim's consent. Forgiveness, in short, emerges from an exchange with the person who has been wronged, not from a dialogue of the mind with itself. Introspection is necessary but not sufficient for forgiveness to occur.

The victim, in turn, must relinquish any desire for revenge, commit to overcoming resentment, and trust the offender's self-representation, including his expression of contrition and stated willingness to change. None of this is easy. Griswold is especially good at plumbing the appeal of resentment or the simmering anger that can set in even after the administration of punishment. It can be difficult to let go of resentment, our sense of being wronged, especially when we may have come to define ourselves in opposition to the person who has hurt us. "In opposition to" usually means "as better than": giving up resentment can entail surrendering our reassuring feeling of moral superiority or, what comes to the same thing, admitting our kinship with an enemy we may have demonized. Sometimes an offense can be so horrible that the victim cannot forgive the perpetrator even when he has taken every step to be forgiven. Other times, however, an unforgiving victim can be faulted for being vindictive, hard-hearted, or stubborn. Nevertheless, even though forgiveness can be recommended, it cannot be coerced without violating the victim's autonomy all over again. There is never any guarantee that an apology will be forthcoming or accepted, and there will always be cases when "the threshold of what will count as forgiveness is not crossed; sadly and painfully, in such cases we are either unforgiven, or unable to forgive."²

But when one individual asks for forgiveness and another individual extends it, both are voluntarily engaged in a transaction that enables each of them to move on instead of staying stuck in what Griswold calls, also citing Arendt, the “predicament of irreversibility” (p. 100): “forgiveness does not reiterate the past but instead promises renewal without forgetfulness, excuse, or condonation of past wrongs” (p. 211). Both the offender and his victim are able to acknowledge—and remember—what happened between them without being forever defined by it. Repaired, their relationship is now free to take many forms, from agreeing to stay out of one another’s way to friendship and even love.

Although interpersonal forgiveness is central to Griswold’s study, he also considers several closely related topics, among them political apology (the University of Alabama, for example, recently apologizing for its historical implication in slavery). Political apology is especially interesting because it crystallizes what in Griswold’s view we can hope from social life. At best, a successful political apology can enable both parties to gain trust in one another, resume or begin collaborating, and thereby begin working together to create a community aware of the acrimonious conflicts of the past but determined to outgrow them. This determination requires constant nurturing and renewal (Griswold is rightly skeptical of facile talk of achieving “closure”). We remain fallible beings in an imperfect world where injustice persists and where we will continue to face opportunities for disappointment, anger, and disgust. But if political apology and forgiveness are not panaceas, neither are they a waste of time. They make possible moments of reconciliation, hope, and peace that may not “satisfy the soul’s deepest yearnings” (p. 193) but that still allow us to rise above the “ongoing violent conflict and ferocious retaliation” (p. 193) that would be our lot without them.

As we have seen, Shakespeare’s late plays also celebrate these moments of reconciliation, even as a tragic hero like Othello adds to the “violent conflict and ferocious retaliation” that forgiveness can suspend. Forgiveness for Griswold underscores our vulnerability to one another, which Othello, again, finds unbearable. Othello would rather destroy Desdemona than allow her to expose him to change (to paraphrase Cavell). But if the possibility of dialogue and empathy is fragile, it is still resilient enough to keep forgiveness alive. Although Othello’s violent resistance is a force always to be reckoned with, it doesn’t have the final say in either Griswold’s account of forgiveness or Beckwith’s reading of Shakespeare.

Griswold and Beckwith converge on another key point. Both see literature as playing a crucial role in enabling forgiveness. For Griswold,

forgiveness is bound up with the creation, exchange, and interpretation of stories. The offender faces the test of telling his victim a story that makes sense of his past wrongdoing and its impact on the victim, a story that acknowledges his deeds as his, while urging that he has changed. In deciding to forgive, the victim must not only accept that story but also continue his own story in a direction no longer dictated by having been wronged, though always remembering it. In the narrative exchanges that constitute forgiveness, the possibilities for self-deception and confusion, as well as mutual enlightenment and growth, are endless and, in Griswold's view, "best left to literary description" (p. 106). In any given case, "much will hinge on just what words are chosen, why contrition was expressed at all, and so forth. Moral philosophy cannot provide guidance at that level of detail, and literature is much better suited to describing the particulars and their context" (p. 121), the context again being the complex interpersonal dynamics that make up forgiveness.

Along similar lines, Beckwith finds "therapeutic and diagnostic power" (p. 9) in Shakespeare's theater. She points out that Hamlet's pessimism about "outward" behavior expressing "inner" thoughts is "deeply anti-theatrical": "in dislocating the natural relation between words, gestures, and appearances, and 'that within,' the fundamental resources of theater are voided" (p. 33). Shakespeare "lends his art to restoring the mind and soul to the face, and the process evolves theatrical forms in which reconciliation and forgiveness become central" (p. 33). Theater does not simply reenact the pursuit of forgiveness, but furthers it.

An equally powerful role is assigned to literature in Jill Scott's *A Poetics of Forgiveness: Cultural Responses to Loss and Wrongdoing*. Scott's central contention is that literature and the other arts can facilitate forgiveness and resolve conflict. She arrives at this claim via Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and Kelly Oliver. Unlike Griswold, Derrida, according to Scott, argues that forgiveness must be radically unconditional and "aneconomical," an irrational, "mad" gift with no strings attached or return expected. In its purest form, forgiveness thus defined is for Derrida impossible. We cannot in everyday life extricate ourselves from practical considerations, political concerns, and other interests. Responding to Derrida, Kristeva reaffirms the irrationality and radical disinterestedness of forgiveness, but for her the gift of forgiveness comes from aesthetic activity. If forgiveness for Derrida cannot be implemented, for Kristeva it is always available in the unconsciously produced ambiguities of poetic discourse as well as in the bottomless creativity of literary interpretation. Aesthetic production, whether in literature or

criticism, unsettles rigid dualisms (for example, between offenders and victims) that try to fix meaning. As Scott puts it, “the infinite possibilities of creative communication” affirmed by Kristeva allow us “to start afresh and to begin anew.”³ Finally, Oliver makes personal growth itself dependent on the “ethics of continual self-questioning” (p. 13) that fuels forgiveness. Strengthening the tie between creativity and forgiveness, Oliver, Scott concludes, “takes forgiveness to a whole new level by transforming it from an instrumental means of overcoming a singular instance of conflict or wrongdoing into an ethical stance and a mode of being in the world with others” (p. 12). Forgiveness becomes “a kind of attitude or disposition, a way of being in the world” (p. 11) fostered by aesthetic activity.

I am attracted to Scott’s conclusion that literature and the other arts encourage a way of coexisting with others akin to forgiveness or at least conducive to it, say by promoting openness to change and willingness to reframe what seems inalterable. But the theoretical support Scott gives the link between literature and forgiveness seems shaky to me. She tends to repeat the ideas of Derrida, et al., instead of further developing or clarifying them. She supports these ideas not by arguing for them but by caricaturing the more performative approach taken by Griswold and others. She notes, for example, that forgiveness “must be much more than a speech act, pronouncing: ‘I forgive you.’ In the most positive sense, forgiveness must start with the self, must be a practice of tolerance, understanding, and mutual healing, or even a mentality that pre-exists any wrongdoing” (p. 53). I cannot think of anyone who disagrees with this, not even the most ardent advocate of speech act theory.

The theoretical ideas invoked by Scott recur in her book without advancing our progress through it, like speed bumps in a road. Fortunately, the readings that these ideas punctuate rise above their tenuous theoretical support and make a better case for the role literature can play in inspiring forgiveness. Scott thoughtfully discusses in a wide range of sources, from the *Iliad* and Kafka’s *Letter to His Father* to Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill I* and *II*; photography by Robert Fleming (of postwar Germany) and Kresta K. C. Venning (from postgenocide Rwanda); and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Her treatment of several post-9/11 novels is especially insightful. Scott wrote her book in part because after September 11 she sensed that “resolution and reconciliation was quickly giving way to vengeance, at least in American foreign policy” (p. ix) and that grief was being “strategically leveraged to create a public discourse of justified revenge” (p. 168). She shows

how literature and the other arts can intervene in that discourse in constructive ways, making *A Poetics of Forgiveness* a timely, humane book.

The essays collected in *The Ethics of Forgiveness* return us to the view of forgiveness as a complex bilateral process as opposed to a pure gift. The book was occasioned by a conference on Griswold's work, and the contributors refine some of his key points, contest others, and address topics he leaves undeveloped, among them self-forgiveness, cultural influences on forgiveness, and the limits of forgiveness. Although the volume as a whole exemplifies the care and attentiveness that makes Griswold's analysis so illuminating, two essays stand out.

In "Conditional Unconditional Forgiveness," Eve Garrard and David McNaughton revisit the legitimacy of unconditional forgiveness and conclude that in all circumstances, even when the offender remains recalcitrant, "there is sufficient reason to forgive."⁴ They emphasize that forgiveness is still "a heavy and difficult task" (p. 105) rather than an easy surge of fellow feeling. Even unconditional forgiveness must meet certain demanding internal conditions, which Garrard and McNaughton go on to explore. Although there can always be a reason to forgive a wrongdoer no matter how unrepentant he may be, there is still "such a thing as objectionably facile forgiveness" (p. 97), or instances when forgiveness comes too easily—a point that can be overlooked when forgiveness is compared to an irrational gift.

In "The Self Rewritten: The Case for Self-Forgiveness," Garry Hagberg elaborates on how the literary imagination can inform self-forgiveness as well as enable forgiveness between individuals. Having hurt someone, we sometimes judge ourselves in the name of the person we have injured, someone we may continue to think about even after he has forgiven us. We can be too hard on ourselves in this judgment but we can also be too easy, for example, by minimizing the impact of what we have done. Hagberg carefully shows how calibrating the consequences of our actions or words on another requires "a kind of literary imagination, thinking our way with genuine imaginative sympathy into the experience of the injured" (p. 73), thereby internalizing the "warranted resentment" (p. 73) he feels. Seeing ourselves from the vantage point of another is essential to our acknowledging what we have done. Self-forgiveness is set in motion when we are able to resituate our misdeeds, releasing other possibilities in ourselves that we can then commit to realizing. We create the "person we want to be" (p. 79) in much the same imaginative way as we take responsibility for what we did. Aspiring to a better self, like regretting what we have done, takes imagination. As Hagberg

persuasively demonstrates, creating a better future while still recalling the past turns out to be “deeply akin to our engagement with literary texts” (p. 78).

I mentioned earlier how Scott began writing *A Poetics of Forgiveness* in the wake of September 11, as she searched for an alternative to the reigning discourse of retaliation and revenge. In her acknowledgments, she observes that “much has changed in the world” (p. ix) since September 11. Anger has given way to “new optimism and faith in humanity with the election of the first black president of the United States, who has made clear his commitment to change of massive proportions” (p. x). She adds that Obama “will have a hard time living up to the expectations of his electorate” (p. x). Her prediction has come true, as for many people optimism has yielded to frustration with the political stalemate I described at the outset: polarized groups nurturing their grievances (real and imagined) against one another and looking for chances to get ahead or get even. The books I have been discussing not only sketch an admittedly difficult path beyond mutual recrimination, they show the crucial role that literature can play in making that path possible: a major achievement at any time—but especially now, when political discouragement is exceeded only by widespread public skepticism about the value of literature and the other arts. Thanks to studies like these, beleaguered defenders of literature may yet be in a position to make Emerson’s words their own: “Patience and patience, we shall win at the last.”

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1. Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 19. Subsequent references are inserted in the text.
2. Charles L. Griswold, *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 212. Subsequent references are inserted in the text.
3. Jill Scott, *A Poetics of Forgiveness: Cultural Responses to Loss and Wrongdoing* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 57, 10. Subsequent references are inserted in the text.
4. Eve Garrard and David McNaughton, “Conditional Unconditional Forgiveness,” in *The Ethics of Forgiveness: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Christel Fricke (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 106. Subsequent references are inserted in the text.