

Kevin Curran. *Shakespeare's Legal Ecologies: Law and Distributed Selfhood*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2017. Pp 179. Paperback USD \$34.95. ISBN: 9780810135161.

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Having finished *Shakespeare's Legal Ecologies*, I hesitated about where to place it on my shelf. Does it belong in the law and literature section, as the title implies? Or does the distinctive word 'ecologies' suggest more of an eco-critical perspective (aided somewhat by the fecundity displayed in the 1509 Garden of Eden woodcut on the cover)? In fact, the book sits most comfortably within a Shakespeare and philosophy section, as hinted at by the crucial last clause '*Distributed Selfhood*'. The book's first lesson, it would seem, is to never judge a book by its cover.

Law is present in Curran's book, certainly, but he makes the distinction that 'Shakespeare thought *with* law' (5, my emphasis) rather than *about* law. 'Legal ecologies' are defined as 'representational environments in which selfhood is both linked to and shaped by other human and nonhuman agents in a juridical setting' (4). Law becomes an 'imaginative resource' (3) available to Shakespeare as he meditates on ways of being that are not bound by some hermetically sealed 'self'. In arguing this, Curran draws on a number of philosophical interlocutors, from Spinoza to Kant to Merleau-Ponty, who have explored more collective forms of being-in-the-world. The book shifts away from a focus on the interiority of dramatic characters, placing them instead within networks of interpersonal relations and nonhuman 'actants' (borrowing from Latour): fathers, daggers, bonds, oracles. Curran thus offers a definition of selfhood as contingent, something that emerges through social practice rather than as the toy inside a Kinder egg. Thus in Curran's reading of *Richard II's* Bullingbrook, the exiled courtier accesses multiple sources of identity within the univocal 'I': 'As I was banish'd, I was banish'd Herford, / But as I come, I come for Lancaster' (2.3.113–14).

Curran wears his knowledge of twentieth-century philosophy lightly, and does not assume a deep familiarity with phenomenology or the works of Hannah Arendt at any point. Indeed, kudos must be given to Curran for the clarity of his writing style throughout, showing the reader a clear path to his conclusions, be they via sixteenth-century land law or Derridean hospitality. The principle of selection is eclectic, including as it does sonnets, history plays, tragedies, and romances (no comedies other than *The Merchant of Venice*, of which more anon). The scenes selected for analysis do not aim towards a reading of whole plays;

rather, the accumulated moments illustrate Shakespeare's philosophical preoccupation with states of 'distributed' selfhood.

Chapter 1 hones in on *Richard II* through a rigorous analysis of early modern land law: 'Land law gives expression to some of the deepest structures of social order, collective identity, mutual obligation, and political strength in England' (27). Richard's transformation over the course of the play 'is consistently portrayed as an expression of his changing relation to property', from accusations of transforming England '[l]ike to a tenement or pelting farm' (2.1.60) to his own wish to exchange 'my large kingdom for a little grave' (3.3.153). Curran deftly links lines such as 'Thus play I in one person many people' (5.5.31) to Spinoza's theories of the 'inescapable connectivity of all things' (48). Curran's work here is reminiscent of Holger Schott Syme's work on *Richard II* (*Theatre and Testimony in Shakespeare's England* [Cambridge, 2011]), which similarly uses law and literature to make larger arguments about subjectivity and mediated selfhood.

For his chapter on hospitality, Curran pairs three sonnets (35, 49, and 88) with *The Merchant of Venice*. Hospitality 'is always linked to a larger notion of justice — of what is right, or at least of what is required' (18). Where the chosen sonnets exhibit forms of 'absolute' hospitality that Curran relates to Levinas's ethical principle of obligation towards the Other, *The Merchant of Venice* oscillates between the self-sacrifice of Antonio and a more 'cosmopolitan' hospitality as described by Kant, mandating the rights of a foreigner not to be treated with hostility. I found such a perspective more effective in relation to *Merchant*, not least because the relationship in the sonnets is more obviously aligned with that of a lover who puts the welfare of the beloved before his own personal well-being — a typical courtly trope — whereas Curran favours the ethical dynamic of host/guest, drawing on biblical examples such as Lot and the Levite, who welcome in strangers and protect them at all costs.

Chapter 3 deals with criminality in relation to *Macbeth* and 'the phenomenology of treason'. The focus throughout is on the crucial dagger scene as 'the theatricalization of the process of criminal intent' (81), and the visceral, sensual quality of Macbeth's thought processes. Here, Curran employs Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'a unit of experience' to tease out the complex interaction between subject and object, and 'the degree to which thoughts both shape and get shaped by the material world' (89). This approach is particularly effective in relation to legal conceptions of treason, which included thoughts as well as acts in early modern England. In *Macbeth* Shakespeare dramatically illustrates 'the way imagination functions as part of a material ecology that includes but also exceeds the individual body' (93). Finally, through some clever etymological linkage, Curran

proposes that ‘the dagger soliloquy should be thought of as both an act of theater and an act of theory’ (96) through the Greek verb *theaomai* — to look.

From a single scene in chapter 3, chapter 4 moves towards judgment as a collective activity in *Hamlet* and *The Winter’s Tale* via Hannah Arendt: ‘The important thing to remember about judgment, then, is that it always constitutes a form of participation in the world of people and things’ (103). Curran sees decision making in *Hamlet* as ‘almost always collaborative in form’ which leads him towards an understanding of ‘the intersubjective grounds of moral agency’. While this is arguably the case when Hamlet confronts Gertrude with the portraits in the closet scene, the example of Polonius’s act of literary criticism in relation to Hamlet’s love-letter to Ophelia is less convincing as a moment of collaboration, lacking as it does any real input from Claudius and Gertrude. Nevertheless the chapter offers important insights into the sociality of judgment as well as into the links between aesthetics and law more generally. In contrast to *Hamlet*, *The Winter’s Tale* showcases Leontes’s refusal to engage in collaborative scenes of judgment, disregarding even the oracle of Apollo. The play then traces a journey towards inclusivity and forgiveness, culminating in the statue scene which Curran sees as an adjudicatory event predicated on our all-too-human interdependence. The book ends with a coda on the ‘ethics of exteriority’ that urges us to look outwards, beyond the bounds of our own ‘entrenched egotism’, with Shakespeare, Ricoeur, and Arendt as our guides.

The imaginative range of the book’s argument, as well as its pursuit of broad ethical questions, is admirable and worthy of attention. Yet for a book on interconnectedness, why is Shakespeare dealt with *solus*? At a time of unprecedented interest in collaborative practices, the book’s argument surely has applications in debates about Shakespeare as a collaborative author, a ready-made example of intersubjectivity. I also found puzzling the absence of comedy (excepting *Merchant*), a genre long seen as a bastion of collectivity. Lastly, more than once I turned to the footnotes for a paragraph dealing with specific and obscure legal terminology, only to be redirected to general secondary studies (30 n18; 32 n21; 85 n19; 101 n2; 108 n28), or even a complete silence after a litany of terms like ‘socage, escuage, burgage, frankalmoin, frankmarrage, villenage, and so on’ (27, cf. 55). These reservations aside, the book is a rewarding read for anyone with an interest in interdisciplinary Shakespeare, and how his writing ‘forms a space of encounter and knits discrete persons into the social and material fabric of the world’ (131).

