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'There Is No Alternative': *Timon of Athens* and contemporary economic crises

Imogen Goodman, Freie Universität Berlin

In 2009, in the immediate aftermath of the global financial crash, Queen Elizabeth asked a group of analysts assembled at the London School of Economics why they, like everybody else, had failed to see it coming. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, global banks had been engaged in ever more precarious feats of financial juggling designed to maximise their revenues, yet even as late as 2006 and 2007, it seemed the dream of infinite abundance could never come to an end.

According to the views of many working in the finance sector, nobody could have predicted the crash because there was a less than one-in-a-million chance of it happening in the first place: it was, according to David Vinier, the chief financial officer at Goldman Sachs, 'comparable to winning the lottery 21 or 22 times in a row'. (Dowd *et al.*, 2008: 5). How, they asked, do you go about modelling the potential for several extreme unlikelyhoods all occurring at the same time? In reality, however, it wasn't the unlikelyness of the sequence of events, but the models used for calculating the probability of these events that were to blame for the short-sightedness of the experts. At the time, assessments of probability were based almost exclusively on the patterns of the past, leading to a vast underestimation of the likelihood of a systemic collapse (Blyth, 2013: 33–4).

At the start of William Shakespeare and Thomas Middleton's *Timon of Athens*, we are introduced to a protagonist with a wilful inability to foresee his imminent ruin. In the words of one commentator on the Greek debt crisis, Timon is living 'in a universe of benign neglect', blissfully ignorant of his own insolvent state and the kind of economy he and his 'friends' are operating in.¹ Much like the financial analysts of the pre-crash economy, he engages in a stark mis-assessment of risk, choosing to base his perception of the future on his



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present and past experience – a model that the more cynical Athenians, with their belief in the cyclical machinations of Fortuna, know to be flawed.

Discussing the reason for the financial sector's widespread insensitivity to the oncoming crisis, political economist Mark Blyth explains:

[T]o be truly blindsided by a crisis of this magnitude you need to have a theory of risk that denies that catastrophic events can happen in the first place, and then leave it entirely to the self-interested private sector to manage that risk. Unfortunately, almost the entire global financial system worked with just such a theory of risk management. (Blyth, 2013: 32)

In a world in which probability is calculated entirely on previously known quantities, it takes a crisis on a whole new scale to correct society's assessment of what can be possible. When Timon's own 'financial crisis' occurs, he is forced into a radical revaluation of the world and his own place within it. At the centre of the play, following on from the collapse of a fragile debt-based economy, Timon experiences a moment of recognition with the potential to lead to decisive action: he must choose a path, and formulate a response to the new economic conditions he finds himself in.

In her discussion of notions of utopia in contemporary post-crisis Greek literature, Maria Boletsi draws on the work of Reinhart Koselleck in framing crisis as a type of crossroad at which binary choices are faced. Quoting Koselleck, she points out that, for the ancient Greeks, the term *crisis* 'demanded "choices between stark alternatives – right or wrong, salvation or damnation, life or death"':

Following Reinhart Koselleck's history of the concept, in the classical Greek context, crisis signified both an 'objective crisis' (a decisive point 'that would tip the scales', particularly in politics) and 'subjective critique' (a judgement or verdict, in the sense of 'criticism', but also in the juridical sense of 'trial' or 'legal decision'). (Boletsi, 2017: 260)

According to Giorgio Agamben, however, instead of signifying decisive resolve, 'the present understanding of crisis refers to an enduring state [that is] extended into the future,



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indefinitely'. During this type of crisis, 'judgement is divorced from the idea of resolution and repeatedly postponed', which 'serves to legitimize political and economic decisions that in fact dispossess citizens and deprive them of any possibility of decision' (Agamben, 2013: n.p.).

If *Timon of Athens* is widely considered one of Shakespeare's most claggy and ambivalent works, it is perhaps because of its inability to establish a new paradigm, a decidedly new state, which, like the destruction of old dynasties and the crowning of new kings at the end of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, heralds the dawn of a new epoch.

Timon's dramatic emotional pivot throughout the play tracks the traumatic shift from trust in immutable patriarchal bonds and fair-dealing to a sense that society's institutions hold no chance of redress, justice or reform. It is a disillusionment that sees corruption as the necessary outcome of all contact with the city or *polis*, and all of mankind's civil institutions. As he prepares to leave the city he concludes that:

All's obliquy.
 There's nothing level in our cursed natures
 But direct villainy. Therefore be abhorred
 All feasts, societies and throngs of men!
 His semblable, yea himself, Timon disdains.
 Destruction fang mankind! (4.3.18–23)²

For Timon, all men are equal, but only in 'villainy'. This passage echoes the passage in the feast scene, in which he declares to his guests, 'your diet shall be in all places alike', adding: 'Make not a city feast of it to let the meat cool ere we can agree upon the first place'. (3.7.65–7) In Timon's satirical construction – mimicking ritualistic social norms through which men scramble over status symbols – he flips the gesture of mock politeness on its head: there is no longer any need to pit anyone above one another, not because men are equally valuable, but because they are equally corrupt.



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Following the global banking crisis and its exposure of society's inequalities, compounded by the sleight of hand that saw the losses of private-sector entities put a permanent drag on the balance sheets of nation-states, we are facing a similar crisis of trust in our contemporary society: for many, this manifests itself in a rampant distrust of the political class, and for some it has prompted a search for ways to escape the 'bonds' that tie us within what is now widely perceived as a broken system. Timon's sentiments echo a common refrain from disillusioned voters in this post-crisis state: the sentiment that 'they' – the political class – are 'all the same'.

In order to understand the catalyst for this dramatic shift, it is worth looking more deeply at the kinds of economic and social critiques dramatised in the play. In this, I hope to also shed some light on why early modern commentators can offer us an unusually clear-sighted approach to late modern predicaments, and how the changes affecting England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries contain the seeds of much of our thinking about the economic world we now live in.

I.

With its dual authorship and irresolute structure, *Timon of Athens* often has a mixed reception from critics, who struggle to place it comfortably within a single genre, either as a tragedy or a city satire. In contrast to the tragedies that produce their affective power in part through their depiction of strong familial, hereditary or romantic ties, the primary effect of *Timon* has been described as one of 'insistent alienation':

Timon denies us the connection we expected with its hero and his world – partly because of the total lack of family relationships, or indeed close relationships of any kind. [...] What characterises Timon's last moments is contempt, an almost absolute distancing from, and negation of, others. (Dawson and Minton, 2017: 30)



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Marx's concept of alienation is central to an understanding of the play's economic and social environment, in which gold operates as the 'confounding and compounding of all natural and human qualities' (Marx, 1988: 140). In the Athens that Timon inhabits (with its persistent echoes of early modern England), Shakespeare and Middleton depict a world in which people are increasingly divorced from themselves and their innate human needs and qualities; in which perceptions of value are precarious and endlessly mutable; and where material truth has been replaced by abstractions, while signs and symbols are imbued with a magical subjective power and agency.

From the start of the play, it is apparent that art and nature have become inexorably muddled. On the verge of purchasing a work of art from the Painter, Timon states:

The painting is almost the natural man,
For since dishonour traffics with man's nature,
He is but outside; these pencilled figures are
These pencilled figures are
Even such as they give out. (1.1.161–5)

The symbolic representation of the thing has, for Timon, become more real than the thing itself: in real life, dishonour 'traffics with men's nature' and causes them to put on social airs but the painted 'figures' are just what they appear to be.

Here, signs have been divorced from their proper, referential function: rather than providing a 'necessary, practical system of mediation between the subjective mind and its objective environment', they are now 'mistaken for the reality that they represent' (Hawkes, 2010: 14). According to David Hawkes, such a mistake would have had an uncomfortable resonance for early modern audiences due to its link with the world of magic. In contrast to predominant teachings of the Aristotelian and Platonic philosophy and the Judeo-Christian-Islamic religious tradition, magic suggests 'there is nothing real that exists beyond representation, that there is no referent beyond the sign' (*ibidem*).



The act of usury – lending at interest – enables money bypass its supposed referent (commodities) and become an autonomous actor with the ability to ‘breed’ more of itself. As a result, Aristotle viewed the practice of obtaining wealth through usury as ‘the most contrary to nature’ (Aristotle, 1998: 51). Although money, as a sign that achieves its meaning in the human mind, is able to reproduce endlessly, it is not morally desirable for it to do so, since it is ‘logically and ethically barren in essence, even though it is not necessarily so in practice’ (*idem*, 49).

In *Timon*, an important shift has taken place in the criteria for assessing the worth of a commodity, promoting what is ‘barren’ to an increasingly elevated social position. Instead of ‘use-value’ – the innate qualities of an object and the uses to which it can be put – Timon starts the play entirely focused on ‘exchange value’, a much more volatile and subjective method of calculation. He, like much of Athenian society, has become blind to all ‘natural and human qualities’, and obsessed instead with socially constructed exchange value. This is an irony that comes to the fore when Timon finds gold out in the woods while digging for food, and Apemantus tells him, ‘Here is no use for gold’ (4.3.289). As well as there being no way to use it to purchase anything, Timon picks up on the implication that, removed from its social context, it can be no longer ‘used’ for usury and extortion, making its use in the forest ‘the best and truest, / For here it sleeps and does no hired harm’ (4.3.289–90).

That exchange value is the primary form that value takes in Shakespeare and Middleton’s Athens is clear from the short discussion between Timon and the Jeweller over the price of a jewel in the first scene of the play. The jewel, Timon implies, has become more expensive through a ‘satiety of commendations’. If he were to ‘pay [...] for’t as ’tis extolled’, he tells the Jeweller, ‘It would unclaw me quite’ (1.1.170–2).



Social discourse – and in this case, praise and admiration – have mysteriously reformed the physical properties of the jewel in question. When Timon makes the oxymoronic assertion that the jewel ‘hath suffered under praise’ (1.1.169), the word ‘suffered’ suggests its etymological sense of bearing a weight or being weighed down. In driving up the price of the jewel, praise has almost literally added weight to it. Nevertheless, the value of the jewel does not remain static; rather, it rapidly becomes the object of financial speculation, with the Jeweller indicating that its price would rise even further after purchase. Once again, public opinion has the ability to transform the physical world around it: Timon, he argues, would ‘mend the jewel by wearing it’ (1.1.176).

In his discussion of the cultural signification of the ‘market’ in modern discourse, Campbell Jones writes that, as a result of numerous political, cultural and economic developments,

[a] set of abstractions have risen to centre stage in economic, political and cultural life and among these one abstraction in particular, the abstraction that is ‘the market’. The market has become a reality unto itself, at the same time that human bodies and the very existence of the material world have become increasingly incidental when faced with the market. (Jones, 2013: 5)

The precariousness of such an abstracted system is evidenced on a daily basis in the rapid creation and destruction of value on the stock exchange. Quantitative estimations of the value of a company rise and fall, based on qualitative estimations of the business, as well as analysts’ attempts to read the ‘mood’ of the market.

In its representations of alienation, *Timon* offers a vision of nascent capitalism that reflects both the rapid economic developments occurring in early modern England and some of the most troubling aspects of the late-capitalist, finance-driven economy of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In both cases, money is no longer a referential sign,



but rather an autonomous, reproducing actor floating in a volatile world of shifting signifiers, offering the potential for almost infinitely large gains – and infinitely large losses.

II.

In the years preceding the financial crash, writes David Graeber, 'everyone had been hearing of a whole host of new, ultra-sophisticated financial innovations: credit and commodity derivatives, collateralised mortgage obligation derivatives, hybrid securities, debt swaps, and so on'. At the time, these were presented as mechanisms so complicated that 'financiers couldn't even begin to understand them' – a message designed to encourage the rest of the world to 'leave it to the professionals' and discourage states from even attempting regulatory oversight. After the crash, however, 'it turned out that many if not most of them had been nothing more than very elaborate scams' (Graeber, 2011: 15).

In fact, in order to maximise profits, financiers had been engaging in the practice of leveraging and accruing debts on an unbelievably large scale, ensuring that the amount of borrowed capital and running investments on balance sheets dwarfed the value of banks' financial reserves entirely. As Blyth explains,

Leverage, the ratio of assets (loans and investments out in the world) relative to equity (reserve capital – the cushion you draw upon when things go wrong) rose precipitously throughout the 1980s and 1990s. If a major bank is running thirty times leverage, which was not uncommon in the run-up to the crisis, all it takes is a very small change in its asset values against its equity cushion to make it illiquid, if not close to insolvent. (Blyth, 2013: 28)

In *Timon*, the scale of the economic disaster that befalls Timon is largely a result of his being leveraged up far beyond his actual means. The monetary sum he owes to his concatenation of lenders bears no relation to his current assets or historic wealth: a situation pithily summarised by Flavius when he states, 'The greatest of your having lacks a half / To pay your present debts' (2.2.144–5). Here, debt functions through language, and specifically the



speech act of 'promising', enabling financial obligations to reproduce endlessly. As Flavius asserts, Timon's 'promises fly so beyond his state / That what he speaks is all in debt – he owes / For every word' (1.2.200–2).

The picture is one of radical instability, where men are constantly pummelled by the 'quick blows of Fortune's' (1.1.93), whose 'shift and change of mood' (1.1.86) can cause wealth and status to collapse in an instant. Indeed, 'mood' plays a particularly important role in the debt economy of *Timon*, where 'confidence' (3.4.31) and social 'credit' are the prerequisites for remaining solvent in a complicated network of lending and obligation.

At the outset of what quickly develops into a catastrophic run on credit, the Senator declares that he must call in his debts from Timon because

My uses cry to me, I must serve my turn
 Out of mine own, his days and times are past,
 And my reliances on his fracted dates
 Have smit my credit. (2.1.20–3)

In Athens' elaborate financial system, much like early modern England, money lenders exist in an elaborate credit chain, often involving borrowing money from other parties in order to lend money out at higher rates of interest to someone else. The senator's 'uses' could refer both to the money he has borrowed and the money he has lent – they are closely connected, because a default or deferred payment from Timon has a domino effect that can harm both his social and financial credit.

In his glossing of this scene, Vivian Thomas observes that it is highly likely that the Senator 'fears his precarious situation will be perceived, thereby undermining his own creditworthiness' (Thomas, 2015: 93). In fact, it is Timon's creditworthiness that is damaged: as word spreads of his financial straits, he continues to be rejected (more and more forcefully) by potential creditors, as others rush to cash in their debts without success. 'Liquidity', as Blyth reminds us, 'does not simply evaporate like the morning dew. It burns up in a "fire



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sale” as a process known as ‘contagion’ takes place’ (Blyth, 2013: 26). As Lucius assesses, ‘Timon is shrunk indeed, / And he that’s once denied will hardly speed’ (3.2.62–3).

With the expansion of usury, complementary ‘professions’ such as scribes and brokers sprung up on the streets of early modern England, developing new ways of generating money that were increasingly convoluted and abstract. Marvelling over the complexity of these emerging practices in a tract which was translated into English in 1607, French printer and scholar Henri Estienne declared: ‘[T]here are such villainous vsuries practised at this day, with such strange courses and proceedings, as (doubtlesse) the aforesaid Preachers neuer heard of: and it is not vnlike but that they haue bin deuised of late’ (qtd. in Hawkes, 2010: 31).

As a result of increasingly complicated financial networks – not unlike the mind-achingly complicated derivatives markets of the early 2000s – the reality of an entity’s financial health becomes more and more difficult to determine. However, once the smokescreen of credit is taken away or ‘[w]hen every feather sticks in his own wing’, some are ‘left a naked gull’ that previously appeared in the guise of ‘a phoenix’ (2.1.30–2).

III.

In his polemical text on the contemporary debt crisis, *The Making of the Indebted Man*, Maurizio Lazzarato summarises one of the central and most unjust paradoxes at the heart of the financial crash. ‘We should note’, he writes, ‘that in crises the recovery of damages due to money as capital (“virtual” money, since it remains to be fully actualised) depends on revenue money (wages and public spending, actual money)’ (Lazzarato, 2012: 86).

While, as Jones asserts, what lies behind what we term ‘the market’ may be ‘abstraction upon abstraction’ (Jones, 2013: 4), the effects of its mood swings – like the changeable whims of Fortuna – are all too real. Since 2008, what started out as a liquidity



problem for a set of private financial entities has transformed into a sovereign debt crisis that has directly impacted the lives and prospects of hundreds of millions of citizens, their rights and their futures.

By forcing citizens – through austerity – to pay a debt that, like Timon's, is more than what they owe, debt has revealed itself to be a force that 'rearticulates chains of capital valorisation and accumulation, reconfigures the composition of the labour force and the population, and establishes new forms of subjection' (Lazzarato, 2012: 86). Radical cuts to public spending and rising taxes on the unemployed and lower-income workers have meant that the most vulnerable in society have overwhelmingly paid for gross miscalculations on the part of the private financial sector, with no perceivable end in sight.³

As Deleuze and Guattari suggest,

[t]he infinite creditor and infinite credit have replaced the blocks of mobile and finite debts. [...] [D]ebt becomes a debt of existence, a debt of the existence of the subject themselves. A time will come when the creditor has not yet lent while the debtor never quits repaying, for repaying is a duty but lending is an option [...]. (Guattar and Deleuze, 1983: 197–8)

For Timon, the first explicit moment of confrontation occurs in 3.7, when the 'covered dishes' that his guests suppose contain '[r]oyal fare' are uncovered to expose bowls of steaming water (3.7.47–8). This '[s]moke and lukewarm water' (3.7.88), revealed to both the onstage audience and real audience in a dramatic *dénouement*, is potentially epiphanic. Set up like the performance of a magic trick, it is a turning point at which Timon attempts, for the first time, to expose the 'smoke and mirrors' of the credit economy.

The transformative potential of the moment is quickly abandoned, however, and the guests rapidly retreat, gathering up their scattered belongings and remarking, 'Lord Timon's mad' (3.7.114). Rather than perceive commodity and debt culture as a form of madness – a



'confounding and confusing of all natural and human qualities' – the Athenian elite choose to believe their detractor is 'but a mad lord, and naught but humours sways him' (3.7.109–10).

In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, writes Graeber,

there was not only public rage and bewilderment, but the beginning of an actual public conversation about the nature of debt, of money, of the financial institutions that have come to hold the fate of nations in their grip. But that was just a moment. The conversation never ended up taking place. (Graeber, 2015: 15)

If, as Jill Philips Ingram suggests, 'providence' in early modern diction had come to mean 'an especially pragmatic kind of prudence', Timon's decision to leave the city could be interpreted as a 'negative example of such providence, its positive counterpart evident in the actions of another character who responds quite differently to "annoyance", Alcibiades' (Philips Ingram, 2006: 61–2).

A kind of anti-Coriolanus, Alcibiades is ultimately happy to adapt his notions of honour to cohere with Athens' 'public laws' and the pragmatic structure of civil society (5.5.62). Convinced by the senators' arguments that '[a]ll have not offended' (5.5.35) and their pleas for him to, like a shepherd, '[a]pproach the fold and cull th'infected forth, / But kill not all together' (5.5.44–5), he agrees to

Use the olive with my sword
Make war breed peace, make peace stint war, make each
Prescribe to other, as each other's leech. (5.5.80–2)

The outcome of Alcibiades' attack on Athens – the tokenistic punishment of a small, select group of wrongdoers – seems unlikely to bring about any form of radical change in Athenian society. While he promises to help enforce 'the stream / Of regular justice in [the] city's bounds' (5.5.60–1), there is a strong fissure between ethical and legal practice. It is perfectly legal to practice usury – indeed, the senators themselves seem to be some of the most prolific usurers who have 'told their money and let / Their coin upon large interest' (3.6.106–7) – but



this does not change its ethical ramifications or social implications. Essentially, Alcibiades is agreeing to place human laws above the more profound, enduring ethical laws that should govern human behaviour.

Furthermore, in an act that would no doubt be welcomed by all proponents of capitalist self-regulation, Alcibiades delegates the task of picking out this select group of bad eggs to the senators themselves:

Those enemies of Timon's and mine own
Whom you yourselves shall set out for reproof
 Fall, and no more. (5.5.56–8, my italics)

Immediately after this exchange, a soldier enters to deliver news of Timon's death. Recounting the words on his gravestone, we are reminded of the fact that 'those enemies of Timon's' were not merely a small group of offenders, but rather '*all living men*' (5.5.70).

In Alcibiades's closing lines, the use of the word 'breed' to link the abstract concepts of 'war' and 'peace' forges a discomfiting connection with the most prominent type of breeding in *Timon*: the unnatural 'breeding' of money through usury. The vision of a society in which everyone acts as 'each other's leech' is similarly ambivalent, suggesting both a medicinal cure and the bloodthirsty financial cannibalism depicted throughout the play. In other words, while Alcibiades and Timon form a dramatically significant pairing in the play, it is not, as Jill Phillips Ingram suggests, 'through the respective success and failure' of the former compared to the latter (Phillips Ingram, 2006: 64). Rather, Timon's misanthropy – his critique of society as a whole – acts as an ideological counterweight to the uneasy conclusion of the play, which sees a potential challenger to the status quo reincorporated into a *polis* that is still plagued by the problems it manifested at the start. As Lazzarato reminds us: 'The financial catastrophe is far from over [...]. [T]he oligarchies, plutocracies, and 'aristocracies' in power have no alternative political program' (Lazzarato, 2012: 165).



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Discussing the riots and the anarchist Occupy movement that sprung up in the wake of the financial crisis, Blyth writes:

Its motivations were diffuse, but one stood out: concern over the income and wealth inequalities generated over the past twenty years that access to easy credit had masked. Winter, and police actions, emptied the Occupy encampments. But the problems that spawned those camps remain with us. (Blyth, 2013: 1–2)

If 'crisis' once signified both an objective and subjective event – in its medical sense, both the condition and its diagnosis – in recent years there seems to have been a concerted attempt to rob it of its second, subjective meaning. As austerity came to represent the hegemonic response to the debt crisis in Europe and the United States, Margaret Thatcher's so-called 'TINA' doctrine was adopted once more in an attempt to convince citizens that 'There Is No Alternative'. In these circumstances, crisis becomes, not a crossroads, but a 'perennial state of exception that [...] renders critical thinking and acting redundant, irrational, and ultimately unpatriotic'. (Athanasίου and Butler, 2013: 149).

Along with the flashes of clarity that can come to us in such moments of collapse – exposing, in the case of 2008, the almost-fatal flaws in the financial system – it seems more necessary than ever to reimagine the term with its former sense of agency, and take the opportunity to ask, as David Graeber suggests, 'who really owes what to whom' (Graeber, 2005: 8). By incorporating an element of human analysis, choice and agency alongside the manifestation of a political or social crisis, such junctures can therefore become a 'turning point, not of trauma, but of new possibilities'. (Stauning Willer, 2017: 235).

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¹ These are the words of Jean Claude Trichet, president of the European Central Bank between 2003 and 2011, who levelled this criticism of financial mismanagement against the Papandreou-led Greek government in an interview for the 2015 documentary film *Agora: From Democracy to the Marketplace*. The narrative of lavish over-spending by a well-meaning but financially illiterate centre-left ruling party is one that has been developed in the years following the financial crisis to imply that the real problem facing debt-stricken nations is a bloated welfare state. As Mark Blyth has convincingly shown, however, the financial crash had far more complex causes – none of which were related to public spending. In fact, the 'universe of benign neglect' could more accurately refer to states' attitudes towards the financial sector, manifesting itself in an unwillingness to regulate the financial instruments that originally led to the economic crisis.

² All references to *Timon of Athens* are from Anthony Dawson and Gretchen Minto, eds., *Timon of Athens*, Arden Third Edition (London: Bloomsbury [2017]). Act, scene and line numbers are parenthetically indicated in the text.

³ The brief interlude of 4.2, in which Timon's poverty-stricken servants meet for one last time before vanishing in a 'sea of air', offers a powerful depiction of the way in which such credit crises overwhelmingly impact the poorest in society. The unfathomably large debts that Timon owes were accrued via verbal contracts among the upper classes and translated into gifts that are devoid of use-value and offer no tangible benefits either to Timon or his entourage. When these debts are called in, however, they suddenly materialise in real terms, leading to a sell-off of Timon's estate and erasing the servants' homes, incomes and security.



Law and Mercy in *The Merchant of Venice* and the Present Refugee Crisis

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The aim of my essay is to analyse the concepts of law and mercy in *The Merchant of Venice*.

The famous court scene has been interpreted as the conflict of the rhetoric of law, which

recalls the Old Testament; and of mercy, which is the central concept of the New Testament. I

will argue that this straightforward dichotomy does not quite apply. Different kinds of 'law'

are evoked, subverted, and transgressed throughout the play. The treatment of parental duty, a

servant's obligations to his master and marital vows, are all relevant to the discussion of this

purported victory of Christian mercy over the legalistic Jew. References to broken trust,

unkept promises as well as clever manoeuvres within the existing laws in order to assert one's

own will abound in *The Merchant of Venice*; while mercy, and rather dubiously at that, is

evoked only within other agendas. Indeed, we could speculate that, as A. D. Moody argues:

'Mercy is not being practised, but merely invoked as cover for "will"' (Moody, 1964: 40).

Both law and mercy are ostensibly meant to facilitate understanding, but in fact serve to give

one side advantage over the other. I will argue that the interpretation of the play in terms of

law and mercy has to be tempered by two considerations. First, that although the dichotomy

of law and mercy automatically suggests that the central subject of the play is the clash of two

different religious systems and their codes of behaviour, the events of the play are in fact not

so much driven by religion than by financial matters. Second, if the play is to be interpreted

through the prism of law and mercy, it cannot be viewed as a conflict in which one of the two

prevails, but rather as a warning against various misuses of both law and mercy, which lead to

problematic solutions for the issues that the play presents. The discussion of law and mercy

will then be used to raise questions about ways in which today's 'Christian Europe' (Christian

in name but focused on easy, enjoyable life, much like the Venetians) may profit from

recognition of what kind of law and what kind of mercy we may offer those who come into our country, who are our 'Others' and whose 'Others' we are.

The interpretation of the plot of *The Merchant of Venice* in terms of contention between law and mercy, the Old Testament and the New, revenge and forgiveness, is fairly widespread, especially in the play's earlier criticism.¹ For example, John P. Sisk interprets the outcome of the play as loving, generous Christians triumphing over the evil, parsimonious Jew. In his interpretation, all of the actions of the Christians are justifiable since 'the action of the play [is] to be released by love from all false and evil bonds to a fulfilment of life' (Sisk, 1969: 218). Shylock is viewed as the embodiment of 'bondage to money and hatred' (*idem*, 219) while the Christians are the soul of 'magnanimity' both regarding money and 'the free dispensing of mercy' (*idem*, 220). In the interest of this dichotomy, the Christians' faults and questionable behaviour are interpreted in a positive light, while Shylock's good traits such as his faithfulness to his wife are ignored completely. Another strain of interpretation that frequently refers to law and mercy is a typological reading of the play.² John Scott Colley reads the play as 'the symbolic fraternal struggle between Jacob and Esau, the younger and the elder, the new and the old [...] a clash between the perfect legal righteousness of Old Testament Law, on the one hand, and the New Testament tenets of faith and forgiveness, on the other' (Colley, 1980: 184). Much like the Biblical story where Jacob uses dishonest means to steal Esau's blessing and become the first-born and, notwithstanding, is revealed to be chosen by God, the author argues that the pattern of the play is to 'sin in order to do the right thing' (*idem*, 187). The actions are not made palatable by any merit of the Christians but simply by the fact that they are God's chosen people, which justifies anything they do as long as in the end the outcome is the triumph of Christianity. This is problematic not least because the supposedly chosen Christians do not take their religion very seriously, a problem further



discussed below. Therefore, it seems that Christian religion simply puts those who profess it into a privileged position and can be used to excuse the actions of theft, treason and trickery as long as they leave them victorious in the end. Furthermore, one may compare the Biblical Jacob, who is clearly aware that he has done an injustice to his brother and goes to reconcile with him bearing gifts and humbly calling himself his brother's servant, with the Venetian Christians who self-righteously gloat over the destruction of Shylock, which prevents any possible reconciliation or forgiveness similar to that which Esau shows to Jacob.

As I have mentioned, the reading of the play as a conflict of Christian mercy versus Jewish law is complicated by the fact that neither the Christians nor Shylock uphold the principles of their religion very rigorously. Most of the Venetians live for dinners, parties and amusements, and even the reserved Antonio clearly does not abide by the Biblical maxim of 'love your enemies' (Matthew 5:43), while Shylock appears, at least by the end of the play, to be willing to break one of the Ten Commandments ('You shall not murder' [Exodus 20:13]) in order to eliminate Antonio. John Gross argues that 'Shylock's stage-Judaism is a pseudo-religion, a fabrication: there is no true piety in it, and nothing to hold him back as he pursues his revenge' (Gross, 1992: 46). The same applies to Antonio's Christianity, which in no way prevents him from spitting on Shylock. The words 'Christian' and 'Jew' are used primarily to create an opposition between the two sides. It is the easiest way to clearly separate one side from the other, as Shylock and Antonio share quite a lot of other characteristics, being both Venetians, both merchants. Religion is used to draw the battle lines: it functions as a means of separating 'us' from 'them', as well as a perfect excuse to insult the other side, although the complaints that each side has against the other have less to do with religion and more with economics. In contrast to this, John P. Sisk argues that 'the good people in the play put love ahead of money' (Sisk, 1969: 219). The good people are, in his reading, everyone except



Shylock, which ignores or diminishes some of the basic facts of the play, such as that Bassanio's courtship of Portia is at least partly motivated by his intention to pay off his debts with her money; that Jessica not only runs away from her father, but also steals from him; and that even Antonio, the Christian martyr, as some critics style him to be³, is not impervious to financial motivations. As a matter of fact, I would argue that most of the play's events are motivated by money rather than by religion.

As an example of this tendency one may first turn to the central event of the play: Antonio's bond and his near-sacrifice. At the first glance it seems to be the pinnacle of Christian morality – 'greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends' (John 15:13). However, if closely analysed, Antonio's bond becomes much less a selfless sacrifice than a miscarried attempt to save some money. When he agrees to the bond, Antonio does not think he is risking anything at all. Although his ships are presently at sea, he stresses that '[his] ventures are not in one bottom trusted / Nor to one place' (1.1.43–4)⁴ and that 'Within these two months, that's a month before / This bond expires [he] expect[s] return / Of thrice three times the value of his bond' (1.3.169–71). Under these circumstances, Antonio could easily concede to pay interest since he believes he will have the money to do it. Instead, Antonio agrees to guarantee the bond with a pound of flesh, which means that he will avoid paying Shylock any extra money.⁵ Choosing to rather risk his life than his money is hardly congruent with the Christian injunction to 'take heed and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consists not in the abundance of the things which he possesses' (Luke 12:15). When Antonio's ships miscarry, and he is suddenly held to his bond, he assumes the posture of a martyr for love of Bassanio, either forgetting or disregarding his original motivation in sowing the seeds of the present situation.



On the other side of the conflict, Shylock's reason for hating Antonio is also ostensibly religious – he even says, 'I hate him for he is a Christian' (1.3.42). However, he goes on to add, 'But more for that in low simplicity / He lends out money gratis and brings down / The rate of usance here with us in Venice' (1.3.43–5). His main complaint against Antonio indeed appears to be that he takes away Shylock's profit and sullies his business reputation 'where merchants most do congregate' (1.3.49) by condemning his business practices, which incidentally are closely connected to his Jewishness. This provides Antonio with extra ammunition, since he feels that as a person of different religion, he does not need to treat Shylock as a human being. Nevertheless, I would argue that the core of the problem is in fact money, i.e. making profit off of the Christians.

Other examples of financial rather than religious motivation abound in the play. Launcelot Gobbo makes a point of saying that he is breaking his loyalty to the Jew, and incidentally going against Paul's teachings about servants in Colossians, because of religion, since the 'Jew is the very devil incarnation' (2.2.26–7). However, his goal is financial betterment, and his complaint is not about the Jew's religious practices but the way the Jew works him hard and does not reward him to his liking. Master Bassanio, in contrast, 'gives rare new liveries' (2.2.109) and lives extravagantly enough that Launcelot will have a good chance of gaining better rewards in his service. Therefore, his words to Bassanio, 'you have the grace of God' (2.2.150), smack of empty flattery and are hardly the reason for Launcelot's desire to serve him.

Jessica's flight from the Jew has its monetary aspect as well, because she steals as much as she possibly can from her father before she leaves, but also because of the careless way in which she spends the money, exchanging her mother's ring for a monkey and spending 'in one night fourscore ducats' (3.1.107–8). Although in Sisk's interpretation, the



fact 'that she takes some of [Shylock's] wealth with her is much less important than the fact that, in the interest of loving and living, she voluntarily cuts herself off from rich expectations' (Sisk, 1969: 219), I would argue that Jessica's motivation is to enjoy the money she takes and have fun now rather than obey her father's wishes and probably be married to a man of his choosing, who most likely would not allow her to cultivate a lavish lifestyle. She says to Launcelot, 'I am sorry thou wilt leave my father so: / Our house is hell, and thou, a merry devil, / Didst rob it of some taste of tediousness' (2.3.1–3). Tediousness is Jessica's main complaint about her father's household, not cruelty or inhumanity on her father's part. Her relationship with Lorenzo then revolves around what Shylock terms 'shallow foppery' (2.5.36), since they escape from Venice to Genoa to spend all the stolen money on presumably amusements, and then come to Belmont to enjoy Bassanio's hospitality, who throughout the play is known to foster a similar lifestyle.

Not only are the uses of law and mercy in the play not motivated by religion, but I would also argue that, rather than look at the clash of these two values, one should look at the play as a series of fundamental misunderstandings and self-serving misuses of both. In order to interpret *The Merchant of Venice* as a conflict of law and mercy, one would have to draw a strict line between the side of the Christians that is defined by mercy and Shylock who exclusively follows the law. This does not work for two reasons. First, at the end of the play Shylock no longer cares about law but only about revenge. He does not insist on the bond because of his incorruptible adherence to the letter of the law, but because at this point he wants to hurt the Christians in retaliation for his daughter's betrayal. Second, it is Portia who can manoeuvre the law in a way that not even Shylock can do, which makes her the ultimate legalist. John Scott Colley points out that 'Shylock is foiled by a sharp bit of legal sleight-of-hand worthy of an Old-Law pettifogger' (Colley, 1980: 185), while Richard H. Weisberg



argues that Antonio himself ‘turns out to be no *ingénu*: his false generosity is but the preface to a highly legalistic manoeuvre that will totally destroy Shylock’ (Weisberg, 1998: 15). Samuel Ajzenstat similarly argues that ‘in a further irony it is Antonio, though a Christian, who is the play’s committed legalist’ (Ajzenstat, 1997: 270), as shown both by his initial resignation in the face of the law and, after Portia’s reversal of his fortunes, his deft manipulation of the situation to his advantage. Moreover, Gross points out the fallacy of the law/mercy divide being equated to Judaism versus Christianity: ‘the notion that Judaism has an inadequate grasp of the concept of mercy is a travesty – as much of a travesty as it would be to suppose that Christianity has an inadequate grasp of the concept of justice’ (Gross, 1992: 81).

Many critics nevertheless attempt to view the finale of the court scene in a positive light as a triumph of Christian mercy over Shylock’s misguided adherence to the letter of law. Barbara K. Lewalski interprets this scene in terms of religion, stating that ‘Shylock, as a representative of his entire race, having refused the earlier opportunity to embrace voluntarily the principles of Christianity, must undergo in the trial scene the harsh “Schoolmastership” of the Law, in order to be brought to faith in Christ’ (Lewalski, 1962: 342). She does not elaborate much on Shylock’s dispossession, merely stating that ‘Shylock’s pecuniary punishment under the laws of Venice precisely parallels the conditions imposed upon a Jewish convert to Christianity’ (*idem*, 341). However, as Weisberg skilfully shows, Antonio’s mercy is in fact no mercy at all, since instead of forgiving some of the fine that is due to him (half of Shylock property), Antonio in fact seizes more of Shylock’s future property by establishing a trust with his half, that is for him to ‘use’, which means that ‘under his direction alone [...] [the money] will be invested, and they will provide both income and preservation or growth of the principal itself’ (Weisberg, 1998: 16) – the principal is reserved for Jessica



and Lorenzo, while the growth of the sum 'provides an annual income [...] to Antonio for as long as Shylock lives' (*idem*, 17). Not content with this, Antonio oversteps the bounds of his privileges by insisting that Shylock leaves all of his present and future property to Jessica and Lorenzo after he dies and also converts to Christianity, which, as Jan Lawson Hinley points out, 'will have the immediate effect of destroying Shylock's livelihood' (Hinley, 1980: 228). The Duke then threatens to rescind his pardon for Shylock's life unless he acquiesces. Antonio thus returns control of half of Shylock's present, and all of his future, property into Christian hands, and at the same time eliminates him as competition and gets rid of the thorn in the side that Shylock's moneylending has been to him. Reiterating the point about financial instead of religious motivation, I argue that the conversion is not concerned with Shylock's soul at all (he is clearly not convinced and does not convert out of his own will), but rather with making him unable to practice usury and thus endanger the Christians' profits. Arguably, this also parallels the reason why Shylock wants to get rid of Antonio – not because he is a Christian but because of the threat he poses to his business. Antonio does not need to kill Shylock to neutralise the threat – his 'mercy' does that well enough. The contrast between law and mercy therefore breaks down completely since the Christians, despite Portia's and the Duke's appeals to mercy, are themselves adept at reading and applying the law to their own ends,⁶ while Shylock, although he attempts to use law to enact his vengeance, is not in fact motivated by it.⁷

In contrast to this, the mercy offered at the very end of the play by Portia to Bassanio is very generous and unconditional. While disguised as a lawyer in the Venetian court, Portia witnesses her husband liberally offering to pay the debt 'ten times o'er' (4.1.218) with her money, but also saying to Antonio that



life itself, my wife, and all the world,
 Are not with me esteem'd above thy life.
 I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
 Here to this devil, to deliver you. (4.1.196–9)

Finally, Bassanio breaks two promises that he has given to Portia, first, that 'till I come again, / No bed shall e'er be guilty of my stay, / no rest be interposer 'twixt us twain' (3.3.337–9). After the trial he goes with Antonio to his house and resolves to set off for Belmont in the morning. Second and more importantly, Bassanio promises that 'when this ring / Parts from this finger, then parts life from hence' (3.2.187–8), following Portia's statement about the ring's significance when giving it to Bassanio:

This house, these servants and this same myself
 Are yours, my lord: I give them with this ring;
 Which when you part from, lose, or give away,
 Let it presage the ruin of your love
 And be my vantage to exclaim on you. (3.2.174–8)

The ring symbolises their marriage and all that Bassanio has gained by the union (both property and wife), and therefore when he gives it away on Antonio's prompting to 'let his deservings and my love withal be valued against your wife's commandment' (4.2.468–9), Bassanio symbolically sacrifices his marriage and once again shows the disguised Portia that he values Antonio's friendship and advice above her love. The same plot is also mirrored in Nerissa similarly getting her ring off Gratiano. The ease with which their husbands forswear their oaths must be shocking and disappointing to both young wives, although, given the treatment of different laws, oaths and promises by the Christians in the play, perhaps not surprising to the audience. To add insult to injury, when confronted, instead of being contrite, Gratiano rudely calls his gift 'a hoop of gold, a paltry ring' (5.1.160), signalling once again the preoccupation with financial rather than spiritual value of things that is typical of the play.



Both Bassanio and Gratiano keep insisting that the judge and the clerk deserve the rings; Bassanio even unselfconsciously declares, 'my honour would not let ingratitude so much besmear it' (5.1.234–5), showing that he does not give the oath he gave his wife enough importance to even think about it being dishonourable to break it. After these rather weak and insulting excuses, both Portia and Nerissa briefly tease Bassanio and Gratiano by indicating that they were unfaithful to them with the judge and the clerk, to which Gratiano immediately reacts with righteous indignation, saying 'are we cuckolds ere we have deserved it?' (5.1.284). Insultingly, his indignation is on account of being cuckolded so soon in the marriage, revealing his opinion of their wives' virtue in having expected it to happen at all. He is mildly reprimanded by Portia for speaking grossly, then both women reveal the deception and suddenly all is well, everyone forgiven. Randy Lee argues that 'the mercy displayed in this context is a fruitless mercy, a mercy that seems not to fuel redemption or a better heart [...] because forgiveness is obtained so easily and without consequence by Bassanio and Gratiano, they take it for granted; perhaps they do not even notice that it was ever needed' (Lee, 2006: 22). Indeed, the men appear to feel sorry mostly because their wives are angry with them, not because they realise the fault in their actions. The cheap mercy that they are offered may encourage them to act similarly in the future, knowing that their spouses may berate them but will easily be won over.

Finally, reflecting on the various applications of law and mercy in the play, one may sense irony in Portia's famous speech in court, where she declares that 'earthly power doth then show likest God's / When mercy seasons justice' (4.1.202–3). Although it is a great truth, throughout the play the audience never gets an example of such wise tempering of justice with mercy, but only careless breaches of unwritten laws such as familial duty,



marriage vows, and servant's loyalty in the name of financial gain; strict application of the law that masquerades as mercy; and cheap, unheeded mercy that has no justice in it.

What should then be the lesson with regard to the current refugee crisis? Perhaps one may consider that, much like in the case of Antonio's and Shylock's conflicts, the reasons for the resentment towards refugees are perhaps of more economic than religious quality. After all, although rhetorically Europe has rediscovered its 'Christian roots' under the perceived threat of Islam, a great number of Europeans in no way practice Christian religion. Furthermore, the Czech government has also refused the applications of 70 Chinese Christians who left their country because of religious persecution; only eight people were accepted.⁸ It therefore seems logical that the complaints are much more concerned with the money that goes towards aiding the refugees instead of benefiting the citizens, rather than with religious or cultural considerations. In addition, there are somewhat spurious attempts to distinguish between people fleeing for their lives, and 'economic migrants'. The futility of such an effort can be illustrated by two articles published within a week of each other in July 2017 on two different Czech news sites. One headline reads, 'Economic migrants are a myth: 80% of people flee to Europe [from war and conflicts]'⁹, while the other one states, 'According to OSN, seven out of ten refugees are economic migrants'.¹⁰ The discussions are fraught with conspiracy theories, for example, that refugees are in fact in search of Europe's wealth (to be gained without honest work, of course) rather than trying to make a peaceful living. This may recall the Christian's resentment of Shylock's money and how he earned it, while he considers it simply 'well-won thrift' (1.3.50). Undeniably, there is fear involved: fear of the 'Other' from a different culture and religion. A survey made in October 2018 shows that out of a thousand respondents, two-thirds are afraid of the refugees settling in their country and 86% are afraid of the refugees spreading Islam.¹¹ Furthermore, it seems that in the minds of many



Czech people, migrants are closely connected with crime – another survey cites 72% respondents as worried about national safety.¹² Once again, we may refer to the play and to how both sides – the Jew and the Christians – feel that abuse and perhaps even crime are justified against the Other, because they are not part of the community. These feelings in the play stem from the fact that both sides refuse to see each other as fellow human beings, nursing one-dimensional concepts of the Other that suit their own narratives. There is not a single instance in the play where both sides meet with the intention to truly understand each other. What is more, though both strict law and unconditional mercy, practiced unilaterally and without understanding on both sides, may in fact bring an immediate resolution of the problems that arise, such a resolution is superficial and promises more problems in the future. Similar reasoning may be applied to the present crisis, the long-term solution of which will require careful mediation between the proponents of the strict law (protecting the boundaries, not letting anyone enter) and those of unconditional mercy (providing aid without imposing limits or conditions), and facilitation of learning and understanding on both sides.

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¹ William Baker and Brian Vickers give a useful overview of this strain of interpretation from 1939 onwards in the introduction to *Shakespeare: The Critical Tradition: The Merchant of Venice 1775-1939* (Baker and Vickers, 2005: 14–15).

² See also Lewalski, 1962, and Danson, 1978.

³ See Snider, 1872; Gollancz, 1931; Lewalski, 1962; Sisk, 1969.

⁴ All quotations from *The Merchant of Venice* are from the Folger Digital Texts edition.

⁵ Interestingly, Antonio has no qualms about spending money on his friends. As a possible reason for this, Jan Lawson Hinley suggests that 'Antonio is practicing his own spiritual usury' (Hinley, 1980: 227) by expecting return for his investment, particularly in Bassanio, not in money but in privileged position in his life and affections.

⁶ Grace Tiffany connects this tendency to monetary interests in 'Law and Self-Interest in *The Merchant of Venice*', where she argues that 'contractual laws, or rules, designed to keep property safe hold sway in *The Merchant of Venice* despite its Christians' protestations of absolute generosity. Throughout the comedy not only enemies, like Shylock and Antonio, but lovers and friends hedge their commitments to one another with rules, charges, directions, and laws safeguarding their interests' (Tiffany, 2010: 174).

⁷ Richard H. Weisberg shares this claim in 'Antonio's Legalistic Cruelty: Interdisciplinarity and *The Merchant of Venice*', where he states that 'neither [Portia] nor any even-handed observer of the play as a whole needs find any necessary linkage of "legalism" to vengeance' (Weisberg, 1998: 14).

⁸ 'Proč nedostali čínští křesťané azyl? "Strach z perzekuce nestačil, přitížila jim práce", říká právnička'. *iROZHLAS*, 12:30 (22 February 2018). https://irozhlas.cz/zpravy-domov/cinsti-krestane-azyl-cesko-ministerstvo-vnitro-rozhodnuti_1802221230_kno (accessed 29 December 2018).

⁹ 'Ekonomičtí migranti jsou mýtus. 80 % lidí do Evropy prchá, tvrdí zpráva' (8 July 2017). https://zpravy.idnes.cz/uprchlici-ekonomicti-migranti-valka-evropa-libye-f7q-zahranicni.aspx?c=A170708_101904_zahranicni_fka (accessed 29 December 2018).

¹⁰ 'Sedm z deseti uprchlíků jsou ekonomičtí migranti, tvrdí OSN'. *Týden* (3 July 2017). https://t.tyden.cz/rubriky/zahranici/evropa/sedm-z-deseti-uprchliku-jsou-ekonomicti-migranti-tvrdi-osn_436882.html (accessed 29 December 2018).

¹¹ 'Dvě třetiny Čechů mají strach z uprchlíků, devět z deseti se bojí rozšíření islámu'. *zpravy.aktualne.cz* (26 November 2018). <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/domaci/dve-tretiny-cechu-ma-strach-z-uprchliku-9-z-10-lidi-se-boji/r~5830c872f16a11e884f6ac1f6b220ee8/> (accessed 29 December 2018).

¹² 'Přibylo odpůrců přijímání uprchlíků, k jaké národnosti jsou Češi vstřícnější?'. *zpravy.tiscali.cz*. (9 November 2018). <https://zpravy.tiscali.cz/pribylo-odpurcu-prijimani-uprchliku-k-jake-narodnosti-jsou-cesi-vstricnejsi-320493> (accessed 29 December 2018).



Students' best essays collection, Barbora Šedivá, Prague, March 2019

'I have no humour to marry'¹: Representation of Conjugal Life in *The Roaring Girl* and its Reflections on Our Present Society

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In literary criticism, early modern English drama is extensively examined for its treatment of gender roles. Often involving powerful female characters, the plays written in this period contributed to the redefinition of social norms concerning gender in contemporary society. According to Susan Zimmerman, a prominent scholar in the field of early modern culture, 'as a primary locus for the interrogation of subjectivity, the English Renaissance theatre would also have served as a medium for the release of transgressive erotic impulses' (Zimmerman, 2005: 34). Although this aspect of Renaissance writing has been the subject matter of many critical texts, most of these were concerned with the plays of a single author: William Shakespeare. As Zimmerman notes in the introduction to her analysis,

Studies of the English Renaissance theatre, including many postmodern ones, have traditionally foregrounded the dramatic canon of Shakespeare. Notwithstanding the importance of Shakespeare to his time and ours, such a skew, particularly in cultural criticism, is badly in need of correction. Neither the social function of the theatre nor the production of eroticism within it can be anatomized in terms of the oeuvre and practices of a single playwright. (*idem*, 5)

In support of Zimmerman's claim, this paper considers one of the other plays written in this period, worth noticing especially for its focus on gender roles.

Written between 1607 and 1610, *The Roaring Girl* by Thomas Middleton and Thomas Dekker contributes to the discussion concerning gender in several different ways. Dealing with the position of women in English society, the play has been argued to both reaffirm and transgress established social norms. Moll Cutpurse, the play's protagonist, is based on a real historical person, Mary Frith, an eccentric figure of a disreputable character. While a lot of critical attention has been given to the theme of female cross-dressing in the play², there seems to be a proportional lack of interest in its treatment of the role of women in marital life.



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Although the protagonist's preference for male attire has been perceived as the main source of the play's transgressive character, the representation of conjugal life provides an essential comment on gender roles, which contributes to the overall message of the play. Rather than a relationship based on love and mutual respect, marriage is depicted as an economic transaction governed by the exchange of money and personal interest. In her steady refusal to marry, Moll is expressing the need for independence but also, and most importantly, her resistance to the corrupted values associated with marital life in the society around her. Worth noting is the fact that a lot of the principles concerning marriage in Middleton and Dekker's piece are still perceived as valid today. It is the aim of the present study to examine the representation of conjugal life within the play and to consider its reflections on our present society. Consequently, in dealing with plays such as *The Roaring Girl*, we might not only learn about the role of women in the early modern period, but also trace the development of this role until the present day, and in this way to learn about ourselves. For a society like ours, facing various kinds of crises, one way of constructing a positive future is by understanding and re-establishing the essential unit of humankind: the couple.

In seventeenth-century England, marriage was considered of central importance, especially for women. As Phyllis Rackin asserts, it was 'the paradigm that governed the lives and defined the identities of Renaissance women' (Rackin, 1987: 30). In this sense, marriage was seen as the ultimate goal of every woman's life. According to *The Lawe's Resolution of Women's Rights*, published in 1632 and designed to help the female population accept their role in society, 'all [women] are understood either married or to be married' (Edgar, 1632: sig. B3^v). While women were thus pressed into wedlock, the significance of marriage in Renaissance society is also testified by the presence of numerous advice manuals and conduct books dealing with marital obligations and proper household management. Such advice books



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were then very popular and widely read, especially among the middle classes. Mostly written by men, they propagated patriarchal ideals of conjugal life as the norm and reaffirmed patriarchal values at the same time.

One notable advice book, *A Godly Form of Household Government* [...] (1621) written by John Dod and Robert Cleaver, promotes the notion of marriage as a patriarchal type of government, with the husband as its sovereign ruler and the wife as an obedient subject. According to this manual, the husband is to 'love his wife as his own flesh', 'to govern her in all duties that properly concern the state of marriage', and 'to use her in all due benevolence, honestly, soberly, and chastely' (Dod and Cleaver, 1621: sig. H2^v). The wife, on the other hand, was exposed to a necessary subjection in all the duties concerning marriage and household care. The institution of marriage was thus compared to that of a realm, with the male part being the government and the female its subject.

It bears keeping in mind, however, that while conduct books such as this *A Godly Form* were one thing, reality was another. In fact, society was much more heterogeneous already at that time, and that is precisely what Middleton and Dekker's play reflects. While the publication of *The Roaring Girl* roughly coincides with that of Dod and Cleaver's manual, the notion of the sacred union between a man and a woman in the play is represented in vastly different terms. As mentioned above, the meaning of marriage within the play is presented in favour of a more economic understanding of the relationship, where women often take the leading position instead of their male counterparts. The pressure for women to marry was in any case thriving, both in society as well as within the play. Within certain contexts, it can be felt even today.

Although the main protagonist of *The Roaring Girl* avoids marriage in any way possible, this kind of union nevertheless plays an important role in the play, both in Moll's



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surroundings and in her own life. As Stephen Orgel argues, 'the historical Mary Frith, but as Middleton and Dekker present her in *The Roaring Girl*, [...] is powerfully concerned with matrimony, both as the object of wooing and as the enabling figure for other marriages' (Orgel, 2005: 15). In this sense, there seems to be a certain discrepancy between Moll's attitude to the institution of marriage in relation to herself, and with respect to other women around her, especially one of the maidens, Mary Fitz-Allard. Critics, including Jean Howard, note that 'seeing marriage as a straitjacket for herself, she [Moll] none the less promotes it for Mary Fitz-Allard and other women' (Howard, 2005: 37). In the course of the play, Moll becomes willingly involved in a strategic plan, the aim of which is to achieve the consent of a gentleman called Sir Alexander Wengrave for the marriage of his son Sebastian and Mary. The question of Moll's readiness in promoting marriage for others while rejecting it for herself has been the subject matter of several critical studies dealing with this play.

In her essay examining the role of women in the marketplace in *The Roaring Girl*, Jo E. Miller claims that 'one of the most troubling things about this play is that Moll does not at first glance seem overtly to reject her society's vision of marriage as a male-dominated hierarchy, but rather opts out of it only for herself' (Miller, 1990: 12). For Miller, rather than being a transgressive figure, Moll is used as an instrument to reaffirm precisely those values that she appears to refuse. In spite of her dismissal of Moll as a conventional character, Miller nevertheless perceives the play as transgressive in that it makes its audience aware of the objectionable conventions concerning marital life that Moll is helping to re-establish. Along the same lines, Jane Baston argues that 'Moll is fitting into the traditional requirements of marriage rather than seeking to change them' (Baston, 1997: 328). Indeed, in several places throughout the play, Moll does appear to be reinforcing social conventions regarding the role of women in conjugal life rather than trying to do away with them. An example of such an



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attitude can be found in her conversation with Sebastian in Scene 4, where she claims that 'a wife, you know, ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too headstrong to obey' (4.36–7). However, while such a statement seems to be in accordance with the patriarchal notion of marriage, it does not yet mean that Moll identifies with it. Neither does it necessarily imply that she is pursuing the same kind of union for Sebastian and Mary.

Moll's seeming inconsistency in her approach to marriage might be resolved by the claim that there are, in fact, two kinds of marriages within the play: the ideal one and the actual one. While most of the married couples represent the debased, profit-driven, and ultimately unfaithful kind of union, what Moll seeks to achieve for Sebastian and Mary is precisely the opposite, uncorrupted, and ideal relationship, based on love and mutual respect.

As Jennifer Higginbotham asserts,

Moll's objection to marriage is not to marriage *per se*, but the social reality of marital power relations in her world. Her speeches recognize the material constraints within which women function in her society, and Moll seeks to open up, rather than close down, options for other female characters (Higginbotham, 2013: 91).

Instead of reaffirming the convention that perceives marriage as a patriarchal union involving female subjugation, Moll promotes for her friends the kind of union in which both participants would be allowed to retain an equal share of power and independence. The wedlock of Sebastian and Mary is thus set into direct opposition to the already established marriages of the middle-classes couples within the play. According to Viviana Comensoli, 'the idealistic conclusion of the Sebastian-Mary action must be considered in relation to the dramatists' cynical treatment of marriage in the citizen-plot and its realistic treatment of conjugal malaise' (Comensoli, 1987: 251).

Therefore, if the play 'offers a biting critique of the institution of marriage', as Higginbotham insists (Higginbotham, 2013: 90), it is not to be searched for in the final union promoted by Moll, but rather within the lives of the couples already settled, whose affairs



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generate the play's subplot. It is precisely this deviation from the main marriage plot that distinguishes this particular play from other comedies of the early modern period. While *The Roaring Girl* departs from a similar situation to that in Shakespearean festive comedies – a young couple's pursuit of a happy marriage – in its moral implications it goes far beyond. It is an exceptional play, precisely because it attempts to answer the question of what happens after the happy endings in Shakespeare's comedies. As Howard argues, 'Shakespearean comedy, of course, rarely moved beyond the portrayal of courtship to engage the actuality of marriage' (Howard, 2005a: 136). In this sense, *The Roaring Girl* starts where the conventional comedy ends: in the life after the wedding, which might not always be the exact image of happiness.

As a typical city comedy, *The Roaring Girl* is thus much more realistic than most Shakespearean plays. In contrast to them, this play portrays a broad range of characters encompassing the whole social spectrum. In its focus on the lives of the ordinary citizens and their daily activities, the play employs what Ben Jonson has termed the 'deeds and language such as men do use',³ as opposed to the dramatic adventures and elevated language of Shakespeare's characters. Its highly satirical tone, characteristic of city comedies, also contributes to the gender debate. In their portrayal of the lives of the merchant families, Middleton and Dekker depict the dissatisfactions of conjugal life that were considered taboo in most Elizabethan drama.

The subplot dealing with the merchant-class families commences in the 'marketplace scene' (scene 3), where the corrupted nature of conjugal life becomes exposed through the couples' moral failings in their behavior outside of marriage. While marital life is pushed into the background in this scene, new relations are uncovered between the married women and the single gallants, which reflect on the marital relations themselves. It is precisely in the



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economic environment of the market, that the commercial nature of human relationships among the characters is revealed. As Valerie Forman observes, 'at the same time that the marriage plot recedes, the merchant/gallant plots come into the foreground and the play negotiates social relations, and especially relations of desire, through the circulation of money and commodities' (Forman, 2001: 1531–2). In this sense, the market becomes a space of both economic and sexual transactions. While the citizens' wives offer their goods to the passing gallants, their own bodies are on display for potential exchange. In her essay investigating the importance of space in the play, Kelly Stage observes, 'the play's intertwined dynamic of commercial practices and private practices', arguing that 'early Stuart popular literature often conflated the shopwoman's crying of her goods with the advertisement of her own body' (Stage, 2009: 420).

The marketplace run by the merchants' wives is thus far from neutral ground. The appearance of the wives in the public space of the market reflects the changing role of women in society. While women were historically confined to the domestic space of the household, the early modern period witnesses a general release of this stereotype. Within the play, the public and private spaces become intertwined. When their own house is turned into a shop, the wives find themselves somewhere in between the domestic and the public zone. Not only does the play observe these married women in public, it also assigns them a role in the business sphere that was often perceived as an exclusively male space. The merchant's wife thus becomes a potential threat to patriarchy precisely for her ability to move in the economic sphere and to be even more successful there than her husband. The fact that the wife can operate to some extent independently of her husband's income creates tension in the married couple.



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This tension is further enhanced by the sexual implications of the woman's exposure to the public gaze. According to Mario DiGangi, the marketplace is 'an arena, much like the public theatre itself, in which female visibility could easily translate as sexual availability' (DiGangi, 2003: 147). This assumption is confirmed when the crooked relationships between the gallants and the wives become exposed. The marketplace within the play thus becomes the stage for marital infidelity and corruption.

Public visibility and sexuality in the marketplace go hand in hand with the economic status this setting offers. Just as the wife becomes economically independent from her husband, her erotic desire starts to develop on parallel lines. For a self-sufficient woman, marriage, as represented in the merchant subplot of *The Roaring Girl*, becomes highly frustrating and as a result she starts to search for other sources of fulfilment. Female economic independence was thus perceived as troublesome. Howard accurately describes this implication when she argues that the marriages in the play 'are not depicted as erotically fulfilling. There is the unmistakable implication that, like female play-goers, the publicly visible, economically useful urban wives were experienced by men as threatening figures' (Howard, 2005a: 137–8).

Already from the very beginning of the marketplace scene, economic metaphors are used for the expression of social relations. In this way, sexual innuendo in the dialogue becomes intertwined with business-related language, and the exchange of goods soon turns into a potential transaction of human bodies. While marriage has the function of a mere economic partnership, the citizens' wives feel the need to pursue their sexual fulfilment outside of wedlock. This is precisely where the play offers its critique of the contemporary conditions of conjugal life. A union that is supposed to be based on loyalty and chastity will not, in this case, prevent the married women from committing adultery. This is obvious



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already from Mistress Openwork's opening line: 'Gentlemen, what is't you lack? What is't you buy? See fine bands and ruffs, fine lawns, fine cambrics. What is't you lack, gentlemen, what is't you buy?' (3.1–3). Always ready to provide anything the gallants might need, Mistress Openwork would not hesitate to offer her own body if it was in the gentlemen's demand, something they might be lacking. According to DiGangi, 'when she introduces the market metaphor of "opening shop" to describe her attempts to "take" her husband sexually, Mistress Openwork blurs the distinction between the "chaste wife" and the "whore"' (DiGangi, 2003: 150). What follows her initial cry for attention is a conversation held between the two men she was addressing, full of double entendre, the function of which is to reveal the erotic subtext of the social relations operative in the market, as well as to make the audience laugh.

Another example of what Higginbotham calls an 'unruly woman' is Mistress Gallipot. In her attempt to seduce one of the gentlemen, she herself becomes an object of the economic transaction, the purpose of which is the acquisition of money rather than erotic fulfilment. Naively believing herself to be an object of Laxton's sexual desire, Mistress Gallipot is in fact turned into a mere tool in his strategic plan to obtain her husband's money. Laxton's manipulation of Mistress Gallipot is disclosed in one of his confessional asides: 'I put her off with opportunity still: by this light I hate her, but for means to keep me in fashion with gallants: for what I take from her, I spend upon other wenches, bear her in hand still; she has wit enough to rob her husband, and I ways enough to consume the money' (3.77–81).

In order to preserve Mistress Gallipot in her role of one who obtains money, Laxton constantly delays the sexual satisfaction that is promised in their economic exchange. Instead of expressing his gratitude for Mistress Gallipot's service, the gallant uses her husband's money in order to draw the attention of other women. With his belief that 'money is that aqua



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fortis that eats into many a maidenhead' (3.176–7), Laxton hopes to use Master Gallipot's money in order to buy Moll herself. However, in his presupposition that every woman can be bought with enough money, Laxton critically underestimates Moll's moral principles, which only results in driving her further away from himself. Moll's refusal to participate in the economic transaction of bodies testifies to her chastity and moral purity, but also results in her avoidance of marriage. As Miller asserts, Moll's 'unwillingness to enter the market of exchange must effectively exclude her from the celebration of exchange that constitutes marriage as her society knows it' (Miller, 1990: 22).

In the market scene, as well as in the rest of the play, the character of Moll is constantly contrasted with the married women. Since marriage is considered a social norm, Moll's deviation from this norm – or rather, her refusal of this norm – is perceived as one of the sources of her presumed madness. In this sense, marriage serves as a standard for women to be judged against. As *The Lawe's Resolution of Women's Rights* explains, a woman can either be already married or not yet so. According to Adrienne Eastwood, 'the social category of singleness has, until recently, been largely ignored by both literary critics and historians, who tended to group unmarried women with widows' (Eastwood, 2004: 10). It might be for this reason that Moll's refusal to be married is met with little or no understanding. Even if it were not for the practice of cross-dressing, society might still condemn her simply for the fact of her desired singleness. As Eastwood argues, 'her unmarried status allows her freedom, but not without the negative consequence of being considered a whore or a "monster" by some of the characters in the play' (*ibidem*).

Even though it is always Moll who is, because of her unconventional behaviour, dismissed by her surroundings as a whore, she is the one who steadily resists all kinds of temptation and corruption of character. Since the married women in the play could hardly



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aspire to become models of chastity, this position is instead taken up by Moll. Although she is not bound by any legal union as the others are, she nevertheless remains true to her moral principles. Whereas the middle-class women in the play are willing to sell their bodies for any amount of money, Moll will not be bought. In this way, Moll's unmarried status is always compared to the marital life considered the norm. As a result, there is a reversal of values between what is perceived as normal and what deviates from this norm. The presumably happy conjugal life therefore becomes associated with infidelity, immorality, and corruption, whereas the transgressive figure of Moll stands for righteousness, chastity, and virtue. The monstrous within the play is thus associated with the normative rather than with the queer. Moll's independence is contrasted with the unhappy side of marriage, and her single status becomes the target for the married couples to express their anxieties stemming from the degraded nature of their own relationships.

More than four hundred years have gone by since the first publication of *The Roaring Girl*, and yet the figure of Moll Cutpurse might still serve as an example of a successful independent woman in social life. Although the position of women in society has advanced considerably since the English Renaissance, there are certain points in which the development appears to stagnate. It is especially the role of women in marital life that remains fairly conservative. The pressure for women to marry is prevalent in many cultures, and although female independence is acknowledged and accepted as a possibility, it is still often frowned upon, whereas marriage tends to be seen as the ultimate goal of every woman's life. Take, for example, a recent popular comedy movie conveniently entitled *Man Up* (2015)⁴, which tells the story of a single thirty-four-year-old woman, who is pressed by her surroundings to find herself a husband. While the movie never questions the desirability of marriage for that particular woman, the audience is manipulated into the belief that wedlock is the only



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possible solution for her (whereas the unmarried status of the man she eventually finds is seen as unproblematic).

Other aspects of *The Roaring Girl* also find reflection in today's world. Middleton and Dekker wisely chose to stage some of the most revealing scenes of the play in a marketplace – it is an environment where economic transactions took place, but also the kind of public sphere where women start to build their independence. Since then, the distribution of men and women in public spaces has changed considerably. Although complete equality in this area is still far in the future (sometimes even for understandable reasons), the presence of women in the public sphere is nowadays mostly unrestricted. If the marketplace and the public theatre were among the first spaces to open up to female visitors, the range of places to frequent is incomparably wider today. And yet, one can hardly speak of complete freedom of movement for women. The threat of assault or violation is so powerful in some places that many women feel discouraged from venturing out. These conditions are, of course, vastly different from those in which Moll had to fight for her independence, and yet her free movement is something to be envied by women both then and now.

Another instance of the persistent quality of *The Roaring Girl's* portrayal of gender roles lies in the economic nature of the conjugal bond itself. It is no secret that marriage was, and continues to be, a way of obtaining economic security. Similarly, it was also often used as a means of social mobility and to the acquisition of property. The link between marriage and money is so firmly embedded in our thinking that we rarely deem the union successful if it does not involve material improvement for the woman. If the improvement is too substantial, on the other hand, the bride is easily dismissed as a gold-digger. In this sense, Laxton's hypothesis that 'money is that aqua fortis that eats into many a maidenhead' is not far from the general premise held about women entering marriage even today.



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In *The Roaring Girl*, we see several marriages that could be described as unsuccessful from this point of view. As soon as the woman becomes economically self-sufficient, the authority of her male counterpart starts to disintegrate. Such marriage, as Howard points out, is no longer erotically fulfilling. There is the straightforward implication that only an economically successful man might have done for an attractive husband. To argue that such an approach is predominant today would be, of course, a serious overstatement. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon to come across this perspective in certain contexts. Though it might not be appropriate to quote from an American rap song here, the environment surrounding this type of music would be precisely such a context, to name but one. The discrepancy in economic prosperity between men and women is thus still a hot topic when it comes to marriages.

This goes hand in hand with the way women are perceived in the economic sphere. Female independence and individual ambition are still considered a threat, especially in a conjugal bond. For the man, losing the status of breadwinner in the family is often felt to be a loss of masculinity itself, while ambitious women are perceived as overtly masculine. A suitable example is the case of Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, who is often caricatured in popular media as a man due to her self-confidence and powerful initiative. However, even worse than being an ambitious wife is to be a resourceful single woman. Therefore, to be Moll Cutpurse today would not necessarily mean to wear men's clothes, but to behave as an independent economic person, or in other words, as a man. And such behaviour might be considered just as transgressive as Moll's cross-dressing was.

When comparing the situation concerning gender roles in marital life between the early modern period and today, one needs to keep in mind the extent of this subject as well as the impossibility of encompassing it as a whole in a study of this scope. Also, relying on a text such as *The Roaring Girl* as a single primary source may potentially lead to serious



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misconceptions and overgeneralizations. Nevertheless, Europe is said to be in a state of crisis. In order for us to be able to face the present challenges, we need to make sure our society is transparent and can rely on its constituents. As a central unit of society, the married couple represents stability. For this reason, it needs to be a union in which both components feel comfortable, secure, and self-assured. To what extent this is the case today is debatable and highly individual. In any case, Moll's decision to avoid marriage as she saw it around her continues to be understandable and inspiring.



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¹ Middleton, Thomas and Thomas Dekker, *The Roaring Girl or Moll Cutpurse* (1611), in *The Roaring Girl and Other City Comedies*. Ed. James Knowles. Oxford: Oxford University Press (2001), p. 225–310: 4.35. All scene- and line-numbering come from this edition.

² Cross-dressing as an instrument of transgression was the subject matter of many critical studies dealing with *The Roaring Girl*, including the following texts: Cressy, 1996; Krantz, 1995; Mikalachki, 1994; and Bierman, 2013.

³ Jonson, Ben, *Every Man in His Humour* (1598), in Knowles, ed. *The Roaring Girl* [...], p. 141–224: 133.21.

⁴ The movie reaches its climax when the potential husband advises the main protagonist that if she wants to find someone to love her, she needs to 'man up' – a rather interesting phrase, which proves the fact that our everyday language is still to a large extent gendered.



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Identities under Siege: a Comment on the Hungarian Attitude Towards Refugees Informed by Shakespeare's *Othello*

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Introduction

During the Hungarian parliamentary elections of 2018, the Fidesz-KDNP coalition led by Viktor Orbán maintained its two-thirds majority, despite winning only 48.49% of the votes. In spite of such extreme curving achieved via the voting system which has been geared in favour of the ruling party, 48% remains an inarguably large value. I argue that a major – if not the single most important – factor that contributed to such great portion of the votes is the coalition's policy regarding the refugee crisis that started in 2015 and on which Orbán's party centred its political campaign before the election. Up until its victory, the antagonistic discourse with which refugees were represented, had been the government's most potent tool for gaining supporters, even amongst those who were otherwise aligned with the opposition. Although members of the government are now much less vocal about refugees in the national media, the discourse about them became an integral part of the Hungarian national discourse. Moreover, one could argue that perhaps the refugee crisis, and the supposedly innate deviance of refugees, became a characteristic component of Hungarian identity, since they remain paramount concerns of individuals and organizations alike, even among those who do not have an affiliation with the government. Besides its persistence, I consider the Hungarian discourse noteworthy in Europe and the West in general, due to the immense hostility with which it treats refugees. One significant characteristic of the attitude of this discourse toward refugees is their subhuman, animalistic portrayal. They are often depicted as a swarming mass of predatory young men, an entity that conjures up the prospect of the systematic raping of women; the infestation of Europe; and the defilement of its old Christian culture.



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Even though such an adverse depiction of the current crisis is still largely unusual, the enmity that arises when a community must face a cultural 'Other' has a long tradition. A similar concern is illustrated in William Shakespeare's *Othello*. There too, the established cultural boundary separating the Self from the Other is breached by the marriage between members of the two groups, which engenders an animalised, barbaric conceptualisation of the Other. In my essay, I compare Shakespeare's dramatic text with Hungarian media articles to highlight certain transhistorical qualities of the process of Othering, for which purpose I utilise the findings of psychoanalysis. During my examinations, I intend to illuminate how Othering in fact underlines the fragmented nature of the Self that is doing the Othering.

I.

Both in the refugee crisis and in *Othello*, the Other is perceived to be threatening due to its proximity. The reason why the lack of distance is regarded as alarming can be explained by the psychoanalytical concept of *abjection* as posited by Julia Kristeva. To briefly summarise, when an infant begins to detach itself from the mother and establish its own subjectivity in the symbolic realm of the father, the process of separation is underlined by a set of rituals involving ingestion and excretion. We all consume food to subsequently expel it from our bodies along with other bodily fluids. However, these rituals can never be concluded for they are necessitated by our corporeal existence, we can never achieve a complete control over our subjectivity. Therefore

the outside is elaborated by means of a projection from within, of which the only experience we have is one of pleasure and pain. An outside in the image of the inside [...]. The non-distinctiveness of inside and outside would thus be unnameable, a border passable in both directions by pleasure and pain. (Kristeva, 1982: 61)

Any external object that vividly reminds the subject of its incomplete subjectivity is then consequently conceived as threatening in its psyche.



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Melanie Klein posits that the negative conception of this external object and the consequent attempts of its destruction arise not simply because it reminds the subject of its incomplete being, but because the Other is perceived to be complete (Klein, 1975: 176–235). According to her, the subject's sense of Self emerges from the relationship with its primary object: the mother's breast. Depending on the success of this relationship, the primary object can either become 'the good breast' or 'the bad breast'. The former 'is the basis for trust in one's own goodness' (*idem*, 188), while the latter signifies life-long feelings of incompleteness, emptiness, and of being damaged. However, counter-intuitively, experiences of the bad breast do not engender resentment toward the bad breast, but rather envy toward the good breast:

For if the infant cannot tolerate either the discrepancy between its own badness and the goodness outside itself or the sense of dependency on this external source of goodness, the good breast will not be available for the infant's use: its goodness will in effect be spoiled by the infant's own envious rage. (Adelman, 1997: 135)

The subject can only satisfy this rage by 'put[ting] badness, primarily bad excrement and bad parts of the self, into the mother, and first of all into her breast, in order to spoil and destroy her' (Klein, 1975: 181). Therefore, the status of the Other in fact belongs to the Self that develops at the sight of an external object's goodness or completeness in the face of the Self's feelings of inadequacy. The establishment of the external object as Other is the tool that the Self chooses to demolish the perceived discrepancy of inner quality. To borrow Adelman's words, 'racism is the psychic property of the racist, not simply of his [*sic*] victim' (Adelman, 1997: 127).

Feelings of threat and envy most readily emerge when the object is perceived to be near. Such proximity need not be close in a sense that the Other is able to make physical contact with the subject: it can be understood more abstractly through entities referred to as body



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images. These 'are not confined to our bodies but extend beyond them to encompass elements of the object world and the body images of others' (Wilton, 1998: 176). Furthermore, the construction of boundaries, and the impulse to keep the abject far away from the body or the body image, are not merely individual psychic phenomena but can be observed in communities that regard themselves as relatively homogenous. In such cases, facing the Other becomes a 'struggle for collective psychological survival' (*idem*, 175). The struggle takes the form of constructing the boundary where one side is designated for the Self and the other for the abject. However, a 'boundary can be variously located according to who is doing the categorizing' (Sibley, 1995: 34); therefore, the identity of the Other may vary among different communities and different eras. Yet, there exists a palpable aversion to people who seemingly do not belong and must be separated both in the early modern and at present. Below, I will chart the similar manners in which the two periods utilise the transhistorical practice of Othering.

II.

David Sibley argues that the predominant manner in which European powers in the Middle Ages and in the early modern period visualised the world was that a given power and its people identified themselves as the centre of the known world; for they assumed themselves to be the most civilised of peoples, and all the others that surrounded them were considered to be vile (*idem*, 49–71). Moreover, Europeans believed that this kind of innate deviance translated into physical characteristics. Members of such 'lowly' groups were seen as "imperfect" – physically deformed and/or black and at one with nature, in other words, not quite human by civilised, white European standards' (*idem*, 51). It was necessary to locate the signs of Otherness in physical characteristics because biological difference sealed the



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boundary between Europeans and their Others; otherwise, the boundary could have been easily dismantled.

Therefore, it is not surprising that Othello is Othered via his blackness. However, it is impossible to know whether Shakespeare did in fact imagine Othello to be dark-skinned, or whether he wished to underline the constructivist nature of this tradition. As Doris Adler points out, Shakespeare utilises the words *black*, *white*, and *fair* multiple times in the play; and he also tends to merge the various literal and metaphorical meanings that the terms possess (Adler, 1974: 248). Adler identifies the following functions in *Othello*:

first, *black* is used as a color designation for the darkest hue, 'an old black ram' (I.i.88); *white*, as the opposite, designates the lightest hue: 'white ewe' (I.i.89). Second, *black* is used to designate a Moor, a Negro, one of African origin: 'the black Othello' (II.ii.29); *white* is suggested for European counterparts, as in Othello's reference to Desdemona, 'that whiter skin of hers than snow' (V.ii.4). Third, *black* is used to describe a brunette, 'black and witty' (II.i.131), and both *white* and *fair* are used to describe a blond, 'fair and wise' (II.i.129), 'a white that shall her blackness fit' (II.i.113) Fourth, *black* is used to denote the soil of filth or grime, 'Her begrimed and black' (III.iii.386-87), and by suggestion, *white* is clean or unsoiled. Fifth, and finally, *black* is used for the morally foul, 'blackest sins' (II.iii.334), 'black vengeance' (III.iii.447); and *fair* is used as an aspect of virtue: 'If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black' (I.iii.289-90) (*ibidem*).

In accordance with Adler and Adelman, I maintain that a shift occurs in the usage of these terms as the play progresses. Whereas in the beginning, blackness and whiteness seem to describe merely aspects of the physical realm, later in the action they appear to connote a largely moral discrepancy that happens to be articulated with the same words. For instance, at the beginning of the play Othello does not associate the blackness of night with negativity: 'The goodness of night upon you, friends' (1.2.33). However, in the later acts the blackness of his own face becomes the indicator of moral filth: 'My name, that was as fresh / As Dian's visage, is now begrim'd, and black / As mine own face' (3.3.392-4). The transformation of meaning is further supported by a phonological aspect: Adler argues for the significance of



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the similar pronunciation of 'white' and 'wight' (Adler, 1974: 253). The latter denotes 'a human being' and, if used as an adjective, it means 'active, strong, brave and nimble'. At first, 'white' is simply a physical phenomenon; but as meanings alter, it begins to signify the human being, and anything that falls outside its spectrum is no longer human. In other words, Othello is dehumanised as the play progresses, and he himself internalises this notion. It is paramount to note that this metamorphosis of meanings is not organic but is purposefully used throughout the play by the Venetian characters in order to cement Othello's Otherness. The primary agent in this process is Iago; nevertheless, other white characters are also apt in bending implications of words as exemplified by the Duke. When he says, 'If virtue no delighted beauty lack, / Your son-in-law is far more fair than black' (1.3.287–8), he deems blackness to be abhorred; however, he excuses Othello from being defined as such. Adler claims that 'the black-skinned Othello is exonerated as being metaphorically white' (Adler, 1974: 252). I insist that it is impossible to know whether Othello was truly conceived to be black-skinned, for the human body can display a myriad of skin colours. It is possible that Othello's skin colour may have been simply *darker* than those of the Venetian characters, and as such the category to which he belonged could have been debated. This would in fact explain the determination to define him *via* the colour of his skin. Nevertheless, in either case, the example supports the capricious nature of words and especially the way they are used.

A similar unpredictability, or outright self-contradiction, is evident in the Hungarian government's policy regarding who is and who is not considered to be a refugee, an immigrant, or a notorious 'migrant'. The last word implies an individual whose movement has neither an origin nor a destination: it denotes a person who does not belong anywhere. According to the government, this category is by far the largest and is the reason for the so-called '*migrant crisis*'. The government claims that such people barely resemble humans; they



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are not even individual people but are more akin to threatening swarms that are controlled by Western forces that mean harm to Hungary. The most notable of such figures is George Soros, the Hungarian-American investor. His ill-intentions are the works of the government's imagination, since – amongst others – Soros has generously contributed to the development of non-governmental organizations in Hungary. Nevertheless, *via* his figure, the migrants acquire a Western aspect and as such they can be used in arguments against the East and West alike. The difference between migrants and refugees is described as thus: 'Refugees are not migrants, they knocked on our doors [...]', as the prime minister articulates (Kovács, 2018). According to Orbán, the difference is simply that while migrants do not have the slightest respect for Hungary's borders and violently threaten the Hungarian nation with their invasion,



refugees respectfully stop at the country's entrance and politely request a refugee status. Ironically, having a refugee status equates to being locked up in the transit zone, which resembles a prison fabricated from containers (figures 1 and 2):

Figure 1. The transit zone. Source: MTI / Hungarian Telegraphic Office. Photo by: unknown.



Figure 2. The transit zone. Source: Index.hu. Photo by: István Huszti.

In addition, new legislation came into effect in the beginning of July 2018, according to which refugee status in Hungary is denied to those who have already entered another safe transit country. This affected two refugee families in August, who were not granted refugee status but were handed over to the Aliens Policy Authority within the transit zone. The difference in status meant that only the children and the breast-feeding women received food. Not even the leader of the Hungarian Evangelical Fellowship, Gábor Iványi, was allowed to give food to these families. The issue was eventually resolved by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, a non-governmental watchdog organization, which appealed for an intervention by the European Court of Human Rights (Dobsi, 2018). All in all, despite the different terms, refugees and ‘migrants’ receive equally harsh and inhumane treatment. However, the word ‘immigrant’ appears to have evaporated from public discourse. A probable reason for this is the booming business of the Hungarian investment immigration programme. Between 2013 and 2017, roughly 20,000 foreigners brought shares and consequently citizenships in



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Hungary, which cost more than €60,000 per person (Zöldi, 2018). Yet, since the primary theme of the campaign of Orbán's party was the refusal of aliens within Hungary, it would have been openly hypocritical to admit to the existence of the programme. Therefore, the party's discourse was manipulated by completely eradicating the topic as well as the general notion of the immigrant. Similar to the Venetian characters of *Othello*, the fluidity of language is exploited to the fullest – with the difference being that the government's logic is not driven by skin colour but by money, profit, and *self-interest*.

The emphasis of 'self' is key, for both the Othering practices of the Hungarian government and the events of the action of *Othello* arise from a single, damaged Self, as Klein and Kristeva remind us. In the case of *Othello*, the position of this Self is occupied by Iago. Adelman notes that Iago's very name hints at this function: 'Iago's name unfolds from the Italian *io*, Latin *ego*' (Adelman, 1997: 127). But more importantly, his Self is thrice damaged:

Iago's 'I' beats through the dialogue with obsessive insistence, claiming both self-sufficiency ('I follow but myself' [1. 58]) and self-division, defining itself by what it is not ('Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago' [1. 57]), in fact, simultaneously proclaiming its existence and nonexistence: 'I am not what I am' (1. 65). (*ibidem*)

Self-sufficiency would normally be considered a positive characteristic; however, coupled with the other two aspects of his personality, it instead reinforces the sense of injury. After all, he is dependent on his divided, vacuous Self. Furthermore, Adelman highlights that 'Iago erupts out of the night [...] as though he were a condensation of its properties' (*ibidem*), and posits that his schemes are directed at Othello because he appears to Iago as the epitome of matter, fullness:

Othello is everywhere associated with the kind of interior solidity and wholeness that stands as a reproach to Iago's interior emptiness and fragmentation [...], Othello is initially 'all in all sufficient' (4.1.261), a 'full soldier' (2.1.36), whose 'solid virtue' (4.1.262) and 'perfect soul' (1.2.31) allow him to achieve the 'full fortune' (1.1.66) possessing Desdemona. (*idem*, 127–8)



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Iago's only chance to cope with such a sight lies in the destruction of Othello, which he achieves by gradually infusing his own darkness within him, like an envious child does with 'a good breast', according to Klein. In fact, the whole play is nothing but a playing out of this process, which is supported by W. H. Auden's criticism of the play: 'I cannot think of any other play in which only one character performs personal actions – all the *deeds* are Iago's – and all the others without exception only exhibit behaviour' (Auden, 1962: 145).

The current state of Hungarian affairs could be envisioned somewhat analogously. Since 2010, Orbán's government has communicated a phoenix-like phenomenon: out of the ruins of a leftist government a powerful leadership has emerged, which has made Hungary strong and self-sufficient once again, but is continuously attacked by enemies such as the notorious George Soros, the migrants or, if all else fails, the European Union. The notable difference between the two narratives lies in the fact that while Iago appears to perceive Othello's solidity to be set in stone (which necessitates its destruction), the Hungarian government claims that Western prosperity is maintained by the purposeful disposal of 'migrants' in Eastern Europe, and especially Hungary. In the next section of my essay, I will analyse the particularities of the Hungarian government's discourse by examining the public letter that the prime minister wrote before Christmas 2017, for which I will provide my own translation.

III.

The text of merely 1,188 words speaks volumes, but I will concentrate on three themes that are relevant for the discussion of this paper. To begin with, Orbán expresses sentiments of the aforementioned anxiety which is engendered by an Other. He describes the refugee crisis as follows: 'Today, our lives, the foundations of our world are targeted by the attack'. The grim end of Europe is envisioned; and interestingly, though he often talks of Europe – especially



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Western Europe – in a negative tone, here it is presented as a respected partner. It is probably more accurate to say that he cherishes an ideal notion of Europe but is disillusioned by most of the leaders of the other nations that are part of it. This is supported by his claim that other European nations either contend that there is no crisis whatsoever and deem the integration of refugees into Europe an advancement or that they have just simply given in. Hungary, however, in his view is different, and has always been because it has never failed to stand up for its rights. In light of this, the reigning government promises to maintain Hungary's integrity without compromises; it assumes the role of guardian, not only of Hungary but of the whole of Europe. The ghastly prospect Orbán conceives for Hungarians is twofold. On the one hand, Hungarians are forced to change their customs: amongst several changes, they have to 'celebrate Christmas Eve behind curtains drawn'. On the other hand, these arguably superficial modifications threaten something much more essential – the Hungarian sense of Self:

They want us not to be what we are. They want us to become people whom we do not want to be. They want us to mix with people who have arrived from a different world and that we change for the seamless completion of this fusion [...]. They want to take our lives away from us and to change it for a life which is not ours. (Orbán 2018)

The stressing of the alien nature of the ominous people is peculiar since in this very same text he posits that Hungarians themselves have a degree of 'alien quality' about them.

Albeit briefly, Orbán draws attention to segments of Hungarian history which to him signify the special position of Hungary within Europe; yet at the same time he highlights that Hungarians to some extent occupy the periphery, the place usually reserved for Others. At the beginning of the letter, he mentions that Hungarians originate from the East and that only after having met European culture did they become an integral agent in it. He later alludes to three periods when Hungary's independence was limited and when Hungarians attempted to



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reclaim it: the occupation of the Ottoman Empire, and the revolutions of 1848 and 1956. His intention is to establish a connection between the freedoms of Hungary and Europe. If Hungary remains free, so will Europe. In my view, however, these allusions also underline Hungary's peripheral position in Europe and its link more to the East than to the West. I would propose that what Orbán is trying to engage is a nationwide subconscious fear of identifying with the East which in turn fuels the antagonism toward refugees arriving from the (Middle) East. By refusing to let these people inside Hungarian territory via the erection of fences and by treating them as if they were inferior, the Hungarian collective psyche is able to conceptualise itself as more European than Eastern.

Finally, the most dominant theme of the letter is that Hungarian freedom and identity are inextricable from Christianity, though Orbán is quite self-contradictory in its depiction. He begins his argument with Christ's second commandment: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' (Mark 12:31). He mentions that his government is often frowned upon, for it deems itself Christian yet is unwilling to welcome the refugees. He then suggests that one should focus on the second part of the commandment: one should love oneself and that includes 'the family, the home, the nation': the core values of modern societies according to Sibley (1995: 41). Orbán claims that 'Christianity is culture and civilization. We live within it. It's not about the number of people that go to church or how many pray sincerely'. I would certainly agree with the first part of the last statement; yet the second part quite perplexes me. If a whole nation's identity is rooted in religious faith, I contend that its faith should be sincere; otherwise, the whole structure of that identity is faulty and unstable. He adds: 'The self-evidence of European life is now at risk, those things which one does not need to reflect upon, merely perform'. For him, Christian life in Europe is one that lacks self-reflexivity, with people carrying out their actions the way they do simply because they were told or taught to.



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As such, according to Orbán, the European Christian is merely a machine. At the end of the text, he even admits that such a lifestyle is far from perfect:

we are aware of imperfection, our own imperfections too, nevertheless we have learnt to live with them, to draw inspiration from them, to gain lift from them. That is why we, Europeans, have been striving for centuries to make the world better. (Orbán 2018)

The logic within this sentiment looks erroneous. If one is aware of one's imperfections, one should try to improve them within oneself, and not try to change the world to fit these imperfections. Besides, I cannot help but associate with this sentiment the multitude of occasions when people, perceived as Others, were exploited or, in the worst of cases, slaughtered by people who claimed their actions were serving God. Despite such illogical reasoning, Orbán stresses the importance of Christianity because, due to its ubiquitous nature within Europe, and to the more positive connotations it holds (in contrast to money), it can be fabricated into a litmus test to identify the Self and the Others, the civilised and the subhuman.

IV.

Finally, I would like to illustrate that the above-mentioned ideological concepts, which emerge in the proximity of an Other to the Self, are most fully fleshed out if that Other is animalised. Bequeathed to Europeans by Antiquity, there exists the 'habit of seeing animals not as they are, but as crucial sites of contrast to human identity' (Anderson, 2000: 7). Identity depends on factors such as 'reason, agency, history, communicative status, and cultural life' (*apud* Ingbold, 1994: 22), especially European Christian cultural life, as Orbán and his government contend. Every individual's identity is determined by these factors, whether one is deemed to be human or animal: identity depends upon whether one can claim to possess these features or is presented to lack them. Both the Hungarian refugee policy and *Othello*



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depict this dialectic and both utilise a terminology that expresses such sentiments. Othello is referred to by all sorts of animal names instead of his own name: 'an old black ram', 'a Barbary horse', 'exchange me for a goat', for instance (1.1.89 and 112; 3.3.178). In addition, his humanity is questioned by Iago: 'Are you a man? Have you a soul? Or sense?' (3.3.372).

The humanity of refugees is questioned in a similar fashion. Outside of the transit zone, individual identities are reduced into 'waves of migrants', a term which many government-affiliated news outlets have integrated into their style of communication. András Bencsik, a journalist and editor of several of these news outlets, stated that 'these are animals' (qtd. in Herczeg, 2015), when refugees attempted to cross Hungary in order to reach other European countries. In addition to this, Tamás Varga-Bíró, a journalist of *Pesti Srácok* ('Guys of Pest'), an online magazine favouring the government, recently commented on his blog that 'these African migrants are not animals. Namely, animals possess a serious and ordered sense of flock'. Here, he was referring to the alleged incident that took place on the Spanish coast, when refugees, who had already landed on the shore, did not bother to offer help to their fellow refugees on the brink of drowning. As discussed earlier, once inside the transit zone, refugees are locked into metaphorical 'cages' where they are completely at the mercy of their 'caretakers', like animals. Several news articles dealing with the predicament of refugees were filled with comments by people who asserted that this was the right place for 'migrants' and that they agreed with such measures. These few examples illustrate the readiness with which people tend to question the Others' humanity and animalise them at the same time. When discussing the process of Othering, Sibley notes that Others are usually associated with 'nature, dirt, excrement, overt sexuality' (Sibley, 1995: 51). All of these aspects are applicable to animals as well; therefore, the image of the animal provides the perfect vehicle for



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Otherring. However, I will only discuss sexuality here, because it is the most dominant feature both in *Othello* and in the Hungarian public discourse.

The prospect of sexual relations between a male who is perceived as Other and a female who belongs to a given community is perhaps regarded as the most potent catalyst of anxiety about the Other because it embodies the transgression of two boundaries at once. On the one hand, it conjures up the image of the miscegenation between people who belong to two distinct categories and as such it is argued that their bloodlines would be spoiled and their lineages destroyed. On the other, it evokes the boundary crossed between the animal and the human. The desire for sex is instinctive and natural but Nature denotes everything that humans have distanced themselves from and against which they have established their sense of identity. Therefore, to be defined by one's sexuality is an act of dehumanisation and animalisation which is exactly what happens to Othello and the refugees. The first impressions of Othello, which Iago offers, relate to the sexual relationship that exists between Othello and Desdemona.

Even now, now, very now, an old black ram
Is tugging your white ewe. Arise, arise,
Awake the snorting citizens with the bell,
Or else the devil will make a grandsire of you (1.1.89–92)

you'll have your
daughter covered with a Barbary horse; you'll have your
nephews neigh to you (1.1.111–12)

your daughter
and the Moor are now making the beast with two
backs (1.1.115–17).

the gross clasps of a lascivious Moor (1.1.127)

Besides insinuating that sexuality is depraved, these remarks also appear to come from a collective unease that one's otherwise seemingly pure lineage may be defiled by the genetic



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intrusion of the Other. Hence Brabantio's outcry: 'O treason of the blood!' (1.1.168). Although this instance does not specifically revolve around money, it certainly involves value and once again, *self-interest*. Othello has wrecked the chance of Desdemona having a favourable marriage for which reason Brabantio deems him 'an abuser of the world' (1.2.80) a scene later. With his 'transgression', Othello, in Brabantio's eyes, does not simply disrespect local custom but the very order of the world.

Similar attitudes are discernible in Hungarian attitudes toward refugees. Countless Hungarian magazine articles report cases of refugee men having sexual relations with European women. On most occasions, these men are portrayed as immoral and aggressive to the point that intercourse becomes rape. In 2018, the League of Towns with County Rights held a meeting in Budapest concerning the refugee crisis. One main line of argumentation for resisting the entry of refugees was encapsulated by the rhetorical question formulated by Éva Farkas, mayor of Makó: 'Do you want to bear children for migrants?' (qtd. in Vég, 2018) In my mind, the conception of children with a refugee parent is a repulsive notion to many Hungarians because first, it would cement the physical proximity with the Eastern Other; and second, it would seal an ideological subjugation to Western influence. I believe this encapsulates the core of the Hungarian dilemma: the Hungarian nation is within the throes of an identity crisis. Since historically it has suffered subjection from East and West alike, it is, as an independent nation now, unable to establish its sense of Self on the grounds of anything other than grievance in both directions which are both embodied by the refugees. I think that Hungarian identity is currently in grave need of the refugees because their Othering provides the only means in which it can engage its Self. Wilton notes that 'the prolonged proximity of someone identified as abject/uncanny overwhelms the symbolic construction of them as 'Other'' (Wilton, 1998: 181). If this happened, however, it would be a fatal blow to



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Hungary's current state because, like Iago, the Hungarian nation would no longer be able to define itself: it would be unable to speak a word.



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Conclusion

Understanding the mechanisms that operate behind the refugee crisis is a task of growing importance because, even though the number of arriving refugees is at its lowest, the crisis is far from being over. There are only a handful of measures that minimise the influx of refugees and the countries within the European Union are still unable to reach a consensus on how to tackle the crisis. Hungary is one of the most prominent opponents of the integration of refugees which is why I think it crucial to investigate how the crisis is approached there. I maintain that the Hungarian Self, similarly to Iago, is experiencing an identity crisis. Due to its historical injuries, Hungary is unable to establish itself in a positive manner; it is entangled within various ill-feelings toward both the West and the East and, for the moment, it can only define itself through the alienation of Others. Through a comparative analysis of current Hungarian public discourse and Shakespeare's *Othello*, I hope to have illustrated the ways in which this Othering occurs. In the face of this, I would claim that initiatives such as the one instigated by Judith Sargentini in which she proposes sanctions in accordance with Article 7 of the EU treaty against Hungary are beneficial, because they raise awareness of the detrimental effects of the current Hungarian government's actions – both nationally and internationally. The former seems to me to be more important in this case because national awareness could propagate a re-evaluation of national identity. For this, actions are needed but at the same time it is equally important that researchers investigate how Hungary and other countries equally crippled in their identity will be able to construct a positive sense of Self based on strengths and not on the demonisation of Others.



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Figure 1. The transit zone. Source: MTI / Hungarian Telegraphic Office. Photo by: unknown. <https://civilhetes.net/a-menekultek-halalraehetztesen-dolgoznak-a-magyar-hatosagok-a-tranzitzonaban> (accessed 5 January 2019).

Figure 2. The transit zone. Source: Index.hu. Photo by: István Huszti. https://index.hu/belfold/2017/06/12/tranzitzona_roszke_tompa_borton_menekultek_terhes_no_hatosagi_tulka_pas_gyerekek/ (accessed 5 January 2019).