Making Strangers
Outsiders, Aliens and Foreigners

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"You must needs be strangers": Stigma and sympathetic imagination in Shakespeare's *Sir Thomas More*

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After the March 2011 outbreak of civil war in Syria, an estimated 11 million Syrians fled their country, most seeking refuge in neighboring countries, but about one million requesting asylum in Europe (Migration Policy Centre). This mass migration led to a backlash of nativist sentiments across Europe, where an economically fragile populous fretted about immigrants taking their jobs and distorting their culture (Dempset). That nativism received a powerful Shakespearean response from the actor Ian McKellen.

What did a 400-year-old English playwright have to do with this twenty-first-century political problem? Over the course of several years, McKellen treated audiences across Europe to the speech Shakespeare added to Anthony Munday's *Sir Thomas More* (1603), a censored play never performed in the early modern age.[1] McKellen, who played More in 1964 in one of the play's first-ever stagings, would preface the speech by associating it with twentieth-century progressive political causes such as gay pride parades and anti-apartheid demonstrations. As McKellen's gesture suggested, Shakespeare's representations of stigma are transferable across temporal lines (his early

[1] See M.S., "Refugees and the Bard." One of McKellen's many performances of this speech can be seen, for example, at a press event for Colin Firth and Anthony Arnove's book *The People Speak: Voices That Changed Britain*; see "The People Speak." When Gregory Doran, artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, included the *Sir Thomas More* speech in the star-studded BBC show *Shakespeare Live!* (2016), the headline in *The Daily Express* (April 25, 2016) was "Outrage as BBC bosses 'use Shakespeare to push pro-immigration agenda'" (see http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/664069/bbc-shakespeare-pro-immigration-agenda).

modern art speaks to modern situations) and conceptual lines (his representation of ethnic conflict speaks of discrimination due to race and sexual orientation) precisely because those representations are about the generalizable phenomenon of discrimination rather than the specific identity being discriminated against.

Six hundred years earlier, as McKellen narrated, London was the site of a different kind of demonstration, a riot dubbed the "Ill May Day." Between 1330 and 1550, more than 64,000 foreigners, from Lombard bankers to Flemish laborers, migrated from continental Europe to England.[2] On May 1, 1517, a mob of some 2,000 young, male, working-class apprentices resentful of those immigrants marched on St. Martin le Grand, a wealthy area of London north of St. Paul's Cathedral heavily populated with foreigners. The city's deputy sheriff at the time, a young Thomas More, pled with the mob and "almost brought them to a staye," as Edward Hall narrated in his 1548 chronicle (lxi), but then the residents of St. Martin's started throwing stones, bats, bricks, and hot water out their windows upon the crowd. More was undone; riot broke out.

Nearly 80 years later, Munday wrote the first draft of *Sir Thomas More* (ca. 1592-93) in the wake of another immigrant crisis in England. Wars in France and the Netherlands had driven some 10,000 displaced Europeans toward England (Griffin 19 n.13). In 1586, seeing the situation "lyke unto Yll May Day," William Fleetwood, Recorder of the City of London, warned William Cecil, chief advisor of Queen Elizabeth, that certain apprentices were "conspiring an insurrection [in] this cittie against the French and Dutch" (quoted from Griffin 19). In the wake of the Spanish Armada, a royally approved pamphlet, *A Fig for the Spaniard* (1591), boasted of England's readiness for more war with Spain, but it also tempered this nationalist chest-thumping with a proclamation of Queen Elizabeth's Christian charity for displaced European immigrants:

> Poore strangers from their soyles expeld by warre,
> For Christes sake, find fauour in her sight:
> From North, from South, from East, and from the West.
> To hir they come, and heere they finde a rest. (B)

Clearly, government policy welcoming the "strangers" and public sentiment resenting them were in tension, providing fertile ground for drama. Munday's

[2] See *England's Immigrants 1330-1550: Resident Aliens in the Late Middle Ages*, a major research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (https://www.englandsimmigrants.com).

play begins with an impudent Lombard immigrant sexually assaulting a faithful English wife (1.1.1-14), followed by a complaint that "aliens and strangers eat the bread from the fatherless children, and take the living from all the artificers and the intercourse from all merchants" (1.1.109-12). Such is often the nativist's image of immigrants whether in 1517 (More's time), 1593 (Munday's time), or 2015 (McKellen's time): *they're taking our women, and they're taking our wealth*. Thus, one of Munday's Englishmen vows to "make it the worst May Day for the strangers that ever they saw" (1.1.127-28).

This is the point in the play where More is called in to address the nativists, and also the point where, in 1603, Shakespeare was called in to write More's speech.[3] Keep in mind that Shakespeare had his own experience coming to London as a stranger looked upon with suspicion by the native inhabitants (i.e., the University Wits) whose jobs he stole *en route* to fame and fortune. The Shakespearean material in *Sir Thomas More* has the feel of a celebrity script doctor brought in for a moment of artistic virtuosity that, the other authors working on the script seem to believe, only Shakespeare could write. I want to suggest, however, that the systematic opposition to stigma evident in Shakespeare's career is one of the reasons his colleagues called upon him to write More's address to the nativists, and also one of the reasons Shakespeare was later identified as the author of the passage. Indeed, E. A. J. Honigmann, one of the leading commentators on *Sir Thomas More,* considered the fact that it is "a wonderfully compassionate statement on behalf of refugees" as evidence that "Shakespeare wrote it [and] no one else could have written it" (225); I wouldn't go that far, but Honigmann was unflinching.

The passage employs one of Shakespeare's most celebrated rhetorical and dramatic devices, one which, importantly, recent social scientists have associated with the reduction of stigma in a person's thoughts, words, and actions—namely *imagination*—not in the banal sense of creativity, but in the technical sense of a mental picturing of things which are not immediately evident in the world as it appears before our eyes. As soon as More's speech to the nativists starts, "Grant them removed" (2.3.80), he is asking them (and us in the audience) to engage in a hypothetical: imagine a situation which is different than what is true. The whole speech is a hypothetical. Imagine first, More says to the rioters, that you got your way, that the city turned these immigrants out to sea, and that you had to watch as they sailed with their helpless children out into an abyss of uncertainty and danger:

[3] Jackson used computational stylistics to confirm Shakespeare's long-suspected authorship. Craig did a stylistic analysis comparing 30 plays from 1590-94 to 30 plays from 1600-04 to determine that the Shakespeare sections belong to the latter period.

> Grant them removed, and grant that this your noise
> Hath chid down all the majesty of England.
> Imagine that you see the wretched strangers,
> Their babies at their backs, with their poor luggage,
> Plodding to th' ports and coasts for transportation. (2.3.80-84)

Starting with an emotional appeal, More asks: How would you feel? Would you be happy? Satisfied? Or would you feel guilty? Would you not regret violating the basic Christian call for love, kindness, and caring for the most vulnerable among us?

Imagine second, More says, the precedent that would be set if the threat of violence from a group of rowdy commoners were allowed to dictate government policy to the king:

> And [imagine] that you sit as kings in your desires . . .
> What had you got? I'll tell you. You had taught
> How insolence and strong hand should prevail,
> How order should be quelled. And by this pattern
> Not one of you should live an agèd man. (2.3.85-91)

An opposing mob would form, More says, and "men, like ravenous fishes, / Would feed one on another" (2.3.94-95). Would you want to live in such a state? Would you feel safe? What would happen when your enemies threatened violence against you? Should the king then send you out to sea?[4]

Imagine third, therefore, that you were yourself a stranger in a strange land:

> Whither would you go?
> What country, by the nature of your error,
> Should give you harbor? Go you to France or Flanders,
> To any German province, Spain, or Portugal,
> Nay, anywhere that not adheres to England—
> Why you must needs be strangers. (2.3.134-39)

[4] Here McKellen slyly elided some lines making a conservative justification of strong state political order. Given this sentiment in Shakespeare's original text, we have to ask why the Master of Revels, Edmund Tilney, censored *Sir Thomas More*, telling the authors to take out the scene of More's address to the nativists: "Leave out the insurrection wholly and the cause thereof," Tilney wrote, saying More's role in the riot should be relayed "Only by a short report and not otherwise, at your own perils" (quoted from Appendix C in *The Norton Shakespeare*). Tillney was not driven by ideology—he censored both the anti-immigrant material in Act I and the anti-nativist material in Act II—as much as a desire to keep the peace. What Tilney censored, and McKellen later exploited, is the politically incendiary quality of Shakespeare's scene.

Would you want a riotous mob of ruffians to welcome you with hostility and violence, More asks. Would you want to be kicked out of the country? To be attacked? Treated like dogs? As if you were existentially inferior because of your ethnicity? As if they had an unassailably greater claim to the earth than you?

> Would you be pleased
> To find a nation of such barbarous temper…
> What would you think
> To be thus used? This is the strangers' case,
> And this your mountainish inhumanity. (2.3.139-49)

Coincidently, the phrase "the golden rule" was first coined one year after Shakespeare's additions to *Sir Thomas More*, in Charles Gibbon's treatise on fair taxation, *The Order of Equalitie* (1604): "Euery man should remember this golden rule *To doe as he would be done to*" (17). Indeed, Jesus's summation of the law ("whatsoeuer ye wolde that men shulde do to you, euen so do ye, to them"[5]) underwrites Shakespeare's entire passage, but he had More conclude his hypothetical with the notion of a "case," associating the strangers with law and rhetoric, and the imagery of the "mountain," associating the nativists with a cold, hard, inflexible, and oppressive state of nature. In More's speech, the antidote to social Darwinism, cultural narcissism, and ethnic discrimination is "humanity," the human capacity for compassion and, more importantly, for a reason: More's main point is not that discrimination is immoral but that it is irrational. Ultimately, his appeal is to the head, not the heart, and it works. The rioters instantly lay down their weapons (2.3.158sd), and Henry VIII thanks More by knighting him (2.3.210-12). Thus, looking at the symbolic associations in this scene, Shakespeare associated stigma and discrimination with low-class weakness, inconstancy, and the losing side of an argument, and opposition to stigma with power, wisdom, words, logic, law, order, and success.

As such, Shakespeare's contribution to *Sir Thomas More* dramatizes "the efficacy of the hypothetical mode in bringing about a change of heart," as the French Shakespearean scholar Margaret Tudeau-Clayton observed in 2012 (244). "In this way," the German Shakespearean Sabine Schülting wrote in her 2013 reading of *Sir Thomas More*, "Shakespearean drama also reflects on the power of the theatre to effectively engage its audience, thereby enabling them

[5] Matthew 7.12 in *The Bible and Holy Scriptures*; cf. Leviticus 19.34: "The stranger that dwelleth with you shalbe as one of your selues, & thou shal loue him as thy selfe: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt."

imaginatively to cross the gap not merely between fiction and reality, but also between their own and another's experiences" (37).[6] What More asks the other characters on stage to do—*imagine yourself in their shoes*—is what Shakespeare habitually asked his audiences to do with stigmatized characters such as Richard III, Aaron, Shylock, Othello, Edmund, and Caliban. By giving these characters a voice, through soliloquies and asides, Shakespeare asked us to see their stories from their perspectives. More's speech is a clear example of what has been identified as Shakespeare's "sympathetic imagination," not because More the character and Shakespeare the author ask audiences to pity the strangers, but because they ask their audience to see a situation from a perspective which is not their own (Bate).

The sympathetic imagination was first theorized by the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Adam Smith in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759): "As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation … By the imagination, we place ourselves in [another's] situation" (2). In *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespear* (1769), Elizabeth Montagu, who knew Smith, saw a sympathetic imagination at work in Shakespeare's drama: "Shakespear seems to have had the art of the Dervise, in the Arabian tales, to throw his soul into the body of another man, and be at once possessed of his sentiments, adopt his passions, and rise to all the functions and feelings of his situation" (37). Such sentiments formed the foundation of the Romantic reading of Shakespeare conducted by William Hazlitt ("[Shakespeare] had only to think of anything in order to become that thing" [93]) and John Keats ("Shakspeare possessed so enormously… negative capability" [93]). More recently, Martha Nussbaum has argued that a "literary imagination" is "an essential ingredient of an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own" (xvi). And thinkers such as Lynn Hunt and Stephen Pinker have even suggested that an increase in literary production and consumption in the modern age has contributed to an increase in empathy and, consequently, a decrease in violence.

In fact, recent empirical research from the social sciences has drawn attention to the relationship between literature and empathy.[7] The term "empathy"

[6] Schülting cited the English Shakespearean scholar Richard Wilson's treatment of Shakespeare's scenes of strangers as a premonition of the unconditional hospitality theorized in the late work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida.

[7] For an overview of this field of research, see Koopman and Hakemulder, who significantly note that "in these studies, researchers typically attempt to change white school

(which only entered the English language in the twentieth century as a translation of the German *Einfühlung* ["empathy, n."]) is comparable to what the Romantics called "sympathy" (imagining the perspective of another—"feeling with") but, somewhat confusingly, "empathy" is also contrasted in the social sciences with "sympathy" (expressing pity for another's pain—"feeling for"). What the Romantics called "sympathy" and what we moderns call "empathy" are both about perspective-taking, but social scientists have further distinguished between "cognitive empathy" (the ability to understand why someone thinks, believes, or acts in a certain way) and "emotional empathy" (the experience of feeling someone else's feelings). Viewing literature as a moral laboratory which fosters a role-taking ability, these social scientists argue that reading literature evokes empathy by making people aware of the experiences of others, especially the plights of those who are suffering. Readers imagine what it would be like to be in such a situation. Just as we must imagine the events described in a literary text actually happening, we must—when we empathize—imagine the experiences and feelings of another human being. That's what literature is: one big hypothetical game which requires and therefore cultivates an awesome imaginative power. That imaginative power can then be repurposed for social interaction. We can imagine what it would be like to be another person in another situation. Allowing for stillness and slow thinking, literature stimulates moral self-evaluation and provides emotional exercise, building up our capacity to use emotion. Thus, empathy leads to more pro-social behavior.

As this is an emergent field of study, there are many open questions. The positive correlation between literature and empathy could exist, not because literature creates empathy, but because already empathetic people are drawn to literature. The make-believe quality of literature that requires a sympathetic imagination also takes away any urgency to act; we can empathize with a literary character without actually having to do anything about it. Does empathy derived from literature involve problems of complacency? Researchers have only just begun to specify which kinds of texts—narrative vs. argumentative, fictional vs. non-fictional, literary vs. non-literary—most generate empathy (Koopman and Hakemulder 87-90). It has not yet been considered which kinds of literature (verse, drama, novel), which kinds of media (books, performance, film), or which authors (Homer, Shakespeare, Austen, Plath, etc.) most generate empathy.

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children's attitudes toward (minority) outgroups (from Native Americans to children with disabilities) with the help of stories" (85).

But this connection between literature and empathy is important because, elsewhere, social scientists have demonstrated a link between empathy and the reduction of stigma. In 1991, citing Adam Smith, C. Daniel Batson developed the "empathy-altruism hypothesis," which suggests that taking the perspective of a person in need generates empathy, and empathy evokes a desire to help that person.[8] Among other strategies of reducing stigma in society—such as protest, education, and face-to-face contact[9]—"perspective-taking" has emerged as the most successful because it reorganizes the foundations of stigma: the relationships among the self, the other, and the groups to which they belong. In 1996, a group of behavioral scientists led by Mark Davis was the first to demonstrate something philosophers empirically in the "sympathetic imagination" tradition had argued for years: "The mental processes associated with perspective taking cause an observer's thoughts and feelings about a target to become, in some sense, more 'selflike' … At the level of mental representation, the effect of active perspective taking will be to create a merging of self and other" (713-14). Because perspective-taking activates the idea of selfhood in the other, it reduces stigma in a person's words and actions more effectively than, for example, deliberately saying to yourself that you will avoid stereotypes (Galinsky and Moskowitz). Perspective-taking reduces prejudice and discrimination by (1) identifying with a member of a stigmatized group, (2) attributing selfhood to that member, (3) further attributing the selfhood attributed to that member to his or her entire group, and (4) then attributing the new selfhood of the group to additional individuals from that group encountered in day-to-day life (Batson, et al.; Shih, et al.). Interestingly, additional research has shown that the higher self-esteem we have ourselves, the higher regard we attribute to others when we take their perspectives (Galinsky and Ku). Perspective taking has been shown to prevent not only words and actions that are explicitly biased and discriminatory, but also implicit and unconscious bias (Todd et al.). And perspective-taking makes someone more psychologically flexible (Michael Levin et al.). In sum, by increasing empathy and decreasing prejudice and discrimination, perspective-taking leads to a reduction of stigma, better social bonds, and less interpersonal conflict (Galinsky, Ku, and Wong).

Borrowing a method from the social sciences, we can now consider the possibility of a new hypothesis: reading Shakespeare reduces stigma. His repre-

[8] In a subsequent study, Batson, Early, and Salvarani drew distinctions between kinds of perspective-taking: imagining how someone in need feels (which produces empathy) vs. imagining how you would feel in that situation (which produces empathy but also a more visceral distress).

[9] See Corrigan and Penn; Heijnders and Van Der Meij; and Corrigan, et al.

sentations of stigma were sympathetic in both the soft sense (they encourage us to "feel for" the stigmatized) and the strong sense (they ask and allow us to "feel with" both the stigmatizer and the stigmatized, to understand why people stigmatize and what it is like to be stigmatized, and to reflect upon how we might think or feel in either situation). The sympathetic imagination Shakespeare employed when creating these characters enables our own sympathetic imagination when interpreting them. By prompting perspective-taking, Shakespeare's art generates an empathy which erases the stark distinctions usually made between self and other, in-group and out-group. If this hypothesis is true, then reading Shakespeare's representations of stigma can result in a reduction of stigma in one's thoughts, words, and actions, which can, in turn, bring about stronger social bonds, more pro-social behavior, and a decrease in conflict and violence. A collaboration of literary criticism and cognitive science could test this hypothesis. We owe as much to Shakespeare—and to each other.

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