

**The Dangers of Hospitality in
Shakespeare: the Hostess in
The Rape of Lucrece and *The Winter's Tale***

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Hospitality recurs across Shakespeare's works in diffuse and complex ways: his characters grapple with the tension that can arise between host and guest, the uncomfortable intimacy of sharing a domestic space, and the balance of debt and exchange that hangs within any hospitable situation. Many representations of hospitality we see in Shakespeare's works reflect an early modern anxiety over the perceived shift in hospitality from a generous practice of charity to a corrosive celebration of excess. My focus here is on the figure of the tragic hostess in Shakespeare who is betrayed by her own adherence to a noble and generous hospitable code of conduct that is ultimately unrealistic. The early modern hostess wields authority through her management of the household and welcoming of guests into the domestic space, and is subject not only to the dangers of a decaying standard of hospitality but to gendered constraints as well. In his early narrative poem, *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), and again in *The Winter's Tale* (1609), Shakespeare presents women damned by an overly generous and guileless performance of hospitality. Examining Lucrece and Hermione in terms of their position as hostesses allows us to consider how women in early modern culture may be caught between the simultaneous responsibilities and risks of being both wife and host.

Felicity Heal has influentially articulated how, in this period, hospitality was a fraught social, moral, and political issue. She explains that

Something, many authors believed, had gone wrong in the practice of hospitality. It is impossible to read early modern texts without attaching the prefix “decay of” to the notion hospitality, for it was firmly held that the English had fallen from some previous standard of domestic excellence.¹

This concern over a decay in hospitality from noble to sinful often surfaces in early modern literature. For James Heffernan, Shakespeare’s works offer a way to explore early modern conceptions of hospitality. The playwright continuously “test[s] the very meaning of hospitality in his own time,” thereby “revealing the worst as well as best that host and guests can do for and to each other.”² The decayed grandeur that Heal identifies as characterizing early modern hospitality underscores Shakespeare’s explorations of the highs and lows of hospitality: he continuously returns to the idea that hospitality can exalt and reify social bonds but can just as easily exploit people’s vulnerability to dangerous ends. The ways in which the unstable state of hospitality creates the potential for both joy and danger is illustrated with particular clarity through the figure of the hostess in Shakespeare.

In both *Lucrece* and *Hermione*, we see a woman extend hospitality to a man without reservation and as a result become trapped within a violent situation. Heffernan briefly acknowledges the similarities between these two characters, but neither in his work nor elsewhere in critical discussion is there sufficient attention to the connections between *Hermione* and *Lucrece*. By putting *The Rape of Lucrece* into conversation with *The Winter’s Tale* and contextualizing the role of an early modern hostess, we can see how Shakespeare explores the fraught and potentially tragic position of a woman at the head of a household.

Surprisingly little scholarship acknowledges the centrality of hospitality within *The Rape of Lucrece*. In brief, this classical story details how Tarquin, upon hearing of the supreme beauty and virtue of Lucrece, journeys to present himself before her as a guest while her husband, Tarquin’s friend Collatine, is absent at battle. Adopting the role of guest affords Tarquin intimate access to Lucrece, and opportunity to attack her. Hospitality is

the context within which the plot unfolds. While other versions such as Thomas Heywood's 1609 play of the same title feature more subplots or a more extensive cast of characters, Shakespeare's rendition is primarily a detailed exploration of Tarquin's perspective leading up to the rape and Lucrece's reaction in the aftermath. This close study of Tarquin's violence and Lucrece's desolation at many points emphasizes the rape as a breach not just of morality or chastity, but of hospitality.

When Tarquin first arrives, already harboring a violent lust, the narration tells us that "well was he welcomed by the Roman dame" (51), and that "guiltless she securely gives good cheer / and reverend welcome to her princely guest, / whose inward ill no outward harm expressed" (89-91).³ Here for the first time we see the discord between Tarquin's and Lucrece's understandings of hospitality. For Lucrece, the arrival of her husband's friend is a celebratory occasion that merits feasting, conviviality, and unconditional welcome. She, operating within a noble system of hospitality, "touch'd no unknown baits, nor feared no hooks," unable to read anything sinister in her guest (103). Tarquin, meanwhile, understands that the intimacy of a shared domestic space will offer the opportunity to attack his hostess.

Lucrece entertains her guest over supper, as her duties as hostess require. While the narration focuses solely on the conversation between Tarquin and Lucrece, and the disparities between their intentions, the simple premise of a prosperous household entertaining a powerful guest holds significance. It is worth pausing to consider the labor, elided by the narration, that any hospitable situation entails. While there is no doubt that women occupied a constrained position within early modern society, there is also evidence of the vital, creative, and indeed authoritative role exercised by the noble hostess. In her analysis of country house entertainments during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, Elizabeth Zemen Kolkovitch demonstrates the active, strategic role women played in hospitable events. Far from being sidelined or functioning as figureheads, noble women sitting at the heads of households actively engaged with the political negotiations and social power plays arising from entertaining a powerful person within one's home.⁴ Further emphasizing the early modern woman's authority as host in her work on banqueting as a form of theatre, Sara Mueller

reframes women's roles in orchestrating banquets to highlight their "creative agency in their own households."⁵ The hostess was not merely an emblem of domestic welcome, but an authoritative actant who understood the potential for social development and power exchange in any host-guest relationship. Domestic guides such as those authored by Hannah Woolley indicate the skill and effort of the early modern hostess, with Woolley's *Gentlewoman's Companion* explicitly defending the running of a household as "an excellent and profitable employment"⁶ and implying that this employment can contribute to social gain through "the entertaining of persons of Quality."⁷

Thus, Lucrece's welcome is not simply a display of kindness and an invitation to sit for dinner, but rather the skillful, deliberate result of a conscientiously run household. The meal itself could be understood as Lucrece exercising her agency, and any hostess in her position would have fully understood the social importance of entertaining the powerful Tarquin. In fact, in Heywood's *The Rape of Lucrece*, Lucrece explicitly describes her position as mistress of a household as requiring great care and work. Addressing a servant, she says:

Now that your Lord is absent from this house,
And that the Masters eie is from his charge,
We must be carefull and with prouidence
Guide his domestick busines, we ha now
Giuen ore all feasting and leaud reuelling,
Which ill becomes the house whose Lo: is absent.⁸

She explains that since all her husband's business becomes her responsibility when he is absent, she must be conscious of this and always be first to rise and last to sleep in the effort to effectively run the household. While we do not hear a similar proclamation of responsibility and labor from Shakespeare's Lucrece, we can acknowledge that her position as head of a wealthy household entails significant work. Entertaining a noble guest such as Tarquin is made possible by Lucrece's continual household management, which engages her awareness of the potential for social and political gain through hospitality.

It is all the more wrenching, then, that Tarquin's calculated assault on Lucrece is framed as a violation not only of her body and chastity, but of the hospitality she extends. In attacking Lucrece,

Tarquin is also dismantling her power as hostess, a parallel which the text makes clear. In order to reach Lucrece's room Tarquin must move past barriers both emotional and literal. Every door he moves through is an "unwilling portal," and the "locks between her chamber and his will" through which he forces himself "all rate his ill," the physical structure of the house resisting as does their mistress (302-309). When Tarquin does at last reach the isolated, unsuspecting Lucrece, he at first attempts to convince her that she should willingly have sex with him to protect herself from the rape and intentional destruction of her reputation that he is prepared to commit. In her response Lucrece rebukes him by invoking the social contract she believes exists between them as host and guest:

Reward not hospitality
 With such black payment as thou hast pretended;
 Mud not the fountain that gave drink to thee;
 Mar not the thing that cannot be amended. (575-78)

Hospitality, in Lucrece's eyes, is the fountain that Tarquin has enjoyed the bounty of; to now act violently within the context of hospitality is to pollute this from sustenance to poison. There is, in this, an implication of the anxiety over hospitality's decay that Heal identifies: Lucrece upholds the standard of open and free-flowing hospitality which Tarquin, focused on his selfish, violent passions rather than a social ideal, will taint. Lucrece's language highlights how generosity is spoiled through excessive consumption: The abundant fountain of hospitality should be wholesome, but Tarquin's greed for more than what is offered will corrupt this. Lucrece goes on to urge Tarquin not to mar "the thing that cannot be amended." While this could be referring to her virtue, within the close context of this passage it seems to be again referencing hospitality. Once the fountain has been polluted it cannot be redeemed; once the trust between host and guest is betrayed, it cannot be amended.

Part of the fatal issue here is that Lucrece views hospitality as a noble, sacred practice in which host and guest share the intimate space of the home and are bonded through respect. Tarquin, meanwhile, recognizes hospitality as an opportunity for subterfuge and violence. As hostess Lucrece is vulnerable to the stranger in her home; as woman, she is vulnerable to male violence and caught within a restrictive state. This will be mirrored in *The Winter's Tale*,

in which Hermione becomes similarly trapped between a hostess's duty and a woman's vulnerability.

The Winter's Tale opens with two courtiers discussing the exchange of hospitality taking place between the kings of Sicilia and Bohemia. For David Ruitter this scene shows a tension between the Sicilian Camillo's conception of "true hospitality"—what Derrida would call a sort of Kantian idea/ideal of hospitality," and the Bohemian Archidamus's anxious awareness of the debt that his king has incurred as an extended guest.⁹ Heal shows that the loss of the "golden, vanished age of generosity" mourned in early modern writing is often attributed "to man's innate depravity, and to some or all of the seven deadly sins."¹⁰ To Hermione, hospitality is a perfect system that upholds the high moral standard of the domestic space; to Leontes, it is subject to these sins and weaknesses. In the scene that follows, these two competing perspectives of hospitality will play out further as Leontes employs Hermione's help in convincing their guest Polixenes to stay longer, only to then see her success as proof of adultery. Hermione's skill as a hostess makes her vulnerable to her own husband's suspicions, showing again the double bind of a hostess having to enact perfect welcome even when it puts her into danger.

Leontes' attempts to convince Polixenes to extend his visit, which has already stretched nine months, are met repeatedly with gentle but firm rejections. Their friendly back-and-forth includes the exchange:

Pol. No longer stay.

Leon. One sev'nnight longer.

Pol. Very sooth, tomorrow. (1.2.20-22)¹¹

When Polixenes finally asserts that "there is no tongue that moves" that could change his mind on the matter, Leontes looks to Hermione for help (1.2.26). With her husband's encouragement, Hermione pushes Polixenes further, even reprising the rhythm of her husband's attempts:

Pol. No, madam.

Herm. Nay, but you will?

Pol. I may not, verily. (1.2.26)

This launches Hermione into a teasing speech in which she asserts that "verily, / you shall not go. A lady's 'verily' is / as potent as

a lord's," and offers Polixenes a choice to be either her guest or her prisoner (1.2.63-65). In this playful threat to hold Polixenes within her home against his will Hermione alludes to the sinister potential of hospitality, yet she does not see the true danger lurking in the silent, increasingly suspicious Leontes who watches this exchange. Hermione performs her self-proclaimed role of "kind hostess" perfectly, happily occupying an ideal hospitality which is eroding without her knowledge under Leontes's growing jealousy (1.2.76).

Hermione's quick success in persuading Polixenes to remain as guest, and Leontes's rapid dissolution from loving friend and husband to murderous tyrant, has been the subject of much critical speculation, some of which productively considers the role of hospitality. For Ruitter, Leontes sees hospitality as based on sovereignty and exchange, while Hermione, like Camillo, understands hospitality as a social ideal. To her view, the peaceful bond between hosts and guest insulates them from harm, but for Leontes there is something threatening in his wife's success:

In demonstrating the power to enforce [Polixenes's] coming and going, which her husband appears unable to do, she appears to gain the sovereignty that Derrida claims is necessary for the enactment of hospitality and that Leontes, in some respect, lacks.¹²

Hermione's too-generous, too-friendly performance of the role of hostess seems to Leontes not only to contradict her responsibility to be chaste, but to usurp his authority as king and host. For both Ruitter and Heffernan, Leontes's reaction against Hermione and Polixenes is explicable, if not justifiable. Heffernan, in fact, holds that Hermione is notably flirtatious in her persuasion, and comments that "whenever a male guest is entertained by a woman, whether or not her husband is watching and whether or not she is chaste, she may find herself skirting the razor-thin line between friendship and seduction."¹³ In addition to this, he notes, by successfully petitioning a foreign king, she is moving from the domestic to the political, creating further strain. But while I have argued that the early modern woman held creative skill and significant responsibility as hostess, I would be no means extend this to claim that she could hold equal social power to her male guest or fellow host, or that she can always balance the

responsibilities of the hostess with the constraints of a wife. The “razor-thin line” Heffernan describes is often invisible, and can cut. Hermione extends hospitality, as does Lucrece; she is betrayed, as was Lucrece, not through any lapse into flirtation, but through the system of hospitality which is precariously vulnerable to violence and sinister intent, especially for a woman.

In Tracy McNulty’s sustained analysis of the figure of the hostess in Western traditions she considers how femininity, or feminine subjectivity, operates within the practice of hospitality. She intentionally distances this feminine subjectivity from a fundamentally welcoming mode characterized by maternal impulse and homemaking and instead uses the “marginalized or devalued position of the hostess” as a lens through which to consider identity and ethics in acts of hospitality. She argues that

The first important consequence of woman’s designation as the personal property of the host is that she is able to act as an extension of the host’s personhood. The host’s offer of hospitality often depends upon his ability to dispose of the female dependents who make up his personal property, who he offers to the guest as though giving some part of himself.¹⁴

Leontes extends Hermione as if she is part of himself in his entreaty that she speak and persuade Polixenes. She at first echoes his playful entreaties, but speaks more passionately (and compellingly) than Leontes did. When he sees his wife acting differently than he expects, Leontes fears that his wife and friend “mingle friendship far” and that Hermione might move beyond platonic feelings for Polixenes, towards a desire that is foreign to him (1.2.140). Shocked at the thought of her capacity to be so unlike him, Leontes decides that she has betrayed him and is deserving of death. Of this moment, McNulty comments that the friendship between the two kings is “splintered” by Leontes’s misinterpretation of welcome as lust, “thereby introducing rivalry and uncanny difference into what seemed to be a perfectly equal, reversible relation between host and guest.”¹⁵ Hermione’s enactment of a hospitality that is feminine, authoritative, and decidedly unique from her husband’s, has shifted the bond between host and guest to a degree that is, to Leontes, unbearable.

In both *The Rape of Lucrece* and *The Winter’s Tale* we see a hostess extending hospitality with unguarded generosity, which

for both ultimately leads to horrible violence being enacted upon them. Both Hermione and Lucrece make the mistake of taking for granted an ideal mode of hospitality, while the others involved recognize the capacity for deception and violence within the host-guest relationship. Of course, the key difference between these two texts is that *The Winter's Tale* has an ostensibly happy ending, with Hermione either returned or revived and the repentant Leontes reunited with both his wife and Polixenes. This ending takes place within another moment of hospitality, as Leontes, Polixenes, and their children enter into Paulina's home to see the statue she claims to have made of Hermione. Paulina intentionally frames this as hospitality, telling Leontes

That you have vouchsafed,
With your crowned brother and these your contracted
Heirs of your kingdoms, my poor house to visit,
It is a surplus of your grace which never
My life may last to answer. (5.3.5-9)

Paulina is deeply aware of both the capacities and limitations of hospitality. By reminding Leontes that he is passing within her house, she claims the role of hostess to her king, with all the responsibility and potential gain bound up in hosting noble guests. But she speaks to Leontes's perspective on hospitality as exchange rather than Hermione's ideal mode, putting herself in his debt for the grace he has given and which she can never repay. Indeed, for James Kearney, Paulina's "elaborate hospitality" creates the conditions for reconciliation in part by putting Leontes in the role of guest rather than host for the first time.¹⁶ Ruitter likewise emphasizes the importance of Leontes accepting someone else as host, and moreover directs attention to the very real risk Paulina takes in this moment.¹⁷ Paulina is a successful hostess, but the danger of backlash is still present, and perhaps even actualized in her conscripted marriage to Camillo. While *The Winter's Tale* closes with a redemptive moment of hospitality that repairs the earlier destructive one, it cannot undo the harm Hermione incurred through her practice of hospitality and only reaffirms the precarious position of a hostess entertaining men.

The early modern hostess is a figure of both authority and vulnerability, wielding social and political power while also subject to the demands and the desires of her guests and husband. For

a final demonstration of this, I turn once more to *The Rape of Lucrece*. In the aftermath of Tarquin's attack Lucrece lies alone, a "woeful hostess" left with her grief (1125), and laments that by being raped, she has brought dishonor on her husband. Directing her words to the absent Collatine, she says:

Yet am I guilty of thy honor's wrack;
 Yet for thy honor did I entertain him;
 Coming from thee, I could not put him back,
 For it had been dishonor to disdain him (841-44).

Here, Lucrece directly articulates the impossible position she was put in as hostess, and indicates the possibility of resentment against her husband. Because of her responsibilities to entertain Collatine's friend, Lucrece was forced to welcome Tarquin into her home, yet by doing so she gave this guest the access he needed to attack her. Lucrece rails against "vile opportunity" for creating the condition of her harm (895). She has been a victim not just of violent lust, but of her position as hostess. For Lucrece as well as Hermione, extending open welcome to a male guest leads to destruction: hospitality creates opportunity for violence.

What we see in drawing together these two texts is Shakespeare's exploration of hospitality's equal capacity for conviviality and destruction intertwined with a consideration of the early modern woman's vulnerability. First, in his early career with the simple narrative of *The Rape of Lucrece*, there is a close focus on the dangers posed by a hostess's ill-intentioned guest; later Shakespeare returns to this figure of a victimized hostess in the more complicated *Winter's Tale*, with consideration of the way hospitality's fraught power dynamics can destabilize intimate and political relationships. Since hospitality occurs within the domestic space, it opens the possibility for women to fully inhabit the position of head of household as Lucrece does in welcoming Tarquin, and to enter into negotiations of social and political power as Hermione does in swaying the opinion of a foreign king. Yet the opportunities opened by hospitality are treacherous, and can expose the hostess to violence and suspicion. An understanding of the way gender and the conventions of hospitality operate upon these characters lends greater nuance to a reading of these texts. While there is a rich body of scholarship on hospitality more broadly in Shakespeare's work and other early modern drama,

the figure of the hostess in particular remains largely overlooked. Increased attention to representations of hostesses in early modern texts can allow us to better appreciate the role women played in hospitality, foregrounding rather than marginalizing women's fraught positions as mistresses of households.

Notes

1. Felicity Heal, "The Idea of Hospitality in Early Modern England," *Past & Present* no. 102, (Feb. 1984): 80.

2. James A. W. Heffernan, *Hospitality and Treachery in Western Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014): 148.

3. William Shakespeare, *The Rape of Lucrece*. ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles. Folger Shakespeare Library. Accessed on October 7, 2021. (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library). <https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/lucrece/>

4. Elizabeth Zemen Kolkovitch, *The Elizabethan Country House Entertainment; Print, Performance, and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

5. Sara Mueller, "Early Modern Banquet Receipts and Women's Theatre," *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 24 (2011): 107.

6. Hannah Woolley, *The Gentlewomans Companion; Or, A Guide to the Female Sex Containing Directions of Behaviour, in all Places, Companies, Relations, and Conditions, from their Childhood Down to Old Age: Viz. as, Children to Parents. Scholars to Governours. Single to Servants. Virgins to Suitors. Married to Husbands. Huswifes to the House Mistresses to Servants. Mothers to Children. Widows to the World Prudent to all. with Letters and Discourses upon all Occasions. Whereunto is Added, a Guide for Cook-Maids, Dairy-Maids, Chamber-Maids, and all Others that Go to Service. the Whole being an Exact Rule for the Female Sex in General.* by Hannah Woolley (London, printed by A. Maxwell for Dorman Newman at the Kings-Arms in the Poultry, 1673), 108. Early English Books Online. <https://www-proquest-com.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/books/gentlewomans-companion-guide-female-sex/docview/2240862378/se-2?accountid=14553>.

7. Woolley, *The Gentlewoman's Companion*, 112.

8. Thomas Heywood, *The Rape of Lucrece a True Roman Tragedie. with the Seuerall Songes in their Apt Places, by Valerius, the Merrie Lord Amongst the Roman Peeres. Acted by Her Majesties Seruants at the Red-Bull, Neere Clarcken-Well.* Written by Thomas Heywood (London: Printed by E. Alld for I. Busby and are to be solde by Nathaniel Butter in Paules-Church-yard at the signe of the Pide-Bull, 1608), F2. Early English Books Online. <https://www-proquest-com.proxy2.library.illinois.edu/books/rape-lucrece-true-roman->

9. David Ruitter, "Shakespeare and Hospitality: Opening the Winter's Tale," *Mediterranean Studies* 16 (2007): 106.

10. Heal, "The Idea of Hospitality," 80-81.

11. William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles. *Folger Shakespeare Library*.

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Accessed on October 7, 2021 (Washington, DC: Folger Shakespeare Library).
<https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/the-winters-tale/>.

12. Ruiters, "Shakespeare and Hospitality," 165.

13. Heffernan, *Hospitality and Treachery*, 140.

14. Tracy McNulty, *The Hostess: Hospitality, Femininity, and the Expropriation of Identity*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007): xxxvii.

15. McNulty, *The Hostess*, 242.

16. James Kearney, "Hospitality's Risk, Grace's Bargain: Uncertain Economies in The Winter's Tale." *Shakespeare and Hospitality: Ethics, Politics, and Exchange*, ed. David B. Goldstein and Julia Reinhard Lupton. (New York: Routledge, 2016): 105.

17. Ruiters, "Shakespeare and Hospitality," 175.