

NEW FACES
Facing Europe in Crisis
Shakespeare's World and Present Challenges

Association Humanitaire de Montpellier : Fighting poverty and social exclusion

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In March 2019, Feantsa, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless, in conjunction with French housing charity Fondation Abbé Pierre, has released its fourth report on housing exclusion in Europe. It makes it clear from the first pages that the fight against poverty and social exclusion has been unsatisfactory so far in Europe. Poverty doesn't only exclude people from the social space, it also has consequences on food quality, clothes, housing, health care, education, employment and it increases the risks of insecurity.

In response to some of these issues, Association Humanitaire de Montpellier was created in 2013 and serves 135 meals a day, 7 days a week, to people in dire poverty. It includes families with very young children or babies, immigrants, poor workers, students and homeless people. They reached 170 meals a day last summer, which is the deadliest season of the year due to dehydration, illnesses caused by the heat or hygiene issues. Unfortunately, it is also the period of the year when there are the fewest volunteers for food distribution. Besides these questions, the members of the association represent people to talk to for those who are alone most of the time.



In that regard, when Romeo is banished from Verona in *Romeo and Juliet*, he considers losing the right to see Juliet as a punishment much worse than death:

*Ha, banishment? Be merciful, say 'death',
For exile hath more terror in his look,
Much more than death. Do not say 'banishment'.* (3.3.12-14)

Losing home is a social death indeed as the individual loses his or her place in society and his or her meaningful social relationships. As far as Romeo is concerned, he is separated not only from his family, but also from his one true love. His life is then quite meaningless and he won't be able to see her again before his death. Physical death thus confirms the social death.



The isolation of those who lose their places in society is also compared to forced silence by Mowbray in *Richard II*:

*Within my mouth you have enjoined my tongue,
Doubly portcullised with my teeth and lips,
And dull unfeeling barren ignorance
Is made my jailer to attend on me. [...]
What is thy sentence then but speechless death,
Which robs my tongue from breathing native breath?*
(R2 1.3.160-67)

Losing one's home thus means being condemned to a social, a political and a linguistic death. Exile is alienating because it makes you foreign. That is why meeting the excluded and engaging in dialogue with them offers a form of social interaction which is far from enough but represents a significant human and humanist gesture.



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