

Book Reviews

Stanley Cavell. *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays by Shakespeare*. Updated edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp 250.

The first essay in this collection, 'Disowning Knowledge in *King Lear*,' was written in 1967 and published in 1969 as the culminating exemplification of the philosophical argument of Stanley Cavell's *Must We Mean What We Say?*¹ It was subsequently republished in 1987, as the first essay of the original edition of *Disowning Knowledge*, Cavell's magisterial reading of Shakespeare's tragic drama. 1967, 1987, 2003. These dates tell the story of an extraordinary philosopher and critic whose work has never been part of mainstream Shakespeare scholarship, but which exposes the blind spots and evasions of that criticism while at the same time anticipating many of its fruitful directions.

Amongst scholars of literature the pioneering essay on *King Lear* is probably Cavell's best known work. It most clearly sets the stage for Cavell's abiding, some might say obsessive, interest in the equally alluring and incapacitating role of scepticism in human beings' relations to each other and the world in which they live. For Cavell, Shakespeare's tragedies are the most complete working out, in all its cunning subtleties and alluring perversities, of the sceptical alienation from the world and from the love of others. The sceptic – who can be anybody – demands certainty beyond the human capacity or condition to provide it. He thereby loses or rejects the world, which appears to lie beyond his fastidious requirement for absolute knowledge. (I use the masculine pronoun deliberately, for Cavell's later essays suggests that scepticism may be gender specific.)

Cavell argues, via Shakespeare's tragedies, that scepticism with regard to our possible knowledge of objects in the world takes a peculiarly debilitating form when it inhabits human relationships. If Descartes and Hume could continue to live their lives normally in spite of their doubts about the existence of the external world, Shakespeare shows how the sceptic makes his world unliveable by turning even those closest to him into strangers, their humanity paradoxically becoming their most alienating quality. Cavell thus transforms what is initially an epistemological question in philosophy – about the limits of

knowledge – into an ethical one in literature – concerning the necessity and impossibility of *acknowledging* others. A puzzle that arises with the dawn of scientific enquiry simultaneously resides at the centre of the moral investigations of literature, especially the literature of Renaissance theatre. In an argument not unfamiliar to readers familiar with Derrida, Levinas and Lacan, Cavell shows that the problem is metaphysically inextricable from the finitude of human beings, their relation to language, and the demands made upon that finitude by its necessary encounters with others.

Cavell's readings of *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *The Winter's Tale* are united by an argument that the tragic outcomes of the first two plays and the near-tragedy of the last arise from the incapacity of their male protagonists to accept or acknowledge those they love on grounds other than knowledge. Lear and Gloucester both fail to acknowledge those closest to them, most significantly in their blind refusal to recognise that they need their love or acknowledgement, and Edgar is drawn into the web of tragic evil by withholding recognition by his father until it is too late. Gloucester's blindness is given a compelling literal force in Cavell's exemplary close readings, which, always attentive to the place of the body in the theatre, refrain from converting its incarnations too hastily into metaphor or symbol. His insight into the desperate measures that human beings will take to avoid acknowledging their capacity or need for the recognition of others opens a compelling analysis of the ethically debilitating effects of shame. The avoidance of love, which has its roots in the sceptical attitude to the world, is in Cavell's view at the heart of tragedy: 'Cordelia's death means that every falsehood, every refusal of acknowledgement, will be tracked down' (80). The second part of this extraordinary essay, often considered to be superfluous by anthologists, explores the issues of acknowledging others as an ethics of aesthetic experience, especially of and in the theatre. Here Cavell's philosophical acuity brings together a beautifully illuminating discussion on the nature of our relationship with characters on the stage, the central problems of scepticism as the total separation of self from others, and the particularly pressing political and ethical concerns of late 1960s America in its relations to the rest of the world in ways that speak directly to us today.

Extracted from Cavell's extended philosophical treatment of community, language, and the world,² the essay on *Othello* argues that the play is Shakespeare's most powerful exploration of the lengths to which the sceptical cast of mind will go in its mad and desperate disappointment in the finite nature of human knowledge. Iago does not convince Othello of something he did not know before; he rather presents the possibility for which Othello is desperately

in need, something he wants to know, as Cavell puts it, *against* his knowledge. Othello cannot bear what he has himself aroused in his marriage to Desdemona: her desire for him, which means her separateness from him. Living out the sceptical cancer unto death, Othello thus cannot bear Desdemona's difference, the difference that makes sexuality possible, but which desire ever wishes to overcome. If Othello exemplifies the sceptical horror at human finitude and separateness in personal relationships, Coriolanus is the figure who embodies that horror with regard to the body politic, especially with regard to our human need for and dependence upon language. *Coriolanus* presents us with a famine of words, Cavell argues, because its protagonist cannot bear the fact that speech makes him part of a human community and imposes upon him the requirement that he recognise himself through the acknowledgement of that community.

Macbeth is equally a play shot through with the metaphysical necessities of language, especially as they strike Wittgenstein and Derrida. Cavell's essay on the play is perhaps the most subtle, suggestive, original, and difficult of the collection, possibly because, first published in 1992, it is the culmination of his critical project. In general philosophical terms he shows the iterability of language at work in the role of prophecy in the play, while his analysis of the paradoxical closeness and distance of Macbeth and his wife (in what he calls 'mind reading') focuses on the shared nature of words. But there is much else: an intriguing return to the question of children in the Macbeth's marriage; a great deal of insight into the power of the theatre in the play; its transformation of history in relation to politics, privacy, and blood; an extraordinarily Derridean meditation on conditions undecidably lying between passivity and agency; and, an issue that is central to his discussion of *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Winter's Tale*, the force of marriage and the destruction by scepticism of what Cavell calls the 'domestic'. These two plays explore possibilities of redemption from the ravages of scepticism, via the magical theatricality of female desire and creativity. They also suggest the possibility that the impossible requirements of the sceptical frame of mind may be peculiarly masculine: that is to say, that the demands of scepticism arise not from the universal human commitment to language and all that that entails, but to the asymmetrical demands of sexual difference. Cleopatra exemplifies Cavell's abiding interest throughout these essays with the nature of theatre and our relationship to it, especially insofar as it enacts the possibility of coming to terms with the necessary separateness of the other through ethical responsiveness.

Those active in contemporary Shakespeare scholarship will be especially struck by Cavell's distance from current obsessions and paradigms. Although

some of his philosophical concerns are echoed by thinkers recently appropriated into literary theory (Derrida, Levinas, Lacan spring to mind), and his interest in Freud will make the questions he asks and the directions he takes not unfamiliar to critics interested in psychoanalysis and feminism, some may be surprised by his explicit distance from historical questions, at least as they have been posed in Renaissance studies over the past two decades. Cavell's early dismissal of what we now know as 'old' historicism will be familiar enough, but his reservations – or, more explicitly expressed, puzzlement (226) – at the motivations of the New Historicism put his work at odds with a great deal of what is taken for granted in current Shakespeare scholarship. The history that forms the backdrop to Cavell's philosophical question is the grand sweep of intellectual change, specifically the post-Shakespearean development of fully fledged scepticism with Descartes and the concerns with the limits of knowledge that followed with the Empiricists and Kant. Although *Disowning Knowledge* does not eschew questions of politics, it does not invoke the structural systems of power bequeathed to literary enquiry by Foucault. Nor are Cavell's readings merely an application of some pre-given framework from philosophy upon an unsuspecting literary text. His acute, patient, responsibility before the texts (always imagined in their embodiment in theatre) exemplifies both his sense of what philosophy should be – an ever wakeful responsiveness – and the highest claims of literary reading.

The republication of Cavell's reading of Shakespeare's tragic work almost forty years after he embarked on that journey is extremely timely. *Disowning Knowledge* recalls much that has been suppressed and repressed in literary criticism over the past thirty years. Cavell shows how we may restore the ethical demands of community and responsiveness to a culture and a history that has shrunk from their messy finitude: he shows us how to recognise in the difficulties of knowledge the uncomfortable, human demands of acknowledgement. These essays, simultaneously familiar and strange, take us down paths generally avoided by recent criticism and theory. Their ways may be difficult, sometimes tortuous, but they offer endless opportunity for discovery and renewal.

David Schalckwyk

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- 1 Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge, 1969).
 - 2 Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford, 1979).