

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-82189-6 - Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare,

Updated Edition

Stanley Cavell

Excerpt

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Introduction

I HAVE resisted earlier suggestions that the few essays I have devoted to individual plays of Shakespeare be put together as a book. I did not want to give the impression that I felt I had arrived at a stable view of Shakespeare's writing from the limited perspective I work from and the limited sample of plays I have worked on; and I did not feel the justifications I have for my intrusions into this fearful territory would make themselves felt taken in isolation from the philosophical bearings that led me to them. But with the completion of the two hitherto unpublished essays included here, on *Hamlet* and on *The Winter's Tale*, I began to wish to assess what happens to the essays in the face of one another, or backed against one another, and to let them find their weight with just the philosophy that clings to them in their individual emergencies. The misunderstanding of my attitude that most concerned me was to take my project as the application of some philosophically independent problematic of skepticism to a fragmentary parade of Shakespearean texts, impressing those texts into the service of illustrating philosophical conclusions known in advance. Sympathy with my project depends, on the contrary, on unsettling the matter of priority (as between philosophy and literature, say) implied in the concepts of illustration and application. The plays I take up form respective interpretations of skepticism as they yield to interpretation by skepticism. To indicate as much for each of these plays is the task of this introduction.

There is a further reason for agreeing to this collection. It seems to me that I have done the best I can do in justifying and exemplifying my sense of an epistemological reading of Shakespearean tragedy and I want now to be able to encounter the Shakespearean corpus with a free mind. So I shall let this introduction go on at

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further length than I had at first proposed to do. Those who have some interest in what I have so far written may be glad of this; others may find the results needlessly difficult and obscure. Since conviction in its pertinence must depend on the convincingness of the handling of individual plays, a reader unfamiliar with how I look at the work of the plays might find it efficient to turn at once to one or another of the individual readings and then come back here.

Because I foresee that these introductory remarks are not going to constitute the simple words of welcome I had meant to produce, I am hoping they will provide help to those who themselves welcome, or are prepared to welcome, the company of philosophy in reading works of, let us say, literature; and vice versa. (I know the company is sometimes restive, difficult, occasionally quite impossible. If you do not find it so it may be that you are too much conceiving of philosophy as a well-behaved and well-explored function of literature, or of literature as treating independently well-known philosophical ideas.) I become perplexed in trying to determine whether it is to addicts of philosophy or to adepts of literature that I address myself when I in effect insist that Shakespeare could not be who he is – the burden of the name of the greatest writer in the language, the creature of the greatest ordering of English – unless his writing is engaging the depth of the philosophical preoccupations of his culture. I guess the insistence comes from a sense that English philosophy is characterized, in distinction from, say, that of France and of Germany, by its relative distance from the major literature of its culture. Compared with Kant's or Hegel's or Schelling's awareness of Goethe or Hölderlin (or Rousseau or Shakespeare) or with Descartes's and Pascal's awareness of Montaigne, Locke's or Hume's or Mill's relation to Shakespeare and Milton or Coleridge (or Montaigne) amounts to hardly more than that to more or less serious hobbies, not to the recognition of intellectual competitors, fellow challengers of intellectual conscience. (I do not speculate here about why this is so. It is, among other matters, surely some function of the differences in the relations of these philosophical cultures to religion, or perhaps rather to what the West calls the Bible.) Sensing this difference makes me sorely aware of my American fate.

Is there an American difference in philosophy? If there is, it will look one way if you think of its source as Peirce's and Dewey's

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pragmatist empiricism or experimentalism; it will look another way if you think of its source in Emerson's and in Thoreau's transcendental experimentalism. Because I yield to the latter (perhaps sometimes too stridently just because of its oddness to reigning philosophy) and therewith to the side of philosophy that edges against literature, and because I do not therefore feel free of the former, of the side of philosophy that edges to science, I have a thirst for a question that motivates the writing of this introduction: Is the issue of communication between philosophy and literature itself a philosophical or a literary issue? Something mannerly and no doubt something unmannerly in my prose is caused by my acceptance of such a question and by my refusal to decide it prematurely, to decide it judiciously ("It is both"), or to decide that it is undecidable ("It is neither quite"), before closing with it, keeping it open, enacting it, experimenting.

My intuition is that the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes's *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare, from the time of the great tragedies in the first years of the seventeenth century, in the generation preceding that of Descartes. However strong the presence of Montaigne and Montaigne's skepticism is in various of Shakespeare's plays, the skeptical problematic I have in mind is given its philosophical refinement in Descartes's way of raising the questions of God's existence and of the immortality of the soul (I assume as, among other things, preparations for, or against, the credibility of the new science of the external world). The issue posed is no longer, or not alone, as with earlier skepticism, how to conduct oneself best in an uncertain world; the issue suggested is how to live at all in a groundless world. Our skepticism is a function of our now illimitable desire. In Descartes's thinking, the ground, one gathers, still exists, in the assurance of God. But Descartes's very clarity about the necessity of God's assurance in establishing a rough adequation or collaboration between our everyday judgments and the world (however the matter may stand in natural science) means that if assurance in God will be shaken, the ground of the everyday is thereby shaken.

If Shakespeare's plays interpret and reinterpret the skeptical problematic – the question whether I know with certainty of the existence of the external world and of myself and others in it – it follows that the plays find no stable solution to skepticism, in particular no rest in what we know of God. Being Shakespearean texts

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they test, as well as test themselves by, their sources, so that in incorporating, let us say, a philosophical problematic, they test, as well as test themselves by, philosophy. What interpretation a text finds of skepticism is, accordingly, not knowable apart from what interpretation the text finds of itself; and in particular philosophy's own interpretation of skepticism (or skepticism's self-interpretation, namely as discovering that we cannot achieve certainty in our knowledge of existence on the basis of the senses alone, hence on no human basis) is denied privilege.

I do not command the learning to argue seriously on historical evidence that the shaking of the ground of human existence, in what philosophy calls skepticism, finds its way into Shakespeare's words – call this ground authority, or legitimacy, in the realms of religion, of politics, of knowledge, of love, of family, of friendship – hence to argue that the unique endlessness of the Shakespearean order of words is a function of that shaking. My conviction, or evidence, is in something of the reverse state. Given my intuition of the occurrence of skepticism in Shakespeare, it is from him that I would have to learn, were I a historian, what to look for to give his history. In calling my guiding theme an intuition I am distinguishing it from a hypothesis. Both intuitions and hypotheses require what may be called confirmation or continuation, but differently. A hypothesis requires evidence and it must say what constitutes its evidence. (I know what it means to say that lighter objects fall to earth at the same rate as heavier objects, though it may be no easy matter to collect the evidence that determines this one way or the other.) An intuition, say that God is expressed in the world, does not require, or tolerate, evidence but rather, let us say, understanding of a particular sort (and it may be no easy matter to talk someone out of the idea that the only need for statements of such a sort is, or was, as hypotheses). Emerson says in “Self-Reliance”: “Primary wisdom [is] Intuition, whilst all later teachings are tuitions.” He is accordingly called, not incorrectly, a philosopher of intuition. For some reason it is typically not noticed that he is at the same time a teacher of tuition. But in such a statement declaring the importance of intuition, Emerson is at the same time grounding the necessity of tuition. I read him as teaching that the occurrence to us of intuition places a demand upon us, namely for tuition; call this wording, the willingness to subject oneself to words, to make oneself intelligible. (Tuition so conceived is what I un-

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derstand criticism to be.) This is something Descartes means in looking to express clear and distinct ideas; for example, in finding that his idea of God is a function of his sense of himself as dependent, finite.

In looking for words for Shakespeare's interpretations of skepticism I may well from time to time, in my experimentation, speak incredibly or outrageously. For me this is no more serious, though no less, than making a mistake in computation – if the words do not go through they will simply drop out as worthless. My aim in reading is to follow out in each case the complete tuition for a given intuition (tuition comes to an end somewhere). This has nothing to do with – it is a kind of negation of – an idea of reading as a judicious balancing of all reasonable interpretations. My reading is nothing if not partial (another lovely Emersonian word). Yet some will take my claim to partiality as more arrogant than the claim to judiciousness.

A full decade elapsed from the time I completed my first Shakespeare essay, “The Avoidance of Love,” on *King Lear*, in 1966–7, to the moment, a third of the way through the last part of *The Claim of Reason*, at which I recognized that bringing the thoughts of that book to a conclusion would depend on formulating the significance to me of the fact that that *Lear* essay, in concluding *Must We Mean What We Say?* follows an essay on what the Anglo-American tradition of philosophy calls the problem of other minds, “Knowing and Acknowledging.” I had seen that the extreme precipitousness of the *Lear* story, the velocity of the banishments and of the consequences of the banishments, figured the precipitousness of skepticism's banishment of the world, and I had surmised at some length that not only was tragedy obedient to a skeptical structure but contrariwise, that skepticism already bore its own marks of a tragic structure. (This surmise is registered in the section on the tradition of epistemology interpolated into the *Lear* essay. I note the surmise there as both obscure and as relying on my doctoral dissertation. This reliance was a principal motivation for my continuing measures to preserve what I could of the dissertation in what became *The Claim of Reason*.) But not until the working out of the end of *The Claim of Reason* with a reading of *Othello* could I claim that tragedy is the working out of a response to skepticism – as I now like to put the matter, that tragedy is an interpretation of what skepticism

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is itself an interpretation of; that, for example, Lear's "avoidance" of Cordelia is an instance of the annihilation inherent in the skeptical problematic, that skepticism's "doubt" is motivated not by (not even where it is expressed as) a (misguided) intellectual scrupulousness but by a (displaced) denial, by a self-consuming disappointment that seeks world-consuming revenge.

That the study of tragedy can and should entail reconceptions of what drives skepticism – of what its emotion is, of what becomes of the world in its grip, its stranglehold, of what knowing has come to mean to us – is, in retrospect, hinted at when I first show my awareness that a reading of *Othello* is called for, and I begin steering toward it, for some reason, along routes of romanticism. Romanticism aside, the opening moments sound this way:

Over and over, an apparent symmetry or asymmetry between skepticism with respect to the external world and skepticism with respect to other minds has collapsed, on further reflection, into its opposite. . . . It would not hurt my intuitions, to anticipate further than this book actually goes, were someone to be able to show that my discoveries in the region of the skeptical problem of the other are, rightly understood, further characterizations of (material object) skepticism, of skepticism as such. So that, for example, what I will find in Othello's relation to Desdemona is not just initiated by that phase of its career in which the human being makes to secure or close its knowledge of the world's existence once and for all, only to discover it to be closed off forever; but also that their relation remains to the end a certain allegory of that career. The consequent implication that there is between human existence and the existence of the world a standing possibility of death-dealing passion, of a yearning at once unappeasable and unsatisfiable, as for an impossible exclusiveness or completeness, is an implication that harks back, to my mind, to my late suggestion of the possibility of falling in love with the world.

(*The Claim of Reason*, pp. 451–2)

In that context I continue for a moment by touching a certain vision of film comedy, as if merely to stake the claim that some way remains through this tract of denial. Now I note certain veins of implication I have since come to expect from that stake.

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Most immediately, what philosophy knows as doubt, Othello's violence allegorizes (or recognizes) as some form of jealousy. Now, whatever philosophy's dissatisfaction with its own understanding of doubt, it will scarcely accept this step to jealousy as a help. Because whereas jealousy shares with doubt the idea of suspicion, it shifts the philosophical balance in two ways: It makes the project of assurance or appropriation less cognitive, so to speak, than philosophy takes it to be; and it makes the object of suspicion uncomfortably, let me say, animate. But the shift of philosophical balance seems to me to uncover the animism, so to speak, in the philosophical idea of doubt itself: Doubt, like belief, is most fully, say originally, directed to claims of others, of speakers; an appropriate reaction to, for instance, rumor, Iago's medium. If you tell me that there is a table in the next room I may or may not believe you; hence I may say I believe or do not believe there is a table there. But philosophers are led to say that they believe that there is a table *here* (the presence that is for all the world *this* table), before the very eyes. The context is one in which the philosopher is talking, so to speak, at most to himself: He is not speaking to someone whose position is inferior to his with respect to the table, so he is not telling anyone anything; nor is his position with respect to the table inferior to anyone else's, so he cannot be denied, from outside as it were. It is the position that reveals us humans to be in the same human boat of sensuous endowment, fated to the five senses, the position from which alone the skeptic's doubt demands to be answered. It is (therefore) equally alone the position from which the skeptic's radical question demands to be raised, in which *the best case* of knowledge shows itself vulnerable to suspicion. We may say that what it is vulnerable to is the transformation of a scene of knowing for oneself into a sense that true knowledge is beyond the human self, that what we hold in our minds to be true of the world can have at best the status of opinion, educated guesswork, hypothesis, construction, belief. The concept of belief is turned from its common course. I say, in *The Claim of Reason*, in a phrase from, and as part of an interpretation of, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, that in such a case a word is being used outside its language game(s), apart from its ordinary criteria. It is essential to language that words *can* so be turned. But there are consequences. In turning the concept of belief to name our immediate or absolute relation to the world, say our absolute intimacy, a relation no human other *could* either confirm or com-

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promise, the philosopher turns the world into, or puts it in the position of, a speaker, lodging its claims upon us, claims to which, as it turns out, the philosopher cannot listen. Everyone knows that *something* is mad in the skeptic's fantastic quest for certainty. Philosophers from the beginning, in Descartes and in Hume, have taken the madness into account. I am here merely picking up a different corner of the veil. The glimpse is of an internal connection between skepticism and romanticism, of a sense of why skepticism is what romantic writers are locked in struggle against, writers from Coleridge and Wordsworth to Emerson and Thoreau and Poe (and for future reference I single out E. T. A. Hoffmann); and specifically in struggle for some ground of animism, which may take the form of animation (as emblemized in Hoffmann's automatons, in Coleridge's figure of life-in-death in *The Ancient Mariner*, perhaps in *Frankenstein*), a struggle as if to bring the world back to life from the death dealt it in philosophy, anyway in philosophical skepticism.

Skepticism's results pass themselves off, before all to itself, as specific claims, as expressions of particular beliefs – as if “The world exists” were one more belief among others, the world one more object among others. It is the object so conceived, as representing the world, the world as object, that in response to the skeptical interrogation is put in the position of inaudible speaker. Here one would one day have to look at the philosopher's extraordinary treatment of objects, as in Descartes's wax that is melting, in Price's tomato with nothing but its visual front aspect remaining, in Moore's raised moving hands, in Heidegger's blooming tree, to explore the sense of hyperbolic, unprecedented attention in play. It is not just careful description, or practical investigation, under way here. The philosopher is as it were looking for a *response* from the object, perhaps a shining. And of course one may not sense this; the skeptic exactly would not. It is in taking tragedy as the display of skepticism, and skepticism with respect to other minds as allegorical of skepticism with respect to material objects, that in my experience the treatment of the object forces its attention upon us. (If this were meant as an *argument* for the presence of this issue of the object it would be a terribly poor one.)

What specifically for me is at stake epistemologically in the allegory of Othello and Desdemona is my finding that Othello's radical, consuming doubt is not caused by Iago's rumoring. Othello rather seizes upon Iago's suggestions as effects or covers for some-

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thing the object has itself already revealed, and claimed, despite its most fervent protestations to the contrary. In this way Othello's jealousy itself is an unstable, turned concept. He seeks a possession that is not in opposition to another's claim or desire but one that establishes an absolute or inalienable bonding to himself, to which no claim or desire *could* be opposed, could conceivably count; as if the jealousy is directed to the sheer existence of the other, its separateness from him. It is against the (fantasied) possibility of overcoming this hyperbolic separateness that the skeptic's (disappointed, intellectualized, impossible, imperative, hyperbolic) demand makes sense. (Othello's capacity for eloquence or incantation comes in here. It is the counter to that drive of skepticism I have called the fear or anxiety of inexpressiveness. This drive should particularly be borne in mind when we take up Cleopatra's powers and motives of self-presentation.)

With his "jealousy," Othello's violence studies the human use of knowledge under the consequence of skepticism. This violence in human knowing is, I gather, what comes out of Heidegger's perception that philosophy has, from the beginning, but, if I understand, with increasing velocity in the age of technology, conceived knowledge under the aegis of dominion, of the concept of a concept as a matter, say, of grasping a thing. In Kant this concept of the concept is pictured as that of synthesizing things, putting together appearances, yoking them, to yield objects of knowledge: Knowledge itself is explicitly, as opposed to the reception of sensuous intuitions, an active thing – Kant says spontaneous; intuitions alone occur to us passively. (In a motto, there is no intellectual intuition; or, there is no world without the suffering, the sensuous reception, of intuitions together with the active emplacement of concepts upon them.) I have claimed elsewhere that Emerson contests Kant on this fundamental ground of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Or if Kant is himself ambivalent about this matter, then Emerson may be seen to contest the ambivalence, putting his weight on the side of receptiveness, of, say, intelligible intuition. What this means for Emerson, however, is not to be taken at face, or Kantian, value – as my linking of what Emerson sees in intuition with what he expects from intuition should indicate. I add that the suggestion of a masculine/feminine contest over the nature of knowing, over, say, the economy as between activity and passivity in knowing, is not to be missed here, however difficult it will be to develop usefully.

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It shows up, or fails to show up sufficiently, in the habitual citing of the biblical use of the term “knowing.” The term is always, so far as I recall, used (and always in the past tense?) to name the man’s access to the woman, not hers to him. (*The Winter’s Tale* is pertinent here and I shall come back to it.)

The violence in masculine knowing, explicitly associated with jealousy, seems to interpret the ambition of knowledge as that of exclusive possession, call it private property. Othello’s problem, following my suggestion that his problem is over success, not failure, is that Desdemona’s acceptance, or satisfaction, or reward, of his ambition strikes him as being possessed, as if he is the woman. This linking of the desire of knowledge for possession, for, let us say, intimacy, links this epistemological problematic as a whole with that of the problematic of property, of ownership as the owning or ratifying of one’s identity. As though the likes of Locke and Marx, in relating the individual to the world through the concept of laboring, and relating the distortion of that relation to the alienation or appropriation of labor, were preparing a conceptual field that epistemology has yet to follow out. “Appropriating” seems to have the same stress put on it in relating the individual to the world through the ownership of property as “belief” has in relating the individual to the world through the acquisition and power of knowledge. As with belief it seems clear what the relation of appropriation is as between persons. I have no more conceptual hesitation over the possibility of one person appropriating something from another person than I have over one person believing another. But as it seems unclear, or ought to, what it is to (feel driven to) establish the relation of belief between me and the isolated (say, private) existence of this object or place, so it seems unclear what it is to (feel driven to) establish the relation of appropriation between me and this isolated (say, private) object or territory.

A metaphysically desperate degree of private bonding, of the wish to become undispossessable, would seem to be an effort to overcome the sense of the individual human being not only as now doubtful in his possessions, as though unconvinced that anything really belongs to him, but doubtful at the same time whether there is any place to which he really belongs. It remains to be assessed how the institution of law takes its bearing here, particularly in relation to the demand for consent to a social contract. I assume that if there is a skepticism with respect to belonging and to belongings, the