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

Updated Edition

Stanley Cavell

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Disowning Knowledge

Reissued with a new essay on *Macbeth* this famous collection of essays on Shakespeare's tragedies considers these plays as responses to the crisis of knowledge and the emergence of modern skepticism provoked by the new science of the late 16th and early 17th centuries.

Stanley Cavell is the Walter M. Cabot Professor of Aesthetics and the Theory of Value at Harvard University, Emeritus.

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Harvard University



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
 32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521821896

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 Updated edition © Stanley Cavell 2003

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First published 2003

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Cavell, Stanley, 1926–
 Disowning knowledge in seven plays of Shakespeare / Stanley Cavell. – Updated ed.
 p. cm.

Rev. ed. of: Disowning knowledge in six plays of Shakespeare.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-521-82189-4 – ISBN 0-521-52920-4 (pbk.)

1. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616 – Tragedies.
2. Shakespeare, William, 1564–1616 – Philosophy.
3. Knowledge, Theory of, in literature.
4. Skepticism in literature.
5. Tragedy. I. Cavell, Stanley, 1926– Disowning knowledge in six plays of Shakespeare.

I. Title.

PR2983.C38 2003

822.3'3–dc21 2002034802

ISBN 978-0-521-82189-6 hardback
 ISBN 978-0-521-52920-4 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2007

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To David Franklin Cavell

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Suppose that philosophy is pursued either according to the myth or wish that one may know everything, or else according to the myth or wish that one may know nothing – defenses against the philosophical defeat of claiming to possess some privileged access to or measure of truth. In our century the names of Heidegger and of Wittgenstein are reasonably clear instances, respectively, of these modes of defense. By instinct and training my mode has been that of careful ignorance, but nowhere more than in my reading of Shakespeare have I been more aware of the liabilities and hazards of this course, hence nowhere more needful of timely aid and encouragement.

From the first of these essays I have counted on the friendship and the work of Michael Fried, of John Harbison, and of the late Seymour Shifrin; especially in recent years on that of Janet Adelman, Jay Cantor, Burton Dreben, Marc Shell, and Judith Shklar. I think also with gratitude of the vivid lift in particular exchanges with Paul Alpers, David Bevington, Carol Neely, Norman Rabkin, Amelie Rorty, Edward Snow, Meredith Skura, and Richard Wheeler. And throughout there have been the students – from those in the General Education course at Harvard for which the material on *King Lear* was prepared, to those in the two discussion seminars I have offered on the other plays represented in what follows here, to those generations of philosophy graduate students on the third floor of Emerson Hall willing to listen and to question as I sought to follow out my irregular sense of philosophy's bearing toward and from Shakespeare, conversations many of which – I am blessed to know – continue now years later.

In the months since the present work was sent off to the publisher, I have, as part of a third Shakespeare discussion seminar, begun studying recent criticism of Shakespeare composed from

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the perspectives of the new historicism or cultural materialism, and from that of deconstruction, and from that of feminism. Much of it seems to me to bear on what appears here, but for me to say how is something for other occasions. I had, in any case, for my part, to come to feel that this sequence of readings or measures has been accomplishing the staking out of a certain reasonably early and reasonably consistent perspective; otherwise the bearing on it of others would have no particular point.

That there is some such perspective whose staking out it was for me to accomplish I glimpsed consciously as a result of an exchange whose special role for me I wish to record explicitly. It took the form of a telephone call to me during the spring (as I recall) of the year I was in residence at the Center for the Humanities at Wesleyan University, so in 1970–1, from C. L. Barber in Santa Cruz, California. He said that students of his had been recommending that he read my essay on *King Lear* and that having now done so he wanted to invite me to share a symposium with him (I no longer remember for what institution) in which we each would undertake to say something about the complete body of Shakespeare's work and then to compare this achievement with that of another writer (I gathered in any other language and I imagined in any other mode). It seemed to me a remarkable stroke simply to recognize that the time had come again in which a project of that character could be well conceived, or reconceived. I said so, moved as much by the tone of the invitation and by the idea of it as by the fact that they came from a scholar I had not then met but whose book *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* I had, with so many others, profited from. But I went on to decline the invitation, arguing that preparation for such an undertaking would require from me, at a guess, about ten years. More than half again that span has now passed, and my sequence of essays or measures takes up no more than a sixth of the corpus of the plays; but however incomplete the extent and limited in scope the accomplishment, the idea in it of Shakespeare as a writer of human consistency, developing a particular problematic in and of a world, and in and of a language, shared with and faced against other writers, is part of whatever good there is in it, and that idea began to become active for me from the time of Barber's invitation.

After the Introduction, the essays to follow appear, with one reversal I shall note, in the order of their writing. That on *King*

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Lear was completed in 1967 and appeared as the concluding essay of *Must We Mean What We Say?* (first published in 1969, reprinted in 1976 by Cambridge University Press). The pages on *Othello* conclude *The Claim of Reason* (published in 1979 by Oxford University Press). The paper on *Coriolanus* was prepared at the invitation of Janet Adelman for the Shakespeare Congress held at Stratford-upon-Avon in the summer of 1981. I was unable in the event to attend that Congress, but two subsequent invitations gave me opportunities to present the paper and to profit from its discussion. The first, at the invitation of Philip Holzman, was to read a paper to the Rapaport-Klein Study Group at the Austen Riggs Center in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, in June 1982, and the second, in the following September, to participate in a colloquium on *Coriolanus* at The Humanities Institute during its meetings at Stanford University. The paper first appeared in *Representations* for Fall 1983 and then in my collection of essays entitled *Themes Out of School* (published in 1984 by North Point Press). I am grateful to Oxford University Press and to North Point Press for permission to reprint. The *Hamlet* piece was part of a symposium held at the American Shakespeare Association in April 1984; it is to appear in the forthcoming issue of *Hebrew University Studies in Literature and Art*. The essay on *The Winter's Tale* is printed here for the first time. It was written as the last of four Mrs. William Beckman Lectures given at Berkeley in February 1983; a revised version was presented as a Louis O. Mink Memorial Lecture at Wesleyan University in February 1984; and a similar version at The Humanities Center at The Johns Hopkins University in October 1985. The Beckman lectures were entitled *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, and the opening and closing moments of the essay on *The Winter's Tale* show the marks of its links there. They are links of value to me and I have not wished to hide them. I hope to see this essay also appear in its place as the last of my Beckman lectures when that sequence is published as a group, indicating more freely and clearly paths of the Shakespeare material and of the romanticism/skepticism material across one another. The chronological reversal I mentioned is of the final two essays, made because the study of *The Winter's Tale* seemed better able to stand up to ending this sequence than the somewhat later piece on *Hamlet*, so conscious of its brevity. As it turns out, however, the book still contrives to end on a thought of Hamlet's.

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Editing has for the most part confined itself to syntactical clarification and to bringing the material into stylistic consistency. The *Lear* essay is the exception. It bears scars of our period in Vietnam; its strange part II is not in control of its asides and orations and love letters of nightmare (once casting America's shame and wrath as Lear's). Then its period-piece, male-centered use of pronouns I had thought to let stand, not out of a desire for rueful self-humiliation, and not to brazen out the obvious human obligation sometimes to take the bad with the good, but for two other reasons. First, I am in fact there often concentrating on the male inflection of the world, Lear's and ours, one in which, from which, I felt I suffered as much, no doubt, as I profited, my expression of which will eventually have to enter into the balance of whatever credit may be mine for whatever feminism was mine early, forever. Second, the male inflection cannot be undone, needless to say, by altering a few pronouns, and the essay has meant too much to me to dismiss, without more care than I can exercise now, the possibilities that the inflection was the condition both of worse things and also perhaps of some better things, say more progressive, than show up at a glance. Yet I could not after all let the pronouns, all of them, stand. The effect of tone was sometimes simply too grating, so I have accordingly here and there rephrased. That feminism is in these years a movement of such depth that its pressure on, say, pronouns poses a continuous stylistic pressure not to be answered with the use of certain set formulas but to be decided in each case does not surprise me. But I was I guess surprised, reading over the essay with this particular question in mind, by the experience I called grating. For a political experience to have moved back out from the mind onto the skin and into the senses means that in these twenty years something like a new set of natural reactions has formed, which means a new turn of history.

I am grateful to my production editor at Cambridge University Press, Mrs. Jane Van Tassel, for her eye, tact, conscientiousness, and forbearance; and to my research assistant Jim Conant for, among other things, the making of the index.

References to Shakespeare's texts are according to the respective Arden editions.

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This new edition of the essays I have devoted to individual plays of Shakespeare incorporates an essay on *Macbeth* written five or six years after the others were initially collected and published as *Disowning Knowledge*. *Macbeth* was the remaining great tragedy of Shakespeare's I had not been moved, or was otherwise not able, to test against the thought that this mode of tragedy is a response to the crisis of knowledge inspired by the crisis of the unfolding of the New Science in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, especially as articulated so decisively for philosophy in the next generation following those tragedies by Descartes's articulation of modern skepticism.¹ The absence of testimony from *Macbeth* left an obvious gap in the tale I was exploring; yet, whatever the losses in writing about Shakespeare without professional thoroughness, I have gained in being allowed to leave things incomplete, as it were uncovered, until I felt I had something interesting and urgent enough to say in my circumstances. In particular, concerning *Macbeth*, until I would, if ever, find a way to account for its famous spookiness, which would mean, for me, find the spookiness or uncanniness as reflected in the skeptical process.

The essay on *Lear* has, I believe, been requested for reprinting, in a sense, more than any other piece of my writing. Just in a sense, because without exception the request has been to use only its first part, and even from that to excise everything "philosophical" (naturally the request was not put that way), which in practice meant everything not contributing to a fairly direct recounting of the interpretation of the play's narrative. Of course I could understand why this was asked – who could not? Space

¹ The new essay, "Macbeth Appalled," was originally published in two installments in *Raritan: A Quarterly Review* (XII:2, Fall 1992, 1–15; XII:3, Winter 1993, 1–15).

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and time are humanly limited. This does not mean that I was not pained in being asked to understand, however pleased to be included. Recently the pain has led me to refuse further requests for permissions of this sort. It seems to me no exaggeration to say that excising the philosophy takes the heart out of what drove the composing of the text.

Yet it is in truth rather an exaggeration. The philosophy that arises from issues of what I call attention to – beginning with the essay on *Lear* to read Shakespeare in public – as acknowledgment and avoidance, bears on what English-speaking philosophy knows as the problem of other minds. It was just this intersection that caused me to try my hand at following an individual text of Shakespeare in my manner, namely only where, and wherever, I could be led. But what guides the manner is the conviction that such a text would lack the bearing I propose unless it achieved interpretative results of interest apart from, while not independent of, its call upon philosophy. What else could establish philosophy's pertinence, not confirm its impertinence? The original publication of the essay on *Lear* concludes my first book, *Must We Mean What We Say?*. What it follows is a philosophically determined essay entitled "Knowing and Acknowledging," on overcoming, or reconceiving, skepticism with respect to the existence of others, and it in effect concludes the analysis of acknowledgment presented in that preceding essay by making visible, one might say realistic, the fantastic consequences of the avoidance of acknowledgment.

But what is it that calls for philosophy, Shakespeare's play or my manner of reading the play? Without now disputing the sense of such a question, I recur to ideas, or images, of philosophy that I associate with becoming impressed, as I was coming to see the riches of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, by their each being describable as beginning with the words of someone else, the Wittgenstein text with some lines of Augustine in his *Confessions*, the Heidegger text with a line of Plato from the *Sophist*. I have taken this as presenting philosophy in its sense of itself as forbearing to speak first. But if this is not an affectation of indifference, an early stage of seductive irresponsibility, then it must constitute a claim to responsiveness, which I have assigned to philosophy as its first virtue, pictured at the end of Plato's *Symposium* as Socrates awake

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and speaking when all the others have fallen asleep. It is agreeable to me that this will count certain texts as philosophical that may not announce themselves so. I do not mean that Shakespeare's texts, for instance, are to count as philosophy, but if not, then the most responsive texts in the world, to the world, the ones accordingly most extreme in their manifestation of philosophy's first virtue, are not philosophy. We might then wish either to distinguish between literary and philosophical responsiveness, or, as I prefer, to find that Shakespeare's texts are indifferent to philosophy's companion virtue, call it patience, a willingness to give over judging that conversation may effectively begin or that it has found its useful end. The philosopher's *interlocutor* (if only himself or herself) must find these things to happen. Those who conceive of philosophy's sufficiency, not alone its necessity, as argumentation, will understandably reject this view of philosophy. And then what is literature's companion virtue? Perhaps one can speak of the impatience of innocence and the suffering of experience. Texts will differ in the extent to which, and in which ways, they have to provide for themselves their opposite virtues.

But didn't I implicitly accept a moment ago the view of philosophy as argumentation when I claimed that my reading of *King Lear* shows it to provide the "analysis" of the concept of acknowledgment, rather than, what seems less contentious, that it shows the importance of the concept, indeed of the act, of acknowledgment, by showing the significance of its failure? Well, something the play shows is that disowned knowledge is not ignorance, not an absence, but the presence of something, say of the undone, of one's hand in one's undoing. But do we need philosophy for this? Is this not one more version of the message of the expulsion from Eden, that knowledge cannot be taken back, that it therefore presents itself as a temptation? As does skepticism. And philosophy left to itself has been unable to determine whether skepticism is refutable (Descartes, Kant, Moore) or irrefutable (Hume, Wittgenstein) or unworthy of refutation (Husserl, Heidegger, Quine) or self-refuting (Austin, Strawson, Dewey).

Because whatever my contribution to the intersection of Shakespearean tragedy and epistemology amounts to depends simultaneously on its philosophical soundness and openness, and on its tact with the plays it touches – to be verified, or not, in the way the readings of the individual plays each demand and

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find a specific, unpredicted interpretation, let's call it, of skepticism – it is indispensable to my sense of having a hearing that my text on *Lear* appear not only uncut, but both in its connection with the philosophical essays in *Must We Mean What We Say?* and with the companion experiments in reading Shakespeare collected in *Disowning Knowledge*. I am immensely grateful to Cambridge University Press, in now bringing out new editions of both books, for keeping this practical.