Introduction
Secularizing Skepticism?

At the start of *Hamlet*, uncertainty hovers in the air. The soldiers of the watch at Elsinore feel uneasy, unsettled by a ghost they have encountered on previous nights. They summon Hamlet's friend, Horatio. As Horatio approaches the battlements, the soldiers chide him for having "ears / That are so fortified against our story" (I.i.29–30). Evidently, his philosophical allegiance to stoicism (with its valuing of reason) predisposes him to skepticism about spirits, omens, and auguries. One soldier grumbles, "Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy, / And will not let belief take hold of him" (I.i.21–22). Horatio confirms his reputation for rational doubt with a dismissive, "Tush, tush, 'twill not appear" (I.i.28). He resists the soldiers' report, but not for long, as the ghost soon enters. "It harrows me with fear and wonder," Horatio confesses (I.i.42). His companions urge him to address the apparition, but the ghost "stalks away," offended, they surmise, causing Horatio to "tremble and look pale" (48, 51). "Is not this something more than fantasy?" one soldier rebukes Horatio.

Horatio spends the rest of the scene trying to process his experience. Having initially scoffed at their report, he now concedes, "Before my God, I might not this believe / Without the sensible and true avouch / Of mine own eyes" (54–56). Devotees of *Othello* and *Much Ado About Nothing* know that ocular proof is problematic in Shakespeare. Shakespeare takes a skeptical view of the senses, considering them unreliable avenues to knowledge, and literally recommends "consensus" among senses and people before acting on a hypothesis. Horatio's eyewitness may therefore be flawed although being shared increases its likelihood. Horatio may fall into the category of a doubting Thomas – a person of shallow faith who requires tactile evidence before he is willing to believe in the reality of spirits.

Recognizing that what he has seen may be significant, Horatio entertains possibilities of what the ghost might mean. Although he concedes that he "know[s] not" why the ghost has appeared, he ventures that it

"bodes some strange eruption to our state," ascribing this hypothesis to "the gross and scope of my opinion" (I.i.66–68). Like a good humanist student, Horatio weighs alternatives, turning to history, both current and ancient, in his effort to understand. His disquisition on Denmark's troubled history with Norway – extended in Q2 with an account of bloody omens marking the eve of Julius Caesar's assassination – is suddenly interrupted by the ghost's return. "Stay, illusion!" Horatio commands (I.i.108). Unsure what this illusion is or means, he implores it more formally this time, pleading repeatedly "speak" and "speak to me." Horatio may be confounded by the ontological status of the illusion, but he is willing to interact with it, as if it were real, on a provisional basis. Then the cock crows and Horatio says of the ghost, "it started like a guilty thing / Upon a fearful summons" (129–130). He is remembering folklore about ghosts. "I have heard," he explains, that at the cock's crowing "th'extravagant and erring spirit hies / To his confine; and of the truth herein / This present object made probation" (135–137). Horatio entertains a story of cause and effect, relating the timing of the ghost's disappearance to his compulsory return to his abode, interpreted as a zone of punishment. The soldier, Marcellus, gives a Christian coloring to Horatio's hypothesis, adding

> Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
> Wherein our saviour's birth is celebrated
> The bird of dawning singeth all night long;
> And then, they say, no spirit can walk abroad,
> . . . .
> So hallowed and so gracious is the time.
> (I.i.139–145)

Horatio replies, "So have I heard, and do in part believe it" (146). This may be a tactful concession to Marcellus's feelings, but it is also sincere. Horatio is rueful, even wistful that faith eludes him. He is not ready to embrace the Christian folklore about the seasonal fluctuation of erring spirits.

Nevertheless, the encounter with the specter has changed Horatio. He has abandoned his resistance to the idea of ghosts, but he is not prepared to let belief take hold of him. He occupies an epistemologically intermediate condition, neither disbelieving nor believing, but suspended in between. Although he is poised precariously between the entertainment of propositions and assent, Horatio is receptive to new evidence – up to a point. As Hamlet famously says, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in our philosophy" (I.v.168–169).

Q2 offers a key variant on the line, substituting "your" for "our" philosophy. Either way, Hamlet implies that the philosophy they have imbibed at Wittenberg has made Horatio skeptical of an enchanted universe alive with spirits.

Too often skepticism is considered a cynical reflex associated with atheism and disbelief. But as the opening scene of *Hamlet* illustrates, skepticism permits of degrees, waning and waxing in response to new evidence, often comprising an intermediate stage in the formation of beliefs and convictions.[1] Skepticism and belief are intertwined in complex ways affecting rationality.[2] Skeptical doubt is not an ideological position, then, so much as an epistemological condition constantly in process and subject to change. This book aims to show the vitality and creativity of skeptical doubt for literary production in early modern England by discussing neglected aspects of skepticism in signature texts. Instead of understanding skepticism as an existential dead end or arid philosophical problem, a "fortuitous imbroglio" as Hegel called it, or an insidious force evacuating the world of spirit and enchantment, I argue that for certain early modern writers skepticism proves to be an aesthetic boon – a fertile source of literary invention, offering mind-opening possibilities.[3] Its aesthetic ramifications in turn have political implications that go beyond a celebration of diversity, multiplicity or perspectivism.[4]

Scholars disagree about whether skepticism tends left or right, toward radical stances and free speech (*parrhesia*) or toward passivity and conformity. If ties are found to neo-Stoicism or Tacitus, skepticism is often deemed conservative; while if ties are found to Epicureanism and to Lucretius, it is deemed liberal and emancipatory. Activism or detachment, toleration or fanaticism, republicanism or absolutism, a Machiavellian *Realpolitik* or the embrace of diversity and community – all these stances are said to be shaped by skepticism.[5] When it comes to literature, the jury

[1] For further discussion of degrees of belief in Shakespeare, see Sherman (2019).

[2] See, e.g., Neto and Paganini's collection (2009), especially section 2 on the relations between skepticism and the Protestant Reformation (63–123); Popkin's seminal work (2003), especially xxi–16, 64–79, 112–127; Stephens (2001) on the relation of belief and resistance to skepticism (26–31, 99–102).

[3] *The Phenomenology of Mind* (1967), B.IV. B.2.249.

[4] Coined by Nietszche in *The Genealogy of Morals*, "perspectivism" has become a critical commonplace for describing the polyphony of multiple perspectives constitutive of skepticism in Cervantes's work; see, e.g., Castro (1925), Spitzer (2015), and others.

[5] On the political work of skepticism, see, e.g., Bredvold (1934); Burke (1990); Dykstal (2001), especially 77–104; Greenblatt (2011); Kahn (1985); Laursen (1992); Laursen and Paganini's collection (2015) surveys political responses to skepticism ranging from conformity to libertinism; Lom (2011), 11–29; Oakeshott (1996); Tuck (1993); Zerba (2012), Part 3, especially 164–236,

is also out on skepticism's effects. Some find skepticism in the radical nihilism of Renaissance tragedy, identifying the skeptical dictum that nothing can be known (*nihil scitur*) as a source of tragic despair.[6] Others focus on links between skepticism and traditions of debate, specific rhetorical techniques or a digressive style.[7] The wandering of Montaigne's essays, it is said, captures the testing and assaying quality of skepticism.[8] While these analyses are insightful, they sometimes fall short of a holistic approach to skeptical art.

Skepticism should be seen more broadly as a philosophical, psychological, aesthetic, and political phenomenon that informs a stance toward the world. Only then can skepticism's full impact as a secularizing force be felt and assessed. Today when secularism is an inflammatory political issue the world over and when the skepticism promoted by intellectual elites is blamed for cultural relativism and for a resurgence of fundamentalist piety, populist politics, and anti-Western ideologies, it is instructive to revisit the seventeenth century.[9] Toleration was hard-fought for in the seventeenth century and by no means inevitable.[10] Now, when intolerance is once more prevalent and notions of truth increasingly under siege, it is timely to show the many ways skepticism manifests itself in works from the golden age of English literature. By investigating the literary fortunes of skepticism in the seventeenth century, this book contributes to current debates about the role of the arts and the humanities in fostering polities that endorse civil liberties and religious freedoms. The cultural role of art in mediating and thinking through the religious wars and political conflicts of that distant time has much to teach us, our advances in technology notwithstanding. It is therefore important – even urgent – to understand the aesthetic pleasures and ethical dilemmas incited by literary forms

examines the politics of skepticism in Cicero, Machiavelli, and Montaigne. See the end of Chapter 3 in this book for discussion of Oakeshott and Tuck.

[6] See Dollimore (1984), 9–29, 83–108, 163–181.

[7] See Altman (1978) who attributes the tradition of debate *in utramque partem* visible in drama to the medieval *quaestio* and before that to the Ciceronian dialogue. See Charles Schmitt (1972) for continuities between *disputatio in utramque partem* and Ramism's approach to rhetoric. See Skinner (1996) for *paradiastole*, a technique of redescription said to foster a skeptical outlook. See Cave (2009) for *antiperistasis*, a variant on oxymoron involving risky intellectual moves that gesture outward only to retreat to safety, thereby disturbing orthodoxies while retaining an orthodox appearance.

[8] On skeptical styles, see, e.g., Giocanti (2001); Minazzoli (1998).

[9] See Annas and Barnes (1985) for an elegant refutation of the conflation of skepticism with relativism (98).

[10] On the growth of toleration in the seventeenth century, see, e.g., Curley (2005); Jordan (1932–40); Levine (1999); Zagorin (2003); Zweig (1951).

conducive to skepticism. After all, it is these pleasures that help literature insinuate itself unpredictably into hearts and minds, motivating a range of social and political actions.

Studies of Renaissance skepticism have tended to neglect its devious pleasures, focusing instead on the rediscovery and circulation of skeptical texts from Antiquity; the different branches of skepticism (chiefly, Cicero's Academic skepticism versus Pyrrho's more stringent version) together with their connection to Stoicism; the influence of skepticism on the Enlightenment; and the effects of skepticism on other fields, mainly science but also historiography.[11] Literary histories of Renaissance skepticism are few and far between. Most address a single genre, usually drama thanks to its dialogic nature, or a single author, most often Montaigne or Shakespeare.[12] Surprisingly little has been written about the ways the structural problems inherent in philosophical skepticism affect the lives and texts of a range of literary figures, as they seek to address its challenges.[13] This book offers a new literary history of skepticism in England, centered on problems involving cognition, aesthetics, and politics. The writers discussed here – among them, Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert of Cherbury, Cavendish, Marvell, and Milton – seldom, if ever, call themselves skeptics, but all feel compelled to engage with what the philosopher Stanley Cavell calls "the threat" or "temptation" of skepticism with its ethical and existential dilemmas.

While the book could have discussed a host of other seventeenth-century English playwrights, prose writers, poets, and political theorists famous for their skeptical stances toward the world, I have limited my scope to texts that I believe best illustrate key topics that remain under-theorized as regards skepticism. Hence, each chapter deals with a particular topic, problem, or cluster of problems, attendant on skepticism.

[11] See, e.g., Floridi (2002); Hamlin (2001); Matytsin (2016), especially 1–36, 233–274; Rosin (1997) surveys the sources of skeptical thought in his second chapter, noting that "if one had no access to the prime sources for information on classical skepticism, Erasmus's edition of Galen certainly could provide the basic tenets of the position" (75). Charles Schmitt (1972) traces the influence of Cicero's *Academica* from Antiquity through the sixteenth century, noting how it wanes after the publication of the writings of Sextus Empiricus (73–77); Smith and Charles (2017), especially 103–124.

[12] See, e.g., Aggeler (1998); Millicent Bell (2002); Bradshaw (1987) analyzes "the exploratory, interrogative effect of Shakespeare's perspectivism" (x); John D. Cox (2007); Demonet and Legros (2004); Engle (2000); Hamlin (2005, 2014); Hiley (1992); Hillman (2007); Kellogg (2015); Kuzner (2016); Pierce (1993); Lauren Robertson (2016); Sherman (2007); Srigley (2000); Strier (2000).

[13] Exceptions include Bredvold (1934) with his sensitive treatment of Dryden; Caldwell (2016); Spolsky (2001); Wiley (1952).

These include (1) engagements with nominalism, (2) fantasies of private language, (3) illusions of neutrality, (4) parodies of sovereignty, and (5) exercises in aesthetic discrimination. The chapters are organized chronologically, opening with Edmund Spenser's translations of Du Bellay (1569) and closing with Andrew Marvell's *Poems* (1681). Although each of the chapters can be read independently, reading them sequentially helps highlight recurrent threads that weave the book's argument. One thread is skepticism's tempestuous relationship with language, enamored of its baroque multiplicity, jealously questing for its truth, but checked by disappointment. Hear the absurd *cri de coeur* of Shakespeare's misanthrope, Timon of Athens: "Let . . . language end" (5.2.105)! Another recurrent thread is the skeptical attraction to the sublime – that overwhelming experience of awe and dread inspired by the vastness of the unknown. Attracted to objects and encounters that defy understanding, the skeptical seeker (*zetetikos*) is transported by complex emotions, feeling at once incapable and exalted, ignorant and superbly inventive.[14] Intertwined with these divergent preoccupations – the skeptical appropriation of the nominalist desire for a science of language fitted to experience and the emotional susceptibility to the sublime – a third thread recurs throughout these pages: a heightened attention to beauty following from the skeptic's obsession with unreliable appearances. In Herbert of Cherbury's case, this beauty is figured in idealized terms: a harmonious unity, proto-Kantian in its disinterested autonomy. In Marvell's case, by contrast, beauty is figured in the myriad fluctuations of the everyday.[15] Either way, the skeptic's attention to beauty leads to questions of aesthetic

[14] The reemergence of the category of the sublime in early modernity has elicited reams of erudite commentary, much of which centers on exploring the sublime as an aesthetic and experiential hallmark of modernity. Robert Doran (2015), for example, claims that the discourse of the sublime contributes to secularization in the early modern period inasmuch as "the sublime is a bourgeois appropriation of aristocratic subjectivity," serving "to exalt the bourgeois individual through the aesthetic" (20). Patrick Cheney (2018) argues that the classical sublime is integral to the formation of the modern author. Cheney shows that Longinus's *On the Sublime* (ca. first century AD) had a widespread influence long before its mid-seventeenth-century translations into the vernacular (9–15). Adapting David Sedley's work (2005) on the skeptical sublime, Cheney's analyses of Marlowe and Spenser disclose how the mind's "titanic struggle with doubt" issues in "sublime authorship" (107). For an insightful taxonomy of the sublime, structured around Longinus, Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, and Jean-François Lyotard, see forthcoming work by Patrick Gray (n.d.). The structural affinity of the sublime and skepticism is evident in the following definition: "The sublime is the sudden and unsettling experience of the contingency of one's own frameworks of meaning and understanding" (Porter 2016, 140).

[15] Adapting Ernst Cassirer's analysis (1932), Luc Ferry (1993) dubs these two approaches 'rationalist' and 'sentimental,' arguing that this opposition defines the history of aesthetics from its beginnings in the seventeenth century.

discernment. By tracing an intellectual arc from nominalism to aesthetic taste and exploring the political quandaries attached to skeptical doubt, these chapters endeavor to capture the skeptical pulse at the heart of modernity.

My goal is to transmit a sense of the complexity of skepticism, the way its many facets influence conditions of human possibility represented in literature: fantasies of intimacy and experiences of loneliness, theories of language and ideals of governance, notions of mind and norms of conduct, ideas of war and worship, God and the supernatural, nature and nurture, as well as rules for judgment and aesthetic evaluation. My historical approach – a combination of intellectual history and literary analysis – does not preclude competing, modern philosophical views of skepticism. Philosophers and theorists like Giorgio Agamben, Roland Barthes, Hans Blumenberg, Stanley Cavell, Martin Heidegger, Charles Taylor, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, among others, figure in these pages because they themselves address the upheavals and innovations of seventeenth-century Europe in addition to illuminating the ideas and texts under discussion.

Yet, before embarking on this endeavor, I need to define skepticism and address its contingent relation to secularization. These terms are often discussed in isolation from one another, while sometimes they are treated interchangeably as each purports to explain the same phenomenon – modernity – but from a different vantage point. I hope to dispel misunderstandings by offering historically respectful definitions that defamiliarize each term. Then I offer an overview of each chapter. The definitions and overview will help clear a path for analysis of key sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts.

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What is meant by skepticism? At a minimum – and as an initial working definition – skepticism means a commitment to inquiry through a process of questioning. As John Donne memorably puts it in "Satire III", "Doubt wisely, in strange way / To stand inquiring right, is not to stray" (77–78). This skeptical stance often translates into the perspectivism mentioned earlier whereby conflicting viewpoints are juxtaposed in a bid to understand difference. In Renaissance writers skepticism often manifests itself in affection for techniques that destabilize visual perception and for paradoxes and puzzles that dislodge the certainties of the "dogmatists."[16] Despite this

[16] On Renaissance paradox, see Colie (1966).

fondness for cerebral games, skepticism involves humility before the mysteries of the universe and other people, often expressed through protestations of ignorance and an anti-intellectual suspicion of academic learning and rationality.

I complicate this definition in several ways. First, I include medieval antecedents, thereby emphasizing historical continuities. Until recently the scholarly consensus was that Renaissance skepticism burst onto the European scene thanks to the publication in 1562 of Henri Estienne's Latin translation of the Greek *Outlines of Skepticism* by Sextus Empiricus, a second-century philosopher and compiler of ancient skeptical lore. But, as Henrik Lagerlund (2009) declares, "we now know that this is wrong and that the history of skepticism must be rewritten" (1). Lagerlund points out that Cicero's *Academica* circulated widely throughout the Middle Ages, as did Augustine's refutation, *Contra Academicos* (10). Furthermore, a translation of Sextus was made in the late thirteenth century.[17] By the late fourteenth century, several manuscripts of Sextus were available – presumably the source of the skeptical arguments confuted in the first three books of Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola's 1520 *Examen Vanitatis*.[18] Lagerlund shows that skeptical problems preoccupied thinkers throughout the Middle Ages, especially in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. For two hundred years, many European university scholars engaged with "skepticism of a much more problematic sort" than that introduced by Sextus (27). Lagerlund's findings challenge the implicit periodization separating Renaissance doubt from putative medieval piety. Yet Lagerlund sounds a note of caution: "how this is related to and had an impact on Renaissance and Early Modern skepticism is not known yet, but must be a future area of research" (1).[19] I suggest that even if medieval skepticism was resisted by Renaissance humanists and poets, medieval investigations into language and mental fictions invigorated the poetic creativity of Renaissance humanists, contributing to their exuberant flights of linguistic imagining as well as to their philosophical thought.

[17] See Wittwer (2016). [18] See Floridi (2002).

[19] Lagerlund echoes Schmitt (1972, 197): "A major question, which to the best of my knowledge has not been faced, is: 'What influence did this nominalistic tendency toward skepticism have in the Renaissance?'" (9). For Lagerlund, the influence, if it exists, hinges on "largely unstudied" commentaries to Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics* (27). Cf. Pasnau (2013) on the neglected importance of the *Posterior Analytics*.

A few intellectual historians have also challenged the standard narrative of origins and emergence attached to skepticism and centered on Sextus. Less cautious than historians of philosophy about drawing connections, they have had no qualms asserting that late medieval skepticism is a precursor of early modern skepticism. In Louis Dupré's account of European intellectual history, for example, the signal event triggering modernity is nominalism. Following Etienne Gilson, Dupré argues that nominalism inaugurates "the fragmentation of the ontotheological synthesis" of the high Middle Ages such that the orders of nature and grace become separated (1993, 11).[20] The separation of nature in turn permits the cultivation of scientific curiosity. As Michael Gillespie puts it, Francis Bacon "confronts and accepts the nominalist vision of the world and attempts to find a solution to its fundamental problems" (2008, 39). In this view, nominalism enables skepticism, which prompts an attention to method focused on the observation of facts; this leads to empiricism and science. Similarly, Hans Blumenberg declares, "Only after nominalism had executed a sufficiently radical destruction of the humanly relevant and dependable cosmos could the mechanistic philosophy of nature be adopted as the tool of self-assertion" (1983, 151).[21]

Historians of philosophy tend to balk at these sweeping generalizations. William Courtenay (2008) goes so far as to deny that there was a nominalist school, while Katherine Tachau (1982) argues that William of Ockham – the theologian most often invoked by intellectual historians as the preeminent nominalist – had very little influence, his ideas barely circulating outside his Oxford college.[22] While these scholars are surely right that *grands récits* premised on continuity are as difficult to prove as those premised on rupture – especially given the tendency among early modern thinkers to revile and ridicule the scholastics – it stands to reason that differing philosophical viewpoints may have subsisted side by side,

[20] Like Dupré, who mourns the passing of Aquinas's ontotheological synthesis, Toulmin suffers from nostalgia for "Cosmopolis," attributing the demise of the concept of "an overall harmony between the order of the heavens and the order of human society," not to nominalism, but to other factors, among them, Descartes' method as well as the assassination of Henri IV in 1610 (1990, 67).

[21] Other intellectual historians linking nominalism and Renaissance skepticism include Funkenstein (1986), Gregory (2012), Oberman (1960, 1963, 1974) and Rosin (1997, 47–78). See Chapter 4 for further discussion of Blumenberg.

[22] But see Normore on the seventeenth-century interest in medieval nominalism as shown in, e.g., Obadiah Walker's *Artis Rationalis ad mentem Nominalium* (1673) and Johannes Salabert's *Philosophia Nominalium Vindicata* (1651) (2017, 122–123). See also Biard who observes that debates about mental language persisted well into the sixteenth century and beyond, noting that Leibniz in 1670 "praises 'the nominalist sect, the most profound of all the scholastics, and the most consistent with the spirit of our modern philosophy'" (2014, 673).

occasionally mingling, despite the polarizing postures taken. As Calvin Normore suggests, many sixteenth-century thinkers adopted nominalist positions without giving credit to nominalism's "founding fathers," even as some tried to reconcile conflicting views (2017, 128).[23] Hence, my efforts in this book to backdate skepticism, giving late medieval thinkers a role in introducing some of the questions that fascinate early modern writers.

Second, my understanding of skepticism goes beyond perspectivism and inquiry by showing the spectrum of emotions – from paralysis to passion – resulting from susceptibility to skeptical doubt. Here Stanley Cavell's definition of skepticism is useful because it reinstates a narrative of rupture with respect to emotion. He contrasts the despairing, hyperbolical tenor of modern skepticism inaugurated by Descartes with the healing tranquility offered by Sextus and other Pyrrhonists. Cavell thinks of skepticism as a psychological worldview: "the human disappointment with human knowledge" (1979, 44). This approach allows him to define skepticism as "dissatisfactions with finitude" involving "an idea of life as inadequate to the demands of spirit" (2005, 44). He argues that what distinguishes modern skepticism from its earlier, Stoic manifestations is that "skepticism is a function of our now illimitable desire" (2003, 3). It produces a way of inhabiting the world, full of yearning for ideals and absolutes issuing from frustration with things as they are. "Skepticism is not," Cavell elaborates, "the discovery of an incapacity in human knowing but of an insufficiency in acknowledging what in my world I think of as beyond me, or my senses" (2005, 22). That insufficiency in acknowledging the beyond can manifest itself in attitudes of avoidance – averting the gaze from, say, the demands of love – or in wild longing. "A passionate utterance," he notes, "is an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire" (2005, 19). Extreme desire issues from the limitations of acknowledgment. While investigating skepticism's moods in art, Cavell posits that "if tragedy is the working out of a scene of skepticism, then comedy in contrast works out a festive abatement of skepticism, call it an affirmation of existence" (2005, 26). The role of genre in expressing or abating skepticism is crucial to his philosophical literary criticism.

Cavell recognizes that his post-Cartesian approach to skepticism, rocked as it is by emotion, marks a sea-change from the approach of the ancients

[23] Of "the cursus of sixteenth-century Nominalism," Normore says, "the story begins in semantics and ends in theology and ecclesiastical politics" (2017, 130). He adds of the *via Nominalium*, "Many of its views, however, lived on, and many of its characteristic theses appear in the work of scholastics and *novatores* alike and played a central role in shaping the philosophy and the physics of the seventeenth century" (133).