

Cavell, Wittgenstein, Shakespeare and Skepticism:

*Othello vs. Cymbeline*¹

Stanley Cavell's engagement with Shakespeare and philosophy is exemplified by his singular work on knowledge and acknowledgement in Shakespearean tragedy, in which, he holds, the tragic attitude towards the world is skepticism. As Cavell employs it, skepticism, in one form, is the methodological doubt about the very existence of the external world and, in another, later manifestation, the existence of minds other than our own. Whereas the existence (or not) of an external world beyond my specific consciousness is the subject of Descartes's *Meditations*,² the specific issue of other minds is generally attributed to a much later extension of skepticism by Thomas Reid and John Stewart Mill.³ The Cartesian divorce of mind and body is, however, thought to prepare the ground for skepticism about other minds, and leads Cavell to the claim that "the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes's *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare."⁴ By "full existence," Cavell means other-mind skepticism, since there is no trace of any skepticism about the external world in Shakespeare. Shakespearean tragedy, especially, confronts and lives through the consequences of skepticism's turning of ordinary human finitude into a metaphysical impossibility, not about physical objects but rather about the interiority or consciousness of others.

Skepticism ignores the work of words like doubt, uncertainty, suspicion, ignorance, distrust and disbelief in ordinary uses of language by reducing it to absolute doubt, which does not seek to resolve uncertainty by seeking evidence, but rather holds that no such evidence is possible. For the skeptic nothing can possibly count as evidence against doubt: "the best case of

knowledge shows itself vulnerable to suspicion” (Cavell, *Shakespeare*, 7). In Cavell’s view, the tragic in Shakespeare is the consequence of the refusal to accept the finitude of the human, which is grounded in the finitude of human beings’ knowledge of each other and their incapacity to transcend such limitations by acknowledging each other as human beings.⁵ Shakespeare’s tragic characters are thus incapable not only of acknowledging others but also of acknowledging their own need of acknowledgement by others.⁶ Othello kills Desdemona—he turns her to the perfect smoothness and whiteness of alabaster—because he cannot forgive her for being someone other than himself or the image he has created of her: not only for being other than he is, but also for being an other upon whom he has staked his existence: “My life upon her faith...” (1.3.335) and “...when I love thee not / Chaos is come again” (3.3.101-2).⁷

I

In this exploration of the putative place of skepticism in Shakespeare I move beyond the plays regarding supposed female infidelity upon which Cavell focuses—*Othello* and *The Winter’s Tale*—to ask, first, why Cavell ignores *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Cymbeline*, and, second, whether these other plays offer a different perspective on the relationship among the concepts cognate with the skeptical position: doubt, uncertainty, suspicion, distrust and disbelief. I argue that Cavell ignores *Much Ado* and *Cymbeline* despite the similarities of at least some aspects of their plots to *Othello* and *The Winter’s Tale* because in the the romantic comedy Shakespeare shows the operations of ordinary concepts of doubt, mistrust, and uncertainty as they work in a particular kind of patriarchal society, which is given to doubting female fidelity as a matter of ideological projection and anxiety. The same social forces may underlie the deadly marriage of doubt and certainty in the minds of Posthumus and Leontes in *Cymbeline* and *The Winter’s Tale*,

but, I argue, Shakespeare suggests that in these late adaptations of the comic form, especially in the former, the corrosive skepticism that Cavell discerns in *Othello* is circumvented by the movement of *eros* through relations of service, where the vulnerability of love to the withholding of reciprocity is transformed by its passage through the necessary reciprocity of the master-servant relationship. My comparative analysis suggests that even in *Othello* other-mind skepticism cannot wholly account for the disturbing power of the tragedy.

Cavell's argument prompts two remarks. The first draws attention to its paradoxical historicism. He is anything but historicist in the sense that Shakespeareans have come to understand the term over the past three decades, but he does allow that skepticism may be attributed to Shakespeare because of his *historical* proximity to its rise as a fully conceived philosophical position in the form of Cartesian doubt, which Descartes keeps at bay by appealing to the existence of God. Shakespeare thus anticipates through the theatre what Descartes comes to work out discursively, within a period of fifty years, in his study. And yet, for Cavell, once skepticism is posited as a full-blown philosophical problem, it engulfs the human condition and transcends history. It turns into a metaphysical riddle about the given finitude of all human beings.

The second is a more intractable puzzle concerning what we consider to be philosophy itself. Cavell's analysis of *Othello* originally appeared in *The Claim of Reason*, his extensive disquisition on Ludwig Wittgenstein's response to skepticism: "the correct relation between the inner and outer, between the soul and its society, is the theme of the *Investigations* as a whole," he claims.⁸ Recognizing that it cannot be refuted, Wittgenstein aims to work through skepticism by showing that its claims are senseless. In the face of skepticism's suspicion or rejection of the

ordinary, he counters it with what Cavell calls his “devotion to the ordinary”:⁹ the ordinary uses of the concepts concerning belief and doubt that I list above.

Given Wittgenstein’s oblique approach to the skeptic’s problem, and Cavell’s acknowledged comprehension of Wittgenstein, I am intrigued by Cavell’s conviction that Shakespeare is fundamentally concerned by the madness of skepticism rather than the ordinariness of human uncertainty. Let me explain this obliquely, via Wittgenstein’s notorious dislike of Shakespeare—or his profession not to understand him. Between 1939 and 1950—the year before his death—Ludwig Wittgenstein inscribed in his personal notes a dozen or so remarks about Shakespeare. The remarks form no coherent thesis or argument, and their attitude to the English national poet is quirkily iconoclastic, if not downright perverse. Almost all of them are disparaging. Overall, they register Shakespeare’s *badness*, expressed in three different ways. First, Wittgenstein opposes the adulation of others with his personal sense of Shakespeare’s inadequacy; second, he finds bad or unconvincing Shakespeare’s failure to represent life *realistically*—his likenesses are in an ordinary sense not true to life, they are even *inhuman*; finally, he concedes that if one is indeed to appreciate Shakespeare, one needs to recognize that he is *sui generis*—he has simply to be accepted for his otherness, as one would a “splendid piece of scenery.” He has no “great heart” as Beethoven, for example, may be said to have; he is instead the *creator* of a language; he sings as the birds sing; he is someone “who can allow himself anything.”¹⁰

Although Wittgenstein states categorically that he finds Shakespeare bad, his remarks show him trying to come to terms with something that he finds difficult to comprehend: “... it’s all wrong, things aren’t like that—and yet at the same time it’s quite right according to a law of

its own ... he is completely unrealistic (*like a dream*)” (*Culture and Value*, 83; emphasis added). The remarks occur within a context of a repeated set of questions about the difficulties of acknowledging the truth of something that one has *not* seen for oneself or the concomitant challenge of tending to see what one expects to see, rather than what is there: with what he calls the stubbornness of the *will*.¹¹ It may be precisely such “willfulness” that underlies the Bardolatry that the alien in Cambridge found distasteful, stating that “an enormous amount of praise” is “lavished on Shakespeare without understanding and for the wrong reasons, by a thousand professors of literature” (48). It takes the “uncorruptible” Milton to make him subject his own dislike of the Bard to critical scrutiny.

What might be the “wrong reason” for praising Shakespeare?

Wittgenstein’s claim is that, against the impulse to read the plays naturalistically or mimetically, the corpus should rather be viewed as an organic whole. Shakespeare is a “creator of language” rather than a poet in whom one can recognize a “great human heart” (84). This repeats, along a different trajectory, the modernist turn from an interest in Shakespeare’s mimetic art—from the delineation of character and truth to life—to a conception of the corpus as a complex system of connected literary metaphors, images, or poetic languages.¹² What is most surprising about Wittgenstein’s surprise at the unconvincing nature of Shakespeare’s “likenesses,” however, is that it contradicts his own pronouncements elsewhere that art is not primarily mimetic. “You might say,” he writes in the years when he was considering the peculiarity of Shakespeare, “the work of art does not aim to convey *something else*, only itself.”¹³ What more fitting exemplification of this observation could there be than the comment, made about Shakespeare three years later, that “[i]t is *not* as though Shakespeare portrayed

human types well and were in that respect *true to life*. He is *not* true to life. But he has such a supple hand and his brush strokes are so individual, that each one of his characters looks *significant*, is worth looking at” (*Culture and Value*, 84)? Wittgenstein writes—extremely uncharacteristically—in his private observations on Shakespeare as if what was “true to life” were written on the surface, inscribed in the faces of the characters, a position that he persistently attacks in his philosophical remarks.

What I find striking is that what Cavell sees in Shakespeare after his reading of Wittgenstein, Wittgenstein himself sees not at all. If Wittgenstein’s greatest work is indeed an attempt to shift the ground from beneath skepticism, not by refuting it but by teaching us how to live in and with human ordinariness, then why does Wittgenstein not acknowledge that Shakespeare may be working through or representing the same problem (however badly or idiosyncratically)? There are two possible answers: the first is that Wittgenstein did not see the representation of skepticism in Shakespeare because, *pace* Cavell, it is not there. The second is that Wittgenstein disliked Shakespeare so much precisely because skepticism does loom so large in the plays, and that it therefore takes language away from the ordinary or the human to the metaphysical.¹⁴ When Wittgenstein suggests that his failure to appreciate Shakespeare lies perhaps in his “inability to read him easily” (49) and in the likeness of Shakespeare’s worlds to dreams, this recalls his remark that Freud’s interpretation of dreams shows “how complicated is the way the human mind represents the world ... So complicated, so irregular ... that we can *barely* call it representation any longer” (44). With their bad but nevertheless striking similes, their characters that are not true to life, and their created rather than representational language, do Shakespeare’s plays capture the complicated nature of representation by extending its limits beyond the ordinary? And therefore, possibly, into the alien regions of skepticism?

II

Wittgenstein's response to skepticism involves removing the ground from the skeptic's extraordinary doubt to restore doubt's partnership with certainty or knowledge in ordinary discourse, from whence doubt gets its sense. It makes sense to doubt something in a situation where it is possible to be certain: where there is a way or possibility of finding out.

Wittgenstein's reminds philosophy that the concepts of doubt, uncertainty, belief, suspicion, conviction, and satisfaction are *ordinary* concepts. Doubt is a concept, not an interior state: it gets its meaning from its relation to other concepts and their place in a language. Doubt has no purchase in situations where there is by definition no possibility of proof. Where it appears to do so, it is no more than a wheel turning idly in a machine; it looks as if it is working, but since it is not connected to the rest of the machine this is an illusion. The skeptic thinks he is subjecting everything to doubt, but his doubt is an unconnected wheel—it is not engaged with the language-games from which it derives its sense.

The problem of doubting whether someone else is in pain seems to arise from the incorrigible knowledge I have of my own pain. But the problem disappears when we recognize that I cannot be said to *know* that I am in pain—for what would such knowledge be contrasted with? “If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty,” Wittgenstein writes in *On Certainty*.

Furthermore,

‘Knowledge’ and ‘certainty’ belong to different *categories*. They are not two mental states, like ‘surmising’ and ‘being sure’ ... about certain empirical statements no doubt can exist if making judgments is to be possible at all ... the questions that we raise and our doubts depend upon the fact that some presuppositions are exempt from doubt, are as if were like hinges on which those turn ... The truth of certain propositions depends upon our frame of reference.¹⁵

No doubt can exist about certain apparently empirical statements if we are to be able to make judgments at all. Wittgenstein thus tackles the problem of skepticism by emptying it of epistemological content: he casts it not as a problem of knowledge, opinion, or belief, but of interaction, attitude, or what Cavell calls *acknowledgement*.¹⁶ “My attitude” towards another, Wittgenstein writes, “is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul” (*Philosophical Investigations*, p. 178).

Just as important to Wittgenstein is the counter-intuitive assertion that the claim to knowledge made in the face of skepticism is as senseless as the skeptic’s doubt. Appeals to common sense, such as the obvious existence of the world for the past hundred years, or the palpability of these two hands in front of me, are equally beyond doubt and certainty. I can no more say meaningfully that I am certain that my hands exist than I can doubt the fact. Certain propositions (which only appear to convey indubitable truths) are placed beyond the paths travelled by inquiry: they form the framing possibilities of enquiry where doubt and proof are pursued. They are no more certain than they are doubtful: “The *truth* of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference” (*On Certainty*, 83). These moves do not constitute a refutation of the skeptic; they are instead a form of therapy, an attempt to show the

fly the way out of the fly bottle, to bring language back home to its ordinary work, to wean the skeptic of the madness that threatens to unhinge him. To refute the skeptic would be to offer him proofs, which would affirm the sanity or meaningfulness of the game he has chosen to play.

Could we make sense of Shakespeare, then, not by regarding him as an anticipator of Cartesian skepticism but rather by simply (well such things are never simply simple) teasing out the relationships between the ordinary words “suspicion,” “uncertainty,” “reservation,” or “disbelief” as they are embodied in the life worlds represented in the plays? If we could do so, it would mean that Cavell is mistaken to regard Shakespeare as the precursor of the terrifying consequences of a lived form of skepticism. I propose to test this proposition via four plays that are concerned with the problem of putative female unfaithfulness and its attendant network of uncertainties: *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *Cymbeline*. One is a comedy, one a tragedy, and we have come to classify the other two as romances.

III

In *Shakespeare the Thinker*, which is in effect about Shakespeare as philosopher, A.D. Nuttall writes of *Much Ado About Nothing* that in this play “Shakespeare had chosen not to think hard,” specifying that it “is innocent of epistemological implications.”¹⁷ In this romantic comedy Shakespeare is thus not pursuing the philosophical problem of knowledge. But knowledge, doubt, uncertainty, disbelief, and misprision are central to the play. It’s about noting, and the failures of noting properly or noting with too much engagement or willfulness. But Nuttall is correct to claim that the limitations and recovery of knowledge and perception are explicable in non-metaphysical terms. Not only can one give an account of the play’s events by appealing to a mixture of sociological context, situation, and literary tradition, but the comedy also offers very

little purchase for skepticism of the kind that Cavell finds central to *Othello*. Despite its similarity to the aspects of *Othello* that turn on the suspicion of female infidelity, Claudio's doubts about his betrothed are attributable, variously, to his own callowness, the place of women in a society which regards them as instruments of homosocial exchange and bonding, and the literary tradition of courtly love whose very idealization of women veils the darker anxieties and aggressiveness of male desire. There is plenty of doubt and uncertainty in *Much Ado About Nothing*, but it is not rooted in the metaphysical limitations of human knowledge. It exists in the structures of power and the sexual politics of a particular social order, and it may be put to rest by the presentation of evidence, as it is through discoveries of the watch. In a society in which young males are expected to seek the approval of and mobilize the authority of their superiors in negotiating their uncertain erotic desires, it should not surprise us when such young males turn out to be less than certain about not only the affections of their prospective partners but also about the motivations of those whom they engage to woo on their behalf.

Claudio expresses his disillusionment as a set of personally achieved and universally projected sententiae, but the speech is in fact no more than the product of particular language games and their enabling conditions within a particular society:

'Tis certain so, the Prince woos for himself.
 Friendship is constant in all other things
 Save in the office and affairs of love.
 Therefore all hearts in love use their own tongues.
 Let every eye negotiate for itself,
 And trust no agent; for beauty is a witch

Against whose charms faith melteth into blood.

This is an accident of hourly proof,

Which I mistrusted not. Farewell, therefore, Hero.

(2.1.172-80)

Moreover, what Claudio registers here is not doubt but rather a new-found *certainty*. He is sure, from his readings of the behavior of those upon whom his own sense of self depends, that this is the way the world goes. That he is wrong about the specifics of this case is incidental to the larger question of the limits of knowledge, and the fact that he is happy to accept a veiled substitute for the dead Hero—the very symbol, one would have thought of the essential inscrutability of the other—indicates that the deepest questions of our capacity to know others is not at issue here.

The kind of knowledge that the comedy does raise, however, is knowledge about love. It is clear from Claudio's "love in idleness" (1.1.291-300) speech, and his readiness to believe the lie about Hero, that he does not know what it is to love. Neither do Benedick and Beatrice, but in a different way. They show us that this lack of knowledge, which cannot be reduced to uncertainty, is essential to love. The play shows us that neither of them knows what they want from the other or what the other wants from them aside from interaction. From the moment of Beatrice's self-contradictory declaration, "I wonder that you will still be talking, Signor Benedick. Nobody marks you" (1.1.114), that interaction is indubitable. From the beginning, each seeks an at least verbal engagement with the other, but that engagement achieves a greater depth when they join in their conviction that Beatrice's cousin is wronged. Benedick will finally fight to the death for that conviction. In opposition to Claudio, whose imaginary relation to Hero (to borrow Lacan's terms for the moment) does not change in the course of the play, Beatrice and

Benedick find their relation to each other in the symbolic—“our hands against our hearts”—through which they renegotiate their respective imaginary relations to gender and self. Much has been made by critics attuned to gender politics of Benedick’s silencing of Beatrice at the end of the play: “Peace, I will stop your mouth’ (*kissing her*) (5.4.102). Yes, he does silence her; but he also kisses her, which we can read variously as the Neoplatonic commingling of souls, the patriarchal reassertion of control under the guise of love, or a tiny irruption of the Lacanian Real into their relentlessly symbolic pursuits.¹⁸ The point is that *Much Ado About Nothing* not only declares via its protagonist that “man is but a giddy thing” but also registers its acceptance of that condition, equally in its conceptual pursuit of doubt, suspicion, belief and uncertainty and in its invitation to its audience to celebrate such giddiness through communal laughter. Such communal laughter marks the limits of skepticism. We suffer alone, but in the theater we laugh together, conjoined in an irrational union that denies a foothold, however briefly, to skeptical doubt.

IV

Are things different with *Othello*? We can begin to answer that question by asking whether its protagonist’s behavior and condition are fully explicable in sociological, historical, and ideological—that is to say, in the contingent, non-philosophical terms to which I allude in the discussion of *Much Ado About Nothing*. Race has been one key to such readings. Othello’s uncertainty stems from his social position as racial other to Venice. While the state is happy to employ him in its defense against the Ottomans, who are racially and religiously different, it nonetheless harbors a deep-seated racism, of which Iago is the most explicit mouthpiece, and which Othello himself internalizes in his growing fixation, via Desdemona’s whiteness, on the

blackness of his own visage. Another approach focuses on the gender politics of Venice, arguing that what Othello imbibes from Iago and then projects onto Desdemona is a peculiar, if prevalent, ideological suspicion of female fidelity as such.¹⁹ Othello's doubts, about both himself and his wife, though deep-seated, thus are open to ideological and sociological explanations. They are not metaphysical or philosophical. But are they sufficient to account for the horror of this play?

Cavell's philosophically oriented reading of *Othello* suggests that there is something unbearable about Shakespeare's tragedy that no understanding of ideology or historical context, however apposite, can explain. His argument is difficult to follow--not least because it develops through suggestions, rhetorical questions, and assertions with little textual support. The idea that Othello is beset by a skeptical doubt about whether he can know Desdemona is clear enough, but it is hardly grounded in a reading based on textual evidence. Cavell claims that the play presents us with "the scene of skepticism epitomized" (128), and that Othello represents in his "sufferance" "the most extraordinary representation known to me of the 'astonishment' of skeptical doubt" (*ibid.*).²⁰ These are strong claims about the play as an exemplum of other-mind skepticism *avant la lettre*. To the objections of his Wittgensteinian interlocutor, "But Othello surely knows that Desdemona exists! So what has his ... condition to do with skepticism?" (137), he responds twice with an affirmation that Othello certainly knows that Desdemona exists: "Nothing can be more certain to Othello than that Desdemona exists" and "Othello is hardly in doubt that that he can ever know that Desdemona is, for example, in pain ... and for that reason in doubt that she exists; so again his problem cannot match the skeptical one" (138). I am assuming that the voice of these assertions is that of the interlocutor, who is pointing to Cavell's

lack of textual evidence for his claim that Othello's problem is "the problem of knowledge – of the dominance of modern philosophical thought by it" (126).

How does Cavell respond? By repeating his question about the philosophical problem of certainty and doubt: "But I ask again: Do we know what it is to be in such doubt? and know this better than we know how to think of Othello's doubt?" (*ibid.*) The questions offer very little textual evidence that Othello's doubt is not a version of the kinds of uncertainty that besets Don Pedro's band in *Much Ado* but rather a fully blown issue of the existence of other minds. Moreover, in response to the assertion, "Nothing can be more certain to Othello than that Desdemona exists," Cavell states (in his own voice, I assume), "That is precisely the possibility that tortures him" (*Disowning Knowledge*, 138). Which is it? Is Othello the epitome of doubt about other minds or is his secure knowledge of the existence of Desdemona as a finite being like himself the problem? Why does Othello kill his wife?

There are two further avenues along which Cavell's argument proceeds: one stems from Descartes's need to prove the existence of God to avoid external world skepticism; the other involves a Christian conception of sexuality and of humanity in general, that is to say of finitude and contamination. "The integrity of my human (finite) existence," Cavell writes, "may depend upon the fact and the idea of another being's existence, and on the possibility of *proving* that existence, an existence conceived from my very dependence and completeness, hence conceived as perfect, and in some sense conceived as conceiving me, 'in some sense [in] its own image'—these are the thoughts take me to a study of *Othello*" (*Disowning Knowledge*, 127-8). These thoughts are thoroughly Cartesian. My question is whether Cavell can legitimately move from Descartes's desire to *prove* the existence of the infinite being upon which one's own incomplete

being depends as a creature formed in the image of the Other, to Othello's dependence upon his own fantasy image of Desdemona.

Cavell thus moves from the Cartesian derivation of a non-finite being as the assurance of the finitude of human existence to Othello's projection upon Desdemona of divine qualities, upon which he stakes his own existence. Cavell suggests that the discovery that Desdemona is human—a finite being like himself—causes Othello's sense of himself to collapse: “Chaos is come again.” He connects the discovery of the finitude of the other to the place of virginity within a Christian framework of marriage and to the release of blood through consummation. Again, it is difficult to ascertain precisely what Cavell means when he declares that “there is reason to believe that the marriage has been consummated, anyway reason to believe that Othello does not know whether it has” (131). How could Othello possibly not know whether or not the marriage has been consummated?²¹ Unless Cavell means by “consummation” the requirement that Desdemona has lost her virginity in the process. That's a big stretch, but let us grant it for the purposes of discovering Cavell's argument.

Knowing that he and his wife are “one flesh,” Othello is caught in a dilemma: if they have had sexual relations upon being married, either he has or he hasn't deflowered her; if he hasn't, she is unfaithful and he is contaminated; if he has, he is still contaminated precisely for turning a perfect being into one marked by human desire and sexuality.²² He will have “shed her blood.” This reading situates itself in a very particular moment—not only in the Christian conception of marriage but also in a very particular, not so say peculiar, conception of sexual contamination. It leaps from the skeptic's general loss of the world to a Christianized, and even post-Freudian, notion of sexual contamination that appears to have little connection with the

philosophical problem of other minds. Indeed, in this part of his argument, Cavell emphasizes what Othello knows only too well but of which he is in denial: that he is responsible for transforming his idealized image of Desdemona into a being of flesh and blood, whose aroused desire for his blackness is a sign of her contamination. Cavell thinks of Othello as “having been surprised by Desdemona ... to find that she is flesh and blood ... He cannot forgive Desdemona for existing, for being separate from him, outside, beyond command, commanding her captain’s captain” (*Disowning Knowledge*, 136).

Tzachi Zamir, in his own exploration of Shakespeare’s relation to philosophy, rejects Cavell’s focus on Desdemona’s sexuality for his own nonetheless Cavellian claim that Shakespeare’s play is “about the psychological murder implied by the very idea of an erotic bond that transcends action and contingent biography.”²³ Zamir rejects even Cavell’s attenuated history to insist on the purely conceptual or philosophical, on the *very idea*: “It is ... a condensed focus on the violence inherent in the very idea of deep erotic attachments.” He might have acknowledged that the very idea of erotic violence in *eros* is elaborated in Freud.²⁴ Zamir’s point is that there is something, elaborated in *Othello*, about the *very idea* of love that is tragically violent. Othello’s race, or male attitudes to female sexuality, or the encounter between Christianity and Islam in the early modern Mediterranean may draw the lineaments of this idea in specific terms, but they cannot of themselves explain the *very idea* of the play, which is independent of contingent biography, place, or time.

The very idea--What would Wittgenstein make of such notion? He would treat it with great suspicion. He would hold that the very idea that there is such a thing as *the very idea* is the incurable philosopher’s disease: the deluded search for a thing that underlies, weaves together,

ensures the unity of a concept that is in practice produced across a multitude of uses. It is like Cavell's conception of Othello's disease: an infirmity that drives him to demand "ocular proof" of something that falls outside the language-game in which the giving and testing of proofs has its life—not of the adultery, of which proof is perfectly possible, but rather of his own unbearable dependency upon another. So we might ask what Wittgenstein might tell us of love in *Othello*? Directly, not much. In *Othello*, he might have said, language goes on holiday; or Shakespeare gives himself the freedom to create a new language, which also means the imagination of forms of life that are only tangentially related to ours; he sings as the birds sing, and we may find the song beautiful and impressive, but it is as intelligible to us as the lion's speech.²⁵ Or he might say that Shakespeare's tragedy presents us with a dream world not explicable by either a "dynamic theory of dreams"²⁶ or a consideration of skeptical doubt, but rather a world in which character and action are "not true to life." Wittgenstein's sense of Shakespeare's being "completely unrealistic" (*Culture and Value*, 83) may thus in part account for my difficulty in following Cavell's paradoxical, if not contradictory, characterization of Othello. It may signal that Cavell's apparent inconsistencies merely follow the inconsistencies of the play.

This leaves us in a stalemate. I am not persuaded that Cavell unpacks Othello's behavior in terms that are strictly in accord with skeptical doubt as philosophy knows it; I am partially convinced by the many attempts to give historically specific and ideologically wide-ranging conditions for the tragic behavior of the Moor of Venice, and therefore of the ordinary uses (which may also be deeply ideological) of such concepts as doubt and uncertainty, faith and proof. But there is something—call it philosophical—about the play that I feel in my bones that such accounts ignore. Cavell tries to capture that sense when he writes that once skepticism is

unleashed upon the world it leaves none of us untouched: it is not a philosophical aberration but rather a predicament of the human condition as such. Othello's life is not an aberration. Rather, Cavell is struck by how it "figures mine, how mine has the makings of his, that we bear an internal relation to one another; how my happiness depends upon living touched but not ... stricken [by his problems] ... of trust and betrayal, of false isolation and false company, of the desire and fear of both privacy and of union" (*Claim*, 453). How far can we take this claim about the way in which the universal threat of skepticism forges a bond between a fictional character and the reader or spectator of Shakespearean tragedy?

V

Cavell's reading of *The Winter's Tale* offers his most compelling and subtle treatment of the general argument that Shakespeare is fundamentally concerned with an anticipatory form of skepticism. It is thus striking that he moves from tragedy to romance, or tragi-comedy. From the idea that Othello is stricken by the all too human separateness of Desdemona, Cavell moves to Leontes's fanatical encounter with the essential unknowability of the provenance of his child. "Art thou my boy?" the king asks, knowing that there is no way absolutely certain way of telling other than through the fallible notion that the child resembles the father.²⁷ What answers are possible for Mamilius, the boy, who is not struck down by skepticism?

On epistemological grounds, Mamilius is no position to answer the question. He too has no way of knowing; but more important, he has no way of making sense of the question. Women know who their children are; men can never be certain, although they can satisfy themselves in

various, more or less satisfying, ways. The argument from resemblance cannot offer certainty, only a certain degree of (perhaps gullible, perhaps projective) comfort. And children? In the sense that J.L. Austin discusses the problem in his essay, “Other Minds,” they can never know *for themselves* who either of their parents is.²⁸ In his discussion of Leontes’s descent into madness as a result of his being unable to find anything about either Mamilius or in what others say that will prove their filiation, Cavell argues that Wittgenstein’s concept of criteria—which Wittgenstein offers as a passage beyond skepticism²⁹—reaches its limit: there are no criteria, no aspects of affinity or similarity, telling or stipulating, that can dispel the possibility that Mamilius is some other man’s “boy.” And once what counts as someone being one’s child is revealed to be ultimately unanswerable, or untellable, Leontes wishes *everything* to stop counting: he reduces the world itself to “nothing.” The play obliges with the deaths of both his wife and son.

There is, however, another way in which, “Art thou my boy?,” may be answered, by the boy as well as the man: through the affirmation that stems from acknowledgement. “Given our history, or relationship, this conversation, what else could I be?” the boy might answer in our thought-experiment. This follows Wittgenstein’s move from treating someone as a human being on the basis of knowledge that they have a soul (which is open to doubt) to the givenness of my attitude to others as bearers of souls. The final act of *The Winter’s Tale*, which seems to present Hermione miraculously brought back to life by Leontes’s “awakened faith,” is in fact the reenactment of that ordinary, unreflective attitude to human beings as souls. It is not an epistemological event—through which Leontes is finally offered “ocular proof” of his wife’s faithfulness and his children’s legitimacy—but rather the readjustment and openness to a world that is not merely not amenable to proof but in which the quest for proof is a kind of madness.

Much Ado About Nothing, Othello, The Winter's Tale. Looking at these plays, we might now say that Shakespeare's relation to skepticism takes different generic forms. In a Romantic comedy like *Much Ado About Nothing*, in which the dramatist, we recall, is "has chosen not to think hard," questions of suspicion, uncertainty, or disbelief are no more than our ordinary concepts as they work themselves out in the vagaries and vicissitudes of ordinary human life.³⁰ Comedy in this sense avoids being philosophical; it precludes skepticism by dealing in the ordinary concepts of social life, at least as they concern doubt and knowledge. Tragedy, however, is philosophical insofar as it takes as its fundamental issue not merely the problem of skepticism but also its lived nightmare. Shakespearean romance begins with the skeptical nightmare but shows how it may be avoided or overcome by the suspension of the natural laws that go hand in hand with epistemology. Romance would, in following the Wittgensteinian paradox, be thoroughly philosophical: it would pit philosophy against itself; it would be a kind of anti-philosophy.³¹ It would show the fly the way out of the fly bottle; it would bring language back from its destructive wanderings to its proper home. It would put the search for proof in its proper place by awakening faith.

All well and good. But in his afterthoughts on his reading of the *The Winter's Tale*, Cavell speculates, from the problem of knowing whether or not a child is yours, that skepticism may in fact be divided by gender: men, who can never really know the provenance of their children, are open to skepticism, whereas women, who of necessity know, are not. The point is ostensibly not psychological or temperamental but rather logical or conceptual. Only a woman can know whether or not a child is hers. All other patriarchal symptoms of identity—including likeness to the ostensible father—are fallible. More important, Cavell's introduction of a difference of gender into the putatively general, human problem of skepticism undermines the

philosophical purity of skepticism as something applicable to all human beings. Would Cavell feel the affinity if not quite (stricken) identity that he expresses with Othello had he been a woman? We do not know. But Cavell opens the possibility (thereby contradicting the history of the homocentrism of accounts of skepticism from the Pyrrhonists to Hume), that skepticism is a not a condition to which all human beings are fundamentally susceptible but rather one that is split along gendered lines. This means that there is something—biological, social, ideological, historical—that distributes the propensity for radical doubt unequally between the sexes.

Under this new distinction doubt ceases to be the ground for all distinctions between uncertainty and knowledge, and, furthermore, it seems that there is no philosophically rigorous way of distinguishing between the two classes divided in this way: between men and women. What does this mean? It means that in our endeavors to pursue a logical difference, we are pushed into the field of contingency, of the temperamental or psychological or ideological or sociological factors that shape male and female experience, or what Cavell finally calls the male or the female in all of us. If men are prone to a destructive skeptical fanaticism that wishes finally to abandon and destroy the world, he suggests, then women are open to the passionate intensity which he calls love, and which, presumably, resists skepticism. Love, Cavell asserts, ought to be the “best case” against the corrosive effects of skepticism. Is this true?

VI

As a way into this question I turn to a play that Cavell ignores, even though it contains the ingredients shared by the other three plays: *Cymbeline*. Why does this play, with its striking reprises of *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Othello*, and *The Winter's Tale*, escape Cavell's attention? Presumably because, although it is filled with doubt, uncertainty, credulity, the elusiveness of knowledge and the suspension of belief, it does not present these concepts under the general sign of skepticism. The plot is almost identical to story nine of day two of the *Decameron*, where the background condition is not doubt but rather the ordinary conviction that in the absence of their spouses, men and women would equally seek sexual pleasure elsewhere.³² The husband who boasts of his wife's peerless fidelity is considered to be foolishly reckless, and although his gullibility is judged stupid and his subsequent order for his wife to be murdered condemned, the tale does not present the problem as the essential inscrutability of others, not even women.

Boccaccio's tale and Shakespeare's romance do, however, interweave erotic relationships with those of service, and I want to ask whether this makes a difference to the philosophical import of our reading. In each case, the servant who is ordered to kill the wife is put under moral pressure regarding his loyalty to his master. They each ultimately choose to disobey.³³ Moreover the wives themselves, disguised as boys, become cherished servants to other powerful men, the Sultan in the *Decameron*, and the Roman general, Caius Lucius in *Cymbeline*.

Service, a central feature of *Cymbeline*, but also present in the other plays, complicates Cavell's mix of skepticism, acknowledgement, and love. The striking feature of service in this play is that it is not merely a static or background condition but rather a dynamic set of changing

relationships. Virtually all the characters find themselves or put themselves in the position of servants at some point. In his discussion of *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*, Cavell is singularly uninterested in characters other than the protagonists: he focuses on Leontes and Hermione to the exclusion of Camillo, Antigonus and Paulina. His lack of interest in Iago is so pronounced that he regards him as a mere projection of what would have happened inside Othello's head anyway.

Hegel offers a concept of subjectivity that avoids skepticism (at least of other minds), since it posits self-consciousness as something that arises between two different but necessarily related instances of such consciousness through the mediation of the other. Hegel's analysis of mutually dependent consciousness in general is closely related to the famous master-slave dialectic, which rests on the grammatical necessity of the reciprocal relationship between master and servant. The paradox of the master-servant relation lies in the fact that whereas the master seems to himself to be independent of the slave or servant—that is to say, a consciousness that exists purely for itself—he exists as master only through his mediated relation to the servant. He is thus dependent upon the, in turn dependent, being of the servant:

But it is evident that ... just where the master has effectively achieved lordship, he really finds something has come about quite different from an independent consciousness. It is not an independent, but rather a dependent consciousness that he has achieved. He is thus not assured of self-existence as his truth; he finds his truth is rather the unessential consciousness [i.e. the servant] and the fortuitous unessential action of that consciousness ... the truth of the independent consciousness is accordingly the consciousness of the bondsman.³⁴

Terms like “essential” and “inessential” are provisional; they change as Hegel develops the dialectic. But Hegel’s position could be stated, perhaps over simply, in the following grammatical terms: master-servant relationships are necessarily reciprocal. I cannot be a master without having a servant, and you cannot be a servant without having a relationship to a master. But this is not true of love: I can, and often do, alas, love alone. Does the master-servant relation in its purely conceptual terms, then, avoid the solipsism that loving seems to invite, especially if we take Othello and Leontes as our paradigms of love? Cavell touches on this question in passing in *The Claim of Reason*, when he entertains the thought that the duties that a servant owes a master may encompass a “restricted mode of acknowledgement” (*Claim*, 434). But he does not consider such social, and therefore arbitrary, duties as a form of reciprocity. His speculation forms part of a putative “surmise” (of others—“more that half of the moralists who ever wrote” [435]) that, if we have duties towards others, they are owed to them merely as human beings, beyond any specific social relationship, and moreover, such a surmise encompasses the idea that “the idea of a duty towards others as human beings may be a restriction of my knowledge of their existence” (*loc cit.*). Cavell doesn’t say why such a sense of duty as a form of acknowledgement should restrict knowledge of their existence. The point is that, despite the inescapable range of master-servant relationships in the Shakespeare plays he discusses, Cavell does not consider them as territory for the critical examination of skepticism.

All of the plays I have discussed have as their ground master-servant relationships against which, or intertwined with which, the love relationships are developed. *Much Ado About Nothing* develops within the context of the retainer band—a set of largely military master-servant relations which are overwhelmingly patriarchal, and from which Benedick finally frees himself when he throws in his lot with Beatrice and her cousin, although it is striking that the discourse

in terms of which he pledges himself to her does not free them from those relationships: he is finally engaged to kill his closest friend as *her* servant, against his former allegiances. *Othello* is a more intricate case. Othello is both master (of Iago) and servant (to the Venetian state), and the variously servile conditions of the women in the play, at least in terms of the ideologists of service, who regard husbands as masters of wives and servants alike,³⁵ adds to the general social and personal pervasiveness of conditions of service.

Zamir reads Othello's service to the state as an essentially debilitating condition. Consumed by his own instrumentalized conception of himself vis-à-vis the Venetian state, he projects upon Desdemona the turning of everything, including her own sexuality, to use. This assumes two things: that there is a morally ideal mode of existence beyond service; and that it encompasses a form of love that is radically different from service. Zamir's resolute anti-historicism blinds him to ways in which service in Shakespeare's plays may encompass love in ways that are alien to a modern perspective.³⁶

Cymbeline is more focused on master-servant relationships than it is on erotic ones:³⁷ the former constitute a tissue of complex relations, sometimes intertwined with erotic ones, that are marked by multiple instances of divided loyalty, insubordination, transferred allegiance, fidelity, love, and most important, changing roles as masters become servants and servants masters. Service is also closely related to the erotic uncertainties of *Much Ado*, *Othello*, and *The Winter's Tale*. Master-servant relationships involve much the same need for trust, fidelity, even love, and are equally open to betrayal and uncertainty as erotic ones. Does service in its early modern context offer a return to a Wittgensteinian ordinary that returns the concepts of doubt and certainty to their non-metaphysical work?

Two points may be made here, one historical, the other philosophical. The first is that Iago embodies a terrifying anxiety which all early modern ideologists of service underline, namely the dreaded concept of mere “eye-service”: the always present possibility that one’s servant is merely going through the motions of serving you—that he or she may be performing the acts of service only to serve themselves.³⁸ I have written at length about Iago in *Shakespeare, Love and Service*, where I argue that Othello’s ensign activates the source of this fundamental anxiety. Service merely performed as a form of outward show, presented merely to the eye, involved the display of all the outward forms of duty and devotion without carrying them within the heart:

IAGO O, sir, content you.
 I follow him to serve my turn upon him.
 We cannot all be masters, nor all masters
 Cannot be truly followed . . . Others there are
 Who, trimmed in forms and visages of duty,
 Keep yet their hearts attending on themselves,
 And, throwing but shows of service on their lords,
 Do well thrive by them; and when they have lined their coats,
 Do themselves homage. These fellows have some soul,
 And such a one do I profess myself.

(1.1.44-61)

As the embodiment of the pure show of service, Iago might have been considered an exemplary instance of what Cavell, following Wittgenstein, calls “soul-blindness”³⁹. Cavell refers in passing

to the slave owner as a possible instance of such soul-blindness, but in *Othello* it is rather the servant who is soul-blind.

There is a striking exchange between Iago and his master that pinpoints exactly the metaphysical conditions that give other-mind skepticism its foothold: the fact that human beings have neither any direct access to the inner being of others and there are no methods for forcing anyone—even a slave—to reveal his or her interior self:

OTHELLO By heaven, I'll know thy thoughts.

IAGO You cannot, if my heart were in your hand,

Nor shall not, whilst 'tis in my custody.

(3.3.191-3)

This indication of the metaphysical limits of human capacity to fully know another—“You cannot, if my heart were in your hand”⁴⁰—differs from Iago’s earlier declaration to Roderigo of his determination to offer no more than the show of service to Othello:

... when my outward action doth demonstrate

The native act and figure of my heart

In complement extern, 'tis not long after

But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve

For daws to peck at. I am not what I am.

(67-71)

Iago's concluding gnomic declaration, "I am not what I am," can, however be taken in a metaphysical way—that is to say, as more than a mere declaration of pretending to be something that he is not. We might take it as a declaration of Iago's non-humanity—he looks like a human being, but he is not.⁴¹ He is not a human being in the most obvious way, of course: he is a character in a play, a character that (I deliberately do not write "who") continues to defy attempts to explain his actions in human, psychological terms. Coleridge famously wrote of his "motiveless malignity,"⁴² a phrase that suggests the lack of a fundamental human quality, while Bernard Spivak argues that this feature is derived from Iago's literary derivation from the Vice figure of the medieval stage.⁴³

The combination of servant and actor-as-servant gives Iago his less than human—or perhaps superhuman—quality. As the pure embodiment of the player or actor, the figure of Iago exemplifies the creature of skepticism who has nothing "within that passes show" (*Hamlet*, 1.2.88), but who is perfectly adept at playing every language-game as if he were engaged in responding to or acknowledging others as part of the normal expectations of ordinary conversation.⁴⁴ He can remain completely detached from the usual engagements, responses, and commitments of human intercourse, while playing the games they require with apparent naturalness.⁴⁵

The fact that Iago is both actor and servant (and actor-as-servant) means that he anticipates, through the deep anxieties of the age about whom the servant is actually serving, one of the figures that populate the stories of other-mind scepticism: the automaton who looks and behaves perfectly like a human being, but has none of the usual forms of interiority that are

thought to define humanity. Iago's ultimate response to Othello's demand to explain himself is the blank "what you know you know" (5.2.355). Iago's Satanic *non serviam*, combined with his fiendish capacity to play the loyal servant to the hilt, negates the grammatical (in the Wittgensteinian sense) reciprocity of the master-servant relationship and replaces it with the asymmetry characteristic of scepticism. Iago thus exemplifies the isolated inscrutability of the subject of scepticism, but he does so only by ceasing to be a servant properly conceived.

In the light of Wittgenstein's reminder that our ordinary interaction with others is not based upon our satisfying ourselves of the correctness of our opinions that they have souls, but rather upon a given attitude to what we might call soulfulness, Iago thus not only has no soul but also lacks such an attitude towards or fundamental acknowledgement of others. Iago is the figure that would inhabit the skeptic's world if it existed. One way of putting this would be to say that Iago is the servant who escapes Hegel's master-slave dialectic insofar as the dialectic requires a double form of self-conscious dependency. It may seem that Othello's relation to Iago exemplifies the Hegelian insight that the apparently independent master is dependent upon the servant, but for the dialectic to work that dependency has to be mutual, which it is not in *Othello*.

In *Cymbeline* it is mutual, without exception. Moreover, there the space of performance is not the specter of the skeptic's dreams; rather, this space allows masters to inhabit the roles of servants and servants to free masters and husbands through their distributed devotion. The signal example is Imogen, who uses Caius Lucius's selfless plea to have his devoted page set free--even if Lucius himself is to be executed--to free her husband, who has shifted from being Cymbeline's subject through banishment to the military service of Rome, and then to being the lowly peasant soldier who saves Cymbeline from the Romans.

The crucial aspect of *Cymbeline* is that, however much its plot is driven by mistaking, misprision, misrecognition, and misrepresentation, the resolution of these “misses” is not based upon knowledge. Posthumus is wracked with guilt, pain, and remorse—to the point that he seeks death—but not because he discovers that Imogen is faithful. It is for the *unfaithful* Imogen (as he thinks) that he implores the gods to allow him to serve her (“But Imogen is your own, do your best wills, / And make me blest to obey” [5.1. 16-7]) and for whom offers his own life. And it is over Cloten’s body that Imogen acknowledges and revives her love for Posthumus. No “ocular proof” or revelation of the truth is required for Imogen and Posthumus to continue loving each other. They acknowledge, in pain, isolation and *ignorance*, the value of the other.

If we return to Hegel with *Cymbeline* in mind, we can see that Shakespeare’s romance opens up the philosophical truth of all self-consciousness that lies at the heart of relationships of service and of love in service and service in love. In the Introduction of *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel states that the will “is not something complete and universal prior to its determining itself and prior to its superseding and idealizing this determination. The will is not a will until it is this self-mediating activity, this return unto itself.” Such determination requires freedom, which Hegel significantly conceives of in terms of the will’s relation to others: “Freedom ... we already possess in the form of feeling—in friendship and love for instance.” He goes on to explain, “Here we are not inherently one-sided; we restrict ourselves gladly in relating ourselves to another, but in this restriction know ourselves as ourselves. In this determinacy a human being should not feel determined; on the contrary, by treating the other as other he first arrives at the feeling of his own selfhood. This freedom lies neither in determinacy nor indeterminacy; it is both of these at once.”⁴⁶ “Love,” he writes, “means in general terms the consciousness of my

unity with another, so that I am not in isolation by myself but win my self-consciousness only through the renunciation of my independence” (162, para. 158).

Friendship and love are therefore the purest instances of the freedom to create, or discover, independence through a relation to others.⁴⁷ In *Cymbeline*, erotic relationships are displaced onto master-servant relationships so that each turns into but also allows for the transformation of the other. In the case of Posthumus, the apparently free discovery of self in the other in love is first turned into a will to destroy the other, but then recovered through free service. The coercive framework of service provides the possibility of free devotion, and, for the male, the free framework of marriage turns into unilateral coercion.⁴⁸ Moreover, by distributing these transformative relationships across men and women, Shakespeare does not, in this play at least, suggest that the corrosive doubts of skepticism are gendered (as Cavell suggests in his reading of *The Winter's Tale*), even though male and female attitudes towards revenge and violence are sharply differentiated. Imogen becomes a male servant who engenders the selfless love of her Roman master; her husband in the end pledges his service (and love) to her after staking his life in service of the king who had banished him. Each of them is liable to uncertainty and doubt, but such doubts do not concern the metaphysical inscrutability of other minds.

So where does this leave us with regard to skepticism? I have entertained three possibilities: 1) that Wittgenstein's failure to recognize in Shakespeare his own abiding philosophical battle with skepticism suggests that Cavell is projecting skepticism upon the plays rather than discovering it there; 2) that skepticism may exist in Shakespeare, but in a generically differentiated way; 3) and that *Cymbeline* alerts us to a dialectical relation, in the Hegelian sense,

between erotic relations and the master-servant nexus that is central to all of Shakespeare's plays, in which the free choice of mutual dependency in the service relation overcomes the tendency towards skeptical solipsism in the erotic.

There is a fourth, ancillary and not exclusive, possibility suggested by the curious parallel experience of a dream-like state by Posthumus and Imogen alike, which recalls both Wittgenstein's suggestion that Shakespeare's plays are like dreams in their refusal to be true to normal modes of representation and the dream as the foundation of Cartesian skepticism. Waking after her funeral rites have been performed, to find Cloten's body beside her, Imogen first imagines, indeed hopes, that she is in a dream, and then finds that even waking she can't rid herself of the dreams' quality as lived experience:

These flowers are like the pleasures of the world,
 This bloody man the care on 't. I hope I dream,
 For so I thought I was a cavekeeper,
 And cook to honest creatures. But 'tis not so.
 'Twas but a bolt of nothing, shot of nothing,
 Which the brain makes of fumes. Our very eyes
 Are sometimes like our judgements, blind. Good faith,
 I tremble still with fear; but if there be
 Yet left in heaven as small a drop of pity
 As a wren's eye, feared gods, a part of it!
 The dream's here still. Even when I wake it is
 Without me as within me; not imagined, felt.

(4.2.369-380)

Is this extraordinary expression of the permeability of life and dream—of the “nothing” that the “brain makes of fumes,” of the fact of the dream being equally “without me as within me,” “even when I wake; not imagined, felt”—Shakespeare’s most compelling representation of the “felt” compulsions of skepticism as they are famously suggested by Descartes? I think not. Instead, I it should be seen as a self-reflective expression of the dream world (in Wittgenstein’s sense) of Shakespeare’s work, for which, in the extraordinary complexity of their play of representations, there is no “dynamic theory.”

When Imogen acknowledges the mutual blindness of eye and mind, sight and judgment, she looks forward unknowingly to her own misreading of Cloten’s body, whereby she infuses its lineaments with her own intense investment in Posthumus. She therefore projects upon the lifeless form her own quick, if utterly mistaken, apprehension that attests not so much to the mind or eye’s blindness as to its dreamlike eagerness to project value rather than merely reflect it—to make, in a sense, “fumes” of the material quiddities of “leg,” “hand,” “foot” and “thigh”:

A headless man? The garments of Posthumus?
 I know the shape of ’s leg. This is his hand,
 His foot Mercurial, his Martial thigh,
 The brawns of Hercules; but his Jovial face—
 Murder in heaven! How? ’Tis gone.

(381-5)

The acknowledgement that she expresses in this despairingly passionate speech shows the importance of knowledge as the basis of acknowledgement: to be ignorant of the body one

acknowledges surely negates the acknowledgement itself, which, however, poignant, is misdirected. But, finally, it doesn't matter that she doesn't *know* that the body she addresses and caresses is not that of Posthumus. Her lack of such knowledge underlines in powerfully moving ways her acknowledgement of her husband, in spite of her knowledge that he has horribly mistaken her, has ordered her death: *I acknowledge you beyond all knowledge (but I do not know that this is what I am doing)*.

Upon the entrance of the Romans, there is a critical point of transference, in which Imogen as Fidele first claims Posthumus as her/his “master”—“I may wander / From east to occident, cry out for service, / Try many, all good, serve truly, never / Find such another master” (450-53), and then induces Lucius to take Posthumus's place: “I will not say / Thou shalt be so well mastered, but be sure / No less beloved” (464-6). In doing so, she acknowledges the imbrication of service and love in her relation to her husband. But, critically, Lucius in turn acknowledges her—a stranger—as a subject of love and service, but most of all, of love. It is a very strange moment. Lucius, the new master, acknowledges his own possible incapacity to match or surpass Fidele's old master, but Lucius is completely certain that he will surpass the former master's *love*. It is clearly an erotic moment but is also one in which *nomos* and *eros* are impossible to distinguish from each other.

From here to the end of the play such intertwining of love and service will become ever stronger until love finally comes to rest by being transferred back onto father and husband. Posthumus, stricken by grief and guilt at, as he supposes, Imogen's death, reduces himself to the most abject state of slavery and bondage, hiding his identity so that he may pay for his sin by exchanging his (worthless, as he sees it) life for hers:

[To the gods] For Imogen's dear life take mine; and though
 'Tis not so dear, yet 'tis a life; you coined it.
 'Tween man and man they weigh not every stamp;
 Though light, take pieces for the figure's sake;
 You rather mine, being yours. And so, great powers,
 If you will take this audit, take this life
 And cancel these cold bonds. O Imogen,
 I'll speak to thee in silence. (5.4.24-31)

His own dream—in which the gods appear in a vision that resolves the entanglements of disguise and mistaking—is experienced in a way strikingly similar to that of Imogen: as something that continues after waking, as the very substance of his life:

'Tis still a dream, or else such stuff as madmen
 Tongue and brain not; either both or nothing,
 Or senseless speaking, or a speaking such
 As sense cannot untie. Be what it is,
 The action of my life is like it, which
 I'll keep, if but for sympathy.

(5.4.148-53)

The most bewildering aspect of this late play lies in its capacity to “speak such as senses cannot untie”—in the language such as the birds sing, that Wittgenstein noted about Shakespeare's form of imitation. It is therefore especially difficult, among other things, to track the *sense* of love's entanglements in service, especially given their rapid forms of transference.

Within a few moments Lucius finds, to his utter chagrin, that his plea to Cymbeline for the life of his new servant is not returned by the reciprocal intervention that he refuses to command but nonetheless expects:

Never master had
 A page so kind, so duteous, diligent,
 So tender over his occasions, true,
 So feat, so nurselike. Let his virtue join
 With my request, which I'll make bold your Highness
 Cannot deny. He hath done no Briton harm,
 Though he have served a Roman. Save him, sir,
 And spare no blood beside....
 ... I do not bid thee beg my life, good lad,
 And yet I know thou wilt.

(5.5.98-105, 116-7)

Fidele's faith is instead transferred to a new object: Lucius's love is usurped by the British king, who represents himself as Fidele's loving master—"What would'st thou, boy? / I love thee more and more ... Thou 'rt my good youth, my page. / I'll be thy master" (126-7 & 140-1), leaving the devastated Roman to reflect on the proverbial inconstancy of boys and women: "The boy disdains me, / He leaves me, scorns me. Briefly die their joys / That place them on the truth of girls and boys" (122-4).

What seems to Lucius to be an abrogation of faith is in fact a rediscovery (and assertion) of Imogen's faith in Posthumus via her recognition and interrogation of Iachimo. The multiple

transference of master/servant relationships obeys both the necessary reciprocity of such relations and their essential fungibility. Shakespeare's canny sense of the similarities and differences of *eros* and *nomos* enables him to make erotic relationships pass through those of service, with the effect that the uncertainties of reciprocity in *eros* are inoculated by the mutuality and the transferable nature of service. Each person in a loving relationship becomes a servant, where the corrosive uncertainties and anxieties of *eros* are replaced by the realities of reciprocity. The transferability of the latter enables the loving relationship to be restored, newly informed by a secure sense of mutuality.

Cavell is right to recognize that for Shakespeare love demands not knowledge but acknowledgement; nor does this insight put him at odds with Wittgenstein's sense that skepticism mistakes as an epistemological problem an ontological reality bound up with the framing conditions that make human interaction and the concepts upon which they rely possible. And that conviction has its roots in the Hegelian idea that human self-consciousness depends upon the recognition of the self through others, even in as apparently asymmetrical a relation as that between master and servant. In Shakespearean comedy theatrical laughter may disarm skeptical doubt; in Shakespearean romance acknowledgement may replace an inappropriate demand for knowledge. Such acknowledgement is exemplified by Leontes' awakened and awakening faith and wonder in *The Winter's Tale*, and by Posthumus's redemptive re-acceptance of Imogen in words and gesture that eschew any sense of transcendence or epistemological security: "Hang there like fruit, my soul, / Till the tree die" (5.5.312-3).

¹ I wish to thank the two anonymous readers of *Modern Philology* for their helpful comments, and especially the Editor, Richard Strier, for his unfailing critical eye, encouragement, and patience, without which this essay would have remained in my digital bottom drawer.

² Rene Descartes, *Descartes: Meditations on First Philosophy*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³ Anita Avramides, *Other Minds* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

⁴ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge: In Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 3.

⁵ Cavell's distinction between knowledge and acknowledgement is presented in chapter IX, "Knowing and Acknowledging," of Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁶ The argument about the avoidance of acknowledgement (or love) is developed most extensively and powerfully in the essay, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (267-356), reprinted in *Disowning Knowledge: In Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 39-124.

⁷ All quotations from Shakespeare are from *The Folger Shakespeare*, ed. Paul Werstine and Barbara Mowatt, <http://www.folgerdigitaltexts.org/>

⁸ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 329. In a somewhat different form it appears as chapter 3, "Othello and the Stake of the Other," in *Disowning Knowledge*, 125-43. I use both versions in this essay.

⁹ Stanley Cavell, *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida*, The Bucknell Lectures in Literary Theory 12 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 112.

¹⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 84.

¹¹ Wittgenstein, L. *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* Vol. 1, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 17.

¹² This view is exemplified by twentieth-century critics like G. Wilson Knight and L.C. Knights. See, for example, G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1960) and L. C. Knights, *Explorations* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1963).

¹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, ed. Rush Rhees, trans. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), 58.

¹⁴ See Wittgenstein's statements that philosophical puzzles arise from language that has "gone on holiday" and that the philosopher's task is to bring language back "home" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe [Oxford: Blackwell, 1973], 38).

¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M Anscombe and G. H. von Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1979), 115, 308, 341 and 83.

¹⁶ See "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," in *Disowning Knowledge*, 39-123.

¹⁷ A.D. Nuttall, *Shakespeare the Thinker* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007).

¹⁸ The Imaginary, Symbolic and Real are the three concepts upon which all of Lacan's work from his middle period onwards rests. For an accessible account, see the respective entries in Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁹ For an overview of such readings, see William Shakespeare, *Othello, the Moor of Venice*, ed. Michael Neill, The Oxford Shakespeare (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). For representative examples, see Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); Karen Newman, “‘And wash the Ethiop white’: Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*,” in Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O’Connor (eds.), *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 2008), 143-62; Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989); Dymphna Callaghan, *Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage* (London: Routledge, 2000).

²⁰ “Astonishment” is a reference to Descartes declaration of his response to the discovery that he can find no conclusive grounds on which to distinguish dreaming from waking in the first of the *Meditations* in Veitch’s translation (Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method and the Meditations*, trans. John Veitch (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2008), 74.

²¹ Othello’s uncertainty about consummation is connected to Cavell’s speculation about Othello’s possible impotence (*Disowning Knowledge*, 137). I see little evidence for assuming or speculating about such a problem in the text.

²² “Either I shed and scarred her or I did not. If I did not then she was not a virgin and this is a stain upon me. If I did then she is no longer a virgin and this is a stain upon me. Either way I am contaminated” (*Disowning Knowledge*, 135).

²³ Tzachi Zamir, *Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007). 160.

²⁴ For a Freudian reading of the affinity of love and hatred, and therefore the closeness of *eros* to *thanatos*, in relation to Shakespeare, see Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

²⁵ See *Philosophical Investigations*, “If a lion could talk, we could not understand him” (p. 223).

²⁶ See *On Certainty*: “if dream hallucination sometimes serves a plausible purpose (of imaginary wish fulfillment), count on its doing the opposite as well. There is no ‘dynamic theory of dreams’” (72).

²⁷ Cf. Leontes’s musing on the uncertain criteria for paternity:

... Mamillius,

Art thou my boy?

MAMILLIUS Ay, my good lord.

LEONTES I’ fecks!

Why, that’s my bawcock. What, hast smutched thy nose?

They say it is a copy out of mine. Come, captain,

We must be neat—not neat, but cleanly, captain.

And yet the steer, the heifer, and the calf

Are all called neat.—Still virginalling

Upon his palm?—How now, you wanton calf?

Art thou my calf?

MAMILLIUS Yes, if you will, my lord.

LEONTES Thou want’st a rough pash and the shoots that I have

To be full like me; yet they say we are

Almost as like as eggs. *Women say so,*

That will say anything.

(1.2.150-67; my emphasis)

For a discussion of the effects of this uncertainty, see David Schalkwyk, "'A Lady's 'verily' is as potent as a Lord's': Women, Word and Witchcraft in *The Winter's Tale*," *English Literary Renaissance* 22.2 (Spring 1992): 242-72.

²⁸ J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961). It is precisely this knowing for himself—through ocular proof—that Othello vainly pursues.

²⁹ See Cavell's extensive discussion of Wittgenstein's concept of criteria and skepticism in *The Claim of Reason*, 3-86.

³⁰ It might be claimed that Don John's plot does not conform to our conception of the normal events of "ordinary life." This is true, but my point concerns the difference between ordinary doubt, which is finally resolved in *Much Ado About Nothing* through the admittedly accidental discoveries of the watch, and skepticism proper, as Cavell sees it in *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*, which refuses any kind of evidence that might allay its corrosive forms of uncertainty.

³¹ See Alain Badiou, *Wittgenstein's Antiphilosophy*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London ; New York: Verso, 2011).

³² Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, ed. G. H. McWilliam, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 165-77.

³³ The servant who disobeys a master out of conscience is in fact acting in accordance with the early modern precepts of service. See Richard Strier, "Faithful Servants: Shakespeare's Praise of Disobedience," in *The Historical Renaissance: New Essays on Tudor and Stuart Literature and*

Culture, ed. Heather Dubrow and Richard Strier (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1988), expanded in Richard Strier, *Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism, and Renaissance Texts*, New ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); David Schalkwyk, *Shakespeare, Love and Service* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), and the debate between Stephen Greenblatt and Richard Strier, "An Exchange on Shakespeare & Power," *New York Review of Books* (31 May 2007), <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2007/may/31/an-exchange-on-shakespeare-power/>.

³⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. J.B. Baillie (Digireads.com, 2009), 192-3.

³⁵ See Gouge, *Of Domestic Duties*, Chapt. 6 passim.

³⁶ The relations between love and service is elaborated in David Schalkwyk, *Shakespeare, Love and Service* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³⁷ This claim is supported by the results of Wordhoard, a computer programme that analyses the relative frequency of words, which indicates that both in relation to *Othello* and the whole corpus, the verb and noun forms of "love" appear less frequently in *Cymbeline*.

³⁸ See William Gouge, *Of Domestic Duties: Eight Treatises* (London: 1622), 593.

³⁹ "If it makes sense to speak of seeing human beings as human beings, then it makes sense to imagine that a human being may lack the capacity to see human beings as human beings. It would make sense to ask whether someone may be soul-blind," (Cavell, *Claim*, 378).

⁴⁰ Cf. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*: "If God had looked into our minds he would not have been able to see there whom we were speaking of" (Part II, p. 217).

⁴¹ Cf. Cavell's discussion of "I am I" (*Claim*, 389).

⁴² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. T.M. Raysor (London: 1930), I, 49.

⁴³ Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil* (London: Columbia University Press, 1958).

⁴⁴ In ordinary conversation we are often uncertain about the intentions or motives of others, but we are seldom besieged by doubt about whether or not they are fully human, and we assume that they will generally follow the normal procedures and protocols that govern conversation, even if they turn out to be lying or duplicitous. For a developed account of such assumptions, see P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, new ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

⁴⁵ Cf. Wittgenstein's consideration of the "automaton," in *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 178, where the latter advances the idea that neither belief nor certainty characterizes others as human beings, but rather an *attitude* that they have souls.

⁴⁶ G. W. F. Hegel, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox, Revised ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁴⁷ For a discussion of such freedom in relation to *Romeo and Juliet*, see Paul Kottman, "Defying the Stars: Tragic Love as the Struggle for Freedom in *Romeo and Juliet*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 63.1 (2012): 1-38.

⁴⁸ I have approached the possibility of discovering freedom through the paradoxical need for others in Hegelian terms, but it should be noted that the notion of service as a form of freedom is deeply Christian, exemplified by the Collect for Peace in the Tudor *Book of Common Prayer*, translated by Thomas Cranmer from the *Missa pro pace*, which asserts that service of God is

“perfect freedom.” See Brian Cummings, *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 248. This paradox is the foundation of David Evett’s argument in *Discourses of Service in Shakespeare’s England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). See also Schalkwyk, *Shakespeare, Love and Service*, 41.