

CAVELL & SHAKESPEARE SEMINAR ABSTRACTS (SAA '16; STRIER)

JASON E. COHEN, Berea College, "*The Merchant's* Losses: Conversion, Economics, & the Iniquities of Pain"

This essay takes up a pair of discussions about the status of public and private forms of testimony in Shakespeare's problem comedy, *The Merchant of Venice*. In Stanley Cavell's seminal 1979 book, *The Claim of Reason*, *The Merchant* operates doubly, first as a meditation on the bodies on stage, particularly the Jewish body, and second, as a more absolute sign of (tragic) otherness. When Cavell returns to discuss *The Merchant* in an essay over thirty years later, he is concerned with the status of "saying" something using ordinary language in the play. In this move, I understand Cavell to shift away from public forms of evidence and towards its legal and philosophical forms: what does it mean to "say" something when language has become vexed, Cavell seems to ask. It is deeply strange to answer this question by disavowing the public and visceral status of language in a play like *Merchant*, which depends on highly public forms of shame and humiliation. I want to investigate that move away from the public and toward private concerns, particularly as it forms a basis for a subsequent re-conversion of private matters back into public discourse through the legal inquiry into the status of flesh the play. Consequently, I aim to think through Cavell's bookended discussions of the comedy by bringing his interest in linguistic community and its failed conventions into conversation with Shylock's specific and deeply economic insistence on the of the pound of flesh, alongside the pain it is positioned to represent, in the form of what Heidegger might call "being towards death."

BRENT DAWSON, U of Oregon, "Skepticism & the Art of Life in *Antony & Cleopatra*"

My paper outlines some ways in which skepticism in Shakespeare offers a materialist ethics. By freeing herself of all illusions of values outside the world, the skeptical practitioner achieves tranquility, a state of pleasurable attention toward finite, material life. My reading breaks with Cavell's understanding of Shakespearean skepticism as a source of anxiety and self-destruction. I articulate these differences through a reading of the final scene of *Antony and Cleopatra*. Cavell sees Cleopatra's self-performance as an alternative to skepticism, a transcendence within life achieved through both art and heterosexual marriage. In contrast, I read the scene as an affirmation of skepticism, which finds life's variety and finitude as themselves worthy of value.

RICHARD ELDRIDGE, Swarthmore College, "This Most Human Predicament": Cavell on Language, Intention, and Desire in Shakespeare"

Cavell practices a form of Shakespeare criticism that insists on the reader's or viewer's vulnerability to being affectively moved and changed by the texts and their performance. I trace this practice to Cavell's general views about human subject formation and about how human subjects live always between avoidance and acknowledgment.

DAVID HERSHINOW, Princeton U, “Shakespeare, As It Were Cavell”

This essay argues that Cavell’s syncopated drumbeat of “so to speak” and “as it were” are more than mere stylistic tics, that they serve a purpose beyond announcing Cavell’s commitment to ordinary language as a way to get at his philosophical meaning. More importantly, Cavell’s use of these phrases (and of “as it were,” in particular) sets the unacknowledged mood in which he makes (or conjugates) all of his literary-philosophical claims. Philosophers have long struggled with the problem of what claims can and can’t be made when discussing fiction character and worlds, and this problem is particularly acute when it comes to the project of practical philosophy, to the project of philosophy as a way of life. Tracking the long tradition within practical philosophy of turning to literary character for instructional models, I diagnose a pervasive problem with the kind of didactic claims upon which this tradition hangs. Cavell’s “as it were” mood forges a better bridge between the fictional and the real precisely because he figures both differently.

AMANDA KELLOGG, Radford U, “Time, Love, and Tenderness: Pleasure and Isolation in Shakespeare’s Sonnets”

Beginning with the observation that Stanley Cavell’s writing about tragedy and the theater in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* focuses on a more modern understanding of the theater (in which participants sit fixed, silent, and mostly in the dark during the performance), I argue that Shakespeare’s sonnets might instead offer a genre through which to consider his engagement with skepticism. Shakespeare’s sonnets—more so than those of any other sonnet sequence—use metaphors related to the theater to evoke epistemological questions about the nature and limits of human understanding of other minds. In drawing a distinction between the present of the sonnets’ subjects and their presence, Shakespeare encourages the reader to feel their own isolation from other minds, not as an experience of anxiety, but rather as a source of pleasure.

ROBERT S. KNAPP, Reed College, “Something I am doing to the word’: Stanley Cavell on *King Lear*”

After some framing gestures (acknowledging Cavell’s impact, mentioning some philosophical counter-influences, and expressing a worry about Cavell’s modernist tendency to deprecate theatre and theatricality), I address the central claim in his great essay on *King Lear*, that Lear (and Gloucester and Edgar) wish to avoid recognition, and hence to avoid love. I first revisit the suggestion that Cornwall and Regan exemplify evil’s wish to hide itself, arguing that they don’t blind Gloucester in order to avoid being seen, but in order to prevent his seeing winged vengeance overtake them. I then examine the claim that Gloucester has failed to acknowledge Edmund, and argue that the avoidance of love is not personal, but embedded in the play’s social order, caused by “aged tyranny,” by Gloucester and Lear mistaking partial understanding for epistemological and moral privilege. Conceding the power of his analysis of Edgar, I argue that Cavell nonetheless avoids recognizing the necessity and metaphysical effect of Edgar’s theatrical masquerade. Finally, suggesting that “shame” indeed motivates much of the play—not personal

shame, but the shame that every would-be autonomous self expresses when blinding itself to the heteronomous forces that really drive its action—I argue that Cordelia shames Lear, and that her restoration of his sanity occurs by means of the ceremony and theatricality she had earlier rejected. Though I critique what I see as Cavell’s tendency to make the play into an allegory for his own wrestling with the angel of skepticism, I acknowledge that without Cavell, I could not have seen what I claim to find in *King Lear*.

JAMES KUZNER, Brown U, “It stops me here”: Love and Self-Control in *Othello*”

This paper considers Shakespeare’s skeptical practice through the workings of love and self-control in *Othello*. Shakespeare, I argue, casts a skeptical, withering eye on what love is and on whether self-control is one thing that love involves. In the end, Shakespeare allows only for self-control that is attenuated and love that is unknown, and even suggests that Othello can only have such control when love feels elusive. When Othello thinks he knows love’s precise demands and entitlements, by contrast, he renounces all control; when Othello thinks he has a grasp of love, he loses his grip. The minimal self-mastery available in love demands humility, especially epistemological humility. To make this argument I read the play alongside Descartes. I do so not because Shakespeare thinks along proto-Cartesian lines more in *Othello* than in other plays, but because a Cartesian background provides the sharpest contrast for Shakespeare’s skeptical thinking about love and self-control.

CASSIE MIURA, University of Michigan, “Cavell’s Tragic Skepticism and the Comedy of the Cuckold: *Othello* and Montaigne Revisited”

This paper reconsiders the essential relationship that Stanley Cavell posits between Shakespearean tragedy and philosophical skepticism by comparing Montaigne’s comic depiction of cuckoldry to *Othello*. Although Cavell ultimately patterns Shakespeare’s skepticism after Descartes, his essay “Othello and the Stake of the Other” invokes a number of Montaigne’s essays and thus invites us to consider at greater length, Montaigne’s contrasting treatment of skepticism and sexual jealousy. By questioning Cavell’s representation of Othello as a skeptic, I conclude that comedy may be as amenable a mode as tragedy through which to express the skeptical problematic in an early modern context and one more in line with the therapeutic objectives of the ancient Pyrrhonism elaborated by Montaigne.

CODY REIS, NYU, “Cavell avec Empson”

For our seminar, “Cavell on Shakespeare,” I address the corollary question of “Cavell on Shakespeareans,” especially William Empson. Empson’s curious cameo in Cavell’s long essay on *Lear*, “The Avoidance of Love,” supplies my point of departure as I reconsider the uncertain, and so not uncontroversial, difference between literary criticism and philosophical critique in the context of these two great readers of Shakespeare for whom the very nature of uncertainty itself is so crucial: the ambiguitist Empson and the skeptic Cavell. Is the difference between Empson’s literary ambiguity and Cavell’s philosophical skepticism a difference in degree or in kind? How can we tell? Why does it matter, and for whom? For Shakespeareans? For philosophers? Or

for those real and imaginary "lay readers" whose acknowledged presence in the writing of Empson and Cavell is belied perhaps by their unacknowledged absence in the reading of it? I wonder, in other words, to what extent Empson's own definition of "pastoral" vis-à-vis "the people" might apply to him and Cavell as Shakespeareans with pretensions to unpretentiousness: "pastoral though 'about' is not 'by' or 'for'..." (*Some Versions of Pastoral*).

SARA SAYLOR, U of Texas. Austin, "From the Heart, and to Wound: Cavell's Intuitive Criticism"

This essay charts the emergence of an emotionally vulnerable, self-reflexive critical subjectivity in the philosopher Stanley Cavell's Shakespeare scholarship, particularly his foundational "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*" (1969) and his later review essay "Reading Harry Berger" (1999). I consider moments when Cavell weighs critical arguments against his affective "experience of the play" and marks the emotions that animate his own readings, such as his "terror" at Gloucester's confrontation with Lear. I argue that by asserting the importance of ethical acknowledgment and self-revelation in criticism, Cavell anticipates our field's current turn toward openly personal scholarship that foregrounds critics' affective connections to the plays we study (a turn exemplified by the 2014 volume *Shakespeare and I*). Yet he also poses challenges to this critical movement, acknowledging its risks of solipsism and sentimentality. Thus, I argue, proponents of a turn toward Shakespeare scholarship as life-writing can find both a model and a provocative source of resistance in Cavell's accounts of criticism as a practice that "reveals one's standing with oneself."

STEVEN SWARBRICK, Brown University, "Tis unmanly grief": Shakespearean Melodrama and the Difference Affect Makes in Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*

In this paper, I argue that Cavell's theory of melodrama provides a unique response—centered on affect—to the problem of skepticism outlined in his previous philosophical works. Part of what I aim to show is that Cavell misses some of the radical implications of his theory by treating melodrama as something to be overcome—typically in the form of the heterosexual unit. Because Cavell sees melodrama as negatively derived from the Hollywood comedy of remarriage (which he theorizes in *Pursuits of Happiness*), he overlooks the positive aspects of melodrama, that is, its reliance on affect as an alternative to representational clarity. Affect inverts the two-world paradigm that the skeptic tries unsuccessfully to reunite. Whereas Cavell sees the comedy of re-marriage as providing the only possible response to skepticism in the form of re-united opposites—husband and wife—melodrama eschews this dialectical solution and offers an alternative (non-heteronormative) rejoinder. This is what Cavell calls "the world of women." In it, the dominant language is not private emotion but impersonal affect. Melodrama, to be sure, is often criticized *because* of its excessive use of emotion; its subjection of its female characters to passions and forces leaves them feeling vulnerable, exposed, and outside the human community—without recourse to public forms of freedom. My goal in this essay is to distance melodrama from this familiar critique. Instead I argue that melodramatic affect is not

(only) about the inner life of subjects but about the forces that compose and recompose those subjects.