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**Avoiding Edmund: Reading Acknowledgment as Failure in Stanley  
Cavell's *King Lear***

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**Avoiding Edmund: Reading Acknowledgment as Failure in Stanley  
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**by**

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**Report**

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Forgive me, please, could we be alone together?  
I have never been alone; I'll live to rue my word.

Our silence, Beloved Enemy, is not beyond  
whatever love has done to your word, to my word.

Agha Shahid Ali, from "My Word"

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## **Abstract**

### **Avoiding Edmund: Reading Acknowledgment as Failure in Stanley Cavell's *King Lear***

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

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Critics of *King Lear* often remark that the play feels like a dramatic failure despite its place at the very top of the Shakespearean canon. Using Stanley Cavell's famous essay on the play, "The Avoidance of Love," as a framework for interpreting *Lear*, I argue that an epistemological and ethical failure lies at the heart of the play: an inability to acknowledge the presence of others. In my reading, Cavell's essay works emotively rather than argumentatively, by approximating the affective scenario of *King Lear*. Appropriately, Cavell's essay falters in the same way that Shakespeare's play does: it cannot attempt to acknowledge other minds without enacting the failure of that very effort. I consider this failure primarily in relation to Edmund, the play's chief antagonist. Using Cavell's understanding of what it means to be present before others and before oneself, I show that Edmund's final words are a brief and poignant instance in which he realizes his true position relative to other minds and his own. I argue that Cavell's argument fails to properly consider Edmund by its own terms, and in doing so, it enacts its own subject: the impossibility of acknowledging the presence of the other. Moving to *Lear's Fool*, I argue

that the Fool functions as a voice of political consciousness, comparing his position to Cavell's own context. The Fool imagines a world where the failure of acknowledgment leaves everyone "darkling." Ultimately, the play imagines human relationships in essentially pessimistic terms: the attempt to recognize the other results in the erasure of any sense of commonality.

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## Introduction

Stanley Cavell's famous essay on *King Lear*, "The Avoidance of Love," concludes with an extended discussion of the definition of tragedy as it relates to the ethics of human relationships. In part one of his essay, Cavell reads *Lear* as a play where Lear's abdication ceremony ultimately fails due to his inability, because of his overpowering shame, to acknowledge the presence of other minds. In the second section, he considers the implications of this reading for a skeptical view of the world in an attempt to understand the relationship between presence and tragedy. In this second act of his essay, Cavell, working intuitively rather than logically, provides readers with an argument that derives its power, not from interpretive coherence, but from emotive force. As Cavell's essay seems to move further and further from Shakespeare's play in its overt content, its underlying impulses and emotive strategies approximate those we see in Shakespeare's play.<sup>1</sup>

As some readers may not have read Cavell's landmark essay, I will briefly summarize the argument of the piece. Cavell opens the essay by invoking I.A. Richards' work on the sight pattern in the play. Diverging from Richards' reading, Cavell argues

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<sup>1</sup> See Mario DiGangi and Amanda Bailey eds., *Affect Theory and Early Modern Texts: Politics, Ecologies, and Form*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 4-5. In their recent collection of essays on affective readings of early modern literature, Mario DiGangi and Amanda Bailey argue for the use of "affect as a prism through which to read early modern cultural, economic, and political phenomena" in order to reveal "the abiding connections, as well as the conceptual divergences, between early modern and current ideas about the capacities of and interrelations among matter, power, and bodies." While I am not attempting an affect-theory reading of *King Lear* or Cavell's reading here, it's noteworthy that Cavell's approach to the play seems to anticipate DiGangi's and Bailey's interest in considering early modern texts from a position of affective understanding.

that the role of sight in the play is tied not to moral knowledge but to literal acknowledgement. What interests Cavell is the ability of a character to accept the knowledge that comes through seeing others, acknowledging their presence before oneself as well as one's presence before them. In Cavell's formulation, acknowledgement of another necessarily leads to revealing oneself before that other, which produces immense shame. In this reading, Lear suffers shame upon realizing that Cordelia truly loves him because he cannot bear to consider himself a valid object of love. Cavell reads the abdication scene as a moment where Lear asks his daughters to feign love because he cannot bear the reality of their love for him. Cordelia, who truly loves Lear, finds herself in an impossible position: she loves Lear but knows that expressing it verbally would play into his gambit, rendering her love fake. For Cavell, when she says "nothing," she expresses love and a recognition of Lear's inability to acknowledge it. But, by voicing this recognition, she sets off the play's catastrophic chain of events. Lear recognizes the legitimate love residing in Cordelia's "nothing" and the accompanying shame of knowing that he cannot return her love—because he feels too ashamed—leads to his madness. In Cavell's formulation, Lear torments Cordelia by placing her in the impossible position of having to feign a love that is legitimate while Cordelia makes Lear suffer by forcing him to confront her real love for him. In Lear and Cordelia's final scene together, Cavell finds the resolution of their conflict: Lear's fantasy of their life together implies a version of love that can be denied because they are hidden from the world and death will free them from the shame of recognizing each other. In Cavell's formulation, recognizing the other

is shameful because it implies revealing oneself to that other person. For Cavell, death in the play opens up the possibility of love because it renders recognition impossible.

In the second part of his essay, Cavell turns away from the play and toward questions of tragedy and its relationship to the presence of others. This second section is much longer than the reading of *King Lear*, full of extended asides. The crux of this second part lies in its account of Cavell's definition of tragedy and his discussion of Vietnam War-era America as a national tragedy. Cavell defines tragedy using the example of Othello's murder of Desdemona. He locates tragedy in the audience's experience of helplessness before the spectacle of drama: we know that Othello will kill her and that we are as unable to halt the act as Othello and Desdemona. The recognition of that helplessness produces tragedy. Recognition of the other is tragic because it admits that shared helplessness and the distance between the self and the other. Cavell distinguishes between recognizing the presence and present of another mind. Presence suggests an individual's mind, inaccessible to others because we are already inhabiting our own presence and cannot share in the other's. On the other hand, we do have access to someone's present because this describes a temporal state which we can easily recognize. In the final section of his work, Cavell turns to his own historical present. He argues that the onset of the Vietnam War has made America into a version of Lear. Both America and Lear embark on a destructive search for a variety of love that they can avoid. Both also feel helpless even as they exert their power over others in this quest. The ethical claim ultimately made by Cavell's essay is that a form of abdication that admits the impossibility of acknowledgment must replace avoidance. Abdication is not

avoidance because it possesses the ability to stop and admit the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of recognizing the other. Avoidance, on the other hand, continually seeks to evade that recognition, to the point of destroying the world, just as Lear does.

The emotive approach I ascribe to the essay should not be confused with rhetorical posturing. Rather, the essay confronts readers with Cavell's heartfelt response to the play and asks them to accept this premise in order to proceed. Cavell's essay, in its section on the American nation as a tragedy, demands that the reader acknowledge the historical and political position in which Cavell wrote the essay. In this section, Cavell reveals himself as occupying the position of Kent and the Fool: he can recognize the national tragedy but he remains a helpless commentator before it. These lesser figures, free from the constraints of rule, are able to articulate the failure of acknowledgement more clearly than Lear and Cordelia. Cavell draws the reader's attention to this helpless position in order to make a point about the impossibility of fully acknowledging another's presence, even though the attempt at recognition remains necessary.

Acknowledging Cavell's present, his historical moment, at the time he writes the essay invites the same problems as acknowledging Edmund at the moment of his death. While Cavell's essay does not necessarily attempt to rewrite *King Lear*, it does recreate the affective drives from which the play, in his reading, derives its dramatic force. In this process, Cavell complicates the ethical dimensions of acknowledging the play's characters by invoking the problem of philosophical skepticism about the existence of other minds and our ability to recognize them.

In the introduction to *Disowning Knowledge*, Cavell declares that his “intuition is that the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes’s *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare.”<sup>2</sup> Setting aside the odd decision to align Shakespeare with Cartesian skepticism rather than the variety espoused in Montaigne, I wish to consider the implications of the word “intuition.” Admitting the anachronistic problems with this “intuition,” Cavell will invoke skepticism in his attempt to clarify the way the play’s key figures navigate its tragedy. In Cavell’s reading, *Lear’s* tragedy comes from its dramatization of the way human beings deny love because it requires acceptance of our presence before the other: “Whereas what skepticism suggests is that since we cannot know the world exists, its presentness to us cannot be a function of knowing. The world is to be *accepted*; as the presentness of other minds is not to be known, but acknowledged.”<sup>3</sup> The pessimism regarding the impossibility of knowing the other here provides Cavell’s reader with both an epistemological position and an ethical claim. Empathy is necessary and impossible in the world of *King Lear*. And Cavell, in unravelling the skeptical problem of other minds at the heart of the social interaction of the play falls into his own trap, into the central dilemma of the skeptic, who must “accept” that which he knows he cannot fully access.

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<sup>2</sup> Stanley Cavell, “Introduction,” in *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Stanley Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear,” in *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 95.

Future references to this essay will be given in the body of the text using parenthetical citation.

The crux and embodiment of Cavell's failure is the character Edmund: he cannot acknowledge Edmund properly, although he attempts to do so. In its discussion of presence, Cavell's essay recognizes this failure, and, through it, he reveals the impossibility of establishing commonality with others. Cavell's reading of Edmund—specifically his avoidance of Edmund's bastardry—becomes a case study in the inherent failure of acknowledgment. Cavell ultimately lays bare the failure at the heart of *Lear*: where the essay fails—in its inability to properly recognize Edmund at the moment of his death—is where the play's failure resides, in registering the impossibility of recognizing the other. *King Lear* reveals that the problem of acknowledgement can be rendered in grammatical terms: in recognizing the other through language as “you,” the speaker erases the possibility of articulating a “we.” As I shall argue, plurality is rendered impossible in a world where we are always in the second person when we acknowledge each other. From their unraveling of this failure, both Cavell's and Shakespeare's texts derive their remarkable poignancy.

“Yet Edmund was beloved”

My essay begins with a consideration of a particularly troubling moment in *Lear*: Edmund’s death and final words. Edmund’s death is but one of many moments in the play that strains the reader’s sympathy. For the purposes of this essay however, his demise is a critical affective crux in the play, a moment of problematic sympathy that aligns with Cavell’s view of acknowledgment as central to the tragic force of *Lear*. For Cavell, acknowledgement requires recognition of the other and the self, by both parties. In his reading, the conflict of the play originates in Lear’s shame and his dread of mutual acknowledgement between Cordelia and himself. Love requires acknowledgement and when deprived of that recognition, love becomes cruelty, which “cannot bear to be seen” (47). In Cavell’s reading of the play (and my own), acknowledgement only becomes possible after the tragedy has taken place; recognition occurs for Edmund at the moment of his death. The emotional force of the play emerges as we watch the characters realize this sad irony.

Northrop Frye suggests that the initial experience produced by *King Lear* is one of confused sympathy:

When you start to read or listen to *King Lear*, try to pretend that you’ve never heard the story before, and forget that you know how bad Goneril and Regan and Edmund are going to be. That way you’ll see more clearly how Shakespeare is building up our sympathies in the opposite direction.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Northrop Frye, “*King Lear*,” in *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, edited by Robert Sandler, (New York: Yale University Press, 1986), 102-103.

What Frye gestures at here is what makes *Lear* such a resonant, if not especially enjoyable, text: the play pushes you to pity and sympathize with Regan, Goneril, and Edmund in addition to Lear, Cordelia, and Kent. Just as its protagonist does with his kingdom, *Lear* divides our sympathies and provides no satisfactory resolution. This problematic division of sympathies might explain Bradley's curious remark that "*King Lear* seems to me Shakespeare's greatest achievement, but it seems to me *not* his best play."<sup>5</sup> I contend that what Bradley finds so remarkable in the play is that its affective force comes from the same feature that hampers it dramatically: its constant division of the audience's sympathies. He asks of the play "[h]ow is it, now, that this defective drama so overpowers us that we are either unconscious of its blemishes or regard them as almost irrelevant?"<sup>6</sup> Cavell begins his own reading of *Lear* in the same spirit, in order to make sense of the seemingly nonsensical abdication scene. In his attempt to answer Bradley's question he takes recourse in the play's affective confusions, as I shall.

Frye also identifies Edmund's death as an especially difficult moment to process: "Even at the end of the play, his simple phrase "Yet Edmund was beloved," meaning that Goneril and Regan loved him at least reminds us how intensely we can feel dramatic sympathy where we don't necessarily feel moral sympathy."<sup>7</sup> We might quibble with Frye's terminology here. I do not think that the sympathy we feel when we read or hear

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<sup>5</sup> A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, (London: MacMillan and Co), 1937,

<sup>6</sup> Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 261.

<sup>7</sup> Frye, "*King Lear*," 103.

“Yet Edmund was beloved” has a dramatic source.<sup>8</sup> We do not react to the dramatic impact of what has happened to Edmund here. It is not his death which moves us, but his emotional response. Rather, we react to the emotional experience of realizing, in Cavell’s terms, both Edmund’s present and his presence. Cavell writes

that in failing to see what the true position of a character is, in a given moment, we are exactly put in his condition, and thereby implicated in the tragedy. How? [...] The medium is one which keeps all significance continuously before our senses, so that when it comes over us that we have missed it, this discovery will reveal our ignorance to have been willful, complicitous, a refusal to see. (84-85)

When we experience “Yet Edmund was beloved,” we suddenly feel the weight of Edmund’s full presence crashing upon us. And we experience a particular kind of presence here: not Edmund’s presence in the action of the play but his presence before himself. At the moment of his death, his “true position” reveals itself to him: the fact that he believes himself to exist to Goneril and Regan as a valid recipient of love becomes apparent to him. And unlike Lear when faced with Cordelia’s love, he acknowledges it. The pathos we feel in the scene is genuine, because it is real for Edmund.

Sadly, Cavell emerges from this scene with a reading that seems decidedly unsympathetic to Edmund’s “true position.” Cavell suggests that Edmund’s death “releases his capacity for love” (70). While Cavell proceeds to elaborate on what allows

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<sup>8</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare: King Lear*, edited by Stanley Wells, (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), 24.236. This edition is based on the 1608 Quarto version of the play. All citations of *King Lear* are from this edition and will be cited in text by scene and line numbers using the format (*KL* 1.1).

for this release, he is unclear about what the verb “release” means at this moment. The key to this meaning lies in the grammar of “Yet Edmund was beloved.” I will return to this claim shortly. Cavell then asks

What has released him? Partly, of course, the presence of his own death, but that in itself need not have worked this way. Primarily it is the fact that all who have loved him, or claimed love for him, are dead. He has eagerly prompted Edgar to tell the tale of their father’s death; his reaction upon hearing of Goneril’s and Regan’s deaths is as to a solution to impossible, or illegitimate, love: “All three now marry in an instant”; and his immediate reaction upon seeing their bodies is: “Yet Edmund was beloved.” *That* is what he wanted to know, and he can acknowledge it now, when it cannot be returned, now that its claim is dead. (70)

This is essentially the argument that Cavell makes in regards to Cordelia and Lear, and he admits as much. But Edmund is neither Cordelia nor Lear. Cavell’s misunderstanding of Edmund becomes vital to our understanding of the tragic role of acknowledgement because his failure reveals the inevitability of the failure to recognize the other. In failing to see Edmund’s presence, Cavell demonstrates how easily we might fail to truly recognize the other. In this moment, Cavell falls into the error that he will define in the second half of the essay. In his reading of “Yet Edmund was beloved,” Cavell shows us exactly what “failing to see [...] the true position of a character” looks like. He seems to forget, at this crucial juncture, that Edmund’s “true position” in the play has been, up until this very moment, that of a bastard, one whom his own father has “so often blushed

to acknowledge” (*KL* 1.9). Edmund’s first soliloquy embodies this anxiety about his lack of acknowledgment:

Why ‘bastard’? Wherefore ‘base’?  
When my dimensions are as well compact,  
My mind as generous, and my shape as true  
As honest madam’s issue? [...]  
Our father’s love is to the bastard Edmund  
As to the legitimate. Well, my legitimate, if  
This letter speed and my invention thrive,  
Edmund the base shall to th’ legitimate.  
I grow, I prosper. Now gods, stand up for bastards! (*KL* 2.6-21)

Edmund recognizes that it is not his father’s love which he lacks but the legitimacy requisite to acknowledgment. Edmund craves not love but societally recognizable personhood. His “true position,” which begins as “bastard” and evolves into “beloved,” renders him the inverse of Lear, who cannot brook the reality of Cordelia’s love and becomes part of the disenfranchised world alongside Poor Tom. Edmund thus becomes a different sort of Cavellian skeptic: the problem of the presence of other minds does not bother him so much as his own presentness, his social position before others. “Yet Edmund was beloved” marks the moment at which he realizes that he had the capacity to occupy a “true position” beyond “bastard.” In other words, he is not moved by the fact that Goneril and Regan loved him but by the fact that they saw fit to express it, which, in Cavell’s terms, implies their acknowledgment and acceptance of his position. The tragedy, if readers are inclined to read any into Edmund, is that he reaches this new “true position” only in death, and having wrought many of the chief horrors of the play.

“Yet Edmund *was* beloved.” At the moment of his death—also his redemption and his epiphany—Edmund sees himself in the third person and in the past tense. He

never *is beloved*. The recognition of this potentially redemptive “true position” occurs only in death, only as he sees himself ceasing to exist in the present. Furthermore, he sees himself in the third person, for only the second time in the play: the only other instance in which he refers to himself as Edmund is in his soliloquy from Scene Two. In that moment, he could only bring himself to speak the name Edmund alongside the words “base” and “bastard.” Here, at his end, he allows himself a brief moment to act as Beloved Edmund rather than Base or Bastard Edmund. But Beloved Edmund exists only in the past tense, he cannot change the course of the play: “Some good I mean to do, / Despite of my own nature” he tells Kent and Albany (*KL* 24.239-240). The “nature” he acts in spite of here is that of his new Beloved self, which exists only in the past tense. Thus, his attempts at goodness must be ineffectual; he can only ever act too late. In a touchingly ironic moment, Edmund’s words render prophetic his earlier claim to Edgar that “’Tis past, and so am I” (24.160). His ability to see himself in the third person as “Edmund” reflects his acknowledgement as “beloved,” by Goneril, Regan, and himself but also his realization that his new presence only becomes available to him when he ceases to be the active, present, agent “I” and becomes the inactive, dead, “Edmund.” In a touching moment of paradox, at the moment he attempts to reclaim the present tense, “some good I mean to do,” he causes death, state of permanently occupying the past tense. Edmund’s acknowledgement of his true present (and presence) can only occur as it fades into, and brings about, his past.

Everything I have written about Edmund thus far has failed to acknowledge his other “true position” in the play: Edmund is a dreadful human being. He causes the exile

of his innocent brother and the torture and eventual death of his father; his only reaction to the deaths of Goneril and Regan is to consider what it signifies about him. While Bradley does not treat Edmund with the same vehemence he reserves for Regan, whom he labels “the most hideous human being (if she is one) that Shakespeare ever drew,” he marvels at the way Edmund “moves wonder and horror,” proclaiming Edmund’s evil “nature” poses “a dark mystery” for which the fact of his bastardry seems an insufficient explanation.<sup>9</sup> Even though at the end of the play he fruitlessly attempts to prevent the execution of Cordelia and Lear, these words and gestures ring hollow in the wake of his body of work within the play. “Yet Edmund was beloved.” Still, we feel Edmund in that moment coming to realize his presence before the dead Goneril and Regan, as well as himself. Our dramatic and moral sympathies—our sense of what *does* and *should* happen in the play—will naturally set us against Edmund but something still compels pity. What we feel in this moment we might term surrogate sympathy: we experience pity upon realizing what Edmund himself *feels* in this moment, to the point that it temporarily erases the reality of what he has *done* in the course of the play. Thus, while we may disagree with Frye’s labeling of this scene as a moment of “dramatic sympathy,” the general point he makes remains, in spite of its apparent simplicity, remarkably lucid for a consideration of Edmund’s death: “The moral for us, as students of the play, is clear enough: we have to take a much broader view of the action than either a fatalistic or a moral one, and try, not to ‘explain’ it, but to see something of its dimensions and

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<sup>9</sup> Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 301.

scope.”<sup>10</sup> Acknowledging Edmund need not rule out condemning him. It merely requires that we define very clearly what it means to see Edmund, and the play.

The physical dimensions of staged drama, Cavell argues, alter our understanding of what it means to be present before one another. Using *Othello* as his example, Cavell argues that the helplessness of the audience—and the playgoers’ awareness of that — performs a central role in generating tragedy. When we watch Othello strangle Desdemona, “[t]here is nothing and we know there is nothing we can do. Tragedy is meant to make sense of that condition” (101). For Cavell, recognized and embraced helplessness defines tragedy. Our specific helplessness is before the character on the stage. Despite sharing in the physical space of the theater, or the page, our worlds exist separately. In Cavell’s terms, “[w]e are not in, and cannot put ourselves in, the presence of the characters; but we are in, or can put ourselves in, their present” (108). Whether reading or seeing the play performed, the shared temporal experience allows us to witness what happens to Edmund even though his “presence” remains cut off. Cavell frames this dramatic problem of presentness/presence in the terms of skepticism: “In another word, what is revealed is my separateness from what is happening to them; that I am I, and here. It is only in this perception of them as separate from me that I make them present. That I make them *other*, and face them” (109). The insight which Cavell’s essay brings forth is the truth of “Yet Edmund was beloved,” the line of the play he cannot quite acknowledge. We see Edmund’s “present” as past; he is Beloved Edmund. As he comes into active being before us he dies, becomes past, “was beloved.”

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<sup>10</sup> Frye, “*King Lear*,” 113.

## Cavell's Intuitive Reading of *Lear*

I remarked at the beginning of this essay that Cavell's reading of *Lear* develops its argument without the habitual emphasis on logical coherence that we would consider a typical mark of intellectual rigor. I did not do so derisively. Cavell's sacrifice of coherence in order to create affective experience makes his essay an ideal reading of *King Lear*, where coherence seems to cede to sheer emotive force. Cavell acknowledges this, describing his method in the opening of *Disowning Knowledge* as one of "intuition" rather than argumentation.<sup>11</sup> Cavell distinguishes "intuition" from "hypothesis" in that the former "does not require, or tolerate, evidence but rather, let us say, understanding of a particular sort."<sup>12</sup> In treating *King Lear* as a text where "understanding" enjoys precedence over "evidence," Cavell asks the reader to partake in, and possibly rewrite, that "understanding." Hypothesis asks nothing of its readers—in fact it must pass *their* evaluation—while "understanding" requires that the reader not only indulge but share in Cavell's "intuition."

Our evaluation of Cavell's reading of the play must then take on a different form than the evaluation of a standard critical essay. This does not, as Lawrence Rhu observes, make the process of interpreting Cavell's reading any simpler:

Cavell admits that his writing perhaps makes exceptional demands and, as chief among them, he specifies, the 'friendship' of the reader. If this sounds like an inordinate demand, it may also be a necessary one. Cavell borrows from Luther

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<sup>11</sup> Cavell, "Introduction," in *Disowning Knowledge*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Cavell, "Introduction," in *Disowning Knowledge*, 4.

and earlier biblical exegetes to suggest that much of what we read in the humanities requires belief prior to understanding.<sup>13</sup>

The recreation of his own affective response to *Lear* that Cavell enacts in his essay requires the reader to acknowledge the emotional presence of the author within the text. If we are moved by the essay, then we are also moved by Stanley Cavell. Our sympathy to his argument proceeds from a positive emotional reaction to feeling what Cavell felt as he developed his interpretation. Moved by the fact that Cavell himself feels moved, the reader enters into an emotional contract with the author. Especially remarkable about this effect is that various readers of Cavell seem to hint at it, but only within their own argumentative or interpretive framing of his essay.

For example, Thomas Dumm says the following about Cavell's use of character in his reading of *Lear*:

Cavell introduces 'The Avoidance of Love' with a discussion of the role that the analysis of character may play in thinking about tragic drama. He is interested in character not because he is uninterested in language, but because to comprehend the use of words it is necessary to understand the intersection of the words that are used and who it is who uses them. For Cavell, the comprehension of the meaning

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<sup>13</sup> Lawrence F. Rhu, "Competing for the Soul: Cavell on Shakespeare," in *Stanley Cavell and Literary Studies: Consequences of Skepticism*, edited by Richard Eldridge and Bernard Rhie. (New York: Continuum, 2011), 139.

of an event, as a philosophical matter, cannot be separated from the meaning a particular person attaches to it.<sup>14</sup>

What Dumm says here about Cavell's reading of Shakespeare also applies to my understanding of Cavell. He becomes a character in the drama that his interpretation of the play creates. This leads us to read him with the sympathy of friendship: to read "The Avoidance of Love" is to engage in a prolonged dialogue with a Stanley Cavell who asks that you acknowledge the "present" of his interpretive encounter with the text of *Lear*. This is not an experience unique to reading Cavell: we experience it in seminar rooms every week. Cavell's style evokes pedagogy more so than it does argumentative discourse. We encounter Cavell and his *Lear*; we return to them, perhaps grapple with them. But the relationship the text creates is affective as much as it is discursive. In my critique of Cavell's reading of Edmund, I sought to show how Cavell's essay, in an early section, fails to fully acknowledge Edmund, only to provide us with the means to recognize that failure within a few dozen pages. This is a remarkable feature of Cavell's essay: even in a moment of failure it provides its readers with the tools necessary to read *Lear*. Cavell does not misread Edmund; he avoids him. In doing so, he teaches us the flawed nature of acknowledgement. In critical writing, we deride this as inconsistent or incoherent. But in literature, we applaud the complexity and problematization that such fragmented texts provide us as generative. We can read Cavell's treatment of Edmund in two ways: either it is inconsistent because Cavell wrote an eighty four page essay and

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas L. Dumm, "Cordelia's Calculus: Love and Loneliness in Cavell's Reading of *Lear*," in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*, edited by Andrew Norris, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 215.

failed to recognize a possible contradiction. Or we can say that Cavell recreates in his critical prose, and in the reader's experience of the essay, the progression of how Edmund understands his "true position" across the play.

By making himself a character—the central character—in his own reading of the play, Cavell requires the reader, as Rhu suggests, to acknowledge him, to a certain degree, as a friend. If we do this, if we acknowledge Cavell as a friend who is present at the moment of our reading him, then we must take into account *his* own "true position." We do not typically attempt this sort of contextualization, typically reserved for the examined texts, with our critics. But if we manage to acknowledge Edmund then surely Cavell does not represent a step too far. In fact, Cavell himself admits to his reader that his essay emerges from a particular and fixed present: America in the immediate wake of the Vietnam War's onset. If we take Cavell as author and participant in his recreated *Lear*, then we must also recognize that the America of the late 1960s informs his "darker purpose" (*KL* 1.36). Cavell's essay dramatizes its historical present in order to introduce the political implications inherent in the problem of acknowledging the presence of other minds.

## Cavell's Ordinary Lear

Lawrence Rhu suggests the centrality of the Vietnam War to Cavell's thinking in "The Avoidance of Love," citing some of Cavell's own remarks two decades later in the preface to *Disowning Knowledge* about his thinking at the time:

Alarm about the war was greatly intensifying though these years, especially on college campuses. During the following summer, 1967, Cavell wrote part two of the *Lear* essay, which, as he remarked at the time of its republication in 1987, 'bears scars of our period in Vietnam; its strange part II is not in control of its asides and orations and love letters of nightmare.'<sup>15</sup>

By Cavell's own admission, the second part of his essay wanders from its subject as he loses sight of *Lear's* present in favor of his own. In doing so, he argues that America itself became *Lear*. Even when he leaves *Lear*, Cavell returns to it as a source of affective presence, as the paper upon which he composes his "love letters of nightmare" to America. While his presence remains cut off to his reader—just as Edmund's is to Cavell himself—the attempt to accept Cavell's present, just as the skeptic does the world, remains vital, even though it is an endeavor sentenced to failure.

Cavell begins his account of the American tragedy with a return to its origins. He imagines America as a figure resembling *Lear*:

its fantasies are those of impotence, because it remains at the mercy of its past,  
because its present is continuously ridiculed by the fantastic promise of its origin

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<sup>15</sup> Rhu, "*King Lear* in their time," 231.

and its possibility, and because it has never been assured that it will survive. Since it had a birth, it may die. It feels mortal. (115).

Here, Cavell surely has in mind the Lear that rages in the storm, decrying cruel nature for allying with his treacherous daughters:

I never gave you kingdom, called you children.  
You owe me no subscription. Why then, let fall  
Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand your slave,  
A poor, infirm, weak and despised old man (*KL* 9.17-20)

Both Lear and Cavell's America howl against the indignity that natural progression forces upon them: birth begets mortality. For Cavell, America, because it can recall its national origin, shares Lear's sheer dread of death's eventuality. While Lear's dread takes on an explicitly misogynistic tone in its attempts to pervert the feminine generativity of Goneril and Regan and subdue Cordelia's into the benevolent matrimony of his "birds i'th' cage" fantasy, Cavell's America experiences an existential terror as the fact of its violent origin functions always as a reminder of its mortality. Thus the ironies of America and Lear's anxieties overlap: both see themselves as helpless, even at the moment of exerting their will. Lear, in the moment of physically banishing Cordelia, sees only her threat to his fantasy in the love-gambit that begins the play's action. Cavell understands the American invasion of Vietnam in these same, affective terms:

Hence its [America's] terror of dissent, which does not threaten its power but its integrity. So it is killing itself and killing another country in order not to admit helplessness in the face of suffering, in order not to acknowledge its own separateness. So it does not know what its true helplessness is. People say it is imperialist and colonialist, but it knows that it wants nothing more. (116)

Here, Cavell seems to have made himself into the Kent of his American Lear: able to recognize the grand folly of his patriarch but powerless to do more than identify and acknowledge the madness. Cavell and Kent are watching what Cavell would define as a tragedy.

Kent's entreaty to Lear proceeds from his frustration at how the man Lear betrays the duty of the sovereign Lear in his fury against Cordelia: "[t]hinkst thou that duty shall have dread to speak / When power to flattery bows?" (*KL* 1.138-139). Kent himself will betray this line of thinking as he attaches himself to Lear in a doomed attempt to save him from his folly. Yet at the end of the play, his cogency returns in his pronouncement upon the dead Lear that "The wonder is he hath endured so long / He but usurped his life" (*KL* 24.311-312). Lear "usurped" as did Cavell's America: both incorrectly inhabit their own existence in an effort to preserve it.

Suffering from "the need for love as proof of its existence," America/Lear becomes "incapable of seeing that it is destructive and frightening," and thus rendered unlovable. America/Lear is the inverse of Edmund: beginning in a "true position" that can be loved and through a failure to acknowledge that position, due to the shame of their origins, finally becoming "isolated in its mounting of waters, denying its shame with mechanical lungs of pride, calling its wrath upon the wrong objects" (116). The tragedy of Lear and America is that they imagine themselves as the Edmund of the play's beginning and this leads them to become Edmund at the end of the play. These grandiose figures also fail to recognize the shadows they cast upon their constituencies.

In Cavell's essay, the Fool only comes up once, when Cavell discusses the "Lear's shadow" comment made by Lear in the Quarto and the Fool in the Folio. Lear asks "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" to which the Fool replies "Lear's shadow" (F 1.4.221-222). In the Quarto Lear answers his own question: "Who is it that can tell me who I am? Lear's shadow?" (Q 4.222-223). The Fool's reply is a statement while Lear's is another question. Cavell, working only from the Folio, reads this scene as a moment of doubling, in which Shakespeare's "point [...] is not so much to amplify or universalize a theme as to focus or individuate it, and in particular to show the freedom under each character's possession of his character" (78). If we read the Fool as Lear's double, as "Lear's shadow" who at this moment gives Lear a fair answer, then

it will mean that the answer to Lear's question is held in the inescapable Lear which is now obscure and obscuring, and in the inescapable Lear which is projected upon the world, and that Lear is double and has a double. (79)

Here, Cavell somewhat disappointingly defaults to the Shakespearean doubling trope when his reading implies something far more intriguing. If "Lear's shadow," whether spoken by Lear or the Fool, is in fact "the inescapable Lear which is projected upon the world," then, rather than a double, what we see is a literal shade engulfing the Fool, leaving him "darkling." The Fool is not "Lear's shadow" in a mimetic sense but in a sociopolitical and interpersonal one. While the Fool is in and of himself a separate being, Lear's and the play's treatment of him renders him a part of Lear, his shadow.

One of the more remarkable phrases in the play comes from the Fool as Lear confronts Goneril in scene four. In the midst of the conversation between father and

daughter, the Fool breaks briefly into song: “[f]or, you trow, nuncle, / The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long / That it had it head bit off by it young; / so out went the candle, and we were left darkling” (*KL* 4.206-209). The Fool’s words here warn Lear, as Wells observes in his notes, “against his daughter,” who might devour him (*KL* 4.207-208n.). It is not the warning to Lear that stands out here but the subsequent line, in which everyone else is “left darkling.” The Fool’s opaque comment might hint at a subject generally glossed over by the play: the political and national repercussions of the drama. *King Lear* represents the abdication of a sovereign and its consequent crisis while showing almost no regard for the political ramifications of that event: the play’s concerns remain stubbornly personal. But the Fool, as he so often does throughout the play, intervenes with a glib but sobering dose of reality: the consequences of Lear’s family squabble will be visited upon the ordinary people of the kingdom. Perhaps he derides and mocks Lear so heavily because he resents the chaos instilled in the kingdom by Lear’s foolishness in scene one. His warning to Lear about Goneril becomes a desperate plea for the sovereign to see reason, to acknowledge his kingly duties. The words “so out went the candle and we were left darkling” sound a note of prophetic resignation that Lear’s madness will continue and that the kingdom will collapse. Like Cavell’s and Kent’s, the Fool’s words go unheeded. They are so affecting because they recognize their own helplessness. This explains the Fool’s decision to speak in the past tense: they “were left darkling” because the ordinary people of a kingdom are always excluded from tragedies.

Appropriately, the Fool's brief moment of political consciousness is glossed over in both the modern editions by Wells and Foakes and in the play itself.<sup>16</sup> "Are you our daughter?" Lear asks in reply to this moment of political consciousness (4.210). Wells' edition of the Quarto renders this line as spoken directly to Goneril. In Foakes' Arden version of the Folio the stage direction is absent.<sup>17</sup> While the line certainly makes the most sense as being spoken by Lear to Goneril, we can read it as Lear speaking to the Fool, replying to his political critique. If we accept this reading, then we see Lear rebuking the Fool with a reminder of his position. Lear shuts down the Fool's political complaint. Lear cannot acknowledge the Fool's "darkling" presence and so he excludes him from political discourse.

The Fool, alongside Kent, thus becomes the figure within the play embodying the national tragedy which Cavell sketches in his reading. In the words of Kent and the Fool, one hears the sorrow of men witnessing the collapse of their sovereign under the weight of the "true position" the monarch cannot acknowledge. Cavell seems to ask us to hear Shakespeare's characters rather than read them. In their words we will hear our present as it occludes their presence. It is this act of listening that David Rudrum characterizes as Cavell's tendency to derive seemingly anachronistic or unlikely motivations from Shakespeare's characters:

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<sup>16</sup> Wells provides no interpretive gloss of the line while Foakes merely notes the Fool's "hatred of Goneril" and speculates that line could either predict or invite "the affliction soon to come" (n.208).

<sup>17</sup> *The Arden Shakespeare: King Lear*, 204.

Cavell's attempts to psychologize or psychoanalyze Shakespeare's characters sometimes go so far as to venture a claim as to what a given character is thinking in a given moment, and all too often what they are thinking turns out to impinge in some way on a philosophy or a philosopher close to the heart of Cavell's broader project. It is at this level that I find Cavell's readings of Shakespeare to be at their weakest, as well as their least persuasive: while they are intriguing and entertaining as interpretations of character's words and actions, their plausibility too often hinges on ideas or concepts voiced in philosophical texts whose relation to the play under discussion is not always rendered altogether intelligible. However, what makes them compelling interpretations nevertheless is, in part, the stark incontestability of the method in this madness, which Cavell basically derives from ordinary language philosophy.<sup>18</sup>

Rudrum's critique here, in the case of Cavell's reading of *Lear* at the very least, does not hold true. What he refers to as Cavell's tendency to assume knowledge of a character's thoughts is, in "The Avoidance of Love," the way in which Cavell situates himself within the presentness of Lear, Kent, and the Fool. His engagement with their presentness leads him to see how it coincides with his own. Rather than project himself onto Shakespeare's characters, Cavell empathizes with them. From that empathy with the presentness of Lear, Kent, and the Fool, emerges his presentist reading of America as suffering a national tragedy. Rudrum attempts to mitigate his criticism of Cavell by claiming

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<sup>18</sup> David Rudrum, *Stanley Cavell and the Claim of Literature*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 71.

admiration for his methodological origin in “ordinary language philosophy.” This seems an unsatisfying reading of what Cavell does with *King Lear*. Certainly he gives attention to the words of Shakespeare’s characters and their contexts. But he also considers these verbal interactions from a profoundly empathic position: Cavell wants to understand the affective conditions that allow such tragedy to occur. We might more aptly describe his method in “The Avoidance of Love” as ordinary life philosophy. For Cavell, *Lear* constitutes a lesson in the ordinary, and national, character of tragedy. And by reading this tragedy, we realize what animates it: the practical linguistic act of acknowledging the other, which enacts an erasure of any commonality between the two referents “I” and “you.”

## “Beloved Enemy”: The End of ‘We’

The final thesis of his essay is not its interpretation of the play, or even of Vietnam War-era America, but the following claim: “[t]he cost of an ordinary life and death, of insisting upon one’s life, and avoiding one’s own cares, has become the same as the cost of the old large lives and deaths, requires the same lucidity and exacts the same obscurity and suffering” (122). In other words, the tragedy of the play is the tragedy of Lear, the tragedy of Edmund, the tragedy of Cavell, and the tragedy of his reader. By the end of the essay, “the old large lives” of *Lear* cannot be readily distinguished from Cavell or his reader: we share in the collective inability to process our presence before “the old things,” and, concurrently, their presence before us (121). Acknowledgment is the only strategy that remains available. In Cavell’s formulation, without acknowledgment we become tragic:

The cause of tragedy is that we would rather murder the world than permit it to expose us to change. Our threat is that it has become an option; our tragedy is that it does not seem to us that we are taking it. We think others are taking it, though they are not relevantly different from ourselves. (122)

And Cavell reminds us that we cannot acknowledge without creating this disjunction between the self and the other, irrelevant in principle but utterly relevant in practice. Edmund demands that the gods “stand up for bastards” when he need only stand before himself, something that his tragic “Yet Edmund was beloved” reveals: he can only acknowledge his value as “beloved” in the past tense (*KL* 2.21). Albany’s closing words to the play leave us cold because they refuse to acknowledge what has happened on the

stage: “The oldest have borne most. We that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long” (*KL* 24.320-321). He mistakenly thinks that a conception of a plural “we” is still possible after all the suffering that has occurred. Albany fails to recognize the “true position” shared by the play’s key figures. His closing platitudes, naively spoken in the future tense, disavow the reality implied by “Edmund was beloved.”

The Fool provides us with a better working definition of *Lear’s* tragedy than Albany: “so out went the candle, and we were left darkling” (*KL* 4.209). He reveals the Albany’s myopic understanding of the play’s events as he speaks to the ordinary life concerns of the play directly here. The “large lives” of beings like Lear are, as Cavell says, not “relevantly different” from his own. Yet, because of the collective failure to acknowledge that commonality, the candle goes out and the collective “we” is “left darkling” to grope about for a hand to grasp. The problem with Cavell’s argument against “relevant difference” is that he neglects the practice of that difference. And *King Lear* is a play whose tragedy in large part derives from the way its central characters struggle against the problem of practical difference. “Come, sir, I’ll teach you differences,” Kent tells Oswald as he assaults him (4.85). Throughout the play we see how these “differences,” perhaps not relevant in Cavell’s theorization but profoundly so in practical terms, propel the horror of the play. There is no relevant ontological difference between Lear and the Fool; their respective presents exist simultaneously on the same plane. Yet in practice, Lear rebukes the Fool’s message of political consciousness and anxiety for the health of the body politic with a reminder of his difference when he, perhaps, asks him “Are you our daughter?” as a rebuke. Practical difference is inevitably reinforced

through speech acts. Shortly after Kent's lesson of "differences," the Fool tells Kent, "Sirrah, I'll teach thee a speech," appropriately, and ironically, invoking their class difference in the word "Sirrah" (4.110). The Fool, whose livelihood depends on maintaining a clever balance in his "speech" between sense and nonsense in order to entertain and instruct his betters, reminds Kent that they cannot teach difference because of their true positions. The teaching of difference is the preserve of beings like Lear, of the irrelevant yet practically different. In practice, the Fool becomes "Lear's shadow."

"Join hands here as we may, one of the hands is mine and the other is yours," writes Cavell, commenting on the tragedy underlying comedy (110). In the "darkling" world tragedy creates, we are left with only this "hand," and it, like Edmund, must be acknowledged. And in acknowledging it, we create the separation of first and second person. Cavell uses both the singular and the plural first person at this moment, acknowledging both the empathic impulse of "we" and the irrelevant difference between "mine" and "yours": Cavell seems to argue that we may join hands but the acknowledgement of the other's presence erases "we" and divides us into "mine" and "yours." When Cavell attempts to acknowledge Edmund only to avoid his true presence, his reading of *Lear* showcases the failure of human relationships at the heart of the play's ethical vision. Our hands may meet but they are like Eve's and Adam's hands at the end of *Paradise Lost*, poised at the verge of the world of erasure that Edmund, Lear, and the Fool inhabit. We are, as our first parents may have been, "hand in hand" yet set upon our

“solitary way.”<sup>19</sup> This is acknowledgment: the moment of recognition and the moment of erasure must always “marry in an instant” (*KL* 24.224).

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<sup>19</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *The Complete Poems and Essential Prose of John Milton*, edited by William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon. (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 630.

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