Absent Fathers, Invisible Mothers, and the Theological Dance of Knowledge and Love

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Abstract

This article explores the relationship between knowledge and love through an encounter with the mode of drama. The allegorical martyrdom drama *Sapientia* written by Hrotsvit of Gandersheim in the tenth century, which suggests that the theological virtues inform a particular vision of knowledge, is brought into conversation with Stanley Cavell's reading of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Where *Sapientia* elaborates a theological vision of knowledge as a work of love, *Lear* dramatizes the tragic consequences that can arise when love is viciously distorted. After examining Cavell's account of the relationship of knowledge and love, as well as his claim that modern epistemology is often beset by a form of mother-denial, the article concludes with suggestions for how the theological dance of knowledge and love might be conceived in a Mennonite context.

Introduction

How might we understand the relationship between knowledge and love? What role might the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love (charity) play in the range of activities we associate with knowing and thinking? These questions are likely to sound somewhat strange to our contemporary ears, but discussions of knowledge by early Christian and medieval writers routinely included the theological virtues in their attempts to make sense of matters we now call "epistemological." While some contemporary philosophers have championed the movement known as "virtue epistemology," attention to the theological virtues in that body of literature remains relatively scant by comparison. Focusing specifically on the theological virtue of charity or love,[1] I will explore the relationship between knowledge and love by way of

[1] The three theological virtues are faith, hope, and charity (love). I give charity (love) priority only for the purposes of this article.

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an encounter with the mode of drama.

I take my cue from American philosopher Stanley Cavell (1926-2018). I will develop and extend Cavell's reflections on the difficulty of knowledge by weaving together three intergenerational dramas in which a parent is notably missing. I will attend to some of the themes he explored in his reading of Shakespeare's great tragedy, *King Lear*. But I will give it a different twist, by situating Cavell's reading of *Lear* between two other dramas that he did not discuss. By reading these stories of absent fathers and invisible mothers alongside one another, my primary goal is to examine how they might help to make a case for a conception of knowledge informed by the theological virtue of charity or love. While this is not how Cavell described his own work, I hope to show that he is a valuable resource for entering more deeply into what I call "the theological dance of knowledge and love."[2]

To begin, I will bring Cavell's reading of *King Lear* into conversation with another play that was written some 600 years earlier—the allegorical martyrdom drama *Sapientia*, penned by the medieval German canoness Hrotsvit of Gandersheim. Where *Sapientia* elaborates a theological vision of knowledge as a work of love, *King Lear* dramatizes the tragic consequences that can arise when love is viciously distorted. Following Cavell's account of the relationship of knowledge and love—especially his claim that modern epistemological approaches are often beset by a form of what he calls mother-denial—I will conclude by turning to a third story that features one of the many mothers included in early Anabaptist martyrdom literature. This suggests that we might discern traces of the theological dance of knowledge and love in a specifically Mennonite context.

[2] The point of my discussion is not to defend the value of Cavell's reading of Shakespeare against others. Neither is it an argument in support of his general approach to philosophy. Rather, I grant the force of his intuitions about Shakespeare and philosophy and explore their implications by placing them alongside two other dramas representing aspects of the Christian theological tradition that I hold dear. Readers interested in a general interpretation (and defense) of Cavell's work could consult Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2011); Peter Dula, *Cavell, Companionship, and Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010); and Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies After Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2017).

Knowledge Then and Now

Let me offer some comments on epistemology, the study of knowledge, to help set the stage. In a recently published set of lectures, historian of philosophy Robert Pasnau describes a kind of historical alienation that lies at the heart of contemporary discussions of knowledge. "Of all the main branches of philosophy," he writes, "epistemology is the most alienated from its history."[3] One reason for this is that epistemology doesn't have the lengthy history that other branches of philosophy have. Pasnau notes that the term 'epistemology' is relatively recent, emerging only in the middle of the 19th century to name a particular approach to the study of the nature and possibility of knowledge in general. The term stuck, and epistemology quickly became one of philosophy's foundational subjects. Pasnau is not suggesting that there aren't very many discussions of knowledge scattered throughout the history of philosophy. His concern, rather, is to show that these historical discussions are framed in ways that differ significantly from those gathered under the heading of epistemology today.

"From Aristotle to the Middle Ages and well beyond," Pasnau observes, "philosophers took an interest in carefully circumscribing one or another particular kind of cognitive grasp of reality—perception, imagination, assent, deduction, and so on—but showed little interest in defining the broad category of knowledge."[4] By drawing attention to these differences, it does not follow that contemporary epistemology is somehow irredeemably misguided. On the contrary, he hopes that it might be enriched by attending more closely to the way knowledge was historically conceived.

One characteristic of the earlier discussions of knowledge is that they found ample room to incorporate appeals to ethical categories such as the virtues. This is no doubt because questions of knowledge were understood to belong to a broader discourse, that of human perfection. A second characteristic is that theological considerations were not automatically put on the defensive, as they are in much contemporary epistemology. To illustrate and provide a sense of the stakes involved, consider the distinction of faith and reason. From the perspective of epistemology today, faith and

[3] Robert Pasnau, *After Certainty: A History of Our Epistemic Ideals and Illusions* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017), 1.
[4] Ibid., 2.

reason are commonly taken to represent different epistemological capacities. Whether or not they are thought to be compatible, it is assumed that each belongs to and operates within a particular domain: faith is construed as a way of acquiring knowledge about things not accessible by means of reason alone. Because of this, it is typically taken to be secondary to the work of reason. If there is any room left for faith, it is to complement the knowledge we acquire by reason. In earlier discussions of faith and reason, by contrast, we are more likely to find depictions of faith as a virtue that disciplines and gives shape to a range of human capacities, including that of reason. That is, faith does not work so much to complement our knowledge of, say, the natural world but rather to help us distinguish between reasoning well and reasoning poorly.

A third characteristic of the discussion of knowledge before the rise of epistemology is that it was frequently taken up in dramatic works, theatrical performances, and other forms of literature. These artistic approaches were especially relevant for exploring the sorts of ethical and theological themes mentioned above. These matters are often better presented by showing than simply by saying. Nobody has been more attentive to the many intersections of philosophy with literature and drama than Stanley Cavell, whose work is a refreshing counter-example to Pasnau's claims about contemporary philosophy's alienation from its history.

Cavell was especially concerned to highlight and study the ethical character of knowledge. He was also an astute reader of theology. If there is a common thread running throughout his interest in all three of these characteristics, it is his understanding of the expressive character of language and thought, his sense that knowledge flourishes just to the extent that it is given voice and is compromised when voices are silenced or lost. Cavell found that intergenerational dramas revolving around relationships between parents and children provide especially rich material for exploring these connections. In particular, he was drawn to "tales in which one parent is notably and suspiciously absent." [5] Tales like these draw attention to the difficulties of knowledge and the challenges involved in finding (or failing to find) a voice. By attending to these difficulties and challenges we can better

[5] Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, updated ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 17. Subsequent references are made parenthetically in the text.

understand the wide range of factors that our pursuits of knowledge involve.

Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, *Sapientia*

Let me start with the oldest of the three stories—a play called *Sapientia*, written by the medieval German canoness, Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (c. 935 – c.1000). Hrotsvit's drama was written toward the end of the 10th century, approximately 600 years before Shakespeare wrote *King Lear*. The story it recounts is much older still. In the year 137 AD, a widowed mother and her three young daughters arrived in the city of Rome from another large Italian city (some accounts suggest it was Milan).[6] The mother was a devout Christian woman of noble descent, and she raised her three daughters in the fear of God. There is no mention of the father of the three girls. The mother's name was Sapientia (Wisdom), and she had given her daughters the names Fides, Spes, and Caritas. I will refer to them by their English names: Faith, Hope, and Love. Although they were quite young—their ages were 12, 10, and 8—they were also said to be wise beyond their years. Together with her daughters, Wisdom began visiting the churches of Rome, and they quickly gained a reputation for winning many of the women of Rome over to the truth of Christ.

This caught the attention of the Roman Emperor Hadrian, who summoned Wisdom and her daughters to appear before him in his court. He was concerned that their stirring up of religious dissent posed a grave danger to the harmony of civic peace he was charged with preserving. He was particularly anxious that the women who had come under the influence of Wisdom were starting to despise their husbands. "They refuse to eat with us," his assistant Antiochus reported, "or even more to sleep with us" (126). Understanding the close relationship between power and population, the Emperor conceded that this was a significant threat to his reign. But Hadrian was also known for his considerable intellectual capacity; he thought of himself as a champion of the Greek philosophical tradition and was proud of his reputation as a patron of the arts. In keeping with this sense of himself as a person of knowledge, he attempted to win the favor of the

[6] My account of the story is drawn from Hrotsvit, "Sapientia," in *The Plays of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim*, trans. Katharina Wilson (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989). Subsequent references to the play will be made parenthetically in the text.

girls by appealing to their shared desire for knowledge and truth. He offered to take them in as his own children and pledged to help them realize their extraordinary intellectual potential—on the condition that they renounce their belief in Christ and direct their worship instead to the Roman goddess Diana. Not only did they refuse his offer, the young trio mocked his claim to possess knowledge. They teased him about his foolishness and called him stupid for venerating base metal instead of the Creator, before serenading him with hymns of praise to their lord Jesus Christ (135).

Not surprisingly, this shameless act of provocation by three precocious girls did not go over well with the proud and powerful Emperor. He responded by separating the sisters from each other and also from their mother, interrogating each of them in turn. When this proved ineffective, he subjected them to a series of brutal tortures in a last desperate attempt to elicit from them a renunciation of the lordship of Christ. However, the violence he directed towards them was equally unproductive. Far from winning their allegiance, it served as the springboard for a surprising series of miraculous occurrences. As difficult as it is for contemporary ears to hear depictions of violence against young women—not to mention the litany of miracles that test the limits of modern believability—the details of these torments are important because they are an integral part of the story's allegorical logic.

Consider the torture of Love, the youngest of the three sisters. Hadrian ordered his men to have a furnace "heated for three continuous days and nights" and to throw her into the fire when it glowed "red-hot with its heat" (144, 145). The furnace grew so hot that it exploded—and burned 5,000 members of the emperor's army! Yet the raging flames seemingly had no ill-effect on Love. She was seen dancing playfully in the fire, singing hymns of praise to her God in the company of three men dressed in white. Frustrated by the futility of his efforts to subdue the three girls, Hadrian finally ordered each of them to be put to death by beheading. They responded by declaring that they welcomed the sword and rejoiced in anticipation of their impending betrothal to Christ the divine bridegroom. After they succumbed to death by the sword, the story concludes with their mother Wisdom tending to their bodies and preparing them for burial at the "third milestone outside of town" (147). She spent the next three days at their graveside in continuous prayer, giving praise both for the "heavenly reception of [her] daughters" and "for

all that is knowable through science" (149, 148). When she completed her prayer, she "expired in Christ" and was buried alongside her daughters by the matrons who had accompanied her.

This story may have first appeared in hagiographical literature around the sixth century. It is also included in *The Golden Legend*, an immensely popular medieval book of saints' lives that was first published in 1260. Today, responses to the story tend to be concerned with the question of whether these events actually happened as described and with the horrific forms of violence to which the three girls were subjected. However, these reactions tend to miss its allegorical meaning. Indeed, Hrotsvit's dramatic rendition of the story reads like a checklist of well-known allegorical tropes prominent in medieval martyrological discourse. She alludes to the three holy youths from book of Daniel, with whom the three daughters of Wisdom were connected by a sort of typological relationship. Her account of the tortures suffered by the girls suggests that, like the unburnt bush from which God spoke to Moses, what is holy cannot be destroyed by fire. And her portrayal of Love dancing and singing in the furnace makes it clear that she embodied the virtue whose name she bore. I refer to this powerful scene staged toward the end of the play as a depiction of "the theological dance of knowledge and love."

If there is a distinctive contribution that Hrotsvit gave to the story, it is how she emphasizes the stakes concerning the question of knowledge that are involved between the Emperor Hadrian and the four Christian characters. In addition to Wisdom's praising of science in her final prayer, she inserted a humorous episode in which the girls explain their ages to the Emperor by means of a riddle based on Boethian mathematical theory that he fails to comprehend. Such references, however, are perhaps best described as ornamental. If there is a claim about knowledge made by this play, it is embedded in the very structure of the story. Trading upon the literary device of personification in ways not exactly subtle, Hrotsvit makes it clear that the figures of Hadrian and Wisdom represent the traditional contrast between mere knowledge and the fullness of wisdom. What is perhaps less obvious is how her account of the relationship between Wisdom and her daughters fleshes out this general contrast. *Faith, Hope, and Love are the means by which knowledge is transformed into wisdom*. This means that it is not so

much that Wisdom and her daughters know something that Hadrian does not know. His problem is not that he lacks *information* so much as *formation*. His relationship to knowledge differs from that of Wisdom, in other words, because it is not shaped by the theological virtues.

I am not suggesting that this connection between knowledge and the theological virtues originated with Hrotsvit's *Sapientia*. On the contrary, it can be found scattered throughout Christian scripture and tradition, and it is already suggested by the original legend of Wisdom and her daughters. It is also at the heart of Paul's letters to the Corinthians. Hrotsvit's contribution was to provide a dramatic rendition of this connection and in so doing to present a compelling and powerful vision for her fellow Christians to strive for.

Parenthetically, this means that tales of martyrdom are not always or only about the torture and slaughter of innocent victims. Sometimes there is more to a martyr than being an instance of exemplary piety. Vasiliki Limberis notes, for example, that "the Cappadocians framed all Christian life within the cult of the martyrs."[7] Today, stories of martyrdom are typically understood to represent one discourse among many and so in a sense their scope is narrowed. But where "martyr piety served as the customary way people showed Christian devotion," the stories of martyrs were often deployed for other purposes.[8] One of these purposes was the work of interpretation or conceptual clarification. Stories of this variety perform what Cavell has described as a way of seeing things together.[9] While contemporary readers find it hard not to fixate on the graphic depictions of torture and death, Hrotsvit wrote *Sapientia* in order to stress that knowledge and the theological virtues belong together.

While some readers may be put off by the violence, others readers may find it difficult to stomach the heavy dose of allegory in Hrotsvit's dramas. They find it frustrating that her characters remain significantly underdeveloped, that she tilts the balance toward formulaic types and away

[7] Vasiliki Limberis, *Architects of Piety: The Cappadocian Fathers and the Cult of Martyrs* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2011), 13.
[8] Ibid., 98.
[9] Stanley Cavell, "A Cover Letter to Molière's *Misanthrope*," in *Themes out of School: Effects and Causes* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), 97.

from real human beings with emotional complexity and depth. Furthermore, her interest in telling stories about the moral purity of virgin martyrs is likely to strike contemporary sensibilities as quaint and therefore difficult to engage.[10] More important for my purposes here, a critic might suggest that while Hrotsvit may make a case for thinking that faith, hope, and love are to be understood as epistemological virtues, she does little to show what that this equation looks like—or to demonstrate why it matters. Each of these responses can make it tempting to dismiss her work. However, that would be a mistake, not only because Hrotsvit can be defended against each of these charges but because reading her helps us to make sense of other work that followed in her wake. That is, echoes of her vision of a form of knowledge that is disciplined by the theological virtues turns up in some surprising places—like the plays of Shakespeare and the philosophy of Cavell.

I think it is fair to read these echoes of Hrotsvit as commentaries that elaborate and flesh out her vision of the theological dance of knowledge and love. Although this is not how Cavell described his own work, and while some scholars have identified traces of Hrotsvit's influence in Shakespeare, Cavell never once mentioned her work.[11] Nevertheless, I take his reading of *Othello* to be an invitation to explore the relationship between knowledge and the theological virtue of faith. His discussion of *The Winter's Tale* makes a similar invitation with respect to the theological virtue of hope. And with *King Lear*, the first Shakespearean drama on which he wrote, Cavell studied the relationship between knowledge and the theological virtue of love. For brevity's sake, I will limit my comments to *King Lear*—another story in which a parent is "notably and suspiciously absent."[12]

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[10] For a helpful discussion of these sorts of issues, see Marla Carlson, "Impassive Bodies: Hrotsvit Stages Martyrdom," *Theater Journal* 50:4 (1988): 473-87.

[11] Some scholars have argued that Shakespeare was familiar with the work of Hrotsvit by pointing to scenes in *Romeo and Juliet* that closely resemble scenes in Hrotsvit's play *Calimachus*. See Katharina Wilson, *Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: A Florilegium of Her Works* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1998), 54. It is not likely, however, that Shakespeare was using *Sapientia* as a source text for *King Lear*. At any rate, I am certainly not making a case for a direct connection. Far more likely is that both Hrotsvit and Shakespeare were drawing on a common tradition of resources for their reflections on the relationship between knowledge and love. This would include the Bible, martyrdom accounts, folk traditions, histories, other forms of literature, etc.

[12] Just as *Sapientia* makes no mention of the father of the three girls, so *King Lear* makes no

Shakespeare, *King Lear*

That *King Lear* can be read as a commentary on Hrotsvit's *Sapientia* is perhaps most clearly signaled by the so-called abdication scene with which Shakespeare opens the play. An elderly Lear unexpectedly announces that he has decided to renounce the title to his throne. He initiates a process in which he will divest himself of his property and relinquish his hold on power. He reveals to his three daughters that he has divided his kingdom into three separate territories. In order to distribute the territory among them, he has decided to portion it out on the basis of how much love each daughter has for him. So he invites the three to declare their love for him. "Which of you shall we say doth love us most," he asks, "that we our largest bounty may extend where merit doth most challenge it?"[13] The two older daughters—Goneril and Regan—respond immediately with effusive flowery speeches about how much they love their father. But the youngest daughter, Cordelia, responds in a completely different manner. It is at this point that the dramatic arc of the play is really set into motion.

Upon hearing her sisters boast about the depth of their love for their father, Cordelia utters her first words in the play—but only as an aside: "What shall Cordelia do?" she asks herself, but "Love and be silent" (Sc. 1, ln. 56). Later, as a second aside, she adds "Then poor Cordelia—. And yet not so, since I am sure my love's more richer than my tongue" (Sc. 1, ln. 70-72). Later we learn that Lear loves—or at least thinks he loves—Cordelia the most, and he wishes that she so loves him in return. He tries to make it clear that she has much to gain by expressing her love for him. "What can you say," he asks her, "to win a third more opulent than your sisters?" Cordelia responds by simply saying "Nothing, my lord." Lear is unable to accept this and continues to press her. She says, "I cannot heave my heart into my mouth" (Sc. 1, ln. 82-83). Though Lear is desperate to hear his youngest daughter tell him how much she loves him, Cordelia finds that she has no voice capable of doing so.

Cordelia refuses to participate in Lear's scheme because she understands that flattery is the corruption of love. She calls it a "glib and oily art" (Sc. 1, ln. 215). She knows that love cannot be bought and sold and that

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mention of the mother of Lear's three daughters.

[13] Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), Scene 1, lines 45-47. Subsequent references to the play will be made parenthetically in the text.

it is incompatible with bribery, with calculation and measurement. Unlike her sisters, she really does love her father, and she is uninterested in offering him anything less than authentic love. But Lear's problem is that he does not understand such love. He tells Cordelia that "her price is fallen" (Sc. 1, ln. 186) and cries out, "better thou hadst not been born than not to have pleased me better" (ln. 24-25). The rest of the play follows Lear's descent into madness and demonstrates how it is bound up with what we might call the forces of misrecognition. The cascading series of betrayals and banishments that make up much of the play's action is motivated by what Cavell calls the avoidance of love.

With *Sapientia* and *King Lear*, then, we have two intergenerational dramas that feature the relationship of a single parent to three daughters. Both stories reflect on the relationship between knowledge and love, but they move in entirely opposite directions. In one story, a wise mother bestows upon each of her three daughters a different gift of her wisdom. These gifts are received by the daughters in a spirit of non-competitive gratitude. In the other, a tyrannical and irrational father offers his daughters not a gift but the opportunity to compete for a share of his property. Two of his daughters are all too eager to place their bids and are torn apart by rivalry and jealousy. The youngest daughter, the play's lone figure of love, moves to the rhythms of her own love-soaked heart. She cannot help but love and so refuses to accept the bribe. And for this she is disowned by her father and banished.

If *King Lear* serves to interpret *Sapientia*, it does so by presenting a hellish inversion of Hrotsvit's vision of the theological dance of knowledge and love. In the hands of Shakespeare, her comedic vision of knowledge perfected by love is disastrously split apart as both are violently distorted with tragic consequences. If *Sapientia* sketches out an image of the well-formed mind, *Lear* is a drama about the disintegration of the mind. Where *Sapientia* is about the fruitful union of knowledge and love, *Lear* demonstrates the failures of knowledge bound to happen when love has become viciously distorted. By inverting the comedic structure of Hrotsvit's drama, Shakespeare offers us an opportunity to pay closer attention to how love might inform knowledge. He recognized that we can learn as much from studying the process of love's dissolution as from drawing attention to its vital significance. One of the great gifts of Cavell is the close attention he

pays to these dynamics of love and his ability to describe them with subtlety and nuance.

Cavell's Reading of *King Lear*

Cavell's reading of *King Lear* can help us think about love as a virtue that can inform our pursuits of knowledge. Here I offer three observations about the claims that are central to his reading. His main contribution to this discussion may simply be the way his work is a reminder that it is not enough to make a point about the theological virtues—namely that they might have some epistemological application—but that this is only possible if we reimagine what we call knowledge and understand it as an inherently ethical enterprise.

That love serves to inform the exercise of knowledge is suggested first of all in Cavell's influential reading of the abdication scene, where he makes an important structural observation about how the play conceives the relationship between knowledge and love (*Disowning Knowledge*, 57). When Cavell first turned his attention to *King Lear*, it was common to see Lear's words and actions at the beginning of the play as the reflection of one already in the grip of full-blown insanity. But he argued that this assumption is incompatible with the movement of the play's overall plot (57-58). For Cavell, it is not the disintegration of Lear's mental capacities that explains his distortion of love. Rather, it is the other way around: the distortion of love comes first for Lear. This means that Lear's madness and folly emerge against the background of this critical flaw in his character. His treatment of Cordelia is not the outworking of a delusional plan he hatches in a misguided attempt to secure her love but a depiction of the kind of thinking that can arise when one is incapable of loving and being loved. Lear's forms of speech are expressions of one who is compulsively driven to control and, if necessary, to silence the voice of another.

The other side of Cavell's observation is reflected in Cordelia's words, "Nothing, my lord"—that is, in her silence about love. It is not because she does not love Lear that she refuses to speak any words of love to him. On the contrary, she is the only character in the play who actually does love him. For her, love comes first. "All her words are words of love," Cavell notes, "to love is all she knows how to do" (63). It is because she is so moved by love that she

is committed to speaking truthfully. This is also why she is unable to utter the lie that her father tries to coax from her lips. Under the conditions set by Lear, any true words about love are simply unspeakable.[14] Yet this does not mean that love is successfully repressed or that clear thinking is impossible: Cavell refers to Cordelia's silence as her "revelation" (59). By saying nothing she exposes Lear's fundamental distortion of love, and it is this revelation that ignites the rage he directs against her.

Lear and Cordelia thus reflect the difference it makes when love nourishes and sustains our thinking or fails to do so. Cordelia embodies a form of thought infused by love. It would not be wrong to call it wisdom. By contrast, Lear is unable to think because he incapable of love. All of this suggests another way of reading Cavell's claim that the play is about the avoidance of love. If Cavell's reading of *Lear* is sound, not only does Lear's denial of love lead him to banish Cordelia, the paly itself should be understood as dramatizing the banishment of love from the world of knowledge.

A second contribution Cavell makes to our thinking about the relationship of knowledge and love is in his exploration and elaboration of the complex emotional register of love. He demonstrates that infusing knowledge by love is not a matter of mechanical application. It is an art, subject to subtle and intricate forms of judgment, and it involves the full range of our personhood. If we take a closer look at Cavell's account of how Lear gets love all wrong, we see Lear as a figure desperate to receive (to obtain or acquire) love but incapable of offering his love to others. His idea of love is structured as a form of ownership, something fully under his control; the object of his love is something to possess, perhaps even something that would belong exclusively to him. This is what the attempts at flattery and bribery reveal. This is how Cavell summarizes Lear's encounter with his three daughters in the opening scene:

> Lear knows it is a bribe he offers, and—part of him anyway—wants exactly a bribe can buy: (1) false love and (2) a public

[14] I owe this way of putting it to Sarah Beckwith. For her, Lear's "public ritual of competitive flattery makes any true declaration of love impossible, unspeakable under those conditions. Cordelia cannot declare her love precisely because she does really love him. Goneril and Regan can declare their pseudo-love precisely because they don't."—Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness*, 90.

> expression of love. That is, he wants something he does not have to return *in kind*, something which a division of his property fully pays for. And he wants to *look* like a loved man—for the sake of the subjects, as it were. He is perfectly happy with this little plan, until Cordelia speaks. Happy not because he is blind, but because he is getting what he wants, his plan is working. Cordelia is alarming precisely because he *knows* she is offering him the real thing, offering him something a more opulent third of his kingdom cannot, must not, repay; putting a claim on him he cannot face. She threatens to expose both his plan for returning false love with no love, and expose the necessity for that plan—his terror of being loved, of needing love. (*Disowning Knowledge*, 61-62)

This suggests that love is a reciprocal exchange—we might say a dance—of giving and receiving. Lear was incapable of love because he was incapable of being loved, of being recognized by another. He could not do "what every love requires, put himself aside long enough to see through to her, and be seen through [by her]" (73). Cavell describes the emotion that motivates the avoidance of love as a form of shame, specifically the shame of exposure. This is also how he takes the sight imagery scattered throughout the play. "Shame," he suggests, "is the specific discomfort produced by the sense of being looked at" (49). It is the feeling that leads us to recoil or retreat from the sight of another, to safeguard ourselves against the risk of being seen.

In this sense, shame expresses a deep fear of being exposed, an anxiety about what might happen if we reveal ourselves or an aspect of ourselves to another. Because it obsessively desires the avoidance of eyes, Cavell describes shame as the "most isolating of feelings" (58). Rather than risk being in a position of vulnerability with others, a person gripped by it is confined to a position of radical loneliness. In *King Lear* the effects of shame are dramatized through the image of banishment, the "last legitimate act" Lear has left (49). In exercising this act, however, the king ultimately finds that it is he himself who is banished.

Throughout the rest of the play, Lear exists as one who has effectively

been sealed off from the rest of the world.[15] Given his account of the way love turns upon both the giving and receiving of recognition—what he calls "acknowledgment"—Cavell stresses that shame's avoidance of the eyes is also the avoidance of love itself. This is how he accounts for Lear's attraction to the blinded figure of Gloucester, who is appealing to Lear because Gloucester gives Lear an opportunity to be recognized without being seen. This demonstrates, again, how Lear convinces himself that he might be able to know and to be known in a way that somehow bypasses the work of love. Even though the meeting with Gloucester sets the stage for Lear's reunion with Cordelia at the end of the play, it does nothing to change his understanding of love. Indeed, Cavell insists that Lear's avoidance of love and his avoidance of Cordelia carry through to the very end, an avoidance marked by their deaths that draw the play to a close.

The third way Cavell's reading of *King Lear* contributes to understanding the theological dance of knowledge and love is his framing of the question of skepticism. Although the skeptic has not made an appearance in my discussion thus far, it is his figure that can be credited with leading Cavell into the world of Shakespeare in the first place. All Cavell's work arises from the intuition that tragedy and skepticism share a similar structure: as he puts it, "tragedy is an interpretation of what skepticism an interpretation of" (5-6). In his hands, the skepticism that Descartes is often said to have placed at the heart of modern philosophy is not so much, or not only, a *theoretical* challenge that must be overcome in order to secure the possibility of knowledge. It is also an *ethical* challenge that revolves around the possibility of acknowledgment, recognition, and responsiveness. The overwhelming tendency among philosophers is to interpret the skeptic as someone motived by a kind of "intellectual scrupulousness" (6). However, this judgment misses the lesson that Shakespearean tragedy teaches, namely that it is equally motivated by a form of unacknowledged denial, what I have been calling 'avoidance'.

The skeptic also desires knowledge. The problem is not that he gives up on knowledge too quickly, as if his commitment to it is somehow too weak.

[15] For Cavell's account of how modern epistemology is informed by a feeling of being sealed off from the world, see Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1999), 144, 238.

Rather, Cavell suggests that skepticism reflects an attachment to knowledge that is far too strong, functioning like an obsessive preoccupation. This is manifested in how skepticism requires something more than a "best case" for knowledge, whether of the world or another's love. The skeptic demands a kind of certainty purified of the possibility of doubt (11). Not only is this desire for the best case impossible to achieve, it is also unlivable, as Lear and other tragic figures such as Othello know only too well. Cavell effectively calls the skeptic's bluff and refuses to take his demands at face value, much like Cordelia did with Lear. This implies that Cavell has a profound love for the skeptic: instead of allowing the skeptic to keep lying to himself, he reads the skeptic's posture of intellectual scrupulousness as a cover or shield for concealing important truths from himself.

Skepticism's apparent preoccupation with certainty is a way of converting the experience of "metaphysical finitude" into a problem of "intellectual lack" (138). It functions to excuse his emotional dumbness. Cavell claims that the skeptic's fantastic desire for connections that bear no trace of imperfection reflects an all-consuming dissatisfaction with the fact that humans are finite and mortal creatures who are separate from, yet dependent on, one another and the world.

Cavell's attention to the skeptic is unusual in the world of philosophy. He insists that the skeptic is not all wrong. This marks an important departure from the tradition of mainstream epistemology and its dedication to defeating or at least containing the threat of skepticism. Instead of defending the possibility of knowledge against the skeptic's challenge, Cavell urges us to recognize the "truth of skepticism" (25). The skeptic is correct to conclude that our relationship to the world and to others "cannot be a function of knowing" or at least "not what we think of as knowing" (95).[16] What we think of as knowing is a purely cognitive activity that denies the emotions any meaningful role. The skeptic is also right to recognize the sense in which we are separate from the world and from one another. If there is a problem with skepticism, then, it is not with its conclusions (the disappointment with knowledge, the fact of separateness) but with the emotions that motivate them.

For Cavell, the challenge of skepticism is not centered on its intellectual

[16] See also Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 241.

claims but on the practical challenge of "living our skepticism." To try to defeat skepticism as mainstream epistemology does simply prolongs the problem. His point is that this is not a genuine response, and he seeks a genuine response. We must acknowledge that there is a legitimate place for the frustrations and worries that motivate the skeptic. We do the skeptic no favors if we enable his denial of these feelings. This is what happens when we accept the skeptic's fixation with a knowledge we might strive to possess. What the skeptic needs is the same thing we all need: to stop avoiding the difficult work of love.

This is where Cavell's work offers an instructive alternative to the approach known as 'virtue epistemology'. From its beginning in an influential essay by Ernest Sosa in the early 1980s, virtue epistemology has been construed as a response to the so-called Gettier problem—namely that justified true belief is not sufficient for knowledge.[17] Gettier's groundbreaking essay launched what came to be known as a search for an elusive fourth condition beyond justified true belief. This led some to suggest that epistemological virtues might supply the necessary fourth condition for knowledge. In doing so, they are construed as reliable belief-forming faculties or processes that enable us to hit on the right beliefs. Here I simply observe that virtue epistemology assumes the skeptic's obsession with knowledge. If Cavell is correct, then we should not be surprised that it has struggled to entertain the emotions with the kind of range and depth that he finds in Shakespeare. All of this suggests that virtue epistemology has failed to learn what Cavell claims to have learned from *King Lear*: "What we need is not more knowledge but the willingness to forgo knowing" (95).

This way of putting it implies there are two ways of approaching the notion of "disowning knowledge" that Cavell uses to draw together his

[17] Sosa's essay "The Raft and the Pyramid" is commonly identified as marking the beginning of "virtue epistemology." See Ernest Sosa, "The Raft and the Pyramid," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5:1 (1980): 3-26. For Gettier's short but classic essay, see Ernest Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23:6 (1963): 121-23. For a helpful, if somewhat dated, introduction to virtue epistemology, see Abrol Fairweather and Linda Zagzebski, eds., *Virtue Epistemology: Essays on Epistemic Virtue and Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001). In a more theological vein, see Lydia Schumacher, *Rationality as Virtue: Towards a Theological Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2016); and Lydia Schumacher, *Theological Philosophy: Rethinking the Rationality of Christian Faith* (London: Routledge, 2016).

reflections on Shakespeare. For Lear, disowning knowledge is driven by a toxic mix of shame and jealousy. Disowning in this sense serves as a qualifier of knowledge. Cavell argues that when knowledge is severed from love, it becomes preoccupied with ownership yet often leads to the disowning of others who do not fit into a possessive scheme such as Lear's banishment of Cordelia or Othello's rejection of Desdemona. This is the form of skepticism that Cavell describes as unlivable. It tends to work itself out as a form of tragedy. However, there is another form of disowning that flows like a cross-current throughout his work. This is disowning not as a stubborn unwillingness or inability to recognize someone or something but as a renunciation of the epistemological temptation to ownership and possession. This renunciation is not a refusal of love. On the contrary, it is the very outworking of love, a generous and life-giving act of letting go. "Disowning knowledge" in this sense is not a form of knowledge that strives for ownership and is inclined to disown when it comes up short, but one that disavows such ownership. It is this sort of disowning that Cavell is calling for when he says we need a "willingness to forgo knowledge."

This willingness is the posture of Cordelia. It is also the posture of Wisdom and her daughters. It is at this point where Hrotsvit, Shakespeare, and Cavell converge. Their concern is not to defend the possibility of knowledge as such but to indicate that there may be other ways to approach what we think of as knowing. In particular, they are pointing to the possibility of a knowledge that has been transformed into a form of wisdom. A person transformed in this way has learned how to hold knowledge loosely because she has been nourished by faith, hope, and love. One way to describe the place of Cavell's reading of Shakespeare in this discussion is that he provides an account of how Hrotsvit's allegorical and somewhat skeletal depiction of the dance of knowledge and love can be fleshed out so that it becomes recognizably human and thus potentially livable.

I want to wrap up this attempt to elaborate on my contention that *King Lear* provides a helpful commentary on Hrotsvit's *Sapientia* by returning to Cavell's remark about the importance of attending to stories in which one parent is notably and suspiciously absent. One way that he summarizes his account of how contemporary epistemology splits apart knowledge and love

is that it reflects philosophy's "pathological mother denial."[18] In discussing another Shakespeare play, Cavell contends that "what philosophy renders as uncertainty in our knowledge of the existence of the world is a function of, say an intellectualization of, the child's sense of loss in separating from the mother's body" (13). This means that the skeptic can be described as one who reacts with disgust, or at any rate with disappointment, to everything representative of the fact that we are born of mothers. In the face of epistemology's rather complacent attitude toward this sense of disgust, Cavell takes the skeptic's reaction seriously and seeks to provide a response.

In doing so, he offers a profoundly illuminating account of the dangers of denying our creatureliness and repudiating our inescapable mortality. If he is correct—if our experience of skeptical uncertainty with the world, our anxiety about human separateness and finitude, our avoidance of recognition and love, our feeling of shame, if all of this expresses unresolved separation between children and their mothers—then it is hardly surprising that mothers are nowhere to be seen in the story of *King Lear*. Nor is it surprising that Hrotsvit develops her account of the theological virtues as epistemological around the close relationship of a mother to her three daughters. By attending to these stories, we are presented with a vision of how love might serve to transform (mere) knowledge, redirecting our possessive inclinations into a more generous and responsive way of relating to others and the world—what Cavell calls acknowledgment, and what Hrostsvit and the biblical tradition upon which she draws calls wisdom.

Martyrs Mirror: A Mennonite Angle?

In lieu of a strict conclusion, I will briefly direct our attention to another story centered on the relationship of a single mother and her three children in the hopes of stimulating discussion among Mennonite thinkers. Prompted by Cavell's emphasis on philosophy's mother-denial, I have been led to wonder about the many stories of mothers and children that turn up in Anabaptist martyrological literature such as the *Martyrs Mirror*.[19] There is of course

[18] I owe this way of putting it to Natalie Carnes. See Natalie Carnes, *Image and Presence: A Christological Reflection on Iconoclasm and Iconophilia* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2018), 34.

[19] Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians*,

Anna Jansz, searching the crowd in Rotterdam for someone to take care of her young son Isaiah before she is drowned, and there is Maeyken Boosers, giving the gift of a pear to her son when he came to visit her in prison. Even more somberly, there are the children of Maeyken Wens, rooting through the ashes of their mother to retrieve the tongue-screw with which she was tortured. As stories like these pile up, one gets the sense that there might be something new worth exploring here.

On the one hand, the early-modern martyrological tradition—Anabaptist and otherwise—departs in significant ways from the discourse of the medieval martyrdom legend which gave us the story of Wisdom and her daughters. It is tempting to assume that part of this shift was due to the influence of modern epistemological developments and how they gave rise to a new, more narrowly cognitive conception of beliefs. On the other hand, I am starting to have second thoughts about this assumption. At least I am more and more inclined to think we should be careful not to overstate the break. As a way of suggesting that we might be wise to hold this question open, I reference another story that displays an approach to knowledge that is disciplined by the theological virtue of love.

In the summer of 1560, approximately 40 years before Shakespeare is said to have written *King Lear*, a woman named Soetgen van der Houte was apprehended by the ecclesial authorities in the city of Ghent. She was originally from the nearby town of Oudenaarde, where she lived with her husband who worked as a weaver while also running a small school out of their home. When he was executed six years earlier, Soetgen took over his work as a teacher. She remained a widow, raising their three young children on her own. Unlike the many Anabaptist martyrs put to death by burning or drowning, she was beheaded, like the daughters of Wisdom.

While she was awaiting her sentence at the Gravensteen castle in Ghent, she wrote her children a long letter that was later published, possibly by the well-known Mennonite printer Nicolaes Biestkens. Her *Testament*, as it was known, became a popular book that was reprinted several times. A version of the letter is also included in the *Martyrs Mirror*. The *Testament* is notable for weaving together an emphasis on the importance of learning and wisdom with an allegorically rich account of the theological virtues,

trans. Joseph F. Sohm (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996).

especially that of love. She repeatedly stressed to her children that they should "learn to read and write, so that [they] may get understanding."[20] She told her son David that, since he was the oldest, he was to "learn wisdom," so that he may serve as a "good example" for his younger sisters.

The rhetorical force of Soetgen's letter is heightened by the way she plays with a sense of double meaning that is not unlike Cavell's treatment of "disowning knowledge." Soetgen introduces her *Testament* by telling her children that it was "written by me Soetgen van den Houte, your mother in bonds written with haste (shivering of cold) out of love."[21] Through the many examples included in the letter, she strives to teach them that "all relations are to be based on love, which is the perfect bond."[22] She concludes by encouraging her children to "follow the little flock, … those who walk most in love."[23] The Dutch word *zoet* from which she gets her name means sweet and gentle, which seems fitting for someone who can be said to embody the sense of disowning love that is at the heart of Cavell's reading of Shakespeare.

Mennonite descendants of Dutch Anabaptists like Soetgen are well known for their deeply ingrained aversion to dancing. In fact, Soetgen explicitly identified dancing as one of the worldly pleasures from which her children should refrain.[24] Nevertheless, I find that her writing reflects an image of a different dance, the theological dance of knowledge and love that was so strikingly presented in Hrotsvit's story and shown to come undone in *King Lear*. This suggests that there might be more to the *Martyrs Mirror* than arguments for believer's baptism and a celebration of Christian "defenselessness." It might also include a rich collection of philosophical undercurrents that could be approached in a manner inspired by Cavell's reading of the plays of Shakespeare. More specifically, there might also be a Mennonite point of entry into this discussion of the relationship between knowledge and love. To read Soetgen's letter alongside Hrotsvit's *Sapientia*

[20] *Martyrs Mirror*, 650.
[21] As quoted by Marjan Blok, "Your Mother in Bonds: The Testament of Soetken van den Houte," in *Sisters: Myth and Reality of Anabaptist, Mennonite, and Doopsgezind Women ca. 1525-1900*, ed. Mirjam van Veen, Piet Visser, Gary K. Waite, Els Kloek, Marion Kobelt-Groch, and Anna Voolstra (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 136.
[22] Ibid., 141.
[23] *Martyrs Mirror*, 650.
[24] Ibid., 648.

and Cavell's reading of *Lear* suggests that there is much to explore here. But that is a task for another day.[25]

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[25] For an invited response to this article, see Néstor Medina, "Absent Peoples, Unaccounted Mothers, and Repressed Knowledges," in *The Conrad Grebel Review* 39, no. 3 (2021): 214-219. https://uwaterloo.ca/grebel/publications/conrad-grebel-review.