

SHAME, RECOGNITION AND LOVE IN
SHAKESPEARE'S *KING LEAR*

Vergüenza, reconocimiento y amor en El Rey Lear de Shakespeare

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore the experience of shame and its connections to recognition and love as manifested in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. My main focus in this paper is the ethical relevance of shame. I start from Sartre's account of shame in *Being and Nothingness*, and I consider Webber's attempt to reformulate it in terms of bad faith. I reject this and propose a way to rethink shame through a study of the workings of recognition in *King Lear*, following Stanley Cavell's reading of this tragedy. I claim that the experience of shame has a relational structure, which makes it a crucial part of our ethical sensibility. My analysis of *King Lear* brings out this structure and underlines the ethical significance of shame at this structural level, by highlighting its connection to recognition and love.

Key words: Shame; Love; Recognition; Bad faith; Freedom; Moral emotions; Jean-Paul Sartre; Stanley Cavell; King Lear.

RESUMEN

En este trabajo exploro la experiencia de sentir vergüenza y sus conexiones con el reconocimiento y el amor tal y como se ponen de manifiesto en *El Rey*

Lear de Shakespeare. Mi principal preocupación es postular la relevancia moral de la vergüenza. Comienzo con la visión sartriana de la vergüenza en *El Ser y La Nada*, pasando por el intento de Weber de reformularla en términos de mala fe. Este trabajo rechaza ambas formulaciones y propone una manera de repensar la vergüenza basándome en el estudio de los esfuerzos de reconocimiento en *El Rey Lear* y para ello sigo la lectura que hace Stanley Cavell de dicha tragedia. Afirmo que la experiencia de la vergüenza y tiene una estructura relacional, por lo que forma parte esencial de nuestra sensibilidad moral. Mi análisis de *El Rey Lear* saca a la luz esta estructura resaltando su conexión con el reconocimiento y con el miedo, y subraya la relevancia ética de la vergüenza en ese espacio estructural.

Palabras clave: Vergüenza; Amor; Reconocimiento; Mala fe; Libertad; Emociones morales; Jean-Paul Sartre; Stanley Cavell; Rey Lear.

In this paper¹, I explore the experience of shame and its connections to recognition and love as manifested in Shakespeare's *King Lear*². My main focus will be on the ethical relevance of shame, which can be located at two levels. At a more superficial level, it is clear that some varieties of shame are typically triggered by causes that lie within the moral domain, i.e. by moral transgressions such as lying or stealing. At a deeper level, however, I claim that the experience of shame in all its central varieties has a relational structure, which makes it an essential part of our ethical sensibilities. In other words, the capacity to feel shame reveals a selfhood that stands in a particular relation to others and to itself, a relation of mutual interdependence at a constitutive level, a relation that makes ethical considerations possible, meaningful and perhaps even necessary. The capacity for shame is *not* all we need to be ethical, but it is an important part of the ground of concerns and motivations that makes ethics meaningful. My analysis of *King Lear* brings out this structure and underlines the ethical significance of shame at this structural level, by highlighting its

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2. Shakespeare, W., *The Oxford Shakespeare: The History of King Lear: The 1608 Quarto*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000.

connection to recognition and love. I heavily rely on Stanley Cavell's³ reading of this tragedy, but I expand and comment on it by developing further the notions of shame, recognition and love. I start by explaining the Sartrean notion of shame I will be using, and how Jonathan Webber⁴ re-contextualizes it in terms of bad faith. I then move on to an analysis of *King Lear*, where I unfold the notions of recognition and love as they become relevant, and then draw and justify the conclusions I just stated.

I

Shame, in my view, is an emotion of social self-consciousness: a phenomenon where human consciousness is revealed as constitutively intersubjective. It is typically characterized as a distressing, often very painful, emotion that makes us feel faulty and unworthy, exposed, vulnerable and judged. The intentional object of the emotion is not the situation or action which gives rise to the shame episode, but the self of the person ashamed. Shame is reflexive, in the sense of directed back at myself⁵, and that is why it has been labeled as a "self-conscious emotion". In shame, I focus on myself and apprehend myself as small, faulty or inadequate. Another key aspect is exposure: many authors claim that shame is a response to being exposed to the censoring gaze of a real, an imagined or an internalized audience⁶. In this sense, it would be distinctively a "social emotion"⁷. The account of shame I favor and I rely on in this paper is, roughly speaking, a Sartrean one, in which shame entails

3. Cavell, S., "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of King Lear", Cavell, S., *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp. 267–353.

4. Webber, J., "Bad Faith and the Other", Webber, J. ed., *Reading Sartre: On Phenomenology and Existentialism*, London, Routledge, 2011, pp. 180–94.

5. I interpret the cases of other-directed shame (*vergüenza ajena* or *Fremdscham*) as cases where I feel exposed by proxy, where a strong association with another leads me to feel exposed through her exposure. I cannot go further into this discussion here.

6. See e. g. Williams, B., *Shame and Necessity*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2008; Sartre, J. P., *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel Barnes, London, Methuen, 1969; Maibom, H. L., "The Descent of Shame", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 80 (2010), 566–94.

7. This is a controversial issue that I have addressed in detail elsewhere: Montes Sánchez, A., "Social Shame vs. Private Shame: A Real Dichotomy?", *PhaenEx*, 8 (2013), 28–58. I will not dwell on it here.

something more akin to a change of perspective on oneself, rather than the internalization of a particular audience.

As Sartre⁸ explains, in shame, I suddenly shift from a purely first-person perspective, where I'm focused on the world, on the objects of my experience, and where I apprehend myself pre-reflectively as the consciousness that is doing the perceiving, to a perspective where I apprehend myself as the object of somebody else's experience. I am no longer a perceiving subject but a perceived object: I discover my own objective dimension. I see that I am being seen. Now, this does *not* mean that another person must always be present for me to feel shame, but it does entail my becoming aware of that dimension of myself that can only be apprehended from the outside: my "objectness", what Sartre calls my "being-for-others". In shame, I become aware that I have an outside that can be perceived by others and that is an integral part of me, but escapes my control entirely, that a whole dimension of what I am is entirely established from without. Intersubjectivity and relationality are therefore constitutive of a whole dimension of my being.

Now, the problem with Sartre's account is that he uses the structure of shame as the general pattern underlying every encounter with the other, which implies an overly negative view of our interpersonal relationships.⁹ As Guenther¹⁰ argues, Sartre's account forecloses the possibility of transforming shame or moving beyond the stalled dialectic he brings out: I am either a subject and objectify the other (in arrogance), or she is recognized as the subject and objectifies me (in shame). I am either the absolutely free and powerful perceiver of an animated object, or I am trapped without escape in my own objectness. But is it true that the other always subordinates me and destroys my freedom and possibilities? Is there no room for those nurturing and caring relationships that actually support and reinforce our freedom?¹¹

Jonathan Webber tries to defend Sartre and offers a possible solution to this problem. In Webber's view, Sartre did not think that all human relations are based on shame and structured in this way: they are only structured in this way within the project of bad faith. According to Webber, the discussion of bad faith precedes and frames Sartre's analysis of shame in *Being and*

8. Sartre, pt. 3, ch. 1.

9. See Guenther, L., "Shame and the Temporality of Social Life", *Continental Philosophy Review*, 44 (2011), 23–39; Zahavi, D. "Self, Consciousness, and Shame", Zahavi, D. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 304–323.

10. Guenther, p. 27.

11. Guenther, p. 27.

Nothingness, and this analysis should be read in that context¹². If we do that, Sartre's account of the encounter with the other becomes much less negative. For Sartre, bad faith is a cover-up against the anguish of freedom. Since we are projected towards the future, we can never be fixated by a momentary definition; our essence cannot be captured by a description of properties at one time. Rather, we are our possibilities: we are pure freedom. Any attempt to capture the totality of our being in a fixed definition negates our future possibilities, and therefore our freedom, our true nature. Bad faith consists in trying to identify with and pretending to be fully defined by one fixed definition, like the waiter in Sartre's famous example¹³, and thus negating one's own freedom. If I think of my being as dependent upon one particular identity, anything that challenges it, especially my freedom, must be anguishing: it would seem that if I'm not my definition, I lose myself. Equally, shame must be the product of my encounter with the other if I experience this encounter as making me lose myself in a different way: by fixating me in a definition that denies the identity I am attaching to¹⁴. The encounter with the other is shameful, according to Webber, when it goes against my project of bad faith, although it can also be pride inducing, if the other confirms my identity¹⁵. But is this the only possibility Sartre contemplates for human relations, that we crush each other's freedom? Webber thinks not. He interprets Sartre as claiming that this is a product of our culture: in our surroundings, others see us this way, as defined in a fixed manner by a label, they expect us to be thus defined and we internalize this expectation and aspire to fulfill it¹⁶. This is why the encounter with the other takes the shape of a conflict and is pervaded by shame. But Webber implies that it should be possible to have authentic relations to others in a different cultural configuration that does not teach everybody to internalize and live in bad faith and shame¹⁷.

One problem with this defense of Sartre is that Webber does not specify exactly what he is referring to by "culture". Is Sartre diagnosing, for example, the West in general or Paris in the 1940s? If one thinks about what anthropologists call "*shame cultures*", however, the cultural problem would seem to extend far beyond what Webber intended. My underlying suspicion here is that the cultural explanation cannot do the job that Webber wants it to do, because bad faith, as

12. Webber, p. 191.

13. Sartre, pp. 59–60.

14. Webber, pp. 185, 191.

15. Sartre, p. 290.

16. Webber, pp. 186–87.

17. Webber, pp. 191–92.

Sartre describes it, as a shield against freedom and its perils, goes much deeper than a mere project, a project one can choose to undertake or give up¹⁸, because the interdependence of subjects and the burden of responsibility towards others are not mere cultural contingencies. Secondly, it is dubious that relating to others through labels or identifying with them to some extent is constitutive of bad faith in all situations. There are different types and spheres of encounters and relations with others, which call for different forms of recognition. We can at least distinguish among a public sphere, a private sphere, and an intimate sphere; and relating to others (or to oneself) through labels or stereotypes is not equally (in)appropriate or shame-inducing in all of them. As I will explain later, labeling would be a problem in the intimate and private spheres, but not in the public one. Bad faith is better understood not as the problem of a culture in general, but as a problem of mixing up spheres of recognition. And finally, a further worry about Webber's proposal is that it attempts to rescue Sartre's account of intersubjectivity at the expense of his account of shame. Webber construes shame exclusively as a product of bad faith, in a way that is not entirely justified by Sartre's writings or by the phenomena¹⁹. In my view, this construal is too narrow and insufficient to account for the complexity of shame, and it obscures the ways in which it can contribute to ethics. All this will become clear in my analysis of *King Lear*: at first sight, Cavell's reading can illustrate to a certain extent Webber's idea that the stalled dialectics of our relations to others in some instances of shame is a product of bad faith, but this approach will quickly reveal itself as insufficient. The intersubjective structure of shame cannot be described exclusively in these terms. Indeed, I will show that in many cases the explanatory relation between shame and bad faith is reversed: bad faith is a product of shame, a reaction against it, and not the other way around. Shame emphasizes relationality and the reciprocal responsibilities it entails in all its burdensome and dangerous aspects, and thus it can give rise to avoidance strategies such as bad faith.

II

Let me now turn to *King Lear*. The central question is why does the tragedy happen. Why does Lear do what he does in the abdication scene? If he wants to split his kingdom among his three daughters, the most sensible method for that political decision hardly seems to be demanding from them

18. Thanks to Arne Grøn for pressing this point.

19. See Sartre, p. 290.

public declarations of love and letting the assignation of land hang on the question "Which of you shall we say doth love us most?"²⁰. Cavell argues convincingly that Lear acts out of shame²¹, and this is one of the situations that, on a first approach, Webber's proposal seems to be able to account for: it is possible to argue that the tragedy of Lear comes about because Lear is in bad faith. He has lived for many years as the king, fully identifying with that identity. But public identities carry public responsibilities with them, and at the beginning of the tragedy we encounter a king that has become too old and weak to be able to fulfill his role successfully. His vassals see this incapacity, so his identity can no longer be sustained by the gaze of others: self-concept and being-for-others no longer coincide, so his pride starts to turn into shame. But if he stops being the king, then what is he? Lear is unable to deal with this situation: he attempts to give up the heavy public responsibilities that attach to the role while retaining the title and still being treated as king. But how can he achieve this? Which gaze is going to sustain him as king when he can no longer do the job? Perhaps the gaze of those in power, he thinks— and those in power will be his daughters. So he then tries to make the intimate recognition of love fulfill the same role as the public political recognition of a sovereign by his subjects. This, however, is an impossible and absurd endeavor. And when it does not work, he descends into a hell of shame and anguish from which he cannot emerge again.

According to Cavell²², the tragic mistake that several characters make and repeat, and that hunts them down with its consequences²³, is the refusal of recognition and the avoidance of love out of shame. Lear, the central character, and his vassal, the Earl of Gloucester are parallel figures: two old men who fail to recognize loyalty and love and banish and disinherit their "good" children, in favor of their "evil" ones. The central plot is of course the story of Lear, with the Gloucester subplot providing a powerful doubling that comments and expands on it. In the Lear plot, the characters are more extreme and pure, and their motives are less clear: Shakespeare gives no explicit reason for Lear's behavior in the abdication scene, nor for the unmixed hypocrisy and cruelty of his older daughters, Goneril and Regan; and there isn't a single trace of doubt or ambiguity in the youngest daughter Cordelia's pure, enduring, endlessly forgiving love. In the Gloucester plot, all characters are slightly more nuanced and ambiguous (more ordinary,

20. I, i, 49.

21. Cavell, pp. 285–89.

22. Cavell, pp. 273–87.

23. Cavell, p. 309.

perhaps more human in this sense): Gloucester is ashamed of having fathered an illegitimate son, which complicates his relations to his two children; Edmund is given a motive to hate his father and brother; Edgar's love and loyalty towards his father are not perfectly pure.

What does Cavell mean when he says that Lear's tragic mistake is succumbing to shame and avoiding love? How is this claim justified? His reasoning relies on the doubling of plots. To begin with, Cavell²⁴ focuses on two crucially climactic moments in the play, which are two moments of recognition. The first is Gloucester's realization of the mistake he made with Edgar, a realization that comes to him through torture, when Regan and her husband pluck out Gloucester's eyes and let him know it was Edmund who unleashed their revenge. Only then does Gloucester see which one of his two sons was really a traitor. The second moment is Lear's recognition of Cordelia, when he temporarily comes out of his madness. These moments mark a realization and a recognition that had been absent before. Recognition is climatic and extraordinary because it is the exception. The wrong of both fathers consists in not recognizing their children.

The question here is: why did the old men not recognize their children before? In order to understand this, it is important to note that the structure of recognition is not one-sided. According to Cavell²⁵, fully acknowledging the other implies self-recognition: it implies putting oneself in the other's presence, allowing oneself to be recognized. In the verses Cavell quotes, both fathers mention themselves first, and then their children:

GLoucester: ... Oh my follies! Then Edgar was abused.
Kind Gods, forgive me that, and prosper him!²⁶

LEAR: ... Do not laugh at me;
For, as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia²⁷.

For both men, self-recognition comes first. They place themselves in the presence of the other; they present themselves, and *then* recognize the other. This is the only way in which it can happen: one cannot recognize the other while hiding from her; there is no such thing as secret or hidden recognition. And this is Cavell's crucial point. The problem for both Gloucester and Lear

24. Cavell, pp. 273–74.

25. Cavell, p. 275.

26. III, *vii*, 90–91.

27. IV, *vii*, 68–70.

was precisely this: that they could not put themselves in the presence of the other, they could not allow themselves to be recognized, and therefore they were unable to recognize their children. According to Cavell, then, "Lear's dominating motivation to this point, from the time things go wrong in the opening scene, is *to avoid being recognized*".²⁸ This is what triggers and fuels the tragedy.

But why does he not want to be recognized? Why should recognition be disagreeable or frightening? Recognition is more often than not discussed as something we aspire to, something we want from others, something we fight for even to death, according to Hegel.²⁹ Some claim, precisely, that love entails or even just is mutual recognition. The answer to this is that recognition is dangerous when one is afraid of what others might see, of what might be revealed to them; when one is ashamed, or afraid of shame:

... if the failure to recognize others is a failure to let others recognize you, a fear of what is revealed to them, an avoidance of their eyes, then it is exactly shame which is the cause of his withholding recognition. ... For shame is the specific discomfort produced by the sense of being looked at, the avoidance of the sight of others is the reflex it produces³⁰.

Gloucester (Lear's double) says it at the very beginning while talking to Kent about Edmund: he is ashamed of having fathered a bastard son. Edmund is his shame, and this is a shame that pervades his relations not just to Edmund, but to Edgar too, because it taints his image as a father. But what about Lear? Where does his shame come from? What shameful thing is there to be revealed? There is the shame of old age and senility, as I said above, but deeper than this, the shame of being a mortal man. Lear is not simply ashamed of being old. The Shakespearean text does not restrict itself to the problems of old age, but speaks about the general wretchedness and fragility of the human condition as such, which becomes especially evident when our degree of dependence on others is exacerbated by various circumstances, including old age, disability and poverty. Indeed, according to Lévinas³¹ account of shame in *On Escape*, this emotion reveals the totality of our

28. Cavell, p. 274.

29. Hegel, G. W. F., *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. by J. N. Findlay, trans. by A. V. Miller, New ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1976, chap. 4.

30. Cavell, pp. 277-78.

31. Lévinas, E., *On Escape*, trans. by B. Bergo, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 2003.

being as insufficient, the constitutive and inescapable vulnerability of human existence. For Lévinas, this insufficiency does not amount to a need that can be satisfied, a gap that can be filled in: no amount of desire satisfaction can do away with it. Need is fundamental and structural, it reveals our being as indigent, limited and essentially insufficient. And the particular kind of insufficiency that shame reveals is the insufficiency of dependence: we have a vital need of others but we are afraid of the damage that they can inflict on us with their rejection.

One moment when this theme surfaces particularly forcefully in the tragedy is when Lear encounters the blind Gloucester and recognizes him. Given the centrality of recognition in the play, it is no small matter that the first person Lear recognizes, and therefore the first person he allows himself to be recognized by, is Gloucester, whose eyes have just been plucked out. Indeed, in this encounter, Lear cruelly teases him about his eyes, “as if to make sure they are really gone”³², and only then comes the recognition: “If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes. / I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester”³³. This is a moment of special intensity, because at that point their fates have become so similar that for Cavell they are no longer parallel, they are the same. So that what we have here is a moment of self-recognition:

Lear ... is for the first time confronting himself. ... what comes to the surface in this meeting is not a related story, but Lear's submerged mind. ... In this fusion of plots and identities, we have the great image, the double or mirror image, of everyman who has gone to every length to avoid himself caught at the moment of coming upon himself face to face³⁴.

At this point Gloucester has acknowledged what he did to Edgar and accepts his horrible fate as punishment for that. He is perfectly lucid. But Lear is mad, he will be mad until the end, and before the great realization that only comes once Cordelia is dead (“I might have saved her”)³⁵, he never comes closer to confronting the consequences of his actions. Everything he says around Gloucester in this scene of self-confrontation makes it clear that Lear, stripped of crown and royal cloak, feels worthless of anybody's love, as is obvious when he rejects Gloucester's offer of affection and respect:

32. Cavell, p. 280.

33. IV, *vi*, 165-66.

34. Cavell, p. 280.

35. V, *iii*, 319.

GLOUCESTER: O, let me kiss that hand!

KING LEAR: Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality³⁶.

Lear the mortal man (anybody stripped down to bare humanity) is too wretched to deserve love.³⁷ So much so that love seems like an unattainable ideal, or worse, a deception: an elevated name for a sordid reality. During this scene, Lear declares all forms of love and loyalty to be base, hollow and worthless, particularly the love of children for parents, the love that produces children, and the loyalty of servants and vassals. It is not difficult to read this in the framework that Webber sets, as a confirmation that “*the king*” was all the while afraid of being seen as “*a wretched old man*” and rejected. However, there is a deeper issue. Up to this point, my formulations suggest that the problem is one of labeling mismatch: under the label “king”, Lear feels lovable. Under the label “*old man*”, he feels wretched and undeserving. This fear and this danger are present, as I will argue below. But on their own they would imply a misunderstanding of love, of what Cordelia is offering. In Cavell’s³⁸ view, the deeper problem is that Lear is afraid of love itself and unable to return it (unlike Gloucester, who at this point has found the courage to love and trust, to expose himself naked).

III

To understand this, something more should be said about love and recognition. Does one entail the other? In Cavell’s text, at least two senses of recognition are at play: recognition in the Hegelian sense of *Anerkennung* and recognition in the Aristotelian sense of *anagnorisis*. Recognition as *Anerkennung* refers to an intersubjective encounter where one subject acknowledges the other as such—a step which, according to Hegel³⁹, is necessary for one to become a subject in the full sense of the word, and which necessarily has to be reciprocal: only because I recognize the other as free can she confirm my own freedom in her recognition. On the other hand, recognition as *anagnorisis* is a concept that comes from Aristotle’s *Poetics*⁴⁰, and it refers to the specific moment in a tragedy when a

36. IV, *vi*, 125-26.

37. See Cavell, p. 289.

38. Cavell, pp. 288-94.

39. Hegel, chap. 4.

40. Aristotle, *Poetics*, ed. by Anthony Kenny, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, 1454b19.

character discovers her own true identity, such as when Oedipus realizes that *he* was the criminal that he had been looking for, that the man he had killed was his father and the woman he had married was his mother. The moment of *anagnorisis* is crucial in tragedy: it is what tragedy moves towards, and it always comes too late (often, like for Oedipus, at the beginning it is already too late). Cavell here intertwines both senses, and makes them appear as two sides of the same coin, where no recognition of the other is possible without self-recognition, and in recognizing the other, one comes to acknowledge one's own self. In this way, the intersubjective recognition that is necessary for an ethical relation becomes inseparably intertwined with self-acquaintance.

Now, as Antonio Gómez Ramos⁴¹ reminds us, there is here the further, crucial, question of what is recognized in recognition of the other. Do we recognize her identity as a defining property or collection of properties? Or do we recognize her as this free singular subject? In a very simplified manner, being free, for Hegel, means "not to be bound to life", to the life cycle of desire, consumption and destruction, but instead to be autonomous, "to have one's own criteria and to have authority over them"⁴². Public identities and roles are ways of not being bound to life, of subordinating one's desires and their satisfaction to norms, but they don't singularize us. Thus, one can be recognized abstractly, in terms of a property or set of properties, which often can be seen as one's own achievement, something one can be proud of: "I am the king", "I am a good citizen", "I am a good professional". A part of what we are is captured by those labels, but precisely because they are abstract, they do not capture our singularity, what makes each individual irreplaceable. According to Gómez Ramos, the minimal degree of recognition happens at this abstract level and consists in being recognized as a (any) human being, while "the maximal is to be recognized as oneself, as the event of a subjective achievement that one is. Not that one simply belongs to a universal genus, but that one is, as Hegel puts it, a genus in itself. Someone singular –Einzeln"⁴³.

In the public sphere, recognition is of the abstract kind, and it has to do with the ascription of a set of rights and responsibilities attached to the role(s) one assumes: the king, the parent, the citizen. The crucial thing here is the role and the public rights and responsibilities that attach to it, not the singularity of the person that is fulfilling them. In stark contrast, in intimacy and love one is recognized in one's singularity. What is at stake there are

41. Gómez Ramos, A., "What Does It Mean, Not to Be Bound to Life? Hegel on Subjectivity and Recognition", *Hegel-Studien*, forthcoming.

42. Gómez Ramos, sec. 3.

43. Gómez Ramos, sec. 4.

not the abstract duties, responsibilities and claims that generally hold for fathers and daughters, for example, but the unique loving relation between two singular subjects in all its specificity. As I suggested above in passing, Lear's problem is that he mixes up these two spheres. One of the ways of mixing them up to avoid responsibilities would be what Sartre calls bad faith. Lear masters the dynamics of the political realm, where he used to have the means of securing recognition as the king, but he does not know how to deal with the intimate realm of love. He does not understand how one is supposed to secure recognition of any kind when one does not have land, power, pomp or crown; and he is terrified. He is no longer strong enough to be recognized as king by his subjects, and in order to maintain the identity he has adopted, he tries to sneak in the intimate recognition of love to do the job. His daughters' public declarations of love are supposed to allow him to still be treated as king, with none of the encumbrances of the role. But love cannot do the political job: mixing these two spheres in this way corrupts them both.⁴⁴ Cordelia knows it, and refuses to let her love be corrupted.

How should we understand love in this framework? One difficulty here is that, despite the centrality of the concept in his essay, Cavell never spells out what he means by love—he simply takes it for granted. But the concept is far from obvious, and the phenomenon is immensely complex. Love comes in many varieties and it has been the subject of countless philosophical explorations since Plato's *Symposium*⁴⁵ at the very least, including recently some eliminativist and reductionist attempts⁴⁶. This is no place to attempt an account of love, but the relevant question here is: what role does recognition play in love?⁴⁷ Does love require mutual recognition? Harry Frankfurt, for instance, thinks that love is a structure of the will, "an involuntary, nonutilitarian, rigidly focused, and—as in any mode of caring—self-affirming concern for the existence and the good of what is loved"⁴⁸, and in that sense it is fully private, self-defining and entirely independent of reciprocity. To love someone or something is to act wholeheartedly (i.e. in accordance to

44. Cavell, pp. 295–96.

45. Plato, *Plato's Symposium: A Translation by Seth Benardete with Commentaries by Allan Bloom and Seth Benardete*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001.

46. See Goldie, P., "Love for a Reason", *Emotion Review*, 2 (2010), 61–67 for an overview and refutation.

47. Another vastly complex issue that I cannot tackle here is distinguishing among the many varieties of love. I here focus on interpersonal love, not on love for inanimate objects.

48. Frankfurt, H. G., *Taking Ourselves Seriously & Getting It Right*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2006, p. 40.

my will) to foster what I take to be the good of my beloved. But Frankfurt has been criticized for this self-centered account. Isn't openness to the other a necessary element of love, at least of love between people? On many other accounts, mutual recognition, the perfect mutual recognition of two subjects, is indispensable for love. But this seems too demanding: would we want to say that unreturned love is not love at all?

It is not entirely clear where Cavell stands, but it is also obvious that the notion of recognition is crucial for him, at least in its dimension of openness to the other. He seems to allow for the possibility that love remains through failures of recognition, so the presence of a form of concern similar to what Frankfurt describes would be enough to speak of love of an imperfect kind at least. However, his interpretation of the ending of *King Lear* and of Cordelia's death strongly suggests that, according to him, love in the full sense of the word, what I will call "perfect" love, necessarily entails placing oneself in the presence of the other, allowing oneself to be recognized in an intimate sphere, as the naked singular individual that one is. This is not so easy, though, and as we will see, his analysis of Edgar's relationship to his father, Gloucester, allows for the possibility that some degree of loving or love-like concern, perhaps even a high one, remains through attempts to hide more or less partially from the other: ambivalence and imperfection do not entirely preclude love. But truly loving implies openness to the other, placing oneself naked and defenseless in her presence.

The obstacle to perfect love, of course, is that it entails dangers and so it requires great courage. Our fragility, our constitutive insufficiency, makes us simultaneously dependent on and afraid of others: we need them to be who we are, so we want them. But we do not control them, they are free, which means they could deny us, and that would destroy us, so we fear them too. On the one hand, then, love is dangerous because it places us at the mercy of specific others. On the other hand, the wretchedness of the other is no less terrifying. We are scared to see it and feel its interpellation: love places on us a claim that demands a response, a responsibility. Love places others at our mercy, and that can be overwhelming. Love therefore requires courage and trust to see the claim and respond by opening our arms instead of running away. On the one hand, Lear cringes before the possibility of being denied as the king he has always been, of being fixated as "the fragile old man" and rejected, or treated as less than a free subject, an individual with no authority over himself and whose decisions need to be made for him, a senile, dependent old man. According to Cavell,⁴⁹ the other "*good child*"

49. Cavell, pp. 283–85.

in this tale, Edgar, inflicts this treatment on his father, which would illustrate part of the perils of love and justifies that Lear might be afraid of it. On the other hand, Lear is unable to return love, unable to assume his freedom and the responsibility it entails. It is quite obvious that Cordelia is not offering patronizing concern, she is offering the real thing, and Lear knows it⁵⁰. His problem is that he is afraid of responding to the claim of love, of recognizing her as an adult woman, a free singular subject, and no longer just seeing her as the beautiful little princess-doll that ornaments her father's court.

IV

Let me explain how Edgar illustrates some of the perils of love⁵¹. Edgar, who disguised himself as a beggar in order to stay around after his father disinherited and banished him, encounters the tortured, blind Gloucester, acts as his guide, and averts his attempt at suicide. All the while, Edgar makes aside remarks about how his heart breaks at seeing Gloucester suffer in his miserable state. But he knows from the beginning that the old man's greatest sorrow does not come from his wounds or his state of poverty, but from being unable to place himself before Edgar and acknowledge his mistake to him. Gloucester longs to encounter his older son and ask for his forgiveness, and he says so before a disguised Edgar:

... Ah dear son Edgar,
The food of thy abused father's wrath!
Might I but live to see thee in my touch,
I'd say I had eyes again!⁵².

Gloucester is saying that his misery, his very blindness, would be gone if he could reunite himself with the son he wronged. And yet, Edgar keeps Gloucester in the dark and does not reveal himself to his father until much later, at the very end, when the old man is dying and Edgar is about to rejoin the army, dressed and armed again, fully equipped to reclaim his inheritance from the hands of his traitor brother. Why does he wait and prolong his father's suffering? According to Cavell, this delay is a cruel avoidance of recognition:

50. Cavell, p. 290.

51. See Cavell, pp. 283–85.

52. IV, *i*, 24–27.

He cannot bear the fact that his father is incapable, impotent, maimed. He wants his father still to be a father, powerful, so that he can remain a child. For otherwise they are simply two human beings in need of one another, and it is not usual for parents and children to manage that transformation, becoming for one another nothing more, but nothing less, than unaccommodated men⁵³.

In my view, if this is correct, Edgar is also trapped in bad faith and shame: when his circumstances do not allow him to sustain the identity he aspires to, he hides from others and avoids them, even if it means hurting the father he (imperfectly) loves, refusing to fully honor the responsibilities and claims of love. So Gloucester would by now have learned to love, to expose himself naked, and Edgar would be fixating him in a role, attributing him a label, an undesirable one, one that Edgar cannot live with.

But is this Cavellian reading not too uncharitable to Edgar? After all, he hesitates and is about to reveal himself several times: his concealment is not an easy one, he also longs for love. One could interpret that it is not out of cruelty or the fear of his own shame that Edgar does this: it is out of his sense of shame, out of delicacy towards his father, to protect Gloucester from the shame of being seen as a poor blind beggar, or from the even greater shame of unequivocally seeing that he has reduced his loyal son to a miserable state. Edgar, one could argue, doesn't want to add these further shames to his father's other sources of suffering, so he doesn't reveal himself until he is able to cut a figure that his father can be proud of. In the meantime, he hides because he loves him⁵⁴. This is true: Edgar loves his father. But human love is not always perfect. There *is* something patronizing in his attitude (Edgar decides unilaterally what is good for both him and Gloucester), and the structure would still be one of bad faith: of labeling and being labeled and identifying with those labels as if they were one's true nature. It assumes that Gloucester cannot sustain his own freedom or that of his son, that he needs more to rejoice in loving Edgar than recognizing his naked singularity. So in both interpretations of Edgar's motivations, his love is imperfect and ambivalent, he lacks the courage and trust that perfect love requires; neither of them, father or son, fully receives the love they need, and both are hurt. Trust was betrayed at the outset as a result of both believing Edmund's lies about each other, and Edgar cannot bring himself to restore it completely. The risk of exposing oneself to recognition is great, and this is why "there are no lengths to which we may not go in order to avoid being revealed,

53. Cavell, pp. 284–85.

54. Thanks to Annemarie van Stee for pointing this out.

even to those we love and are loved by. Or rather, especially to those we love and are loved by: to other people it is easy not to be known"⁵⁵. When one is in bad faith, it is unbearable to be stripped of one's cloak, of one's role, to place oneself naked in the presence of the other. A concern, even a profound concern, for the good of the beloved remains, but this good is interpreted in the lover's own terms, with no need for communication with the beloved, and the intimate face-to-face relationship becomes fraught with misunderstandings. But is bad faith the only possibility?

After all, Edgar has reasons of his own to feel ashamed and guilty too: he was gullible as well, he let himself be fooled by Edmund, and instead of trusting his father's love, he fled without confronting him⁵⁶. He has his own reasons to hide. In sharp contrast, Cordelia never did this: she always offered unambiguous, perfect love. She confronted her father and spoke her undisguised mind. Indeed, it could be argued that "to love is all she knows how to do"⁵⁷, and therefore, unlike her sisters, she is completely inept for politics, for the public sphere of abstract recognition and power. In the Cavellian reading of the abdication scene⁵⁸, Lear is not deceived by Goneril and Regan. He knows material things are by no means the response that love demands. But love is not what he asks of his daughters, because perfect love and intimate recognition are too dangerous, and he lacks the courage that they require. What he asks is for an assurance that they will keep behaving as if he was wearing the crown and being the powerful father, even though he can no longer be those things. His kingdom is an adequate payment for a public pretense, but not for love: not for Cordelia's love. And in the end, her death shows that the risk of loving is very real: one risks one's life and, if the beloved doesn't sustain it, one pays with it⁵⁹. Because of the structure of what I have called perfect love, which entails openness to the other and mutual recognition, and because of its fragility, "families, any objects of one's love and commitment, ought to be the places where shame is overcome (hence happy families are all alike); but they are also the places of its deepest manufacture"⁶⁰. Indeed, Cordelia's purity supports the idea that bad faith goes much deeper than a project that can be given up. It might be unavoidable for us who have to negotiate relations to others in

55. Cavell, p. 284.

56. Cavell, p. 284.

57. Cavell, p. 292.

58. Cavell, pp. 290–93.

59. Cavell, pp. 297–301.

60. Cavell, p. 286.

different spheres. Human relations are rarely carried out exclusively in one of them; or rather, public ones can be exclusively public, but most intimate relationships have public dimensions and public repercussions, so mix-ups are always a danger. Cordelia's purity is so powerful because it is much more than a fairy-tale idealization: it is an exceptional mirror in which to look at the limits of the human condition and of human love, while still remaining a human possibility (cases of sacrifice are not the norm, but they happen often enough)⁶¹. Indeed, Gloucester, the other father in this story, also succumbs to the inability of his loyal son to sustain his love after doubt has been cast over their mutual trust. Cordelia is exceptional (and exemplary) in her capacity to keep loving unconditionally after her father outrageously betrays her trust.

As for shame, Webber's proposal, although it works well sometimes, is too narrow to account for it more generally. As I have explained, some elements of the abdication scene make it a good example of shame as a product of bad faith, of a labeling mismatch, of having a label imposed on me that goes against my project of bad faith. But there are cases of shame where the explanatory relation is reversed: shame comes first, and bad faith appears as its product. We can see this now by going deeper into Lear's relation to Cordelia. If the love she offers is perfect in the sense I have defended, her love implies the recognition of Lear's singularity and freedom; if she is offering to love him just as he is, without a further reason (without any royal cloak, or power, or pomp), it is not fixation and objectification that she is offering, but the opposite: confirmation of him as a free subject. She is offering a nurturing and supportive relationship of the kind Guenther finds missing from *Being and Nothingness*⁶². What Sartre and Webber forget is the Hegelian twist: I *also* need the other to be free, or rather, I need the other for my freedom to be meaningful and real. The gaze of the other can do *two* things: it can objectify me, label me and deny my singularity, or it can give meaning to my possibilities and confirm me in my freedom. Cordelia's is not an objectifying gaze, but its opposite: it is a recognition of Lear's freedom. Despite this, Lear still feels shame before it most of the time, so this means that there are forms of shame that do not fixate us in a particular role; they rather arise from an unmasking.

Now, why should the recognition of my freedom be shameful? The answer I gave above is that freedom can be a heavy burden: it entails the need to take responsibility for our actions and ourselves, assume our responsibility towards the other. There is no recognition given without the reciprocal claim: "respect

61. Again, I am grateful to Arne Grøn for pressing this point.

62. Guenther, p. 27.

me, recognize me". In Cordelia's case also "love me as the singular human being that I am". This is the claim that Lear cannot respond to (he wants her to be his little doll), an inability that causes him shame, and that he covers up in bad faith as a way of shunning responsibility. Shame would then turn out not to be exclusively a function of the other objectifying me, but more generally a function of the other having a certain power to shape who I am independently of my own control. The other can place herself before me confirming my freedom, and I may want to run away from it in anguish and shame. In this case, the direction of effect is reversed: shame is not a product of bad faith, but instead it gives rise to bad faith as a way of hiding away from the claims that the other places on me. Webber does not take this possibility into account.

Moreover, Cordelia herself has been described as being deeply ashamed in the abdication scene⁶³, mainly as a result of her father corrupting her love. That would be the shame of someone who is *not* in bad faith, someone who, on the intimate level, can allow herself to be recognized and can sustain her father's love, and who sees herself fixated as (and reduced to) someone who would be ready to corrupt that love in exchange for land and power, as if she loved him because of the material things he can give her. As if love was ever a function of those things. Shame, then, can be a product of the other fixating me also when I'm not trying to cover up in bad faith, a product of the other not sustaining my freedom and fixating me in possibilities that are precluded by my love of him. The relations between shame and bad faith are therefore much more complex and multidirectional than Webber seems to allow for.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, what all the above instances of shame seem to have in common is the apprehension that a whole dimension of my being escapes me. In this sense, the abstract objectification of bad faith and labeling is one possibility. But abstract objectification in terms of a "view from nowhere" is not the same as being the object of someone else's experience. This is the crucial, Sartrean, point: in the picture I have just presented, the other, the gaze of the other, understood as Sartre does, is always implied in the experience of shame. It is a second-person objectification. What is crucial to shame, rather

63. See Taylor, G., *Pride, Shame, and Guilt: Emotions of Self-Assessment*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1985, pp. 62–63; and Welz, C., "Scenes of Shame, Social Roles, and the Play with Masks", *Continental Philosophy Review*, 47 (2014), 107–21 (pp. 109–12) for a helpful commentary.

than being assessed in a specific manner or labeled in a specific way, is just the lack of control, the lack of the capacity to determine a dimension of my being, because it escapes me. So, in my view, the objectness we experience as constitutive of ourselves in shame does not amount exclusively to bad faith, i.e. to labeling, but to situatedness and embodiment, it amounts to experiencing “in intersubjective contexts the irreducibility of one’s own particular subjective situation in the world”, as León defends⁶⁴. Situatedness makes us liable to receiving labels and being fixated by descriptions, and it also makes the meaning and accomplishment of our freedom depend on the other’s recognition. Thus, Webber’s reading can apply to some instances of shame, but not all of them, and therefore it doesn’t give us all we need to move beyond the stalled dialectic that Sartre established as the only possibility for intersubjectivity. A more promising way is to fully embrace and articulate the idea that I need the other to be free, along the lines that I have suggested by discussing love and recognition.

Aside from the issue of accounting for the constructive side of intersubjectivity more generally, what my foregoing analyses show is that shame reveals us as relational beings that depend on each other to be who they are. Relationality can be empowering, but it can be damaging too, and this ambiguity is fully disclosed in shame. This is why a capacity for shame is a crucial element of our ethical sensibilities, because it enables a primitive understanding of what is at stake in our encounters with others. What is at stake is not just the relation, but my very singularity and the singularity of the other, which partially depend on mutual recognition. Shame is only possible for a being that is aware of having an outside dimension that escapes her and that depends on the other. It is only possible for a being that cares about what others perceive because her being is at stake in that. Shame is obviously not all we need for ethics, it is a selfish mode of caring about others, but it is a first step, one that places us in a territory where we can understand the vital importance of ethical considerations. A being who cannot feel shame, who cannot experience her very being to be at stake in encounters with others, is a being who cannot love perfectly, who has not taken the first step towards recognizing the other’s singularity. But as the tragedy of *Lear* shows, love doesn’t solve the problem of the ambiguity of relationality that shame poses; it complicates it by raising the stakes even higher. Love and shame are phenomena that bring home to us what is at stake, existentially and ethically, in our relations to other people. They give meaning and help us make sense of ethical considerations. However, as tragedies like *King Lear* show,

64. León, F., “Shame and Selfhood”, *Phänomenologische Forschungen* 2012, 2013, 1–19 (p. 211).

facing up to the challenges of interdependence and dealing with them in an ethically constructive way, such that one gets to act in the right way and achieve a good life, is quite another matter, a matter that requires much more than the ability to feel one particular emotion.

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