ESSAY

Shakespeare's Epistemology and the Problem of Truth

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HIGHLIGHTS

"A work of art creates its own reality." This notion—rooted in the ideas of the Greek philosopher Gorgias—is at the center of Shakespeare's knowledge formation, but Gorgias' ideas were simply unavailable to the Stratford man.

ABSTRACT

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines epistemology as "the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge." What, according to Shakespeare, was the origin of human knowledge? Various critics have attempted to understand Shakespeare's epistemology, but most have ignored the blatant evidence in the plays that Shakespeare was, in fact, somewhat obsessed with epistemology. Digging deeper, it would seem that his attitude to the subject was informed by his readings of obscure Greek and Roman philosophers, especially Gorgias. But given that the man from Stratford apparently could not read Greek (it was not taught in 16th-century provincial schools), how could he have been able to read these theoretical and scholarly works? In this essay, I argue that the first Greek sophist, Gorgias, whose work is often associated with the skepticism delivered to early modern England by Sextus Empiricus, was a huge influence on the true author. I show that during the Enlightenment, there was an intellectual war between early scientists who studied nature and the ancient faithful who studied God. Shakespeare neatly skirted this dilemma by focusing on the possibility that art might itself created its own reality — one that was not immutable 'truth' in the traditional sense but rather a very mutable fiction that must always necessarily be viewed with suspicion. In the modern world, with the advent of 'fake news' — and a new and unsettling relativity concerning facts — Shakespeare's bold experiment in epistemology becomes startlingly relevant.

KEYWORDS

Shakespeare, Shakespeare Authorship Question, Gorgias, Epistemology, Sophists.

INTRODUCTION

At the sunny end of Oscar Wilde's classic comedy, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Jack has satisfied Lady Bracknell's expectations for what is required of a young husband, and is finally given permission to marry Gwendolyn. But he panics. All along, Gwendolyn has stipulated that she cannot marry a man who is not named Earnest. And as Jack has recently discovered that his name is not Jack — and that he is named after his dead father — he frantically searches the army lists for his father's name. He soon discovers that all along, his name has been Ernest: "I always told you, Gwendolyn my name was Ernest, didn't I? Well, it is Ernest, after all. I mean it naturally is Ernest" (Wilde, 1899, p. 151).

Jack is not the only character in the play to find his dearest fantasies have become reality. When Algernon proposes to Cecily, she informs him that although he is

not aware of it, he has proposed to her already: "You silly boy! Of course. We have been engaged for the last three months" (Wilde, 1899, p. 87). When he inquires exactly when he proposed, she explains: "On the 14th of February last. Worn out by your entire ignorance of my existence, I determined to end the matter one way or the other, and after a long struggle with myself I accepted you under this dear old tree here" (Wilde, 1899, p. 88). So, although in reality we can touch, see, taste, hear, and smell, Cecily has never met Algernon — he has proposed to her in a fantasy which she believes to be true, mainly because she has chronicled it in her diary.

What strange epistemology is this, where fantasy becomes reality? But Wilde's whimsies have much in common with Shakespeare's epistemology.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines epistemology as "the philosophical study of the nature, origin, and limits of human knowledge."(Encyclopedia Brittanica, 2023) How do we come to know the world? How do we know what is true? How do we come to name that truth and classify it? First, it's important to look at Shakespeare's epistemology in the context of his time because early modern epistemology resembled medieval epistemology more than our own; it was built less on science than poetry. In order to understand how the Elizabethans came to know the world, it is necessary (but nearly impossible) to understand the two central subjects of the classical trivium — grammar and rhetoric.

Early modern 'grammar' was not merely — as it is today — the study of sentence structure, nouns, and pronouns. Grammarians conceived of the world as a book written by God which could only be interpreted by poets. Media guru Marshall McLuhan described it this way: "The whole of nature was a book which he [Adam] could read with ease. He lost his ability to read this language of nature as a result of the fall … the business of arts however, to recover the knowledge of that language which once man held by nature" (McLuhan, 2006, p. 16). McLuhan then goes on to quote 14th-century philosopher Salutati: "we must study poetry because scripture employs the modes of poetry. Since we can have no concept of God, we can have no words in which to speak to him or of him, we must therefore fashion a language based on his work. Only the most excellent mode will do, and this is poetry" (McLuhan, 2006, p. 158).

David Haley suggests that when early modern writers referred to reality, they were not necessarily speaking of what we know in modern scientific terms as reality today, but instead, the reality created by art. For instance, there are many references to nature in Shakespeare, but these do not necessarily mean 'nature' as we know it today. Haley (1993) says that when Hamlet references "to

hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature" (Shakespeare, 2012, p.137) — "The nature Hamlet means is not the physical realized world … investigated by modern science or naturalistic novelists. Rather 'nature' refers to what becomes apparent only in the mirror. Nature has no discernible feature (shape) until the dramatic mirror creates it" (Haley, 1993, p. 34).

Similarly, what early modern rhetoricians spoke of was not so much informed by what they observed about the world or its mechanisms, but instead, what was stored in the rhetorician's memory (which was an important element of rhetoric). To create their speeches, poems, and dissertations, poets and rhetoricians accessed items stored there. This technique was called 'inventio'. This all sounds very odd to us. In fact, McLuhan (2006) suggests that, as we live in a scientific world — devoted to microscopes and telescopes, experimentation, argumentation, and proof, it's nearly impossible to understand early modern education: "We inevitably are attempting to deal with the complex and sophisticated intellectual disciplines provided by the trivium in the terms of the naïve literary and linguistic culture of our own day." (McLuhan, 2006, p. 105)

When and how did the Western world come to value science over art as a perceptual tool? It was during Shakespeare's lifetime that the philosopher Petrus Ramus revolutionized epistemology by moving 'inventio' from rhetoric to dialectics (the third subject in the classical trivium). Dialectics went on to become what we now know as modern science. As Miller (1939) says, Ramus yanked 'inventio' into the real, perceived world: "Hence Ramus use of 'invention' in the 'etymological' sense, to mean 'coming upon' or 'laying open to view' not as creating or devising." (Miller, 1939?, p. 148) And Miller quotes Ramus: "Ideas are not what they are 'because I discern them; but they are existing, and therefore I discern them.' A concept is not floating in the brain 'a meer fantasme or fantastical thing'" (Miller, 1939, p. 148). With this new concept of invention, Ramus could plant the seeds for what is now known as the scientific method.

These pedagogical models from the early modern period set the scene for Shakespeare's epistemology. But we must go beyond them, if only because Shakespeare himself did. Unfortunately, although modern critics tackling Shakespeare's epistemology get very close to identifying his approach, they seem frightened to identify it. This is not only because Shakespeare's approach is very alien to the modern scientific method but because it points to lesser-known Greek and Roman philosophers whose work is considered radical even today. Our epistemological forbears — Plato and Aristotle — believed that reality is stable, identifiable, and unchangeable. Shakespeare did

not.

Stratfordian scholars assume that because it is likely that the grain merchant from Stratford named 'Shakspere' attended a 16th-century public school, he was also likely exposed to Greek and Roman classical writers like Livy, Plutarch, and Ovid. After all, even the poorest and most ill-educated schoolboys learned from copying Greek and Roman models. But the 'Man from Stratford' would not have had access to more obscure sources, especially those which were not translated into English and not taught in public school. So those critics who write about Shakespeare's epistemology — though they get dangerously close to understanding Shakespeare's work — stop before they can fully comprehend it, as such musings might lead them to imagine a much more educated bard — i.e., Edward de Vere. The Earl of Oxford, after all, was not only the recipient of an outstanding humanist education typical for noblemen of his time, but he had access to one of the most extensive libraries in England — owned by his guardian William Cecil, Lord Burleigh.

Thus critic Eric P. Levy (2000) comments on *Hamlet's* encounter with epistemology, concluding Hamlet is paralyzed by his discovery of ignorance: "The problem of knowing in *Hamlet* is complicated by the intrinsic limitations of the cognitive faculty" (Levy, 2000, p. 197) …" and "against this background of cognitive inquiry a more important epistemological development unfolds: a ripening awareness of that which cannot be known" (Levy, 2000, p. 205). Levy quotes Kierkegaard for whom "the epistemological task is….'to understand more and more that there is something which cannot be understood'" (Levy, 2000, p. 205). At this point — instead of looking for ideas from Greek and Roman philosophy that might shed light on Hamlet's situation— Levy labels Hamlet's restless thinking as the ubiquitous 'tragic flaw;' Hamlet is not 'stoic' enough to control his relentless thinking.

Similarly, Alexander Dunlop (2020) notes that the word 'know' appears more than 77 times in Hamlet. Hamlet's epistemological quest "is how we can know the real essence of people" (Dunlop, 2020, p. 206). But Hamlet's difficulties in perception appear immediately — when his father's Ghost tells Hamlet that he was murdered. However, as this testimony comes from a ghost — who can be heard only by Hamlet: "the appearance of the ghost compels acknowledgment, within the context of the play, of dimensions of life that transcend normal experiential observation" (Dunlop, 2020, p. 208). It seems as if Dunlop might stumble on Shakespeare's epistemology later when he observes, "Shakespeare valorizes the passion of faith over the calculation of reason … the principle is distinctly unmodern; epistemologically, in privileging moral intuition over empirical verification" (Dunlop, 2020, p. 230).

But-- probably because Shakespeare's lack of modernity is clearly in opposition to familiar Aristotelian models -- Dunlop leaves it there.

Another theatrical scholar, Eric C. Brown, starts out promisingly. He notes philosophical correspondences between Marlowe's Faust and Shakespeare's *Love's Labours Lost*, positing that in both plays, "scholastic learning becomes little more than a literary corpse" (Brown, 2003, p. 23). Taking a step beyond Dunlop and Levy, Brown suggests that Shakespeare harbored a prejudice against modern science. He mentions Berowne's satire of astronomy in *Love's Labours Lost*: "These earthly godfathers of heavenly lights,/ who give a name to every fixed star,/ Have no more profit from their shining nights / than those that walk and wot not what they are." (Shakespeare, 1996, p. 13). Brown also observes Berowne's "resistance to the most fundamental precedent, that of naming" (Brown 2002 2003?, pp. 24-25). Indeed, it seems that Berowne's criticism of astronomers is almost 'anti-epistemological.'

Brown then points to an 'anti-Aristotelian' line from *The Taming of the Shrew* "Let us be no stoics nor no stocks I pray / or so devote to Aristotle's cheques / As Ovid be an outcast quite abjured" (Shakespeare, 2010, p. 161). It is dangerous to quote Shakespeare's characters' opinions on any given subject, as other Shakespearean characters may contradict them. At any rate, Brown goes no further than mentioning the possibility of a Shakespearean resistance to Aristotle. And he ends with the somewhat ineffectual, paradoxical notion that Shakespeare wrote "a text that seems simultaneously to revere and revile it's past" (Brown, 2003, p. 37)

It's a shame that these critics can go no further, for a closer examination of Shakespeare's style points to his philosophical bent. Shakespeare is obsessed with synesthesia; he often uses it as a metaphor — even when it seems gratuitous to do so. Synesthesia is a neurological condition in which people find their senses are connected. For instance, a synaesthete might see colors when they hear musical notes. Shakespeare has a tendency to confuse sensory observation in the same manner, casting doubt on the reliability of perception. When Hamlet confronts his mother, he cast critiques her ability to perceive reality:

> What devil was't
> That thus hath cozen'd you at hoodman-blind?
> Eyes without feeling, feeling without sight,
> Ears without hands or eyes, smelling sans all,
> Or but a sickly part of one true sense
> Could not so mope." (Shakespeare, 2012, p. 175)

Shakespeare is quite fond of this metaphor. Bottom

famously — and comically — conflates the senses when he attempts to describe the experience of his dream: "The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was" (Shakespeare, 2010, p. 61). In *Love's Labours Lost*, Boyet says of the lovesick Navarre that his confession of love is spoken through his eyes: "I have only made a mouth of his eye / By adding a tongue which I know will not lie." (Shakespeare, 1996, p 59.).

All this suggests Shakespeare is quite willing — even eager — to question our sensory apparatus. Some of Shakespeare's characters even believe that love is a kind of 'sixth sense' that outperforms the others. In *Love's Labours Lost* Berowne (who is often thought to be a stand-in for the author himself) suggests that love is a better teacher than any of the senses — "A lover's eyes will gaze an eagle blind. / A lover's ear will hear the lowest sound.... Love's feeling is more soft and soft and sensible / Than are the tender horns of cockled snails." (Shakespeare, 1996, p. 131). This sentiment is echoed in Shakespeare's famous poem when Venus says of Adonis: "Say that the sense of feeling were bereft me, / And that I could not see, nor hear, nor touch, / And nothing but the very smell were left me, / Yet would my love to thee be still as much;"(Shakespeare, 2002 p. 199) Why this studied disregard for traditional perception?

Shakespeare is more interested in the 'ineffable' than the 'observable.' This is confirmed by his evident admiration for the early modern philosopher Cardeno. Scholars have long noted the correspondences between Bedington's translation of Cardeno's *De consolatione* (called in English *Cardanus Comforte*) and Hamlet's 'to be or not to be.' Significantly, the young Edward de Vere wrote an introduction to *Cardanus Comforte* at age 23. Though Cardeno was a skilled mathematician whose theories are still relevant today, he also was, as Giglioni (2010) says — "a sort of late medieval ghost hunter, who apparently spent a large part of his life investigating the life and mores of demons and other aerial creatures using all the scientific means at his disposal (optics, astrology, medicine)" (Giglioni, 2010, p. 471).

The original of Cardano's *De subtilitate* was likely available to Edward de Vere but certainly not likely available to Will Shakespere in provincial Stratford. In his introduction to the English translation of *De subtilitate*, J. M. Forrester says, "The bulk of the work can be seen as a miscellany of phenomena which Cardano sees as exposing the inability of Aristotle's neat system to account for all things" (Forrester, 2013, xiv). Forrester (2013) quotes Cardano's definition of *subtilitatas*: "the feature (*ratio quaedam*) by which things that can be sensed are grasped

with difficulty by the senses, and things that can be understood are grasped with difficulty by the intellect" (Forrester, 2013, p. xv). It was not so much that Shakespeare believed that truth and knowledge were a matter of faith as that he was deeply interested in those truths which are more elusive, i.e., that evade both careful observation and the rigors of 'factual' investigation. In other words, to quote Hamlet: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy." (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 67).

If Shakespeare did not trust his senses, or learned books, or Aristotelian epistemology, how did he pursue truth? Was he even interested in it? The answer lies in the work of the Greek rhetorician Gorgias. There are two reasons to connect Shakespeare and Gorgias. One is the astounding similarity between their literary styles. But there are also uncanny resemblances between Shakespeare's work and the work of John Lyly — who was a disciple of Gorgias (Lyly and Shakespeare also share similar thematic concerns). To further cement the connection between Gorgias, Lyly, and Shakespeare, there is a historical link between Shakespeare and Lyly. That link is Edward de Vere: John Lyly was Edward de Vere's secretary.

But even if this were not true, the work of these two poets is similar enough to conclude they worked in tandem. As I argued in an earlier essay, "Was Shakespeare a Euphuist?" both writers are singularly and extravagantly obsessed with paradox, both are very conscious not only of the meaning of words but of the sound of them, and both are terribly sensitive to subtle poetic resonances that are less obvious than rhyme (slant rhyme, alliteration, and balanced sentences). Barish thinks that Lyly's work was — for whatever reason — a literary experiment in a style that Shakespeare was later to perfect: "a style that needed only the further flexibility and modulation brought to it by Shakespeare to become an ideal dramatic prose" (Barish, 1956, p. 35).

It's true that critics have long been reluctant to associate Shakespeare and Lyly. Lyly's 'euphuistic' style has been associated with 'effeminacy' and dismissed as superficial. Andy Kesson's recent book (2014) on Lyly suggests "in the 18th century Lyly is repeatedly described as an infection or disease for which Shakespeare was the cure" (Kesson, 2014, p. 5) because if Lyly's work can be dismissed as effeminate, then Shakespeare's might be too. Thus: "the denigration of Lyly's work in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been an important part of the formation of the Elizabethan canon" (Kesson, 2014, p. 205). But recently, scholars have begun to take note of the similarities between Shakespeare and Lyly.

Assuming the connection between Shakespeare and Lyly, what is the link between Lyly and Gorgias? C.

S. Lewis (1959) said of Lyly: "So far as the elements are concerned, we are indeed embarrassed with too many ancestors rather than too few: those who inquire most learnedly find themselves driven back and back till they reach Gorgias" (Lewis, 1959, pp. 312-313). Furthermore, Feuillerat (in his book on Lyly) speaks of the early modern influence of Gorgias on Renaissance writers:

> Among the writers I have mentioned, there is one who, from the first, in England, enjoyed an unusual vogue: Isocrates. The works of the Athenian rhetorician were imposed by royal decree as subjects of study in the Universities… One could then with sufficient accuracy, assign Isocrates the honor of having taught the usage of the so-called figures of Gorgias. (Feuillerat, 1968, pp. 462-63)

So, who was Gorgias? Gorgias was one of the first and the most famous sophists — known mainly today by classical scholars for being reviled by Plato in the Socratic dialogue that bears his name. Aristotle, too, detested Gorgias, dismissing him — in the manner of Plato — as a dangerous liar and flatterer. There is good reason for their resentment as Gorgias was singularly dedicated to ridiculing the philosophers which not only preceded but anticipated the theories of Plato and Aristotle — they were called the 'Eleatics': Parmenides, Zeno, and Melissus.

Broadly speaking, Greek philosophy — though divided into many schools, primarily featured two opposing conceptions of reality. The Eleatics saw reality as fixed and immutable, whereas the various philosophies inspired by Heraclitus saw reality as unstable and unknowable. Stern reminds us Heraclitus famously said, "you can't step twice into the same river" (Stern, 1991, p. 579), emphasizing that everything in life changes so persistently that it is impossible to speak of what reality is at any given moment. Plato and Aristotle (though they approach reality in somewhat different ways) both believed that there is 'a truth' somewhere. Aristotle believed that reality was what was observed by the senses, while Plato believed the reality we perceive is only a glimpse of the true one. But for both philosophers, there was nevertheless a 'there' there. The philosophy of Skepticism (and its many attendant philosophies (including Sophism, Epicureanism, and Atomism), on the other hand, held that since the reality was not identifiable or easily understood, we must content ourselves with the notion that what we know as reality is merely an appearance — and then set about enjoying it.

Gorgias' work was translated into Latin by the skeptical Roman philosopher Sextus Empiricus. Schiappa (1997) quotes Sextus Empiricus, who speaks of Gorgias in the "treatise in which he discusses thinkers who 'abolish the criterion' of truth" (Schiappa, 1997, p. 15). Sextus Empiricus was the great Roman advocate for the Greek skeptic Pyhrro, and the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* states that "the Pyrrhonian skeptic has the skill of finding for every argument an equal and opposing argument, a skill whose employment will bring about a suspension of judgment on any issue which is considered by the skeptic, and ultimately, tranquility." Although the Skeptics accept that there are certain practical contingencies that must be accepted (i.e., the fire is hot, it is raining outside) — for pragmatic reasons — any 'ultimate' or more profound truth is arguable. (For instance, if it is raining now, it may stop, if the fire is hot, it may cool down.) Sextus' attitude to truth was very different from the attitudes of Plato and Aristotle, as he held there should be no dogma, only questions.

The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* also tells us that a student of the skeptical Atomist Democritus (Anaarchus of Abdera) "likened existing things to a stage painting," (Morrison, 2019) and was even quoted as saying, "all the world's a stage painting" (Morrison, 2019). This phrase bears a remarkable resemblance to Jacques oft-quoted line from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*: "all the worlds a stage" (Shakepseare, 1997, p. 146). Shakespeare was a Skeptic, and Skepticism formed the basis for Sophism, which stood in direct opposition to the eleatic philosophy that laid the foundation for Plato and Aristotle, and eventually, the Enlightenment. How do we know that Shakespeare was a skeptical Sophist? Shakespeare's fondness for perceptual confusion matches a fundamental principle of skeptical thought (explained by Pawlita here): "The skeptics' argumentative repertoire…. emphasizes that sensory perception cannot provide a basis for certain knowledge" (Pawlita, 2018, p. 81). In other words, the Skeptic questions the epistemological power of the senses, questioning their ability to reveal not only what is good and beautiful but what is true.

But this is not the only reason for associating Shakespeare and Gorgias. A close examination of Gorgias' work — and his attitude to poetry and performance — reveal startling similarities. There are only four extant works by Gorgias, and all are relatively short, and it is somewhat impossible to understand the impact they may have had in the 5th century B.C. by simply reading them on a page — partially because they offer dense wordplay in Greek that is difficult to translate. But more significantly, they were 'performed' (quite sublimely apparently, according to accounts at the time) by Gorgias, who was not only a poet but an actor. Two of Gorgias' works are particularly relevant to Shakespeare: *On Being or the Non-Existent* and

The Encomium of Helen.

In *On Being or the Non-Existent*, Gorgias satirizes the epistemological theories of the eleatic philosophers Parmenides and Melissus. Kerferd (1955) summarizes Gorgias' essay: "Nothing is. If it is, it is unknowable. If it is, and is knowable, it cannot be communicated to others, "'because' neither being nor not being exist" (Kerferd, 1955, pp. 5-6). Gorgias' philosophical satire presents us with an extremely reasonable treatise. In other words, he employs the syllogisms used by the eleatic philosophers to come to an impossible conclusion — one the Eleatics would have hated — because, paradoxically, Gorgias utilizes logic to craft an unassailable critique of the proposition that reality is stable and immutable.

On Being or the Non-existent is very unpleasant to read in translation, as it is a series of dense arguments made to justify a conclusion which most of us might find useless —that 'nothing exists.' There is no 'passion' in it, in the sense that the logic is ruthless and is, to some degree, devoid of surmise, wish, or even observation. The essay/poem is nearly mathematical in its precision. But that is Gorgias point; that reason can be used to justify anything, and that the tool which the Eleatics — and later Plato and Aristotle — used, which was reason, can make an eloquent argument in favor of anything, including the seemingly ludicrous notion that there is no such thing as reality. Reason is a fundamentally flawed tool because anything can be argued into anything.

It's important to take Gorgias seriously in On Being and the *Non-Existent*, for though he is parodying the Eleatics, he is also articulating the principle on which his epistemology is based. Gorgias' alternative notion of truth was that reality is created in the mind. It would not be inappropriate to quote Hamlet here without mentioning: "for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so" (Shakespeare, 2006, p 466.). Gorgias took Hamlet's supposition a little further, saying, in effect, that 'nothing is true but thinking makes it true.'

This is not the only instance in which Hamlet seems to be quoting Gorgias. Though Hamlet's famous monologue is rightly interpreted as a man musing on the possibility of suicide, Hamlet's opening question vibrates with ontological implications. Kerferd gives us this translation of a passage from *On Being or the Non-Existent*: "it is not possible to be or not to be. For he says, if Not-To-Be is Not-To-Be, then Not-Being would be no less than Being. For Not-Being is Not-Being and Being is Being, so things no more are then not" (Kerfered, 1955, p. 15). Here Gorgias argues that *neither* being nor not-being exist and, as such, equates them — in the sense of being equally possible — or impossible — ideas.

The idea that, in his famous speech, Hamlet might be

talking about -- not only suicide but ontology and/or epistemology -- may seem arbitrary. But Shakespeare's odd, seemingly irrelevant wordplay on the concept of 'being' is not simply ornamental or superficial. In fact, it holds the key to the connection between Gorgias' work and Shakespeare's. This is not only because the idea of 'not being' would be summarily dismissed by the Eleatics and Aristotelian philosophy, so Shakespeare would have necessarily had to have read Gorgias in order to speak of it. More than that, such wordplay is an essential aspect of the work of Shakespeare and Gorgias, who were both obsessed with the philosophical implications of the polysemous nature of language.

On Nature or The Non-Existent (like all of Gorgias' work) is an essay in the form of a poem. It overflows with wordplay. One example would be Gorgias' conclusion, mentioned by Schiappa (1997): "'Nothing exists,' could be interpreted in two ways.' Nothing, in this context, is ambiguous... The difference is a matter of emphasis. One can say either that 'Nothing *exists*'... or that "*Nothing* exists" (Schiappa, 1997, pp. 25-26). In other words, Gorgias might be simply telling us there is a thing called 'nothing,' or he might be making the much more pessimistic statement that the whole world is 'nothing.' This final conclusion is a rhetorical figure called amphiboly (an example of 'false reasoning' that, predictably, Aristotle rejects in his *Sophistical Refutations*).

Plato and Aristotle rejected Gorgias' work because they thought he was more interested in style than in content and because they believed he cultivated complex and unique styles of speaking so that he could manipulate his audiences. But scholar Scott Consigny (2001) is convinced that Gorgias was obsessed with excessively complex figurative language because he believed it was the only way to accurately represent an unrepresentable world: "Gorgias relentlessly experiments with the style of utterance in the hope of producing genuine novelty, because language can never accurately imitate what is real...[and he] liked words that were strange, provincial, archaic or obsolete, and that require a glossary in order to be understood" (Consigny, 2001, p. 158).

That is to say, Shakespeare and Gorgias share several semantic obsessions. Shakespeare not only invented more than 1700 words, but he was — like Gorgias — inordinately fond of compound words and epithets. A list of compound words invented by Shakespeare includes (but is not limited to) dew-drop, earth-bound, full-hearted, high-blown, lack-luster, lily-livered, made-up, rope-trick (appropriately meaning *rhetoric*), sad-eyed, sea-change, snail-paced, and time-honored. Shakespeare's long list of epithets includes these two from *Romeo and Juliet*: "star-crossed lovers" (Shakespeare, 2022, p. 1) and "death-

marked love" (Shakespeare, 2022, p. 1) — both used to refer to tragic romance. Then there is the character of Gadshill in *Henry IV Part One*, who differentiates between his true friends and: "mad mustachio purple-hued malt-worms" (Shakespeare, 1994, p. 54).

Consigny thinks that Gorgias fondness for paradox has a philosophical basis too. The five 'antithetical' figures of language favored by Gorgias and Shakespeare include paradox itself — as well as 'likeness of sound,' which is found in slant rhyme, as well as alliteration, repetition, puns, and the arrangement of words in nearly equal periods. Consigny (quoting Untersteiner) says Gorgias' use of paradox "creates a simulacrum of the antithesis inherent in the nature of things thereby conveying through poetry what cannot be portrayed logically ... [he is] circumventing the impossibility of rational communication of the tragic nature of things by using an antithetical style" (Consigny, 2001, p. 80). Shakespeare and Gorgias both wish — as James Baldwin expresses it — "to defeat all labels and complicate all battles by insisting on the human riddle." (Baldwin, 1964) The sad contradiction of our existence is that we live only to die. No understanding of this can come from reasoning in ordinary non-figurative language; but the constant piling of paradox upon paradox may eventually leave us with an approximate notion of the extremity of the human condition.

Going further, Lyle Johnstone (2006) thinks that Gorgias invented new words and exhaustingly utilized paradoxical figures in order to create another reality with language: "Gorgias' ostensible denial of objective reality as existent, knowable, or communicable had the effect of privileging speech itself as ontogenic (creating 'existence') and epistemic (creating knowledge)" (Johnstone, 2006, p. 271). Not only does Gorgias create the reality of our tenuous existence through paradox, but -- according to Consigny -- Gorgias conceived that "rather than ante-dating language, the very idea of what is 'real' emerges only within the specific discourses in which we use it" (Consigny, 2006, p. 80). In other words, speaking about the world is the only way to understand it.

Shakespeare (2005) references this notion in *Titus Andronicus*. Titus is tricked into cutting off his own hand. Suddenly he no longer wishes to say the word 'hands' because — without the word — there would be no such thing as hands: "O, handle not the theme, to talk of hands.... / As if we should forget we had no hands / If Marcus did not name the word of hands" (Shakespeare, 2005, pp. 114-115). When a fly appears, Marcus swings at it with his knife, and Titus calls this a "deed of death done on the innocent" (Shakespeare, 2005, p.115), but when Marcus tells Titus the fly is black, Titus suddenly changes his tune. And the reality of the fly: "Yet, I think, we are

not brought so low, / But that between us we can kill a fly / That comes in likeness of a coal-black Moor" (Shakespeare, 2005, p. 117). The fly has no corporeal reality; it is whatever is assumed in speech. This is the fundamental principle behind all of Gorgias work; that the reality that we live in is created most purely and appropriately by poetry.

How does art create reality? In *The Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias suggests that Helen was persuaded by Paris to love him, and that this was a kind of rape, because not only are words exceedingly hypnotic — but they are, in themselves, a kind of violence. For Gorgias, words are dangerous magic. As Johnstone notes, he gives "proof to the opinion [doxa] of [his] hearers': the 'agency of words' rests upon their power to 'beguile... and persuade... and alter [the soul] by witchcraft'... a potency that 'is comparable to the power of drugs over the nature of bodies'" (Johnstone, 2006, p. 276). And, as Johnstone also notes, It is in The Encomium of Helen that Gorgias says that "the one who... is willingly deceived is 'wiser' (*sophoteros*) than the undeceived" (Johnstone, 2006, p. 278).

This sentence, in fact, is the key to both Gorgias' work and Shakespeare's. The word 'willingly' is especially important. In viewing a play -- or in the case of Gorgias, when watching a sophist perform a poem -- one gives consent to believe (or not believe) in what is being presented. When we do believe what we see, it is called 'suspension of disbelief' because, for the moment, we enjoy the work we give ourselves over to another reality. But Gorgias would have had us always remember that what we are watching is an illusion created by him, and one of the ways he reminds us is to constantly call attention — in a 'performative' way — to the artificiality of his language and to its virtuosity. Generally speaking, Gorgias' performances of his poems were apparently often quite funny — filled with witty, adroit, hypnotic wordplay.

In addition, they were parodic. Consigny (2001) says "Gorgias' texts mock themselves as well as other texts" (Consigny, 2001, p. 174). Each of his texts parodied a certain style of speech — a certain rhetorical approach — from philosophical treatise to funeral oration, from impassioned plea to legal defense. And Gorgias "exaggerates the tropes of the genre in ways that render his text even more artificial than others in the genre" (Consigny, 2001, p. 172). Gorgias' Epitaphios is "an imitation of the orations delivered by Athenian citizens selected by the city itself" (Consigny, 2001, p. 172). Gorgias' In Palamedes is using so many legal tropes that he draws attention to the use of the tropes themselves" (Consigny, 2001, p. 174). Gorgias' parodic style was announced by the choice of such unlikely subjects for his defenses, as: "by praising Helen of Troy, Gorgias is announcing his work as parodic"

(Consigy, 2001, p. 174).

But Consigny's summary (2001) of Gorgias style makes it clear that Gorgia's 'tongue in cheek' approach had a very serious intent:

> Gorgias' style may best be characterized as 'parodic' in that he adapts to the conventions of diverse discourses while playfully drawing attention to the conventions of those discourses and the rhetoricity of every text .... he foregrounds the conventions of the discourse in order to expose the strategies his foundationalist rivals use to deceive audiences into believing that their arguments or texts are objectively valid ... he deconstructs the assertions by self-effacing Eleatic philosophers who present themselves as speaking the voice of reason .... By displaying the rhetoricity of every text, he shows his audience that all arguments including his own are contingent, situated fabrications that are 'true' only insofar as they are endorsed by specific audiences. (Consigny, 2001 p. 30)

Shakespeare, like Gorgias, was not so much preaching the gospel of any particular philosophy. He was, instead, a paradoxical sophist dedicated to emphasizing the rhetoricity of all philosophy. Consider that during the restoration, critics like Thomas Rymer labeled Othello a comedy— mainly because of the unlikely fancy that a 'moor' could be the subject of pathos. It was not until 150 years after Shakespeare's death that his work came to be accepted and praised by the general public. This delay was partly due to Shakespeare's fondness for genre mixing; his comedies are full of tragedy; his tragedies are full of comedy — and the romances and 'problem plays' resist genre classification altogether. Almost all of Shakespeare's tragic figures — when considered in the context of his time — are unlikely candidates for high tragedy. *Antony and Cleopatra*, for instance, would have been viewed by an Elizabethan audience as the tale of an effeminate man emasculated by a whore; hardly a suitable subject for catharsis.

This is not to suggest that Shakespeare's plays and Gorgias' poems did not have a serious or ennobling intent. But even today, audiences have difficulty understanding Shakespeare's attitude to his own characters. This is why the plays still remain controversial. What is the message of *The Merchant of Venice*? Is Shylock painted as evil — in an antisemitic fashion — or has Shakespeare created a sympathetic portrait of a character who is part of an oppressed minority? Is Caliban a racist stereotype, or has Shakespeare managed the sensitive portrayal of an Indigenous victim? And remember that whatever evil his characters do, Shakespeare gifts them all with sensuous, gorgeous, sensitive, and insightful poetry.

It may be easier to understand Shakespeare's project by viewing it in the context of the Greek concept of the 'agon.' The Greek word means an assembly of people, but it also means a kind of game, a contest. Consigny (2001) quotes Nietzsche's definition of agon: "to perceive all matters of the intellect, of life's seriousness, of necessities, even of danger, as play" (Consigny, 2001` p. 74). Gorgias work reminds us, over and over that" We must not "forget that there will always be alternative ways of construing the situation" (Consigny, 2001, p. 92).

This was what the early Sophists did. They traveled about *lecturing* (that is, performing poems in a dense poetical style), trying to persuade viewers not only of what was good or bad but what was real or true. Gorgias could persuade people that nothing was real, or that Helen was innocent of wrongdoing. And the key is — like so many other aspects of Athenian culture — the *rhetorician* presented his proposals in the context of a game or competition. It was up to the audience to choose their own reality while all the time exercising their critical faculties. As good Athenian citizens, they were expected to be staunchly critical of each rhetorician's vision. Even more importantly, they were to be forever aware that what they had chosen as today's reality was ultimately a fiction -- not the immutable truth discovered through dialectical argument, by an aging, wise -- yet humble -- patriarch like Socrates. No. It was *fiction*, a lie; one that might at any moment be replaced by another lie, presented on another day, by another, more persuasive rhetoric.

Shakespeare's characters are like these sophistic rhetors. We are meant to do exactly what we end up doing; that is to argue about the realities each character creates with their rhetoric. So, when Richard II eulogizes himself before his death, weaving the reality of his tragic, undeserved victimhood through elegiac poetry, we are free to see him as he imagines himself — or, conversely, we can vote against that interpretation and view Richard II as an effete, decadent, deluded despot.

Plato and Aristotle were so threatened by the Sophists that they tried to diminish Gorgias' success by labeling him a liar. Similarly, early modern anti-theatricalists in England (some of them puritans) took up this ancient anti-poetry crusade, often quoting Plato's critique of art in The Republic. Shakespeare -- perhaps in response to this, and in defense of Gorgias -- says that art does not only create reality, but art is more real than reality and is, in fact, *a kind of 'better reality.*

There are many seemingly random references in the Shakespeare plays that suggest not only that art is a lie,

that it is not only as 'real' as life, but that it is actually a welcome improvement. Touchstone, for instance, suggests to Audrey that the best poetry is the most 'lying' poetry: "No, truly, for the truest poetry is the most feigning, and lovers are given to poetry, and what they swear in poetry may be said as lovers they do feign" (Shakespeare, 1997, p. 119). Poetry is simply the language of lovers; a derivation of that lie. Similarly, Shakespeare references Ovid's story of Pygmalion in *The Winter's Tale*. In Ovid's telling of the myth, a man creates a statue of the most beautiful and virtuous woman in the world, who comes to life when she kisses him. In *The Winter's Tale*, the statue of the dead Hermione is infused with her spirit so that she can be reunited with her husband Leontes. Hermione died — presumably from grief — after her husband accused her of wrongdoing. But the sculptor has created a better Hermione, one with the same virtues as the real, deceased Hermione but cured of debilitating shame.

Pliny's tale of Zeuxis tells of a legendary Greek painter. He created such a realistic rendering of grapes on the vine that hungry birds pecked at it for food. In Venus and Adonis, the goddess's frustrated desire is compared to the plight of Zeuxis' birds, and Adonis' beauty becomes a painting that has come to pulsing life: "E'en so she languisheth in her mishaps / As those poor birds that helpless berries saw" (Shakespeare, 2002, 207). Lucrece — in Shakespeare's narrative poem of the same name — praises the artist for surpassing reality when she speaks of a tapestry depicting the story of Helen of Troy, saying: "a thousand lamentable objects there / In scorn of Nature, Art gave lifeless life" (Shakespeare, 2002, p.316). And again, in Venus and Adonis, Shakespeare praises a real horse for looking like a painting of a horse: "Look, when a painter would surpass the life, / In limning out a well-proportion'd steed, / His art with nature's workmanship at strife, / As if the dead the living should exceed; /So did this horse excel a common one, / In shape, in courage, colour, pace and bone." (Shakespeare, 2002, 191)

It is not surprising that the idea of art surpassing reality with a beautiful lie was frightening -- especially to many puritans in the post-early-modern era. In 1642 Richard Carpenter published an anti-Catholic treatise -- *Experience, Historie, and Divinitie*. Carpenter's theme -- favored by 16th century English Protestants -- was that music, vestments, and ritual (and the Latin tongue itself) were Catholic agents of deception. The Catholic artist Michelangelo created works for the papacy that were amazingly lifelike. Land tells us that Carpenter not only suggests that Michelangelo's depiction of the dying Christ "fools ignorant Catholics into believing they see life itself" (Land, 2006) but goes on to imply that Michelangelo tortured and killed the young man who modeled

for him — "but he had the skill and genius required to resurrect the young man in his drawing. By virtue of the excellence of his art Michelangelo was allowed to escape punishment." (Land, 2006)

This apocryphal tale refused to disappear. Land tells us the Sicilian painter Sussino said Michelangelo "used real nails to fix some poor man to a board and .... then pierced his heart with a lance in order to paint a Crucifixion." (Land, 2006) (In his novel *Justine*, de Sade refers to the same story.) "The importance of the tale" says Land "is not so much that Michelangelo murdered a man, but that the artist had no conscience and was therefore free of remorse .... [the] typically Catholic Michelangelo considered his art — particularly the lifelike representation of nature — more important than the life of his model, and, in a sense, more important than nature itself." (Land, 2006) Land also reveals that Carpenter said art "will deceive you, with excuses, glosses, pretences, professions, expressions, accusations. And he that suffers himself to be deceived by another is his foole." (Land, 2006)

On the contrary, Shakespeare and the Sophists believed that the one who gives himself up willingly to deception is the wisest man of all. Shakespeare and Gorgias are lying to their audience — and both, I posit, would admit it — but they are lying only to remind us again and again that everyone lies constantly. As Trevor McNeely (2004) says, the message of Shakespeare's work is not in the ideas a character expresses at any given moment. Instead, Shakespeare's entire oeuvre reminds us over and over again "that we can build a perfectly satisfactory reality on thin air and never think to question it" (McNeely, 2004, p. 121).

This is because Shakespeare and the Sophists realized that all language is, in effect, a lie. Consigny (2001) quotes Nietzsche, who said that for Sophists— "tropes or figures of speech are not 'occasionally added to words but constitute their most proper nature'...What is usually called language is actually all figuration" (Cosigny, 2001, p. 77). What this means is that we can't talk about anything without lying, and it is the job of the artist to remind people of this — one of the only facts we can be sure of.

Like Gorgias and Shakespeare, the French philosopher Foucault believed that all language is fiction. But we do the post-structuralists (and Shakespeare) a great disservice if we blame them for the present obliteration of truth. Politicians on both the left and the right today continue to assure us that they have 'the truth' and the other side are liars. But blaming post-structuralism for the supposed devaluation of truth is not the answer. This blame is related to the false context into which the work of post-structuralism is placed. They are not philosophers (as is so often assumed) but poetical liars — like Gorgias

and Shakespeare. Foucault himself said that his work was all fiction (it is a little-known fact that Foucault started out as a novelist). And the work of the most famous post-structuralists (Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida) is, I think, closer to sophistic poetry than it is to scientific 'truth.'

All this talk of lies may, in fact, seem like playing with fire in our 'post-truth' age. We are told that the answer is, instead, to abandon fiction for truth and to embrace the newest, freshest foundationalist philosophers when they posit that notions of right and wrong are self-evident and clearly enduring and that reality never changes. Gorgias and Shakespeare, on the other hand, would posit that it makes more sense to distrust the man who says that there are immutable truths, especially if he claims he is in possession of them.

Similarly, just as there are many versions of science, and many versions of fake news, there is also 'historicism,' i.e., many versions of history. The methodology I am proposing here, Shakespeare's epistemology if you will, is that only through careful examination of any art (including poetry) can ever find the truth. My truth is that **truth is not immutable**.

In his book *Shakespeare's Fingerprints*, Brame (2002) makes an eloquent argument that easily traceable stylistic touches In Shakespeare's writing ultimately reveal that the true author really is Edward de Vere. Some of these touches may have been deliberate attempts on de Vere's part to hint at his identity, whereas others may simply have been unconscious semantic quirks that point us in that direction. Brame believes Edward de Vere is deliberately revealing his true identity when he says, in Sonnet 76: "Why write I still all one, ever the same, / And keep invention in a noted weed, / That every word doth almost tell my name, Showing their birth, and where they did proceed?" (Brame, 2002, p. 533). Brame says that in the phrase — 'every word doth almost tell my name' — Edward de Vere is revealing, through wordplay (i.e., through a pun), that he is the real Shakespeare: "The word every truly tells the author's name, if that name is Edward de Vere, or in abbreviated format E.Vere" (Brame, 2002, p. 34).

But what if de Vere is saying much more than that? What if he is saying: '*You will find me in my work.*' I am enough of an aesthete to prefer to look for his true identity — not through his actions, his personal history, or the history of his time — but in his art. Because I believe art is where we will find 'the answer' to Shakespeare's identity, as well.

When I was much younger, I had the privilege of meeting Harry Hay. The name may not be familiar to everyone — but Harry Hay was a very important man — arguably

the instigator of the modern gay liberation movement. He founded the Mattachine Society in 1950 when it was still a crime to be 'out of the closet' in the United States. Harry Hay was an artist and aesthete, and his comrades-in-arms were two gay men who went on to be quite famous artists (designer Rudi Gernreich and actor Will Greer). Hay was also a communist, and he founded gay liberation on principles that were ultimately rejected by more conservative modern gay rights activists. In 1979 Hay founded the 'Radical Fairies,' a group that believed gay men are spiritual aesthetes and gifted wise men, who through their art and intuition, could save the world.

I was a great admirer of Harry Hay then, and so it was with some surprise that I happened upon him (in the mid '80s) in a restaurant in Provincetown. I recognized Hay immediately by his 'hippie-esque' garb (headband, profuse necklaces, etc.) and because he was accompanied by his ubiquitous lover, John. I knew this would be a once-in-a-lifetime chance and that I had to approach my idol. (I was perhaps 35 at the time, he would have been about 75). I walked up to him and introduced myself. Hay told me that he had come to Provincetown to protest gay marriage. He also said that I wouldn't agree with him. I told him that I did agree with him (which was true). Then a strange thing happened, Harry flirted with me.

Or perhaps it wasn't so strange at all. After all, I got the feeling that he had flirted with men many times before, so perhaps it was just very strange to me. He went on to explain why he was not married to his lover John Burnside (who nevertheless was his partner for many, many years). He said (and I am, of course, paraphrasing), "I have been with John for a very long time and we love each other very much. But we would never get married. And you know why? Because at any moment, another man might come along, and that man might replace John, and I might run off with him. Another beautiful man. A man, perhaps like" — and he gazed around the room theatrically until his eyes returned to me — 'like, well, you." I tried to receive the compliment gracefully, but I was also a bit embarrassed. The encounter didn't last much longer than that. I politely said goodbye and went on my way.

Looking back on that meeting, it strikes me that it was a very Shakespearean moment. What this gay witch doctor — whose life was infused with and dedicated to — magic, art, and spiritualism, was trying to tell me was that his love for his partner was not an immutable truth. Rather, it was a kind of belief, and one which he held very dear. But it was also true that this cherished belief, on which he had founded his life, could be challenged at any time by a better 'argument' made by a better man.

If one can understand why this particular kind of 'belief' matters — in other words, why it is necessary to treat

even our most valued truths with necessary skepticism — that we must accept all facts as contingent; then I think one will understand Shakespeare's epistemology clearly and that we will, someday, 'solve' the problem of truth. Because nowadays -- for me certainly -- it is only poetry that can save the world. In art, we will find -- to quote the Rolling Stones -- perhaps not everything we want — but what we undoubtedly need.

BIOGRAPHY

Sky Gilbert is a poet, novelist, playwright, filmmaker, theatre director, and professor of theatre and creative writing at the University of Guelph in Canada. He was co-founder of Toronto's Buddies in Bad Times Theatre and was its artistic director for 17 years. He has had more than 40 plays produced, has written eight novels, three award-winning poetry collections and several volumes of Shakespeare criticism. There is a street in Toronto named after him: 'Sky Gilbert Lane.'

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