Blind Spots of Knowledge in Shakespeare and His World

A Conversation
STUDIES IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN CULTURE

Medieval Institute Publications is a program of
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WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY
Blind Spots of Knowledge in Shakespeare and His World

A Conversation

Edited by
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Studies in Medieval and Early Modern Culture LII
MEDIEVAL INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS
Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo
For my parents, Indrani and Asoke Mukherji—
for putting up with my blind spots and diverting me with theirs.
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I AM GRATEFUL TO THE participants in this conversation for their faith in the topic and their willingness to play. Roberta Klimt has proved much more than a trusty copy-editor: interlocutor par excellence. Much thanks to Carla Suthren for coming on board last-minute, helping with the proofs and meticulously compiling the index. Erika Gaffney has been saintly in her patience as commissioning editor while the book has taken its stop-start course, and exemplary in her sanity and her support.

The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) / ERC grant agreement n° 617849.
Introduction
Blind Spots of Knowledge in Shakespeare and His World

Subha Mukherji

Blind Spots: A Concept and Its Typology

When, in King Lear, the old man refuses to leave Gloucester despite his bidding, because Gloucester “cannot see [his] way,” the blind Gloucester replies, bitterly reflecting on his earlier failure to recognize his sons morally:

I have no way, and therefore want no eyes.
I stumbled when I saw. Full oft 'tis seen,
Our means secure us and our mere defects
Prove our commodities ...

(F, 4.1.18–21).²

What do we see when we cannot see, or see defectively? How do our blind spots prove our commodities? By extension, what happens when seeing and knowing are prised apart? What is the epistemic purchase of unseeing? In the same play, Lear questions the familiar sensory hierarchy of Aristotelian epistemology, where “sight best helps us to know things,” a privileging also familiar from the Platonic tradition where knowing is a kind of seeing.³ Learning the cost of his emotional and ethical misrecognitions with each passing moment, he ironically severs the function of seeing from that of knowing oneself, and even from being known and knowing the other: “Doth any here know me? This is not Lear: / [...] Where are his eyes? / [...] Who is it that can tell me who I am?” (1.4.246–50). As John Berger writes, “it is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world,” but “the relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.”⁴ He posits seeing as a more complex, more active, more mobile activity than a purely optical function, “a question of mechanically reacting to stimuli”; “It can only be thought of in this way if one isolates the small part of the process which concerns the eye’s retina.”⁵

Yet even the internal processes of the retina are more dynamic and less “settled” than—literally—meets the eye, which sees more than it sees “through means secure.” The assumed relation in social discourse between ocular vision as vehicle and perception as tenor is unsettlingly reversible. So the optical metaphor remains functional, and has an unexpected synergy with the social,
psychological, and interpretative acts of seeing to which Berger has trained us to be attentive. The “blind spot” is a part of the retina—the optic disc or nerve-head—which lacks photoreceptor cells. Hence, no vision is detectable at this spot in the visual field. But, by a curious process of readjustment, the brain “reads” the blind spot by interpolating it with information from the surrounding field, including the other eye: so the blind spot itself is not visible to the eye to which it belongs. But, because of its invisibility in the “normal” sense, it induces an optically inventive way of seeing, activating tools of perception not ordinarily in use. It is, thus, analogous at once to a particular point in a larger picture that, for different possible reasons, we fail to see and to a mental act of seeing that makes up for what is off-scene by seeing indirectly, inferentially and imaginatively. But there is a further twist in the paradoxical reach of the blind spot as metaphor: in a digital photo of the retina, it looks dazzling. Thus, it is at once blind in that it cannot see, or be visible to vision, and blindingly bright in its dense, nerve-packed opacity when imaged.

It was not till 1660 that the French physicist Edmé Mariotte—sensationally—discovered and documented the blind spot, as noted by Supriya Chaudhuri in this volume. Yet the perceptual implications of the scotoma in any given monocular field of vision were understood, and in productive use, in the cultural imaginary of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries: a contrapuntal strand in the dominant ocularcentrism of its texture. Shakespeare, for one, seems to have “known” the blind spot of the eye and the mind well before it floated within the ken of science. The viewing relations and optical agencies implicated by its “blindness” inform and structure his explorations of the forms, processes, and intersubjectivity of knowing, our possible engagements with it, and the business of representation—making visible and thereby knowable. The love-juice with which Puck streaks the lovers’ eyes in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, from which the dream of the night arbitrarily ensues, engendering at once “hateful fantasies” and unlikely “[enthralments]” (2.1.258; 3.1.116), makes the Platonic optics of love run helter-skelter—a playful send-up of what George Hakewill (and Stuart Clark, after him) call “the vanity of the eye”: the assumptions of the rationalism and primacy of sight. But the imperfections of the eye had particular applications in drama, not least because of the ontology of the early modern theatre which relied on activating modes of seeing what could not be shown: routinely asking the audience to see with “parted eye.” Shakespeare picked up on the theatrical potential of this condition as well as its demands, enjoining his viewers to see Dover cliff while looking at flat ground, or the vasty fields of France within the wooden O of the stage. But he also tuned into the affective, ethical, perceptual, and mimetic scope of blindness, blind-spotting, and indeed blind-spot-spotting,
pushing the implications of seeing what is not visible, and not seeing what is, by deploying his medium. Shakespeare’s works are our focus, but not our horizon. This volume, likewise, is an indicative probe rather than an exhaustive exploration. We hope that it will thematize an internally complementary process, between text and hermeneutics, and make it available for a wider range of works in the early modern period.

In common parlance, a blind spot is an obstructed view, or an instance of partial or partisan perception, or even a localized lack of understanding, its meaning sliding from the physical to the cognitive to the epistemological. Integral to Shakespeare’s recreation of human reality, both individual and relational, this function determines the first kind of blind spot in his works, which repeatedly stage moments of unmastered and unmasterable knowledge, whether it is because characters cannot or will not “know” it. This can take the form of a perceptual failure or denial within the fiction that can exact a devastating cost, as when Emilia in Shakespeare’s *Othello*—and perhaps Gertrude in *Hamlet*, especially the Folio text—resist knowledges about their own agency and their husband’s designs that are accessible, but emotionally unaffordable.\(^8\) Obscured by the psyche, they surface like spectres at key moments of re-cognition—as when Emilia mutters, on learning of Iago’s villainy, “I thought so then; I’ll kill myself for grief” (*Othello* 5.2.192). As Berger says, “to look is an act of choice”; so is not to look.\(^9\) Or think of *The Winter’s Tale* when Leontes—with doomful shades of Oedipus—not only declares the oracle void of truth, but perversely refuses to see the corrosive damage his jealous fury is wreaking on his loved ones, and interprets Mamillius’s reactive sickness in the light of the only knowledge in his sight: “Conceiving the dishonour of his mother! / He straight declin’d, drooped, took it deeply, / [...] / And downright languish’d” (*The Winter’s Tale* 2.3.13–17). Looking the obvious in the face, Leontes fails to see it. His vision is so skewed by his “too much [belief]” in his “own suspicion” (3.2.151) that he forgets the sanity of seeing at its simplest, most lucid level as he declares its irrelevance in proving his wife’s assumed guilt:

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... Camillo’s flight,
   Added to their familiarity,
   (Which was as gross as ever touch’d conjecture,
   That lack’d sight only, nought for approbation
   But only seeing ...  

   (2.1.174–78).
```

Cognitive blind spots can show us how precariously close suspicion is to conviction, and how hopelessly entangled knowledge is with the force of belief, for better or for worse.\(^{10}\)
But let us take a more layered example—an instance of a blind spot of knowledge which slides from mimetic content to representational concern, operating not only at the threshold between the self and the other, but also between the text and the reader. Significantly, it is a scene of viewing. As the raped Lucrece laments at length before disclosing her plight to her husband in the narrative poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*, she comes to face a tapestry (or panel-painting) depicting the siege of Troy. In a crowded canvas, her eyes fasten on one detail, “a face where all distress is stelled” (line 1444): this is “despairing Hecuba” (line 1447), a passive sufferer with whom she can identify. “[Throwing] her eyes about the painting round,” she extends her lament to “who she finds forlorn” (1499–1500), all other figures and themes being (as it were) invisible to her eyes. But then she pauses on “the perjured Sinon” (line 1522)—in her mind, the cause of Hecuba’s grief, having been the direct instrument of the siege of Troy. Indignant that he should have “so fair a form,” “with a mind so ill,” her outrage mounts to destructive rage as she identifies him with her rapist Tarquin who had a similarly deceptive exterior:

In her fit of passion, she fails to see that the painted Sinon is “senseless” and ends up destroying the artwork. Soon enough, she herself registers the hysteria, indeed almost ridiculousness, of her naïve response as a quieter maturity dawns: “At last she smilingly with this gives o’er: / ‘Fool, fool,’ quoth she, ‘his wounds will not be sore’” (lines 1567–68). In a poem much engaged with the affect and ethics of response, especially to pain, Lucrece’s empathy may seem to qualify her to give the voiceless Hecuba’s grief a tongue, unlike Marcus’s rhetorical, aestheticizing, over-eloquent attempt to speak for the raped, tongueless Lavinia in the other work Shakespeare wrote about rape and representation around the same time as the poem: *Titus Andronicus*. Marcus’s dissonant address feels, even if it is not, emotionally detached from its subject, while Lucrece is not only both reader and writer, but subject as well as object. Yet Lucrece’s extreme identification makes her blind to the fundamental difference between art and life, if only for an extended moment. So here is a blind spot that confronts us, through textual inscription, with our own relation to works of art. Do we need to unsee the affective reality and subjecthood of characters within a
fiction, to be sophisticated consumers of art? What are the limits of empathy in aesthetic response? Can identification—infeeling—be the blind spot which, instead of helping, closes the critical distance that empathy actively needs as material for reaching across, as space for bridging? Dipping back, for a moment, from reflexive art into inset life, we might consider how Titus forgets basic distinctions in his ludicrously disproportionate railing against Marcus for killing a fly: “How if that fly had a father and mother?” (Titus Andronicus 3.2.60). Pace the blind spot of certain strands of ecocritical readings of a seamless continuum between human and animal life in such moments, the theatre audience invariably laugh and share Marcus’s incomprehension—“Alas, my lord, I have but kill’d a fly”—even while they register the extremity of grief that makes Titus overidentify with any infinitely suffering thing (Titus 3.2.59). The tradition of archly witty exercises in the disproportion between a literary genre and its small subjects (and tropes) was established enough to provide a playfully parodic context to the fly-killing scene—from Lucian’s encomium “In Praise of a Fly,” to Spenser’s “Muiopotmos, or the Fate of the Butterflie,” and Donne’s “The Flea.”11 The faintly ironic frames or overtones of these moments in Shakespeare refract our vision. A character’s encounter with a fly, no less than another’s with the painting of an epic war, raises questions about the blind spots of aesthetic encounter. What excesses of its own does tragedy tend not to acknowledge, which outsiders to the high tragic culture—a Moorish Aaron, say, “[prying] ... through the crevice of a wall” at the Roman Titus’s hand being swapped for his sons’ heads—would laugh at till their “eyes were rainy like to his” (Titus 5.1.114, 117)? In the 1590s, Shakespeare’s “crannied [holes]” tend to figure apertures through which one genre refracts into another, making us see in a different key. So the comic Bottom “as” the tragic Pyramus pleads to his “lovely wall”: “Show me thy chink, to blink through with mine eyne” (Dream 5.1.156; 174).

Another instance of a blind spot presenting itself as an encounter in the text that invites a recalibrated encounter with the text is the double report of Brutus’s wife Portia’s death in Julius Caesar. Anyone who was taught by the late Tony Nuttall will have been faced with this puzzling re-occurrence in the Folio and asked to make sense of it. Is it another textual error or corruption? A repetition that someone—maybe Shakespeare—forgot to take out during some sort of process of revision? There are potential indications in the relevant section—not least in the variety of speech headings for Cassi/Cas/Cass, and the unique stage direction of “Boy” to replace Messala—of incomplete revision and interpolations at two stages of composition.12 Here is the anomaly. Cassius and Brutus have uneasily made up after an angry altercation, but, when Brutus
intimates a hinterland of heart-struck sorrow—“O Cassius, I am sick of many griefs”—Cassius cannot resist a last jab: “Of your philosophy you make no use, / If you give place to accidental evils” (4.1.145–46). This prompts Brutus to reply, slightly defensively, “No man bears sorrow better. Portia is dead” (4.1.147), and leads him to disclose the terrible manner of her suicide. Cassius is suitably mortified, as this is a far stronger justification of Brutus’s disturbed state of mind than his own poor excuse of a “rash humour” his mother gave him (4.1.120) for his own ill temper. The impact of the revelation seems about to be helpfully defused by the entrance of Lucius, and then of Messala and Titinius, allowing Brutus to stop Cassius from harping on the unbearable subject: “No more, I pray you” (4.1.166). But Messala leads up, through probing questions, to the subject of Portia’s death. Trying and failing to throw him off track, Brutus realizes he has to engage and pretends he has not heard anything: “Now, as you are a Roman, tell me true.” Messala comes right back at him on his terms: “Then like a Roman bear the truth I tell, / For certain, she is dead, and by strange manner” (4.1.186, 4.1.187–88). Brutus “reacts” with what, to Cassius, is at once duplicity and an astonishing display of fortitude:

> Why, farewell, Portia: we must die, Messala.  
> With meditating that she must die once  
> I have the patience to endure it now.  

(4.1.190–92)

Messala observes, with hushed admiration, “Even so great men great losses should endure” (4.1.193). Cassius, more knowingly, remarks:

> I have as much of this in art as you,  
> But yet my nature could not bear it so.  

(4.1.194–95)

Are we to assume, because it lacks immediate coherence, that the double announcement must be an oversight? Or should we read the duplication as a dramatic shape, inducing us into a way of seeing what cannot be owned within the parameters of the Rome that these characters inhabit: the parallel processes of a keenly felt challenge to Brutus’s Roman identity; the inseparability of this identity from the ethic of Stoicism—the “philosophy” Cassius alludes to; the distance between Brutus’s private, emotional self and his public, political persona; and the high Stoic manner as the stuff of performance, and the affective repressions and evasions it demands? If we had the second report alone, we might have found Brutus’s response almost inhuman—exemplifying the static model of Stoicism as a freedom from emotional disturbance.13 If we had the first alone, we would only have seen his fragility. Together, they
show us the dynamic arc from a bleak, all too human bereavement to a formal, willed control of emotions. This is also an insight into the half-lit cognitive crevices and bypaths of the intense relationship between Brutus and Cassius. Nuttall suggests that this textual crux—which has divided editors—invites us to step out of the “customary canons of art” by probing the tautness of the moment in terms of the emotional life of the characters, to read nature into art. This feels right. And such redirection of attention is, typically, a function of our encounters with blind spots in artworks.

The implication of recasting seeing distinguishes a range of Shakespearean blind spots, often combining with other properties. The recalibration that is so central to the optical functions of the blind spot models a hermeneutic encounter where the conventional processing of information is disrupted and diverted. When inscribed in the action, this has the potential to be tragic: think of situations where characters misread from circumstantial evidence, supplementing what is invisible or obscure by bending their gaze, reading inferentially from a semiotic neighborhood. Typically, this variety of oblique reading operates in an evidentiary dramatic structure. When Diana in All’s Well that Ends Well enargeically presents a ring to incriminate Bertram—“O, behold this ring”—the Countess is convinced that she is his wife and, further, that he has murdered his wife: “That ring’s a thousand proofs” (All’s Well 5.3.191, 199).

Yet, as the plot unravels, it turns out to prove, rather, the manipulative potency of visual tokens presented as synecdochic parts of an invisible scenario. We also see the ironic susceptibility of a defendant to a counter-use of over-freighted signs, as Bertram stakes his honesty on the same object:

If you shall prove
This ring was ever hers, you shall as easy
Prove that I husbanded her bed in Florence ...

(5.3.124–26)

In the event, the ring does prove he had meant to sleep with Diana, but not with any intention to marry her, and that he had in fact slept with his lawfully wedded wife—showing how evidential inference from sensible contiguous signs can be a slippery index to both deed and thought. Emotional situations dominated by sexual jealousy tend to focus such processes with particular imaginative force, for, in the grip of passionate suspicion, we make the world we see, though we take our cues from the visible world around us: Othello “wear[s]” his eyes to watch his wife but images what is not through his mind (3.3.198). Cymbeline offers a paradigmatic example in Posthumus’s disastrous mis-seeing of Iachimo’s vividly visual evocation of “corporeal [signs]” of his supposed enjoyment of Imogen’s body, backed up with
visible material tokens from the alleged scene of “incontinency” (Cymbeline 2.4.119, 127). But the foregrounded and dilatory jouissance of Iachimo’s narrative recreation, both when he convinces Posthumus and when he recounts the bedroom scene again by way of confession, manifests Shakespeare’s acute alertness to the potential non-congruence of enargeia with evidence: an equation derived from the Latin rhetorical tradition and, more specifically, its translation of enargeia as evidentia. Their assumed identity is undercut as rhetorical temptation is shown to outstrip legal necessity. So, in the Shakespearean theatre, enargeia becomes the blind spot of the judicial imagination, with rhetoric at once shaping, and helping us deconstruct, the temptations and errors of the mind’s eye.

Yet, in an almost chiastic move, precisely such cognitive diversions can take a productive form when the text demands a reorientation of our position as the knowing subject to the object of knowledge. In Troilus and Cressida, faced with a Cressida he cannot recognize by his unitary code of human nature—”This is, and is not, Cressid”—Troilus muses on “the spacious breadth of this division” which “admits no orifex for a point as subtle / As Ariachne’s broken woof to enter” (5.2.146; 150–52). There is an obvious wobble in the text here, which the Riverside editors call “Shakespeare’s error for the name of Arachne, who, according to Ovid ... was turned into a spider by Pallas.” But the designation of “error” may be a blind spot refusing to see around this fracture in the text, this visible obscurity, to find the luminousness of Shakespeare’s conflation. For if he is half-remembering Arachne’s spiderweb in talking of Ariadne’s thread, given to Theseus to help him out of the Cretan maze, that would be a glimpse of how the tremor of a single image can capture the closeness between the sinister labyrinth that traps and the clue that guides.

If Shakespeare’s own errors are acts of mingled memory opening up a corridor of knowingness that “correct” rendering—or seeing straight—would have left closed, his characters’ mistaking eyes seem, often, to similarly defer the closure of a text. Sometimes this can take the opposite form to seeing “double” (Dream 4.1.190): collapsing persons and identities that should be distinct. Even as he correctly sees Polixenes’s features in his son, Florizel, who presents Perdita as his wife, Leontes fails to recognize his long-lost daughter. The truancy here is deeper and darker than mere sensory failure. When Florizel says that his father, Polixenes, would “grant precious things as trifles” at his old friend Leontes’s bidding, Leontes immediately replies that in that case he would “beg [his] precious mistress / Which he counts but as a trifle.” If this is a joke, its uneasiness is sealed by Paulina’s reprimand: “Sir, my liege, / Your eye hath too much youth in’t,” reminding Leontes of
Hermione’s superior mature beauty even at the time of her death. Leontes replies hastily: “I thought of her / Even as these looks I made” (The Winter’s Tale 5.1.222–27). This moment was bound to call up, in Shakespeare’s theatre, the incestuous passion of the father for the daughter in the Shakespeare’s source text, Greene’s hugely popular prose romance Pandosto (1588). Indeed, it anticipates that other glimpse of kink through a literary prehistory—Ovid’s Pygmalion and his sex-doll—at the moment when Leontes moves to kiss the supposed statue of Hermione and Paulina restrains him, saying that the paint is still wet. Miscognition in the plot, here, acts as a productive distortion of the intertextual lens, generating new interpretative possibilities. The mischief written into such errant seeing could be seen to work at the expense of the characters’ sense of self, but as aesthetic capital, if played with suitable authenticity on stage. Somewhat similarly to Troilus and Cressida, blind spots of knowledge at moments such as these could enact the ironic variance between the mimetic reality of the characters’ emotional lives and their helplessly pre-scripted status in literary history. Yet, at the same time, blind spots have a way of teetering on the verge between almost alienated subjecthood and subjective emotional lives. For Leontes’s encounter with the grown-up Perdita is not just a hint of incestuous attraction drifting in from the genetic past of the text, but also a deep longing for her to be Hermione in the living moment, just as that later moment of a near-kiss embodies a heartrending desire for the return of love. These oddly disruptive moments of temporal telescoping are little puncta in “the optical unconscious”—to borrow Rosalind Krauss’s term—opening not only into corridors of intertextual and psychosexual memory, but also into well-springs of affective fantasies that are unutterable except through indirection because they are so extreme in their improbability. They fray the surface of the text to make us see both beneath, and beyond, what can be shown.

Blind spots such as these are also, potentially, a generic threshold. The glimpse of the buried knowledge of the father–daughter story in The Winter’s Tale is also the pivot on which genres turn: it contains in a single event the translation of Pandosto’s suicidally tragic passion into a tragi-comedy of restoration, as if allowing desire to transit from repression to wish-fulfilment. “What you know, you know,” says Iago, in an ultimate defiance of evidential epistemology and propelling an unbearable tragedy to its unyielding end in Othello (5.2.303). But the words his line echoes most closely are from Dromio of Ephesus, in the early comedy The Comedy of Errors: “I know what I know” (3.1.11). Are cognitive blind spots—faced or fashioned—generically Janus-faced? Or do they face us with the contrivance of generic structures by pushing the bounds of one genre
towards another? To reclaim a responsible relation with its living material, for example, comedy forges a language that works against the grain of its own conventional underpinnings: witness Hermione’s anguished but sharp question to Leontes when he first erupts with jealous fury: “What is this? Sport?” (The Winter’s Tale 2.1.58); or Beatrice’s seemingly disproportionate and generically out-of-place demand of Benedick, in Much Ado About Nothing, after his friend emotionally kills hers: “Kill Claudio” (Much Ado 4.1.289). In the final moments of the Folio tragedy of Lear, on the other hand, Lear’s blind spot and ours come together as opposed generic affects brush against each other. With the dead Cordelia in his arms, Lear glides from recognition—“Thou’lt come no more” (5.3.281)—to possible misrecognition, dying on these words: “Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there” (5.3.284–85). The range of ways in which directors, actors, editors, and indeed readers want to interpret, and have rendered, these lines mirrors the blind spots in our own imagined vision of tragic ending, tragic magnitude, and tragic knowledge.

The agency of the theatre vis-à-vis textually open and indeterminate moments brings us to the blind spot of embodiment. Shakespeare’s “open silences,” to borrow Philip Maguire’s phrase, become an operative counterpart to what cannot be shown. What cannot be heard, no less than the invisible, directs our attention to the ways in which performance can forestall closure. On occasions, like the errors in or of the text, these mark portals into textual prehistories and reach for information in the “backward and abysm of time.” In North’s Plutarch (1579), Shakespeare’s source text for Coriolanus, Tacita is the Roman goddess of silence: “[Numa] taught the Romans to reverence one of them above all the rest, who was called Tacita, as ye would say Lady Silence.” As with the affective translation of Ovid and Greene in The Winter’s Tale, so here, the narrative source is made to speak its silence on stage. On the triumphant return of Coriolanus to Rome in Act II, his greeting to his wife Virgilia turns the spotlight on her eloquently speechless presence: “My gracious silence, hail!” (2.1.175). Prefiguration helps cast silence as an island of sacrosanct intimacy and tenderness in a clamorous scene; it also makes Virgilia’s inwardness shimmer—intimating its reality but not giving away its substance. The blind spot of the play text, in examples such as this, intimates a model of memory and marks a type of literary interrelation between past and present.

The other kind of non-verbal gap—the one explored by Maguire—consists of features that determine the meanings of speechless moments by drawing on the emotional environment around them. The mutilated
Lavinia in *Titus*, speechless from Act 2 scene 4 onwards, in a different context is the most vivid presence on stage; the theatre has to decide how to mediate, or make known, her inner state through action. But, if this is a moment that can draw both horizontally and vertically (so to speak) from the affective neighborhood in the play as well as from its Ovidian past, the silent Isabella facing the duke’s uneasy speech at the end of Measure for Measure presents a gap in the fabric of the action which can only take shape in performance, out of the extratextual resources of the play itself: I have seen as many interpretations as there are Isabellas on stage. The play text, here, acts as the retinal nerve sheet, where moments of silence are openings for actors and director to fill in, just as the eye—helped by the brain—fills in the cavity where the optic nerve enters with information from the adjoining field. These blind spots, then, create an interface at which choices need to be made. Barthes talks of the distance between crude knowledge and subtle life as one that is “corrected” by literature, just as the brain corrects the visual void of the blind spot. Yet the model is less stable than “correction” when it comes to performance. Such choices in the theatre need to negotiate the mobile boundary between knowledge as lived experience within the fiction and what the text knows, and, in turn, between both of these and what—and how much—the text would have the reader or viewer know. These imbrications create an ecology of knowledges that is never entirely predictable or fixable.

Irreducibility takes several forms. The Other is a foreign country, as so many plays show: witness Othello or The Winter’s Tale, or, in a more metaphysical key, Troilus. But sometimes, so is the self. The inevitable partiality of self-knowledge is a trigger for the undoing of Lear, who “hath ever but slenderly known himself” (1.1.292–93); this in turn makes him blind to the difference between rhetoric and intention, between the effusive Regan or Goneril and the reticent Cordelia. But the unknowability of the self can take stranger forms. Early on in Troilus, Cressida uses the construct of an unknowable interior as a defence against the threatening ability of a world of men to exhaust her, and her identity, through their desire: “Then though my heart’s content firm love doth bear, / Nothing of that shall from mine eyes appear” (1.2.254–55). But in a painful twist, when she does perhaps, finally and desperately, want to make herself known in a letter to Troilus, her intentional self is rendered unknowable as the play stops her mouth; Troilus shreds and scatters the letter, unread, declaring, “Words, words, mere words, no matter from the heart” (5.3.108). The inexpressible becomes hopelessly entangled with the unknowable in a failed act of communication.