

## The Acknowledgement of Love in Sarah Ruhl's Drama

*Thomas Butler*

How can the mourning of a parent have anything to do with romantic love? This question is at the heart of much of Sarah Ruhl's wide-ranging drama. Ruhl, the popular and prolific thirty-nine-year-old American playwright, has written nine original plays that have been produced, not counting her versions of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. In recent years, her *Passion Play* and *In the Next Room or the Vibrator Play* have had runs in several cities and have received critical accolades.<sup>1</sup> As these titles suggest, Ruhl's interests have been so expansive and idiosyncratic that they include both the history of the passion play and the invention of the vibrator as a means of therapy for "hysterical" women. In much of her work, *New Yorker* theatre critic John Lahr perceives a certain "lightness"—an aesthetic term borrowed from Italo Calvino—that comes across, Lahr says, as "the distillation of things into a quick, terse, almost innocent directness."<sup>2</sup> Speaking to Lahr, Ruhl agrees: "Lightness isn't stupidity. It's actually a philosophical and aesthetic viewpoint, deeply serious, and has a kind of wisdom—stepping back to be able to laugh at horrible things even as you're experiencing them." Ruhl's sensibility for lightness allows her works to explore without sentimentality characters' concomitant emotions of grief and vitality.

After her father died in August 1994, Ruhl, at the time a second-year student at Brown University, sought to channel her grief into her writing. She turned to one of her teachers, the playwright Paula Vogel, for help: "I

was having trouble writing, and she found ways to get around that emotionally, to write indirectly about experience—which is what she does in her own work and teaching so beautifully.”<sup>3</sup> The result was Ruhl’s first play, *Dog Play*, which tells the story of a father’s death from the perspective of the family dog. Vogel recalls, “I sat with this short play in my study and sobbed. She had an emotional maturity that no one else in the class had.”<sup>4</sup> The emotional maturity has certainly persisted through Ruhl’s post-university drama and has developed in conjunction with her lightness. It is not surprising, then, that Celia Wren finds in her work “a compassionate humor that often coexists with deep sadness.”<sup>5</sup> Such doubleness of vision characterises Ruhl’s drama. In her imaginative world, love is tinged with death, just as lightness is tinged with grief. In this essay, I detail how these paradoxical relations work in two of her plays, *The Clean House* (2004) and *Eurydice* (2003), and maintain that both plays present a complex understanding of love whereby love demands an acknowledgment, not of the unity of two individuals, but rather of their separateness.

### Finding Dirt in *The Clean House*

The opening stage direction of *The Clean House* reads:

*Mathilde tells a long joke in Portuguese to the audience.*

*We can tell she is telling a joke even though we might not understand the language.*

*She finishes the joke.*

*She exits.*<sup>6</sup>

And so goes the first scene of the play. This opening establishes the spry humour that drives the play as it delves into weighty matters, like marital infidelity and euthanasia. Mathilde is a Brazilian housekeeper for an exacting physician named Lane. Mathilde, however, hates to clean and would much rather spend her days coming up with jokes. By a stroke of good fortune, Lane’s sister Virginia is happy to visit and do Mathilde’s cleaning for her.

Trouble arises, however, when Lane reveals to Virginia and Mathilde that she recently learned that her husband Charles, also a physician, has left her for one of his patients, Ana, whom he met while treating her for breast cancer. Charles tells Lane that Ana is his soulmate and that he has little choice in pursuing such an extraordinary love match. Before long, however, Ana’s health deteriorates, which drives Charles to distraction. He heads off to Alaska in desperation hoping to retrieve a yew tree whose fragrance, he believes, could possibly heal Ana. As he is away, Lane agrees to treat and, soon thereafter, to forgive Ana. Lane by this point has come

some distance from the play's beginning when she priggishly recoils at the prospect of cleaning her own house. She has relinquished her need for control and order, which is nicely exemplified in a scene in which Lane, Ana, Mathilde, and Virginia all eat from a carton of ice-cream and then afterwards fail to clean up, an act of negligence Lane would never have tolerated in the first half of the play. As Ana realises she is dying, she refuses treatment in a hospital because, as she says, "I don't want a relationship with a disease. I want to have a relationship with death" (CH, 96). She then calls on Mathilde, who had told Ana earlier the story of how Mathilde's father killed his wife by telling a joke. Ana asks Mathilde to kill her by telling her the funniest joke in the world. Mathilde agrees, whispers the joke in her ear, and Ana dies laughing.

Three times during the play Mathilde imagines her parents into existence on stage. A scene early in the play begins with Mathilde saying: "this is how I imagine my parents" (CH, 14). The parents then swoop in and dance, laugh, and kiss as Mathilde watches them and, as the stage direction indicates, "*longs for them*" (CH, 15). Mathilde's mother and father died a year earlier, and she still grieves for them. In her parents' final appearance near the end of the play, Mathilde recounts that she was born while her mother was laughing uncontrollably from one of her father's jokes:

My mother said I was the only baby who laughed  
when I came into the world.  
She said I was laughing at my father's joke.  
I laughed to take in the air.  
I took in some air, and then I cried. (109)

This juxtaposition of laughing and crying illuminates a crux of this play. The stage direction after Mathilde's speech calls for her to look at her parents, prompting "[a] *moment of completion between them*" (CH, 109). Mathilde then looks at the audience and says, "I think maybe heaven is a sea of untranslatable jokes. Only everyone is laughing" (CH, 109). Dressed in black mourning garb throughout the play, Mathilde constantly readies herself for the perfect joke, which she ultimately discovers and tells to kill Ana in an act of mercy. Death, love, mourning, and humour converge at the play's end with a hopeful and richly layered suggestiveness.

When Charles and Ana enter for the first time, the audience immediately sees that their roles have been doublecast as Mathilde's parents. Ruhl comments in her introductory notes: "It is important that Ana and Charles play Mathilde's mother and father in Act 1. How much can they create, without speaking, a sense of memory and longing, through silence, gesture and dance? Ana's transformation at the very end of the play should

create a full circle for Mathilde, from the dead to the living and back again" (CH, 8). Charles and Ana's love recalls the love Mathilde's parents shared. For Mathilde, Charles and Ana's relationship is marked by her parents' love and death: Charles and Ana are like a palimpsest through which her parents can appear.

It is clear, then, that romantic love exists in the world of *The Clean House* and that it is ineluctably tinged with death. When Charles puts forth his explanation of his love affair, he is hard to bear: "Lane. Something very objective happened to me. It's as though I suddenly tested positive for a genetic disease that I've had all along. *Ana has been in my genetic code*" (CH, 62). Though he undoubtedly sounds self-satisfied, Charles is, nonetheless, genuine. Ruhl admitted in an interview,

I believe in the possibility of true love—I think. But there's not much use in writing about it. Then we'd just be jealous of the people on stage. It's like Mathilda's [*sic*] view of her parents' love ...: you can only see it in flashback. You can only see it in a dance. You can't ever hear them speaking: what would those people have to say that we'd want to listen to? I think those states are possible but hard to look at artistically. I end up writing about doomed love.<sup>7</sup>

Ruhl's point seems to be that any explicit profession of love will come up short in theatre, as is clear in Charles' flatfooted, cliché-ridden explanation of his affair.

However, Ruhl is not particularly interested in love relationships that fail; rather, she is intent on examining how love survives once detached from romantic naïveté. In *The Clean House*, Charles and Ana's romantic love does not survive, but the play offers another form of love that is less tidy but more sustaining. Just after Lane imagines Charles and Ana dancing and kissing (which the characters do on stage, just as Mathilde's parents did in an earlier scene), Mathilde questions the equation of happiness and love:

Mathilde: They look happy.

Lane: Yes.

Mathilde: People imagine that people who are in love are happy.

Lane: Yes.

Mathilde: That is why, in your country, people kill themselves on Valentine's Day.

Lane: Yes.

Mathilde: Love isn't clean like that. It's dirty. Like a good joke. Do you want to hear a joke? (*CH*, 47)

Because of her perspective on her parents' relationship, Mathilde surely recognises and admires romantic love, but, because of her parents' deaths, for her, love is always coloured by mortality. Mathilde recognises that it is misguided to assume that love is a happy experience. Rather, love is messy and resists categorisation, particularly the categories singled out on Valentine's Day cards. If clean love is dreamy, romantic attraction, dirty love, as Mathilde conceives of it, upends an individual's desire to order experience and, concomitantly, thwarts expression. This distinction between different kinds of love has much in common with a distinction Hans-Georg Gadamer finds in his account of two different forms of experience expressed in the German words *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. Drawing on the hermeneutic tradition of Dilthey and Husserl, Gadamer notes that experience as *Erlebnis* is conceived of as taking place within the context of a whole: "If something is called or considered an *Erlebnis*, that means it is rounded into the unity of a significant whole."<sup>8</sup> The concept gains prominence in biographical writings whereby events in someone's life make sense only in the context of the person's whole life; therefore, Gadamer says, "*Erlebnis*, as a unit of meaning, is teleological."<sup>9</sup> It can be grasped and ordered within a larger framework of understanding.

Gadamer contrasts this sense of experience with *Erfahrung*, which, in his work, approximates hermeneutic experience, including the reading of literature. Unlike *Erlebnis*, *Erfahrung* charts a course amid failed expectations and fragments rather than an efficacious unity. Experience as *Erfahrung* does not grant a person the ability to conceptualize or even to express what he or she is going through. This kind of experience is, therefore, "painful and disagreeable" and so marked by a "fundamental negativity."<sup>10</sup> This negativity bars conceptualisation but opens an individual to further experience: "a person who is called experienced has become so not only *through* experiences but is also open *to* new experiences."<sup>11</sup> *Erfahrung* is not teleological like *Erlebnis*; rather, it constantly undercuts what we may take to be the end or the meaning of the experience. The only meaning that we can extract from the experience is an awareness of our "finiteness."<sup>12</sup>

Clean love resembles *Erlebnis* as it happens within the parameters of understanding and seeks expression in language, whereas dirty love, the kind of love Ruhl is more interested in, resembles a less certain form of experience, *Erfahrung*. Importantly, dirty love as *Erfahrung* is not limited to erotic love. In fact, in the play, it manifests itself most fully in the unlikely and patently unerotic relationship the four women cultivate in the second half of the play. Where clean love easily finds expression in clichés (recall

Charles' speech to Lane about his love of Ana: "*Ana has been in my genetic code*"), dirty love, an experience of finitude, works at the limits of expressivity. For example, when Lane is treating Ana, they have a candid, unremarkable conversation that masks their love for each other:

Ana: How did you and Charles fall in love?

Lane: He didn't tell you?

Ana: No.

Lane: Oh. Well, we were in medical school together. We were anatomy partners. We fell in love over a dead body.

*They look at each other.*

*Lane forgives Ana.*

Ana: Want an apple?

Lane: Sure. (CH, 93)

The simple question—"Want an apple?"—illustrates that dirty love exists at a remove from rhetorical flourish and posturing. Dirty love evades language and dramatic representation because it exceeds the conceptual limits language necessarily imposes in order to communicate meaning.<sup>13</sup> It offers, as Gadamer says of *Erfahrung*, insight rather than knowledge; that is, it is experienced but resists conversion into a knowable and expressible fact.<sup>14</sup> In this scene of *The Clean House*, Ruhl presents a trace of inexpressible love experienced by Ana and Lane through a simple, ordinary gesture, which is as far as representation can go when dealing with an untidy experience of love.

*The Clean House* presents two kinds of love and shows the different problems of each. Clean love comes up short because it is difficult to articulate one's feelings of love without resorting to clichés that fail to adequately express one's feelings. Dirty love, in contrast, resists expression in language, in part because it is characterised by experiences that entirely rebuff categorisation. How could anyone possibly articulate the love Lane feels as she forgives her husband's lover? Such an experience of love happens in the course of ordinary life. It is the territory that Stanley Cavell often examines in his vigorous defence of ordinary experience, in contrast to conceptualised experience. At one point, he proposes a style of interpretation called "the uneventful" that would attend to "the everyday, the common, the low, the near; you may call it an empirical interpretation, still pre-philosophical."<sup>15</sup> Once preserved from abstraction, such experience is tinged by mortality. When Ana says she wants to have "a relationship with

death,” she gets a relationship of love that is attuned to her and each of the characters’ mortality. Here a problem with clean love comes into focus: it cannot admit death. Charles flees when Ana’s condition worsens. She laments, “I want him to be a nurse and he wants to be an explorer” (*CH*, 98). In place of Charles, Mathilde nurses Ana to her death:

Ana: I would like you to kill me with a joke.

Mathilde: I don’t want to kill you.

I like you.

Ana: If you like me, help me. (*CH*, 101–2)

Mathilde agrees to meet Ana’s request, which the play presents unequivocally as an act of compassion:

*The lights change.*

*Music.*

*Mathilde whispers a joke into Ana’s ear.*

*We don’t hear it.*

*We hear sublime music instead.*

*A subtitle projects: The Funniest Joke in the World.*

*Ana laughs and laughs.*

*Ana collapses.*

*Mathilde kneels beside her.*

*Mathilde wails. (CH, 105–6)*

Mathilde accepts that love demands that individuals acknowledge death or, more generally, separation, as essential to all love relationships. An absence is at the heart of this kind of love: it comes across both through a failed expressivity and through an acknowledgment of mortality. Yet the characters’ acceptance of these obstacles to fullness is precisely and paradoxically what allows them to love fully. In his book *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds*, Zygmunt Bauman argues that love relations in contemporary society are marked by the paradoxical desires for security and freedom, a condition he describes as “liquid.” He claims, “All love struggles to bury the sources of its precariousness and suspense; but if it succeeds, it quickly starts wilting—and fades. Eros is possessed by the ghost of Thanatos which no magic incantations can exorcise.”<sup>16</sup> It is, I am arguing, this possession—death at the centre of love—that Ruhl’s drama examines.

### The Two Doomed Loves of *Eurydice*

In October 2006, Dinitia Smith wrote in *The New York Times*: “Jockeys have the Triple Crown, hockey players have the three-goal hat trick, but there is no equivalent in the theatre for what has been happening to Sarah Ruhl lately.”<sup>17</sup> Smith is referring to the well-timed opening of *The Clean House* at New York’s Lincoln Center, the success of *Eurydice* at the Yale Repertory Theatre, and the announcement of Ruhl’s MacArthur award. *Eurydice* premiered at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre in 2004, ran at the Yale Rep. in 2006, and then opened in New York in 2007. In his review of the Yale Rep. production, described as “devastatingly lovely—and just plain devastating,” Charles Isherwood asserts, “*Eurydice* is ultimately about the painful choice that comes with the passing of joys and pleasures: whether to remember, in sadness, or to forget, and achieve a calm but emptier equilibrium.”<sup>18</sup> Also at the core of this play, which Ruhl dedicated to her father, is the matter of how death and loss affect romantic love. *The Clean House* examines a kind of non-romantic love capable of acknowledging mortality, but it stops short of inquiring into whether mortality is squarely incompatible with dreamy, Orphic love. To get at this issue, Ruhl turns to the myth of Eurydice and Orpheus. According to the myth, soon after Eurydice and Orpheus are married, Eurydice is bitten by a snake and dies. Her grieving husband descends to the underworld to retrieve her. He is granted permission to lead her back to earthly life so long as he does not turn to look at her as they climb to the upper world. Near the threshold, Orpheus steals a glance at his trailing wife, and, just as quickly, Eurydice plunges back to the underworld. And, alas, they are forever separated.<sup>19</sup>

Traditional accounts of the myth tend to emphasise Orpheus’s bravery and impatient desire. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, for example, Orpheus’s boldness and gallantry are central: “Up the sloping path, through the mute silence they made their way, up the steep dark track, wrapped in impenetrable gloom, till they had almost reached the surface of the earth. Here, anxious in case his wife’s strength be failing and eager to see her, the lover looked behind him, and straightway Eurydice slipped back into the depths.”<sup>20</sup> Ovid says little more about Eurydice than that she felt pain in her heel from her fatal snake-bite as she waited for her husband to rescue her. The tendency to downplay Eurydice caught Ruhl’s attention: “I’d seen so many beautiful retellings from Cocteau to *Black Orpheus*, but rarely does anyone look at Eurydice’s experience. I always found that troubling—she’s the one who dies and takes a journey before Orpheus, but we don’t really see her experience.”<sup>21</sup> Ruhl notes one exception: Rilke’s poem “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.” In this poem, Eurydice is described as “uncertain, gentle, and without impatience” as she waits for Orpheus.<sup>22</sup> Death, surprisingly,

hasn't been so bad for Eurydice:

Being dead

Filled her beyond fulfillment. Like a fruit  
Suffused with its own mystery and sweetness,  
She was filled with her vast death, which was so new,  
She could not understand that it had happened.<sup>23</sup>

In Ruhl's play, Eurydice gains depth and complexity in her "vast death" through her encounter with her father who already resides in the underworld.

The emotional core of this play centres on Eurydice's choice: should she go with Orpheus and lose her father, or should she stay with her father and lose Orpheus? In traditional accounts of the myth, there really is not much of a choice for Eurydice: of course, she should follow Orpheus.<sup>24</sup> But Ruhl casts a sceptical eye on Orpheus and Eurydice's relationship. The play begins in a self-conscious, pseudo-mythic manner as it introduces Orpheus and Eurydice when they are young, in love, and still in the land of the living:

Eurydice: All those birds? Thank you.

*He nods. They make a quarter turn and he makes a sweeping gesture, indicating an invisible sea.*

And—the sea! For me? When?

*Orpheus opens his hands.*

Now? It's mine already?

*Orpheus nods.*

Wow. (CH, 333)

Eurydice's "Wow" tempers the seriousness of this mythic courtship, and, to a similar effect, Ruhl, in her "Notes," instructs Eurydice and Orpheus to "resist the temptation to be 'classical'" (CH, 332). Nonetheless, despite the scene's abundant lightness, this courtship is a legendary example of a great love. As Ruhl presents it, Eurydice and Orpheus's love is innocent and marked by a desire to come together in a joyous, everlasting union, the kind Aristophanes imagines in Plato's *Symposium*.<sup>25</sup> This desire is clearest when Orpheus, the composer of "the most beautiful music in the world," explains: "I'm going to make each strand of your hair into an instrument. Your hair will stand on end as it plays my music and become a hair orches-

tra. It will fly you up into the sky" (CH, 352 and 339). According to Orpheus's dreamy vision, the two lovers will come together, like a musician and an instrument, to create beautiful music. As sincere as Orpheus may be, his understanding of love is analogous to Charles's love of Ana in *The Clean House*. Both Orpheus and Charles articulate a vision of what I called earlier clean love: romantic love that relies on tired imagery that tries to express the passionate attraction between two people.

Eurydice experiences a very different but equally compelling form of love with her father in the underworld. At first, she neither recognises him nor has the ability to use language. The father, on the other hand, immediately recognises her and can speak and read. He attempts to explain to Eurydice who he is after it becomes clear she does not know the word "father":

Father: When you were alive, I was your tree.

Eurydice: My tree! Yes, the tall one in the backyard! I used to sit all day in its shade!

*She sits at the feet of her father.*

Ah—there—shade! (CH, 364)

From this point on, Eurydice recognises him as the gentle, nurturing parent she knew on earth. One of the more moving scenes in the play comes soon after Eurydice enters the underworld and learns that it is not furnished with rooms. Her father, eager to provide for his daughter, adroitly builds a room for her with the scant supplies available to him in the underworld:

*The Father creates a room out of string for Eurydice.*

*He makes four walls and a door out of string.*

*Time passes.*

*It takes time to build a room out of string.*

*Eurydice observes the underworld.*

*There isn't much to observe.*

*She plays hop-scotch without chalk.*

*Every so often,*

*The Father looks at her,*

*Happy to see her,*

*while he makes her room out of string.*

*She looks back at him, polite. (CH, 367)*

Eurydice clearly comes across as a young child. In succeeding scenes, the father teaches Eurydice vocabulary and tells her stories from his childhood.<sup>26</sup> Where the scenes with Eurydice and Orpheus were marked by fanciful love, the scenes with Eurydice and her father are marked by nostalgia. Ruhl is certainly not discounting the relationship between Eurydice and her father; indeed, they offer some of the play's most poignant moments. But the play suggests that a relationship defined by nostalgia is ultimately unsustainable. Eurydice and her father cannot live in the present assuming their roles from the halcyon days of Eurydice's childhood. When Orpheus comes to retrieve Eurydice, her father gives her his blessing to go off with Orpheus:

Father: Do you want to go with him?

Eurydice: Yes, of course!

Oh—you'll be lonely, won't you?

Father: No, no. You should go to your husband. You should have grandchildren. You'll all come down and meet me one day. (CH, 392)

Eurydice is not convinced she should leave her father. Indeed, the script suggests she chooses to stay with her father rather than leave with Orpheus.

*Eurydice follows him [Orpheus] with precision, one step for every step he takes.*

*She makes a decision. She increases her pace.*

*She takes two steps for every step that Orpheus takes.*

*She catches up to him. (CH, 396)*

And she says, "Orpheus?" Why would she get his attention like this if not to get him to turn around? Orpheus is flabbergasted: "why'd you have to say my name—Eurydice—" (CH, 398). That she called for him as a question suggests how tentative her decision was. Tentatively but irrevocably, Eurydice chooses nostalgic love over romantic love.

Eurydice's hope of enjoying her father's company in a fantasy of childhood happiness is, however, immediately dashed when she returns to the underworld to discover that her father has dipped himself in the river of forgetfulness. Thus, they are unable to connect. She desperately tries to find a way to communicate: "Listen. I'll teach you the words. Then we'll know each other again. Ready? We'll start with my name. Eurydice. E, U, R, ..." (CH, 404). Nothing seems to work; all she can do is hold her father.

Would things have been much better had Eurydice chosen to follow

Orpheus out of the underworld? It's uncertain. At the end of the play, Eurydice is bracing to marry the insufferable Lord of the Underworld after she dips herself in the river and forgets her lost loves. Ruhl, however, refuses to offer romantic love as an unproblematic alternative to nostalgic love. Ultimately, the play suggests that neither form of love can flourish in the world. Both demand a kind of unsustainable unity between individuals in the case of romantic love and between past and present in the case of nostalgic love.

### Acknowledging Another Love

Midway through the play, Orpheus offers a gift to his bookish wife who by now has connected warmly with her father:

*Orpheus holds the Collected Works of Shakespeare with a long string attached.*

*He drops it slowly to the ground. (CH, 376)*

Eurydice has no idea what the book could possibly be. "*She is wary of it, as though it might bite her*" (CH, 376). After she throws it in frustration, her father picks it up, opens it, and reads a passage from *King Lear*:

We two alone will sing like birds in a cage.

When thou dost ask my blessing, I'll kneel down

And ask of thee forgiveness; so we'll live,

And pray and sing ... (CH, 377)

This is part of Lear's speech to his daughter Cordelia at the beginning of the final scene of *King Lear* just before Edmund sends them off to prison. These are Lear's last words to Cordelia before Edmund's servants kill her off stage. These words, then, carry extra weight when Eurydice's father speaks them just before she heads off with Orpheus.

A closer look at *King Lear* and, in particular, Stanley Cavell's well-known reading of it offers us a way to identify a kind of love *Eurydice* endorses in the wake of Eurydice's two lost loves. For Cavell, *King Lear* is a play that documents the lengths people go to avoid love from others. They are motivated to avoid love, Cavell says, because the act of acknowledging such love demands a potentially painful recognition of one's own vulnerability. Crucial to Cavell's understanding of the play is a distinction he makes between knowing and acknowledging; things in the world lend themselves to cognitive knowledge, but people upend the categories a person uses to conceptually place things in the world.<sup>27</sup> Gerald Bruns explains in his essay

on Cavell: "At all events acknowledgment means openness and acceptance of the other as such, that is, as other, as that which resists every effort on my part to reduce it to something containable within the legislation of my concepts. The other is excessive with respect to this legislation."<sup>28</sup> *King Lear*, Cavell's argument goes, dramatises the difficulty people have in acknowledging others as individuals and not as whatever may accord with their cognitive grasp of them.<sup>29</sup>

This conflict between knowing and acknowledging is central to the first scene of the play, the famous love test. Lear convenes his court to witness his three daughters' displays of love for him as he divides his kingdom. "Lear knows it is a bribe he offers, and—part of him anyway—wants exactly what a bribe can buy: (1) false love and (2) a public expression of love. That is, he wants something he does not have to return *in kind*, something which a division of his property fully pays for."<sup>30</sup> Cordelia, of course, foils the pageantry by refusing to cheapen her love to satisfy Lear's pomp. Cavell maintains that Cordelia is not being impudent in her refusal to play Lear's game. Instead, her deep and genuine love has no place in a spectacle demanding false love. Lear needs false love because he is unable to acknowledge real love, that is, love that upends formulaic expectations.

Cavell argues that even in the final scene of the play Lear is still unable to acknowledge Cordelia's love. Lear's speech, which Eurydice's father reads, is Lear's fantasy of retreating from the world with his daughter where, importantly for Cavell, they would be unseen and unrecognised by the rest of the world. "His tone is not: We shall love *even though* we are in prison; but: Because we are hidden together we can love. He has come to accept his love, not by making room in the world for it, but by denying its relevance to the world. He does not renounce the world in going to prison, but flees from it, to earthly pleasure."<sup>31</sup> Love, for Lear, can only take the form of a fantasy cut off from life. Cavell stresses that Lear does not act out of senility or malice; rather, his inability to acknowledge love is commonplace and is not limited to the world of the play: "For some spirits, to be loved knowing you cannot return that love is the most radical of psychic tortures."<sup>32</sup>

Unable to acknowledge Cordelia as a separate individual alive in the world, Lear resorts to proposing his fantasy of their union apart from the world. Notice, for example, that he never inquires about Cordelia's husband, whom he would presumably take to be an encumbrance from the real world. Lear's vision has the two removed from the world joining together in a harmonious duet: "We two alone will sing like birds i'th'cage."<sup>33</sup> As the play makes abundantly clear, such a fantasy is impossible to fulfil.

What is the alternative? If a love-relation based on unity and removal

from the world is doomed, a relation that acknowledges the separateness of each individual in the world may fare better. Cavell arrives at this suggestion after thinking about a spectator's experience of watching the play in a theatre. Though spectators are physically separated from the characters on stage, they can put themselves in "their *present*."<sup>34</sup> The act of placing oneself in the same present as the characters demands that one acknowledge one's vulnerability: "I am hidden and silent. In a word, that there is a point at which I am helpless before the acting and suffering of others."<sup>35</sup> Cavell's claim is that the experience of watching or reading a play like *King Lear* is an experience analogous to love: "what is revealed is my separateness from what is happening to them [the characters]; that I am I, and here. It is only in this perception of them as separate from me that I make them present. That I make them *other* and face them."<sup>36</sup> Lear's problem throughout the play is that he is unable to face Cordelia, to see her as someone other than his projection of her, and to open himself to her love for him.

Following Cavell's reading of *King Lear*, I would like to suggest that what Eurydice and Cordelia have in common is an unsustainable—albeit heart-rending—relationship with their fathers that avoids the acknowledgment of an inexpressible (or, in Mathilde's sense, dirty) love. Both plays end with the dashed fantasy of an otherworldly union. But in dashing this fantasy, the plays open the way for a more enduring love, which always runs afoul of adequate representation. Cavell says of Cordelia: "All her words are words of love; to love is all she knows how to do. That is her problem, and at the cause of the tragedy of *King Lear*."<sup>37</sup> Certainly, part of Cordelia's problem in the opening scene is that it is impossible for her to speak her love truly in the theatrical setting her father has set up. After her sisters claim to love Lear above all else, Cordelia is speechless:

The truth is, she *could* not flatter; not because she was too proud or too principled, though these might have been the reasons, for a different character; but because nothing she could have done would have *been flattery*—at best it would have been *dissembled flattery*. There is no convention for what Cordelia was asked to do. It is that Goneril and Regan have taken the words out of her mouth, but that here she cannot say them, because for her they are true ("Dearer than eye-sight, space and liberty"). She is not disgusted by her sisters' flattery (it's nothing new); but heartbroken at hearing the words she wishes she were in a position to say.<sup>38</sup>

The setting of this scene—Lear's court, filled with spectators—serves to highlight the impossibility of representing love in theatre. Cordelia is aware

of this problem when she expresses her initial strategy to deal with Lear's love test: "What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent."<sup>39</sup>

In Ruhl's drama, too, we can observe an acknowledgment of a love that skirts expressivity. First, as we have seen, love articulated as visions of a union of individuals fails:

Charles: *Ana has been in my genetic code. (CH, 62)*

\*\*\*\*\*

Orpheus: Your hair will stand on end as it plays my music and becomes a hair orchestra. (*CH, 339*)

\*\*\*\*\*

Father: We two alone will sing like birds in the cage. (*CH, 377*)

What counts as a more powerful love, on the other hand, evades representation. Recall the scene, cited earlier, in *The Clean House* when Lane forgives Ana:

*They look at each other.*

*Lane forgives Ana.*

Ana: Want an apple?

Lane: Sure. (*CH, 93*)

In the context of Lear's avoidance of being seen, Lane and Ana's mutual recognition here is significant. They see each other as separate from themselves and follow Cordelia's advice—"Love, and be silent."

*Eurydice* is even more sceptical than *The Clean House* of the possibility of expressing love. The two love-relations—Eurydice and Orpheus, and Eurydice and her father—are doomed. But each is unsustainable because of its escapist predilection (the opening scene of the play ends with Eurydice and Orpheus racing from the beach—from grounded reality—to the sea). What's missing in these relationships is an acknowledgment of the world, which includes other people and other relationships. Just as Lear never asks Cordelia about her husband, Orpheus never asks Eurydice about her father. The play suggests that if love is going to survive, it needs to be open to and affected by other love relations, particularly in this case relations with the dead. Derek Goldman, director of a 2009 production of *Eurydice*, says: "Sarah [Ruhl's] faith [is] in the idea of death as not an ending but as a space in which a relationship that may not feel resolved can continue to unfold. That's the gesture of this underworld even if it's a temporary space that has to be left in the end."<sup>40</sup> Similarly, Vogel comments on the centrality of death to Ruhl's theatrical vision: "Sarah is going back to an

older time when theatre was designed to be a conversation between the actor and the audience about human mortality."<sup>41</sup> Ruhl's plays insist that an acknowledgment of mortality is essential for love relations, because through such an acknowledgment individuals recognise their vulnerability and ultimately the weakness of conceptions of love based on unity.

The idea is that death—understood in part as an acute awareness of the separation between individuals—can mark love productively in this world. A problem with the union of two individuals is that one could never be fully at one with another person at the expense of all others. Cordelia is right again:

Happily, when I shall wed,  
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry  
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.  
Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,  
To love my father all.<sup>42</sup>

True love is incomplete and involves an acknowledgment that the other, the beloved, cannot be contained by one's identity or, more specifically, by one's idea of him or her. Love, according to this definition, is a failure and will disappoint Orpheus and his romantic descendants: for love to exist, the beloved must always be other to oneself.

Symbolically, then, *Eurydice* suggests that death haunts love. Just as Eurydice's mourning of her beloved father would inflect any other love-relationship she has, loss or incompleteness inflects any representation of love. The end of *Eurydice*, despite its poignancy, does not suggest that love is impossible; rather, it opens a way for a kind of love that does not presume self-sufficiency. What would love tinged by mourning look like? Ruhl does not attempt to answer that question apart from indicating that it would acknowledge the otherness of each of the lovers and welcome the memory or, indeed, the mourning of those loved in the past.

*Eastern Kentucky University*  
*tom.butler@eku.edu*

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In a review of Ruhl's play *Stage Kiss* (2011), John Lahr notes Ruhl's popularity: "In the past year alone, two hundred and forty-four individual productions of her plays were performed around the country [the U.S.], and there are currently plans for

eighteen foreign productions, in twelve languages" ("Mouth to Mouth," *The New Yorker* (May 30, 2011): 84). As often as her plays have been performed, they have received little critical attention. James Al-Shama has, to my knowledge, written the only critical work on Ruhl; see his: *Sarah Ruhl: A Critical Study of the Plays* (McFarland, 2011). Apart from this book, criticism of Ruhl has primarily taken the form of journalistic reviews of productions.

<sup>2</sup> John Lahr, "Surreal Life: The Plays of Sarah Ruhl," *The New Yorker* (March 17, 2008),

[http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2008/03/17/080317crat\\_atlarge\\_lahr](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2008/03/17/080317crat_atlarge_lahr)

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Ruhl, Interview by Wendy Weckwerth, "More Invisible Terrains," *Theater* 34, no. 2 (2004): 35.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Lahr, "Surreal Life."

<sup>5</sup> Cecilia Wren, "The Golden Ruhl," *American Theatre* Oct 2005. <http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/oct05/ruhl.cfm>

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Ruhl, *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), 9. All references to this work will follow parenthetically in-text with the abbreviation *CH*.

<sup>7</sup> Ruhl, "More Invisible Terrains," 34.

<sup>8</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1994), 67.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 355.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.

<sup>13</sup> This predicament is similar to the one Maurice Blanchot describes in his analysis of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. For Blanchot, Eurydice represents a point of origin or, in Blanchot's idiom, "the other night" of artistic inspiration that cannot be translated into the everyday, daylight world where language operates. Art, for Blanchot, is always a failure, because it is unable to bring forth what exceeds expressivity:

The essential night which follows Orpheus—before the careless look—the sacred night which he holds enthralled in the fascination of his song and which is at that point kept within the limits and the measured space of the song, is certainly richer, more august, than the empty futility which it becomes after Orpheus looks back.

Maurice Blanchot, *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader: Fiction & Literary Essays*, ed. George Quasha (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1998, 441).

All is not lost for art, however; Blanchot says art in the world retains a trace of "the sacred," which is boundless in the underworld.

<sup>14</sup> Gadamer relates *Erfahrung* to Greek tragedy and, in particular, to the concept of *pathei mathos*, learning through suffering. "What a man has to learn through suffering is not this or that particular thing, but insight into the limitations of humanity, into the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine." Gadamer,

*Truth and Method*, 357.

- <sup>15</sup> Stanley Cavell, "The Ordinary as the Uneventful," *The Cavell Reader*, ed. Stephen Mulhall (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996): 258.
- <sup>16</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love: On the Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 8.
- <sup>17</sup> Danitia Smith, "Playwright's Subjects: Greek Myth to Vibrators," *The New York Times* 14 (October 2006), <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/14/theater/14ruhl.html>
- <sup>18</sup> Charles Isherwood, "A Comic Impudence Softens a Tale of Loss," *The New York Times* 3 (October 2006), <http://theater.nytimes.com/2006/10/03/theater/reviews/03eury.html?pagewanted=all>
- <sup>19</sup> Bullfinch's classic account of the myth is a touchstone:

Eurydice, shortly after her marriage, while wandering with the nymphs, her companions, was seen by the shepherd Aristaeus, who was struck by her beauty and made advances to her. She fled, and in flying trod upon a snake in the grass, was bitten in the foot, and died. Orpheus sang his grief to all who breathed the upper air, both gods and men, and finding it all un-availing resolved to seek his wife in the regions of the dead.... Eurydice was called. She came from among the new-arrived ghosts, limping with her wounded foot. Orpheus was permitted to take her away with him on one condition, that he should not turn around to look at her till they should have reached the upper air. Under this condition they proceeded on their way, he leading, she following, through passages dark and steep, in total silence, till they had nearly reached the outlet into the cheerful upper world, when Orpheus, in a moment of forgetfulness, to assure himself that she was still following, cast a glance behind him, when instantly she was borne away.

Thomas Bulfinch, *Bulfinch's Mythology* (New York: The Modern Library, 1934), 151–52.

- <sup>20</sup> Ovid, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, trans. Mary M. Innes (New York: Penguin, 1955), 226.
- <sup>21</sup> Ruhl, "More Invisible Terrains," 30.
- <sup>22</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Viking, 1989), 51.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 51.
- <sup>24</sup> The ancient accounts of the myth give Eurydice little agency. Apollodorus, for example, presents the rescue as a deal strictly between Orpheus and Pluto: "And when his wife Eurydice died, bitten by a snake, he went down to Hades, being fain to bring her up, and he persuaded Pluto to send her up." Apollodorus, *The Library*, trans. J.G. Frazer (The Theoi Classical E-Texts Library), <http://www.theoi.com/Text/Apollodorus1.html>.
- <sup>25</sup> According to his account of love, each human being was originally bound to another. Zeus split each bound pair into two individuals, which gave birth to desire: each individual sought to find his or her missing half. Thus, Aristophanes con-

cludes, "The reason is that this is our original natural state and we used to be whole creatures: 'love' is the name for the desire and pursuit of wholeness" (26). Further: "our human race can only achieve happiness if love reaches its conclusion, and each of us finds his loved one and restores his original nature." Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Christopher Gill (New York: Penguin, 1999), 26–27.

<sup>26</sup> John Lahr reports that the vocabulary lesson and even the specific words ("ostracize," "peripatetic," and "defunct") were tributes to Ruhl's own father, Patrick: "Each Saturday, from the time Ruhl was five, Patrick took his daughters to the Walker Bros. Original Pancake House for breakfast and taught them a new word, along with its etymology." Lahr, "Surreal Life."

<sup>27</sup> Cavell establishes this difference between knowing and acknowledging in his early work *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969), in which his essay on *King Lear* originally appeared. Acknowledgment adds ethical force to knowledge: "Acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge. (Goes beyond not, so to speak, in the order of knowledge, but in its requirement that I *do* something or reveal something on the basis of that knowledge.)" Cavell, "Knowing and Acknowledging," *The Cavell Reader*, ed. Stephen Mulhall (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 63.

<sup>28</sup> Gerald L. Bruns, *Tragic Thoughts at the End of Philosophy: Language, Literature, and Ethical Theory* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 184.

<sup>29</sup> "What we need is not rebirth, or salvation, but the courage, or plain prudence, to see and to stop. To abdicate." That is, we need to abdicate the certainty of our knowledge and to acknowledge people and things as they are, irrespective of our cognitive designs on them. Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 81.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 61. An important part of Cavell's essay, which I cannot treat fully here, examines how *Lear*'s failure of acknowledgment carries over to readers of the play. Cavell points to several questions in the play that have consistently baffled readers over the years: why, for example, does Edgar wait on revealing himself to his blind father, or why does Goneril send Gloucester to Dover? The answers are obvious, Cavell says (Edgar avoids recognition as *Lear* does, and Goneril confuses Gloucester with *Lear*), and in failing to see them "we are implicated in the failures we are witnessing; we share the responsibility for tragedy." Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 54.

<sup>33</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. Grace Ioppolo (New York: Norton, 2008), 5.3.9.

<sup>34</sup> Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 108.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>39</sup> Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.1.60.

<sup>40</sup> Jane Horwitz, "Avoiding a Sentimental World in *Eurydice*," *The Washington Post* 4 (Feb 2009), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2009/02/03/AR2009020303294.html>

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Lawrence Goodman, "Playwright Laureate of Grief," *Brown Alumni Magazine* (March-April 2007), <http://www.brownalumnimagazine.com/content/view/288/40/>

<sup>42</sup> Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.1.98–102.