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Abstract title:

'Lives that have stories': Cavell and the surprise of Shakespeare's sonnets

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In *Philosophy the Day After Tomorrow* (2006), Stanley Cavell comments briefly on Shakespeare's sonnets. This paper expands on Cavell's suggestion that one may find in these poems 'the modern discovery of what philosophy calls the problem of the other', to read of a range of the sonnets, drawing also on the work of Joel Fineman and Helen Vendler. Discussion will centre on surprise; Shakespeare's disruption of the sonnet sequence as a literary form of praise and (related to this) the pleasure and difficulty in realising the existence, and complexity, of other people. The emphasis on 'stories' in Cavell's account is central; that is, story as a means to understanding and one that allows for the unexpected, sudden emotion, or an acknowledgement of new ideas. Through this reading, the paper offers thoughts on literary criticism's task of 'finding lives in [Shakespeare's] words' and, drawing also on the work of Cora Diamond, suggests how philosophy might accommodate 'lives that have stories'.