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'Occasionally an idea comes along that clarifies complicated matters and suggests approaches for managing fundamental problems in higher education. Student engagement is one of those ideas' (Kuh 2014, 313).

This article takes issue with George Kuh's assertion that current discussions of the complex matter of student engagement, clarify the problem. Indeed, recent research suggests that the opposite may be true, and that attempts to define 'student engagement' have led to understandings that simply illustrate its diversity, at the expense of gaining clarification. Some brief examples serve to illustrate the issue here. One definition runs as follows: 'In education, student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning, or being taught' (Glossary of Educational Reform[1]). But this fails to capture all aspects of the term, and the Glossary then further breaks down student engagement into intellectual, emotional, behavioural, physical, social, and cultural engagement. Ella Kahu's (2013) work similarly resorts to providing categories to manage the inherent complexities. In attempting to reach a clear understanding of student engagement, she argues that there are behavioural, psychological, socio-cultural, and holistic perspectives at play. Government and regulatory agencies find similar difficulty in providing a clear definition. The Quality Assurance Agency for Scotland, for example, identifies five elements needed for student engagement: students feeling part of a supportive institution; students being engaged in their learning; students working with the institution to shape the direction of learning; students engaging in the formal mechanisms of quality and governance; and students influencing their experience at a national level (QAA Scotland 2011). But outside of Scotland, The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) gives a rather different emphasis

to student engagement, claiming that it is 'all about involving and empowering students in the process of shaping the student learning experience'.[2] The emphasis is not on the student-as-engaged-learner, but on the student-as-engaged-partner with the university: influencing decision-making; having opinions heard; ensuring that students are at the heart of the processes of higher education; and on empowering students to act as the university's critical friend. The picture is no clearer internationally. In the United States, the National Survey of Student Engagement[3] collects data on ten 'engagement indicators' across the four themes of academic challenge, learning with peers, experiences with the faculty, and the campus environment.

Given the strength of the discourses of student engagement in the contemporary university (illustrated in the often repeated slogan, 'You said…we did'), we might say that student engagement has become almost rhizomatic as a global phenomenon in higher education. It is used by governments as a measure of institutional performance, by universities as a proxy for quality, and by academics who vaunt the latest innovations in engaging methods of teaching and learning. Its appeal is also illustrated in the attention given to it in the research literature. Universities, keen to demonstrate that their courses are engaging, and that the student themselves are highly engaged learners, look for the latest tools to assess levels of engagement (Lane and Harris 2015). To keep the engagement statistics rising, and their university near the top of the league tables, institutions also seek to understand the factors negatively affecting student engagement, so that they can minimize or eradicate them (Groves et al. 2015). And high levels of engagement are vital, since the link between engagement and attainment is emphasized over and above other variables. Student engagement is seen as *the* predictor of attainment and achievement:

The engagement premise is deceptively simple, even self-evident: The more students study a subject, the more they learn about it. Likewise, the more students practice and get feedback on their writing, analysing, or problem-solving, the more adept they become. The very act of being engaged also adds to the foundation of skills and dispositions that is essential to live a productive, satisfying life after college. (Kuh 2003, 25)

But amidst the hype surrounding student engagement, there are those who adopt a more cautionary tone. Johanna Vuori writes: 'A reason to question student engagement is that is has become a "fuzzword" that in its fashionability conceals even the contradictory goals of different stakeholders' (2014, 510). Graham Gibbs (2014) makes a broadly similar point, arguing that since the terms now refers to so many different things, it is difficult to know precisely what is being talked about. We read about students 'engaging with feedback' (Stone 2014); 'engaging in placements' (Pollard 2009); 'engaging in university governance' (Carey 2013), and 'engaging with social media' (Graham 2014). Clearly student engagement is understood more broadly than simply a measure of whether a student is 'on task' in lectures or seminars. In some cases, it is not even clear *who* is responsible for the student's engagement. One might reasonably think that the *student* herself engages; but the discussions do not entirely support this view. Is the university responsible for engaging students through particular pedagogical approaches (and thereby is at fault if students are disengaged)? Or is it the students who are responsible for their own engagement? Simon Lancaster holds the *university* responsible for ensuring the use of pedagogical approaches that engage students. He writes: 'The lecture has serious shortcomings, not least in *delivering* student engagement' (2013, 29, [emphasis mine]).

There are still further difficulties when we consider, in a practical sense, what student engagement consists in. Despite the plethora of definitions, there is still a perception that

student engagement is simply about a kind of 'doing' or performance. This is a resurgence of an idea that students are engaged if they have a certain attendance rate at lectures, access the virtual learning environment regularly, or write on the course blog. Laurence Steinberg, writing in the late nineties, draws attention to this view: 'Engaged students attend their classes, try reasonably hard to do well in them, complete their homework they are assigned, and don't cheat' (1996, 67). Perhaps the appeal of such understandings of engagement lies in the ease of their measurement. A further aspect of the fuzziness surrounding any precise definition of 'student engagement' is illustrated in its links with the related concepts of 'student experience' and 'student satisfaction'. The argument tends to run that student engagement in quality learning experiences leads to high levels of student satisfaction. Moreover, as a measure of the quality of higher education, Gibbs (2014) points to those who argue that measures of engagement are, in reality, more reliable and meaningful than those of satisfaction.

Disengagement, refusal, and non-participation

With so much talk of engagement, there is a question that is rarely asked; should students *be* engaged? And there is a further question: is there a value in a *disengagement* in higher education? Research on disengagement in education is extensive, and has a long history, with the term derived from Cumming and Henry's (1961) work on ageing.[4] It tends to be focussed on compulsory schooling, and is often discussed in relation to related terms such as disaffection, disruption, and inattention. Some work attempts to define the concept by drawing attention to the subtleties of meaning in the terminology used. Brenda McMahon and John Portelli, for example, highlight what they see as a significant difference between 'disengagement', which is suggestive of an unhelpful, negative 'disconnect or

marginalization' (2004, 64), and a state of being 'unengaged' which indicates 'a passive and perhaps more temporary withdrawal' (*ibid*). In general, the research tends to address disengagement in relation to issues of gender (Stahl and Dale 2013), and special educational needs (Macdonald 2012). Other literature considers the effects of moral disengagement (Bussey et al. 2015), and evaluates initiatives for re-engagement (Kettlewell et al. 2012). Two things are common across this literature: first, as with engagement, there is no agreed definition (beyond the fact that it has behavioural, cognitive, and emotional dimensions), and second, that it is seen as pathologized conduct.

Ross Fergusson's (2013) work discusses what disengagement means in an age of mass youth unemployment. He argues that recent political moves have emphasized *participation* (in socio-political processes), thus demonizing non-participation or disengagement. This is evidence, he argues, of a deliberate, but subtle shift from discourses of social exclusion, to ones of disengagement. He writes: 'The conceptualisation of non-participation as disengagement anticipates a positively radical move away from locating it in exclusionary failures of provision, and towards implied self-exclusionary failures of individual performance' (p. 20). Participation is axiomatic, and disengagement through non-participation is seen as an individual refusal. Anyone refusing must therefore take responsibility for their actions, and face the consequences. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality, Fergusson shows how non-participation ceases to be the subject of government, but rather an object of governance. On this view, he concludes that wilful disengagement is seen in the following terms:

> The act of withdrawal is conceptualised antithetically. That is, it signifies an absence
> – of engagement. Disengagement is thereby conceptualised as a fundamentally
> negative process. It is by implication a failure to act, an absence of exercise of will, or

at extremes a default condition of passivity or indolence in which personal

responsibility is abrogated. (Fergusson 2013, 21)

Fergusson's work foregrounds a critique of disengagement as non-participation, and

concludes by suggesting trajectories for future work in this field. But, it disappoints in failing

fully to counter what is implied in current conceptualizations. In the remainder of this article,

I seek to re-think the notion of disengagement, particularly in the context of higher education.

I offer a way of understanding it that positions it *not* as a failure to act and an absence of will,

but rather as an awakening of voice that is an active expression of a commitment to one's

language, community, and education. This understanding is drawn from the work of the

American philosopher, Stanley Cavell, especially his work on language and criteria in *The*

Claim of Reason, on voice in relation to Hollywood film, and on disowning knowledge in

Shakespearian tragedy. It is to these themes that the article now turns.

Criteria, consent, and attunement

Cavell's writings have consistently been considered to have an educational bearing. It

is not that his philosophy is concerned directly with matters of policy and practice for

contemporary education, but rather that his writings give attention to education as a

significant aspect of our human lives. Paul Standish summarises the educational force of

Cavell's work like this:

He is interested in education as a critical dimension of human life. He shows how the

autonomy of the individual is not to be separated from her role as a citizen.

Understanding this requires attention to the criteria that sustain human practices and the development of judgement in relation to them. (Standish 2013, 49)

The criteria of which Cavell writes are there in relation to all human practices – including, of course, education. Standish illustrates the everyday nature of criteria by using the example of a chair. There are, he notes, criteria that govern the appropriate way to sit, for example, on a chair. In such cases, the criteria require no explicit articulation, as they are inextricably part of the fabric of our everyday practices. But criteria are especially important in our language, and the so in the words we use. Cavell takes up Wittgenstein's claims about what he calls 'grammatical investigations' (1996b, 385). When we ask about the specific circumstances in which we would say a particular thing, we are talking about criteria. For example, what are the criteria that determine whether we use the term 'education' or training' for a particular activity,[5] or, what constitutes a satisfactory distinction between autonomy and freedom?[6] If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement in criteria. Such agreement signals community; as Cavell, in his seminal work, *The Claim of Reason*, puts it: 'The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis on which we say what we say, are claims to community' (1979, 20). To agree in criteria, is, for Cavell, to be 'mutually voiced…mutually attuned top to bottom' (1979, 32). What we consent to, is, for Cavell, an indication of our membership in a *polis*. It is about what *we* say. This does not suggest some kind of generalization based on a majority view. Nor is it the case that we come together on a particular occasion and arrive at an agreement. It is rather an idea of 'being in agreement throughout, being in harmony, like pitches or tones' (Cavell 1979, 32). In thinking about what *we* say, it is significant that the term is both first person, *and* it is plural. That it is first person indicates that there is consent from the speaker to what is said; she shows her commitment through her assent. Put another way, she '"owns" what she

voices' (Standish 2012, 84). That it is plural shows that she speaks on behalf of others, that others have consented with her, and that her community is both hers, and that she is answerable to it.

Dissent, refusal, and being out of tune

If our consent is our agreement in criteria – agreement that this is the way things are for us, that we see the world in this way – then what does our dissent consist in? It would be a disagreement in criteria, a refusal to acknowledge that the world is *this* way for us. We are out of tune. This language reminds us that Cavell first trained as a musician at Berkeley in the 1940s, that his mother had perfect pitch (and he didn't), and that a car accident in his childhood left him with a scarred tympanum. Indeed, these aural tropes throughout his work are philosophically important (Alfano 2013). For Cavell, skepticism might be thought of as a denial of the need to listen. In moments of being out of tune, we appeal to criteria, not as a way of proving our attunement, but as a response to when that attunement is threatened. We recognize a community as ours; that the community speaks for us and we speak for it (until we say that it doesn't, until we refuse, and withdraw our consent). Naoko Saito considers themes such as these in her discussion of communication and John Dewey's call for creative democracy from within. She asks what it means for us to become 'public and to be engaged in political life, and what "social communication" can and should be' (2012, 281), and what to do when we encounter the refusal of such communication. She reads Dewey as claiming that communication is the means of ensuring a common understanding; but she is also interested in testing the limits of such conversation in Deweyan participative democracy. In drawing a distinction between a potentially more positive refusal, and the more subtle and negative form of resignation, Saito writes:

The first obvious limit is disagreement, especially in the face of moral dilemmas, though this is understood as a positive limit in facilitating mutual respect. There is, however, another layer of limit in communication: refusal of participation. Refusal can take various forms. If it takes the form of an active choice, the question arises of the extent to which one has the right to intrude upon those who can afford to lead apparently comfortable lives of withdrawal, who do not see any immediate need to learn from difference. But refusal can take the more subtle and negative form of resignation. Faced with refusal, one possible response would be to "respect" the choice of withdrawal. (Saito 2012, 283)

For Saito, the focus is on learning from difference; this idea is also taken up, albeit in a different context, in Barbara Applebaum's discussion of avoidance in a university course on social justice, and mutual understanding between students of different racial backgrounds. She writes: 'It is not so much a lack of knowledge [or]…a simple lack of information, but the incapacity – or refusal – to acknowledge one's own implication in the information' (2007, 336). This sense of avoidance is amply illustrated in Cordelia's response to her father in the opening scene of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, a scene that Cavell takes up in his essay 'The Avoidance of Love' (2002). Lear demands that his daughters, Goneril and Regan, give a declaration of love to their father, the King. But Cordelia, the remaining daughter, refuses. Her withholding of a response (other than merely to state that she has nothing to say), is a form of avoidance. It is 'a refusal to recognize or accept the terms of the performance by which she is judged' (Standish 2012, 79). Applebaum also draws attention to ideas of avoidance, refusal, and withdrawal, but for her, the source of these lies in students being introduced to unpopular ideas, and simply refusing to give attention to them. Ideas of avoidance and acknowledgement, however, are much more richly conceived in Cavell's

work. Writing about the themes of acknowledgement and avoidance in Cavell, and of the possibilities of our human thought and action, Richard Eldridge describes the basic conflicting tendencies of our struggle between pursuing a course of action that is not shared by others (our 'departure'), and our return to the common. 'Seeking both' he writes, 'one is left between *avoidance* (of others, of the common, of what is common with others in oneself, as decayed, vulgarized, inhibiting, and empty) and *acknowledgement* (of others, of the common, of what is common with other in oneself, as what alone enables thought, recovery, conversation, and restoration)' (2003, 2). This is the burden that we face if we are to have language at all, or if we are to live in community and learn from difference.

At the end of Part I of *The Claim of* Reason, and in returning to the matter of criteria in life and in philosophy, Cavell writes of what is at stake in our attunement with, and dissent from, criteria:

> What I require is a convening of my culture's criteria, in order to confront them with my words and life as I pursue them and as I may imagine them; and at the same time to confront my words and life as I pursue them with the life my culture's words may imagine for me: to confront the culture with itself along the lines in which it meets in me…This seems to me a task that warrants the name of philosophy. It is also the description of something we might call education. (Cavell 1979, 125)

The kind of education that Cavell envisages is not simply acquisitive. It is 'the education of grownups' (*ibid.*) that is a form of confronting (from the Latin *confrontare* – to assign limits) others with how things are for us, and seeing if how things are for others, also resonates with me. This kind of education, Cavell writes, 'is not natural growth, but *change*. Conversion is a turning of our natural reactions; so it is symbolized as rebirth' (p. 125). This

sense of conversion here is important: etymologically, it holds the sense of turning along with (*com – vertere*), but also of turning away from (in the religious sense, from sins). Cavell's analysis of our education into language, or in philosophy, is also one that holds for our education more generally; it requires a turning with and a turning against. Such ideas, then, are ones that call into question current understandings of disengagement in terms of deficit. Instead, they position disengagement as something that, counterintuitively, can be educative in itself.

Consent, dissent, and voice: the 'Hollywood melodrama of the unknown woman'

Little serious critique exists of student engagement in higher education. Where it does, it tends towards highlighting the high profile that measures of student engagement have gained, and how they support discourses of instrumentality, performativity, and accountability (Zepke 2014). Such work exposes the outcome of prescriptive approaches to managing student engagement that impoverish curricula, and limit 'pedagogy' to teaching approaches that amount to nothing more that forms of entertainment. Where the definition of student engagement is focussed on adherence to particular measurable behaviours, education is stripped of its political, ethical, and critical aspects, and is conceived of in narrowly technical terms. Wayne McGowan and Lee Partridge represent the few dissenting voices whose work aims to 'suspend an analytic that reduces student engagement to sanctioned institutional arrangements…by eliminating the fragmenting force of disengagement' (2014, 238).

Much work, and significant resources, are given to this very task of eliminating disengagement; this is seen across all sectors of education. But the present article suggests a re-thinking of disengagement in terms of Cavell's ideas of dissent and refusal. What this

affords is a re-appraisal of disengagement *not* as a passive nonchalance or casualness, but as active recognition that a community does not, or no longer, speaks for you. Disengagement, then, might be thought of in the way that Cavell writes of dissent: 'Dissent is not the undoing of consent, but a dispute about its content, a dispute within it over whether a present arrangement is faithful to it' (1979, 27). Dissent is therefore a kind of speaking for yourself, which, Cavell writes, is a risky business: 'To speak for yourself then means risking the rebuff – on some occasion, perhaps once for all – of those for whom you claimed to be speaking; and it means risking having to rebuff – one some occasion, perhaps once for all – those who claimed to be speaking for you' (*ibid.*). Cavell takes forward this idea of speaking for yourself in his discussion of Hollywood film, where he identifies a genre of 1930s and 40s film that he calls the 'Melodramas of the Unknown Woman'[7] (Cavell 1996a). Two of the most important features of these films are first, that they begin with the woman's search for an education that is also a 'demand for a voice' (1996a, 220), and second, that the films portray the controlling of the woman's voice (by a man), the forms of inexpressiveness that result, and the climactic recovery of the woman's voice. In particular, the film *Stella Dallas* depicts the kind of dissent as speaking for oneself that is illustrative of the very form of educative disengagement for which I am arguing here.

The plot of *Stella Dallas*[8] runs like this: The young Stella Martin longs to escape the drab existence of her home town. She is dazzled by a local factory boss, Stephen Dallas, and the unlikely pair marry, and have a child, Laurel. Stella wants to be educated and stylish like Stephen; she wants him to teach her so that she can join 'the crowd' and live the society life 'with all the swells'. Stephen is irritated by Stella's friendship with the loud and gauche Ed Munn. Gradually tensions in the marriage emerge, made worse by Stella's constant failure to improve her manners and style as Stephen wishes. Stephen moves away for work, leaving Laurel and Stella. When Stephen returns on a visit and finds a drunk Ed Munn with Stella, he

seeks a separation, which lays the way for the blossoming of his relationship with the rich and sophisticated Mrs Morrison, whom Laurel adores. During the divorce proceedings, Stella takes Laurel - now in her teens, and in love - to an exclusive resort. Stella dresses herself up in an outrageously ostentatious outfit, far removed from the refined style of the other guests, who deride Stella to each other. Laurel is mortified, and Stella knows this. Stephen and Helen Morrison plan to marry. Knowing that Laurel craves society life, Stella approaches Mrs Morrison and asks if Laurel can go and live with her. Stella tells Laurel that she will make a new life with Ed Munn in South America. Laurel's marriage is announced, and takes place in the elegant Morrison home. A crowd gathers outside in the rain; Stella is at the front, gazing through the railings to catch a glimpse of the society wedding. She smiles as the marriage takes place. As the film ends, she turns and walks away towards the camera, her face radiant.

We can read this film as saying that Stella has no taste – no style. But this would not be right. She knows what she likes, and knows that others have no taste for that kind of style. As Cavell writes: 'Stella learns the futility of appealing to the taste of those who have no taste for her' (1996a, 202). For her trip to the exclusive resort, she surely knows that the outlandish way in which she dresses (described as one of the guests as making her look like a Christmas tree) will invoke derision. But we also see her adapting her style, removing an ornament from a simple black dress when Stephen comes to visit, knowing that keeping the fancy flourish would be, in Stephen's eyes, a *faux pas*. But style is not all that is at stake here. For Cavell, to understand this film, and others in the genre, depends on our seeing them as illustrating the search for, the repression of, and the finding of voice. It is a film in which the tropes of consent and dissent recur through her conformity to, or aversion from, others' taste. The finding of her own voice - and this moment is reached in the final scene of the film - is her education. In the film we see the convening of her culture's criteria with her own words and life as she pursues them. Stella's aversion to, her disengagement from, her culture's criteria,

is not a passive withdrawal, not something to be overcome and put right; it is instead the finding of her voice, her education as a grownup. As Naoko Saito, in her discussion of the film puts it: 'Aversion to the criteria of the community she finds herself in prepares Stella for the finding of her new voice, a voice that is produced in exiting from the culture into which she was once initiated' (Saito 2004, 89).

Re-thinking disengagement in higher education

Thinking of engagement and disengagement in terms of the Cavellian themes of agreement in criteria, dissent, and the finding of voice, should not be taken as indication that disengagement – if it is a problem in education – is somehow solved. There is an important distinction to be drawn between forms of disengagement that suggest the existence of serious issues related to a student's experience of university life and study, and those forms that, counterintuitively, signal a student's active *engagement*, and so are educative in themselves. This proposing of a form of educative disengagement in no way minimizes the ethical complexities of the engagement/disengagement debate in the university. There are, of course, physical, emotional, and personal issues that can seriously affect students in higher education. These can result in behaviour such as absence from lectures, missing assessment deadlines, and not responding to communications, all of which are signs of disengagement that properly require intervention from the university. But there is an increasing tendency to characterize *all* behaviour that does not conform to what is expected (or even required) as evidence of disengagement that is need of rectifying to get the student 'back on course'. Such 'disengagement' is often from particular activities that the university can measure: contributing to the module blog, visiting the virtual learning environment regularly, and so

on. Armed with the statistics, an institution can resource initiatives to re-engage students, thus assuring the university's place in the various league tables.

But non-conformity, understood in these technical terms, should not be equated with disengagement. Stella's rebellion against the world to which Laurel belongs, but Stella does not, *is*, in the Emersonian sense, her self-reliance (Saito 2004). It is not that she passively allows her former life to slip away from her as she watches her daughter's marriage from her position outside in the rain-soaked street. It is rather that, in her disengagement from Laurel's world, she finds her self-reliance against the criteria that her culture supplied. Her dissent is not, as some interpretations of the film suggest, a form of self-sacrifice. Cavell resists this position, showing instead that it is her conversion, her transformation; it is the education of her voice. Such an education seeks not to suppress disengagement, understood in terms of aversive thinking, but to embrace it as an expression of voice. Thought of in this way, something of a reversal is achieved. Disengagement is no longer a lack of action (or of care about an issue), but rather the opposite: the active voicing of what we will, or will not, consent to. It is concerned both with what we disown, and what we acknowledge.[9] In the university, aversive thinking and the expression of voice suggests something more than just demonstrating a critical perspective. Indeed, popular iterations of critical thinking have been hijacked by performative measures, and critical thinking reduced to mere skill, or to a means of indoctrination into particular ways of thinking (Hayes 2015). Disengagement, thought of in terms of Emersonian aversion, requires a particular relation to our words (in writing, in speaking and in reading), and so to our education. It is one that 'ask[s] attention to an attitude toward or investment in words…allegorical of an investment in our lives' (Cavell 1990, 34). The university must surely be the space for the fostering of such an attitude, where disengagement as the expression of aversive thinking, and of voice, is welcomed. 'A Cavellian education of voice,' writes Saito, 'encourages the voice of the dissident - of the one

who cannot adjust herself to her community, and who aspires to attain a better vision of society according to her own light (Saito 2004, 87-88). If the notion of disengagement, thought of in these terms, muddies the waters that George Kuh claimed had been made clear by 'student engagement', then higher education will be the better for it.

Acknowledgements

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[1] Glossary of Educational Reform, [online], Available at: http://edglossary.org/student-engagement/, Accessed October 19th 2015. The Glossary supports media organisations, parents, and the community in understanding specialist educational terminology.

[2] QAA, 'Student Engagement at QAA', [online], Available at: http://www.qaa.ac.uk/partners/students/student-engagement-at-qaa, Accessed October 19th 2015.

[3] See http://nsse.indiana.edu/html/about.cfm, Accessed October 19th 2015.

[4] Roger Slee (2014) provides a useful historical overview from a sociological point of view.

[5] Paul Standish uses this example. See "Skepticism, Acknowledgement, and the Ownership of Learning." In Stanley Cavell and the Education of Grownups, edited by Naoko Saito and Paul Standish, 73-87. New York: Fordham University Press.

[6] Judith Suissa (2007) uses this example from one of her student's research projects.

[7] Cavell (1996a: 3) identifies the following films as representative of the genre: *Stella Dallas* (1937), *Now Voyager* (1942), and *Gaslight* (1944).

[8] In the 1937 production directed by King Vidor, Barbara Stanwyck plays the lead character of Stella Dallas.

[9] Standish draws attention to one sense of the term 'disown', in that 'disown' functions as a negation of 'own'. However, he also finds in Cavell that the opposite of 'disown' is also 'acknowledgement' (see Standish 2012: 83).