

The Dialectics of Speech and Silence in Shakespeare's *King Lear*

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Abstract

This article deploys the critical lines of new historicism, feminism and performance studies to argue that Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a critique of King James I's absolute authority and the destructive ideology of gender difference via the binary opposites of speech and silence. A new historicist reading would argue that the dominant male powers in *King Lear* deliberately foster the subversive behaviour of others (Cordelia, Regan, Goneril, Edmund) in order to crush it publicly and so assert their dominance. However, in this paper, I argue that *King Lear* is a trial of language, ending with the renunciation of patriarchal speech and the subordination of male figures to Cordelia's silence. Following materialist feminist criticism, I argue that Regan and Goneril are reproducers of the masculine ideology of power, property and linguistic domination. While Shakespeare criticises male figures' absolute voices that are ventriloquised by Regan, Goneril and Edmund, he represents silence as a subjective space of truth and honesty and a site of rebellion against unjust speech as illuminated in the figure of Cordelia whose silence undermines Lear's game of words.

Key words: Silence; Speech; Absolute authority; Ventriloquism; Madness; Boy actors

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1. METHODOLOGY

Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a critique of the absolute political power within King James I whose first words in 1603 to England's Parliament were: "I am the Husband, all the whole Isle is my lawfull Wife; I am the Head, and it is my Body" (Goldberg, 1983, p.141). In *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, King James establishes himself as the father and his subjects as his children who should act within the laws of the father in making their absolute claims to obedience (Hadfield, 2003, pp.579-80). I interrogate new historicist conception of all containing ideology and its emphasis on containment rather than subversion. Greenblatt (1988) argues that "actions that should have the effect of radically undermining authority turn out to be the props of that authority" (p.53). However, I argue that *King Lear* is a trial of language that ends in the renunciation of speech. Following the methodology of feminism, I argue that Shakespeare criticises the masculine ideology of absolute authority as ventriloquised by Regan, Goneril and Edmund. While Shakespeare comments on masculine, ruthless speech, he condones Cordelia's silence that rebels against Lear's unjust ceremony of language. I argue that Shakespeare's subversive treatment of speech, silence and hearing is linked to the condition of theatrical performance. The boy actors impersonating the silences and speeches of Regan, Goneril and Cordelia are the mouthpieces of female characters who overthrow gender stereotypes, opening up spaces for interrogating the male voice.

2. DISCUSSION

Shakespeare condemns patriarchal speech in the male figures of authority like Lear and Gloucester and as ventriloquised by Edmund, Goneril and Regan. King Lear's very commanding voice contains the seeds of its

own destruction. Lear's love test, which reveals Lear's power to control language, exposes his tyranny in a way that transforms him from king to nothing. Lear asks his daughters to flatter him in a show of patriarchal power. Lear has asked not which daughter loves him most, but which will deliver the best expression of love believing that a demand for love could elicit the expression of real love. Lear asks: "[t]ell me, my daughters, / [...] Which of you shall we say doth love us most" (1.1.47, 50, my emphasis). Kelly Gesch (2008) notes that, "speech is brought to the immediate forefront in this scene, with variations of the words 'speak' or 'say' used eleven times in the ninety some odd lines that make initial questioning of the three daughters" (p.2). Citing Lear's opening speeches, Doran (1976) notes that "in no other Shakespearian tragedy we hear so imperious a voice—so cunningly demanding, ordering, exclaiming, imprecating" (p.94). The irony of Lear's demand of familial kindness is that he swaps from the pronouns "me", "my", appropriate to a father speaking to his daughters, to the formal pronouns "we", "us", which shows that familial relations operate in the service of property and hierarchical authority that Cordelia's silence opposes.

Shakespeare's *King Lear* redeems silence, praising it as an enlightened presence that liberates language from violence, slipperiness and unreliability, as is manifested through Cordelia's silence. Cordelia is associated with the realm of silence throughout the play (1.1, 4.4, 7, 5.3). While she marries in 1.1 and does not reappear until 4.4, her acoustic and physical disappearance is a moment of deliberate silence. Her silence, as critics point out, adheres to the patriarchal code of feminine virtue (Harvey, 1992, pp.132-33). However, her resolution to 'love and be silent' (1.1.61) undermines Lear's game of speech. Lisa Jardine (1983) argues that "to her father, Cordelia's silence is not a mark of virtue, but a denial of filial affection [...]. The audience must, I think, understand this as a moral mistake on Lear's part" (p.108). Lear's deafness to Cordelia's voice can be read as a subtle political critique of James I as a king/father. While Lear turns deaf to Cordelia's speech and silence, Shakespeare shows that Lear must subjugate his ears to Cordelia's silence before himself and his kingdom can be rejuvenated. Lear's suffering results from his deafness to Cordelia's vocal silence. Significantly, Lear's subsequent renunciation of language is predicated on his recognition that he "did [Cordelia] wrong" (1.5.21) once he has listened to her silence. Cordelia's silence conceals an active interior as "ponderous" connotes what is heavy and unspoken (1.1.77, 90-91). When Goneril claims to love her father with "[a] love that makes breath poor and speech unable" (1.1.59), silence exposes the inadequacy of speech that Lear demands to express love: "speak" (1.1.85). Cordelia's silence is, therefore, a threatening female agency that negates Lear's speech, "wounding Lear's public pride" (White, 2000, p.81). Lear demands

flattery (1.1.85) that Cordelia refuses to utter (1.1.90-92), for she says that goodness is associated with action not words (1.1.224).

Cordelia's silence is subversive, as she is deliberately jeopardising her dowry to test the love of Burgundy and France. Her speech is fraught with sexuality as she turns her voice to marriage, displeased with Regan and Goneril's claim that they love their father "all", as if he were a divine being (1.1.98-99). When Burgundy submits to Lear's voice, Cordelia comments, "since that respect and fortunes are his love, / I shall not be his wife" (1.1.247-48), for love for the sake of gain is not love, as France recognises (1.1.237-39). However, Cordelia constructs herself conventionally as daughter and wife. Cordelia admits that she loves her father "[a]ccording to my bond, nor more nor less" (1.1.92), and is likewise bound to give half her love and duty to her husband (1.1.99-102). As William Elton (1966) notes, Cordelia respects "due proportion" while "Goneril and Regan move within a universe of confused proportions in which the only unit of measurement is quantitative, and the main value word, 'more'" (p.123, 121). Significantly, Cordelia's uncompromising devotion to Lear (4.3.23-29) leads her to return from France without her husband (4.3.1-6).

Cordelia's speech challenges Lear's unjust speech and his rejection of her. She denounces any suspicion of committing "vicious blot, murder, or foulness, [...] unchaste action or dishonoured step" (1.1.226-27). "Even her name contains the mystery of the 'heart' of a woman, yoked with the goddess of chastity" (White, 2000, p.80). However, Cordelia's self-defence incurs Lear's wrath (1.1.232-33), stripping Cordelia of her identity as his successor and kin (1.1.112-13, 262) with his curse (1.1.201-02), as if human relations were based on property and language. As Leggatt (2005) notes, "[h]e violates his relationship with her by violating the language of relationship" (p.149). Lear is the "barbarous Scythian" who wishes to devour his own child (1.1.114-18).

The final scene in which the three daughters are silenced onstage produces an uncanny parody to this scene. While Albany commands to "[c]over their [Regan's and Goneril's] faces" (5.3.217), Cordelia's face is not covered, for the focus is on her silence and breath. In Lear's imagination, "[t]his feather stirs, she lives"; although "now she's gone for ever" (5.3.239, 244). In the Quarto, Lear kills himself: "[b]reak, heart, I prithee break" (5.3.303). In the Folio, Lear dies with a concentration on Cordelia's mouth, asking the audience to behold and listen to Cordelia: "[l]ook on her: look, her lips, / Look there, look there!" (5.3.284-85). Arguably, Cordelia's vocal and gestural performance of passion arouses an answering passion in the audience members. While Cordelia's silence in the first scene is self-imposed, her silence now can be read as involuntary, for there is no space for the boy actor's articulation of

the female voice. The impersonation of female role was dependent on voice, for spectators were aware that “[t]he natural transition from playing women to playing men is at the breaking of the voice”. The boy actor’s voice may break and such “vocal crisis signals the interruption and rupture of seamless spectacle” (Dusinberre, 1996, pp.253, 72). The boy actor’s vocal challenge is associated with tragedy. Philippa Berry (1999) notes that Cordelia remains “the play’s central riddle”, “a mystery even in her death” (p.166). Rutter (2002) proposes that “speechless, Cordelia is deprived of obvious power to construct her own meanings” (p.5). However, she adds:

She is both a troubled and troubling signifier. Performing death, her corpse alienates—in the Brechtian sense—Lear’s performance by challenging the anguish Lear attempts to fix upon it. The discursive effect of this is to frame the theatrical site of female death not as a comfortable but as a subversive site (p.5)

The death of the female character “means registering and fixing scrutiny on the woman’s body as bearer of gendered meanings—meanings that do not disappear when words run out or characters fall silent” (Rutter, 2002, p.xv). Because death is meta-theatrical (Zimmerman, 2002), the breathing of the corpse shows that “transgressive perspectives on vocal agency can emerge” (Bloom, 2013, p.16). The breathing corpse opens up a space for various interpretations of women’s silence and men’s inability to read women’s verbal performances. Cordelia has become impenetrable, beyond Lear’s voice and unresponsive to its claim on her, “Cordelia, Cordelia, stay a little” (5.3.245). As the actor, along with the audience, hears King Lear’s words, but gives only silence for answer, it makes it possible for the silence of this living boy actor playing a corpse to open up a space from which to subvert Lear’s voice. While Lear is asking Cordelia to speak, her initial silence is now literalized in the challenging silence of her body. While Edgar’s speech kills his father, Cordelia’s silence, to which Lear shows deafness in Act 1, is now an unnerving silence that causes his heart break (Q: 5.3.303, F: 5.3.287).

Cordelia teaches Lear the emptiness of speech and the value of silence. Her voice restores Lear from “the heaviness of sleep” (4.6.19, 44). Cordelia’s gentleman highlights the analogy between Cordelia and Christ (5.3.20-21), who redeemed human nature from the curse of language brought by Eve and Adam (4.5.198-201). As a queen in command of the French army, Cordelia’s language is regal and formal, using plural pronouns, abstractions and nominalisations (4.3.6-8, 22-28). However, she uses direct, personal language when she addresses Lear and Kent (4.6.1-3, 23-26). Cordelia forgives the offence Lear’s speech has done her. While Lear thinks that she does not love him for the wrongs he does her (4.6.65-67), she echoes her nothing from the first scene, uttering “[n]o cause, no cause” (4.6.68) with “cause” making a Latinate substitute for the Anglo-

Saxon “thing” (Sun, 2010, p.57). Her silence achieves its consummation with Lear: “I know not what to say” (4.6.48), which is consistent with his acknowledgment of the bond of paternity (4.6.63-64). Lear responds to Cordelia’s silence and makes much ado about nothing, proclaiming that Cordelia’s voice epitomises the feminine traits that he had rejected in the first scene (5.3.246-47). Lear’s voice is characterized by its humility, simplicity, and a desire to communicate rather than command (4.6.28, 53-60). While Hamlet commands Horatio “to tell my story” and to Fortinbras he sends his “dying voice” (5.2.342, 349) and Othello exhorts men to speak of him (5.2.341), Lear substitutes transcendental silence for their transcendence through speech. Lear replaces his early quest for revenge (2.4.268) with the command to “forget and forgive” (4.6.77). His speechless cry (5.3.231) places him in the realm of silence (Leider, 1970; Nowotny, 1960). Peter Rudnytsky (1999), following a feminist, psychological approach, argues that “Cordelia’s death shatters this morality-play pattern and casts *King Lear* irrevocably into the abyss of tragedy” (p.302). However, Cordelia’s death signals the triumph of silence over speech. In an inversion of the Renaissance convention that masculine identity is achieved through the separation from the female and in contrast to the new historicist reading based on crushing opposing voices, Lear assimilates himself to Cordelia’s silence. Cordelia’s and Lear’s deaths, which set their souls free from the prison of their bodies, enable them to become reunited in the eternal bliss of silence.

Shakespeare shows that loyal male characters oppose Lear’s voice. Kent, the Fool and Edgar are Lear’s counsellors who express Cordelia’s plain truth and drive Lear to madness. Kent follows the model of Cordelia’s subversive silence and plain speech in order to serve Lear. Leggatt (2005) notes the paradox that “Kent’s rebellion against Lear is intended to serve him” (p.153). In the first scene, he defends Cordelia who, he says, “justly think’st, and has most rightly said” (1.1.181), opposing Lear’s decision to disown her. Kent’s defence of Cordelia’s just speech could be a radical departure from the absolutist patriarchal regime that King James I inaugurated. Kent’s change in address from “Royal Lear” to “old man” (1.1.137, 144) is disastrous, since this ceremony is the turning point from Lear being king to simply being an old man. Kent’s choice between the formal and informal language shows that his loyalty is to the person and he is indifferent to the title of king. Kent’s plain speech is offensive to Lear who warns Kent not to come “between the dragon and his wrath” (1.1.120). When Kent persists in speaking (1.1.18, 137-53), Lear silences him: “Kent, on thy life, no more” (1.1.152). Lear’s deafness to Kent’s opposition to his rash decisions springs from his perception that it is not honourable to break his vow (1.1.165-75). Lear banishes Kent so as to silence his critical voice which,

like that of Cordelia, undermines Lear's ceremonial language.

In disguise as Caius, Kent's plain speech contrasts with the speech of court flatterers like Oswald. In response to Lear's question, "whom am I, Sir?" (1.4.73), Oswald's insulting but truthful response reduces Lear to the position of "My lady's father" (1.4.74). This identification spurs Kent on to verbally abuse Oswald (1.4.80, 84-86). Regan silences Kent by pinning him down in the stocks to annoy Lear: "Being his knave, I will" (2.2.130). Significantly, Kent is silenced here because of his plainness (2.2.92-96, 104), which echoes Lear's banishment of Cordelia and Kent due to their plain speech. In this scene, in which Kent articulates that Regan and Cornwall silence him, his plain speech contradicts Lear's speech (2.4.11-18). While Kent remains loyal to Lear by opposing him, he obeys his master by choosing silence when Lear dies. He refuses Albany's offer to divide the "rule in this realm" (5.3.296), and prepares for a "journey, sir, shortly to go; / My master calls me, I must not say no" (5.3.297-98). In this dialogue between the dead Lear and Kent, Lear's silence and his ability to listen carefully is a powerful voice that summons Kent's silence and obedience, to which Kent submits. Presumably, Kent withdraws to commit suicide.

While Kent opposes Lear by speaking plainly, the Fool opposes him through puns, riddles and jokes. The Fool's ambiguous speech estranges Lear from his modes of imperative speech and curse. Bennett (1962) notes that the Fool's "bitter jests counter and balance Lear's bitter thoughts. Where Lear blames his daughters, the Fool blames Lear" (p.145). He confronts Lear with the truth that he was a fool to give his power away, leaving himself nothing (1.4.102-03, 123, 134-40). When he complains that Lear, Regan and Goneril have him whipped for telling the truth (1.4.156-58), he says he would rather be a fool than be Lear (1.4.159-61). Kent admits the Fool's insight, commenting that "this is not altogether fool, my lord" (Q: 1.4.141). As Regan says, "[j]esters do oft prove prophets" (5.3.63). Even Goneril says, "[t]his man hath had good counsel" (1.4.291). The Fool addresses the audience (1.5.44-45) and tells bawdy jokes with the goal of entertaining them and in so doing reveals his understanding of the human condition (1.4.110-20), emphasising that the function of drama is to teach and entertain.

The Fool is an alter ego of Cordelia, for she is the Fool who is "whipped out" (1.4.105) due to her plain and truthful voice (1.4.123-24, 156-58). The actor playing Cordelia might also have played the Fool. The Fool appears in 1.4 and 3.6; Cordelia is prominent in the first scene, then disappears until 4.3. The two characters are conflated in Lear's "And my poor fool is hanged" (5.3.279). The Fool can speak freely as he is male, unlike Cordelia, who was allowed to speak only

in accordance with the conventions of Lear's court. As White (2000) notes, "the Fool [...] is very close to Cordelia, but for reasons of social role and mode of speech, he is more protected" (p.87). Furthermore, unlike Kent's and Cordelia's plain speeches, because the Fool speaks through riddles, proverbs and snatches of verse, he obtains a hearing without being reprimanded. The Fool lacks courage in the presence of Goneril and Regan (1.4.168-69) and in the storm scenes where his role is usurped by Edgar, Lear's "philosopher" (3.4.141). The fact that Lear welcomes the Fool as 'my pretty knave' and "my boy" (1.4.91, 93) and the Fool calls Lear "Nuncle" (1.4.124) suggests a mutual devotion between a childish man and an old man who has returned to childishness (Brown, 1963; McEwan, 1976). Because the Fool is parentless, Lear is his surrogate father. The Fool transforms Lear into an errant son, being tutored by the Fool who is a severe father (1.4.139-40).

While the Fool embarks on a journey of silence, Lear takes over from the Fool and begins to speak in riddles and jokes, as does the Fool. The Fool foretells his silence in his last words: "[a]nd I'll go to bed at noon" (3.6.41). After this, we hear nothing further about him except that he is hanged. Bradley, who exemplifies the humanist critical movement and treat characters on the stage as if they were real, complains that readers and spectators are left in ignorance to the fate of the Fool, thanks to Shakespeare's "carelessness or an impatient desire to reduce his overloaded material", (Bradley, 2007, 193). However, the Fool's fate is visible in Lear, who internalises the Fool's philosophy (1.5.40-41). As Jan Kott (1965) notes:

When he [Lear] meets Gloster for the last time, he will speak the Fool's language and look at "Macbeth's stage" the way the Fool has looked at it: "They told me I was everything; 'tis a lie,—I am not ague proof". (p.133)

While Lear does not take the Fool's criticism seriously and his ears receive it as a simple joke in the first scenes (1.5.11), we can sense Lear's internalisation of the Fool's voice in the conversation about Gloucester's blindness—a conversation that is embellished with riddles and insights of truth (4.5.136-48).

Shakespeare dissociates Regan and Goneril from the condemnation that male characters voice, for they are the mouthpieces of patriarchal discourse and representative of its ideology. A number of feminist critics claim that Shakespeare asserts stereotypical female characters, pointing out that Shakespeare makes Regan and Goneril queerly evil (McLaughlin, 1978; Cox, 1998). However, Shakespeare suggests that Regan and Goneril transgress gender stereotypes to reproduce the patriarchal power structures of monarchy. Alfar (2003) argues that

"Goneril and Regan must resist their culture's definition of femininity if they are to take up the crown and rule the nation". She notes that "rather than denouncing the women for their

masculinist performance of power, the play asks us to reject the tyranny of absolute monarchy" (p.173, 172).

Shakespeare's liberation of Regan and Goneril is illuminated through his deconstruction of the binary opposites of good and evil female characters. Cordelia, who "redeems nature from the general curse" (4.5.198-200), restores patriarchy in terms of speech and silence rather than redeeming womankind. Cordelia's silence in the final scene redeems the faults she committed by her rebellious speech. Saying nothing, "Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman" (5.3.246-47). In dissociating Regan and Goneril's speeches from condemnation and ennobling Cordelia's silence, Shakespeare questions the aural/oral libido of patriarchy. In the mock trial in the Quarto text, Lear and the Fool persist in silencing Goneril, who is represented by a stool that can say nothing (Q: 3.6.48). While Lear realises that 'ay' and 'no' to [sic] was no good divinity" (4.5.98) and that he has "his ear abused" (2.4.296), Regan and Goneril are good listeners who comply with Lear's ceremony of words. Their hyperbolic speeches (1.1.54-60, 68-74) are responses to Lear's unjust commands (1.1.53, 3.2.35-36).

Regan and Goneril's assertion that "[w]e must do something, and i' the heat" (1.1.304) is not a conspiratorial conversation, but a defensive strategy. They express their fear that Lear who in "poor judgement [...] [c]ast her [Cordelia] off" (1.1.286-87) and banished Kent will also curb their voices and monarchical power. As Goldberg (1974) notes, Goneril is more than "a hypocritical ingrate". She knows Lear's evil intentions, he argues, "in the only terms in which he has given it to her", and his behaviour justifies her fears. Her response to Lear is defensive: "The control visible in Goneril's speech is the kind necessary to keep the world at bay, as though she could not cope with her experience of it otherwise". She "can see personal relationships only as power-relationships" (pp.104-06). Just as Lear refused to be undermined by Cordelia's and Kent's objections to his voice and acts, Goneril and Regan consolidate their power by castrating opposing voices.

Goneril and Regan's commanding voices reproduce Lear's appeal to quantitative measures of power and love. In response to Lear's unwillingness to control his knights (1.4.278-79), they remove his train of knights and curb his authority and voice (2.4.249-52) by thrusting him out of the gates. Lear becomes a "shadow" (1.4.204) that cannot sustain "itself" in the public order of the kingdom. When he demands to speak to Regan and Cornwall he is not heard, for they feign illness (2.4.78). While he forces Regan to speak he—like Cordelia, who would not speak as ordered—is banished from the house. Regan's unkindness is a speech act that silences Lear. As he tells her, "I can scarce speak to thee" (2.4.125) and as he tries to impose his authority, she interrupts him with "[n]o more with me" (2.4.244). Regan and Goneril, therefore,

force Lear to adopt the oppressive version of feminine silence. He speaks to deny himself speech: "I will be the pattern of all patience / I will say nothing" (3.2.37-38). Like Lear, Regan and Goneril are tyrannical fathers rather than virtuous mothers; they exercise loveless domination over their child. Lear's verbal outbursts (1.4.266-72) and the restraint of Goneril and Regan capture stark power imbalances, subverting the Renaissance convention that situates women on the side of passion and men on the side of reason.

As Lear deteriorates so far as to resort to the use of curses, complaints and angry speech, the play depicts an inversion of gender difference with respect to discourse. While Lear's curses against his daughters act as a defence mechanism against his awareness that he is powerless and feminine, his tears speak his weakness and the breakdown of his mind (2.4.260-66). Though he adopts the brutality of a thunderbolt to verbally attack his daughters (3.2.1-9), Lear's curses are impotent. The storm becomes, as Adelman (2012) writes, "the embodiment of the female force that shakes his manhood" (p. 114). Goneril has "power to shake my manhood thus" (1. 4.267). Regan emasculates Lear as he sheds "women's weapons, water-drops" (2.4.266) rather than masculine words. While Lear's curse strips his daughters off the qualities traditionally associated with femininity and humanity (1.4.245-59), the storm speaks his powerlessness, exposing him as "a poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man" (3.2.20).

Regan's and Goneril's usurpation of Lear's speech and sight is literalised in the blinding of Gloucester (3.7.65, 80), who is the surrogate victim of Regan's and Goneril's revenge on Lear (3.7.53-54). In a parody of the opening scene, Regan has taken Lear's place, commanding Gloucester to "speak" (3.7.44). Gloucester is a "traitor" (3.7.3) and a "treacherous villain" (3.7.84), because he opposes Regan's and Goneril's commands, communicating with Lear and Cordelia (3.3.4-5, 16-17). As Alfar (2003) argues, "Gloucester [...], in possession of a letter that reveals France's imminent arrival and having arranged for the safe passage of Lear to those who represent Cordelia in Dover, has committed treason" (p.183). Regan and Goneril subversively ally themselves with patriarchal voices in their blinding of Gloucester, for this violent act allows the familial bond to assert itself between Gloucester and Edgar. Furthermore, by disowning his legitimate son and declaring the bastard legitimate, Gloucester attacks patriarchy. Gloucester relates his suffering and blindness, which can be read as a displaced form of castration (Halio, 1992), to a corruption in his flesh, in that his past sin of adultery recoils upon him (3.4.149-50, 5.3.163-64).

Bastardising Goneril and Regan (1.4.245, 252-55) is Lear's defensive projection to avoid recognising his own contribution to his suffering. However, their verbal and physical violence emanates from the patriarchal structure

they reproduce; they are Lear's progeny and blood (2.4.210-14). Their subversive complicity is linked to the condition of performance in that they are boy actors, reproducing Lear's speech and the absolute monarchy that Shakespeare condemns. "Are there any women in *King Lear*?" asks Ann Thompson (1991, pp.117-28). The answer is surely, "[n]o", and in support of this answer Thompson cites Kathleen McLuskie: "[f]eminism cannot simply take the 'woman's part' when that part has been so morally loaded and theatrically circumscribed" (Thompson, 1991, p.123). Female figures' voices are constructed according to masculine rhetoric and ideologies textually and physically, in that the boy actors impersonating female characters articulate the voices scripted for them by older men. Goneril and Regan deny responsibility and lay the blame of misconduct on Lear himself (2.4.280-81, 292-96), which is consistent with Lear's growth in self-knowledge during the storm. For Kahn (1986), Goneril and Regan do Lear a favour against their wills, since Lear's progress towards wisdom is to admit his vulnerability, subverting a cultural convention which "dichotomized power as masculine and feeling as feminine" (p.47). Their subversive complicity is illuminated by the fact that Edgar facilitates Lear's openness to weakness, which is the threshold of his pilgrimage towards self-discovery and regeneration.

While Edgar and Albany take over government, neither Regan nor Goneril complies with the male figures' condemnation of their speeches and actions. Goneril asserts that "the laws are mine, not thine" (5.3.150). Her final exit is marked by a vow of silence (Q: 5.3.154), which demonstrates her refusal of her husband's evaluation of herself as monstrous and highlights her enduring dignity and moral strength. Catherine Belsey (1985) argues that "suicide re-establishes the sovereign subject [...]. As an individual action, therefore, suicide is a threat to the control of the state" (pp.124-25). Goneril's suicide is as an act of uncompromising self-definition as a monarch against the patriarchal order that would define her legal reproduction of male figures' discourse as immoral. Goneril's poisoning of Regan is an act of silencing; as she speaks, she becomes "[s]ick, O sick" (5.3.88). However, while Regan is deliberately poisoned by Goneril (5.3.89), her death is marked by self-empowerment, "creat[ing] [Edmund] here, / [Her] lord and master" (5.3.70-71). Shakespeare's condoning of Regan's and Goneril's reproduction of Lear's and in extension King James I's absolute authority is illuminated through the fact that he gives the boy actors impersonating them a subjective space to defend themselves. As Alfar (2003) notes, "both Goneril and Regan's refusals to internalize patrilineal definitions of 'moral' femininity suggest a refusal on Shakespeare's part to condemn them wholly for their actions" (p.188). It could be argued that the boy actors are silenced because they are no longer able to

impersonate female characters physically and vocally. The boy actors playing Regan and Goneril have adopted fully empowered masculine discourse which, as the play implies, is self-destructive. Shakespeare's liberation of Regan and Goneril from condemnation is illuminated by Edmund's deceptive and ineffective speech and Edgar's incorporation of Cordelia's silence.

Edmund's voice and silence are appealing to Regan and Goneril, thanks to his marginalisation as an illegitimate son and a younger brother who can, they think, be easily dominated by their commanding voices. However, their alignment with Edmund, which demonstrates their need for a powerful masculine accomplice to secure their authority (4.2. 25-28, 5.3.67-71), leads to their defeat and denial of speech and suggests that such a speech is itself illegitimate. Goneril chooses the silent act of a kiss to raise Edmund (4.2.21-23), deconstructing the conventional association between silence and chastity. Likewise, Regan relinquishes authority to Edmund (5.3.67-71). While their submissive speech echoes the false submission that led them to power in the first scene, they are destroyed by their opposing voices through rivalry over Edmund (5.1.12-13, 5.3.88).

Silent in the opening scene, Edmund is a victim of his father's bawdiness with reference to his predicament as an illegitimate son (1.1.12-15, 20, 22, 31-32). Fernie (2002) notes that as the younger and illegitimate son cannot inherit his father's estate, Edmund decides to retaliate against prejudicial customs which have branded him "with shame of his birth and inflame[d] his mind" (p.185.) Fernie notes that Gloucester's inability to acknowledge Edmund as his son forces Edmund to "silently acquiesce [...] in three plots to torture his father, to murder Lear, and to kill Lear's youngest daughter, Cordelia" (p.199). Jonathan Dollimore argues for a materialist reading of *King Lear* which emphasises its concern with power, property and inheritance. He argues that Edmund is a producer of Lear's and Gloucester's ideology of power and inheritance, planning to use land and property to confront the pangs of shame (1989). While Edmund replaces Edgar through the fabricated letter, he replaces Gloucester as the Earl of Gloucester (2.1.82-84, 3.5.15-16) by accusing him of treason (3.3.7, 19-23).

Edmund disinherits his father and brother through his speech and silence, which is the diabolic obverse of Cordelia's discourse. Through his witty, deceptive language, he controls his father and brother as puppets. Edmund speaks Edgar's words (2.1.44-47) to replace him, just as Regan and Goneril claim for themselves words of filial loyalty that properly describe Cordelia (Carroll, 1993). The forged letter expresses Edmund's view that estates should be maintained by the younger generation, freed from the "oppression of aged tyranny" (1.2.48-49). Edgar allegedly says that should Edmund "produce / My very character" (2.1.70-71), he would 'turn it all /

To thy suggestion, plot, and damned practice” (2.1.71-72) —an exact narrative of what Edmund has conceived. Both plots are set in motion when Cordelia and Edmund articulate the loaded word “nothing”. Edmund uses verbal withdrawal to arouse Gloucester’s suspicions as he equates the forged letter (1.2.19-22, 30) with “[n]othing” (1.2.31). While Lear accepts the truth of speech in the first scene, Gloucester questions what he hears: “[l]et’s see” (1.2.34). However, Gloucester’s ignorant ear falls prey to Edmund’s mediatory speech. He asks Edmund: “[y]ou know the character to be your brother’s?” (1.2.59). The word “character” refers to the handwriting that Edmund has produced. Edmund confirms: “[i]t is his hand, my lord, but I hope his heart is not in the contents” (1.2.64-65). Gloucester perceives the letter as the ocular proof of Edgar’s villainy (1.2.71, 2.1.77-78). Therefore, he severs his ties to Edgar, saying “I never got him” (Q: 2.1.78), the same way Lear does to Cordelia, as if familial relationship is the stuff of words rather than blood. Gloucester’s and Lear’s follies (3.7.88, 4.6.54) are that they trust their ears, without recognising that words can be woven into lies (4.6.150-51). Gloucester and Edgar are, therefore, cast into the wilderness once they are released from the whirlpool of Edmund’s game of words.

Edmund seems to internalise male figures’ condemnation of his evil deeds, as is seen through his speech. He confesses his wrongs and acknowledges the justice of his punishment (5.3.154-55, 165-66). Bradley (2007) finds Edmund’s unexpected nobility “mysterious” and “peculiarly strange” (pp. 229-30) while Bernard McElroy (1973) argues that Edmund’s sudden alteration “is, if not unconvincing, at least not very compelling either in the text or in the theatre” (p.158). However, I argue that Edmund’s enigmatic “confession” is a technique of speech and silence he also uses to carry out the execution of Lear and Cordelia. By pretending to be touched by Edgar’s “brief tale” (5.3.173) of their father’s end, Edmund propels Edgar to tell his story. Cordelia’s silence in the opening scene is counterfeited in Edmund’s silence regarding his word on the murders of Cordelia and Lear—the first silence has divided Lear and Cordelia; Edmund’s silence kills them (5.3.213). Edmund’s death, which is “but a trifle” (5.3.269), does not take place until Cordelia has been hanged following his orders. Even his redemptive speech is illegitimate in the sense of being ineffective, false, and deceptive.

King Lear shows that madness is constructed through the body and language. Edgar’s mad discourse permits him to express and conceal his victimisation and his suppressed desire for revenge. His words, “Edgar I nothing am” (2.3.21), ally him with Cordelia. His soliloquies and asides reveal an interiority which forms a mediating perspective for the audience. In his speech, “I heard myself proclaimed” (2.3.1), he becomes both the subject/speaker and object/listener of his speech,

in that the speaker thinks differently from the subject/object spoken about. Cannon (2012) argues that “the audience takes in a character who is hearing double: both as the wronged Edgar and as the ‘natural’ beggar, Poor Tom” (p.41). Edgar inverts his aristocratic status in the disguise of Poor Tom (2.3.7-9), who speaks in the voice of the devil and addresses fiends (3.4.135, 147). Tom’s mad speech, which contains song fragments (3.4.44-45), bits of romance (3.4.126-28), and proverbial sayings (3.4.74-75, 89-91), suggests that Edgar’s subjectivity has been usurped by his psychological and social world. In maintaining his disguise, Edgar manipulates Lear and Gloucester’s feelings and becomes the agent of their self-discovery. Edgar rescues his father through the disguise of his speech (4.5.6-8) to convince his father that he has fallen from the cliff but was rescued by the gods from a fiend (4.5.34-40). Lear projects his plight onto Poor Tom (3.4.47-48, 60-61, 70-71) to whom he refers as a “[n]oble philosopher” (3.4.160) whose physical abjection and dislocated language can be read as an embodiment of Lear’s psychic fragmentation (3.4.94-101). Lear’s newborn wisdom leads Edgar to remark: “O matter and impertinency mixed, / Reason in madness” (4.5.167-68). Shakespeare suggests that madness is the metaphysical impulse of moral insight, self-realisation and rationality (Salkeld, 1993; Sheridan, 1980). The mad Lear seeks to know the reality beneath and engages with philosophical issues (1.4.123-25, 3.4.78, 3.6.33-34, 4.5.148-51). Edgar’s return to sanity is marked by a change in his appearance (4.5.8-9) and voice (4.5.6-7). The gentleman addresses him as “sir” (4.5.202), suggesting that Edgar begins to climb up the social ladder. In his challenge of Oswald, Edgar switches to Kentish dialect (4.5.225-37), demonstrating his ability to speak in different dialects. However, Poor Tom’s voice is challenged by his former identity that speaks within him. The disguise restrains Edgar from speaking his pent up passions (5.3.173-91), finding the voice of Poor Tom difficult to sustain (4.5.5-6). When Edgar unleashes his pent up passions, he casts his father in a feminised and subjected position. Edgar’s flow of words pierces his father’s ears and kills him.

“Is this the promised end?” (5.3.237) and Kent’s response “Or image of that horror” (5.3.238) shows that the silent entrance of Lear carrying the silent body of Cordelia defeats the expectations raised by language. The new monarchs represented as “noble friends” (5.3.270) are united to serve the state. The play transforms the negatives Edgar plays into the positive assertion of identity (5.3.161). He forgives Edmund and elevates him to equal status (5.3. 158-61). But his willingness to forgive crimes against himself does not extend to crimes against his father (5.3.163-64). Some critics, therefore, argue that Edgar returns with the spirit of vengeance holding the patriarchal ideology that condemns Edmund (Alfar, 2003). However, while Edgar kills his father and

brother in restoring his relationship with them, the silence of Cordelia gives way to change. As Stanley Cavell (2003) notes, "Cordelia's death means that every falsehood, every refusal of acknowledgement, will be tracked down. In the realm of the spirit, Kierkegaard says, there is absolute justice" (p.80). Edgar advises the survivors to "[s]peak what we feel, not what we ought to say" (5.3.300) and the response to Edgar's prescriptive speech is silence. Whilst the Quarto version includes Edgar along with Lear in the play's title, the Folio attributes the very last lines of the play to him. Edgar, who has assumed the voice of the mad and the dispossessed, succeeds Lear as survivor—king; Edgar is Lear conceived in the realm of Cordelia's silence.

CONCLUSION

My discussion of Shakespeare's *King Lear* has drawn on new historicist readings which argue that *King Lear* is a political drama which critiques Jacobean ideologies of sovereign paternalism, absolute authority and the tyranny which is closely allied to it. *King Lear* subverts the new historicist paradigm of resistance, subversion and containment. Male figures submit their voices to Cordelia's transcendental silence—a silence that is perceived by Lear initially as a sign of subversion of, resistance to, his ceremony and game of words. *King Lear*, which exposes the frailty of absolute authority and articulate the means of avoiding the tragedy and rejuvenating the kingdom, is an advice to King James I who may find himself promoting flatterers if he shows deafness to his loyal advisors.

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