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“Look, her lips”: Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

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I

Slack and sleeping senses must be addressed with thunder and heavenly fireworks. But the voice of beauty speaks gently: it creeps only into the most awakened souls.¹

Twentieth-century theorists have been severe with the notion of literary character. It does not speak strongly to post-Victorian souls—to this century’s skepticism toward moral and mimetic constructions. The New Criticism set character aside for finer patterns of imagery and wit or paradoxical structures of ironical tone. Myth criticism subsumed it in the more powerful archetype. Deconstruction, new historicism, and the related specialties of poststructural critique have viewed an obviously figurative construct with alert suspicion. It has seemed a rallying point for essentialist notions of the self, reinforcing a superficial moralism and commonsense psychology while all along remaining just rhetoric: *ethos* and *pathos* meeting in *proso-pographia*. Nevertheless, the artifice of character is hardly a post-modern discovery. The notion is central to most rhetorical traditions, although not entailing in every case the reduction of character to rhetoric.² In drama the issue is moot: there, within a constructed environment, the rhetoric of character is allowed to take on guises of truth because spectators can willingly—and consciously—suspend degrees of disbelief. It needs to be added that suspending disbelief is not the same thing as becoming credulous.

Although no more than a literary device, composed of rhetorical elements, character has shown such persistence in literary and critical practice that it may well outlast theories that diagnose its death. The idea that literary character might remain one of the textual pleasures we seek out may be tested in the relentless assault on character we find in *King Lear*, which goes beyond character but uses the device itself to do so. Indeed, the play constitutes itself by dramatizing meanings and values that arise from various nodal locations set *between* literary devices of character. The play’s disguising, for example, seems

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

to flaunt such *knotted intervals* by calling attention to character put on, then off.³ “Poor Turlygod! poor Tom! / That’s something yet: Edgar I nothing am” (2.3.20-21).⁴ Another example, and one central to my purpose of reconfiguring character here, involves the voicing-over of one character upon another: juxtaposition and joining of two distinct figures—one with “something yet” in speech, the other with “no breath at all” (5.3.306). The interval comes down to this shifting, barely perceptible space between speech and silence, between one voice and an invoked voice no longer there. *Topoi* of speech, voice, and breath disclose an uncertain space between characters and suggest some moral arguments of acknowledgment that arise within it. These arguments extend from acknowledgment by a dramatic character to the particular kinds of acknowledgment offered in literary response.

This essay presents an interpretation of the value of one character, Cordelia, and the final relation of that value to Lear’s last speeches over her body. My concern lies with a relation between characters at or near points of death and the issue of aesthetic closure. I find Cordelia’s value located in her soft voice and “ripe lip” (4.3.20), and I wish to link these descriptions to Lear’s final summons to our close attention: “Look on her, look, her lips” (5.3.309). This essay raises issues of stability of character, considering changes in the dying Edmund as preliminary to changes that occur for Lear. In my argument Lear changes by *looking* for and *imitating* Cordelia’s soft voice; his character change is not solely a development of internal depth but is also an acquired responsiveness to another character. Character evolves not as a formation around a void but as a progressive delineation of spaces between or beyond distinct figures onstage. Instability in this case is no hindrance to character as meaning; it is a groundwork for varied effects of meaning. My goal is to emphasize this interpretation but also to keep in view a theoretical proposition concerning subjectivity. This holds that to term character “constructed” strips it of signifying value and reveals an emptiness of meaning in matters of subjectivity. Since character is nothing but marks on a page, such arguments run, it must be silent, seen but not heard. This claim is not so much a theorized objection to character as it is an eva-

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

sion by reduction of the issue of meanings (and knowledge) generated by literary constructions.⁵

Against this reductive claim I try to find within Lear's speech to the dead Cordelia a discourse that is dramatic in its concern with character, ethical in its judgment of value, and constructed in its establishment of a perspective not original to Lear. My purpose is not to offer a theoretical defense of literary character; it is, rather, to test the possibility that a traditional literary device has been set in an unusual construction and, in so doing, to articulate patterns of achieved bonds more than those of developed interiority. My concern is to detach subjectivity from an exclusive identification with inwardness and to attach it to forms of ethical perception that resist categorical explanation. I aim at a description of character, ethical value, and shaped perspective that is "thick" in the sense that it plaits these different languages into an "anthropology" of Lear's change.⁶ His character is complete, defined by death and the play's close, in moments of final change and construction that embrace other characters. This is the antithesis to disguising, for Lear becomes most himself as he becomes more like his daughter—or, more precisely, like her only in the briefest of dramatic moments and in the delicate sharing of a single trait as he takes on her voice. This taking-on is contingent, tangential, yet so marked that it may well elude theory's finest rigors. That is, precisions of a theoretical skepticism may not be the best way to recognize brief and delicate points of closure in *King Lear*.⁷ Moral inquiry, with its concern for the particular nature of exchanges between persons, is better able, I believe, to represent those qualities that summon, shape, and puzzle our attention.

Such an occasion of brevity and delicacy gains dramatic resonance within a large architecture that continually repositions eyes and voices in significant meetings of image, theme, and situation. The father finds himself by means of his child, for this least daughter's voice has already taught him how to recreate certain bonds amid a ruin of doubt. The achievement in Act 5 depends upon an exchange in Act 4, where this poor sinner, once a king, claims nothing for himself except the name of his child. Yet his terrible weakness finds recompense in Cordelia's immediate response as she enacts without hesitation the difference between laughter and gentle acknowledgment.

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

LEAR ...Methinks I should know you and know this man;
 Yet I am doubtful: for I am mainly ignorant
 What place this is, and all the skill I have
 Remembers not these garments; nor I know not
 Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me;
 For, as I am a man, I think this lady
 To be my child Cordelia.

CORDELIA And so I am, I am.
 (4.7.64-70)

An effective brevity, Erasmus considered, is “so full of meaning that much more is understood than is heard.”⁸ The brevity of this lady/child makes up an affirmation that is richly understood, and her two qualities—simplicity and affirmation—constitute the “I,” also constructed, who identifies in gentle reverberation the family relationship and the proper name. Confirming herself, she confirms this abused “man” as father and king, a confirmation of identities and roles that will be brutally tested until simple assertions of existence can no longer be uttered. Yet Lear will recall Cordelia’s voice and proclaim its general excellence, joining two crucial inflections—distinction and type—in the value of character: “Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle and low, an *excellent* thing in *woman*” (5.3.272-73, emphasis added). The close of *King Lear* projects drama’s rich interrogations about being and presence. What does it mean to hold and consider such excellence? to recollect her saying “I am, I am” or “No cause, no cause” (4.7.75), only to listen and watch her die, unable to speak? The shock to Dr. Johnson is well known and was not endured again until he subjected the play and himself to editorial discipline.

II

*Finis coronat opus.*⁹

The play has other patterns of character development to examine beyond those of disguising, personal confirmation, or spherical predominance. Edmund uses (without perhaps believing) a notion of historical conditioning or shaping. “[M]en / Are as the time is,” he notes to his captain after the British victory: “to be tender-minded / Does not become a sword” (5.3.31-33).¹⁰ He then sets his executioner a task that leads to rope and his own death from the old king’s sword. This is one of the many turns to the sword that mark the violence of this

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

play. We never hear, and perhaps do not expect to, whether the captain had his own moment of tendermindedness as Cordelia's death conjoined with his. Since all characters are not equally important, by extension, what is offstage and out-of-text need not exist for speculation. It is different for Edmund. He is attractive (as Harold Bloom assures us), desired by both evil sisters, and distinctive; the time conspires to grant him, before death at his brother's hand, a final and surprising shift to kind intention.¹¹ Moved by Edgar's "brief tale" of their father's end (5.3.181-99), he thinks of enacting a good. He reveals his "writ . . . on the life of Lear and on Cordelia," offers his sword as a "token of reprieve," and urges all to "send in time" (11. 243-51). Time does expire for the queen. But what of her executioner, turned by voice, tale, and timing into a would-be savior: is his conversion legitimate or out-of-character? Is the problem one of ethics or aesthetics? What is the "time" of this character which leads him to this last effort at ineffective charity?

Does Shakespeare as well as Nature stand up for Edmund? Should we? Does it make a difference to condemn him for a writ on these two lives if he then goes on to mean well, despite his own nature? Cannot the end crown the work, the bastard speaking for, not against, Cordelia? Edmund's attractiveness, for me, is theoretical in that he illuminates problems of stability and alteration in matters of character and ethical judgment. After 3.7 who could have thought that this young man had so much good in him? His Act 5 conversion is astonishing not only in itself but also as a prelude to more remarkable changes in *Lear*. They do share extremes of attitude toward Cordelia, even if last judgments on the two should not rest there. Nonetheless, an ultimate Edmund, unexpectedly tender, introduces a "new *King Lear*," who brings his silent daughter to the stage and once again asks for her speech.¹² As the play concludes, *King Lear* raises basic issues of character, acknowledgment, and exchange. In my sense of the play, change of character is directly related to processes in which characters gain or lose acknowledgment as their voices contend within dramatic time.¹³

We like to view human character as stable, as fixed somehow in nature. Yet we know that it is not. It grows, or is constructed and reconstructed, to follow the signs of our time. In either case, a char-

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

acter must alter if ethical judgment is to do more than report on disjunct moments from the past when this or that agent performed well (or ill). That is, notions that a character can change yet retain a distinct identity are crucial to ideas of responsible freedom and their representation in literature. As Paul Ricoeur has remarked, one can distinguish between identity as sameness and as selfhood (a site for significant change) and in this distinction find occasions to weigh elements that do and do not change.¹⁴ In this sense, character is not at all an unequivocal formation but the name for certain continuing negotiations between stability and alteration. In turn, an ethical judgment must be supple over time as well as tolerant of the sudden changes that can come to one as attractive as Edmund. Literary interpretation is not alien to such latitudes of judgment, for this practice encourages varied readings rather than a unitary law. Here, ironically, an attractive traitor is reduced to a character function and his dying affords an aesthetic perspective on the royal characters whom he tries to murder, then fails to save. Edmund's good serves the literary plot before any argument of ethics; he is neither center nor circumference of this work. He can usurp many things but not *King Lear*. It has its own way with a "ficelle" so winningly brutal. He is borne offstage toward his man, to die—"a trifle" (5.3.295)—as his victims return to the center with a specifically dramatic power. This aesthetic shaping of dismissal and return does carry some relish of ethical value. Poetic justice remains a kind of justice, at least for Edmund. Conversion to a good only earns him Albany's final contempt and alerts us to more striking transformations for Lear. The endings of the two men are quite different yet not unrelated, for each comes to a voicing of ethical perception as a sign of altered character. Such signs should not be mistaken; they may very well bring us to a deep sense of the continuity of characters within the play. This can be said in another way: that judgments made about one character are not made in isolation from judgments about other characters. To note the irrelevance of Edmund, even in his last muster of an ethical voice, is to register the final power of Lear and Cordelia. Appeals to aesthetic qualities cannot, of course, forestall other judgments, even as acts and performances said to be ethical can still be evaluated aesthetically. One language of judgment cannot preempt the other. Nonetheless, *King Lear* asks for both and

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

torments our professional efforts at a strict discrimination of issues. We may deny Edmund any benefit from his conversion even as we appreciate its aesthetic virtues. Acting always as an end unto himself, he ends up as a device of the play.¹⁵

Literary critics as different as Harley Granville-Barker and Stephen Greenblatt have noted an odd circling in *King Lear*.¹⁶ Its action opens and closes with Cordelia's silence, and it is the ethical value of those silences that I want to consider now, especially and obviously in their effects on Lear. The two silences are radically different, yet we know that difference to be the point of the dramatic action, language, and scene as these coalesce intensively at the end in general patterns of speech and sight.¹⁷ The old man bends over his daughter's body, desperate to prove any signs of an invisible speech or breath. Now his concern is less *what* she says than *that* she says, and he dies in the act of acknowledging something intended but unspecified—except for location—about Cordelia. Beholders are asked to see what may not exist, for this is and is not Cordelia. Her character now appears only in an actor's body's mimicry of a past life—a striking union of death and theatrical illusion. Yet the rhetorical effect is one of intense concentration on “her”—by the king and, with him, by the watching armies. Lear ends in a passion of seeing and commanding sight, with his own mortal period and point of exclamation: “Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there! [*Dies.*]” (5.3.309-10).¹⁸ As before, he desires her speech and gains nothing. Shakespeare reconstructs his design so that this last question and command extend from the stage groupings to us as readers or spectators. We are asked to see and told to look. To do so, we must read Cordelia's lips, her father's anguish, and our own capacity for compassion. Ethical judgment is contextual; it must include the object of value, the affect of those interested, and the skills of the judge. Lear can be held to these standards, for he comes to a profound revision of the value of his daughter and her gender as he asks her not to go. In Act 1 he bribed Cordelia to speak her love; then, when she would not (or could not), he ordered her to go. Here, as the circle closes, he utters a plea of love that asks only for softest speech—speech he must then recreate himself. We could say that Lear mistakes silence in a new way. Or perhaps we are struck by his belief that

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

speech remains possible. In either case, the process is one of naming, address, and characterization with an intensity that few works match. The old king's voice has changed.¹⁹ An imperative "stay" begs. The original command—"Speak" (1.1.85)—is here a gentle question, although he himself is certainly not gentle in stopping Edmund's man. Nonetheless, he has learned to plead with silence—the figure he now holds, addresses, and describes. His language becomes briefly a caress, softness itself.

Cordelia, Cordelia! stay a little. Ha!
 What is't thou say'st? Her voice was ever soft,
 Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman.
 I kill'd the slave that was a-hanging thee.
 (5.3.271-74)

Edmund was wrong about the time. Here a sword has indeed become tenderminded, for Lear has not always spoken so well of this woman, let alone all women.²⁰ The rack of the world has cracked his darker purpose as well as the misogyny in his own hangman impulses: "the great rage, / You see, is kill'd in him," the doctor told Cordelia as she bent over her father (4.7.78-79). That rage was an exiled, exposed man's frenzied madness. It followed and enlarged the earlier rages of an angry father and monarch. The arc of those emotions brought Lear to his own silence, an exhaustion between sleep and death. A medical diagnosis, however, was hardly enough to represent this condition or its outcome.

The play's circle travels from and toward Cordelia by way of the king. Plot movement suggests an inner circle of characters bound together. We cannot understand the silence of the daughter without understanding the state or speech of the father. Lear's health now rests with his daughter's return and manner of identification. She must sweeten his imagination of "the sulphurous pit" (4.6.130), extending the motif of royal medicine by inverting archetypes of lost children and searching parents.²¹ Her character seeks out his—to say in Act 4 what could not be commanded in Act 1, and with a gentleness that can repair the "high-engender'd battles" of his storm and night (3.2.23). It may strike some viewers that Cordelia mingles qualities of passivity and power to such a fine degree that the first quality must enhance (not diminish) the second. Cordelia's gentleness can be understood etymologically as a joining of social or family status and of personal

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

qualities—a royal birth as well as a private sense of loving duty. The difference between Act 1 and Act 4 concerns a divergence, within this patriarchal system, between royal commands and paternal appeals to a complex gentleness.

An ethics without an objective standard must be trivial. In *King Lear* that standard—one concerning the worth of speech—is embodied in Cordelia, especially in her lips and voice. They both form the shape and sound of value in this kingdom and suggest its vulnerability. Ironically, the injury to value begins in the command to speak. Lear is not wrong to want to hear Cordelia's love; he is wrong to command its expression as a condition for inheritance. Commodifying love is not a way to recognize this daughter's worth. "She is herself," France chides Burgundy—and Lear—"a dowry" (1.1.241). Since this wealth lies in a silent character, the real challenge is a difficult discrimination between softness and emptiness. Kent puts the matter negatively to the king, but he only begins a terrible process in which Lear learns to distinguish "low sounds" from the "hollowness" of least loving: "Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least; / Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds / Reverb no hollowness" (11. 152-54). Kent's "plainness" (1. 148) has no effect but to send Lear's hand to his sword, while "*low* sounds" are indeed concealed by "*hollowness*." A statement of Cordelia's value is assigned to France, a monarch-suitor who provides a formal set of loving paradoxes (11. 250-61).²² We in turn may decide that, if Cordelia is a center of value, her "low sounds" have yet to be constructed in an adequate rhetoric. The speech on duty which rings so coldly in Act 1 (11. 95-104) requires later events to bring out its full tonalities.²³ Her exile heralds a terrible void in Britain, one that is figured by chaotic sites and acts of terror—a wild heath, a blinding storm, plucked eyes. The challenge for ethical inquiry is to complete a circle, to redraw that map of hollowness, to call a soft voice home. An acoustics of true reverberation is tested severely by the longest absence from the stage of a major Shakespearean character.

The construction finally occurs in 4.3, a scene omitted from the Folio and often dropped in performance, perhaps because its technique is indirect yet highly mannered in the fashion of the reporting scenes in the late romances.²⁴ The scene may also seem irrelevant if

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

one is unconcerned with Cordelia speaking or spoken about, with indeed the play's reverberations of her presence and absence. But 4.3 does reverberate the scene in which Kent, while stocked, takes out Cordelia's letter and prays for a "warm sun" to read by (2.2.162). In 4.3 Kent, turned auditor, listens to an unnamed gentleman describe Cordelia's reading of letters about Lear.

GENTLEMAN ...it seem'd she was a queen
Over her passion; who, most rebel-like,
Sought to be king o'er her.

KENT O! then it mov'd her.

GENTLEMAN Not to a rage; patience and sorrow strove
Who should express her goodliest. You have seen
Sunshine and rain at once; her smile and tears
Were like, a better way; those happy smilets
That play'd on her ripe lip seem'd not to know
What guests were in her eyes; which parted thence,
As pearls from diamonds dropp'd. In brief,
Sorrow would be a rarity most belov'd,
If all could so become it.

KENT Made she no verbal question?

GENTLEMAN Faith, once or twice she heav'd the name of
"father"

Pantingly forth, as if it press'd her heart....
(11. 14-27)

Both scenes contain rebellions—Kent's enraged attempt to punish Oswald, Cordelia's better self-control. The gentleman's language traces elaborate conceits of thematic bearing and a ceremonial description that offers itself as a part of its own gentleness. It is lettered artifice: a flourish of metaphors, an effort to state Cordelia's full worth as ruler and woman while underscoring her absence.²⁵ Here understanding is achieved by courtliness, not suffering, and by a language that asserts a virtue in surplus as *King Lear*'s plainest speaker listens. Although rhetoric, this is the antithesis of hollow speakers at court or of unaccommodated man, whimpering his folly before the elements. It is a revelation in figured meaning of what "play'd on her ripe lip" (1. 21).

The anonymous gentleman restates the Stoic ideal of self-government in a language of courtly richness. France's metaphor of the self as dower is extended to issues of rule. This new rhetoric shows rebellion subdued by queenly patience, nature's "sunshine and rain" bettered in the true daughter's ripe lips and pearl tears. Her qualities still

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

speak to this gentleman's eye of recollection as he tries to convey to Kent the wonder of her presence. Here the power of her subjectivity is so well controlled that, in governing itself, it can lay claim to govern others, this unnamed gentleman or a would-be king of passion. The masculine title of "king" suggests that the implicit model may be Lear's earlier usurping rage. A gentle microcosm suddenly takes shape in Cordelia's rich sorrow, as if Act 3's storm should be replayed now in precious miniature.

In addition to self-government, the gentleman describes an act of heavy lifting that Cordelia could not perform in Act 1: "Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave / My heart into my mouth" (1.1.91-92). (In Act 5 that verbal action will pass to Lear in the literal burden of a dead daughter.) Here, before Cordelia returns to the stage, her authority in two bodies—as queen and as subjective person—is confirmed.²⁶ Her majesty is not that of Lear's raging nor that of her husband's cool faith. She can project her heart in the name of her father. In the next scene she will begin a process of healing, advised by the doctor to "close the eye of anguish" (4.4.15). A court ceremony of bestowing jewels will be translated into a deeply emotional spending of attention and care. From Cordelia's heart and eyes (as imaged by the gentleman), a royal progress travels by tears and lips to Lear's own sight (as witnessed by the audience). A ripeness of language and spectacle is all in both plots of the play; acts of jeweled pathos—the queen's touch in language—will reach an untender brother in Edgar's words about their father's "bleeding rings, / Their precious stones new lost" (5.2.11; 5.3.189-90). This iconic language gradually rules even Regan's "sweet lord," who absented himself from ring-pulling and delegated murders so attractively.

Cordelia's "ripe lip" closes the eye of anguish to enable better seeing. She is "rare" not only because of her absence but also because of her own verbal translation of the gentleman's jewel metaphors into healing medicines. Act 4 moves from Cordelia described to Cordelia present (yet without her father) and finally to her moment of awakening him onstage.

DOCTOR	Please you, draw near. Louder the music there!
CORDELIA	O my dear father! Restoration hang Thy medicine on my lips, and let this kiss

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

Repair those violent harms that my two
sisters
Have in thy reverence made!

(4.7.25-29)

The simples of music and embrace lift him “out o’ th’ grave” and soothe the “molten lead” of his tears (11. 45, 48). Act 1’s expulsion is under repair: having learned for himself to “say nothing” (3.2.38), the old man is reborn, recast. The natural relation of father and child is reconstructed as a relation of art. The void fills with gentle sounds. A counterpoint of music and the queen’s voice calls Lear from “the heaviness of sleep” to a restored vision of her as soul (4.7.21, 46). “[W]here did you die?” he asks her (1. 49), believing her to be the one transformed rather than the agent of his transformation. His phrase in Act 1 for a future with Cordelia could not have meant this scene, yet the scene does ironically reveal “her kind nursery” (1.1.124). Salving the hollow sisters’ “fangs” (3.7.57), the child brings the father to himself in a scene of waking and second birth as she heals a prodigal parent with an artful medicine of lips.²⁷ The intimations of a romance recovery are strong but not strong enough to overcome the swords, writ, poisons, noose, and quick savagery of Act 5.

The gentleman’s account was static, ornamental; Cordelia’s address is dynamic, performative. “Restoration” is allegory, desire, and event. The paired speeches are complementary, not antithetical; both hang on her lips as she returns to her nation and to language. “Love, and be silent” was the first resolve (1.1.62); now her lips can be act and speech act, the kiss and the gentle speech of kissing. Fragile and gracious, she is the real physician-antagonist to nature’s fearful storms. Such complementary fits other relationships. If royal authority is patriarchal, it still requires this daughter’s healing; the “reverence” she anoints is that of the unkind father and the injured monarch at once. It is both reconciliation and recoronation: “How does my royal Lord? How fares your Majesty?” (4.7.44). The construction of Cordelia’s value passes to her own speech and to the verb “repair” issuing in speech and kiss from her *ripe* lip; *ripe* in the senses of rich, red, full, yet ready for the reaping.²⁸ The play sets the construction of value in the lady, dramatizing a worth to her objective presence in stages of absence, reported return, and actual appearance. It then reveals the force of her value and presence in the repair of Lear, which

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

will survive further losses, including that of the lady herself. She returns to go about her royal father's business and reapplies Luke 2:49 by subsuming in her "simples" the work of ideology in family, state, and belief (4.4.14, 23-24). Her character is at once value and value's instrument.²⁹

A new power in that healing shows in the aftermath of defeat as feudal chivalry is put to one side. We are left to wonder whether Shakespeare's feudalism works as a sign of bourgeois progress or as a dramatic frame for tragedy. We may even conclude that historical approaches, whether that of a history of ideas or that of a new cultural materialism, over-value not the fact but the role of feudalism in the play.³⁰ There may be some sense in following the lead of the characters. Lear does not regard this lost battle as he once did the loss of his knights, and we attribute the difference not just to the reductions experienced on the heath but also to the mingled strengths and tenderness given by Cordelia's love: her emotions fill the spaces opened and exhausted on the heath. He has been—and will be again—"child-changed" (4.7.17). There may be traces of escapism in the lyrical speech beginning "Come, let's away to prison" (5.3.8). Its assertive energies and purpose, however, stand in contrast to the weak, uncertain questionings in 4.7. Not so much distracted as prudent, it is the oblique, coded speech necessary before triumphant power.³¹ One of "Gods' spies" (1. 17), distinct from Oswald, Tom, and Kent, Lear can speak to divine methods with an assurance that is resonant and vernacular, finding strange virtues in this necessity. Most kings enjoy a power over prisons; this one enjoys his power within and against the cage.³²

Upon such sacrifices, *my Cordelia,*
 The Gods *themselves* throw incense. Have I caught *thee?*
He that parts *us* shall bring a brand from heaven,
 And fire *us* hence like foxes. Wipe *thine* eyes;
 The good years shall devour *them*, flesh and fell,
 Ere *they* shall make *us* weep: *we'll* see 'em starv'd first.
 Come.

(5.3.20-26, emphasis added)

One can set Lear's two earlier speeches banishing and recognizing Cordelia against this farewell to power that invites new bonds of intimacy constructed in speech. Even programmatic skeptics toward large claims for language might allow that one could speak for two

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

here. A new authority in the king emerges in this speech to Cordelia. Something is “caught” in his discourse, despite defeat and prison. What it means to win and lose is now in process of reconfiguring.

The failure of public speech and understanding in Act 1 is past. These two begin to share an imagination of sacrifice that ranges from heaven to fox burrows and across the good years that devour. The point is tone, not prediction; an uncanny poise of force and gentleness in which, although she says nothing—a strange prolepsis—we may hear the lady’s silent acceptance shaped in the address to her. Along with 4.3’s Gentleman, Lear also talks for two. The king’s speech is a harbinger—not the end but closer to the end than the plot is yet. Character effects—a rhythmical shifting of singular pronouns to plural—impart a sense of Lear’s stand against the cosmos. Invoked sacrifices lead to mysterious images of *our* triumph in *providentia edax*: “the good years shall devour them.” We are left uncertain, as we are later in the scene, of the exact referents of pronouns and thus of the vocalized space that is set for us. Lear’s language no longer divides the kingdom for others; it establishes a special space for his and his daughter’s understanding. Feudalism establishes bonds of service that carry authority due to an ordering of classes and property by means of kinship hierarchies and personal dependence. *King Lear* explores sacrificial transformations that disclose through subjectivities of speech a new and objective authority. Lear’s power rests in his speech, not in “champains rich’d” (1.1.64). His tones claim a vernacular emphasis quite new to him, although the accent took hold gradually in Acts 3 and 4. On seeing Gloucester in 4.6, he offered advice that seemed to amalgamate the experiences of both men: “What! art mad? A man may see how this world goes with no eyes. Look with thine ears” (11. 151-52). Lear takes his own advice in Act 5. His eyes and voice disclose together, beyond the pain of loss, the rough shapes of sacred violence.³³ Yet this play does not allow private reconstructions to go unchallenged. However we may understand any testing agency ourselves, one appears in this play with terrifying economy and precision. This couple has been caught and shall be parted. An attractive character has had his own timely thoughts about the devouring to be done. As Lear and Cordelia exit under guard, Edmund signals to his captain and, by echoing “the old and miserable King” (5.3.47),

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

extends the metrical line that Lear began: “Come hither, captain; hark. / Take thou this note” (11. 27-28). The time is ripe for a brief lecture on tendermindedness and men who are swords—but it is delivered to a mercenary who is willing to hang a young woman in front of her father. Charity will later extend itself quite differently to Edmund. Here the postwar executions begin with an unattractive, banal exchange on postfeudal service—an administrator’s act of passing on a letter and a chore.

III

And the truth is, one can’t write directly about the soul. Looked at, it vanishes....³⁴

King Lear does not advance a single or unitary notion of literary character. It allows us to see characters made and unmade. A king is maddened but restored, only to face defeat, imprisonment, release, and stages of dying. The unmaking can be done verbally or violently, as a function of cultural practice or of physical assault. Cordelia’s place in Britain goes as quickly, as savagely, as Gloucester’s eyes. Throughout the play, we need to recall that Lear is the first to presage her death. In disowning her, his imagination inaugurates horror.

Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
Propinquity and property of blood,
And as a stranger to my heart and me
Hold thee from this for ever. The barbarous Scythian,
Or he that makes his generation messes
To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighbour’d, pitied, and reliev’d,
As thou my sometime daughter.

(1.1.113-20)

We can read the Marlovian simile one way before syntax adjusts sense to make Cordelia, not Lear, the savage cannibal. We may further note the peculiar form of high speaking that is involved in this citation of a helpless daughter for her supposed savagery. It is not simply that an error is made here. Lear’s speech reveals him as fully capable of evil—the evil of Tamburlaine, lord of “these barbarous Scythians,” who made his own child nothing, and who is present here as an allusive, usurping voice that reverberates, against historical time, within the British king’s words.³⁵

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

Lear will be held to account for this disfathering voice that invokes, if only by simile, the monsters to come. He must know the force of “disclaim” in the feudal vocabulary of renouncing lordship, although he cannot know the parallel between what he does to Cordelia and what he is doing to himself. The irony in his speech is that the behavior attributed to Cordelia seems, in the gender and violence of his chosen figure, all the more his own. In one or another reading of “generation,” Lear seems determined to interrupt and unmake his creation.³⁶ The simile of the “barbarous Scythian” seems at first to align him with the man who “makes his generation messes.” A surprise lies in turning from the three verbs of kindness to the brutal equation of Cordelia with that barbarity—the rhetorically dramatized consequence of being disclaimed by the king. The primitive fury stated here with deliberate and measured pace, Latinate diction, and calculated simile is—and ought to be—frightening. The voice is that of the savage father, wrathful beyond cause, demolishing all of the shelters of law and civilized existence as he learnedly denies his own child and, of course, himself. The agent of horror can be legitimate authority or not, a dragon or a dog in office. It makes little change: bodies, like kingdoms, were made to be torn apart, and other bodies are there to do what the captain terms, with brutal casualness, “man’s work” (5.3.40).³⁷

There is a large difference, to be sure, between bodies and characters. This is clear with Gloucester, who does not begin to see until after his eyes have been put out. Lear, in turn, is thrust into the “eyeless rage” of the storm (3.1.8), but his eye of anguish can discover a new vision of Cordelia. Yet there should be no quick assumption that new visions are necessarily desirable. Lear must move relentlessly from seeing the child restored as a royal lady to viewing the strangled woman “dead as earth”—Cordelia’s character reduced to no more than the body of his sometime daughter (4.7.70; 5.3.261). At the end, he is beyond all issues of feudalism—not because society does not matter but because, as society’s head, he has already broken the bonds of blood, neighborliness, and pity. Feudalism ceases to operate as an image for social structure at his own behest. All come crying hither, and no one in *King Lear* can alter this condition of birth beyond tears that part, like guests or jewels, from eyes of anguish.

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

Lear can anticipate madness. He can imagine a long imprisonment, provided Cordelia is there. Her actual death is another matter. His imperious temperament still expresses itself in absolute judgment: “I know when one is dead, and when one lives; / She’s dead as earth” (5.3.260-61). But temper is now swayed by an intense love—one reconstructed from fury, madness, and exhaustion. Lear searches for Cordelia’s life with things as slight as a looking glass, a feather, or his own dull eyes, hoping for “a chance which does redeem all sorrows / That ever I have felt” (11. 66-67). We must be struck by such contrasts of frailty and subjective intensity, as Lear does find a woman whose value has been repaired and restored at a cost not less than everything. She is now everything but alive, and his judgment wrestles with this disproportion of all and nothing, juggling in his words a hierarchy of queen and missing fool.³⁸

And my poor fool is hang’d! No, no, no life!
 Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,
 And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more,
 Never, never, never, never, never!

(5.3.305-8)

What value could come to something poor, absent, dead? How can so little earth on a map be worth so much?—no less than all the sorrows of an antic majesty, redeemed perhaps but not yet ended. His speech contracts from “no life” to “no breath at all” and then to “no more.” It is destitution’s language; all ceremonies of distinction vanish with Cordelia’s last absence, and what remains is ordinary or worse—dog, horse, rat. This is an agony of dying, one of such force that the negations, augmented in the Folio, are simultaneously denials and acceptances of “no life” and “Thou’lt come no more.” The half-brothers’ struggle—a feudal contest of trial by sword and combat—is completely outdone, and within seconds the questions asked of Cordelia will apply as well to this speaker. Set in climactic position, the deaths of these two characters are given a greater significance than the conflicts of national armies or the ritual contests of the brother-knights. Historical events and institutions, all arbitrations by sword, are subordinated to privileged characters and character relationships—everything that the new historicism argues is off-center in such literature. Should constructed characters of royalty so center and command the field of history? The daughter speaks with “no breath” to her

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

anguished father; Kent declares that he “must not say no” to a silent call heard only in his ear of loyal service (1. 322). Can meaning’s “something yet” ever come from so near nothing? Can history simply declare itself a privileged form of new or old interpretation and tell us what *he* might have heard? Now as then, Cordelia speaks only to awakened ears as the soundless voice of gentle ways, the softest mystery in all things. Her silence is not the feminine submissiveness that Catherine Betsey hears, for the quality of her voice has passed to Lear as an authoritative sign of her rule in his ethical growth. To trace the limits on individual character in this play, we must study the interplay of its characters and not just the paradigms of social structure.³⁹

Ethical judgment in *King Lear* arises from and returns to literary character. Each is matrix to the other. It is not a matter of a moral allegory or a Greek etymology but a view of dramatic action. Drama allows us to watch a process in which the construction of character cannot be separated from the judgments made by the characters about one another. Plot is not the only binding; we see that *ethos* is ethics. Lear’s first address to Cordelia concerns his “joy” in her, but that is a love understood according to elements of hierarchy, competitions of kingdoms or sisters, and the property wealth of nations. He stages spectacles—first for the British court, then for neighbor rulers—as his desires *interest* the presumed greed of all.⁴⁰ He can mention love, but Cordelia must speak for opulence, for rich lands in Britain and in France or Burgundy. As king and father, Lear defines her character as a subject-daughter: she must, in nature, want what his speech dictates. His pride swells as he gauges the worth of his “last” and “least” to fertile nations elsewhere. The command to speak introduces what should astonish all: that when this British king divides, more is created. It is no simple weighing of dukes and their moieties. His least is indeed most, as the powers of France and Burgundy await the verbal aptitude of a youngest daughter. Her speech is supposed to delight Lear, then re-map Europe. We watch a royal father who gives away his kingdom but tries to control the gift, who gives away his last daughter but makes that gift contingent on his command over her. The treatment of Cordelia replicates the treatment of the kingdom, as the use of

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

heraldic crops and geographical titles to identify her two suitors makes clear.

... Now, our joy,
Although our last, and least; to whose young love
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
Strive to be interest'd; what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.
(1.1.82-86)

The nothing of Cordelia's silence reveals the failure in Lear's speech, which has demanded that her voice fulfill ideological purposes. Imperial calculations like these are absent from Lear's last speeches, although kingdoms remain at stake and the speaker can show his old temper. Cordelia no longer stands before and against him; she is nearer yet more distant. From her, still his center, he asks little: nothing formal, a short stay, a soft voice before the return to killing thoughts. The sequences of impotence and power in his address are rapid, intense.

I might have sav'd her; now she's gone for ever!
Cordelia, Cordelia! stay a little.
Ha! What is't thou say'st? Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman.
I kill'd the slave that was a-hanging thee.
(5.3.270-74)

As if beyond hearing him, "Cordelia" seems to move away. The effect tests in a turn from "thou say'st" to "Her voice" in line 272, as the dead body holds mimetic place onstage. Spaces open from his gestures of language, as intimacy suddenly generates—where no one is—a tiny dialogue of *I* and *thou* across a linguistic distance to death. Does one invoke Buber or Bakhtin here: the dialogue as a structure of intense, intimate relationships or as a structure of radical differences conjoined?⁴¹ The gentle speaker and the murdered hangman join in the king's sentences: one death easily given, the other impossible to tell. Yet both figures have crossed to an undiscovered country whose nearest border is mapped by this final juncture of bent age and a least body. It is obvious to say that the play replaces Act 1's literal map with one that must be intuited, less obvious to urge that the second map is one of language, one that can chart the spaces between the ferocity of the finite verb in line 274 and the desperate tenderminded

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

ness of the last personal pronoun of renewed address to the hanged woman.

This point concerns Lear no less than Cordelia, his own lips as well as hers, and the way he speaks about her “now she’s gone for ever.” The fate of the hangman reminds us—and Lear—of the persistent, violent energies of the warrior-king. Edmund’s sense of the times is not distant from this “good”: “I have seen the day, with my good biting falchion / I would have made them skip” (11. 276-77). All the more remarkable, then, is the juxtaposition of another ethical character within the dramatic character’s speech. This character is also Lear, but it has been constructed in the course of the play, as if being follows on speech. It has emerged after a natural schooling—in wild weather and in the abyss of madness. Howlings of storm and man still to a deep quiet. In this new character and experience, Lear can speak yet listen for the softest of gentle and low voices. Cordelia’s asides in Act 1 would be marked now. Her softness is not the king’s tonic register, but he has learned to speak within it and to hear it.⁴² He seeks Cordelia’s voice in his question, glosses her silence as her custom, and deflects the fact of her hanging into his execution of Edmund’s “sword.” In Lear’s own voice we find the changes worked by this child who can speak no more, as Lear performs her voice before “her” body. A strange dialogue across existential spaces and times joins two different characters, preserving a difference in speech yet folding the two voices into the one body of the king.

This is not, though brief, an event without context. In 4.7, when Cordelia bent over Lear’s exhausted face, she could see there, despite her absence and a reported reliance on letters, the storm and heath of Act 3.

... Was this a face
To be oppos’d against the warring winds?
To stand against the deep dread-bolted thunder?
In the most terrible and nimble stroke
Of quick, cross lightning? to watch—poor *perdu!*—
With this thin helm?

(4.7.31-36)

Oddly, her gentle voice reproduced his voicing of the winds: the characters reunite in shared speech. A stylistic joining of epithets, battle imagery, and a foreign term allows us to register the presence as well

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

as the absence of the lady at the play's center. It must be a British princess and now a French queen who joins these two languages to lament her unconscious father—lost, then seen in marks on a page, now found in sleeping ruin: “poor *perdu*.” From his face she seems to read and hear the terrible sights and sounds of cosmic battle. Her gentleness and absence form no obstacle to understanding his great loss, which is summoned from the past in a near-Marlovian echo of a more distant struggle and a very different face.⁴³ In 5.3 positions reverse as Lear scans his daughter's face. Others tried to interpret Cordelia for him in Act 1; he assumes that role here as his right, whether as father or as king. His reiteration of “ever” transmutes his loss (“gone for ever”) into her enduring excellence (“ever soft”). The first silence is no longer “nothing”; what the angry father then disclaimed he now gives back in gentleness, her voice plaited within his own. Near death himself, yet still on watch within his thin helm, he completes a circle begun in Act 4, preserving in his speech the ever-soft voice of the absent-present dead, the character who is and is not there either at the play's center or at its end.⁴⁴

The ethical value of Lear's speech is located in three emergent traits of dramatic character. The first is flexibility. An otherwise inflexible man assumes another voice radically different from his own. In the process, he alters his violently expressed opinions about his least daughter and her sex. He racks himself into tolerance, stretching his character by taking hers on. The second is acknowledgment. At the moment of death, Cordelia's presence is recognized as a value of utmost worth. Her body must be returned to the stage by the old man himself. After howling, he must bend over, cajole her into speech, and acknowledge the fact of her death and the equal fact of his passionate need for her life. The third is reciprocity. It presupposes the first two but goes beyond them while twining them together. In imitating and characterizing the voice of Cordelia, Lear returns that voice to her in desperate gift and compliment. Her ripe lip repaired and restored him to social exchange. His deictic rhetoric concentrates final attention on her: “Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there!” (5.3.310-11). “[T] his” is “there” in all ripe presence and reverberation, much more than can be said; and the corollary of such ripeness, now “autumn's dust” (4.6.199), is a last

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

reaping on a site anciently named a seeing place.⁴⁵ The mysteries of entwined lives meet in this accounting of eyes and voices, opening the terrible spaces in a dialogue of one. He looks, speaks, to her lips, there, “there.”

Shakespeare phrases Lear’s words so that no one shall see as much as the king commands. We are told to look, and we are left. We can, however, see what he says and read there the values in a committed attentiveness that bonds ethics and character in the play’s eponymous construction. The ethical point of real importance is not whether Lear is deluded as he dies.⁴⁶ It is rather the register and quality of his voice as he attends his daughter before he dies, his voice sinking toward hers as toward a shelter. No theory or law, however powerful, gives access to this site. There is no hovel or vault that stage or film can show us. It is the verbal space between characters that separates as it bonds them on a terrain of meanings. It is the unnerving sense in Shakespearean drama of an intense subjectivity showing its back above the language that it lives in. A gesture of direction is made, “Look there,” and we reach it—there is no other way—by means of the ripe lip, simple, and soft voice of interpretation.⁴⁷ Death may end the lady but not other locations for her voice. The value of Cordelia is now a function in Lear’s speech, a last “trick of that voice” (Gloucester’s phrase at 4.6.109), as if dramatic language could show, well beyond both bodies and characters, a transpersonal soul or (in terms less metaphysical) an ethical bond to a remembered voice. It is, as the gentleman said of the absent Cordelia, a becoming sorrow, “a rarity most beloved.” Subjectivity is sensed most sharply not inside one character but in the intervals disclosed by the verbal response of one character to another’s silence. H. P. Grice coined the term *implicature* to refer to the influence of context on formations of unstated meaning. In *King Lear*, implicature locates subjectivity powerfully within the spaces between speech and dead silence.⁴⁸ Context allows us to hear Cordelia in *King Lear*, and that response from us completes the protagonist-king’s command.

Characters mean marks and subjects of difference. Shakespeare constructs and positions them to reveal the palpable gaps in between—joining; interesting; investing as though with rights, values, being—those same literary constructions that remain different yet so

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

remarkably combined in dramatic speech, death, and closure. It is not that any one character per se defines meaning but that characters, stable or changing, have agencies to perform in constructing those complex meanings that plays supply. They are agencies that audiences do and theories should aim to read.⁴⁹ The notion of an essential self may well be delusory. It may also be a red herring. There is no cognate relation between the philosophical concept and the literary construction, and the former's powers of delusion only increase if invoking them can direct attention away from Shakespeare's inventions of character and the extraordinary relations between their sustaining words. We repeatedly watch characters start out as *données* yet end as achievements, and such achievements only heighten the interplay of pattern and distinction in structures of language, character, and drama. When King Lear describes Cordelia as a voice—soft, gentle, low—he also re-describes himself, binds a constant of her character to his own, and enacts some small measure of the freedom to complete change at *King Lear*'s ending. In the midst of “general woe” (5.3.319), a cracking and tearing of all given bonds, he performs something remarkable yet next to nothing, a shift of phrase and tone in four lines: “Few words, but, to effect, more than all yet” (3.1.52). The achievement may be slight in various schemes of judgment, including some within the play, but interpretations of it can still reward the effort.⁵⁰ “Look with thine ears” was Lear's mad counsel to the blind earl (4.6.152), and the end of the play shows the king observing his own advice. What would it mean if we did not or could not listen? That the voice was not there? Or too soft for sleepers to hear? Even Nietzsche—the notable thunderer of my epigraph—knew to listen for soft sounds and a gentle voice.

IV

I don't really speak *about* what I see, but *to* it.⁵¹

Such is the power of artistic conventions, as E. H. Gombrich has shown us, that we are always completing patterns, designs, and forms in our minds.⁵² Characters only begin in marks on the page; they reach their ends in us, occasioning a more extensive text than appears on the page. Even if skeptical, we may still find it difficult to regard such signs without presuming an interior self continuous with the charac-

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

ter we behold. Perhaps this is the point of the device. As we advance our own process of inner understanding, it may seem quite natural to imagine a similar process at work, especially onstage, in a vivid, powerful figure like Lear as he beholds Cordelia. And who is to say that such imagining is unreal or irrelevant? Why not call it a personal experience pressing toward conditions of knowledge, a speculative sympathy, an exercise in ethical imagination?⁵³ Moral inquiry requires such attitudes of generosity, a speculative willingness to entertain the value of someone other who is only partially perceived. Much the same may be claimed for the literary interpretation of texts. An essay by Maynard Mack that I admire accounts for Lear's death as just such a complex of actions interior to one character. It creates meaning by making Lear's own vision, consciousness, heart, and hope trace a final plot of inner subjectivity. Seeing his daughter dead, the character is said to confront what he knows and has known of this world and so to strain the limits of his being. As his *cogito* disintegrates, he still

tries to hold...this painful vision unflinchingly before his consciousness, but the strain...is too great: consciousness itself starts to give way: "Pray you, undo this button: thank you, Sir." And with it the vision gives way too: he cannot sustain it; he dies, reviving in his heart the hope that Cordelia lives: "Look on her, look, her lips, Look there, look there!"⁵⁴

This is a forceful account of Lear's death, its qualities drawn from the confident use of texts and inward perspectives on dramatic action. Yet in it, the royal directive only seems to point toward Cordelia's lips. Its plot stands revealed as a subjective action in Lear's heart and hope, an inner space where, despite disintegration, both revive, as if only there they can unite, as if inwardness and subjectivity must be one space—the sole place to join the importance of speech to that of unity and termination.

My effort has been to look in a different direction: to study the fields of space around and between characters rather than within one character, and to consider acts of looking and speaking as dramatic contractions of such spaces. A distinction from Wittgenstein has served as my prompt.⁵⁵ I have concentrated on the energy and intensity of *looking to*, and the pattern that I complete involves Lear's lips

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

rather than his heart and a mimetic sentence that prolongs “a little” Cordelia’s vocal life. It is a voiceover of recognized otherness rather than one of interior expression, revealing a knowledge of one character embodied in the other, s vocal action. Because Lear knows this, and can say this, we now know a great deal more about his powers. What he achieves in his language—a combining of distinct voices—is not simply an interiorization of the other gained by inferences about that character’s subjectivity. His language is public, ethical, dramatic—meant for all audiences to hear, to understand as judgment, and to feel as the completion of a terrible circle. “Speak” was the imperative to Cordelia in Act 1. No one could then realize that his command would be obeyed only when she speaks at last in and through his voice, complicating finally the roles of speaker and listener as “she” mends his speech a little (1.1.93). Cordelia *speaks there* so gently and softly as to be heard and not heard, her lips’ motions seen and not seen. The end is thus a strange form of pleasure asking us to see exact yet wrenching constructions of *ethos* and *pathos* in distinct yet contingent characters who make little sense, have no life, apart from one another.⁵⁶

Precisely because it is a matter of characters, not one character, I cannot look through Lear’s racked body to his breaking heart, although that word has figured in the play’s language from the first scene. Stage directions signal a different turn and bond: “*Enter Lear with Cordelia in his armes.*”⁵⁷ We are to witness an unexpected strength, endurance, and discipline as we measure finally Lear’s burdened acts of carrying, looking, and speaking. A broken heart may mark the end, as Kent prays, but it is only one sign of the ethical action that is at last painfully complete. I agree with the last speaker—Albany (Q) or Edgar (F): this king has indeed seen much and borne most.⁵⁸ He has looked on Cordelia’s lips, and what he sees there, in the face of final silence, entails the play. He has borne to the stage not only this least weight of body but also a soft, gentle voice in his own child-changed character of speech. Lear speaks as father but also as king, surrounded by audiences but centered as before by variously gauged distances between his character and that of Cordelia. The spectacle is both domestic and political. Cordelia returned to a father and king: “How does my royal Lord? How fares your Majesty?” Lear

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

and his play circle back again to divisions of kin and kingdom. Having much to answer for, he brings in the work's grim harvest as two distinct changes in death and closure remain. They set him with his daughter in the namesake play and finish a father's business in an achieved softness of voice: not "nothing" but "something yet," a tonality struck by him that is not his alone, a voice literally now between their lips. Before the silences of death and dramatic closure, such shifting constructions of character let us hear fine lines of affiliation drawing a fullness and an emptiness in represented being. The study of character in *King Lear* need not restrict or simplify meanings; it need not return us covertly to Victorian codes of ethics and empire. It can enable the play's richest meanings because the figures of character are thoroughly constructed and set within intimate companies and embraces of voice, though within, finally, no more than voice itself.⁵⁹

It is an ending that a later play repairs, although in a language of antithetical reverberation. Impossibility here is art's easy making in *The Winter's Tale*. There one king, urged on by another ("See, my lord, / Would you not deem it breath'd?"), can admire in a "dear stone" a queen's true image: "The very life seems warm upon her lip" (5.3.63-64, 24, 66). Leontes, his lost daughter now found, can be moved to astonished questioning—"What fine chisel / Could ever yet cut breath?" (11. 78-79)—and then to genuine wonder. He affirms the lady who has preserved his dead wife's character and statue so that image and figure, seeming and life, can be one. It is a resonant, happy metamorphosis of emotion, stone, and art; everything, in short, that cannot be achieved in *King Lear*.⁶⁰

What you can make her do,
I am content to look on: what to speak,
I am content to hear; for 'tis as easy
To make her speak as move.

(11.91-94)

Contingencies, even of breath and speech, move oppositely in romance and tragedy. Ethical meaning in *King Lear* has little to do with assembled pieties or retreats into a fragmenting, solitary self. It has everything to do with the nearly ineffable value of life in a character who has none, and under this intense pressure the character who

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

speaks of that life gives up his own, after commanding us to do as he has done. “Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there!” The force of this perception, which I have linked to moral inquiry, is such that we run the risk of becoming what we see, of speaking for ourselves the voice that we long to hear. There is, nevertheless, a greater risk: that of refusing sight and of regarding silence as if it means nothing at all. “Nothing will come of nothing,” Lear retorted earlier to Cordelia’s silence (1.1.90). By play’s end, he thinks differently, and that difference is a function of his character and hers over the time of the plot. There is “something yet” in the nothing of her death, and it is caught in, and represented by, Lear’s recollection of her voice.

My last point—that there is a function to characters—cuts against the grain of current speculation about literature. That speculation finds the idea of character too blunt an instrument for analytic work as well as too burdened with suspect categories of philosophical thought. In each case the objection involves attitudes toward literary construction. The first objection concerning bluntness may well seem true if certain instances of literary analysis are put on display. But since character is a constitutive part of the literary work itself and not merely a term of hermeneutic art, it cannot be the case that we *ought* to read a play and ignore its characters, no matter what else we or others choose to notice. It is precisely the construction that needs a finer study. The second objection concerning suspect categories is well taken, but only if the idea of character has been confused with ideological concepts of an impermeable, self-sufficient, or sovereign individualism. Lear may be every inch a king; it does not follow that he knows or rules himself. There is a clear remedy: study the construction, erase the confusion, trace the knots that bind characters. Toward that end, this essay has sought to understand characters within a play as one would words within language. That is, the meanings generated by characters are established by an interplay of difference and resemblance across protocols of custom and use, and the meanings so generated and established own their significance not within themselves but against groundworks of structure. The structure studied here is the voice of Lear as he comes to articulate the value of his daughter’s life in dramatic speech that shapes absence and presence at start and finish.

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

Literary works are indeed structured like a language, and it is because of such structuring that characters, like words, enable a play of meaning—not in any absolute sense but in the varied and contingent senses of meaning that make up the difficult conditions of truth within time.⁶¹ Within those conditions, the “voice of beauty,” which is not the voice of any single character, offers distinctive inflections and asks an acknowledgment of the crucial work of characterization, voice, and speech in *King Lear*.

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear***Endnotes**

Two seminars at annual meetings of the Shakespeare Association of America gave this essay its start: one on character led by Robert Knapp (1994), and one on *King Lear* led by R. A. Foakes (1996). I would also like to thank Walter Reed, who read an early version with care; my colleagues at Southern Methodist University; and an anonymous reviewer for this journal, who saw large as well as small problems acutely.

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), 93.
- 2 Christy Desmet situates character in the context of theory; see *Reading Shakespeare's Characters: Rhetoric, Ethics, and Identity* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1992), 3-58. See also J. Leeds Barroll, *Artificial Persons: The Formation of Character in the Tragedies of Shakespeare* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1974); and Lawrence Manley, *Convention 1500-1750* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980), 106-33. Richard Lanham defines the rhetorical terms in *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms*, 2d ed. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1991), 111 and 123.
- 3 Maynard Mack treats an opposite arrangement: "umbrella speeches, [under which] . . . more than one consciousness may shelter" ("The Jacobean Shakespeare" in *Jacobean Theatre*, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 1 [London: Edward Arnold, 1960], 26). Mack states his purpose modestly as a revision of Bradley, but his notion of speech as a shelter for multiple consciousnesses suggests a new view of language rather than a revision of ideas about character. One should note that New Criticism and postmodern theory do share some views: e.g., on the limits of character criticism. My italicized phrase notices the somewhat different qualities of density (*knotted*) and emptiness (*intervals*) that concern me.
- 4 Quotations of *Lear* follow the Arden Shakespeare *King Lear*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1952). Muir's is a composite text, based on the Folio with additions from the Quarto. I am grateful to the publishers of the Arden Shakespeare Third Series, who allowed me to see bound proofs of Reginald Foakes's forthcoming edition, *King Lear* (Walton-on-Thames, UK: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1997). Bringing to bear a thorough knowledge of the textual issues, Foakes has chosen to present a conflated text's "possible versions" (128). Quotations of all other Shakespeare plays follow the *Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
- 5 The classic case against *nothing-but* arguments is William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985), 11-50; the reduction he counters: that religion is nothing but sexuality displaced. To say that character is nothing but marks on a page reduces an idea to its material display. William H. Gass offers the grammatical reduction: "Polonius, that foolish old garrulous proper noun" ("The Concept of Character in Fiction" in *Fiction and the Figures of Life* [New York: Knopf, 1970], 34-54, esp. 37). On the beholder's share that lets a noun age and talk foolishly, see E.

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

- H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, rev. ed. (New York: Pantheon, 1965), 181-241. Bernard Harrison comments on *Lear* while discussing postmodern theory and kinds of truth in literature; see *Inconvenient Fictions: Literature and the Limits of Theory* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1991), 54-61.
- 6 Character is usually viewed as a literary device that represents effects of consciousness—senses of coherent interiority and depth. Harold Bloom declares Shakespearean inwardness canonical; see *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 70-75. I do not deny such representation or its importance in *Lear*. I consider an awareness that seems to move among characters and not within one alone. “Thick description,” a term coined by Gilbert Ryle, is associated with Clifford Geertz’s “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” (in Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* [New York: Basic Books, 1973], 3-30) and indicates accounts that are circumstantially specific and interpretive. By “an ‘anthropology’ of Lear’s change,” I mean that change in Lear’s character is best understood as a function of his bonds to others, especially Cordelia. I use the term more narrowly than Louis Adrian Montrose does in “The Purpose of Playing: Reflections on a Shakespearean Anthropology” (*Helios* n.s. 7 [1980]: 53-74) to refer to a dramatic refinement of kinship relations. His concern is with larger implications of ritual and symbol in theater and society.
 - 7 Paul de Man, for example, makes fragmentation a theoretical principle in his essay on Shelley’s *Triumph of Life*; see “Shelley Disfigured” in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, Geoffrey Hartman et al., eds. (New York: Seabury, 1979), 39-73. De Man’s closing abstractions assert a program of radical skepticism (68-69); in contrast, Shelley’s richly figured *terza-rima* stanzas lead to a break-off question. The distinction lies between unfolding a theoretical argument of skepticism and a poetic rhetoric of interrogation.
 - 8 Desiderius Erasmus, *On Copia of Words and Ideas*, trans. Donald B. King (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette UP, 1963), 104. Kent likewise notes the value of brevity: “Few words, but, to effect, more than all yet” (3.1.52).
 - 9 Cf. “The end crowns all” (*Troilus and Cressida*, 4.5.224).
 - 10 According to Jonathan Dollimore’s materialist reading of *Lear*, the play confirms the dictum that men are determined by the time; see *Radical Tragedy*, 2d ed. (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993), 196. He does not put the theory in any qualifying context: e.g., Edmund’s own deviation from that time. At 1.2.124-40, Edmund mocks his father’s sense of heaven’s agency, as he would, no doubt, any similar dependence on history as an agent.
 - 11 Harold Bloom suggests that Edmund is attractive because he is at ease in the world and able to articulate it as his own; see *Ruin the Sacred Truths* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1989), 77-79. Shakespearean character, Bloom argues, has come to model human nature; developing Chaucer, Shakespeare stages “the representation of change by showing people pondering their own speeches and being altered through that consideration” (54).

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

- 12 Barbara Everett, "The New King Lear," *Critical Quarterly* 2 (1960): 325-39. Her title takes in two meanings: a change in the king's character and a shift in interpretations of that change. She spots tendencies to Christianize Lear's suffering, opposing to them her vitalist sense of "forms of intense life" (338).
- 13 S. L. Goldberg emphasizes "acknowledgement" and the limits to meaning in *An Essay on King Lear* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1974), 30-34, 174, and 190. I admire this account but find a greater possibility for meaning in Lear's sense of Cordelia's voice than Goldberg's essay allows. See also Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1993), 121-25 and 34. Levinas adopts tropes of "the face" and "face-to-face" encounters to express issues of subjectivity and intersubjectivity.
- 14 See Paul Ricoeur, "Self as *Ipse*" in *Freedom and Interpretation: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures*, 1992, Barbara Johnson, ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 103-19.
- 15 It is formally neat as well as ethically appalling that Edmund is responsible for the deaths of all three daughters. Stephen Booth finds the proper end of the play in the deaths of Edmund, Goneril, and Regan (the end in poetic justice?) and declares the deaths of Cordelia and Lear to be "culminating events of [Shakespeare's] story" that take place "after his play is over" (*King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy* [New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1983], 11). I am uncertain about the value of distinguishing between *play* and *story*.
- 16 See Harley Granville-Barker, *Prefaces to Shakespeare I* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1927), 133-231; and Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in early modern culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 98. For a severe circularity that omits Act 4's reunion, see Jonathan Goldberg, "Shakespearean Inscriptions: The Voicing of Power" in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman, eds. (New York: Methuen, 1985), 116-37.
- 17 Paul J. Alpers offers an interesting critique of the New Criticism; see "*King Lear* and the Theory of the 'Sight Pattern'" in *In Defense of Reading*, Reuben A. Brower and Richard Poirier, eds. (New York: Dutton, 1963), 133-52. Alpers argues that treating metaphors as primary data (in place of characters and actions) yields unwarranted equations; images of sight (a function of metaphor) are made to represent insight (a function of character). Patterns of imagery intensify instead character bonds, "man's actual dealings with other men" (138). Postmodernists, however, might question any designation of character as primary with respect to other uses of literary language. The issue is whether literary study can accept categories other than those of language, whether hierarchies of categories are possible or useful.
- 18 These lines appear in F only (without exclamation point). They concentrate Lear's attention on Cordelia and move forward the moment of his death. Kent's reference to "the rack ["wracke"] of this tough world" (1.313) follows as choral commentary. In Q the death and choral commentary coincide, turning attention from Lear and Cordelia to Lear and Kent. Q thus lacks the intensity of structure in F. The treatment of death as a visual or theatrical experi-

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

- ence is established by the managed suicide in 4.6.
- 19 Beginning with Alpers's distinction between language and character, Stanley Cavell argues that *King Lear* avoids recognitions and thus love. A subargument treats character change; another considers what it means to acknowledge a person. Cavell treats character experience atomistically; he discusses Lear's recognition of Cordelia but not, as a part of that experience, Cordelia's response to her father. Cavell's general view of the play excludes responsiveness and exchange; see "The Avoidance of Love" in *Must we mean what we say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1976), 267-353.
 - 20 F gives *woman*; Q, *women*. It is worthwhile to consider both words in competition for textual space and the differences they suggest about general character. Editorial selection on display yields a richer end than does strict separation—here a generic, not a plural, term, marking Cordelia's constitutive power. Such work with a conflated text and its apparatus can show the text to be more than marks on a page yet not mystify its origins.
 - 21 Maud Bodkin's well-known treatment of archetypes emphasizes a pattern of heroic suffering in the father, an emphasis that obscures Cordelia's role in returning to vary the pattern of paternal suffering; see *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1934), 15-17 and 272-76.
 - 22 For Elder Olson France's sketch of Cordelia as a value in herself anticipates Lear's final intuition; see *Tragedy, and the Theory of Drama* (Detroit, MI: Wayne state Up, 1961), 207-9. The conflict between Lear and Cordelia he argues, lies between a feudal lord's asking for one kind of love and a family member's understanding of love not as formal pledge but as unspoken trust. Cordelia dies so that Lear can learn familial love; he dies in sign of the lesson learned. At 1.1.160, Rowe added the stage direction that has Lear reach for his sword.
 - 23 Cordelia's death enacts Kent's point and turns her sisters' early lies to her late truths. Goneril asserted "A love that makes breath poor and speech unable"; Regan claimed that Goneril names her deeds: "In my true heart / I find she names my very deed of love; / Only she comes too short" (1.1.60, 70-72). The older sisters' speeches are validated by the youngest's silence. Cf. Harry Berger, Jr., "King Lear: The Lear Family Romance" in *Making Trifles of Terrors: Redistributing Complicities in Shakespeare* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997), 25-49, esp. 46-49.
 - 24 Such reporting scenes include *Pericles*, 1.4; *Cymbeline*, 1.1, 2.4, and 5.3; and *The Winter's Tale*, 1.1 and 5.2. Sidney's *Arcadia* is a source for this passage in *Lear* (see Muir, ed., 161n).
 - 25 Sheldon Zitner dislikes the high style's "emptiness" and "pasteboard prettiness" ("*King Lear* and Its Language" in *Some Facets of King Lear: essays in prismatic criticism*, Rosalie L. Colie and F. T. Flahiff, eds. [Toronto: Toronto UP, 1974], 6). These qualities—under other names perhaps?—are relevant to dramatic function in a sequence from description to appearance to act. Patricia Fumerton, for example, links uses of adornment to "the rise of the *self*"

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

- (*Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* [Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991], 28). Marianne Novy traces an imagery of tears to develop themes of pity, mutuality, and forgiveness and comments acutely on Lear's description of Cordelia's voice in relation to issues of femininity and patriarchy; see *Love's Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1984), 158-63.
- 26 Ernst H. Kantorowicz shows not only the constructedness of character but a full awareness and use of the issue in medieval discourse. He traces distinctions between the monarch's political and natural persons or bodies, beginning his influential study of medieval political theology with *Richard II*; see *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1957). In *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1991), Richard Halpern approaches the issue through a neomarxist economics, studying "the divorce between the signs and the material realities of royal power" (220). Constructedness, one concludes, is not an unconditioned idea; to own significance, it needs a specified historical context. To point out that an entity is constructed cannot by itself fix (or unfix) meaning, since construction is precisely the manner of creating meaning.
- 27 There is a marked orality to family relations in *King Lear*. One can give, deny, withhold, or destroy love by acts of voice, mouth, or lips. On fantasies of passivity and sadism in the oral phase of development, see Norman N. Holland, *The Dynamics of Literary Response* (New York: Oxford UP, 1968), 34-38. F makes Cordelia the medical figure, replacing the Doctor with a Gentleman; see Foakes's Arden edition, 349n.
- 28 The etymology of *ripe* includes Old English *rip* (harvest) and *ripan* (to reap, harvest). Cordelia describes Lear "crown'd" with weeds and sends a search party to "the high-grown field" (4.4.3, 7). For *repair* and *rich*, see Gloucester to Tom/Edgar (4.1.76-77). Spenser's account of King Leyr (reprinted in Muir, ed., 237-38) traces patterns of restoration, ripeness, and death; it ends, after the king's death, with Cordelia's overthrow and suicide by hanging. Redemptive readings of the Lear story antedate not only Bradley and New Criticism but also Shakespeare's tragedy.
- 29 Muir, ed., cites Luke 2:49 (166n). Cordelia's shift of reference to an earthly father is one part of her mediating work. Harold C. Goddard studies Cordelia's work of repair in *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1951), 522-57, esp. 541-49. For a compressed account of materialist ideology in *Lear*, see Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 76-83.
- 30 Studies of the play have treated feudalism variously. For a valuable contrast between the history of ideas and the new historicism, see Rosalie L. Colie, "Reason and Need: *King Lear* and the 'Crisis' of the Aristocracy" in Colie and Flahiff, eds., 185-219; and Halpern, 215-69. We may debate whether Shakespeare's feudalism works primarily as a historical topic or as an artistic device to image historical settings of character. Is chivalry put aside a sign of

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

- bourgeois progress, a dramatic frame for tragedy, or some admixture? On the problems of using Foucault and Stone in commentary on Shakespeare, see David Cressy, "Foucault, Stone, Shakespeare and Social History," *ELR* 21 (1991): 121-33.
- 31 Annabel Patterson shifts the study of censorship from a censor's work to the author's mediation of living with censorship; see *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1984). The point extends to characterization. Censorship becomes an issue in the play if one takes Lear's speech as imagining a new life within conditions of imprisonment.
- 32 Marlowe provides a model for powerful helplessness. Bajazeth gains rhetorical power within Tamburlaine's cage, where he is held with his wife for the spectacle of two onstage imperial suicides; see *Tamburlaine I* in *Christopher Marlowe, The Complete Plays*, ed. J. B. Steane (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1969), 4.4 and 5.2. *Lear* redirects atrocity in Act 5 toward the savaged emotional bonds between father and daughter, suggesting that the real prison and torture are a world without Cordelia: "he hates him," Kent states, "That would upon the rack of this tough world / Stretch him out longer" (5.3.313-15).
- 33 René Girard's work on the relationship of violence to the sacred bears importantly on *King Lear*; see *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979). A complex rite of sacrifice, the play reveals bewildering, abrupt acts of substitution and violent displacement. Lear's language shows him at last to be ripe for a true ceremony of surrendering the kingdom in death. On the use of the pronouns *thou* and *you* in *Lear*, see Randolph Quirk, "Shakespeare and the English Language" in *A New Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, Kenneth Muir and S. Schoenbaum, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1971), 67-82, esp. 70-72; and Alessandro Serpieri, "Reading the signs: towards a sermotic of Shakespearean drama," trans. Keir Elam, in *Alternative Shakespeares*, John Drakakis, ed. (London: Methuen, 1985), 119-43.
- 34 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: The Hogarth Press, 1953), 85.
- 35 Marlowe heightens the cruelty of his barbarous Scythian in *Tamburlaine II*. The captured Olympia utters this phrase while killing her son to preserve him from worse tortures (3.4.19); Tamburlaine kills his first son for failing the father's heroic standards (4.1.105-39). On earlier dramatic forms in Shakespeare, see Howard Felperin, *Shakespearean Representation: Mimesis and Modernity in Elizabethan Tragedy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1977), 12-43.
- 36 Muir, ed., gives examples of usages in which *generation* can mean *parents* rather than *offspring* (11n). Lear may intend a shock at the emergence of the former meaning.
- 37 If one considers the work of Goneril and Regan, an irony attends the phrase "man's work." Elaine Scarry's discussion of the body in pain offers valuable

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

- reading beside *King Lear*; see *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985). See also Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 338-39. On the range of Lear's voice in the physical space of the theater, see Daniel Seltzer, "King Lear in the Theater" in *On King Lear*, Lawrence Danson, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1981), 163-85, esp. 178-85.
- 38 Muir summarizes various speculations about Lear's use of "fool" for Cordelia; e.g., Armin, playing the Fool, may have doubled as Cordelia (see Muir, ed., 217n). Sidney objected to kings and fools on the same stage; see Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (London: T. Nelson, 1965), 135. Lear's king is called a fool by a fool; later, with a new tone and meaning, the king directs the term to his daughter.
- 39 A principal aim of new-historicist critique is to "decenter" the subject, to remove it from an unfounded place of privilege in the interest of redressing power. New historicism's understanding of a work is thus frequently shaped by ideologies of power and victimization. Alvin Kernan offers a "Whitehall" reading of divine-right theory in *King Lear*, a sly marriage of the often-anathematized Tillyard to new historicism; see *Shakespeare, the King's Playwright: Theater in the Stuart Court, 1603-1613* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1995). On the softness of Cordelia's voice as a sign of feminine submissiveness, see Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), 178. The issue of literary centering (e.g., on constructed characters) returns us to what Aristotle might mean by his observation that literature is more philosophical or universal (not simply abstract but putative, counterfactual, speculative) than history; see *Poetics*, trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1927), 34-39.
- 40 The Latin term *interesse* acquired technical meanings in property law: to invest someone with a right to or share in something; to admit to a privilege. The word occurs in F (1623) but not in Q (1608).
- 41 See Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribner's, 1958), 1-11; and Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981), 259-422.
- 42 Clifford Geertz points to the ethical dilemma of the anthropologist when recording yet thereby appropriating another's voice; see *After the Fact: Two Countries, Four Decades, One Anthropologist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), 128-30. Literature generally, and drama in particular, offer significant violations of this code. Lear's appropriation of Cordelia's voice, however, seems to carry the significance of ethical perception rather than asserted power.
- 43 Cordelia echoes Lear's language on the heath. The letters referred to in 4.3 lead one to expect her knowledge of wind, thunder, and lightning, but she adopts as well his epithets (3.2.1-9) and compound epithets (3.1.11, Q only). We are shown the storm as a continuing function in Lear's mind that Cordelia can read, speak, and calm. *Perdu* entered English in the French phrase *sen-*

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

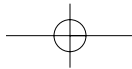
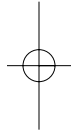
- tinelle perdue*—an exposed or forward and hazardous sentinel post (or the sentinel himself). Such a post was the position of a scout or spy; hence the link of “poor *perdu*” to “God’s spies” (5.3.17). Cordelia’s use holds the military sense as well as the sense of exposure to the elements. For Marlowe’s Faustus and Helen’s face, see *Doctor Faustus* in Steane, ed., 5.1.97-103. René Weis notes the allusion and F’s abbreviation of this speech in *King Lear: A Parallel Text Edition* (London and New York: Longman, 1993), 269n.
- 44 Marjorie Garber discusses the equation of silence with death and Freud’s use of Shakespeare; see “Freud’s choice: ‘The Theme of the Three Caskets’” in *Shakespeare’s Ghost Writers: Literature as uncanny causality* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 74-86. Freud understood Lear’s entrance carrying Cordelia as his act of carrying death to himself; I understand it as Lear’s qualification of death by love. Cordelia is thus carried in an opposite direction to dying Edmund, an emblem with ethical and theatrical significance.
- 45 *Theater*, from Greek *theátron*, a place for seeing, a theater; from *theáomai*, to view, gaze at, behold. On deictic rhetoric—language that articulates “the situation and . . . the space in which it is pronounced”—see Serpieri, 122.
- 46 Muir asserts a complicated emotional process for Lear in which joy over seeming life in Cordelia causes his death, a belief that we can see as delusion (1iii). Joseph Summers, in a line of argument near mine, revises this Bradleyan point, arguing that what Lear sees and what has life is what Cordelia has taught him about love; see “‘Look there, look there!’ The Ending of *King Lear*” in *English Renaissance Studies*, John Carey, ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980), 74-93. Summers traces convincingly the emotional rhythms of this discovery (92). Muir’s view is seconded by Maynard Mack in *King Lear in Our Time* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1965), 114; Barroll, 250; and recently by R. A. Foakes in *Hamlet versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare’s Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), 218-19. For criticism of this view, see Ian J. Kirby, “The Passing of King Lear,” *Shakespeare Survey* 41 (1989): 145-57.
- 47 Getting the world right—and not merely interpreting it—is a traditional way of defining knowledge and philosophy. Considering the limitations of philosophy for ethical thought, Bernard Williams suggests analogies for similar limitations of other forms of theory in relation to interpretation; see *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985). The point is not to deny theory—it is a strong form of interpretation—only to question claims of governance over all methods of interpretation, as if theory somehow stood outside or above interpretation.
- 48 In arguing against Bradley’s notion of a deceived joy, Kirby suggests that what Lear sees is not an illusion of renewed life but a departing-yet-summoning spirit (156-57). Susan Snyder studies the play in terms of Kübler-Ross’s stages of dying; see “*King Lear* and the Psychology of Dying,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 33 (1982): 449-60. She concludes that Lear and Cordelia die together and not as individuals; that the time lapse “allows Lear to do the impossible, to experience his own death and cry out against the terrible wrongness of

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

- it" (459). Roger Fowler introduces Grice's term, summarizes his argument, and provides a bibliography; see *Linguistic Criticism*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996), 135-36 and 159.
- 49 Jonathan Goldberg urges "the radical instability of character as a locus of meaning in the Shakespearean text" ("Textual Properties," SQ 37 [1986]: 213-17, esp. 215). This claim may be true if one attempts to align particular meanings with particular characters. If one views a variety of characters as engaged in a process of constructing thick or clustered meanings, the case may seem less desperate, as Goldberg's discussion of Malvolio suggests.
- 50 In view of such slightness, an objection might be put that I describe less than a change of character—merely a new element added to an existing character. Such an objection might encourage a review of basic terms—*character, person, body, voice, change, event*—and what we might expect of them in literary discussions of constructedness. I have found Bernard Williams especially helpful on physical qualities of a voice as mediations between body and character; see *Problem of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973), 11-12. Roland Barthes remarks on pleasures in "the grain of the voice" and "the articulation of the body, of the tongue"; his remarks, suggest character's presence in the physical or material voice (*The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller [London: Jonathan Cape, 1975], 66-67).
- 51 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), 175.
- 52 See Gombrich, 181-287. Earlier he discusses the role of "schemata" in a process of stipulation, correction, and making in the visual arts (84-90), an exposition that can apply to other disciplines. Here literary character is a function of rhetorical and literary schemata, an author's practice with them, and the contributing emotions, intelligence, and memory of different audiences. In this view, character could never be reduced simply to printed marks on a page.
- 53 In a recent issue of *PMLA* on "the status of evidence," Heather Dubrow observes the value of "experiential evidence" and "personal accounts" ("Introduction: The Status of Evidence," *PMLA* 111 [1996]: 7-20).
- 54 Mack, *King Lear in Our Time*, 114. Mack's argument is larger than I have managed to suggest; he notes levels of meaning contributed by senses of "intimate humanity" and by various practices of literary history (78-80).
- 55 Elaborating on this distinction, Wittgenstein points out that a direction to see ought not to be confused with what is seen (176).
- 56 A. D. Nuttall puts the issue in a title—*Why Does Tragedy Give Pleasure?* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996)—and ends his discussion with *Lear* and the strange pleasure of tracing sequences to a terrible end (104).
- 57 The stage direction is the same in Q and F (references to attendant figures differ). Muir's Arden edition gives "*Re-enter LEAR, with CORDELIA dead in his arms*" (5.3.256 SD). Because Lear appears earlier in the scene, Dyce altered "*Enter*" to "*Re-enter*"; Rowe inserted "*dead*" to end uncertainty over Cordelia's condition.

Softness of Voice, Construction of Character in *King Lear*

- 58 Albany speaks in the plural (“The oldest have . . .”) and presumably refers to both Lear and Gloucester; Edgar speaks in the singular (“The oldest has . . .”) and refers to Lear alone. The problem of the close is to adjust the Lear experience to the ongoing fortunes of the state. F develops Lear’s death by inserting 5.3.309-10, giving a firmness to the role of Edgar in closure. Thus, rather than the detached Albany, Edgar, who has been to the heath, speaks last in F to represent Lear’s influence on the living.
- 59 H elene Cixous’s meditation on character as singular and repressive of genuine literary energies is both stimulating and provocative; see “The Character of ‘Character,’” trans. Keith Cohen, *New Literary History* 5 (1974): 383-402. Although her essay can be described *as against character*, it requires the concept to drive its polemic.
- 60 In his Arden edition of *The Winter’s Tale* (London: Methuen, 1965), J.H.P. Pafford notes the Pygmalion story from Book X of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (xxxiv). Lynn Enterline argues the success of the female voice in a rhetoric of animation in *The Winter’s Tale*; see “‘You speak a language that I understand not’: The Rhetoric of Animation in *The Winter’s Tale*,” *SQ* 48 (1997): 17-44. *King Lear* seems to me to present other problems: the female voice succeeds but at the cost that is tragedy.
- 61 For the analogy between characters and words, see Martin Price, *Forms of Life: Character and Moral Imagination in the Novel* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1983), 55. I have benefited from this wide-ranging discussion of character in the novel.



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