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“Aggressive Disintegration in the Individual”: A Lacanian Study of Signification and the Destruction of Self in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*

| Alex Muller

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In Lear’s division of the kingdom, the essential warning of contemporary Gestalt Theory resonates clearly: The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. As Lear divides his kingdom (his political body) into thirds, he divides his physical body—or more accurately, his own wit as noted by the Fool in I.iv—into a series of fragments that will never again be powerful or whole. The parallel construct of Lear’s physical body and his body politic has important implications when considered alongside the theories of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, especially Lacan’s theory that the self is developed as a fragmentation. Lear represents what Lacan calls the Symbolic Order, the Signifying¹ entity that establishes the identity of subjectivity through language. Yet Lear is also the signified subject in the larger entity of the body politic; the title of “King” is precisely what alienates him. Language betrays Lear in the play as he unknowingly wields it as a self-destructive tool, and the Symbolic Order loses its ability to impose Signification.

Cordelia, then, acts as a foil to Lear’s language through her decision to say “nothing” at the beginning of the play. For Lacan, Cordelia’s decision to remain silent is important because she is choosing to negate the power of the Symbolic Order. In Sigmund Freud’s 1913 essay, “The Theme of the Three Caskets,” he proposed that Cordelia’s muteness established her as a Death figure. Yet Freud’s great mistake is that he often views women only as they pertain to men: He notes, “the three inevitable relations that a man

has with a woman . . . in the course of a man's life—the mother herself, the beloved one who is chosen after her pattern, and lastly the Mother Earth who receives him once more” (301). I would like to enter the discussion where Freud left off and where Lacan picked up by acknowledging Lear's initial de facto title of Father-King and his role in the Symbolic Order while exploring the formation of his fragmented subjectivity through his own acts of self-harm and Cordelia's ultimate Signification of him as a fragmented (and eventually dead) man. Examining the reversals of Signifier/signified binaries in the play and the destructive power of the phallus-as-language, I will argue that once the Symbolic Order loses its ability to enact Signification it can only further the fragmentation of the self; Cordelia becomes the Signifying power that ultimately determines Lear's identity and creates a new meaning for Signification, suggesting that the female does not gain her meaning from the male but rather that male's meaning is formed within the female.

The discussion of the Lacanian language in the play has yet to be fully addressed. While the linguistic irony is obviously present—much of the play's meaning derives from the statement of “nothing” in its opening pages—the amount of Lacanian criticism is disparate to the more general psychoanalysis of Lear. Most of the initial psychoanalytic scholarship identified the significance of Lear as the Father-King figure, but often only focused on Lear's relationship with Cordelia and the Oedipal/incestuous connotations it brings. Later critics became interested in Cordelia's objectification through the patriarchy of her father. In Carol Chillington Rutter's text *Enter the Body: Women and Representation on Shakespeare's Stage*, she devotes her opening chapter to the study of Cordelia as a character as well as an actual object on stage: The body that Lear carries in by the end of the play has become a prop (2). Jeffrey Stern identifies Cordelia as a “self-object,” a maternal/mirror figure that ultimately causes Lear's fragmentation of self, offering, perhaps, the best understanding of how Cordelia is both powerful and objectified at once (307). As a

bridge into the linguistic aspect of psychoanalysis, David Willbern examines how Cordelia's nonlanguage exemplifies Shakespeare's portrayal of the gendered (and sexed) opposition of the male "thing" and the female "no-thing" (245). In a similar way, Julia Reinhard Lupton notes the Lacanian implications of signified objectification: "[the signified] in turn becomes itself a kind of thing—the material remnant of signification" (124). The psychoanalytic discussion as a whole, then, seems to be gaining interest in the nuances of gender theory and linguistics.

Lacanian theory is, perhaps, the best way to combine these theoretical approaches into one cohesive understanding of the issue of the self in *Lear*. Although Lacan is often criticized for his neo-Freudian (and patriarchal) perspective, his theories leave enough room for adaptation. While Lacan notes the male-dominated power of the Symbolic Order, he proposes that the phallus-as-language is what ultimately fragments the self; in order to be whole one must be outside of language. Because Lacan's theories are grounded in Saussurian linguistics, it is fitting to observe the Signifier and the signified as a binary opposition. As Yannis Stavrakakis explains in *Lacan & the Political*, "[the signified subject] depends on the [S] ignifier[;] it is located in a secondary position with respect to the [S] ignifier," (20). Likewise, the text of *Lear* supports binary opposition, even from its opening line when Kent asks Gloucester whether Lear favors Albany or Cornwall (I.i.1), or when Edmund notes his lower binary status with his Signification of "bastard" and seeks to "top the legitimate" position of his brother Edgar (I.ii.21). The play allows these binaries to be reversed: Lear loses his paternal power to his daughters, Edmund gains the power he seeks, and Cordelia loses her position as the favorite child. Through this reversal, the phallus of the Symbolic Order no longer contains the power of imposing meaning, it only splinters the self into a fragmented body, and it exacerbates division.

Lear displays the destructive power of the Symbolic phallus as he begins the binary reversal in the play and continues his self-

fragmentation. As Stavrakakis explains, a subject's identity is frail; "[it] is always an unstable identity, a split or even non-identity, since even identification is marked by an alienating dimension" (35). Although Lear is King, or head of the body politic, he is alienated from that body by being identified as the head. As Lacan explains in one of his seminars, "by being born with the [S]ignifier, the subject is born divided" (qtd. in Stavrakakis 28); Lear threatens his frail identity by dividing his kingdom, shattering an already fragmented structure, and accordingly, his actions toward the body and the body politic may be seen as a form of self-harm. In the opening scene, he hopes to "shake all cares and business from our age / Conferring them on younger strengths while we / Unburdened crawl toward death . . ." (I.i.39-41). As if on a whim, Lear reverses the order of things, as the Fool keenly observes later in Act I: ". . . thou gav'st them the rod and putt'st down thine own breeches" (I.iv.170-71). Indeed, Lear wants to surrender his symbolic power, unknowingly assuring that he will never again be in control of his kingdom, nor be able to rectify the situation toward the end of the play. As Stern notes, Lear has disrupted the "oedipal law of culture" by making "his daughters his mothers" in his attempt to "retain the name but to forsake the function of king," which alienates him from that cultural construct and furthers his fragmentation (302). By being born with the phallus-as-language in the Symbolic role of king, Lear is damned with a fragmented identity. Yet Lear continues, through language, to divide himself and to ensure his total destruction.

Lear's dependency on the phallus-as-language is seen throughout the play. At first, he displays his dependency when he asks his daughters to vocalize how much they love him. Later, after Goneril refuses to house his hundred knights, he relies on language as condemnation, invoking the destruction of her body and its female functions: "Into her womb convey sterility; / Dry up her organs of increase / . . . stamp wrinkles in her brow of youth, / With cadent tears fret channels in her cheeks" (I.iv.279-80, 285-86). His violent use of language continues as he relates Goneril to a disease of his

own body: “thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter— / Or rather a disease that’s in my flesh, / . . . A plague-sore, or embossed carbuncle” (II.iv.221-25). His dependency on the phallus-as-language has turned aggressive, and, as Lacan notes, “intended aggressivity gnaws away, undermines, disintegrates; it castrates; it leads to death . . .” (ch. 2). Through language, Lear has divided his kingdom, banished his only loving daughter, and ensured his own destruction.

However, Lear does not recognize the irony in his use of language. While he curses his daughter to grow old without giving birth to “a babe to honor her” (I.iv.283), he unknowingly prophesies that he will die without having an heir to continue his rule—all of his heirs are dead by the end of the play before they ever give birth to children. As he speaks of the drying up of reproductive organs and the corrosive effect of tears, he is ensuring that his kingdom will likewise fade from the earth. Likewise, his association with Goneril as a disease of his flesh parallels the actual decay of his fragmented body. Oddly enough, Lear’s speech comes true; the disease that he introduced into the body—what Lupton calls an alien, “invasive foreign body” (127)—has spread and killed off the continuation of his blood line. Thus Lear adheres to the Lacanian principal that the fragmented body may never be repaired—as Stavrakakis notes, the subject’s shattered identity can “never realize its aim . . . never achieve full identity[;] it can never bring back [its] lost fullness since it was its own institution that introduced this loss” (38). Instead, Lear’s use of language at this point in the play demonstrates how the Symbolic Order can no longer create; it can only destroy. By connecting himself to his daughter through language, Lear condemns both of them to death.

Cordelia, however, stays outside of her father’s language. Because of her refusal to speak, Freud identified her (though he did not recognize it in these terms) as the true Signifying power in the play. Indeed, Lear’s self-harming Signification of himself as a shattered body seems to lead into the idea that Cordelia is the character who imposes true meaning on the play—her famous proclamation of

“nothing” certainly seems to foreshadow the play’s grave conclusion, and it is for this reason that Freud identifies her as Death. For Freud, Cordelia’s “dumbness” (a less-than-desirable connotation, of course) equates her to a Death figure. Throughout the “Theme of the Three Caskets” Freud explores how silence is connected to the Death figure not only in Shakespeare but also throughout mythology:

Lear carries Cordelia’s dead body on to the stage. Cordelia is Death. If we reverse the situation it becomes intelligible and familiar to us. She is the Death-goddess who, like the Valkyrie in German mythology, carries away the dead hero from the battlefield. Eternal wisdom, clothed in the primaeval myth, bids the old man renounce love, choose death and make friends with the necessity of dying. (300)

Lear’s devastation at the end of the play—“She’s dead as earth” (V.iii.266)—becomes both a proclamation of grief and an announcement of his realization that Cordelia is death; in Freudian terms, she is the Death/Earth Womb (Grave) that will receive Lear at the play’s close. Wilbern makes a note of Cordelia-as-Death’s mask as well: Cordelia’s face, “That face of hers again” (I.i.262-64) “. . . remind[s] him of nothing (the ‘face between the forks’). Eventually he will meet its most traumatic mask, represented by Gloucester’s bloody eyeless face . . .”—a hopeless harbinger of Lear’s own eventual end (Wilbern 247).

Cordelia’s refusal to speak at the beginning of the play connects with Lacanian theory as well. Her refusal to speak begins to undermine language as a tool of power. As Stern acknowledges, the language in the play is an empty vessel disconnected from action: “Regan and Goneril are eager to participate in the trial because if words no longer depend on deeds, if action no longer joins [S] ignifier and signified, rhetoric alone will be power, and their claims, by definition, will be as valid as those of Cordelia” (301). Cordelia, however, gets outside of language—and thus the Signification of the Father—by refusing to use language as a communication tool with

the Father. Cordelia's function in the play is arguably outside of the actual text/language as well: As Aronson notes, "Cordelia is seen on the stage in only four scenes and speaks less than a hundred lines" (182). Again, considering Stern's point about Cordelia as a mirror, she is a silent "self-object" that only shows Lear his own fragmented reflection, but does not speak it (Stern 308). For Willbern, however, Cordelia's silence is the grounds for the formation of Lear's self: "Nothing, in other words, is the very ground of being, just as silence is the ground of speech . . . silence, too, can speak" (Wilbern 247). He, too, suggests that Cordelia defines the Signifying/signified binary by acting as the center, the determinate: "Cordelia's nothing, at beginning and end, circumscribes or pinpoints the elemental absence at the center of the target of [Lear's] sight . . ." (247). Lear sees himself in Cordelia, and she becomes the center of his perception of his selfhood, the nothingness of his broken body.

The consolidation of Cordelia's character in Freudian/Lacanian theory, then, is that Cordelia as a Death figure becomes the Signifying power, further determining the fragmented Signification of Lear as he passes from his mental instability into the mental nonexistence of death. Just as Lear (even as King) is the alienated signified in the construct of his body politic, so too does he become the signified subject in the greater structure of life. As the play's somber ending seems to suggest, death is the ultimate alienation, the inevitable Signification of all human subjects. If this inevitable death is the true theme of the play's ending, it falls in line with the rest of the play's depiction of Signifier/signified reversal. The supposed Signifying powers are ultimately outside of mankind. The "goddess" of nature invoked by both Edmund and Lear (I.ii.1, I.iv.276) is truly beyond their control; true nature Signifies only with death. Yet Cordelia-as-Death should not be seen as evil. If language is the destructive power of the Symbolic Order, then nonlanguage is reparative. The reversal of the Signifier and signified has created a new meaning of Signification. If the previous phallus-as-language was a penetrative force, then the new Signifying power

of nonlanguage-as-death is non-penetrative. Death, in this way, is the gentle silence of sleep, the return to the Earth Womb. In Lacanian terms, this is a return to the pre-Symbolic stage of the Imaginary Order, the time before subjectivity is formed—when, within the womb, the pre-self cannot differentiate itself as separate. By reading Cordelia as a benevolent, maternal Death, we may view Lear’s earlier hope to “set my rest / On her kind nursery” as less incestuous and more natural because all men must return to the womb through death (I.i.123-24). This return, then, is restorative. If the fragmented body of the subject cannot be repaired during life, then there is hope in death; the complete destruction of the self (the end) is the beginning of its re-integration in the wholeness of nonexistence.

Examining Lear through the psychoanalytic lens supports the Lacanian view that the self is truly fragmented. Michael Schoenfeldt, in *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England*, describes how “The self becomes for [early modern literature] a little kingdom, filled with insurrectionary forces, and in continual need of monitoring from within and without” (39). It is little wonder why Signifying/signified constructs can be so easily reversed—their subjective identities, like kingdoms, are susceptible to attacks from outside as well as from within. Because of its malleable nature, identity will continue to be an important factor in the Lear discussion, and, as I have suggested in this essay, Lacanian linguistics may be the best way to understand that identity. Certainly the idea that Cordelia’s nonlanguage is perhaps the true Signifying power at work in the play is an idea that has merited further discussion ever since Freud offered the first psychoanalytic reading of the play, painting the scene with Cordelia in light of Lear.

I hope to have begun painting the picture of Lear in light of Cordelia. Indeed, the great problem with the psychoanalytic perspective is that it views the female as the blank canvas on which the Symbolic Order of patriarchy imposes meaning. As Willbern acknowledges, the female is often Cordelia’s “nothing”—in other words, the empty space, a womb—in which the Signification is

prescribed: “These metaphors of an original lack, hole, defect, or wound signify that anatomical manifestation of presence and absence which demonstrates the fact of genital difference (la différence in the Derridean ‘différance’)” (247). The Symbolic Order (the Signifier) inserts its meaning into the signified. In the traditionally sexual language of the patriarchy, the male phallus (of power, meaning, and so forth) pierces the female space of nonmeaning, or rather, nonlanguage. Examining Cordelia as a Signifying power reveals how the female imposes her meaning onto the male, eliminating the phallus (and thus language) as the scepter of the Symbolic. I have suggested that nonlanguage is not so much an open (negative) space as it is its own sort of (positive) power, a power that is non-phallic and non-destructive. Rather, the nonmeaning, the Death, and the imminent Earth Womb are what truly shape the self—the inevitable “promised end” realized in the inarticulate unconscious: that man is born from non-meaning and to non-meaning he shall return; that the order of language is only a temporary reprieve amidst the aggressive disintegration, but the female offers a space outside of language. The womb and the grave offer forgiveness, re-integration, and wholeness—a place where we may “Say what we feel, and not what we ought to say” (V.iii.330) and in this “gored state sustain” (V.iii.326) a sense of an original unified self.

Notes

1. I capitalize “Signifier” throughout this essay to emphasize its higher power in this binary, as Lacan seemed to believe in his seminars on language.

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