Full of Sound and Fury, Signifying Nothing:
The Name-of-the-Father in King Lear

Dominique Hecq

In Essence, the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation.
Georges Bataille

Lacan’s conception of Eros revolves around “a presentification of lack.”¹ It is my contention that King Lear invites a theoretical reading of kin(g)ship as such “presentification of lack.” Indeed, the dialectic of desire in the text derives from King Lear’s discovering that his own kingly signifier signifies nothing. This error of judgment, which stems from a confusion between desire and jouissance, leads him to misappropriate the rules of both kingship and kinship. Interestingly enough, it is Cordelia, the daughter and subject with whom he is erotically involved, who brings home to him the truth of his error. As an incestuous drama of signification, then, King Lear not only relates to the Phallus as master signifier, but also to the Name-of-the-Father as referent of the law. Moreover, the truth Cordelia speaks is “a half-said” that leads to the “abolition of discourse”: muteness, madness and death.² Thus, if the violence implicit in the erotics of the play strikes at “the self-contained character of the participators,” it strikes first at the core of language.³
Lear: This is nothing, Fool.
Fool: Then 'tis like the breath of an unfee'd lawyer: you gave me nothing for it.
(King Lear, I, vi, 128-29)

Lacan: Mythically, the father... can only be an animal.
(Television)

No one, not even the fool, escapes the effects of language. No one, not even the king. For kings, as much as fools, are subjected to the dynamics of desire. And because desire is constructed by language, it is "eccentric and insatiable," inexorably bound up with the Law.⁴

"There is a level in the subject on which it can be said that his fate is expressed in terms of a pure signifier, a level at which he is merely the reverse-side of a message that is not even his own," writes Lacan in his famous reading of Hamlet.⁵ However, if Hamlet is a "tragedy of desire" articulated upon a drama of interpretation, King Lear is a tragedy of the Law articulated upon a drama of signification. This is because the dynamics of Lear's desire and the violence it unleashes derive from his discovery that his kingly signifier signifies nothing.⁶ How could it signify anything when Lear pretends to be Father of the Name while making no separation between desire and jouissance? It is this imposture, of course, which implicates all characters in the play, not least his favourite daughter, Cordelia, the one who points to Lear's failing by demanding that he stick to the Law and the one for whom the empty signifier brings a dowry of not the truth she desires as reference, but death.⁷

The stage opening by Kent, Gloucester and Edmund draws attention to the narrative duplication of main plot (Lear and his daughters) and sub-plot (Gloucester and his sons) as the characters introduce the important themes of division of the kingdom and of the notion of kinship (legitimate versus illegitimate children). The two issues of generation and inheritance become even more intricately linked as the drama develops while redefining the signification of both kingship and kinship – Phallus and Name-of-the-Father.

As King Lear and his retinue make their entrance, the audience is struck by the element of pageant and ritual that contrasts with the mixture of polite civility and bitchy jokes of the opening scene. The person identified with the figure of the Law has precedence and members of the court enter in order of degree of importance. Then Lear, speaking with the authority of one long used to rule, breaks his news: expecting to "unburdened crawl towards death" (I, i, 43), he has resolved to apportion the kingdom to his daughters. This, however, amounts more to a demand for love than an im-
plementation of the Law. It is as though Lear comes by his méconnaiss-
sance legitimately, experiencing as he seems to, the unity of the phallic
signifier with his own person: the king is subject only to himself, the Father
rules in a state where symbolic, imaginary and real seem one and where
also desire and jouissance seem one.

The spectacle Cordelia offers in the first scene is a testimony to this
discrepancy at the very heart of the structure of the Name-of-the-Father. So
when asked what she can "say to draw a third more opulent than [her] sis-
ters" (I, i, 64), she answers "Nothing" (I, i, 89) and to Lear's now famous
angry remark that "Nothing will come out of nothing" (I, i, 90), she retorts
that she "cannot heave her heart into [her] mouth" (I, i, 92), making it clear
that she loves her king and father according to her "bond, no more nor
less" (I, i, 93). This, of course, highlights King Lear's error of judgment: how
could he ever expect to abdicate by splitting his authority in three and retain
"The name and all th' addition to a king" (I, i, 138)? No more than anyone
else, he cannot have his cake and eat it. As royal father, Lear cannot be
both symbolic father, "the support of the symbolic function which, from the
dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law," and
real father. For the real father "who knows no bounds" is the primordial fa-
ther whose jouissance merges with his desire, the mythical "father from be-
fore the incest taboo, before the appearance of law, of the structures of
marriage and kinship, in a word, of culture."

Fair is foul and foul is fair (Macbeth, I, ii, 127): nature is culture and
culture is nature. The notion of culture, or "naturalness" as constructed by
the law of the language system, is fundamental in King Lear, with its em-
phasis on interrelating hierarchies as the basis of "natural" order and on
Lear's expectations of "natural" behaviour from his daughters as ironically
made clear in act II, for instance, when he calls Goneril and Reagan "un-
natural hags" (iv, 277) for having indulged what they saw as an expression
of his desire. The very word "nature" echoes in fact throughout the play, as
does its counterpart, the word "bond." Both words carry significations of
power relations and positions with regard to kin(g)ship and hence that
which is "natural" is a cultural construction. Thus, to say that Lear's demand
for declarations of love from his daughters is "childish, foolish - but very
human" is not the point. It is foul for a royal father to request love in ex-
change for a portion of his kingdom: it amounts to a backing up against the
wall, "a strictly literal interpretation of the function of the father, of the Su-
preme Being, of Eternal God," perhaps, when it ought to be metaphorical.

Lear's eccentric as well as insatiable desire to "retain/ the name, and
all the addition to a king" while dividing "the sway, revenue, execution, of
the rest" (I, i, 135-37) between Cornwall and Albany severs the signifier of
king with its no less signifying "addition" from the authority it represents and implementation of the Law it presupposes: it severs the nom from the non of the Father, or the signifier which encodes the Law from the phallic prohibition which enforces it. In one word, Lear performs symbolic self-castration. This he does to the dismay of Cordelia, his retinue and his fool. For indeed, such a repudiation of the phallic referent reveals to those who have eyes to see with the gap between the chain of signification and that of the drive upon which castration is located in the unconscious.

Lear's action is, as the fool points out, more than a metaphorical undoing:

Why, after I have cut the egg i' the middle and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou clovest thy crown i' the middle, and gavest away both parts, thou borest thine ass on thy back o'er the dirt. Thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gavest thy golden away. (I, iv, 156-161)

To make of the crown two pieces is to empty it of its signifying substance and turn each piece into similarly nothings. Thus the fool's use of the metaphorical potential of the signifier "crown" highlights here that the king's action is literally destructive.

"Nothing can be made out of nothing," reiterates Lear in the same scene, though he doesn't seem to know what he is saying, since he needs the fool's lights (I, iv, 131). Like Cordelia, then, he misconstrues the power of language. But while Cordelia resists the very power of language, Lear attributes to language a power it does not have. Thus while "from her voiced 'Nothing' to her mute voice as 'an excellent thing,' Cordelia's discourse traces a circle of absent presence," Lear's own discourse traces the very circle of present absence which turns the daughter into "the queen of silence" – 'every inch' – of nothing.  

Present absence and absent presence are everywhere in the play, signifying as they do the nothing and the king, the castration and the phallus, the negation of desire by the Law and the negation of the Law by desire. Lear's demand to signify confronts Cordelia's reciprocal demand for truth as reference. Their mutually negating demands negate the bond between father/king and daughter/subject because of the radically opposed interpretation of the paternal metaphor: Lear aspires to identify with the real father while Cordelia pines for recovery of the symbolic father. Lear's madness can thus be viewed as the expression of this double impossibility in the gap signifying the loss of phallic referent.

"They told me I was everything. 'Tis a lie: I am not ague-proof" (IV, vi, 104-05) rages Lear when faced with the realization that he can neither re-
construct nor recover his own kin(g)ship. The truth appears to be "the re-
verse-side of a message that is not even his own," the lie Lear has not
been able to detect so far, bound as he is to and by his mécéconaissance, a
kind of symbolic ab-err-ation, so to speak, at the root of his overvaluation of
the bonds of kingship at the expense of the laws of kinship. Indeed, it is
such an aberration that prompts him to say early on in the play "by the
marks of sovereignty,/ Knowledge, and reason, I should be false per-
suaded/ I had daughters"(I, iv, 231-34), an aberration that does but high-
light the split between the nom and the non of the Father in this drama of
signification.

From Lear's position, kingship provides the illusion of perfect presence
and this presence constitutes his mécéconaissance. And it is this mécécona-
issance which triggers off the tragedy: Lear's pursuit for kingly honours
veils a desire unarticulated to the law of kinship and unveils, albeit fleet-
ingly, jouissance, thus turning kinship into the mirroring reversal of kingship
and both Father and King into symbolic out-laws. Now since Lear's desire
cannot, by virtue of his self-designation, be wholly satisfied, he errs from
one daughter to the others: rejected by Cordelia, he turns to Goneril and
Reagan for comfort.

Furthermore, Lear's desire for honour and prerogative – his "additions"
– is a desire acceptable both to him and his loyal subjects. Kingship pre-
supposes a certain order of precedence: as one critic puts it, "a real hierar-
cy at least allows universal participation for all those whose lives it organ-
izes, and also... allows for the potential of any of its participants to rise and
fall within it."

The cast of characters surrounding Lear thus enacts the fic-
tion of kingship as reference accordingly, because it conceals the true na-
ture of desire as impossible violence. Lear alone, however, comes by his
mécéconaissance legitimately. He alone experiences the unity of the phallic
signifier with his own person. Through the linguistic aberration of kin(g)ship,
Lear knows no difference; the king is subject only to his kingly self in a
kingdom where symbolic, imaginary and real are One. And it is this unified
kingdom which provides a referential world of power attained through signi-
fication for Lear, and truth for Cordelia.

Tragically, then, the unity of subjectivity with the Law that kingship sig-
nifies outlaws Lear from his own kingdom as it names him. Even the king
cannot be the phallus. Indeed, the phallus is the very "term for the signifier
of his alienation in signification." Thus alienated from his desire through
his relationship with kingship, Lear gives up the phallus in an attempt to
unbind himself from the Law that impedes his desire as well as his jouis-
sance. But the alienating master signifier, the phallus which distances him
from the daughter he most loves but cannot have, cannot be disposed off
so lightly, even emptied out of its significance and split into two. The alienation he attempts to counter through symbolic self-castration leads him to make impossible demands on those who become unveiled objects of desire – his daughters, and Cordelia in particular. The aberration is not so much that Lear abdicates the phallus, but that he doesn't see how it is predicated on the Name of the Father and how this makes it all the more impossible to abdicate his demand to signify – should such a demand arise.

The particular meaning of kingship for Lear and the aberrant signification of kin(g)ship this entails arises from the relationship of desire to the Law. Crucial here is Lacan's translation of the Freudian oedipal drama into the venue of language and the re-positioning of terms and roles this entails. Following the logic of the paternal metaphor, the subject who claims to lay down the Law in order to close the gap opened up by desire is necessarily an impostor despite there being "nothing false about the Law itself, or about him who assumes its authority." It is all a matter of positioning with regard to the phallic referent. Though the set of cultural codes deployed from a variety of deceptive positions, and he who like "an unfee'd lawyer" (I, iv, 128) deploys them, are fictional constructs, they do nonetheless define positions of agency from which authentic authority may be exercised. So it is in King Lear, but with one exception: the Law and the legislator merge in a position of perfect referentiality in the very figure of the king.

Now kingship in Lear is even more complex, since the king is also a father whose role is to assert the authority of the Father which is sustained by a "privileged mode of presence" beyond the subject. Thus, King Lear, as long as he is king, provides both perfect reference and absolute presence through precedence. This would then presuppose the existence of perfect and absolute truth, but this cannot be, as truth can only be a "half-said."

Cordelia's nothing, her refusal to speak anything that is not the truth, betrays her naive insistence on this very reference that cannot be, as well as on a discourse that does not fictionalize. The very nature of language precludes the converging of heart and speech that she is unable to initiate. Any speech that presents itself as truth is twice removed, a nothing of nothing, yet two distinct nothings, for as Lacan points out, inferring Shakespeare's conception of life as a stage, it arises out of the pretense (the stage) split by the other (the audience). It is indeed "from somewhere other than the Reality that it concerns that Truth derives its guarantee: it is from Speech." Thus in order to be able to tell the truth, one must necessarily be able to lie and to resist speech out of an insatiable desire for the perfect speech that would not betray but coincide to make a nothing out of Truth.
Cordelia’s nothing is the reverse-side of what she demands: a reification of the power of speech and an eradication of Truth.

Signification and action, or Truth and Law, will split for Cordelia no more "naturally" than speech and Law for Lear. Cordelia demands that Lear perform in the space of action, in the realm of the Law he wants to abdicate, and so tacitly forces him into banishment. Lear’s command is the familial Other’s by which Cordelia is entitled as daughter and subject, since the Father "is the expected source of the sanction from the locus of the Other, the truth about truth." ¹⁹ Provided that Lear continues to rule, Cordelia remains undisturbed in a referentially unified realm where Law and truth, word and deed, merge, blind as she is to her misplacement of truth in resistance to speech, "the deceptive accentuation of the transparency of the I in action at the expense of the opacity of the signifier that determines the ‘I’." ²⁰

The question of Cordelia’s speech, or absence thereof, appears to be even more perplexing by her being so articulate when arguing in her own defence. Thus, when she attacks her father for being the keeper of the Law but without truth, Cordelia locates Lear’s error quite literally in the Name-of-the-Father, pointing out that she has been truthful to the paternal nom and obeyed his non all along:

You have begot me, bred me, loved me.
I return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honour you. (I, 1, 96-98)

And so Cordelia begs her father to acknowledge her rectitude:

that you made known
It is no vicious blot, murder, or foulness,
No unchaste action, or dishonoured step,
That hath deprived me of your grace and favour,
But even for want of that for which I am richer -
A still-soliciting eye, and such a tongue
That I am glad I have not, though not to have it
Hath lost me in your liking. (I, i, 227-33)

What Cordelia does not understand is that, "the Father must be the author of the Law, yet he cannot vouch for it any more than anyone else can, because he, too, must submit to the bar, which makes him, insofar as he is the real father, a castrated father." ²¹ Lear cannot offer Cordelia the perfectly referential world of absolute truth she demands – no more than she can heave her heart into her mouth and satisfy his desire. The Name-of-the-Father in King Lear is full of sound and fury: Lear sticks to his desire,
Cordelia to the Law, with their mutually destructive desires violating all symbolic and imaginary bonds between them.

Denial of desire and resistance to signification: nothing comes out of nothing. As a symbol of Lear's self-inflicted castration with regard to the Law, Cordelia also signifies, at the level of desire, his self-castrating self-division. She must therefore be subjugated. If her penalty is literally the loss of her dowry and banishment from Lear's kingdom, it is also symbolically the loss of her name as daughter, for as the king spells out, "We have no such daughter, nor shall ever see that face of hers again" (I, i, 263-64). Banished from both the symbolic and imaginary registers of Lear's kingdom, she is, however not so easily banished from the real. Repressed though it may be, Cordelia's nothing does return in hallucinations at the peak of Lear's delirium.

Lear's "nothing will come out of nothing" negates Cordelia's negation, delaying the recognition of his own self-castration through his cutting her off from his kingdom of signification, for to focus his wrath on her "nothing" amounts to locating this nothing within her and thus prolonging the potency of his kingly signifier. However, the "nothing" cuts both ways: Lear's repression signified by his banishment of Cordelia is the reverse-side of her inability to recover what her father lacks, just as the ending of the play is the reverse-side of its beginning in terms of division and mutual destruction.

The drama proper unfolds in a series of confrontations between the man and father who insists on retaining the name King Lear and those affected by the significance of either his name or title - or both. As daughter and subject, Cordelia is doubly affected, of course, and it is against the nothing she displays for everyone to see that Lear desperately tries to reaffirm phallic potency. Amongst those who see this "nothing" is the Fool, who in fact mirrors and replaces the absent Cordelia. The Fool thus takes up Cordelia's "nothing" in more than one respect and throws it back at his master from the place of the Other, starting with the cheeky question "Can you make no use of nothing, uncle?" (I, i, 131). Interestingly enough, as the Fool extrapolates on Cordelia's nothing, he makes its bloody, bawdy, latent meanings obvious, blatantly pointing to the "nothing" the king now signifies.

Inexorably, the Fool's nothing undercuts the King's speech, cutting through signification to the breach in the real: no thing is really there. Perhaps castration is not merely symbolic, then, as the Fool is so willing to indicate when he tells Lear: "Thou hast par'd thy wit o' both sides, and left nothing in the middle" (I, iv, 187-88), or "now thou art an O without a figure... thou art nothing" (I, iv, 192-94). Ironically, though, all the nothings exchanged between King and Fool amount to nothing. It is as though Lear's theory that "nothing can be made out of nothing" (I, iv, 133) is indeed a law
in itself. And there is no transference here: Lear is twice stuck. For if the unconscious is the discourse of the Other, and the discourse of the Other is nothing, then the other's linguistic fooling around can only perpetuate the illusion of presence. To put it differently, this signifies the foreclosure of The Name-of-the-Father (and castration). By reinstating Lear's status as phallic referent, the Fool, then, who also acts proxy for Cordelia, only reminds his master of his nothing by underscoring his dual impotence (as King and Father).

The following act in fact displays the castration Lear's imposture imperfectly conceals: though Lear admits, for instance, that "we are not ourselves" (II, 4, 107), and perceives the threat of boundless jouissance in the "O me, my heart! my rising heart!" he orders it "But down!" (II, 4, 116) in a desperate attempt to preserve the illusion of nominal kingship. The fool, of course, doesn't miss the opportunity to turn Lear's words into a phallic joke when he advises his master to "cry to it" as one would to live eels "Down, wantons, down!" (II, iv, 119), thus highlighting Lear's disintegration as referent and reference.

It is this disintegration, which is illustrated in the now famous mad scenes of the play as fantasies irrupt into Lear's speech. Interestingly enough, what these fantasies expose is less the disintegration of the signifier "king" than its predicate in "the Name of the Father," foregrounding the tension between the Father of the Name and the Name-of-the-Father proper in a series of perverse images conjuring perverse wishes: witness how demand now becomes an infantile, omnipotent command of the natural kingdom, for instance, and how once Lear's orgiastic outburst of "oak-cleaving thunderbolts" (II, ii, 5) is abated once he becomes a "slave, a poor, infirm, weak and despised old man" (III, ii, 19-20) soaking wet in the raging storm. It is Lear himself who denounces the imposture and links it to his impotence in a passage where specific images of perjury and castration overlap:

Tremble thou wretch  
That hast within thee undivulgèd crimes  
Unwhipped of justice. Hide thee, thou bloody hand,  
Thou perjured, and thou simular of virtue  
That are incestuous. (III, ii, 53-54)

Lear's own méconnaissance, however, instead of turning him into a criminal in his own eyes, turns him into a saint: "I am a man/ More sinn'd against than sinning," (III, ii, 59-60).

When Lear's delirium peaks at the end of act four in a chaos of images evoking the violent disintegration of culture and nature as pure expression
of violence, the king plunges head down into the real and discovers the secret of the Other: "They are not men o' their words. They told me I was/ everything. 'Tis a lie: I am not ague-proof" (IV, vi, 104-106). This realization is shattering, for it implies not only that Lear's kingly signifier signifies nothing, but also that it is predicated upon nothing. It is as though the secret of the Other comprises three parts. Thus Lear's first discovery provokes an outburst of abject images he throws in the face of blinded Gloucester, images of hell where Satan is castrated (a "simpering dame... that minces virtue and does shake the head to hear of pleasure's name" (IV, vi, 118)) and man a mythical animal: a centaur with the attributes of both fitchew and stallion (IV, vi, 122-24). Thus Lear, "every inch a king" (VI, vi, 107) really goes through hell only to find out that he is nothing but the image of a castrated animal, the image of the mythical father of the primal horde who has been murdered by his sons: "the great image of authority" is "a dog's obeyed in office" (IV, vi, 159-60), a totem. This descent into the real just falls short of being presented as a return to the womb. Indeed, it ends with an evocation of the new born's first cry and Lear's desperate attempt to deny his very Lacanian discovery, i.e., that one comes "to this great stage of fools" (IV, vi, 184) with no choice as to the part one has to act nor as to the line one has to speak. Lear's response is that of the mythical father who knows no bounds - archetypal and murderous: "And when I have stolen upon these sons-in-laws, Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!" (IV, vi, 186-87).

Now, with drum and colours, enter soldiers, Cordelia and the doctor. In what amounts to a salute to the symbolic father, Cordelia, who has seen the mad Lear with his coronet of flowers, makes her intent to restore her father's authority and honour clear:

O dear father,  
It is thy business that I go about;  
Therefore great France  
My mourning and importu'd tears hath pitied.  
No blown ambition doth our arms incite,  
But love, dear love, and our ag'd father's right.  
Soon may I hear and see him! (IV, v, 23-29)

Thus Cordelia conceives of her father's restoration in legal terms: a restoration of right. Though played on the stage of the symbolic for everyone to see, since arms will be wielded to this effect, Cordelia's design is a plan for revenge not unlike Hamlet's, since it "leads us to ask questions about retribution and punishment, i.e., about what is involved in the signifier phallus in castration." Henceforth guilt and punishment must be assessed and assigned: damages must be compensated for and restoration compensates
When Cordelia makes up with Lear in the final scene of the fourth act, she seems to give in to her father's fantasy of loving care, taking on the role of nurse, thus coming as close as could be to fulfilling his desire. Her use of language, however, expresses more than ever her attachment to the Law impersonated in her father, and the kiss she gives him is really to repair the "violent harms" her sisters have made in his "reverence." Cordelia's prolific use of military metaphors highlights that she remains as bent as ever upon enforcing the Law her father and "royal lord" (IV, vii, 44) stands for. She demands action:

Had you not been their father, these white flakes
Did challenge pity of them. Was this a face
To be oppos'd against the jarring 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? (IV, vii, 29-36)

Ironically enough, Cordelia turns Lear's majestic moment of insight into his own powerless and impotent confrontation with the elements into a battle scenario, filling the empty phallic referent with the ammunition of her own discourse, as it were - an act Lear perceives as violation: an "abuse" of a power he does not have (IV, vii, 53 and 78).

When Lear proclaims his manhood, humanity and fatherhood to fend off ridicule, however ("Do not laugh at me / For as I am a man / I think this lady To be my child Cordelia" IV, vii, 68-69), Cordelia is at peace and reinstates her role as daughter and subject ("And so I am, I am"). At this point, one could say that father and daughter, king and subject, seal the linguistic contract whereby they become the construction of each other's desires; they also seal their tragic fates. Tragic, because these fates are predicated upon the reiteration of the play's double "nothing": Lear can no more be the king and reinstate the Law using the arms Cordelia provides than Cordelia can be his nurse and mother.

Nothing can be made out of nothing: here lies the tragedy in _King Lear_, and thus nothing could possibly happen at the point of intervention. In response to the doctor's admonitions to beware of "danger" (IV, vii, 78), those intent upon Lear's restoration are unwilling to acknowledge, let alone tolerate and support, the violations that have taken place through his destitution and madness. And so they rush to prop back the original stage, setting up the terms of the original battle in reverse order, turning the final act of the play into an inversion of the first, carrying out their speech in the cut,
the void, the gap, opened by Lear's original demand - and méconnaissance. These are archetypal times ticking to the hand of the mythical father, the totem which is a fetish. But history marches on.

"Alarum within. Enter, with drum and colours, Lear, Cordelia holding his hand, and soldiers, over the stage, and exeunt." (V, ii) Quite appropriately, and following the laws of precedence, Lear appears to lead the battle (the old absent presence?). He is indeed in Cordelia's good hands. Quite appropriately too, the battle thus turns out to be a dumb show which ends in father and daughter being taken prisoners.

With the last scene, the consequences of Cordelia's desperate attempt at reinstating the symbolic father in a place he has renounced are made clear. In a mythical time where neither daughters nor sisters are seen, together alone and awaiting to be taken to their "walled prison" (V, ii, 4-18), father and daughter are locked within the walls of a womb-like state where they fuse the original paradox of kin(g)ship and reduce the dialectic between desire and Law to a timeless fantasy of being "two alone" singing and telling tales, blessing and forgiving, in blissful ignorance of an outside world where the Law cuts across desire. Lear's "Have I caught thee?" (V, ii, 21) sounds farcical, as it only draws attention to the spectacle of a mute Cordelia - in tears, this time, which in turns highlights his fantasy of protection.

It all falls flat. Cordelia dies by hanging, a strangulation consonant with her first choking off of heart and speech. Yet even in death, it seems, she clings to the Law as Lear avenges her and kills "the slave that was a-hanging thee" (V, iii, 274), an ironic comment, should one choose to read it with the ear of some Other.

Others, however, rush in to voice their concessions or demands. Once having acknowledged that Lear, with the dead Cordelia in his arms "knows not what he says" (V, ii, 293), Albany restores authority and dignity to the symbolic king: "For us, we will resign, during the life of this old majesty, to him our absolute power" (V, ii, 299-301). This pathetic attempt at restoring what human hubris and military defeat have taken away is less a recovery of "the name, and all th' addition to a king" than a cover up of Lear's impotence and imposture. It is a cruel irony that at this point Lear should make his first request in the play: "Pray you undo this button" (V, ii, 310). Choking on his own demand, so to speak, Lear dies!

The key to Lear's drama of signification is in Kent's interpretation of Lear's biography: "He but usurp'd his life" (V, ii, 318) as father of nominal kingship, but not on the lawful side of the phallus, that is indeed what an impostor is. The play that begins with the division of the kingdom, ends with the same, though not quite for the same reason: Kent and Edgar inherit a
"gored state" (V, ii, 328), the consequence of Lear's méconnaissance. Moreover Kent does refuse his part of the inheritance, leaving to Edgar the duty to "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say." (V, ii, 322). Whether the latter is about to repeat Cordelia's mistake or not is, of course, outside of this text.

Swinburne University of Technology
dhecq@swin.edu.au

NOTES

7 King Lear, I, 1, 108.


