

The Politics of Filial Silence: Ethical Refusal and Psychological Collapse in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*

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This article analyzes the political significance of filial silence in King Lear and Hamlet through a comparison of the two plays' treatment of Cordelia and Ophelia. Rather than viewing these two figures in isolation—as good daughter versus bad daughter—it argues that their silences propel two different tragic narratives. In King Lear, Cordelia's refusal to speak in rhetorical flourishes during the love test unmasks the performative nature of patriarchal rule and sparks political upheaval. In Hamlet, Ophelia's speech is subject to patriarchal command until it gives way to madness, illustrating the psychological effects of patriarchal constraint. By bringing these two figures into dialogue with one another, this study shows that silence in Shakespearean tragedy is neither static nor monolithic. Rather, it is a site of patriarchal limitation, culminating in either ethical martyrdom or psychological dissolution before the re-establishment of political stability.

1. Introduction

Shakespeare's tragedies continuously drag the daughter into a place of tension and conflict where power, speech, and proper place are all in competition with each other (Adelman, 1992). The notion of Shakespearean tragedy has always been that of complete moral and psychological collapse. Tragedy is defined as the depiction of severe suffering as the result of an internal conflict that concludes with an unavoidable, irreversible loss (Bradley, 2022). Yet these accounts, though fundamental, often emphasize the tragic hero's inner life to the detriment of the positioning of other characters on the stage. This study focuses on the daughter, whose speech and non-speech reveal a very different pattern of power relations. In both *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, it is not simply the nature of who you are as a child that has been preordained but rather one that has been worked out under the pressure of a father's command.

The father demands to hear the speech of the child as proof of love, proof of obedience, and proof of moral stance. In these worlds of drama and theater, the words are not only the way of feeling but also the way of making and molding the world (Foucault, 1972). To speak affection is to ratify sovereignty. In these dramatic structures of politics, silence also comes forward as the disturbing factor that is not only resistant, destabilizing, but also fatal (Foucault, 1978). In the scenes of *King Lear* where Cordelia answers Lear's ritualistic question with the word "Nothing," or the scenes of *Hamlet* where the voice of Ophelia becomes more and more constricted in her disjointed song and madness, silence is no longer absence but reveals the tension of paternal authority.

In the past four decades of *Lear* and *Hamlet* scholarship, the figure of the daughter has been viewed in terms of her gendered victimization, moral integrity, and/or psychoanalytic complexity. Cordelia has been seen as the moral check to Lear's theatricality, while Ophelia has been the paradigmatic figure of female vulnerability in a degenerate court. While some critics engage with the issue of language and performance, the role of silence has been viewed as either moral gesture of integrity in the face of corruption (Bradley, 2022) or as symptom of psychic rupture and hysteria, particularly in feminist accounts of Ophelia (Showalter, 1985; Adelman, 1995).

What has remained comparatively unexamined is the role of silence as a structural feature of the tragic form. This study differs from previous readings of silence as moral virtue or psychological pathology in its contention that silence acts as a structural challenge to sovereignty in Shakespearean tragedy. Instead of interrogating what silence discloses about the daughters as individuals, this article asks what it discloses about tragedy. In dealing with the theme, it approaches tragedy as a form of genre rather than the psychological development of a character, which is the distinction used in theories of structural genres (Frye, 1957). In comparing Cordelia and Ophelia at length, it suggests that Shakespeare presents two different grammars of tragedy as daughterhood: one in which denial threatens sovereignty from outside, and another in which observation shatters subjectivity from within. Silence is not absence but a place where political linguistic form and legitimacy come together and produce death in *King Lear* and psychological collapse in *Hamlet*.

This study also creates each of the daughters her own moral/psychological world. Cordelia becomes the icon of refusal, Ophelia the icon of patriarchal injury. But such opposition masks another more basic structural similarity between the two plays: the way in which silence brings together patriarchal authority and its limits. The issue is not simply whether or not these daughters are silenced, but what their silence means for the structure of tragedy. Without considering silence as a structural feature, which reconfigures political authority, the course of the narrative, and conditions of restoration, we are in danger of reifying these characters in the realm of the affective, rather than considering their structural importance.

2. Review of Literature

In all of the scholarly work on Shakespearean tragedy, there exists a circular pattern of interest in how family power and authority impact political legitimacy and the creation of subjects. Claire McEachern (1988) has written of how the daughter's voice begins within unstable constructs of paternal power and how agency must be earned rather than assumed (McEachern, 1988, p. 1-3). In recent years, scholars have pointed to how Shakespeare's *King Lear* is replete with themes of familial relationships and inheritance, and how unstable intergenerational power can be (Pollard, 2025). All of these works collectively assert that Lear's power cannot exist outside of family order and that political unrest begins within the tight confines of family itself.

Feminist Shakespeare criticism has long examined the gendered dynamics of authority and subject formation in these plays (Belsey, 1985; Showalter, 1985; Adelman, 1992). This kind of criticism has focused particularly on the regulation, interpretation, or containment of women's speech in patriarchal discourse. Elaine Showalter's famous article on Ophelia situates her madness within the context of a broader cultural myth of female hysteria and how patriarchal discourse constructs women as excess, fragility, and instability. Showalter writes of how Ophelia becomes less of a dramatic character and more of a cultural icon whose body and voice are aestheticized, eroticized, and encoded within the traditions of patriarchal art and criticism (Showalter, 1985). In this account, the madness of Ophelia was not so much an individual pathology as a culturally recognizable performance shaped by the ideals of femininity and obedience. As Carol Thomas Neely explains in her work, early modern madness is a socially constructed condition as much as a medical one, a, thereby situating the character of Ophelia within a discourse of gender (Neely, 2004).

Janet Adelman's exploration of the themes of family and mother anxiety in Shakespeare provides further depth to the sense of psychic and political tension within the world of Hamlet. Adelman writes of how the moment of the father's death and the mother's remarriage undermines the ground of paternal authority and forces the son to confront the "sexualized mother's legacy," making masculine identity itself unstable (Adelman 1992, pp.17-18). Hamlet's famous crisis, therefore, becomes less of a moral struggle and more of the son's struggle to find himself within the structurally unstable world of the family. Accordingly, Adelman's argument shifts tragedy from the ethical to the psychic and familial realms, where authority is always insecure.

This body of scholarship convincingly argues how Shakespeare's women are trapped within the patriarchal structure of power. However, while Ophelia is clearly constructed as the quintessential victim of patriarchal oppression and Cordelia as the emblem of filial love and moral integrity, their silences are not usually discussed within the same structural context. Critical discourse usually isolates Cordelia's silence in ethical terms and Ophelia's in psychological ones, rarely positioning these two silences in relation to one another in the formal logic of tragedy. Silence is often seen as characterological rather than architectural.

3. Theoretical Framework

What are the theoretical implications of such a comparison? According to J.L. Austin's theory on the "performative statement," there are statements that merely describe a state of affairs, and there are statements that merely perform an action when uttered. In the case of the "performative utterance," it has already been stated that "the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action" (Austin, 1975, p. 6). The love test suggested by Lear is a "performative" in nature. Cordelia's rejection does not merely interrupt the communication of emotions; it interrupts sovereign rule. Butler's extension of the theory of performativity suggests that identity is created through the repetition of socially regulated acts; it is the "repeated stylization of the body" within a normative structure which gives the appearance of substance (Butler, 1990, pp. 43-44). Butler's more recent work suggests that the effectiveness of the performative depends on its movement within a "total speech situation" and the conditions of recognizability which give life to the subject's existence (Butler, 1997, pp. 4-5). In the chapter on Panopticism in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes a structure in which the individual is "observed at every point" within a bounded space (Foucault, 1977, pp. 195-197). The scene in the nunnery stages an almost panoptic configuration in which Ophelia is observed while her language is observed and regulated. It is not merely the case that her language is regulated by paternal command; it is also the case that her language is shaped within a structure of surveillance. In such a configuration, the role of language and the role of silence are less choices than internalized structures. This study adopts a comparative close-reading method informed by speech-act theory, performativity theory, and Foucauldian concepts of surveillance to analyze how silence operates structurally within each tragedy.

4. Discussion and Analysis

Cordelia's refusal to play the game of filial love and her utterance of the word "Nothing" disrupts the script of filial performance and the repetition which underpins patriarchal authority. What is enacted in the first scene is not just a division of land but a crisis of kingship through ceremony. Lear is not just abdicating; he is choreographing his own political legacy. Lear's love test is a ceremony of transfer meant to convert royal authority into emotional continuity. Before the division of the land or the transfer of power begins, Lear insists on words: "Which of you shall we say doth love us most?" (1.1.50). Lear's words seem interrogatory; however, they make sense only through ceremony. Lear is establishing a ceremonial exchange in which words replace contracts. What is important in this scene is that sovereignty is not inherited but re-inscribed through ceremony. Lear's insistence on words shows us that at this point, sovereignty must be reaffirmed through ceremony to remain symbolically intact. Goneril and

Regan understand the logic of this ceremony. What they say is not just an expression of love but an inflation of rhetoric. Goneril says she loves Lear more than “words can wield the matter” (1.1.54), while Regan says she is “an enemy to all other joys” (1.1.72). What is important is not just the inflationary rhetoric but its function. What Goneril and Regan say is that love is expressed through ceremony that must be witnessed by the audience at court.

Thus, kingship in the early modern period was not only hereditary but also visible, dependent upon ritual forms that rendered the symbolic and performative dimensions of sovereignty publicly manifest (Hennings et al. 2025, p. 3). Sovereignty was not only inherited but also proclaimed. The courtroom becomes a witnessing body. Speech is oath-like, love is evidence of succession. The ceremony aims to span the impossible divide between how a king can give up ruling but still rule. The response given by *King Lear* is theatrical in its nature: he will still rule if he affirms it. The love test is a rite of continuity.

It is within this context of theater and theater’s logic of excess that Cordelia’s words are catastrophic. Asked to speak and offer something to “draw / A third more opulent than your sisters?” (1.1.85–86), Cordelia answers simply, “Nothing, my lord” (1.1.87). In these words, the logic of succession and its ritualistic underpinnings begins to break apart. “Nothing” does not simply refuse to play along; it eliminates the words upon which the ceremony relies. If power is enacted through words, then the absence of words begins to cancel out the ritual. Lear quickly catches on to the problem: “Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again” (1.1.89). His words betray the fact that silence or minimal words are impossible within a structure of theater and words.

The words of Cordelia, “Nothing,” demonstrate that the performativity of sovereign power is in jeopardy. If sovereign power must be recognized in order to have power, then it is necessarily tenuous (Butler, 1997, pp. 4-5). The ceremony is not a display of power; rather, it is a production of power and therefore necessarily subject to failure (Austin, 1975, p. 6). By doing so, she cuts the symbolic distance required for the ceremony to take place. When she says, “Why have my sisters husbands if they say / They love you all?” (1.1.99–100), she makes evident the logical impossibility embedded in the declaration.

Silence of Cordelia, therefore, works as a denial to ratify the official authority. It is not just the denial of the exaggeration of the denial; it is the denial of the process by which the official authority is theatrically reproduced. What seems to be the filial stubbornness leads to the discovery of the kingship’s dependency on the reproduction. What seems to be the denial of the reproduction of love is the discovery of the dependency of kingship on the reproduction. It is the moment at which the official authority begins to disintegrate.

While Cordelia interrupts a ritualistic request for speech, Ophelia is located in a world in which her words are never entirely her own. Ophelia is instructed and monitored from her first appearance in *Hamlet*. Where Cordelia actively works against a public performance, Ophelia is caught in a system of paternal and royal control that seeks not only to dictate what she will say but also in what manner and in what degree she will speak. When Ophelia is instructed by Polonius in Act I, Scene iii, he takes on a position of control that is both that of father and of regulator. His words are clear and directive. Ophelia is to “tender yourself more



dearly” (1.3.107) and is to consider Hamlet’s vows as “springes to catch woodcocks” (1.3.115). The metaphor of entrapment and of deception is clear in both of these images. Ophelia’s words in this scene are remarkably few. “I shall obey, my lord” (1.3.136) is Ophelia’s defining statement. Ophelia exemplifies what Foucault describes as a subject who, placed within a “field of visibility,” assumes responsibility for the constraints of power and internalizes its regulation (Foucault, 1995, p. 202). Where Cordelia actively works against the structure of the love test, Ophelia accepts that structure and that control. As Janet Adelman argues in her reading of *King Lear*, Cordelia’s speech emerges within a paternal economy in which the father’s need for recognition and legitimacy structures and constrains the daughter’s position (Adelman, 1992, pp. 108–112). Ophelia’s words here are less those of self-definition and more those of recognition of authority.

This trend continues in what is often referred to as the “nunnery scene” (3.1), where the idea of surveillance is literalized. In this scene, Polonius tells Ophelia to “walk you here,” while he and Claudius hide behind the arras (3.1.44). The scene resembles the panoptic mechanism in which individuals are caught within an asymmetrical relation of seeing and being seen, producing an anxious awareness of observation (Foucault, 1995, p. 203). Even the way this scene is set out appears to be choreographed for the purpose of observing Hamlet’s reaction to Ophelia’s words. Ophelia is set up as a kind of “bait” in a scientific experiment to observe Hamlet’s reaction to her words. Ophelia’s words in this scene are not only controlled by her father’s instruction but also by the fact that she knows she is being observed. When Ophelia tries to return Hamlet’s letters, her words are controlled, measured, and emotionally flat: “My lord, I have remembrances of yours / That I have longed long to re-deliver” (3.1.95-96). The fact that Ophelia “longed long” to return the letters could indicate anxiety or apprehensiveness in her tone.

This response disrupts the precarious state of composure. Hamlet’s charges, such as the command to “Get thee to a nunnery” (3.1.136), redirect the aggression to her body and speech. In the conversation, Ophelia’s position changes from respondent to target of verbal aggression. She speaks less than she is spoken to. Her silence is not refusal but containment. As Elaine Showalter notes, Ophelia’s story is repeatedly constructed and mediated through the voices of father, brother, and lover, leaving her with limited autonomous space for self-definition (Showalter, 1985, pp. 78–79). What transpires is not so much a dialogue of balance but a significant asymmetry between the speaker and the target. Hamlet acts out madness, while she internalizes its impact. In such a situation, self-speech is almost impossible. Ophelia’s speech is conditioned by the anticipation of male response and the impact of being observed. While surveillance dominates Ophelia’s early speech, the scenes of madness in Act IV of Shakespeare’s play reveal what happens when this surveillance fails. In Act 4, Scene 5, Ophelia’s speech is fragmented in a bold and almost untamed fashion. Ophelia enters speaking in pieces of ballads—“How should I your true love know / From another one?”—and distributing flowers whose meaning is both given and withheld. Ophelia’s sentences fragment; songs interrupt her speech; images substitute for argument. Ophelia’s speech is no longer offering a direct and logical answer to the question posed to her. The court is confused by her speech. Claudius recognizes her speech as “nothing,” and yet “more than matter” (4.5.149).

From this perspective, madness is the crease in order and meaning. The tight, short, and precise “I shall obey” gives way to a drifting, meandering style. What was contained within the strictures of paternalistic commands now seeps out in signs and symbols. Her songs are full of suggestion—of betrayal, death, broken promises. Regardless of intent, her songs are suggestive of a return to speech long suppressed by obedience in a symbolic form. Madness does not silence Ophelia so much as change the form in which she might speak. She talks more than she did before, yet talks less understandably. The abundance of words is in stark contrast with the initial lack of words. Ophelia’s progression is different from that of Cordelia in that Ophelia progresses from structured compliance to wordy excess. Ophelia’s silence is not a chosen state; rather, it is a forced state that she has internalized. When the structured state is no longer able to contain Ophelia’s emotional and psychological state—after Polonius’ death and Hamlet’s departure—speech is fragmented instead of integrated. The fragmentation of speech is both linguistic and psychological in that the state that structured Ophelia’s words has been destabilized.

However, the contrast with Cordelia shows us just what’s at stake. For Cordelia, audacity is never an option; it’s simply not something she’s given the chance to do. For Ophelia, it’s not an option either. The “Nothing” of Cordelia was a direct challenge to power and got her banished. The “Nothing” of Ophelia occurs gradually and consists of the gradual disintegration of self within a web of patriarchal control and royal observation. Callaghan (2000) contends that the construction of female subjectivity in Renaissance drama is located in the representational framework that regulates and circumscribes women’s speech (Callaghan, 2000). While the “Nothing” of Cordelia retains some sense of ethics, the “Nothing” of Ophelia leads to disintegration. In *Hamlet*, observation doesn’t merely serve to fuel resistance; it merely serves to destroy it. The path of Ophelia shows us one kind of tragic daughterhood. While internalized silence, if imposed upon one and gradually assimilated, will not serve to counteract the powers that be; it will merely serve to buckle under the pressure of them. While the “Nothing” of Cordelia was symbolic and was enacted by calculated boldness, the “Nothing” of Ophelia was one of conformity and constant observation and finally becomes one of speech which cannot speak itself. The disintegration of speech is the moment when patriarchal control stops directing and disintegrates.

When comparing and contrasting these two characters and their silences, it becomes clear that silence in Shakespearean tragedy is not one condition but many. While both of these characters are linked to the disruption of language, the outcome of this disruption follows very different paths. For instance, whereas Cordelia’s silence begins as a refusal, Ophelia’s silence begins as a compliance. While Cordelia’s silence involves a shrinking of language, Ophelia’s involves its gradual internalization until it begins to break apart. This is not just a psychological difference but also applies to the overall structure of the two plays, which in turn affects the action taken. Cordelia’s “Nothing,” for example, in *King Lear* challenges the performative structure of the love test and proves that true sovereignty is dependent on the ceremonial conditions of reception (Austin, 1975, pp. 8-9).

Ophelia’s situation is quite different. She is not interrupting a rite; she is completing it. Her speech is shaped by both paternal command and royal supervision from the very beginning.

The obedience implied in “I shall obey, my lord” (1.3.136) is a linguistic form. Obedience is a world away from the political statement that might be made by Cordelia’s refusal to play the role set for her. Ophelia’s restraint is one that is imposed upon her from outside and one that she gradually comes to accept. But with the collapse of the frameworks that had governed her words following Polonius’ death and Hamlet’s departure, her words do not become more restrained; they become more fragmented. The scenes of madness are not so much scenes of a crazy woman; they are scenes of a collapse of the frameworks that contained her words. They are scenes of a shift from a more restrained form of obedience to a more fragmented form.

Cordelia is politically expelled. Lear disinherits her and gives his land to his sisters. She is no longer part of the symbolic order of the kingdom. This expulsion may be viewed as Lear’s attempt to disown his daughter on the grounds of not imitating his behavior, as suggested in the analysis of the play by Janet Adelman. This is indicative of the weakness of the legitimacy of the father himself (Adelman, 1992, pp. 110-111). However, her coherence has not been disrupted in the way Lear’s has been. She re-enters the scene as a force of unity and restoration, however briefly and in however tragic a context. Her death is not only violent but also has the dimension of martyrdom. She is the victim of political rather than psychological disintegration. Ophelia, on the contrary, goes through psychological disintegration before she meets her death. Her personality is fragmented through the medium of song, flowers, and circuitous reference. By the time the news of her death is reported in Act 4, Scene 7 of the play, she has undergone the experience of symbolic death, and the intelligibility of her speech is not clear to the court, nor is the ceremony of her funeral assured. Thus, the disintegration of personality is evident in the case of Ophelia even before the actual death occurs.

It is not adequate to speak of both of these characters simply as silenced daughters. Silence has a different function within the dramatic structure of each play. In *King Lear*, silence begins political disintegration; in *Hamlet*, silence discloses the cumulative effects of observation. Cordelia challenges power and is expelled from it. Ophelia is constituted by power until her words no longer allow for coherence. As Foucault observes, disciplinary power operates through hierarchical surveillance and continuous supervision, shaping individuals within a network that functions “permanently and largely in silence” (Foucault, 1995, pp. 175–177). In one play, the trajectory of silence leads to moral martyrdom; in the other play, it leads to psychological disintegration. What these two plays disclose about each other is not the relative value of each of these characters but rather Shakespeare’s use of silence as a dramatic structure with profoundly different effects. For Cordelia, silence becomes a challenge to the sovereignty of the father because it reveals the dependency of power on performance. For Ophelia, compliance with power reveals the disintegration of the self under observation.

The comparison between Cordelia and Ophelia ultimately leads us to pose a broader question about the structure of the plays: why must these daughters die? If the silence in both plays subverts patriarchal authority—either by denial or by default—what does the death of the daughter represent in the structure of the tragedy? The death of Cordelia and Ophelia is not merely collateral damage in the violence. Indeed, as Janet Adelman argues of *King Lear* in general, the drama is ultimately about “the primal material” of maternal power and breaks down generational lines to reveal the instability of paternal identity (Adelman, 1992, p. 103). The

conflict between Lear and his daughters repeatedly brings him back to the maternal power the drama initially appears to reject (Adelman 1992, p. 104). In *King Lear*, the return of Cordelia establishes the possibility of reconciliation. The play momentarily shifts its attention to restoration: Lear's madness subsides to sanity, and political disintegration seems to be made whole. However, this restoration is short-lived. The execution of Cordelia eliminates not just the daughter but the moral standard she represents. The political order established by Albany's ascendancy and Edgar's survival happens only after Cordelia's body has been removed from the stage. The moment Lear enters with Cordelia's body, he grasps the inversion of patriarchal power: the father who demanded to be heard has nothing to say. The death of Cordelia completes the tragic process. The order that has been restored to the kingdom has been accomplished at the expense of her integrity as daughter.

While Ophelia's death scene is of a different significance, it is similarly impactful. Ophelia doesn't rise up in defiance against those in power, as Cordelia does, but her madness serves to expose the fissures within the Danish monarchy. Claudius senses it, too, and knows that Ophelia's ravings threaten the balance he is trying to establish: "Oh, this is the poison of deep grief," he says to himself (4.5.49). Even in her madness, Ophelia's words threaten what Claudius is trying to establish. When her death is announced, it is described in a way that is almost beautiful, a pastoral tableau. Ophelia's presence within the world of power has been erased, and by the time Fortinbras enters to take power, she is simply a memory. Yet both plays return to the theme of political continuity only after the daughter's body has left the stage. As de Grazia (2007) demonstrates, *Hamlet* is deeply structured by anxieties surrounding dynastic succession and the transmission of political authority (de Grazia, 2007). This repetition emphasizes the position of the daughter in these tragedies: on the margin. The daughter is situated in a position of domestic affection and public authority. She is the child of the father; she comes to the household in marriage or alliance. When Cordelia refuses to speak in grandiloquent terms, she breaks the ritual upon which kingship is founded. When Ophelia's carefully controlled nonspeech breaks down into lyric fragmentation, she lays bare the insidious grip of surveillance in a decadent court. In her own way, both women subvert the limits of patriarchal authority.

Does female integrity, then, threaten patriarchal sovereignty? In *King Lear*, Cordelia's integrity disrupts the performative model on which Lear's sovereignty is based. Lear's request for love in return is challenged by Cordelia's insistence on proportional love. In a culture where political power is predicated on ritualistic display and symbolic self-fashioning (Greenblatt, 1980), such a resistance to ceremonial excess is structurally intolerable. This challenge to the logic of inflation that drives political spectacle is punished by expulsion and death. In the case of *Hamlet*, the integrity of Ophelia is not demonstrated by such a challenge, but by her unswerving determination behind her obedience. Yet, the attempt to control the expression of integrity points to the fear of the unpredictability of the female form. But once the control of that expression has been breached, the fragmentation of the female form is no longer tenable. The death of Ophelia serves to negate the failure of control. It would be simplistic to suggest that the daughters are removed by Shakespeare as a means of reasserting the male form of order. Yet, it is undeniable that the form of integrity demonstrated by the female, through the

controlled or implosive form of the silent female, is no longer tenable within the reassertion of the male form of order. The martyrdom of Cordelia, the dissolution of Ophelia, both pave the way for succession. Albany, Edgar, and Fortinbras succeed to a new form of political order in which the daughters have no part. The reassertion of the male form of order is inextricably linked to the removal of the daughters. Silence, within the new context, goes beyond the individual form. It points to the structural weakness of the patriarchal form of order. The daughter who fails to demonstrate the integrity of love threatens the sovereignty of the male form of order, the daughter whose words dissolve points to the destructive power of the male form of order.

5. Conclusion

This study demonstrated that silence in *King Lear* and *Hamlet* is not simply a trope about women as victims. In comparing Cordelia and Ophelia, Shakespeare presents us not simply with silenced women but also with what happens when patriarchal power fails to control women's speech. In both *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, language becomes a form of control. In both works, too, language fails to meet patriarchal expectations of appropriate speech. In both works, patriarchal power fails to control it. The result is a system of language that begins to show cracks and fissures. Cordelia and Ophelia are at opposite ends of the spectrum regarding what language does in a tragedy. Cordelia does not indulge in rhetorical flourish. Her "Nothing" breaks in upon a ritualistic exchange in which the inflation of speech equates with loyalty. It is a refusal that is both calculated and measured, one that maintains moral balance in the face of exile and death. Ophelia, on the other hand, is never given the opportunity to refuse. Her speech is always subject to the dictates of obedience and surveillance until it finally ceases to be intelligible. When control breaks down, speech reverts to song, symbol, and disjunction. The death of both figures is not the moment of reconciliation but the moment in which the discursive structure reaches its limit in its inability to accommodate the precision of truth or the fragmentation of speech. Political succession happens in both plays but in the absence of the daughter whose speech could not be contained. Silence in both plays does not represent absence or emptiness. Shakespeare's tragic daughters thus occupy a paradoxical position. They reveal the vulnerability of sovereignty but do not remain visible in the political futures that succeed them. Through Cordelia's refusal and Ophelia's dissolution, the two plays stage two limitations of language: refusal to perform and inability to perform. In this way, they imply that patriarchal discourse, faced with a speaking subject it cannot command, finally succumbs to violence. What is tragic is not simply the death of the daughters but the inability of the authority to endure the truth that their silence makes visible.

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