

## The opposite of white: Apollo's Crow and learning to be silent in *King Lear*

When, in the midst of his 'darker purpose', King Lear turns to his youngest daughter and demands that she "Speak", we are already fearful of the response. Cordelia has warned the audience that her 'love's / More ponderous than my tongue' and that she can only 'Love, and be silent' (1.1. 78;62).<sup>1</sup> The soft and low voice of Cordelia that will come to define her moral position in the play is here invoked as a synecdoche for love. 'To love, and be silent' are inextricably linked from this point on, so that the worth of speech is set against the ethical value of silence: a silence that records truth, authenticity, integrity, an opposite to that 'oily and glib' art of her sisters.<sup>2</sup> But this silence, just like her later 'nothing', is equivocal: whether mobilised as resistance, obfuscation, denial, recalcitrance or noncommitment, it can be both the most ethical and egregious of responses. Cordelia's silence, or not quite silence, as she does indeed offer up a 'nothing', has long been the centre of critical analysis of the play. Whether in search of motivation, exoneration, character, source or system, readings of *King Lear* have sought to make sense of the horror of the play's tragic vision through an understanding of where Cordelia's 'nothing' resides in the moral paradigm of the play.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. R. A Foakes (London: Thomas Learning, Arden Third Series, 1997). All further references are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> According to Michael Holahan 'the worth of speech' is the objective standard of ethics that the play establishes in the figure of Cordelia, "'Look, Her lips'", Softness of voice, Construction of character in King Lear', SQ 48, No. 4 (Winter 1997), 414.

<sup>3</sup> The list of responses to the play in relation to Cordelia's silence is long but perhaps the most salient for my purposes are: Kelly Gesch. "Not what we ought to say": Male anxiety and the power of female speech in Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Richard III*. *Concept*, 31, 1-12. Julie Dusingberre, *Shakespeare and the nature of women* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1996). Catherine Cox, "An excellent thing in woman": Virgo and viragos in *King Lear*. *Modern Philology*, 96(2) (1998), 143-57. Ann Thompson, Are there any women in *King Lear*? In V. Wayne (Ed.), *The matter of difference: Materialist feminist criticism of Shakespeare* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991). Catherine Belsey, *The subject of tragedy: Identity and difference in renaissance drama*. (London: Methuen, 1985). Philippa Berry, *Shakespeare's feminine endings: Disfiguring death in the tragedies*. (London: Routledge 1999). B. T. Hamamra, The Dialectics of speech and silence in Shakespeare's *King Lear* Studies in Literature and Language 13 94), 31-39. Michael Holahan's "'Look, Her lips'", Softness of voice, Construction of character in King Lear', SQ 48, No. 4 (Winter 1997), 406-431. Stanley Cavell, *Disowning knowledge in seven plays by Shakespeare*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

Apportioning blame, understanding motivation or even the potential psychologies of love became an important part of making sense of the inexplicably violent and relentlessly tragic nature of *King Lear*. For Stanley Cavell, whose essay on the play marked a decisive shift in critical studies, both in terms of psychology and character, Cordelia represents the bedrock of shame and denial on which the play rests: ‘All her words are words of love; to love is all she knows how to do. That is her problem, and the cause of the tragedy of *King Lear*’.<sup>4</sup> There are many issues one might take with Cavell’s reading of the play, not least of all its attitudes to women, but the problem of Cordelia persists: she is the centre of the play’s tragedy; if only she could heave her heart into her mouth, all would be well? If only she could, as it were, just play the game?

In this essay, I want to re-address the problem of Cordelia – not as a vessel of male prejudice, fantasy or repression but as an image of truth and the social life of that truth as it moves across the play world. In an essay, ‘Look, her lips’, Michael Holahan shifts the focus on Cordelia away from character as selfhood, motivation or subjectivity, to the moral dynamic established in interaction. For Holahan, character is neither construction nor interiority but ‘a progressive delineation of spaces between or beyond distinct figures on stage’ which manifest in the ‘barely perceptible space between speech and silence’.<sup>5</sup> This barely perceptible space is one that supports the exchange of voices, not as individuated positions but as moral experiences. Inhabiting or apprehending Cordelia’s silence as a space between her and Lear, as an ethical value through which various characters in the play must move, and as an image of both the unspeakable but also the unknowable allows us to reconsider the value of that silence and the different contexts through which it becomes available to us. The

---

<sup>4</sup> Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, p.63.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Holahan, “‘Look, Her lips’”, *Softness of voice, Construction of character in King Lear*, SQ 48, No. 4 (Winter 1997), 407.

play's rather pious summation that we must 'Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say' (5.3.323) returns the focus of the tragedy to speaking and the apparently widely held assumption that what we feel and what we ought to say are not one and the same thing. Once again, the tragic reflection resides in the spaces between words – somewhere between feeling and speaking lies a truth that we cannot recover. But the value of that truth remains in contention: for all that Cordelia's soft and low voice of silence came to represent it has been largely absent for the majority of the play; just as Albany or Edgar's appeal to feeling as the marker of truth is lost in the recognition that they – 'the young' – 'Shall never see so much nor live so long' (5.3.325).<sup>6</sup> Whatever we might have learned, it seems, it's too late: for the old who are dead and the young who will not live long enough to implement it. So just how important is truth to *King Lear* and why does it come to reside in an image of silence?

The relationship between truth and silence is notoriously slippery: as many critics have observed, the play's demand that we look to Cordelia's dead lips as the final recognition of her truth becomes inextricably caught up with gendered discourses of female power, the Virgo and virago. Where, for Holahan, Lear's plea to Cordelia's lips becomes testimony to his acceptance of, and access to, her silence, for Catherine Cox:

In death then, Cordelia's virgo silence reinstates her position as Lear's favourite daughter; no one but Lear grieves for her, and no "voice" threatens to contradict or confront his nostalgic fantasy. "Gentle" silence is "excellent" in an ideal woman, even if the idealized status is contingent upon the death of the heroine.<sup>7</sup>

In Cox's reading, silence is less an ethical value and more a form of annihilation, which the female body is forced to endure as well as validate. I want to add to these readings by suggesting that there is a socialised discourse of silence in the play, in which *not* telling the truth becomes more important than telling it. Truth telling has long been valorised as the mainstay of social and political stability and yet there is an equally vibrant literary tradition

---

<sup>6</sup> Albany speaks these lines in the 1608 Quarto, Edgar in the 1623 Folio.

<sup>7</sup> Cox, "An excellent thing in a woman": Virgo and Virago in *King Lear*, *Modern Philology*, vol. 96, No.2 (Nov., 1998), 156. The figure of the silent women, so acerbically satirised by Ben Jonson in *Epicoene*, becomes a contested site for the exploration of truth and talking, not only within the gendered context of women, but in the wider contexts of an audience's expectations of their theatre. Within the matrix of Jonson's (naturally allegorical) imagination, the value of truth lies in its performance as comic revelation, rather than absolute ideal

which recognises that the truth is often more destructive than deception.<sup>8</sup> Many of Shakespeare's characters have laid claim to a preferred status of blissful ignorance – Othello claims he could accept Desdemona having slept with half the army base as long as he didn't know; just as Leontes' torment lies in seeing the spider rather than its presence.<sup>9</sup> The equivocations around truth and knowing are written deep into the psychological experiences of human relations and Shakespeare's representation of truth is laced with ambivalence: here I want to consider one version of a story that celebrates silence through a repression of truth and the implications this has for re-reading Cordelia not as the vanquished virago or the idealised virgo, but as the crow who used to be white.

## §

If all human relations, according to Annabel Patterson's reading of Aesop, are a negotiation between slavery and liberty then *King Lear* is especially fascinated by not only the terms through which such negotiations take place, but by the irreducibility of these binary positions.<sup>10</sup> *Lear*'s preoccupation with enslavement, as a marker of functioning social relations as well as a metaphysical state of being, explores the tensions between unequal power relations as necessary markers of ontology. From the declaration of his 'darker purpose' to the claim that 'Which of you shall say doth love us most/ That we our largest bounty may extend' (1.1.51-2) Lear establishes the fatal semantic relationship between love and power. Admonishing Cordelia to 'Mend your speech a little / Lest you may mar your fortunes' (1.1.94-95), Lear draws the spoken word into a contest with economic value so that abundance comes to signify success.<sup>11</sup> There is, of course, no other play by Shakespeare in which the narrative is so powerfully dominated by the social implications of speaking: Lear's incessant commands to his daughters that they must 'say' or 'speak' are matched only by his own commitment to the spoken word as a figure of destruction or promotion: what he gives

---

<sup>8</sup> In *A Short History of Truth, Consolations for a Post-Truth World* (Quercus, 2017), Julian Baggini explores the relative value of truth as both an abstract principle and a mode of living.

<sup>9</sup> Othello states: 'I had been happy if the general camp, / Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body / So I had nothing known' (3.3.345—7); whilst Leontes exclaims: 'Alack, for lesser knowledge! How accurs'd / In being so blest' (2.1.37-8)

<sup>10</sup> Annabel Patterson, *Fables of Power: Aesopian Writing and Political History*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 29.

<sup>11</sup> Even Erasmus, in the midst of his support of copia, recognises that less can often mean more when he writes that brevity 'so full of meaning that much more is understood than is heard', *On Copia of words and Ideas*, trans Donald B. King (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette UP, 1963), p. 104. Cf. Holahan, 409.

he also takes away; status, freedom, futures, selves. Lear's devastating response to Cordelia's 'nothing', that her 'truth will be her dower' (1.1.109) appears to maintain this causal relationship between truth and value whilst at the same time refusing to see any value in 'truth' whatsoever. If the value of Cordelia's truth lies in its public devaluation so that the financial deficit is filled by a moral surfeit, how does the play fill that gap and at what point does Cordelia become 'most rich in being poor' (1.1.252)?

The figure of the slave talking truth to the master is a well-rehearsed image in the reproduction of Aesop's fables in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Aesop's own mythological status – the mute, deformed Ethiopian slave – chosen by the philosopher Xanthus on the basis of his wit, occupies the place of a fable in its celebration of triumph over adversity and mental agility over physical strength.<sup>12</sup> Yet despite their prolific print runs, assimilation by Chaucer, Henryson, Caxton and Lydgate into common parlance, and discernible traces over almost every literary text that invokes morality, power relations or beast fables, Aesop is a surprisingly under represented figure in literary criticism.<sup>13</sup> Understood largely as belonging to a sub strata of classical mythology, Aesop's fables tell the stories of strength, ingenuity, inequality, injustice and ignorance through the figures of an animal world which is not only typified and allegorical but is powerfully organised on the basis of its own conceptions of authority.<sup>14</sup> Just as the ambiguous power of nothing – as a condition that recommends Aesop for a worthy sale in the slave market – supports the idea of wisdom from below so it also maintains that state of servitude in a climate of power relations that insist on hierarchy. In Aesop's worlds a vast range of animals move across his imaginative fields in order to invoke the complex ways in which power asserts itself – oppression, bullying, might, right and destiny, for example – and the myriad ways in which it can be resisted or submitted to.<sup>15</sup> In this way, 'Aesop became a symbolic figure for the

---

<sup>12</sup> According to the *Life of Aesop*, Xanthos of Samos acquires Aesop because he says 'nothing' when asked by the philosopher what he knows. His silence is rewarded by the 'gift of articulate wisdom', Patterson, p. 16. There are a number of different versions of this tale, some record Aesop as mute, others as having a speech impediment.

<sup>13</sup> In the period, 1557-1645 Aesop's Fables went through 20 different English translations. Stephen Daniels, in his article, 'Political and Philosophical uses of Fables in the Eighteenth Century, explores the contested status of the fable itself: 'In some contexts, fables were understood simply as lies, or, more specifically, as the false religious teachings found in the classical myths', *The Eighteenth Century*, Spring 1982, Vol. 23. No. 2 (Spring 1981), pp. 151-171; 151.

<sup>14</sup> Within the compass of the fables, for example, the lion and the eagle may remain figures of strength but they can be outwitted or overcome in different situations. Similarly, the frog takes on a number of different roles in the fables, sometimes 'empty-headed' and at other times 'evil'.

<sup>15</sup> See Katherine Acheson's 'The Picture of Nature: Seventeenth Century English Aesop's Fables', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, Volume 9, No. 2 Fall/Winter (2009), pp. 25-50, which argues that illustrations

challenge from below to the social theory of good government that the work promoted'.<sup>16</sup> Many instances in Shakespeare seem to assimilate Aesop's animal authority into the socio-political world of human relations: we might consider Portia's assiduous focus on the terms of Shylock's bond as akin to Aesop's ingenious commitment to the language of intent, when he, in a move to rescue his master from an oath to drink all the water in the sea, requires that all the boundaries of the rivers must be dissolved so that the sea is complete. Unable to fulfil this task, those who sought the fulfilment of the master's oath are forced to accept defeat. Similarly, Shakespeare's dominant interest in social theories of good government make Aesop a compelling figure in the drama's approaches to injustice and inequality. Many of Aesop's moral winners emerge in their abilities to use language at its most literal and thereby absolve themselves from the social implications of accumulated meaning: the truth, in these contexts, is rarely pure but often simple; it is about saying what you mean, and, as *King Lear* bears out, that is harder than it sounds.<sup>17</sup> Shakespeare's interest in classical mythology is conventionally dominated by allusions to Ovid and yet the literary relationship between Ovid and Aesop becomes inextricably intertwined in a period in which each story told is an injunction to the story not chosen.<sup>18</sup> Heather James's brilliant exploration of Ariosto's assimilation of Ovid and Aesop, for example, considers how the placing of Rinaldo and his guide in a boat sailing down the river Po rehearses the vibrant processes of creativity: 'While Rinaldo's guide avoids sinister paths, Ariosto does not. He sifts through the multiple versions of the story of Cephalus and Procris and selects the least salubrious options to be found in Apollodorus, Ovid, Hyginus and Antonius Liberalis.'<sup>19</sup> For James, the act of allusion is always revisionist but in that process Aesop himself becomes a symbolic figure in the quest for truth: 'political philosopher, fabulist and slave – whatever Aesop represents to Ariosto – it

---

of the Fables invite counter readings and provide an interpretative category in their own right. Acheson suggests that by positioning the reader as a viewer of nature, the illustrations confront the viewer with epistemological questions about the status of the human.

<sup>16</sup> Patterson, *Fables of Power*, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Juliet Clutton-Brock, 'Aristotle, The State of Nature, and Modern Attitudes to Animals', *Social Research* (1995:3), 424-426. Gary Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and Its Discontents; the Moral Status of animals in the history of Western Philosophy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005)

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and Ovid* (Oxford: Calrendon, 1986); Ronald Martinez, "Two Odysseys: Rinaldo's Po Journey and the Poet's Homecoming in the Orlando furioso," in *Renaissance Transactions: Ariosto and Tasso*, ed. Valeria Finucci (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 17-55.

<sup>19</sup> Heather James, 'An Aethopian Sodomite, Aesop and Ovid: the undoing of dynastic epic in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*', *Modern Philology*, volume 117, No 2 (2019), p. 178.

is not an injunction to take books or things in the world at face value'.<sup>20</sup> Speaking to his master, Xanthus, who initially rejects him for his physical deformity, Aesop says: 'O philosopher, it is proper to inspect the mind, not the face'.<sup>21</sup> The allusions are amplified by an interconnected network to Socrates and his appearance as a satyr, which for Erasmus, was 'an emblem of Christ's comic concealment of deity within a human frame'.<sup>22</sup> The mask of Socrates becomes a powerful emblem for the duality of human nature 'the appearance of one thing always covering its opposite'.<sup>23</sup> For Aesop, the animal kingdom provides a myriad of opportunities in which to explore this doubleness in which animals are typified through relative characteristics: hence in one story a crow may advertise the depth of its plumage over a swan but in another be outwitted by a fox. Aesop's claim that it is 'proper to inspect the mind, not the face' resonates through a playful and often cynical range of experiences in which one is surprised, admonished or appalled by animal interaction. <sup>24</sup> Such images of the animal world become manifest in the Aesopian imagination as dynamic arenas in which status and survival are always in contention and the figure of the fool becomes a 'playful yet polemical figure of hindsight'.<sup>25</sup>

The vast array of animals invoked in *King Lear* has often supported a critical focus on the moral and social degradation of nature in the play: the terrible image of humanity, 'prey[ing] on itself / Like monsters of the deep' (4.2.50-51) has become a mobile metaphor for the play's representation of social collapse. The monstrous and the parasitic are effective images for the translation of rabid individualism into cultural critique. On a similar, if more local, level Aesop's animals reflect the tensions between inequality, power, and understanding that emerge when one species or type will survive on the weakness or demise of another, either as parasite or predator. Conventionally, the animal imagery is shown to collide around impulses of ingratitude, isolationism and self-serving greed. Part of the powerful attraction of Aesop's apparently simple tales is that they circumnavigate the need for justice; his world is not one of moral supremacy or fairness; it is one of survival and disillusionment. Just as, for Erica Fudge, 'the real animal is clearly absent' from Aesop's world, real nature might be said to be

---

<sup>20</sup> James, p. 172

<sup>21</sup> James, p.173.

<sup>22</sup> Albert R. Ascoli, *Ariosto's Bitter Harmony*, 343. cf. James, p. 175

<sup>23</sup> Ascoil, 343.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, *The swallow and the Crow and the Fox and the Crow*.

<http://classics.mit.edu/Aesop/fab.mb.txt> and <http://classics.mit.edu/Aesop/fab.mb.txt>

<sup>25</sup> James refers to Aesop and Ariosto's Moor in these terms, p. 184

clearly absent from *Lear*'s: instead the images and animals that fill Lear's mind, and the play's emotional weather, are predicated on a need to accept, just like *Aesop's Fables*, human injustice.<sup>26</sup>

Edgar or Albany's assertion at the end of the play, that we must 'Speak what we feel not what we ought to say' (5.3.322) belies the agonising journeys that the protagonists have made to reach this apparently obvious conclusion. More importantly, it reasserts the myth that truth matters most. The ambiguity of the play's final vision – both 'the promised end', and 'an image of that horror' – suggests the different ways in which we can recognise the allegorical presence of an imagined apocalypse. Looking towards a Lear who dies believing that there was justice 'I killed the slave that was a'hanging thee' (5.3.272) to one who doesn't: 'Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life / And thou no breath at all' (5.3.305-6) belongs to the fabulist world of paradox and inequality. When Lear holds the dead body of his daughter in his arms, he thinks he hears her speak: 'What is't thou sayst?': once again she says nothing, although this last time, of course, it is *not* said rather than *unsaid*, and in which moment Lear responds to an imagined sound: 'Her voice was ever soft, / Gentle and low, an excellent thing in a woman' (270-1). He is listening to her for the first and last time and hears, unlike the first act, what he wants to hear. This most bitter of ironies is not justice, nor is it morality; it is the fearful and unpredictable world of human perception, in which truth is the first man down.

We are copiously aware of Shakespeare's theatrical fascination with truth and his shifting faith in both its necessity and accessibility across the arc of his plays, but in *Lear* there is another version of the stories that search for truth and what they do when they find it. In Chaucer's *The Manciple's Tale*, we meet a retelling of Aesop's story of Apollo's crow and how it turned from white to black and lost its song.<sup>27</sup> Focusing on the animal as moral exemplar, Chaucer exposes the bird, who 'used to be white', as having told his master of his wife's affair. Condemned for tattling, Apollo curses the bird by turning her black and

---

<sup>26</sup> Erica Fudge, *Brutal Reasoning: Animals, Rationality and Humanity in Early Modern England* (Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 73. See also Bruce Boehrer who suggests that for Shakespeare the animal images are often more 'textual effect' than real animal, *Animal Character: Non Human Beings in Early Modern Literature* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), p. 166

<sup>27</sup> Ovid also tells a version of this story in Book 2 of *Metamorphoses*; here the focus is much more on the penalty for gossiping rather than truth telling but he roundly asserts: 'The Raven hoping for his truth to rewarded well / He maketh blacke, forbidding him with whiter birds to dwell', Golding's translation, 1567, ll-794-5.



replacing her sonorous voice with an ugly caw.<sup>28</sup> The moral of the tale is not, as one might suppose, do not have an affair, but rather, do not tell anyone. Reflecting on this story of the crow, the manciple concludes that he, ‘Techeth a man to kepen his tonge weel. / But as I seyde, I am nought textueel. / But nantheless, thus taught me my dame: / “My sone, think on the crowe, a Goddes name! / My sone, kepe wel thy tongue, and keep thy freend’ (ll. 315-319).<sup>29</sup> For Chaucer’s story teller, the moral centres on social responsibility, and the truth is less important than his friend’s peace of mind: ‘Kepe wel thy tonge and thenk upon the crowe’. In Gower’s version of the story, the emphasis falls similarly on the ‘tunge stille clos’, which, again, appears to recognise the social function of truth: not as an absolute category but as conditional upon ‘conseil’.<sup>30</sup> Here social relations are more important than truth, and speaking the truth is neither celebrated nor encouraged:

Mi Sone, be thou war ther by,  
And hold thi tunge stille clos:  
For who that hath his word desclos  
Er that he wite what he mene,  
He is fulofte nyh his tene  
And lest ful many time grace,  
Wher that he wolde his thonk pourchace.  
And over this, my Sone diere,  
Of othre men, if thou miht hiere  
In privete what thei have wroght,  
Hold conseil and descoevere it nocht,  
For Chestre can no conseil hele,  
Or be it wo or be it wele:

---

<sup>28</sup> See Peter Berek’s ‘The Upstart Crow’; Aesop’s Crow and Shakespeare as reviser’, which explores the image of the bird in relation to plagiarism, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol 35, No. 2 (Summer, 1994), pp. 205-207. In his chapter on parrots, Bruce Boehrer explores the symbolic transition that these birds make from the ‘miraculous’ to the ‘mindless’ through associations with the papacy, *Animal Characters*, p. 75.

<sup>29</sup> Larry D. Benson (ed), *The Riverside Chaucer*, third edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 286.

<sup>30</sup> The importance of ‘counsel’ as in political sovereignty is explored in Joanne Paul’s *Counsel and Command in Early Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) and in, ‘The Rhetoric of Counsel in Early Modern England’, in D. Hoak (ed.), *Tudor Political Culture* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), John Guy makes the important distinction between counsel as ‘inspirational myth’ and ‘socio-political matrix’.

And tak a tale into thi mynde,  
The which of olde ensample I finde.<sup>31</sup>

Cordelia's mistake, like the crow's, was to put truth before social accord, individual integrity before political stability, and she, also like the crow, is condemned for it. In Ovid's version in Book II of the *Metamorphoses*, the emphasis falls on the transition from white to black: 'For he had once been a bird of silvery-white plumage, so that he rivalled the spotless doves, nor yielded to the geese which one day were to save the Capitol with their watchful cries, nor to the river-loving swan. But his tongue was his undoing. Through his tongue's fault the talking bird, which once was white, was now the opposite of white'. 'Talking too much', becomes the more obvious moral of Ovid's tale and the bird becomes a powerful image, both as crow and nightingale, of the unfaithful and silenced woman.<sup>32</sup> Within these images of 'spotless' plumage, beautiful songs, and saving the Republic, Ovid suggests a radical loss by the talking bird: 'But the raven, which had hoped only for reward from his truth-telling, he forbade to take their place among white birds'.<sup>33</sup> Rejection, isolation and condemnation mark the truth telling bird, who now takes his place among the black birds, forever defined by what he is not.<sup>34</sup> The sense of injustice that attends on this image of the crow is modified only by the various versions which all insist on the social necessity of silence. For Cox, the social necessities of silence remain ambiguous in the play as she suggests that the 'closing directive will reiterate the ambivalence of both the characters and their author regarding the efficacy and propriety

---

<sup>31</sup> John Gower, 'The Tale of Phoebus and the Crow', *Confessio Amantis*, book III, ll.768-782. My own rather basic translation of this passage is: "My son, take heed of this, and keep your mouth closed, for those who have revealed their words before fully understanding what they mean are in great danger and often fall into disfavour where they hoped for thanks. Above all remember that if you hear what other men do in private hold your counsel and do not reveal it as nothing can heal the damage of disclosure, whether it be good or bad". With thanks, too, to my wonderful colleague Carole Maddern for her corrections and advice.

The word 'counsel' is especially important here since it belongs to a political, as well as social, network of duty and accord. For an exploration of how the terms of 'counsel' provides a 'common fund of language' see above.

<sup>32</sup> In *The Manciple's Tale*, the narrator takes care to note that the crow had a 'songe whilom lyk a nyghtyngale' until it is cursed by Apollo (l.294).

<sup>33</sup> Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, with an English Trans. by Frank Justus Miller. Leob. Cambridge, 1916, Vol I. pp.97-105.

<sup>34</sup> The relationship between speech and reason is a central tenet in the exploration of the human with Aristotle, Plutarch, Sextus and Philo using the word 'logos' to include speech, reason and inner thought. Birds are an interesting case in point since although, as Sorabji explains, 'some philosophers ascribe both kinds of logos to animals, citing birds for the clearest examples of speech', the Stoics suggested that 'it might be said of some birds that they have articulate utterance (dialektos), in other words segmentation (diarthrosis) of utterance by the tongue', Richard Sorabji, *Animal Minds and Human Morals* (Cornell, 1995), p. 80, 81

of speech'; recognising the allusive significance of Edgar's injunction to 'speak what we ought to say' Cox goes on to assert that:

While overtly connected to Cordelia's performance in the opening scene, Edgar's stated dichotomy between obligation and emotion, between decorum and truth, is a false one. Cordelia, in fact, manages neither: while her "nothing" appropriately articulates the silence befitting the virgo, it is followed by a sequence of scolding remarks that are neither truthful nor decorous, and her attempt at candor thus fails to communicate both "what [she] feel[s]" and "what [she] ought to say."<sup>35</sup>

The deeply contested understanding of silence as withholding, mendacity or integrity is revised by Shakespeare throughout his drama, but Cordelia's admission that 'I am sure my love's / More ponderous than my tongue' recognises a deep breach in the space between speaking and feeling that should, within the contexts of early modern gender relations, present her as a figure of authority rather than suspicion.<sup>36</sup> Almost all of the many early modern texts to explore the value of silence do so within the context of spirituality. One such example, Giacomo Affinati's *The Dumb Divine Speaker, or an Excellent Treatise in Praise of Silence* (1605), presents a humanist debate between two speakers, on the value of speech. Affinati's overriding claim, that it is 'better to remain silent than to speak', is approached through various opportunities to insist on the integrity of silence: 'well, admit that by silence a man may runne into some defect, yet nevertheless, beyond infinite comparisons and without all question, farre greater defects and harmes ensue by speaking than silence'.<sup>37</sup> To speak too much or foolishly is frequently allied with the devil so that silence becomes a necessary corollary to faith.<sup>38</sup> In Regan's claim that Goneril's praise for their father is commensurate

---

<sup>35</sup> Cox, 'An Excellent thing in a woman', 147

<sup>36</sup> For a discussion of speech and silence, see B. T. Hamamra, 'The Dialectics of speech and silence in Shakespeare's *King Lear*' *Studies in Literature and Language* 13 (94), 31-39

<sup>37</sup> Giacomo Affinati, *The dumbe diuine speaker, or: Dumbe speaker of Diuinity A learned and excellent treatise, in praise of silence: shewing both the dignitie, and defectes of the tongue. Written in Italian, by Fra. Giacomo Affinati d'Acuto Romano. And truelie translated by A.M.*, At London, 1605, pp. 4-5.

<sup>38</sup> One of Affinati's points on this subject is that the Devil sinned in speaking against God, not in 'avarice, nor gluttonie, nor luxurie', p. 20-21. Similarly, in Boehrer's discussion of the symbolic representation of the parrot, he cites Increase Mather's *Essay for the Recording of illustrious Providences* and the assumption that if a parrot speaks meaningfully it 'can only be the product of demonic inspiration and, that, as such, it must be destroyed', *Animal Characters*, p. 106.

with hers – ‘In my true heart / I find she names my very deed of love’ (1.1.70-71) – she seems to represent the spoken word as reflective of feeling, but then she re-evaluates that claim when she declares that, in fact, her sister ‘comes too short’.<sup>39</sup> Regan’s prolixity sustains, albeit briefly, Lear’s need for excess but radically fails to offer an opportunity for truth. Cordelia’s admission that she ‘want[s] that glib and oily art / To speak and purpose not’ (1.1.225-6) only reaffirms that which she had already confided in the audience, that she cannot heave her heart into her mouth. The play’s enquiry into the social function of silence begins with the impossible claim that words and truth are commensurate. Kent’s recognition of the ‘hollowness’ of the ‘low sounds’ of Goneril and Regan are rejected by Lear who strains in his curses to assure the spoken word’s authority. Crying out in the name of Apollo, Lear invites into the play world the very master of the bird who was condemned for her truth telling and sentenced to silence.

Lear: Now by Apollo –

Kent: Now by Apollo, King,

Thou swear’st in vain (1.1.161-2)

As Lear asserts the power of speech, Kent denies it: here, as both philosopher and master, Lear must be taught by the banished, the slave and the fool as to when words matter. Lear’s invocation of Apollo becomes deeply ironic within the context of the beast fable, as Lear aligns himself with the master who silences his caged bird for telling a truth he did not want to hear. Later in the play, as Lear prepares to die, he imagines himself and Cordelia as caged birds who will ‘take upon’s the mystery of things / As if we were God’s spies’ (5.3.16-17). It is not always clear where the emphasis falls in this speech and whether Lear reinvents himself with his dead daughter as moral agents of God, or those who take on the mysteries of the world on behalf of God: or indeed, in the context of Apollo’s crow, whether Lear further

---

<sup>39</sup> Gina Bloom, *Voice in motion: Staging gender, shaping sound in early modern England*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013). Kelly Gesch, “Not what we ought to say”: Male anxiety and the power of female speech in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and *Richard III*. *Concept*, 31 (2008), 1-12.

celebrates himself and Cordelia as the birds who used to be white: the truth telling creatures who can see but no longer tell.<sup>40</sup> The invocation of bird imagery in the play is frequently employed by Lear in relation to his daughters: pelicans, kites, wrens, hedge-sparrows, cuckoos and owls are all summoned in support of aberrance, lechery or discord. The binaries that Lear insists upon to represent his moral outrage record Goneril and Regan as the ‘pelican daughters’ who are not, in fact, the self-sacrificing images of Elizabethan devotion, but quite the contrary, the devouring, greedy, selfish creatures who seek to destroy him. Just as Goneril and Regan are the pelicans who feed on him, rather than for him, Cordelia is the crow who used to be white.<sup>41</sup> Eventually, and finally, Lear will take refuge in the image of a caged song bird who gestures, in her loss of liberty, to his greatest acceptance of both Cordelia and of himself. For Holahan, this moment registers the play’s poetics of silence which allows character to emerge as a series of ethical positions through which and against which other positions take shape. The most important for Holahan is that Cordelia’s soft voice and silence, her gentle and low tone, gives Lear a new vocal opportunity to inhabit and become the soft silence of his ill fated daughter: Lear becomes Lear, as Holahan argues, when he becomes Cordelia, first as a caged bird, and finally in death.<sup>42</sup> When Lear appears to be at the zenith of his madness, ‘crowned with flowers’, and a ‘side-piercing sight’ (4.6.85), he imagines or observes a ‘fellow’ who ‘handles his bow like a crow-keeper’, only to then admire the bird who avoids being harmed: ‘O well flown, bird, i’the clout, i’th clout’ (4.6.87, 91). Lear’s rambling observations focus on a crow who flees: an imaginary scarecrow, an armed soldier or farmer, a target or a blow: we don’t know; but what presents itself to Lear’s imagination is seemingly a wild crow, who escapes the arrow and might well remind him of the daughter condemned by her truth telling. Cordelia becomes in many ways a very Aesopian figure in the play: she speaks truth to the master in words that reflect exactly, and only, what they say. When she begs the question: ‘Why have my sister’s husbands, if they say / They love you all?... Sure I shall never marry like my sisters/To love my father all’(1.1.99-100;103-4) she brings Lear to the very limits of language. Like Aesop, she answers the question literally and in doing so contests the power balance between them. But

---

<sup>40</sup> Cavell admits that this image alludes him: ‘The astonishing image of “god’s spies” (v.iii.17) stays beyond me, but in part it continues the final emphasis upon looking without being seen; and it cites an intimacy which requires no reciprocity with real men’, *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 69.

<sup>41</sup> John Lyly compares Elizabeth I to “that good pelican that to feed her people spareth not to rend her own person”, *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit and Euphues and his England*, an annotated modern spelling edition, ed. Leah Scragg, *Revels Plays Companion Library* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 30030, p. 342. See also Gordon McMullen’s forthcoming article, ‘Cormorant Shylock’, in *Shakespeare Quarterly*.

<sup>42</sup> For Holahan, this is when Lear has ‘learned to say nothing’, ‘Look her lips”, 416.

Cordelia, like Apollo's crow, is punished for her truth telling and when she admits to her father that 'we are not the first / Who with best meaning have incurred the worst' (5.3.3-4) she acknowledges the inequality of their worlds and the history of their ethical positions. The play's final images of injustice, restraint and limitation are perhaps most powerfully and evocatively expressed through Lear's imagination, where the fantasy of reconciliation with Cordelia is also the acceptance of an unjust world: 'Come, let's away to prison / We two alone will sing like birds i'the cage' (5.3.8-9). The reversible world into which Lear admits them both becomes a haven for the dispossessed who can accept their sentence and absolve themselves of the pernicious bonds of the 'great ones' (19). Cordelia's nothing is, after all, not about silence but restraint: hers is the language of withholding predicated on the horrors of her sisters' inauthenticity. The conventional critical focus on the play's animal images is often within the contexts of 'foolishness' and hence the inability of animals to exercise reason or responsibility, speech or judgement.<sup>43</sup> But foolishness takes on another quality in *Lear* where it is the province not of ignorance or a failure of reason but a more enlightened state of acceptance through which the play recognises the value of nothing. Cordelia's relationship to Lear's Fool is inextricable, as truth teller but also mask wearer, both characters are constrained by the limits of tragedy as well as farce. Cordelia's truth, just like the Fool's, speaks to a Dionysian world of suffering in which 'representation' is not only misleading, as Aesop would affirm, but also an illusion.<sup>44</sup> Like Socrates's mask of Silenus, comedy and wisdom, truth and silence are always in state of duality.<sup>45</sup> The world of *Lear* is not, in the end, an apocalyptic vision of human degradation but a sceptical analysis of the value of acceptance and restraint, unhinged from their stoic or Christian contexts, and resettled as a recognition of the social necessities of silence.<sup>46</sup> In true Aesopian style, talking back to power is not talking at all: the dumb slave is also the wise fool who says 'nothing'.

---

<sup>43</sup> John C. McCloskey, 'The Emotive use of Animal Imagery in King Lear', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol 13 No. 3 (Summer, 1962), pp.321-325. As Susan McHugh says, animals are expected to serve as metaphors for "the poetic imagination and (voice) the limits of human experience", *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 6.

<sup>44</sup> See Katie Brennan's article, 'The Wisdom of Silenus: suffering in The Birth of Tragedy', *The Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Volume 49, Issue 2, (Autumn 2018), pp. 174-189.

<sup>45</sup> See James on the representation of Socrates in Plato's Symposium, *The Aethiopian Sodomite*, Aesop and Ovid, pp. 173-4.

<sup>46</sup> Robert B. Heilman, *This Great Stage: Image and structure in King Lear* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1967); Magreta de Grazia, 'King Lear in BC Albion', *Medieval Shakespeare, Past and Presents*, ed. Ruth Morse, Helen Cooper and Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

---

Catherine Belsey, *The subject of tragedy: Identity and difference in Renaissance drama*. (London: Methuen, 1995).