SPEECH MADE UNABLE:
INEXPRESSIBILITY, SUBLIMITY, AND NOTHINGNESS IN KING LEAR AND ITS RECEPTION

By

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To Trygve Tonnessen, my grandfather
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In this dissertation, I examine the role that *King Lear* plays as a paradigm for the discourse of the Sublime in British Romanticism. I argue that this rhetorical move misrecognizes the play’s famous, difficult conceptualization of nothingness, and that the more radical attention paid to the play by Søren Kierkegaard and Jacques Lacan begins to offer a corrective to this misrecognition.

The British Romantics’ praise of *King Lear* should be understood in terms of *epideixis*, the branch of classical rhetoric dedicated to arguments of display (generally, praise and blame). In their epideictic readings of *Lear*, the Romantics do not only praise the play, but seek to re-display the play. Examining the works of Shelley, Coleridge, Hazlitt, and Lamb, I identify the Romantics’ conventional praise of *King Lear* as an instance of psychological defense. In a critical reaction formation, the Romantics invoke conventions of classical rhetoric—*exempla*, the *topoi* of inexpressibility and outdoing—in order to decry classical rhetoric as a mode of sublimity.

In the second half of the dissertation, I examine the attention paid to *Lear* by two post-Romantic thinkers: the philosopher and theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, and the psychoanalyst,
Jacques Lacan. Kierkegaard and Lacan’s rhetorical orientation, unlike the Romantics’, is founded upon recognition, rather than display. The references to Lear in Kierkegaard’s “indirect communication” and in the transcriptions of Lacan’s seventh seminar indicate an interrogation of Romantic critical ideals. However, even Kierkegaard and Lacan respond anxiously to the play’s nihilistic vision.

Examining the history of defensive readings of King Lear is more than just a curiosity for literary historians; it illuminates the play’s distinctive traumatic narrative. My primary concern in this dissertation is a clearer understanding of Shakespeare’s masterpiece and what I identify as its crisc core. I read the reception history of Lear as prefigured by the play itself: the complicated praise of Lear in the first scene of the play redoubled as literary history’s complicated praise of Lear. The crises of recognition that we experience reading King Lear are authored by Shakespeare, in much the same way that an analyst enables a transference.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In his often-blasting critique of the “Romantic ideology,” Jerome McGann notes, “today, the scholarship and interpretation of Romantic works is dominated by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism’s own self-representations” (137). Justin Clemens has recently leveled a variant of this charge at all post-structuralist literary theory: “contemporary theory is still essentially Romantic . . . despite all attempts to elude or exceed the limits bequeathed it by Romantic thought” (iix).1 Given the centrality that Shakespeare plays for literary criticism authored by the Romantics, Shakespeare studies may benefit from examining the presence of aesthetic attitudes “bequeathed” by Romanticism in our own field. I hope that this dissertation contributes to such an analysis.

Though this project is similarly critical of what John Keats, following William Hazlitt, dubbed the “egotistical sublime” (Selected Letters 147),2 its scope is considerably more confined than that of Romanticism or contemporary theory as a whole. Instead, my interest is limited to the Romantic reception of a single play. In this dissertation, I examine the role that King Lear plays as a rhetorical exemplum for the Romantic discourse of the Sublime, how such a rhetorical move misrecognizes the play’s conceptualization of nothingness, and how the more radical, post-Romantic thought of Søren Kierkegaard and Jacques Lacan begins to offer a corrective to this

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1 Clemens’s argument follows upon critiques made by the contemporary French philosopher, Alain Badiou, whose work Clemens has championed and translated. In Clemens’s estimation, “much of the force of Badiou’s work depends on the distance that he takes from Romanticism” (192). In brief, Badiou opposes the open-ended, self-conscious ignorance of sublimity (discussed below) with the more scientific study of infinite values and quantities offered by set theory. See Badiou “Philosophy and Mathematics,” as well as his most recent opus, Logics of Worlds. See also Peter Hallward’s book length gloss and study of Badiou, Badiou: A Subject to Truth.

2 For a summary of Hazlitt’s critique of Wordsworth and the egotistical Sublime, see Bromwich 150-96 and Natarajan Hazlitt 96-102.
misrecognition. My ultimate goal with this dissertation is to provide a clearer understanding of Shakespeare’s masterpiece and what I identify as its crisis core. Understanding the crises of recognition in the play’s reception history will better clarify the crises of recognition within the play itself. However, reading Lear alongside its history of (mis)recognition will also clarify many of the defensive mechanisms inherent in the familiar traits of Romanticism: namely, the attitude toward the study of rhetoric, the attitude toward the staging of Shakespeare’s plays, and the esthetic privileging of the fragment.

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3 A few notes on terminology. The reader will perceive that, throughout this dissertation, I capitalize “Romanticism” and “Romantics,” treating this era of writing and its writers as proper, and collective, nouns. I recognize that this is a mildly controversial decision; David Perkins has persuasively demonstrated that the Romantic period is a “construction of literary historians” rather than a construction by the so-called Romantics themselves (85). I primarily capitalize these terms to avoid confusion: to separate Romantic in a Coleridgean or Shelleyean sense from romantic in an amorous one, for example. Perhaps this move is overly cautious. However, I write about the collective Romantics because I recognize a consistent response to King Lear and literary brilliance throughout the works of Coleridge, Shelley, Hazlitt, and Lamb that manifests itself in reference to (or construction of) the philosophy of the Sublime. This is almost certainly to perform the kind of constructed, and therefore questionably creditable, literary history that Perkins warns against; however, as Perkins suggests (with reference to Philippe Forget), “we must classify, since otherwise we sink into a mass of unrelated details and lose all possibility of understanding them” (67).

As far as my capitalizing of “the Sublime” is concerned, my reasoning is much the same. Writers as disparate as Longinus, Burke, Kant, Weiskel, and Lacan have separately conceptualized the Sublime in equally disparate and separate measures. Yet the difficulty to pin down a definition of the Sublime, a concept invoked to account for indefiniteness itself, only adds to the allure for the Romantics, and I have formalized the term in recognition of their quasi-religiosity in alluding to it. I also separate the Sublime from the adjective form “sublime” (and the related “sublimity”), which is a descriptive quality rather than the concept proper (much as to speak of “godliness” is not the same as to speak of God). If I quote from a writer who does not capitalize any of these terms, I have maintained his or her preference, assuming that the he or she put as much thought into the presentation of these phrases as I have.

4 “Crisic” is a rarely used adjective form of “crisis,” but it is not a neologism; it is often used in contemporary theology, for example. My main purpose in using “crisic” as an adjective is to distinguish from “traumatic.” Crisis implies a recognition, even a misrecognition, and a decision. Trauma does not: our first experience of traumatic anxiety is the moment of birth, and surely very few of us recognize the specifics of that situation. See my final chapter, on Lacan, for a discussion of the distinction between crisis, trauma, and what Lacan calls the “disarray” of an analysis’s conclusion. See Freud Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety, especially Chapter VIII (132-43), for more on the birth trauma.
Critical studies of Romanticism invariably begin by examining the opposition of René Wellek and Arthur Lovejoy’s understandings of the term. For Lovejoy, “Romanticism” means so many things that it means none. The “exceedingly diverse and often conflicting” strains of Romantic writings are so diverse and conflicting that “any attempt at a general appraisal even of a single chronologically determinate Romanticism . . . is a fatuity” (Lovejoy 22). Wellek, on the other hand, argues for Romanticism’s essential coherence: “the major romantic movements form a unity of theories, philosophies, and style” (129).

In reading King Lear, at least, the British Romantics are in relative accord. Put quite simply, they see the greatest achievement by their nation’s greatest poet as a work worthy of praise. Of course, praise, as the first scene of King Lear itself demonstrates, is rarely simple.

In Brian Vickers’s estimation, shared by many, the Romantics “abruptly cut [rhetoric] off” and abandoned it to history (Classical 58-9). Obviously, identifying the Romantic tendency of reading Shakespeare as conventionally epideictic complicates many assumptions about Romantic literary convention. With an examination of their similar readings of Lear, I argue

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5 See Clemens, especially 5-7, for a summary of this debate and its reverberations in twentieth-century Romantic criticism. See also McGann (especially 17-18) and McFarland Romantic Cruxes (especially 13-14), for examples of studies of Romanticism that begin with a discussion of Wellek contra Lovejoy.

6 Wellek famously identifies three definitive criteria with which to identify a Romantic work: “imagination for the view of poetry, nature for the view of the world, and symbol and myth for poetic style” (161). Wellek is particularly concerned with rebutting Lovejoy’s charge of the dissimilarity between British and Continental Romantics. Of this triad, we are primarily concerned with the aesthetic privileging of symbol over allegory, the latter being the stuff of Classical, “mechanical” rhetoric. Seminal commentaries on symbol’s supplanting of allegory include Todorov, especially Chapter 6 (“The Romantic Crisis”), Gadamer (61-70), and de Man’s “Rhetoric of Temporality.” The “profound commitment to symbol” is also one of the “fifteen hallmarks of Romanticism” that McFarland identifies in Romantic Cruxes (13), not counting the “diasparative triad” of “incompleteness, fragmentation, and ruin” that he identified in his earlier study, Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin. Privileging symbol for its open, organic qualities is directly related to the attraction to incompleteness; both are obviously related to interest in the “infinite,” inexpressible Sublime. See, for example, Robert Cohen’s essay on the topic, which concludes without a conclusion: the questions of how we move from Romanticism to Symbolism form an “ever-receding horizon” (190). See Roy Park’s Hazlitt and the Spirit of the Age for a discussion of William Hazlitt’s distrust of allegory (170-172).

7 For a more measured account of the widespread “disparagements of rhetorical doctrine” of Romanticism (Wellbery 185), see David Wellbery “The Transformation of Rhetoric.” Bialostosky and Needham’s edited collection, Rhetorical Traditions and British Romantic Literature, contains several fine close readings of specific cases of such
that the Romantics’ shared prejudices against rhetoric and the stage, and in favor of the fragment or ruin, can be understood as instances of psychological defense. In this introduction, I will sketch the framework of this argument by first examining the historical context of the Romantic reaction to eighteenth-century neo-classical methods of reading, focusing on how *epideixis* informs Samuel Johnson’s Shakespeare criticism. This analysis will also demonstrate the historical problem of the uncanny relationship between *Lear* and its reader. I then attend to some of the problems inherent in praise writing itself, as explicated by Joel Fineman, in order to understand the Romantic critical orientation as one of *display*. This analysis, in turn, clarifies the Sublime—as a category of literary criticism, at least—as a revision of the *topoi* of inexpressibility. In a critical reaction formation, the “labor and study” of rhetoric actually becomes the claim to eschew labor and study in demonstrating an experience of the Sublime (Shelley 39).

To understand what exactly it is that the Romantics are defending against, let us briefly examine Samuel Johnson’s crisis encounter with the play’s conclusion. For Johnson—a thinker critiqued by Hazlitt for his fundamentally unpoetic mind8—the critic must examine Shakespeare’s plays in terms of both praise and blame. The critical essays appended to each of the plays in his 1765 edition (his “ſhort ſtrictures”) contain “a general cenſure of faults, or praiſe of excellence” (*Johnson’s Preface* 56). In one of the most quoted passages from these “ſhort

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8 See Hazlitt’s comments on Johnson’s “mechanical” view—the “mechanical” being the arch-enemy of the Romantic ideal of the organic, whether it describes industry, rhetoric, or theatrical stage effects—in the introduction to the *Characters of Shakespear’s Plays* (1.88-90). All citations from Hazlitt taken from *The Selected Writings of Williams Hazlitt*, edited by Duncan Wu. Parenthetical citations of this edition cite the volume number, and then the page number.
strictures,‖ Johnson addresses the ending of *King Lear*, and appears to applaud the notorious “happy ending” of Nahum Tate’s 1681 adaptation of the play:

A play in which the wicked prosper, and the virtuous miscarry, may doubtles be good, becaufe it is a juſt repreſentation of the common events of human life: but fince all reaſonable beings naturally love justice, I cannot eaſily be persuaſed, that the obſervation of juſtice makes a play worſe; or, that if other excellencies are equal, the audience will not always riſe better pleasèd from the final triumph of perſecuted virtue.

In the present cafe the publick has decided. *Cordelia*, from the time of *Tate*, has always retired with victory and felicity. And, if my fenſations could add any thing to the general suffrage, I might relate, that I was many years ago fo ſhocked by *Cordelia*’s death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the laſt scenes of the play till I undertook to reviſe them as an editor. (*Plays* 159)

Not surprisingly, many previous readings of this passage have glossed Johnson as blaming Shakespeare and praising Tate. He does not do that exactly. On the contrary, he yields his authority to decide to the “publick.” As a result, Johnson illuminates the various critical double binds inherent in denouncing Tate.

Johnson similarly rejects Gloucester’s blinding as “too horrid to be endured in dramatick exhibition,” yet trusts Shakespeare’s authority on the point: “our auſthour well knew what would pleae the audience for which he wrote” (*Plays* 159). Shakespeare also modified the historical

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9 In a superb reading of Johnson and Lamb’s attention to *Lear*, particularly their shared concerns with the transformation of Shakespeare from page to stage, Jonathan Arac suggests that Johnson attended more to the Sublime than the Romantics suggest (“The Media of Sublimity”). See Parker for an often-spirited defense of Johnson against the Romantics’ critiques. See Holland for a complex reading of Johnson’s famous response to the play’s conclusion, and how that response informs our own, with reference to both psychoanalysis and Johnson’s own theories of the mind.

10 I quote from a facsimile of Johnson’s 1765 edition, uploaded to Google Books from Harvard’s collection, rather than Arthur Sherbo’s edition of Johnson’s notes included in the Yale *Works*. Due to obvious spatial constraints, Sherbo’s edition does not include the Shakespearean text, nor many of the notes from earlier editions reprinted in Johnson’s “variorum edition.” For a strong reading of the *variorum* nature of Johnson’s edition that is lost by consulting Sherbo’s edition, see Lynch. For a celebration of Johnson’s editorial practices, see Johnston “From Preface to Practice” (which also comments on the unavoidable shortfall of the Sherbo text) and “Samuel Johnson’s Text of *King Lear*.” For more on Johnson’s contributions to eighteenth-century editions of Shakespeare, see Sherbo *Birth of Shakespeare Studies* and Jarvis *Scholars and Gentlemen*.

11 See Holland 36 and Orgel. This misreading may begin with Hazlitt, who claims that the Tate ending is “approved” by Johnson (1.179).
account of the Leir narrative by “fluffer[ing] the virtue of Cordelia to perisf” (159). One can then hardly criticize Tate for changing the ending of the play as a matter of principle or, for that matter, blame Tate for accounting for what “pleasfs” his own audience. Johnson’s edition also takes great care to utilize its paratextual apparatus in indicating where Shakespeare revises his own King Lear. The differences between Q and F are not only referred to in the footnotes, but also indicated by changing font types within the text proper. Therefore, Johnson implies that whatever critical praise of the facts of the Shakespearean composition—playing to the crowd, modifying history, and even modifying Shakespeare—cannot then, as a deduced tenet of aesthetic appreciation, be applied to a blame of Tate.

What is clear is that the reader approaching Shakespeare’s “original” text of King Lear—whatever that may mean for a subscriber to the revision hypothesis—is unlikely to be pleased. Instead, the reader inevitably endures a kind of crisis. For Johnson, this crisis is universal. It may be an oversimplification of the historical situation of the Restoration stage, but in Johnson’s view, the public has chosen to revise the play and, in effect, look away from what Shakespeare would have us “observe.”

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12 For background on Shakespeare’s knowledge of the anonymous 1605 play, the True Chronicle History of King Leir, see Elton 63-71 and Knowles.

13 For a reading of the resonances of eighteenth-century editorial practices in the Oxford edition of the complete works of 1986, see Bevington (especially 516). All of my quotations from Shakespeare are taken from the Norton Shakespeare. The Norton, which is based upon the Oxford, provides three texts of Lear: the quarto (indicated in my parenthetical citations as History, then scene and line number), the Folio (indicated in my parenthetical citations as Tragedy, then act, scene, and line number), and a conflated text prepared by Barbara K. Lewalski. Andrew Murphy’s invaluable survey, Shakespeare In Print, reports that Stanley Wells was displeased with the addition of the conflated Lear in the Norton (259). As my argument occasionally refers to the differences between the quarto and the Folio, I do not cite from Lewalski’s conflated edition, although I have consulted it (as well as Foakes’s edition for the Arden third series). The major studies of Shakespeare’s revision of Lear include the essay collection The Division of the Kingdoms, edited by Taylor and Warren, and Urkowitz’s Shakespeare’s Revision of King Lear.

14 On the question of pleasure and tragedy, see Nuttall, especially his final chapter on Lear.

15 See Oya 8-58 for a reading of Garrick’s Lear and its impression on Johnson and his edition.
Granted, this purported act of aversion ascribed to the public may be Johnson’s projection. Johnson confesses that it was only with the defensive apparatus of editing the text that he was able to face Lear’s brutal conclusion. Even then, there is still a glimmer of misrecognition. Lear’s ending, in contrast to what Johnson suggests is a representation of the “common events of human life,” does not actually conclude with the wicked prospering. Nor does Lear conclude with (all of) the play’s “virtuous” figures miscarrying. In other words, Johnson believes he is appalled by an unjust vision of the world, and yet what he actually cannot endure is a world where justice prevails inadequately: many of Lear’s friends do “taste / The wages of their virtue” and all of Lear’s foes do taste “the cup of their deservings” (*Tragedy* 5.3.276-9). But that is not enough:

*Lear.* This feather stirs. She lives. If it be so,

It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows

That ever I have felt. (*Tragedy* 5.3.239-41)

The reader expecting an explanation of the traumas of King Lear, and a verification of one’s own principles regarding virtue and suffering, resembles the figures of the play itself. The characters in this play seek signification everywhere that will justify or explain what they have endured. And at the play’s conclusion, they cannot discern the difference between a signifier or its signified: is this the promised end or just the image of that horror? (*Tragedy* 5.3.237-8).

Here, Lear identifies such a figuration as a redemption. But Cordelia does not live, and nothing is redeemed. Holding his dead daughter in his arms, Lear himself seems to become a figure, and signify a *pietà*. Yet if he and Cordelia resemble a *pietà*, they are an inverted one: here, a father holds his daughter, rather than a mother holding her son. And if they invert the

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16 See Peat 51.
image of the pietà, they do so completely: resurrection is proved impossible just as it is anticipated. But then, in his final moments, Lear appears to believe otherwise: “Look there, look there” (Tragedy 5.3.286). Lear misrecognizes the state of things—missing that she does not live, and all of his sorrows are therefore not redeemed—and is “pleased” because of it. Choosing not to “endure” the final moments of King Lear is not so much a misreading as it is a repetition of the play’s delusional characters and the crises of recognition that they endure. For Lear and its readers alike, recognition is traumatic and misrecognition is comforting.

At the end of the play as at its beginning, Lear’s delusions are rooted in his egotism: sparing Cordelia would redeem his sorrows exclusively. Lear’s exclamatory rejection of recognizing Cordelia’s death—going from “thou’lt come no more” to “look there, look there” in four brief lines (Tragedy 5.3.282, 286)—is a frantic, reactionary act of repression performed in a moment of crisis.\(^{17}\) King Lear is not the only work to dramatize the mechanisms of defense. But it is, as nearly all of its readers attest, a uniquely powerful one. In Dr. Johnson’s estimation, “there is perhaps no play which keeps the attention so strongly fixed” as King Lear (Plays 158). And yet, Johnson confesses that there was a moment in his reading where, similar to Lear, he had to look away. Johnson is not the first to reject the play’s crisis moment—he invokes an entity no smaller than “the publick”—and, as we shall see in this project, he is not the last. Examining the history of defensive readings of King Lear is more than just a curiosity for literary historians; it is an examination that illuminates the play’s distinctive traumatic narrative.

\(^{17}\) For Reinhard and Lupton, Lear is not the tragedy of repression, but rather the more radical, Lacanian concept of foreclosure (see 153-185). Foreclosure, as a variant of Freud’s Verwerfung, or repudiation, may suggest a consciousness that is missing from other mechanisms of defense, and therefore better fits our investigation of crisis in the play and its reception. In her seminal study, The Ego and Mechanisms of Defense, Anna Freud identifies ten different defenses: regression, repression, reaction formation, isolation, undoing, projection, introjection, turning against the self, reversal, and sublimation (44). For our purposes, special emphasis will be placed on repression (always given a place of preference among the defenses), sublimation, and reaction formation. See also Sigmund Freud’s addenda to Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety, for a discussion of the “modification of [his] earlier views” on repression and the other defenses (157-64).
Understanding the binary of recognition and misrecognition is central to diagnosing both Lear’s torment and Lear’s accomplishment as the most canonical work of the most canonical author. Furthermore, attention paid to the history of misreading the play—and, perhaps more importantly, attention paid to the history of those who avoid a reading of the play—contributes to not only the history of reading Shakespeare, or even the history of reading in general, but to a deeper understanding of the methodology of Lear. A play this concerned with misinterpretation as well as interpretation asks of its readers, as it does of its protagonist, to “see better” (Tragedy 1.1.156).

Dr. Johnson’s short stricture presents a handful of defensive strategies for the reader confronted with the crisis of Lear, and these strategies are shared by the British Romantics in their literary criticism and literary theory. One could simply not read the play, for instance. However, the far more interesting case of defensive reading is found in the re-presentations of the play, either in Tate’s rewrite or Johnson’s own edited text. Despite their aversion to Johnson and Tate, the Romantics perform a variant of each of these defensive moves: think of all of the long quotations from Shakespeare or the illustrative paraphrases of his scenes. Of course, this is not to equate the Romantic era with the Augustan, merely to examine the transition between the two ages, while noting what is particular and unchanged about receiving Lear in both.

If the British Romantics experience a crisis reading the play that is similar to Johnson’s own, they differ from Johnson in their claim that their response is really a “sense of awe, in a sort

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18 See Foakes’s Hamlet Versus Lear for a “genealogy” of the canon debates of the twentieth-century (5); see Ryan for a helpful survey of the critical responses from 1980 to 2000. My concern with “recognition” is drawn primarily from my own close reading of the play, and secondarily from my understanding of recognition in an analytical sense (see Felman). Of course, I am also inspired by Stanley Cavell’s reading of Lear in “The Avoidance of Love”; Cavell claims that the motivations that drive the play are “the attempt to avoid recognition, the shame of exposure, the threat of self-revelation” (58). Where Cavell is interested in the characters’ fear of being recognized, I am more interested in what they are afraid of recognizing.

19 Hazlitt: “a happy ending has been contrived for this play, which is approved of by Dr Johnson . . .” (1.179).
of tranquillity shadowed with horror” in the face of sublimity (Burke 32). According to Jonathan Bate’s fine history of Shakespeare’s influence on the English Romantic imagination, Lear’s sublimity was established as Romanticism evolved in Britain.20 Lear, then, plays a central role in that century’s emergent “parallel phenomena”: “the rise of Romanticism and the growth of Shakespeare idolatry” (Bate Imagination 6). The critical evaluation of Lear as an example of the Sublime should be accordingly understood in terms of, and in the tradition of, epideixis, rather than as a break with such a rhetorical mode. This is not only the case because it is a celebration of the play and its author, but also because identifying Lear as sublime clearly elaborates upon the historical tendency to re-display the play.

Joel Fineman’s reading, in Shakespeare’s Perjured Eye, of the history and symptoms of epideixis is quite helpful in clarifying this point. Deixis is, etymologically speaking, demonstration or display; when it is accompanied with a “prepositionally diffuse and intensifying” epi-, and is provided with a “rhetorical surplus” that Aristotle associated with auxēsis, or amplification, it becomes authored, affected, and a potentially poetic praise or blame (Fineman 5).21 The Romantic critical orientation is essentially deictic: if a work is identified as sublime, it is displayed as an object of praise and deserving of awe. By virtue of a long excerpt or an illustration, the critic tries to subtract both himself and any auxetic surplus. No doubt the most bothersome and obvious incarnation of this deictic critical impulse would be Coleridge’s

20 Bate: “For the eighteenth century, Lear, with its storm, heath, cliff, frenzy, and blindness, was the great drama of the sublime, comparable to Milton’s epic sublime” (Imagination 144). We will see how Lear’s sublimity is verified with reference to Paradise Lost’s in our examinations of Coleridge and Lamb.

21 See Aristotle’s original discussion in On Rhetoric 1.9.38-39 (85-87 in Kennedy’s translation). See also Burrow, especially chapter one (“The Poetics of Praise”), for a discussion of many of these issues in relation to the medieval reception of Aristotle’s advice on rhetoric.
plagiarism of Schiller and others, a total re-presenting of the critical object. Yet even in the properly cited quotations of Coleridge or Hazlitt, where the text may be re-presented or edited into a block-quote, translated into a new illustration or image, or invoked as an exemplar of genius, it is rarely examined. The text is simply raised to the status of a sublime, textual void. Paul de Man, a great reader of the lingering influence of Romanticism’s ideals upon its readers, phrases this deictic ideal in his critique of the New Criticism: “ultimately, the ideal commentary would indeed become superfluous and merely allow the text to stand fully revealed” (“Form and Intent” 30). But, in de Man’s reading, “this ideal commentary can never exist as such”: the deictic inevitably becomes auxetic.

Such amplification, which is so crucial to the project of praise, is actually beyond the basic deictic function, which is to merely display for others to look. The “beyond” is what the Romantic critic identifies as sublime. Later in the Perjured Eye, Fineman writes:

“inexpressibility” topoi (the technical term is adynata, “words cannot express . . . ”); this is what Auerbach calls “the Outdoer”) are not only common in but also seem required by the poetry of praise. Moreover, to the extent that this is the case, to the extent that panegyric makes a point of its own limits, to precisely this extent does such poetry rather pointedly give expression to the existence of something fundamentally outside the system of its likeness. What is significant about this is the emphatic way in which the height of praise is placed beyond the logic of

22 De Quincey seems to be the first writer to level the charge of plagiarism against Coleridge (Engell “Biographia” 68). For a discussion of plagiarism as or in Coleridge’s “marginal method,” as well as a survey of twentieth-century charges of plagiarism by Walter Jackson Bate, Norman Fruman, and Thomas McFarland, see Christensen. See Bate’s chapter on “Coleridge and the Problem of Inherited Language” in Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination (22-42) for a defense of Coleridge’s “works [as] not copies and imitations” (25). Bate fairly treats Coleridge’s own defensiveness: “It is the partial covering of tracks, the half-admission, that has got Coleridge into trouble” (26).

23 See James “Charles Lamb” 40-51 for a reading of Lamb’s anthology of quotations, Specimens of English Dramatic Poets Who Lived About The Time of Shakespeare, and its impact on the nineteenth-century reception of Shakespeare. Neil Hertz demonstrates that the obsession with quotation has always been central to the methodology of the Sublime. The “subtlety” of Longinus’s positions and methods are comparable, Hertz argues, to Walter Benjamin’s: both writers depend heavily on “the more or less violent fragmentation of literary bodies into ‘quotations,’ in the interest of building up a discourse of one’s own” (14). One could well argue that there is a parallel between Lamb’s Specimens or the extensive excerpts in Coleridge and Hazlitt and Walter Benjamin’s vision of a criticism written entirely in quotation (“Program For Literary Criticism” 290). Jonathan Bate also compares Benjamin to Hazlitt in his chapter on “Quotation” in Shakespearean Constitutions (185-186).
comparison, beyond the self-remarking, self-confirming indication of epideictic logos—displayed, that is to say, by means of circumlocutory light, to a peculiar place, outside of sight, that visionary words cannot express. (117)

Praise is always at odds with itself: “To the extent that such ostentation dominates ostention, the objective showing of epideixis amounts to a subjective showing off” (Fineman 104). Epideixis, as the branch of rhetoric that becomes poetry when infused with an exaggerative auxēsis, “pointedly” gives expression to what is beyond its own limits because, by definition, it can only point there. The deictic focus of epideixis is both driven by and confused by its auxetic presentation. If what you love is truly “beyond,” in this peculiar place, it will make your (ideal) speech unable (Tragedy 1.1.58). What Lear presents in its nihilistic, crisis-invoking vision, is that both the place and the speech that indicates its existence add up to nothing. The play then prefigures our own theoretical discussion: Cordelia’s critique of the praise of Lear is itself a commentary on the praise of Lear. In the light of Cordelia’s “nothing” and, say, Hazlitt’s desire to say “nothing” and pass the play over in silence, it is increasingly clear that what is peculiar about the Romantics is not just their concern with identifying the beyond, the “peculiar place,” as the Sublime. Rather, what is important for our study is that the Romantics are the beyond pointed to by the play itself. Their defensive engagements with the play’s inexpressibility fulfill the play’s prefiguration of its own misrecognition.

Whether one reads the Romantic engagement with classical rhetoric as a conscious expunging or merely a transformation, the invocation of sublimity itself suggests that the

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24 Fineman seems to me to be misidentifying some of these topoi. The adynaton, the inexpressibility topos, and outdoing are not one and the same. The source of confusion may be that what Fineman attributes to Auerbach he almost certainly found in Curtius (no page numbers, volumes, or titles are cited). A document search of Auerbach’s major books and essays on PDF produces no results for “Outdoer,” “outdoing,” “inexpressibility” and other related terms. I suspect that Fineman is thinking of the section on “outdoing” in European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages, which immediately follows the section on the inexpressibility topos in Curtius’s chapter on poetry and rhetoric. The adynaton is not discussed in that chapter, but in an earlier one dedicated to “topics.” Perhaps, like William Hazlitt, Fineman quotes from memory. See Bromwich 275.
instinctive tropes and figures of rhetoric may be present at some level. (That is to say, as with any impulse that is rejected or repressed, they may be sublimated upwards.) Even in Longinus’s treatise on the topic, the Sublime functions as a means of obscuring rhetoric: “Sublimity and the expression of strong emotion are, therefore, a wonderfully helpful antidote against the suspicion that attends the use of figures. The cunning artifice remains out of sight, surrounded by the brilliance of beauty and sublimity” (section 17, 138). In his reading-cum-survey of rhetoric in England, Thomas De Quincey identifies this artifice with “machinery,” and while “the artifice and machinery of rhetoric furnishes in its degree as legitimate a basis for intellectual pleasure as any other”—provided the rhetorician is of the order of, say, Donne—it is nonetheless a pleasure of “an inferior order” (40). The familiar understanding of Romanticism opposes an organic, naturalistic, and expressive poetic vision to the machinery, conventionality, and “cunning” of rhetorical convention and devices. Lear, above all, is to be defended from these dark satanic mills of trope. In effect, it is to be defended from critical discourse.

Several studies have examined both the allusions to Lear in Romantic poetical works and the lingering influence of Romantic-era criticism on twentieth-century methods of close reading. However, it is rarely noticed how little the Romantics seem to read the play in their

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25 All passages from Longinus taken from the Murray and Dorsch translation, which does not list line numbers. Parenthetical citations of this edition cite the section number (called “chapters” in Murray and Dorsch), and then the page number.

26 See Abrams Mirror (especially 156-183) for a classic study of this problem.

27 That this defensive intention is itself a defensive move (in the psychoanalytic sense) lends an obvious double meaning to the title of a protreptikos like Shelley’s Defense of Poetry. On this point, I have learned much from the essays included in The Literary Freud: Mechanisms of Defense and the Poetic Will, edited by Joseph Smith. In particular, see Ferguson “Border Territories,” Kerrigan “Articulation of the Ego,” and Bloom “Freud’s Concepts of Defense.”

28 See Bate for a survey of the allusions to Lear in Blake’s poetry (Imagination 132-156); see Sun 81-107 for a reading of the impression the heath scenes of Lear made on Wordsworth’s poetry. Coleridge’s impact on twentieth-century literary criticism, particularly the role his “practical criticism” plays for theories of close reading, has been debated at length; see Esterhammer for a brief summary. For an extraordinarily thorough overview of the history of
critical or theoretical treatises. Rather than interpret *King Lear*, the Romantics prefer to appropriate *King Lear* and its unique cultural capital,\(^{29}\) essentially invoking the play as an *auctoritas*, or exploiting it as an *exemplum*, in support of broad theoretical statements. As the exemplary representative of literary or dramatic sublimity, *Lear* exceeds the power of mere, mortal critical capability. It is “beyond all art” (Lamb 262). It is best “pass[ed] over” in silence (Hazlitt 1.167). This is also conventional—it is an exemplary instance itself—as a citing of the *topos* of inexpressibility.\(^{30}\) All of which suggests that the Romantic approach to rhetoric is less a transition or revision than a reaction formation: a disavowal of rhetorical practices enacted through the practice of those same practices.

As we will see, the use of *Lear* as an *exemplum* in the service of Romantic literary theory both avoids critical analysis of the play and postulates that such analysis is unnecessary. When Coleridge does examine the play in his lectures, he paraphrases its details illustratively; Shelley alludes to the sublimity of the play’s “comedy,” without ever clarifying what exactly he finds comic. Analytical attention to the text’s particulars would, apparently, demean its authoritative status for Romantic literary theory. Indeed, what Jonas Barish calls the anti-theatrical prejudice may in fact be indicative of a broader anti-*interpretative* prejudice. The “contemptible machinery” of the stage transforms Shakespeare as loathsomely as a critic invoking the mechanics of rhetoric (Lamb 261). The Romantics tend to see themselves as *pseudo-Hamlets*,\(^ {31}\)

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\(^{29}\)For instance, see Hazlitt’s polemic, “What Is The People,” with its many allusions to *Lear*: “Such is the old doctrine of Divine Right, new-vamped up under the style and title of Legitimacy. ‘Fine word, Legitimate!’” (4.242). See Bate *Constitutions* 190 for a reading of this passage.

\(^{30}\)See Curtius’s discussion of this *topos* and the related *topos* of “outdoing” (159-165).

\(^{31}\)I address this tendency, famously criticized by T.S. Eliot, in my final chapter. One of Lacan’s direct rebuttals to Romantic models of reading is his critique of the tendency to read *Hamlet* as a kind of mirror.
and here claim to “wipe away . . . all saws of books” that dissect Shakespeare’s text too thoroughly (*Hamlet* 1.5.99-100). The Romantic anti-theatricalism is directly related to the lingering resistance to annotated editions of Shakespeare’s works that began in the previous century. The era of lambasting Garrick is also the era of lambasting Theobald and Warburton.\(^{32}\)

Samuel Johnson curiously describing footnotes as a necessary evil in the preface to a *variorum* edition seems to anticipate the reaction of a Percy Shelley. Shelley not only separates the act of poetic composition from that of labor and study, but seems genuinely appalled that an annotated edition would count the “fifty-six various readings of the first line of the Orlando Furioso” (40). This hostility to annotation contextualizes the general consensus of the British Romantics that the text of *King Lear* should be encountered but not explained. Many of these attitudes are resonant today.\(^{33}\) While a full examination of the continuing influence of Romantic critical tropes is beyond the scope of this project, I suggest that any contemporary attempt to “defend” the Bard from critical scrutiny has Romantic traces. Whether *Lear* functions as an *exemplum* to advance an argument in praise of the poetical faculties or imagination, or *Lear* is the object of praise itself, the Romantics safeguard the play from the analytical rigor that it demands of its reader.

The Romantics’ view of sublimity explicitly celebrates both ignorance and failure. Being excessively well-read only makes the classic familiar and mechanical; genius and passion, 

\(^{32}\) Andrew Murphy lists a number of objections to the swell of critical editions of Shakespeare in the eighteenth-century. According to John Holt, Shakespeare has been “explained into obscurity . . . rendered unintelligible by his commentating Editors”; according to John Bell, Shakespeare has been “illucidated into obscurity”; T.J. Mathias envisions Shakespeare as Actaeon, pursued by editors like William Warburton, whom Mathias compares to Pamphagus (qtd. in Murphy 99).

\(^{33}\) We do not need to go back as far as E.K. Chambers’s blame for the “Disintegrators” of Shakespeare to find such defenses. Think of Harold Bloom aligning himself with Charles Lamb’s opposition to the staging of *Lear* as well as decrying “French Shakespeare” (*Invention* 476, 9), or R.A. Foakes rebuking editions that “undermine[] Shakespeare’s authority” (*Hamlet* 9), and of the fact that British editions of the complete works are still typically printed without explanatory notes (see Murphy 258). On Bloom’s defense of Shakespeare, see Kerrigan “The Case For Bardolatry.”
conversely, can only be expressed through the awe of unknowing. Dr. Johnson, for example, “could not quit his hold of the common-place and mechanical, and apply the general rule to the particular exception” (Hazlitt 1.89). In Romantic literary criticism, the resistance to what Shelley calls labor and study becomes a celebration of ignorance. Ignorance, in turn, is the bedrock of the sublime “sense of awe” (Burke 32). Edmund Burke clarifies this attitude in his famous *Enquiry*:

*poetry with all its obscurity, has a more general as well as a more powerful dominion over the passions than the other art. And I think there are reasons in nature why the obscure idea, when properly conveyed, should be more affecting than the clear. It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions. Knowledge and acquaintance make the most striking causes affect but little. . . . The ideas of eternity, and infinity, are among the most affecting we have, and yet perhaps there is nothing of which we really understand so little, as of infinity and eternity. (Burke 57)*

In Thomas Weiskel’s famous formulation, the “essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and in speech, transcend the human” (3). There are, then, two poles of sublimity in the critical context: feeling and expression. In order to impart the Sublime, the “conveyance” in language of an obscure feeling must match the initial feeling. The Sublime is, in this formulation, supposedly incompatible with the study of rhetoric. One cannot reach a sublime ignorance when engaging with the familiar tropes, figures, and recommendations of the study of rhetoric (“knowledge and acquaintance”). An “ignorance of things” is the only deducible method, as “art can never give the rules than make an art” (Burke 49). Conversely, a critical method that resists “knowledge and acquaintance” would find the new everywhere.

For the literary critic, this is a sly rhetorical device in and of itself, a reconfiguration of the terms of argument so that they are accessible exclusively to the critic invoking his own passions, admiration, and ignorance. Far from being an *expressionistic* model of critical
discourse, this is an internalizing one, where the text is completely relocated within the critic. As we shall see in chapter three, William Hazlitt appropriates this exact device when discussing King Lear: “To attempt to give a description of the play itself or of its effect upon the mind, is mere impertinence . . . It is then the best of all Shakespear’s plays, for it is the one in which he was the most in earnest” (1.167). Not only is the proof of Shakespeare’s earnestness proven with reference to the critic’s sense of ignorance, the critic’s sense of ignorance is proven with a declaration of inexpressibility. Whereas Shakespeare’s tragedy captures the crises associated with recognition, the Romantic model of reading the play is wholly interested in its own display, the passionate demonstration of the inexpressible, unmeasurable Sublime. Such a demonstrative impulse is the polar opposite of recognition. Any recognition by Hazlitt’s reader of these sublime “effects upon the mind” is moot, because it is impossible. The two professed poles of sublimity for critical discourse—feeling and its expression—are effectively one mode of utterance. For any reader of Romantic literary criticism, there is only the expression by the critic that a certain feeling was felt by the critic. If for Weiskel, the claim of the Sublime is that, in poetry, man can transcend the human, here we see that, in praise, by reading Lear as sublime, the critic can transcend the text.

As a device used by Romantic criticism and critical theory to account for King Lear, the Sublime is a good deal simpler than it is in, say, the critiques of a Kant (where the dynamical Sublime is distinguished from the mathematical Sublime) or Weiskel (with its distinction

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34 Reading Hazlitt, Abrams suggests that the Romantic expressionist ideal (i.e. an overflow of powerful feelings) reverses course and sends us “on the way to critical impressionism” (Mirror 135).

35 See Bromwich 288-300 for a summary of Hazlitt’s reading of Burke. In Bromwich’s estimation, “Burke was the great soul whose echo returned constantly to Hazlitt’s thoughts” (288).
between the positive and negative Sublimes). I find, in the Romantics’ readings of Lear, no such polarity. There is only what I call the Epideictic-critical Sublime. The critic repurposes the familiar topoi of panegyric as a means of re-displaying the original text, drafting off of its invoked, but never explicitly examined, sublime power. To the extent that the Romantic critic is interested in sharing his feeling with his reader, and in helping the reader recognize the feeling, the critic will reproduce the original Shakespearean object, seeming to violate his own

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Briefly, Kant sees the mathematical Sublime as a matter of reason, and the dynamical Sublime as primarily a matter of emotion. If we encounter something absolutely great—something “in comparison with which all else is small” (80)—and we strive to comprehend it with reference to measurement and comparison, we may reach a mental impasse where “the estimation of the magnitude of things of the world of the senses to attain to the idea” awakens “a feeling of a suprasensible faculty within us.” Thus, the mathematical Sublime is “the mere capacity of thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of the senses” (81), or, the moment where the reason fails and the imagination takes over (and fails as well). The dynamical Sublime, on the other hand, seems more immediate. We encounter an object in nature that we understand to be fearful, but from a vantage point where we are aware that it “has no dominion over us” (90). The tempestuous ocean waves or “thunderclouds piled up the vault of heaven, borne along with flashes and peals”—it is impossible not to think of Lear in storm, and his challenge to the storm at the play’s crisis conclusion, desiring to use tongues and eyes “so / That heaven’s vault should crack” (Tragedy 5.3.232-3)—are “all the more attractive for [their] fearfulness,” “provided our own position is secure” (91). Still, the sensation of sublimity leads to a sense of failure or defeat: either the sense of our faculties’ inadequacy or our sense of our essential smallness in relation to nature’s “immeasurableness” (91).

Thomas Weiskel offers a challenging reading of Kant and the British tradition of the Romantic Sublime, made with reference to the discourses of psychoanalysis and semiotics. Weiskel’s project informs my own because, while Kant is primarily concerned with the comprehension of the Sublime in nature, Weiskel is primarily concerned with the Sublime as a literary category. The Sublime is always a three-step process for Weiskel (22-25). First, the mind encounters an object and forms a determine, harmonious relation with that object. Second, the habitual relationship breaks down and the mind experiences surprise or astonishment. Finally, the mind recovers and forms a new, fresh relation with the object. The final recovery, in the third phase of the Sublime, is understood as either positive or negative. The Kantian thinker will experience “the absence of determinate meaning” and respond with the “discourse of substitution”; this is an essentially metaphorical response, a “reader’s” negative sublime (28). A Wordsworthian thinker, on the other hand, will respond to the disorder of the second phase “by displacing its excess of signified into a dimension of contiguity” (29). This metonymical, or “writer’s” Sublime, is positive, despite its habit of elision and fragmentation in pursuit of a total continuity. Weiskel’s difficult study resists summary, and I am glossing over his bravura connections between the conflict of the mind with sublime object and Freud’s conceptualization of the Oedipal complex. See Hertz 40-60 for more on the instant of the faculties’ “blockage” in Kant’s Sublime and Weiskel’s model.

I do not see my own concept of the Epideictic-critical Sublime as a revision or challenge to Longinus, Burke, Kant, Weiskel, or Hertz. Rather, I see the Romantics as defensively affecting the experience of sublimity in the face of what they have recognized in reading King Lear. Lear’s vision is not sublime; it is nihilistic. The characters in Lear do not struggle with comprehension of what exceeds their measure, they recognize with certainty that these means of measurement—both mathematical and linguistic—are themselves defenses against the realization that nothing matters.
prescriptions against “copy.” We see this act of re-display throughout Romantic readings of Shakespeare: the long quotations of Hazlitt, the illustrations of the plays’ events in Coleridge’s lectures, and the privileging of the theater of the “mind” in Lamb. Ironically, the Romantic critical “cut[ting] off” or transformation of rhetoric is not only rhetorical, it is quite classically rhetorical, as it declares itself an agent of deictic demonstration (Vickers *Classical* 58). What Vickers sees as an abrupt, historical foreclosing “cut” may be a repression, yet his diction also relates to the vehicle of the Romantics’ *deixis*: namely, the fragment.

Burke explicates the Romantic privileging of the fragment elsewhere in the *Enquiry*. If we are “most affected” by ideas of the infinite, that which we know the least about, it follows that this immeasurable quality can be invoked by the unfinished:

> Infinity, though of another kind, causes much of our pleasure in agreeable, as well as of our delight in sublime images. The spring is the pleasantest of the seasons; and the young of most animals, though far from being compleatly fashioned, afford a more agreeable sensation than the fully grown; because the imagination is entertained with the promise of something more, and does not acquiesce in the present object of the sense. In unfinished sketches of drawing, I have often seen something which pleased me beyond the best finishing; and this I believe proceeds from the cause I have just now assigned. (70)

Burke’s analysis of the fragment’s pleasing qualities is far more optimistic than most twentieth-century studies of the Romantic “agony.” For Thomas McFarland, the defining “diasparactive triad” of Romanticism— incompleteness, fragmentation, and ruin—are symptomatic of the era’s melancholy “longing for completeness and wholeness” (*Forms of Ruin* 5, 46). I have no doubt

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37 See Coleridge’s distinction between imitation and copy, from the thirteenth lecture of the 1818 series (5.2.225). All excerpts from Coleridge are taken from the Princeton edition of the *Collected Works*. Parenthetical citations of this edition cite the volume number, the sub-volume number (where applicable), and then the page number.

38 Mario Praz, the very coiner of the phrase “Romantic agony,” suggests that the inexpressibility *topoi* are directly implicated in the so-called “Romantic agony” (“the essence of Romanticism consequently comes to consist in that which cannot be described . . . It is romantic to consider concrete expression as a decadence, a contamination”) (14-15). See also McFarland: “it was not joy that was the Romantic norm, but melancholy” (*Romantic Cruxes* 29). In the fourth chapter, we will examine how Kierkegaard parodies the Romantic agony in his narratives of broken engagements in *Either/Or* and its sequel, *Stages on Life’s Way*. 
that Wordsworth’s failure to complete *The Recluse* or Coleridge’s failure to complete his *magnum opus* tormented these men. Yet fragmentation and failure are not just qualities of Romantic writing, they are its stated esthetic principles.\(^\text{39}\) Coleridge may well have “longed” to complete the treatise on Kant and the imagination begun at the end of volume I of the *Biographia*, and see his philosophy made whole. But he phrases its incompleteness as intentional and for the better, “in consequence of [a] very judicious letter” urging him to cease transcribing those comments (7.1.304). (I will have more to say about this fascinating moment in the *Biographia* in the next chapter).

Turning back to Burke’s passage, we can see the Sublime as, in effect, a critical category that turns away from its critical “object.” The act of criticism itself, it can only be deduced, is best left unfinished. Accordingly, Burke does not write a treatise, or a critique, but an open-ended *enquiry*. Similarly, that Coleridge may have formulated his own principle of fragmentation or failure defensively—i.e. the inability to finish the *magnum opus* becoming a claim that the diasparactive *Biographia* pleases “beyond the best finishing”—does not mean he does not then *apply* that principle to texts beyond his own authorship. In the next volume’s reading of Wordsworth, for instance, we are told that “The Thorn” is great because Wordsworth’s “mere theory” does not interfere with “the processes of genuine imagination” (7.2.59-60). This reading is the most famous example of what Coleridge called his “practical criticism.” This “practical criticism” is often credited with inspiring the analyses of the New Criticism, and is therefore central to any examination of what McGann calls the Romantic ideology and its practice.

\(^{39}\) See also Longinus’s discussion of sublimity’s overlap with failure or error (Section 33, 152-3).
Regarding his attention to Lear, I am more interested in Coleridge’s theory than his practice. In the next chapter, I begin with an examination of how such principles are formulated in two of the era’s treatises on artistic greatness: Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria and Shelley’s “Defense of Poetry.” Both of these texts eschew a practical reading of Lear in favor of invoking the play as a clarifying example. This leads to a circular reasoning: invoking Lear as an example of the Sublime itself verifies that Lear is sublime. Such a circularity of thought befits a doctrine of poetry that defines itself as self-consuming: “Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it” (Shelley 19). For Shelley, the “scabbard” in this famous image is not just stifling conventions and critical delineation, but the original inspiration of the poem itself. This Platonic idea is consumed by the poetry that attempts to disseminate it, and poetry itself is defined as—at best—a divine failure. Coleridge’s own theories in the Biographia reflect a similar sense of reading Lear as a declining from ideality; thus, the best way to “read” Lear may be to refer to one’s imagination or (faulty) memory. I argue that such a reading is prefigured by Lear at his most rash (Tragedy 1.1.290).

40 Understanding Shelley’s definition of poetic inspiration as “self-consuming” no doubt suggests a parallel with Stanley Fish’s study of Renaissance rhetoric, Self Consuming Artifacts. Indeed, just as this model of poetry is related in a Defense, Self Consuming Artifacts begins with a conventionally (“usually”) “defensive” preface (Fish xi). Though she never mentions Shelley, see Younglim Han’s Romantic Shakespeare for a convincing reading of how the Romantic “practical criticism” of Shakespeare’s plays anticipates twentieth-century reader-response criticism. Shelley’s self-consuming, piece of lightning has Longinian echoes as well, both for its incendiary imagery and for its sense of dissolution: “Pindar and Sophocles seem at times to burn up everything before them as they go, although their fire is often unaccountably quenched . . .” (Section 33, 153). Heller also links Lamb’s approach to reader-response criticism (115-27).

41 The Defense’s title’s allusion to Sidney indicates its neo-Platonic influence; Shelley’s famous model of poetry as inspiration’s divine decline—“the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet” (39)—is likely an allusion to the Ion. See Notopoulos for a major examination of Shelley’s Platonism, as well as reproductions of Shelley’s translations of Plato. See Abrams Mirror 126-32 (“there is more of Plato in the ‘Defence’ than in any earlier piece of English criticism . . .”) (126). See also Tracy Ware’s essay on Shelley’s Platonism. Paul de Man’s reading of “Triumph of Life” in “Shelley Disfigured” connects Shelley’s Platonism with his compositions’ effacement of figure and the inevitable fragmentation.

42 Coleridge’s arguably most famous poem is a dramatization of faulty memory. It is tempting to read his consignment of his lectures to his audience’s memory as a rhetorical decision.
While the second chapter contends with the use of Lear as a rhetorical exemplum, the third chapter examines the tropes of inexpressibility and outdoing in the readings of the play written by William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb. Romantic critical practice applies more direct attention to the play and its text than what is found in the allusions of Coleridge and Shelley’s works of theory. In particular, I examine how Hazlitt’s extensive quotations from the play—the display of these quotations makes up the bulk of his short explicative essay—is a method of critical display that parallels Lamb’s call to read the play from the vantage point of Lear’s mind “laid bare” (261). With comparisons to Sir Philip Sidney’s Astrophil and Stella and the first scene of Lear itself, I clarify just how conventional Hazlitt and Lamb’s acts of critical panegyric truly are. However, while we can certainly sympathize with the desire to sing the praises of Lear, reading not only the presence of but the attraction to the traditions of praise in the Romantic reading of Lear indicates just how uncanny the play is as a demonstration of its own misreadings.

In the second half of this dissertation, I examine the attention paid to the play by two post-Romantic thinkers: Søren Kierkegaard and Jacques Lacan. The Romantic orientation towards display accounts for these misrecognitions of Lear and its treatment of nothingness; an examination of a rhetorical orientation founded on recognition, rather than display, might better account for Lear and its own aporias of recognition. I begin with an examination of the network of references to King Lear in the early works of the Danish philosopher and theologian, Søren Kierkegaard. I argue in this chapter that Kierkegaard not only cites the play, but that he reworks its narrative into the novelistic Either/Or and its sequel Stages on Life’s Way. The effect of this sequence of allusions—which I believe to be as of yet unnoticed by readers of both Lear and Kierkegaard—is central to understanding Kierkegaard’s specific challenge to the tropes and
methods of Romanticism with what he calls the “indirect communication.” By presenting Lear as a work that needs to be uncovered in a network of allusions, Kierkegaard uses the play to interrogate the impulses of Romantic fragmentary display, while also revealing his own personal crisis response to the play, which I read with reference to passages from his journals.

Kierkegaard’s parodies of Romantic Epideictic-critical tropes not only offer a corrective of the Romantic misrecognition of King Lear, they anticipate Lacan’s “indirect communication,” and the analyst’s role as the subject supposed to know.

As with my reading of Kierkegaard’s references to King Lear, I argue that Jacques Lacan’s reading of the play in his seventh seminar has been unduly neglected. In my final chapter, I argue that Lacan’s reading of Shakespeare is meant to provide a corrective of the Romantic heritage of psychoanalysis, and that such a reading is delivered via an “indirect” rhetoric partly inspired by Kierkegaard. This chapter is both a reading of what I take to be another crucial moment in the reception of King Lear, as well as an argument that Lacan’s reading is a culmination of earlier such moments. Whereas Coleridge invoked his reader’s memory of Lear, Lacan instructs the audience of his seminar to “read the play again” (Ethics 305). Using the far more detailed exegesis of Hamlet from the previous year’s seminar as a guide, I take this as an invitation to read Lear as Lacan might. Much as Lacan himself examined the figure of Polonius, the “wild analyst” treating Hamlet’s feigned madness, Lacan wants us to recognize two narratives in King Lear that closely resemble clinical analysis: Edgar’s treatment of Gloucester’s despair and the Fool’s attempts to “outjest / [Lear’s] heart-struck injuries” (Tragedy 3.1.7-8). As with my reading of Kierkegaard, I find that the briefness of Lacan’s remarks is itself illuminating. This brevity is both a rhetorical decision by a master orator—and a clinician fond of variable length sessions—and indicative of Lacan’s own personal, anxious
encounter with the play. While I find the psychoanalytic model of recognition to be closest in spirit to the crisis core of the play, I do not suggest that the analysis of *Lear* has yet come to an end. I conclude with a reading of what such an end might mean for a play that is so hauntingly “about” nothing.

Any study of the rhetoric of Romanticism is naturally indebted to the work of Paul de Man, and his *virtuoso* readings of trope and figure. De Man is of particular interest to any study of Romanticism in or as a reception history. In clarifying the crisis of “mystification” that is *within* criticism itself, Paul de Man writes of Rousseau’s perceived “delusion” as a contrast to the mind of the contemporary literary critic:

> here, the consciousness does not result from the absence of something, but consists of the presence of a nothingness. Poetic language names this void with ever-renewed understanding and, like Rousseau’s longing, it never tires of naming it again. This persistent naming is what we call literature. . . . the work of fiction invents fictional subjects to create the illusion of the reality of others. But the fiction is not the myth, for it knows and names itself as fiction. It is not a demystification, it is demystified from the start. When modern critics think they are demystifying literature, they are in fact being demystified by it; but since this necessarily occurs in the form of a crisis, they are blind to what takes place within themselves. (“Criticism and Crisis” 18)

Similarly, these mystified modern critics supposedly reach a kind of “dead-end” when they are unable to form a “correspondence between the initial experience and the reader’s own” (“Dead-End” 236). However, there is an equally frustrating dead-end in the supposedly desmystified open-endedness of Romantic critical thought.**43** The invocation of the Sublime as a descriptor of *Lear* does not in any substantial way differ from the praise of inexpressibility, by which I mean both the object of praise and the vehicle of praise. The effect of such an *epideictic* criticism is not only a reflection of what makes “speech unable,” it intends to stifle any rebuttal, to make any

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**43** See Weiskel’s reading of Schiller and the alienation associated with the “negative sublime,” or reader’s sublime: “the negative sublime cannot really be recommended as an ethical posture, for it appears to culminate in a transcendent dead end” (48).
further speech unable. As a goal of criticism, even an unattainable one, the ideal of “merely”
“revealing” the text begins with the Romantics, and it is revelatory of their crises of recognition
and misrecognition, blind to both the play and “what takes place within themselves.”

Nowhere is such a “form of a crisis” more pronounced than in responses to King Lear,
and we need not limit the survey of such responses to “modern critics.” Think only of Samuel
Johnson’s shock at reading Cordelia’s death, and his repression of any memory of returning to
the text (“I know not whether I ever endured to read again . . .”). Shakespeare would not want us
to simply re-reveal this crisis instant, or re-name it persistently. After all, he does not simply
rename this nothing, he identifies it as “nothing.” One of the immediate effects of the so-called
New Science of Shakespeare’s time was the effect of speaking with a newfound clarity (and with
a newfound signifier) about nothingness.44 In what may well be the least Romantic literary text
yet composed, Shakespeare turns again and again not to the quandaries of poetic inexpressibility,
but to the certainty that all we hold dear is equal to nothing.

Truly recognizing that this is what Shakespeare displays for us in King Lear is nothing
short of traumatic, even for post-Romantic readers. These reactions are not just a sense of our
mystification, a general blindness to the effects of literary form, but are a particular effect
authored by Shakespeare. Again, we are greatly indebted to de Man for his analyses of

44 See Brian Rotman’s Signifying Nothing, a great study of the history of the “semiotics of zero.” Rotman reads
Lear as a historically specific encounter with both the advances of mathematics associated with the New Science
and the “rupture in the medieval world brought about by the transactions of Renaissance capitalism” (86). For more
on Shakespeare’s references to math and Renaissance units and methods of measurement, see Blank Shakespeare
and the Mismeasure of Renaissance Man. Blank argues that Lear’s traumatic vision is “based less on linguistic and
more on arithmetic terms of human value”; tellingly, the Fool’s “o without a figure” is the first instance of using the
letter “o” metaphorically to mean nothing in our language (122). See also David Willbern’s “Shakespeare’s
Nothing,” which traces the various mathematical, ontological, linguistic, biological, and theological resonances of
Shakespeare’s frequent play on the word “nothing.” Willbern’s conclusion that “nothing, ultimately, is what the
plays are about,” and that they anticipate many of the achievements of psychoanalysis and its understanding of “the
ways in which we give meaning to nothing, botching up words to fit our own thoughts” (259, 251). See also
Kerrigan’s “Articulation of the Ego in the English Renaissance” for a study of how the New Science parallels
Lacan’s revision of psychoanalytic practice (particularly as an opposition to ego psychology). Other fine studies of
Shakespeare and “nothing” include those by Fleissner, Jorgensen, and Burckhardt.
Romanticism’s use of trope and figure. But for the purposes of examining Lear in the study of the rhetoric of Romanticism, we may consider figure in the sense meant by Erich Auerbach, as something “real and historical which announces something else that is also real and historical” (29). The Romantics read defensively, rejecting the mechanical interpretation of Shakespeare while conforming to the mechanics of rhetoric, and thereby fulfill the prefigurative prophecy of Lear’s portrayal of misrecognition.

Shakespeare must have known that he composed a masterwork, and I suspect he knew that he was prefiguring our own responses to his masterwork as well: the complicated praise of Lear redoubled as literary history’s complicated praise of Lear. Such a recognition is uncanny because it fuses familiarity and novelty: Lear and Lear being the same but different. As is the case with his Fool, Shakespeare speaks of what comes after his own time (Tragedy 3.2.94). Here as well, the reader of this dissertation may recognize traces of de Man, as I seem to argue that Lear allegorizes its own misreading. But in fact, I mean something more extraordinary than that. I argue that the crises of recognition that we experience when reading this play are authored by Shakespeare, in much the same way that an analyst enables a transference. Accordingly, this project ends with a reading of Lear and Jacques Lacan, and a recognition that Lear is also a prefiguration of psychoanalytical practice.

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45 Auerbach: “Since in figural interpretation one thing stands for another, since one thing represents and signifies the other, figural interpretation is ‘allegorical’ in the widest sense. But it differs from most of the allegorical forms known to us by the historicity both of the sign and what it signifies” (54). See also my reading of the relation of Pericles to the Merchant of Venice as a demonstration of Shakespeare’s figural method (made with reference to both Auerbach and de Man) (“How Every Fool”).
CHAPTER 2
KING LEAR IN ROMANTIC CRITICAL THEORY: THE RHETORIC OF EXAMPLE IN COLERIDGE AND SHELLEY

In this chapter, we will examine how Coleridge and Shelley invoke *King Lear* as a rhetorical *exemplum* to argue for general aesthetic principles in their works of literary theory. I hope to show that these references are classically rhetorical, not just as invoked, paradigmatic examples, but also as instances of treating *Lear* as an *auctoritas*. Both of these rhetorical moves necessitate an avoidance of engaging directly with the play’s text, as any critical reading would challenge rather than reinforce its power as an authority or *exemplum*. This avoidance of reading demonstrates a synchrony with the Romantic Sublime, and the privileging of ignorance, fragmentation, and failure of expression that we examined (particularly in relation to Burke).

The matter of Shelley’s Platonism—either neo- or otherwise—cannot be denied.¹ Likewise, Coleridge is celebrated for his critical practice: i.e. the “practical criticism” that celebrates how “little a mere theory” interferes with genuine imagination and genius, best examined through the particulars of a given text (7.2.59).² It would seem that both of these thinkers have little to do with our understanding of the Sublime as a literary category, with its abstract open-endedness and refusal of classical modes. Yet, in the *Biographia*, Coleridge only declares genius’s superiority over theory after the failure to complete his own theory in volume one. In effect, he offers the material, textual variant of Shelley’s Platonist model of poetic inspiration as a divine failure, an inevitable fading or falling from inspiration’s ideality. This

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¹ See Notopoulos for a major study of Shelley and Plato. Notopoulos distinguishes between Shelley’s “natural,” “direct,” and “indirect” Platonisms, and includes reproductions of Shelley’s translations. See Ware, especially 554-7, for a meticulous reading of Shelley’s various allusions and uses of Plato in the *Defense*. For an alternate reading, see Abrams, who argues that, in the *Defense*, we see Shelley leave the “Platonic facts” behind for the increasingly impressionistic, organic model of Romanticism (*Mirror* 192).

² For a reading of Romantic literary theory as a synthesis of the theories of German Romanticism and the direct reading of Shakespeare’s texts, see Bate *Imagination* 14-21.
idealization of failure is classically defensive: for Shelley, it actually appears in a *Defense*, and for Coleridge, the failure of theory is implicitly celebrated immediately following upon his own theory’s failure. That their critical pronouncements of *Lear* have now become *exempla* in their own right—Shelley is often cited as declaring *Lear* the “most perfect specimen of dramatic art existing in the world” (17), and Coleridge is cited as declaring *Lear* Shakespeare’s “most tremendous effort” (14.2.32)—indicates the synchrony between the Romantic’s ideal of sublime unfinishedness and the deictic fragmenting of *exempla*.

In effect, discussing *Lear* in terms of exemplarity and authority is symptomatic of the same Epideicti-critical tendencies of Hazlitt and Lamb (whom we will examine in the next chapter). The effect of defending *Lear* from the “labor and study” of interpretative reading decried by Shelley (39) ironically makes *Lear* into a rhetorical device, the kind of “mechanical art” or rule to which poetry is supposed to be opposed (Coleridge 7.2.83). *Lear* is another piece of evidence cited by the Romantics in an imaginary trial, supposedly defending poetry, but actually defending themselves from having to (be) read too closely. Recalling Lear at his most rash, at both the play’s opening and attending to a mock trial, the Romantics only want the unchallenged, uncritical *praise* of Lear or *Lear*, or blame of his, its, or their opponents.

In the reading that follows, I contextualize Shelley’s reference to *Lear* by first examining his use of the rhetoric of example and authority elsewhere in the *Defense*. This reading will demonstrate that the familiar understanding of Shelley’s canonical celebration of *Lear* is

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3 Defense, or *protreptikos*, is the definitive Epideicti-critical mode. For a discussion of *protreptikos* as a panegyric of art itself, see Curtius 547-58 (especially 548-50). For a reading of Hazlitt’s “On Poetry in General” as a defense, see Natarajan *Hazlitt* 21.

4 See Lyons 9-12 for a discussion of the theoretical and practical application of *exempla* as both an excised part of a whole and as a clarifying exhibit. Etymologically, *exemplum* is related to the verb *eximere*, meaning remove; *exempla* is definitively a cutting off of a fragment from a whole (9). On the other hand, “*paradeigma* is related to *paradeiknumi*” and to *deiknumi*, so “the Greek term is therefore always associated with light, showing, seeing, and pointing” (10). For the Sublime’s variant of *epideixis*, the rhetoric of example seems unavoidable given its qualities of cutting and pointing.
misguided. His reading of Lear is far more hesitant (the play only may be judged to be the best specimen of dramatic art), in accord with his ironically logical adherence to an illogical ideality of poetry. I then turn to an examination of Lear’s role in the Biographia, with a particular focus on references to the play at the beginning and conclusion of the second volume, as a clarifying example cited in the “practical criticism” of Wordsworth’s lyrics and Charles Maturin’s Bertram. With reference to the treatment of Lear in the lectures, I argue that Coleridge’s attention to Lear indicates the defensive construct of his principles of literary criticism.

The figure of Percy Bysshe Shelley offers a counterexample to the famous distinction between Romanticism and classicism. In particular, as a devoted reader of Cicero and translator of Plato, Shelley’s example challenges the more extreme accusations of Romanticism’s “cutting off” of classical rhetoric ala Vickers. His famous figuration of poetic inspiration as a “fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness” (39)—an image I will return to later in this chapter—alludes to Plato’s Ion. As a political activist, Shelley was a deft master of both conventional and unconventional oratory, and seems to confirm Wellbery’s understanding of Romanticism as a transformation of rhetoric. If he even bothered to transform it at all: Shelley’s arguably most famous poem, “Adonais,” comfortably conforms to the traditions of panegyric. As noted above, the title of Shelley’s Defense of Poetry indicates Shelley’s debt to the neo-Platonic tradition.

It is not surprising that some of the most quoted passages from the Defense in contemporary criticism are its epideictic judgments on King Lear as “sublime” and “the most

5 See A.W. Schlegel “Lectures” 206-14. For a discussion of Friedrich Schlegel’s shifting understandings of classicism and its influence on the modern or the Romantic, see Millán-Zaibert 160-5. See also Abrams Mirror 237-41.

6 For a discussion of Shelley’s reading of Cicero, and his use of the exemplum in the Defense, see Behrendt. See Clark for a discussion of Coleridge and Plato’s intertwined influence on the Defense and the impact on Shelley’s complicated sense of audience (especially 144-54).
perfect specimen of dramatic art existing in the world” (17). I will demonstrate in this chapter that these comments are more opaque than such excerpts suggest: Lear’s supposed perfection is heavily qualified by Shelley. It is precisely this qualification—and the elision of that qualification in reproductions of Shelley’s comments on Lear—that demonstrates Lear’s ambiguous role as both exemplum and unit of cultural capital in the Romantic body of critical thought. What makes Shelley’s Defense of such interest to the contemporary reader—especially the contemporary reader of Lear—is its persistent demonstration of the tropes of classical argument and demonstrations of logic and deduction all in praise of the sublime illogic of poetry. In a classically humanist appeal both to his contemporaries and to an auctoritas (the father of British literary sublimity, Milton), Shelley pronounces a concrete distinction between poetry and scholarly rigor that parallels the distinction of reason and imagination that open the Defense. Shelley repeats many of the tropes established by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers of Shakespeare (not least of all the antipathy towards footnotes addressed by Johnson in his preface). But Shelley takes this common resistance to a scholarly apparatus much farther, culminating in a bizarrely literal reading of Milton’s account of the muse, Urania:

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7 For example, Jonathan Bate identifies Lear as the work Shelley “judged the most perfect specimen of dramatic art” (Imagination 216).

8 See Gelley for a discussion of the distinction between the Platonic and the Aristotelian paradeigma or exemplar. Plato’s understanding of exemplar resembles synecdoche: an “archetype deriving from a transcendent source,” or a part relating to a whole or vice versa (Gelley 1). The Romantics already link synecdoche with their understanding of symbol; Coleridge writes that a symbol is “a part of that of the whole of which it is representative” (5.2.418). See de Man “Rhetoric of Temporality” 191. Yet, regarding their use of Lear, they are closer to Aristotle’s understanding of exemplar as “a form of induction whereby particulars are linked and traced so as to produce . . . an unspoken recognition of the universal proposition” (Gelley 1-2), with a particular focus on the unspoken. See Aristotle 1.2.1-19 for the discussion of example (36-40 in Kennedy’s translation).

9 See Curtius 515-18, for a discussion of the use of ancient authors’ names as invoked authorities in medieval literature (see also 48-54 for a discussion of how this practice determined curriculum). See Bate for an analysis of the dialectic of influence of Milton and Shakespeare on Romanticism as a revision of Harold Bloom’s claim “that Milton is the central problem in any theory and history of poetic influence in English” (Imagination 2). It is “important to see Shakespeare and Milton as complementary exemplars” (Bate Imagination 83), following Coleridge’s characterization of Shakespeare and Milton as “compeer[s] not rival[s]” (7.2.27). See also Abrams Mirror 250-6 for a summary of the problem of Milton and the Romantics.
I appeal to the greatest poets of the present day whether it is not an error to assert that the finest passages of poetry are produced by labor and study. The toil and the delay recommended by critics can be justly interpreted to mean no more than a careful observation of the inspired moments, and an artificial connection of the spaces between their suggestions by the intertexture of conventional expressions—a necessity only imposed by the limitedness of the poetical faculty itself; for Milton conceived the Paradise Lost as a whole before he executed it in portions. We have his own authority also for the muse having “dictated” to him the “unpremeditated song.” And let this be an answer to those who would allege the fifty-six various readings of the first line of the Orlando Furioso. (39-40)

The passage is thoroughly, though perhaps unintentionally, ironic. At the beginning of the Defense, Shelley famously distinguishes between reason and imagination; however, there is essentially no distinction between great prose writers and great writers of poetry. Yet here we are meant to dispel the value of labor and study (the implied stuff of prose, or at least rhetorical prose), and are persuaded to do so via an appeal to the great poetic minds of the present and to a named “authority” of the past. Such an appeal may have a certain power on its own merits, but it surely works best for readers of Milton and the classics, which is to say, former students.

According to Hardison, “by the fourth century, A.D., rhetoric and poetic had become so thoroughly intermingled that there was no clear distinction between orator and poet” (26), so Shelley’s pairing of prose with poetry—even the anti-poetical Plato is essentially a poet—has some fifteen-hundred years of literary tradition in its corner. But if there is no distinction between poetry and prose for Shelley in theory, there appears to be an implied difference in practice: the “toil and delay” of critical reading is a means of drawing artificial connections.

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10 Shelley: “The distinction between poets and prose writers is a vulgar error” (9). This conflation of prose and poetry, and by extension the poet and the critic, may be Longinian in nature. See Hertz: “Longinus begins by distinguishing the orator’s imagination from the poet’s, then qualifies that distinction, and then apparently ignores it altogether” (8). See also Clark: “the most extraordinary feature of A Defense of Poetry [is] . . . it is not possible to tell whether Shelley is writing of the process of composition or of reception, or of both at once” (159).

11 Shelley: “Plato was essentially a poet—the truth and splendor of his imagery, and the melody of his language, are the most intense that it is possible to conceive” (9). Sidney, of course, makes much the same argument in his own Defence: “truly even Plato whosoever well considereth shall find that in the body of his work, though the inside and strength were philosophy, the skin, as it were, and beauty depended most of poetry” (213).
between the parts of the naturally fragmented poetic vision. Analysis is an attempt to shape disjointed parts into a whole; it is far better to leave the “whole” to the realm of the ideal, the poet’s conception. Prose, or at least works of reason and argument, can be read and analyzed, whereas poetry can only be admired. So what are we to do with this prose? Read it or admire it?

Milton exceeds the power of a reader’s reason. What better example of that exceeding could there be than his own invocation (or recognition) of the muse, Urania? That this is not literally the case—if the Muse were real, one wonders why she would dictate a Christian epic, or, for that matter, why Milton would deserve any credit for “conceiving” the poem—is of secondary concern. Even if we take (Shelley and) Milton’s claim about the muse who “dictates to [Milton] slumbering, or inspires / Easy [Milton’s] unpremeditated Verse” (9.23-4) entirely literally, it is not applicable, simply because Milton’s muse is not Ariosto’s. The reason why critics need not worry themselves about reading Ariosto closely can be found in reading Milton, yet not in reading Milton, but rather considering him as an exemplum of literary sublimity, limited only by his own mortal faculties. Even Shelley’s literal reading is unstable or, at best, selective in its application. We know Milton conceived of the poem as a whole because he tells us so. He also tells us that the poem was dictated to him, but we need not worry about that image and its contradiction of the earlier one, as we choose to believe that the poem was conceived not received by Milton. The move of selective reading in turn begets an ideal of selective authoring, personified in the Romantic ideal of the fragment.

The invoking of familiar figures and devices in order to discuss Milton’s invocation of familiar figures and devices as proof of why critics need not study familiar figures and devices suggests that Shelley’s understanding of poetry is not just the result of a circular logic but is
actually self-consuming.\textsuperscript{12} This is not the kind of unconventional usage of rhetoric that we can trace back to the tradition of New Rhetoric,\textsuperscript{13} or a de Manian aporia of figure failing to line up with meaning, or even a Johnsonian distinction of study as a “necessarily evil” in disseminating and clarifying poetic genius. Shelley’s aesthetic model is paradoxical, claiming to profess two distinct and contrary terms from a binary that he himself proposed at the outset of the essay. Classically rhetorical and studious in its defense of poetry from rhetoric or study, it is itself an exemplum, a paradigm of the Romantic ideality of failure and fragmentation.

Given “the limitedness of the poetical faculty”—even Milton’s!—any poet cannot help but fail. The Defense, then, is not just praising poetry in an epideictic venue using familiar topoi: it dissolves its own venue of discourse in praise of poetry, becomes poetry, and is therefore no longer subject to the rules of reason. A rebuttal itself,\textsuperscript{14} this is an argument that will not permit a response, as it literally exceeds its genre and cannot be held accountable to the dictates of that genre, specifically, the “toil and delay” of argument. The Defense declares itself poetry, a divine failure. Any rebuttal to Shelley’s Defense is then impossible, as pointing out its failures of logic

\textsuperscript{12} According to Abrams, Shelley saw “Paradise Lost, properly deciphered, [as] refut[ing] the theology it purports to advance” (Mirror 252). Genuine, sublime poetry is a “sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it” (Shelley 19), be that “scabbard” social doctrines, rhetorical application, or even the composition of poetry itself, as whatever is “communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet” (39). In other words, what makes poetry Platonic is its role as a “shadow” of the form of inspiration; what makes Milton sublime is the self-consumption or dissolution of his own argument. See Hodgson for a complex reading of the rhetorical and psychological biases inherent in Shelley and Coleridge’s portraits of transcendence. Hodgson detects an “antithetical, even parodic subversiveness of argument” in the Defense that informs what I identify as its self-consuming logic (65).

\textsuperscript{13} The term is James Engell’s, and refers to “a group of professors and divines [who] completely renovated the study of rhetoric and applied it to contemporary English literature” during the second half of the eighteenth-century (“New Rhetoric” 217). In Engell’s reading, the New Rhetoricians (including Adam Smith, Joseph Priestly, Hugh Blair, and others) are the key middle figures between the classical, formalist rhetoric of the Renaissance and the expressionist Romantic models that followed. See Blair’s third lecture, on the connection between criticism, genius, taste, and sublimity (21-31), and the fourth, which addresses the Sublime in writing. Blair is critical of “what is called the Sublime style,” which would define the Romantic critics. However, he inadvertently presents a kind of logic for the reworking of inexpressibility topoi as sublime that is so common: “the main secret of being Sublime, is to say great things in few and plain words” (41). See Ruttkay for a reading of how the New Rhetoricians’ understanding of “feeling” may bare on Coleridge’s reading of King Lear.

\textsuperscript{14} Shelley’s Defense is a response to Thomas Love Peacock’s satirical The Four Ages of Poetry. See Clark 150-2.
is to point out its achievement as poetic prose. As a rhetorical tactic, this is not an unsuccessful method for cutting off future rebuttals, making any further speech unable. However, an unexpected effect for the reader is not just the elevation of argumentative prose to the heights of poetry, but the denigration of poetry to slippery rhetoric, *ala* Kant’s critique of persuasion as an enemy of truth.\(^\text{15}\) Shelley is of an age that privileges the writer’s powers of expressive display over the reader’s recognition,\(^\text{16}\) and he accordingly appeals to poets exclusively.

We establish, then, that Shelley’s reasoning here is supposed to be *like* poetry and (not) read as such. Turning to the passage immediately preceding that one excerpted above, we can further clarify the distinction between the poetic and the reasonable:

Poetry is not like reasoning, a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, “I will compose poetry.” The greatest poet even cannot say it; for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like the color of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are unprophetic either of its approach or its departure. Could this influence be durable in its original purity and force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of its results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet. (39)

Shelley’s habit of sliding from one image to another resembles the device of *adynaton*, a “stringing together [of] impossibilities” (Curtius 95); for example, consider the second half of the Fool’s prophecy in Act III of the Folio-*Lear* (“When every case in law is right . . .”) (*Tragedy* 3.2.86).\(^\text{17}\) Shelley may not have the Fool in mind—though it is not clear what else he is referring to when he writes elsewhere in the *Defense* of the sublime “comedy” of *Lear*—but the

\(^{15}\) See Section 53 of the *Critique of Judgement*. See also Vickers *In Defence of Rhetoric* 201-4.

\(^{16}\) Abrams identifies this as “the nineteenth-century displacement of the audience by the author as the focal term of reference” (*Mirror* 72).

\(^{17}\) See Elton 310-17.
comparison is fitting. The use of the device deftly reflects the argument that Shelley makes: namely, that poetry is the result of an inconstant *decline*, or failure to do justice to imagination, just as a chain of *adynata* indicate a failure to settle on a single representative image. *Adynata* so closely resemble *topoi* of inexpressibility that a critic as brilliant as Joel Fineman appears to confuse the two.\(^\text{18}\) Here the apparent lack of satisfaction with a single exemplifying image (does it resemble a fire or a flower?) parallels the failure of the referent for that (inaccessible) exemplifying image. The playful exaggerations escalate until they become a literal “impossibility.” Part of what defines Shelley and Sidney—the author invoked by the title of this *protreptikos*—as *neo*-Platonists is their inverted *defense* of poetry. (We will return to Sidney in the next chapter). Yet here, it is as though Shelley inverts his inversion, completing the circle,\(^\text{19}\) and inadvertently gives credence to the Platonic critique of poetry, as it is just a “feeble” shadow of the forms that the “strange” prisoners should be seeking (515a).

“Probably.” This qualifier causes further complications within the passage. Shelley does not allegorize his text’s misreading so much as deduce its own unreasonableness. With this qualifier in place to temper the otherwise obvious contradictions and self-inverting logic, we can turn to Shelley’s reference to *Lear* in the *Defense*. If poetic masterpieces are “probably” feeble shadows of the poet’s initial inspiration, a poem that preserves the force of that form-like sublime presence may be possible, if only because when one is regarding anything sublime, one can never say anything *for sure*. However, if that were so, than we almost certainly would not know such a poem when we see it (and perhaps we have seen it already). In which case, what

\(^\text{18}\) See note 24 in the previous chapter.

\(^\text{19}\) The circle is a central metaphor in the *Defense*, illustrative of poetry’s wholeness and divinity: “Poetry is indeed something divine. It is at once the centre and circumference of knowledge” (38). On this point, see Natarajan “Circle of Sympathy” for a reading of Hazlitt and Shelley.
would be the ontological difference between the ideal poem and just about any other work of poetic utterance, including, apparently, prose pieces with imagistic failures of logic?

Of course, even if Shelley did assess Lear without such reservation, the reader of the Defense would be able to posit plenty of reservations him or herself, given this model of decline formulated near the conclusion of the essay. As it happens, Shelley discusses Lear and its greatness obliquely, and with the same impulse towards qualification that he applies to his definition of poetry as a divine failure:

The modern practice of blending comedy with tragedy, though liable to great abuse in point of practice, is undoubtedly an extension of the dramatic circle; but the comedy should be as in King Lear, universal, ideal, and sublime. It is perhaps the intervention of this principle which determines the balance in favor of King Lear against the Oedipus Tyrannus or the Agamemnon, or, if you will, the trilogies with which they are connected; unless the intense power of the choral poetry, especially that of the latter, should be considered as restoring the equilibrium. King Lear, if it can sustain this comparison, may be judged to be the most perfect specimen of dramatic art existing in the world, in spite of the narrow conditions to which the poet was subjected by the ignorance of the philosophy of the drama which as prevailed in modern Europe. Calderon, in his religious Autos, has attempted to fulfil some of the high conditions of dramatic representation neglected by Shakespeare; such as the establishing a relation between the drama and religion, and the accommodating them to music and dancing; but he omits the observation of conditions still more important, and more is lost than gained by the substitution of the rigidly-defined and ever-repeated idealisms of a distorted superstition for the living impersonations of the truth of human passion.

But I digress. (17, my emphasis)

The italicized words and phrases indicate just how indecisive Shelley appears to be regarding Lear’s greatness. I take this deferral as a confirmation or performance of the ideal of the decline of inspiration: if the greatest poetry is still a failure to do justice to its initial inspiration, the greatest criticism is all the greater for failing to do justice to its subject. Indeed, whatever Lear achieves as the “most perfect” work of dramatic art is “in spite” of its own ignorance of (Shelley’s determined) dramatic ideals.
Shelley here recalls the pre-Romantic reactionaries who balked at the emergence of the English bard from the “reigning Barbarism” of Shakespeare’s age and social class (Theobald 73), when “the public taste was in its infancy” (Warburton 103). But more than that, he points towards the Sublime, and the efficacy of “ignorance of things that causes all our admiration and chiefly excites our passions” (Burke 57). The sublimity of Shakespeare’s Lear is contingent on its sustaining a comparison with that of which it is ignorant: ancient Greek drama, where the employment of “language, action, music, painting, the dance, and religious institution [produced] a common effect in the representation of the highest idealisms of passion and of power” (Shelley 16). Though Shelley seems to fault Shakespeare for eliding what Calderon attempts to restore (the Greeks’ employment of a religious tradition in drama),\(^{20}\) the sublimity of the Greek drama is ultimately not the result of its compiling of these elements via a demonstration of “discipline” and “consummate skill,” but rather in its representation of what exceeds calculation: the poet’s inspiration, the passionate ideal.

It is not entirely clear what Shelley means when he refers to the “comedy” of King Lear (the obvious answer would be the figure of the Fool, though how exactly the Fool is “universal” and “ideal” is up to the reader to determine).\(^{21}\) But the Sublime informs the entire passage, not only the proposed, though vague, “equilibrium” of comedy and tragedy recommended for contemporary dramatists. The ideal of dramatic art was practiced by the ancient Greeks; for Shelley, the Greek stage has a vastness that the modern stage lacks (“on the modern stage, a few only of the elements capable of expressing the image of the poet’s conception are employed at once”) (16). Yet, ultimately, the reader has the impression that Shelley does not praise ancient

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\(^{20}\) For an alternate reading see Park Hazlitt 39-40.

\(^{21}\) See Svaglic 55-6 for an inferred reading of Shelley’s (possible) interpretation of the Fool.
drama for all that it possesses that modern drama lacks, but rather because we lack so many examples of ancient drama: “However a succeeding writer may have equalled or surpassed those few great specimens of the Athenian drama which have been preserved to us, it is indisputable that the art itself never was understood or practised according to the true philosophy of it, as at Athens” (16, my emphasis).

Why this claim is “indisputable” is, ironically, because we only have a “few great specimens”—the scientific diction seems especially pertinent given Shelley’s claim that poetry is greater than science, and that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the (scientific) world—and lack the empirical evidence to do any disputing. It is impossible for Shelley to have witnessed any of the productions that he identifies as the only true productions of dramatic philosophy. Yet the absence (or “ignorance”) of a complete, empirical experience may be all the more evidence of the presence of sublimity. (As with Lear in congress with Poor Tom, Shelley prefers his Athenians imagined). Shelley deduces that the titans of Greek drama fulfilled the promise of their dramatic theory by evaluating the historical fragments of the surviving dramas. Furthermore, these historical fragments could only ever be fragments of a fragment; as is the case with any other poem, and as with the greatest poem, they are but “feeble shadows” of the poet’s conception. The Romantics’ formal inclination towards and appreciation for the fragment has been discussed at length, but here we see that the ideal of Romantic fragmentation has less to do with the triumph of the surviving fragment, emerging from some void of lost inspiration, but is rather indicative of a wistful appreciation of the missing text. This is precisely in line with a rhetoric of sublimity, such as Burke’s delight in “often” identifying “something which pleased me beyond the best finishing” in viewing unfinished sketches (70). The pinnacle of the
unfinished is not only to be expected here, it is the only possible principle of what amounts to a theory without a thesis.  

It follows that the only peak that might surpass the sublime-unfinished would be the never-begun. Recall the passage from de Man’s “Criticism and Crisis” quoted in my introduction. This mystification of modern criticism seems to begin with the criticism not of but rather by the Romantics. The Defense attests in prose—that is, in reason, in rhetoric, in criticism—to the lyrical ideal that unheard melodies are sweeter. Thus, Shelley’s assertion of the greatness of King Lear is not only dependent upon its sense of unfinishedness—it lacks precisely the religious component of drama that made the Greek drama so (reportedly) sublime—but is asserted precisely by not even beginning to make the claim. This Defense is not defending poetry so much as appealing to the poetic as a defense against critical reading. We are not comparing Lear to Oedipus here, exactly. We are proposing that, perhaps, a comparison might be made that, if it were sustained, Shakespeare’s tragedy might be determined to be better than Sophocles’s. All of this occurs in what Shelley labels a “digression,” a kind of interruptive fragment that should deviate from the focus of the Defense and yet exemplifies it, as the Defense most defends and praises poetry’s capability for deviation. Or, as Burke puts it, the only rule of art is that “art can never give the rules that make an art” (49). 

Of course, there are rules to art; Shelley invokes them throughout this piece by recycling familiar rhetorical devices. And, despite his claim that natural sciences should defer to poetic

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22 There are some parallels here not only with Coleridge’s praise for Wordsworth surmounting his own “mere theory,” but also with Hazlitt’s critique of abstraction. This critique leads, in Charles Patterson’s view, to Hazlitt’s “frankly impressionistic” qualities as a critic (648).

23 Such “digressions” are a recurrent technique in Longinus (see section 9, 126).

24 Coleridge seems to rework this phrase in the Biographia: “could a rule be given from without, poetry would cease to be poetry, and sink into a mechanical art” (7.2.83).
license and not the other way around, there are rules to nature as well. The nature in Lear is not supernaturalized, as it is for the Romantics. It is simply uncaring. When the traumatized Lear asks “why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life, / And [Cordelia] no breath at all?” (Tragedy 5.3.281-2), he does not speak for a sublime ignorance of the way the world works and its habit of exceeding our comprehension, but of a distinct awareness that death is universal because it is not ideal or sublime, merely natural. Shakespeare does not “neglect” the religious here, either in the sense of an exoticized otherness of the fragmented, ancient Greek culture or Calderon’s Catholicism or a “displaced and reconstituted theology” of Romanticism (Abrams Natural 65). He decimates its capacity for comfort, as that comfort is founded upon a specious discourse; that is why Lear’s questions resemble a twisted catechism, and why they are so horrifying.

King Lear’s presence in the Defense testifies to its unique cultural and rhetorical role as an exemplum of literary greatness and sublimity; as such, it would be almost counterproductive to include an in-depth critical reading of the play. Formally, this reference to King Lear anticipates the discussions of the play in the post-Romantic writers that I will examine later in this project. As for the rest of this chapter, I attend to the way that the play performs a similar role in Coleridge’s prose writings, particularly his massive Biographia Literaria. The Biographia is a project that one might also be tempted to identify as proto-Kierkegaardian, if not post-Romantic, given its bizarre structure, hyperawareness of its own paratextual and textual apparatus, and (in)direct engagement with its reader. Its inventive structure—or, at least, its

25 Shelley: “[poetry] is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred” (38).

26 See Veedee for a reading of the influence of sermons and “pulpit rhetoric” on Romantic expressive theories.

27 Much has been written about the unusual structure of the Biographia, which Arthur Symons called “the greatest book of criticism in English, and one of the most annoying books in any language” (qtd. in Engell “Biographia” 59). Much of its difficulty can be ascribed to its troubling composition: what was supposed to be a short preface to
unusual structure—formalizes many of the Romantic concepts of reading and readers that we see identified in Shelley’s *Defense*. Naturally, *Lear* plays a central role in the paradoxical construction of these concepts and their utterance in the *Biographia*.

If Coleridge anticipates the formal inventions of modernism—or, at least, takes up the challenge of earlier proto-modernist works like *Tristam Shandy* or *Don Quixote*—he may do so entirely accidentally, with the length and structure of the *Biographia* the result of its difficult publication history and Coleridge’s own substance abuse. Still, it is of no small interest to readers of the *Biographia* and *Lear* that Coleridge’s text theorizes textual publication as well as poetic inspiration, and that this discussion is both informed by and illuminates the Romantic rhetoric of praise. In other words, this text that seems “put together with a pitchfork” (Stephen 355) is symptomatically if by no means systematically concerned with the proper way to display a text.

At the beginning of the second volume of the *Biographia*, Coleridge develops his principles of “practical criticism” with reference to Wordsworth and Shakespeare. Coleridge’s modern admirers credit this “practical criticism” for anticipating the methods of close reading of

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28 The letter in Chapter XIII of the *Biographia* seems to me to be a revision of the anecdote attached to “Kubla Kahn,” but it also resembles the narrative Cervantes shares in his prologue. Cervantes struggles to complete *Don Quixote* and is interrupted by “a friend of mine . . . a lively and clever man” who teaches Cervantes how to invent one’s own citations (13-15).

29 See McFarland’s *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin*, particularly chapter two, for a reading of Coleridge’s lifelong anxiety and torment that “was deeper than”—but obviously encompassed—“the opium-addiction, deeper than the hypochondria, deeper than the plagiarisms, deeper than the inability to work” (108).
the twentieth-century. (Not unfairly. The phrase lends the title to I.A. Richards’s “study of literary judgment”). Before querying the modern qualities (or lack thereof) of the *Biographia* and the role *Lear* plays in their construction of a Romantic critical theory (even a theory of practice), let us consider a longer, “practical” reading of *Lear* by Coleridge, taken from his lecture. The text of the 1819 lecture on *Lear* is lost, but some of Coleridge’s notes survive. By beginning with this passage, we will clarify both our sense of Coleridge’s understanding of *Lear*, as well as the technique and problems of Romantic textual partialness. We will then examine the references to *Lear* in the *Biographia*, and examine the parallels between Coleridge and Shelley’s use of the play as an *exemplum*.

The notes included in Coleridge’s specially-printed, interleaved copy of Samuel Ayscough’s edition of the complete works are incomplete and “are often little more than cues to himself for developing a point in the lecture-room” (Foakes “Introduction” 17). As a result, reading the notes demands a kind of constructive or reconstructive approach, and perhaps we should not be surprised to find a sense of modernity to Coleridge’s insights, as it may well be projected there. Still, projected or not, the similarities between Coleridge’s brief observations on *Lear* and the conclusions drawn by modern readers abound. A brief remark identifying the “nursery-tale character of the tale,” and comparing that character to a similar reading of *Merchant of Venice* (5.2.326), reminds this reader of Freud’s “Theme of the Three Caskets.”

Connecting the Fool’s language with Caliban’s, dubbing him an “inspired Ideot” (5.2.330), suggests the tradition of reading the Fool as a disabled, “natural fool.” The blinding of

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30 Hazlitt also connects *Lear* to *Merchant*: Shylock is “a man no less sinned against than sinning” (1.228).

31 See Welsford, especially chapter 3, for more on “the court fool” who amuses by “mental deficiencies or physical deformities” (55). Christopher Moore’s *Fool*, a comic novelization of the *Lear* narrative told from the Fool’s perspective, is of some interest, particularly for its portrayal of a “natural” fool named Drool. I will read the character of the Fool in depth in my final chapter.
Gloucester revolts Coleridge, but he does not retreat from the play as Johnson does; his reaction may even anticipate twentieth-century readings of the trauma of the supra-tragic passage, such as Kott’s or Mack’s: “I will not disguise my conviction, that in this one point the Tragic has been urged beyond the outermost Mark and Ne plus Ultra of the Dramatic” (5.2.327). Coleridge argues that we feel consistent “pity” for Lear throughout the play, but also identifies with the “strange yet by no means unnatural, mixture of Selfishness, Sensibility, and Habit of Feeling” that inspires the predetermined love test (5.2.325). Both identifying the “trick” of the love test, as well as identifying Lear’s behavior as understandable and relatable, if bizarre, may prefigure a reading like Cavell’s.

On the other hand, if there are comparisons to be drawn between Coleridge’s half-finished marginalia and Lear’s modern critical tradition, those comparisons may not indicate Coleridge’s proto-modernity as much as the twentieth century’s indebtedness to Romantic rhetoric. Elsewhere in the notes, written alongside the passages from Act III depicting Lear’s madness in the storm, Coleridge conforms to the nineteenth-century convention of identifying of King Lear with the Sublime:

What a World’s Convention of Agonies—surely, never was such a scene conceived before or since—Take it but as a picture, for the eye only, it is more terrific than any a Michael Angelo inspired by a Dante could have conceived, and which none but a Michael Angelo could have executed—Or let it have been uttered to the Blind, the howlings of <convulsed> Nature would seem concerted in the voice of conscious Humanity— (5.2.333)

Here we see two contradictory impulses of the Romantic Sublime simultaneously in play: the fantastical computation of a mathematical Sublime and the impulse toward fragmentation. The scene is not exactly described, but rather equated with an incalculable figure: Michelangelo + Dante < the storm in Lear. At the same time, the image is broken down into parts, fragmented ala the unfinished ideal explicated by Burke. In order to properly grasp Shakespeare’s
accomplishment, imagine the storm as if for the eye only, or read it aloud to somebody who is blind. The idea that Shakespeare conceived of the storm (or all of nature, for that matter) as something that can be both seen and heard is ironically unnatural, or at least is not the kind of natural that is inwardly imparted by a human consciousness. “A man may see how this world goes with no eyes” (Tragedy 4.5.142-3), but one wonders why Coleridge suggests that he must.32 Again, the Romantic conception of the Shakespearean Sublime is not fragmentary simply because of its historical or biographical circumstance (i.e. these are only marginalia, so it would be unfair to read them as fully conceptualized critical statements). Identifying Lear as sublime is literally reductive, not only in the familiar method of excerpting an example, cutting out a passage to be read apart from any other passage, but also by means of limiting one’s own powers of recognition in order to display the text as one would care for it to be displayed. As with Shelley’s double-bind of sublimity, where if Lear is truly the most sublime example of the Sublime it cannot be recognized quite as such, Coleridge’s reading of Lear is destined towards fragmentation.

That this reading is reductive does not mean it is not successful. Conventions become conventions for a reason, and this is how the Sublime “works.” Coleridge’s reading is certainly powerfully phrased. Proof of the successful reception of the presented, finished reading can be found in the surviving record of the lecture proper, a review in the Courier:

The subject with which Mr. Coleridge closed his first series of Lectures upon Shakespeare, last Thursday, was Lear; and we appeal to a numerous and delighted auditory for the impression which he produced. We shall not attempt to follow him through his admirable illustrations of that beautiful and most affecting drama. . . . [The fool’s] wild and incoherent language, still “babbling the food of anguish to the mind of Lear” (to use the happy expression of Mr. Coleridge himself), his half-mysterious, yet always shrewd, rhapsodics, and his fond attachment to his master,

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32 This seems to me to be precisely the kind of example that McGann has in mind when he reads the Romantic vision as a false consciousness.
were skilfully displayed. The same praise may be bestowed upon his touching elucidations of Lear’s character. (qtd. in Coleridge 5.2.335)\(^33\)

As with Shelley appealing to his fellow poets, the reviewer makes an informal appeal to a contemporary authority. It may be impossible to *argue* that an “impression” exists, but perhaps it is shared. That this is a trope of rhetorical oratory mirrors the performance of the lecture itself, a (to borrow Coleridge’s own phrase) *convention* of “illustrations” and “display.” In a comment by Alfred Harbage quoted by Foakes, we are reassured that “Coleridge’s is the criticism with immediacy, the power to evoke the works criticized; when he speaks, Shakespeare is there” (qtd. in “Introduction” 18). *Lear*, more than any other play, seems to function for Coleridge as a *symbol* rather than a text, even an ambiguous text.\(^34\) It may be praised, even worshipped, but, at its best, it cannot be read. The text of the notes in Coleridge’s copy of the plays speaks to this avoidance of reading. The ideal moments in the play are Shakespeare’s depiction of the storm, yet the bulk of Coleridge’s analysis in the “practical” sense focuses on the character of Edmund, as he is presented in the opening scene.\(^35\)

Coleridge’s illustrative, symbolic approach seems antithetical to, say, William Hazlitt’s use of long-form quotation in his *Characters of Shakespear’s Plays*, but the two methods are parallel examples of the Romantic *deictic* impulse.\(^36\) Note how the reviewer in the *Courier* praises Coleridge’s skillful “display.” In his discussion of the critical reception of Southey in the

\(^33\) As always, Romantic praise is coupled or balanced with blame: the reviewer celebrates Coleridge’s illustrations in contract to the “glib nonsense” and “violent distortion” of Hazlitt (5.2.334).

\(^34\) See the first lay sermon in the *Statesman’s Manual*, on the difference between symbol and allegory, and how it is faith which navigates the former. An allegory is “but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is itself nothing but an abstraction”; a symbol is characterized by a “translucence of the Eternal through and in the Temporal” (6.30).

\(^35\) See Coleridge 5.2.325-9.

\(^36\) See Bate *Constitutions* 185-201 for a reading of Hazlitt’s use of “casual” quotation. In the next chapter, I argue that the *length* of Hazlitt’s quotations of Shakespeare has largely been under-examined in attention to the *breadth* of those quotations over his variety of writings.
*Biographia*, Coleridge clearly formulates a theory of such a deictic criticism and how it applies to the practice of editing. Still, regarding *Lear*, this power of evocation—illustrating and displaying the elements of the drama without, apparently, quoting them very much—is the ideal for all Romantic Shakespeare criticism. The “illustration” is directly related to the decline of inspiration formulated by Shelley, and the historical resistance to critical annotation that developed at the end of the eighteenth-century.\(^{37}\) It is the height of Shakespeare criticism, worthy of repeated praise, because it is imitative of Shakespeare himself. Why interpret Shakespeare when you can present “him” via an epideictic display?

Analyzing the Shakespearean text by illustrating his text is well in accord with the discourse of the sublime. Neil Hertz has demonstrated that it was long customary to identify the Sublime by imitating the Sublime, thereby overriding the lines of demarcation between the text and its interpretation (1). In particular, such an effect is produced through a “play of text with quotation and of quotations with one another” (2). Coleridge demonstrates *Lear*’s sublimity through a performance of sublimity that produces an affecting “impression” comparable to the “most affecting” *Lear*, which is incalculably praiseworthy. It is so praiseworthy that the reviewer shall not even attempt to parse out the actual arguments, recalling Shelley’s own avoidance of reading.

The discourse of sublimity begets the discourse of sublimity,\(^{38}\) just as Goneril’s invocation of the *topos* of inexpressibility can only be followed by Regan’s even less expressible *outdoing*. (I will treat the *topos* of outdoing at length in the next chapter.) Logically, the only

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\(^{37}\) Again, the source of this critical impulse may be found in Longinus’s treatise on the Sublime. Longinus advocates “the imitation and emulation of the great writers and poets of the past” as a “way that leads to sublimity” (Section 13, 131).

\(^{38}\) Gelley argues that the *exemplar* works this way as well: “the example turns into an exemplar and its function becomes that of propagating itself, creating multiples . . .” (3).
The proper way to venerate the unfinished Sublime is to perform unfinishedness. As the praise builds, so does the fragmentation. This is not a productive unreadability, such as Derrida’s model of the unreadable as the edge that directs one towards reading.\(^{39}\) It is an open-endedness that functions as a reductive dead-end.\(^{40}\) Even if Coleridge had properly edited and published his lectures, it seems as though they still would have been fragmented and *Lear* would have been fragmented with them.

Before turning to the references to *Lear* in the *Biographia*, let us consider the discussions of quotation and editing within that massive tome. Coleridge’s understanding of quotation as a device serving both rhetorical and aesthetic purposes is most developed in his prescription of an ideal edition of Southey’s poetry, and the need to defend that poetry from a hostile readership:

> In times of old, books were as religious oracles; as literature advanced, they next became venerable preceptors; they then descended to the rank of instructive friends; and as their numbers increased, they sunk still lower to that of entertaining companions; and at present they seem degraded into culprits to hold up their hands at the bar of every self-elected, yet not the less peremptory, judge . . . (7.1.57)

The “sinking” of authoring and reading seems to materialize the model of decline that we see elucidated by Shelley. Readers and reading suffer from the existence of too many books; authors suffer even more from the existence of too many readers.\(^{41}\) Poets and philosophers, in an idealized “times of old” not dissimilar from the image of Greece posited by Shelley’s *Defense*, were able to address themselves exclusively to “learned readers.” As the extant bibliography expanded, authors “aimed to conciliate the graces of ‘the candid reader,’” so that “the critic still

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\(^{39}\) See “Living On—Borderlines,” a text that partly attends to Shelley’s fragmented “Triumph of Life”: “The unreadable is not the opposite of the readable but rather the ridge [arête] that also gives it momentum” (95).

\(^{40}\) See Weiskel 48 for a critique of the negative sublime as a “transcendent dead-end.” See also Hertz’s reading of Weiskel in clarifying the related concept of “blockage” (49-53). See Park *Hazlitt* for a thorough discussion of “the demand for an imaginative or poetic openness [as] the central characteristic of the experiential response” of late Romantic theory, “whether it appears as a demand for negative capability as in Keats, imaginative sincerity as in Hazlitt, or a ‘dialectical open-endedness’ as in the case of Arnold” (36-7).

\(^{41}\) See Bromwich 119 for a discussion about the Romantics’ anxiety over the popularity of “fashionable literature.”
[would rise] as the author sunk” (7.1.59). The early works of a soul like Southey’s—marked, Coleridge admits, with the “faults as might have been anticipated in a young and rapid writer” (7.1.55)—were subject to such critical “calumny.” Coleridge prescribes “an excerpta of all the passages, in which his writings, name, and character have been attacked, from the pamphlets and periodical works of the last twenty years, may be an accompaniment [to Southey’s collected works]” (7.1.57).

In other words, the academic editorial apparatus has sunk from Dr. Johnson’s “necessary evil” to something purely evil, a means of displaying only what is deserving of epideictic blame. Where Johnson’s variorum edition presented a history of views on individual passages and plays—some that he agreed with, some that he disagreed with, many that he reproduced without comment—this approach was meant to encourage future editions and critics. Coleridge, on the other hand, prescribes a reproduction of earlier criticism to forestall future reading. It is perhaps no coincidence that, unlike Johnson and his colleagues at the “birth” of Shakespeare studies (to borrow Sherbo’s phrase), the Romantics demonstrate virtually no interest in the differences between the quarto and Folio texts. Here, with their concern of displaying their sense of Lear rather than an analysis of what Lear actually depicts, they ironically channel their foe Alexander Pope. The drive toward critical illustration is a descendent of his much-maligned editorial emendation.

If the method of extended quotation differs from the device of illustration from Coleridge’s lectures, the goal is more or less identical: a pure display, an epideixis without the supplementary epi- of auxetic amplification. For Southey’s poetry to be ideally published, it

42 Lynch: “Johnson had his eye on future critics when he vows to offer a text with as many variants as possible . . .” (108)
43 See Amarasinghe 137-176 (“Anti-Augustan Criticism”).
should be presented in such a way to guarantee readers absorb its loveliness; it is his critics that deserve the reproachful editorial framing. We will see, in the next chapter’s discussion of Hazlitt, several examples of the practice of long-form quotation in Romantic criticism of Shakespeare: here we have an enunciation of its theory. The Romantics praise various texts as sublime, yet the Sublime is famously a concept that is less discussed-in-and-of-itself than it is treated heuristically. In order to impart a sense of the Sublime in passages identified as Sublime, the Romantics treat their quoted examples as though the sublimity therein is self-evident. This is both a method and a philosophy—if the Sublime inspires the movement of the writer’s mind, it will similarly inspire the move of the reader’s—and analysis can only diffuse the claim of Sublimity. That this is also the case for the decidedly un-Sublime criticism of Southey is merely the result of epideictic blame proceeding along the same dictates of epideictic praise, the pointing of the epideixis both the blamers and the blamed deserve can best take place in a displayed, barely edited text.

Editing is derived from the Latin edo, meaning to put forth. But it is related it, or is at least homonymic with, the root word for eat or consume. To praise his friend, Coleridge idealizes a method of epideictic quotation where presenting or putting forth Southey’s greatness is an act of bare, nonbiased editing. The act of editing and citation, the severing of a portion from a whole, is as much a bite as a cut. This cut or bite drives the reading even as it threatens to consume the reading. The threat of self-consumption links the familiar rhetoric of epideixis—so familiar that Coleridge ends this paen to Southey with a quote from Pindar’s odes, to cement the

44 The OED’s etymology for “edit” is edit-us, a past participle of edere (“to put forth”); it shares many verb forms with the verb edere, a synonym for esse (“to eat”). A further connection between the homonyms could be found in the use of esse (edere) in the phrase ut edit de patella, or a putting forth of “offerings for the gods.” At any rate, there seems to me to be a spectral commentary present in the linguistic roots of the Romantics’ methodology, epitomized in Coleridge’s editing rather than reading Southey. He thinks that he can innocently put the text forth, present it for display. But that cannot be done without also consuming (part of) the text himself.
comparison—with both Shelley’s notion of self-consuming sublimity of poetry and the occasionally “violent fragmentation” of quotation in the discourse of the Sublime from Longinus to Benjamin.

The Romantic critical Sublime is a subset if not a complete recasting of the epideictic tradition. The critical treatment of Lear, as the exemplary figure in Romantic literary theory, is founded upon an anti-analytical model of sublimity that we might better understand as Epideictic-critical. Lear’s sublimity is so much higher than every other figure of sublimity—recall the equation of Dante added to Michelangelo from Coleridge’s marginalia—that for the Romantic critic it can exceed even the deictic impulse toward quotation. (Hazlitt calls this our wish to pass the play over in silence). As with Shelley’s tentative discussion of what “may be judged to be the most perfect specimen of dramatic art existing in the world” (17), Coleridge’s commentary on the play in the Biographia is virtually nonexistent. But Coleridge’s references to Lear in the Biographia imply something more than the logic of exempla (i.e. given its status as a figure of exempla, Lear needs no discussion). He suggests that the reader is a figure capable of reconstructing what is lost in the model of authorial decline posited by Shelley.

In the discussion of the non-dramatic verse, Coleridge appeals to the authority of his reader: “for unrivalled instances of this excellence, the reader’s own memory will refer him to the Lear . . .” (7.2.24). In other words, just as Shakespeare is different, Lear is different from the corpus of Shakespeare. To clarify the exemplarity of a “Lucrece” or “Venus and Adonis,” Coleridge invokes Lear as the exemplum of the exemplary. Yet Lear achieves that unique

45 See Burrow 1-5 for a reading of a similar reference to Pindar by Ezra Pound.

46 See note 23 in the previous chapter.

47 Coleridge: “The power of poetry is, by a single word perhaps, to instil that energy into the mind, which compels the imagination to produce the picture” (5.1.362).
impression by living on in the reader’s (no doubt faulty) memories. In his brief comments on the play, Lacan will invite his seminar’s attendees to read the play again. Coleridge asks his readers to remember it, as Lear will always be better in the theater of the mind than it is even on the page. Younglim Han compares the Romantic critics to the twentieth-century theorists of reader response theory, yet in his understanding of Lear, Coleridge may be far more radical. He does not see the reader as crafting the meaning of Lear; he sees the reader as improving Lear.

By my count, there are only five explicit references to Lear in the entirety of the Biographia: in a footnote discussing the use of double epithets (7.1.6), as an example to distinguish between the imagination and the fancy in chapter IV, in the appeal to the reader’s memory in Chapter XV, in a “mere transcription” of Wordsworth’s account of a conversation with Klopstock (7.2.203), and in a previously printed review of Charles Maturin’s tragedy Bertram. It is the last instance that interests us most, as it relates directly to the discussion of ideally editing Southey (or any deserving poet).

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48 See Weiskel 157-62 for a difficult, but illuminating, discussion of the role that memory plays for Wordsworth’s egotistical Sublime, and how Coleridge’s formulation of the “secondary Imagination” conforms to this “circular dialectic of narcissism” (158).

49 Not only is this indicative of an egotistical Sublime, it is so at the expense of breaking with Longinus’s prescriptions for the Sublime, which account for both memory and rereading: “For a piece is truly great only if it can stand up to repeated examination, and if it is difficult, or, rather, impossible to resist its appeal, and it remains firmly and ineffaceably in the memory” (Section 7, 120).

50 This note succinctly interrelates the deictic impulses of Romantic praise criticism with the rhetorical devices of exemplarity and auctoritas: “the authority of Milton and Shakespeare may be usefully pointed out to young authors” (7.1.6.n).

51 Engell suggests that the reason to “make up the requisite space” in the Biographia with Coleridge’s anonymous review of Bertram was three-fold: “(1) he had it on hand; (2) he might have felt Drury Lane took Bertram instead of Zapolya (which was not the case); (3) he was atoning for letting his review in five issues of the Courier appear anonymously, a practice he attacks in Biographia Literaria” (“Biographia” 62). I doubt that Coleridge was “atoning” for violating his own principles. If so, he violates a few others, and inadvertently praises Bertram: reprinting the review of Bertram this way conforms to the methods of editorial-blame that he prescribes for Southey’s harshest critics. The original letters to the Courier are reprinted in the appendixes of the Princeton edition of the Biographia: see 7.2.257-9.
The Romantic ideal of praise-criticism made via editing reaches a kind of apex in the final chapters of the *Biographia*, where the chapters of an authored autobiography or literary treatise become something closer to edited appendixes. This miscellany includes letters to and from Wordsworth, diary entries, interviews, and the records of an imagined trial of a “defendant” who dares to enjoy modern sentimental drama as much as those of Shakespeare. This mock-trial—treating the witness as hostile, Coleridge’s imagined plaintiff badgers the admirer of “modern sentimental plays” by repeatedly asking him why “do you pretend to admire *Shakespeare*?” (7.2.188)—is drawn from a letter written by Coleridge sent from Germany in 1798 (and previously published in *The Friend*).52 But it prefigures the kind of rhetorical assault he writes as an older critic.

Reviewing *Bertram*, a play that is “a melancholy proof of the depravation of the public mind” (7.2.229), Coleridge is particularly repulsed by an allusion to *King Lear* (“these two lines consist in a senseless plagiarism from the counterfeited madness of Edgar in Lear”) (7.2.232). The image in question (“He rides the night-mare thro’ the wizzard woods”) bares as much resemblance to Edgar’s song (“Swithin footed thrice the wold, / A met the night mare and her nine foal”) (*Tragedy* 3.4.107-8) as Edgar’s allusion surely does to its own source material. One need not praise Maturin to see Coleridge’s blame as hysterical and unfair: alluding to Shakespeare’s own practice of allusion in a nonsense verse is senseless? Given the accusations leveled at Coleridge himself, it is more than a little ironic that Coleridge accuses Maturin of plagiarism. Whether one reads Coleridge’s use of his unacknowledged sources as (in his own

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52 See Haney 146-147 for a discussion of this trial scene in “Satyrane’s Letters,” and how the scene illustrates both Coleridge’s understanding of drama and the disorientation inherent in the “Coleridgean sublime.”
terms) a disgusting copy or a revitalized imitation, his critical orientation is inarguably one of re-
display.\textsuperscript{53}

But most importantly, the entire evisceration of \textit{Bertram}\textemdashprinted at the end of the
\textit{Biographia}, in those sections that feel put together with a pitchfork, in a kind of accompanying
appendix forgotten to be labeled as such\textsuperscript{54}\textemdashis an exact reversal of what Coleridge prescribed for
an ideal edition of Southey. Not unlike those reviews that Southey endured, this reading of
\textit{Bertram} originally appeared as an anonymous review published in the \textit{Courier},\textsuperscript{55} reprinted here
in the \textit{addenda}, as a testament to its own mean-spiritedness.\textsuperscript{56} As a result, Coleridge’s self-
editing, his use of display, quoting himself quoting \textit{Bertram}, consumes the earlier argument
about the ideal edition of Southey. This self-consuming editing is all in defense of \textit{Lear}, a play
that is not analyzed, only invoked, because for the Romantic Epideicti-critical project, \textit{Lear} is
less a play than a figure. The lecture on \textit{Lear} reviewed in the \textit{Courier} would be delivered the
next year, but here we have a sense of why it was never, and could never, be submitted for
publication despite the purported excellence of its remarks. Following the logic of the Romantic
Epideicti-critical Sublime, \textit{Lear} has been reduced to a symbolic, immaterial ideal, and a near-
total abstraction.

\textsuperscript{53} See note 22 in the previous chapter.

\textsuperscript{54} I cannot say whether Søren Kierkegaard was aware of Coleridge’s \textit{Biographia}. However, there are deep stylistic
resonances between its seemingly slapdash composition (or compilation) and the fictionally edited works of
Kierkegaard’s “indirect communication.” I will examine Kierkegaard’s play on editing in \textit{Either/Or} and \textit{Stages on
Life’s Way} in chapter four of this dissertation.

\textsuperscript{55} See note 51.

\textsuperscript{56} Bromwich reads Hazlitt as suffering a “lifetime of abuse” from Coleridge (\textit{Hazlitt} 9). Wu’s biography of Hazlitt
similarly characterizes Coleridge as a bullying figure in Hazlitt’s life. The famous night in 1798, when a nineteen-
year old Hazlitt met Coleridge and Wordsworth, is described as “the defining experience of his life” (19), both due
to the exhilarating “glimpse of the future” offered by meeting two geniuses, and by a glimpse of the mistreatment he
would often face from the older poets: “Hazlitt remembered the exchange for the rest of his life, and was deeply hurt
by it” (14).
Coleridge’s various conversions are often considered when reading his poetry, his criticism, and his retirement from poetry. Turning to an excerpt from the 1836 edition of the *Specimens of the Table Talk*, we may see a turning away from the habit of praising Shakespeare’s dramas as Sublime:

Schiller has the material Sublime: to produce an effect, he sets you a whole town on fire, and throws infants with their mothers into the flames, or locks up a father in an old tower. But Shakespeare drops a handkerchief, and the same or greater effects follow.

Lear is the most tremendous effort of Shakespeare as a poet; Hamlet as a philosopher or meditater; and Othello is the union of the two. There is something gigantic and unformed in the former two; but in the latter, every thing assumes its due place and proportion, and the whole mature powers of his mind are displayed in admirable equilibrium. (14.2.31-2)

As is the case with Shelley, Coleridge intentionally contrasts the aims or achievements of a Continental dramatist against Shakespeare, in order to praise the latter. This is clearly an invoking of what Curtius calls the *topos* of “outdoing,” a familiar device for the later Romantics, and one with a particular political, or nationalistic significance. Both Shelley and Coleridge praise Shakespeare for *out*doing another dramatist or poet without *over*doing it. What takes Schiller a flaming infant to accomplish, Shakespeare does with a dropped handkerchief. While Calderon needs music, dancing, and religious ritual to recall the majesty of the Greeks, Shakespeare can impersonate the passions without the formal excesses of theatrical philosophy (or rhetoric).

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57 Coleridge: “All things and modes of action shape themselves anew in the best of MILTON; while SHAKESPEARE becomes all things, yet for ever remaining himself. O what great men hast thou not produced, England! my country!” (7.2.28). Such a nationalistic spirit informs the *Defense*: for Shelley, Shakespeare is greater than a Spanish dramatist, as he is greater than a German one for Coleridge. As we shall see in the next chapter, Hazlitt takes Shakespeare’s *exemplary* greatness as a given, but he is troubled by the Germans’ superiority at reading Shakespeare. See Nataranjan on Hazlitt’s reading of Schlegel, with the *Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays* meant partly as a practical response Schlegel’s “mysticism” (“William Hazlitt” 79-81).
Whereas Shakespeare’s perceived lack of reading and awareness of classical dramatic principle frustrated some of his eighteenth-century editors and critics, the Romantics idealized this perception of a natural genius, proof of Milton’s vision of Shakespeare as “fancy’s child.”

For the Epideicti-critical reader, it is precisely this naturalistic, savant-like quality of Shakespeare’s genius leads to the “tremendous,” “unformed” achievements of Hamlet and Lear.

Still, it is Coleridge’s late interest in unity that leads him to prefer Othello and, essentially, invert the argument from the Defense, where Shelley takes the ideal of unfinishedness so seriously that he renders his own argument incapable of saying what it is he wants it to say: that Lear is the greatest work of drama ever composed.

Coleridge’s comments have been, like Shelley’s, abridged to suggest a less problematic praise of Lear (i.e. that it is Shakespeare’s “most tremendous effort”). The pronouncement is much more complicated. Lear’s “tremendous,” “gigantic,” and “unformed” qualities all obviously ally the play with the Sublime. Only Hamlet comes close to being such an “effort,” but its vastness and unfinishedness (to return to Burke’s phrasing) are restrained by meditation and philosophy. Yet, for the openly Christian and conservative Coleridge of 1822, this unfinishedness and philosophizing are no longer his ideal. Othello, as a “whole” representation, is preferable to the implied wildness of the storm and frenzied ranting of Poor Tom and mad

58 For example, see Rowe: “If one undertook to examine the greatest part of these [works by Shakespeare] by those rules which are establish’d by Aristotle, and taken from the model of the Grecian stage, it would be no very hard task to find a great many faults: But as Shakespeare liv’d under a kind of mere light of nature, and had never been made acquainted with the regularity of those written precepts, so it would be hard to judge him by a law he knew nothing of” (15).

59 See Bate Imagination 6.

60 Shelley’s Defense was written a year before the conversation recorded in the Table Talk, and not published till after both his and Coleridge’s deaths. I mean only to show the conventionality of their praise of Lear—as sublime, as inexpressible—and that in this moment of late conversion, Coleridge clarifies that conventionality precisely by resisting it.
The “admirable equilibrium” of Shakespeare’s mature mind putting everything in its right place in the right proportions fulfills Coleridge’s late interest in unity and “accordance,” particularly the accordance he finds between Christianity and reason at the close of the Biographia: “the Scheme of Christianity, as taught in the Liturgy and Homilies of our Church, though not discoverable by human Reason, is yet in accordance with it” (7.2.247). Shakespeare as exemplum or symbolic figure wears many hats: the natural genius, fancy’s child, and the measured applier of philosophical depth and formal subtlety towards an ideal “unity.” It is not unexpected that an ambiguous conception of Shakespeare-as-symbol will be applied indiscriminately to fit variances of poetic ideals (that seems to be more or less the history of Shakespearean reception history), but it is a testament to the imprecise nature of the Romantic Sublime that such an application can be made towards a near rejection of the Romantic Sublime itself. As with Shelley, what reading we find here is thoroughly selective, and self-consuming. To my mind, this reception itself indicates that King Lear is not unformed, but is a remarkably precise prefiguration of its own history of misreception.

What Burke calls “unfinished,” Coleridge calls “unformed,” and while the gigantic, unformed sublimity of Lear may not be as fine an accomplishment as Othello’s equilibrium, it is still worthy of praise. As is the case with Shelley, Coleridge is caught in the tropes of sublime rhetoric, where the critique of the object of sublimity must also attempt to achieve sublimity. By the time of these conversations in Table Talk, sublimity is not the ideal for Coleridge that it is for the other Romantics; when he recognizes previous attempts to perform the Sublime of Romantic praise-criticism, he is self-critical. Consider another use of “unformed” in Table Talk, in

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61 See McFarland Forms of Ruin for a reading of the Romantics’ conceptualization of a part’s relation to a whole as fundamentally anxious: “both the sublime and the symbolic, accordingly, have in common a diasparactive structure: the object itself, which is present to the mind, implies a larger whole, which is not” (30). We will examine an alternate conception of literary wholeness in our final chapter, with Lacan’s use of Hamlet to distinguish between literary and clinical subjects.
reference to the *Biographia*: “the metaphysical disquisition at the end of the first volume of the ‘Biographia Literaria’ is unformed and immature;—it contains the fragments of truth, but it is not fully thought out” (14.2.293). By contrast, this older and wiser Coleridge of 1834 (less than a month before his death) thinks contentedly that “it is wonderful to myself to think how infinitely more profound my views now are, and yet how much clearer they are withal. The circle is completing” (14.2.294).

Of course, we will have to take Coleridge’s word for it that these thoughts on metaphysics were so much clearer and more profound than what is found in the *Biographia*. But one cannot help but notice the irony in disavowing the earlier “fragments” in the second-hand, indirectly reported conversations of *Table Talk*. Nor, for that matter, do I think we should forget the similar apparatus at work when we read Coleridge’s lectures on Shakespeare. There is a very real parallel between our position as a reader of Coleridge’s adulated Shakespeare criticism and the position of Shelley’s reading of the similarly adulated, similarly fragmented, but presumably *perfect* Athenian drama. The time of the reader is never the time of the author, but since what Coleridge speaks of in *Table Talk* was never properly “authored” at all, the problem of Romantic temporality is particularly vexing here. What seems to be clear is that the earlier Coleridge, of the *Biographia*, is retroactively a finer reader of the Romantic critical project—including the lectures and conversations he had not delivered yet—as that is where he writes *intentionally* in fragments.

The methods of “practical criticism” that Coleridge bequeaths modern critical reading are born from such a fragment, namely, the famous interruption in Chapter XIII of the “metaphysical disquisition” alluded to in the *Table Talk*:

Thus far had the work been transcribed for the press, when I received the following letter from a friend, whose practical judgement I have had ample reason to estimate
and revere, and whose taste and sensibility preclude all the excuses which my self-love might possibly have prompted me to set up in plea against the decision of advisors of equal good sense, but with less tact and feeling. (7.1.300)

This interrupting friend recalls the visitor on business from Porlock in the accompanying note to “Kubla Kahn,” so the passage can be indirectly read as a commentary on Coleridge’s early poetry (just as it immediately precedes the long reading of Wordsworth’s in Chapter XIV).62

This friend, whose appearance fragments the “metaphysical disquisition” and who warns in the excerpted letter that Coleridge has “done too much, and yet not enough” (7.1.302), is unusually well read. “Unusual” not in the sense that he is well-versed in Kantian metaphysics (he confesses that the contrary is the case), but because he is capable of an impossible reading.

Chapter XIII, the excerpted anecdote informs us, was not only written but virtually published (“transcribed for the press”); the friend, apparently, has access to the future-published work, given his ability to refer to specific page numbers in the printed text. Furthermore, the friend not only has access to what we have already read, though what at the time had not yet been published, but also to a longer draft of Chapter XIII that would “amount to so little as an hundred pages” (7.1.303). The letter appears, interrupting the draft after we read a mere four pages of this mammoth phantom chapter, in a Sternean move of cutting off the analysis (or narrative) before it even begins: “as for the PUBLIC, I do not hesitate a moment in advising and urging you to withdraw the Chapter from the present work…” (7.1.302). Coleridge, “in consequence of this very judicious letter” (7.1.304), does exactly that.63

62 See McGann’s reading of “Kubla Kahn” in The Romantic Ideology (98-104). McGann sees the poem as a statement of purpose of sorts for the Romantic ideology: “The poem is, as everyone agrees, about the poetical faculty itself, and the poem’s central problem—that this faculty may lose its potency—is finally set aside in a set of gestures which show its continuous operation to the poem’s end” (100). I understand this “setting aside” as a direct parallel of what I identify as the defensive turning away from the crisis in reading King Lear.

63 See McFarland Forms of Ruin 351-2 for a discussion of how the letter from the unnamed friend informs “the provisional nature” of the Biographia “dictated by the futurity” of the unfinished magnum opus (350).
The subject capable of such an impossible reading—that is, with an eye simultaneously on the finished, published document, the raw, unedited manuscript, and the ideal, unfinished, and never-to-be-finished text—is, obviously, Coleridge himself. The apparatus of editing interrupts the temporality of both composition and reading; just as editorial display may save Southey’s poetry from critical reading, it saves Coleridge’s ideal philosophy from having to actually be written. In these fascinating passages, which suggest the stylistic invention of Kierkegaard’s indirect communication, Coleridge is not only announcing his inability to adequately discuss the concept of Imagination, nor is he simply presenting editing as a means of displaying praise (even a potentially ironic self-praise). Expressing a “darker purpose,” Coleridge presents the fragmenting of editing as a method of encouraging a literally endless praise (Tragedy 1.1.34). What is not included in the edited fragment can be postulated; this means that what is written but not excerpted (but still, synecdoche-like, is related to the excerpted part) is not ontologically different for the reader than what is not written at all. This is how Coleridge is able to speak flatteringly about his own “infinitely more profound views” in Table Talk: they are infinite because they are unwritten, which makes them endless, and—though we will have to take his word for it—Sublime. As the friend puts it, Coleridge says too much (recalling the mathematical, uncountable Sublime) and not enough (recalling the unfinished, reductive Sublime). The circle was already complete when the ideal of its failure to be completed was postulated. It is just that the circle is formed by the “circular dialectic of narcissism” (Weiskel 158), circumscribed by that ego’s defenses.

The failure to complete a theory, and the accompanying aestheticization of that failure, is followed by the next volume’s models of “practical criticism”: long, formal readings of Shakespeare and Wordsworth’s verse, drawn out from extended block quotations. That this
criticism is formal, or practical, does not mean it is not epideictic. Reading “The Thorn,” Coleridge is reminded of Milton, and “reflect[s] with delight, how little a mere theory, though of his own workmanship, interferes with the processes of genuine imagination in a man of true poetic genius” (7.2.59-60). That the poetic faculty and accomplishment is decidedly anti-analytical may not be particularly inoffensive to modern readers. But it is the application of this illogical ideal to a series of logical principles that returns the Romantics again and again to an erasure of poetry. Hence, the highest praise Coleridge reserves for Wordsworth is not for what he has written, but for what he is “capable of producing”: “the FIRST GENUINE PHILOSOPHIC POEM” (7.2.156). For the Romantic reader, it is far preferable to imagine a better poem than it is to contend with the poems that we have; this is why Coleridge refers his reader to their memory of Lear, rather than the text itself. To return to the text itself risks the recognition that it differs from how you remember its ideality being displayed.\footnote{See note 49.} Lear is sweet, the remembered Lear is sweeter, and the unwritten Lear is sweetest of all.

We are discussing the sublimity of unfinishedness, explicated by Burke. We are also discussing tropes of exemplarity and inexpressibility so common to, perhaps so required by, the discourse of praise. But we are also examining what Shakespeare calls “nothing,” again and again, throughout King Lear. The privileging of nothing as a means of praising King Lear or King Lear, as with the propensity to stage mock trials, aligns the Romantics with the imaginary Lear himself. It does not align them with Shakespeare.
CHAPTER 3
KING LEAR IN ROMANTIC CRITICAL PRACTICE: TOPOI OF INEXPRESSIBILITY IN HAZLITT AND LAMB

We have examined how, in Romanticism’s view of poetic composition that privileges inspiration over “labor and study,” the Romantic critic or reader avoids analysis of the work of art, instead treating the work of art’s impression. The inevitable failure to do justice in language to the passionate reflection on the work of art is used to justify idealizing the work of art itself as a sublime failure, the result of an unavoidable decline from the initial inspiration. Even in Coleridge’s directive for a practical criticism, this ideality of the unfinished-as-infinite leads to the unreadable as a literary ideal, with the never-written as the ultimate ideal that outdoes even the unreadable. In Romantic critical theory, Lear fills a unique role of exemplarity, not exactly unwritten, but certainly sublimely unreadable. Any case for the play’s authority makes itself by invoking or asserting the notion that the play is not only the better for being incomprehensible, but that any reading of the play denigrates Lear’s incomprehensible sublimity.¹

¹ See also Friedrich Schlegel’s twentieth fragment: “A classical text must never be entirely comprehensible. But those who are cultivated and who cultivate themselves must always want to learn more from it” (Lucinde 144-5). Hazlitt’s Characters of Shakespear’s Plays announces itself at the outset as a correction of (or improver of) A.W. Schlegel’s lectures on drama:

The only / circumstances in which it was thought not impossible to improve on the manner in which the German critic has executed this part of his design, were in improving an appearance of mysticism in his style, not very attractive to the English reader, and in bringing illustrations from particular passages of the plays themselves, of which Schlegel’s work, from the extensiveness of his plan, did not admit. (1.86)

That the improvement of A.W. Schlegel’s reading of the plays necessitates an illustrative display is obviously in accord with the deictic impulse that I argue is intrinsic to Romantic criticism of Shakespeare and the Sublime. As we shall see with our attention to Hazlitt’s revival of the topos of inexpressibility, he is not unconcerned with incomprehensibility either. The inexpressible Sublime seems to me very much in the spirit of mysticism that he purports to overtake. In a phrase that seem to anticipate Wittgenstein, Lear is a play that Hazlitt wishes we could all pass over in silence; such things that cannot be put into words are called the mystical in the Tractatus (6.522). See below for a reading of Hazlitt’s opposition to philosophical “abstraction,” and how that leads inevitably to an abstraction of a different sort. See also Friedrich Schlegel’s discussion of the above fragment in his essay “On Incomprehensibility” (Lucinde 259-71) where he praises its prefigurative character (“what I prophetically set forth as a maxim . . .”) (269). According to McFarland, Hazlitt’s Liber Amoris “can vie with Friedrich Schlegel’s Lucinde as a key text for Romantic passion” (Romantic Cruxes 53).
In this chapter, I will examine two extended epideictic treatments of Lear that better personify the critical “practice” that the Romantic era, and Coleridge in particular, begets.² Both William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb explicitly align Lear with the discourse of the Romantic Sublime though, even more pronouncedly than Shelley and Coleridge, this invocation of the Sublime is a barely veiled performance of the classical *topoi* of inexpressibility and outdoing. If Romantic poetry is, in Abrams’s influential reading, an attempt to be more lamp than mirror, Romantic critical practice, with its emphasis on illustrative “description” is a textual mirror presented as lamp. To push the metaphor that much further, we shall see that what I have referred to as the Epideicti-critical sublime is an ironical mirror, where the Romantic’s reading of Lear’s reflects his own misreading.

*King Lear*, as well as modern Shakespeare criticism, begins not only with the language of praise, but with the language of praise that functions by calling language’s very function into doubt. Before turning to the arguments of Hazlitt and Lamb, and their shared invocation of the inexpressibility *topos*, let us examine how the same *topos* informs *King Lear*, the text that they find so inexpressibly sublime:

*Gon.* Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;

Dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty;

Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare,

No less than life; with grace, health, beauty, honour;

As much as child e’er loved or father found;

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² I mentioned Coleridge’s bullying of Hazlitt in note 56 of the previous chapter. See also McFarland’s chapter on “Hazlitt’s Struggle with Coleridge” in *Romantic Cruses* 53-89 (especially his disagreements with Bromwich on 74). McFarland is also quite helpful on Lamb’s relationship with Coleridge (“Lamb never lost the intensity of his need for Coleridge”) (*Romantic Crues* 39n.). See also Felicity James’s *Charles Lamb, Coleridge, and Wordsworth: Reading Friendship in the 1790s* for a reading of the various textual and personal interactions between the Romantics.
A love that makes breath poor and speech unable.

Beyond all manner of so much I love you. (Tragedy 1.1.53-9)

If Goneril’s rhetoric is excessive, it is also wholly conventional. Her claim to love her father more than language can express, ironically claiming in speech to be unable to speak, invokes the familiar “emphasis upon the inability to cope with the subject” that Curtius identifies as the “standard topos in the eulogy of rulers” (159). The topos is not exclusively eulogistic; Lear may not realize that he is invoking his own eulogy, but he is certainly aware that he is invoking something “standard” for “rulers.” Of course, the inexpressibility topos is not only used to praise the dead and it is not only used to praise rulers; Curtius remarks dryly that there are examples in “all ages” (159). The topos appears at least as early as the Psalms (the LORD’s knowledge is “too wonderful for me: it is high, I cannot attain unto it”) (139:6), it is perhaps the central conceit of the Paradiso, and it is de rigueur for Petrarchan love poetry in the Renaissance. According to Joel Fineman, the topos of inexpressibility is not only universal, but “also seem[s] required by the poetry of praise” (117).

For the Romantics, Edmund may be a largely sympathetic figure of “the united strength and beauty of earliest Manhood,” comparable to Hamlet (Coleridge 5.2.326), but there is no reproach sufficient to account for Goneril and Regan’s vileness. As blame is nearly always paired with praise, Hazlitt will find Goneril and Regan unspeakably wicked (“so thoroughly

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3 I find much to admire in Lynda Boose’s claim that Lear is staging a pseudo-wedding with the love-test and would only add that I think he is staging a pseudo-funeral as well, albeit one where the attendees come to praise their king and not bury him (yet). Regardless, just as the epideictic mode is not exclusively a discourse of praise, it is not exclusively eulogistic either, which is precisely why the scene, by invoking a practically universal tradition, is able to evoke the particular anxieties of incest and death. See also Freud’s famous reading of the play in “The Theme of the Three Caskets,” where the enacting of reaction-formation allows Lear to dramatize an unavoidable compulsion (death) as a choice: Cordelia, as the “fairest and best of women” is actually taking the place of the “death goddess” (299-300).

4 See Durling 12.

5 Hazlitt: Edmund’s “religious honesty . . . is admirable. One speech of his is worth a million” (1.168).
hateful that we do not even like to repeat their names”) (1.168) as he will find the play itself inexpressibly sublime. Coleridge similarly finds Goneril and Regan “outrageous,” as in a kind of overexpression on Shakespeare’s part, bordering on inadvertent parody. Yet such an overreach of rhetoric is precisely Goneril’s own tactic. The oldest sister not only performs the trope of ineffability auxetically, but also amplifies that amplification, claiming in the final line that hers is a love that goes beyond the rhetorical “manner” of what is already amplified beyond expression. Read with a text like Shelley’s *Defense* in mind, considering its self-imposed contradictions, Goneril appears to be delivering a satire of the spontaneous overflow of powerful praise.⁶ By trying to count what is uncountable, her ridiculousness is a kind of critique of the mathematical Sublime before the fact. Supposedly beyond all value, Goneril’s love is, despite being immeasurable, insistently measured: it is a love that is equal to (“as much”) the greatest love between a child and father, it is certainly not less than the other things that are beyond value (the love of life itself, for instance), and it is certainly more than the love of “eyesight, space, and liberty.”

If this is parodic, on either Goneril or Shakespeare’s account, it is certainly intentional, as it foreshadows the suffering of the play in what cannot be other than a deliberate matter. The supposed disposability of “eyesight, space, and liberty” all prefigure what will be lost in the

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⁶ In Longinus’s discussion of *panegyric* in chapter 8, he writes: “I would confidently maintain that nothing contributes so decisively to grandeur as noble emotion in the right setting, when, filled as it were with frenzy and enthusiasm, it breathes a kind of divine inspiration into the speaker’s words” (122). Whatever is inspiring Goneril at this moment in the play, it is hardly divine. Yet I would suggest we not overlook the value of her critique of “frenzy and enthusiasm” as anything but impromptu, given its conventionality (i.e. something that “contributes so decisively”). As with Cornwall’s own treatise on deixis’s inability to free itself from auxēsis (“in this plainness / Harbour more craft and more corrupter ends”) (*Tragedy* 2.2.94-5) and Edmund’s habit of speaking the truth in order to advance dishonest ends (“I am no honest man if there be any good meaning toward you”) (*Tragedy* 1.2.150-1), it seems to me that it is often the villains in this play who come closest to evincing whatever it is that Shakespeare believed about the inherent dupl exity (to use Kierkegaard’s phrase) of language.
course of the play: “eyesight” being a clear prefiguring of the blinding of Gloucester, \(^7\) “space” being both the openness of nature in the storm and the recognized “nothingness” that torments the mad king, \(^8\) and “liberty” being those “free things” lost to the sufferings of madness (History 13.94). \(^9\) These images all strive to symbolically carry or “wield” the matter at hand (i.e. love) as Lear will tragically carry the object of his love at the play’s conclusion, in a display of complete inexpressibility figured by the eruptive “howl, howl, howl, howl” (Tragedy 5.3.231). Goneril, in a disingenuous way, claims to exceed all value even as this performance of love is explicitly a question of exchange, \(^10\) and, therefore, she ironically speaks with something similar to what Hazlitt calls Edmund’s religious honesty. She does love her father beyond all value, because she does not have a love for him at all, and therefore her love has no value. If the figures beyond measure are still insistently measured, the nothingness of auxēsis is uncomfortably equal to the nothingness of what does not exist.\(^{11}\)

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\(^7\) See Alpers for a classic account (and rebuttal) of the supposed “sight pattern” in Lear; see also Cavell’s critique of Alpers’s reading of the blinding of Gloucester and its “necessity” for the play’s thematic account of recognition and insight (44-6). See Rocklin for a fine reading of the historical and textual contexts of performing the blinding scene. See my reading of Sarah Kane’s adaptation of the process of figuration and prefiguration of Gloucester’s blinding in her first play Blasted (“Touch of the Real” 92-7).

\(^8\) If the Sublime is present in this play, it is closer to a post-structuralist or Lacanian understanding of the term, rather than the Romantic sense of it. See Žižek: “the Sublime is an object whose positive body is just an embodiment of Nothing” (Sublime Object 234).

\(^9\) Edgar: “Who alone suffers, suffer most i’th’ mind, / Leaving free things and happy shows behind” (History 13.93-4). Shakspeare left this passage behind in the revised Folio version, perhaps in order to deemphasize Lear as a moral center of the play. Pat insights like “How light and portable my pain seems now, / When that which makes me bend, makes the King bow” (History 13.97-8) detract from Lear’s drive toward the crisis recognition that nothing matters.

\(^10\) See Leslie Kurke for a reading of epideictic poetry as system of gift-exchange (Kurke’s book is also discussed in Burrow, chapter 6). The nature of this kind of exchange is highlighted throughout the love-test scene, and is what drives Regan’s outdoing: she “prize[s]” herself at her sister’s worth, and when she looks into the tropological legible heart, she does not find a book, but a “deed of love” (Tragedy 1.1.68-70).

\(^11\) This completely inverts the formula expressed by the Romantic Sublime: “The logic of incompleteness is thus ultimately the logic of infinity” (McFarland Forms of Ruin 28).
Still, despite Goneril’s barely-subliminal critique of the love test, her critique can only work this way if she performs within the familiar borders of a discourse of praise. The parodic intricacies aside, Goneril’s flattery is not only expected but this particular method of flattery is expected and implicitly requested. When Stanley Cavell argues that Lear’s desire for the avoidance of love is the desire “to look like a loved man” (62), he is speaking of this self-consciousness of display from the perspective of the displayed. Lear’s problem is that he only seeks this poetic surplus, the amplification that is actually “nothing.” His request is addressed literally by Goneril’s invoking a topos of inexpressibility, Regan’s expansion of the topos of inexpressibility by invoking a topos of “outdoing,” and then more literally still by Cordelia’s devastating reply. As we shall see, critics who seek to praise Shakespeare and his drama by invoking the same topos are caught in a similar double bind, though perhaps they lack what Paul de Man might call Goneril’s power of “demystification” (Blindness 18). The Romantics rely upon the discourse of amplification to prove that Shakespeare’s innate greatness (or sublimity) deserves display. But, if that is the case, that sublimity does not need amplification at all ala the non-readings of Lear’s exemplarity in the theory of Shelley and Coleridge that we examined in the previous chapter. As Fineman demonstrates, the self-conscious nature of all post-Petrarchan poetry addresses a similar paradox; the issue at hand is whether or not, by exemplifying Lear as an unreadable, inexpressibly sublime work beyond the expression of “mechanical” rhetoric, the Romantics are similarly self-aware.

In the oft-quoted first paragraph of his chapter on Lear from Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays, William Hazlitt similarly professes to love the play more than words can wield the matter.

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12 See Fineman’s discussion of the paradox of praise beginning on 29; Shakespeare takes the genre of mock encomium and presents it, in the later sonnets of the sequence, as something somberly earnest. This reading suggests that Shakespeare—or, at the very least, the “Will” figure of the Sonnets—is a kindred spirit to Cordelia, who takes the inexpressibility topos literally, when everyone expects her to take it literally.
In order to claim that the play is both sublime and about the Sublime, Hazlitt directly—and, I would argue, unavoidably—invokes the inexpressibility *topos*:

We wish that we could pass this play over, and say nothing about it. All that we can say must fall far short of the subject; or even of what we ourselves conceive of it. To attempt to give a description of the play itself or of its effects upon the mind, is mere impertinence: yet we must say something. — It is then the best of all Shakespear’s plays, for it is the one in which he was the most in earnest. He was here fairly caught in the web of his own imagination. The passion which he has taken as his subject is that which strikes its root deepest into the human heart; of which the bond is the hardest to be unloosed; and the cancelling and tearing to pieces of which gives the greatest revulsion to the frame. (1.167)

Roy Park reads Hazlitt’s transition from a career in painting to one as a journalist, philosopher, and critic as driven by a rejection of a Lockean notion of abstraction. Park’s work applauds Hazlitt’s attention as both critic and philosopher to the “characteristic or essential detail” (“Painter” 1080), yet the opening page or so of the short chapter on Lear does not refer to a single concrete detail from the play. This passage may seem, on first glance, to conform to Charles Patterson’s harsher account of Hazlitt’s “frankly impressionistic” qualities as a critic (648), a pattern of reading that—in the case of Milton and Spenser at least—makes Hazlitt’s readings not only wrong, but “corruptingly wrong” (657).

If Hazlitt’s readings are not quite as detailed as Park claims, and are not even the character criticism that they *purport* to be, we may still identify the “impressionistic” quality that

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13 Park expands this argument in his highly influential monograph, *Hazlitt and the Spirit of the Age*. In Park’s reading, for Hazlitt, our thoughts are initially abstract, and it is the role of a poet as *vates*-seer, “characterized by an openness to the whole of experience in all its complexity and variety as a result of his greater sensitivity of feeling” (“Painter” 1078), to isolate and present the representative, concrete detail of a given object or passion that sufficiently accounts for the whole. What Park and Hazlitt call “abstract,” we might call “symptomatic”: his objection to abstraction was “a rejection of closed systems of thought” (Park *Spirit* 35). My understanding of “abstract” is probably closer to Patterson’s, who sees the “frankly impressionistic” quality of Hazlitt’s writing extending from a refusal to adopt a closed system becoming a refusal to adopt any system. See also the discussion in Natarajan *Hazlitt* 136-141. For a discussion of how Hazlitt’s critique of abstraction influenced Keats’s concept of “negative capability,” see Bromwich 130-2.

14 Patterson: “in his determination to be free of the trammels of literary theories, systems, and ‘schools’ he emphatically refused to do formal analysis . . . the resulting fragmentary quality and incompleteness in Hazlitt’s work is frequently a real blemish” (648).
Patterson notes as both representative of a Romantic tendency in general (and a “conversational” quality of Hazlitt’s writing in particular)\(^\text{15}\) and also as an intentional rhetorical choice. In a way, Hazlitt’s wish is fulfilled: going nearly a page without a single clear quotation or even allusion to Lear all certainly seems like nothing. Nor, for that matter, does Hazlitt yet reference Samuel Johnson (whose reading of the play he despises) or Charles Lamb (whose reading of the play he adores). Later in this opening paragraph, Hazlitt crafts an extended metaphor comparing Lear’s mind to a “tall ship driven about by the winds,” a possible allusion to the tempest in Lear’s mind (Tragedy 3.4.12)—or, perhaps, to the “night-founder’d Skiff” of Paradise Lost (1.204)\(^\text{16}\)—but the bulk of his introduction is dedicated to forestalling a reading of the play and “passing over” its characters and events. In place of an interpretative response to the play is a typically vague incantation about Shakespeare’s passion and imagination.

While on one level, Hazlitt’s famous opening seems like nothing, on another, it may be an imitation of something. These are exclusively Hazlitt’s words, and yet it feels as though he is quoting the play, precisely because those words seem to add up to “nothing.” In a direct reversal of the model of abstraction that Park recognizes in Hazlitt’s thought—i.e. the mind generates a general, abstract conception of something which the author or artist compresses into a representative concrete detail—and much in line with the model of illustrative criticism that we associate with Coleridge, Hazlitt appears to be depicting the concrete details of Shakespeare’s drama in an abstract verbal portrait. Hazlitt’s opening paragraph not only recalls Goneril’s speech, it maps out the entire first scene of the play. Similar to Cordelia, “we” wish that we could say nothing about the object of our praise but, for either the loving daughter or the loving...

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\(^\text{15}\) For a discussion of Hazlitt’s “conversational” style, see McFarland Romantic Cruxes 57-9.

\(^\text{16}\) Or, if not a reference to Paradise Lost, it may be an attempt to invoke something even more conventional. See Curtius 128-30 for a discussion of the topos of nautical metaphors.
critic, nothing does not suffice. It is not even nothing; it is “nothing.” We cannot account in language for the effects the play has upon our mind any more than Cordelia can heave her heart into her mouth. Yet we are both compelled to say more. These further attempts to expound are references to the duties—Cordelia’s “bond” is echoed in Hazlitt’s “we must”—that strike both Lear and Lear as mere impertinence, and the one rejects our reading as the other rejects his daughter. And whereas Lear’s rejection of Cordelia indicates that she is the greatest of the three daughters, the play’s rejection of us is indicative of its own greatness.

The invocation of the topos of inexpressibility may certainly be an intentional and pragmatic decision to do justice to a work of genius, but it also illuminates a crisis of perspective in Romantic critical writing. If, accepting Abrams’ influential thesis about the expressive impulse in Romanticism—the “one decisive change” between the age of Johnson and the age of Wordsworth being that “the poet has moved into the center of the critical system and taken over many of the prerogatives which had once been exercised by his readers” (Mirror 29)—the Romantic poetical critic must cede or share his place at the “center” of the critical text to the author of the initial poetical text.

As with Shelley’s celebration of the sublime “comedy” of Lear, it is not exactly clear what specific “passion” Hazlitt understands to be the subject of Lear, and he similarly confuses or conflates the subjective perspective of the play. As the original critic of Romanticism’s egotism,¹⁷ Hazlitt may be expected to navigate the challenge of subject-centrality more ably than others of his age. Yet here he appears to dispense with the hierarchy of reader and writer altogether. The central focus in the passage may well be a wholly general understanding of

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¹⁷ See Bromwich 150-96 for a detailed overview of Hazlitt’s series of critiques of Wordsworth and his egotism. Keats’s 1818 letter to Richard Woodhouse (quoted in my introduction) distinguishing himself from “the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime” clearly bears the influence of Hazlitt (not least of all in his discussion of “gusto”) (147-8).
“mind”: be it the reader’s, the author’s, or the titular character’s. This “mind” is precisely the subject that Hazlitt finds so inexpressible, and while he does not clearly delineate what the “effects” on the mind are—like Lear’s exemplarity in general, the definitive characteristics should be apparent and self-explanatory—or even which mind he is discussing, the generality of the point is still presented in a direct, emphatically deductive phrasing. The “evidence” here suggests that this is “then” Shakespeare at his most earnest. The claim for Shakespeare’s earnestness dispenses not only with the accepted doxa of the bard as a master of Romantic irony, but even with Hazlitt’s own celebration of Shakespeare’s selfless, protean quality. The proof of Shakespeare’s earnestness, which upends all of the accepted celebratory doctrine of his irony and depth of character, is his assumed bafflement as his own creation (“fairly caught in the web of his own imagination”), the evidence for which is this particular reader’s bafflement.

As I noted in the previous chapter, it is customary for both the writers examined by Longinus, as well as the Romantics, to imitate the Sublime when discussing the Sublime. Such a tactic clearly leads to the illustrative criticism of Coleridge’s lectures. Imitating Shakespeare—here to the point of actually equating the reader’s imitation with the Shakespearean original—is central to Hazlitt’s entire theoretical program of reading Shakespeare. Take Hazlitt’s critique of Johnson from the introduction to Characters of Shakespear’s Plays. While Johnson can find a mountain sublime or a rose beautiful, “he would no more be able to give the description of Dover cliff in Lear . . . than to describe the objects of a sixth sense.” Johnson is faulted for not being able to write like Shakespeare, because

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19 Comparing Shakespeare to Proteus was an established topos for the Romantics. See Coleridge’s Biographia: contra Milton, Shakespeare “darts himself forth, and passes into all the forms of human character and passion, the one Proteus of the fire and the flood” (7.2.27).
he was not only without any particular fineness of organic sensibility, alive to all
the “mighty world of ear and eye,” which is necessary to the painter or musician,
but without that intenseness of passion, which, seeking to exaggerate whatever
excites the feelings of pleasure or power in the mind, and moulding the impressions
of natural objects according to the impulses of imagination, produces a genius and
a taste for poetry. (1.90)

Though we were informed earlier that the critic must not “necessarily be a poet” (1.89), we are
on familiar Romantic anti-mimetical ground here. Coleridge’s distinction between *copying*
nature (an “idle rivalry!”) and *imitating* it properly, with an appropriate union of “Sameness and
Difference” (5.2.220), is here presented in purely auxetic terms. The poet, or in this case, the
poet-critic, should not only reproduce the mighty world of the senses, but should *exaggerate*
what is perceived. Johnson may have a fineness of sensibility, but without an intenseness of
passion resembling Shakespeare’s, his criticism can never emit the amplification that mimics
Shakespeare’s own in order to do Shakespeare’s justice. In other words, to properly imitate
Shakespeare, one will have to present something far beyond what Shakespeare initially presents.

For Hazlitt to present himself as a kindred spirit to Shakespeare, in a way that Johnson is not, the
parallels between the opening of his own chapter on *Lear* and the opening of *Lear* itself must
break apart. Cordelia’s failure to say (only) “nothing” and Hazlitt’s failure to say nothing, prove
Lear’s folly and *Lear*’s greatness. (By positing the very *existence* of his essay as a failure, we
see how Hazlitt is presenting a work of criticism that should be evaluated as though it is a work
of poetry, read *ala* Shelley’s schema of the decline of inspiration.) The parallel between
Hazlitt’s critical reader (his “we”) and Cordelia breaks down at the moment Hazlitt begins

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20 For an overview of the Romantic revision of mimetic theories, see Abrams *Mirror* (especially 50-6).

21 Ironically enough, this lecture seems to be largely plagiarized from Schelling. See the notes in the Princeton
dition, by Foakes, to see which passages were “adapted.”
writing about a third figure who is just as perplexed by Lear (or Lear) as we are: Shakespeare himself.

Shakespeare, in Hazlitt’s essay, is aligned more with the reader than the play. Our failure to say nothing about King Lear is proof of not only the play’s sublimity, but of the author’s similar struggle for expression. Both the Hazlitt-“we” and Shakespeare are here stripped of agency: the reader who “must” say something despite wishing to say nothing, and the author who is “fairly caught in the web of his own imagination.” The inevitable “falling short of the subject” of Lear presents criticism as dependent upon an affectation of modesty. But professing a conviction that no criticism could be worthy of Lear then transforms into a conflation of the reader with Shakespeare, a definitive display of immodesty on the critic’s part that is equally conventional. The quotation of “Tintern Abbey” in the introduction’s critique of Johnson is particularly fitting, as Hazlitt ironically succumbs to a variant of the egotistical sublime that he decries in Wordsworth. Conflating the reader and author here strips the passage of its perspective. Lear is not unreadable because “we” are poor readers, or even because what it depicts is so unbearable to consider, but it is unreadably or unwriteably sublime because its greatness is beyond the powers of its own author’s expression. As is often the case in Hazlitt’s epideictic precursors, the invocation of inexpressibility is accompanied by a declaration of earnestness. Yet here the conventional pairing of topoi is upended: if Hazlitt’s “we” cannot account for the play, it must be Shakespeare who is at his most earnest. The epideixis is a complete, defensive projection of the critic’s self and his perceived lack.

Well in accordance with what we have examined in Shelley and Coleridge, Hazlitt venerates failure and fragmentation, and idealizes an unwritten version of (a reading of) Lear.

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22 For more on the modesty topoi, see Curtius 83-5.
Recalling those two theorists of the Romantic Epideictic-critical Sublime, this practice is self-consuming according to its own principles, as Shakespeare’s work can only properly be assessed with the amplifying rhetoric that extends beyond its actual text, thereby effectively ignoring the text. Despite the Romantics’ supposed anti-theatrical prejudice—exemplified in the essay by Charles Lamb quoted at length in Hazlitt’s essay on Lear—this extension has an obvious parallel with dramatic performance. Performance elaborates upon the dramatic text, and perhaps Hazlitt’s approach to (what is beyond) the text as an appreciation of the text is indebted to the lingering influence of Edmund Kean’s performances on his understanding of Shakespeare. Yet this sort of amplification also recalls the Longinian Sublime. Longinus briefly discusses the relation of the Sublime to amplification—the clear distinction between sublimity and auxēsis in the twelfth section is one of the lost passages of the manuscript—and finds that both are best achieved via the “profusion” of familiar rhetorical techniques. The excess of rhetorical techniques particularly befits “all descriptive and epideictic writings” (Section 12, 130) (recall in section eight, Longinus wrote that panegyric achieves sublimity when the orator’s passions intrude and his speech takes on a frenzied quality). The technique discussed in Longinus’s next chapter, “Imitation,” suggests to writers reading the treatise that a path to sublimity is paved via “the imitation and emulation of the great writers and poets of the past.” It is perhaps by adhering to the practices of both profusion and amplification, that the imitative writer is protected from plagiarism: “this procedure is not plagiarism; rather it is like the reproduction of good character in statues or other works of art” (Section 13, 131).

23 See Natarajan “William Hazlitt” 65-73, Bate Constitutions 129-43, and Mulvihill for more on Hazlitt’s view of the theater, both as a critic and admirer of Kean. In a review of Kemble’s King John, Hazlitt speaks of Kean much as he refers to Lear in the Characters essay (“we wish we had never seen Mr Kean”) (3.178). This review is addressed, with reference to the Sublime and Burke, by Bate in Constitutions 138.
To better consider this task of reproducing a “character” of Lear or Lear (I take both senses of the word to be understood in the title of Hazlitt’s volume) via sublime amplification, it behooves us to briefly digress, and consider the use of the topos of inexpressibility in one of Hazlitt’s epideictic predecessors: Sidney’s Astrophil and Stella. Such a digression is fitting not only to clarify the practice of invoking topoi by a poetic theorist, but because the Sublime always demands a digression. Recall that Shelley’s discussion of Lear appeared in such a digression in his own Defense of Poetry.

In a depiction of an unusually productive case of writer’s block, the first sonnet in the sequence is impossibly “written” by a poet who supposedly cannot write poetry: Astophil “fain in verse” his love to show, but “words come halting forth” (1.1, 9). The inexpressibility topos is associated with reading as well as (not) writing, since Astrophil’s inability to compose—he can only bite his “truant pen,” not write with it (1.13)—is caught up with his envy towards those poets who can fill many “leaves” with “inventions” (1.7, 6). So, to fully embrace the poem’s conceit, to “walk about” in it, as Curtius suggests readers do (14), is to believe that the poem that we have read is not actually written, since the Muse’s advice to the “fool” in the final line is to “look in thy heart and write” (1.14). The poem supposedly ends before any poetry-writing has actually begun. This sonnet, then, is nothing, “fool.” Writing about the heart, the only kind of writing that counts for either Astrophil or his muse (but which, mutatis mutandis, Cordelia finds to be an impossible form of writing or, in her case, oratory), begins with Cupid’s “dribbed shot”

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24 Kinnaird argues, in a fine essay on the issue of “design” in the Characters of Shakespear’s Plays, that the later reputation of Hazlitt as the prototypical “character critic” is a distortion of a broader thematic examination of the imagination.

25 Longinus’s treatise digresses away from the topics at hand frequently. He celebrates Cicero’s power of digression, and explicitly associates the digression with “all descriptive and epideictic writings” in his section on amplification (Section 12, 130).

26 All excerpts from Astrophil and Stella taken from Sidney’s Major Works; in my parenthetical citations, the poem’s sequence number is cited first, followed by the line number.
in the next poem in the sequence – the next *line* in the sequence, to be even more precise (2.1). In other words, while Astrophil is “fain in verse [his] love to show,” he also *feigns* in verse his love to show. The sequence does not *actually* begin with the next sonnet any more than Sidney’s name is *actually* Astrophil, despite the numerous puns on “phil.” What Sidney’s pun on *fain*/*feign* demonstrates is the reader’s desire (what he “fains” to show) for an impossible (what can only be “feigned”) poem – an unwritten, and thus unreadable, poem capturing what is in Astrophil’s “heart.” But, rest assured, Sidney is only feigning. The first poem of the sequence exists, after all.

The Romantic ideal of sublimity, where the work of art is itself the product of inspiration’s decline and criticism declines even further, extends from a much earlier, established ideal of (performative) unreadability in the tradition of praise poetry. But Hazlitt’s reading only captures one part of the equation magnified in Sidney’s sonnet. Hazlitt may be “fain” in criticism his love to show, but he cannot “feign” it, since he genuinely believes that any reading of *Lear* is “mere impertinence” in the face of pure, literary sublimity. In *As You Like It*, Touchstone proffers a formula for *epideixis*: that “the truest poetry is the most feigning” (3.3.15-6). Yet the claim of *Lear*’s supremacy is founded upon earnestness, and what may previously be understood as feigning or mystification—recall in Touchstone’s attempted seduction of Audrey that “poetical” is not opposed to “honest,” it merely lends the “hope” that poet *may* be feigning when she claims to be honest—becomes confusion and an inexpressible, sublime unreadability for Hazlitt.

The earnest confusion of the Sublime is raised in connection with *Lear*, again, in Hazlitt’s lectures published the following year. From “On Poetry in General”:

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27 See also the rebuttal of Plato in Sidney’s *Defence*: “for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth” (235).
The intensity of feeling makes up for the disproportion of the objects. Things are equal to the imagination, which have the power of affecting the mind with an equal degree of terror, admiration, delight, or love. When Lear calls upon the heavens to avenge his cause, ‘for they are old like him,’ there is nothing extravagant or impious in this sublime identification of his age with theirs; for there is no other image which could do justice to the agonising sense of his wrongs and his despair! (2.168)

Making things “equal” was Goneril’s method too, but of course she was not genuine, so she presumably possessed little “imagination,” and thus only “feigned.” Speaking truly—in proportion with objects—is of course out of the question, as that would subtract all “power” from speech. Feigning is also out of the question, since it is only the earnestness that motivates the intensity of feeling that can “do justice” to the (literally) untrue identifications. That means that the only way to speak truly about or in poetry is to speak from a place of sublime ignorance, claiming neither to feign nor speak truly but rather claim that you just do not know, as prescribed by Burke. The passage excerpted above defines the Sublime precisely according to Burke’s criteria (“terror,” “admiration,” etc.). Burke’s thoughts on tragedy are directly quoted elsewhere in the essay, and in a comparison of “the history of religious and poetical enthusiasm,” Hazlitt adopts the Burkan ideal of ignorance wholesale: “it is the undefined and uncommon that gives birth and scope to the imagination; we can only fancy what we do not know” (2.172). Turning again to the discussion of Lear calling upon the heavens, note the unfortunate quotation marks surrounding “for they are old like him” – lines that the king does not actually speak in the play.

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28 See Natarajan’s Hazlitt and the Reach of Sense, especially 11-39, for a gloss of Hazlitt’s conceptualization of “power.” “Power,” in Natarajan’s summary, “signifies the mind’s independence of the senses” (2), and is central to Hazlitt’s metaphysics. See also Metaphysical Hazlitt, a collection of readings of Hazlitt’s “Essay on the Principles of Human Action.”

29 Burke was arguably the greatest influence on Hazlitt as a writer, thinker, and critic (though Hazlitt despised Burke’s politics). For a summary of Hazlitt’s readings of Burke, see Bromwich 288-300.

30 Lear’s actual lines are “O heavens, / If you do love old men, if your sweet sway / Allow obedience, if you yourself are old, / Make it your cause!” (Tragedy 2.2.354-6). Hazlitt quoted from memory. See Baker for a brief catalog of his misquotations.
Hazlitt misremembering the passage’s exact wording is not so much sloppy as it is a performance of the figurative ideals of Romantic Epideictic-critical reading: memory is placed above re-reading and ignorance is placed above knowledge, provided the praise “does justice” to the “sense” the praiser has of the praised.

Privileging passionate ignorance over poetical feigning lends Hazlitt’s writing the impressionistic quality that is derided by Patterson, yet it must be noted that—similar to Shelley adhering to the paradoxes of logic that govern his aesthetic ideals—Hazlitt is quite systematic in applying these principles. The conflation of Shakespeare, Lear, and Hazlitt’s reader is maintained throughout the essay on Lear. All three are vehicles for this sublime ignorance, the play itself a divine failure of representing the passions as a pattern of fragmentary stops and starts:

It has been said, and we think justly, that the third act of Othello and the three first acts of Lear, thirty are Shakespear’s great master-pieces in the logic of passion: that they contain the highest examples not only of the force of individual passion, but of its dramatic vicissitudes and striking effects arising from the different circumstances and characters of the persons speaking. We see the ebb and flow of the feeling, its pauses and feverish starts, its impatience of opposition, its accumulating force when it has time to recollect itself, the manner in which it avails itself of every passing word or gesture, its haste to repel insinuation... (1.168-9)

We see here the familiar model of Romantic expressionism—Shakespeare’s individual passion overflowing forcefully, and dramatizing a similar overflow in the “striking effects” of fictional individuals—phrased in terms of a not un-Coleridgean exemplarity. The “highest examples,” pieces fragmented from the whole of the canon, are further fragmented, discussed in terms of their own greatest parts. We have already considered how such a fragmentation and re-fragmentation is familiarly sublime (it is both the process of “disintegration and figurative reconstitution” that Hertz calls the “sublime turn” and what McFarland calls Romanticism’s

31 See Kinnaird 32-34 for a reading of the import the third act of Othello held for Hazlitt.
“diasparactive forms”) (Hertz 14, McFarland Forms of Ruin 5). Elsewhere in Hazlitt’s writings, this model of passionate “ebb and flow” is again applied to the natural quality of Shakespeare’s characters in terms that seem to anticipate deconstruction (“in Shakespeare there is a continual composition and decomposition of [the essence of character’s] elements”) (2.212). In other words, the practical model of criticism and its account of the writer or reader’s passions is an often vague conflation of the natural and the logical. The “pauses and feverish” starts of a confused reading or expression of any given passion—say, an explosively misogynistic rant against perceivedly disappointing daughters—is equated with the movement of that most paradigmatic paradigm of sublimity, the ocean.32

Yet all of this naturalness is still labelled a “logic,” and Hazlitt’s impression of how these passions may unfold according to a kind of methodology suggests the rhetorical technique of outdoing: that is, a means of “repeling insinuation” in its “impatience” with and foreclosure of any argumentative opposition. Think of Regan’s answer to Goneril: she is of that “self mettle” as her sister, yet Goneril “comes too short” (Tragedy 1.1.67, 70). If the passionate poet or character may have to contend with him or herself, Shakespeare’s depiction of such a “continual composition and decomposition” of arguments is itself the ultimate outdoing:

Shakespear’s mastery over his subject, if it was not art, was owing to a knowledge of the connecting links of the passions, and their effect upon the mind, still more wonderful than any systematic adherence to rules, and that anticipated and outdid all the efforts of the most refined art, not inspired and rendered instinctive by genius. (1.169)

This is more than just an obvious allusion to Burke’s maxim that “art can never give the rules that make an art” (49); it is closer to Shelley’s qualified canonizing of Lear as the work that “may” be judged to be the most perfect dramatic specimen yet composed. The possibility

32 See Longinus (Section 35, 155) and Burke 53-4.
remains that Shakespeare’s Lear is a masterpiece of “art” and not pure imaginative expression, though it certainly resembles the latter. Reading Lear this way is familiarly epideictic; this is a claim of outdoing, “a comparison with famous examples provided by tradition, [so that] the superiority, even the uniqueness, of the person or thing to be praised is established” (Curtius 162). Yet the familiarly rhetorical claim is still made to assert the supremacy of passionate, imaginative instinct over the “systematic adherence” to a rhetorical heuristic, even as Hazlitt allows that it may be a work of such “art” after all, since whatever Lear is, it outdoes his (and our) reading.

We will have much more to say about “outdoing,” the trope of choice for Regan, when we turn to Charles Lamb’s reading of Lear in his seminal essay “On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation.” For now, we need merely consider that, for Hazlitt, Shakespeare does not only outdo all systematic rules of “refined” art and rhetoric, but virtually all rules of expression in general. “Saying nothing” about the play is not only a rhetorical device applied to the praise of the play, it is the end of a circuitous logical deduction about the play, following upon the principles of genius, ideality, fragmentations, and unfinishedness that were accepted at the outset of the argument. “Saying nothing” is both an invocation of the inexpressibility topos and a case of what Hertz calls “blockage,” as Hazlitt approaches the dead-end of the Romantic ideal of open-endedness.33

We have considered one of the formal processes of accounting for this aporia of needing to exceed Shakespeare in order to do justice to Shakespeare (the great Outdoer) and yet also needing to prostrate oneself before his inexpressibly sublime achievement and declare ourselves outdone. Inexpressibility is certainly a rhetorical conceit for Hazlitt, but it is also one that he

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33 Park identifies “the poet’s openness to the whole of human experience” as a central element of Hazlitt’s “view of the non-abstract nature of poetry” (Hazlitt 161).
considers with an almost religious sincerity: he cannot “feign” his love to show. As is the case with Wittgenstein identifying the mystical as what we must “pass over” in silence—*exactly* like Wittgenstein, since they use the same phrase—Hazlitt identifies the sublime *Lear* as that which we must say “nothing” about and pass over. 34 What he *does* say about the play is a careful exposition of how he does not really wish to say anything at all. And, perhaps of most interest given the self-proving rhetoric of literary *exemplarity* associated with *Lear*, the essay in *Characters of Shakespeare’s Play* dedicated to the play is composed almost entirely of quotations of Shakespeare’s words. We have already examined how the model of “illustration” so central to Coleridge’s program for a practical criticism functions as a mode of *display*; this is all the more the case for the *Biographia’s* prescription for editing-as-criticism *via* long-form quotation, a central device in the criticism written by Hazlitt. Much has been said about the extent of Hazlitt’s use of Shakespearean quotation—the flurry of references and allusions to the plays in the political writings, for instance35—yet the often-absurd length of his excerpts of the plays in the critical *analyses* of those plays has been curiously underexamined. For example, Hazlitt cites an excerpt of over 120 lines from Act II, nearly a quarter of his entire chapter on *Lear*, amounting to nearly three pages; this long extract receives little commentary other than

34 Park suggests intermittently throughout his monograph on Hazlitt that Hazlitt’s view of poetry paves the way for Wittgenstein’s “existential” view of poetry (especially *Hazlitt* 5-6).

35 See Bate “Hazlitt’s Shakespearean Quotations” (and its expanded argument in *Shakespearean Constitutions*) for both a reading of Hazlitt’s use of quotation and a historical summary of contemporary response to that device. See also Bromwich 275-87. Of particular interest is Bromwich’s attention to how Hazlitt’s use of quotation informed (or was informed by) his reading of Longinus and his attempts at sublimity in his criticism:

> De Quincey thought Hazlitt went too far in the direction of mere display and called it dealing in borrowed tinsel. But in making that objection he betrayed a protective concern for his own style, which was more elaborate than Hazlitt’s, less sudden in its wit or grandeur: a style of amplification rather than sublimity. (276)

I would only add that Hazlitt may be as defensive a writer as De Quincey, and that there may be more craft in this plainness than Hazlitt suggests with his protests of inexpressibility and modesty (*Tragedy* 2.2.94-5).
“this is certainly fine” (1.172). Again, this is not simply an innocuous stylistic feature of Romantic criticism, it is a central tactic in authoring a definitively epideictic criticism. Epideictic writing demonstrates or displays; the omnipresence of long-form quotation exhibits a very literal understanding of that definition.

In an elegant reading that I have referred to throughout this project, Neil Hertz discusses how the “sublime turn”—that is, the “transfer of power (or the simulation of such a transfer) from the threatening forces to the poetic activity itself” (6)—is reflected in the formal decision to quote extensively. The reader of the Sublime’s method is “the more or less violent fragmentation of literary bodies into ‘quotations,’ in the interest of building up a discourse of one’s own, a discourse which, in its turn, directs attention to passages that come to serve as emblems of the critic’s most acute, least nostalgic sense of what he is about” (14). A writer like Hazlitt, caught in a double bind of genuinely believing that the object of his praise is so praiseworthy that its praiseworthiness should be immediately apparent and therefore not necessitate any of the praise he is actually writing, supposes that he can innocently put the text forth, present it for display. But that cannot be done without also consuming (part of) the text himself. The aura of the missing Lear—i.e. all of the play that has gone unquoted—does not haunt the text of the essay so much as evince this “least nostalgic sense” of what Hazlitt’s desire to say nothing is all about: a sense that his comments on the play, if they are true, are wholly unnecessary.

Just as we considered how the nothingness of auxêsis is uncomfortably equal to the nothingness of that which does not exist at all in Goneril’s own self-consuming performance of praise, Hazlitt’s use of long form quotations in place of the conventional, Coleridgean illustrative display all but erases the auxetic invocation of the inexpressibility topoi that already yearned to
erase or consume its own presence. Again, if this is a self-aware performance querying absence and presence—as though Lear does not only outdo or surpass any of Hazlitt’s attempts to read the play, but that it does so in something resembling real time—it still occurs within the conventional expectations of classical rhetoric. The use of long form quotation is not only related to the logic of sublimity and inexpressibility—namely, what is inexpressibly grand or sublime can only be observed, so fragments are excerpted for the reader to apply her own powers of observation—but it is inscribed with the expectations of epideixis. But the inexpressibility topos is not the only topos Hazlitt invokes in order to praise the play, nor is the play all that he seeks to praise. Characters is a dedicatory work, inscribed to Charles Lamb as “a mark of old friendship and lasting esteem” (1.84), and therefore an extended work of praise of Lamb. And the topos that Hazlitt repeatedly invokes to praise Lamb is the topos of outdoing.

Outdoing is not only associated with Lamb in Hazlitt’s essay, it is equated with him. Lamb is never explicitly named in the chapter on Lear; he is identified only as “a better authority than either” Johnson or A.W. Schlegel (1.179). Then, as though Lamb cannot be answered, cannot himself be outdone, and his authority has been established, his entire reading of the play from the essay “On The Tragedies of Shakespeare” is quoted in full as more-or-less the final word on the play. The page-long excerpt is, naturally, not read, and followed only by a few general ruminations on the nature of poetry and the passions. The outdoing that decimated the attempt to say something about Lear—the necessary attempt, as we must say something, but an admitted failure nonetheless—is implicitly equated with Lamb’s own outdoing of Schlegel and Johnson. Outdoing establishes Lamb as an auctoritas.

36 David Bromwich takes much more interest in these ruminations than I do, and compares them to similar observations in both Shelley’s Defense and Weiskel’s Romantic Sublime. See 194-6, and the accompanying endnote dedicated to a critical reading of Weiskel (427-8n.18).
To better understand the *topos* of outdoing and its interrelation with the inexpressibility *topos*, we can turn again to the opening scene of *Lear*. Often, the inexpressibility *topos* is an attempt to forestall any further outdoing, by foreclosing representation itself. This is a familiar display of Romantic logic, recalling the appeals to (impossibly) count different values of the infinite. Hazlitt answers the “better authority” of Lamb with a claim that he would prefer not to answer him at all, and pass the play over in silence. All of which is precisely why the inexpressibility *topos* can only be followed by outdoing:

*Reg.*

I am made of that self mettle as my sister,

And prize me at her worth. In my true heart

I find she names my very deed of love—

Only she comes too short, that I profess

Myself an enemy to all other joys

Which the most precious square of sense possesses,

And find I am alone felicitate

In your dear highness’ love. (*Tragedy* 1.1.67-74)

As is the case with Dante declaring, “Let Lucan now be silent” (*Inferno* 25.94), Regan declares herself the agent of outdoing. This is, as with Goneril’s initial speech, completely expected, given the circumstances. If you begin by saying that there is nothing that you can say about the object of praise, it is only logical to simply list all of the other objects that your object is more praiseworthy than.

Regan can only outdo Goneril by claiming to be “of that self mettle” as her sister (that is, loving Lear more than words can wield the matter) only more so, since Goneril “comes too

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37 See Curtius 165, for a reading of this example, and of its import for Dante’s contribution to the history of poetic style.
short.” It is a literally but not literarily impossible claim, since it declares itself beyond what is already beyond the logic of comparison, in what Fineman calls the “peculiar place.” But, for Regan, the indefiniteness of claiming to love someone more than the person who loves them infinitely is something that can only be expressed in conventional epideictic amplification. It is exclusively literary, an auxetic nothing. So Regan understands, or authors, the peculiar place as a particularly literary place. It is (in) the legible heart, where Astrophil’s muse directed him to look “before” he begins to write. Astrophil also struggles with following the words of others, and claims that the rigor of rhetorical study hinders poetic inspiration (“invention, nature’s child, fled step-dame study’s blows”) (1.10). Astrophil tells us that he is feigning, and Regan cannot do anything but feign, since to follow in this increasingly literary logic is to move further and further into amplification and further and further away from a purely demonstrative deixis. (Not that she would want to display her true feelings in the first place). Only the Romantics, in discussing such matters as not merely praise-worthy, but actually Sublime—and therefore literally true but only literarily discussable—take these topoi at their word.

The essay by Lamb quoted by Hazlitt, “On The Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered With Reference to their Fitness for Stage Representation,” is famously associated with the Romantics’ supposed anti-theatrical prejudice. Without emphasizing or deemphasizing Lamb’s open hostility towards stagings of Shakespeare’s tragedies, we can still understand that hostility rhetorically. Regan can only outdo her sister’s invocation of the topos of inexpressibility by invoking a topos of outdoing; Lamb can only verify that Lear is a play “beyond all art” by claiming that all attempts to perform the play are already outdone by the play (“Tragedies”

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38 See Barish Anti-Theatrical 329-331. Recent critics sympathetic to Lamb have dedicated much energy to rescuing him from these charges of anti-theatricalism. See Felicity James “Charles Lamb” 17: “Lamb is decisively not, then, anti-theatre.” Similar points are made by Han and Heller. See Arac for an excellent reading of Lamb’s preference for reading over staging considered alongside Walter Benjamin’s preference of the stage to the screen.
If Lamb exemplifies a certain tendency in Romantic criticism, it is less a specifically anti-theatrical one than a more general anti-interpretative prejudice. His preference for a “theater of the mind” or “closet reading” is as indicative of the era’s hostility towards footnotes and “mechanical” criticism as it is contemptuous of the “machinery” of stage effects.

There is a direct example of this impulse to denigrate previous interpretation in order to raise the estimation of Shakespeare at the outset of Lamb’s essay “On The Tragedies.” If the Romantic’s claim that Shakespeare should be praised via his power to outdo all those who come before and follow after him, the application of that *topos* is a kind of synecdoche for a more general dialectic of praise and blame. Such an interrelation of the two poles of *epideixis* is indicated with Lamb’s opening corrective of an encomium of David Garrick. Upon “taking a turn” in Westminster Abbey, Lamb discovers Garrick’s monument and this accompanying panegyrical description:

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till Eternity with power sublime
    Shall mark the mortal hour of hoary Time,
Shakespeare and Garrick like twin-stars shall shine,
    And earth irradiate with a beam divine. (qtd. in Lamb “Tragedies” 253)
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The use of heroic couplets may suggest Pope more than Shakespeare, but the bard seems to be evoked by the “twin-stars” shining in a single beam. If it is not Shakespearean (i.e. not a direct allusion to, say, Romeo and Juliet’s “star-crossed lovers”), it is certainly an attempt to be

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39 By “art,” Lamb is specifically referring to poor productions of the play that rely on unconvincing stage effects, which he also refers to as “contemptible machinery” (“Tragedies” 261). That he uses the same term that De Quincey, Hazlitt, and Shelley all use to decry mechanical rhetoric and annotated readings suggests that it is not only the finality of a staged interpretation that Lamb is opposed to, but any conclusive interpretation of the play.

40 This phrase is resuscitated by Mallarmé and the Symbolists. See Heller 131 and Barish *Anti-Theatrical* 337-40. See also Barish’s brief, somewhat polemical essay challenging the Romantic impulse to drive Shakespeare “from the stage, to find his proper place in the heart and in the closet” in “Shakespeare in the Study; Shakespeare on the Stage” (33).
Shakespeare-esque. Couple this stab at imitation with an invocation of sublimity, and the piece suggests the approach—if not the form—of the Romantics’ own works of praise.

Lamb’s response to this hokey, but quite expected, conventional, and perhaps even similar, auxësis is to declare it unreadably bad. It would be “an insult to my readers’ understandings,” he tells us, “to attempt any thing like a criticism on this farrago of false thoughts and nonsense” (“Tragedies” 253). Again, just as the nothingness of Goneril’s praise was “equal” to the nothingness of not saying anything at all, there is an uneasy synchrony between what is worthy of praise and what is worthy of blame. Lear’s greatness is inexpressible, worthy only of having “nothing” said over it. A paen to Garrick is also inexpressible, not worthy of “any thing like criticism.” Praise meets blame not only because they are both epideictic, but because their objects are essentially equated in a critical move that draws a circle signifying nothing, the logic of the critical Sublime so self-consuming that it sketches its own a zero-mark.

Again, the impulse of the Romantic praiser confronted with a value of either the infinite or the void—the difference is surprisingly negligible—is to declare that the object cannot be measured, and then try and measure it all the same. Recall Shelley’s objection the footnotes that catalog “the fifty-six various readings of the first line of the Orlando Furioso” (40). Given the infinite reach of the imagination itself, such a critical dissection is folly not only because this unnamed critic says too much about a single line, but because that is not nearly enough to say about a work of poetry, a work of infinitude (though one still infinitely smaller than the vastness of the original imaginative conception). Similarly, Lamb will histrionically, though perhaps sincerely, declare that Garrick was not even “a true lover of [Shakespeare’s] excellencies” (“Tragedies” 260). The only truth that can actually be spoken about Shakespeare’s plays is that they exceed, or outdo, the “strait-lacing actuality” of the stage, or, a counted reading (254), what
turns *Hamlet* into “another thing by being acted” (256). This is the familiar interplay of the *topoi* of inexpressibility and outdoing that was dramatized in the first scene of *Lear* performed yet again. In an act of auxetic praise, Garrick is equated with Shakespeare; taking that *topos* literally, Lamb declares Garrick outdone by Shakespeare. Garrick is in the business of staged expression; Shakespeare’s greatness can only be “measured” with reference to the inexpressible.

Let us turn now to Lamb’s praise of *Lear*—and blame of the staged *Lear*—that is quoted in full (and then some) by Hazlitt:

> So to see Lear acted,—to see an old man tottering about the stage with a walking-stick, turned out of doors by his daughters in a rainy night, has nothing in it but what is painful and disgusting. We want to take him into shelter and relieve him. That is all the feeling which the acting of Lear ever produced in me. But the Lear of Shakespeare cannot be acted. The contemptible machinery by which they mimic the storm which he goes out in, is not more inadequate to represent the horrors of the real elements, than any actor can be to represent Lear, they might more easily propose to personate the Satan of Milton upon a stage, or one of Michael Angelo’s terrible figures. The greatness of Lear is not in corporal dimension, but in intellectual: the explosions of his passion are terrible as a volcano: they are storms turning up and disclosing to the bottom that sea his mind, with all its vast riches. It is his mind which is laid bare. . . . On the stage we see nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness, the impotence of rage; while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear,—we are in his mind, we are sustained by a grandeur which baffles the malice of daughters and storms; in the aberrations of his reason, we discover a mighty irregular power of reasoning, immethodized from the ordinary purposes of life, but exerting its powers, as the wind blows where it listeth, at will upon the corruptions and abuses of mankind. (Lamb “Tragedies” 261-2; qtd. in Hazlitt 1.179-80)

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41 Here Alain Badiou’s critique of Romanticism is especially relevant; the Romantic wants to celebrate the infinite but has no interest in the mathematical operations, formulas, and theories that *clarify* infinity. For Badiou, it is only by such a formalistic study coupled with a Kierkegaardian leap (dubbed the “point” of decision) that leads to knowledge of an eternal truth, rather than the sustained awe of unknowing that the Romantics associate with sublimity. Badiou is both a sometime dramatist and a theorist of the theater (see “Rhapsody”). A productive study of how his anti-Romanticism informs or is contrasted by Badiou’s own attitude toward the theater could well be developed.

42 In a remarkable and surprising error in his otherwise meticulous study, Duncan Wu attributes the passage by Lamb to Hazlitt as an *exemplum* of “the key to Hazlitt’s modernity” (212). If the effect of Hazlitt’s occasional *misquoting* of Shakespeare is an inadvertent revisionist tendency on the part of the critic, the effect of his excessive quoting (mis- or otherwise) also leads to an inadvertent tendency to plagiarize on the part of the critic’s reader. There are simply so many copies that, even when they are attributed to the original author, we cannot help but misattribute the original ourselves.
Lamb’s rhetoric is familiar: Lear cannot be acted, his sublime qualities as a character not expressed, and—ala Coleridge—the character is comparable or better than the characters of Milton or Michelangelo. If Lear does not exactly outdo those sublime figures, than the character certainly outdoes the efforts of all those who attempt to come to grips with the play, at least on stage. These are familiar arguments not only because Hazlitt reworks and quotes them and presents them in his own essay, or because they echo Coleridge, but because they are conventional invocations of some of the oldest, most established rhetorical devices.

There are none of the multi-paged quotations that fill the pages of the Biographia and Characters of Shakespeare’s Plays, yet Lamb is no less obsessed with pursuing a method of deictic display free of epideictic auxësis. In fact, it is the presentation of something purely deictic that Lamb epideictically praises as Shakespeare’s greatest accomplishment. Reading Shakespeare’s Lear is to experience Lear’s mind “laid bare,” completely and purely displayed, free of any auxetic amplification because (since we are speaking of our own experience rather than the drama proper) it is without text: rather than read this character or his mind, we are this character with this mind. Such a fanciful reading is a radical, if perhaps expected, descendent of the Romantic preference for the reader’s memory of the text over a re-reading of the text. Yet, if for Coleridge and others, the memory of a text’s sublimity permitted imagination’s flight in a way that re-reading did not, for Lamb, reading is sufficiently ethereal, at least compared with the

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43 We have already examined Coleridge’s view that the images of Lear are beyond what “a Michael Angelo inspired by a Dante could have conceived, and which none but a Michael Angelo could have executed” (5.2.333). Tying the greatest visual artist of the Renaissance with its greatest dramatist may simply be a recurrent trope for Romantic literary criticism, or this instance may be another specific example of the network of influence between Coleridge and Lamb. Either way, it is a characteristic example of the dependence upon devices of both example and authority in Romantic rhetoric.

44 As with his fellow Romantics, Lamb asserts the supremacy of Lear. Although, as with Shelley and Coleridge, Lear’s canonical status as “the most stupendous of the Shakspearian dramas” is tempered somewhat, since Lamb attributes this point to his alter ego Elia (“Table Talk” 446).
“strait-lacing actuality” of the playhouse. The “instantaneous nature” of the actors’ performed text contradicts the experience of “slow apprehension oftentimes of the understanding in reading”—the odd syntax seemingly mimicking the familiar *ebb and flow* of understanding’s comings and goings in reading—and choosing the stage over the page is to “let go a dream, in quest of an unattainable substance” (“Tragedies” 254).

Nowhere is this “dream”-state of reading more called for than in reading *Lear*. For Lamb, reading *Lear* is beyond reading. The reader does not approach the object of praise tropologically—with reference to a readable heart, for example—the reader is actually transported into Lear’s unreadable mind. That this makes absolutely no sense if one takes it at all seriously—which is to say, to avoid reading it tropologically—is precisely Lamb’s point. Lear’s mind is a sublime place, a Finemanean “peculiar” place that the critic can only point to. It goes beyond not only the stage effects imitating the storm, and not only beyond the power of language to account for the sublimity of the storm, but even beyond the terror-like sensation of an actual storm. For Lamb, to praise Lear and *Lear* as Shakespeare’s supreme accomplishment is not to idealize the play, but to *actualize* it. Lamb invokes irregular powers of reasoning and presents something not only aside from critical method but rather something that *immethodizes* reading, something that allows the reader to be as mad and susceptible to influence as the titular King himself.45 The process of approaching the text must imitate the “mighty irregular power of reasoning” that the text represents, so that the critical imitation is not just imitating the narrative, but the torments of the titular character. The Romantics have always approached the illogical infinite qualities of the Sublime as something that can be discussed deductively; here that

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45 On the Romantic “passion” appearing as affected madness, see Abrams *Mirror* 138-40. This impulse is perhaps linked to the Romantics’ habit of reading *Hamlet* autobiographically, identifying with the titular figure (see Bate *Imagination* 18-19). As we will see in my final chapter, Lacan begins his critique of the Romantic influence on psychoanalysis by examining this “mirror quality” of reading *Hamlet*. 
approach is recognized as not only Shakespearean, but specifically Lear-ean. This is an epistemological reading that demands the play outdo us, and all of our possible readings, as the play outdoes its own author. Any reading that claims to be more than “nothing,” even one speaking epideictically about the play, is wrong: the only true response to the play is a mind laid bare.

If Park’s reading of Hazlitt as an arch-critic of abstraction is correct, than what of the high praise reserved for abstraction in the essay by Lamb that he quoted at length? Regarding performances of Macbeth, the staged violence materializes what is easily ignorable with a reader’s “vantage-ground of abstraction”: “the too close pressing semblance of reality” of the murders gives viewers “pain and uneasiness,” as opposed to “delight” taken from “the sublime images, the poetry alone, is that which is present to our minds in the reading” (“Tragedies” 261). Thus, what has been understood as the anti-theatrical prejudice of the Romantics—Lamb in particular—may simply be symptomatic of their preference of one kind of reading over the other. Lamb’s open, reflexive reading is preferable to either theatrical staging or a written-reading because it frees one from the responsibilities of fixity; such a reading is also inherently poetic, in the Shelleyean sense of a decline from a sublime ideal. Such a poetic reading, privileging the ideal of abstract inspiration that led to the work of art, rather than the specifics the work of art is representing itself, is open-ended because it is anti-analytical. An analytical approach might consider why such sublime poetry is associated with a series of murders, and such an inquiry leads towards to questions posed by Johnson and those associated with what Sherbo calls the birth of Shakespeare studies. The open-endedness of inexpressibility and a specifically auxetic Sublime is preferable because—despite the claim to mirror the sufferings of the mad king’s irregular reasoning—it is more comfortable.

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46 Georges Bataille offers a similar critique of the Romantic mechanisms of defense in his essay “The Notion of Expenditure”: “without speaking of God, Spirit serves to mask the intellectual disarray of the few people who refuse
Ultimately, Lamb and his fellow Romantics prefer this kind of reading because they see it as a tribute to Lear. We may here amend Derrida’s maxim about quotation marks: once praise appears, it does not want to stop.\(^{47}\) The Romantics’ Epideicti-critical Sublime is an objection to the fixity of written interpretative reading because the very notion of interpretation suggests that reading can (or should) end. In order to defend literature from ending, the Romantics frame their ideal of the Epideicti-critical Sublime as a reading that does not even, actually begin. The difference between invoking the Sublime and invoking the inexpressibility topos is, at most, a matter of degree: as is the case with Hazlitt, the invoker of the Sublime wants to say nothing but must say something, the invoker of the topos of inexpressibility claims to say nothing as though that is saying something.

Turning back to Shelley for a moment, we might see the project of praising this play as less a defense of the play than a defense, in the psychoanalytical sense, for the Romantics themselves. Their method of praise is an elaborate, often meticulously systematic, dismissal of system in order to represent the object of their praise as a vehicle of abstraction, which invites any response that the praiser can display at all, so long as it closely resembles no response. The study of defenses begins with, may even be limited to, the study of failed defenses.\(^{48}\) The Romantics’ ideality of failure in writing and reading, via the celebration of “attempts” and

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\(^{47}\) Derrida: “once quotation marks demand to appear, they don’t know where to stop” (“Living On” 63).

\(^{48}\) Anna Freud: “as is usually the case in psycho-analytic investigations, the study of repression started not with the successful but with the miscarried defence” (Introduction 520). Sigmund Freud confesses in “The Neuro-psychoses of Defence” that he is unable to analyze successful repressions: “nor do I know whether and in what way intentional forgetting succeeds in those people who, under the same psychical influences, remain healthy” (48).
fragments, belies their own foreclosure of reading Lear.\textsuperscript{49} As Freud diagnosed Lear as a dramatization of reaction-formation, we now see the Romantics’ approach to Lear in much the same way: the display of an elaborate defense-mechanism decrying the mechanisms of rhetoric while closely adhering to those same devices. One need not defend the performances of Garrick and adaptations of Tate that the Romantics decry to note the defense against recognizing what is displayed in Lear. For all of their attempts to resemble Cordelia—saying nothing—while following the rhetorical path laid out by Goneril and Regan, they resemble Lear most of all.

The poetic “nothing,”’ the amplifying, auxetic \textit{epi}- that enables the epideictic even as it pushes it beyond pure deictic display, transforms the Romanics’ ideal of a literal nothing into an unwritten reading. For better or for worse, this is to directly align the Romanics with King Lear himself, who also (initially) only wants to have Lear praised.\textsuperscript{50} All Lear desires in the opening scene is the pomp and affect that any king is (legally) entitled to. As many commentators (including Coleridge) have noted, the ceremony of the love test is particularly contrived: Gloucester tells Kent in the first lines that Albany and Cornwall’s “qualities” are already weighed equally in the division of the kingdom (\textit{Tragedy} 1.1.3-5). The pure nothingness of the praise that Lear solicits could not be more artificial, and Cordelia’s answer, which chills on every reading, illuminates that insincerity.

The problem that Cordelia faces as she sees one highly conventional \textit{topos} conventionally supplanted by another conventional \textit{topos} is the problem of representation, which is to say, the

\textsuperscript{49} See Reinhard and Lupton 153-85 for a reading of Lear as the “tragedy of foreclosure.” See note 17 in my introduction.

\textsuperscript{50} My interest in Kierkegaard stems largely from his indirect critique of reading literature this way. Both he and Lacan indicate in their critiques of Romanticism that it is precisely by identifying with Hamlet—the intellectual who abhors intellectual systems, who points to the peculiar place beyond philosophy—that the Romantics are in fact most like the rash, egotistical Lear. See Cavell’s elegant reading of the love test (61-8), which does not reference Freud, but still seems to me to identify Lear’s “plan” as a rhetorical and psychological defense that is in league with what we have identified in the Romantics’ literary criticism.
problem of fixity. Her two asides—spoken from that peculiar place, a mind laid bare—declare as much: “What shall Cordelia speak? Love and be silent” (*Tragedy* 1.1.59-60); “Then poor Cordelia— / And yet not so, since I am sure my love’s / More ponderous than my tongue” (*Tragedy* 1.1.74-6). She fails her first query, since she says “nothing” and not nothing, and the second aside, with its interruption of a half-finished thought, suggests why. Her love is more ponderous than Regan’s, because it is “weightier.” But it is also more ponderous because it is being *pondered*: her love is, as Lamb might say, “immethodized from the ordinary purposes of life,” and free from the necessity of either a finished deictic or epideictic display. Cordelia is not satisfied with the affect of *topoi*, even if they are entirely appropriate: claiming a love more ponderous than one’s tongue is not particularly different (or more inherently virtuous) than claiming one that makes speech unable. The difference is that only one of those claims is verbalized as rhetoric, the other internalized as an aside. She is easily idealized because she resides in a place in-between the internal and the external, the refusal to express what is inside because doing so would appear identical to *feigning*. Yet—and here is the power of demystification in *Lear* that is lacking in the Romantic criticism of Hazlitt and Lamb—the performed aside is by definition a (staged) feigning.

The play begins with “poor Cordelia”; it is gradually revealed to be about “poor Lear” (*Lacan Ethics* 310). In both cases, Lacan’s aphorism about love applies: “it follows that in love it is not the meaning that counts, but rather the sign, as in everything else. In fact, therein lies the whole catastrophe” (“Television” 45). Cordelia is very much her father’s daughter: both are obsessed with the catastrophe of representation or, to continue with the terminology of this dissertation, display. Cordelia is not satisfied with her response. She not only says “nothing” rather than nothing, she does not only say “nothing,” either. She follows her answer with an
explanation – something that resembles editing since it quantifies her feelings ("half my love") much as Shelley lamented an editor cataloging "the fifty-six various readings of the first line of the Orlando Furioso." This counting of half her love seems far colder than the Romantic, expressive counting of mathematical and dynamic sublimes because it is delivered with a tone of certainty, rather than one of impressionism. Yet we know in our own hearts that that is when she is actually feigning. Closer to the play’s end, Cordelia follows that quasi-editing with something that resembles a retraction, asking for her father’s blessing and declaring she has "no cause, no cause" to do him wrong (Tragedy 4.6.68).

Hazlitt grasps that Cordelia wishes to say nothing, but is compelled to say something, and relates that compulsion to his own criticism. But unlike Hazlitt, what Cordelia has to say fails to fall far short of the subject. Saying "nothing," and then clarifying that her reward of the "opulent" third of the kingdom is worth "half" her love (Tragedy 1.1.84, 100), is an act of display without a trace of amplification. The failure to say nothing is, even if inadvertently, the refusal to perform auxetically, which is itself already nothing. And that nothing is the nothing that Lear solicits with the love test and which he retracts when he encounters Edgar as Poor Tom:

Thou wert better in a grave than to answer with thy uncovered body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou owwest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha, here’s three on ‘s are sophisticated; thou art the thing itself. Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked, animal as thou art. Off, off you lendings! Come, unbutton here. (Tragedy 3.4.91-8)

The desire for nothing at the play’s opening is replaced by a desire for its polar opposite: the thing itself. A delicate chiasmus may be drawn between Nothing and Thing and the impulses

toward Display and Recognition, where the values intersect and are conflated because, as with
the values of the infinite and the non-existent, they are uncomfortably equal when they have been
examined closely. Just as nothing was presented as increasingly unrevealing amplification,
conversely, the thing itself is conceived as something bare. Yet this bareness is itself an
amplification, a performative nothing, since Edgar is not really Poor Tom.

When Lear tries to imitate this imitation of a mad man, by unbuttoning his own clothes,
he strives to be the thing itself himself. Yet imitating an established imitation is inherently
rhetorical, and when it is repeated, it essentially establishes a *topos*:

Thoul’t come no more.
Never, never, never, never, never.

[To Kent] Pray you, undo this button. Thank you sir.

Do you see this? Look on her. Look, her lips.

Look there, look there. (*Tragedy* 282-86)

*Topoi* serve a purpose: they are a nothing that—because they are repeated and made familiar—
act like something. And that is precisely why Lear finds comfort in his *topos* of unbuttoning at
the end, when he carries the something that can do nothing (“come no more”): Cordelia’s body.
The affect of unbuttoning enables Lear to see and display something that is not really there (“Do
you see this? Look on her.”). Lear demands the reappearance of the *topos* of unbuttoning here,
not only because a *topos* is a kind of psychological defense, but because he wants a genuine
resurrection, a corporal fulfillment of what was textually prefigured. Shakespeare tells us that
such fulfillments are and mean nothing. But what viewer or reader of the play could possibly
fault Lear’s desire for this nothing at the play’s conclusion, as much as he or she may object to
his earlier desire for bare *auxësis*?

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52 See Bloom: “troping and defending may be much the same process . . .” (“Freud’s Concepts” 1).
The Romantics act as though *Lear* should only be praised, because its sublimity is so deeply inexpressible; the play, however, demands that it be read precisely *because* its expression of truths is in a representation indistinguishable from feigning. Unreadability, after all, is no excuse for not reading: “the unreadable is not the opposite of the readable but rather the ridge [*arête*] that also gives it momentum, movement, sets it in motion” (Derrida “Living On” 95-6).

Still, *King Lear* inverts Derrida’s formula. It begins with the reading—Cordelia identifies her sisters’ speeches as and her father’s desire for “nothing”—and ends with the unreadable. Lear’s heart cannot, like Astrophil’s, be read. This is not so much because it is sublime, as Lamb interprets the King’s mind, but rather, as Kent understands, because it is broken.53

The rhetoric of praise was a defense for the Romantics as much as it was a defense of the objects of that praise, enabling them to repress or foreclose the lesson that *Lear* taught them about the impossibility of their own project and the comforts that can be found—and not dismissed—in feigning. We leave the failures, both intentional and otherwise, of Romanticism behind and turn to the post-Romantic thought of Kierkegaard and Lacan. These are two thinkers unafraid of feigning, either in the indirect communication of the former and the role performed by the analyst as the subject supposed to know of the latter. Despite the acknowledged influence of Socratic irony upon Kierkegaard’s indirect communication, post-Romanticism is not a return to the neo-classical “study” of Johnson *et al*.

53 Kent’s “Break, heart, I prithee break” (*Tragedy* 5.3.287) is spoken by Lear himself in the quarto (*History* 24.305). At least according to the stage directions presented in the Norton edition, this revision of the earlier moment in the *History* text is an inscribing of Lear’s death, where like Lear looking on Cordelia and seeing something displayed on her lips, Kent and Edgar look on the dead Lear and read his body as having “faint[ed]” and needing encouragement to “pass” (*Tragedy* 5.3.286, 288). If the *Tragedy* is Shakespeare’s revision of the *History*, I take Edgar and Kent’s befuddlement over whether or not he has died or fainted as underlining the play’s emphasis on interpretation as the only possible defensive response to its presentation of a nihilistic reality.
is to say by *recognizing*, unbridgeable gaps: the voids between the different stages of existence, for Kierkegaard, and those between the realms of symbolic, imaginary, and real for Lacan.\(^\text{54}\)

In addressing *Lear* allusively—elliptically, barely at all—both Kierkegaard and Lacan confront the Romantic construction of an inexpressibly sublime *Lear* head-on. If any of the irregularities of the Romantic immethodizing of reading remain, and haunt our own approaches to *Lear*, the process of correcting those prejudices may begin by turning our attention to the post-Romantic thought of Kierkegaard and Lacan.

\(^{54}\) Slavoj Žižek has repeatedly drawn a comparison between Kierkegaard’s three stages of existence (the esthetic, the ethical, and the religious) and Lacan’s three orders (the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real). See *Enjoy Your Symptom* 78-86.
CHAPTER 4

KING LEAR IN POST-ROMANTIC THOUGHT: RESTAGING LEAR IN KIERKEGAARD’S INDIRECT COMMUNICATION AND JOURNALS

In this chapter, we will examine how the references to *King Lear* by the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard inform Kierkegaard’s unique, though influential, challenge to Romanticism. References to Shakespeare are legion in Kierkegaard’s writings, but the centrality of *Lear* in Kierkegaard’s early pseudonymous works is under-examined. In a series of brief allusions in his first major work, *Either/Or,* and its quasi-sequel, *Stages on Life’s Way,* Kierkegaard’s novelistic texts sequentially enact scenes from the narrative of *King Lear.* Though many Kierkegaard scholars would no doubt privilege the theological effect of this network of allusions, Kierkegaard’s appropriation of *Lear* is not only a crucial moment in his body of thought, but also offers a striking, post-Romantic critique of the conventional identification of *Lear* as a work of unreadable sublimity. Kierkegaard’s adaptation of *King Lear*’s narrative appears in a series of writings that parody the methods of the Romantic

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1 For example, see Kierkegaard’s reading of Richard III as the “demonic hero” in *Fear and Trembling* 105-6. Important readings and surveys of Kierkegaard’s references to Shakespeare include Ruoff, Ziolkowski 183-212, and Stewart *Shakespeare* 98-135. Kierkegaard did not know English, but he read Shakespeare vociferously in both Danish and German, and expressed a particular preference for the Schlegel-Tieck translation completed in 1833. According to Eric Ziolkowski, this means that Kierkegaard’s Shakespeare was an unavoidably Romantic Shakespeare, inseparable from the German phenomenon dubbed *Shakespearomanie* (“Shakespeare mania”) that fixed the Shakespeare to the core of the Romantic imagination (188-9). I hope to show that Kierkegaard mounts a challenge to the Schlegelian variety of Romanticism, particularly with his parody of *Romans* like *Lucinde* in *Either/Or* and *Stages on Life’s Way,* and that Shakespeare is a key reference point for this critique of Romanticism. On this point, he may parallel Hazlitt as a critic of Schlegelian “mysticism.” Habib Malik reports that early reception of Kierkegaard in England compared him to Hazlitt (267).

2 It is widely understood among readers of Kierkegaard that the authorship officially “begins” in 1843, after his return from Berlin, and with the publication of *Either/Or.* The writings that precede *Either/Or*—including his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony,* and the review of Andersen’s *Only a Fiddler*—are certainly of interest, but do not yet demonstrate the unique rhetorical perspective of either the pseudonymous writings or the signed upbuilding discourses.

3 For an overview of the problem of Kierkegaard’s relation to Romanticism, with a particularly helpful gloss of *Either/Or*’s relation to *Lucinde,* see McDonald. (I read Kierkegaard’s response to Romanticism as far more critical than what McDonald identifies as his “ambivalent attitude”) (94). See Rasmussen *Between Irony and Witness* 15-53 for a more detailed study of Kierkegaard’s critique of Schlegel as “an ironic revision of Romantic irony” itself (53). See also the essays collected in Stewart *Kierkegaard and his German Contemporaries,* a volume in Ashgate’s fine *Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources* series.
Epideictic-critical model. Kierkegaard both uses *King Lear* to diagnose the egotism of a display-oriented philosophy and to clarify his own recognition-based rhetorical practice. This method of “indirect communication” both offers a recognition-based corrective to Romanticism and anticipates the methods of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Some exegesis of Kierkegaard’s unique rhetorical strategy, specifically what he refers to as the “indirect communication,” is necessary in order to contextualize Kierkegaard’s attention to *Lear*. For Kierkegaard, the indirect communication revives maieutic irony, as practiced by Socrates, as a corrective of Romantic irony. The indirect communication is made up of a number of quasi-novels and philosophical enquiries, published under a series of pseudonyms, that subversively demonstrate a Romantic worldview, in order to take the “delusion” of the esthetic reader “at face value” (*Point* 54). (Anticipating contemporary readings of Romanticism as an “ideology,” Kierkegaard critiques the esthetic as a worldview or “life stage,” meant to be supplanted by a leap into the stages of the ethical and the religious). The tropes and devices of Romantic discourse that we have already examined are on display (and subverted) throughout these pseudonymous works. The texts are presented as found or edited fragments and critical analysis of other literary texts is presented *via* performative illustration. Kierkegaard’s famous “Seducer’s Diary,” from *Either/Or*, closely resembles novels like Friedrich Schlegel’s *Lucinde*.

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4 In brief, Kierkegaard sees Romantic irony as fundamentally nihilistic and simple: it is primarily an attitude, and not a commitment. Maieutic irony, on the other hand, can be used to deceive a reader into a committed belief in what is true (i.e. religious inwardness). See Mjaaland, especially 129-31, and Taylor 51-62, for a clear summary of Kierkegaard’s interpretation and appropriation of Socrates. Other major studies of the “indirect communication” include those by Poole and Daise. (Daise places a particular emphasis on understanding the indirect communication as a “Socratic art”). See Martinez for a reading of Kierkegaard’s Socratic irony with reference to the study of both Classical and contemporary schools of rhetoric.

5 In the previous chapters, we have attended to the discourse of the Sublime as a Romanticizing of the religious. Abrams reads Romanticism as finding its “origins in theological concepts, images, and plot patterns,” which are then reformulated to become a “secularized form of devotional experience” (*Natural* 65). Kierkegaard sees the reverse as the problem: “Christendom” is too Romantic, too rooted in the esthetic. The true Christian, or single individual, would reject the universal, outside world, and seek a radical, completely individual relationship with God. See Kirmmse 449-86 for more on Kierkegaard’s “attack on Christendom.”
the sort of *Roman* that may have given Romanticism its very name.⁶ Not surprisingly, many identify Kierkegaard as a “kind of poet,” rather than a philosopher proper.⁷ Yet with reference to Kierkegaard’s signed-writings (the “direct” communication), especially to the posthumously published *The Point Of View For My Work As An Author*, we can understand this poetic pose as a rhetorical decision meant to undermine the esthetic life-stage or, rather, a Romantic ideology or worldview.

By presenting *Lear* as a work that needs to be discovered in a network of allusions, and as a work that can easily be misinterpreted by the esthete, Kierkegaard upends the Romantic impulse of *display* for a model of *recognition*, and thereby is a pivotal figure in the transition from the epideiti-critical *Lear* to the challenge to the Romantic view mounted by Lacan.

Ultimately, the nihilistic vision of *Lear* is incompatible with the religious promise of what is “beyond” the esthetic, and Kierkegaard’s restaging of the play stops with some abruptness. As with Samuel Johnson choosing not to “endure” the play until he had to edit it, the Romantic desire to pass its sublimity over in silence, and—as we shall see—Jacques Lacan’s own anxious encounter with the play,⁸ Kierkegaard recognizes something traumatic in his reading of *King

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⁶ For more on Friedrich Schlegel’s use of *Roman* and its role in the etymology of “Romanticism” and “Romantisch,” see Peer 19-30.

⁷ See Mackey.

⁸ I argue in my next chapter that Kierkegaard’s indirect communication is itself a direct influence on Lacan’s clinical method and the rhetorical method of the seminars. Lacan argues in the eleventh seminar that the repetition compulsion should be understood with reference to what is conceptualized in Kierkegaard’s novel, *Repetition*. See Žižek *Symptom* 69-110. See also Ramsland, who proposes an application of “Kierkegaard’s theory of indirect communication to the practice of psychotherapy.”

In many ways, the familiar reading of Kierkegaard as the “Father of Existentialism” has yielded to an understanding of Kierkegaard as the “Father of Post-Structuralism.” Derrida’s own comments on Kierkegaard are relatively brief. They are limited primarily to a reading of *Fear and Trembling in The Gift of Death* (54-81), an elliptical comment in *A Taste For The Secret* that, “it is Kierkegaard to whom I have been most faithful and who interests me most” (40), and an even more elliptical citation of Kierkegaard as the epigraph for his essay on Foucault from *Writing and Difference*. Still, Mark Taylor, John Caputo, and others have long championed a reading of Derrida’s debt to Kierkegaard (or, rather, Kierkegaard’s anticipation of Derrida). See the collection *The New Kierkegaard*, edited by Elsebet Jegstrup, and the volume *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, edited by Matuštík and
Lear, and he turns away. The crisis of recognition that Kierkegaard experienced while reading Lear resembles these other examples, yet it is also deeply personal and unique, and the moments in the indirect communication that touch King Lear also come into contact with the traumas of his own life: the broken engagement with Regine Olsen and the resonance of his difficult relationship with his father, Michael. A reading of Kierkegaard’s personal response to the play can be made with reference to his journals, but such a psycho-biographical interpretation is only possible after first contending with the play’s function within Kierkegaard’s complex theorization of reading, as formulated in the authorship proper.

Kierkegaard’s various unreliable narrators demonstrate both a mastery of the esthetic and the limitations of the esthetic, in order to “deceive” the reader into “what is true” (Point 53): i.e. the religious. Still, Kierkegaard’s output is not exclusively “indirect.” Kierkegaard published a series of “upbuilding discourses” under his own name alongside the pseudonymous works; these works spoke of his theological system directly, and less sensationalistically. However, the signed works are only capable of this directness because they are addressed to an exclusive audience: the “single individual.” The single individual has attained or seeks the religious, and has rejected the esthetic life stage depicted in the pseudonymous works:

the movement was, maieutically, to shake off “the crowd” in order to get hold of “the single individual,” religiously understood. At the very same time when the sensation Either/Or created was at its peak, at the very same time appeared Two Upbuilding Discourses (1843), which used the formula that later was repeated

Westphal (especially Caputo 216-38). See also Weston for an overview of Kierkegaard’s influence on twentieth-century continental philosophy, especially for a genealogy of Kierkegaard’s influence on Existentialism, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Post-Structuralism. See Poole “The Unknown Kierkegaard” for a reading and overview of Kierkegaard reception in the twentieth-century.

9 The “single individual” is one of the most disputed concepts in Kierkegaard’s oeuvre. See the introduction by Howard and Edna Hong to their translation of the Point of View and Ferreira for a clarification of the interrelation between the signed works (addressed to the single individual) and the pseudonymous ones. See also the chapter on the single individual in Buber’s Between Man and Man (46-97). See also Malik 81 for more on immediate misinterpretation of this concept (and by extension, Kierkegaard’s “attack on Christendom” and the authorship as a whole!).

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unchanged: “It seeks that single individual whom I with joy and gratitude call my reader.” (“On My Work As An Author” in *Point 9*)

As is the case with many of Kierkegaard’s terms, the “single individual” is a fluid one, defined with a pronounced “duplexity” throughout the works.¹⁰ For the purposes of this chapter, in order to understand how *King Lear* informs the indirect communication, we will focus specifically on the single individual as Kierkegaard’s ideal reader. The single individual alone can penetrate the layers of irony and recognize the truth of the religious stage concealed by the “deception” of esthetic discourse. The author can assist with this sort of recognition via Socratic “midwifery,” but the reader/single individual alone is the one who identifies the truth that “is not introduced into him but was in him” (*Philosophical Fragments* 9). With this maieutic strategy in mind, we can turn to *Either/Or*, the first work in the authorship proper, and the first work by Kierkegaard to directly engage with the text of *King Lear*. Though the references to Lear are brief and subtle, they are crucial. In fact, their briefness alone suggests that Kierkegaard expects the single individual to recognize their importance and not have it “introduced,” or displayed, to him.

A brief summary of *Either/Or* is necessary to qualify the role that Lear plays in the two volumes of this “Chinese Puzzle” of a book (*Either/Or* 1.9). The title-page of the first volume informs us that the work is “A Fragment of Life” edited by a character named Victor Eremita.¹¹ In his preface, Eremita recounts the events of how he came into possession of “two groups” of papers, “with marked external difference” (1.6-7), then edited and published these two groups as

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¹⁰ See “The Equivocalness or Duplexity in the Whole Authorship” (Kierkegaard *Point* 29-32).

¹¹ Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms are often puns. Ziolkowski: “Apparently his use of the pseudonyms Victor Eremita [“editor” of *Either/Or*] and Frater Taciturnus [author of “Guilty/Not Guilty” in *Stages on Life’s Way*], literally Victor the Hermit and Brother Taciturn or the Silent Frater, encouraged other people to view [Kierkegaard] in a monastic light” (119). When excerpting *Either/Or*, I reference the volume number and then the page number in my parenthetical citations.
the two volumes of *Either/Or*. The first volume, primarily authored by a figure Eremita calls “A,” is by far the more diverse set of writings. A’s writings include a number of esthetic essays which consist of a series of aphorisms (the “Diapsalmata”), a long reading of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (“The Immediate Erotic Stages”), a long reading of *Antigone* (“The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama”), a series of “Silhouettes” examining female characters from Goethe and Mozart, a review of a contemporary comedy by Augustin Eugène Scribe, and a “venture in a theory of social prudence” called “The Rotation of Crops.” However, A is not only an author, but also purports to be an editor similar to Eremita, and the longest section of the first volume of *Either/Or* is a journal that A himself claims to have found and edited. This is “The Seducer’s Diary,” by far the most famous section of *Either/Or*, supposedly written by a figure named Johannes. A’s introduction to the diary comments upon its contents and includes excerpts from the letters of Johannes’s seduced, a girl named Cordelia Wahl.

12 Eremita’s preface details the unusual, but hardly supernatural, desire he felt for a writing desk that he saw in the window of a secondhand store that he passed daily. He buys the desk in a moment of prodigality, justifying the purchase as “lucky” and telling himself that, “every time you look at it you will be reminded of how prodigal you were; with this desk commences a new period in your life” (1.5). Indeed, he now passes the desk within his house much as he previously passed it on the street. A page and a year later, Eremita claims to have been so frustrated opening the drawer of this monument to a “new period of his life” that he attacks it with a hatchet. This attack is a new “stroke of luck,” and the blow springs open a secret door holding “a mass of papers,” that he then edits into the two volumes of *Either/Or*.

13 See Stokes, especially 23-28, for a fine reading of the “rotation of crops” as a means of pursuing and maintaining the aesthetic (and intrinsically selfish) goal of the interesting. In the *Point of View*, Kierkegaard clarifies that the goal of the single individual is to move not from the simple to the interesting, but “from the interesting to the simple” (94).

14 The “Diary of a Seducer” was often published as a separate work. See Malik for a reading of several instances of how reading the diary without the context of *Either/Or* as a whole contributes to the misreception of Kierkegaard; Malik is particularly incensed with Georg Brandes’s characterization of Kierkegaard as “an irrepressible aesthetic genius, longing to break out into freedom” (238). As Brandes’s monograph on Kierkegaard—the first critical monograph on Kierkegaard—has yet to be translated into English, Malik’s account of Brandes’s reading is the most thorough one available in English, though this summary is occasionally hindered by Malik’s own polemics.
In direct contrast to the three named voices in *Either/Or* volume one, not to mention the more than half-dozen selections, volume two is made up almost entirely by two letters written to A from “B” (“The Esthetic Validity of Marriage” and “The Balance Between the Esthetic and the Ethical in the Development of Personality”). Within these letters, B reveals his name (William) and occupation (judge). He is also an editor of sorts. In his final letter addressed to A, Judge William includes and introduces a copy of an as-of-yet undelivered sermon written by an unnamed pastor called “The Upbuilding That Lies In the Thought That In Relation To God We Are Always In The Wrong.”

We can see already how Kierkegaard compounds the problem of reading that begins with the unreliable voice—i.e. *Either/Or* is not “by” Søren Aabye Kierkegaard, it is “by” anywhere from two to five different people, and edited and introduced by someone else, Victor Eremita—by upending a reader’s expectations for a “published” work. Much of *Either/Or* appears to be unfinished; its genres vary wildly, ranging from a decadent young man’s diary to an account of a devout minister’s sermons. Furthermore, *Either/Or* is unique in that it records its own missed reading. Several comments made by Judge William suggest that his letters may have all gone unread by A. \(^{15}\) In other words, even a direct communication can be received indirectly. Nobody has to finish reading anything. (And, as Samuel Johnson noted in his discussion of Lear’s ending, sometimes it is preferable to stop reading something). As a critique of the esthetic, the indirect communication begins by dramatizing problems of reading with its unusual construction, particularly by dramatizing avoided readings. These problems are all compounded further by

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\(^{15}\) Judge William suggests that A sees the exchange of letters as a “secret” that should not be acknowledged in conversation: “I know that you do not take kindly to having anyone speak to you about your inner history; I have, therefore chosen to write and will never speak to you of such matters” (2.332). In the letter that follows, the transmitted sermon on upbuilding, he seems to defensively recognize that the letters are not just a secret, but given the young man’s sensitivity to the matters discussed, they are also unread, and the young man must be “reminded” of the letters’ content: “Perhaps you have forgotten, just as I have, most of the contents of my previous letters . . .” (2.337).
*Stages on Life's Way*, a work where Eremita, Johannes the Seducer, and Judge William all appear. This quasi-sequel to *Either/Or* is not edited, only bound, by a figure named Hilarius Bookbinder. Hilarius has apparently not read the papers that he has bound together (or has not read them closely, at any rate).\(^{16}\)

The direct allusions to *Lear* begin, not surprisingly, in “The Seducer’s Diary,” where the beloved, Cordelia Wahl, is compared to *Lear*’s Cordelia. With the convoluted makeup of *Either/Or* and its sequel in mind, this allusion is all the more resonant for Kierkegaard’s critique of Romanticism. It is not going too far to suggest that the appearance of *Lear*’s Cordelia as Cordelia Wahl in the “Seducer’s Diary” is metonymic for Kierkegaard’s indirect, but radical interrogation of these three volumes’ textual, intertextual, and paratextual features. Johannes the Seducer has very little interest in the actual text of *Lear*; his analysis is based on an impression of supposedly established givens, rather than a direct engagement with the text. (In other words, he seems to have only “read” *Lear* inasmuch as it is a rhetorical and cultural *exemplum*). Even if Kierkegaard did not read Hazlitt, it feels as though he is showing us that *this* is what it means to pass the play over in silence.\(^{17}\) Instead, Johannes seems to want to read his Cordelia purely aesthetically by making a harmless comparison with another work of aesthetic beauty:

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\(^{16}\) This is the narrative of Hilarius Bookbinder, laid out in the introduction to *Stages on Life’s Way* (“Lectori Benevoli!”). A member of the intelligentsia that Hilarius calls “Mr. Literatus” sends several books and manuscripts to be bound, then dies before Hilarius finishes the job. Nobody asks for the works, so Hilarius reads from “the book” occasionally for diversion (“But I cannot say that there was much diversion, for I did not understand very much”) (4). His children copy from the manuscript occasionally to practice their penmanship. Later, Hilarius recounts how a tutor he hired (someone who “had entirely abandoned studying to be a pastor since he found out that he was an esthete and a poet (I think that is what he calls it)”) (4), borrows the book, and sings its praises. In what seems distinctly like a scam, the esthete encourages Hilarius to bind and publish the book, for surely he will “be able to earn a not inconsiderable sum when the book is sold” (5). The esthete charges Hilarius a finder’s fee of ten rix-dollars and “a half pint of wine for dinner on Sundays and holidays” (6). Hilarius confesses that he is uncertain of both the quality of the work or its likelihood to draw a profit (“Personally, I have no opinion”) (6), and turns the matter over to the “fair-minded reader” (6).

\(^{17}\) Kierkegaard was certainly familiar with British Romanticism. See *Either/Or* 1.106-8 for a reading of Byron’s *Don Juan*; Garff suggests the influence of Shelley’s *Cenci* on *The Concept of Anxiety* (348). Kierkegaard may have
Cordelia! That is really a splendid name—indeed, the same name as that of King Lear’s third daughter, that remarkable girl whose heart did not dwell on her lips, whose lips were mute when her heart was full. So also with my Cordelia. She resembles her, of that I am certain. But in another sense her heart does dwell on her lips, not in the form of words but in a more heartfelt way in the form of a kiss. How ripe with health her lips! I have never seen lips more beautiful. (1.336)

The allusions here are not simply literary. They also suggest Kierkegaard’s own biography. In Copenhagen, Kierkegaard coupled an elaborately conceived public persona with the “godly deception” of his published, indirect communication; he consciously affected the persona of a loafer or flâneur to distract from his actual, extremely prodigious, workmanship. (Reversing Shelley’s opposition to “labor and study,” Kierkegaard writes in The Point of View that “nothing resembles my conduct less than that outburst of genius and then a tumultuous breaking off. I have basically lived like a scribe in his office”) (74). Yet just as he concealed his decidedly anti-Romantic work ethic, he used the shroud of pseudonymity to reveal his reflections on his personal life, specifically the public scandal of his ending his engagement to Regine Olsen to pursue a hermetic-like life as a writer. Regine’s sister, one of the few members of the Olsen family to react sympathetically to Kierkegaard’s decision to break off the engagement, was named Cornelia.

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18 See Kierkegaard’s account in the Point of View of his “personal existing in relation to the esthetic writing” (58-63): “If Copenhagen was ever of one single opinion about someone, I dare say it has been of one opinion about me: I was a street-corner loafer, an idler, a flâneur . . .” (61).

19 Similarly, contra Shelley. Kierkegaard explains in the Point of View that he is explicitly not writing a “defense” (24), as such a stance would subtract the element of the single individual’s recognition from the indirect communication.

20 Kierkegaard also writes narratives of broken engagements in Repetition and Stages on Life’s Way.

21 See Garff 189-90 for an account of Cornelia Olsen’s influence on the character of Cordelia Wahl in Either/Or.
Still, if Cordelia Wahl is implicitly a “somewhat idealized Cornelia Olsen” (JP 5772),\textsuperscript{22} she is explicitly a revised version of Lear’s Cordelia. In the Hongs’ translation of Kierkegaard reading Lear in translation, a slippage occurs where Cordelia’s inability to “heave / My heart into my mouth” (Tragedy 1.1.89-90) is joined with Lear’s final, hysterical hallucination that his daughter has revived (“Look on her. Look, her lips.”) (Tragedy 5.3.285). Whether this conflation of Lear’s beginning and conclusion is intentional on Kierkegaard’s part, I doubt that it is intentional on Johannes’s part. It is, however, fitting, considering his inevitable discarding of Cordelia Wahl. Precisely where Johannes’s monstrous aesthetics—even A is appalled\textsuperscript{23}—are meant to illuminate something poetic about Cordelia, he inadvertently indicates something about himself. Namely, Johannes reveals that he is a character in a fictional world that inverts the fictional world of King Lear. In a complete reversal of Shakespeare’s narrative, “The Seducer’s Diary” begins with an awareness of love and concludes with the misguided and cruel rejection of a devoted Cordelia. In another conflation of the beginning of Lear with its conclusion, we might also equate Johannes’s love for his Cordelia’s muteness with Lear’s praise for the “excellent thing in woman,” a gentle, soft voice, that the king only recognizes when she is dead and completely mute (Tragedy 5.3.246-7).\textsuperscript{24} The Romantic reader often sees himself as a Hamlet; Kierkegaard suggests that, unconsciously, that is precisely what makes the Romantic a Lear.

\textsuperscript{22} All excerpts from Kierkegaard’s journals and papers are taken from the Hongs’ translation, and are cited “JP,” followed by the entry number.

\textsuperscript{23} A: “Terrible it is for her; more terrible it will be for him—this I can conclude from the fact that I myself can scarcely control the anxiety that grips me every time I think about the affair” (Either/Or 1.310).

\textsuperscript{24} Silence is one of the most important concepts in Kierkegaard, the paradoxical sign of both the esthetic stage at its most pernicious and the relationship with divinity accessible in the religious stage: “Silence is the demon’s trap, and the more that is silenced, the more terrible the demon, but silence is also divinity’s mutual understanding with the single individual” (Fear 88). See Ziolkowski 315-8.
Johannes would probably object to being compared with Lear, even as he compares his beloved with Cordelia. Yet, again, this is a comparison is drawn for and not by the reader, just as Johannes is guided into making that comparison by Cordelia’s name:

Yesterday she told me there was something royal in my nature. Perhaps she wants to defer to me, but that absolutely will not do. To be sure, dear Cordelia, there is something royal in my nature, but you have no inkling of the kind of kingdom I have dominion over. It is over the tempests of moods. Like Aeolus, I keep them shut up in the mountain of my personality and allow one and now another to go out. Flattery will give her self-esteem; the distinction between what is mine and what is yours will be affirmed; everything will be placed upon her. Flattery requires great care. Sometimes one must place oneself very high, yet in such a way that there remains a place still higher: sometimes one must place oneself very low. The former is more proper when one is moving in the direction of the intellectual; the latter is more proper when one is moving in the direction of the erotic. (1.400)

It is nearly impossible to read the narrative of Johannes and Cordelia without thinking of Søren and Regine; the alternate methods of flattery—placing oneself high or low—even suggest the degrees of deception attained by indirect communication. Still, if we make the aesthetic move, as Johannes himself prescribes with Cordelia, and align this “non-fiction” (because Johannes’s diary is ostensibly found, rather than crafted in the manner of Frater Taciturnus’s “imaginary construction” of Quidam’s diary in Stages on Life’s Way) figure with a fictional one, there is only one true comparison we can draw. With his “royal nature,” the not entirely-convincing claim to reign over the “tempests” in his mind, and the obsession with flattery—both giving and

Reading Kierkegaard’s indirect communications autobiographically is obviously intrinsic to the rhetorical project of the indirect communication (see note 18). Still, reading Søren as a kind of Novalis and Regine as a kind of Sophie risks over-Romanticizing the indirect communication. In A Short Life of Kierkegaard, Walter Lowrie explicitly recalls the reading strategies of the Romantics and Georg Brandes by reading Kierkegaard and Regine as doubles of Hamlet and Ophelia: “If Hamlet feigned madness, he was often on the brink of it, and many times he debated the question of suicide. He too loved a girl, and because of his secret could not marry her. He treated this girl shockingly, but so did Hamlet—and yet we can pity him” (143). See also Lowrie’s reading of the “Books Written for Regina [sic]” (Kierkegaard 233-71).

In the Point of View, the maieutic deception of the reader begins with flattery: “one does not begin (to hold to what essentially is the theme of this book) in this way: I am Christian, you are not a Christian—but this way: You are a Christian, I am not a Christian. . . . [because the other person] thinks he is a Christian and yet he is living in esthetic categories” (54).
getting—Kierkegaard appears to be conflating Johannes with Lear precisely at the moment that
Johannes enacts what is, in essence, a love test.

For Freud, Lear is the play that is best clarified through an understanding of reaction-
formation, and for Either/Or, we may find that the differences presented in Johannes’s inversion
of Lear actually demonstrate the resemblances between their two “royal natures.” Lear’s
Cordelia is not exactly mute—saying “nothing” is not the same as saying nothing—but what
Johannes reads as muteness earns Lear’s hate (Tragedy 1.1.207) and Johannes’s admiration.
Still, this is all phrased with reference to the familiar trope of the readable- or legible-heart that
Regan spoke of figuratively (and dishonestly), that Cordelia took far more seriously, and that the
Romantics took practically literally. Johannes’s aesthetics are certainly rooted in a Romantic
primacy of the symbol.27 His aestheticization of the affair is steeped in the tropes that we have
examined in the previous chapters, and, as is the case with the Romantics, he takes tropes very
seriously. He prefers a silent Cordelia whose heart does not dwell upon her lips not because she
hides what is in her heart, but because he can inscribe her heart with what he likes. Speaking of
the other girls who visit the Wahls’ “sociable house,” he states that “their hearts are already a
filled autograph album, and I never care to write my name where many have already written”
(1.339).

Going beyond even “inscription,” Johannes declares that he refers a sculptable heart to
the legible one:

What am I doing? Am I beguiling her? By no means—that would be of no avail to
me. Am I stealing her heart? By no means—in fact, I prefer that the girl I am
going to love should keep her heart. What am I doing, then? I am shaping for

27 In a letter to Cordelia, Johannes instructs her that “for love, everything is a symbol” that it “in turn is actuality”
(1.418). This seems to be a dictum that Johannes takes to heart, raising himself to the status of symbol at the
completion of his journey. Immediately preceding the consummation of the seduction, in the frenzy of “the power
of erotic love, its longing, its bliss” he declares that “everything is a metaphor; I myself am a myth about myself”
(1.444).
myself a heart like unto hers. An artist paints his beloved; that is not his joy; a sculptor shapes her. This I, too, am doing, but in an intellectual sense. (1.388–89)

The narrative of “The Seducer’s Diary” is fully ironic: Johannes can only desire someone who “keeps” her heart and follows through on her own desires and wishes, but that heart and those desires are still meticulously shaped according to his parameters. “Everything,” he declares early in the diary, “must be properly arranged” (1.342).

Johannes’s plan to begin an engagement that is then broken by the beloved followed by a tryst also initiated by the beloved certainly differs in specifics from the public expression of Lear’s “darker purpose” (Tragedy 1.1.35). Yet, reading indirectly, Lear’s delusions are illuminated by the parallels with Johannes’s need for a public display of Cordelia’s love even as he claims otherwise.28 Both Lear and Johannes need for the display to appear natural and unprompted, even though it is thoroughly familiar to the point of trope. As we will learn from Lacan, we must not think that Lear is actually giving up anything; the same diagnosis applies to Johannes. Cordelia’s utterance of “nothing” confronts Lear with the facts of what he wanted all along—perhaps the thought of what lies between her legs as well as the bare auxësis of her praise—but with his “arrangement,” Johannes does not actually give his Cordelia such an opportunity. In contrast to the Cordelia in Lear, he believes that Cordelia Wahl actually says nothing, and not “nothing.” In order to preserve this illusion even after achieving what he calls “the ultimate” (1.368), he finds a way to keep her silent, by sending back her later letters unopened (1.311).29 This total non-reading, the avoidance of reading, is essential to the esthetic

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28 In a letter to Cordelia, Johannes writes: “Erotic love loves secrecy—an engagement is a disclosure; it loves silence—an engagement is a public announcement; it loves whispering—an engagement is a loud proclamation, and yet, with my Cordelia’s help, an engagement will be a superb way to deceive the enemies” (1.388).

29 In other words, unlike the divine silence of religious inwardness, the experience of esthetic or demonic silence can be affected through an avoidance of reading. In addition to its theological aims, this is a direct critique of the Romantic idealization of fragment and ignorance in the discourse of the Sublime.
or Romantic view. Johannes’s non-reading is doubled in the second volume of Either/Or, where Judge William’s letters to the young man go presumably unread (they are certainly unanswered), and again in the ironic structure of Stages on Life’s Way, a collection of fragments compiled yet also largely unread by Hilarius Bookbinder.

The unreadable Lear was an ideal Lear for the Romantic thinkers that we considered in the previous chapters. The Romantics guarantee the legacy of the play and its sublimity by misquoting and not quoting its intricate actualities, and elevating it to a silent, symbolic exemplum. As such, they ironically resembled the king at his most foolish, clamoring for superficial praise. As a portrayal of a “delusion,” Johannes’s diary resembles both Lear’s desire for display and its counterpart, the Romantic rhetoric of display (Kierkegaard Point 54). Through his narratives of reading and non-reading, Kierkegaard interrogates the impulses and problems of a specifically Romantic reading as a limited and fragmented reading. The so-called “Romantic Agony” of “The Seducer’s Diary” or Lucinde is then presented as a constructed performance, rather than a passionate expression. Rather than a genuine expression of inwardness, this construction is performed via an intentionally unrepresentative fragmentation of texts and lives read as texts.

The volumes of Either/Or and Stages on Life’s Way are not exhaustive, as the esthetic view is by definition fragmentary and limited. But they are exhausting: the characters’ reflection upon their selves and the texts that they read are dragged out and punctuated with so many errors of judgment that we eventually ask, in the words of George Pattison, “If Kierkegaard is right

30 See Rasmussen Between 26-31 for a reading of Either/Or as an “indirect attack” on Lucinde (27), made with reference to Kierkegaard’s dissertation, The Concept of Irony. The direct attack on Lucinde in Concept can be found on 286-301, and concludes with a critique not dissimilar from what we have qualified as the dead-end of Romantic open-endedness: “The oddity about Lucinde and the whole trend associated with it is that, by starting from the freedom and the constitutive authority of the I, one does not arrive at a still higher spirituality but comes only to sensuousness and consequently to its opposite” (301). The “irony” is that it is, in fact, not “more poetic to be a slave to whims than a slave to money” (295).
about reading, why read Kierkegaard?” This moment of frustration, if we recognize it, is itself the moment of the either/or,\(^{31}\) where the reader must decide to recognize the deception of the esthetic, leave it behind, and leap into the religious stage. Whether one should make that leap is beyond the scope or interest of this study. What is crucial is that this “godly deception” is meant to urge the reader to become a “single individual” in the face of the “crowd” of the esthetic. In the early writings, the single individual must oppose a way of seeing the world that is here equated with a general sense of Romanticism (and, in the later writings, a similarly general sense of “Christendom” and the public),\(^{32}\) and essential to that query of the esthetic “crowd” is demonstrating its unified mis- or non-reading of *King Lear*. Perhaps Kierkegaard understood the crisis of reading present in *Lear* and adapted it for his own maieutic practice in the indirect communication. Kierkegaard may well rephrase Pattison and ask, since the Romantics are wrong about *Lear*, how can they be right about life?

There is one more parallel between the narrative of “The Seducer’s Diary” and *Lear* that we should briefly consider. Johannes has a kind of competitor for Cordelia’s affection in “The Seducer’s Diary,” the wholesaler’s son, Edward Baxter (1.346). Johannes manipulates Edward into professing his love for Cordelia, so she will “acquire a distaste for plain and simple love and thereby go beyond her own limits” (1.361). (In other words, Johannes’s method of seduction is itself an indirect communication contrasted with a direct one). Edward’s name recalls the brothers Edgar and Edmund, and the way he is manipulated by Johannes—who writes that, “to

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\(^{31}\) This facet of Kierkegaard’s indirect communication—that is, the point of decision foisted on the reader—is of much interest to contemporary literary theory and philosophy. Badiou modifies the structure of the “either/or” for his concept of points in *Logics of Worlds* (425-35). Derrida elliptically refers to the “moment of decision” in his epigraph to “Cogito and the History of Madness.” See Llewelyn 71 and Bennington for discussions of this moment in Derrida.

\(^{32}\) See *The Two Ages* for Kierkegaard’s great critique of the public as “an abstraction”: “The public is not a people, not a generation, not one’s age, not a congregation . . . the public is a kind of colossal something, an abstract void and vacuum that is all and nothing” (92-3).
me it is as if he were my brother‖ (1.362)—also resembles Edgar’s manipulation by the scheming Edmund in the first scenes of Lear. It is tempting to read a critique of Nahum Tate’s revised Lear, with its infamous happy ending, in the broken romance of two lovers named Cordelia and Ed(gar/ward), narrated from the perspective of the manipulative interloper who comes between them. Edgar is a malleable enough figure even in Shakespeare’s original text, taking on a variety of guises and accents, all of which add up to nothing (“Edgar I nothing am”) (Tragedy 2.2.178). In Tate, he also takes on the role of Cordelia’s lover. Perhaps in “The Seducer’s Diary,” he becomes Cordelia’s spurned lover.

Kierkegaard may have known of Tate’s revised version. A translation of Tate’s Lear appeared in Danish in 1794, though it was “almost at once forgotten” (Ruud 84). Still, coincidence or not, given the preoccupation with revision-as-reading in the earlier chapters of Either/Or, the comparison is productive. “Johannes” the Seducer’s name is a relatively obvious Danish-ization of “Don Juan” or “Don Giovanni,” the figure treated at such length in the first volume. It is not impossible or even unlikely that Edward Baxter’s name would similarly (and intentionally) carry the resonance of Edgar/Edmund. Furthermore, Johannes’s method of seduction, and his ultimate goal of fully estheticizing his Cordelia, recalls A’s own tactic of “reading” the beloved women from Clavigo, Faust, and Don Giovanni in the “Silhouettes.” Though A writes that he has “learned much” from Donna Elvira (1.200), such lessons resemble a reading less than a re-writing or translation into A’s schema. (For instance, Elvira faces an

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33 It seems as though Tate’s revision was well-known on the Continent. Hazlitt writes that Schlegel “condemned” the happy ending of Tate (1.179). See also Smidt 95-99 for a discussion of appearances of Lear onstage and in translated editions in Scandinavia in the nineteenth-century. Kierkegaard could not have seen Lear in the Danish theater by the time of Either/Or’s composition; a production flopped in 1816 and Lear was not staged again until 1851 (Ruud 90).

34 See Berry for a superb feminist reading of the “heterosexual imagination” in Either/Or, connecting both Johannes’s task of “living poetically” (Either/Or 1.304) and A’s illustrations in the “Silhouettes.” I argue that
either/or: “either to enter into the ethical and religious categories or to keep her love for Giovanni”) (1.198). Each of these sections conclude with a monologue delivered by each of the women, imagined by A, which conveniently verifies A’s character analyses. Read ironically, or indirectly, this re-writing is a critical take on the illustrative, Romantic criticism born out to a disastrous conclusion in the “Seducer’s Diary.”

In an influential reading, Walter Kaufmann suggests that Kierkegaard was tormented by the fact that Regine Olsen did not likewise withdraw into inwardness out of respect for his sacrifice of their engagement (199). While many of Kierkegaard’s figures value literature, even biblical literature, precisely for its ability to be morphed and modified in readings, “The Seducer’s Diary” at least partly portrays the tragedy of expecting that actual people will behave literally. The tragedy of taking the literary literally—pretending that literature is not most true when it feigns—may have reflected Kierkegaard’s own actual romantic agony, but it is represented here via the Romantic illustrative criticism. In addition to querying the frameworks of Romantic reading, Kierkegaard further indicates the parallels between that method of interpretative reading and the catastrophic foolishness of King Lear. The confusion of the literary and the actual betrays Lear’s opening request for praise, a moment that Kierkegaard calls the “madness with which the play begins” in his journals (JP 1165). It is no coincidence that as we move further inwards with the treatment of the ethical and religious stages, that an understanding of King Lear—with Lear’s failed, “constant will to publish” (Tragedy 1.1.41) his

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Kierkegaard is indirectly critiquing the Romantic model of illustrative criticism; Berry argues for a similar model of reading the heterosexual imagination as a “negative maieutic” (47).

35 However, Kaufmann posits this theory in the voice of “Brother Brash,” a Kierkegaardian pseudonym that is answered by another pseudonym, Brother Brief; Brash is critical of Kierkegaard, whereas Brother Brief approves of him. I will leave it to other readers to deduce which Brother speaks for Kaufmann; Malik, at any rate, finds Kaufman’s reading of Kierkegaard to be a “crude” reflection of a late Romantic view of Kierkegaard, such as Brandes’s (282n. 256).
handling of his daughters in exchange for their poeticized love—appears at the upper edge of the text, treating the limits and limitations of each of those phases of existence.

Cordelia’s expression of “nothing” in Lear does earn her the love of the King of France, but it also leads to a broken engagement with Burgundy. In turn, the volume of Either/Or that concretely addresses the next stage of existence—the ethical—has little to say about Shakespeare. For B/Judge William, Shakespeare is only a producer of “old sayings” like “to be or not to be,” that hold for the person who lives esthetically, but not for others: “all such imaginary gymnastic constructing is equivalent to sophistry in the realm of knowledge” (2.253). By contrast, William is a kind of empiricist, who takes the success of his own marriage as verification of the ethical view of life, and of the ethical marriage in particular.

In The Point of View and other signed-writings, the ethical is linked with the esthetic: both are essentially too “interesting” and rational in contrast with the simple, though absurd and paradoxical, religious. When the authorship is read as a whole, the “either/or” of the title is between the two spheres of existence treated in its two volumes on the one hand, and the religious sphere that is more abstractly inferred on the other. The single individual should not agree with virtually any of Either/Or. Indeed, this negative reading, reading the work as Neither/Nor, is foreshadowed by Eremita’s preface (“read [the two volumes] or do not read them, you will regret it either way”) (1.14). (This negative reading is not dissimilar from the skepticism we feel at the end of Lear when offered the prescription to “speak what we feel,” as

36 Judge William pays more attention to Shakespeare in Stages on Life’s Way. The married man should resemble “a deceiver portrayed by Shakespeare” (meaning Iago). William also praises Desdemona for her “sublime lie” and “angelic patience” (140, 142), implicitly suggesting that the ideal couple in Shakespeare would not be Romeo and Juliet (168), but rather an Iago paired with a Desdemona!

37 For a discussion of the “interesting” in the context of Kierkegaard’s more abstract concept of “interest” (Interesse)—particularly as a revision of “interesting” in a Romantic sense, as elucidated by Novalis—see Stokes 17.
though that would change anything). William, who sings the praises of the ethical marriage, cannot achieve the religious himself. It is precisely his defense of marriage that indicates his failure to be a single individual, the paradoxical individual who is "higher than the universal" (Kierkegaard *Fear* 70), and thus certainly higher than the couple. That Kierkegaard’s vision of the religious meant something close to the ascetic is indicated by Eremita’s name.

Yet Judge William includes a letter from a pastor friend who speaks of “upbuilding,” Kierkegaard’s own term for religious development. Notably, it is at the moment in the text where the transition between the ethical and religious is treated that Kierkegaard directly engages with Shakespeare, alluding to Lear on the heath. Thus, as we make our way through the writings, from the esthetic stage to the ethical and forward on into the religious (if we happen to be single individuals, that is), we also make our way linearly through the plot of *King Lear*. The first volume of *Either/Or* depicted a Lear-of-sorts crafting a love test, while the second portrays a Lear-of-sorts out in the storm. The unnamed pastor who closes volume two prefaces his sermon on “upbuilding” with the following description:

“"The heath in Jylland [Jutland],” 38 he says, “is a real playground for me, a private study room beyond compare. I go out there on Saturday and meditate on my sermons, and everything unfolds for me. I forget every actual listener and gain an ideal one; I achieve total absorption in myself. Therefore, when I step into the pulpit, it is as if I were still standing out there on the heath, where my eyes see no human being, where my voice rises to its full power in order to drown out the storm.” (2.338)

As with Cordelia Wahl’s resemblance to the Olsen sisters, this passage alludes to Kierkegaard’s biography as well as the plot points of *King Lear*. Kierkegaard’s father, Michael, was from Jutland. In the journals, Kierkegaard describes an event from Michael’s youth, where exasperated from hunger and poverty, Michael went out on the Jutland heath and cursed God; the

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38 Throughout this chapter, I will follow the example of most of Kierkegaard’s translators and commentators and refer to Jylland by the Germanized “Jutland.”
memory of this blasphemy tormented Michael till his death, and the recounted narrative was formative for both Kierkegaard and his brother, Peter. (I will examine this journal entry in more detail, in relation to the references to Lear in the journals, below). But such biographical resonance, as powerful as it is, would of course be unknown to Kierkegaard’s initial readership. The Danish intelligentsia who read the first and second editions of Either/Or would, instead, have recognized the Jutland heath’s cultural resonance as a particularly “romantic spot” (Either/Or 1.6). 39

Still, there seems to be a fairly clear and deliberate reference here to another, exclusively literary heath (and one that also resonates with the Romantics). 40 The figure of the pastor addressing the storm, seeking an “ideal” listener as opposed to the “actual” congregation, and associating that “ideal” listener with achieving “total absorption” in himself, recalls Lear “contending with the fretful elements,” whom he identifies with “servile ministers” (Tragedy 3.1.3, Tragedy 3.2.20). Lear argues or “contends” with the storm, but he does not think that he wins such an argument:

I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness.

I never gave you kingdom, called you children.

You owe me no subscription. Then let fall

Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand your slave,

A poor, infirm, weak and despised old man,

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39 For instance, the heath would be the subject of a popular poem by Hans Christian Anderson in 1859. There is a similar depiction of the Jutland heath in The Concept of Anxiety (see 159). Marino clarifies this moment with reference to Kierkegaard’s relationship with his father (326). See Olwig for a discussion of parallels between the literal transformation of the Jutland heath (i.e. converting the land to agriculture and forestry) and the literary transformation of the landscape in the poetry of Anderson. By the time Anderson wrote his ode to the heath, he had read Either/Or. See Malik 7-17 for a discussion of the Anderson-Kierkegaard relationship.

40 See Sun 81-107 for a reading of the impression the heath scenes of Lear made on Wordsworth’s poetry. Olwig suggests, as a cultural touchstone, the Jutland heath is a counterpart to Wordsworth’s Lake District (50-54).
But yet I call you servile ministers,
That will with two pernicious daughters join
Your high-engendered battles 'gainst a head
So old and white as this. (Tragedy 3.2.15-23)

Lear’s characterization of the elements as “servile ministers” that are not to be blamed for “battling” him, because they are merely attending the will of his “two pernicious daughters,” speaks to the delusion that Lear shares with Johannes the Seducer. Lear gave up “the name and all th’addition to a king” precisely when he tried to retain only “the name and all th’addition” without “all the large effects / That troop with majesty” (Tragedy 1.1.134, 129-30). There is nothing particularly natural about what Johannes calls a “royal nature”; it is guaranteed by signifying “effects.” Both Johannes and Lear are unable to recognize the bar between the natural and the unnatural. Where Johannes thinks that he can govern the tempests of his own moods—through variations of flattery, sometimes placing himself highly, sometimes low—Lear sees those actual tempests governed, in effect, by Goneril and Regan. Of course, they would not be in such a privileged place of governance had he not given them that kingdom, given them “all” (Tragedy 2.2.415). It is not until he is confronted with what he assumes is “the thing itself,” in the figure of Poor Tom, that Lear seems to allot that the elements are beyond the mastery of his (former) kingdom, asking his “philosopher,” “What is the cause of thunder?” In other words, while he may not blame the elements for “unkindness,” and while he calls himself their “slave,” the argument with the storm reveals his literally maddening self-absorption.

Again, if there is an allusion to Lear at this moment in Either/Or—and I contend that there isootnote{The connection between the Jutland heath and Lear’s heath was certainly clear enough to Peter Brook, who filmed his celebrated film version of the play there. I’m not aware of any critical readings that examine Jutland as the}—there is also an avoidance of reading the text. We know from Fear and Trembling
that the move into the religious stage is to “plunge confidently into the absurd” (34). If we draw the connection between Lear standing on the precipice of madness with the edge between the Judge (who speaks to the ethical stage) and the unnamed pastor (who speaks of upbuilding toward the religious stage), are we to interpret that absurdity as comparable with madness? Perhaps. Though if upbuilding is absurd, it is also somewhat cerebral. Lear argues with the storm, but admits that he cannot really blame it for his woes, because it only serves the will of the two pernicious daughters, directly contradicting his claim that he “tax[es] not” the storm. For the pastor, there is a similar conclusion about such absurd arguments; upbuilding begins with an awareness that “lies in the thought that in relation to God we are always in the wrong” (Either/Or 2.346). Lear’s debate with the elements arrives at a conclusion of sorts; it is absurd, but it is nonetheless an epistemological understanding of the world in keeping with the “royal nature” that he still privileges. For the pastor, a similar, affected “total absorption in myself” out on the heath, speaking with the storm, leads to an ongoing dialectic of humility that negates deliberation: “it was not through deliberation that you became certain that you were always in the wrong, but the certainty was due to your being built up by it” (2.350).

specific connection between Kierkegaard’s Lear and Brook’s, though Grigori Kozentsev writes (in the diaries he kept while completing his own film of Lear) that seeing Brook’s stage production reminded him of the “unhappy one” passages from Either/Or (23).

42 See Westphal for a treatment of madness as the pivot between reason and faith, and the unhappy parallel between agents of Christendom (particularly academic theologians) and the Romantic esthetes:

Kierkegaard’s logic of the insanity of faith, far from denying [the] circular character of theological proofs, calls our attention to it in opposition to the insane logics of both the orthodox apologists and their free-thinking opponents. It directs our attention to the necessity of choice and the inescapability of the leap. It reminds us that theological affirmation is grounded in presuppositions which are chosen not proven. (202)

Westphal’s interest in the “madness” of the moment of decision perhaps suggests the influence of Derrida. Derrida’s epigraph to “Cogito and the History of Madness,” taken from the Philosophical Fragments, is translated as “The Instant of Decision is Madness” (31). The Hongs’ translation offers a more interesting connection with Lear: “the moment of decision is foolishness . . .” (Philosophical Fragments 52).
At any rate, both of these allusions to Lear in *Either/Or*—the story of Johannes and Cordelia in volume one and the lone man contending with the elements out on a heath in volume two—arrive at the very end of each volume, when the sense that each volume’s extended treatment of either the esthetic or ethical stage of existence has run its course. In both volumes, the Lear-figure is voiced by someone other than the official “author,” and this figure is placed at the edge of the text, at a remove from either the text’s supposed author or its supposed editor-reader: Johannes is not A, the pastor is not B/Judge William. By placing Lear in the quoted voice, Kierkegaard stages Lear as something to be discovered by the reader (even if that reader is the narrator). Or, rather, it is a figure that must be recognized, as when it is named, it differs from Shakespeare’s original narrative, and when it more closely resembles the plot, it is not named. In either case, Lear is a figure that, discovered and recognized, is edited in the pseudonymous authorship. Unlike the Romantic ideal appropriation of scholarly editing for its quoted displays of the play, the effect of the edited-Lear in *Either/Or* is of suspension and distance. Considering that Victor Eremita edits the totality of *Either/Or*, Lear is then doubly edited in the text, held at least two removes from the reader (i.e. Eremita edits A editing Johannes reading Lear). The sublimely unreadable qualities of the play, as enunciated by the Romantic critical ideology, are dramatized as an editorial construct.

According to Kierkegaard himself, this sort of editor-figure is almost precisely central to his authorship. In *The Point of View*, Kierkegaard writes that one of his major works, the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, is the “turning point” between the primarily esthetic pseudonymous writings and the signed religious writings that follow:

*Concluding Unscientific Postscript* is not esthetic writing, but, strictly speaking, neither is it religious. That is why it is by a pseudonymous writer, although I did place my name as editor, which I have not done with any purely esthetic
production—a hint, at least for someone who is concerned with or has a sense for such things. (31-2)

As the figure who frames the pseudonymously authored material—in keeping with the fictions themselves, the discovered documents—the editor is Kierkegaard’s rhetorical means of simultaneously presenting the either and the or, the esthetic and the religious: “The religious is present from the very beginning. Conversely, the esthetic is still present even in the last moment” (Point 30). The “hint” here is dependent upon the reader’s interest and it can suggest either the reader oriented toward the esthetic (i.e. one with a scholarly interest in edited fragments) or the religious (i.e. one who reads Kierkegaard, the author who addresses that “single individual”). In either case, the editor is an in-between figure, one who makes the fragmentary into something that resembles a whole.

In contrast to these doubly edited voices in Either/Or, the collection of pieces that make up Stages on Life’s Way seems more slapdash. The conceit of Stages on Life’s Way is that it is not edited, only bound, by Hilarius Bookbinder, at the recommendation of a “candidate in philosophy” whom Hilarius hired as a tutor for his son:

he made me aware that my service was greater because it was not one book I would publish but several books, probably by several authors. In other words, my learned friend assumes that there must have been a fraternity, a society, or an association of which that literatus had been the head or president and therefore had preserved the papers. Personally, I have no opinion on this matter. (Stages 6)

Hilarius is the anti-Eremita. Despite phrasing the dialectic of the esthetic versus the ethical as an option of either one or the other, and admitting that the text demonstrates the reader will regret either choice “either way,” Eremita nonetheless has a preference that he expresses in the editorial paratext, where he wishes that readers “may succeed in scrupulously following B’s well-

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43 “Single” individuality may be the matter of the religious, but individual subjectivity is nonetheless a feature of each of the various stages. It is what motivates an individual’s decision to (or not to) leap. See Malantschuk (especially 5-11) for a discussion of “individuation” as a process of becoming the single individual.
intentioned advice” (1.14-15). Hilarius, on the other hand, holds no opinion on who wrote the book he has bound, and does not even seem to know how many books are being bound in this volume. In fact, a typographical “error” remains in the text, as the concluding piece, Frater Taciturnus’s “Letter to the Reader,” is not listed in the table of contents. Furthermore, the “appendix” to this concluding section is placed within the letter to the reader, and not appended at the end. Kierkegaard may have been only tangentially aware of the British Romantics, but as an exploration of printed language as a vehicle for truth claims, Stages on Life’s Way performs a valuable critique of a diasparactive text, such as the Biographia Literaria.

As with The Point of View, Stages on Life’s Way comments upon Kierkegaard’s own authorship, with a particular focus on the two volumes of Either/Or. The documents bound by Hilarious Bookbinder include “In Vino Veritas,” an account of a Symposium-like banquet attended by Johannes the Seducer and Victor Eremita, as well as two characters from Kierkegaard’s novel Repetition (another fictional account of a broken engagement).44 At the conclusion of this narrative, the banqueters eavesdrop on a conversation between Judge William and his wife; Victor surreptitiously steals a manuscript from the judge, declaring, “If I have published his others, it is no more than my duty to publish this also” (Stages 85). The narrator then steals the manuscript from Eremita, and it is presumably the next section of the bound-Stages: “Some Reflections on Marriage in Answers to Objections.”

These two sections awkwardly continue the narratives of Either/Or and Repetition. However, the bulk of Stages is dedicated to a kind of rewrite of, rather than a sequel to, Either/Or. “Guilty?/“Not Guilty,” a work with two subtitles, is “A Story of Suffering” and

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44 See Perkins “Woman Bashing” for a fine reading of Kierkegaard’s adaptation of the Symposium for “In Vino Veritas.”
“An Imaginary Psychological Construction” by Frater Taciturnus. As is the case with “The Seducer’s Diary” and Either/Or as a whole, “Guilty?/‘Not Guilty’” is a found manuscript, the diary entries written by a young man called Quidam, who recounts yet another broken engagement. The entries are divided into those written in the morning, which detail the events of the engagement from the year before, and those at midnight, which detail the events of that present day. The diary is followed by a “Letter to the Reader,” an extended analysis by Frater Taciturnus. Taciturnus has read both Repetition and Either/Or, and “Guilty?/‘Not Guilty’” is presented as a work of fiction inspired by Kierkegaard’s earlier pseudonymous writings. In other words, while many themes from Either/Or and Repetition are developed, Stages on Life’s Way is nonetheless presented as a work of near-plagiarism. The earlier works were no doubt a direct response to the problems of the German Romantics, but Stages indirectly, and therefore more interestingly, reflects the problem of copying by the British Romantics.

This British quality, however inadvertent, is further reflected by the fact that when Frater Taciturnus writes literary analysis, he turns to Shakespeare. As is the case with Either/Or, Quidam’s diary includes a key allusion to King Lear, finishing the narrative train of thought begun in “The Seducer’s Diary.” Yet the “appendix” to Frater Taciturnus’s “Letter To The

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45 In an earlier draft, Taciturnus was the Eremita-like editor of “Guilty?/‘Not Guilty,’” rather than its author (see the supplemental material in Stages 565). In addition to clarifying his critique of the authorial projection inherent in Romantic deictic reading, I suspect Kierkegaard made this change to clarify the narrative-world of Stages on Life’s Way. We might take Hilarius at his word, but read the philosophy student as mistaken. These are not works “probably by several authors” (6), but meant to be a series of experiments inspired by Either/Or and Repetition—“In Vino Veritas” and Judge William’s “Reflections on Marriage” included—all authored by the Frater Taciturnus figure. (Taciturnus indicates on 437 that he has read Repetition). In other words, I suspect that Frater Taciturnus is Mr. Literatus. That might explain William’s newfound interest in the works of Shakespeare (see note 36).

46 “What I write in the morning is from the past and belongs to the past year; what I am writing now, these ‘night thoughts’ of mine, are my diary for the current year” (Stages 216). See the Hongs’ introduction to Either/Or volume one for a discussion of the relation between the “Seducer’s Diary” and Quidam’s diary (xi–ii).

47 Incidentally, Kierkegaard found something British about his put-on persona (see note 18): “This is how I actually am treated in Copenhagen. I am regarded as a kind of Englishman, a half-mad eccentric . . .” (JP 6254).
Reader” discusses the other great tragedy, *Hamlet*. This appendix is oddly placed within the letter, as a “side glance,” as opposed to at its conclusion, and thus resembles the odd collection of letters and reviews appended within the final chapters of the *Biographia*. As in Coleridge’s tome, the impetus for the discussion begins with a reading of a review article. Writing in response to an essay by Karl Ludwig Börne arguing that *Hamlet* is a “religious drama,” Taciturnus rebuts that that *Hamlet* is not, but only because no play ever could be:

> the religious is in the interior being and therefore misgivings have their essential significance.

If Hamlet is to be interpreted religiously, one must either allow him to have conceived the plan, and then the religious doubts divest him of it, or do what to my mind better illuminates the religious (for in the first case there could possibly be some doubts as to whether he actually was capable of carrying out his plan)—give him the demonic power resolutely and masterfully to carry out his plan and then let him collapse into himself and into the religious until he finds peace there. A drama, of course, can never come from this; a poet cannot use this subject, which should begin with the last and let the first shine out of it.

> On a specific point, one may have a doubt, another opinion, and yet agree on the one opinion that has been the opinion of one and two and three centuries—that Shakespeare stands unrivaled, despite the progress the world will make, that one can always learn from him, and the more one reads him, the more one learns. *(Stages 454)*

A learned much from Donna Elvira after he rewrote her dialogue. When Johannes de Silentio gives his example of Agnes and the Merman in *Fear and Trembling*, he takes “the liberty of

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48 Much critical attention has been paid to the parallels between the two “melancholy Danes,” Hamlet and Kierkegaard (see note 25). See Ziolkowski 183-212 for more on the history of the critical trope of Hamlet/Kierkegaard parallels, as well as a fine reading of the “Side-Glance at Hamlet” in *Stages on Life’s Way*. Kearney’s analyses of how the “Side-Glance” is “nothing more nor less than Kierkegaard talking about Kierkegaard to himself” is one of the better deconstructive readings of Kierkegaard (224). See Duquette for a very interesting discussion on how Hamlet (especially in Brandes’s interpretation, recounted by Freud) clarifies the connections between Kierkegaard and Lacan. See Fendt’s book-length response to the questions posed by Taciturnus in the “Side-Glance.”

49 Again, inherent in Kierkegaard’s *post*-Romantic approach to the problems of representation and recognition raised by the discourse of the Sublime is his subtle critiques made “in character.” Namely, that Romantic criticism is essentially *illustrative* and imaginative, rather than analytic. “On the whole,” writes Taciturnus, “Börne, Heine, Feuerbach, and such authors are the individualities who have great interest for someone who is composing an imaginary construction” (452).
changing the merman somewhat” (95). Similarly, Frater Taciturnus “interprets” *Hamlet* by changing the story.

The reference to the demonic power recalls *Fear and Trembling*’s paradox of silence: “Silence is the demon’s trap, and the more that is silenced, the more terrible the demon, but silence is also divinity’s mutual understanding with the single individual” (88). Thus, what Frater Taciturnus envisions as an un-stageable drama would be a circumnavigating of the ethical stage. A demonic esthete authors a plan that he is resolutely capable of carrying out, yet this plan must be kept silent—for obvious reasons—and gradually becomes the kind of total self-absorption that the pastor spoke of occurring out on the Jutland heath. In other words, perhaps *Hamlet* would be a religious drama were it only a little more like *Lear*.

Frater Taciturnus—like Johannes de Silentio in *Fear and Trembling*—is a character who writes of the religious yet cannot attain it himself, which aligns his own failure with *Hamlet*’s. This may speak less to the incompatibility of Shakespeare with the religious stage (though we will see that Johannes de Silentio believes that to be the case) than it speaks to the compatibility of Shakespeare with the indirect communication. The esthetic or demonic approach to the text enables the reader to mould a Shakespeare of one’s own choosing; this is clearly reflective of the Romantic approach to illustrative or selective reading that we have examined at length already. If this is, in the words of the *Point of View*, a deceiving into what is true, the critique is not of one in Christendom who believes he is a Christian but is in fact deceived. It is a critique of a delusional Romantic who thinks that, because he idealizes failure, he is a Hamlet. Unlike Coleridge invoking the reader’s memory, Taciturnus provides the rebuttal to his own argument by declaring that we *read* Shakespeare again. There is always more there to find and to read and to learn from. (Lacan makes more or less the exact same points, both in his critique of a
Freudian interpretation of *Hamlet* overly indebted to Brandes, and in his charge to “just read [King Lear] again”) (*Ethics* 305).

Frater Taciturnus’s inter-appendicized analysis of *Hamlet* interrupts his own extended analysis of his own “imaginary construction” of a young man “in the power of spirit in the direction of the religious” (*Stages* 420). Quidam, tragically, breaks his engagement in order to pursue the religious, yet he cannot finalize the break and “come to rest in the ultimate religious resolution but is constantly kept in a state of suspension” (426). For Frater Taciturnus, the young diarist’s suffering comes precisely from a continued devotion to his beloved, Quaedam: “by virtue of the fact that for him the decision is over, he ought to have his religious resolution at rest and not let the decision become dialectical because of her” (426). The persistence of a paradigmatically Romantic agony is what holds Quidam in suspension, another word for what we have been calling the dead-end of the Romantic open-endedness, and the kind of suspension that is reflected by Kierkegaard’s meticulous intersection of narrated and edited voices. (Quidam’s diary, fittingly, ends only “for the time being”) (397). This agony is illustrated most poignantly in Quidam’s voice with reference to *Lear*, in a moment that both demonstrates the centrality of the play as a reference for these pseudonymous narratives and reflects critically upon the general Romantic appropriation of the play and its supposed unreadability for a doctrine of the Sublime.

The narrative of a broken engagement communicated via a “found” diary obviously recalls the “Seducer’s Diary” section of *Either/Or*, and the slashed-title of “Guilty/Not Guilty” further accentuates the latter text’s return to the earlier one. There is also a kind of return of the

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50 “Quidam” and “Quaedam” both mean (in a masculine and feminine form) “a certain person.” The critical habit of reading these designators as proper nouns begins with Kierkegaard himself. A note by the Hongs explains: “Because the main characters in ‘Guilty?'/‘Not Guilty’ are anonymous, Frater Taciturnus uses the Latin *quidam* and *quaedam* in referring to them. In *Postscript...* Johannes Climacus regards Quidam as a name, and therefore the initial letter is capitalized. The same form is used in the present volume” (*Stages* 737n. 519).
(no-longer) repressed Lear. Johannes the Seducer, in committing to a life dedicated to the esthetic, was closer to Lear than he cared to admit. The unnamed pastor depicted upbuilding as a process of dialectical failure, and unconsciously resembled Lear’s descent into madness. But it is Quidam who most closely, and certainly most consciously, reads King Lear. As a result, he is the one most affected, even tormented, by the play’s imagery:

And yet if I were just sitting with her, just that I dared to be in her presence, that I dared to do everything even if it is nothing—that would still be a relief, a relief that, like a smoldering, is an uninterrupted dull pain but not so much a suffering. Then she would confuse everything; she would believe that as before we were sitting in the boat on that lake we sailed together, and then we would exchange, if not winged words, then expressions of madness, and would understand each other in madness, and speak of our love as Lear wanted to speak with Cordelia about the royal household and ask for news from it. (Stages 264)

If the first volume of Either/Or depicted a kind of love test, and the second volume alluded to Lear on the heath, the revision or return that we read in “Guilty/Not Guilty” ends with the image of Lear and Cordelia together in prison. This is an image that is not staged in the play (though it has been hauntingly imagined),51 and therefore speaks to Kierkegaard’s ongoing tendency throughout the indirect communication to fill in the blanks of Shakespeare’s plays or other literary works.

On the other hand, Quidam does not quite phrase this image. The play is still suspended, still at a remove from the reader. This sense of suspension, a not quite-reading of a scene that was not-quite in the play to begin with, parallels Quidam’s suspended desire. Yet that resembles Lear’s own unfulfilled desire, and Quidam is aware that Lear’s desire was the stuff of madness:

No, no, no, no. Come, let’s away to prison;

We two alone will sing like birds i’th’ cage.

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51 For example, consider William Blake’s early watercolor, “Lear and Cordelia in Prison.” The piece, which can be seen at the Tate Gallery’s webpage, depicts Lear laying his head in an angelic Cordelia’s lap, distinctly re-inverting the inverted pietà of the play’s final moments, as well as fulfilling Lear’s prefigured desire to “set my rest / On her kind nursery” (Tragedy 1.1.121-2).
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness; so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too—
Who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out,
And take upon 's the mystery of things
As if we were God's spies (Tragedy 5.3.8-17)

Quidam seems to recognize that any relief that comes to Lear's suffering comes in the form of a hallucination, either this fantasy of gossiping over courtly nothings or the final, hysterical sense that Cordelia is breathing. But it is not real; it is a nothing that Lear treats as though it is everything, and when he tells us to "look, her lips / Look there, look there" at this nothing—a nothing that Johannes the Seducer inadvertently celebrated—he is consumed. To "understand each other in madness" is what Lear wanted from Cordelia all along and what readers of the play want from its most exquisite passages. When we read Quidam (as a figure imagined by Frater Taciturnus, a reader of Kierkegaard) reading Lear, we see Lear's hallucination as a performative illustration in the Romantic, agonistic style. Kierkegaard is querying the trope of reading Romantically (such as Charles Lamb unconvincingly declaring that the reader is in Lear's mind), and equating it with the impossibilities of interpersonal subjectivity. As we shall see in the next chapter, when Lacan reads the same material, he formulates this impossibility as a problem of desire, a metonym for subjectivity. For Kierkegaard, it is the problem of the religious, and the incongruity of married life with the way of the single individual.

Quidam understands that treating nothing as though it is everything can feel like a relief, when it is an expression of madness. This is very much in the spirit of Lear. But Quidam does
not embrace either the delusions of this passionate romantic love, nor does he wholly abandon it and leap into the religious stage. As such, we may understand his torment less as the Romantic agony than as a post-Romantic agony: an awareness that the esthetic is not enough while still feeling unable to break free of its hold:

what is the point of all my concerns and plans and efforts? What am I achieving? Nothing. But I am not going to stop for that reason. Precisely for that reason I am not going to stop, for when a person does everything and it is of no help, then he can be sure that he is acting with enthusiasm. Therefore I do not disdain this nothing . . . (Stages 306)

In his letter to the reader, Frater Taciturnus tells us that these are the words of “a demoniac character in the direction of the religious—that is, tending towards it” (398). We will need something like calculation, and we will need to calculate numbers that are like nothing—“infinitely small numbers” (398)—in order to address such a figure. Just as, for Johannes de Silentio, faith is belief in the paradox that the single individual is valued more highly than the universal (Fear and Trembling 55), for Frater Taciturnus, the religious means a kind of impossible mathematical situation where “the negative is higher than the positive” (Stages 443).

The celebration of nothingness is indicative of Quidam’s tending toward the religious, but it is also indicative of his demonic nature, and why he is still best read in dramatic terms:

It is a task for the esthetic to have someone who fancies that he is something be shown up in actuality in his nothingness, but if the esthetic has first acknowledged that in actuality he is great, then the esthetic has no superior power over him and must acknowledge him as a hero, but then the religious says: Wait a minute, let us look at this a bit closer and see how he is in himself. (449)

Quidam’s “great” act of turning away from his beloved causes him to “topple” inwardly, worrying at length over the implications of doing everything to accomplish what looks like nothing. Frater Taciturnus, with his pronouncement that “the negative is higher than the positive,” seems to suggest that Quidam’s problem is that he welcomes nothingness as proof of the accomplishment of his suffering—the final entry in the diary claims that “Guilty/Not Guilty”
“contains nothing . . . sometimes it is the hardest life that deals with nothing” (Stages 397)—and, therefore, he does not go far enough. The religious is closer to the “pure being” of a narrator who presided over the first chapter of Stages on Life’s Way: something that is “thus almost less than nothing . . . everywhere present but yet not noticeable” (86). The religious stage is just that much farther than, that much less than, nothing, and by settling for nothing, and existing in print, Quidam remains demonic. The single individual can only reach the religious stage through something beyond reading, something ironically resembling the Romantic refusing to read, a rejecting of the lessons supposedly expressed by the indirect communication. Frater Taciturnus not only recognizes that “two-thirds” of his book’s few readers will quit before they are even halfway through with Quidam’s diary, but that this is to their benefit: “How fortunate that there is no reader who reads all the way through” (494).

Kierkegaard invokes Shakespeare to illustrate the demonic in Fear and Trembling. But that is not necessarily how Quidam is referring to Lear. He alone seems to read Lear accurately, not because it speaks to the religious stage, but because it does not, and therefore is parallel to his own demonic condition. Through Either/Or and Stages on Life’s Way, we linearly follow Lear’s plot: Johannes inverted the play’s beginning, revealing the faithlessness and misreading that characterizes the esthetic stage, and the limits of the esthetic stage were tested by a pastor who resembled the mad king. Other figures in Kierkegaard’s various works of indirect communication change narratives and details at will. Why, then, does Quidam not simply change Lear to fit what it is he wants to say about the religious stage? Why does he, out of all of these other figures, alone understand that Lear is completely mad, and is probably happier that

52 Again anticipating Lacan, this unnamed figure compares himself to something like the bar: “I am like the line with the arithmetic problem above and the answer below—who cares about the line?” (Stages 86).

53 See the reading of Richard III in Fear and Trembling 105-6. Kaufmann’s “Brother Brash” persona cites this moment in order to diagnose Kierkegaard’s own perceived inadequacies as a man and a writer (192-3).
way, and to want to resemble him or learn from him would be mad as well? As with poor Quidam’s diary itself, which ends “for the time being” (Stages 397), the narrative of Lear is suspended, and ends here with Lear’s twisted delight at being led off to prison. Is this suspension of the plot another example of Kierkegaard dramatizing a non-reading as either a symptom of the esthetic or, conversely, its refusal? Or should we read this suspension as a refusal to face the play’s crisis conclusion, *ala* Nahum Tate, Samuel Johnson, or the Romantics, with their defensive repurposing of the play’s confrontation with the unbearable as the inexpressible Sublime?

I suspect that Kierkegaard may have been resistant to recognizing something in his reading *Lear*, yet it was not necessarily something in the text itself, but rather in his own personal response to the tragedy. It seems to me that *King Lear* affected Kierkegaard as personally as nearly any other work of literature. To make such a claim, we must now turn away from the fictional works, the indirect communication that Kierkegaard tells us is intentionally deceptive, and examine the references to Lear in the journals and papers. In the indirect communication, Kierkegaard alludes to Lear and Cordelia when he is portraying lovers: Johannes and Cordelia, and Quidam and Quaedam. An esthetic reading, *ala* Lowrie, would identify Lear and Cordelia with Søren and Regine (see note 25). However, in the journals, Kierkegaard suggests that he saw himself as a Cordelia and saw his father, Michael, as a Lear.

In his journals, Kierkegaard transcribed a portion of the speech alluded to in Quidam’s diary, where Lear fantasizes about life in prison with Cordelia (JP 5429). In an “addition” to this entry, a bare display of Shakespeare’s lines, Kierkegaard wrote these thoughts:

Then it was that the great earthquake occurred, the frightful upheaval which suddenly drove me to a new infallible principle for interpreting all the phenomena. Then I surmised that my father’s old-age was not a divine blessing, but rather a curse, that our family’s exceptional intellectual capacities were only for mutually
harrowing one another; then I felt the stillness of death deepen around me, when I saw in my father an unhappy man who would survive us all, a memorial cross on the grave of all his personal hopes. A guilt must rest upon the entire family, a punishment of God must be upon it: it was supposed to disappear, obliterated by the mighty hand of God, erased like a mistake, and only at times did I find a little relief in the thought that my father had been given the heavy duty of reassuring us all with the consolation of religion, telling us that a better world stands open for us even if we lost this one, even if the punishment the Jews always called down on their enemies should strike us: that remembrance of us would be completely obliterated, that there would be no trace of us. (JP 5430)

Lear’s delusion, a pathetic rebuttal to Cordelia’s observation that they “have incurred the worst” (Tragedy 5.3.3), is a counterpart to the Kierkegaard’s own epiphany about his father, and the melancholy that they shared. These lines make up “one of the most disputed of all Kierkegaard’s journal entries” (Garff 132), and, indeed, it is virtually impossible to know for certain what Kierkegaard is referring to when he mentions a “great earthquake.” In fact, it is virtually impossible to know when this passage was written. The “great earthquake” passage is glued to the transcribed passage from Lear. The Princeton edition dates both entries as 1838, though Garff points out that the Lear passage was excerpted from Ernst Ortlepp’s translation of Shakespeare, which was not published until the next year. Whether Kierkegaard affixed these two passages, or if they were joined by his notoriously sloppy editor H.P. Barfod, is impossible to determine; whether the parallels between Lear and Kierkegaard’s father were drawn by Kierkegaard himself, or by one of his many readers and editors, cannot be decided with certainty.

Still, somebody noticed the parallels between these two passages and affixed them together, and perhaps it was Kierkegaard. In both Lear and the journal, insight is compared to the brutality of nature, expressed with a sublime image (“hurricano,” earthquake). In both Lear

54 “Barfod, however, was particularly notorious for his cutting of the manuscripts and for his subsequent pasting, which resulted in a completely new whole—deconstruction before its time” (Garff 100). In the case of the “great earthquake” passages, Barfod was as captivated by their enigmatic nature as subsequent readers have been. As a result, he “broke entirely with the principle of chronological continuity and placed them at the very beginning of the multivolume section he titled From Søren Kierkegaard’s Posthumous Papers” (Garff 132). See also Malik 211-7.
and this journal entry, the effects of the father’s misdeeds are felt by his children; outliving them, and the fact of his old age, both exemplify and signify his torment. There is some consolation to be found in religion, but there is also anxiety and skepticism in the face of the obliteration that is prophesized: is this the promised end, or only the image of that horror?

Kierkegaard confesses in this entry to “only at times” finding comfort in the promise of a better world. *Lear* offers no such comfort at all. While it is unclear specifically what Kierkegaard means by the “great earthquake,” it is possible that he is referring to the revelation of the pathological guilt his father felt for cursing God as a child, out on the Jutland heath.\(^5^5\) In an entry from 1846, alluded to above, Kierkegaard writes:

> How appalling for the man who, as a lad watching sheep on the Jutland heath, suffering painfully, hungry and exhausted, once stood on a hill and cursed God—and the man was unable to forget it when he was eighty-two years old. (JP 5874)

If Kierkegaard turned to *Lear* when he wrote of a pastor out on the Jutland heath, with a “voice [rising] to its full power in order to drown out the storm,” he likely had his father Michael’s lifelong guilt in mind as well. Whether or not this is the “great earthquake” that Kierkegaard discussed in the entry from 1838, both he and his father struggled for a very long time with the anxiety borne eruptively from this moment out on the Jutland heath.

*King Lear* may be a play about anxiety, in the Kierkegaardian sense of what is bequeathed by original sin – which is to say, somebody else’s sin. In this sense, Kierkegaard’s *Lear* is inexorably intertwined with Kierkegaard’s relationship with his own father:

> King Lear’s fate can be accounted for as Nemesis. His fault is the madness with which the play begins, of summarily requiring his children to declare the depth of their love for him. Children’s love for their parents is a bottomless mystery, rooted as well in a natural relationship. An event can therefore be the occasion which

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\(^5^5\) See Garff 131-8 for a discussion of other possible readings of the “great earthquake,” including Brandes’s suggestion that it refers to Michael’s infidelity, or to Michael’s suspected, superstitious belief in a curse that each of the Kierkegaard sons would die before their thirty-fourth birthday.
reveals its depth, but it is unseemly, impious, and culpable to wish curiously and selfishly to dissect it, as it were, for the sake of one’s own satisfaction. Such a thing is tolerable in an erotic relationship (when the lover asks the beloved how much she loves him), although even here it is pandering (JP 1165).

What is a great earthquake if not an event that painfully reveals unseen depths? In Ernst Ortlepp’s translation of Lear, the edition excerpted and attached to the “great earthquake” entry, Lear’s dream that he and Cordelia will shuffle off to prison to discuss the “mystery of things / As if [they] were God’s spies” (Tragedy 5.3.16-7) becomes a more general claim to speak of mysterious things, “as if we saw into the depths,” or “the deepest” (das Tiefste) (JP 5429).56 For Kierkegaard, King Lear addresses quite painfully which depths of intersubjective relationships should be revealed and which concealed. Or, rather, for Kierkegaard, the play addresses which of those depths were revealed to him specifically.

This moment is where King Lear ends for Quidam. It is a moment where Lear seems particularly ridiculous, not only because he seems delighted to head off to prison, but because speaking as one of “God’s spies,” he thinks that he and Cordelia will actually be able to quantify the uncountable quantity of their love for one another. Kierkegaard similarly dissected his love for Regine at length, and was never satisfied with what he uncovered. As a result, his God-relationship, is in many ways the happy love of my unhappy and troubled life. And even though this love story (if I dare to call it that) has the essential mark of the true love story, that only one can completely understand it, and to only one does a person have absolute joy in telling it, to the beloved, therefore here the one by whom one is loved—it nevertheless is enjoyable to speak of it to others also. (Point 71).

The notion that love is only expressible between individual lovers is the model for Kierkegaard’s own identification of his readership as one other single individual. Though he writes that is

56 Ortlep’s translation, as transcribed in the journals, reads: “Wir sprechen von geheimnissvollen Dingen, / Als ob wir in das Tiefste sie durchschauten” (qtd. in Kierkegaard JP 5429). I thank Vasu Venkata and Eric Kligerman for their help with this reading.
“impious” for a father and his child to communicate this way, Kierkegaard seems to have found an echo of this quandary of communication in Lear’s dream of prison, before the revelation that Cordelia will, in fact, “come no more / Never, never, never, never, never.” (Tragedy 5.3.282).

There is one more moment in the indirect communication that may be touched by Lear. Johannes de Silentio remarks in Fear and Trembling that “great Shakespeare” can “say everything, everything, everything just as it is”:

why did you never articulate this torment [i.e. Abraham’s horror religious]? Did you perhaps reserve it for yourself, like the beloved’s name that one cannot bear to have the world utter, for with his little secret that he cannot divulge the poet buys this power of the word to tell everybody else’s dark secrets. A poet is not an apostle; he drives out devils only by the power of the devil. (61)

Frater Taciturnus suggests that Shakespeare withholding a portrayal of the religious because no drama could ever accurately depict the inwardness of the religious stage. Johannes de Silentio suggests here that Shakespeare’s avoidance of the religious is more strategic; rather than reveal his own “secret,” inward torments, he sublimates them into an unmatched, though demonic, aesthetic achievement.57

Still, though it may be a slippage resulting from the Hongs’ translation, there seems to be a possible allusion to the language of Lear when Johannes di Silentio praises Shakespeare’s ability to communicate “everything, everything, everything.” If so, it goes further than Quidam, beyond the mad comforts of imagined gossip in prison and closer to the devastating final moments of Lear where we see the disintegration of language itself. Lear, at the play’s close, faces the nothing that has come out of nothing (“No, no, no life”; “Never, never, never, never,

57 For a variation of this point, made in the “direct” communication, see Kierkegaard’s essay on “The Difference Between A Genius and an Apostle: “As a genius, Paul cannot stand comparison with either Plato or Shakespeare; as an author of beautiful metaphors, he ranks rather low . . . [but as apostles] (Plato as well as Shakespeare and tapestry maker Hansen) are without any comparison to Paul” (174). Note how in this movement away from the “interesting” of the esthetic toward the religious stage, Kierkegaard explicitly condemns the epideictic impulses: “praising Paul” as a stylist amounts to “thoughtless eloquence” (174).
never” (Tragedy 5.3.280, 283) and can only respond by “howl, howl, howl, howl!”-ing and directing those around him to look at something that is not really there (Tragedy 5.3.231).

Johannes de Silentio may wonder why Shakespeare can say “everything” but does not show the religious despair and anxiety that Abraham must have felt; other figures from the indirect communication suggest that Shakespeare simply could not express such a feeling dramatically. But the truth is that, in Lear, Shakespeare shows us something else and something worse: the void that Johannes di Silento feared would prove that everything is despair and that Abraham suffered for nothing.

Howard Hong writes of the journals that, “Kierkegaard cannot be either the primary subject for us or the proper object for us. The reader is the primary subject” (“The Kierkegaard Papers” 120). The journals and the direct writings, as with The Point of View, are ultimately only a clue to interrogating what Kierkegaard “really” means. The decades of what Malik calls the “misreception” of Kierkegaard’s work place us at an even further remove from this ideal signified, so that reading Kierkegaard is not so dissimilar from reading Lear, a world where nothing matters above all. Much as King Lear prefigures its own misrecognition, Kierkegaard seemingly courted misreading through his use of pseudonyms and maeutics. Both Lear and Kierkegaard’s writings move in the same way: “the movement is not from the simple to the interesting, but from the interesting to the simple” (Kierkegaard Point 94). They each begin with the “interesting”—treatises on eros, epideixis, and the endless play of feign and fain—and conclude with the simple certainty of either a divine presence, or its absence.

Kierkegaard is often called the father of existentialism; the “single individual” is an obvious source of inspiration for that school of philosophy. Following Maynard Mack, Jan

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58 See the essays collected in Stewart’s Kierkegaard and Existentialism, a volume in Ashgate’s fine Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources series.
Kott, and others, *King Lear* is often read that way as well. Yet there is no figure similar to the single individual in *Lear*. There is only language, and its constructs:

   *Kent.* I have a journey, sir, shortly to go:

   My master calls me; I must not say no. (*Tragedy* 5.3.296-7)

Lear lives on in an impossible language even after his death, calling to Kent with no voice: a signified with no signifier. Kent’s ambiguous lines appear to indicate a duty that is not explicitly pronounced, nor is it expected or—perhaps most importantly—rebuted. Hamlet, after all, never chooses “not to be,” and in a moment that Kent’s lines appear to revise, he rejects Horatio’s offer to join him in death. Horatio phrases this offer as a Classicist might (“I am more an antique Roman than a Dane”) (5.2.283). Kent is told, on the other hand, that the weight of this sad time we must obey: at the recognition of the play’s nothingness, suicide may be as natural or as necessary as Lear’s howling. Whether there is a precedent set by antique Romans or learned Thebans is irrelevant.

Kierkegaard’s critics often compare him to that other famous, melancholy Dane: Hamlet. Yet perhaps it is not their melancholy that binds Kierkegaard and Hamlet, but their certainty. As Jacques Lacan puts it, Hamlet *knows* (*Desire* 17.12).⁵⁹ Though both Hamlet and Kierkegaard are not without doubt, at heart they both believe in the existence of something beyond what is “dreamt of in our philosophy” (*Hamlet* 1.5.169). Given the existence of such “wondrous strange” things (*Hamlet* 1.5.166), what is to be gained by playing the antique Roman, then? What is the use of philosophy?

⁵⁹ In the Karnac press reprint of Cormac Gallagher’s translation of Lacan’s sixth seminar, each day of the seminar is numbered (and referred to as “Seminar #”), and the pagination begins over again with each new day. The clearest way to cite from the seminar is Seminar #. Page #. All other references from Lacan’s seminars are taken from the official translations published by Norton, and are cited by page number.
Yet Lear does find some comfort in keeping “still” with a “learned Theban” (*Tragedy* 3.4.158, 140). Poor Tom’s philosophical “study” is itself nothing—as is the case with Coleridge, Tom’s philosophy is essentially the regurgitated thoughts of somebody else\(^6\)—and the “word” he shares with the King is accordingly staged as a silent pantomime (*Tragedy* 3.4.141, 143). Lear and *Lear* also demonstrate a vision of existence with certainty, but it is one that suggests that what awaits us—unless you mercifully hallucinate otherwise (“look there, look there!”)—is nothing. Whatever comfort or joy there may be is founded upon the nothingness of discourse, be it philosophy or a “defense” of poetry or even the “pandering” that Kierkegaard objected to in any love-relationship besides the one that he believed he shared with God.

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\(^6\) I am referring to the influence of Samuel Harsnet’s pamphlet *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* on Edgar’s speeches. See Elton 89-94 and Greenblatt 94-128.
In this chapter, I argue that Jacques Lacan’s reading of *King Lear* in his seventh seminar, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, held from 1959 to 1960, is a pivotal moment in his body of thought, despite being largely overlooked by both Shakespearean and Lacanian scholars. According to Kenneth Reinhard and Julia Reinhard Lupton, Lacan’s comments are “almost an afterthought” to the seminar’s extended analyses of *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone* (153), and Marc de Kesel’s book-length study of the seminar does not mention Lear once. Still, the briefness of Lacan’s remarks on Lear is no hindrance to identifying the play as a central text in the critical legacy of psychoanalysis; the reading of Lear is no shorter than the reading of *Hamlet* in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In fact, if this “afterthought” of a reading resembles a kind of slip, Lacan’s comments are all the more promising as a site for psychoanalytic reflection.

Lacan’s reading of Lear illuminates both the notion of recognition that we have examined within the play,¹ as well as Lacan’s own place in intellectual history as a practitioner of post-Romantic criticism and philosophy. While Lacan inherits and expands upon Kierkegaard’s challenge to what we have termed the dead-end of Romantic open-endedness,² the briefness of his remarks on Lear may also reflect a personal crisis of reading the play similar to Kierkegaard’s. Reading Lear alongside Lacan’s own comments on both Lear and Hamlet, I infer that Lacan recognizes a portrayal of clinical analysis within the play. If the reading of Lear

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¹ See Borch-Jacobsen and Felman for more on how Lacan specifically revises Freud’s conceptualization of recognition (“identification” for Borch-Jacobsen) for the clinical setting.

² I argue in this chapter that Lacan’s rhetorical stance in the seminars is influenced by Kierkegaard’s indirect communication. In the sixth seminar, Lacan admits that “I prefer to do things in an indirect fashion” (2.11), and in the eleventh seminar, he clarifies that this means he does things “in a maieutic, eristic way” (126). In the eleventh seminar, Lacan suggests that the repetition compulsion should be clarified with reference to Kierkegaard’s *Repetition*. See Žižek *Symptom* 69-110. See Crownfield for more on the intersections between Lacan and Kierkegaard.
raises complicated and valuable questions about the relation of analyzing literary and clinical subjects, it also raises the specter of Lacan’s own anxiety about what may be recognized about the _analyst_ during the transference and countertransference.\(^3\)

Any reading of the reception history of _King Lear_ is, in many ways, a reading against the reception of _Hamlet_. R.A. Foakes has argued that the development of the Shakespearean canon in the last century is essentially a campaign of _Hamlet versus Lear_. Similarly, discussing _Lear’s_ role in the history of psychoanalytic reading can mean arguing for its place as a counter-narrative to the formative Hamlet-Oedipal narrative. Such a counter-narrative may be definitively Lacanian, where the “return to Freud” is a correction of Freud’s own division of the kingdom of psychoanalysis. Where _Hamlet_ is a narrative of the idealized father, _Lear_ depicts the father as failure, and for Lacan, Freud was no “model father.” Given the attention Lacan pays to the play, Freud’s resemblance to Lear in this passage from Seminar VII may well be intentional: “he was truly the father, the father of us all, the father of psychoanalysis, [but] what did he do but hand it over to the women, and also perhaps to the master fools?” (_Ethics_ 182).

Aside from reading this reproach as a possible allusion to _Lear_, the lambasting of “the women” and “master fools” is a familiarly Lacanian moment of high blame for ego psychology and the professional societies with whom Lacan publicly quarreled. For his mentee and analysand, Stuart Schneiderman, this quality of Lacan’s writing and personality was itself _Lear_-esque: “Lacan’s was a tragedy of ingratitude,” of exile, and of the loyalty of “his youngest of three daughters” and son-in-law (_Death_ 17-8). The _Dissolution_ Statement, Schneiderman tells

\(^3\) See the “Presentation on Transference” for Lacan’s definition of countertransference as “the sum total of the analyst’s biases, passions, and difficulties, [and] even of his inadequate information, at any given moment in the dialectical process” of the analysis (183). I will argue below that Lacan’s resistance to Romanticism stems from his objection to its ideality of fragmentation, of celebrating “inadequate information.”
us, is “worthy of a King Lear” (90). What Lacan noted about the infirmity of Freud’s age was then self-reflective, at least in Schneiderman’s reading (Tragedy 1.1.288).

In the context of the history of psychoanalysis, suggesting that there is a struggle of Lear versus Hamlet is itself a kind of Oedipal struggle against the “father of psychoanalysis.” As is the case with all such struggles, it tells us more about the son than the father. Clearly, to understand Lacan’s remarks on Lear, and to understand the import of those remarks not only for psychoanalysis but also for the post-Romantic rhetorical context of the play, we must, in the manner of Frater Taciturnus in Stages on Life’s Way, take a side-glance at Hamlet. Lacan’s reading of Lear from the seventh seminar can only be identified as pivotal with reference to the far more detailed analysis of Hamlet from the previous year’s seminar. As Lacan says himself in the sixth seminar, Hamlet makes the way for Lear. In the argument that follows, I hope to clarify Lacan’s challenge to the Romantic influence on the established psychoanalytic interpretation of Hamlet, as well as demonstrate how this challenge both indicates a debt to Kierkegaard’s indirect communication and foreshadows Lacan’s own indirect reading of King Lear.

In the eleventh seminar, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, Lacan couples the concept of Name-of-the-Father with both the traditional Oedipal reading of Hamlet and the Kierkegaardian understanding of original sin (Four 34). Later in the same seminar, he

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4 See Felman on the role that the Oedipal narrative plays for psychoanalysis not just as a “specimen story” but as a parallel with the narrative of psychoanalysis itself: “the literary drama of the destiny of Oedipus, which, in becoming thus a reference narrative—the specimen story of psychoanalysis—, situates the validating moment at which the psychoanalytic story-telling turns and returns back on itself” (1022). I argue that this means that psychoanalysis is not only a return to Oedipus, but that the Oedipus narrative may be understood as a prefiguration of psychoanalysis. See also Rudnytsky’s Freud and Oedipus for more on the “implications of [the] dynamic relation between Freud and Oedipus” (3).

5 Lacan: “From Hamlet on the whole skyscape has altered, and we touch things which are beyond all limits, which no longer have anything to do with any kind of canon, which are no longer of the same order. After Hamlet, we have King Lear, and still more things before we end with The Tempest” (Desire 15.5-6).
will suggest that the Freudian concept of repetition should be glossed with reference to Kierkegaard’s novel of the same name (61), and, following Kierkegaard, Lacan identifies his own rhetorical practice in the seminars with Socratic maieutics (126). The Four Fundamental Concepts was the first seminar to be published with Lacan’s blessing, and it notably demonstrates Kierkegaard as not only a model of sorts for the Lacanian discourse, but also as a crucial intermediary figure between Shakespeare and Freud.  

For English readers, Hamlet plays a similarly vital role introducing the appearance of Lacan’s ideas in print.  

In Lacan’s reading from Seminar VI, Hamlet’s “notorious delay” is symptomatic of his mourning the “original lost object,” the phallus, as incarnated by Claudius (Muller 147). This reading, from the spring of 1959, has been examined nearly as much as any other example of Lacan’s literary analysis. The popularity of this reading is due in no small part to the popularity of the play itself, and of its obvious interest to anyone claiming to “return to Freud.” However, the reading is also widely cited because it was one of the first works of Lacan’s to appear in English. The seminar was partially published as “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in

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6 See Duquette for more on how Kierkegaard informs the Lacanian reading of Hamlet and Lacan’s rhetorical use of exempla: “Not only is Kierkegaard already in the Freud to whom Lacan returns, but through Kierkegaard it becomes possible to see the ways in which the example in Lacan works as an ethical instrument, not of imitation but of particularized action” (24).

7 As noted above, Lacan’s reading of Hamlet—particularly the sections published in Yale French Studies—has been glossed again and again, and I have little to add to such illuminating readings as John Muller’s, Tamise Van Pelt’s, Bruce Fink’s, and Ellie Ragland-Sullivan’s. Instead, I hope to focus on what Shakespeare is doing in Lacan rather than what Lacan does with Shakespeare – specifically Lacan’s challenge to the Romantic interpretation of Hamlet as a kind of mirror for the reader that informs psychoanalytic responses to the play. Still, familiarity with Lacan’s thesis is of obvious import, so I reproduce Muller’s summary here:

Hamlet’s notorious delay in acting results from the dependence of his desire on the desire of the other, and his being subject (as we all are, as subjects of language) to the signifier of this desire, namely the phallus. Ophelia is a substitute for the phallus as lost object, and Claudius incarnates it, therefore preventing Hamlet from killing him until Hamlet is dying and set free from its subjection. The much-discussed oedipal nature of the play comes from the play’s repetitive theme of mourning, for Lacan says it is with the decline of the Oedipus complex that the loss of the phallus is mourned: it is the original lost object. In mourning, images rush in to fill the gap in the real caused by someone’s death, much as in psychosis the imaginary reshaping of signifiers attempts to fill the hole in the symbolic order caused by the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father. (147)
Hamlet” in a highly influential issue of Yale French Studies from 1977, edited by Shoshana Felman, and featuring essays by Fredric Jameson, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Daniel Sibony, Philippe Sollers, and Barbara Johnson. This issue appeared in the same year as Alan Sheridan’s partial translation of Écrits and, as with Sheridan’s work, “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire” is a fragment. In fact, it is a fragment of a fragment: a transcription of Lacan’s remarks on Hamlet was published in Ornicar? between 1981 and 1983 covering only seven days of the entire seminar. Of those seven dates, only three were translated and published in the earlier issue of Yale French Studies.8

This fragmenting of Lacan’s text reflects what he calls the “indirect” aspect of his discourse in the seminars (Desire 2.11), following Kierkegaard. The fragmentation of the sixth seminar also reminds us of the Romantic heritage of psychoanalysis, specifically the attention given to Shakespeare in psychoanalytic literature. Early in his career, Lacan recognized psychoanalysis’s critical debt to Shakespearomanie9: “It is well know that Freud was steeped in German literature, which, by virtue of an incomparable translation, can be said to include Shakespeare’s plays. Every one of his works bears witness to this, and to the continual recourse he had to it, no less in his technique than in his discovery” (“Function and Field” 244). Yet, by virtue of the fragmenting of the sixth seminar for Yale French Studies, the extent to which he interrogates the Romantic interpretation’s influence on psychoanalysis’s interpretation of Hamlet has not been fully recognized. On the contrary, Lacan’s earliest American critics read the fragmented Lacan of Sheridan and “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire” in a manner reminiscent of the Romantic criticism that we have examined in earlier chapters. Recalling the

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8 Furthermore, the remarks from these days are not complete. See Duquette for a discussion of Lacan’s joke—“One can not make a hamlet without breaking some eggs”—cut from the Yale French Studies version of the seminar (14).

9 See note 1 in the previous chapter.
description of Kierkegaard as a “kind of poet,” Schneiderman says Lacan’s writings “resemble poetry” (v). Citing Schneiderman, Jane Gallop infers a kind of sublime unreadability: “Lacan’s writings appear to be poetry, [they] beckon the literature professor, but are a decoy; they do not yield, they cannot be read” (34).10

The diasparactive dissemination of Lacan’s work may not have been conspiratorial, but the effect of fragmenting his work and then identifying it as poetically incoherent certainly belies a tendency in literary theory to read for a Romantic open-endedness.11 Bruce Fink’s translation of the Écrits—subtitled on its cover, not too subtly, as The FIRST Complete Edition in English—marks an obvious, major advance. Fink is particularly concerned with rectifying the common understanding of Lacan as unreadable: “What may at first seem nonsensical or absurd often, in my view, becomes quite comprehensible and even sensible when understood in context” (Lacan To The Letter vii). “Sensible” may be less attractive than “Sublime” or even “inexpressible”—the inexpressible being, as we have seen, the stuff of praise—but such a “context” is crucial for understanding what Lacan does with Hamlet in Seminar VI. As is the case with Fink, Lacan emphasizes completion. Therefore, I cite from the more complete—though unauthorized—translation of the seminar by Cormac Gallagher, rather than the excerpts from “Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in Hamlet.” If the presentation of Lacan’s reading of Hamlet is inadvertently Romantic in its fragmentation, that editorial decision is a counterintuitive presentation of a reading that (in passages excised from Yale French Studies) treats both the

10 Of these two writers, I prefer Schneiderman’s take, as he understands Lacan’s poetic stance as a rhetorical ploy; Gallop’s self-reflexive study of the difficulty of the writings is less illuminating (“I have chosen not to do a reading of this central text for the present book; the only reason I can give is that the sheer length of the ‘Discours’ intimidates me”) (55). This is a little too close to the high Romantic fragment reading that I believe Lacan (via Kierkegaard) is challenging. Gallop cites others who read Lacan as ineffable on 37-8.

11 See Clemens 113-32 for more on Lacan as a thinker who “explicitly contests many of the directions taken by Romantic thought” (113), while also demonstrating his “complicity” with Romanticism (114).
Romantic reception of *Hamlet* and a decidedly un-fragmented *Hamlet*: “It is quite obviously the *totality*, the articulation of the tragedy in itself which is what interests us” (*Desire* 15.5, my emphasis).

Lacan’s reading of *Hamlet* clarifies the fundamental distinction between the analysis of literary and human analysands. Unlike *Hamlet*, which can be read in its totality, the enunciation of a dream is inevitably fragmented by the analysand, and fragmented further when the analyst re-enunciates the dream in a case study.12 The reading of *Hamlet* follows immediately upon a critique of such a case study by Ella Sharpe. Sharpe, we are told, did not err “completely,” but Lacan indicates steps that Sharpe should have taken to ensure a “more complete accommodation” (11.2).13 As befits a figure compared by his own followers to Lear, Lacan fills his sixth seminar with his distinctive, *epideictic* blame for fellow analysts. In addition to his criticisms of Sharpe, the entire reading of *Hamlet* is peppered with critical asides directed at the familiar object of his ire, Ernest Jones.14 Granted, such blame could implicitly be directed towards Lacan’s own fragmented publication by readers of the sixth seminar: it is not as though

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12 Again, echoing Kierkegaard, Lacan calls the enunciation of a dream an “indirect discourse” (*Desire* 8.2): “In other words, what we are enunciating in producing the enunciation of the dream, is something to which is given, in the very form in which we produce it from the moment that we recount our dream to someone else, this question mark which is not just any question mark, which presupposes that there is something beneath this dream, of which the dream is the signifier” (*Desire* 8.3).

13 Lacan accuses Sharpe of misrecognizing several admissions on the analysand’s part, particularly the patient’s desire for her (“It seems that there was absolutely no rejection [of a sexual fantasy concerning the analyst], but that there was rather an admission”) (*Desire* 9.8). In language reminiscent of both Kierkegaard’s theoretical orientation and Hamlet “leaping” into Ophelia’s grave (14.17), Lacan diagnoses Sharpe’s “leaps” of logic and prescribes yet another leap: “an imprudent step can only be rectified, contrary to what is said, by another imprudent step” (11.2). Such rectifying, critical leaps will allow Lacan to fix what is fragmented in Sharpe—he cautiously reminds us that “we are not saying that Ella Sharpe erred *completely*”—so that further analysis will determine what would have led to “a more *complete* accommodation” (11.2, my emphasis).

14 See Roudinesco 112-7 for an account of Jones’s famous interruption of Lacan at the Marienbad conference in 1936. See Van Pelt *Other Side* 91-95 for more on the differences between Lacan and Jones’s interpretations of *Hamlet*. 

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he approved an official transcript of the seminar to begin with. But Lacan explicitly directs such blame towards the fragmented reading of *Hamlet*:

what distinguishes the tragedy of *Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*, is essentially that it is the tragedy of desire. *Hamlet* which—we cannot be absolutely sure, but according to the most rigorous of studies—was first presented at London during the Winter season of 1601; *Hamlet* of which the first quarto edition, this famous edition which was almost would could be called a pirate edition at the time, namely that it was not done under the control of the author, but borrowed from what were called [actor’s copies], booklets used by the prompter. This edition—it is interesting all the same to know these little bits of literary history—was unknown until 1823, when a few filthy copies were found—ones which had been handled a good deal, probably taken to the performances. And the Folio edition, the great edition of Shakespeare, only began to appear after his death in 1623, preceding the great edition in which the plays are divided into acts. Which explains why the division into acts is much less decisive and clear in Shakespeare than elsewhere.

In fact it is not believed that Shakespeare intended to divide his plays into five acts. This is important because we are going to see how this play is divided.

There is a point in evoking these reference points, since we are not the only ones to have tried to resituate *Hamlet* in its context. What I am telling you here is something that I have not seen stressed by any analytic author. These are nevertheless the basic facts which are important.

To tell the truth what has been written by analytic authors can not be said to have been enlightening. *(Desire 14.1-2)*

One could dispute many of the claims Lacan makes about the editorial history of *Hamlet* (he says himself that we cannot be “sure”), but one can certainly not miss the accusation that the analysts who have failed to properly account for *Hamlet* have done so because they have simply passed over what it readily displayed. And while Lacan himself does not exactly obsess over the differences in Q and F, there is a sense of the text’s *completion* here (in spite of its split) that eludes the unavoidable fragmentation of a dream analysis as an “indirect” enunciation. Shakespeare’s plays *resist* editorial division. Such “important,” “basic facts” lead Lacan to examine two elements of *Hamlet* that characterize the rest of his analysis of the play: first, his sense of the play’s completeness, and second, the “mirror”-like quality of the play, that fact that
“each and every person finds his own place in [Hamlet], can recognize himself in it” (Desire 14.8). It is this second aspect of Hamlet—or, more accurately, the reception of Hamlet—that is defined with reference to and initially by Romanticism. Indicating that the materiality of the letter is often defined textually, Lacan’s text here itself mirrors Hamlet: we only have this passage because of a similar “pirate edition” of his own seminars.

That Freud’s Shakespeare was, even more so than Kierkegaard’s Shakespeare, a German, Romantic Shakespeare is not simply a result of the popularity of Schlegel and Tieck’s translation. The influence of Georg Brandes’s reading of the “personal element in Hamlet” upon Freud’s reading in The Interpretation of Dreams has long been established. Brandes, an influential Danish critic and philosopher, wrote the first book-length study of Kierkegaard, as well as one of the earliest histories of the German Romantic movement, and a highly influential, two-volume critical study of Shakespeare. While Brandes expressed antipathy to the Romantic movement, his claim that Shakespeare “merged himself in Hamlet” seems to me to take the Romantics’ familiarly autobiographical reading of Hamlet and make it a biographical one (364). In other words, “merging” with Hamlet is nothing new for Romantic readers of either the German or British tradition. The merging figure is just normally the reader and not the writer of Hamlet.

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15 See below for a discussion of Lacan’s interest in Hamlet as a textual problem for Freud: “Hamlet at that time is also published in 1900 in the form that Freud left it in afterwards, but in a note, and it was in 1914 that it passed into the body of the text” (Desire 13.2).

16 See Habicht for more on the “Romanticism” of the Schlegel-Tieck translation.

17 See Duquette 20-4 for a discussion of Kierkegaard’s influence on Brandes and Brandes’s influence on Freud. See also Rudnytsky Freud 84. For an examination of Brandes’s psycho-biographical study of Shakespeare and its impact, see Hansen.

18 See Bate Imagination 18-9. Lacan twice alludes to T.S. Eliot in the sixth seminar—once to reference Eliot’s critique of Hamlet as a failure and again to criticize his metaphysics—implicitly aligning himself with Eliot’s famous critique of the Romantic’s Hamlet: “Hamlet the character has had an especial temptation for that most
Goethe’s Wilhelm Meister is the most familiar German example of this “merging” of reader and Hamlet, and, indeed, Lacan refers to the influence of Goethe’s reading of Hamlet’s “action paralysed by thought” in his dissection of Jones (Desire 14.4). Yet Lacan is far more interested in the response to the play by the British Romantics. (Conversely, Lacan describes Freud’s reiteration of Brandes’s points as “simple”) (13.5). Coleridge, in particular, earns Lacan’s esteem for demonstrating more of a talent for reckoning with Hamlet’s “psychological character” than Goethe does, admitting “I experience in myself some taste for the same thing” (14.4). This mirroring-position of Hamlet is symptomatic of British Romanticism, and if Lacan faults psychoanalysis for failing to pay attention to the play’s editorial history, they are doubly wrong for ignoring its critical history:

The intervention of hesitation, of multiple motives, is a brilliant piece of psychology which gives us the essential, the mainspring, the sap of its essence, in this remark made in passing by Coleridge: after all I have a taste for that myself. This means, I can see myself in it. He admits this in passing, and he is not the only one. One finds an analogous remark in someone who is more or less Coleridge’s contemporary, and who wrote some remarkable things about Shakespeare in his Essays on Shakespeare, namely Hazlitt, whom Jones is wrong not to mention at all because he is someone who wrote the most remarkable things on the subject at that time.

He goes still further, he says that in the last analysis to talk about this tragedy…… We have heard so much about this tragedy, that we scarcely know how to criticize it, any more than we would know how to describe our own face. There is another note which makes the same point. And here we have lines that I am going to take very much into account. (14.4-5)

dangerous type of critic . . . These minds often find in Hamlet a vicarious existence for their own artistic realization” (45).

19 See the discussion of the subjective position, treating Goethe, Coleridge, and Schlegel, in Jones’s Hamlet and Oedipus 26-33.

20 These ellipses are Gallagher’s, and refer to a missing section of the original French text.
The “taste” that Coleridge shares with Hamlet is a sense of being like-minded, an intellectual or psychological mirroring where he recognizes the traces of his inwardness in Hamlet’s demonstrations of inwardness. This mirroring—seeing oneself in it—seems directly contradicted by Hazlitt’s metaphor that compares the inexpressible greatness of the play to an inability to “describe our own face.” It may be uncomfortable, but with access to a mirror, it is certainly possible to describe one’s own face. What kind of mirror is Hamlet, anyway?

Naturally, there is some resonance here with Lacan’s own theory of the mirror stage, where the infant’s identification of his image in the mirror transforms into an assumption of the image as “ideal-I” or ego-ideal (“Mirror Stage” 76). The mediating bar—for the infant, a literal mirror, or for Hazlitt’s reader, the textual document of Hamlet—prompts a recognition that is also a separation: “Hamlet is a name: his speeches and sayings but the idle coinage of the poet’s brain. What then, are they not real? They are as real as our own thoughts. Their reality is in the reader’s mind. It is we who are Hamlet” (Hazlitt 1.143). As with Horatio comparing the ghost’s resemblance to the King to Marcellus’s resemblance to Marcellus (1.1.57), Hamlet’s language is real because it can be rendered as a purely signifying construction. It is all the more real because it is rendered (by the “poet’s brain”) and then rendered again (in our mind). With this doubling, Hamlet is extimate and leftover like the objet petit a—or, for that matter, like Ophelia—the unattainable object that causes a desire to be Hamlet and also the material remainder that reminds us how separate we are from that desire.

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21 Coleridge’s actual phrasing is, “I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so” (14.1.77n.22). It is not clear whether or not the slip from “smack” to “taste” is Lacan’s or Gallagher’s, though perhaps the specifics do not matter too much, as Coleridge’s line is itself only rumored, and reported in the Table Talk.

22 See Desire 18.11-5 for a discussion of Ophelia’s “transformation” as the object of Hamlet’s desire after her death: “It is in a way in the measure that the object of his desire has become an impossible object that it becomes for him once again the object of his desire” (18.12).
Lacan’s praise for Hazlitt’s “remarkable” reading of Hamlet focuses on his use of the inexpressibility topos, his sense of “scarcely knowing” how to criticize the play. This obviously recalls Hazlitt’s reading of Lear from the same volume, both in his emphasis on the play’s inexpressibility and of the sense that it would be impossible not to express something about it. Yet while it would seem that the Romantic Sublime, and the accompanying obsession with dramatizing how difficult it is to depict the Romantic Sublime, would align comfortably with those “unreadable” concepts of Lacan’s, Lacan focuses on the moment where Hazlitt identifies Hamlet as unreadable not because of its sublimity so much as its familiarity. We hardly know how to criticize Hamlet because “we have been so used” to it (Hazlitt 1.143). It is, as with a symptom or with desire, both inaccessible and unavoidably familiar. Think of how many people who have not read the play that can nonetheless quote it directly (“to be or not to be . . .”).

The mirror-quality of Hamlet is another historical reality, an oft-ignored “basic fact” of the play’s Romantic reception, in a way that Shakespeare’s biography itself is not. I think what makes Lacan’s attention to Hamlet post-Romantic, rather than late Romantic ala Brandes or Jones or perhaps even Freud, is his critical attention to the transition from the projected, autobiographical reading (it is we who are Hamlet) to the psychoanalytic biographical reading (it is Shakespeare who is Hamlet). Freud, Lacan tells us, has very “simple indications” of what Hamlet is about, as he is too influenced by Brandes’s biographical reading (Desire 13.5). But such a reading is not only simple. Such a reading can literally not, to most analysts’ surprise, be based upon “fact”:

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23 Hazlitt on Lear: “We wish that we could pass this play over, and say nothing about it. All that we can say must fall far short of the subject or even of what we ourselves conceive of it . . . yet we must say something” (1.167). Hazlitt on Hamlet: “We have been so used to this tragedy that we hardly know how to criticise it any more than we should know how to describe our own face. But we must make such observations as we can” (1.143-4).

24 For a reading of Freud’s “On Narcissism” and Beyond the Pleasure Principle as “two texts which truly are High Romantic crisis-poems,” see Bloom “Freud’s Concepts” (9).
There is something absolutely surprising: it is that apart from the fact that he certainly existed, we are able to say nothing about him, about his attachments, about everything that surrounded him, about his love affairs, about his friendships. Everything has passed away, everything had disappeared without a trace. Our author presents himself to us analysts as the most radically vanished, dissolved, lost enigma that we can find in our history. (22.15)

We know that Lacan was aware of Hazlitt’s *Characters of Shakespear’s Plays*. What Lacan finds most fascinating about the Romantics’ admiration for *Hamlet* is their tendency to find themselves in *Hamlet*. They found Hamlet paralyzed by thought – “eaten up by thought” in Hazlitt’s phrasing (Hazlitt 1.143), in an echo of Shelley’s self-consuming model of poetic inspiration. And they also expressed a desire to say “nothing” about *King Lear*, and “pass” over the text in *epideictic* silence. Paralyzed by an inability to say anything, they phrase their paralysis as a desire to say nothing. This defensive avowal is itself phrased as a defense of *King Lear* from those who do not praise it sufficiently. In this manner, though they see themselves as Hamlets, they resemble Lear.

When the Romantics produced fragments of thought, they claimed that it was a result of inspiration’s unavoidable decline. When they turned to Hamlet, they found a similar affirmation of a mind consumed by its own processes, a figure so “familiar” that they do not need to say anything about him. His indecision reflects their own critical indecision. Thus, reading *Hamlet* is as difficult and uneasy as looking in a mirror, because they *are* looking at a mirror, and not a text. Lacan says that, “it is in fact quite striking in effect that Hamlet remained a complete literary enigma up to Freud” (*Desire* 13.5). Given the Romantic ideology’s privileging of the unfinished Sublime, the play’s enigmatic reception is less striking than inevitable.

For Lacan, what is “surprising” to analysts is not that anyone wishes to say nothing about Shakespeare but that “we are able to say nothing” about Shakespeare’s actual biography. Analysts are “surprised” that Shakespeare’s biography has disappeared for the same reason their
comments on *Hamlet* are not interesting: *Hamlet* is not a mirror of Shakespeare’s life. Nor, for that matter, does it mirror the Romantic stance of sublime ignorance. Lacan’s Hamlet is unable to *act*, but he is not *uncertain*. Not only unlike the Romantics, but also unlike Oedipus, “Hamlet knows” (*Desire* 17.12, my emphasis). Reinhard and Lupton identify this knowledge as “post-Oedipal” in both a dramatic and psychoanalytic sense (79), and in a brilliant reading, they align Hamlet more with Seneca’s Oedipus rather than Sophocles’. Sophocles’s hero has his crimes revealed to him over the course of the play. Seneca’s hero begins with the crimes already revealed. As is the case with Hamlet, the Senecan Oedipus begins acknowledging that he is too much in the sun: “day will reveal the havoc of the night” (6). The verb-tense here is misleading; the day has *already* revealed the revelations that Oedipus has *already* recognized. Reinhard and Lupton note that the verb *ostendere*, translated as “reveal” by both Watling and Miller, is accurately translated as “display.”

In other words, Hamlet knows because he has been deictically *shown* what he knows. He *knows* that there are more things in heaven and Earth than are dreamt of in philosophy because he has seen them, unlike an analyst, who cannot literally see what is in the analysand’s dream. The figure of the analyst is closer to Hamlet three scenes prior, who “thinks” he sees his father in his “mind’s eye” (1.2.183, 185). Such a figure can, at best, be the subject who is *supposed* to know. The value that *Hamlet* offers analysis is not so much a means of analyzing Shakespeare, or even literature, but as a means of analyzing the central dialectic of display and recognition of

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25 On the contrary, “if Hamlet is someone who is unequal to his task, Shakespeare too was unequal to the articulation of the role of Hamlet” (*Desire* 15.3).

26 Critchley and Webster rework many of these arguments in the early chapters of their *Stay, Illusion*. In these very brief chapters—some less than two pages long—Critchley and Webster often, curiously, invoke theory more than they read it. For example, in a book that never cites Deleuze, Hamlet is twice referred to as an anti-Oedipus (5, 43); a chapter that analyzes the shared surveillance-qualities of Elsinore and the Globe theater refers to the latter as a “panopticon,” yet never mentions Foucault (50).
psychoanalytic treatment. Not surprisingly, Lacan discusses the figure of Hamlet in deictic terms: “Hamlet demonstrates some neurosis to us” (Desire 16.4, my emphasis). The true value of Shakespeare’s display is its function as a model rather than mirror or lamp:

I believe I am showing you, that Shakespeare has gone further than anybody, to the point that his work is the work itself and is the one where we can see described a sort of cartography of all possible human relationships, with this stigma which is called desire as touchstone, that which irreducibly designates his being, that by which, miraculously, we can find this sort of correspondence (22.14)

Here we find yet another echo of Kierkegaard. Just as Lacan reads “to be or not to be” as an either/or, Shakespeare’s mapping of all human interaction recalls Johannes de Silentio’s claim that Shakespeare can say “everything, everything, everything.” I argued in the previous chapter that that passage from Fear and Trembling alludes to King Lear, and Lear resonates in this passage from Lacan as well. Shakespeare’s “work” is the “work itself.” This aligns “work” (or text) with “thing,” the “beyond-of-the-signified” that will be the focus of much of the next seminar (Ethics 54), and which, incidentally, is the inexpressible signified that the discourse of the Sublime attempts to signify. This “beyond”-ness of das Ding is the same “further”-ness of Hamlet, a play that—far more than Oedipus Rex—presents a universal, topological demonstration of desire. This topological quality of the play accounts for why it so often (and so easily) mirrored by its readers and performers. It is not a sublime mirror that reflects all who inquire into its mysteries, but a kind of mathematically precise model that enables “the problems of the relationship of the subject to desire to be projected into it” (Desire 15.7).

27 Lacan: “It is precisely because for him the oedipal drama is open at the beginning, and not at the end, that the choice between being and not being is proposed. And is is[sic] precisely because there is established this either/or, that he is in any case taken up into the chain of the signifier, into something which means that he is in any case the victim of this choice.” (Desire 13.11)

28 Lacan: “the most general formula that I can give you of sublimation is the following: it raises an object—and I don’t mind the suggestion of a play on words in the term I use—to the dignity of the Thing” (Ethics 112). See Žižek’s gloss of this passage, and a discussion of its parallels with Hegel, in Sublime Object 221.
misrecognized “the thing itself” when he identified it with Edgar/Poor Tom, but he understood what a recognition of “the thing itself” should resemble. Lacan performs a similar recognition with his discussion of Hamlet’s mourning for the phallus.

Early in his reading of the play, fresh off of the four day-long critique of Ella Sharpe’s case study, Lacan discourages the attendees of his seminar against predictable readings: “I would not like to encourage you towards these foolish utterances which literally swarm in psychoanalytic texts. I am only astonished that it has not been written that Ophelia is *ho phallus*” (*Desire* 17.13). And yet, a day later, he presents an argument that appears to be strikingly similar to such “foolish utterances.” Lacan himself is pleasantly surprised to identify his own terminology in the text of *Hamlet*:

> on this occasion the most veiled instrument of the drama, the one that Hamlet can only receive from the other, the instrument which causes death, is something which is elsewhere than what is here materially representable [*sic*].

> Here one cannot fail to be struck by something which is literally in the text. It is clear that what I am in the process of telling you, is that beyond this parade of the tournament of rivalry with the one who is his most beautiful counterpart, the myself that he can love, beyond this there is played out the drama of the accomplishment of Hamlet’s desire, beyond this there is the phallus. (18.8)

Lacan argues against the tendency to read the play as a mirror, and yet argues that it is a distinctly Lacanian graph that maps (if not reflects) his own concepts. This may not suggest Lacan’s hypocrisy so much as an understanding of *how* a “cartography of all possible human relationships” operates once it is *recognized* as such. Clearly, the sense of being “struck” indicates such a recognition; this is precisely the sort of recognition that is the analysand’s goal, and which will be central to Lacan’s understanding of Lear’s access to the zone between the two deaths in the next seminar.

What Lacan recognizes in the text of *Hamlet* is something that, resembling the text of *Hamlet* itself, is both here and beyond here: the phallus which, Lacan is pleasantly “struck” to
note, is literally staged and literally present in its near-homophone *foils.* At this point in his yearly seminar, Lacan had already begun to distinguish between the symbolic-, imaginary-, and real-phalluses. Why Shakespeare is able to go farther than anybody, Lacan himself included, is because he is the sole writer who does not distinguish such matters, but rather conflates them, representing the real as the symbolic, rather than representing *around* the real with the symbolic. They are all “literally” there. This is also why Lacan refers to *Hamlet* as not a textual-mirror but rather a “kind of cartography of all possible human relationships.” Shakespeare’s accomplishment, how he has written a “play of genius [that] has never been replaced by a better one” (*Desire* 13.13), is to express in the supposed “absolute gratuitousness” of language the kinds of formulations that Lacan will dedicate so much of his life and career to expressing in graphs and equations (“Function and Field” 223).

As is the case with Sharpe’s patient, whose own analysis seems more productive to Lacan than Sharpe’s, *Hamlet* and Hamlet both know better than their analysts. For Lacan, the play predicts its own reception history. *Hamlet* has been ill-served by analysts who misread the play or miss its various demonstrations, just as Hamlet himself suffers the “wild analyst” Polonius (13.10), a “caricatural character” who represents the “ironic accompaniment of the easy option that is always provided by the external interpretation of events” (*Desire* 13.11). If Shakespeare authors a cartography of all human relationships, the relationship of primary interest to Lacan in these professional seminars is the relationship of analyst to analysand. For Lacan, *Hamlet’s* map of the personal relationships of Shakespeare is marginal to its achievement as a map of the

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29 This sense of readerly “surprise” is characteristic of Lacan’s seminars. Lacan briefly discusses this sense of surprise at finding his own terminology in an earlier, literary text in the next seminar: “If I find a word now and then which echoes what I have to say, that would be a by no means arbitrary mode of confirmation” (*Ethics* 254).

30 See Evans 141 for an overview of this problem, and of the problem of “semantic slippage” between the distinctions of real, imaginary, and symbolic phalluses and the actual genital organ.
clinical relationship. The claim that Shakespeare’s personal mourning can be projected into
Hamlet is not incorrect, merely incomplete, as any relationship can be mapped there.

With this reading in mind, we will be able to infer that Lacan identifies the Fool and
Edgar as the analyst-figures in Lear. Polonius, as wild analyst, is an ironic figure not because his
analysis is wrong—Ophelia is the figure of the objet petit a in the play, although tragically she
will only fully realize that import for Hamlet after her death—but because it is both “external”
and “easy.” To repeat, Hamlet knows. Whatever analysis can demonstrate or display for the
analysand has already been demonstrated or displayed for him:

It is precisely because for him the oedipal drama is open at the beginning, and not
at the end, that the choice between being and not being is proposed. And is is[sic]
precisely because there is established this either/or, that he is in any case taken up
into the chain of the signifier, into something which means that he is in any case the
victim of this choice. (Desire 13.11)

The question of being has already, for Hamlet, become the question of articulating the question
of being. Lacan will turn more directly to this question in the next seminar, where the question
of ethics becomes the question of action (i.e. have you acted in conformity with the desire that is
within you?). We may deduce that this is, in effect, the question of what happens after analysis,
when the analysand himself becomes an analyst. It is, at any rate, for Hamlet the question of
patience. He cannot display his own desire in the play-within-the-play without confusing the
issue and leaving everybody in a completely ambiguous situation (if, for Lacan, Shakespeare is a
better writer than Lacan, he is also a better writer than Hamlet). He can only wait for the time
when the phallus/foil will be exchanged to him; if he acts precipitously, his actions can be

31 This lends a great import to Lacan’s call for a more “complete” analysis of Hamlet; the end of an analysis of
Hamlet would lend Hamlet the powers of analysis: “If we are to consider an analysis completed for someone who is
subsequently to find himself in a responsible position relative to analysis, in the sense that he becomes an analyst
himself” (Ethics 303). See Felman for more on Lacan’s privileging of clinical practice in his seminars: “Contrary to
received opinion, Lacan’s preoccupation is not with theory per se (with games of ‘intellectualization’), but always,
with his practice as a psychoanalytical clinician” (1049). See Gallop, especially 28-30, for a theorization of
transference in the psychoanalytic interpretation of literature.
disastrous (*Desire* 18.1). He has to wait, if only because he cannot do anything but wait. He mirrors Shakespeare-the-text, not Shakespeare-the-man, in that the five-act structure is something imposed upon him. He is the product of the totality of the structure of the text, of its *whole*, and while that grants the reader an absolutely unique vision of a *whole* subject, it is also a written, textual subject and carries all of the limitations that textuality imposes, even as it goes as far as textuality has ever gone and depicts a fictional subject who seems to rebel against those impositions.

By positing the Oedipal crisis in *Hamlet* as the crisis of existence and its enunciations, the play illuminates its position in the “chain of the signifier,” and therefore its ontological textual status. That is what enables the play to pose “a problem for us,” not by reflecting us but by creating something for us: “I maintain, and I would maintain unambiguously—and I think I am in accord with Freud in saying it—that poetic creations engender rather than reflect psychological creations” (*Desire* 13.13). In addition to brashly claiming accord with Freud while disputing the familiar, psychobiographical account of *Hamlet*’s construction, this amounts to a wholesale rebuttal of the Romantic model of poetic composition as inspiration’s decline. Again, recognizing Lacan’s debt to Kierkegaard is vital in understanding his correction of Romantic prejudices of reading. *Hamlet*’s great accomplishment as a signifying text is to demonstrate precisely what is beyond signification. Lacan indicates as such by reading “to be or not to be” as an essentially Kierkegaardian “choice” of “either/or.”

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32 Lacan clarifies how Kierkegaard informs *Hamlet* when he briefly returns to the play in the seminar, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, in 1964. In that seminar, the role that the “name of the Father” plays in the Hamlet-model of Oedipal construction—as the final stage, where the mother’s rejection of the infant is transformed into the father’s role as establisher of the Law against incest—is designated as Kierkegaardian, where the infant inherits the father’s sin, thus sustaining desire as well as the law (34). Later in the seminar, as we have noted, Lacan also expounds on the parallels between Kierkegaard and Freud on repetition (61).
the reader of Hamlet is as direct and clear a demonstration of what is beyond the symbolic realm could (and probably will) ever be. It is the reception of Hamlet that is indirect.

This indirect reception is itself manifested as a problem of textuality, which is why Lacan begins his study of the play by paying attention to its appearance and reappearance in The Interpretation of Dreams: “Hamlet at that time is also published in 1900 in the form that Freud left it in afterwards, but in a note, and it was in 1914 that it passed into the body of the text” (Desire 13.2). The passing upwards—as opposed to the Hazlitt-ian “passing over” of Lear—closely resembles the supposedly impossible “crossing over the bar” of signification. If Hamlet passes upwards because of its brilliant textuality, it does so through its literality. The thematic “who’s there?” that obsesses all readers of the play can be answered literally with reference to the unspoken, paratextual stage directions. It is a Ghost. That such an indication would probably not have been present in the “rolls” of scripts that give the actors the lines for their “role” further demonstrates the materiality of the letter that lives on well beyond Shakespeare himself (the move, say, from a pirated Q to a “great” F), and is yet so thoroughly designated and clarified by him.

For Lacan, Hamlet is a structure, not unlike a graph or a map or an algorithm, where one can locate a formulation of virtually any human desire or interaction, not least of all the interactions of clinical analysis. And Hamlet paves the way for Lear: “From Hamlet on the whole skyscape has altered, and we touch things which are beyond all limits, which no longer have anything to do with any kind of canon, which are no longer of the same order. After Hamlet, we have King Lear, and still more things before we end with The Tempest” (Desire 33)

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33 See “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious” for Lacan’s classic reworking of a Saussurean algorithm as the topography for the unconscious. See also Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe 33-59.

34 Like the Romantics, Lacan distinguishes between the theater of the stage and the theater of the mind (“it is not at all the same thing to read Hamlet and to see it produced”) (Desire 15.7).
15.5-6). Again, this is a question of recognizing the thing itself (here the canon and not just an individual play) as being far more than just a thing: what makes the Shakespearean canon a canon is this beyond-ness, the breaking of order, and establishing of “things.”

The quick but pointed references to Kierkegaard’s indirect communication provide an essential counter-example to the methodology of ego-psychology. Yet Kierkegaard suggested in The Point of View that his own authorship should be read as a complete, structured “whole.” Virtually nobody reads Lacan this way, and much recent work has focused on the various “shifts” in the development of his thought, particularly the later interest in mathematics and topologies. The readings of Hamlet and Lear appear in what Slavoj Žižek identifies as the “third period” that arises at the end of the 1950s (Sublime 146), where the focus of Lacan’s teaching shifts from the symbolic order to the real. Their appearance in the seminars indicates not only a return to Freud, but a kinship with Lacan himself, given their unique topological function despite being works of literature. Only Shakespeare could work here, as both a figure to exemplify the transition from the symbolic to the real and the transition from rhetoric to mathematical formulations.

In “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” a paper delivered in Rome in 1953 upon the founding of the SFP (Société française de philosophie), Lacan raises the question of psychoanalysis as a science. Foreshadowing the question that would

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35 Lacan’s interest in set theory partly incited the “mathematical turn” for Alain Badiou’s thought (see Hallward 49–78). Ragland and Milovanovic’s collection Lacan: Topologically Speaking has several important glosses and readings of Lacan’s move from “typology to topology” (xiv), especially Miller’s introduction to Lacan’s conception of mathemes. Fink’s Lacanian Subject also clearly introduces and demonstrates the processes of Lacan’s topological thought, without sacrificing complexity. In particular, see Fink’s appendixes dedicated to showing his work, so to speak, by enunciating Lacan’s claims in the postface to the “Seminar on the ‘Purloined Letter’” in a series of tables and graphs (153–72). See also Lundberg, who argues that the interest in math and topology should still be primarily considered in reference to Lacan’s interest in rhetoric and tropology: “it is fruitful to read the turn to mathematization in Lacan’s work as part and parcel of the project of framing the subject as an effect of tropological processes (16).
drive the eleventh seminar, the seminar given after his Lear-like expulsion from both the IPA (International Psychoanalytic Association) and SFP,\(^{36}\) Lacan suggests that if psychoanalysis can ever “become a science,” it can “do no better than return to Freud’s work” (“Function and Field” 221). This return to Freud is a return to rhetoric as, contra Shelley but ala Kierkegaard, a labor and a study.\(^{37}\) It is a return of the rhetoric repressed by Romantic discourse of the Sublime:

Ellipses and pleonasm, hyperbaton or syllepsis, regression, repetition, apposition—these are the syntactical displacements; metaphor, catachresis, antonomasia, allegory, metonymy, and synecdoche—these are the semantic condensations; Freud teaches us to read in them the intentions—whether ostentation or demonstrative, dissimulating or persuasive, retaliatory or seductive, with which the subject modulates his oneiric discourse. (221-2)

Lacan shares the Romantic obsession with symbol and its all-encompassing, though vaguely defined, sublimity.\(^{38}\) However, the labor and study of rhetoric are necessary, rather than deficient, for navigating symbol’s gaps. For Shoshana Felman, this Lacanian return to Freud is a kind of “return of the repressed” riddle of psychoanalysis (1043). But it is also a return of the repressed rhetorician, the orator who distinguishes between speech and language, whose Écrits are often not writings at all but rather delivered “seminars,” and who defines analysis itself in terms of demonstration (here contrasted with but informed by auxetic “ostentation”), where the analysand only accesses something resembling a “cure” after his desire has been displayed for him, largely by him:

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\(^{36}\) See Roudinesco’s account in 244-259 of the various attempts to gain IPA recognition, culminating in the decisive break of 1964 which “was as disastrous for the IPA as it was for the development of Lacanianism” (259).

\(^{37}\) See Chaitin and Lundberg for monograph studies of Lacan and rhetoric. Lundberg’s work is particularly interesting as a critique of Žižek’s “impulse to minimize the place of rhetoric in Lacan’s work” (14); in particular, see Lundberg’s chapter on the economy of trope (73-97).

\(^{38}\) Lacan: “Symbols in fact envelop the life of man with a network so total they they join together those who are going to engender him ‘by bone and flesh’ before he comes into the world” (“Function and Field” 231). See Fink The Lacanian Subject chapters 1 and 2. See also Kerrigan “Articulation of the Ego” for a reading of the parallels between French psychoanalysis and the early modern understanding of symbol (which is closer to the Romantic understanding of allegory). Like Lacan speaking of a “total” network of symbols and meanings, “it is both the glory and, at times, the tedium of Renaissance art consistently to project a wholeness” (299).
We teach [the subject] as one might say to speak, to recognize himself . . . But for all that we do not give him the answers. By maintaining interpretation entirely in this register of the recognition of the hidden unconscious signifying supports in his demand, we are doing nothing other if we forget what is in question, namely to confront the subject with his demand, we do not perceive that what we produce is precisely the collapse, the effacing of the function of the subject as such in the revelation of this unconscious vocabulary. We solicit the subject to efface himself and to disappear. (Desire 7.7)

In one of his most quoted aphorisms, Theodor Adorno writes, “in psycho-analysis nothing is true except the exaggerations” (49). The analysand’s utterances may be divinely auxetic in this fashion, but, for Lacan, the treatment is ideally deictic. The analyst confronts the analysand with a display completely lacking the “rhetorical surplus” that Joel Fineman associates with epideixis’s “epi-” (5), so the analysand may simply “recognize himself.”

The obvious historical fact that Lacan disagrees with professional colleagues about the nature or goals of clinical treatment or theoretical application is not in and of itself classically epideictic, of course. But the focus on trope and figure, and the placement of that emphasis in the context of accusing colleagues of misreading such terminology, demonstrates not only Lacan’s position in the tradition of praise and blame, but also an understanding of rhetoric as more than just a general sense of argument, and rather as a science of recognition. What the above passage illustrates is how this traumatic recognition on the part of the subject—and, for that matter, the analyst as well, in instances of transference and countertransference—is the other side of demonstration or display. If the rhetorical goal of any argument of display is for the listener or reader to recognize what the rhetorician is demonstrating, in the analytical model, the listener is a subject who needs to not only recognize what is within, but also assume the role of an orator at the conclusion of the analysis. The analysand is taught by the analyst not only to recognize but also to speak. The analysand does not only become an analyst upon the conclusion of the treatment, he becomes a rhetorician.
Felman writes that psychoanalysis shares “the trauma of recognition” with its specimen texts, the *Oedipus* cycle. Lacan’s understanding of such a traumatic recognition is dependent upon a reconfiguration of Ernest Jones’s notion of *aphanisis*, here understood as the subject “effac[ing] himself” and disappearing. Lacan’s reading of *Hamlet* is not just a radical revision of the Oedipal conflict in analysis, it is a synecdoche for a broader reading of any Shakespearean text as the specimen text of such an aphanistic disappearance. Shakespeare, in Lacan’s reading, is not the author of a character mourning like himself; Shakespeare is the author with the absent, disappeared biography. Analysis risks, may even demand, both the subjects’ resistances and *aphanisis*. *Aphanisis* accentuates a process of reducing the subject’s symptom to “the thing itself,” that is nonetheless a thing of no thing, something in the nature of a signifier:

this indeed is what is the most paradoxical, the most full of warning for us. It is the fact that in short it is under this signifier, here completely unveiled in its nature as signifier, that the subject manages to abolish himself in so far as he grasps himself on this occasion in his essential being. If it is true that with Spinoza we may say that this essential being is his desire. (*Desire* 7.13)

As is so often the case in this seminar, Lacan criticizes his contemporaries for not going far enough. *Aphanisis* is a term that is “so surprisingly and so curiously abandoned in analysis” (6.6), and which Lacan takes much further than the term’s originator, Ernest Jones. Jones identifies *aphanisis* as the “total, permanent” disappearance of sexual desire (“Early Development” 461); the dread of this disappearance is linked to both the castration complex and penis envy. For Lacan, this disappearance or fading is far more radical. For Lacan, *aphanisis* is not just the “fading” of desire but the fading of the entire subject.

With *aphanisis*, or fading, in mind, we can now at last turn to *Lear*. *Aphanisis* is the key to understanding why Lacan turns away from *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Rex*, and why he presents a kind of spectral *Lear*, “almost an afterthought,” in a kind of disappeared-reading that is barely in his seminar at all. *Aphanisis* is essential to understanding the parallels between Lacan’s thought
and Shakespeare’s, given Lacan and Shakespeare’s shared intellectual sources. Aphanisis is crucial in understanding the concept of the “two deaths,” illustrated in Antigone and Lear.

The appearance of Antigone suggests the role Kierkegaard plays in Lacan’s encounter with Lear in seminar VII. Structurally, the seventh seminar parallels Either/Or with its shared attention to these two texts. The similarly brief allusions to Lear in Either/Or are contextualized by A’s similarly extensive attention to Antigone in “The Tragic in Ancient Drama Reflected in the Tragic in Modern Drama,” a performance of Romantic critical reading subtitled “A Venture in Fragmentary Endeavor.” For Lacan, the text where Creon recognizes at last that “I don’t even exist—I’m no one. Nothing” (line 1446) is illuminated by the one that ends with the suspension between arrival of the promised end or merely its representation, the image of that horror. Both texts portray the zone where the subject recognizes his desire, with everything else subtracted. Such an illustration indicates the symbolic touch of the real that may only be possible in Shakespeare. Aphanisis then provides a devastating critique of the Romantic pathology, the rhetoricizing of a “self-consuming” model of poetry. And, finally, it provides a Lacanian model for critiquing Lacan himself, and the expression of his own anxieties in the seventh seminar. These anxieties are laid bare in a familiar moment of crisis when he turns to, and then away from, the text of King Lear.

I suspect that Shakespeare was aware of the Oedipus cycle, and that it influenced the construction of King Lear; he could have read Sophocles in a Latin translation. (Charles and Michelle Martindale claim “if Shakespeare read [Sophocles] he gained little from the experience,” though conceding that, “obviously one cannot prove a negative.” See also Silk.) (41). But Montaigne, whose essays are cited in Lear, is another key, shared source. Lacan diagnoses Montaigne as “one who has centred himself, not around skepticism but around the living moment of the aphanisis of the subject” in seminar XI (223). Shakespeare may not have read Lacan, as Žižek infamously claims (Looking Awry 9), but it is of no small interest that the two men read many of the same books and may have come to many of the same conclusions about that material.

Žižek’s gloss is the clearest: “This place ‘between the two deaths,’ a place of sublime beauty as well as terrifying monsters, is the site of das Ding, of the real-traumatic kernel in the midst of symbolic order” (Sublime Object 150). In other words, it is the “zone” where one recognizes the desire that is metonymically linked with one’s very subjectivity. Antigone “incarnates” that desire, because she accesses the zone triumphantly and defiantly (Ethics 282); alternately, Lear takes the “derisory” path, and does not “understand” what confronts him there (310).
In the sixth seminar, Lacan indicates that what Shakespeare accomplishes with \textit{Hamlet} paves the way for what he will accomplish with \textit{Lear} (\textit{Desire} 15.5-6). The seventh seminar, which “follows directly” from the sixth (\textit{Ethics} 1), is a veritable catalog of the concerns of Shakespeare’s later tragedy and its reception history. Lacan references both the British Romantics and Kierkegaard,\textsuperscript{41} and, similar to the play itself, Lacan engages with the discourses of sublimity, eschatology, \textit{creatio ex nihilo}, and Epicureanism. The central analyses of Kant and the ethics of “duty” recall the fallout that begins with Cordelia’s vow to love “according to [her] bond, no more nor less” (\textit{Tragedy} 1.1.91). The seminar contains long passages treating the nature of fools and knaves (of obvious import to the tragedy). To clarify the concepts of the \textit{real} and \textit{das Ding}, Lacan examines the ancient maxim “nothing is made from nothing” (\textit{Ethics} 121),\textsuperscript{42} which Lear repeats twice in the first act. A reading of \textit{Lear} seems almost inevitable for Lacan’s seventh seminar. The more pressing question about Shakespeare’s role for Lacan may be not what Lacan does with \textit{Lear}, but why does he not do \textit{more} with \textit{Lear}?

Here is the near entirety of Lacan’s commentary on the play:

In order to make myself understood, I should perhaps evoke another tragic figure, one who is no doubt closer to us – King Lear.

I cannot give a detailed analysis of the play here. I just wanted to make you understand what Oedipus’s crossing over means on the basis of \textit{King Lear}, where we find that crossing over in a derisory form.

King Lear, too, gives up the service of goods, gives up his royal duties; the old fool believes he is lovable and, therefore, hands over the service of goods to his daughters. But you must not assume that he gives up anything. It’s supposed to be the beginning of freedom, a life of festivities with his fifty knights, lots of fun,

\textsuperscript{41} See Lacan \textit{Ethics} 24 for a discussion of Wordsworth’s adage that “the child is father of the man”; in introducing the concept of the second death, Lacan posits Sade as the apocalyptic converse of the nineteenth-century philosophies of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche (198).

\textsuperscript{42} See the references to Lucretius throughout Elton’s study. I would also like to thank Professor R. Allen Shoaf for sharing a draft of his chapter, “\textit{King Lear}: Shakespeare’s \textit{De rerum natura},” taken from a longer study on Lucretius’s influence upon Shakespeare’s drama, with me.
during which time he stays in turn with each of those two shrews whom he thought
he could entrust with the duties of power.

In the meantime, there he is with no other warrant than that of loyalty, of an
agreement founded on honor, since he conceded the power he had of his own free
will. Shakespeare’s formidable irony mobilizes a whole swarm of destinies that
devour each other, for it isn’t just Lear but all the good people in the play whom we
see condemned to suffering without remission for having trusted to simple loyalty
and to agreements founded on honor. I don’t have to emphasize the fact; just read
the play again.

Lear as well as Oedipus shows us that he who enters that space, whether it be by
the derisory path of Lear or the tragic one of Oedipus, finds himself alone and
betrayed. (Ethics 305)

We see hints of the familiar rhetorical and cultural context for Lear (the play is an exemplum
invoked to “make [Lacan] understood”), though the passage lacks the familiar epideictic praise
found in his discussions of Hamlet and, for that matter, discussions of Lear by the Romantics. In
fact, with Lacan’s attention to Coleridge in the previous seminar in mind, we might take his
injunction to “read” the play again as a corrective of the Romantic invocation of the reader’s
memory from the Biographia. I take the invitation to “just read the play again” as a kind of
challenge by Lacan to read as Lacan does, following upon the lessons of the previous seminar.
Such a reading attends to the utterances of both Lacan and Lear.

With Hamlet, Lacan was struck to find his own concepts literally present and functioning
in the analyzed text. With Lear, he appears to project his own concepts into the play. Lear
“crosses over,” “hands over the service of goods,” et cetera. The closest that Lacan comes to
engaging with the text itself—a text that, as is the case with Hamlet, is split into multiple texts—is
a misquoting of the text.43 Everybody knows that Lear begins with a hundred knights, and that
the number is cut down to fifty only after Goneril “hath abated [Lear] of half [his] train”

43 See Halpern 87 for a discussion of Lacan’s misquoting of Dante earlier in the seventh seminar, and how
misidentifying Arnaut Daniel’s place in the Divine Comedy informs Lacan’s reading of Daniel and what Halpern
calls “the anal thing.”
(Tragedy 2.2.324), and that he is further “abated” of all of his knights over the course of the final scene of act two. Even the broad recounting of the Lear-narrative seems contradictory: Lear gives up his royal duties, the service of goods, yet you must not “assume” that he gives up anything. The entire passage testifies to the impossibility to speak directly—briefly, clearly—about King Lear. Giving anything less than a “detailed analysis” is to invite mistakes.

Furthermore, Lacan invites comparison with the very predictable psychoanalytic, symptomatic readings that he warned against in the earlier seminar. Those “foolish utterances” were discussed in the same way as Lear’s “devouring” destinies: they both “swarm.” Ultimately, the passage does the exact reverse of what Lacan promises: we need the explanation of the “second death” as demonstrated in the readings of Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone to understand what Lacan means to say about Lear more that we can use the evocation of Lear as one who is “closer” to us to understand what Lacan means about Oedipus and Antigone.

Still, if the passage is problematic, that means it is all the more worthy of our critical attention; Lacan himself argues that psychoanalysis should be subject to its own scrutiny.44 Before turning to Lear itself, and surmising what Lacan hopes we will find there when we “read the play again,” we should recognize a few more illuminating details from this passage. First, note how Lacan conflates Shakespeare’s character Lear with the text Lear: “all” of the play concerns the “suffering” of the “good” who, like the king, trust loyalty and honor. This conflation of the character Lear with “all” of the play that he appears in is itself reflected by any reader speaking, though not necessarily writing, about both the king and the text, as they share a proper name (King Lear/King Lear). (As we have seen, Lacan capitalizes on the similar conjunction of Shakespeare the man and Shakespeare the corpus in order to challenge the

44 Lacan argues in “Function and Field” that the “deterioration of analytic discourse” can best be diagnosed and treated by “legitimately apply[ing] psychoanalytic method to the collectivity that sustains it” (203).
biographical assumptions of other analytical analyses of the canon.)

This shared spoken, though not printed, signifier indicates how Lear the character and Lear the play are both similarly split subjects: the character with his wit pared down the middle (Tragedy 1.4.153-4) and the play that exists in very different quarto and Folio versions. Lacan instructed his audience to pay attention to such details in the previous seminar.

Finally, note how the discussion ends in terms of deixis. Lear and Oedipus both show us something. What has been shown to Lacan, what he has recognized, about Lear concerns Lear’s “closeness” to “us.” I take this sense of “closeness” as not only the historical closeness of a play from the Renaissance as opposed to one from more than four hundred years before the common era, but also a closeness of resemblance. Lear is a figure close to us because he is the titular figure of a play that depicts two narratives that resemble clinical analysis: the Fool’s laboring to outjest Lear’s melancholy, and Edgar’s trifling with Gloucester’s despair.

As with his reading of Hamlet, Lacan seems to (want his seminar attendees to) read Lear as a whole, total work. Though he pardons himself for not being able to give a “detailed analysis of the play here,” the briefness of the remarks does not necessarily detract from this goal of a total reading. As mentioned above, the length of the remarks is comparable to the length of the reading of Hamlet in The Interpretation of Dreams. Yet the brevity may be especially, distinctly Lacanian, and not Freudian. With Lear as an interruptive aside in the middle of the “detailed analysis” of Antigone, the detour recalls Lacan’s own clinical practice, particularly the controversial, variable-length sessions. Schneiderman writes in his memoir of the effectiveness of these sessions, which disrupted the patient’s enunciations in imitation of the “noise that draws

45 See Reinhard and Lupton’s comments on understanding Shakespeare not as author but as signifier and process of signification (xviii).

46 See also Rudnytsky’s “‘Darke and Vicious Place’” for a reading of the Fool as Lear’s “psychotherapist” tasked with confronting the king with “the painful truths he would otherwise prefer to ignore” (298).
us out of sleep” (itself an “exemplary instance of the real”) (132): “There was something of the horror of death in the short sessions, in these psychoanalytic sessions whose time could not be known in advance” (133).

Read in the context of Lacan’s reading of *Hamlet* as a map of all possible human interactions, not least of all the analyst- analysand interaction, we can understand Lacan’s reading of *Lear* as an application of the indirect discourse of clinical analysis to a literary text. Just as “Shakespeare” is a signifier that tests the barrier between two signifieds (man or text), the analysis of Shakespeare narrows the distinction between the application of psychoanalytic interpretation to human and textual analysands. The *Lear* detour, itself a treatment of (the two) death(s) and itself interruptive and in-between the exposition of the *Oedipus* narrative and the extrapolation of what it means for analysis, is a figuration of the sublime horror of the zone between the two deaths that it is meant to explicate formally. The inevitability of death, as well as the drive or drift towards it, is reconfirmed with the arrival of *Lear* in the seminar, and with the sense that Lacan is done with it even as he invites his audience to pursue the play themselves. Moments before his discussion of *Lear*, Lacan clarifies what “should” happen at the end of analysis: “At the end of a training analysis the subject should reach and should know the domain and the level of the experience of absolute disarray” (*Ethics* 304). An analysis of *Lear*, in this setting, ends in a similarly messy and unfinished fashion, a moment of “disarray” that Schneiderman associated with the recognition of death’s inevitability.

As every occasionally frustrated reader of Lacan has recognized, the detour is a recurring rhetorical and stylistic feature of Lacan’s seminars. To contextualize the discussion of *Lear*, we

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47 See Lacan’s revision of the death drive in the eleventh seminar, where the death drive and “life drive” are simply different aspects of the drive: “The distinction between the life drive and the death drive is true in as much as it manifests two aspects of the drive” (*Four* 257).
might compare it with Lacan’s discussion of Harpo Marx from the same seminar. This passage indicates both Lacan’s general use of the exemplum—here Marx’s face exemplifying das Ding—and connects directly to Lacan’s reading of Lear itself:

> It is enough to evoke a face which is familiar to everyone of you, that of the terrible dumb brother of the four Marx brothers, Harpo. Is there anything that poses a question which is more present, more pressing, more absorbing, more disruptive, more nauseating, more calculated to thrust everything that takes place before us into the abyss or void than that face of Harpo Marx, that face with its smile which leaves us unclear as to whether it signifies the most extreme perversity or complete simplicity? This dumb man alone is sufficient to sustain the atmosphere of doubt and of radical annihilation which is the stuff of the Marx brothers’ extraordinary farce and the uninterrupted play of “jokes” that makes their activity so valuable. (Ethics 55)

The portrayal of Harpo Marx is as a figure of terrible dumbness, a cipher personifying a horrifying correlation between perversity and innocence, or between a best object and a thing so monstrous (Tragedy 1.1.211-14). With the focus on Marx’s face and his silence, one is reminded of Johannes’s praise of his beloved: a silent Cordelia, whose lips are all the more beautiful because her heart does not dwell there. Lacan may have known that passage; he refers to Kierkegaard in this very seminar. As someone who advised his students to familiarize themselves with literary history and literary criticism, he may have also been familiar with the tradition of grouping Cordelia with the figure of the Fool. On screen, the face of Harpo Marx personifies the conflation of Cordelia’s loyalty, loveliness, and silence (as well as her “disruptive” appearance in the first scene) with the Fool’s enigmatic knavery. What is more, the Thing-ness of Marx’s face and silence personifies that conflation in its horrifying totality; the face demonstrates the “radical annihilation” that is alternately read as the promised end or image of that horror. The moment where, for the “good people in the play,” the signification of the

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48 See also my “Touch of the Real” 87-8 for a reading of Lacan’s comments on La Dolce Vita, a similar detour in The Ethics of Psychoanalysis.
apocalypse is identical with the apocalypse itself is brought upon by the collapse of signification that separates Cordelia from her counterpart, the Fool: “And my poor fool is hanged” (Tragedy 5.3.280).

Yet in the case of a Thing-like figure like Harpo Marx, what is emphasized is not even the form of the signifiers—Harpo’s face no less a part of the signifying chain than any letter of the alphabet—so much as the sense of the in-betweenness that his foolery emits or evokes. The reading of Harpo Marx’s Thing-like presence is relatively early in the seminar. We are many weeks away from the famous locating of the site of the Thing beyond the Pleasure Principle and Signifying Chain, in a place “beyond” that is also “in-between” the two deaths. Before Lacan is able to define that place, he still has more to say on the nature of fools. This discussion is essential in understanding what King Lear has to teach Lacan.

As he so often does when discussing matters of history, Lacan invokes early modern Britain as his primary authority:

“Fool” (sot) or, if you like, “simpleton” (demeuré)—quite a nice term for which I have a certain fondness—these words only express approximately a certain something for which the English language and its literature seem to me to offer a more helpful signifier—I will come back to this later. A tradition that begins with Chaucer, but which reaches its full development in the theater of the Elizabethan period is, in effect, centered on the term “fool.”

49 Derrida is a thinker who, like Lacan and Kierkegaard, extensively analyzes Hamlet and yet confesses to a kind of failure to analyze Lear. See “My Chances/Mes chances” for Derrida’s use of quotation as apology (“my regret at not having attempted with you, as I initially projected, an analysis of King Lear”) (374). Reserving this reading of Lear—which was never completed, to my knowledge—for “another time” closely resembles Lacan’s apology at being unable to give a “detailed analysis” of Lear in the time left for his seminar. We may also consider Wittgenstein’s alleged consideration of Kent’s “I’ll teach you differences” (Tragedy 1.4.78-9) as an epigraph for the Investigations (see Eagleton 99), despite his rejection of Shakespeare’s greatness in the journals (see Wittgenstein Culture 48e). These moments of allusion, and avoided readings of the play, suggest something like the crisis “turning away” that is so prevalent in Lear’s reception history. Most of these thinkers are identified by Alain Badiou as “antiphilosophers,” and perhaps these moments of avoiding a reading are indicative less of a lingering trace of the Romanticism (as Clemens may have it) and rather of a resistance to the play’s depiction of philosophy, even a false philosophy, as a discourse as equally comforting or specious as any other. See Bosteels for a clear gloss of Badiou’s understanding of antiphilosophy.
The “fool” is an innocent, a simpleton, but truths issue from his mouth that are not simply tolerated but adopted, by virtue of the fact that this “fool” is sometimes clothed in the insignia of the jester. And in my view it is a similar happy shadow, a similar fundamental “foolery,” that accounts for the importance of the left-wing intellectual. (*Ethics* 182)

The right-wing intellectual, by contrast, is the “knave”: a term that is used “in conjunction” with fool, but which “goes further.” The knave is (quoting Stendhal) an “unmitigated scoundrel,” “your Mr. Everyman with greater strength of character. . . . he doesn’t retreat from the consequences of what is called realism; that is, when required, he admits he’s a crook” (183).

This brief, confusing discussion—identifying the “fool” as a simpleton who inadvertently speaks the truth with the “knave” who charmingly concedes his misdeeds—paves the way for the discussion of Sadean second-death, a relation he brings up cautiously in the next day of the seminar.\(^{50}\) It is also characteristic (perhaps symptomatic) of his ongoing rhetorical strategy of praise and blame; these “fools” and “knaves” are meant to clarify the “master fools” that so poorly maintain Freud’s legacy. Still, the reference to left- and right-wing intellectuals offers what little connection to reality the literary concept of the two deaths—used to discuss figures from Sade, Sophocles, and Shakespeare—may hold.

We have already considered how this discussion of Freud “handing” psychoanalysis over to the master fools and “the women” resembles the plot of *Lear*, and how that narrative also resonated with Lacan’s champion, Schneiderman. As is the case with *Lear*, the seventh seminar is obsessed with nothing: both the nothing that created us and the nothing that is within us. For Lacan, *the Thing*, as the object of one’s *jouissance*, is actually a *Non-Thing* (*Ethics* 134). If the Romantic impulse is to say nothing of *Lear*, the post-Romantic impulse of Lacan is to invite the subject to *recognize* nothing.

\(^{50}\) See Lacan *Ethics* 191 for a warning against “misunderstanding” the interest in Sade for psychoanalysis; see also his opening remarks in the outline of the seminar on the failure of libertinage (4).
Central to Lacan’s discussion of the mirror stage is the understanding that recognition begins with a sense of likeness, when the subject perceives a counterpart (semblable) to himself. It is no surprise that Lacan reads Lear, with its interlocked plots and its use of doubles, as a structure made up of counterparts and likenesses. All of the “good people” in the play, Lacan says, are like Lear: condemned to suffer because they trust “agreements founded on honor” (Ethics 305). But Lacan also tells us, in addition to the rest of the cast resembling Lear, that Lear resembles a member of the cast: he is a “fool.”

Perhaps inadvertently, perhaps “indirectly,” this leads us to a very productive engagement with the language of the play. If, for Lacan, Hamlet is a play where nobody talks about anything other than mourning (Desire 19.1), Lear is a play where virtually everybody calls virtually everybody else a fool or a knave. Of the two terms—which are used alternately as insults or as terms of affection—“knave” is certainly more prominent. From Gloucester referring to Edmund as a “knave [who] came something saucily to the world” (Tragedy 1.1.19) to Lear and Kent’s separate assaults on Oswald (Tragedy 1.4.69, Tragedy 2.2.13-21) to Cornwall’s rebukes of Kent (Tragedy 2.2.63, 94), “knave” carries the implication of impudence and villainy that Lacan associates with the term, only without the “greater strength of character” of a self-realized scoundrel. For Lacan, the right-wing “knave” “admits” he is a crook; for Lear, someone else has to show you that you are a knave:

Kent. A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats, a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy worsted-stocking knave; a lily-livered, action-taking, whoreson, glass-gazing, super-serviceable, finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd in way of good service, and art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pander, and the son and

51 In the mirror stage, the counterpart is an “imago,” the ego-ideal that to which the ego compares itself, thereby defining itself. The counterparts in Lear are often extremely real—demonstrated via the use of prefiguration as a dramatic conceit—but are interpreted by the play’s characters in much the same deluded manner as the confused infant.
heir of a mongrel bitch, whom I will beat into clamorous whining if thou deniest the least syllable of the addition. (Tragedy 2.2.13-21, my emphasis)

Kent’s raving is characteristic of these early appearances of “Caius.” This instance is essentially a repetition of his earlier tripping up of Oswald’s heels (Tragedy 1.4.74), only exacerbated and without Lear as audience. While it is impossible to know precisely how the “real” Kent behaved at court, Caius’s short-temperedness is likely an exaggeration of Kent himself, as both devoted servant and one who was expelled from service for speaking out of turn.

Kent is addressing Oswald and, with the repeated accusation of acting the bawd, he foreshadows Oswald’s role as the carrier of Goneril’s letters to Edmund. These letters contain transparent offers to “supply the place for your labour” (Tragedy 4.5.258-9), a phrasing that anticipates Edgar’s line about the “dark and vicious place” where Edmund was begot (Tragedy 5.3.162). Kent is then accusing Oswald accurately, albeit before the fact. The passage also appears to indirectly depict a number of other characters in the drama, Kent’s performed exaggeration of himself as “super-serviceable” in his devotion to Lear included. With the accusations of panderism, the passage invokes the figure of that “saucy” knave, the “whoreson” Edmund. The “worsted-stockings” conjure a grotesque vision of the Fool (and foreshadow Kent’s own “cruel garters”) (Tragedy 2.2.184), while the lone adjective “filthy” presages Edgar’s disguise (“My face I’ll grime with filth”) (Tragedy 2.2.166). The image of the “one-trunk-inheriting slave” suggests Lear in the storm, the slave who taxes not the elements thundering above (Tragedy 3.2.15, 18). Nor are knavery’s vices limited to the male characters of the play. Kent accuses Oswald of narcissism (“glass-gazing”), pairing him with his master, Goneril, a personified “Vanity” (Tragedy 2.2.32). This pairing prefigures Albany’s interrogation of Goneril, traditionally staged by holding up a mirror (“See thyself, devil”) (Tragedy 4.2.35), itself a horrible prefiguration of the tragic buffoonery of the play’s final moments: “She’s dead as
earth. [He lays her down.] Lend me a looking-glass. / If that her breath will mist or stain the stone, / Why then she lives” (Tragedy 5.3.235-7).

Without overstating the obvious, Kent’s torrent of invectives—which may well be metonymic for the entire cast’s various faults and actions, “action-taking” as indicative of knavery as anything—is a particularly brash example of epideictic blame. Cornwall indicates how the fury of blame is a dialectic counterpart to (self-)praise:

*Cornwall.*

This is some fellow
Who, having been praised for bluntness, doth affect
A saucy roughness, and constrains the garb
Quite from his nature. He cannot flatter, he;
An honest mind and plain, he must speak truth.
An they will take’t, so; if not, he’s plain.
These kind of knaves I know, which in this plainness
Harbour more craft and more corrupter ends
Than twenty silly-ducking observants
That stretch their duties nicely. (Tragedy 2.2.88-97).

Again, there is a prefiguration here, where the equating of Edgar’s performance as “unaccomodated man” with “the thing itself” is anticipated by Cornwall’s reading of Kent’s plain “garb” as simultaneously affected and natural. As a reading, Cornwall’s analysis is not incorrect: Kent’s rhetoric is not the “plain” *deixis* that he claims, but “crafted,” heavily auxetic blame. Just as “Poor Tom’s” nakedness is a costume, and not at all evidence of Edgar’s “unacaccomodated” nature, Cornwall’s accusation of knavery faults Kent/Caius for falsely considering himself above “flattery”—or pandering, in the other sense of the word—because his
plain speech subtracts praise’s flattering, auxetic elements (or blame’s auxetic counterparts). Speaking plainly, or directly, is just another form of indirect knavery.

Speaking plainly, Kent cannot offer any “fault” for Oswald—probably the most loyal character in the play, albeit loyal to the wrong side—other than “his countenance likes me not” (Tragedy 2.2.82-3). Reasoning plainly may be as crafty and corrupt as flattery, what the Fool calls “court holy water” (Tragedy 3.2.10). Thus, Cordelia already indicted Kent’s reasoning as a kind of nothing. But without this reasoning that is nothing, there is literally no reason for anything. Regarding Kent’s dislike of Oswald’s countenance, Cornwall again surprises us with a deft revelation of the obvious: “no more perchance does mine, nor his, nor hers” (Tragedy 2.2.84). Cornwall recognizes the infinite flexibility of the signifier: it means both everything and nothing, to the point that virtually every character parallels virtually every other character in word or deed. The “corruption” of rhetorical craft is paired as well with “silliness,” which indicates where knavery meets foolery.

Aside from the Fool himself, the character most frequently accused of being a fool is the nearly cuckolded Albany. If knavery is linked with bawdiness, foolery is linked with the betrayed husband (think of the “sely” John of “The Miller’s Tale”) (Chaucer 1.3404). Yet the Fool himself seems to occupy a kind of erotic middle space between knavery and foolery. Introduced as pining for Cordelia, he is a desirer (Tragedy 1.4.62-3); as Lear’s “boy” and “pretty knave” (Tragedy 1.4.86, 84), he is (at least verbally) a figure of desire for Lear. Goneril accuses the Fool of being “more knave than fool” (Tragedy 1.4.277), but in his own speech distinguishing between the two terms, identifies with the latter:

When a wise man gives thee better counsel give me mine again. I would have none but knaves follow it, since a fool gives it.

That sir which serves and seeks for gain
And follows but for form,
Will pack when it begins to rain,
And leave thee in the storm.

But I will tarry, the fool will stay,
And let the wise man fly.
The knave turns fool that runs away,
The fool no knave, pardie. (Tragedy 2.2.241-251)

The Fool’s song both recalls Kent’s rant against Oswald, as he is criticizing an inappropriate form of “service,” and foreshadows Lear’s rage in the storm. The storm appears first in the symbolic register of the Fool’s song, before appearing in the imaginary of the stage-effects and the real of Lear’s mind, a place where it can make “vile things precious” (Tragedy 3.2.70) – or, ala Milton, a Hell of Heaven, or, for that matter, an object sublime by raising it to the dignity of a Thing (Lacan Ethics 112).

The song is so specific, it hardly resembles the more enigmatic riddles that the Fool is known for, and instead suggests the “prophecy” that he quotes impossibly before it is originally uttered: “This prophecy Merlin shall make; for I live before his time” (Tragedy 3.2.94). The Fool’s bizarre claim to not prophesy the prophecy he speaks, because it is actually a prefiguration of another prophet’s prophecy, speaks to Lear’s unique textual composition as exemplified by Kent’s harangue of Oswald. The characters of King Lear constantly, inadvertently prefigure the other characters’ actions and traits. The Fool is different, because he prefigures his own actions and, here, the actions of figures literally outside of the text. He does so consciously. As is the case with Hamlet, but even more so, the Fool knows, and these passages demonstrate as much. The sense we have reading the Fool’s impossible prophecy
resembles Lacan’s sense of reading *The Interpretation of Dreams*: that is, that we are reading a “magical book” (*Desire* 4.1). The prophecy does not appear in Q, and it seems to have passed over into F, either through revision or something more mystical, like the movement of *Hamlet* up into the body of the text of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. The line amounts to something like a statement of purpose and identity for the Fool. It indicates his difference from every other character in the canon.

As a figure to speak Merlin’s prophecy “before his time,” and as a character who disappears only to briefly be recalled to signify another (“my poor fool is hanged”) (*Tragedy* 5.3.280), the Fool is a figure out-of-time and a figure in-between signification and realization. As is the case with Kent, but literally so, he seems to come “betwixt our sentence[s]” (*Tragedy* 1.1.167). In the twentieth seminar, Lacan associates the phallus with idiocy52; here, he might well have associated the phallus with *foolery*. The Fool is not unlike a phallic signifier, the bar-like present absence of a signifier without a signified (Lacan *Feminine* 81). Just as Lear and *Lear* share a signifier, and “Shakespeare” similarly signifies both man and text, the Fool performs this role both as a character with a unique theatrical agency and through the effect of his own name. He is Shakespeare’s figuration of “the Phallus as Signification . . . the signifier of signification itself” (Fink *To The Letter* 139). This effect was not unknown to Lacan. “Fool,” like “foils,” was one of the near homonyms with “phallus” that Lacan was so surprised and impressed to find in the text of *Hamlet* (*Desire* 18.9). When Lacan tells us to read *King Lear* again, how can we not notice the Fool’s obsession with all things phallic?:

He that has a house to put ’s head in has a good headpiece:

The codpiece that will house

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52 Lacan: “What is [phallic jouissance] if not the following, which the importance of masturbation in our practice highlight sufficiently – the jouissance of an idiot?” (*Feminine* 81).
Before the head has any,
The head and he shall louse:
So beggars marry many.
The man that makes his toe
What he his heart should make,
Shall of a corn cry woe
And turn his sleep to wake —
for there was never yet fair woman but she made mouths in a glass. (Tragedy 3.2.24-35)

Again, we see the Fool as not just the simpleton who speaks a kind of prophetic truth, but a speaker of truths in overplus. In this song, the Fool offers maxims on promiscuity, protecting what is precious (that is, not kicking away what your heart wants), then revisits the play’s now thoroughly troped concern with woman’s vanity. The various proverbs are linguistically but not logically connected by the conjunction “for.” As a portrait of Lear himself, the two initial prophecies are thorough but still disjointed: one sympathetically concurs with the raving against sexual desire from the storm speeches, while the second critically alludes to the king’s discarding of Cordelia (“what he his heart should make”). The Fool, as the singer of this convoluted song, is the agent of grouping the images together. His signifying power is so total it is practically annihilative: Lear’s reply is “I will say nothing” (Tragedy 3.2.37).

But the Fool is not only a crafter of this literary, signifying chain, he identifies himself four lines later as its phallic object. In reply to Kent/Caius’s Hamlettian inquiry, “Who’s there?,” the Fool declares himself a “codpiece”: “here’s grace and a codpiece—that’s a wise man and a fool” (Tragedy 3.2.38-40).53 For Lacan, Hamlet’s delay has to do with awaiting the

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53 Even if the Fool indicates that he is the wise man and Lear is the fool, the structure of the lines would be a chiasmus, rather than a parallel. The King can ironically be discussed as the “grace,” as he no longer holds that title;
unveiling of “the most veiled instrument of the drama” (*Desire* 18.8), the “fools”/“foils”/phallus that the Fool *insistently* veils.\(^{54}\) The “housing” of fornication that he depicts is doubly foolish, just only because it is thoughtless (“before the head has any”) but because the offending phallus is still clothed with a codpiece during the act. The Fool’s insistence on keeping the phallus veiled returns when introduced to his counterpart, his *semblable*, his foil, and Edgar’s alter ego: Poor Tom:

*Lear.* Has his daughters brought him to this pass?

*[To Edgar]* Couldst thou save nothing? Wouldst thou give ’em all?

*Fool.* Nay, he reserved a blanket, else we had been all shamed. (*Tragedy* 3.4.59-61)

Recall Lacan’s reading of Lear as correlative with all the “good people” of the play. As is the case with the Servant who predicts that all women must turn into monsters if Regan is not punished for torturing Gloucester (*History* 14.99) or Albany’s premature attempt to apply “comfort” to the “great decay” of the play’s tragic conclusion (*Tragedy* 5.3.272), Lear’s attempt at explanation is too simple, too self-reflexive. His method resembles the one Lacan attributes to Polonius, that of the “wild analyst” prone to “easy” interpretation (13.10).\(^{55}\) Hamlet will offer to “be” Laertes’s foil/phallus, but Lear identifies Poor Tom as his phallus (in the sense that Fink glosses as “the signifier of signification itself”) (*To The Letter* 139). However, for the

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\(^{54}\) See also the famous remarks in “The Signification of the Phallus”: the phallus “can play its role only when veiled” (581). The veiled quality of the phallus as a mediating-figure in desire is also discussed at length in the sixth seminar: see *Desire* 7.13 and, in relation to *Hamlet*, 16.5-6.

\(^{55}\) See also the discussion of “wild analysis” in “The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of its Power” (509).
narcissistic Lear, the Tom-phallus is less like the bar than a mirror, a means of signifying that interprets all suffering as mirroring Lear’s own. The Fool notes, however, that Edgar/Poor Tom is not nothing—and therefore is not the Thing itself either—he is still auxetically signified and veiled by the diffusive rhetoric of what, discussing Saint Martin, Lacan calls the “cloth-phallus” (Ethics 226).

In the previous seminar, Lacan identified Hamlet’s performance as a madman as the detail that makes him an essentially modern hero. The feigned madness encourages the detours of “wild analysts” (such as Polonius), which is to say, anyone a little too quick to render an interpretation. Feigned madness, it seems, is but a symptom of the fundamental desire that Hamlet cannot disclose until the time of the other, and no analyst in Elsinore seems able to assist him. But Lear is actually mad, and actually surrounded by attempts at a cure his “heart-struck injuries” (Tragedy 3.1.8), performed by both the Fool and the Doctor. I agree with previous readings that compare the Fool to an analyst or therapist. It is crucial to note that he is not a wild analyst ala Polonius, even though King Lear is even more concerned than Hamlet with dramatizing wild analysis (i.e. the Edgar-Gloucester treatment). Instead, the misinterpretations

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56 In reading the phallus’s similarities with the bar, I have in mind this difficult passage from “Signification of the Phallus”: the phallus “then becomes the bar with which the demon’s hand strikes the signified, marking it as the bastard offspring of its signifying concatenation” (581). See also Evans: “the bar can also be interpreted as the symbolic phallus (which itself is never barred)” (15). Of course, mirrors are not only mirrors in Lacan. They produce ideal imagoes as well as empty reflections. Hence, the “foils”/phallus reflects Laertes as Hamlet’s double.

57 This narcissistic factor of Lear’s recognition is doubly reflected when he “wakes” in act four: “I should ev’n die with pity / To see another thus” (Tragedy 4.6.46-7).

58 I read Edgar’s “blanket” as auxetic (i.e. as the stuff of language) following Lacan: “textile is first of all a text” (Ethics 227). See also the remarks about the “clothed” specular image in discussing the graphs of desire in “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire” (“It is to this object that cannot be grasped in the mirror that the specular image lends its clothes”) (693).

59 The “Doctor” is only identified as such in the stage directions of the quarto History. In the Folio’s Tragedy, he is listed as “first gentleman,” a lay analyst.
of a Kent or an Albany or an Edgar take shape not in the sphere of clinical analysis, but in philosophy.

Once Hamlet “knows,” he turns away from philosophy, ripe with the knowledge that there are more “things” in heaven and earth than either is capable of containing. Lear, on the contrary, finds consolation with what he takes to be a philosopher:

*Lear.* First let me talk with this philosopher.


I’ll talk a word with this same learned Theban.

[To Edgar] What is your study?

*Edgar.* How to prevent the fiend, and to kill vermin.

*Lear.* Let me ask you one word in private. *[They converse apart]. (Tragedy 3.4.137-142)*

This performance of philosophy is a *dialogue* and not oratorical. It is then *maieutic* in nature, if not specifically Platonic or Socratic (although Lear does call Edgar/Tom his “good Athenian”) *(Tragedy 3.4.162).* Lear turns back to philosophy to understand the natural, reversing what is presented in *Hamlet,* where Heaven and Earth held “more things” than what is “dreamt of in our philosophy” *(1.5.168-9).* What is the cause—“cause” being another word for “thing”*60*—of thunder?

At the beginning of the third act, Lear is “contending” with the elements, striving to “outstorm” the storm *(History 8.4, 8.9).* The Fool is with him, “labour[ing] to outjest / His heart-struck injuries” *(History 8.15-6).* Moreover, the Fool does so seemingly at the King’s request;

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*60* See Reinhard and Lupton 180-5 for a brilliant reading of Cordelia’s “‘cause’ retranslat[ing] ‘thing’”: “returned from France, she repeats in a foreign tongue her emblematic ‘nothing,’ which had ‘caused’ the tragic foreclosures that form the action of the drama” (181). Yet, for Lacan, the *thing/chose is a thing of nothing (Ethics 121)*; Cordelia could just as well be translated as rejecting her earlier “nothing”: “no-nothing, no-nothing.” Mark Taylor’s “Refusal of the Bar” concludes with an interesting discussion of the indefinite nature of the cause for Lacan, and how the cause’s function as the “opening of the unconscious” informs Lacan’s understanding of the divine. For Taylor, Lacan’s belief in an unconscious God is less atheistic than it is an atheological *ala* Georges Bataille (49).
Lear’s last lines in the previous scene are, “O fool, I shall go mad!” (History 7.439). As the narrative progresses, the Fool’s presence interests Lear less and less, as he appears to understand that the storm cannot be outstormed, only reflected within (“this tempest in my mind”) (Tragedy 3.4.12) and, finally, examined and “studied” as something totally separate. As a kind of reading of Hamlet’s recognition, Lear sees the thunderbolt as a bar that both separates and joins the heavens and the earth, signifying the one for the other. Such bars separate divisively and entirely. He cannot impact nature by contending with it, and he cannot illuminate his own nature by comparing his inner life to its events. There is only the consolation of philosophy as, ala Wittgenstein, a something that does nothing, that which only describes and “leaves everything as it is” (Philosophical Investigations §124). In other words, he is resisting the treatment by rejecting the Fool’s analytical “labours” for Poor Tom’s “study” of philosophy. And while Hazlitt aptly understood that it was Edgar who “replaces” the Fool, the transition from the recognitions of analysis to the significations of philosophy appears to have little common ground with the Romantic understanding of poetry, that which is produced apart from labor or study.

Edgar-Tom’s replacing the Fool illuminates not only the Shakespearean relation to philosophy, or the value of Shakespeare for philosophy or psychoanalysis. This instant is nothing less than a dramatization of the tensions between philosophy, literature, and clinical treatment, particularly as Lacan navigates those tensions in these early seminars. Since we too notice the figurations and prefigurations that characterize the text, Lear’s own failure to find an enlightening “answer” in the parallels between the storm in the sky and the tempest in his mind may strike us as the play’s most uncomfortable moment of mirroring. Our desire for the analysis

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61 See note 49. For more on Wittgenstein’s dislike of Shakespeare, see Hawkes.
of the text to end may indicate that it is we who are more knave than fool. Perhaps the end of a reading of Lear should resemble the end of an analysis: in disarray (Ethics 304).

Edgar resembles Lacan’s Hamlet, as they both affect madness. He also resembles Lacan’s Polonius, since he is a dreadful analyst. Edgar is too prone to impulsive explanation and wild displays, and in his elaborate attempt to cure his father of despair he appears to believe he is the philosophical authority that the mad king imagined he was. Yet Edgar takes his method from the Fool. He initially resists adopting a fool’s stance—“Bad is the trade that must play fool to sorrow, / Ang’ring itself and others” (Tragedy 4.1.38-9)—but he later confidently embraces it to the extent that it completely consumes the Tom persona (Gloucester: “Methinks thy voice is altered, and thou speak’st / In better phrase and matter than thou didst”) (Tragedy 4.5.7-8). By the time Gloucester goes over the “cliffs,” Edgar is defending his treatment confidently: “Why I do trifle thus with his despair / Is done to cure it” (Tragedy 4.5.33-4). The doctor has already declared that “our foster-nurse of nature is repose” (Tragedy 4.3.12), so it is not clear exactly why Edgar thinks that “trifling” with his father will cure him, until the following passage:

Edgar. Thy life’s a miracle. Speak yet again.

Gloucester. But have I fall’n, or no?

Edgar. From the dread summit of this chalky bourn.

Look up a-height. The shrill-gorged lark so far

Cannot be seen or heard. Do but look up.

Gloucester. Alack, I have no eyes. (Tragedy 4.5.55-60)

Edgar’s treatment, which concludes with its repeated assertions that the analysend “look,” is a phrasing of an impossible deixis. Edgar invokes the subject’s recognition of not only something that he cannot see (because he is blind), not only of something that the analyst cannot see
(because the analyst is never entirely privy to the subject’s desire anyway), but of something that is literally not there.

In the quarto version of Lear, Edgar delivers a case study of the Lear analysis (‘‘Who alone suffers, suffers most i’th’ mind’’) (History 13.92). However, his own deictic-treatment of Gloucester is fundamentally a misreading of the treatment of Lear that he carefully observed. Edgar believes that he can cure melancholy by revealing something that is not to his father; what the Fool revealed to Lear was not something that was not, but rather that what was was nothing:

Fool.

I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are. They’ll have me whipped for speaking true, thou’lt have me whipped for lying, and sometimes I am whipped for holding my peace. I had rather be any kind o’thing than a fool; and yet I would not be thee, nuncle. Thou hast pared thy wit o’both sides and left nothing i’the’ middle. . . .

Thou wast a pretty fellow when thou hadst no need to care for her frowning. Now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art, now. I am a fool; thou art nothing. [to Goneril] Yes, forsooth, I will hold my tongue; so your face bids me, though you say nothing.

[Sings] Mum, mum. (Tragedy 1.4.148-162)

Reminding Lear of his “prettiness” pairs the earlier, pre-retired king with the Fool himself (Tragedy 1.4.84), just as the previous paragraph begins by drawing parallels between the king and his daughters. These brief speeches belong in the list of speeches that equate, confuse, or figure the characters with one another by virtue of language’s infinite flexibility. The response to such impasses—the Fool can neither speak true, like a Lacanian fool, nor lie, like a knave—is a failed attempt to say nothing or “nothing.” The Fool quite literally keeps mum at the threat of violence, foreshadowing Kent’s threat to beat the very signifying chain out of Oswald: “I will beat [you] into clamorous whining if thou deniest the least syllable of thy addition” (Tragedy 2.2.20-1). And, as with Cornwall’s surprisingly apt criticism of Kent, the Fool is speaking
indirectly by virtue of a direct discourse. If we take “thou art nothing” as literally as I suspect that we should, his rhetoric could not be more indirect.

The Fool’s pairing himself with Lear parallels Lacan’s description of Lear as the “old fool.” The Fool will quite literally become nothing when he disappears from the play, but before that reversal is actualized, it is signified. In his phallic mode of appearing-in-disappearing (of signifying nothing), he identifies Lear, and by extension, *The Tragedy or History of Lear*, as nothing. The Fool alone seems to recognize that this is not simply a problem of auxetic representation, but the problem of presentation’s impossibility, similar to what Lacan associates with the symbolic order. The Fool wants Lear to recognize what is beyond signification and yet, since inviting the analysand to the revelation of such things still must be somehow indicated if not outright displayed by the analyst, the Fool allows his signifiers to slip. Lear is both the figure O and without a figure at the same time. We are not privy to this display any more than we are privy to the Socratic dialogue of Poor Tom and Lear, but we are told that it is in-between whatever has been split in half inside the King. Lear the king, as well as Lear the play, is divided. What Lear struggles to recognize in his own split subject prefigures what we seek in our analysis of the multiplicity of Lear in its quarto, Folio, and conflated editions. Again, what this means for our reading of Lear with Lacan begins with a sense of the inevitability of Lear’s appearance in Lacan, appearing as it does in the seminar examining the desire of the analyst.

Consider this distinction between the artist and the analyst that Lacan (indirectly) formulates in the seventh seminar:

Freud points out that once the artist has carried out an operation on the level of sublimation, he finds himself to be the beneficiary of his operation insofar as it is acclaimed after the fact; it brings in its wake in the form of glory, honor, and even money, those fantasmic satisfactions that were at the origin of the instinct, with the result that the latter finds itself satisfied by means of sublimation. (*Ethics* 144-5)

Whereas, regarding the analyst:
I said somewhere than an analyst has to pay something if he is to play his role.

He pays in words, in his interpretations. He pays with his person to the extent that through the transference he is literally dispossessed. The whole current development of analysis involves the misrecognition of the analyst, but whatever he thinks of that and whatever panic reaction the analyst engages in through “the countertransference,” he has no choice but to go through it. . . .

Finally, he has to pay with a judgment on his action. That’s the minimum demanded. Analysis is a judgment. . . . from a certain point of view, the analyst is fully aware that he cannot know what he is doing in psychoanalysis. Part of this action remains hidden even to him. (291)

A distinctive motivation or drift of the impulse to sublimate is the desire for praise. The burden of the analyst is the knowledge that his action may be blamed, or “judged.” Perhaps most uncomfortable of all is that the analyst may not know for certain whether he deserves this judgment. We have considered Lacan’s remarks on how, for the analysand, the analysis should end with the knowledge of “the domain and the level of the experience of absolute disarray” (Ethics 304). Thus, the only full awareness that the analyst can have after such a revelation is that his own role in guiding another analysand to such a revelation will be definitively incomplete. The analyst can read Hamlet in its totality, but never his analysand or even his own method of analysis, and for pursuing this partly-obscured action he pays in recognition. This recognition will always be partly misrecognition, and the analyst risks the loss of his own self through what Lacan enigmatically calls a “literal” “dispossession.”

Despite Hamlet’s ability to mirror its reader, to form a “new” Hamlet for each actor that takes on the role (Desire 14.8), Lacan does not seem to find much risk of transference from the analysis of the text that he analyzes in its totality. But Lear is different. It goes farther. The characters in Lear figure one another constantly, bringing one another into language, such as Kent’s harangue of a character that he takes to be an “unnecessary letter” (Tragedy 2.2.58). In their constant attempts to make sense of the play’s events, the constant seeking of better answers
(Tragedy 2.2.257), they prefigure the efforts of the play’s many readers. Lear does not just depict something that occasionally resembles clinical analysis—either the Fool laboring to outjest Lear’s torment, or Edgar trifling with his father’s despair—the reading of Lear resembles that as well, carrying all of the risks of a potentially traumatic recognition. Most traumatic of all is the absence of certainty. Is there anyway to know for certain if our reading is a crisis avoidance of recognition, a traumatic misrecognition, or the disarray of the recognition that comes from a successful analysis?

We have noted how Reinhard and Lupton identify Lear as the tragedy of foreclosure. I suggest, instead, that Lear (and the reception history that it has prefigured) is the tragedy of aphanisis. Whereas the previous seminar, with its extensive analysis of Hamlet, spoke to the risks affecting the analysand when asked to “efface himself and to disappear” (Desire 7.7), the seminar that only barely, cautiously, alludes to Lear and his derisory “crossing over” emphasizes the risks of countertransference, and the analyst’s own chance of disappearing. Both kinds of disappearance or “literal dispossession” occur in Lear, with the disappearances of the Fool (Lear’s analyst) and Gloucester (Edgar’s analysand):

Never—O fault!—revealed myself unto him
Until some half-hour past . . .

but his flawed heart—
Alack, too weak the conflict to support—
’Twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief,
Burst smilingly. (Tragedy 5.3.183-9).
Recalling Lear, Gloucester is inadvertently caught “in between” two extremes, in a “fault”-line. But Gloucester was led there, led by a careless analyst who “revealed” his interpretation too wildly. The “old fool” Lear, on the other hand, ends up there accidentally, but on his own:

poor Lear, who doesn’t understand a thing and who makes the ocean and the earth echo because he tried to enter the same region in a salutary way with everyone agreeing. He appears in the end as still not having understood a thing and holding dead in his arms the object of his love, who is, of course, misrecognized by him. *(Ethics 310)*

Lear is not so much an “old fool” because he resembles the foil-phallus of *Hamlet*, but because he resembles the Fool, who resembles an analyst. To return to our earlier query: why does Lacan not do *more* with *Lear*? The briefness of his remarks is itself illuminating, indicating that Lacan perhaps reads the play anxiously, finding the trauma of misrecognition uncomfortably familiar. The analyst’s desire is, in the best of circumstances, a “non-desire to cure” *(Ethics 219)*, just as Lear’s best object is, similar to his very being, the metonymy of his desire. And that is revealed to be nothing. For Lacan, as with Lear, it is always a question of what is located in-between: in-between praise and blame, or two deaths, or two *Lears*, or in-between desire and non-desire, or in-between signification and what is beyond signification.

Lacan’s remarks on the judgment that the analyst must both express and expect clarify points from a paper delivered a year before this seminar. In “The Direction of the Treatment and the Principles of Its Power,” Lacan acknowledges that “psychoanalytic morals” do not prohibit the analyst taking “advantage of [an] error concerning who he is” (494). This “error” is what Lacan will later call the analyst’s function as the “subject supposed to know,” an assumption on the analysand’s part that enables transference during the treatment. This concept

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62 If the “fault” of Edmund’s mother cost Gloucester his eyes, the fault of Edgar’s analysis costs him his existence.

63 Lacan: “The report I gave two years ago at Royaumont on ‘The Direction of the Cure’ is . . . somewhat thrown together . . . I will try and fill out and rectify certain things to be found there” *(Ethics 291)*.
is clarified following a discussion of *aphanisis*. In this “rectification” of the earlier remarks from the “Direction of the Treatment,” Lacan emphasizes that the analyst is, in fact, the subject who does *not* know, or is at least the subject who does not know *everything*. As is the case with Lear, the analyst is at the mercy of his own capacity for misrecognition and misunderstanding, and has to pass through a zone he can never completely comprehend. And, as is the case with the Fool who will be whipped for speaking true, for lying, or for holding his peace (*Tragedy* 1.4.149-50), the analyst is at the mercy of judgments (especially his own) and they can “dispossess” him. Hamlet knows, the analyst is (at best) the subject presumed to know, and *Lear* reveals that there may be nothing to know.

After his disappearance (or *aphanisis*, or fading, or dispossession), the Fool returns as a bare signifier:

*Albany.*

All friends shall taste

The wages of their virtue, and all foes

The cup of their deservings.—O, see, see!

*Lear.* And my poor fool is hanged. (*Tragedy* 5.3.277-80)

Albany, in his rush to give the play an interpretative epilogue, still cannot cast off the mantle of direct discourse, asking everyone epideictically to “see, see!” Lear’s reply highlights that such virtue and “deservings” are parcelled so indiscriminately and randomly that they are as dependable as words. The Fool does not even have a name, and now he is just a designation, a

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64 See *Four Fundamental Concepts* 230-43. The chapter on *aphanisis* can be found on 216-29.

65 In a classic reading, Stephen Booth identifies that Lear’s greatness is determined by “the confrontation it makes with inconclusiveness” (16), and that this indefinite quality is most effectively and terrifyingly at work with the play’s seeming refusal of its own conclusion: “Shakespeare presents the culminating events of his *story* after his *play* is over” (11).
signifier decoupled from its signified. He (or it) can represent anything because, as is the case with Lear and perhaps with Lear, he is nothing.

This is the most profound instance of the figuring structure of Lear, its characters, and, by extension, its reading. Since King Lear treats the nothingness that is beyond expression, we begin to think that it treats anything that is inexpressible. The Romantics find the Sublime there, Christians find the nihilio that we were supposedly creatio-ed from, and Lacanians find the Thing. But Shakespeare calls this inexpressible absent-presence or present-absence nothing, and indirectly dissects our impulse to explain in language not only the meaning of the play, but also anything and everything inexpressible that we believe that we can “see” and show.
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James Newlin completed his undergraduate studies at Davidson College, receiving his Bachelor of Arts in the spring of 2005. He received his Master of Arts in the English department at the University of Florida in the spring of 2009. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Florida in the fall of 2013. After living in Gainesville for over six years, he relocated to Orlando, where he lives with his wife, Erica, and his dog, Gail.