Shakespearean Characters and Early Modern Subjectivity: The Case of *King Lear*

For moderns, and perhaps for early moderns as well, the idea of dramatic characters is inextricably connected with the idea of subjectivity, of what it means to be a self. A dramatic character is perhaps only an imaginary or fictional person, but, to be recognized as a person in any sense, a dramatic character must resemble the people we are surrounded by, even the people we experience ourselves to be. Dramatic characters seem to act, speak, even think (often out loud). They appear to sustain a variety of relations with each other, arising from and producing what appear to be such emotions as desire, compassion, anger, contempt, loathing, and delight—emotions we are conscious of experiencing. It is hard, therefore, not to imagine them as experiencing something like our own sense of self, of inner awareness and particularized identity.

It has been claimed that what we would recognize as subjectivity did not exist in the early modern period, that—instead of experiencing substantial and individualized personal identity—people simply performed expected social roles. Alternatively, it has been claimed that the early modern period saw the emergence of modern subjectivity. My own claim is more modest but perhaps equally controversial: that, though the concept and even the experience of subjectivity have certainly changed over time, subjectivity is a useful notion for understanding human experience in any period, that it has never been either the self-contained and mastering entity imagined in the modern period nor merely the product of impersonal forces, and that agency has never been either entirely unfettered or simply an illusion.

The argument that modern subjectivity did not exist in Shakespeare’s time would invite us to read his characters as something quite different from ourselves, to see them as essentially performances rather than personalities. Beatrice Gottlieb, while not excluding some degree of emotional content in early modern social and especially family relationships, argues that “[t]he relationships most commonly depicted were almost never treated as dynamic interactions of individual personalities. Rather, they were performances—good, bad, sincere, perfunctory.” Relationships consisted of people “following or not following appropriate role patterns” (262). Even playing a role, I would answer, suggests some degree of
agency. Yet (according to Gottlieb) what an individual of the period was aware of, most often, was not inward experience but social obligations.

Some have gone further to suggest that the very concept of an inner life did not exist in Shakespeare’s time. Francis Barker, for instance, contrasts bourgeois subjectivity, which supposedly did not arise until the later 1600s, with “[p]re-bourgeois subjection,” which “does not properly involve subjectivity at all, but a condition of dependent membership in which place and articulation are defined not by an interiorized self-recognition . . . but by incorporation in the body politic” (31). Others argue that, while solitary experience was possible, it was viewed as correlative to public realities and did not provide a sense of private identity. In Patricia Fumerton’s formulation, “the ‘self’”—at least the early modern self—“was void” (130).

The reality, of course, was more complicated. The age of Shakespeare was a period during which the modern sense of self was developing in a variety of ways, including (as Charles Taylor has pointed out) neo-Stoic thought and the intense spiritual self-examination that came in the wake of the Reformation and the Counter-reformation. Taylor acknowledges that the sense of selfhood we commonly take to be obvious and natural is an invention of the modern Western world. Yet he sees the roots of that sense in much older habits of thought and traces its development at least as far back as Augustine, “who introduced the inwardness of radical reflexivity and bequeathed it to the Western tradition of thought” (131).\footnote{Taylor also points out an important distinction between Augustine’s and modern versions of inwardness: for Augustine, we turn inward in order to know God and enter into deeper relation with him; we thus always remain in relationship with and under obligation to someone other than ourselves.}

Of course, Augustine’s attitude did not necessarily coincide with the ordinary experience of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. Yet Augustine’s influence was pervasive, and it became even stronger after the Reformation. Other influences cooperated during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Montaigne heightened the awareness of one’s inner experience as unique and particular. As many have pointed out, Descartes’s insistence, several decades later, on a split between thought and bodily existence moved yet further toward the idea of the self as self-contained and self-governing. The result, according to Taylor, was a “new conception of inwardness, an inwardness of self-sufficiency, of autonomous powers of ordering by reason” (158). “[B]y the turn of the eighteenth century,” he concludes, “something
recognizably like the modern self is in process of constitution, at least among the social and spiritual elites of northwestern Europe and its American offshoots” (185). This modern view includes the sense of being and having a “self,” a self one can somehow examine and also control, a self in which images or conceptions of the “outside” world reside as ideas, a self in which also reside moral sentiments and the freedom and responsibility to act in accordance with those sentiments. This view of the self prepared the way for the idea of social life as a contract entered into by pre-existing selves.

Here, at least, in this view of social life that became dominant in the eighteenth century, we have a strong contrast to the view that prevailed in Shakespeare’s time: namely, that social and moral relations bind us to others whether we want them to or not. Society, for early modern England, and indeed for the pre-modern world in general, is more like a body than an agreement between conscious agents. Individual people are like organs in that body, naturally and inextricably connected to each other and dependent on the life that sustains the entire body. In King Lear, Shakespeare has Kent refer to such social bonds as “holy cords . . . / Which are t[oo] intrins[ee]”—too intricately interconnected—“t’ unloose,” and has several characters (Lear and Albany, among others) use corporeal images to describe interpersonal relations (2.2.74-75; 3.4.15-16; 4.2.32-36). Yet the very fact that such statements are made points to the efforts several of the play’s characters make to wrench themselves free from their bonds with others and become self-sufficient agents in charge of their own existence. So in the Shakespearean text itself we have evidence of both the older and the emerging views.

The modern conception of self continued to develop from the eighteenth century onward, reaching a kind of zenith in some romantic strains of thought (especially in German idealism) that made the self equivalent to the absolute. Robert Solomon traces these developments and their aftermath in a book subtitled “The Rise and Fall of the Self,” indicating that the move during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, at least among philosophers, has been to diminish the self and its pretensions. What we call “postmodern” thought critiques the self—or more properly the “subject”—even more radically and argues that, in contrast to the controlling cogito that moderns had come to imagine, the subject is instead a function or even an illusory effect of discourse, of linguistic or cultural practices, or of the structures of power. The

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2 All Shakespearean quotations are from The Riverside Shakespeare, 2nd ed.
subject is certainly not the autonomous, self-contained, self-sufficient “self” that had arisen in Western thought by the eighteenth century. It might better be described as a space or site where various forces are at play. Furthermore, the subject as described in postmodern thought apparently lacks agency, individual particularity, and even an inner life, at least one separated from a realm of exteriority. Where this description does not match actual experience, a strict postmodernist might argue that what appear to be agency, particularity, or an inner life are simply reflections of cultural and linguistic practices.

Much can be said for the postmodern deflation of the self. But perhaps postmodern thought has gone too far. As Robert Solomon points out, there is “very little difference” in the end “[b]etween the self as absolute Spirit and the self as nothing” (202). In both cases, the plurality of concrete existence has been effaced, replaced by a kind of absolute monism. And the person thinking of the world in either way is imagining that his or her consciousness coincides with the totality of what is, so that, paradoxically, a pervasive and solipsistic subjectivity is reintroduced by the very attempt to deconstruct the subject.

Despite the changes in how individual existence has been imagined and experienced, it seems to me that human beings (or any beings we would recognize as human) have always been aware of their own thoughts and feelings and have been able to reflect on their actions as “their own.” Yet they have, at the same time, always been in relationship with others. Human experience, that is, has always been “intersubjective.” That fact is reflected in Shakespeare’s characters and can be taken as a starting point for understanding whether and to what degree we can properly think of them as possessing subjectivity.

Any number of plays could be used as test cases for such a study. I choose to examine King Lear in part because it is a text in which competing ideas of subjectivity are at play. It is telling that the characters who seem most modern in their sensibilities are the villains. Goneril says, “The laws are mine, not thine” (5.3.159), and her actions support the notion that she sees herself as an autonomous, controlling ego. Edmund’s case is more complicated. He argues that he would be what he is whatever stars oversaw his conception. Yet he points to “Nature”—in some sense a divine entity—as his mistress and the source of his energies and qualities (1.2.1-22). But Nature as Edmund conceives it apparently expects nothing from him but the pursuit of his own desires and so seems something of an alter ego. In obeying Nature, he but obeys himself. Edmund prefigures the modern sense of self in viewing anything and anyone other than himself as an obstacle or an object to be possessed and in seeing himself as unconstrained by any external moral
structures. It appears that his actions proceed from attitudes expressed in such statements as these: “Let me, if not by birth, have land by wit: / All with me’s meet that I can fashion fit” (1.2.183-84); “my state / Stands on me to defend, not to debate” (5.1.68-69); and “The younger rises when the old doth fall” (3.3.25). Even if Edmund’s (imaginary) sense of self is a construction of language, that language (e.g., the emphatic use of “I,” “me,” and “my”) seems to proceed from, or to have produced, an awareness of himself as separate from everyone else and as capable of, almost compulsively bound to, promoting his interests and his power over others.

Lear, interestingly, pursues his interests and power over others while using the traditional language of social roles and obligations, even language that evokes an organic view of society. His daughters ought to love him, and their failure to do so resembles a mouth tearing the hand that lifts food to it (3.4.14-16). It is easy for us to view Lear as a victim of his own massive egotism. But apparently he views himself (or so his language would lead us to imagine) as the victim of daughters failing to act in accordance with the proper nature of things. That is why this family dispute seems to him to involve the ripping apart of the entire cosmos. As a result this cosmic disintegration, Lear finds himself in a position to experience something like modern subjectivity. That is, he feels himself to be isolated—even nature and the gods seem to have turned against him—and he becomes aware at least of the possibility of viewing himself as a being who exists apart from roles and relationships. I take that to be the import of such passages as “Is man no more than this?” (3.4.102-03) and “Does any here know me? This is not Lear” (1.4.226). Yes, this last passage is sarcastic: he is berating a daughter for not treating him in accordance with his social position. Yet the passage also verges on panic: if he is not treated like a king and father, who is he? The breakdown of social roles thus leads to the question, “Who is it that can tell me who I am?” (1.4.230), and at least to the possibility of imagining Lear as an entirely isolated self. Self-reflective early modern spectators might even be led to see themselves, at least momentarily, in the same way.

In contrast to characters for whom the pursuit of personal power and enjoyment seems to be the ultimate project, characters such as Edgar, Cordelia, and the Fool can be read as exemplifying an older kind of subjectivity, that of being subjected to obligations. The Fool not only stays with Lear (at least during the first part of the play) but argues—in a passage much complicated with irony—against self-interest (2.4.67-85). Kent also stays with Lear, out of loyalty and against his own interests.
It is harder to read Edgar and Cordelia since they both fill and fail to fill their expected roles and since it is difficult to attribute to them anything but a complicated sense of subjectivity. Edgar, like Lear, experiences isolation because others have turned against him. His isolation does not produce the mastering subjectivity of an ego that is in charge of itself and its world, but something like the opposite. He is evacuated of substance and identity: “Edgar I nothing am” (2.3.21), a phrase capable, of course, of being read either as “I am no longer Edgar” or as “I Edgar am nothing.” The readings come down to much the same thing: to be deprived of his name and of his social roles and relationships is in effect to become nothing, to become something like the empty space that postmodern thought associates with subjectivity.

This very recognition of his loss of self is, of course, an act of self-awareness. The rest of the play shows him very much an agent, more so perhaps than he would have been if he had remained in a comfortable social and familial context. He creates an identity of his own—Poor Tom. He accompanies and serves his father. And then, though nameless and faceless, he acts something like the part of an assertive ego when he challenges and defeats his brother. On the other hand, he performs all these assertive acts in a spirit of submission. The identity he chooses is the most vulnerable he can imagine, mad, poor, naked, and exposed to the elements (“Poor Tom’s a-cold”). Even speaking in his own voice, to himself, he presents himself as emotionally vulnerable (“Who is’t can say, ‘I am at the worst’? / I am worse than e’er I was”; “O thou side-piercing sight!”; “my heart breaks” [4.1.25-26; 4.6.85, 142]) and as subject to necessity (“I cannot daub it further. . . . And yet I must” [4.1.52-54]). He advises patience and tells his father, “Men must endure / Their going hence even as their coming hither” (5.3.9-10). Even his most assertive acts—killing Oswald and Edmund—are done in the service of others, and he hints that he does the latter of these as an instrument of the gods. He ends the play speaking of the “weight” that he and others “must obey” (5.3.327)—that is, he speaks of himself not as a mastering agent but as one subjected to external forces and responsibilities.

The text invites us to view Cordelia as a similarly complicated example of subjectivity. Her words and behavior in the first scene combine submissiveness and self-assertion. In saying that she loves her father “according to [her] bond, no more nor less” (1.1.93), she both acknowledges her social role and sets limits to how far she will submit to it. Lear claims that what she calls “plainness” is really “pride” (1.1.129). Even if that is putting it too strongly, we can see in her judgment of her sisters and her refusal to
yield to expectations that seem demeaning a desire to preserve her sense of her own integrity and virtue. In other words, given the text, we would have to exercise extraordinary ingenuity not to see Cordelia as possessing a sense of self—an awareness of, or an image of, herself as a substantial entity with a particular character that she has some degree of power over and that she wants to preserve, even in the face of obligations others would press upon her.

But Cordelia, like Edgar and Lear, undergoes a kind of stripping of identity: she is disowned, disinherited, and banished. The King of France is presented as extraordinary in taking her with nothing—a word, of course, that reverberates through the play. Like Edgar, she appears to be something of an empty site, exposed, vulnerable, and void of substance. On the other hand, France’s statement, “She is herself a dowry” (1.1.241), suggests that, even without social status, she has substantial identity.

France’s statement, though it seems simple enough, is difficult to read if we are trying to understand its place in the history of subjectivity. Is France in fact saying that Cordelia has a determinate character even apart from social status, even without a home, a family, or any material means? If she has such a character, does that mean the play is inviting us to view subjectivity as self-contained, independent of social roles and relationships? If it does so, that view amounts to a momentary glimpse, since Cordelia is quickly married to France and disappears from the play for the next two acts. We never really see her as an isolated self.

When Cordelia returns, it is in the service of her father. Her motive (“love, dear love” [4.4.28]) and her reunion with her father suggest that she remains a dutiful daughter—she even kneels to ask for a paternal blessing. She seems, that is, to confirm the view that early modern subjectivity amounted to “subjection,” to “a condition of dependent membership” (Barker 31). Some modern readers of the play have, in fact, betrayed their modernity by in effect condemning Cordelia (or Shakespeare or the play) for her return. According to Carol Thomas Neely, readers must learn not “to be Cordelia” (248). Janet Adelman argues that Cordelia’s death effects “the ultimate silencing of her subjectivity” and that, “[a]t the end, . . . having evacuated Cordelia’s subjectivity, the play takes even her death from her” (127). For such readers, the play ends with Cordelia as an iconic or otherwise lifeless figure, deprived of subjectivity—suggesting of course that she was previously in possession of it and that she would have been better off if allowed to stay in France.
The subjectivity imagined here is not one of complete isolation, but it is one of self-control and self-preservation—something like the modern sense of self that some say existed only in nascent form, if at all, in the early modern period. It seems to me that readers who see subjectivity of this kind in the play are not entirely mistaken. For if the play itself is taken as a guide, a modern sense of self seems to have been powerfully present in the period. It is simply that Shakespeare tends to associate it with characters like Goneril and Edmund.

What kind of subjectivity, then, is associated with characters like Edgar and Cordelia? The play presents them as moral agents, capable of assertive action, capable of resisting expectations. Yet the play also places them in a moral and social context, with obligations to others, and shows them as willingly and actively submitting to those obligations, at least when the obligations are genuine. The characters are *subjected* to roles and relationships, yet they appear at the same time to have an inner life of reflection, emotion, and choice, and they appear to exercise volition. Unlike Goneril, Regan, Edmund, and Cornwall, though, they do not seek to exercise that volition in a moral vacuum and do not act with an eye primarily to their own interest. Perhaps the most startling moments in the play (if we are thinking about subjectivity) are the moments of stripping or self-emptying when characters like Edgar, Cordelia, and Lear seem to be without identity, in the traditional sense and even, in some measure, in the modern sense. Yet those moments, though presenting the characters as almost nothing and as supremely vulnerable, are also in a way the moments at which they acquire something like real significance and particularity, because they are not simply performers of social roles.

Paradoxically, these are also moments that impel them, either immediately or eventually, to recognize the otherness of others. In one of his exchanges with his father, Edgar calls himself a “most poor man, made tame to fortune’s blows, / Who, by the art of known and feeling sorrows, / Am pregnant to good pity” (4.6.221-23). Of course, he is playing a role, but he also acts on what he has said and continues to show compassion to his father. Edgar’s self-emptying and exposure have apparently led him to care for others and to exercise his moral agency on their behalf. By losing himself, he has in a sense become himself.

I have found the thought of Emmanuel Levinas helpful in understanding the complicated and contrasting subjectivities in *King Lear*. Levinas, perhaps the foremost philosopher of postmodern ethics,
agrees with other contemporary thinkers that the masterful cogito is an illusion, though an illusion we are all subject to. Yet there is another kind of subjectivity intimately involved with being human, a subjectivity that “[starts] from [the] position or deposition of the sovereign I in self consciousness, a deposition which is precisely its responsibility for the Other” (Ethics 101). In a richly suggestive passage, Levinas says: “I am defined as a subjectivity, as a singular person, as an ‘I,’ precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual ‘I.’ So that I become a responsible or ethical ‘I’ to the extent that I agree to depose or dethrone myself—abdicate my position of centrality—in favor of the vulnerable other.” He goes on to make it clear that he does not intend to “preserve . . . the idea of a subject who would be a substantial or mastering center of meaning, an idealist, self-sufficient cogito” and in fact opposes ethical subjectivity to what he calls “[t]hese traditional ontological versions of subjectivity” (“Dialogue” 26-27). Perhaps it is a mistake to read back into Lear Levinas’s postmodern conception of “ethical subjectivity.” Yet Levinas was himself influenced by Shakespeare and would probably not object to the linkage.

Cordelia seems to me, in fact, an especially potent image of the kind of ethical subjectivity Levinas has in mind. Cordelia’s return can be viewed as expressing her willingness to expose herself to risk and even death in the service of the other; her reunion with Lear can be read as her acknowledgment and welcoming of the other as other even when that other has persecuted her. (According to Levinas, such acknowledgment and welcoming does not mean deliberately letting oneself be abused or destroyed, for to serve and respond to the other requires that one have resources from which to serve. To serve the other means to treat the other as other; among other things it means—as it does for Cordelia—to command and to teach.)

From a Levinasian point of view, it is by offering herself and sustaining the other that Cordelia attains authentic subjectivity, that she lives (that is) the only kind of life worth living. Her sisters, on the other hand, may be identified with “the alienable subjectivity of need and will, which claims to be already and henceforth in possession of itself, but which death makes mockery of.” The call to responsibility transfigures this subjectivity, bringing it to its final reality and keeping it from being “reduced to [a] place within a totality”; “this transformation does not consist in flattering [the self’s] subjective tendencies and consoling him for his death, but in existing for the Other” (Totality 245-46). Paradoxically, it is in “being
for the other” that subjectivity in its truest sense arises. It is as responsible to the other that I am unique and
irreplaceable: “The surpassing of phenomenal or inward existence does not consist in receiving the
recognition of the Other, but in offering him one’s being. To be in oneself is to express oneself, that is,
already to serve the Other” (183); “To utter ‘I,’ to affirm [my] irreducible singularity . . . , means to possess
a privileged place with regard to responsibilities for which no one can replace me and from which no one
can release me. To be unable to shirk: this is the I” (245); “The I, which we have seen arise . . . as a
separated being having apart, in itself, the center around which its existence gravitates, is confirmed in its
singularity by purging itself of this gravitation, purges itself interminably, and is confirmed precisely in this
incessant effort to purge itself. This is termed goodness. Perhaps the possibility of a point of the universe
where such an overflow of responsibility is produced ultimately defines the I” (244-45).

In a book titled *Reading Shakespeare’s Characters*, Christy Desmet asserts that “[r]ecent literary
title has successfully discredited the notion of a transcendent, coherent self” and that Shakespeare’s
characters in particular are “constructed through language” (3, 13). I am not sure that her first point
necessarily entails her second one. That is, subjectivity does not have to be understood as either
transcendent and coherent (I would prefer “static” and “self-contained”), on the one hand, or merely a
linguistic construct, on the other. It is possible, of course, to understand Shakespeare’s characters (despite
their resemblance to ourselves) as mere signs at play with other signs, though when we do that to characters
we are not far from doing it to ourselves. Yet the experience of playgoers, not to mention the apparent
meaning of the texts, involves some sense of imagined subjectivity that goes beyond rhetorical strategies
and linguistic constructs. If we take *King Lear* as our example (and the same could be said for many other
plays), the characters and events not only provide an illusion of subjectivity but suggest several possible
sources of personal identity and character, including family and other social relationships, the stars, and
“nature.” Arguably, each of these plays its part. Yet something even more powerful and pervasive seems
to be at work. More than anything else, the play’s vision of subjectivity seems tied either to self-offering
(i.e., being for the other) or self-aggrandizement. In both cases, even when a character seems in hot pursuit
of his or her own interests, the characters act out these versions of subjectivity in a context of already
existing and unavoidable relationships.

I believe it makes sense to view Shakespeare’s characters as imaginary persons for whom a degree
of subjectivity and agency can be posited. Yet, despite evidence at times of something approaching a modern sense of self-contained, autonomous selfhood, these characters are best understood in relational terms—not as beings to whom we should ascribe static or substantial (and separate) “personalities” that could be analyzed separately from other characters, but rather as locations for a dynamic activity of offering and response requiring us to take into account multiple characters in order to think about any one of them. The characters’ imagined subjectivity is always from the start intersubjective. If we acknowledge that fact, I believe our encounters with them will yield a richer sense of the plays and of the plays’ past and present relevance, despite whatever changes have taken place since Shakespeare’s time.

Works Cited


