King Lear and the Figures of Speech

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"He apprehends a world of figures here."
(IHenIV I.iii.209)

"Down from the waist they are Centaurs,
Though women all above:
But to the girdle do the Gods inherit,
Beneath is all the fiend's."
(KL IV.vi.123-26)

Madeleine Doran has observed that "English Renaissance drama is rhetorical from first to last" (51). As T. S. Baldwin has shown, Shakespeare received a thorough rhetorical training in school, and his audience, who by and large had received the same training, could be expected to recognize and appreciate the rhetorical aspects of his plays (cf. Knights "Education"; Joseph; Barish; McDonald; Altman; Trousdale; Henderson; Donawerth; Bensel-Meyers). Modern critics of King Lear, however, have been slow to recognize the importance of formal rhetoric, particularly of the figures of speech, in shaping a full response to this play and the issues it raises (Nowottny; Burckhardt; Sell; Atwood; Valesio; Rosenberg; Moss; Toliver 123-52).

In a sense this is not surprising, given the hostility toward formal rhetoric among many critics of earlier generations. Even as late as 1980 L. C. Knights could suggest that rhetorical devices are a prompt to the audience to see some kind of insincerity, or at least to scrutinize carefully the positions with which they are associated ("Rhetoric"). The corollary to this hostility is the assumption that formal rhetoric played a greater role in Shakespeare's earlier works than in his later ones, that the mature playwright outgrew those "passages of
rocket-like rhetoric which so obviously soar over the person they are addressed to for a landing in the back of the gallery," as Harley Granville-Barker so colorfully put it (16; cf. Schirmer; Willcock). These assumptions encourage us to look for a rhetoric of false feelings in *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, but to look for a less artificial, more honest language "consistent with a more naturalistic drama" in a late work like *King Lear* (Hill 456; cf. Draper; Levin; Evans).

The simple equation of rhetoric with insincerity, like the simple chronology of Shakespearean rhetoric, looks dated today, but there is still a tendency to approach *King Lear* with the assumption that "to some extent, the contrast between embellished speech and simplicity or silence reflects the contrast between falsehood and truth" (Dry 14). Indeed, as Margreta de Grazia points out, there is even a tendency among contemporary critics to find in Shakespeare a post-Romantic meditation on the inadequacy of all language to express what the characters think and feel (374-75; cf. Barton). Thus Sheldon Zitner dwells on deliberate obscurity, dialect, and the ravings of madmen as a "counter-system of language, subversive of the inadequate system of decorum and reasonable discourse" (5). By inverting the terms, Zitner finds true eloquence in incomprehensibility and reads *King Lear* as an assault on the fundamental norms of Renaissance rhetoric.

Without denying that now and again, language fails some of the characters in *King Lear*, I see a different role for the figures of speech in this play. *King Lear* does not offer the verbal pyrotechnics of *Love's Labour's Lost*, but it does offer quite a number of instances of what Richard Lanham would call "opaque style," passages that we look at, not through (Motives 142; cf. Muir). I believe that even in a late play like *King Lear*, there is a discernible pattern in the appearances and disappearances of this opaque style, and that this pattern can lead us to important insights into the meaning of the play.

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