

Mary Prokop
Shakespeare's Dramatic Language
King Lear
11/27/17

LEAR Now, our joy,
Although our last and least, to whose young love
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy
Strive to be interested, what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters'? Speak.
CORDELIA Nothing, my lord.
LEAR Nothing?

CORDELIA Nothing.
LEAR
Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.
CORDELIA
Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth.

(1.1.91 – 101)

I spent several hours lost in the wilds of Youtube this week, attempting to learn a smattering of American Sign Language. In the video attachment, you will see me signing key words from the above section of *Lear's* first scene. This form of movement, which embodies language so well that it can be used as a viable form of communication, was simultaneously challenging and intuitive for this beginner. I found the movements themselves much easier to pick up than the complicated choreography I struggled to learn while performing in musicals in high school. Putting the signs together, and timing them to the sometimes rapid-fire movement of speech, however, took some practice. The experience was something like learning intricate blocking that must be performed while speaking onstage, and something like learning to type on a keyboard as quickly as the words come to mind. I also spent some time learning a bit of ASL grammar, such as how one signs the past, present, and future tenses.

In the process of completing this exercise, I happened upon an article about a 1999 performance (The Shakespeare Theatre, Washington DC) in which the deaf actress Monique Holt played Cordelia and signed her lines and the Fool served as her interpreter. The back-story for the production showed the Fool learning sign language along with Cordelia, while Lear could not bring himself to do so. This poignant interpretive choice must have underscored how Cordelia communicates differently than those around her, as well as emphasizing the fracturing of the parent-child relationship. Cordelia's different communication style is obscured in my interpretation, as I sign Lear's lines along with Cordelia's.

At the same time, signing both characters' words made it clear how much their language resembles one another from the beginning. "Nothing," ever-echoing through *Lear's* lexical landscape, is uttered again and again here—in disbelief, in re-affirmation, and as a proverb. The word becomes the repeated refrain of this passage, one that challenges actors to move and modulate their voices in varied ways. Much can be communicated through "nothing." This repetition serves as prelude, too, to Lear's "Never, never, never, never, never." (5.3.373). Those who take on the role of Lear must ask themselves—when all is lost, what comfort or new levels of despair might there be in the numbing repetition of a word without changes in tone, cadence, or meaning? Does allowing one's voice to modulate better communicate despair?