Pleading with an Unreasonable King: on the Kent and Pauline Episodes in Shakespeare

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ABSTRACT

The Kent episode in Act I of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the Pauline episode in Act II of his *The Winter's Tale* are investigated in conjunction. The linguistic methods of conversation analysis and of speech act analysis are used and it is suggested that there are similarities in the rhetorical strategies of Kent and Pauline, on the one hand, and in those of the two kings, Lear and Leontes, on the other. With respect to speech acts favored by the two kings, it is argued that one such favored act is that of dysphemistic epithets. Overall, the rhetoric of the two kings, as substantiated by the two linguistic methods of analysis, is seen to be in large part disruptive, manipulative and designed to distort reality, up to the end of each episode, where the rhetorical equilibrium is restored.

The Kent episode in *King Lear* and the Pauline episode in *The Winter's Tale* have not often, if ever, been considered in conjunction, but this article will suggest that failure to do so is to miss important similarities in the structure and conception of the two episodes [1]. The former episode is about 70 lines in length, running from the second half of line 120 to line 187 of I.i.; from this the approximately ten lines of Lear's first speech addressed to Cordelia can be set aside [2]. The latter episode is slightly longer, some 90 lines, and runs from the second half of line 39 to line 130 of II.iii. (Pauline's interaction with a lord and a servant in the lines just prior to these can be set aside.) In both episodes there is a protracted appeal to a king from a person of a lower rank who pleads not for himself or herself but rather for a third

party. The third parties, Cordelia in one case and the Queen and the baby girl in the other, are persons closely linked to the king by family ties. Furthermore, in both scenes the pleading encounters reluctance and resistance on the part of the king. Such similarities between the two episodes are important, but it will be suggested in this article that there are additional affinities that are revealed by methods of linguistic pragmatics. Two such methods will be applied in the following. These are the methods of conversation analysis and of speech act analysis. The methods are linked and cannot be sharply separated, but they nevertheless arise from different research traditions, and applying first one and then the other will help to structure the present discussion. No systematic review can be given here of the history of either research tradition and the discussion must be limited to what is of immediate significance for the investigation of the two episodes. Admittedly, both research traditions of linguistic pragmatics were originally conceived for the study of «natural» (unscripted) conversation, not of drama, and there are differences between the two types of discourse, for instance, having to do with the presence of a projected audience in the case of drama[3]. Principles devised for the analysis of «natural» conversation cannot therefore be blindly applied in the study of drama. However, it is at the same time clear that the two types of discourse are intimately connected and there is by now something approaching a consensus in the literature that in general methods of linguistic pragmatics can be applied to the study of drama, including Shakespearean dialogue, even if at times some modification or fine-tuning of such methods may be necessary[4].

Conversation analysts have observed that conversations exhibit a number of features of a general nature. The following may be quoted from Sacks et al. (1974: 700 f.; references to subsections omitted), as especially relating to turns and to turn-taking:

    (1)   Speaker-change recurs, or at least occurs.
    (2)   Overwhelmingly, one party talks at a time.
    (3)   Occurrences of more than one speaker at a time are common, but brief.
    (4)   Transitions (from one turn to a next) with no gap and no overlap are common. Together with transitions characterized by slight gap or slight overlap, they make up the vast majority of transitions.
    (5)   Turn order is not fixed, but varies.
    (6)   Turn size is not fixed, but varies.
    (7)   Length of conversation is not specified in advance.
    (8)   What parties say is not specified in advance.
    (9)   Relative distribution of turns is not specified in advance.
    (10) Number of parties can vary.
    (11) Talk can be continuous or discontinuous.
    (12) Turn-allocation techniques are obviously used. A current speaker may select a next speaker (as when he addresses a question to another party);

or parties may self-select in starting to talk.

(13) Various 'turn-constructional units' are employed; e.g., turns can be projectedly 'one word long', or they can be sentential in length.

(14) Repair mechanisms exist for dealing with turn-taking errors and violations; e.g., if two parties find themselves talking at the same time, one of them will stop prematurely, thus repairing the trouble.

This list of features of conversation should be supplemented with the notion of topic and of topical coherence. The term «topic» may be defined as «what the text (or part of the text) is about» (Allan 1986: 110). As for topic coherence, it «is something *constructed* across turns by the collaboration of participants» (Levinson 1983: 315); (emphasis in the original). It is often signalled by devices of cohesion (coreferring noun phrases and pro-forms, lexical cohesion, etc.), although these do not in themselves necessarily guarantee a shared topic (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 31 ff. and 274 ff.; van Dijk 1981: 186 f.; Levinson 1983: 314 f.). However topics are signalled, the notion has unquestionable psychological reality to participants in a conversation, for in the unmarked case they relate their contributions to the topic at hand and failure to do so is liable to be noticed and may become an item for comment. Further, if participants wish to change the topic, they use largely conventionalized means of accomplishing it[5]. An example might clarify the point. Near the beginning of II.iii of *Othello* Iago and Cassio have a conversation whose topic is Desdemona until Iago engineers a topic change:

> *Iago.* ... Our general cast us thus early for the love
> of his Desdemona; who let us not therefore
> blame. He hath not yet made wanton the night with
> her; and she is sport for Jove.
> *Cas.* She's a most exquisite lady.
> Iago. And I'll warrant her, full of game.
> Cas. Indeed she's a most fresh and delicate crea-
> ture.
> *Iago.* What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a
> parley to provocation.
> *Cas.* An inviting eye; and yet methinks right
> modest.
> *Iago.* And when she speaks, is it not an alarum to
> love?
> *Cas.* She is indeed perfection.
> *Iago.* Well—happiness to their sheets! Come,
> lieutenant, I have a stope of wine, and here without
> are a brace of Cyprus gallants that would fain have a
> measure to the health of black Othello.

(II.iii.14-32)

Up to Iago's last turn Desdemona is clearly the mutually constructed topic in the conversation, Iago's and Cassio's turns being tightly linked by such devices of cohesion as coreferring pro-forms, which in this case refer to Desdemona. However, with his last turn Iago engineers a smooth transition to a new topic, that of drinking Othello's health. The transition is signalled in part by the particle *well*, which continues to have a function bearing on topic and topic-shifting even in present-day English (Labov and Fanshel 1977: 156; Svartvik 1980: 177; Schiffrin 1987: 102 ff).

Armed with such notions of conversation analysis, we may now return to the speech events from *King Lear and The Winter's Tale*[6]. One of the most interesting here of the 14 features of conversation is feature 12, which relates to allocation of turns. For much of the time in the two episodes, the principle «A current speaker may select a next speaker . . .» operates in reverse, as it were, along the lines of «A current speaker may block a certain speaker from taking a turn», for Lear and Leontes try to prevent Kent and Pauline, respectively, from taking turns. Both do so repeatedly and in forceful terms. «Peace, Kent!» (121) «Kent, on thy life, no more.» (154) (Lear). Leontes tries to stop Pauline from having a turn by repeatedly asking her to leave or by asking others to remove her, either by the force of words or by physical action: «Away with that audacious lady!» (42), «Force her hence.» (62), «Out!» (67), «Hence with her, out o' door!» (68), «Will you not push her out?» (74), «Once more, take her hence.» (112). At times there are also attempts to select the next speaker in order to exclude another. Thus Leontes turns to others and especially to Antigonus repeatedly, using the speaker-selects-next-speaker technique. However, the technique is apt to fail, as at line 46 «What? canst not rule her?», when Pauline comes in before Antigonus answers the question addressed to him and as around line 77, when Pauline again comes in, pre-empting the turn selected by Leontes for Antigonus.

At a slightly subtler level there is a noticeable similarity in the way the petitioners, Kent and Pauline, respond to and cope with attempts to silence them. For instance, when Lear says «The bow is bent and drawn, make from the shaft.» (143), Kent responds «Let it fall rather, though the fork invade / The region of my heart;» (144-145). That is, Kent, orienting his turn to Lear's by employing cohesive devices (*the shaft* —*it*— the lexically related *the fork*), is able to build on Lear's words, turning them around to his own use. A similar relation holds between Lear's «Kent, on thy life, no more.» (154) and Kent's «My life I never held but as [a] pawn / To wage against thine enemies, ne'er [fear'd] to lose it, / Thy safety being motive.» (155-157) and between Lear's «Out of my sight!» (157) and Kent's «See better, Lear, and let me still remain / The true blank of thine eye.» (158-159). Further examples can be cited from the Pauline episode,

including Leontes's «What? canst not rule her?» (46), addressed to Antigonus, and Pauline's reply «From all dishonesty he can.» (47). Cohesion of this kind is observed in one or two of Leontes' speeches, but on the whole it is more rare in the two kings' speeches. Cohesion and orienting one's turn to the previous speaker's turn tend to make one's conversational contribution sound reasonable, in that the speaker pays attention to others. On the other hand, the lack of cohesion, especially in Lear's speeches, carries the implication of peremptoriness and lack of sensitivity. Such findings have a bearing on the division of audience sympathies in the episodes.

As for other features on Sacks et al.'s list, number 8 is «what parties say is not specified in advance.» Here it is observed that the first attempts by both Lear and Leontes to stop Kent and Pauline from speaking take place even before they (or the audience) learn what the latter two want to say. This creates a sense that Lear and Leontes «know,» or presume to «know,» in advance what Kent and Pauline are going to say, and thus set themselves above feature 8.

Another feature on the list that sheds light on the two conversations is 14, which relates to turn-taking violations, such as two speakers speaking at the same time. (Repair mechanisms for violations seem less central in the present context, simply because violations are often not repaired.) Interruptions in conversation may be accommodated here. It has been emphasized in work subsequent to Sacks et al. (1974) that these may be of two basic types: supportive and disruptive (cf., for instance, West 1978; 1979; West and Zimmerman 1983; Tannen 1989). In a supportive interruption a speaker is interrupted by a second speaker who expresses enthusiasm for what the first speaker is saying, while in a disruptive interruption a speaker is confronted with disagreement or with a challenge for the floor while he or she is speaking. (Often a disruptive interruption involves both disagreement and a challenge for the floor simultaneously.) There is no «norm» for interruptions of either type or for reactions or responses to them, but it is clear that disruptive interruptions, especially those contesting the right to the floor, are dispreferred variants of conversational responses. Yet it is precisely these types of interruptions that are found in especially the *Lear* extract. At the very beginning of the extract Lear cuts Kent off in mid-sentence, after the address «Good my liege—» (120). Kent's second turn is longer «Royal Lear, / Whom I have ever honor'd as my king, / Lov'd as my father, as my master follow'd, / As my great patron thought on in my prayers—» (139-142), but even here he does not get beyond the terms of address before Lear interrupts him in a disruptive fashion. Kent too engages in a disruptive interruption later on. When Lear says «Now, by Apollo—» (160) Kent cuts him off in mid-sentence, disruptively, by coming in with «Now, by Apollo, King, / Thou swear'st thy

gods in vain.» (160-161) before Lear can complete his sentence. However, by
and large disruptive interruptions by the petitioners are much more rare in the
episodes.

A first conclusion here is that in the extracts there are deviations of different
types from the conventions governing turn-taking in conversation. Such
deviations are marked or dispreferred options and their presence explains in part
why the exchanges are felt to be confrontational in nature. Further, it may be
felt that conversational conventions are not violated in arbitrary ways but rather
in ways that on the whole tend to present the petitioners as the more reasonable
conversationalists. The petitioners are admittedly turned into challengers in the
course of the conversations, but this is presented as mainly resulting from the
confrontational hostility of the two kings. The impression of hostility, in turn,
results in large part from the exercise of dispreferred conversational options by
the kings. A measure of audience sympathy accrues to the underdogs as a
consequence.

Looking at the scenes from the point of view of speech act theory, it seems
clear that a dominant speech act in the two episodes is the directive. For instance,
Lear's turns such as «Kent, on thy life, no more.» (154) and «Out of my sight!»
(157) are a variety of directives. (In their surface forms neither of these sentences
has an expressed verb, but a verb may be understood, along the lines of «Kent,
on thy life, say no more!» and «Get out of my sight!») Here is Searle's analysis
of the speech act of requesting, based on the four types of conditions,
propositional content, preparatory, sincerity and essential, together with comments
on ordering and commanding[7]:

Propositional content	Future act A of H.
Preparatory	1. H is able to do A. S believes H is able to do A. 2. It is not obvious to both S and H that H will do A in the normal course of events of his own accord.
Sincerity	S wants H to do A.
Essential	Counts as an attempt to get H to do A.
Comment	*Order* and *command* have the additional preparatory rule that S must be in a position of authority over H. *Command* probably does not have the "pragmatic" condition requiring non-obviousness. Furthermore in both, the authority relationship infects the essential condition because the utterance counts as an attempt to get H to do A *in virtue of the authority of S over H.*

The content of directives in the two episodes is overwhelmingly similar. They are requests or orders by Lear and Leontes for the challenger to fall silent or to leave.

Account should also be taken of questions by Leontes. Questions are often considered a subclass of directives, since to ask a question is to ask the hearer to supply some information. However, questions can also be used as indirect directives to request some action other than the supplying of information (cf. Searle 1975: 65 ff). Questions by Leontes often serve this purpose, as in «Will you not push her out?» (74). Being conventionally indirect is often considered a feature of politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987: 132 ff), but this is scarcely the case here. Both on account of the negative *not* and on account of the context, especially of what went before in Leontes' speeches («Force her hence» (62), «Out!» (68), etc.), the directive is peremptory and insistent in tone, demanding compliance from the hearer.

A dominant speech act of the two kings, then, is the directive, performed either directly or indirectly. It might also be expected that a fair number of directives would occur in the speeches of Kent and Pauline, since in both scenes each of them is pleading for someone. There are some directives from them, as in Kent's «Reserve thy state, / And in thy best consideration check / This hideous rashness.» (149-151) and in Pauline's «Let him that makes but trifles of his eyes / First hand me.» (63-64), but overall the number is rather low in comparison with what is found in the two kings' speeches. It should be added that while Pauline's utterance «The good queen / (For she is good) hath brought you forth a daughter— / Here 'tis—commends it to your blessing» (65-67) is a request for Leontes' acceptance, it is indirect and certainly less insistent than Leontes' questions used as indirect directives. In the two episodes the challengers, even though they are asking for something, come across as more reasonable, on account of the relatively low number of their directive speech acts and on account of the less peremptory nature of their directives.

There is another speech act that is very dominant in the speeches of the two kings. Informally, this is the speech act of name-calling, calling one's interlocutor or interlocutors names that are in some way unpleasant or distasteful. In the literature the term «dysphemistic epithets» has been used with reference to many of Coriolanus's speech acts (Rudanko (1993: 144 f), and the same term might be employed here. Dysphemistic epithets might be defined as follows[x].

Propositional content	Some imputed or projected categorization C of H.
Preparatory	S thinks that C reflects discredit on H and S thinks that H thinks that C reflects discredit on H.

Sincerity   S values C negatively.
Essential   Counts as an expression of contumely or deprecation
                   of H by means of attributing or imputing C to H.
Comments   Epithets in general attribute some categorization to a
                   person or group of people. The opposite of a
                   dysphemistic epithet is a euphemistic — or, perhaps
                   more accurately, a eulogistic — epithet.

The speeches of the two kings abound in dysphemistic epithets. Here are some
examples. Lear calls Kent a «miscreant» (161) and a «recreant» (166), while
Leontes calls Pauline «a mankind witch» (68) «a most intellingencing bawd» (69),
«A callat / Of boundless tongue» (91-92), «A gross hag» (108) «lozel» (109). Not
only does Leontes hurl his invective and dysphemistic epithets at Pauline, but his
attendants, including Antigonus, likewise get their plentiful share of them. Thus
Leontes calls them «Traitors» (73), «A nest of traitors» (82), and Antigonus receives
the ad hominem dysphemistic epithet of «dotard» (75) into the bargain.

Again, the speeches of the challengers are not entirely devoid of epithets or
even dysphemistic, or at least negative, ones. Thus both Kent and Pauline use
the word «mad» (Kent 146, Pauline 72) with reference to the king. However,
on the whole, the number of their dysphemistic epithets is considerably lower
and, as far as the broader class of epithets is concerned, there are also more
qualitative differences. In particular, their epithets are often not dysphemistic
but may in fact be construed as eulogistic or at least as respectful, as in Kent's
phrases «my father» (141), «my master» (141), and «my great patron» (142).
Further, their epithets do not necessarily refer to the king but rather they may
use them to refer to themselves or to a third party not present on the stage. Thus
Kent calls himself the king's «physician» (163) and Pauline calls herself the
king's «loyal servant» (54), his «physician» (54), and «most obedient counsellor»
(55). (The use of the word «physician» is perhaps enough to alert the audience
to a connection between the two scenes.) As far as epithets referring to third
parties not present on the stage are concerned, the positive «good queen» is
introduced by Pauline (58) and in the exchange that follows Shakespeare almost
allows her the upper hand. At any rate, the use of the term is contested or
questioned by Leontes and emphatically reaffirmed and repeated by Pauline,
and as a whole the subepisode about the use of the term further underlines the
importance of epithets in the episode. Terms of address are perhaps not epithets
per se, but the respectful usage of both Kent and Pauline early on in the episodes,
usages such as «Royal Lear» (Kent, 139) and «my lord» (Pauline, 39) is also
worth observing in the present context.

All in all, dysphemistic epithets are an important and frequently occurring speech act in the speeches of the two kings in the two episodes. The challengers likewise use epithets, but their epithets are more varied, more balanced and less often dysphemistic.

This survey has traced three rhetorical patterns as predominant in the speech behavior of the kings in the two episodes: their resort to disruptive interruptions and other violations of unmarked turn-taking conventions, to imperious directives and to dysphemistic epithets. In Shakespeare criticism, as in other criticism, such findings relating to features of language pose the question of what they mean and how such rhetorical patterns can be linked with psychological ones. To attempt an answer to this question is to undertake an interpretive step and caution must be exercised when interpretive steps are taken. However, the three rhetorical patterns discovered here might be associated with a desire on the part of the kings to try to assert their power over —or even to manipulate— their co-conversationalists. As far as dysphemistic epithets in particular are concerned, they are loaded labels, and the two kings' frequent resort to them may be viewed as an attempt to assert their power not only over their co-conversationalists but over reality itself. This latter effect arises because dysphemistic epithets are designed to change and to distort reality[9]. At another level, the rhetorical patterns favored by the two kings might be traced to a sense of insecurity on their part. They do not feel secure and self-confident enough to face out the petitions and challenges in an orderly way, but have to resort to tactics that are more or less peremptory and disruptive of conversational interaction or are designed to distort reality. It should be also observed how in both scenes third parties on the stage, persons who may be presumed to be loyal subjects of the king, evince sympathy or even outright physical support for the challengers. Thus Albany and Cornwall protect Kent's life, and Leontes' many commands to his attendants to remove Pauline by brute force are spectacularly unsuccessful. For their part, the tactics of disruption, manipulation and reality-distortion on the part of the two kings conspire to bring about a measure of audience sympathy for the pleaders, for the underdogs, in the two scenes.

In the two episodes Shakespeare confronted the question of how to present a challenge to a king from a subject with a just grievance, a delicate problem in the society in which he was writing. In the conversational exchanges in question the kings' speeches contain elements that ensure that a considerable amount of audience sympathy accrues to the underdogs, and there is a remarkable similarity between the scenes in this respect. At the same time, this finding must be immediately moderated and counterbalanced by the consideration that towards the end of each episode the king regains a measure of his self-assurance and

perhaps of audience sympathy. Lear does not use his sword and instead pronounces a more deliberate sentence, and at the end of the other episode Shakespeare allows Leontes the exquisite rhetorical question «Were I a tyrant, / Where were her life?» (122-123), which he answers himself «She durst not call me so, / If she did know me one» (123-124). The rhetorical question and the answer to it denote a return of detachment and of self-confidence. There is a measure of sympathy shown for the challenger in both episodes, but at the end of each episode the rhetorical and psychological equilibrium is restored, with the king asserting his authority in a manner that is accepted without argument by those present, including the challengers. The analysis here cannot resolve the question of whether the effect of the episodes in question is to undermine or to underpin royal authority, the former by way of sympathy accruing to the challengers and the latter by way of the hierarchical and rhetorical equilibrium being restored at the end of each episode. What the present article does is to clarify the rhetorical progression of acts and actions in the episodes, highlighting the applicability of methods of linguistic pragmatics to this end.

NOTES

[1] The author is grateful to Ian Gurney and Robert MacGilleon, both of the University of Tampere, for reading and commenting on an earlier version of this article and to James Hurford, of the University of Edinburgh, for reading and commenting on the next to final version of the article at the 1995 LSA Institute in Albuquerque. Markku Kaunisto, also of the University of Tampere, deserves thanks for checking the article. Of course, the author alone is responsible for remaining shortcomings of the final version.

[2] The textual references in this article are to Evans, ed. (1974), and the textual extracts are from the same source.

[3] On the special properties of dramatic discourse, see for instance Downes (1989: 228 f).

[4] Cf., in the present context, Coulthard (1977: 171), Downes (1989: 226 ff), Herman (1991: 97 ff), Rudanko (1993: 18 f) and Bennison (1993: 79 ff).

[5] On topic change, cf. Covelli and Murray (1980) and Levinson (1983: 314 f).

[6] For another study, conceived independently of the present one, of the application of conversation analysis to the first episode, see Herman (1991: 114 ff).

[7] The analysis is from Searle (1969: 66). In the analysis «H» stands for «Hearer» and «S» for «Speaker.»

[8] The account is from Rudanko (1993: 144 f), with slight modifications. The term «eulogistic epithet» was coined by Ian Gurney, personal communication.

[9] Here we are reminded of Dubrow's (1987: 28 ff) account of the effect of naming and misnaming in *Venus and Adonis*.

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