

## Words Made of Breath: Gender and Vocal Agency in *King John*

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WHEN PHILIP, the conflicted French monarch of Shakespeare's *King John*, swears to a peace agreement with England, he gives weight to his words by emphasizing that they are made of breath. Standing beside England's monarch, he declares:

This royal hand and mine are newly knit,  
And the conjunction of our inward souls  
Married in league, coupled and linked together  
With all religious strength of sacred vows;  
The latest breath that gave the sound of words  
Was deep-sworn faith, peace, amity, true love  
Between our kingdoms and our royal selves.

(3.1.226–32)<sup>1</sup>

In his recollection that breath enables words to be sounded and promises to be kept, Philip presents his vocal expression as, at once, a physical and a spiritual act. On the one hand, breath is the airy matter that, from a physical perspective, must be released in order for vocal sounds to be produced and heard. The actor who plays Philip on the stage cannot help but recognize this material reality, as he would need to decipher the best places to pause and breathe while delivering this key speech. Yet as Philip insists upon the inviolability of the vow of peace he has sworn to his new ally, he emphasizes less the physical properties of breath than its spiritual significance. In claiming that his breath carries “deep-sworn faith, peace, amity, true love,” Philip thematizes his breath as the guarantor of steadfastness. While the joining of hands may be symbolic of an agreement, the exchange and coupling of breath enacts a deeper commitment, a “conjunction of . . . souls.”<sup>2</sup>

As Philip's lines invoke the notion that speech is breath—a trope prevalent throughout Shakespeare's plays and in early modern writing more generally—they suggest a tension between Philip's thematization of speech (breath being a metaphor for voice) and his performance of speech (breath being the physical substance that enables the actor playing Philip to be heard). On a thematic level, the trope of breath represents to Philip's audiences the depth of his promise, but from a material, performance perspective, where Philip's words are in essence mere ephemeral air, Philip's promises seem far more uncertain. Such promises, as the audience will soon learn, are only as staunch as the actual breath Philip, and the actor playing him, use to communicate.

In its simultaneous acceptance and suspicion of the agency of the breath, *King John* stands in good historical company. Early modern anatomists and natural philosophers embrace similarly ambivalent positions on the nature of breath—an ambivalence, I would argue, that is animated by their uneasy divergence from Aristotelian theories of vocal sound.<sup>3</sup> Aristotle establishes that the human voice acquires its capacity to create meaning when the soul stirs the air within the body, causing that air to strike the vocal organs and the speaker to emit the breath that carries words; soul is effectively contained in the breath expelled during voiced speech.<sup>4</sup> Early seventeenth-century anatomists like Helkiah Crooke and natural philosophers like Frances Bacon diverge from Aristotle in their emphasis on the physical properties of breath and the environment through which it moves. Using tools like dissection, observation, and experiment, they move beyond abstract theorizing of the soul to describe, for instance, how changes in the temperature and moisture of the air delay the reception of a voice. Yet, as many have pointed out about the seventeenth century "revolution" in science, such practical, materialist explanations by no means point to a clear break with ancient thought. For one thing, even anti-scholastic explanations of vocal sound are grounded in ancient theories of matter.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as Bruce R. Smith notes, many early modern writers try to reconcile Aristotelean views of voice as soul with their own observations about the voice's physical properties.<sup>6</sup> Aristotelean and "new" scientific perspectives did not always coexist without friction, however. When writers turn to the role of breath in vocal communication, a fascinating tension arises between spiritual and physical explanations. Crooke's and Bacon's studies of vocal sound lead them to imply that, in some cases, the physical

attributes of breath and its environment can compromise the successful transport of sound, and, concurrently, of soul.

Philip's speech, like *King John* as a whole, gains dramatic energy by capturing this tension between spiritual and material meanings of breath. The result is almost comical in Philip's case, for moments after reciting his solemn lines, Philip breaks his vow of peace and renews a conflict with England that will rage and subside repeatedly for the rest of the play. Like the promises of other rulers in the play, Philip's sworn oaths turn out to be, in the words of *King John's* Constance, "vain breath" (3.1.8), mere puffs of air that have no value because they lack secure form.<sup>7</sup> While Philip deploys the metaphor of speech as breath in order to shore up his vocal authority, he learns quickly that he cannot disavow what Constance recognizes as a material fact of vocal performance. Breath may be a vehicle for the soul and thereby a guarantor of communicative power, but it is also, as Bacon and Crooke reiterate, "vain," ephemeral air and is thus an untrustworthy medium for expression. With its inherent unmanageability, physical breath can undermine even the most heartfelt of men's vows.

It is no surprise that Constance, rather than Philip, underscores this sobering perspective on vocal authority, for the tension I have cited between spiritual and material meanings of breath takes on gendered significance in *King John*. As I shall argue, the play's central authoritative characters, all of whom are men, tend to ignore, displace, or misread the precarious materiality of their voices, often invoking the trope of breath as soul to cement their vocal power. By contrast, the play's more marginalized characters, women and children, recognize and call attention to breath's ephemeral material form. Their appeals to breath's material attributes, rather than signifying these characters' complete disempowerment, as one might expect, point instead to the characters' surprising influence in the play's political arena. Constance, Eleanor, and Arthur demonstrate the ways the unpredictable physical form of the voice can be constitutive of vocal power. In doing so they prompt an interrogation of modern assumptions about the relationship between voice and agency. Where a traditional view of potent, transgressive speech might emphasize a bond between voice and body—the speaking agent having "a voice of her own"—I maintain that in *King John* it is the *disarticulation* of voice from body that generates vocal power. Through the trope of breath, the play presents this

more capacious model of agency as especially available to, and practiced by, women and youths.<sup>8</sup>

As I have begun to suggest, the play's perspective on vocal authority is intimately tied to the material circumstances of its performance. This is particularly true on account of its use of boys to play the parts of Constance, Eleanor, and Arthur. Using boys to enact women's parts, Shakespeare's stage disrupted any assumed unity of voice and body, dissociating male anatomy and female voice. Yet whatever roles they played, boy actors were ideally positioned to interrogate through their performances the material conditions for vocal agency because of their liminal physical state. With their physiologically and acoustically unsteady pubescent voices, boy actors exposed the material realities of vocalization, showing, much like Crooke's and Bacon's writings, the work involved in directing ephemeral breath. As the play's marginalized characters underscore the precarious materiality of their utterances, they establish a parallel between the challenges of vocal agency that face them as characters in the fiction of the play and the challenges that face actors in theatrical performance of the play. Thus, I will argue in closing, *King John* throws into relief the interconnectedness between the projects of "theatrical" and "literary" analysis.

### The Windy Breath of Soft Petitions

*King John* is certainly not unique among Shakespeare's plays in its use of tropes of breath to thematize problems of vocal agency. A range of plays invoke the voice's evanescent physical form as emblematic of vocal inadequacy. For instance, Falstaff, shirking his obligation to be honorable, mocks the word "honor" as but "Air," and thus not worth his trouble (*1 Henry IV*, 5.1.133–40). Longaville appeals to a commonplace syllogism involving breath to excuse his practice of oath-breaking: "vows are but breath, and breath a vapour is . . . If broken then, it is no fault of mine" (*Love's Labours Lost*, 4.3.66; 70).<sup>9</sup> A vow composed of breath, a mere vapor, is fragile by its material nature; that it cannot be upheld, Longaville submits, is a logical conclusion. Beatrice appeals to the same syllogism involving breath to reprimand Benedick for attacking Claudio with mere "foul words" (*Much Ado About Nothing*, 5.2.51): "Foul words is but foul wind, and foul wind is but foul breath, and foul breath

is noisome; therefore I will depart unkiss'd" (5.2.52–54). No matter how vehement Benedick's words may have been, their physical nature—mere wind—betrays their impotence. For all these characters, if "words be made of breath" (*Hamlet*, 3.4.197), then spoken promises are, by their very nature, untrustworthy. Insofar as the actors playing the parts of Falstaff, Longaville, and Beatrice use their own breath to sound out these statements, the very performance of these lines helps convey suspicion about vocal authority. Since breath is a crucial part of any vocal performance, it serves as a particularly fitting trope for accenting concerns about vocal agency that are a frequent subject of investigation in Shakespeare's dramatic fictions.

The trope of breath serves this function to particularly compelling effect in *King John*, the history play that employs imagery of breath more pervasively than any other. Jane Donawerth notes, in fact, that *King John* ranks second among Shakespeare's plays for oral speech imagery (including tongue, mouth, throat, ear, air, and breath). Moreover, she shows that the play's descriptions of language tend to be more physical than in other plays that emphasize linguistic imagery, with "breath" being the most frequent metaphor for language.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it is partly through meditations on the physicality of breath, I would suggest, that *King John* grapples with an issue that has dominated criticism of the play since the late twentieth century: language and authority.<sup>11</sup> Language in *King John* has been described as an "agent of dissolution" in a world devoid of a single external source of authority and a "manifestation of the corruption in political ambition."<sup>12</sup> For most critics who address linguistic instability in *King John*, speech in the play is interesting insofar as it intersects with a range of historical practices and cultural ideologies that were the site of early modern debates about authority, including patrilineal descent, historiographic methodology, patriotic values, religious providentialism, and Machiavellian individualism.<sup>13</sup>

Although the relationship between the play's speech and the forces generating early modern culture has received extensive treatment, scholarship has devoted less attention to the central material practice that the speech of the play addresses: the practice of vocal performance itself. Moreover, despite extensive work on the play's verbal style, no one has investigated the materiality of the spoken word as it relates to the play's treatment of gender differences. Yet in *King John* imagery of breath reveals a crucial difference between

the vocal authority of men and that of women and children. Indeed, the play imagines an expanded political role for its marginalized characters and a more circumscribed role for its most powerful male characters by underscoring that breath is not only a metaphor for confident, soul-filled speech, but also the ephemeral material form the spoken word assumes when it conveys thought. *King John's* women and children affect the play's political landscape by harnessing the unpredictable theatricality of breath.

Eleanor models such vocal agency in her first utterance of the play: a whisper. When the play opens, Eleanor's son, King John, learns that France will support, with military force if necessary, another claimant to England's throne, Constance's son Arthur. At the conclusion of this public political showdown, Eleanor quietly reprimands her son for not listening to her when she had cautioned him to take Constance's complaints about Arthur's right to the throne more seriously. In effect, it is because he would not listen to either woman that he now must engage in military action. To John's rejoinder that England is his by right as well as by "strong possession" (1.1.39), Eleanor corrects him:

Your strong possession much more than your right,  
Or else it must go wrong with you and me;  
So much my conscience whispers in your ear,  
Which none but heaven and you and I shall hear.

(1.1.40–43)

The lines set up a generative conflict between the role of breath in vocal performance and the figure of breath as a metaphor for voice. As Juliet Dusinberre argues, Eleanor's whispered rebuke of John may be construed within the fiction as a private utterance, but the speech actually appeals strategically to the theater audience, who clearly are also party to Eleanor's remark. Dusinberre notes that Eleanor's whisper, as it solicits the audience's recognition of her "superior intelligence" and control over political events of the play, advances her theatrical power.<sup>14</sup> I would add that the whisper is an ideal mode of utterance for defining the theatrical nature of Eleanor's agency insofar as it reflects on the role of breath in crafting sound. More than any other form of vocal utterance, whispers foreground that the one action essential to any vocalization is the production of breath, for the whisper communicates without using the critical organ early modern writers associated with speech, the lar-

ynx.<sup>15</sup> In Shakespeare's theater, the dramatized whisper is an especially efficient theatrical device for displaying actors' engagement of their breath. Actors cannot speak in genuine whispers if they wish for the audience to hear their words. Whereas the character Eleanor uses only breath in her whispered remarks to John, the actor playing Eleanor must engage both breath and larynx to project these lines—and must incorporate visual markers of the *aside* to indicate private speech. As Eleanor's whisper sets up a tension between theatrical and fictional uses of voice, it exposes Eleanor's power as rooted more in her public theatrical presence than her domestic role as John's mother. Eleanor's vocal agency is a function of her ability to use the theatrical medium to distance her voice from her person. While she *figures* her critical maternal voice as breath—gentle in its tone and inaudible to anyone but John—she *performs* her voice loudly to the theater audience, wryly reminding them that she holds the royal reigns.

Eleanor's recognition of the material attributes of the voice, and especially the role of breath in crafting sound, enables her to exercise a softer, more subtle, and less easily circumscribed kind of power than has been recognized by critics of the play. Critics who discuss female speech in *King John* have generally emphasized the outspokenness of Eleanor as the source of her vocal power. Noting in particular the quarrel between Eleanor and Constance that dominates the play's plot and commands much stage time, critics comment on the sheer quantity of lines given over to female voices and the "irreverent" nature of these contributions.<sup>16</sup> Women, Phyllis Rackin writes, "set the subversive keynote" in this particular history play, but only until the second half when, killed off, they are reduced to "the silent objects of male narration."<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, if we examine the ways Eleanor and Constance gesture when they speak toward the material form of their voices, we discover that their vocal agency also can involve less overtly aggressive, and thus less easily circumscribed, forms of theatrical verbal display.

For instance, later in the play when Eleanor watches Philip and Lewis whispering about whether they will accept Angier's peace proposal, a plan that would enable John to keep the crown without further bloodshed, she says to John:

Mark how they whisper. Urge them while their souls  
Are capable of this ambition  
Lest zeal now melted by the windy breath

Of soft petitions, pity, and remorse,  
Cool and congeal again to what it was.

(2.1.475–79)

Eleanor's shift from noting the whispers to considering the state of the souls of the French is a logical one in terms of early modern understandings of the signification of breath. Followers of Aristotle would see breath as a vehicle for the speaker's soul, thus imbuing an utterance with sense and conviction. As whispers corroborate the role of breath in creating vocal sound, a conversation performed in whispers represents communication as a transmission of souls.<sup>18</sup> But, unlike Philip, whose imagery of breath we examined at the beginning of this essay, Eleanor does not dwell on the spiritual significance of breath; she immediately recalls how its material form shapes the soul's adoption of new convictions: "Lest zeal now melted by the windy breath . . . cool and congeal." Because the Folio of *King John* does not punctuate the phrase "Lest zeal now melted by the windy breath," there is much disagreement among editors about to whom the "windy breath" belongs and whether *zeal* refers to France's eagerness for the peace plan or for Arthur's cause. The disagreement has implications, I would argue, for how we comprehend the agency of breath, and thus of female vocal power. Most editors argue that the speech refers to France's support for Arthur's cause (placing the comma after *zeal*) and, by implication, the "windy breath" would belong to Hubert and his "soft petitions" for peace.<sup>19</sup> Braunmuller argues persuasively, however, that since Hubert's speech has been anything but "soft" (the Bastard has just referred to Hubert's declamatory rant in favor of the peace settlement as "cannon-fire" [2.1.462]), the "windy breath" belongs to Arthur's mother Constance and *zeal* is support for the peace offer.<sup>20</sup> To paraphrase: Constance's future pleas against the peace proposal (which would leave her cause for Arthur unsupported by removing France as her advocate) might, with their appeals to pity and remorse, lead the French to change course. The reading makes more sense of the description of "windy" speech as that which is filled with "pity and remorse." Significantly for my purposes, the reading also gestures toward the peculiar power of "windy breath," which can shape the play's political landscape perhaps even more effectively than the "cannon-fire" that characterizes Hubert's speech.

The agency of Constance's speech, and more broadly of "windy



breath," becomes even more pronounced if one recognizes how Eleanor's lines draw on breath's material attributes. However "windy" Constance's pleas might be, they are still able, Eleanor suggests, to "cool and congeal" France's zealous commitment to Arthur, returning France's "melted zeal" to the level at which it was in the beginning of the play. Editors have not suggested this particular reading of "zeal" in conjunction with my reading of "windy breath" above, but the reading makes sense in light of early modern understandings of the material properties of the breath.<sup>21</sup> Many liquefied substances congeal and harden when they cool, and the breath was observed in the early modern period to be capable of altering the temperature of the substance with which it comes into contact. Indeed the breath's ability to act as an agent of both warming and cooling is a source of amazement to Thomas Wright, who writes, "Some men wonder (and not without reason) how it commeth to passe, that out of the same mouth should issue a cold wind to coole the hot pottage, and a hot breath to warme the cold hands."<sup>22</sup> If we account for this larger scope of capability for windy breath, Constance's potential pleas have even more extensive agency: her voice can not only change France's mind about peace (the current issue at stake), but also restore France to its original ardent level of support for Arthur's cause (the much bigger issue at stake). Calling Constance's speech "windy breath" would seem to mock her expressive capacities: Constance will not blow anything down; hers is not the voice of "cannon-fire," but the circuitous, undirected sound of pleading. Nevertheless, the play suggests that vocal power need not be direct, commanding, and intense in order to work. Constance's breath is imagined to be capable of turning a debilitated, melted substance into a hardy, solid one, reconstituting France's enfeebled determination. And like the breath Wright describes, which has contrasting effects on the substance with which it comes into contact—cooling the porridge and warming the hands—Constance's breath need not even be directed toward a particular goal in order to work. She may wish only to change France's mind about a peace with England, but because breath's effects are not determined solely by the intentions of the speaking individual, Constance's windy petition may accomplish much more than is planned.

For both Constance and Eleanor, the potency of breathed sounds stems, surprisingly, from breath's ephemeral form and from its resistance to being controlled by its producer—the very qualities that

would seem to threaten vocal agency by undermining the link between voice and body. For Constance and Eleanor, the relation of speech and body proves “scandalous,” to borrow the term Shoshana Felman uses in her feminist psychoanalytic account of J. L. Austin’s speech act theory.<sup>23</sup> Insofar as speaking is a bodily act, Felman argues, speech exposes the speaking subject as never in full control of its articulations: “the [speech] act cannot know what it is doing.”<sup>24</sup> In Judith Butler’s reading of Felman, “the speaking body signifies in ways that are not reducible to what a body ‘says.’”<sup>25</sup> A similar disjunction between voice and body helps explain the peculiar agency of Constance’s windy breath and Eleanor’s powerful whispers. Because of the material attributes of their voices, of their breath, Constance and Eleanor’s utterances may exceed the meanings intended by the speakers—saying more, doing more than these speakers and their audiences expect.

Poststructuralist feminist accounts of language resonate suggestively with early modern scientific writings on vocal sound. For early modern theorists of acoustics, a dissociation between voice and body is essential to communication, for breath must be transitory in order to work as a conveyer of sound. Explaining the physiology of speech, Helkiah Crooke notes that sound is produced when two bodies collide, emitting an audible “species.” In the case of voice, a rush of air—the breath motivated by the lungs—hits the vocal organs, causing the air to break and for an audible species to be emitted.<sup>26</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides a useful definition of what Crooke means by “species”: “a supposed emission or emanation from outward things, forming the direct object of cognition for the various senses or for the understanding.”<sup>27</sup> The “species audible” emitted when two objects collide acts, in effect, as an ambassador for or translator of the original collision, transforming that message into a language that the senses can understand. The sound we hear, then, is not the original sound produced by the collision of objects but rather a re-presentation of that sound, what Francis Bacon calls an “image” of the sound. Bacon explains this important distinction: “After that *Sound* is created, (which is in a moment,) wee finde it continueth some small time, melting by little and little. In this there is a wonderfull Errour among Men, who take this to be a *Continuance* of the First *Sound*; whereas (in truth) it is a *Renovation*, and not a *Continuance*.”<sup>28</sup> In effect, early modern acoustic theory problematizes the “metaphysics of presence”<sup>29</sup> that *King John*’s Philip espouses in the passage with which

we began. Bacon and Crooke treat the voice not as the smooth continuance of a speaker's mind and intentions, but as a re-presentation of the speaker's original thoughts, made audible through technologies of sound propagation. Considered from this scientific perspective, the agency of a voice is contingent on its difference and distance from its site of production.<sup>30</sup>

This is not to say that Crooke and Bacon overlook the problems such a theory of vocal agency presents, and the way these writers frame such problems sheds light on *King John's* interrogation of vocal agency. In particular, as Bacon and Crooke explore the technologies of sound propagation, they note ways that the medium through which sound moves—most commonly air—can often compromise the vocalized message. The quality of the air (e.g., density, temperature, motion) can affect the temporal and spatial life of a sound. Explains Crooke, "Pure-thin and cleere ayre" will "sooner receive the sound" than "Ayre which is contained in a concavous or hollow place."<sup>31</sup> Bacon goes on to write that although thin air accepts the sound well, being "better pierced," "Thinner or Drier *Aire*, carrieth not the *Sound* so well, as more Dense."<sup>32</sup> The time of day or year matter because these variables determine the heaviness and moisture of the medium. Bacon claims we hear better at night as well as when the southern winds are blowing, because the thickness of the air at these times "preserveth the *Sound* better from Wast[e]." The quality of the air not only affects the progress of a sound, but can destroy it completely. Bacon explains this "*Sudden . . . Perishing of Sounds*" as resulting from the active influence of the environment through which sound moves:

The *Aire* doth willingly imbibe the *Sound* as gratefull, but cannot maintaine it; For that the *Aire* hath (as it should seeme) a secret and hidden Appetite of Receiving the *Sound* at the first; But then other Grosse and more Materiate Qualities of the *Aire* straightwaies suffocate it.<sup>33</sup>

Bacon ascribes human attributes of will and appetite to the air, depicting the space between speakers and listeners as a battleground of competing tendencies; whether a sound reaches its destination will depend on which side wins out—the "appetite" of reception or the "materiate" quality of suffocation.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the fact that vocal sound both is composed of air and relies upon an airy medium for transport means that any utterance is vulnerable to environmental conditions beyond the speaker's control.

It is no wonder that so many of *King John*'s characters turn to metaphors of breath to express their distrust in vows. Even Constance does so early in the play, before she realizes breath's agentive potential. When she receives news that the French king has sacrificed Arthur's cause to secure his own dynasty, she is dumb-founded, unable to believe that a monarch's oath is violable. To Salisbury, who delivers the news, she retorts:

I trust I may not trust thee, for thy word  
Is but the vain breath of a common man.  
Believe me, I do not believe thee, man;  
I have a king's oath to the contrary.

(3.1.7–10)

The matching meter at the beginnings of lines 8 and 10 accentuates the contrast between the spondees "vain breath" and "king's oath." Constance envisions a clear hierarchy between the inherently potent word of a king and the futile word of comparatively "common" men. Underlying her disbelief is her inability to recognize at this point that while a king might represent divine authority, and embody that authority in his voice, the breath that creates that voice is composed of human stuff and thus can be just as "vain" as the breath of ordinary men.

Yet unlike the kings and common men about whom Constance speaks—and to whom we will turn in the second part of this essay—Constance soon follows Eleanor in recognizing and exploiting dramatically the unpredictable material attributes of the breath. When she learns later in this act that Arthur has been captured and infers (correctly) that his life must be in danger, she falls into a vocal rage that the male characters of the play find unbearable and label a symptom of her mad "affliction" (3.4.36).<sup>35</sup> Insisting on her sanity, Constance stands by her right to grieve vocally and to denounce the world around her. Ignoring Philip's pleas that she be silent and at peace, she declares:

No, no, I will not, having breath to cry.  
O that my tongue were in the thunder's mouth;  
Then with a passion would I shake the world,  
And rouse from sleep that fell anatomy  
Which cannot hear a lady's feeble voice  
Which scorns a modern invocation.

(3.4.37–42)

Reading this passage too quickly, we might conclude that Constance expresses only frustration about the ineffectiveness of her “lady’s feeble voice.” Yet like Eleanor’s whisper, Constance’s lament works on multiple levels. For while she rhetorically declares herself vocally powerless, in the theater she is a dominant presence, her pathos the center of attention in this scene. Constance subtly corrects King Philip’s assessment of her moments before: “A grave unto a soul, / Holding th’eternal spirit against her will, / In the vile prison of afflicted breath” (3.4.18–20). Constance’s “afflicted breath” is not merely a sign of a deteriorating body and mind, but an efficient instrument through which she criticizes men of power: she penetrates Pandulph’s lofty spiritual guise, declaring him “too holy” (3.4.44); and she calls King Philip out on his purported sympathy for her plight, arguing that if he truly cared, he would hasten “To England” (line 268) and rescue Arthur.<sup>36</sup> Constance uses her “afflicted breath” to mourn for her son while at the same time exposing the hypocrisy around her. When she refuses to be “gentle Constance” and proclaims she will continue to rant as long as she has “breath to cry,” Constance figures her vocal exclamations—whether they be heartbroken sobs or furious exclamations—as motivated by her breath. Since, she argues, breath is an indicator of both speech and life, she need only live in order to speak. Simply by breathing, she has tools to express her grief and anger against the men who betrayed her and are responsible for her son’s imminent death.

In her use of breath to circumvent restrictions on her speech, Constance resembles some of Shakespeare’s similarly constrained female heroines who are able to exploit the breath’s precarious form when they seem least able to control expression. We might think here of the sleeping Desdemona in *Othello*, with her “balmy breath that dost almost persuade” Othello not to murder her (5.2.16). The uncontrollable flow of breath similarly grants an eerie form of vocal power to Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*. When Marcus inquires about her ravaged appearance, Lavinia parts her lips as if to speak and “like to a bubbling fountain stirr’d with wind” blood pours from her mouth, “[c]oming and going with [her] honeyed breath” (2.4.23–25). As her breath pushes forth the blood from her mouth, it communicates to Marcus that she has been raped, her tongue removed to prevent her from informing on her assailants. With gruesome literalism, *Titus Andronicus* points to breath as a medium for speech, one that need not be controlled by the speaking

subject in order to be effective. Indeed, Lavinia and Desdemona need not even intend to speak—to direct breath—in order to communicate, albeit in limited ways.<sup>37</sup> Like Constance, they perform surprising acts of vocal agency precisely at the moments that they have the least control over their voices. Notably, this agency, a function of the “scandalous” relationship between voice and body, is made possible by the association of these women’s voices with the material form of breath.

Constance affirms the expanded agency of the material breath when she goes on to articulate her wish that her cries could be made more forceful if they were even further detached from her person: if her “tongue were in the thunder’s mouth,” her “lady’s feeble voice” might be able to “shake the world.” Constance follows Bacon and Crooke in representing vocal agency as a function of the distance of the voice from the speaking body. Indeed Constance imagines her voice to be not less but *more* potent when it enters its erratic natural environment: like the laments of Lavinia, which can be heard when the natural forces of the wind carry forward her “honeyed breath,” Constance’s cries would become more effective were they to leave her “lady’s” body and be delivered by thunder.<sup>38</sup> The speech bears an interesting resemblance to Emilia’s insistent refusals to be silent at the end of *Othello*. Locating her vocal agency in the potent movements of another unpredictable force of the air, the northern winds, Emilia responds to Iago: “’Twill out, ’twill out! I peace? / No, I will speak as liberal as the north” (5.2.217–19).<sup>39</sup> Emilia daws on an early modern understanding of winds as among the most vigorous forces of nature, their agency in part a function of their mysterious and independent workings. Bacon’s *The Naturall and Experimentall History of Winds* (trans. 1653) figures winds as potent agents of change, affecting human appetite and inflicting any number of diseases, all “without help of man.”<sup>40</sup> The aptness of wind as a metaphor for Emilia’s voice becomes further evident when we see how Bacon compares winds to human breath:

The breath in mans *Microcosmos*, and in other Animals, doe very well agree with the windes in the greater world: For they are engendered by humours, and alter with moisture as winde and rain doth, and are dispersed and blow freer by a greater heat. And from them that observation is to be transferred to the winds, namely, that breaths are engendered of matter and yields a tenacious vapour, not easie to be dissolved; as Beanes, Pulse, and fruits; which is so likewise in greater windes.<sup>41</sup>

Unpredictable, fleeting, ungovernable, yet “tenacious” in its power, breath, like “greater winds,” is a compelling trope for female voice. And as Emilia bolsters her confidence to speak by comparing her voice to the northern winds, so Constance denounces corrupt male power by entrusting her windy breath to the unpredictable capacities of the environment, a forum well outside the scope of human direction.

### Holy Vows and Hot Air

Recognizing that Constance’s breath thrives beyond the “grave” of her body is crucial if we want to appreciate the vocal agency Constance exhibits even when she is no longer present mentally and physically. Since Constance’s body disappears from the stage and from the fiction of the play in 4.2 (when her death is reported), critics often assume that erased with Constance’s body is her poignant interrogation of the play’s dysfunctional, masculine political culture.<sup>42</sup> However, as some recent critics and directors of the play have suggested, the absence of women’s bodies does not inevitably preclude their ability to serve as a subversive force in the play.<sup>43</sup> Constance’s “afflicted breath,” hardly reducible to being an “attribute”<sup>44</sup> of her body, seems to linger on as an agent of critique even when, perhaps especially when, her body is absent.

Indeed, throughout the second half of *King John*, the model of vocal agency enacted by Constance (with her self-distanced, “windy” petitions) and Eleanor (with her subtly theatrical whispers) haunts the play’s adult male characters, who grapple repeatedly with the implications of this model for their political authority. As these male characters dominate vocally the second half of the play, they are incapable of recognizing how the unpredictable and detachable material form of the voice enables vocal power. Even when they affirm the materiality of their speech, they refuse to interpret breath’s agency as a function of its uncontrollable form. An investment in guiding the unguidable material breath is evident in John’s first confrontation with the pope’s legate Pandulph. Pandulph demands that John answer to charges of slighting one of the pope’s chosen archbishops: “This in our foresaid Holy Father’s name, / Pope Innocent, I do demand of thee” (3.1.145–46). Pandulph has not (yet) asserted John’s inferiority to the pope, but John interprets this demand for answers as a challenge to his su-

premacy: "What earthy name to interrogatories / Can task the free breath of a sacred king?" (3.1.147–48). Although the folio version of this line employs in place of *task* the word "tast"—an older spelling for *taste*, meaning also to put to trial—most modern editors steer clear of the sensual significance of *tast*, usually substituting a range of alternatives, including *task*, *tax*, and *test*.<sup>45</sup> However, the sensual significance of *tast* is crucial to the passage, which invokes as it disavows, the materiality of speech. Pandulph's command that John use his voice to explain his actions is, in John's formulation, tantamount to forcing John to offer up his breath—"the free breath of a sacred king"—for tasting, thus possibly for consumption and possession.<sup>46</sup> John bristles at the implication that his "free breath" will, once it enters the space beyond his body, be acted upon (i.e., tasted) by Pandulph.

To authorize his words, John thus collapses the distance between his voice and his body, maintaining that even once his voice as breath leaves his body, it remains securely linked to that sacred origin. The claim has validity in terms of early modern understandings of breath as a conveyer of soul. Balthazar Gerbier presents this perspective elegantly in his lecture *The Art of Well Speaking* (published in 1650), which describes the "Spirituell soule" of the voice—"its sence"—as clothed in a "corporeall robe," and "enter[ing] into the pores by permission of the corporall ayre." When this "spirit . . . of humane speech" arrives at its destination, the listener's ears, it "bereaves its selfe of the Corporeall robe, and is conveyed unto our intellectuall parts, and there manifests it selfe, as in a true draught, the very being, thoughts, conceptions, desires, inclinations, and the other Spirituall passions of him that speaketh."<sup>47</sup> During the final moment of communication, the "spirituelle soule" is transmitted to an auditor virtually intact ("as in a true draught"), enabling a voice to affect listeners in the way its speaker intends ("the very being, thoughts, conceptions, desires, inclinations" of the speaker). We can see why Philip and *King John*'s other confidently powerful male characters would so frequently summon the metaphor of breath as soul, for according to this perspective, the effectiveness of a speech act is virtually entirely dependent on the intentions of its speaker, which can be efficiently conveyed to another through the vehicle of breath.

These male characters can maintain overconfidence about their vocal authority, however, only at the cost of neglecting the messy and unpredictable nature of what Gerbier calls the voice's "corpo-



real robe.” Disavowing the volatile physicality of breath thus prevents the play’s male characters from taking advantage of breath’s expanded capacities. Pandulph is a case in point. Like John, he insists upon his breath’s freedom of movement and his own capacity to direct that movement. In an effort to convince Philip’s son Lewis to continue his father’s fight against England, Pandulph blusters that his breath will remove obstacles to the dauphin’s ascension to England’s throne:

Now hear me speak with a prophetic spirit;  
For even the breath of what I mean to speak  
Shall blow each dust, each straw, each little rub,  
Out of the path which shall directly lead  
Thy foot to England’s throne.

(3.4.126–30)

Although Pandulph’s voice is compared to a wind, it is imagined, unlike Constance’s “windy . . . soft petitions,” as targeted in its force and certain in its outcome. Pandulph believes he has complete dominion not just over world events, but over the material form of his voice; indeed, the breath he uses to articulate his plan will, through its local motion, clear the path for Lewis’s political future. Pandulph considers his breath so potent that when John finally apologizes to Rome and asks the legate to pressure France into surrendering, Pandulph confidently declares that his material voice will work upon Lewis: “It was my breath that blew this tempest up . . . My tongue shall hush again this storm of war” (5.1.17–20).

Lewis, however, swiftly challenges Pandulph’s vocal authority by seizing on and deconstructing the very metaphors of breath that Pandulph has so arrogantly deployed. When Pandulph instructs Lewis, in the name of the pope, to lay down his arms, Lewis refuses, reinterpreting Pandulph’s “holy breath” (5.2.68) as hot air:

Your breath first kindled the dead coal of wars  
Between this chastis’d kingdom and myself,  
And brought in matter that should feed this fire;  
And now ’tis far too huge to be blown out  
With that same weak wind which enkindled it.

(5.2.83–87)

Rather than disavowing the unpredictable material nature of breath, Lewis embraces it. Adapting the early modern proverb “a

little wind kindles, much puts out the fire,”<sup>46</sup> Lewis counters that the words Pandulph spoke to reignite tensions between England and France will hardly dissipate the full-fledged, blazing fire already in progress. Such fires (as audiences who attended the Globe’s eventful 1613 performance of *Henry VIII* would have observed) respond to climatic winds, not to human breath; they obey laws of nature that exist beyond even the most steady and controlled human action.

Despite his rhetorically effective recognition that no human subject has the capacity to direct natural phenomena, Lewis shares Pandulph’s audacious belief that he can keep the flames of war moving to his own advantage. In the same breath that he challenges Pandulph’s agency, he flaunts his own. Using the personal pronoun “I” almost a dozen times in his thirty-line riposte, he claims the victories of war to be his own, the progress of this “fire” to be a consequence of his actions—self-guided work of one who is “too high-born to be . . . [an] instrument” (5.2.79–81) of Rome. Nevertheless, as recollections of the material world teach Pandulph his lesson about the contingency of voice, so they show Lewis the limits of personal agency in a tumultuous world. As the next scene unfolds, we learn that the ships Lewis assumes will clinch his victory against England crash to pieces, falling victim to unpredictable weather patterns that endanger the travel not only of ships, but, as Crooke and Bacon note, of words.

The voices and egos of other male characters in *King John* follow a similar trajectory. Salisbury’s breath, which he uses to swear sacred oaths, proves to be just as “vain” as Constance had once supposed. When he and the other noblemen discover Arthur’s dead body and, believing this to be King John’s work, vow revenge, Salisbury appeals to his breath as the source for the steadfastness of his oath: “Kneeling before this ruin of sweet life [the dead body of Arthur], / And breathing to his breathless excellence / The incense of a vow, a holy vow” (4.3.65–67). Echoing Salisbury’s sentiment that the breathing of a vow is equivalent to spiritual commitment to the matter at stake, Pembroke and Bigot solemnly recite together, “Our souls religiously confirm thy words” (4.3.73). Similar oaths are reiterated again when the nobles pledge their allegiance to Lewis and join the French fight. But, as throughout the play, the material conditions of speaking seem to undermine the spiritual authority of men’s oaths. However passionate their commitments, the lords are just as incapable of keeping these breathed vows as

they were in keeping their initial oaths of loyalty to the English king. As soon as they hear that Lewis has secretly vowed to execute them after they help him win the war, they return to John, swearing their allegiance.

Significantly, Lewis's oath regarding their execution, communicated by the dying Melun, plays on the imagery of breath the nobles had used when they first articulated their oaths. According to Melun, Lewis has sworn that

Even this night, whose black contagious breath  
Already smokes about the burning crest  
Of the old, feeble, and day-wearied sun—  
Even this ill night, your breathing shall expire.

(5.4.33–36)

The night's approach is imagined as rapidly spreading black air, here metaphorically described as "contagious breath" surrounding the men whose breathing, or life, shall expire. Once we note that the nobles highlight breath in their original swearing of oaths against John—"breathing to [Arthur's] breathless excellence / The incense of a vow, a holy vow" (4.3.66–67)—we can more easily observe the pun on *expire*. The figurative description of dying as losing one's breath or becoming "breathless" is analogous with the physical act of speaking—both involve the *expiration* of breath. The pun effectively mocks the solemnity of the noble's earlier oath-swearing ceremony, recalling, in contrast, the fragile material form of even the most heartfelt and sacred utterances.

Whereas movements of air—the "night's . . . breath"—endanger the lives of the nobles, they save, at least temporarily, the life of Arthur. Moments before Arthur accidentally kills himself during his escape from the palace, the youth miraculously manages to save his life by convincing his murderer, Hubert, of the unpredictability of breath. Arthur's opportunity to remind Hubert of the unstable nature of his breath arises when, as a consequence of the time expended by Arthur's "innocent prate" (4.1.25), the hot iron Hubert plans to use to excise Arthur's eyes cools and the coals that could be used to reheat the iron burn out. To Arthur's argument that this is nature's support for his cause—"The breath of heaven hath blown his [the coal's] spirit out (lines 109–10)—Hubert responds, "with my breath I can revive it [the coal]" (line 111). According to early modern terminology concerning agency, Hubert imagines his

breath as the *instrument* that, as it acts upon the *patient* (the coal), will enable the *patient* to become an *instrument* again.<sup>49</sup>

By this point in the play, such optimism regarding the instrumentality of breath should give the reader and listener pause. It certainly gives Arthur an opening to deliver his most convincing argument yet: breath is the kind of instrument that must leave the body of the speaker to work, thus its effect on the patient is particularly difficult to predict. Instead of rekindling the fire, Hubert's breath may cause the fire to "sparkle. . . / And like a dog that is compelled to fight, / Snatch at his master that doth tarre him on" (lines 114–16). Arthur suggests that when Hubert uses his breath to enable the agency of the instrument of torture, he may unintentionally surrender his own agency, turning the coals against himself instead. Whatever the intentions of the principle who uses it, breath may not have its anticipated effects—fire might respond to the breath differently. No doubt, as critics have observed, Hubert wavers in carrying out the torture largely as a consequence of his growing compassion for Arthur.<sup>50</sup> Yet Hubert's decision seems to be informed, at least in part, by his recognition of the limits of his control over breath. For it is Arthur's demonstration of the dispersal of human agency in a mercurial material world that immediately precedes Hubert's capitulation.

### Choreographing Breath in the Theater

Although Hubert's breath in this scene is imagined to be used only for the purposes of blowing air on coals, the significance of Arthur's comments to the representation of vocal agency in *King John* cannot be ignored, especially given the frequency with which the play associates breath with speech. Insofar as Arthur takes comfort in the surrender of breath to the vagaries of the air, he can be differentiated from *King John*'s adult male characters, who either disavow the materiality of breath completely, insisting upon its figurative, spiritual significance, or deny the precariousness of breath's material form in their claims that they can command the uncommandable movements of this airy substance. Arthur, by contrast, articulates a view of breath that resembles Constance's and Eleanor's. As we have seen, Constance and Eleanor not only foreground breath as the matter that causes words to resound, but they also demonstrate the agency of breath as "scandalous," a function

of its transience and detachability from the speaker. "Windy breath," for Constance and Eleanor, is effective not in spite, but *because* of its mobile, unpredictable form.

Similarities between Arthur, Constance, and Eleanor seem to have been observed and emphasized throughout the history of the play's performance. In the nineteenth century directors cast a female actor for the part of Arthur, a practice that, as Dusinberre argues, resolves the problem of finding a male child talented enough to perform this exacting role.<sup>51</sup> Whatever the intended reasons for this gender switch, it approaches the effect of Shakespeare's all-male company, insofar as it links Arthur to the play's female characters through the sex of the actors playing these roles. In Shakespeare's period, however, the casting of apprentice boys for these parts would have served the additional purpose of helping define the play's meditations on the issue of vocal agency: boys already represented a scandalous relationship between voice and body. And as they experienced the voice changes that were believed to accompany puberty, they were often viewed as incapable of controlling their voices.

The challenges of vocal control present for any actor would have been particularly acute where boy actors were concerned, for the precarious state of their pubescent bodies left their voices in an especially vulnerable state. From the perspective of humoral physiology, one of the dominant paradigms for understanding bodily experience in the period, boys going through puberty experience an increase in body heat and decrease in moisture. These physiological changes not only account for the development of reproductive organs—according to medical and scientific writers, all the moisture of the body is directed to the testicles, where sperm is generated—but explains why boys' voices begin to waver. As Bacon explains, "when much of the Moisture of the Body, which did before irrigate the Parts, is drawne downe to the Spermatically vessells; it leaveth the Body more hot than it was; whence commeth the dilatation of the Pipes."<sup>52</sup> As the pubescent boy's body gets hotter and drier, the windpipe through which air moves to create sound enlarges, and, as a consequence, fractures. As breath motivated by the speaker's lungs courses through this breaking windpipe, the irregularities of the windpipe compromise the smoothness of the voice produced: the boy is incapable of choreographing his voice effectively, and the voice squeaks or sounds, as Hamlet phrases it, "crack'd" (*Hamlet*, 2.2.48). As with most physio-

logical processes associated with puberty, the cracking of the wind-pipe and its effects on the movement of breath through and out the body cannot be controlled. Short of an intervention like castration, voice changes were inevitable for boys who performed on early modern English stages.<sup>53</sup> Given how central boys were to England's commercial theater industry, it is not surprising, as I have argued elsewhere, that boys' cracking, squeaking voices become a subject of investigation, humor, and general fascination in many of the plays written during the period.<sup>54</sup>

Insofar as the physiological state of the boy actor's body could compromise his capacity to move the breath that creates voice through and out of his body, the boy actor was an ideal figure for underscoring through performance the problems of vocal authority raised in the fiction of a play like *King John*. When the character Arthur thematizes voice as uncontrollable breath, he invokes the condition of the voice of the actor who plays him—a voice that, if not already cracking, carries the potential for uncontrollability. The intersection between the fictional and theatrical worlds of *King John* may help explain why the Bastard Falconbridge—who, like Arthur, is marginalized in the fiction of the play but, unlike Arthur, would have been played by an adult actor—bears little in common in terms of his use of the imagery of breath with Arthur, Constance, and Eleanor. Certainly the Bastard is more canny about vocal power than the other adult male characters in the play, for, as many critics have noted, he discovers quite quickly that the spoken word carries little authority in a world where oaths are just another “commodity” to be used at whim by wily politicians.<sup>55</sup> Yet unlike other marginalized characters, the Bastard does not appeal to the material form of breath when he deconstructs vocal authority. Even when his speech is referred to as breath, that speech is imagined to work more like “cannon-fire” than wind; Austria, for instance, complains that the Bastard is a “cracker [who] deafs our ears / With this abundance of superfluous breath” (2.1.147–48). Later in the play when the Bastard and Pandulph negotiate on behalf of John and Lewis, respectively, the Bastard expressly maligns breath as the authorizing force for voice. Lewis's declaration not to lay down arms is, according to the Bastard, “fury breath'd” by this “youth,” whereas the Bastard's own speech is authorized by the English King whose “royalty doth speak in me” (5.2.127–29). By comparing the Bastard and Arthur, we can see that appeals to unpredictable

breath as a metaphor for voice are the province of figures marginalized not only thematically, but *theatrically*.

If, as I have been suggesting, breath and its implications for agency are intimately linked to the theatrical conditions of performance, then what is the precise relationship between the movement of physical breath in a theater and a play's thematization of breath? Do the material conditions of voicing help explicate the issues of vocal agency represented in *King John*, or does the play's thematization of vocal agency reflect back on the use of voice by adult and child actors in the early modern English theater? The former, calling for a more "literary" approach, privileges the play's thematic concern with voice and authority; the latter, involving a more "theatrical" approach, privileges performance concerns, specifically the actor's vocal craft. To even frame the issue in terms of these antinomies, however, undermines the kind of performance criticism of Shakespeare I have been attempting in this essay. As W. B. Worthen argues in *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance*, the binary of "literary" versus "theatrical," of page versus stage, has beset the discipline of performance criticism with a host of problems, preventing it "from pursuing its justifying critical agenda: to locate the space and practice of criticism in relation to the practices of performance."<sup>56</sup> This is not to say that we should ignore the differences between page and stage, but rather consider how the forms overlap and intersect. P. A. Skantze models such an approach in *Stillness in Motion in the Seventeenth Century Theatre*, cautioning that the binary of print versus performance will "undo the subtleties, the anxieties, the inventive crossing of forms actually at work in the creation of both plays and books."<sup>57</sup> Remaining open to such "inventive crossing of forms," I have tried to follow Robert Weimann's approach to *King John* and consider how the play experiments with the tension between "dramatic representations and the circumstantial world" of the theater.<sup>58</sup>

Weimann broadens his treatment of this tension in *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare's Theatre*, which argues that "the imaginary play-world and the material world of Elizabethan playing" are equally important and interdependent "functions" of a play.<sup>59</sup> While Weimann is concerned primarily with explicating the relationship of "text" (which he associates with the "author's pen") and "performance" (which he associates, notably, with the "actor's voice"), his wider conceptualization of the functions of playing is useful for understanding how I

have sketched the interdependent relationship between *King John*'s thematization and performance of voice as breath. On the one hand, metaphors of speech as breath call attention to the precarious process of circulating one's voice in the Elizabethan theater; Constance, Eleanor, and Arthur's successful conveyance of their voices through this unstable communication process constitutes a testament to the (tenuous) strength of the boy actor's vocal craft. At the same time, the unpredictable movement of actors' breath as they speak, particularly noticeable in the case of pubescent boy actors, can serve as the inspiration for the particular views of vocal agency that the play asserts. Indeed, the realities of playing recall, like the writings of Croke and Bacon, the "scandalous" ways in which the agency of breath is a function of its distance from the speaker. Breath must leave the actor's body to work, but once it leaves, it becomes vulnerable to the forces of the theater air, and to the whims of audience members who receive it. Boy actors make manifest the challenges of vocal control and aural command present for all the male actors on Shakespeare's stage, indeed for anyone who communicates with the voice.

Most of all, perhaps, boy actors show the labor involved in directing windy breath. And when their voices worked successfully on the stage—as they must have for audiences to have heard Constance, Eleanor, and Arthur's powerful utterances—boy actors helped illustrate through performance a generative model of vocal agency. Performance, in Worthen's words, did "material and theoretical work."<sup>60</sup> Through the theatrical and thematic employment of breath, *King John* reminds its actors and the audience that listens to them that the physical performance of language sets the parameters—the limits and conditions—of vocal agency. And, as I have argued, it is the most vocally marginalized of Shakespeare's actors and characters who may have been best positioned to take advantage of these expanded parameters.

## Notes

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1. Unless otherwise noted, citations of *King John* follow L. A. Beaurline, ed., *King John*, New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). All other citations of Shakespeare plays follow *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), hereafter cited as Riverside.

2. The point is underscored when the pope's legate commands Philip to drop John's hand so as to destroy the symbol of their union; Philip reminds Pandulph that the bond that breath creates between two souls is less easily broken than that between two hands. Recalling the "deep-sworn faith" that was sounded by his breath, he responds, "I may disjoin my hand, but not my faith" (3.1.262).

3. Although late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English writers did not embark upon specific studies of sound (unlike their continental counterparts), several devote sections of their work on other topics to questions about auditory phenomena: the most significant treatments among these are Helkiah Crooke, *Microcosmographia: A Description of the Body of Man* (London, 1611) and Sir Francis Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum: Or a Naturall Historie* (London, 1626). As noted in Penelope Gouk, "Some English Theories of Hearing in the Seventeenth Century: Before and after Descartes," in *The Second Sense: Studies in Hearing and Musical Judgment from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Charles Burnett, Michael Fend, and Penelope Gouk (London: Warburg Institute, 1991), seventeenth-century English contributions to the history of acoustics are often ignored by historians of sound, since English writers do not add any new knowledge to the field. For Gouk the texts remain interesting as part of an intellectual history of English thought. For me they are useful because they help elucidate the tensions inherent in dramatic representations of the voice as a material substance.

4. Aristotle, *On the Soul*, trans. Hippocrates G. Apostle (Grinnell, Iowa: The Peripatetic Press, 1981), Book B; 8.420b.

5. Theories of matter proposed and developed by Democritus, Epicurus, Lucretius, and their followers explicitly countered Aristotle in viewing all substances, including breath, to be composed of minute, indivisible molecules, called atoms. Atomistic and "corpuscular" theories of matter experienced a revival in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, appearing for instance in works by Giordano Bruno, Thomas Hariot, and Francis Bacon, and in the "mechanical" philosophy of Thomas Hobbes, René Descartes, Pierre Gassend, among others. For an introduction to English writings concerning atomism, see Robert Hugh Kargon, *Atomism in England: From Hariot to Newton* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966). On Bacon and atomism, see Silvia A. Manzo, "Francis Bacon and Atomism: A Reappraisal," in *Late Medieval and Early Modern Corpuscular Matter Theories*, ed. John E. Murdoch Christoph Lüthy, William R. Newman (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

6. Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 98–99. My discussion of early modern acoustic theory throughout this essay is much indebted to Smith's study.

7. On how characters' traditional views of oaths as "spring[ing] from the most intimate depths of a swearer's being" conflicts with their "prolix justifications" of the need to break oaths, see Jonas Barish, "King John and Oath Breach," in *Shakespeare: Text, Language, Criticism, Essays in Honour of Marvin Spevack*, ed. Bernhard Fabian and Kurt Tetzeli von Rosador (Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 1987),

esp. 13. Barish's argument about characters' simultaneous commitment to these two understandings of oaths corroborates my findings about breath—an image that offers a similarly two-fold formulation of vocal agency. On Shakespeare's oaths and promises in the context of sixteenth and seventeenth century religious, political, and legal thought, see William Kerrigan, *Shakespeare's Promises* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

8. For a related view of how the metaphor of breath is associated with productive vocal failure in early modern literature, see Lynn Enterline, *The Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare*, Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Examining the legacy of Ovid in the Renaissance and particularly Ovid's association of poetic subjectivity with the loss of the female voice, Enterline elegantly demonstrates how tropes of air, breath, and wind enable writers to comment self-reflectively on the evanescent craft of poetry and the pressures of producing such poetry through the medium of writing. Whereas Enterline's focus is on early modern practices of writing and their relationship to ideologies of language, my emphasis is on early modern practices of speaking and their relationship to ideologies of vocal agency.

9. The set of images is articulated throughout early modern drama. For instance, in *Arden of Faversham* Alice incorporates the syllogism when she warns Mosby about swearing oaths: "Oaths are words, and words is wind, / And wind is mutable. Then I conclude / 'Tis childishness to stand upon an oath" (2.436–38). Anon., *Arden of Faversham*, ed. Martin White, New Mermaids (New York: Norton, 1995).

10. Jane Donawerth, *Shakespeare and the Sixteenth-Century Study of Language* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), esp. 165–66.

11. On the play's critical reception through the beginning of the twentieth century, see Joseph Candido, ed., *King John, Shakespeare: The Critical Tradition* (London: Athlone Press, 1996). On modern responses and for an extensive bibliography of scholarship and performance since 1940, see Deborah T. Curren-Aquino, ed., *King John: New Perspectives* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989). Introductions to both volumes offer overviews of critical dissatisfaction with the play as well as explanations for why the play has enjoyed a revival in the late twentieth century.

12. Eamon Grennan, "Shakespeare's Satirical History: A Reading of *King John*," *Shakespeare Studies* 11 (1978), esp. 32; and Donawerth, esp. 175. The seminal work on the play's depiction of language is Sigurd Burckhardt, "King John: The Ordering of This Present Time," *ELH* 33, no. 2 (1966): 133–52. Like Donawerth, I see the physicality of the play's speech imagery as crucial to the play's thematization of the power of speech. However, I read *King John*'s thematization of speech in terms of the play's particular conditions of production in the early modern theater and thus approach breath as a metaphor not of language more generally, but of vocal performance specifically.

13. In addition to Burckhardt, Grennan, and Donawerth, see James E. May, "Imagery of Disorderly Motion in *King John*: A Thematic Gloss," *Essays in Literature* 10, no. 1 (1983): 17–28; Barish; A. R. Braunmuller, ed., *The Life and Death of King John*, Oxford Shakespeare (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), esp. 39–53; Edward Gieskes, "'He Is but a Bastard to the Time': Status and Service in *The Troublesome Raigne of John* and Shakespeare's *King John*," *ELII* 65, no. 4 (1998):

779–98; Dorothea Kehler, "'So Jest with Heaven': Deity in *King John*," in Curren-Aquino, 99–113; Michael Manheim, "The Four Voices of the Bastard," in Curren-Aquino, 126–35; Robert Weimann, "Mingling Vice and 'Worthiness' in *King John*," *Shakespeare Studies* 27 (1999): 109–33; Christopher Z. Hobson, "Bastard Speech: The Rhetoric of 'Commodity' in *King John*," *Shakespeare Yearbook* 2 (1991): 95–114; and Maurice Hunt, "Antimetabolic *King John*," *Style* 34, no. 3 (2000): 380–401. See also Joseph A. Porter, "Fraternal Pragmatics: Speech Acts of John and the Bastard," in Curren-Aquino, 136–43. Much critical analysis has centered on the speech of the Bastard, whose meditations on the multifarious meanings of the word "commodity" at the end of act 2 seem to index the play's figuration of "modern" ideologies of the subject's self-sufficiency. See especially Geiskes; Manheim; and Weimann, "Mingling."

14. Juliet Dusinberre, "*King John* and Embarrassing Women," *Shakespeare Survey* 42 (1990), 43. On Eleanor's intelligence and political savvy, see also Carole Levin, "'I Trust I May Not Trust Thee': Women's Visions of the World in Shakespeare's *King John*," in *Ambiguous Realities: Women in the Middle Ages and Renaissance*, ed. Carole Levin and Jeanie Watson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1987): 219–34.

15. While early modern anatomists recognize an array of organs as contributing to the production of vocal sound—including, notably, the vocal chords, which had recently been anatomized—most represent the larynx as the most fundamental organ associated with speech. See, for example, Hieronymi Ab Aquapendente Fabricius, *De Visione, Voce, Auditu* (Venice, 1600), the sections of which, "De Visione," "De Voix," and "De Auditus" anatomize, respectively, the eye, the larynx, and the ear.

16. Phyllis Rackin, "Patriarchal History and Female Subversion in *King John*," in Curren-Aquino, 76–90, esp. 82. See also, Howard and Rackin, chap. 7, which expands on similar material; Levin, esp. 125; Joseph Candido, "'Women and Fools Break Off Your Conference': Pope's Degradations and the Form of *King John*," in *Shakespeare's English Histories: A Quest for Form and Genre*, ed. John W. Velz (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1996): 91–110; and Dusinberre, esp. 43.

17. Rackin, "Patriarchal," 84.

18. The notion of conversation as an exchange of breath substantiates in material terms the erotic implications of "conversation," as advanced by Jeffrey Masten, *Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama*, Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Some early modern writers explain that when lovers kiss, they are really conjoining their souls through the exchange of breath. Baldesar Castiglione writes that the mouth is "an issue for the wordes, that be the enterpreters of the soule, and for the inwarde breth, whiche is also called the soule: and therefore [the lover] hath a delite to joigne hys mouth with the womans beloved with a kysse: . . . bicause he feeleth that, that bonde is the openynge of an entrey to the soules, whiche drawen with a coveting the one of the other, power them selves by tourn, the one into the others bodye, and be so mingled together." Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Thomas Hoby, *The Tudor Translations* (London: David Nutt, 1900), 355–56.

19. Stanley T. Williams, ed., *The Life and Death of King John*, *The Yale Shake-*

*spcare* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1927); Smallwood; and Riverside. Beaurline, whose edition I cite, offers a wider range of interpretations by leaving the passage unpunctuated. Beaurline, however, differs from Braummuller and others in identifying the spokesperson for Angiers as Citizen, rather than Hubert. Given that later in the play (as I discuss below), Hubert's understanding of speech will again be contrasted with the "windy breath of soft petitions"—this time those of Constance's son—one might argue that this scene serves as a parallel to the later scene, thus supporting Braummuller and others' contention that the speaker in this scene is, in fact, Hubert.

20. Braummuller, *King John*, 2.1.478–80n.

21. Indeed, my reading combines Braummuller's explanation of *windy breath* as breath belonging to Constance with other editors' interpretations of *zeal* as France's zealous commitment to Arthur's cause. Braummuller believes the readings to be irreconcilable: "if *zeal* here were to mean the commitment to Arthur . . . the *soft petitions*, would have to be understood as Hubert's." My reading enables *melt*—which Braummuller must take figuratively as meaning "change"—to carry its full, material significance.

22. Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Minde in Generall*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 162–63. Early modern authors comment on the mysterious discovery that hot food can be cooled using the same substance, breath, that we use to produce speech. For instance, when Mistress Merrythought in Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *Knight of the Burning Pestle* receives a vehement lecture rather than the expected aid from Venturewell, she curses, "let him keep his wind to cool his porridge" (4.3.56–57). In David Bevington et al., eds., *English Renaissance Drama: A Norton Anthology* (New York: Norton, 2002).

23. Shoshana Felman, *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

24. Cited in Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 10.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Crooke, 691.

27. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), s.v. "species," 5.

28. Bacon, no. 206. The prime example is a bell that, once struck, continues to ring until it is steadied. Although it would seem that the bell continues to produce one continuous sound, in fact, Bacon explains, the bell is producing a series of sounds—the "minute parts" of the bell continue to vibrate, "and so reneweth the Percussion of the Aire."

29. Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Glyph: Johns Hopkins Textual Studies* 1 (1977): 172–97.

30. Insofar as acoustic theorists imagine vocal sound as breath that becomes disarticulated from the body that initially produces and "owns" it, their writings share common theoretical and imaginative ground with early modern descriptions of disarticulated hands and tongues. The latter have been examined by Katherine Rowe and Carla Mazzio, respectively, who note that when these expressive, but inherently itinerant, body parts are represented as disarticulated from the body to which they belong, they generate concerns about human agency. Katherine Rowe,

*Dead Hands: Fictions of Agency, Renaissance to Modern* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). Carla Mazzio, "Sins of the Tongue," in *The Body in Parts*: 53–79. See also, Carla Mazzio, "Staging the Vernacular: Language and Nation in Thomas Kyd's *the Spanish Tragedy*," *Studies in English Literature* 38, no. 2 (1998): 207–32.

31. Crooke, 610.

32. Bacon, no. 226.

33. *Ibid.*, no. 290.

34. Among the environmental forces with which a vocal sound must contend is the very breath of listeners. Bacon notes that we hear best when we "*hold our Breath*" because "in all *Expiration*, the Motion is Outwards; And therefore, rather driveth away the voice, than draweth it" (no. 284). In other words, a voice approaching the senses of a listener may be weakened or altered in form by the listener's breathing because that breath pushes away the incoming air that carries the sound. Elsewhere, Bacon takes issue with ancient writers who imagine wind to be an exhalation. Bacon argues that while exhalations move the air, they are not in and of themselves winds. The "exhalations" that ancients thought made up the wind are merely helpers in its motion, not the wind's material itself: "But all impulsion of the Aire is winde; and Exhalations mixed with the aire contribute more to the motion than to the matter." Sir Francis Bacon, *The Naturall and Experimentall History of Winds*, trans. R. G. (London, 1653), 87. The distinction between breath and wind is far less stable in Shakespeare, where the terms are often substituted for and associated with each other. In addition to the examples discussed below, note, for instance, Cassio's prayer to Jove on behalf of Othello's voyage at sea: "swell his sail with thine own powerful breath" (2.1.77–78) and the description of the Cyprus coast storm as "the wind [that] hath spoke aloud at land" (2.1.5).

35. On the ways that Constance's rants have embarrassed male readers of the play—who have responded by cutting many of her lines—see Dusinger; and Candido, "'Women and Fools.'"

36. I draw on Beaurline's glossing of this line.

37. Communication is limited insofar as Marcus, despite clearly recognizing in this scene (through his invocation of Ovid's rape story) that a rape has occurred, somehow forgets what he knows, so that he and Titus wait two acts before truly "discovering" the rape. Emily Detmer-Goebel argues that the point of this recognition and forgetting is to "tease the audience with the idea that men should know that she has been raped" thereby emphasizing, as is true about women's speech more generally in rape cases of the period, "men's ultimate reliance on Lavinia's words." Emily Detmer-Goebel, "The Need for Lavinia's Voice: *Titus Andronicus* and the Telling of Rape," *Shakespeare Studies* 29 (2001), 81. I argue that Lavinia uses her *voice* successfully in this scene, even if she does not utter "words"; that Marcus cannot retain the information she voices indicates a flaw in his listening and apprehension, not in her expression.

38. Beaurline and others have argued that Constance is one of the few characters who looks beyond the play's worldly setting toward the heavens and spiritual concerns, but, as I am suggesting, even in this speech, she lays her faith in the material world.

39. According to the Riverside gloss, "north" refers to the north winds. We

might note that Bacon's *History of Winds* explains that "Northwardly" winds are known for their stimulating effects (55).

40. Bacon, *History of Winds*, A12v.

41. *Ibid.*, 176.

42. Rackin, *Stages*, 18; Howard and Rackin, 126; Vaughan, "Subversion," 72. See also, Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 10; and Levin, 230.

43. Deborah Warner's production (Royal Shakespeare Company 1988/89), for instance, uses "the absence of women in the second half of the play to explore, through male characters aspects of the mother-child relationship." See Geraldine Cousin, *Shakespeare in Performance: King John* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 128–29. I am grateful to Deborah Curren-Aquino for bringing this to my attention. For a key critical reading that develops this theoretical point, see Nina S. Levine, *Women's Matters: Politics, Gender, and Nation in Shakespeare's Early History Plays* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998).

44. Beaurline, 3.4.19n.

45. Honnigman and the Riverside use *taste* but argue that the word is identical in meaning to *task*. Braunmuller goes further when defending his use of *test*: "Printing 'taste' would, through recourse to an archaic definition, conclude with the meaning 'test'; but the connotation of modern 'taste' would be recalled unnecessarily and distractingly" (*King John*, 3.1.148n). I argue, to the contrary, that the sensual significance of *taste* is crucial for interpreting the passage.

46. This is not the play's only reference to the relationship between tasting and hearing. When Lewis has lost all hope in France's potential for victory, he laments: "Life is as tedious as a twice-told tale, / Vexing the dull ear of a drowsy man, / And bitter shame hath spoiled the sweet word's taste" (Braunmuller, *King John*, 3.4.108–10). (I cite from Braunmuller's version, which follows the folio, rather than Beaurline's, which, as it chooses the later emendation of "world" instead of "word" elides the significance of *taste*.) Braunmuller notes that the folio *words* could also be read as plural possessive ("words' sweet taste"), which would refer to the words of the twice-told story. Additionally, when Hubert describes the way rumors of John's murder of Arthur stir through the streets, he notes one commoner "with open mouth swallowing" (4.2.195) the news. Shakespeare associates listening with the consumption of words in other plays as well. For example, Pericles describes Marina as "Another Juno, who starves the ears she feeds / And makes them hungry the more she gives them speech" (5.1.107–8). Also, Desdemona is reported to have fallen in love with Othello in the process of "devouring up" his stories with her "greedy ear" (1.3.150–51).

47. Sir Balthazar Gerbier, *The Art of Well Speaking* (London, 1650), 24.

48. Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950), W424. Cited in Braunmuller, *King John*, 5.2.83–87n; and Beaurline, 5.2.83–87n.

49. I derive this terminology primarily from Rowe, esp. 18–20, who argues that in "dead hand stories," the disembodied part's ability to act independently of the subject that wills it to act blurs lines between the principle (one on whose behalf an action is performed), the agent (one who or that which exerts the power to per-

form the action), the instrument (the tool that accomplishes the action), and the patient (one upon whom or which the action is performed). Rowe offers a lucid account of the history of agency as a concept and, drawing on Perry Anderson (*Arguments Within English Marxism* [London: New Left Books and Verso Editions, 1980]), she argues that the blurring of these terms can be strategically useful for making “the idea of agency both fuzzy and capacious” (18).

50. The claim regarding Hubert’s compassion has been advanced most influentially by Burckhardt, 137–38.

51. Dusinger, 49, 37n. Dusinger assumes that the part must be played by a boy with an unbroken voice—thus the decision by directors to cast a female actor (with a high, “feminine” voice), rather than an older boy whose voice has broken. Yet, as I suggest below, a boy with a more unstable voice—for instance, a youth going through the vocal changes of puberty—would be a more apt choice in terms of highlighting the play’s engagement with questions of vocal agency.

52. Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum*, no. 180.

53. Dymna Callaghan, “The Castrator’s Song: Female Impersonation on the Early Modern Stage,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 26, no. 2 (1996): 321–53. See also Dymna Callaghan, *Shakespeare without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage, Accents on Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2000).

54. Gina Bloom, “‘Thy Voice Squeaks’: Listening for Masculinity on the Early Modern Stage,” *Renaissance Drama* 29 (2000): 39–71.

55. See, for example, Burckhardt, Donawerth, and Hobson.

56. W. B. Worthen, *Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), esp. 152.

57. P. A. Skantze, *Stillness in Motion in the Seventeenth-Century Theatre*, Routledge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 27–28.

58. Weimann, “Mingling,” 131.

59. Robert Weimann, *Author’s Pen and Actor’s Voice: Playing and Writing in Shakespeare’s Theatre*, Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 10–11.

60. Worthen, 180.

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