When Shakespeare’s King Lear announces that he will abdicate and divide the kingdom, characters are left struggling with the meanings abdication might have for them. In this presentation I will use Bruner’s notion of narrative to argue that Lear’s abdication “subjunctives” or hypothesizes social arrangements of early modern English society, disrupting cultural imperatives and traditional practices, like belief in absolute monarchy regarded as necessary for maintaining civil society. Moreover, for the protagonist King Lear, subjunctivizing pertains to his way of denying death, reversing expectations, and situating himself as well as other characters on the boundary between possible and actual states of being, and, ultimately, driving the descent toward the tragedy that ensues.

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