Like many others, I have been thrilled by the exchange between our own Roger Kimball and Jonah Goldberg on the character of President Trump. See here and here and here. But with the greatest humility, I wonder if I might be allowed to interpose a few words on the history of the word “character” that might cast a little light upon the debate. In Shakespeare, “character,” both noun and verb, almost always denotes handwriting. Orlando says in As You Like It,

O Rosalind! these trees shall be my books,
And in their barks my thoughts I’ll character,
That every eye which in this forest looks
Shall see thy virtue witness’d every where.

In Hamlet, Polonius says to Laertes, “And these few precepts in thy memory/ Look thou character”—meaning “write down”—while Claudius, in receipt of Hamlet’s letter after his capture by pirates, says: “’Tis Hamlet’s character.” In figurative usage, likewise, the word is ordinarily used to mean something outward and visible in a person that signifies an inward quality:
“Angelo,” says the Duke in Measure for Measure, “There is a kind of character in thy life,/ That to the observer doth thy history/ Fully unfold.” In Sonnet 59, Shakespeare writes,

O, that record could with a backward look,
Even of five hundred courses of the sun,
Show me your image in some antique book,
Since mind at first in character was done!

In Twelfth Night, Viola says to the Captain, “I will believe thou hast a mind that suits/ With this thy fair and outward character.”

Out of this second, figurative use, the meaning of “reputation” seems to have developed—another outward thing supposed to be a readable signification of inward qualities. The oed’s earliest citation of the word in this sense is 1649, which is more or less contemporaneous with the first use
described above: an outward “description, delineation, or detailed report of a person’s qualities.”
By 1700, the word was being used in the way that was probably most common until the end of the nineteenth century: a reference given by an employer to an employee (especially by a master to a servant) so that he or she could obtain employment elsewhere. To dismiss someone “without a character” was likely to condemn him or her to a life of poverty and unemployment and so was among the more terrifying powers that a master could hold over a servant.

More or less simultaneous to that meaning, we see the first example of the word being used in something like the modern sense, though with the difference that it retains something of the old connotation, which Shakespeare used in Sonnet 59 and Measure for Measure, of outward characteristics signifying inward qualities. When, for example, Alexander Pope writes that “most women have no characters at all,” he doesn’t mean that they have no moral qualities but that they have no pronounced or readable—the oed says “strikingly displayed”—characteristics by which they can be easily distinguished one from another. Women are made, says Pope, of “matter too soft a lasting mark to bear,/ And best distinguish’d by black, brown, or fair.”

It is not until 1875 that the oed records the word unambiguously as it is used by Messrs. Kimball and Goldberg—when Cardinal Henry Edward Manning, Archbishop of Westminster, wrote that “the character is that intellectual and moral texture into which all our life long we have been weaving up the inward life that is in us.” And even there it still preserves the distinction between inward and outward.

Against this semantic background, what is most striking about most discussions of Mr. Trump’s character, and not just this one, is how they all seem to begin with the presumption of transparency. There is no longer any distinction between inward and outward, just as there is no interpreting the one by reference to the other. Mr. Trump is assumed to be an open book—perhaps a children’s book, which anyone can read without having to puzzle over or decipher it. We all, that is, seem to assume our right to put ourselves into the position, with respect to President Trump, of Pope with respect to women or the old-fashioned master with respect to his servant: what we profess to know about him is considered to be definitive, and not only definitive but dispositive. The subtext of Mr. Goldberg’s question is this: if you agree with him about the president’s lack of character, you must also agree that he doesn’t deserve to be president, whether legitimately elected or not.

I wonder if this strikes anyone else as a bit of an impertinence when the subject is the President of
the United States. There’s another word you don’t often hear these days: impertinence. But it was a very useful one back in the days when people thought it a matter of some importance to preserve social distinctions. “Take but degree away—untune that string,/ And hark what discord follows.” These words Shakespeare put in the mouth of Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*, and I think it not unfathomable to imagine that something like the same belief was taken for granted by the foundling fathers when they came to write the Constitution of the United States—and wrote it without making any provision for private citizens to pass moral judgment on the character or fitness of their elected officials. Or none apart from the right to vote like everyone else. All that Mr. Goldberg objects to in the president was widely known before he was elected, and yet we elected him anyway. Doesn’t respect for democracy demand that we give up our pointless complaints about the presidential character, at least until Mr. Trump is up for re-election?

More importantly, there was a reason why “a character” would once have been given by a master to a servant and not the other way around. It was simply a recognition that there was such a thing as “degree” and that those who exercised authority could not, if authority was to be preserved and respected, be held to the same standard as those over whom authority was exercised. The cant expression is that nobody is above the law, but in real life we know that there are always those who are above the law, for they are the people who decide how and when and whether the law is to be enforced. We used to leave these decisions up to the executive branch, acting in concert with the legislature, but now the progressive view is that only judges (by which, of course, they mean progressive judges) are above the law, for they are the ones who decide—often with the sort of whimsy by which Justice Anthony Kennedy decided to overrule millennia of human history and declare that gay marriage should be legal—what the law says. And no one would dare put Justice Kennedy’s character under the microscope, unless he was not yet on the court and Democratic senators thought it desirable to keep him off of it.
Authority and, with it, degree must be preserved, we see, but now it is an unaccountable authority. Elected officials, like everyone else, live in fear of what judges will decide they can and cannot do, for there is no recourse and no alternative but to do it. That’s why the stakes are so high with every new Supreme Court confirmation and why we end up with the Senate-staged kangaroo courts of the Thomas or Kavanaugh hearings. This discord seems to me a much less desirable state of affairs than one in which our more temporary rulers are afforded the “little patience” that the old Spanish proverb says is the due of “the rich and mighty.” The opposite of impertinence is deference, which is another word now mostly heard in pejorative contexts. And yet, by whatever name you want to call it, deference is what the media have often shown to flawed presidents in the past—so long as they were Democrats. Maybe those who once criticized the media for it can learn from them. As the Clinton-Lewinsky example suggests, there is not much political profit to be got out of attacking an elected leader on the basis of morality in any case. The media, of course, are still basking in the glory of having driven, as they see it, Richard Nixon from office forty-five years ago, but that’s no reason why people of goodwill, who are interested in good government and who do not automatically assume that this can only come from Democrats, shouldn’t emulate them in their deference to presidents of their own party.

James Bowman is the author of Honor: A History (Encounter).