

“THE LITTLE O” Signifying Nothing in Shakespeare

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Abstract – This chapter analyses some of the ways in which the crucial concept of Nothingness weaves its way throughout Shakespeare’s work, and those in which the various meanings of the word “nothing” are systematically investigated and set off against one another. The tragedies *Hamlet* and *King Lear* come in for especially close attention, although a number of other Shakespearean works are also considered. Particular emphasis is placed on the idea that something might arise out of nothing, and on the implications for Shakespeare’s writing of the new mathematics based on the symbol zero that had been introduced relatively recently into England. The opposition between Being and Nothingness – or more precisely between the different ways these can be conceived in relation to one another – is in a number of plays subject to processes of poetic negotiation as Shakespeare illustrates the various ways in which things can issue from nothing even as they inexorably return to nothing. “Nothing” becomes a profoundly paradoxical concept in Shakespeare’s drama, as it is shown to possess aspects that are potentially generative – though not necessarily in a positive sense – as well as destructive.

Keywords: Shakespeare; *Hamlet*; *King Lear*; *The Tempest*.

1. Talking of Nothing

As Mercutio becomes increasingly caught up in the momentum of his rhapsody about dreams and their origins in *Romeo and Juliet*, lashing himself into a frenzy of words that seems ungovernable, Romeo abjures him to break off with the exclamation: “Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace. / Thou talk’st of nothing” (1.4.95-96).¹ There are words that reverberate with particular intensity in the Shakespearean universe, shifting between the various meanings and implications with which they are invested with a volatility that is sometimes disconcerting. One of the most arresting of those words is that employed by Romeo at this juncture. “Nothing” is in some respects an anomalous term, one which by its very nature seems to embody a paradox. As a noun denoting what by definition does not exist, it has significance of a

¹ All references to Shakespeare’s works throughout this discussion are to the single volume *Arden Shakespeare Complete Works* (Shakespeare 2001).

kind but no obvious referent. If the phrase “he is looking at a horse” has one kind of meaning, the phrase “he is looking at nothing” has meaning of a completely different order, since one can hardly look at nothing when there is nothing to look at. As the constituent elements of the word itself suggest, “nothing” can be conceived in negative terms only, and is therefore dependent for whatever sense it has on the world of things, whether these be material or immaterial in nature. At the same time that it designates an absence, however, it signifies – intellectually, emotionally, and culturally – a great deal. It represents a kind of challenge to being, a menace to everything in terms of which human beings organize their existences: their sense of their own identities, the social reality they inhabit, the physical universe itself.

In view of what is at stake, it is hardly surprising that philosophers, and thinking persons in general, have over the centuries been much preoccupied with the concept of nothing, and with the relationship that holds between the universe of being and what stands as the negation of that universe. Was the universe created out of nothingness, and will it return in the end to nothingness, or did it emerge out of some inchoate primal substance? In Shakespeare’s own day, Lucretius’s assertion that “*Nil posse creari / de nilo*” (Lucretius 2006, 1.155-56), which he had derived from Epicurus but which in various forms had been articulated by numerous other writers as well, was condemned as anathema by those who thought that to deny that the universe had been created out of nothing was to cast doubt upon divine omnipotence. But not everyone was antagonistic to the Lucretian position. On the contrary, the tenet that God had created the world out of nothing was precisely one of those doctrines that were most concertedly coming under assault by some of the new currents of thought which were gathering force in this period. An article of faith which constituted what William R. Elton describes as the “keystone of the accepted theology of Shakespeare’s time” (Elton 1988, p. 181), was giving ground before a view of the universe and its history that in many respects resembled, and to some degree was directly inspired by, the very philosophy associated with Epicurus and Lucretius that early exponents of the Church had done everything in their power to suppress. Though they are seldom explicitly religious in tenor, and range over a much broader spectrum of possible meanings of the word “nothing” than theologians are typically concerned with, Shakespeare’s own explorations of the concept of nothingness can be seen in relation to a heated debate that was raging in his time between those who believed in creation *ex nihilo* and opponents of this position.

The problematic relation between being and non-being, or more particularly between something and nothing, is an issue that crops up repeatedly in Shakespeare’s work. That something can become nothing poses no particular difficulties of comprehension, however painful the

consequences of becoming nothing might be, for it is a matter of common knowledge that everything is destined to dissolution in the end. Salerio’s observation in *The Merchant of Venice* that merchandise destroyed in a shipwreck is “even now worth this, / And now worth nothing” is merely registering a fact of life (1.1.35-36). In *Othello*, Iago sententiously remarks that “Who steals my purse steals trash – ’tis something – nothing” (3.3.160), before he proceeds very systematically to reduce the “all in all sufficient” Othello to a state of moral nothingness (4.1.265). The general principle according to which everything that exists will dwindle to a state of nothingness in the end applies to human identity as well. In the deposition scene of *Richard II*, Richard, asked if he is reconciled to the loss of his crown, punningly replies “Ay, no; no, ay; for I must nothing be” (4.1.201), and continues by saying “Make me, that nothing have, with nothing griev’d” (4.1.216). Later, meditating on his situation in the final hours of his life, he goes on in the same vein:

Nor I, nor any man that but man is,
With nothing shall be pleas’d, till he be eas’d
With being nothing.

(5.5.39-41)

This is certainly gloomy enough, but it does not present any particular challenge to our faculties of understanding. Potentially more problematic than the way that something can become nothing, however, is that in which nothing can become something, and as various critics have observed this would appear to be an abiding preoccupation in Shakespeare’s work.² In *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the eminently rational Theseus evinces a certain supercilious disdain for the poet’s occupation of giving to “airy nothing / A local habitation and a name” (5.1.16-17). This is an activity which puts the poet in the same category as lunatics and lovers, who under the influence of their particular obsessions also make realities of what does not exist, whether it be “more devils than vast hell can hold” or “Helen’s beauty in a brow of Egypt” (5.1.9-11). Theseus might be referring only to the illusions generated by mental states that he himself happens to regard as aberrant, but, as other Shakespearean plays suggest, the phenomenon whereby things can be made of nothing would appear to manifest itself in the world inhabited by ordinary human beings as well. When Romeo, delivering himself of a series of oxymora more or less whimsical in tenor but not for that reason devoid of relevance to what occurs elsewhere in *Romeo and Juliet*, produces his own

² See for instance Jorgensen 1954, Willbern 1980, and White 2013. Also relevant to this theme are Fleissner 1962, Womack 2007, Cook 2009, and the section dedicated to “Shakespearean Nothings” in Barrow 2001 (pp. 87-91).

variant on the *creatio ex nihilo* formula by exclaiming “O anything of nothing first create!” (1.1.177), the irony is that it is precisely such a paradox as he is enunciating that realizes itself in the events of a play in which something as tenuous as an “airy word” can indeed give rise to the most dramatic consequences (1.1.89).

After Romeo has interrupted Mercutio’s feverish description of Queen Mab and her oneiric pranks with the reminder “Thou talk’st of nothing”, Mercutio concurs with his objection, saying “True, I talk of dreams” (1.4.96). Dreams, he acknowledges, are “Begot of nothing but vain fantasy, / Which is as thin of substance as the air” (1.4.98-99), the image cluster he invokes once again being that consisting in words such as “dream”, “air”, “fantasy” and “nothing” which frequently appear in combination with one another in Shakespeare. Even if they might appear to be wholly ephemeral, however, dreams are discredited only up to a point in *Romeo and Juliet*. They might in themselves be nothing, but there would appear to be something in them nonetheless. Romeo expresses his apprehension about entering the Capulet house because he has had an ominous dream (1.4.49-50), and it will turn out that his forebodings are justified. Towards the end of the play he will be visited by another dream about being kissed by Juliet while he is lying dead (5.1.6-9), and that too will prove ironically premonitory of subsequent events. Although in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Theseus scoffs at the “shaping fantasies” of the imagination (5.1.5), the dreams that Mercutio also dismisses as being no more than the progeny of “vain fantasy” are in the end oddly vindicated in this play as well. Bottom’s dream approximates to a theophany, Hippolyta maintains that a dream “grows to something of great constancy” when it is shared by others (5.1.26), and Puck’s address to the audience in the epilogue suggests that the play itself – which has kept the audience engrossed for more than two hours – might have been a dream. Begotten of fantasy though they may be, dreams have the habit of becoming presences so potent as to subvert what is accepted as being reality itself.

This is the case, of course, not only with dreams as such, but also with such other subjective phenomena as visions or hopes or fears, or indeed with any other emotive state sufficiently powerful as to gain ascendancy in the mind of the individual. Apostrophizing what he calls “hateful Error, Melancholy’s child” in *Julius Caesar*, Messala asks “Why dost thou show to the apt thoughts of men / The things that are not?” (5.3.67-69). A poignant instance of the manner in which a void can seem charged with presence under the influence of an intense emotion can be found in *King John*, when Constance expresses her anguish at the loss of her son by saying that “Grief fills the room up of my absent child” and “Stuffs out his vacant garments with his form” (3.3.93, 97). In *Richard II*, at the same time as the king declines inexorably towards a state of total nothingness as, like Lear after

him, he is progressively divested of the trappings of royalty in terms of which he has defined his own identity, we see even more explicitly the power of nothing to transform itself into a painful reality. This is when the Queen confides to Bushy the anxiety she feels at the distressful turn events have taken:

my inward soul
With nothing trembles; at some thing it grieves,
More than with parting from my lord the king.

(2.2.11-13)

Bushy tells her that it is "false sorrow's eye, / Which, for things true, weeps things imaginary" (2.2.26-27), and she replies that she is "so heavy sad, / As, though on thinking on no thought I think, / Makes me with heavy nothing faint and shrink" (2.2.30-32). And when Bushy insists that "'Tis nothing but conceit", she responds by saying that "nothing hath begot my something grief, / Or something hath the nothing that I grieve" (2.2.33-37).

This might seem a trifle too artful in formulation, but situations in some way analogous to this are encountered with a certain regularity in the Shakespearean universe, and they are not always so contrived. When Macbeth, musing on the prophecies that the weird sisters have pronounced concerning his future, reflects that in his current state of mind "nothing is, but what is not" (1.3.142), he is invoking in rather different terms the paradoxical power of nothingness to become the sole reality that individuals acknowledge. Although he is aware that the dagger he sees suspended in the air before him might be "a false creation, / Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain", he continues to perceive it "in form as palpable / As this which now I draw" (2.1.38-41). In the end he decides that "There's no such thing" (2.1.47), but by this time he has drawn his own weapon and what was previously an elusive nothing has assumed a terrible concreteness. A murder that "yet is but fantastical" while Macbeth is possessed by "horrible imaginings" (1.3.138-39), transforms itself into a very real crime. Even after he has gained possession of the crown by assassinating Duncan Macbeth continues to hover in a world of potentiality rather than actuality, of what might be rather than what is, as he broods on the prophecy that it is Banquo and not himself who will found a dynasty of kings. "To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus" (3.1.47), he says as he sets about his scheme of having Banquo murdered together with his son. Reducing Banquo to a state of nothingness does not solve his problem, however, and a vacant seat at his table will, in his imagination at least, be occupied by the very man he has murdered (3.4.39-107). The security Macbeth craves in order to dispel the anxiety expressed in the phrase "to be thus is nothing" is a chimera, and it is hardly surprising that the black epiphany which will overwhelm him in the

end is that of life as a tale recited by an idiot and “signifying nothing” (5.5.28).

The phenomenon of nothing generating something, or of nothing somehow containing something, is one that appears elsewhere in Shakespeare’s works as well. Sometimes this can manifest itself as merely verbal paradox, as when Bassanio remarks that the irrepressibly voluble Gratiano “speaks an infinite deal of nothing” in *The Merchant of Venice* (1.1.114), or when the protagonist of *Timon of Athens*, contemplating the oblivion that will follow his own imminent death, says that “nothing brings me all things” (5.1.188). But sometimes the idea conveyed by Shakespeare’s plays is that the world inhabited by human beings is, for better or worse, quite literally fabricated out of nothing. Probably the most obviously paradigmatic case in point is *Much Ado About Nothing*, which, as its very title proclaims, deals with the various ways in which nothing can become something, indeed any number of things. The play owes its existence to the nothing upon which it pivots: an alleged tryst between Hero and a lover which has not in fact taken place. Something else that does not exist, an amorous bond between Benedict and Beatrice, is also brought into being through the web of deception woven by their friends. This latter development provides an irresistible opportunity for the two parties involved to improvise a duet on the theme of nothing:

Ben. I do love nothing in the world so well as you – is not that strange?

Beat. As strange as the thing I know not. It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as you, but believe me not; and yet I lie not; I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing.

(4.1.266-71)

Emblematic of the general process operating in this play whereby things that do not exist turn into things that do is the metamorphosis undergone by the aptly named figure Deformed. Deformed begins its career as an epithet casually introduced into conversation by Borachio – “But seest thou not what a deformed thief this fashion is?” (3.3.120-21) – but is swiftly transformed through the distorting perceptions of other characters into a personage in his own right, one who “has been a vile thief this seven year”, who “goes up and down like a gentleman”, and who possesses a number of other intriguing traits of a personal nature (3.3.122-24, 5.1.299-304). Passed through the mill of interpretative re-elaboration, a figure of speech has become a figure of flesh and blood, as real in his own way as any of the other characters populating this play.

2. Ciphers and Crooked Figures

One of the meanings of O is that of “naught” or “cipher”. This is the figure that became known in English as in other languages as zero, the arithmetical symbol which in Hindu-Arabic numerical notation indicates the absence of quantity, and yet in its capacity as placeholder increases or decreases the value of adjacent figures according to its position. By Shakespeare’s time Arabic numbers and the decimal place system had largely supplanted the notational apparatus based on Roman numerals that had been in use for millennia, and the future playwright would probably have received some amount of instruction in the new mathematics while at school. The zero was crucial to this system, and because of its peculiar properties as a sign it was recognized to have implications in areas outside that of mathematics as such. Brian Rotman goes so far as to suggest that “if zero had not made its appearance within Christian Europe, much of this larger interest in ‘nothing’ would not have occurred, and ‘nothing’ might have stayed within the writings of Aquinas and the Schoolmen as a remote theological issue” (Rotman 2001, p. 64). Whether its intellectual impact was quite as radical as this or not, for Shakespeare at least this indispensable but anomalous symbol – a number that does not number anything, but that can augment the value of other numbers – provided a suggestive image of the way nothing can seem to become something, and it is one which he incorporated into several of his works.

One of the most popular textbooks on arithmetic in Shakespeare’s day was *The Ground of Artes* by Robert Recorde, published in 1543 and reprinted in a number of subsequent editions over the next century and a half. Shakespeare himself seems to have had some familiarity with the contents of this book, for as Paula Blank points out he “knew the arithmetic sense of the word ‘place’” (Blank 2006, p. 121), which was first explicated in English by Recorde, and makes metaphorical use of the notion in several of his plays. Among the items of mathematical lore enumerated in Recorde’s book is the information that of the ten figures employed in arithmetic, “one doth signifie nothing, which is made like an O, and is privately called a Cypher” (quoted in *ibid.*, p. 122). The idea, and the wording in which it was expressed, were evidently infectious. Somewhere around 1593, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the clergyman Henry Smith referred in one of his sermons to those who are “like cyphers, which supply a place, but signifie nothing”.³ It is possibly Recorde’s words, or a reiteration of them in some other work, that is echoed in the devastating phrase “Signifying nothing”

³ *OED*, s.v. “cipher | cypher”, *n.*, 1.a.

which concludes Macbeth's most nihilistic meditation on the meaning of life (5.5.28).

Shakespeare uses the image of the cipher as a symbol devoid of intrinsic value on various occasions. Angelo remarks in *Measure for Measure* that "Mine were the very cipher of a function / To fine the faults ... And let go by the actor" (2.2.39-41), the irony of his statement being that an empty cipher is precisely what Angelo turns out to be. In some cases, as if to leave no doubt as to the mathematical inspiration of such allusions, the words "cipher" and "figure" are found in close conjunction with one another. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, Moth deliberately construes in arithmetical rather than rhetorical terms the meaning of Armado's description of a certain turn of phrase as "A most fine figure!", remarking in an aside that his intention is "To prove you a cipher" (1.2.54-55). In much the same vein, Orlando in *As You Like It* describes the "figure" Jaques would see if he observed his own reflection in a river as that of "either a fool, or a cipher" (3.2.286), the purport of this quip being that Jaques is of no account whatsoever. More trenchantly still, in *King Lear* the Fool tells the former monarch that "Now thou art an O without a figure ... thou art nothing" (1.4.183-85), meaning by this that without the accoutrements of kingship he is no more than a naught or empty cipher.

As the Fool's words suggest by implication, however, if an O without a figure is nothing, an O accompanied by a figure is something else altogether. Shakespeare was evidently very much intrigued at the paradoxical number that in itself signifies nothing and yet, in the case of positive numbers, by its mere presence augments tenfold the value of any non-zero digit placed to the left of it. It is at once empty of value and a multiplier of value. Shakespeare points out the magnifying power of the cipher in such passages as Polixenes's ornate farewell speech in *The Winter's Tale*:

therefore, like a cipher
(Yet standing in rich place) I multiply
With one "We thank you" many thousands moe
That go before it.

(1.2.6-9)

What is to be noted is that Polixenes's use of such a simile is ironic in its context, because *The Winter's Tale* is a play which – to an even greater extent than is the case with *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Othello* – illustrates the devastatingly *self*-multiplying power of nothing, its capacity to burgeon through the operations of the imagination into a destructive something. In Shakespeare's earlier dramas of jealousy there are characters – Don John and Iago – who deliberately confound the peace of mind of others by making something of nothing. In *The Winter's Tale* however it is Leontes himself

who, basing himself on evidence so tenuous as hardly to qualify as such, conjures into imaginative existence a longstanding affair between his wife and Polixenes. The juggling of the terms "nothing" and "something", and the allusion to dreams, reflect once again a cluster of ideas that occurs repeatedly in Shakespeare's work:

Affection! thy intention stabs the centre:
 Thou dost make possible things not so held,
 Communicat'st with dreams; – how can this be? –
 With what's unreal thou coactive art,
 And fellow'st nothing: then 'tis very credent
 Thou may'st co-join with something

(1.2.138-43)

It is Leontes who pronounces what is certainly the most extended speech on the theme of nothingness in Shakespeare, a delirious tirade in which, as David Willbern observes, "'nothing' gets obsessively repeated into thing-ness ... becomes a self-reflexive, self-generating agent of its own creation" (Willbern 1980, p. 248). It is a harangue built upon the word "nothing", as Leontes's suspicions themselves are founded on what is essentially nothing:

Is whispering nothing?
 Is leaning cheek to cheek? is meeting noses?
 Kissing with inside lip? stopping the career
 Of laughter with a sigh (a note infallible
 Of breaking honesty)? horsing foot on foot?
 Skulking in corners? wishing clocks more swift?
 Hours, minutes? noon, midnight? and all eyes
 Blind with the pin and web, but theirs; theirs only.
 That would unseen be wicked? is this nothing?
 Why then the world, and all that's in't, is nothing;
 The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,
 My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings,
 If this be nothing.

(1.2.284-96)

Leontes's perverse argument is that since the world and its contents are manifestly not nothing, then what the king generically refers to as "this" – by which he means the various trivial gestures that have aroused his suspicion – must also not be nothing, and so must be something. Through a process of self-reification, what appears to be nothing transforms itself into the only reality Leontes knows. By the time he arrives at the phrase "nor nothing have these nothings / If this be nothing", words that are hopelessly untethered from any possible referential world outside of themselves, the king has been drawn into a kind of conceptual black hole from which there is no escaping.

On a decidedly more playful note, though not for that reason any less misogynist in tenor than Leontes's ranting, Sonnet 136 contains another elaboration in arithmetical terms on the capacity of nothing to become something. This time the "nothing" referred to is nothing other than the poet himself:

Among a number one is reckoned none.
 Then in the number let me pass untold,
 Though in thy store's account I one must be.
 For nothing hold me, so it please thee hold
 That nothing, me, a something sweet to thee.

And in a similarly mock mathematical vein, the prologue to *Henry V* plays with the concept of the cipher which, though having no value in itself, can multiply to an indefinite degree the value of something else:

Can this cockpit hold
 The vasty fields of France? Or may we cram
 Within this wooden O the very casques
 That did affright the air at Agincourt?
 O pardon, since a crooked figure may
 Attest in little place a million,
 And let us, ciphers to this great account,
 On your imaginary forces work.

(Prologue, 11-18)

Just as the cipher or zero, simply by virtue of occupying certain places in a number, has the power to turn the crooked figure 1 into a million, so can those other ciphers that are the actors – who have emptied themselves of their own identities so that they can impersonate characters who are not themselves – augment a millionfold the meagre resources of the stage. It is through such a calculus of the imagination that the physical O of the theater can be transformed into a space capacious enough to contain the vasty fields of France. If all the world's a stage, as Jaques famously remarks in *As You Like It* (2.7.139), then a stage can be all the world. The "wooden O" of the theater, "an empty cipher filled with meaning" as Daniel Tammet appositely describes it (Tammet 2012, p. 62), may thus be seen as being assimilable in more than one respect to what Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* describes as "The little O, the earth" (5.2.80), a nothing which is at the same time nothing less than the world itself.

3. *Hamlet*

There are a number of Shakespearean works in which the word “nothing”, and the concept to which it refers, assume particular relevance. One of these is *Hamlet*. The first reference the play contains to the mysterious entity which has been sighted on the ramparts of Elsinore castle occurs in Marcellus’s question “has this thing appear’d again tonight?”, to which Bernardo replies: “I have seen nothing” (1.1.24-25). Coming very shortly after the question with which *Hamlet* opens – “Who’s there?” (1.1.1) – this brief exchange hints at problems of an ontological and epistemological character that reverberate throughout the tragedy as a whole. Among the questions that the play seems repeatedly to invite its readers to consider is whether what they are dealing with – not only in the matter of ghostly materializations but also in that of other elements present in the work – is something or nothing. While the drama itself supplies no unequivocal answer to this question, and seems in various ways to suggest indeed that no definitive answer is possible at all, what it also appears to intimate is that there are respects in which “nothing” can paradoxically become a “thing” in itself, as real in its own way as any other phenomenon impinging upon human lives.

After witnessing the dramatic impact that the act of reciting the story of the destruction of Troy has had on the demeanour of an itinerant player visiting Elsinore, Hamlet comments in tones of the utmost amazement upon the fact that such a storm of feeling should be provoked by events and personages that belong entirely to the world of the imagination:

Is it not monstrous that this player here,
 But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,
 Could force his soul so to his own conceit
 That from her working all his visage wann’d,
 Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
 A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
 With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing!

(2.2.551-57)

The close proximity of the words “dream” and “nothing” in this soliloquy reflects once again an association of ideas that threads its way throughout Shakespeare’s work. The spectacle of a player being so completely overwhelmed by the contents of the poem he is reciting that he exhibits all the physical symptoms of intense emotional distress illustrates the manner in which “nothing” has the power to produce very tangible effects in the material world. The question that arises is whether the play *Hamlet* itself, like *Much Ado About Nothing*, might not similarly pivot on what is essentially nothing. This is not of course to deny that Hamlet’s father has in fact been

murdered by his brother, nor that something has been appearing on the ramparts of Elsinore. What is open to question, however, is the issue of whether a nexus necessarily exists between these two events – apart that is from the connection that has at some point been forged within the mind of Hamlet himself. More specifically, it remains uncertain whether the Ghost has appeared in order to disclose the details of the late king’s murder and thereby incite his son to revenge, or whether as Horatio and the sentries surmise it is there for some other purpose having to do either with the military emergency confronting Denmark or with some other potentially menacing “eruption to our state” (1.1.72).

If the latter is the case, and there is no direct connection between the murder of the king and the appearance of a phantom on the ramparts of Elsinore, then at least as regards his personal interpretation of events Hamlet is indeed making something out of nothing, and the scene in which he is privately exhorted by the Ghost to dispatch his uncle might be viewed in much the same light as that in which Macbeth sees a bloodstained dagger marshalling him the way to the chamber in which he will kill his king. To complicate matters still further, the Ghost itself, a “questionable shape” even from the beginning of the play (1.4.43), becomes an increasingly problematic presence as the drama proceeds. Although it has been glimpsed by several people even before the play opens, it can apparently be communicated with only by Hamlet himself, and its status as an entity external to the prince’s own mind subsequently becomes even more uncertain. When the Ghost appears to Hamlet in Gertrude’s closet, the prince discovers that his mother does not see what he does, that what he seems to her to be fixing his eyes on is “vacancy” (3.4.117). In the exchange between mother and son that ensues, a word which throbs insistently in the agitated utterances of each is that first heard in the opening dialogue of the play, when Bernardo replies to the question of whether the “thing” has appeared again that night with the declaration that “I have seen nothing” (1.1.24-25):

Ham. Do you see nothing there?

Ger. Nothing at all; yet all that is I see.

Ham. Nor did you nothing hear?

Ger. No, nothing but ourselves.

(3.4.132-35)

Gertrude maintains that Hamlet’s vision is “the very coinage of your brain” and a “bodiless creation” provoked by “ecstasy” (3.4.139-41), a description which bears more than a passing resemblance to that of the airborne dagger as a “false creation, / Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain” in *Macbeth* (2.1.38-39). If she is right, then what we are observing in Hamlet’s case no less than in Macbeth’s is a pathological process of *creatio ex nihilo*.

It is the play itself that provides clues as to the nature of the psychological and cognitive mechanisms that might be operating in this process, thereby affording a possible perspective on events very different from the prince’s own. To cite a single emblematic instance, when the deranged Ophelia produces strings of disjointed phrases that in themselves signify nothing, those listening to her words endeavour in a more than merely idiomatic sense to make something of them, and in this case as well they do so by attributing to them meanings that reflect their own thinking rather than anything intrinsic to the utterances themselves:

Her speech is nothing,
Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
The hearers to collection. They aim at it,
And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,
Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily.

(4.5.7-13)

“Nothing sure” becomes “much unhappily”, as Laertes too, listening to his sister’s distracted ramblings, confirms: “This nothing’s more than matter” (4.5.172). What seems to be nothing is transformed into a something more compelling than the world of material entities themselves.

4. *King Lear*

At a certain point in the play of which he is the protagonist, Hamlet delivers himself of an observation concerning King Claudius that may by extension be applied to kingship in general:

Ham. The King is a thing –
Guild. A thing, my lord?
Ham. Of nothing.

(4.2.27-29)

King Richard the Second makes the same discovery concerning the nature of kingship as, though by a somewhat different route, does Macbeth as well. There are other Shakespearean kings in addition to these who are obliged to confront a sense of the fundamentally illusory nature of their role, and of the identity that is a function of that role. The regal crown, described in *King John* as the “circle of my glory” (5.1.2), and in *Macbeth* as the “golden round” (1.5.27), but more bleakly in *Richard II* as the “hollow crown / That rounds the mortal temples of a king” (3.2.160-61), reveals itself very often to be another cipher enclosing vacancy. But the play that is most relentless in

exposing the emptiness underlying the appearance of power is that in which a character remarks that a king without authority is “an O without a figure ... nothing”. This is *King Lear* (1.4.183-85).

King Lear explores the concept of nothing in a number of its aspects: as metaphysical void, as the zero quantity left after successive processes of subtraction have taken their toll, as absence, as the cipher and what it signifies. Both of the two closely interwoven plots that comprise the play are precipitated by the same word, one that becomes a leitmotif throughout the tragedy. This is the word “nothing” itself. Most crucially, Cordelia pronounces the phrase “Nothing, my lord” when her father asks her what she can say to make manifest her devotion to him and thereby earn her share of the kingdom he is dividing among his daughters (1.1.87). Rather than being evasive, she is actually telling the truth in her own way, because what she means is that words are inadequate to express what she truly feels, and that her personal sense of honesty requires that she refuse to play the empty language game at which her sisters have proven so adept. In an ironic parallel to Cordelia’s exchange with Lear, Edmund uses the identical phrase – “Nothing, my lord” – when his father Gloucester demands to know what he is holding in his hand (1.2.32). In his case as well, though for very different reasons, he is telling the truth obliquely, because the letter he holds is a counterfeit one, and so indeed nothing at least as regards the authenticity of its contents. There is of course no comparison between the two nothings that initiate the plots of the play. Nonetheless there is a kind of specular relationship between the ways those seminal nothings work themselves out in subsequent events.

In what would seem to be an ironic echo of the cardinal tenet of Epicurean/Lucretian cosmology that was so much a matter of debate in Shakespeare’s time, Lear admonishes Cordelia after her refusal to conform to his expectations that “nothing will come of nothing” (1.1.90), inadvertently ambiguous words which he reiterates later in speaking with the Fool. “Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?” asks this personage, to which Lear responds “nothing can be made out of nothing” (1.4.128-30). From one point of view, at least, Lear is egregiously wrong, for everything that occurs in the play proceeds from the ostensible nothings with which it begins. Cordelia’s utterance of the word “nothing” ignites the ire of Lear, shatters the world he has been inhabiting with unthinking complacency, and so sets in motion a sequence of events that that will plunge the kingdom into warfare and terminate in the most agonizing of personal tragedies. In the parallel plot centred on Gloucester and his sons, the letter that Edmund describes as being “nothing” becomes construed as evidence for Edgar’s treachery and therefore brings into being a world that formerly did not exist. In a kind of ironic inversion of the *ex nihilo nihil fit* formula that Lear has invoked in his

warning to Cordelia, Edmund himself, illegitimate by birth and therefore what was defined in common law as a *filius nullius* – a virtual nonentity as regards both social status and legal rights – begins to make considerable headway in the world. As he himself says, remarking on the fact that the sportive circumstances of his breeding endow the bastard with “More composition and fierce quality” than legitimately begotten offspring can boast of: “I grow, I prosper” (1.2.12, 21). Whatever Lear himself might believe to be the case, it cannot be said that nothing issues from the nothings with which the play commences.

At the same time, however, it is indeed a terminal state of nothingness towards which those characters who elicit the spectator’s greatest imaginative sympathy inexorably decline, and in this respect Lear is ironically right. As James L. Calderwood remarks, “‘nothing’ is a kind of vortex that draws the ordered world of *King Lear* downward, reducing Lear to nakedness and madness and Gloucester to blindness” (Calderwood 1986, p. 6-7). In the case of Lear this process of reduction reaches its symbolic nadir in the tempest, in the course of which the old man himself – at the same time that the winds “make nothing” of the hair he tears from his head (3.1.9) – effectively wills the annihilation of the earth and its inhabitants (3.2.6-9), and then echoes Cordelia’s own words by promising that “I will say nothing” (3.2.38). But, even prior to this, the same process of progressive diminution is also rendered in almost mockingly arithmetical terms in the haggling that takes place over the number of knights that the former king is to be permitted to maintain as an escort. The original retinue of a hundred knights is reduced to fifty, then to twenty-five, until at last Regan deprives her father of his last prop by asking him: “What need one?” (2.2.455). After one there is only zero. By bestowing all his property and authority upon his daughters Lear has, as the Fool says, “pared thy wit o’both sides and left nothing i’the middle” (1.4.178-79), and he will eventually become an “O without a figure” (1.4.183). When the former king says of himself at one point that “this is not Lear” (1.4.217), what he is implicitly acknowledging is that his being has come to consist in the negation of his being, in his not being himself. In his case nothing, in the sense of nothingness, has indeed ensued from nothing.

Other characters are subjected to an analogous process. The loyal Kent is banished from Lear’s realm, and obliged to annihilate his own identity by assuming a disguise in order to continue to serve his king. Cordelia, divested of property and station by a father incensed by a candour he does not comprehend, has at least in social terms been similarly deprived of her identity. As Lear says of her: “we / Have no such daughter” (1.1.264-65). In a different though complementary way, Gloucester too, deceived by Edmund, will begin a gradual descent into misapprehension which will culminate in the loss of his eyesight and his relegation to a world of utter darkness.

Deluded by Edmund's feint of concealing the forged letter, he says that "The quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself" (1.2.34-35), and he too, like Lear, is both right and wrong at the same time, since Edmund is not really trying to hide what he describes as "nothing" at all. "If it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles" (1.2.35-36), Gloucester goes on to say, oblivious to the fact that in a short time he will not need spectacles for the devastatingly simple reason that he will have been deprived of his eyes. Edgar too, his experience in some ways paralleling that of the disowned and exiled Cordelia, loses his self, becoming a fugitive from the castle of a father who in the Quarto version of the play protests angrily that "I never got him" (2.1.78). Obliterating his former identity by divesting himself of his clothes and daubing his face with mud, he declares that "Edgar I nothing am" ([II.3.195]).

Thus in their different ways all the major positive characters of the play experience loss of self, social and existential disintegration, a radical reduction to the condition of pure cipher. It is deeply ironic that, in a world in which the principle of nothingness prevails, even those events and acts and utterances that might be regarded as affirmative in character must often assume forms that are in some way negative. Awakening from a long slumber and finding himself in the presence of Cordelia, Lear confesses that "I know not what to say" (4.7.54), thereby effectively reiterating his daughter's own "nothing", and this is followed by a series of further remarks in which negative constructions predominate:

Lear all the skill I have
Remembers not these garments; nor I know not
Where I did lodge last night. Do not laugh at me,
For, as I am a man, I think this lady
To be my child Cordelia.

Cord. And so I am, I am.

Lear Be your tears wet? Yes, faith; I pray weep not.
If you have poison for me, I will drink it.
I know you do not love me, for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong.
You have some cause, they have not.

Cord. No cause, no cause.

(4.7.66-75)

Without going so far as to suggest that the play should be read in explicitly religious terms, it might be tempting to see in this something reminiscent of the *via negativa* that some theologians believe to constitute the sole means by which divine truths can be apprehended. If this is so then those commentators are justified who take the view that there is a "recurring association of negation and knowledge" in the play (Tayler 1990, p. 29), and even that, as Calderwood suggests, there might be something paradoxically creative about the process of uncreation that it enacts (Calderwood 1986, pp. 5-19).

It is certainly by way of such a path that Gloucester arrives at what might in his case be regarded as being a kind of qualified salvation. The paradox of his situation is that as long as he has thought himself capable of seeing with perfect clarity he has not actually been perceiving the true state of affairs at all, whereas it is only when he literally sees nothing that he is finally able to apprehend reality in its true aspect. In his case as well, though in a manner very different to that of Edmund, something comes from nothing. The turning point in Gloucester's ordeal occurs when, determined to put an end to his existence, he attempts to throw himself from what he thinks is Dover Cliff and, finding himself still alive, and being assured that "the clearest gods ... have preserved thee" (4.6.73-74), undergoes what is often referred to in commentary on the play as a symbolic rebirth or resurrection. But this too is not without its ironic aspect, for if Gloucester has come to acquiesce in the will of the gods, and to renounce his project of committing suicide, it is by being deluded by Edgar as he was earlier deluded by Edmund. The vacant space into which he thinks he is launching himself at Dover is in fact a fiction generated by the evocative power of a speech which, as Richard Fly comments, constitutes "an artful structuring of nothing because a felt absence permeates the whole elaborate deception" (Fly 1976, p. 95). Edgar has exploited his father's physical blindness as Edmund has earlier exploited his moral blindness, and in the latter case no less than the former Gloucester has been deceived, quite literally, by nothing.

For Lear himself, however, notwithstanding the temporary respite afforded by his reunion with his daughter, and the mirage of emotional fulfilment that this event seems briefly to hold out, the descent into nothingness continues until the moment of his death. When in the final scene of the tragedy Lear suddenly appears bearing the body of the murdered Cordelia in his arms, Kent's anguished response is to ask, in what would appear to be less an eschatological allusion than a shocked metadramatic reflection on the unexpected turn that events have taken: "Is this the promised end?" (5.3.261). In one sense it is emphatically not the promised end, because the drama has made a clear gesture in the direction of a positive conclusion, with the reconciliation of Lear and his daughter, a recognition on the part of the former king of the wrongs he has been guilty of, and Edmund's eleventh-hour decision to reprieve the people he has condemned to death. But although Kent may not recognize it, there is another sense in which the sight of the grief-crazed king bearing onto the stage the dead body of his child is exactly the end that has been promised, for it is here that the play fulfils with ruthless rigour the premise with which it began. Lear, who has said that "nothing will come from nothing", must confront what is for him the ultimate manifestation of nothingness, an inanimate body which is the inert sign for a beloved daughter who no longer exists, which is something and nothing at the same

time. The woman who has said “nothing” at the beginning of the play says nothing in a far more irremediable and desolating sense at its close:

And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, no life!
 Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life
 And thou no breath at all? O thou’lt come no more,
 Never, never, never, never, never.

(5.3.304-307)

“Nothing” has become “never”, a word that the Quarto version of the play follows up with a series of reiterated “O”s (5.3.308). The “O” that Lear repeats in his final paroxysm of agony is at once an exclamation of grief and the symbol of nothingness, a vacant cipher rendered into sound.

The only way out of this abyss of negativity might seem to be through the rather conventional moral conceptions that Edgar enunciates as he prepares himself to reassert his place in the world. The empty sockets that were his father’s eyes, he piously declares, are the penalty paid for the “dark and vicious place” where Edmund had his origin (5.3.170). Once again, it would seem, nothing comes from nothing. However comprehensible they might be, such attempts to find an obscure kind of poetic justice even in the most atrocious events only function up to a point, and notwithstanding the fact that order is technically restored at the conclusion of *King Lear* the atmosphere that reigns at its close is uncompromisingly bleak. As Kent says, “All’s cheerless, dark and deadly” (5.3.288). Shortly after Lear has expired over the body of Cordelia, Kent announces that he too is about to die, saying that “My master calls me, I must not say no” (5.3.321), and thus expressing in negative terms even his refusal to refuse. Edgar’s advice to the few surviving characters in the tragedy is that they should “Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say”, to which he adds somewhat lamely that in contrast with those who are dead or about to die “we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long” (5.3.323-25).⁴ The piling up of such negative terms – “no”, “not”, “never”, and “nor” – even at the conclusion of the play makes its own sombre point, and would seem to afford linguistic corroboration of Gloucester’s prediction earlier in the drama that “this great world / Shall so wear out to naught” (4.6.130-31). Naught – another word for the cipher or zero – is exactly what the world of this tragedy terminates in. Though it remains unpronounced, “nothing” is the last word of *King Lear*.

⁴ These lines are assigned to Albany in the Quarto edition of the play.

5. Rounded with a Sleep

There is however another cipher in Shakespeare’s works to be briefly mentioned in conclusion, this being the magical circle alluded to in the final scene of *The Tempest*. The Folio in which this play first appeared does not contain a description of Prospero actually inscribing a circle on the ground, but since a scene direction specifies that a number of characters in the play “enter the circle which Prospero has made, and there stand charm’d” it is to be presumed that such a figure is at that point already present and plainly visible (5.1.57 SD). On the stage of the Globe theatre the shape would have been perceived as a circle within a circle, a kind of *mis en abyme* potentially reflecting the wider world itself as the series of circles radiates outward from the wooden O of the theater to what is described in *Antony and Cleopatra* as “The little O, the earth” (5.2.80). Structurally equivalent to a play-within-a-play, the circle embedded within other circles harks back to the extraordinary speech in which Prospero meditates on the dissolution of the masque he has presented for the benefit of Miranda and Ferdinand, drawing an analogy between the melting of that spectacle into thin air and the dissolution of the very world to which Shakespeare’s audience belongs. It is in this speech that Prospero has said that the great globe itself – the theatre in which the actor impersonating him is standing but also the world of which it is an infinitesimally tiny part – “shall dissolve” and “Leave not a rack behind” (4.1.154-56). And it is in this speech as well that Prospero has compared life itself to those dreams which, throughout Shakespeare’s drama, have consistently been identified with nothing, and yet like other forms of nothing have manifested the power to transform existence for better or worse:

We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

(4.1.156-58)

Whether it be positive or negative in tenor, or somehow both at once, this is the image that lingers on in the imagination after Prospero has pronounced one of the most haunting speeches in Shakespeare: that of life as a dream encircled by the darkness of oblivion – a cipher signifying nothing, and at the same time signifying all there is.⁵

⁵ This chapter incorporates material previously published in my book *Shakespearean Perspectives: Essays on Poetic Negotiation* (Lucking 2017), chap. 9.

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