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***King Lear*: Everything Comes of Nothing and the Great Stage of Fools¹**

Abstract

The tragedy of *King Lear* has a unique relationship to ‘nothing’. The word is used more frequently in this play than any other in the canon. ‘Nothing’ as a condition of humanity and the universe itself is the driving concern of *King Lear*, and indeed has a presence in almost all of Shakespeare’s ontological discourses into the nature of the human. But Shakespeare’s ‘nothing’ in *Lear* is never powerless: it is never nihilistic or negative space. In fact, nothing gives birth to everything. Lear must painfully learn through the stripping of self and the re-evaluation of language, that his maxim “nothing will come of nothing” (1.1.99) reveals that the “nothing” that transpires are the subsequent actions and thoughts in the play. Coming to terms with our nothingness is entangled for Shakespeare in our comprehension of human connection and of alleviating human suffering by sharing it. This paper examines the value of ‘nothing’ in *Lear* and in Shakespeare’s concept of the world being a great stage, where humans navigate between being sublime, but also fumbling, fools.

KEYWORDS: Nothing; Lear; Fool; zero; naught; nought; Cordelia; primogeniture; Christian; Pagan; nihilism; stage; tragedy; arithmetic; love

The tragedy of *King Lear* has a unique relationship to ‘nothing’. A complex relationship, one that evokes pagan and Christian readings of the emptying of self for spiritual revelation, and simultaneously encompasses the hollowness of ‘seeming’ virtues and concealed hard hearts. The presence of “nothing” and its cognates in Shakespeare’s great tragedy has long been noted and commented upon (Bigliuzzi 2019; Burzyńska 2018; Chiba 2018; Sheerin 2013; White 2013; Levin 2009; Bigliuzzi 2005; Rotman 1993; Fisher 1990; Fleissner 1962). The word is used more frequently in this play than any other in the canon.² If we examine it in the context of a distinctive pattern of imagery – the figure nought and numerous images of its shape in referenc-

¹ This article, which began as a joint paper, is indebted to many intensive discussions with David Schalkwyk and could not have been written without them.

² It occurs twenty-nine times. See <http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/concordance/> (Accessed 14 July 2019).

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es to planets, the sun, orbs, eclipses, eyes, crowns, eggs, conception, birth, death, female “organs of increase”, the word “love” “poor” “fool” and the play’s multiple instances of the exclamation, “O” – it quickly becomes apparent that “nothing” as a condition of humanity and the universe itself is the driving concern of *King Lear*. But the nothing is never powerless: it is never nihilistic or negative space. In fact, nothing – with its early modern connotations of female genitalia³ – gives birth to everything. And Lear, because of his “blindness to ‘nothing’” (Levin 2009: 158), must painfully learn through the stripping of self and the re-evaluation of language, that his maxim “nothing will come of nothing” (1.1.99)⁴ reveals that the “nothing” that transpires are the subsequent actions and thoughts in the play. *Ex nihilo fit ens creatum*. This creation from nothing is not an image of salvation – the nothing or ‘chaos’ of the creation myth from which the universe is constructed – is not simply the revelatory birth of truth and beauty, but also despair and madness. The abyss is one pregnant with possibility – the domain of both the fiend and the god. And human potential. The critical thing is not whether we are ‘nothing’, but what being ‘nothing’ actually means.

In recent years critics have augmented discussion of the significance of the word ‘nothing’ with accounts of the game-changing but also very late introduction of the figure nought (or cipher) into the English arithmetical system from the East. Some have argued that the resistance to the new, paradoxical nought was religious, stemming both from its signification of the empty chaos from which God created the world *ab nihilo*, and a more racial antipathy to its supposed Arabic origins (Fleissner 1962). But this paradoxical cipher enabled double-entry bookkeeping, and so contributed in practical ways to the efficient extension of trade and commerce, and the growth of capitalism. Nought as a signifier of exponential expansion.

The crucial thing to note about nought is that it has none of the characteristics of the integers with which it keeps company: unlike them, it is neither “positive nor negative, even nor odd, prime nor non-prime, fractional or whole” (White 2013: 234). But this figure of ‘nothing’ acts as a very powerful ‘value’ in the system of integers. In England, as early as 1400,

³ Although Cordelia’s “nothing” is not overtly sexual, it is a word loaded with other meanings and fertile potential. ‘Nothing’ in Shakespeare commonly carries resonances of its well-known double entendre – see Martin Wiggins: “*Much Ado about Nothing* . . . is one of Shakespeare’s smuttiest double entendres. If the story is about anything at all, it is much ado about vaginas, also signified by the word ‘nothing’” (2000: 73). And Edward Taylor: “Signifying what lies between a maid’s legs, as when Hamlet brutally jokes to Ophelia of ‘country matters’, the word ‘nothing’ points to sex” (1990: 31-2).

⁴ All quotations are from William Shakespeare, ‘Folger Digital Texts’, <http://www.folgerdigitaltexts.org>.

Thomas Usk recognised: “Although a sipher in augrim [algorithm or algorism, the Hindu-Arabic numerals] have no might in signification of it selve, yet he yeveth power in signification to other” (qtd in White 2013: 235). Depending on where it is placed in relation to an integer, nought alters the initial signifier. Thus the ‘new’ zero was generally held to be paradoxical: “How is it that ‘o’ can indifferently stand, depending on context, for the number one hundred (‘C’), as a support for the number ten (‘X’), and as a support for nothing at all (‘?’). A question which *King Lear* poses with considerable urgency” (Davis 2019: 123). Lear’s one hundred knights that are reduced to 1, causing his heart to break into a hundred thousand flaws, is a numerical re-evaluation that results from the shifting figure nought (Fisher 1990). This is the contextual power of nought as a value within a system. Nought remains nothing only without its accompanying integer. In Shakespeare’s play the value of nought is similarly perspectival and contextual. The Fool in Lear remarks, “thou art an O without a figure, I am better than thou art now, I am a fool, thou art nothing” (1.4.197-9).

In *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*, Brian Rotman uses the mathematical properties of zero to read *King Lear* as an exercise in nihilism. *King Lear*

dramatise[s] reductions to nothing, charting the annihilation of human warmth, the dissolution of social, natural, familial bonds, the emptying of kindness, sympathy, tenderness, love, pity, affection into hollow shells, into substitutes for themselves which take part in the deal, the transaction, the exchange . . . The play shows the destruction of a world and a self by a force derived from “nothing”; a force wearing the mask . . . of zero. (1993: 78-80)

But is this true? The force wearing the mask of zero may not be a force driving towards nihilism or destruction, but rather to exposure, revelation, infinite potential and creation. According to quantum field theory there is no such thing as a vacuum – “empty space is actually fizzing with short-lived stuff . . . ‘NOTHING will come of nothing’, *King Lear* admonishes Cordelia in the eponymous Shakespeare play. In the quantum world, it’s different: there, something comes of nothing and moves the furniture around” (Brooks 2016). Nought does not necessarily signify naught.

The most famous instance of “nothing” in the play occurs in the first scene:

LEAR . . . what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters’? Speak.
CORDELIA Nothing, my lord.
LEAR Nothing?
CORDELIA Nothing.

LEAR Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.
 (1.1.94-9)

Lear's response is usually read as the classical principle, a general aphorism, the Latin saw, *nihil ex nihilo fit*, contrary to "The theological doctrine that God's Word created all that exists *ex nihilo*" (Fisher 1990: 93). But Lear's statement is also a particular response to a specific word: a warning for Cordelia to mend her speech a little lest she mar her fortune. Nothing will come of Cordelia 'saying' nothing. But what is Cordelia's "nothing"? Saying "nothing" is a contrary act to staying silent.

Jonathan Bate asserts that Cordelia refuses to play the court game (Bate 2008). This is not a game. But if it were a game, Cordelia is not refusing to play: she makes an unexpected manoeuvre.⁵ The setup of the inheritance is discomfiting to all. None know how to 'play', as the first two daughters stumble through their rhetoric. Lear has made the first unexpected manoeuvre. The natural order would be for primogeniture: the passing of the whole kingdom to the first-born. The play begins with a prologue, before the fateful court scene, that alerts us to an interference with this traditional norm. Kent and Gloucester, the two senior peers in the Kingdom, are puzzled that Albany, husband of the first-born Goneril, seems to have fallen out of the direct line of inheritance:

KENT I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.

GLOUCESTER It did always seem so to us, but now in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the dukes he values most, for [equalities]⁶ are so weighed that curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety.
 (1.1.1-7)

This theme of primogeniture is continued in the subsequent discussion about Edgar and Edmund, as first and second born.

Thus, the initial moments of the play give a framework with which to interpret the division of the kingdom.

When Lear enters, his first line signals his pressing concern, his motivation for innovating away from traditional practice: "Attend the lords of France and Burgundy" (1.1.34). Lear is preparing to bequeath Cordelia her dowry – a proportion of the Kingdom. And he has carefully construct-

⁵ For different critical perspectives on the 'game' see Katarzyna Burzyńska: "Both Cordelia's and Lear's 'nothings' are fraught with meanings" (2018: 366).

⁶ The Folger edition inserts 'equalities' in brackets to indicate the alternative "qualities" reading in F. Here "equalities" has the obvious meaning that they are equally weighed.

ed a way to give his youngest daughter the most opulent third: “That we our largest bounty may extend / Where nature doth with merit challenge” (1.1.57-8). Merit will challenge nature. The richest inheritance will not follow the natural order of first born but go to the one with most merit. And what test has he invented to evaluate this merit? “Which of you shall we say doth love us most?” (1.1.56).

If it is a game, Lear has rigged the results. He has loaded the dice. Everyone knows that the one with most “merit” to solve this riddle is Cordelia. This is not a capricious, wayward, narcissistic, or senile manoeuvre, however disastrously it may turn out. It is a careful plan, where Lear’s love supersedes his political responsibility.⁷ Its unexpected backfiring inflames his reaction disproportionately.

E.H. Gombrich alerts us to the fundamental truth of human perception – that we see what we expect to see or want to see (1977). In this case Lear does not hear what he expects or wants to hear. But this creates a similar effect. He consequently projects unto Cordelia’s “nothing” what is not there. That is to say, an absence.

But what is the question asked of Cordelia when she responds with that fateful word “nothing”? “. . . what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters”? (1.1.94-5). What can Cordelia say to draw the most opulent third of wealth and power? Nothing. The question is not a direct question about her love for Lear in itself. It asks her to wield her love into an instrument of transactional value. For Cordelia love cannot be ‘coined’ for land. This is counterfeiting value. ‘Love’ in tennis comes from ‘l’oeuf’ – nothing, nought, the egg. Cordelia introduces “nothing” as an expression of love. It is not empty space, not naught. Kent tries to help Lear understand this, to “see better”: “Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least, / Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds / Reverb no hollowness” (1.1.171-3).

We are oriented through Cordelia’s asides to interpret her language with a particular gloss.

CORDELIA What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent.

. . .

Then poor Cordelia!

And yet not so, since I am sure my love’s

More ponderous than my tongue.

(1.1.68, 85-7)

⁷ Discussing sixteenth- and seventeenth-century notions of sovereignty and Lear, Brain Sheerin notes: “The reciprocity that Lear not only respects but demands – both in the form of tributes of love and of a continuing respect for his “name and all th’addition to a king” (1.1.34) – is perfectly consistent with typical monarchical (and absolutist) discourse of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.” (2013: 802).

Cordelia's love is ponderous. It is a great 'O' with substance and weight. The breath that carries words is light and insubstantial: in one sense, 'nothing'. She cannot heave the weight of her heart into the empty orifice of the mouth.

This is a reoccurring theme in Shakespeare's plays:

ANTONY . . . there is beggary in the love that can be reckoned.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.1.16)

BEATRICE Speak, count, 'tis your cue.

CLAUDIO Silence is the perfectest herald of joy. I were but little happy if I could say how much.
(*Much Ado About Nothing*, 2.1.299-301)

BASSANIO Madam, you have bereft me of all words.
Only my blood speaks to you in my veins,
And there is such confusion in my powers
As after some oration fairly spoke
By a beloved prince there doth appear
Among the buzzing pleasèd multitude,
Where every something being blent together
Turns to a wild of nothing, save of joy
Expressed and not expressed.
(*The Merchant of Venice*, 3.2.179-87)

For Cordelia, "nothing" is an expression of her truth. It is not a scanting or a refusal or a negation. A.C. Bradley writes: "And even if truth were the one and only obligation, to tell much less than truth is not to tell it. And Cordelia's speech not only tells much less than truth about her love, it actually perverts the truth when it implies that to give love to a husband is to take it from a father" (1951: 321). But Cordelia's comments on her sisters' love, to which Bradley objects so strongly, are not an expression of her own attitude to love. Being "nothing", her love is indivisible. But by adopting her sisters' calculating language of love, she points out its logic: if love is something that can be calculated, quantified, distributed, then her sisters do indeed forget the love they owe their husbands. And most importantly, Cordelia is alerting her father to the fulsome emptiness of her sisters' "all". This contrasts with the fullness of Cordelia's "nothing", and, pace Bradley, the fullness of her truth – "the simple truth of Cordelia's 'nothing'" and "her incapacity to ruse and cog" (Levin 2009: 155, 158). "Poor" Cordelia can 'only' speak what she purposes to do. It is not that she will not, but that she cannot, her richness signified by what she lacks: "But even for want of that for which I am richer: / A still-soliciting eye and such a tongue / That I am glad I have not" (1.1.265-7).

Catherine Belsey reminds us that Shakespeare's play, based on Geoffrey De Monmouth's story of *King Lear* and his daughters, has its origins in an older, widely circulated folk tale, "Love like Salt",⁸ "in which an old rich father asks his three daughters which one loves him most . . . The first says, 'More than life itself'" (rewarded with some land and a rich husband), the second affirms, "More than all the world" (rewarded with some land and a rich husband), and the youngest replies, "I love you as fresh meat loves salt". The old man is furious, misevaluating and misunderstanding the response. The daughter is banished, serves in disguise as a scullion next door, the rich master (of course) falls in love with her, and all are invited to the wedding feast. But the mysterious bride orders the kitchen to use no salt in their preparation – salt is the medieval way to keep meat from spoiling. The food is inedible. The old man realises the value of his daughter's expression of love. Her true identity is revealed and they are reunited (Belsey 2008).

Cordelia's "nothing" is like the salt. Like the father in the folk tale, Lear misevaluates the word "nothing"; it is not that "nothing" has no value. For Cordelia the 'nought' is a signifier of truth: "So young, my lord, and true" (1.1.119). Lear bequeaths this truth back to her in purely negative terms. "Thy truth, then, be thy dower" (120). He waywardly amplifies and multiplies the perceived defects of "nothing", adding countless noughts as "truth" becomes the signifier of "pride", "untender", "little seeming substance", "a stranger to [his] heart", a "sometime daughter", a fallen price, "unfriended", "new-adopted to hate", "dowered with [his] curse, strangled with [his] oath", "a wretch whom Nature is ashamed / Almost t' acknowledge hers" (1.1.118-244). She is cast aside with this "nothing" – without his grace, his love, his benison. He propagates the nothing like counterfeiting coins. Cutting what he thinks is her emptiness into signifiers of zeros. Later this haunts him in madness: "No they cannot touch me for coining. I am the King himself" (4.6.102-3).⁹

Gombrich's discussion of perception includes a further phenomenon, after Wittgenstein, of a perspectival switch, where the same figure may be seen as two different aspects, as in Jastrow's duck-rabbit (Wittgenstein 2009: 204e). France responds to the same "nothing" as everything: "Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich being poor; / Most choice, forsaken; and most loved, despised." (1.1.290-1).

In the stocks Kent encapsulates the perspectival conundrum of nothing: "Nothing almost sees miracles / But misery" (2.2.180-1). The completed sen-

⁸ For variants of the folk tale see <https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/salt.html> (Accessed 14 July 2019).

⁹ The Folger text uses "coining" from Q1.

For Lear the hidden things in the world are “close-pent up guilts” that must “rive their concealing continents” and “cry / These dreadful summoners grace” (3.2.60-3). In the storm Lear desires the great gods to expose enemies; the blame, the corruption, the perjured, the caitiff, the lustful, the bloody hand, the wretch with undivulged crimes are all projected onto others. Initially Lear maintains that he is the suffering victim of deception and injustice. He is a man “more sinned against than sinning” (64). He conjures the elements to reduce the world to nothing – “Strike flat the thick rotundity of the world” (3.2.9): to destroy all the seeds of life that make ingrateful man – those other ingrateful men (or women) of course – not him.

But Lear begins to feel compassion. He shares something kinaesthetically with the fool. Coldness of the flesh: “Art cold? / I am cold myself” (3.3.74-5). This great King, with the one part of his heart that feels pity, gestures to the Fool to enter the vile hovel become precious through necessity. To enter before him: “In boy, go first” (3.4.30). In a prayer to the “Poor naked wretches” – the nothing and the dispossessed, Lear rives himself open. Rendering himself naked. Recognising his responsibility with an “O”: “O I have ta'en / Too little care of this” (36-7). This is the moment where he commands pomp to take physic and exposes himself to feel what wretches feel. To feel need not reason. To shake the superflux to others so the heavens appear more just. Understanding that it is only through human action that justness is revealed.

Lear moves from a sense that it is ridiculous or invalid to ask about need to an insight into his complicity in the unequal distribution of needs, to the idea of his own “superflux” (3.4.40), which needs to be shaken to those in greater need. The superflux no longer gives life value. Lear begins to glimpse in contrast to what Agamben calls “bare life” (1998), that the value of life is “unaccommodated man” (3.4.113). And it is this state of humanity that he joins. Unbuttoning his button and unbuttoning his mind and heart. If Edgar is forced by the injustice of Lear’s world to reduce himself to ‘nothing’, Lear actively chooses to repudiate that world by joining poor Tom. And reducing himself to “everything”.

LEAR Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here.
(3.4.113-6)

Although Lear passes through a process in which he can begin to make use of nothing, it is not a linear or teleological process. It is a wrestling, a resistance, an epiphany, a backward glance, a stare of amazement, a desire for revenge, a surrender to fondness, a fear of madness, and ultimately a desire for physic: “Let me have surgeons, I am cut to the brains” (4.6.212).

ter that Edmund told him was “nothing”: “The quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself. Let’s see. Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles” (1.2.37). Gloucester does not need to see to see nothing. But now that he has no physical sight he needs to re-evaluate “nothing” with his mind. “Mark but the penning of it” (4.6.154), Lear antagonises. Gloucester had mistaken the penning of Edgar’s hand. “Were all thy letters suns, I could not see” (155). The image of the round sun would make all the letters blinding zeros. Gloucester’s response also heartbreakingly sounds the double meaning of sons— his initial metaphorical blindness regarding Edgar and his subsequent literal blindness caused by Edmund. Kent instructs Lear to see better. Lear instructs Gloucester to see with no eyes.

The shifting evaluation and the causality of “nothing” in the play, is analogous to shifting the zero in the numerical system.

Gloucester moves from an image of the heavens as capricious and cruel – “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods; / They kill us for their sport” (4.1.41-2) – to one of comfort and reprieve: “You ever-gentle gods, take my breath from me; / Let not my worser spirit tempt me again / To die before you please” (4.6.241-3).

The capriciousness and cruelty he suffered at the hands of humans, and the comfort and reprieve as well. As with Lear’s shaking of the superflux – it is only human action that can show the heavens more just. Gloucester repeats this, “distribution should undo excess / And each man have enough” (4.2.80-1). We probably live in a world where Lear’s critique of the abuse of power and undistributed accumulation of wealth is more pertinent than at any other time.

This brings us to another aspect of “nothing” in *King Lear*. Namely the reading of the play as a whole, offering a nihilist universe.

For James Calderwood, “‘nothing’ is a kind of vortex that draws the ordered world of *King Lear* downwards . . . The consolations of Christian theology are temptingly offered but cruelly withdrawn” (1986: 6-9). For David Levin, it is “nothingness” that defines the world of Lear, “a limitless, paradoxical, negative dimension . . . threatened by evil’s movement towards nothingness, and governed by a blind and destructive nature” (2009: 147-154). Katherine Duncan-Jones decrees when Albany calls to the gods to defend Cordelia we are answered visibly on stage – Cordelia’s dead body dangling from Lear’s arms. According to Jones this presages a godless world. Or a Pagan world of unjust and ungoverned fate (Duncan-Jones 2008). But Lear’s world is not defined by “nothingness”, a word that did not exist in Shakespeare’s time (see Levin 2009: 142). Shakespeare offers an entirely radical and contemporary view. It is not gods that have forsaken humans. It is humans that have forsaken humans. Edmund and Goneril gave the order for Lear and Cordelia’s death, and it is Albany and the others that

have forgotten them: "Great thing of us forgot!" (5.3.282). Human beings can forget. It is not only human cruelty but also human frailty that creates suffering. Lear's world is not a world where gods render humans defenceless. It is a world that needs human responsibility and action.

Readings of the ending as nihilist tend to focus on the death of Cordelia, the repetition of "never", and the gods' injustice – "Is this the promised end?" (5.3.316). Even if Lear dies in ecstasy believing Cordelia alive, the universe appears desolate, the question of redemption centred on a single character – Lear. The mode of reading tragedy focusing on the ending ignores the play as a process which takes the audience through experiences and thoughts that cannot be reduced to the experiences and thoughts of the characters in their final moments. Lear offers his eyes to Gloucester – "If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes" (4.6.194). We can share and understand suffering if we look through the eyes of others. And the audience are able to look at the events of the play through the eyes of all the characters. Thus, the experience of empathy, the transformation of knowledge, the chance of redemption, happen for the audience irrespective of the fates of individual characters. Recall that for Rotman the mask of zero propels "reductions to nothing . . . the annihilation of human warmth, the dissolution of social, natural, familial bonds, the emptying of kindness, sympathy, tenderness, love, pity, affection into hollow shells" (1987: 78). But what is revealed to the audience is not just terror, cruelty and suffering, but countless small acts of human kindness, warmth, love, support and compassion which cannot be annihilated or reduced to nothing by the tragic end of the play.

The acts of kindness are magnified in a tragedy as major signifiers of humanity, amplified by the cruelty and darkness of their surrounding context. The humans in this world face the choice of whether to close their fists or open their hands. Michael Neill has written a compelling and moving discussion on the offering and the extension of hands in Lear, the unadorned friendly hand, desanctified, dispossessed of magic, that smells of mortality: the human hand that can give benediction (2002: 202-3). Lear is also a world of compassion filled with selfless acts. Cornwall's servant self-sacrificing resistance to his master's cruelty, the old man's ancient love to Gloucester, Kent's loyalty to Lear even to the death, Albany ready to give up power, Edgar expressing his anguish at the suffering of others throughout, Cordelia's despair for her father not for herself: "For thee, oppressèd king, I am cast down / Myself could else outfrown false Fortune's frown" (5.3.6).

In Lear's final moments, in poetic reprise of his undoing his button in the storm, he asks: "Pray you undo this button" (5.3.373). Somebody reaches out and helps him in this simple gesture of human connection. And he feels

grateful: “Thank you sir” (374). We are not left with nihilation. The universe is not governed by unjust gods. The tragedy is a tragedy of human condition. What makes it a tragedy is that the self-destruction is not inevitable.

Coming to terms with our nothingness is entangled for Shakespeare in our comprehension of human connection and of alleviating human suffering by sharing it. In *Richard II* the deposed King in prison comprehends that we must come to terms with our nothingness, together: “Nor I, nor any man that but man is / With nothing shall be pleased, till he be eased / With being nothing” (*Richard II*, 5.5.39-41). It is the transformation of our mortality to something precious.

In the final moments of *Lear* the death of Cordelia is a prolonged valuation and re-evaluation of the breath of life. Nothing cannot be divided. Whether she has breath or not is not limited to the final moment of her death. Is she dead as earth or light as the feather that stirs? *Lear* calls them “men of stones” (5.3.308). Then asks for a mirror which he calls a stone. “If that her breath will mist or stain the stone / Why then she lives” (5.3.314-5). Stone may be made an impression upon with the mist or stain of human breath. Of human life. Stone hearts can finally break with love. He listens to her soft voice, now an excellent thing. Then he sees something – perhaps. Potential of life being lived, gives us possibility. Is there breath or no? Is it something or nothing?

The stage on which Shakespeare’s play will materialise for us, the great O of the Globe itself, is a space for nothing but players, whom Shakespeare elsewhere calls “shadows”, “nothing”, “ciphers to this great account” (*Henry V*, Pro. 18), transforms its “airy shapes” into “something of great constancy” (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 5.1.27) in the form of our communal experience of the play. It is the insubstantial breath that gives substance to our dreams, the stuff of our life, rounded by a sleep. The fool in the tarot deck is zero. And *Lear* reminds us that we exist together on this great stage of fools. Between the breath and the death there is hope of life. And in Nothing is our Everything.

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