Since Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor published the Oxford edition in 1986, which included the two versions, the First Quarto (Q 1) and the First Folio (F 1), of *King Lear*, the idea of two substantive and legitimate texts has become largely accepted. Among those who produced editions based on the Quarto are Jay Halio (The New Cambridge Shakespeare, 1994), Graham Holderness (1995), Stephen Greenblatt (The Norton Shakespeare, 1997), and Wells himself (The Oxford Shakespeare, 2000). It is true, however, that a number of scholars, reluctant to accept the two-text theory, still prefer to use the conflated *Lear* text such as the Arden Shakespeare (ed. by R. A. Foakes, 1997). This paper aims to shed new light on the understanding of the multiple meaning of ‘nothing’ in the play, particularly in the First Quarto. The idea of ‘nothing’ lies at the centre of *King Lear*, especially as it pertains to the Q 1 version’s other significant features — theatricality and exorcism. Considering the interpretation of these concepts in the context of the Quarto *Lear* will lead to a new understanding of the Lear world, in terms of ‘artificial exorcism’ and ‘the theatre of nothing’.

**Abstract**

Since Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor published the Oxford edition in 1986, which included the two versions, the First Quarto (Q 1) and the First Folio (F 1), of *King Lear*, the idea of two substantive and legitimate texts has become largely accepted. Among those who produced editions based on the Quarto are Jay Halio (The New Cambridge Shakespeare, 1994), Graham Holderness (1995), Stephen Greenblatt (The Norton Shakespeare, 1997), and Wells himself (The Oxford Shakespeare, 2000). It is true, however, that not a few scholars, reluctant to accept the two-text theory, still prefer to use the conflated *Lear* text such as the Arden Shakespeare (ed. by R. A. Foakes, 1997). In evaluating differences, as Foakes claims, ‘it is also necessary to bear in mind that a change made in F is not necessarily “masterful” or an improvement over Q’ (131).

Along with several major differences between Q 1 and F, there are some important ones for our understanding of nothingness in *Lear*. The fact that the word ‘O’ is in heavy usage in Q 1 (for example, Lear’s groaning ‘O, o, o, o’, and Edgar’s ‘O he is gone indeed’) illustrates some textual awareness of the metamorphosis Lear needs to experience — to become ‘an O without a figure … nothing’ (630–1; I.iv.192–4), ‘Lears [Lear’s] shadow’
(659–60; Liv.231), and finally ‘the naturall foole / of Furtune’ (2386–7; IV.vi.190).\(^1\) As Robert Hornback claims, the Quarto is ‘entirely successful in achieving profoundly different, purposeful effects’: ‘the Quarto Lear offers insights into Shakespeare’s bitter, witty, wise artificial fools’ (181).\(^4\)

In the Lear world, the ‘nothing’ topos reflects the great metamorphosis of the circle. ‘The shape of nothing proliferates’, and in almost every scene ‘we encounter the thematic of loss, evacuation, and emptiness in the repetition of the “O” that acts as the master-figure for tragedy’ (Brayton 411). A circle, symbolized as ‘O’, has some senses as sign, sound, and symbol. We can identify the various senses signified by a circle (Willbern 252–4). There are emblematic images of a circle represented in *King Lear*. One of these is a ‘wheele’, of whether Fortune or Fire, alluded to by some of the characters who suffer most to see the worst: for example, ‘Fortune, good night / Smile, once more turne thy wheele’ (Kent, 1060–61; II.ii.172–3), ‘let goe thy hold when a great / wheele runs downe a hill, least it breake thy necke with follow-ing it’ (Fool, 1140–1; II.iv.71–3), ‘I am bound / Vpon a wheele of fire’ (Lear, 2523–4; IV.vi.45–6), and ‘the wheele is come / full circled [F: circle] I am here’ (Edmund, 2833–4; V.iii.174–54). Each of the characters in the play appears to have his own Wheel of Fate, although we are not necessarily supposed to witness all the fates of each one on the stage. The wheels of their personal fates may repeatedly go up and down, but the fortune of the whole ‘Lear world’ seems to be that of a state of continuous disintegration after his division of the Kingdom at the very beginning of the play. As Richard D. Fly argues in his essay, ‘Revelations of Darkness’, it is the ‘general symphonic movement towards the state of “nothing”’ (74) that we are compelled to see all through the play. The negating energy of ‘nothing’ seems to force all the personal fates in *King Lear* downward in a maelstrom, in which even the ideology of good-and-evil dualism ends up revolving around ‘nothing’. It is rather like a spiral of the snail’s shell which Fool mentions in a conversation with Lear — ‘I can tell why a snayle [snail] has a house’ (763; I.v.27–8), for ‘the question of the snail will always have to be understood as an infinite beginning and a ceaseless ending’ (Gleyzon 203).

When we consider the theatrical role of ‘nothing’ in *King Lear*, there are mainly two aspects to explore: the disguise and the absence. These aspects bear similarities as a kind of escape or a removal from a certain frame — whether religious or social. The discourses of both absolutism and patriarchy are among the most problematic frameworks in *King Lear*. The theatricality of ‘nothing’ can produce and reproduce a variety of escapes from these frames. A desire to escape from a certain social and legitimate frame can be considered subversive enough to be punished or banished as happens with most of the characters in the Lear world. As Dan Brayton argues in terms of ‘a spatial critique of power’, ‘[b]y charting the course of banishment and social dissolution that follows the first act, the play becomes a cartography of dispossesion’: in other words, ‘[t]he map evokes a possibility that will later become apparent, that sovereignty may simply be constituted by the material means and effects of rule: land, men at arms, command over the map of state’ (401).
The artificial strategy of ‘nothing’ will be proved, on the other hand, to be the armours with which to defend the individual ‘self’ in the face of the conflicts of dualism. When one has taken off his / her armour and stands naked, he / she will become ‘something’ out of ‘nothing’. In this sense, Cordelia and Edgar will be the first to escape from a frame so as to lead Lear or Gloucester to the other side of the frame to which they cling. The play may suggest that artificial ‘nothing’ could be turned into ‘something’ real and valuable in this theatrical world of ‘nothing’. In other words, to escape from a frame means to reverse one’s recognition of the value system. There are some, on the contrary, who even attempt to enter a certain frame and keep themselves within it. In the patriarchal society, both Lear and Gloucester are family heads. We know that filial love is absent in the hearts of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund from the beginning of the play. It is their ambitious disguises that will be judged false and evil by the moralistic framework of this play.

Edmund, who deceives his lovers (Goneril and Regan) as well as his father and brother (Gloucester and Edgar), appears to be a person who at first attempts to escape from the frame of custom; eventually, however, what he does instead is not to break the custom but to enter it himself in place of another by using tricks or disguises. In the custom of primogeniture, Bastard Edmund means almost nothing to Gloucester since he has a legitimate son, Edgar. This attempt by Edmund will be judged only as treason by the law of his society. The frame of custom never changes. In this respect, Edmund cannot be subversive enough to break that frame: his defeat in death will serve only to justify the dominant frame. He should have publicly advocated for the change of the custom itself, which would be truly subversive.

The disguises of Goneril and Regan are no more subversive than Edmund’s. As Edmund is naturally differentiated as a Bastard son from a legitimate son, they are differentiated as female. Their disguises in the love test scene only help them to keep their status in the frame of their society. The emphasis laid on their evilness is such as to extend to the general curse on women. When the disguises by women are connected with their gender in Lear’s curse,⁵ the audience might be forced to confuse morality with misogyny within the frame of the patriarchal society. Morality may become here the safety valve for the misogynist. Femininity seems to be unjustly degraded into the cursed sexuality of women because of these two sisters. It is true that their filial ingratitude is the more significant theme, but these evil women are accused and killed for their treasonous sexual desire. The reason why only Edmund is allowed to show clear signs of repentance may lie in the social frame of misogyny. The ‘womb’ becomes a cursed symbol of their ‘nothingness’, like the ‘swallowing womb’ (II.iii.239) in Titus Andronicus in misogynistic discourse. In a way, disobedient women are exorcised as devils in the misogynistic discourse, while feminised Lear himself cannot avoid being exorcised.

This paper aims to shed new light on the understanding of the multiple meaning of ‘nothing’ in the play, particularly in the First Quarto. The idea of ‘nothing’ lies at the centre of King Lear, especially as it pertains to the Q1 version’s other significant features — theatricality and exorcism. Considering the interpretation of these concepts in
the context of the Quarto Lear will lead to a new understanding of the Lear world, in terms of ‘artificial exorcism’ and ‘the theatre of nothing’.

We are now ready to consider the very quality of the Q 1 text of King Lear. When several features of ‘nothing’ in a ‘circle’ have the same paradigm of ‘theatricality’ with Edgar’s ‘exorcism’, King Lear can be considered a great ‘exorcism’ of ‘nothing’ in the ‘wooden O’, or the Globe, where the play was first performed. Having seen several features of ‘nothing’ represented in Q 1 King Lear, the idea of ‘exorcism’ comes to mind as a key term to explain the complex facets of this play. Of course, this term itself has a contemporary discourse as a social spectacle. Focusing on this theatrical function of the ‘exorcism’, this paper will analyse the artificial aspects of ‘nothing’ so as to trace its various transformations ‘in a spatial as well as thematic sense’ (Willbern 259). We will consider this subject under the following heads: (1) Exorcism and Theatrical Nothing: the social discourses of ‘exorcism’ will be examined in relation to theatrical ‘nothing’; and (2) Artificial Exorcism: the representation of ‘artificial exorcism’ will be defined in Q 1 King Lear, in relation to ‘the way to Dover’ as creative nothingness.

(1) Exorcism and Theatrical Nothing

In the Elizabethan or Jacobean discourse, the ‘exorcism’ functions as a fraud to create something from nothing: it produces the shadow of the Devil opposing to Authority, casting the opposite out in the name of the Authority so as to idealize and justify ‘the great image of authority’ (2366; IV.vi.158). The war of such exorcisms between the Protestants and the Catholics seems to have been much ado about ‘nothing’. ‘In early modern England’, Stephen Greenblatt explains in his essay, ‘Shakespeare and the Exorcists’, ‘rivalry among elites competing for the major share of authority was characteristically expressed not only in parliamentary fashions but also in bitter struggles over religious doctrine and practice’ (96). We are certain that a pamphlet of Samuel Harsnett’s (chaplain to the bishop of London then) is a partial source for Shakespeare’s King Lear.

‘Harsnett’s Declaration’, Greenblatt continues, ‘is a weapon in one such struggle, the attempt by the established and state-supported Church of England to eliminate competing religious authorities by wiping out pockets of rivalrous charisma’ (96). He defines this ‘charisma’ as the ‘sense of breaking through the routine into the realm of the “extraordinary” to make direct contact with the ultimate, vital sources of legitimacy, authority, and sacredness’ (96). When Harsnett attacks not only the exorcism by Jesuits but that by Puritans, the Anglican Church is in effect choosing a way to eliminate the confusing danger caused by radical exorcists on both sides, than choosing to utilize the charismatic potentiality of exorcism. The church established ‘Canon 72 of the new Church Canons of 1604’, prohibiting any act of exorcism without special permission of the bishop (99).

What Harsnett intended to achieve was to expose exorcism itself as a fraud. It is in exorcism’s theatricality that he finds a very close analogy between exorcism and the
stage-play. The main difference lies in whether the audience believes in the reality and the supernatural force behind it or not. If Gloucester knew that Poor Tom did not really lead him off a cliff, that it was just a trick by Edgar, he would never believe in the existence of merciful Gods in heaven in the Dover cliff scene. The efficacy of the Charisma would be analysed through the eyes of the audience in a theatre. As for this exorcism of Edgar, Greenblatt insists that ‘Shakespeare intensifies as a theatrical experience the need for exorcism’, acknowledging that this ‘dream of exorcism’ can never be satisfied as much as is accomplished in the ending of *King Lear* (125–6). Linking the ‘religion and the secular’ play in the theatrical, Greenblatt alludes to Brecht’s ‘alienation effect’ and Althusser and Macheray’s ‘internal distantiation’ in *King Lear*; ‘the official position is emptied out, even as it is loyally confirmed’ (126).

According to Greenblatt, even Edgar’s possession itself is likewise emptied out institutionally as merely a theatrical performance. Shakespeare’s theatre is ‘an institution that calls forth what is not, that signifies absence, that transforms the literal into the metaphorical, that evacuates everything it represents’ (127). Greenblatt is right in terms of Shakespearean theatricality, though he appears to be a little hasty in his generalization. The glory of this theatrical power, however, keeps us from appreciating this play as it is: whether Q 1 or F, we should examine the true quality of the text before enjoying it. The theatricality in *King Lear* is argued by Greenblatt on the basis of the paradigm of Edgar’s exorcism, when he says that ‘Shakespeare’s tragedy reconstitutes as theater the demonic principle demystified by Harsnett’ (127). By this ‘demonic principle’, he means that ‘evacuated rituals, drained of their original meaning, are preferable to no rituals at all’, thinking of Edgar’s ‘fraudulent, histrionic performance’ as ‘a response to this principle’ (127). We cannot deny his entire argument: instead we may feel deep agreement with his sympathetic insight into our internal religious need for theatricality. We feel, however, unsatisfied with it because we know that the meaningful plurality inherent in Shakespearean theatricality has been hidden under his monolithic analysis of it. If Shakespeare’s theatre is actually in the ‘ideological matrix’ as he claims (127), it would be more interesting to restore it to the very textuality of Q 1 *King Lear*, as well as the theatricality of it. Following on from the analysis of ‘exorcism’ as a social discourse, we must delve deeper into the abundant speculations on the quality of the Q 1 text, remaining warily alert to the historicity of textuality and the textuality of historicity.

We will then speculate on Edgar’s possession by fiends and his exorcism, in relation to the theatricality in *King Lear*. We see several characters disguise themselves for some purposes in the play. The theatricality in this play seems to be represented in two types of disguises: the disguise to satisfy materialistic desire, and the more inevitable or necessary disguise for some just end. On the one hand, Goneril and Regan disguise themselves as affectionate daughters in response to the love test by Lear. (It is true that the true cause for their filial ingratitude is rather vaguer than Edmund’s.) Edmund pretends to be an obedient son to Gloucester so that he may deprive his brother of the estate by an evil plot. On the other hand, Kent literally disguises himself to serve and
guard the king, who had ironically sentenced him to banishment from the kingdom. Edgar also disguises himself. Firstly, to survive, and secondly, to take care of his father who was deceived into charging him with a crime.

All the other characters seem to escape from the theatrical representation of disguise: the audience will see them acting as themselves on the stage. Duke of Albany, Duke of Cornwall, Earl of Gloucester, Lear, Cordelia, and Fool — each of these characters seems to be played without much shadow of theatricality or disguise. What does this difference mean? The two types of disguises we have seen above seem to be coloured morally in relation to their roles: we may regard the first disguise as an evil one, and the latter as rather good or necessary. We may, thus, find at least three facets of theatricality in terms of disguise in *King Lear*: if disguise is a theatrical representation of 'nothing', it means that we will also see three facets of 'nothing' there. Such characters as Gloucester and Lear are depicted at first as those who cannot distinguish the disguised appearance from the reality. The disguised 'nothing' appears as the reality to them. It is Lear and Gloucester that give substance to the plot of the half dreaming world of *King Lear*: the world of fools with the ‘reason in madnesse’ (2374; IV.vi.175) Of course each one ‘is not altogether foole’ (596; I.iv.151) (Q I only) like the Fool.

When we focus on the theatricality in the play, we can summarize it as a place for ideological conflicts. The theatricality as a disguise is either good or evil. The evil disguise may be further divided into two: the man’s and the woman’s. One is represented by Edmund, the other by Goneril and Regan. In the play, the convention of misogyny seems to make this gender difference comparatively severe, as is shown in Lear’s general curse on women’s adulterous lust or ingratitude. It seems that the true love of Cordelia would be the only hope for lifting that general curse of women. Moreover, Edmund’s allusion to the spiritual marriage with Goneril and Regan may also suggest the equality between men and women in terms of evil theatricality. Among such ideological struggles involving different levels of theatricality, the absence of Cordelia from Britain, as well as from the stage, will be the best theatrical representation of ‘nothing’ in that she is not altogether ‘nothing’.

Affection or love begins to be estimated as nothing from the very opening conversation between Kent and Gloucester: the King’s affection for the Duke of Albany and Cornwall are valued by ‘eithers moytie’ (6; I.i.7). It is Gloucester who suggests the standard way to calculate one’s affection for somebody. After this, the matter of his sons is introduced. Admitting that the legitimate son is ‘no dee[a]rer’ in his account than the bastard son, Gloucester treats Edmund only as a bastard son ‘by order of law’. When Kent asks Gloucester about Edmund, Gloucester confesses to have often blushed to acknowledge him:

*Kent*. I cannot conceive you.

*Glost*. Sir this young fellows mother Could, wherupon thee grew round wombed, and had indeed Sir a sonne for her cradle,
ere she had a husband for her bed, doe you smell a fault?  
*Kent.* I cannot wish the fault undone, the issue of it being so proper.

*Glost.* But I haue sir a sonne by order of Law, some yeare elder then this, who yet is no deerer in my account, though this knaue came something sawcely into the world before hee was sent for, yet was his mother faire, there was good sport at his makeing & the whoreson must be acknowledged, …  

(10–22 ; I.i.12–24)

Edmund is originated as a ‘nothing’ whoreson, as just an issue of a ‘fault’ or of ‘good sport’. Gloucester must estimate Edmund as ‘nothing’ by his material standard. In spite of that, Edmund is still something proper that came somewhat ‘sawcely into the world’ from a ‘round womb’ of his beautiful mother ‘before hee was sent for’. Thus, from the opening of the play, at the level of sub-plot, Edmund, the first representation of ‘nothing’, is to be especially endowed by nature with an evil character who resists both natural and social law. What Edmund desires is to get the estate as an equivalent to his Father’s affection so that he may become ‘something’ real to gain status and by such means be recognised in society. He wants to be a legitimate son instead of a bastard, subconsciously at least, which may partly explain his sudden penitence after hearing Edgar’s story of the moving death of their father. At the division of the kingdoms, it is Lear himself who demands that his three daughters express their affections for him as an equivalent to the land he will give them. Goneril and Regan speak some fulsome words of affection to satisfy their Father and inherit the kingdom. Their theatrical and ritualistic speech will make Lear immediately cede the kingdoms to each of them. Goneril’s words produce the land ‘Of all these bounds, euen from this line to this, / With shady forrests, (F: and with Champains rich’d. With plenteous Riuers) and wide-skirted Meaddes’ (58–59 ; I.i.63–5). Regan’s speech also produces ‘this ample third of our faire kingdome, / No less in space, validity, and pleasure, / Then that confirm’d on Gonorill’ (72–4 ; I.i.80–2). Here in the main plot, theatricality is introduced as a means to obtain the estate, and it transforms into the way Edmund deceives his brother and father to obtain the land.

When we learn that theatricality may produce something real and become the equivalent to the land, we must remember the unconditional praise of theatricality by Greenblatt. He seems to fail to think of somewhat ritualistic theatricality as being of types other than Edgar’s: that of Goneril, Regan, and even Edmund. In order to reconsider the value system itself that Greenblatt seemingly ignored, we need to keep this binary possibility in mind. Furthermore, the meaning of the possession or exorcism of Edgar needs to be examined in terms of the more abundant textuality.

Before turning to the case of Edgar, we must examine the surprising protest that Cordelia utters because of her true love for her Father. When Lear asks her, ‘What can
you say to win a third, more opulent / Then your sisters' (76–7; I.i.85–6), Cordelia answers:

Lear. How, nothing can come of nothing, speake againe.
Cord. Vn happie that I am, I cannot heave my heart into my mouth, I loue your Maiestie according to my bond, nor more nor lesse.
Lear. Goe to, goe to, mend your speech a little,
Least it may mar your fortunes.
(78–84; I.i.87–95)

Lear's interesting phrase seems to signify more when he says that 'nothing can come of nothing'. It means that she shall have no land or property if she speaks nothing favourable. If the flattery serves to mystify the Authority, Cordelia's 'nothing' will suddenly break that economy of exchange: Cordelia's representation of 'nothing' could be the means to unmask the fictitious transactions of love with the kingdoms. It is Cordelia who in fact tries to prove that 'nothing can come of nothing', while her sisters realize that they can have something real for false love — their theatrical representation of 'nothing'. As Cordelia prophesies, the demystification of Lear's authority begins just after he has nothing real but his natural body. Flattery will never come to the king if he has 'nothing' to give a flatterer, and the last thing that will be left to the king is the natural bond, which Cordelia desperately mentioned. Kent is also the person who has noticed this.

When King Lear pronounces the disinheritance of Cordelia and the re-division of the kingdoms between Goneril and Regan, Kent stands up for the demystification of the King so that the King may realise the truth:

Kent. ...
Be Kent vn mannerly when Lear is man [F: mad],
What wilt thou dow ould man, think'st thou that dutie
Shall haue dread to speak, when power to flatterie Bowes,
To plainnes honours bound when Maiesty stoops to fallly,
Reuerse thy doome [F: reserue thy state], and in thy best consideration
Checke this hideous rashnes, ...
(137–42; I.i.145–51)

Kent. Now by Appollo King thou swearest thy Gods in in vaine.
(154; I.i.160–1)

Kent. ...
Reuoke thy doome [F: guift], or whilst I can vent clamour
From my throat, ile tell thee thou dost euill.

(158–59; I.i.164–6)

In the Q 1 version, the effect of Kent’s attempt at demystification seems to be emphasized more than in F. Our attention seems to be led to the political fault of Lear’s division of his kingdoms in F, while in Q to the parental fault of his unnatural renunciation of Cordelia. The blunt protest by Kent makes Lear angry enough to banish him. It is because Kent sought to make the King break his vow, ‘Which we durst never yet; and with strained pride, / To come betweene our sentence and our powre, / Which nor our nature nor our place can beare’ (162–4; I.i.169–71). When Lear pronounces Kent’s banishment, he never forgets to say that ‘by Jupiter’ the sentence passed on Kent ‘shall not be reuokt [revoked]’ (171–2; I.i.178–9). The courageous protest by Kent as well as Cordelia seems to make both Lear and the audience realize Lear’s misconstruing of the material power with the absolute one — that of material love with true one.

What will become of the King, after he invests Cornwall and Albany with his ‘power, / Preheminence, and all the large effects / That troope with Maiestie,’ and he only ‘still retaine / The name and all the additions to a King’ (120–6; I.i.130–6)? Even the ‘reuenue, execution of the rest’ will then be that of his ‘Beloued sonnes’ (127–8; I.i.137–8). The great void of Authority is left unconsciously in Lear’s mind, although he has almost nothing but the name and a yet powerless dignity of a King. Lear becomes ‘Lear’s shadow’ (659–60; I.iv.231) rightly after losing all power. The only figure Lear can acknowledge as a king must be the absolute and mighty king from whose image he himself has just escaped. The rest of life, then, becomes a journey of self-recognition for him — to realize that he is just a trivial being of a man. Thus, we know that Lear is also the one who plays ‘nothing’, if unconsciously, so that he may reach the real understanding of his previous phrase: ‘nothing can come of nothing’, which would be the spell for demystification.

‘Nothing’ in King Lear is represented as ‘Void’, ‘Vacancy’, ‘Absence’, or ‘Lack’, which will be the motive for some characters who are forced to disguise themselves. For Edmund, he naturally lacks the right to inherit his father’s land because of his bastardy: that is why he disguises himself as both an honest brother to Edgar and as an obedient son to Gloucester. As for Goneril and Regan, since they lack power before the division of the kingdoms, they play the role of affectionate daughters at the ritualistic love test to secure these. All of them act like Machiavellians and resort to trickery in order to satisfy their private material desire.

Cordelia, Kent, Edgar, and even Gloucester and Lear are banished from their rightful place or position. Cordelia is unjustly deprived of her dowry by Lear, and is nearly banished to France. Her absence itself from Britain, however, can be the theatrical representation of her ‘nothing’. This void stands as a moral standard in opposition to her sisters’ evilness. The value of her absence seems to be further heightened to such a holy status as to make her a saviour for her Father, implying some religious overtone. If it is
the mystification of herself as just one side of the dualism of good or evil, she is destined to break it by her own deconstructive death — pure vacancy forever.

_Edgar_ ; out hee comes like the Catastrophe of the old Comedy, mine is villanous melancholy, with a sith [F: sighe] like them of Bedlam; O these eclipses doe portend these diuisions.

(411–4; I.ii.134–7)

Edmund cynically sets the figure of a Bedlamite against God’s in the old comedy. This contraposition is dissolved by the disguise of Edgar himself: Edgar becomes Tom of Bedlam to survive, so that he will finally come out like ‘the Catastrophe of the old Comedy’. While escaping the hunt, Edgar decides to assume the figure of a Bedlamite:

The Countrie giues me proofe and president
Of Bedlam beggers, who with roring voyces,
Strike in their numb’d mortified bare armes,
Pies, wodden priches, nayles, sprigs of rosemary,
And with this horrible obiect frame low seruice,
Poore pelting villages, sheep-coates, and milles,
Sometime with lunaticke bans, sometime with prayers
Enforce their charterie, poore Tuelygod, poore Tom,
That’s someting yet, _Edgar_ I nothing am.

(1075–83; II.ii.13–21)

It would be important to note the process by which Edgar acquires a new identity of ‘nothing’ as a Bedlam beggar after leaving the past identity of ‘Edgar’ so that he may save himself. When the name of ‘Edgar’ is detached from his ‘self’, his metamorphosis highlights the other characters’ typical examples of theatricality. Kent also disguises himself as Caius, but is not so marvellous as Edgar. In this play, we can find the characteristic theme of the ‘self’ of mankind: where to establish the ‘self’, or how to show the ‘self’ is somewhat the problem of identification.

The name of Edgar was at first the code of a legitimate son when the Bastard Edmund wanted to supplant him. When Edmund succeeds in banishing Edgar in order to be the heir of Gloucester, he secures the rights to his father’s land. But Edgar can recover his name by winning the final duel with Edmund; the ‘nothing’ of Edgar will be redeemed by the blessed legitimacy in the long run. In contrast, Cordelia’s ‘nothing’ is more positive from the beginning. She shows her ‘nothing’ as an absolute denial against the framework of Lear’s love consisting of ‘severe linguistic inflation’, to borrow Terry Eagleton’s phrase (76). When she resists joining the ritualistic economy of love, the name of Cordelia means ‘nothing’ like that of Edgar. The absence itself is a theatrical representation for Cordelia, while a disguise for Edgar.
Kent's and Edgar's main purpose in disguising themselves is to survive. If Kent, however, did not earnestly desire to serve the King, the disguise would be unnecessary for him, whereas it is essential for Edgar to survive. Although he is 'nothing' as Kent after the banishment, the theatricality for him might be the symbol of obedient service. In his first soliloquy, Kent tells his intention:

\[\text{Kent. If but as well I other accents borrow, that can my speech defuse, my good intent may carry through it selfe to that full is-} \]

\[\text{sue for which I raz'd my likenes, now banishet Kent, if thou canst} \]

\[\text{serue where thou dost stand condem'd, thy maister whom thou louest shall find the full of labour.} \]

(479–83; I.iv.1–6)

When Lear asks him what he is, Kent answers that he is a 'very honest harted fellow' and professes to be no less than he seems. What he wants to do is a 'Seruice' to the person whom he thinks has authority in his countenance. Lear has almost become a shadow of the king he once was. His authority lies not in his power but only in his countenance. The reduction of the number of his men to zero (1336; II.vi.263) will be the symbolic moment for Lear to have become a King's shadow. His play of 'euer [F: euery] inch a King' (2331; IV.vi.107) will continue until he is reconciled with Cordelia and recognizes himself as 'a very foolish fond old man' (2538; VI.vii.59). The disguised service of Kent, however, will not be recognized clearly by Lear: it means that his intention to be pardoned by Lear fails at last. When his purpose to serve Lear vanishes, his need for disguise will be nothing: Kent's absence from the stage will complete his servitude indeed.

In the cases of Lear and Gloucester, things are different: the theatricality of one appears to be infected and proliferated by the theatricality of the other. While Lear's madness may be the inevitable result from his political faults, his state of reason in madness seems to be the extreme expression of 'nothing' as a king. Likewise, Gloucester's sexual fault creates the monstrous void of a bastard, who deprives him of both eyes. His blindness like Lear's madness will be the theatrical mirror to reflect the darker world. The disguises of Edgar and Kent as well as the witty folly of the Fool will serve somewhat to accelerate such features as Lear or Gloucester has. Lear learns to speak the Fool's witty words under the delusions of persecution or of grandeur at first, and then the demonic and crazy words of Tom of Bedlam who is both mad and possessed. When despair drives blind Gloucester to an attempt to throw himself from the Dover cliff, what disguised Edgar does to save his father's life is to deceive him by playing a trick.

(2) Artificial Exorcism

We will now examine the nature and function of the artificial exorcism by Edgar. As we have seen before, the very nothingness or void can be found when Edgar decides to
play the role of a Bedlam beggar to survive. The disguised figures Edgar plays are the varieties of his theatrical representation of ‘nothing’. Neither his demonic possession nor exorcism, then, can simply be due to an evil will, as fake as they appear to be. Even if all that Edgar does as a Bedlamite was prohibited by the Acts under the reign of King James, the sympathy for him is clearly morally loaded throughout the play.

One of the most important roles of Edgar’s disguise as Tom would be to represent his wretched body as ‘nothing’: the Bedlamite’s entrance is preceded by Lear’s famous recognition of mercy for the poor:

*Lear*…

Poore naked wretches, where so ere you are
That bide the pelting of this pittiles night,
………………………………, O I haue tane
Too little care of this, take physicke pompe,
Expose thy selfe to feele what wretches feele,
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,
And shew the heauens more iust.

(1555–63; III.iv.28–36)

Edgar’s possession by the foul fiends is interpreted by Lear in an emblematic expression of ‘Pelican daughters’ (1596; III.iv.75): ‘Death traytor, nothing could haue subdued nature / To such a lownes, but his vnkind daughters, / Is it the fashion that discarded fathers, / Should haue thus little mercy on their flesh’ (1591–4; III.iv.69–73). What Lear has seen is the miserable figure of Bedlam beggar ‘who, with going voyces, / Strike in their mumb’d mortified bare armes, / Pies, wodden prickes, nayles, sprigs of rosemary’ (1076–78; II.iii.14–6). The rather moralistic sermon Tom of Bedlam preaches appears to mean ‘nothing’ to Lear, whereas the same kinds of artificial words of ‘nothing’ will mean everything to blind Gloucester later. Although Tom’s possession is a false one, his naked body cannot but be real, which Lear himself notices:

*Lear.*…is man no
more, but [F: then] this …her’s
three ons are so phisticated, thou are the thing it selfe, vnaccom-
odated man, is no more but such a poore bare forked Animal
as thou art, off off you leadings [F: Lendings], come on bee true [F: Come, vn-
button heere].

(1618–23; III.iv.102–9)

At this moment, Lear seems to have disregarded human pain and gone into the darker world of scepticism. If Tom of Bedlam speaks the demonic discourse, Lear learns to speak it with reason in madness.
While Tom’s bodily suffering can be taken as an example of social diseases, the madness of Lear shall be the mirror for the world’s corruption, as Gloucester grieves: ‘O ruined peece of nature, this great world should so / weare out to naught’ (2348–9; VI. vi.134–35). Edgar, Lear, and Gloucester, each of their bodies appear to be the theatre of suffering itself to the extent that no word can adequately report it, as Edgar confesses: ‘I would not take this from report, it is, and my heart / breakes at it’ (2354–5; VI.vi.141–2).

What is Edgar’s allusion to the fiends in the play about? It seems that it allows the characters to create the demonic world unconsciously within the play, which the audience knows about, consciously. This demonic world is then imagined and created both consciously and subconsciously in the mind of the audience. This effect is amplified by such a linguistic confusion as is caused by the wise folly of the Fool, the reason in the madness of Lear, the blind sight of Gloucester. Further, among these antinomic states, Edgar’s artificial exorcism seems to be one distinguished by linguistic reason in madness. ‘Edgar’s pretended fear’, Malcolm Evans says, ‘…..unites the blindness of Gloucester with the madness of Lear as their meeting approaches, and the vertical line of Edgar’s cliff reconstitutes the axis of representation in the text as a whole’ (224–5). Between the devilish magic and the holy miracle, there seems to be lying the reality.

The tragic symphony of ‘nothing’ moves toward the promised end of the ‘Lear world’. Even if the dramatic climax is reserved for Cordelia, the Dover cliff scene can be said to be the utmost moment of theatrical representation of ‘nothing’. In King Lear, Evans says, ‘the abyss of subjects and signs, complete with its ideological disclosures and abnegations, appears as an almost physical presence, conjured up near the cliffs of Dover during the scene in which Lear and Gloucester finally meet again on the “great stage of Fooles”’ (224). ‘Men are so necessarily mad, that not to be mad would be another form of madness’, Michael Foucault says, in his Madness and Civilization, presupposing a historical ‘zero point in the course of madness’ at which ‘madness itself is an undifferentiated experience, a not yet divided experience of division itself’ (ix).

Evans picks up this zero point to explain Edgar’s undifferentiated experience in that he can no longer recognize a significant difference between his assumed role of madman and his rational self-identity, when saying ‘Edgar I nothing am’.

The theatrical representation of ‘nothing’ we have seen thus far, may be explained by such special marks of the Renaissance texts or of painting closer to the ‘zero point’ as Foucault asserts: a ‘proliferation of meaning, from a self-multiplication of significance’, and imagery ‘burdened with supplementary meanings, and forced to express them’ and an ‘excess of meaning’ into which ‘dreams, madness, the unreasonable can also slip’ (Madness 18–9). In King Lear, we see Edgar’s assumed madness and possession, Lear’s aggravating madness, Fool’s folly, Gloucester’s blindness, and evil characters’ tricks, reduced to such a zero point as Edgar rightly says: ‘O matter and impertinencie mixt reason in madnesse’ (2374; VI.vi.174–5).

The Dover cliff will be the proper place where ‘the excess of meaning’ is spectacled, while the cliff itself is doubly constructed theatrically by means of language in the
process of Edgar’s artificial exorcism. Gloucester leaps from ‘the Dover cliff’, believing that he is where he thinks he is. The main purpose of Edgar’s exorcism in artificial Dover was to transform his father’s thought pattern temporarily from pessimism to optimism to overcome the worst, in terms of the overall disintegrating movement toward creative nothingness, throughout and beyond the text. As in the final lines attributed to the Duke of Albany, we must ‘Speake what we feele, not what we ought to say’ (2984; V. iii.325), endlessly looking for an artificial frame(work), case or house, not to lose our mind (or head), both physically and metaphorically. Fool’s answer to this question becomes a bitter lesson to us: ‘Why, to put his head in, not to give it away to his / daughter [F: daughters], and leaue his hornes without a case’ (765; I.v.30–1). We shall find our horns especially useful as feelers when we see nothing after losing our maps that are to show not only where we are but also who we are. The Q 1 Lear world has thus become the theatre of nothing, a world of artificial exorcism, foretelling the fools’ stage of the ‘wooden O’ which Macbeth has beautifully soliloquised:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(V.v.19–28)

* All lines from Q 1 and F Lear texts are from The Parallel King Lear, 1608–1623, prepared by Michael Warren. Citations will give the Quarto Through Line Number (TLN). The act, scene and line numbers are given from The Riverside Shakespeare (ed. G. Blakemore Evans) for convenient reference to The Harvard Concordance to Shakespeare, following Warren’s version. I have retained the original capitalization, spelling, and punctuation in quotations from Q 1 and F, except for the long s. All other quotations from Shakespeare use the text and lineation of the Riverside edition.

References


Ioppolo, Grace, ed. *King Lear: An Authoritative Text, Sources, Criticism, Adaptations*,


Notes

(1) According to the theory Stanley Wells supports in his Oxford edition, ‘the Quarto and Folio texts, so far from representing a single lost play, are independent witnesses to two distinct Shakespearean versions, the earlier printed from his original manuscript before the play had been put into rehearsal, and the other from a text incorporating changes made for performance’ (6–7).

(2) Grace Ioppolo writes, for example, ‘[t]his Norton Critical Edition uses the Folio text as copy-text. … However, as so many Quarto 1-only passages (including the “mock-trial” in Act 3, Scene 6) have for four hundred years engaged critics, students, actors, directors, as well as reading and theatrical audiences around the world, these passages (when not replaced in the Folio by revisions) have been interpolated into the text of this edition. Thus this is a “conflated” edition’ (116–7).

Peter Davies also notes, ‘[t]he OUP [Oxford University Press] and CUP [Cambridge University Press] experiment was an interesting one, but the practice of centuries has weighed against its being accepted as the last word on the play. Editors, teachers and stage directors have continued to give us a King Lear which is, to a greater or lesser extent, a conflaction of Q and F. It is a solution that enables audiences and readers to enjoy all of Shakespeare’s excellences — and is more in keeping with the likely intentions of such a man of the theatre, to whom we cannot imagine scholarly notions of a “final” or “definitive” text as being particularly important’ (ix).

(3) Some of the major differences between Q 1 and F in association with the theme of this essay are found in the following lines unique to Q 1 Lear: the scene of ‘sweet and bitter foole’ and ‘monopolie’ (589–599; I.iv.140–55), the mock trial scene (1726–55; III.vi.17–56), and the scene of Edgar’s listing of the names of ‘Fiue fiends’ (1977–81; IV.i.58–63).

For a convenient reference to ‘passages unique to the First Quarto’, see the Appendix at the end of The Tragedy of King Lear, ed. Jay L. Halio (293–309); for ‘passages unique to
the Folio', see the Appendix at the end of The First Quarto of King Lear, ed. Halio (138–41).

(4) Hornback also notes, 'while the natural fool's unintended humor could be inversive and anarchic, the artificial fool's purposeful comedy was instead typically satiric and even “normative” in character in that it defended, promoted, and constructed social norms by mocking transgression and unwitting folly' (151).

(5) See some examples of Lear's curse on Goneril: 'ingratitude! thou marble-har-/ted fiend, more hideous when thou shewest thee in a child, then / the Sea-monster' (682–4; I.iv.259–61), and 'harke, Nature, heare deerer God-/desse, suspend thy purpose, if thou didst intend to make this / creature fruitful into her wombe, conuey sterility, drie vp in hir / the organs of increase...' (693–6; I.iv.275–9).

(6) The Globe theatre was called the 'wooden O' because it was made of wood and looked a circular shape from a distance. See the lines of Chorus in Henry V:

...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 accompt, On your imaginary forces work.

(Prologue 11–8)