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## Something in Nothing: A Discussion of Madness and Wisdom in King Lear

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## Something in Nothing:

### A Discussion of Madness and Wisdom in *King Lear*

Nothing is just that: that which is not something. We think of nothingness as an empty, bottomless pit in which all meaning is lost, an abyss with no beginning and no end from which there is no entrance or escape. We fear the abyss, so we choose to ignore it. We like to think that everything we see has some greater purpose, that even the most heartbreaking tragedies have some lesson to offer. Shakespeare critic David Kastan argues against this claim. In his nihilistic criticism of *King Lear*, Kastan writes, “tragedy, as Shakespeare comes to understand it, offers nothing to reassure us about the world of mortal accidents.... [L]oss may teach us nothing but the unspeakable murderousness of the world” (Kastan). In a way, Kastan is right. *King Lear* “offers [us] nothing” on a silver platter. It “teach[es] us nothing,” the most valuable lesson we may learn. The knowledge we gain from nothing may drive us to insanity, or lead us to salvation, or both. The reoccurring theme of divine madness in *King Lear* ascribes meaning to nothingness.

Shakespeare asserts that the essence of human knowledge is nothingness. Cordelia, the first to recognize this truth, attempts to impart this wisdom to her father:

*Cordelia.* Nothing, my lord.

*Lear.* Nothing?

*Cordelia.* Nothing.

*Lear.* Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again. (1.1.89-92)

In its repetition, “nothing” materializes. Shakespeare creates “nothing,” willing it into existence, and in doing so, “nothing” becomes something. But we still cannot define “nothing.”

Nothingness, like divine truth, exists outside the realm of human comprehension. Cordelia’s recognition of the value of nothingness liberates her from the cycle of suffering that plagues

existence.<sup>1</sup> Moved by compassion, she attempts to share this wisdom with her father, returning to Britain after her exile to offer him the possibility of salvation.<sup>2,3</sup> Time and time again, Lear refuses to acknowledge the divine quality of nothingness. He responds to Cordelia's wisdom with a question, suggesting that Lear cannot understand the value of nothing nor does he wish to understand it. He demands that Cordelia "[s]peak again," commanding her to change her answer into something of substance, something within the sphere of his understanding. He dismisses the truth of nothing with the maxim "Nothing will come of nothing."<sup>4</sup> Lear turns away from divine wisdom simply because he cannot understand it.<sup>5</sup>

The Fool's nonsensical prophecies illustrate the incomprehensible nature of divine knowledge. His dialogue often consists of a series of bizarre and jumbled phrases that, to the unwary modern audience, seem only to exist as filler. However, within the nonsense, the Fool displays a prophetic wisdom. For example, the Fool delivers a prophecy of a pseudo-Chaucerian prophecy spoken by Merlin:

When priests are more in word than matter;  
When brewers mar their malt with water;  
When nobles are their tailors' tutors;  
No heretics burn'd, but wenches' suitors;  
When every case in law is right;  
No squire in debt, nor no poor knight;  
When slanders do not live in tongues;  
Nor cutpurses come not to throngs;  
When usurers tell their gold i' the field;  
And bawds and whores do churches build;

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<sup>1</sup> This mirrors Schopenhauer's assertion that existence is a cycle of suffering and boredom, propelled by the futile will to life. However, Cordelia's liberation from the pain of existence is more akin to the concepts of *moksha* in Hindu philosophy and *Nirvana* in Buddhism than to the nihilistic principles modern readers often associate with Schopenhauer.

<sup>2</sup> Cordelia's compassionate, self-sacrificing reentrance into the pain of existence solidifies her position as a Christ figure.

<sup>3</sup> This is similar to Socrates' speech in Plato's *Symposium* in which the philosopher upon witnessing the form of Beauty is not content to merely die into Beauty but experiences a rebirth in order to give birth in Beauty. (*Symposium* 211a-d)

<sup>4</sup> This is derived from the Pre-Socratic phrase *ex nihilo nihil fit*, "out of nothing, nothing comes."

<sup>5</sup> One is reminded of Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians in which he writes "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Then shall the realm of Albion  
Come to great confusion:  
Then comes the time, who lives to see't,  
That going shall be used with feet. (3.3.81-94)

The first four lines describe a time governed by evil and deception, the next six an almost utopian ideal. While these two sections seem to be distinct, time does not move until line 91. Only after the Fool's detailing a world governed both by absolute evil and by pure goodness does one age give way to the next. First comes the time "when" the world is divided into good and evil. "Then" comes the time of "great confusion." Good and evil are always intertwined; one cannot exist without the other.<sup>6</sup> The "great confusion" comes into being when wickedness is mistaken for goodness rather than by a sudden emergence of evil. *King Lear* beings in this era of "confusion." Lear initially confuses the wickedness of Goneril and Regan for filial loyalty, and the honesty of Cordelia for spite. Evil disguises itself as good. Everything returns to normal in the end, but only a few "live to see it."

So the Fool's prophecy becomes one not only of the future, but of the present as well. The rhyme scheme of the prophecy reflects this unity of time. The Fool's prophecy consists of a series of rhyming couplets. Every line is its own entity, but it is united with the line before it in their shared final syllable. Each couplet becomes a single, inseparable idea, just as past, present, and future are indistinguishable in the eyes of God according to the depiction of God's relationship to time in Christian theology. God does not see events as a linear progression from beginning to end. He exists outside of time, seeing everything that is, everything that has been, and everything that will be all at once.<sup>7</sup> The Fool's prophecy of a prophecy is similarly removed

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<sup>6</sup> This reminds one of Schelling's assertion that man, and nature for that matter, is a being of extremes, containing within himself both the highest of heavens and the deepest hell (Schelling).

<sup>7</sup> This depiction of God in relation to time is also reflected in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

from time, reflecting both the present and the future.<sup>8</sup> He becomes the mouthpiece of God. As God's wisdom cannot be expressed entirely by rational thought, the Fool's speech becomes a jumble of nonsensical phrases. It is the audience's responsibility to make sense of it. Divine knowledge cannot be comprehended by people who do not want to hear it, so by charging the audience with the task of deciphering the Fool's speech, Shakespeare essentially exposes who among us choose to be blind to the wisdom of God.<sup>9</sup>

Confusing insanity and divinity, Edgar's soliloquy illustrates the concept of divine madness. He juxtaposes Christological language with images of insanity in such a way that the two become almost interchangeable:

The country gives me proof and precedent  
Of Bedlam beggars, who, with roaring voices,  
Strike in their numbed and mortified bare arms  
Pins, wooden pricks, nails, sprigs of rosemary;  
And with this horrible object, from low farms,  
Poor pelting villages, sheepcotes, and mills,  
Sometimes with lunatic bans, sometime with prayers,  
Enforce their charity. Poor Turlygod, Poor Tom,  
That's something yet: Edgar I nothing am. (2.3.13-21)

"Bedlam" is an allusion of dual significance. On the one hand, "Bedlam" is another term for Bethlehem, and so the allusion imputes a holiness to the disguise that Edgar adopts. On the other hand, we cannot help but think of Bedlam Hospital, the London madhouse. Divinity and madness become hopelessly intertwined, bound together in this one word. The parallelism in line 19 further illustrates the connection between madness and divine knowledge. Juxtaposing the Christian virtues of "prayers" and "charity" with "lunatic bans," Shakespeare suggests that the nonsensical rants of a madman contain within them moments of divine truth. The majority of men, for whom sensory evidence is the primary source of proof, dismiss divine madness because

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<sup>8</sup> The Fool's prophecy of a prophecy mocks the prophetic nature of the Tudor myth of history.

<sup>9</sup> See note 5

it is grounded in something fundamentally irrational. We crucify individuals possessed by divine madness, quite literally in Edgar's description of "wooden pricks" and "nails" being driven into "their numbed and mortified bare arms." We dismiss nonsense because it makes no sense. We assume that all of reality must be apparent to the human mind and to the senses. Equating madness and divinity, Shakespeare reveals that divine knowledge cannot be known through rational thought alone. Divine omniscience, by definition, is infinite, so it cannot be contained within the scope of reason. As man can only know that which reason can reveal, human knowledge is reduced to nothing in comparison to divine omniscience. Edgar realizes this truth and embraces the limits of his own knowledge. Adopting the persona of a madman, he diminishes the role of reason in the world of *King Lear*. Disguised as Poor Tom, Edgar delivers impassioned monologues that are fundamentally irrational, but whenever he speaks out of earshot of the other characters, his speech is eloquent and refined. This shift in Edgar's language suggests that divine madness reveals a truth only understood by those who are liberated from absolute faith in human rationality. Reason is bound to the human mind. Just as man is fallible, so too is reason.<sup>10</sup> While it may be invaluable to man's connection to the world, reason alone cannot express universal truth. Realizing the limitations of human reason, Edgar exclaims "Edgar I nothing am," renouncing his claim to knowledge. His kenotic declaration liberates him from the burdens of existence. Edgar admits he knows "nothing," entering the realm of divine wisdom.<sup>11</sup>

In the guise of Poor Tom, Edgar assumes the characteristics of the Fool, further

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<sup>10</sup> The fallibility of reason reflects Luther's criticism of the primacy of reason within the Catholic Church. Luther argues that pure reason went the way of Eden. So man is endowed with the ability to rationalize rather than with reason itself.

<sup>11</sup> In his admission to know nothing, Edgar gains access to divine wisdom both in a Christian context (see note 5), and in Platonic philosophy in which the wise man "knows that his wisdom is in truth worth nothing" (*Apology* 23b).

emphasizing the connection between divine madness and Christian folly. The Fool and Edgar become united in thought, sharing nonsensical speech patterns. At the beginning of Act III, Scene six, Edgar begins a verse which the Fool completes (3.6.25-28). Embracing divine nonsense, Edgar assumes the role of the Fool, while the Fool himself quietly disappears during this scene. Edgar's replacement of the Fool suggests that in order to pursue divine knowledge, one must embrace madness, but Edgar warns that not all insanity is of a divine nature:

The foul fiend haunts Poor Tom in the voice of a nightingale. Hoppedance cries in Tom's belly for two white herring. Croak not, black angel; I have no food for thee. (3.6.29-32)

The demonic "foul fiend" mimics "[t]he voice of the nightingale," referring to the Fool's singing. It adopts a twisted version the qualities of divine madness and presents itself as good. The image of the "black angel" further illustrates the corruption of madness, transforming the beauty of divine nonsense into a disease of the mind.<sup>12</sup> To the unwitting modern viewer, the two forms of madness are all but indistinguishable. One cannot look to the physical symptoms of madness to determine its nature, for the nature of madness is determined by its source. A man possessed by divine madness is inspired by that which is beyond himself. Diseased madness comes from within. It is a hunger for life, as illustrated by Edgar's description of the demon "in Tom's belly ... [c]roak[ing]" for "food." Edgar, possessed by divine madness, is eventually liberated from the cycle of suffering while Lear slowly decays in agony.

Shakespeare asserts that sickness of the mind is grounded in the preoccupation with bodily existence. In his final moments, Lear cannot separate himself from the physical world. He seeks empty validation in the form of auricular or oracular assurances. This agonizing

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<sup>12</sup> Plato explores the differences between divine madness and diseased madness in *Phaedrus*.

fixation on physical proof eventually consumes him.<sup>13</sup> Lear spends his last breath repeatedly issuing a command to search for any physical evidence that Cordelia is alive:

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? Thou'lt come no more,  
Never, never, never, never, never.  
Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir.  
Do you see this? Look on her. Look, her lips,  
Look there, look there. (5.3.307-313)

Lear repeats the word “look” four times in this passage alone. He is obsessed with his desire to “look,” to “see” proof, for he cannot imagine existence without appearances. Lear’s diseased mind clings to life as it appears to the senses, ending both line 307 and line 308 in “life.” But even as he scrambles to maintain a firm grip on the world of appearances, Lear becomes aware of the proximity of the abyss. Dedicating all of line 310 to the repetition of “never,” the nothing of time, Lear finally sees the truth of nothingness. Upon facing the reality of abyss, Lear loses his will to live and dies on the spot. Kastan is partially correct in saying that Lear’s death is liberating, but he fails to acknowledge the value of nothing. He presumes that nothingness is empty and that the only alternative to the pains of life is to enter into non-existence.

Shakespeare’s discussion of the immortality of the soul negates Kastan’s nihilistic analysis of *King Lear*. Kastan’s criticism implies that once the body dies, man ceases to exist. But Shakespeare holds that there is something in human nature which transcends the confines of physical existence. This concept is perhaps most clear in the last exchange between Gloucester and Edgar:

*Gloucester.* No further, sir; a man may rot even here.  
*Edgar.* What, in ill thoughts again? Men must endure  
Their going hence, even as their coming hither:

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<sup>13</sup> The theme of auricular assurance is a common theme in Shakespeare’s tragedies, *Othello* being the most obvious example. In both *King Lear* and *Othello*, this blind faith in physical proof leads to the tragic end of the titular character.

Ripness is all. Come on.  
*Gloucester.*

And that's true too. (5.2.8-11)

“Rot” has a fleshy, harsh sound. By saying “a man may rot even here,” Gloucester seems to ally himself with Kastan’s nihilistic interpretation of the world of *King Lear*. Gloucester immediately seems to contradict this sentiment, agreeing with Edgar’s assertion that “Men must endure” even in the face of death. Gloucester’s words point to the existence of an eternal soul which “endures” even as the flesh “rots.”<sup>14</sup> The enjambment of line 9 further speaks to the immortality of the soul, Edgar’s thoughts “endur[ing]” beyond the end of the line. Just as it is true that man as a body is mortal, the idea that man is the embodiment of an immortal spirit is “true too.” The two are not mutually exclusive. Death is not an end but a transition from physical existence to the realm of divine nothingness. Cordelia’s death is not, as Kastan writes, a commentary on “the world’s harrowing cruelty.” Rather, Cordelia’s fate marks her total separation from the world of the flesh.

Madness and clarity, everything and nothing, are hopelessly intertwined. The world of *King Lear* is characterized by loss and suffering and nonsense, but meaning can be found amid the messiness of the play. There is meaning in nonsense. There is meaning in loss. There is meaning in nothing. *King Lear* is not a nihilistic denial of the value of life, nor is it by any means a cheery affirmation of life. Shakespeare creates a world plagued by the same messiness and fear and suffering and deceit that haunts reality. But even in a world governed by evil, goodness always appears. A divine light shines through even the darkest moments in the harrowing tragedy of existence. This light is what we call nothing.

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<sup>14</sup> The immortality of the soul is a common theme both in Christian tradition and Greek philosophy. Plato’s *Phaedo*, for example, is an extensive argument in favor of the immortality of the soul.

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