MORE ADO ABOUT "NOTHING" IN *KING LEAR*

Adrian Papahagi
University of Cluj

ABSTRACT:
The present paper explores the philosophical and structural importance of "nothing" in *King Lear*. Stripped of crown, country, kin and majesty, and eventually deprived of human aspect and reason, Lear learns to "make use of nothing." Lear's *kenosis* leads to *anagnorisis*, namely to the acceptance of his folly, and to the discovery that man is "no more than this." The numerous occurrences of "nothing" are analysed from several perspectives, including textual criticism. After the examination of First Quarto (Q1) and First Folio (F1) variants in relevant passages, the author suggests that F1 is not Shakespeare's revision of Q1; indeed, both versions present corrupt readings of the original.

KEYWORDS: nothing; *kenosis*; variants; Quarto; Folio; Shakespeare; *King Lear*.

The tragic mechanism in *King Lear* is set in motion by the uncompromising "nothing" uttered by Cordelia in response to her father's foolish love auction, and to her sisters' disgusting flattery. In a standard edition, the dialogue between Lear and his youngest daughter reads:

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.

(I.i.85–90)[1]

[1] Quotations follow the latest Arden edition edited by R. A. Foakes.

BDD-A26200 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.32 (2026-09-14 14:38:06 UTC)

Cordelia's answer is echoed many times in the play.[2] Lear turns it into an amazed question, but his daughter unabatedly repeats the fatal word.[3] "Nothing will come of nothing" is the King's materialistic—Lucretian or just proverbial—answer.[4] Altogether, the word is repeated five times in this exchange between Lear and Cordelia. It is legitimate to presume that Shakespeare stressed it at the play's outset because he intended the audience to remember it, and to realise its structural and philosophical importance. The repetition may be unnecessary for a reader, who can move back and forth in the text in order to analyse structural symmetries and lexical echoes, but it is certainly essential for an audience attending a live performance, which needs to realise instantly that something of major significance is being said at a given moment.

However, closer inspection of the text reveals that only one of the play's versions stresses this inaugural "nothing." The king's one-word question and Cordelia's reiteration of the fatal answer are absent from the First Quarto edition, printed by the unexperienced typographer Nicholas Okes for Nathaniel Butter in 1608 (Q1),[5] and appears only in the First Folio edition of the collected plays, printed by Isaac Jaggard for Heminges and Condell in 1623 (F1).[6]

The reason of this omission has been variously explained as the fault of memorial reconstruction (Greg 1962)[7] or shorthand reproduction (Davidson),[8] as

[2] With 27 occurrences, "nothing" is one of the most frequent words in the play. The most frequent words are: "father" (78), "see" and cognates (68), "love" (65), "king" (64), "eye" (56), "fool" and cognates (56), "daughter" (55), "nature," "natural," "unnatural" (48), "old" (46), "night" and cognates (39) (cf. Wells ed. 52, n3).

[3] Foakes believes that "the repetition of "Nothing" both enhances Lear's incomprehension that anyone could confront his authority in this way, and points up Cordelia's inflexibility, as well as emphasizing the negatives that echo through the play" (111). Mack considers Cordelia's answer an *acte gratuit* (37). As one critic noted, this cruelly unsympathetic answer also arises "out of a need to feel and to appear more righteous that her sisters" (Goldberg 20), which is morally questionable.

[4] "Nullam rem e nihilo gigni diuinitus umquam" ("Nothing is ever born miraculously of nothing") (*De rerum natura* I.150). See further Pollock. "Ex nihilo nihil" fit was proverbial in Shakespeare's time, according to Dent (184, n285).

[5] For a detailed analysis of Okes's activity and *modus operandi*, see Blayney. See further Small.

[6] Q2, published in 1619 "was printed from Q1, but makes some changes, introduces corrections and further errors, and is of importance because a copy of it was used in the printing of the Folio text in 1523" (Foakes, ed., 111–13). However, it is irrelevant for the present discussion, and shall therefore be ignored. On the making of the First Folio, see Greg's classic, *The Shakespeare First Folio* and, most recently, Smith.

[7] Greg concludes that "the quarto is a reported text, badly printed and arbitrarily corrected, of small textual value. The folio is based on the prompt-book, and is of high authority; however, it was not printed from the manuscript, but from a copy of the quarto that had been brought into general though not complete conformity with it" (100).

[8] Davidson believes that "a theory of shorthand transcription for Q *Lear* can explain why the text of the quarto could be so 'bad' and yet so 'good' – in relation to an authorial draft, so near and yet so far" (268).

BDD-A26200 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.32 (2026-09-14 14:38:06 UTC)

Nicholas Okes's attempt to save space, and thus paper (Vickers), or as authorial revision (Doran, Urkowitz, Taylor and Warren, eds., Ioppolo). In the 1980s, the "revisionist" theory replaced the theory of memorial reconstruction, in favour with the New Bibliographers, and became the new orthodoxy.[9] Revisionist critics believe that, despite its many shortcomings, Q1 is not a "bad quarto,"[10] but represents an earlier version of the play, printed "directly from a holograph manuscript" (Wells 13). According to these critics, F1 records Shakespeare's revision of the play, and thus offers a second, equally authoritative variant. Representatives of this school of thought believe that conflating the Q1 and F1 texts, as is the standard editorial practice, misrepresents Shakespeare's two subsequent versions, and therefore print the two texts in parallel (Weis, ed.) or separately (Wells, ed.).

Such a radical editorial choice has often been felt to misrepresent the textual reality. Scholars like Thomas, Meyer or Vickers criticised the revisionist theory, and resisted considering Q1 and F1 as two distinct texts, despite their numerous substantial and accidental variants (above all, 102 lines present only in Q1, and 285 lines added in F1).[11] In particular, Brian Vickers's book, published earlier this year, is a demolishing critique of revisionist theories, and argues persuasively that F1, and to an even greater extent Q1 are editorial variants of "the one *King Lear*."

In the passage in question (I.i.79–90), Okes eliminated the reference to "the vines of France, and milk of Burgundy," and skilfully completed the orphan half-line to get a valid pentameter ("Although the last, not least in our deere loue"). Okes's priorities are clear: he wants to save space, and uses every possible trick to do so. He leaves no spaces after commas, prints the word "againe" at the end of the previous line, eliminates Lear's amazed echo question, and Cordelia's obstinate repetition of her lapidary answer ("Nothing? – Nothing."), and prints Cordelia's subsequent answer in prose.[12] However, Q1 also has some better readings than F1 ("opulent" instead of "opilent", and Lear's reference to Cordelia as "although the last, not least in our deere loue," where F1 reads "although our last and least"):

> *Lear.* To thee and thine hereditarie euer
> Remaine this ample third of our faire kingdome,
> No lesse in space, validity, and pleasure,
> Then that confirm'd on *Gonorill*, but now our ioy,
> Although the last,not least in our deere loue,
> What can you say to win a third, more opulent
> Then your sisters.
> *Cord.* Nothing my Lord. (againe.
> *Lear.* How, nothing can come of nothing, speake
> *Cord.* Vnhappie that I am, I cannot heaue my heart into my

[9] For recent general discussions about the evolution of Shakespearean text criticism, see Jowett, and Egan.
[10] See also the discussion of Werstine and Maguire. For a general survey of Quarto and Folio issues, see Thompson.
[11] See Vickers, ix.
[12] See also Vickers, 103.

BDD-A26200 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.32 (2026-09-14 14:38:06 UTC)

> mouth, I loue your Maiestie according to my bond, nor more nor lesse.
>
> (Q1, B3)

> *Lear.* To thee, and thine hereditarie euer
> Remaine this ample third of our faire Kingdome,
> No lesse in space, validitie, and pleasure
> Then that conferr'd on *Gonerill*. Now our Ioy,
> Although our last and least; to whose young loue,
> The Vines of France, and Milke of Burgundie,
> Striue to be interest. What can you say, to draw
> A third, more opilent then your Sisters? speake.
> *Cord.* Nothing my Lord.
> *Lear.* Nothing?
> *Cord.* Nothing.
> *Lear.* Nothing will come of nothing, speake againe.
> *Cord.* Vnhappie that I am, I cannot heaue
> My heart into my mouth, I loue your Maiesty
> According to my bond, no more nor lesse.
>
> (F1, pp. 283-284)

As already suggested, Lear's interrogative "nothing" and Cordelia's reiterated answer are essential, and their elimination by Nicholas Okes in Q1 is indeed "a deplorable loss" (Vickers 151). The following pages will demonstrate, I hope, that the obsessive repetition of "nothing" in F1 does not come as an afterthought (i.e. as the fruit of revision), but appears to be constitutive of the initial intellectual design of the play. Philosophically, "nothing" can be shown to carry the play's main ethical and existential message, and may thus be considered a key element in the intellectual and structural architecture of the play.

As always in Shakespeare studies, what anyone has to say has been treated before, and I am obviously not the first to note the importance of "nothing" in *King Lear* or elsewhere in Shakespeare's works. Paul A. Jorgensen analysed the word's numerous meanings, from the sexual connotation present in *Romeo and Juliet*, in the *Sonnets* and elsewhere,[13] to the philosophical implications of nothingness, ranging from medieval *contemptus mundi* to Elizabethan nihilism and Baroque disenchantment. However, Jorgensen misses the full relevance of "nothing" in *King Lear* in writing that:

> Out of a trifle, a misunderstanding, a fantasy, a mistaken over-hearing, a "naughtiness," might come the materials for a drama – as happened, less deliberately perhaps, in *King Lear*.
>
> (Jorgensen 295)

Cordelia's "nothing" is certainly not just a "naughtiness," a mistake, or a "trifle" happening "less deliberately." It carries ethical, philosophical and dramatic weight,

[13] On which see also Pyles.

BDD-A26200 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.32 (2026-09-14 14:38:06 UTC)

"lends shape to the play, provides it with its principal meanings," as Taylor (17) noted. It "is a kind of vortex that draws the ordered world of *King Lear* downward, reducing Lear to nakedness and madness and Gloucester to blindness" (Calderwood 6).

Robert Fleissner's examination of "The 'Nothing' Element in *King Lear*" offers a comprehensive, yet by no means complete, treatment of the question. Starting from the obvious remark that "the real commencement of the play as a tragedy is found in Cordelia's early answers to Lear's question concerning her love for him and in the latter's responses" (67), Fleissner analyses the numerous echoes of Cordelia's answer, but fails to recognise their full philosophical importance. For this critic, "the tragedy has indeed arisen out of 'nothing'" (70), which is merely a matter of "irony." Although, of course, there is a great deal of irony in Lear's inability to make something out of Cordelia's "nothing," there is more to it, as I shall try to demonstrate.

Arleen Ionescu stresses the importance of the "nothing" element in *King Lear*, in writing that Cordelia's "nothing" is "an empty sign" for King Lear, who cannot make anything of it, but also the ironical foreboding of Cordelia's self-annihilation (121–22)[14]. Similarly, but with a focus on classical and Elizabethan sources, rather than on modern philosophy, David Levin interprets the nuances of "nothing," distinguishing between "pure nothingness and mere nothing" (155)—materialistic "mere nothing" leading to ontological "pure nothingness." The mathematician Brian Rotman uses "the language of arithmetic" to show how Lear and other characters are "converted into number signs, are emptied, neutered, stripped of human content" (83).[15]

It is hoped that the following pages, combining the approaches of textual and literary criticism, can add something to previous studies, in a renewed homage to Shakespeare's unique artistic seriousness and thoughtfulness. For now, let us go back to the opening scene.

[14] Similarly, Ann Thompson believes that Cordelia's obstinate answer "constitutes a threat to this [political] system and leaves her, Lear, Edgar and Kent in danger of becoming 'nothing'" (54).

[15] Readings dominated by the shifting fashions of literary theory, or biased by ideology, generally miss the full metaphysical and ethical implications of this notion in *King Lear*. Despite its promising title, Malcolm Evans's *Signifying Nothing* has almost nothing to say about *King Lear*. New historicist and materialist critics characteristically impoverish the Shakespearean text, by reducing it to a mere pretext for neologistically-ideological talks about some real or imaginary "social, political, and economic substratum" (Dodd 477). Richard Halpern, for instance, sees Cordelia's "nothing" as inaugurating "a zero-sum economy" (252), which breaks "the monopoly of the absolutist order-world" and releases "an aristocratic game of challenge and counterchallenge, expense and counterexpense" (250), whatever that may mean. Another critic interprets "nothingness" in terms of "the materialist condition of sovereignty" (Sheerin 794). Sheerin's conclusion argues that, "while Lear's literal giving takes away one kind of sovereignty and makes him nothing, this nothingness in turn offers another mode of sovereignty that allows new possibilities of intervention and givenness among the individuals comprising his state" (811).

BDD-A26200 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.32 (2026-09-14 14:38:06 UTC)

After stripping Cordelia of her dowry, Lear offers her to her two suitors, the Duke of Burgundy and the King of France. In his address to Burgundy, Lear grudgingly stresses that Cordelia has been reduced to "nothing more" than her "little-seeming substance":

> Right noble Burgundy,
> When she was dear to us, we did hold her so,
> But now her price is fallen. Sir, there she stands:
> If aught within that little-seeming substance,
> Or all of it, with our displeasure pieced,
> And nothing more, may fitly like your grace,
> She's there, and she is yours.
>
> (I.i.196-202)

However, this does not mean nothing at all, as even Lear realises. Though disgraced and accompanied by her father's unjust "displeasure," Cordelia remains herself, unblemished by cowardice and the recourse to flattery. She shines with the brilliance of her moral superiority, rather than through the borrowed radiance of royal jewels, titles, and realms. Yet, Burgundy is unable to perceive that, and appears to be blocked like Lear in the negative mode, as the homophones in his answer stress most audibly: "I know no answer" (I.i.202). But he actually does: his answer is to insist on receiving the initial deal.

> Burgundy: Royal King,
> Give but that portion which yourself proposed,
> And here I take Cordelia by the hand,
> Duchess of Burgundy.
> Lear: Nothing. I have sworn, [F]I am firm[F].
>
> (I.i.243-247)

As can be seen, Lear is stubbornly clinging to that one word, "nothing," as if to avenge himself or to exorcise Cordelia's answer, while Burgundy is insisting on having the wrong "something." (The F1 version insists on Lear's regrettable inflexibility, by adding "I am firm"). In an almost medieval scheme, the two men illustrate the crippling effect of sin—anger and pride, in Lear's case, greed in the case of Burgundy. Spiritually blinded, the fools Lear and Burgundy can make nothing out of "nothing." To them, Cordelia is nothing without the artifice that she so categorically rejected. Conversely, through a characteristically symmetrical scheme, Shakespeare allows two characters to denounce this blindness. Kent has the courage to proclaim that "majesty falls to folly" (I.i.150), and urges Lear to "see better," in an ironical answer to the King's banishment sentence: "Out of my sight" (I.i.158). Similarly, the King of France exposes Burgundy's blindness, by realising that Cordelia is "most rich being poor" (I.i.252), and that "she is herself a dowry" (I.i.243).

The scene closes not only with the "division of the kingdom," but also with a first division of characters: the fools and the villains stay, whilst the truthful and

BDD-A26200 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.32 (2026-09-14 14:38:06 UTC)

virtuous leave Lear's court. The old king's "darker purpose" and "his fast intent" (I.i.35-37) of shaking the burden of kingship off his shoulders are evidence of a stubborn and superficial nature, and thus Lear is ultimately just an old fool. Before leaving the stage, Regan and Goneril inform the audience that Lear's "poor judgement" (I.i.292) is not only the result of "infirm and choleric years" (I.i.300) for, as Regan says, "he hath ever but slenderly known himself" (I.i.294–95). And this is precisely what the play is about: knowing oneself. Whether understood as the Delphic commandment presiding over the process of *anagnorisis* in ancient tragedy, or the Christian process of *cognitio* in morality plays, Lear's self-knowledge consists precisely in making sense of "nothing" by getting rid of many disturbing and distorting somethings.[16]

With his famous fondness for symmetry, Shakespeare builds the second scene as the counterpart of the previous one. Gloucester's bastard son, Edmund, is plotting against his father and brother. His villainous scheming is the opposite of Cordelia's honesty, but Gloucester is as blind in realising his son's malice as Lear was incapable of appreciating Cordelia's virtue. When Gloucester enters the stage, Edmund is concealing a forged letter whose message incriminates Edgar, only to stir the duke's curiosity:

Gloucester:	Why so earnestly seek you to put up that letter?
Edmund:	I know no news, my lord.
Gloucester:	What paper were you reading?
Edmund:	Nothing, my lord.
Gloucester:	No? What needed then that terrible dispatch of it into your pocket? The quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself. Let's see. – Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles.

(I.ii.29-36)

As can be seen, Shakespeare is playing on the negatives "no," and "nothing," still audible from the previous scene. "I know no news" is a splendidly euphonic answer, which enhances in terms of homophony and consonance Burgundy's "I know no answer," and adds irony to this echo. But irony becomes supreme when Edmund answers his father's repeated questioning with Cordelia's exact words: "Nothing, my lord."[17] Intrigued like Lear, old Gloucester picks up this "nothing," but fails to understand what Edmund's "nothing" actually conceals. Symmetrically, the metaphor of sight is also summoned as an ironic anticipation of Gloucester's blindness. For, just as Lear was unable to see Cordelia's virtue, Gloucester is unable to perceive Edmund's corruption. All the foolish old king was able to come up with was a ready-made phrase; all Gloucester can think of is a little, yet so telling joke about spectacles. This momentary blindness will be turned into Gloucester's actual deprivation of sight.

[16] On this topic, see Jorgensen, *Lear's Self-Discovery*.
[17] The ironic repetition of "nothing" throughout the play proves the point made by William R. Elton that irony works as structure in *King Lear* (329–34). See further Martin 47–80.

BDD-A26200 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.32 (2026-09-14 14:38:06 UTC)

Thus, "the quality" of Edmund's "nothing" is the opposite of Cordelia's "nothing," for one is a disguise of villainy, the other a demonstration of honesty. Edmund's final betrayal of his father will also turn around "nothing;" saying nothing, rather than seeing nothing is at stake later in the play, when Gloucester asks his son to keep the secret about his intention to support the King:

> Go to, say you nothing. There is a division between the dukes [...]; we must incline to the King.
>
> (III.iii.8-14)

By saying nothing, Cordelia chose a dignified way of being true to herself, her father, and her future husband at the same time. By revealing everything, Edmund betrays the nature he pretends to serve, and turns unnaturally against his father, thus resembling Regan and Goneril.[18] Once again, Gloucester blindly trusts his son, whose "nothing" is as deceitful as Cordelia's was truthful, and for this fault he will be plunged into actual blindness. Gloucester is an old fool, like Lear, only his fault is less, because he is the victim of Edmund's scheming, not of his own excess. Thus, he will be affected by physical blindness, but will escape madness, because—as in the case of Homer and Œdipus—the loss of sight signifies gaining inner vision.

By now, Shakespeare has created the necessary symmetries defining the play's characters: Lear and Gloucester vs their unnatural children, Regan and Goneril vs Cordelia, Edmund vs Edgar, France vs Burgundy, Albany vs Cornwall. Now, that the cast has been divided into villains and victims, and into fools and frauds, the *raisonneur* can be introduced. Enter the Fool, with large discourse:

> Fool: Mark it, nuncle:
> Have more than thou showest,
> Speak less than thou knowest,
> Lend less than thou owest,
> Ride more than thou goest,
> Learn more than thou trowest,
> Set less than thou throwest,
> Leave thy drink and thy whore,
> And keep in-a-door,
> And thou shalt have more
> Than two tens to a score.
>
> (I.iv.115-125)

[18] The discourse about nature is more complex in *King Lear*, and is the object of an important study (Danby). Suffice it to say that Edmund, born from natural love and therefore deprived of social acceptance, claims to be Nature's servant, yet his ways are "unnatural and unkind," to quote from *Titus Andronicus*. Edgar, the legitimate son, recognised by society, acts kindly and naturally, and becomes a "natural" by stripping himself naked and feigning madness.

BDD-A26200 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.32 (2026-09-14 14:38:06 UTC)

In a few terse gnomic sentences, the Fool packs a great deal of common sense. Through recourse to traditional wit in the *Solomon and Marcolf* medieval tradition, the Fool's poem advocates moderation between giving and keeping, saying and knowing. ... Yet, at this stage in the play, Lear can make nothing out of it, just as he was unable to appreciate Cordelia's honesty:

Lear:	This is nothing, fool.
Fool:	Then 'tis like the breath of an unfee'd lawyer, you gave me nothing for't. Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?
Lear:	Why no, boy; nothing can be made out of nothing.

(I.iv.126-130)

Through an obvious mistake, the Folio edition gives Lear's first line to Kent, but modern editors are well advised to follow the Quarto variant, and to restore the line to Lear. Incidentally, this argues against the revision theory, because the F1 reading cannot be ascribed to authorial intention; Q1 was the right reading, intended by Shakespeare, and F1 is an error. In the light of what has been said so far, it is obvious that the dialogue is entirely between Lear and the Fool. Unable to grasp the irony of the Fool's rhymes, or precisely because he starts understanding how they bear upon his own mistakes, Lear dismisses them as "nothing." Yet, the Fool's and Cordelia's "nothing" is the naked truth. What follows is an echo of the dialogue between Cordelia and Lear in the first scene, stressing the king's inability to make use of "nothing."

Despite the loss of his kingdom, at this stage Lear still entertains the illusion of authority, and is unable to understand that, politically, he has been reduced to nothing. By dividing his kingdom, Lear has "left nothing i' the middle" (I.iv.178), and has become "an O without a figure" (I.iv.183), as the Fool reminds him. Both phrases are replete with subtle implications. "Nothing i' the middle" can also refer to the *media via* of moderation, the golden virtue which would have allowed Lear to appreciate Cordelia's "nothing." The "O without a figure" is, of course, just another way of saying "nothing": in giving away his crown, Lear has become a blank coin, without the royal figure on it, and without any figure, or nominal value. The twofold numismatic metaphor returns in a complicated passage, at the end of the King's *anagnorisis*: "No, they cannot touch me for coining; I am the king himself" (IV.vi.83–84), Lear says, once he has realised that, precisely because being a king is "a thing of nothing" (*Hamlet*, IV.ii.27–29), he can become the king himself—or just himself.

Lear's way to himself—his *labyrinthus* or *labor intus*, to use a medieval false etymology—involves realising that everything in excess of mere humanity amounts to "nothing." It also means understanding the folly of Vanity Fair, and thereby becoming a fool in people's perverted sight. Realising one's folly or ignorance has been the true way of wisdom since Socrates: but Lear has not yet gone through the terrible night in the storm, which reduces him to literally nothing, and thus allows him to become "the king himself." For the time being, the king is less than a fool, precisely because he has not yet become aware of his folly. As the Fool tells him, "I

BDD-A26200 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.32 (2026-09-14 14:38:06 UTC)

am better than thou art now. I am a fool, thou art nothing" (I.iv.184–85). However, the king has achieved something: he has moved from saying "nothing" to saying nothing (I.iv.186). Silence is the first step towards becoming "the pattern of all patience" (III.ii.37).

Losing one's social status is one way of discovering one's real self; however, becoming "nothing" to the world, by acting like a mere fool, can also be a feat of political prudence. The scheme is frequently used in Elizabethan revenge tragedy: Hieronimo in Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, Antonio in Marston's *Antonio's Revenge*, Vindice in the *Revenger's Tragedy*, and, of course, Hamlet become "ill compos'd fellows." Edgar's pragmatic disguise as "poor Tom," a "Bedlam beggar," allows him to escape persecution and to assist his blind father, but he "is being taken by purpose far beyond the immediacies of plot and strategy" (Palfrey 29). Like Hamlet, Edgar pushes voluntary madness beyond the political, and deep into the metaphysical realm: "poor Tom! / That's something yet: Edgar I nothing am" (II.ii.192). Edgar's grotesque disguise is an extreme form of humiliating human nature, a sort of contempt for mankind, but also of commiseration with the poorest human beings (Palfrey 29). Yet, Edgar is not necessarily in need of self-discovery, like Lear; he becomes "nothing" socially and physically, not mentally as well, since his madness is only feigned. As he later tells his father: "in nothing am I changed/ But in my garments" (IV.vi.9–10).

Edgar's pretended lunacy and his voluntary reduction to nothing add a new dimension to the didactic bitter-sweet folly of the "all-licensed" Fool. Edgar is an aristocrat who renounces his *insignia*, abandons himself to Nature's mercy, and goes so far as to give up even the semblance of a man. He is thus ready to accompany Lear in his direst need, through the deepest hell of dejection, where the professional Fool cannot go. The Fool teaches Lear moral and political common sense; poor Tom takes him into the metaphysical abyss: "Is man no more than this?" (III.iv.101). Poor Tom's wild nakedness and apparent lack of articulate discourse signify the disgust with even the most basic aspects of human nature. How low can stoop a man who has literally come to nothing? Not only fancy clothes, but even speech and reason seem corrupt, and have to be abandoned. The Fool, who is just a servant, is unable to articulate such discourse: despite their practical wisdom, his didactic quibbles and ditties have an unavoidably trivial sound, and cannot express the full depth of Lear's transformation. This is why, once Lear's transformation has begun, in the storm scene, the Fool has to disappear, and only Edgar can stay.

Kent's and the Fool's role is propaedeutic, so to say: they pave the way for Lear's process of *cognitio*, by providing the voice of common sense.[19] As always in Shakespeare, the professional Fool is a light-footed *raisonneur*, offering comic relief and a welcome distancing effect, but he is never taken too seriously.[20] The

[19] Throughout the play, four characters – Cordelia, Kent, the Fool, and Edgar/Poor Tom – accompany Lear on the path of self-knowledge, providing him with different degrees of common sense, objectivity, moral and metaphysical insight. See also Martin (61).
[20] On the Fool in Medieval and Elizabethan drama, see Welsford, "On Shakespeare's wise fools," see Goldsmith.

BDD-A26200 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.32 (2026-09-14 14:38:06 UTC)

Fool belongs in the half-serious, half-jocular carnival world, not in the depths of the psyche; he is a teacher of morality, not of mortality, a master of irony and satire, not of metaphysics and theology. It is up to the tragic character to descend into hell; the Fool does not belong there.

Lear's way to himself begins with his becoming politically nothing. He must now become humanly nothing, like Poor Tom. This process happens far from civilisation, by night and storm—themselves negations of light and order, and thus forms of menacing "nothing." In the comedies, nature (and particularly forests) signify natural order, the soothing "green world" described by Northrop Frye, in which the pairs of *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* find refuge. The "green world" is a realm where natural order can be restored, and it is normally abandoned once harmony has been re-established. In the tragedies, however, nature no longer acts like a balm, but rejects humans and turns against them. As early as *Titus Andronicus*, the forest is the shelter of rape and murder. In *Hamlet*, eerie nature is haunted by ghosts, and in *Macbeth* Birnam woods turn against the tyrant and "do come to Dunsinane" (V.v.44–45). Lear experiences the adversity of nature in the tempestuous night spent in the wilderness, and the tempest is thus a prolongation of human strife into cosmic disorder. Nature rejects him because he has not discovered his true nature yet. And yet, by reducing him to nothing, unchained nature allows Lear to become "the thing itself." As one knight reports, Lear:

> Contend[s] with the fretful elements;
> Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea,
> Or swell the curled waters 'bove the main,
> That things might change, or cease; ^{Q}tears his white hair
> Which the impetuous blasts with eyeless rage
> Catch in their fury and make nothing of...^{Q}
>
> (III.i.4–9)

F1 omits here an important passage present in Q1 (placed between superscript Q signs in Foakes's Arden edition and above). Obviously, the reference to the storm making nothing of Lear's white hair is yet another ironic echo of Lear's initial inability to make use of Cordelia's answer, of Kent's honesty, and of the Fool's practical wisdom. In its adversity, nature "makes nothing of" Lear, thus accelerating and fulfilling his self-discovery. Indeed, in front of the unbound elements, man is no more than this—he is nothing, and thereby precisely the thing itself. This is, of course, one further argument against the revision theory, because it is hard to believe that Shakespeare would have eliminated the essential occurrence of "nothing," had he indeed revised the Q1 version of his play.

Later in the play, Edgar drops the mask of Poor Tom and, like a *raisonneur*, glosses this passage, showing that deprivation is a means of escaping the frustrations brought about by loss. Even the hostile winds of terrible tempests cannot affect the wretch who "owes nothing" to its blasts. This time, F1 preserves the precious occurrence of "nothing," and Q1 drops it:

BDD-A26200 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.32 (2026-09-14 14:38:06 UTC)

> The lowest and most dejected thing of fortune,
> Stands still in esperance, lives not in fear.
> The lamentable change is from the best,
> The worst returns to laughter. [F]Welcome then,
> Thou unsubstantial air that I embrace;
> The wretch that thou hast blown unto the worst
> Owes nothing to thy blasts[F].
>
> (IV.i.3–9)

If one believes, as I do, that all references to "nothing" are crucial and interconnected in the play, and that by echoing each other they draw a figure in the carpet, it becomes obvious that their absence from either Q1 and F1 is not the effect of authorial revision, but rather of careless editorial abbreviation. If key lines were missing only from Q1, and were consistently supplied in F1, one could perhaps endorse the theory of revision. But, as things stand, one must agree that both Q1 and F1 misrepresent in different ways the one Shakespearian original. The only proper way of editing *King Lear* is by conflating the Q1 and F1 versions, choosing the best readings, and thus reinstituting as much Shakespearean text as possible.

Let us now return to the terrible night spent by Lear and his men in the storm. Most obviously, the tempest is a projection of Lear's tormented soul. But it is also a purgatory allowed to Lear, yet inaccessible to the villains. Regan, Goneril, and their companions "come out o'the storm" (II.ii.499), just as Lear initially wants to resist his growing madness: "O let me not be mad, not mad, sweet heaven!" (I.v.43–44)—but the storm, just like madness, cannot be resisted. It has to be suffered patiently, as bitter medicine leading to blessed sanity. Once the storm has begun, Lear understands its therapeutic virtue, and endures it patiently: "No, I will be the pattern of all patience;/ I will say nothing" (III.ii.37–38). Saying "nothing" is yet another echo of Cordelia's attitude in the first scene; after so much has been said, Lear finally realises the value of "nothing," and of silence, for "everything that is good in a person is silent," as Kierkegaard believed.[21]

It takes Lear some time to detach himself from the trauma of having betrayed Cordelia, and of his evil daughters' betrayal of him. He still finds it difficult to evolve from being everything ("they told me I was everything," IV.vi.103–104) to being nothing. For a while, he is obsessed with his false daughters, and with his former prerogatives. Upon meeting Poor Tom, he believes that the mad beggar's "daughters brought him to this pass" (III.iv.62), and asks him if he could save nothing: "Couldst thou save nothing? Wouldst thou give 'em all?" (III.iv.63). Lear still understands "nothing" as the loss of material goods, of fortune and status, rather than the *kenotic* path to his long-forgotten self. "Nothing could have subdued nature/ To such a lowness but his unkind daughters" (III.iv.69-70), he insists, with an ambiguous formula, stressing once again the subtle way in which nature leads to and suffers the effects of "nothing."

[21] S. Kierkegaard, *Eighteen* 370, quoted by Stewart 289.

BDD-A26200 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.32 (2026-09-14 14:38:06 UTC)

However, the rest of the night will cure him of such trivial concerns. Freed from the bonds of family, society, power and wealth, stripped of clothes, plunged into madness, Lear has touched the void. From now on, he can only emerge renewed, purified and enlightened. His *kenosis* has eliminated everything vain, making place for everything essential, for mere humanity[22]. As Kent puts it, "Nothing almost sees miracles/ But misery" (II.ii.163-164). Misery, deprivation, "nothing" can lead to the miracle of knowledge and salvation. This is the real use of nothing.

But Lear has not lost enough, and has not gained enough during the night's turmoil. He must now meet death—first Cordelia's, then his own. However much he has understood in practical and moral terms, Lear must experience the ultimate "disadvantage of being born," as Cioran phrased it. Despite beams of Christian hope and optimism, despite the road of *kenosis* and the blessings of *anagnorisis*, the conclusion is gloomy. When everything has been said, the rest is silence. When he has understood the virtue of "nothing," and thus turned it into "something of great constancy" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* V.i.26), Lear must experience the ultimate negation of death. His last words are a series of negations of Cordelia's death:

> And my poor fool is hanged. No, no, [F]no[F] life!
> Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life
> And thou no breath at all? O thou'lt come no more,
> Never, never, never, [F]never, never[F].
>
> (V.iii.304–307)

Being able to make use of "nothing" does not deliver Lear from the human condition, whose affirmation cannot exceed the limitations of negation: "No life," "no more," "never." And yet, precisely the realisation that man is "no more than this" is a kind of blessing that the audience, if not Lear, receives at the end of the day.

[22] There is a long Christian tradition behind King Lear's *kenotic* nothingness. Whereas Lucretian materialism believes that "nothing will come of nothing" (see Fleissner 68, Pollock), the Bible speaks about the *creatio ex nihilo*. Then, of course, there is the *vanitas* complex of the sapiential books of the Bible, and one can read with profit in Lear's tragedy the archetypes of Job, stripped of everything only to discover God and his true self, or of Isaiah, lamenting that "I have nourished and brought up children,/ And they rebelled against me" (Isa. 1:2), on which see Traver 181. On the dialectics of nothing in Renaissance thought, from Erasmus to Montaigne, see Henderson 216–218.

BDD-A26200 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.32 (2026-09-14 14:38:06 UTC)

WORKS CITED

Editions of *King Lear*

Foakes, R. A., ed. *King Lear* (Arden 3). Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1997.

Weiss, René, ed. *King Lear: A Parallel Text* Edition. Longman Annotated Texts. 2nd ed. Harlow: Longman, 2010.

Wells, Stanley, ed. *The History of King Lear*. Edited on the basis of a text prepared by Gary Taylor. The Oxford Shakespeare. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000.

Secondary Literature

Blayney, Peter W. *The Texts of* King Lear *and Their Origins. Vol. I, Nicholas Okes and the First Quarto*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Calderwood, James L. "Creative Uncreation in *King Lear*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37 (1986): 5–19.

Danby, John F. *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of* King Lear. London: Faber & Faber, 1961.

Davidson, Adele. *Shakespeare in Shorthand: The Textual Mystery of* King Lear. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009.

Dent, R. W. *Shakespeare's Proverbial Language: An Index*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1981.

Dodd, William. "Impossible Worlds: What Happens in *King Lear*, Act 1, Scene 1." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50 (1999): 477–499.

Doran, Madeleine. *The Text of 'King Lear'*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1931.

Egan, Gabriel. *The Struggle for Shakespeare's Text: Twentieth-Century Editorial Theory and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Elton, William R. *King Lear and the Gods*. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1988.

Evans, Malcolm. *Signifying Nothing: Truth's True Contents in Shakespeare's Text*. 2nd ed. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989.

Fleissner, Robert F. "The 'Nothing' Element in *King Lear*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 13 (1962): 67–70.

Foakes, R. A. "The Reshaping of *King Lear*." *King Lear: New Critical Essays*. Ed. Jeffrey Kahan. Shakespeare Criticism 33. New York and London: Routledge, 2008. 104–123.

Goldberg, S. L. *An Essay on* King Lear. Cambridge: Cambridge University Pres, 1974.

Goldsmith, Robert Hillis. *Wise Fools in Shakespeare*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1958.

Greg, W. W. *The Shakespeare First Folio: Its Bibliographical and Textual History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955.

Greg, W. W. *The Editorial Problem in Shakespeare: A Survey of the Foundations of the Text*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962.

BDD-A26200 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.32 (2026-09-14 14:38:06 UTC)

Halpern, Richard. "*Historica Passio*: King Lear's Fall into Feudalism." *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991. 215–269.

Henderson, W. B. Drayton. "Montaigne's *Apologie of Raymond Sebond*, and *King Lear*." *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin* 14 (1939): 209–225.

Ionescu, Arleen. "Reading beyond Nothingness." *Buletinul Universității Petrol-Gaze din Ploiești: Seria Filologie* 61 (2009): 119–126.

Ioppolo, Grace. "Revision." *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare*. Ed. Arthur F. Kinney. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 85–99.

Ioppolo, Grace. *Revising Shakespeare*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1991.

Jorgensen, Paul A. "Much Ado About *Nothing*". *Shakespeare Quarterly* 5 (1954): 287–295.

———. *Lear's Self-Discovery*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967.

Jowett, John. *Shakespeare and* Text. Oxford Shakespeare Topics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Levin, David. "'Can You Make No Use of Nothingness?'" The Role of Nothingness in *King Lear*." *"And That's True Too": New Essays on* King Lear. Ed. François Laroque, Pierre Iselin, Sophie Alatorre. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. 141–164.

Mack, Maynard. *King Lear in Our Time*. 2nd ed. 1966. London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

Maguire, Laurie E. *Shakespearean Suspect Texts: The 'Bad' Quartos and Their Contexts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Martin, William F. *The Indissoluble Knot:* King Lear *as Ironic Drama*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1987.

Meyer, Ann R. "Shakespeare's Art and the Texts of *King Lear*." *Studies in Bibliography* 47 (1994): 128–145.

Palfrey, Simon. *Poor Tom: Living* King Lear. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

Pollock, Jonathan. "*King Lear* in the Light of Lucretius: *Nullam rem e nihilo*." *"And That's True Too": New Essays on* King Lear. Ed. François Laroque, Pierre Iselin, Sophie Alatorre. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. 165–177.

Pyles, Thomas. "Ophelia's 'Nothing,'" *Modern Language Notes* 64 (1949): 322–323.

Rotman, Brian. *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*. Stanford: University of Stanford Press, 1993.

Sheerin, Brian. "Making Use of Nothing: The Sovereignties of *King Lear*." *Studies in Philology* 110 (2013): 789–811.

Small, S. A. "The *King Lear* Quarto." *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin* 21 (1946): 177–180.

BDD-A26200 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.32 (2026-09-14 14:38:06 UTC)

Smith, Emma. *Shakespeare's First Folio: Four Centuries of an Iconic Book*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

Stewart, Stanley. "*Lear* in Kierkegaard." *King Lear: New Critical Essays*. Ed. Jeffrey Kahan. Shakespeare Criticism 33. New York and London: Routledge, 2008. 278–296.

Tayler, Edward D. "*King Lear* and Negation." *English Literary Renaissance* 20 (1990): 17–23.

Taylor, Gary and Michael Warren, eds. *The Division of the Kingdoms: 1*
Shakespeare's Two Versions of King Lear. Oxford Shakespeare Studies. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983.

Thomas, Sidney. "Shakespeare's Supposed Revision of *King Lear*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 25 (1984): 506–511.

Thompson, Anne. "Quarto and Folio" *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare*. Ed. Arthur F. Kinney. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 71–84.

———. *King Lear* (The Critics Debate). Houndmills and London: Macmillan, 1993.

Traver, Hope. "*King Lear* and *Isaiah*." *The Shakespeare Association Bulletin* 9 (1934): 181–185.

Urkowitz, Steven. *Shakespeare's Revision of* King Lear. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

Vickers, Brian. *The One* King Lear. Cambridge Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2016.

Welsford, Enid. *The Fool: His Social and Literary History*. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1935.

Wells, Stanley. "The Once and Future *King Lear*." *The Division of the Kingdoms: Shakespeare's Two Versions of* King Lear. Oxford Shakespeare Studies. Ed. Gary Taylor and Michael Warren. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983: 1–22.

Werstine, Paul. "Narratives about Printed Shakespeare Texts: 'Foul Papers' and "Bad' Quartos," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41 (1990): 65–86.

———. "A Century of 'Bad' Shakespeare Quartos." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 50 (1999): 310–333.

BDD-A26200 © 2016 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.32 (2026-09-14 14:38:06 UTC)