

## It Nothing Must\*

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Is *Hamlet* a nihilist drama? Is it really a play about nothing? We kept noticing occurrences of the word 'nothing' in *Hamlet* and then began to link them together and discovered that nothing, as it were, structures the action of the play and the interplay between its central characters. In a deep sense, this is indeed a play about nothing. We'd like to enumerate these nothings and then, like T. S. Eliot on Margate Sands recovering from a nervous breakdown, see if we can connect nothing with nothing. In the enigmatic words of the player queen in *The Mouse-trap*: "it nothing must" (III.ii.156<sup>1</sup>).

### *The Ghost*

In the opening lines of the play, Marcellus asks Barnardo if the ghost, "this thing", has appeared again, and he replies, "I have seen nothing" (I.i.22). The ghost *is* nothing, of course, so Barnardo confesses that he has seen it, that is, not seen it. In matters ghostly, there *is* nothing to see. Barnardo, Marcellus, and Horatio are left begging for the ghost to speak. Variations on the words "Stay! speak, speak! I charge thee, speak!" are repeated twelve times in Act I. If there is nothing

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all quotations are from William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. George Richard Hibbard, The Oxford Shakespeare, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1987.

to see, then that nothing is charged with speech. What follows, as we have shown, is that nothing of the truth is spoken while speech abounds everywhere, speech precisely of nothing.

### *Theater*

Hamlet grasps the Gorgiastic paradox of theater – namely, that it is a deception in which the deceived is wiser than the nondeceived. At first the paradox appalls him, before appealing to him with the conceit of the play within the play. Theater is “all for nothing” (II.ii.545), a monstrous fiction and conceit that produces crocodile tears in the eyes of hypocrite actors.

### *Ophelia*

As the play within the play is about to begin, a particularly manic Hamlet unleashes a volley of bizarreness at Claudius, talking of capons, chameleons, and eating the promise-crammed air. Claudius wearily responds: “I have nothing with this answer, Hamlet: These / Words are not mine” (III.ii.89-90); to which Hamlet quips: “No, nor mine now” (III.ii.91). Refusing to sit next to his mother, Hamlet lies at Ophelia’s feet, but his words turn obscenely toward her lap and to what lies beneath it:

HAMLET  
Do you think I meant country matters?  
OPHELIA  
I think nothing, my lord.  
HAMLET  
That’s a fair thought to lie between maids’ legs.  
OPHELIA  
What is, my lord?  
HAMLET  
No-thing.  
OPHELIA  
You are merry, my lord. (III.ii.108-113)

As a venerable tradition of philosophical misogyny insists, extending back to Aristotle’s patriarchal biology in *De Generatione Animalum*, the

vagina is a thing of nothing, a negative to phallic positivity. It is both the hollow 'O' in 'Ophelia' and in "For O, for O, the hobby-horse is forgot" (III.ii.126). The female sexual organs are also identified with matter, which only receive form and life through the pneumatic spark of male semen – country matters is therefore a pleonasm.

But then, as ever in Shakespeare, matters immediately flip around. When Ophelia politely asks what the silent dumbshow at the beginning of *The Mouse-trap* meant, Hamlet replies with a slew of lewd puns on the 'sh' diagraph:

HAMLET

Ay, or any show that you'll show him. Be not you ashamed to show, he'll not shame to tell you what it means.

OPHELIA

You are naught, you are naught. I'll mark the play. (III.ii.134-38)

The truth is that Hamlet is naught, both naughty and nothing, a naughty naught, a zero, a whoreson zed, an 'O'.

### *Gertrude*

The word 'nothing' acquires an ever-increasing imperative force and velocity in Hamlet. The next series of 'nothings' occurs in the extraordinary scene with his mother. After asking why Hamlet speaks to the nothing of the ghost and bends his eye on "vacancy", Gertrude adds:

GERTRUDE

To whom do you speak this?

HAMLET

Do you see nothing there? (III.iv.124-25)

She replies like a true scholastic philosopher trained in Aristotle:

GERTRUDE

Nothing at all; yet all that is I see.

HAMLET

Nor did you nothing hear?

GERTRUDE

No, nothing but ourselves. (III.iv.126-28)

Gertrude sees nothing and hears nothing and concludes that the ghost is nothing but “the very coinage of your brain” and “ecstasy” (III. iv.132-33), which then precipitates Hamlet’s explosion of more dagger-like language. She thinks her son is as mad as the sea and wind, but she would. Her passions are not the nothing that is the very coinage of one’s brain but the base utility of a woman who satisfies her whims with what merely is, at her will. Hamlet even tries to reduce his mother to this zero point, the time when the hey-day in the blood is tame and waits upon the judgment, but she hears none of it.

### *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*

If Hamlet is mad, then this doesn’t prevent him from elaborating a subtle dialectical critique of the feudal theory of kingship, where the king is identified with the body politic, and the king’s *real*, as was said in Elizabethan English, is a realm both real and royal. The limits of the king’s body – which is two bodies in one: part human and part divine – are the frontiers of the state, whose ceiling is heaven itself. Deliberately subverting the entreaties of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (or Rossencraft and Gilderstone, as they are called in the First Quarto, who become Rosincrance and Guyldensterne in the Folio), when they ask where he has hidden the body of Polonius and demand that he come with them to see King Claudius, Hamlet replies:

HAMLET

The body is with the King, but the King is not with  
The body. The King is a thing –

GUILDENSTERN

A thing, my lord?

HAMLET

Of nothing. Bring me to him. Hide fox, and all after. (IV.ii.25-28)

At which point, the hunted Hamlet simply runs away. As well he might, for this is treason. The king cannot be nothing. He is the something of some-things: the totality, the whole, the all, as certain German philosophers were wont to say. Hamlet is denying the legitimacy of Claudius’s kingship by refusing the identification of the king with the body of the body politic. The true king is a ghost (i.e., a nothing), and Claudius is a king of shreds and patches (i.e., he is nothing). Notice

the strange economy of nothingness here: Gertrude declares to Hamlet that the ghost of her dead husband is nothing. Just two scenes later, Hamlet, taking over her words as always, declares that the new king is nothing.

Indeed, although Hamlet is not physically onstage at the time, having just left to visit his mother, he appears to be responding here to Rosencrantz's political theology of majesty:

The cease of majesty  
Dies not alone; but, like a gulf, doth draw  
What's near it with it. It is a massy wheel,  
Fixed on the summit of the highest mount,  
To whose huge spoke ten thousand lesser things  
Are mortised and adjoined, which when it fall,  
Each small annexment, petty consequence,  
Attends the boist'rous ruin. Never alone  
Did the King sigh, but with a general groan. (III.iii.15-23)

The body of the king is the body politic, and when the king dies, there is the real, royal risk that the state will die with him. This is why the king must have two bodies, one corporeal and the other divine, which means that although the physical substance of king-ship is mortal its metaphysical substance is immortal. This is the apparent paradox contained in the words "The king is dead, long live the king". In an image that recurs in *Hamlet*, the king is the *jointure* of the state, and the time is out of joint because the usurper king is that nothing who brought to nothing the true king and stole Hamlet's inheritance.

### *Fortinbras*

Hamlet is sent to England to be murdered. Just before he disappears from the stage, there is a short but extraordinary scene on a plain in Denmark, which is slashed to a mere eight lines in the Folio edition<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Given his preference for the Folio text, Hibbard concurs with this cutting, claiming that Hamlet's final soliloquy, "for all its felicity of phrasing, is redundant. It tells us nothing we do not know already, except that the Prince has become unrealistic" (*Hamlet*, ed. George Richard Hibbard, p. 109). For us, on the contrary, the poignancy and power of this last soliloquy reside in its lack of realism.

The frame of the scene is war, a futile territorial and religious war, between the Protestant Norwegians led by Fortinbras and the Catholic Poles. Hamlet inquires of a captain in Fortinbras's army as to the substance of the conflict, and he replies: "We go to gain a little patch of ground / That hath in it no profit but the name" (IV.iv.17-18<sup>3</sup>). Yet the patch of ground is garrisoned with what Hamlet imagines – although he is never given this information – as "Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats" (IV.iv.24). Oddly, thirty-five lines farther on, Hamlet substitutes souls for ducats and exaggeratingly speaks of "The imminent death of twenty thousand men" (IV.iv.59).

Hamlet being Hamlet then asks to be left alone for a moment and soliloquizes for the last time. The pattern of the soliloquy closely resembles that of the meditation on theater from Act II, which here becomes a theater of war. He ruminates on the essential nihilism of war, where twenty thousand men go to their deaths for nothing, for "a fantasy and trick of fame" (IV.iv.60). But then he finds in the spectacle yet more motivation for his promised act of revenge: "How all occasions do inform against me, / And spur my dull revenge" (IV.iv.31-32). He continues:

Witness this army of such mass and charge,  
Led by a delicate and tender prince  
Whose spirit with divine ambition puffed,  
Makes mouths at the invisible event. (IV.iv.46-49)

Is it not odd that Hamlet denigrates Fortinbras as a "delicate and tender" puff and then with his dying words advocates for his succession as king of Denmark? Be that as it may, Hamlet's familiar line of reasoning here is the following: seeing twenty thousand men led by a dainty, puffed-up prince fight over nothing but a "quarrel in a straw", Hamlet asks himself "How stand I then?" (IV.iv.50). Namely, if twenty thousand men are prepared to fight over nothing, then how can one man who has genuine cause for action, such as himself, *do* nothing? Therefore, he concludes, he must do something.

He ends the soliloquy with the words "My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth" (IV.iv.65). And with that, he disappears until Act V. Now, there is no doubt that Hamlet's thoughts are bloody. He fan-

<sup>3</sup> Hibbard's edition reports the scene in Appendix A (pp. 355-69). In this section quotations are from William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, eds Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, The Arden Shakespeare, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006.

tasizes repeatedly about an act of ultraviolent vengeance that must be performed at exactly the right time. But that time never comes. Hamlet never lives in his own time. The problem does not lie with Hamlet's thoughts but with his acts.

Of course, Hamlet being Hamlet knows this with the lucidity of a philosophical anthropologist. Earlier in the soliloquy, anticipating the culminating question of Kant's critical system, he asks: "What is a man?" (IV.iv.32). The answer, of course, is a rational animal. The human being is divided between the beastly need to feed and God-given reason and the capacity for "large discourse" (IV.iv.35). So, Hamlet ratiocinates, which part of us causes inhibition at the level of action? He ponders:

Now, whether it be  
Bestial oblivion or some craven scruple  
Of thinking too precisely on th'event  
(A thought, which quartered hath but one part wisdom  
And ever three parts coward) I do not know  
Why yet I live to say this thing's to do,  
Sith I have cause and will and strength and means  
To do't. Examples gross as earth exhort me. (IV.iv.38-45)

There are perhaps no more poignant words in *Hamlet* than these: he simply does not know whether it is animalistic cowardice or the fault that flows from an excess of thought that prevents him from the act of revenge. He has cause, will, strength, and means, and he can mumble to himself, like a character in a Nike commercial, "Just do it". But nothing happens. It's like the moment at the end of both acts of *Waiting for Godot* when first Vladimir and then Estragon say: "Yes, let's go". Beckett's stage direction reads "[*They do not move*]"<sup>4</sup>.

## Laertes

Laertes is Hamlet's rival, the double he both deeply admires and who functions as a kind of mirror in which Hamlet begins to glimpse the filaments of his desire. During the final, fatal rapier match, the "water-

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London, Faber & Faber, 1986, pp. 52, 88.

fly" (V.ii.84) courtier Osric declares: "Nothing neither way" (V.ii.253). These words describe with precision their intense loving hatred, their frenmity. There is "nothing neither way" to choose between them.

What Hamlet and Laertes have in common, which brings them together and tears them apart, is a love of Ophelia, debased in life only to be elevated in death. Immediately after Hamlet departs for England, there follows a curious scene that begins with Gertrude refusing to speak with Ophelia: "I will not speak with her" (IV.v.1). However, within fifteen lines, after hearing the arguments of an unnamed Gentleman, Gertrude changes her mind and declares: "Let her come in" (IV.v.16). What sways her is the potent political threat that Ophelia poses. "Her speech is nothing", the Gentleman insists, and "nothing sure", but "it doth move / The hearers to collection" (IV.v.8-9). Ophelia, raving in psychotic grief, in "winks, and nods, and gestures" (IV.v.11), suggests that Gertrude and Claudius are responsible for her father's murder. In the nothing of Ophelia's speech something is heard, standing in such strange contrast to the general deafness of Elsinore castle.

Horatio then advises Gertrude to see Ophelia because she may "strew / Dangerous conjectures in ill-breeding minds" (IV.v.14-15). This might give one pause: what exactly is Horatio doing in this scene at all? Is he truly Hamlet's bosom buddy, or has he somehow become Gertrude's close counselor? It is not at all clear. Indeed, in the Folio edition, the part of the Gentleman is elided, and the scene becomes an intimate tête-à-tête between Horatio and the queen.

But the real nature of Ophelia's threat is revealed as she is exiting this scene. After a flow of seeming non-sense and mad song, she simply adds: "My brother shall know of it" (IV.v.68). However, it appears that Laertes is already fully aware of the situation and about to storm the king's palace in the next scene. The winks, nods, and gestures of Ophelia have already insinuated themselves into the ear of Laertes, as Claudius readily admits:

Wherein necessity, of matter beggared,  
Will nothing stick our person to arraign  
In ear and ear. (IV.v.88-90)

When Laertes and Ophelia meet onstage for the first time since their father's death, she comes a-singing, armed with flowers. She speaks: "It is the / False steward that stole his master's daughter"



(IV.v.173-74). Laertes responds, as if to Claudius's words above: "This nothing's more than matter" (IV.v.175).

The most insurrectionary political threats in *Hamlet* are nothings that are more than matter and that circulate from ear to ear, ghostlike, outside the control of the king and his war-like, massy-wheeled state. The nothing of Ophelia echoes Hamlet's insistence on the king as a thing of nothing. In short, there is a palpable political threat in *Hamlet* that operates through a double negation: to bring to nothing that which is – the matter of the usurper king's state – and to see that which is from the standpoint of a nothing that exceeds it: the ghostly, the spectral, which is also the order of truth and justice, the truth of what happened to Hamlet Senior and the justice of the act of retributive revenge. In order to rebut this threat, Claudius engages in a wonderful example of that quintessential political act – lying – in order to turn Laertes's rage away from him and toward the final showdown with Hamlet. Claudius argues that if Laertes is to truly show himself Polonius's son, then he must kill Hamlet – prove your love with murder!

### *Horatio*

In a heartfelt declaration of love, Hamlet says to Horatio: "For thou hast been / As one, in suff'ring all, that suffers nothing..." (III.ii.60-61). It is certainly true that Horatio has to suffer Hamlet's tangled knot of nothings throughout the play. And this is nowhere truer than in the cluster of negations that appear in the "We defy augury" speech we looked at above: "If it be now, 'tis not to / Come. If it be not to come, it will be now. If it be not now, / Yet it will come" (V.ii.167-69) and so on.

How might one understand the "not" here, the "nothing"? Hamlet goes on, "Since no man knows / Aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?" (V.ii.169-70). Namely, no man knows aught of aught he leaves. Therefore, to follow Hamlet's reasoning, we know naught. We know nothing. When Hamlet concludes: "Let be" (V.ii.170), does this mean let naught be? Let nothing be? Recall that the ghost – who is nothing – accurately reports: "Let me be" (I.v.59).

The readiness that is all is a readiness for the "not" that will come and become now. We must hold ourselves ready for it and, to use Edgar's word from the end of *King Lear*, endure. We must hold our-

selves ready for nothing. This is what we earlier called Hamlet's disposition of skeptical openness. We must not claim to know aught of what we truly know naught.

Does this mean that Hamlet is a nihilist? After his cunning escape from the fatal clutches of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, many readers insist that Hamlet has changed. They claim that he has thrown off his madness; his "antic disposition" disappears; he appears more mature and resolute. In Harold Bloom's words: "What seems clear is that the urgency of the earlier Hamlet has gone. Instead, a mysterious and beautiful disinterestedness dominates this truer Hamlet, who compels a universal love"<sup>5</sup>. Is it really *clear* that Hamlet has changed? Do the ever-shifting melancholia and mania of the earlier Hamlet yield to a truer and more beautiful disinterestedness? Is Hamlet someone who, at the end of the tragedy, compels universal love? To understate matters somewhat, we are not convinced. Is Hamlet really so different when he returns from his passage to England? Is he really more resolute and less crazy? And if he is so utterly changed, then why does he immediately leap into Ophelia's grave and wrestle wildly with Laertes? If he is suddenly so disinterested, then why does the "bravery" of Laertes's grief put Hamlet into such a "tow'ring passion" (V.ii.81), as he later confesses to Horatio? Does such behavior not betray a certain ugly interest rather than beautiful disinterest? Why does Hamlet rave at Laertes – "Woo't weep? Woo't fight? Woo't fast? Woo't tear thyself? / Woo't drink up eisel? eat a crocodile?" (V.i.265-66) – before being wrongly declared mad by Gertrude in exactly the same, stupid, misguided way as she said earlier when her son saw the ghost? Does Hamlet compel universal love? Or are we not reluctantly obliged to conclude that Hamlet is really not such a nice guy? That all his beautiful contemplation is for nothing?

For Bloom, any "apparent nihilism" on the part of Hamlet gives way to "achieved serenity" and "authentic disinterestedness"<sup>6</sup>. In fact he goes so far as to say that Hamlet is a resurrected Christ figure during Act V, at the same time that he represents an Old Testament Adamic truth: "there is a God within him, and he speaks: 'And yet, to me, what

<sup>5</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, fully annotated, with an introduction by Burton Raffel, with an essay by Harold Bloom, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003, p. 230.

<sup>6</sup> "An essay by Harold Bloom", p. 231.

is this quintessence of dust?' Hamlet's is the most refined of all Adamic dusts, but remains the Old Adam and not the New: essentially dust"<sup>7</sup>. This sounds delightful, if not completely contradictory, but all in all it is the assurance of the claim to authenticity, old or new – and thereby to a certain moral standard for what might count as the humanity that Shakespeare allegedly invents – that we doubt and that fails to see the sheer weirdness of the play. We here concur with Melville's hero, Pierre:

Pierre had always been an admiring reader of *Hamlet*; but neither his age nor his mental experience thus far, had qualified him either to catch initiating glimpses into *the hopeless gloom of its interior meaning*, or to draw from the general story those superficial and purely incidental lessons, where the painstaking moralist so complacently expatiates<sup>8</sup>.

Pierre then tears his copy of *Hamlet* into "a hundred shreds" and drops them at his feet<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Harold Bloom, *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*, New York, Riverhead, 2003, p. 145.

<sup>8</sup> Herman Melville, *Pierre, or The Ambiguities*, London, Penguin, 1996, p. 169.

<sup>9</sup> Pierre gloomily goes on in his interpretation of *Hamlet*: "If among the deeper significances of its pervading indefiniteness, which significances are wisely hidden from all but the rarest adepts, the pregnant tragedy of Hamlet convey any one particular moral at all fitted to the ordinary uses of man, it is this: – that all meditation is worthless, unless it prompt to action; that it is not for man to stand shilly-shallying amid the conflicting invasions of surrounding impulses; that in the earliest instant of conviction, the roused man must strike, and, if possible, with the precision and force of the lightning-bolt".