

## “This is nothing, fool”: Shakespeare’s Vanities

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There is peradventure no vanity more manifest,  
th[a]n so vainely to write of it.  
Michel de Montaigne, “Of Vanitie”

It often falls out that somewhat is produced of nothing.  
Francis Bacon, “Of Vain-glory”

Of what is’t fools make such vain keeping?  
John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*

“Vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas”, intones the Preacher of Ecclesiastes (1.2; 12.8): “Vanity of vanities; all is vanity. [...] I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit” (1.2-14). Although we nowadays associate the word with self-conceit, pride and the ostentatious displays of wealth and power, its root lies in the Latin *vanus*, meaning ‘empty’ or ‘void’, so that, in its original sense, it stood primarily for a kind of nothingness. The Preacher’s *vanitas* signifies the hollowness and final nullity of all earthly things – a lesson famously remembered in *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678), where Bunyan’s Christian and his fellow pilgrims arrive at the town of Vanity, with its great fair, set up by the demons Beelzebub, Apollyon, and Legion; here, they discover, the entire catalogue of worldly delights is offered for sale, “as houses, lands, trades, places, honours,

preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures, and delights of all sorts, as whores, bawds, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not"<sup>1</sup>; yet for the pilgrims, who wish only to "buy the truth"<sup>2</sup>, there is nothing there: "All that cometh is vanity"<sup>3</sup>.

Behind Bunyan's allegorical re-imagining of the Biblical text lay the tradition inspired by medieval morality drama in which Vanity had appeared as a Vice figure: usually female and puffed up with narcissistic self-importance, she might easily – as in neo-moralities like Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (c. 1592) – be conflated with Pride (*Superbia*) to become one of the Seven Deadly Sins. In addition to mainstream dramas like Marlowe's, the morality tradition seems also to have spawned the popular form of puppet theatre that is glanced at in several plays of the period. In Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1614) – whose satire of fleshly indulgence surely contributed to Bunyan's own vision of the Fair – the grotesque Puritan, Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, self-appointed scourge of fairground vanities, denounces puppeteering itself as "the waiting-woman of Vanity" (V.v.76)<sup>4</sup>, only for the Puppet Dionysius to retort that Busy's fellow zealots, the tradespeople of Blackfriars, "with their perukes, and their puffs, their fans and their huffs" are the true "pages of Pride, and waiters upon Vanity" (V.v.80-82).

Jonson's Vanity was the same figure that Shakespeare had remembered in *King Lear* (1605), where Kent accuses Oswald of "tak[ing] Vanity the puppet's part against the royalty of her father" (II.ii.35-36)<sup>5</sup>, transforming Goneril into Lady Vanity, and momentarily reducing the tragedy to the moralised simplicity of a puppet play. Yet, despite his evident familiarity with the *vanitas* tradition, Shakespeare's instinct was to resist its allegoric simplifications, so that neither denunciation resonates much beyond its immediate rhetorical context. Nor does vanity (at first

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<sup>1</sup> John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, ed. Roger Sharrock, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1965, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup> Bunyan, p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> Bunyan, p. 124.

<sup>4</sup> Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*, ed. E. A. Horsman, Revels Plays, London, Methuen, 1967.

<sup>5</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. R. A. Foakes, London, Arden Shakespeare, 2004.

sight anyway) seem to be an especially prominent theme in his work: indeed the word appears only twenty-one times in the entire canon; and, in many of these cases, it often conveys little more than its weakened modern sense of “self-conceit” (OED *n.* 3a), while elsewhere it can mean simply “the quality of being foolish or of holding erroneous opinions” (OED *n.* 2b), or refer to some “vain, idle, or worthless thing” (OED *n.* 4a). All of these senses, of course, are necessarily coloured by the word’s Latin origin, but rarely does Shakespeare’s “vanity” seem to equate fully with the biblical *vanitas*.

A marked exception involves the figure of Falstaff in the *Henry IV* plays. It is the fat knight whom the sick king of 2 *Henry IV* (c. 1597) must have in mind when he envisages the scandal of his son’s imminent succession: “Harry the Fifth is crown’d! Up, Vanity! / Down Royal State!” (IV.v.119-20)<sup>6</sup>. Mocked by the prince as “that Vanity in years” (1 *Henry IV*, II.iv.448-49)<sup>7</sup>, as if he were some monstrous male version of Lady Vanity, Falstaff will subsequently encounter a rather different incarnation of *vanitas* on the battlefield at Shrewsbury. Looking down on the dead body of Sir Walter Blunt, “[s]emblably furnished”, as Hotspur has told us, “like the King himself” (1 *Henry IV*, V.iii.21), Falstaff exclaims: “There’s honour for you! Here’s no Vanity!” (V.iii.32-33). His sarcasm transforms the richly clad corpse in its royal coat-of-arms into one of those monitory emblems sometimes known as *memento mori*; but, ironically, just a few lines later, in Hal’s double-edged response to the apparently lifeless form lying beside the dead Hotspur, that role will seem to have passed to Falstaff himself: “O, I should have a heavy miss of thee / If I were much in love with Vanity: / Death hath not struck so fat a deer today” (V.iv.104-6). The word-play that turns the heaviness of grief into a joke about Falstaff’s corpulence neatly matches the way in which what Hal first sees as a tragic figure of mortal frailty is momentarily collapsed into a satiric emblem of worldly self-indulgence, before it rises to become “the true and perfect image of life indeed” (V.iv.118-19).

<sup>6</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 2*, ed. A. R. Humphreys, London, Arden Shakespeare, 1967; capitalisation mine.

<sup>7</sup> William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part 1*, ed. A. R. Humphreys, London, Arden Shakespeare, 1961; capitalisation mine.

Shakespeare's interest in the *vanitas* motif is most conspicuous, however, in a play where Vanity is never named at all. The graveyard scene in *Hamlet* (c. 1599) looks back not to the theatrical morality tradition, but to successive iterations of the pictorial *memento mori*, conspicuously represented in the great mural paintings of the *Danse macabre* and the *Triumph of Death* that adorned the walls of graveyards, churches, palaces, and other public spaces in late medieval Europe, reminding onlookers of the hollowness of earthly pomp and power. More immediately, in the figure of the young prince himself holding a skull, the scene recalls the genre that came to be known as *vanitas* paintings. Unlike their spectacular predecessors in the *memento mori* tradition, these were small-scale works intended for contemplative viewing in private residences. Although the name is nowadays most often associated with the still-life-with-a-skull images that became especially popular in seventeenth-century Holland, earlier forms of the *vanitas* – no doubt influenced by stories of St Jerome's self-mortifying visits to the catacombs in Rome – typically showed a man (usually young and affluent) holding a skull, reminding both himself and the viewer of the transitoriness of human life. This is the image that Webster's Duchess has in mind when she declares that Antonio's kiss is "colder / Than that I have seen a holy anchorite / Give to a dead man's skull" (III.v.84-86)<sup>8</sup>. Made famous by Frans Hals (relatively late *Young Man Holding a Skull* (1626)<sup>9</sup>, the image survives in numerous other versions by Aelbrecht Bouts, Lucas van Leyden, Bernardino Licinio, Jan Lievens, and others – as well as in Holbein's extraordinary variant on the motif, the dual portrait known as *The Ambassadors*<sup>10</sup>.

*Hamlet's* image of a young man contemplating a skull – along with its reworkings in the boneyard of Tourneur's *Atheist's Tragedy* (published in 1611) and in Vindice's grim games with the skull of his murdered mistress in Middleton's *Revenger's Tragedy* (1607) – is enough to show the familiarity of Shakespeare and his

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<sup>8</sup> John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. Michael Neill, Norton Critical Editions, New York, Norton, 2015. Her *vanitas* itself seems to come as a response to Antonio's own reflection on human nullity in the preceding speech: "Heaven fashioned us of nothing, and we strive / To bring ourselves to nothing" (III.v.78-79).

<sup>9</sup> National Gallery of Great Britain, NG6458.

<sup>10</sup> National Gallery of Great Britain, NG1314.

contemporaries with the pictorial *vanitas* tradition. Act IV, scene iii of Tourneur's tragedy is set in an "unfrequented" churchyard where the protagonist, Charlemont, is made to set the scene – "How fit a place for contemplation / Is this dead of night, among the dwellings / Of the dead" (IV.iii.3-5)<sup>11</sup> – as Hamlet-like he muses upon the vanity for which it stands:

This grave – perhaps th'inhabitant  
 Was in his lifetime the possessor of  
 His own desires. Yet in the midst  
 Of all his greatness and his wealth, he was less rich  
 And less contented than in this poor piece  
 Of earth [...] O  
 That man with so much labour should aspire  
 To worldly height, when in the humble earth  
 The world's conditions at the best! [...]
 since to be lower than  
 A worm is to be higher than a king. (IV.iii.5-24)

The action focusses upon a charnel house, from among whose skulls Charlemont and his beloved Castabella choose for their pillows before lying down to sleep. Startled by the sight of another of its death's heads, and haunted by the memory of one of his own victims, the murderous atheist D'Amville longs to be turned to "nothing in the air" (IV.iii.252), only to be confronted by the emblematic spectacle of his daughter and her lover:

Asleep? So soundly? And so sweetly  
 Upon deaths' heads? And in a place so full  
 Of fear and horror? Sure there is some other  
 Happiness within the freedom of the  
 Conscience than my knowledge e'er attained to. (IV.iii.283-87)

For D'Amville, however, these skulls offer only a reiteration of the knowledge that has been the foundation of his atheism from the beginning: the idea of death as a mortal "revolution" that renders "man and beast [...] The same for birth, growth, state, decay and death" (I.i.6-7). This is the same "fine revolution" on which Hamlet

<sup>11</sup> Cyril Tourneur, *The Atheist's Tragedy*, eds Brian Morris and Roma Gill, New Mermaids, London, Ernest Benn, 1976.

moralises in Shakespeare's play (V.i.89)<sup>12</sup> – a levelling transformation exemplified in the fearful anonymity of the bones turned up by the gravedigger's spade: "Imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay, / Might stop a hole to keep the wind away" (V.i.206-7). Hamlet makes the sometime owners of these skulls parade in the audience's imagination like generic figures from the Dance of Death: Politician, Courtier, and Lawyer; but these conjectural identities serve only to emphasise their blank indistinguishability – at least, that is, until the grave-digging Clown gives the last of them a name: "This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the king's jester" (V.i.174-75). Given the horrible sameness of all skulls, there is an uneasy ambiguity about that "same"; yet, whatever the source of the Clown's confidence, for Hamlet his act of naming endows this skull with an intensely personal meaning: "Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft" (V.i.182-83); while, for the audience, the effect is to translate the spectacle from the public moralising of the Dance of Death, to the more private world of *vanitas* paintings.

It is a sign of how perfectly the Prince's contemplative moment seems to reproduce the Young-Man-with-a-Skull motif that Frans Hals's famous painting was so often misidentified as an illustration of Shakespeare's scene. Hamlet, however, though his "gorge rises" (V.i.181) at the sight of the skull, quickly brushes aside any suggestion that it forms the kind of *vanitas* in which he should recognise the mirror of his own mortality. As if, again remembering the *Danse macabre* tradition, where Death himself was often represented in a jester's cap-and-bells, he consigns Yorick to a different mission. Echoing his earlier sarcasms against Ophelia's "paintings" (III.i.144), he orders the bony prankster to "get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come. Make her laugh at that" (V.i.186-189). The picture he thus conjures up is that of Death and the Maiden, another *Danse macabre* pairing that, in paintings, woodcuts, and engravings by Hans Baldung Grien, Niklaus Manuel Deutsch, Barthel Beham, and others, had achieved a life of its own – one that Shakespeare had remembered in his early tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*:

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<sup>12</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins, London, Arden Shakespeare, 1982.

Ah, dear Juliet,  
 Why art thou yet so fair? Shall I believe  
 That unsubstantial Death is amorous,  
 And that the lean abhorred monster keeps  
 Thee here in dark to be his paramour? (V.iii.101-5)<sup>13</sup>

Like Yorick's, the skull carried by the protagonist in the opening scene of *The Revenger's Tragedy* is ambiguously imagined. Although Vindice describes it as the "sallow picture of my poisoned love [...] Once the bright face of my betrothed lady" (I.i.14-16)<sup>14</sup>, it remains oddly anonymous. Indeed, by describing this "shell of Death" as "my study's ornament" (I.i.15), he seems at first to cast it simply as a conventional *vanitas* token, calculated, like the skull in St Jerome's study, only to remind him of his own mortal condition. Almost immediately, however, he (like Hamlet) deflects this suggestion, making the vanity of others the real object of its mocking grin: "Advance thee, oh thou terror to fat folks, / To have their costly three-piled flesh worn off / As bare as this" (I.i.45-47) – a theme to which he will return in Act III as he prepares "the skull of his love dressed up in tires" (III.v.42 sd) for its assignation with the Duke. It is only in this scene, at the moment when Vindice finally introduces his "bony lady" (III.v.120) to the old Duke, that the relic is given the name that seems to confer proper individuality upon it as "the skull / Of Gloriana, whom thou poisonedst last" (III.v.148-49). Even here, however, the rhetorical emphasis continues to be upon its generic significance as an emblem of vanity:

It were fine methinks  
 To have thee seen at revels, forgetful feasts  
 And unclean brothels; sure 'twould fright the sinner  
 And make him a good coward, put a reveller  
 Out of his antic amble,  
 And cloy an epicure with empty dishes. (III.v.89-94)

<sup>13</sup> William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Brian Gibbons, London, Arden Shakespeare, 1980.

<sup>14</sup> Anon [Thomas Middleton], *The Revenger's Tragedy*, ed. Brian Gibbons, New Mermaids, London, A&C Black, 2008.

Thus, when the corrosive poison that Vindice paints upon its lips begins to eat at the Duke's flesh, it does more than simply exact a personal revenge against Gloriana's murderer: for, as "[t]hose that did eat are eaten" (III.v.161), the spectacle becomes an exemplary demonstration of the vanity of "fat folks" (I.i.45) and the hollowness of the court's "false forms" (III.v.96). In both *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *Hamlet*, the protagonist's attempt to deflect the meaning of his *vanitas* itself proves vain, since the skull turns out to be exactly the mirror of a young man's unwitting vulnerability that it first appeared to be. The dying Hamlet's recognition that "this fell sergeant Death / Is strict in his arrest" (V.ii.320-1) locates the prince himself in a Dance of Death procession<sup>15</sup>; while Vindice, whose vicious joke at the beginning of Act V turns the Duke's corpse into a wicked reflection of himself ("I must stand ready here to make away myself yonder", V.i.4-5), becomes at the play's end his own deathly summoner: "Tis time to die when we are ourselves our foes" (V.iii.113).

The treacherous irony registered in the grinning of the *vanitas* skull is by no means limited to reflexive moments of this kind, however: inevitably it turns back, sooner or later, on the audience themselves; for the more they focus upon the apparent victim's predicament, the more they are liable to forget what should be only too apparent – their own implication in the spectacle. Perhaps the most sophisticated example of the way in which such enfolded ironies can entrap the onlooker is Holbein's famous *vanitas* painting, *The Ambassadors*. The subjects of the portrait – the aristocratic landowner Jean de Dinteville and the senior cleric Georges de Selve, Bishop of Lavaur – seem proudly secure amid the trappings of worldly wealth, knowledge, and power that the artist has placed between them. Yet their apparently self-confident control of the pictorial space is destabilised by the outlandish white oblong that is stretched across the painting's lower quarter. What is especially striking about this device is the perspective trick that renders it not merely invisible to the sitters themselves, but enigmatically indecipherable even to viewers of the work – at least

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<sup>15</sup> For examples of Death figured as the arresting sergeant of impending Judgement, see Michael Neill, *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, pp. 59-62 and fig. 6a, p. 55.



until they learn how to look at it from the only angle that can properly resolve the object's distortion, revealing it as an anamorphic skull. More disturbing still is the fact that, once the death's head becomes fully visible, the nominal subjects of the painting are themselves rendered indecipherable, leaving its viewers alone with what now appears to be signature of their own mortal vanity.

Shakespeare, we know from *Richard II*, was fascinated by the ingenuities of perspective art and what it could suggest about the limits of visual perception. In *Richard II*, for example, Bushy is made to reflect on how easily human understanding can be confused: "powerful emotion", he tells Richard's queen,

Divides one thing entire to many objects,  
Like perspectives, which, rightly gaz'd upon,  
Show nothing but confusion; ey'd awry,  
Distinguish form. So your sweet Majesty,  
Looking awry upon your lord's departure,  
Find shapes of grief more than himself to wail;  
Which, look'd on as it is, is nought but shadows  
Of what it is not. (II.ii.17-24)<sup>16</sup>

Needless to say, the stage cannot easily replicate such effects, but there are, I think, moments in Shakespeare's plays that act in a similar way, establishing a perspective which exposes everything that appears most substantial as an empty "shadow of what it is not" – a mere vanity.

This is perhaps most obvious in the way that sly reminders of mortal frailty are set against the conventional happy endings of comedy. In an early play like *Love's Labour's Lost* the effect is managed in a fairly straightforward way: on Marcade's sudden announcement of the death of the King of France, "the scene begins to cloud" (V.ii.714)<sup>17</sup>, upsetting the comic progress towards wedding and rejoicing: "Our wooing", remarks the rueful

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<sup>16</sup> William Shakespeare, *Richard II*, ed. Peter Ure, London, Arden Shakespeare, 1959. See also *Henry V*, V.ii.338-9; *Twelfth Night*, V.i.215; *Sonnet 24*; *All's Well that Ends Well*, V.iii.47-52.

<sup>17</sup> William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, ed. Richard David, London, Arden Shakespeare, 1968.

Berowne, "doth not end like an old play; / Jack hath not Jill" (V.ii.866-67). He himself is condemned to spend a year visiting the mortally sick, doing penance for the vanity of his own wit in what he declares can only be a vain effort "To move wild laughter in the throat of death" (V.ii.847); and the play itself concludes with a song in which the cheerful notes of Spring give way to the cuckoo's mocking cry (V.ii.891, 900), while frozen Winter's "merry note" is sounded by that bird of ill-omen, the owl. The same bird makes its appearance at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – but there only after the Athenian mortals have left the stage. Addressing the happily reunited lovers, Theseus promises "nightly revels and new jollity" (V.i.361)<sup>18</sup>; but, for the audience, this celebratory *exeunt* is immediately countered by Puck's nocturnal *memento mori*:

Now the wasted brands do glow  
Whilst the screech-owl, screeching loud,  
Puts the wretch that lies in woe  
In remembrance of a shroud.  
Now it is the time of night  
That the graves, all gaping wide,  
Every one lets forth his sprite  
In the church-way paths to glide. (V.i.365-72)

This is one of a number of instances in which playgoers are made to confront a kind of *vanitas* of which the characters in the play remain blissfully – or perhaps pitifully – unaware. More subtly perspectival is the plangent song with which the Clown farewells the audience from the emptied stage at the end of *Twelfth Night*. His lyrics set the beating of wind and rain against the buoyant summons of Orsino's "golden time" (V.i.381)<sup>19</sup>, giving an uneasy double meaning to "our play is done" (V.i.406) – one that looks back to Jacques' melancholy elaboration of the trope that "All the world's a stage" (II.vii.140-67)<sup>20</sup>, in which the "last scene of all" presents the "mere oblivion" that attends a creature fast becoming

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<sup>18</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Stanley Wells, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1967.

<sup>19</sup> William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, eds J. M. Lothian and T. W. Craik, London, Arden Shakespeare, 1975.

<sup>20</sup> William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Juliet Dusinberre, London, Arden Shakespeare, 2006.

a death's head "*Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything*" (II.vii.167).

An even darker version of the same effect is produced at the end of that strange Homeric travesty, *Troilus and Cressida* – a tragically plotted play whose prefatory epistle nevertheless compares it to “the best Comedy in *Terence* or *Plautus*”. As the action unfolds, the work’s tragic pretensions are systematically undermined by the cynical self-interest of the pimp Pandarus, who manages the protagonists’ love-story, and by the foul-mouthed sarcasms of the fool Thersites, who acts as a kind of burlesque chorus to its epic contest. For Thersites, the whole matter of Troy amounts to a degraded “war for a placket” whose only reward will be the syphilitic “vengeance” of “the Neapolitan bone-ache” (II.iii.18-21)<sup>21</sup>. Even the lovelorn Troilus is reduced by the fool’s invective whose combat with his rival Diomedes simply illustrates how “in a sort lechery eats itself” (V.iv.35). In the last scene, Troilus seeks to restore a properly heroic note to the action in the defiant couplet that concludes his lament for Hector: “Strike a free march to Troy! With comfort go: / Hope of revenge shall hide our inward woe” (V.x.30-31); but his gallant bluster is immediately made ridiculous by the entry of the wheedling Pandarus, whose obscene epilogue, with its talk of “aching bones” (V.x.51) and promise to “bequeath you my diseases” (V.x.57), finally turns Thersites’ venereal threats against the audience themselves. All that remains in the face of such “monumental mockery” (III.iii.153) are “the husks / And formless ruin of oblivion” (IV.v.165-66) of which Agamemnon speaks, as Shakespeare’s characters are made to look forward to the *vanitas* that the play itself enacts:

When water drops have worn the stones of Troy,  
And blind oblivion swallow’d cities up,  
And mighty states characterless are grated  
To dusty nothing. (III.ii.184-87)

*Troilus and Cressida* is what Sir Philip Sidney would have denounced as an example of the “mongrel tragi-comedy” – that

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<sup>21</sup> William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. Kenneth Palmer, London, Arden Shakespeare, 1982.

bastard form in which his contemporaries perversely chose to mingle "kings and clowns, not because the matter so carrieth it, but thrust in clowns by head and shoulders to play a part in majestic matters, with neither decency nor discretion"<sup>22</sup>. Fools (as Thersites indeed seems to demonstrate) would seem to have no proper place in works claiming to be considered "right tragedies"<sup>23</sup>; even Yorick, after all, is reduced to a mere skull – a ventriloquist's dummy, in effect, for the protagonist's railing. It is true that clowns briefly find their way into *Macbeth* and *Anthony and Cleopatra* in the form of the Porter (II.iii.1-22)<sup>24</sup> and of the "rural fellow" (V.ii.233)<sup>25</sup> who brings the basket of asps to Cleopatra. But, although the former imagines himself as the "devil-porter" at Hell's gate, while the latter is an actual harbinger of death, neither is properly a *vanitas* figure. Rather, it is Macbeth himself who (briefly) comes close to playing that role: responding to the report of Lady Macbeth's death, he dismisses life, in language that echoes Thersites' "dusty nothing", as a meaningless succession of days that serve only to lead "fools / The way to dusty death [...] a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (V.v.22-23, 26-28). That fearful evacuation of meaning, however, immediately sends us back to the play that Shakespeare wrote immediately before *Macbeth*. In *King Lear*, the king's "all-licensed fool" (I.iv.191) is given a role that, for all Sidney's strictures, proves absolutely integral to the play's treatment of "majestic matters".

The word "fool", it is worth noting, derives from the Latin *foliis*, meaning "a bellows", and therefore, by extension, in Latin slang, "a windbag or empty-headed person" – hence the close imaginative link between folly and vanity that is suggested by Goneril's tartly pleonastic dismissal of Albany as "Vain fool" (IV.ii.62). A professional fool's protection lay in the pretence that his words were indeed empty – mere wind: "This is nothing, fool", snaps Kent

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<sup>22</sup> Sir Philip Sidney, "An Apology for Poetry", in *English Critical Essays (Sixteenth, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries)*, ed. Edmund D. Jones, London, Oxford University Press, 1959 (1<sup>st</sup> edition 1924), p. 48.

<sup>23</sup> Sidney, p. 48.

<sup>24</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir, London, Arden Shakespeare, 1951.

<sup>25</sup> William Shakespeare, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, ed. Michael Neill, Oxford Shakespeare, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1994.

at the doggerel which the Fool offers to teach his master (I.iv.126); but nothingness in a deeper sense is what the Fool's promise to set Lear "to school" (II.ii.257) is all about. In this he resembles the Clown of *Twelfth Night*; who, as we have seen, has his own lessons to teach about vanity. The "love-song" he performs to the two debauched knights in Act II, scene iii, ends with the reflection that "youth's a stuff [fabric] will not endure" (II.iii.53), and his later rejoinder to Sir Toby's boast of immortality – "Sir Toby, there you lie" (II.iii.107) – amounts to a punning *vanitas* motto, though it is one that his vain old pupil cannot even hear. In the following scene, his song for Orsino, though announced as "dall[ying] with the innocence of love", begins with the ominous "Come away, come away death" and concludes with the image of a funeral leading to an anonymous grave (II.iv.51-66), before the Clown exits with a jest about making "a good voyage of nothing" that surely refers to the fool's own practice of turning "nothing" to good account (II.iv.79).

There is however a significant difference between this Clown and Lear's Fool, for he is given both a proper name and a history. When Curio introduces him to Orsino as "Feste the jester, my lord, a fool that Lady / Olivia's father took much delight in" (II.iv.11-12), the effect is to endow him with a kind of individuality denied to his counterpart in the tragedy. Lear's Fool, despite his emotional intimacy with the king, is never given any name beyond the generic that defines his role in the court, and the usually affectionate "boy" with which his master addresses him. This is important, I think, for the way it allows him to become at times an almost abstracted embodiment of the *vanitas* motif. In a play which (as I have argued elsewhere)<sup>26</sup> is triangulated around three great negatives, "nothing", "no cause", and "never", it is the Fool who tutors his master on the true significance of "nothing". We hear the word first, of course, in the love test of the opening scene, where it triggers the exchange that initiates the play's catastrophic action:

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<sup>26</sup> See Michael Neill, "'Wherefore to Dover': Seeing Nothing in *King Lear*", *Litteraria Pragmatis*, 26:52 *Versions of King Lear* (2016), eds Martin Procházka, Michael Neill and David Schalkwyk, pp. 6-15. An expanded version of this essay has recently appeared as "From Nothing to Never: Facing Death in *King Lear*", in *Narrating Death: The Limit of Literature*, eds Daniel K. Jernigan, Walter Wadiak and W. Michelle Wang, New York.

LEAR

[...] what can you say to draw  
A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

CORDELIA

Nothing, my lord.

LEAR

Nothing?

CORDELIA

Nothing.

LEAR

How, nothing will come of nothing. Speak again. (I.i.85-90)

Although that last admonitory riposte borrows from the cosmology of the Greek philosopher Parmenides (*ex nihilo nihil fit*), Lear's "nothing" is simply the zero (or "naught") of the crude mathematical calculation that so confounds Cordelia – an emotional reckoning ultimately indistinguishable from the financial "Nothing" (I.i.246) with which he later responds to Burgundy's demand for his daughter's "portion" (I.i.244). The larger resonances of the word, however, will begin to emerge in Lear's first scene with the Fool (I.iv)<sup>27</sup>.

It is Kent's dismissive "This is nothing" (I.iv.126) that gives the Fool his queue: "Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?" (I.iv.128-29) The re-doubled negatives (which alliteration can even seem to extend into the first syllable of that affectionate "nuncle") prompt Lear to a playful reiteration of Parmenides – "nothing can be made out of nothing" (I.iv.130); and what results is a kind of extended tutorial on nothingness – one whose satiric didacticism is repeatedly emphasised by the Fool's determination to "teach" the stubborn old man (I.iv.113, 136,170). The lesson reaches its conclusion with the entrance of Goneril:

Thou hast pared thy wit on both sides, and left nothing in the middle  
[...]. Now thou art an 0 without a figure. I am better than thou art now.

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<sup>27</sup> For James L. Calderwood, Shakespeare makes of "'nothing' [...]" a kind of verbal vortex that draws the ordered world of *King Lear* downward, reducing Lear to nakedness and madness" and diminishing language itself "to the point where words are shorn of meaning and become again mere savage cries [...]" [an] extreme of verbal nothingness" (James L. Calderwood, "Creative Uncreation in *King Lear*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 37:1, 1986, pp 5-19: pp. 6-7).

I am a fool, thou art nothing. (I.iv.178-85)

The Fool's "0 without a figure" returns us to the mathematical "nothing" of the first scene, but now as a way of registering the effective cancellation of all that counts about a king, reducing him, as the Fool announces a few lines later, to an empty theatrical pretender like Macbeth's "walking shadow" (*Macbeth*, V.v.24): "Who is it that can tell me who I am?", the king demands of his entourage; "Lear's shadow", replies the Fool (I.iv.221-22). The moral appears at first sight to be simply political: for a king to "divest [himself] of rule" (I.i.49), or to "unking" himself, is, as Richard II discovered in Shakespeare's earlier tragedy, to "undo" his royal identity, to become a mere cipher: "for I must nothing be" (*Richard II*, IV.ii.203, 220, 201). For Richard, however, this sense of political annihilation would ultimately result in the philosophic resignation of his final scene:

Nor I, nor any man that but man is,  
 With nothing shall be pleas'd, till he be eas'd  
 With being nothing. (V.v.38-41)

No such consolation is available to Lear: for all his sarcastically professed desire to "learn" from the Fool, it is the imagined "marks of sovereignty" that confirm his sense of identity (I.iv.223). As a result, the unconsidered "nothings" of his opening confrontation with Cordelia will become the terribly insistent "nevers" of last address to his dead child (V.iii.307).

Behind the Fool's mockery, then, lies a truth about the mortal condition of humankind – one that the play's remorseless repetition of "nothing" and "naught" will gradually force upon the audience, even as it remains, until too late, occluded from Lear himself. Key to this perspectival revelation is the storm scene in Act III. It is no accident that the Fool should be made to respond to its "dreadful summoners" (III.ii.59) with a snatch from the melancholy song with which Feste ended *Twelfth Night*, *The Wind and the Rain*; but where Feste's lyrics hinted only obliquely at mortality, here the "winds" and "cataracts" have already seemed to threaten nothing less than the annihilation of created nature itself (III.ii.1-9); and, by the time we reach Lear's encounter with the blind Gloucester in the next act,

the king himself has become a "ruined piece of nature" whose mere presence seems to foreshadow how "this great world / Shall [...] wear out to naught" (IV.vi.130-31)<sup>28</sup>. All, in the end, is vanity: the world, as the mad old man declares, is merely a "great stage of fools" (IV.vi.179) and he one of them – "The natural fool of fortune" (I.ii.187). Nature, as both Edmund and Lear have suggested (I.ii.1; I.iv.267), is the presiding power in what the play has shown to be a fundamentally godless world; but "natural", as Lear's pleonasm reminds us, is also a word for Fool. Cordelia's natural goodness may make her, as the Gentleman declares, "one daughter / Who redeems nature from the general curse / Which twain have brought her to" (IV.vi.201-3); but, cruelly, it also helps to account for the way in which Lear in his distraction should seem to confuse her with the Fool ("And my poor fool is hanged", V.iii.304)<sup>29</sup>, precisely at the point where the prophetic truth of their repeated "nothings" is rendered unanswerable.

In the "general woe" (V.iii.318) that overwhelms his kingdom at the end of the tragedy, Lear himself becomes the dreadful summoner to whom Kent "must not say no" (V.iii.321). On one level, this is a reaffirmation of the faithful servant's loyalty to his master; but at this moment Kent also resembles those figures of mortal surrender who populated the great Dance of Death paintings in late medieval Europe. In the sequence of summonings that made up these works, it was the figure of the king who

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<sup>28</sup> See Thomas Nashe's reflection in *Summers Last Will and Testament*: "This world is transitory; it was made of nothing, and it must to nothing", cited from R. B. McKerrow, ed., *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, London, A. H. Bullen, 1904-10, 5 vols, vol. III.

<sup>29</sup> The connection between the two characters has long intrigued critics. In light of the fact that, despite the emotional bond attributed to them by the Third Knight (I.iv.71-72), the two are never seen on stage together, it has sometimes been conjectured that the two were played by the same actor. If Lear's Fool, like Feste, was played by Robert Armin, that seems unlikely. But if, on the other hand, the Lord Chamberlain's Men had recruited a boy actor talented enough to play a clown's part, then the double casting seems entirely possible. Indeed, that would help to explain why Lear habitually addresses his Fool as "boy"; the only other character in Shakespeare to attract this appellation with comparable frequency is *Twelfth Night's* Viola, who, in her guises as Cesario, is repeatedly called "boy" by Orsino. In that play, the endearment involves a metatheatrical joke about a boy actor playing a young woman who is herself pretending to be a young man; something similarly knowing may be involved in *King Lear*.



represented the vain pretensions of worldly “pride, power, and lineage” (“l’orgueil, la force, le lignage”), but it was the Fool to whom Death – repeatedly represented in the *vanitas* tradition as the greatest jester of all – offered the levelling moral of the entire painting: “Tous mors sont d’un estat commun”<sup>30</sup>. So much for the vain pretensions of royal “estate”. Gertrude’s glib reflection on the “common” character of death is what triggers Hamlet’s bitter dispute with his mother in the second scene of his tragedy: “Ay, madam, it is common” (*Hamlet*, I.ii.72-74). Gertrude confidently imagines humankind “passing through nature to eternity” (I.iii.73); but for all the appearances of Old Hamlet’s ghost, the grim foolery of the boneyard renders the play itself more equivocal about human ends. Painting after painting in medieval churches had represented the Last Judgement, in which the dead rose from their graves to confront their everlasting fate, but the great Dance of Death murals that began to decorate churchyards suggest a different end. In the Basel Totentanz, for example, Death’s procession leads to an ossuary, out of which tumble the skulls that speak only of vanity and “dusty nothing”; behind it stands a pulpit from which a Preacher delivers the lessons of *vanitas* to a solemn crowd<sup>31</sup>. In the last scene of *King Lear* Albany may talk of the “judgement of the heavens” (V.iii.230), while Kent briefly imagines himself caught up in some apocalyptic “promised end” (V.iii.261); but Lear’s tolling negatives tell a different story.

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<sup>30</sup> The quotation is from the verses attached to the image of the Fool in the *Danse macabre* at Les Innocents in Paris, as recorded in Guyot Marchant’s engraving of 1485 (Neill, *Issues of Death*, p. 87).

<sup>31</sup> An early nineteenth-century copy of this once famous but now vanished work is reproduced in Neill, *Issues of Death*, p. 16.