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King Lear — centring on the theme of “Nothing”

Goro Suzuki

The concept of “Nothing” in King Lear¹ plays a highly significant role in approaching and appreciating the main current of this tragedy in which Shakespeare “exhibits most fully his multitudinous powers”.² According to A.C. Bradley, what “has again and again been described as Shakespeare’s greatest work, the best of his plays”,³ succeeds in giving to seemingly airy “nothing” an inexhaustible reservoir of moral and spiritual inspiration, as well as philosophical and subconscious intuition. Turning “Nothing”, in other words, into “something rich and strange”, “something holy”, and “something of great constancy” is like turning, metaphorically speaking, the sword to word and death to life.⁴ Turning the sword from “a weapon of destruction” to “an object of inspiration”,⁵ namely, implanting within the embodiment of death a spirit of birth and new life is reservedly and unpretentiously manifested through the emblematic, figurative, paradoxical, and esoterically symbolic use of the word “Nothing”. It is in connection with this dramatic transformation in the reality of “Nothing” from its apparent negation to its ultimate affirmation that the drama of King Lear comes to emerge like “clouds of Albion”⁶ and “open and show riches”.

King Lear’s failure in understanding the reality of “Nothing” uttered in the opening scene by his youngest and most faithful daughter Cordelia derives first and foremost from the ignorance of his own true nature. Lear’s coming to terms with himself, ironically, is made explicit by way of his

subsequent recognition of his own wrongdoings acted primarily upon and against his dearest daughter. His two other daughters Goneril and Regan, who constitute no less than two-thirds of himself, are the allegorical representation of the evil nature that coexists with good nature within Lear himself. ⁷ To be specific, Lear is at war with himself and Act III, scene i symbolizes a whirling tempest out in the heath as much as it does a chaotic and utterly confused state of his mind within. It can be stated therefore that Lear here within himself is struggling with two mighty and opposing forces, thereby undergoing as it were ritual purification through purging the sin of hubris from his soul.

“Action”, Kitaro Nishida argues in Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothing, “forms the centre of the subjective-objective world, because action is the expression of the subjective will, as well as an occurrence in the objective world.” ⁸ Before Nishida comes to define “reality as “self-unification” of subject and object” and finally as the “unity of opposites”, he, perceiving true reality “revealed in the depth of personality”, defines true reality as follows:

True reality on the one hand forms a unity, on the other hand it is an eternal splitting up and eternal evolution. Reality contains endless contradictions which, however, form a unity. On the side of unity we find artistic intuition and on the side of division and evolution we find moral obligation... ⁹

Nishida’s definition of true reality given here can appropriately be employed in the elaboration on the reality of Lear. Lear’s reality embraces both “a unity” that aspires after “artistic intuition” and “an eternal splitting up and eternal evolution” that yearn after “moral obligation”. The latter reality of

“division and evolution” is also concerned with the moral behaviour and growth of the king as a dramatic personage.

Abrupt blocking and marring of Lear’s unified consciousness finds its fatal cause no less in his own choleric temperament than in his failure in his ignominious misunderstanding of Cordelia’s truth of “Nothing”. Sudden cancellation of the originally divided one third “more opulent” of his kingdom reserved particularly for his fairest and most loving daughter Cordelia undoubtedly discloses Lear’s “hideous rashness”, as well as his “poor judgment”. His disinheritance and banishment of his most virtuous daughter out of his kingdom, although Lear at first fails to perceive this, is nothing less than driving out from him his good nature that occupies one third of himself. Cordelia’s truth of “Nothing”, in fact, comes essentially from her inability to heave her heart into her mouth. The Earl of Kent, the King of France and the Fool can understand this apparently paradoxical statement, whereas Lear has no proper understanding and sympathy of her unexpressed allusions and implications. In unravelling the mystery of Cordelia’s “Nothing”, therefore, such three chief characters as Kent, the King of France and the Fool provide valuable aids all through the play and their services are indeed indispensable in arousing within Lear a feeling of compassion and understanding, a feeling of morally unified consciousness and true repentance.

Kent stands in parallel with King Lear in the opening scene, especially in verbal warfare. Convinced of the error and shortsightedness of the King, as well as his overhasty mistaken judgment, Kent, overstepping the bounds of the hierarchical society, assumes a defiant attitude towards the King and points out the mistake he has made in taking Cordelia’s language amiss. Going “between the dragon and his wrath” is of urgent necessity for Kent to let his Liege know that “Thy youngest daughter does not love

thee least; / Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds / Reverb no hollowness” (151-53). Lear’s exhibition of his gross and woeful ignorance of the repudiation of his daughter Cordelia here demonstrates both the exercise of his authority over his subjects and the abuse of his power. Improperly and miscalculatingly using the royal authority above all stamps Lear as an irresponsible sovereign, and such irresponsibility and warped character of his consequently germinates a possible conflict over the division of the kingdom between the Duke of Albany and the Duke of Cornwall. Maintaining a noncommittal and rather ambiguous attitude towards such highly important political problem of the division of the kingdom,¹⁰ in other words, steering the ship of Britain in the wrong direction at the outset is the whole responsibility King Lear has to bear before his abdication from the throne. Kent’s indication with audacious yet shrewd accuracy of the royal error signifies his blindness and inability to see things in their true and wider perspective: “See better, Lear; and let me still remain / The true blank of thine eye” (157-58). Lear’s instant retort against Kent’s counsel by way of quoting, or rather resorting to, a pagan god Apollo (“Now by Apollo—” (159)) under these circumstances lays bare not only his impatience and restlessness, but also his own proclivity towards paganism. Kent, who stands face to face with the King, boldly and undauntedly goes on to assert by swearing to the same god (“Now, by Apollo, King” (159)) that “Thou swear’st thy gods in vain”, (160) and further generates outright hostility. Lear’s outrageous utterance of the ensuing word “miscreant” directed against Kent, nevertheless, brings to light and still more emphasize through the irony of chance his own devotion to Apollo.¹¹

Concerned chiefly with law, prophecy, the arts (including bucolic arts), medicine, music, poetry, and archery, Apollo in Greek religion is worshipped not only as a god of pastures and flocks, but also as a god of light, or Phoebus.

Lear’s religious worship of Apollo has been firm and unassailable, and none except for Kent has ever dared to challenge or question the authority and supremacy over the matter of his faith in Apollo. Kent’s reckless selfless protest against Lear consequently costs him his own banishment from the kingdom. Nevertheless, as Duke Senior in As You Like It finds himself in the Forest of Arden “More free from peril than the envious court”, Kent also finds in the heavy word “banishment” freedom, “free from the bondage” he is held in. Henceforth, disguised as Caius, Kent stays with the King and continues to serve him loyally and competently. Analogous to “The constant service of the antique world” exemplified by Adam over a span of sixty years, first for Sir Rowland de Boys and then for his third and youngest son Orlando, Kent’s continuous and unbroken service stands out conspicuously among Shakespeare’s plays. Kent, under his impenetrable disguise even with a borrowed accent,¹² devotes his services to chiefly bringing Lear to a gradual awakening of himself to the injustice he has inflicted on his youngest daughter Cordelia. Lear’s inability to pierce Kent’s disguise in Act I, scene iv (“What art thou?” (9)) is transformed miraculously through the development of the drama into his ability to see through the true identity of Caius in Act V, scene iii (“I’ll see that straight” (287)). Kent has indeed followed Lear’s “sad steps” all the way through from his “first difference and decay” (5.3.288).

The verbally heated and sharp confrontation between Lear and Kent in Act I, scene i is repeated in a similar manner in Act II, scene iv, but this time with less degree of intensity and ferocity. Such considerable abatement of tone in their verbal exchange can be ascribed indubitably to Lear’s unwilling suspension of disbelief: “Against the grace and person of his master” the King’s messenger is disgracefully in the stocks.¹³ Lear’s swearing “By Jupiter” as opposed to Kent’s “Juno” loses its gradual strength as the Roman

god Jupiter, associated with rain and agriculture and prime protector of the state, is nothing less than wife and sister of Juno, associated with protector of women and goddess of the state. The reality of his royal messenger before him explicitly mirrors the perpendicularly incapacitated state of his kingship; and the negation of both his deputy messenger and his own declining fortune goes against the grim and undeniable truth, allowing him no other option but to accept the unbearable truth that the Duke of Cornwall and his wife Regan have turned against him despite his giving the “ample third of his fair kingdom” (1.1.79).¹⁴ In addition to this, Lear’s sense of growing anger and betrayal comes to its highest limit when the number of his followers is reduced, malignantly and in conspiracy with Goneril and Regan, to naught from fifty through “five and twenty”, ten, five, down to nothing (Regan: “What need one?”) (2.4.262). His axiom of “Nothing will come of nothing” (1.1.89) is now subjected to a stern test and validity of its own truth, and Lear rather ironically has to vindicate the truth and reality of “Nothing” for himself. Although seeking revenge upon his daughters (“unnatural hags”), Lear is also asking “heavens” to pity him “a poor old man” and give him patience,¹⁵ as well as to touch him with “noble anger”. Particularly Act III, scene ii onwards therefore comes to be a trying ordeal and Lear is rigorously tested and tried by “heavens” how much he can endure and stand the trials of life, how much rust he can remove from himself and how much he can come to see the reality of “Nothing”.

Kent, as is made explicit through his secret meeting with a Gentleman in a heath in Act III, scene i, convincingly demonstrates how firmly he grasps the latest political intelligence abroad, especially the latest intelligence from France concerning Cordelia and her “power” coming into some of the best ports of the “scatter’d kingdom”; and making him speedily to Dover with letters and the ring to see Cordelia and report to her “Of how unnatural and

bemadding sorrow / The King hath cause to plain” (38-39) discloses the major role he plays in the mainstream of this drama, particularly in getting the audience come in contact with subsequent dramatic developments in King Lear. Kent, to be more precise, serves through the storm on the heath as a guide for bare-headed and drenched Lear in Act III, scenes ii and iv, leading the heart-breaking King into a hovel. In Act III, scene vi Kent with Gloucester moves Lear whose wits “have given way to his impatience” (4-5) to an outhouse of Gloucester’s castle. Although surreptitious intelligence that “The army of France is landed” is given by Cornwall in Act III, scene vii, it is Kent in Act IV, scene iii that asks the Gentleman “Why the King of France is so suddenly gone back know you no reason?” The question raised here by Kent about the absence of the King of France from Britain is very important particularly from the dramaturgical point of view.¹⁶ Kent then appears with Cordelia, Doctor, and Gentleman in “A tent in the French camp” in Act IV, scene vii; and he makes his last appearance in Act V, scene iii, the last scene in this drama, where Kent sees Lear enter the stage, howling, with Cordelia “dead in his arms” and where he sees his Liege die. Although banished with Cordelia in the opening scene, Kent through his disguise as Caius has always remained faithful to the King; and he has always acted “in good faith, in sincere verity” (2.2.100) and with utmost care, flawlessly discharging his duties. In other words, his adherence to his unwavering faith and devotion to King Lear throughout his life most appropriately accounts for his true and veracious identity. Both the 1608 quarto text of The History of King Lear and the 1623 folio text of The Tragedy of King Lear give Kent nearly the same lines and prove him to be a man of “plain” faith:¹⁷ “I have a journey, sir, shortly to go. / My master calls me; I must not say no” (321-22).¹⁸

The King of France’s dramatic and thematic contribution in the general composition of King Lear, as has already been stated in the preceding

paragraph, deserves special emphasis here; for in the inception of the playwright's conception of this tragic and somewhat problematic drama, the role assigned the King of France might have been centred most likely upon such motives as to give attention to external, politically motivated affairs rather than internal, domestically oriented affairs. The double-plot structure conceived by the dramatist, centring around Lear with his three daughters and Gloucester with his two sons, appertains structurally as well as thematically more to the latter. Nevertheless, the inter-thematic infiltration of both the former and the latter into the overall dramatic structuring of King Lear is in no little degree inevitable; thus the King of France's choice of Lear's "dow'rless daughter" in Act I, scene i furnishes a fundamental basis that takes on the character of partly internal, domestically oriented dissension over the succession "twixt Albany and Cornwall" (3.1.21) and partly external, politically motivated French invasion.¹⁹

Choosing the disclaimed "dow'rless daughter" and impulsively judging the validity of Cordelia's rather vaguely, hesitantly and yet forthrightly expressed term of "Nothing", in fact, decisively determine the character and fortune of the both suitors. To the Duke of Burgandy unfriended and curse-dowered Cordelia means literally nothing and without value, "that respects of fortune" being "his love" (1.1.248). Contrary to his utter indifference to Cordelia, who has lost in a trice so "many folds of favour" and grace from her father, the King of France strangely and surprisingly finds in her "inflam'd respect", virtue, truth and love. Taking up what has been cast away, he is lawfully entitled to the "dow'rless daughter", whose unfeigned price and value are too great to be measured: "Not all the dukes of wat'rish Burgandy / Can buy this unpriz'd precious maid of me" (1.1.258-59). Cordelia's priceless and unparalleled worth is appropriately and explicitly stated in line 226: "I'll do't before I speak." To her action above all speaks

far louder than “glib and oily” tongues and wanting such an art of loquacity, unlike her two deceitful elder sisters, is by no means a blot on her character. The King of France, perceiving intuitively the truths that underlie Cordelia’s plain and unvarnished words, gives the audience the following undying speech that is firmly rooted in the Bible: “Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor; / Most choice, forsaken; and most lov’d, despis’d!” (1.1. 250-51).²⁰ The content and truth of this apparently enigmatic speech of paradox and incongruity is precisely the lesson that Lear has to learn before he ultimately comes to acquire in the fulness of time what is termed in Greek tragedy “anagnorisis”; and the presentation of this drama is the representation and transformation in the dramatic personage of King Lear from his initially authority-bound and inflated ego-possessed king to a compassionate, sorrowful and rationality-esteemed king—a dynamic transformation indeed undergone by such an individual as Lear who is prodigiously “Fourscore and upward” (4.7.61). Lear at this stage, slenderly knowing himself, is “asham’d / Almost t’ acknowledge” his youngest daughter and this closely parallels the case of Gloucester who is too humiliated to allow Edmund to stay in his kingdom: “He hath been out nine years, and away he / shall again” (1.1.31-32). Cordelia’s love, as she has inwardly disclosed in an aside, is “More ponderous than my tongue” (1.1.77); and her silence or her going to France, ranging from Act I, scene i, ll. 284 to Act IV, scene ii, constitutes an undercurrent of what is characteristically designated by John Keats as “The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearian fruit”.²¹

The Fool, diametrically, although outwardly, opposed to Cordelia and her silence, intentionally provokes Lear’s indignation and reflection by way of a rapid-fire cross-examination. It is through this catechism with the Fool that Lear has come to duly recognize his real identity and gain moral as well as spiritual enlightenment. The “all-licens’d fool”, free from the chains

of the conventions of society, exercises his freedom of speech not only by carping at Lear's wrongs, but also by quarrelling over his shortsightedness. In answer to the question by the Fool: "Can you make no use of nothing, nuncle?" (1.4.130), Lear artlessly and unsophisticatedly answers: "Why, no, boy; nothing can be made out of nothing" (1.4.132). The question raised by the Fool here is bound to remind the audience of Cordelia's "Nothing", of whose delicate shades of meaning, hidden nuances and subtleties Lear has indisputably failed to appreciate. Underneath his blunt answer at this stage there seems to be no remorse of conscience. Lear has exhibited his own palpable ignorance by having ignored the axiom laid down by the Fool: "Set less than thou throwest" (1.4.122). Contrary to the wise saying of the Fool, Lear has thoughtlessly given all his titles to his ungrateful daughters and he is now "an O without a figure" (1.4.192). Lear, so the Fool poignantly points out, is thus reduced to "nothing" (1.4.194). When the standard of revolt is unfurled by Goneril against himself, his Fool and retinue, Lear is in open-mouthed astonishment, unable to believe his ears. As if transported with aggravation and grief to hear those words which would undoubtedly bring a disgrace on the aged father, the following line just escapes Lear's lips: "Who is it that can tell me who I am?" (1.4.229). Did Lear think that he had lost his identity, or is he trying instead to prove his identity in one way or another? The answer immediately and rather ironically given by the Fool under these circumstances is briefly yet metaphysically expressed: "Lear's shadow". Is Lear a mere, insubstantial and pale shadow of the king he once was? Is Lear only a shadow of himself, of his former triumphant and magisterial self? In a similar yet much stronger vein of sarcasm and apocalyptic eschatology, Macbeth, after the unexpected news of the Queen's death in Act V, scene v, uses the word "shadow" in his soliloquy: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard

no more; it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing” (24-27).²² Closely associated with the preceding image of “brief candle”, the phrasing of “a walking shadow” has such profound Biblical connotations and resonances as Ecclesiastes 8. 13 (“But it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong *his* days, *which are* as a shadow; because he feareth not before God”) and The Book of Psalms 144.4 (“Man is like vanity: his days *are* as a shadow that passeth away”).²³ Nevertheless, what the wording of the Fool within the dramatic context herein has implied is metaphorically speaking “utusemi (空蝉)”, or “the cast-off skin of a cicada”, giving the audience “a lingering hint of the fleetingness of life.”²⁴ Unlike Plato’s theory of Ideas or Forms that are “the immutable Archetypes of all temporal phenomena”,²⁵ such ephemeral and transient nature of life as is represented in the cicada is no more than an emblematic and symbolic representation of the brevity and instability of the fortune of the king, who is without doubt at the mercy of the wheel of fortune. King Lear cannot be spared that supremacy of fate.

The brief span of space assigned the Fool on the stage between his entrance in Act I, scene iv and his exit in Act III, scene vi characterizes the nature and function of the licensed Fool. The brevity of his life and coded language on the stage has much in common with Cordelia’s hapless life and metaphysical language. These two characters of Cordelia and the Fool, in fact, overlap considerably, and some Shakespeare scholars consequently conjecture that they are interchangeable within the textual framework of King Lear. The absence of one character offstage, more precisely speaking, can be supplemented by the presence of the other onstage. The silence of Cordelia’s “Nothing” is therefore supplemented by the eloquence of the Fool’s rhetorical and classic language of “Paradox”. The Fool views things from a broader, longer, and proper perspective; and providing short-sighted and

unimaginative Lear with such long-range and slightly detached perspective represents the only justification for his existence. In Act I, scene v Lear already begins to show signs of improvement when he unconsciously says, “Because they are not eight?” in response to the Fool’s line: “The / reason why the seven stars are no moe than / seven is a pretty reason.” Suggesting not only the Great Bear in the Northern Hemisphere²⁶ but also Edmund’s astrological reference to “Ursa Major” in terms of his lascivious nativity in Act II, scene ii, ll. 121-24, “the seven stars” further symbolize, among other implications, the Pleiades, namely, Atlas’s seven daughters: Alcyone, Celaeno, Electra, Maia, Merope, Sterope [Asterope] and Taygete. Merope, the wife of Sisyphus, wicked king of Corinth, and the mother of Glaucus in Greek mythology, is called “the Lost Pleiad” as she emits the most feeble light of the Seven Sisters. Legend has it that she hides herself owing to the disgrace she felt for having married a mortal.²⁷ In contrast with such resigned and renounced attitude taken by “the Lost Pleiad”, Cordelia by far outshines her elder sisters and “redeems nature from the general curse / Which twain have brought her to” (4.6.208).

In Act III, scene ii Lear’s language of thundering and ungovernable rage against the ingratitude and unkindness of his two daughters comes to its highest strain and the Fool, also drenched with rain and wind and exposed to lightning and thunder, takes Lear through his catechism: “He that has a house to put’s head in has a good head-piece” (3.2.26). Lear sees himself to be “A poor, infirm, weak and despis’d old man” without sovereignty and he feels the need of perseverance as he thus expresses: “No, I will be the pattern of / all patience; / I will say nothing” (3.2.37-38). What is particularly noteworthy in this line is his conscious or unconscious reference to the word “nothing” as this reminds the audience of Cordelia’s “Nothing” in the opening scene.²⁸ He feels himself “More sinn’d against than sinning”

(3.2.60) and appeals to “the great gods” for punishing those “undivulged crimes / Unwhipp’d of justice”. Lear’s wits begin to turn at this stage and a surge of sympathy for the Fool who is apparently shivering with the cold is engendered in him: “Poor fool and knave, I have one part in my heart / That’s sorry yet for thee.” Lear is awakened to the extraordinary power of necessity that can transform “vile things” into things rich and “precious”. Lear has taken too little care of those “houseless poverty” with the Fool and Edgar, who is disguised as poor Tom, as their prime examples; and he now wants to see evenhanded justice done on earth: “Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel, / That thou mayst shake the superflux to them, / And show the heavens more just” (3.4.34-36).

Lear’s conscious or unconscious employment of the term “nothing” in his lines, already referred to in the preceding paragraph, becomes more conspicuous in Act III, scene iv, where Lear comes to develop a strong affinity for Edgar. Behaving as though he was like a man possessed of devils, Edgar gives a surprisingly detailed account of his running off with the foul fiend following at his heels, and blesses his own “five wits” as well as Lear’s that “are enumerated as common wit, imagination, fantasy, estimation and memory.”²⁹ In keen sympathy with poor Tom, Lear says to him: “Could’st thou save nothing? Would’st thou give ’em all?” Here the word “nothing” is patently contrasted with “all”, and it echoes back to Cordelia and her symbolic use of “Nothing”. No sooner had Lear uttered himself upon the theme of “Nothing” than the Fool pointed out a striking difference between Lear and poor Tom: “Nay, he reserv’d a blanket, else we had been all sham’d.” The Fool’s opportune yet sapient remark nonplused Lear; and the king, raising his voice in anger, rants and raves at his unthankful daughters: “Nothing could have subdu’d nature / To such a lowness but his unkind daughters. / Is it the fashion that discarded fathers / Should have thus little

mercy on their flesh? / Judicious punishment! 'twas this flesh begot / Those pelican daughters" (3.4.69-74). The pronoun "Nothing" is here used solely to emphasize "his unkind daughters"; but, epistemologically speaking, this has a little, if not nothing, to do with his subconscious that lies below the threshold of consciousness: injudicious banishment of his youngest daughter Cordelia. Lear has no one to blame for this tragic catastrophe but himself as he, ironically enough, remarks: "'twas this flesh begot / Those pelican daughters." With reference to the deep awareness of his inability to handle the educational responsibilities of Caliban, Prospero in *The Tempest* likewise, yet in a larger context, admits that: "this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine" (5.1.275-76).

Despite the Fool's attempt to stop Lear from his being exposed out of the hovel to a heavy storm accompanied with lightning, Lear stubbornly refuses to give up talking with what he considers to be a learned and noble philosopher. This tenacious attitude of Lear's discloses his growing awareness that underneath the madman's seemingly strange behaviour and frantic language lies a profound, infinite and true wisdom. Lear has come down to the level of recognition where he sees man in his bare essentials: "Thou / art the thing itself: unaccommodated man / is no more but such a poor, bare, forked / animal as thou art" (3.4.104-07). His tearing off his clothes clearly demonstrates not only his detestation of hypocrisy and insincerity, but also an act of casting off of his former self. Helping Lear outgrow his proud heart and metamorphose himself into a man of compassion and understanding is a miraculous work performed in the main by those "houseless poverty" who are the nearest to the forces and laws of nature; and witnessing in Lear the moral and spiritual regeneration of a fully new being is indeed little short of a miracle in this human and Shakespearean tragedy.

The mock-trial scene in Act III, scene vi is a symbolic representation of

“Judicious punishment” resentfully and repeatedly expressed by King Lear and also a culmination in the display of his “reason in madness” (4.6.176). Edgar as “robed man of justice” and the Fool as “his yoke-fellow of equity”, Lear asks Kent (“o’ th’ commission”) to bring in the evidence to expose his two daughters’ guilt against their poor father. Goneril is arraigned first on a charge of kicking Lear out of Albany’s palace. The Fool says rather diffidently, “Come hither, mistress. Is your name Goneril?” Lear, both self-assuredly and undeniably, declares, “She cannot deny it” (3.6.50). Lear’s self-assured declaration manifested in this specific line and uttered while his wits are far from being recovered marks a most significant turning point in the growth and development of his self-knowledge. That the Fool took the mistress for “a joint-stool”, on the other hand, implies that Goneril is considered by the Fool to be “one of the bench, not a prisoner”;³⁰ and this fatal error of recognition committed by the presumably sapient Fool dramaturgically proves that the tables are now turned in Lear’s favour (namely, in his dramatic upturn). Continued to be blessed by Edgar disguised as poor Tom (“Bless thy five wits!”), Lear goes on to attempt to anatomize Regan and question what essentially constitutes her hard heart. His inquiry into the root of the matter, in fact, goes far beyond the realm of individual reference; and it comes down to a fundamental and universal question that asks about the origin of evil: “Is there cause in nature that make these hard hearts?” (3.6.75-77). His growing sound reason made explicit here in this mock-trial scene illustrates that Lear has finally reached a point where he can unconsciously manipulate the kind of paradox Cordelia has once used in terms of exceptionally symbolic language of “Nothing” in the opening scene: “We’ll go to supper i’ th’ morning” (3.6.84). In response to this paradoxically devised language of rhetoric by Lear, the Fool responds with his last line onstage: “And I’ll go to bed at noon.” Having shrewdly sensed the fulfilment

of his role as court fool, all that the Fool has to do hereafter is not only to disappear from the stage, but also to go to “his eternal rest even in the very ‘noon’ of his existence.”³¹ In connection with this textual context, in Act V, scene iii, Kent, despite Albany’s strong request for service in taking the reins of power into his hands, refuses compliance on the ethical grounds that he has a journey shortly to go with his master.³² Kent’s lines here doubtlessly imply his lasting devotion to King Lear, as well as his subsequent blissful reunion with his master and his daughter Cordelia.

Centring chiefly on such three prominent dramatic characters as Kent, the King of France and the Fool, an attempt has been made thus far in this paper in elucidating the mystery surrounding Cordelia’s paradoxical language of “Nothing” and Lear’s ultimate transformation into a man of deeper understanding of himself, as well as a man of deep compassion for those in poverty and distress. Edgar, inseparably connected with both the main plot and the underplot, also plays a crucial role in bringing Lear and his father Earl of Gloucester into moral and spiritual regeneration; and it is none other than Edgar in the Folio that declares his unwavering determination to assume the reins of the realm: “The weight of this sad time we must obey; / Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say. / The oldest hath borne most; we that are young / Shall never see so much nor live so long” (5.3.323-26).³³ The BBC production of *King Lear*, “recorded between 26 March and 2 April 1982”, presents Edgar (Anton Lesser), disguised as a naked madman, with a thorny crown on his head; and this gives the audience a subtle hint that Edgar is presumably presented as a Christ-figure.³⁴ Subjected to relentless persecution and constantly chased by “the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet”, Edgar undergoes many severe ordeals with unyielding patience and comes to manifest himself in his simple yet implied language of enlightenment appropriately addressed to his blind (visually impaired)

Gloucester: “Men must endure / Their going hence, even as their coming hither: / Ripeness is all” (5.2.9-11).³⁵ Edgar being a patience symbol under adversity and suffering and inexorably linked with the double-plot structure of the play, King Lear, among its varied dramatic qualities, embraces in its composition a forgiving spirit; and this is made explicit between Lear and Cordelia in the main plot, and between Edgar and Gloucester in the subplot, in particular. Cordelia closely parallels Edgar in terms of patience and again she is rightly associated with a Christ-figure. Unlike Edgar, however, Cordelia is exceptionally reticent throughout the play. Nevertheless, her reticence paradoxically and strangely speaks far more eloquently than all her words can do. Cordelia’s one word of “Nothing” magically brings all things through their “eternal splitting up” and “eternal evolution” to “artistic intuition” and “moral obligation” in this drama. The reality of “Nothing” in King Lear manifests the profundity and mystery of human reality itself.

NOTES

- 1 Both the quarto text of The History of King Lear, “first appeared in print in a quarto of 1608” and considered probably Shakespeare’s original creation, and the folio text of The Tragedy of King Lear, “based on the text printed in the 1623 Folio”, are presented in a one-volume edition: Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (gen. eds.) William Shakespeare: The Complete Works (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). With reference to the differences between the two texts of King Lear, Stanley Wells argues as follows: “It is not simply that the 1608 quarto lacks over 100 lines that are in the Folio, or that the Folio lacks close to 300 lines that are in the Quarto, or that there are over 850 verbal variants, or that several speeches are assigned to different speakers. It is rather that the sum total of these differences amounts, in this play, to a substantial shift in the presentation and interpretation of the underlying action. The differences are particularly apparent in the military action of the last two acts. We believe, in short, that there are two distinct

plays of King Lear, not merely two different texts of the same play; so we print edited versions of both of the Quarto ('The History of...') and the Folio ('The Tragedy of...')" (p. xxxvii).

Peter Milward, emeritus professor of Sophia University, in one of his most recent books entitled Shakespeare the Papist (Florida: Sapientia Press, 2005), puts King Lear rather explicitly under the category of "recusant drama". King Lear, according to the author, may well have been chosen, with Pericles, "to be presented by the Cholmeley Players to recusant audiences in the north of England during the winter of 1609-10" (p. 214).

Masahiro Takenaka, professor of Chuo University, in his paper he read at the Lancastrian Shakespeare Conference held at Lancaster University and Hoghton Tower, 21-23 July 1999, gives a detailed account of the performance of King Lear by the Cholmeley Players: "The King Lere to which William Harrison refers does not mean The Chronicle History of King Leir but Shakespeare's King Lear since the fool mentioned in the 5th Interrogatory acted by William Harrison does not appear in The Chronicle History of King Leir. It could also be suggested that Shakespeare's King Lear and Pericles were performed as companion pieces to commemorate Candlemas, the day of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Furthermore, the performance of such established plays as King Lear and Pericles, which were performed in London, implies that the activities of the Cholmeley players were in no way illegal, since both plays were licensed. / It could be argued that travelling troupe such as Cholmeley's players could not perform a big play like King Lear effectively. However, there is no reason for assuming that the performance of King Lear in Yorkshire was inadequate, or that the performance was in any way a lesser production of Shakespeare's art" ("The Cholmeley players and the performance of King Lear in Yorkshire", The Renaissance Bulletin 27 (Tokyo: The Renaissance Institute, 2000)), p. 42.

With reference to the Lancastrian Shakespeare Conference, refer to the following two books: Richard Dutton, Alison Findlay and Richard Wilson (eds.), Theatre and religion Lancastrian Shakespeare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Richard Dutton et al (eds.), Region, religion and patronage Lancastrian Shakespeare (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). Cf. Peter Milward, "Shakespeare's Jesuit Schoolmasters", Theatre and religion Lancastrian Shakespeare, pp. 58-70; "Shakespeare and the Old Religion" from The Catholic Herald

- (London), 5 September 2003; Shakespeare’s Meta-drama — Othello and King Lear, Renaissance Monographs 31 (Tokyo: Renaissance Institute, 2003); Shakespeare’s Meta-drama — Hamlet and Macbeth, Renaissance Monographs 30 (Tokyo: Renaissance Institute, 2003); The Catholicism of Shakespeare’s Plays, Renaissance Monographs 23 (Tokyo: Renaissance Institute, 1997); Biblical Influence in the Great Tragedies, Renaissance Monographs 11 (Tokyo: Renaissance Institute, 1985); Religious Controversies of the Jacobean Age: a Survey of Printed Sources (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1978); Religious Controversies of the Elizabethan Age: a Survey of Printed Sources (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977); Biblical Themes in Shakespeare: Centring on King Lear, Renaissance Monographs 3 (Tokyo: Renaissance Institute, 1975); Shakespeare’s Religious Background (Tokyo: Hokuseido, 1973; London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1973; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973; Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1973).
- 2 A.C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy (London: Macmillan, 1904;1912), p. 243.
 - 3 Ibid.
 - 4 Prince John of Lancaster in The Second Part of King Henry The Fourth: “Turning the word to sword, and life to death” (4.2.10). All Shakespeare quotations herein, unless otherwise stated, are from Peter Alexander’s William Shakespeare: The Complete Works (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1951; 1983).
 - 5 Daisetz T. Suzuki, Zen and Japanese Culture (Tokyo: Tuttle, 1988; 1997), p. 91. This first edition was published by The Eastern Buddhist Society, Otani Buddhist College, in Showa XIII (1938) under the title of Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture. Cf. Chapter Three: Zen and the Samurai (pp. 34-65); Chapter Four: Zen and Swordsmanship (pp. 66-100).
 - 6 John Keats’ Sonnet “*On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again*” (John Barnard (ed.) JOHN KEATS: The Complete Poems (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973; 1988)), p. 220.
 - 7 Lear thus speaks to Goneril in Act II, scene iv: “But yet thou art my flesh, my blood, my daughter; / Or rather a disease that’s in my flesh, / Which I must needs call mine; thou art a boil, / A plague-sore, or embossed carbuncle / In my corrupted blood” (220-24).
 - 8 “Translated and introduced by / Robert Schinzing / in Collaboration

- with I. Koyama and T. Kojima / The International Philosophical Research Association of Japan” (Tokyo: Maruzen, 1958; rpt. 1973 (Connecticut: Greenwood Press)), p. 50.
- 9 Ibid., p. 51.
- 10 Kent. I thought the King had more / affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.
Glo. It did always seem so to us; but / now, in the division of the kingdom, it / appears not which of the Dukes he values / most; for equalities are so weigh'd that / curiosity in neither can make choice of / either's moiety (1-6).
- 11 “6. his worship may have been related to that of the Hyperboreans, who may have built Stonehenge.” Ad de Vries, Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery (Amsterdam: North-Holland, 1974; revised ed., 1981), p. 17. Cf. The Earl of Kent, disguised as Caius, implicitly refers to Salisbury plain in Wiltshire, where “the prehistoric construct of Stonehenge” is situated: “Goose, if I had you upon Sarum plain, / I'd drive ye cackling home to Camelot” (2.2.78-79). Cf. “Malone: We are to understand that Sh. learned from hence that Apollo was worshipped by our British ancestors, which will obviate Dr. Johnson's objection, in a subsequent note, to Shakespeare's making Lear too much a mythologist” (Horace Howard Furness (ed.), A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: King Lear (New York: Dover Publications, 1963; rpt. 1880 (J. B. Lippincott & Company)), pp. 24-25. Kenneth Muir in The Arden Edition of Shakespeare: King Lear (London: Methuen, 1952; rpt. 1966) discusses the necessity of the pagan setting to “Shakespeare's conception of the story.” Regarding miscreant, he comments as follows: “Perhaps, as Wright suggests, the word is used in its original sense of misbeliever. Kent had apparently referred contemptuously to the gods” (p. 14). Robert Bechtold Heilman in This Great Stage (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1963; rpt. 1976) comments: “When Lear in anger swears by Apollo, god of light, Kent vehemently insists that such an oath in such a cause—that is, the blind carrying out of an evil deed—will not work” (p. 257). Peter Milward in Shakespeare's Religious Background (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1973) gives in the following an illuminating and penetrating comment upon the pagan setting of this drama: “It has been maintained that this latter play (King Lear) touches the depths of agnosticism ‘within the confines of a grim, pagan universe’; but if it does so, it does so only to rise again. For, as we have noticed time

and again, in the last plays despair gives place to hope, and the darkness of death to the light of life; and though this all takes place in a pagan setting, like that of King Lear, the undercurrent of thought is both religious and Christian” (“Elizabethan Atheism”, p. 201). The parenthesis is mine.

- 12 Cf. Kent, going out of his dialect and with heavy sarcasm, replies to Cornwall: “Sir, in good faith, in sincere verity, / Under th’ allowance of your great aspect, / Whose influence, like the wreath of radiant fire / On flickering Phoebus’ front—” (2.2.100-03).
- 13 The underlined word is mine. The original one is “my”.
- 14 The underlined word is mine. The original one is “our”.
- 15 “You heavens, give me that patience, patience I need” (2.4.270). Cf. “Mason: The passage should run thus: ‘but for true need, You heavens! give me patience: —patience I need.’ Nature needs not the gorgeous habits you wear, but to supply a real need, you heavens! give me patience—patience I need indeed.” Malone conjectures that “the word ‘patience’ was repeated inadvertently by the compositor” (Horace Howard Furness, op. cit., fn. 268, p. 163). Kenneth Muir in The Arden Edition of Shakespeare: King Lear further explains the word “patience” by putting it in another way, viz., “fortitude”, with a possible suggestion of the cardinal virtues along with “justice”, “prudence” and “temperance” (fn. 272, p. 99).
- 16 Cf. Greg, M.L.R., 1940, p. 445 comments: “The real reason...was that Cordelia succeeded in persuading her husband to abandon his purpose of wresting a portion of the kingdom for himself and retire to his own land, thus leaving her free to use his army in defence of her father, should the occasion arise.” Kenneth Muir further comments: “Shakespeare had to be wary in writing of a foreign invasion” (Kenneth Muir, op. cit., fn. 3-4, p. 160). Cf. Steevens: “It is difficult indeed to say what use could have been made of the king, had he appeared at the head of his own armament, and survived the murder of his queen. His conjugal concern on the occasion might have weakened the effect of Lear’s parental sorrow; and, being an object of respect as well as pity, he would naturally have divided the spectators’ attention, and thereby diminished the consequence of Albany, Edgar, and Kent, whose exemplary virtues deserved to be ultimately placed in the most conspicuous point of view (Horace Howard Furness, op. cit., fn. 2., p. 250).
- 17 Cf. Kent. “Sir, ’tis my occupation to be plain” (2.2.87).
- 18 The 1608 quarto text of The History of King Lear runs as follows: “I have

- a journey, sir, shortly to go; / My master calls, and I must not say no” (313-14). Cf. René Weis (ed.), King Lear : A Parallel Text Edition (Essex: Longman, 1993), p. 308.
- 19 René Weis comments: “...by referring to a possible *something deeper* as the reason for the French invasion, strips it of its crusading character, the restoration in England of true domestic and national harmony. In fact, *furnishings* would suggest that, if anything, France’s motives may be more sinister, perhaps using moral grievances as pretexts for territorial expansion.” Op. cit., fn. 22-34, p. 165.
- 20 Regarding biblical allusions and references, Peter Milward points out the following in his edition of The Taishukan Shakespeare: King Lear (Tokyo: Taishukan, 1987): The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians 8. 9: “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich”; The Gospel According to St. Matthew 27. 46: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”; The Book of the Prophet Isaiah 53. 3: “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (p. 43). All biblical quotations herein, unless otherwise stated, are from the King James’s version of The Holy Bible (Cambridge: University Printing House).
- 21 JOHN KEATS: The Complete Poems, op. cit., p. 220.
- 22 The “shadow” is defined by Alexander Schmidt in Shakespeare-Lexicon: A Complete Dictionary of All the English Words, Phrases and Constructions in the Works of the Poet, 4th ed., 2 vols (1874; Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1923) as “any thing unsubstantial or unreal, though having the deceptive appearance of reality”. Vol. II.
- 23 Cf. Masaaki Imanishi (ed.), The Taishukan Shakespeare: Macbeth (Tokyo: Taishukan, 1987), pp. 274-75. With reference to “Out, out, brief candle!”, The Book of Job 18.5.6 (“Yea, the light of the wicked shall be put out, and the spark of his fire shall not shine”; “The light shall be dark in his tabernacle, and his candle shall be put out with him”) and The Revelation of St. John the Divine 18.23 (“And the light of a candle shall shine no more at all in thee; and the voice of the bridegroom and of the bride shall be heard no more at all in thee: for thy merchants were the great men of the earth; for by thy sorceries were all nations deceived”) are particularly mentioned. The annotator, emeritus professor of Tezukayama Gakuin

University, nevertheless, comments whether Macbeth is speaking this specific line with the consciousness of his sinfulness is open to question.

- 24 The translation of “utusemi” is based on Kenkyusha’s New Japanese-English Dictionary (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1918; 1992). With reference to “cicadas”, JAPAN: An Illustrated Encyclopedia (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1993), states as follows: “In the Japanese poetry of the Nara (710-794) and Heian (794-1185) periods, the cicada appears as an insect of autumn and a symbol of solitude and melancholy, probably because of the influence of Chinese literature. And even though in the HAIKU of the Edo period (1600-1868) it was a symbol of the thriving life of full summer, there was a lingering hint of the fleetingness of life. It is as a summer insect that most Japanese now think of the cicada.”
- Cf. “Nevertheless, should the poet have chanced upon the legal definitions of kingship, as probably he could not have failed to do when conversing with his friends at the Inns, it will be easily imagined how apropos the simile of the King’s Two Bodies would have seemed to him. It was anyhow the live essence of his art to reveal the numerous planes active in any human being, to play them off against each other, to confuse them, or to preserve their equilibrium, depending all upon the pattern of life he bore in mind and wished to create anew.” Ernst H. Kantorowicz, The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957; 1981), pp. 25-26.
- 25 Cf. The entry word “Plato” in The Columbia Encyclopedia (Houghton Mifflin: Columbia University Press, 1935; 5th ed., 1993), p. 2167.
- 26 Cf. Horace Howard Furness, op. cit., fn. 34, p. 98.
- 27 Cf. Kenkyusha’s New English-Japanese Dictionary (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1927; 6th ed., 2002), pp. 1893-94.
- 28 Cf. The Gospel According To St. Matthew 26.62: “And the high priest arose, and said unto him, Answerest thou nothing? what is *it which* these witness against thee?”; 27.12: “And when he was accused of the chief priests and elders, he answered nothing.” Does Lear here try to give an imitation of his banished daughter’s language of “Nothing” or Christ’s silence (“nothing”) at the time of his Passion? (Peter Milward (ed.) The Taishukan Shakespeare: King Lear, op. cit., fn. 38).
- 29 Kenneth Muir (ed.), The Arden Edition of King Lear (London: Methuen, 1952; 1966), fn. 58, p. 117. Cf. Horace Howard Furness, op. cit., fn. 56: “Johnson (note on *Much Ado*, I, i, 66): ‘The wits seem to have been

- reckoned five, by analogy of the five senses, or the five inlets of ideas”, p. 187.
- 30 Op. cit., fn. 23, p. 134. Cf. “Frequently mentioned in 16-18th c. as an article of furniture; also in allusive or proverbial phrases expressing disparagement or ridicule, of which the precise explanation is lost.” Historically, the word “joint-stool” first appeared in 1434 (OED. 1).
- 31 Cf. Horace Howard Furness, op. cit., fn. 83: Cowden Clarke: “This speech is greatly significant, though apparently so trivial. It seems but a playful rejoinder to his poor old royal master’s witless words of exhaustion, but it is, in fact, a dismissal of himself from the scene of the tragedy and from his own short day of life. The dramatist indeed has added one slight passing touch of tender mention (Kent’s saying, ‘Come, help to bear thy master; thou must not stay behind’) ere he withdraws the gentle-hearted fellow who ‘much pined away’ at Cordelia’s going into France, has sunk beneath the accumulated burden, and has gone to his eternal rest even in the very ‘noon’ of his existence.” Moberly: “The poor creature’s fate was sure to be hard when he was separated from his master, under whose shelter he had offended so many powerful persons”, p. 214.
- 32 This reading is based on the quarto text of The History of King Lear (1608).
- 33 This reading is based on the folio text of The Tragedy of King Lear (1623).
- 34 The NHK Shakespeare Theatre: King Lear (Tokyo: NHK, 1984), with notes by David Snodin; and introduction with supplementary notes by Izumi Momose, emeritus professor of Chuo University.
- 35 Peter Milward in The Taishukan Shakespeare: King Lear points out the following with reference to these Edgar’s lines: “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither” (The Book of Job 1.21); “For we brought nothing into *this* world, *and it is* certain we can carry nothing out” (The First Epistle of Paul The Apostle to Timothy 6.7), p. 261. Pertaining to “Ripeness is all” spoken by Edgar, Hamlet’s celebrated line of “The readiness is all” (5.2.215-16) is often contrasted with this. Although the individual nuances are apparently different, each line expresses the very spirit of its own play.