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# *Signifying Nothing: Easier Done Than Said?*

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This essay's argument starts from a simple, indeed self-evident, premise—and risks, I'm afraid, not getting beyond it. At least, I tell myself, the point will be thoroughly made. It is just this: early modern drama is rich with allusions to foolish or mad discourse—for my limited purposes here it seems permissible to conflate the two—as being literally non-sensical, whereas, with very few exceptions, it is actually represented, and registered by the audience, as full of sense, however warped and indirect in expression. This is obviously true of the so-called wise fools, as also of those characters who counterfeit folly as part of a disguise: indeed, the inescapability of the central paradox may help to account for the plethora of these phenomena. The paradox is inescapable, no doubt, because of the very nature of theatre, and perhaps of language at large: according to the code that connects auditors and spectacle, we expect to encounter meaning on stage, not to be confronted with gibberish. If there is to be babbling, as there often is, it must serve some intelligible dramatic end.

Authors who dare to dabble in babble take care to contain and label it. Thus Feste is allowed only a brief—and textually indeterminate—moment of madman's *vox* in presenting Malvolio's eminently sane letter to Olivia:

*Feste*. . . . [*Reads madly*] "By the Lord, madam —"
*Olivia*. How now, art thou mad?
*Feste*. No, madam, I do but read madness; and your ladyship will have it as it ought to be, you must allow *vox*. (Shakespeare, *TN*, V.i.274-77)

Thus the stricken Cornelia in *The White Devil* initially strays only a few times from verse into prose (Webster, V.ii.31 ff.), and when officially pronounced "foolish" (V.iv.72), delivers her finely crafted and moving dirge in what the original stage direction calls "*several forms of distraction*" (91 SD), but obviously without spoiling its extraordinary dignity. Thus the fools and madmen of Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* make a mere passage over the stage, and thereby comment pointedly—intelligibly—on the main plot's forms of folly and madness. And thus, to reach back to Tudor models, the syllable-by-syllable "schooling" of Ingnorance [*sic*] by Idlenes over one hundred lines in Redford's *Wit and Science* (ll. 450-550) serves to define the identity that will shortly be applied to Wit, along with the fool's coat, but is allowed only distantly to taint the fallen hero's speech, which Science still finds above his apparent condition: "Heere you what termes this foole here hath got?" (l. 748).

Hence, too, perhaps, what seems to be the absence from the religious drama in any language of a key medieval model for the motif of madness as divine punishment: the case of Nebuchadnezzar.[1] (It would be intriguing, of course, to know how far and by what means the latter's fall into madness was portrayed in the anonymous lost play on the subject that Henslowe's *Diary* indicates as having been a considerable success for the Admiral's Men in 1596-97.[2]) One offshoot of the Nebuchadnezzar model, the thirteenth-century French romance of *Robert le Diable*, notably transforms for a stage version the discursive sign of folly—unintelligible noise-making in lieu of speech—imposed upon the eponymous protagonist as penance for his manifold crimes: as Élisabeth Gaucher points out with regard to the poetic text, "L'aliénation passe par la régression à la bestialité. . . . Le fou ne communique pas par le langage, il hennit" (*Robert le diable: histoire d'une légende*, p. 37)—that is, neighs like a horse.[3] The fourteenth-century dramatisation of the story, however, for the *Miracles de Nostre Dame par personnages* emphasises the fool's silence, even when tormented and humiliated:

1 See Fritz, pp. 26, 67-69, *et passim*, and, for a comprehensive overview, Doob.
2 See the *Lost Plays Database* at <http://www.lostplays.org/index.php/Nebuchadnezzar>. The dramatic treatments of which I am aware restrict themselves to other aspects of the story; see, e.g., the *Nabuchodonosor* of Antoine de La Croix (pub. 1561).
3 See *Robert le Diable*, ed. Gaucher, l. 1187.

"J'ay pitié de sa guise fole / Et de ce qu'il ne parle goute. / Il pleure, esgar! Esgar sanz doubte" (*Miracle de Robert le dyable*, ll. 1462-64). In a way that recuperates a mystery-play model, this not only lends his suffering a Christ-like passivity but effectively prepares for his noble eloquence when his penance has been fulfilled. Folly is thereby spiritually transfigured.

All in all, then, it is hardly surprising that even genuine fools and genuinely mad characters on the early modern stage should speak versions of sense. What is remarkable, however, is that the representational issue is regularly foregrounded—with seeming inadvertence but in ways that reveal some of the discursive and generic tensions involved.

The text that provides my title, and points to the central contradiction inherent in "signifying nothing" (Shakespeare, *Mac.*, V.v.28), may serve to initiate this part of the discussion. The speech and its moment are too well known to belabour; that is part of the point. Macbeth's soliloquy dismissing life as "a tale / Told by an idiot" (26-27) has made its way into memories, anthologies and textbooks because it is one of the playwright's most rhetorically poised and finally crafted verbal productions—signification *par excellence*, the antithesis of "sound and fury" (26). An actor may inject urgency and despair befitting the tragic context: the news of the queen's death, conveyed by the "cry of women" (V.v.8), may palpably shake Macbeth's self-styled immunity to "[d]ireness" (14) as the enemy approaches. But to allow the slightest tinge of anything like a loss of verbal, hence mental, control would contradict the text and turn pathos into bathos.

What we hear from Macbeth about the empty signifying of madness, moreover, is bound to be set off against what we have recently witnessed from Lady Macbeth, who ironically fulfils her earlier warning to him: "These deeds must not be thought / After these ways; so, it will make us mad" (II.ii.36-37). Certainly, she is made mad in a way that could not be more ostentatiously laden with significance. Far from "signifying nothing", the "tale" composed of her distracted words and gestures conspicuously imposes something supremely horrific on reluctant interpreters—the Doctor and Gentle-woman.

A contrast may usefully be drawn with the death of the evil Queen in *Cymbeline*, likewise announced as part of the resolution but not actually depicted. She is said by the physician Cornelius to have expired

> With horror, madly dying, like her life,
> Which, being cruel to the world, concluded
> Most cruel to herself. (Shakespeare, *Cym.*, V.iv.31-33)

Despite her true revelations, successively reported, the fact that we have not witnessed the least onset or expression of madness on her part, or indeed any psychological dimension beyond caricature, leaves infinite, if momentary, room for our imagination to operate. And what we imagine is nothing less than a self-annihilation at once physical, psychic and moral, an intense implosion of multiple nothings that explodes miraculously with renewed meanings for others, making sense of their lives in the finest tragicomic manner:

> *Cymbeline.* Innogen,
> Thy mother's dead.
> *Innogen.* I am sorry for't, my lord.
> *Cymbeline.* Oh, she was naught, and 'long of her it was
> That we meet here so strangely. (269-72)

The difficulty of staging, as opposed to evoking, madness as "signifying nothing" is confirmed by what we hear and see in *Hamlet*, and also by what we do not. First, of course, we have to do with a pretended madman who super-abundantly serves up something in the more-or-less transparent guise of nothing. Distracted though he may truly seem, Ophelia, by contrast, is unmistakably the (no)thing itself—mentally enacting what Hamlet thinks should "lie between maids' legs" (Shakespeare, *Ham.*, III.ii.117). When her condition is first evoked, the reporting Gentleman paints her discourse as an absent centre which interpretations strain to fill:

> Her speech is nothing,
> Yet the unshaped use of it doth move
> The hearers to collection. They aim at it,
> And botch the words up fit to their own thoughts,
> Which, as her winks and nods and gestures yield them,
> Indeed would make one think there might be thought,
> Though nothing sure, yet much unhappily. (IV.v.7-13)

What the audience actually witnesses a few lines later, however, is nearly the inverse of this picture. The themes and images of Ophelia's voluble mad speech signify in particularly rich fashion, all the more so for their disjointed allusiveness. Her interlocutors, by contrast—Gertrude and Claudius—are all but reduced to speechlessness ("Nay, but Ophelia –" [34], "pretty lady" [41], "Pretty Ophelia –" [56]) and at a loss for interpretation ("Alas, sweet lady, what imports this song?" [27]), except for gross approximation. "Conceit upon her father" (45),

pronounces Claudius, conspicuously hitting on only part of the truth. The interpretative function is more largely transferred to us, the offstage audience, who have more comprehensive information to bring to bear, notably regarding the fraught emotional relations between Ophelia and Hamlet.

This technique, a form of dramatic irony involving two layers of interpretation, with the offstage audience at least one step ahead of the onstage one, is worth identifying as a sleight-of-hand (or tongue) technique for enhancing the impression of mad discourse while keeping it, not merely contained, but dramatically functional—*artistically* coherent. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene is an obvious instance. The model of Ophelia has at least two virtually self-declared offshoots of this ilk: Webster's Cornelia, mentioned earlier, whose chief onstage interlocutor is her guilty son Flamineo, and, perhaps most remarkably, the Jailer's Daughter in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, who risks all for Palamon. In the latter case, there is a striking progression from verse soliloquies signalling progressive distraction (Shakespeare and Fletcher, II.vi.1 ff., III.ii.1 ff.)—the verse in itself performing a containment function because it is socially anomalous—to what is perhaps the most extravagant prose raving in the canon (IV.iii.*passim*). Here, as is quite clear to us, the girl's mingled sexual frustration and guilt spill over into visions of hell verging on hallucination, while her father, the Wooer and the Doctor play interpretative catch-up.

The medico-sexual cure proposed evidently has the desired effect, to judge from the Jailer's later assurance of Palemon: "Sir, she's well restored / And to be married shortly" (V.iv.27-28). Still, it is notable that there is no further direct presentation of her. No doubt, the tragicomic machinery of the play has more pressing concerns at this point; the fact remains that genuine madness cured, of which there are few instances, since the condition is generally fatal, is here denied discursive expression. Given the doubt that is raised and allowed to circulate regarding this jejune marriage as a remedy for such profound and multiple alienation—not just sexual, but emotional and social—one is encouraged to supply the silence imaginatively with some version of the commonplace speech of conversion, repentance and acceptance that often, in early modern comic endings, seems to anticipate the effects of anti-psychotic medication—or lobotomy.

To what extent is poststructuralist linguistic and psychoanalytical theory useful in making sense of the theatrical eschewing of nonsense? Perhaps it does not take us very far, given the overriding practical imperatives previously

cited. Still, I continue to see the point, as I have done in earlier work,[4] of thinking in terms of Lacan's conception of psychotic speech as characterised by the absence of the "existential subject of synchronic relations (*je*)" (Ragland-Sullivan, 199)—another way of stating the paradoxical condition of "speech" that is "nothing". I have proposed that medieval forerunners of early modern mad discourse, notably in the mothers of the slaughtered innocents and the *planctus* of Mary, tend to draw on the Transcendental Signified, the divine framework always already in place, to supplant the individual ego that threatens to slip out of place. In light of the containment mechanisms outlined above, it now seems to me possible to posit the audience's sense-making function as itself performing a similar role in early modern plays, and as doing so even when the notion of transcendental signification is either frankly abrogated or subversively undercut.

There is, broadly speaking, a distinction to be made here between the mad discourses of female and male characters. Zabina, the captive Turkish empress of *Tamburlaine, Part One*, may be taken to stand for the former. Her discovery of Bajazeth's body—"O Bajezeth, my husband and my lord, / O Bajazeth, O Turk, O emperor" (Marlowe, V.i.308-9)—instantly shifts her discourse so as to suggest the abrupt removal of that which anchored it, allowing it to slip into a prose string of images dominated by the stereotypical female fluids ("Bring milk and fire, and my blood I bring him again" [310]) and functions: "Go to my child. Away, away, away! Ah, save that infant, save him, save him!" (312-13). This is particularly disjointed and fragmentary speech, but it is far from gibberish. Its sense, however, is conditioned from outside. The audience assumes here a cultural and intertextual position, focused by the brutal specificities of the play-world ("Streamers white, red, black, here, here, here. . . . Hell, death, Tamburlaine, hell!" [314-16]), which abundantly supplies interpretative context—if we like, the missing synchronising "*je*". There is here a model that applies especially to female distraction, which is almost always triggered by the loss or unattainability of a loved one: Lady Macbeth is a notable exception, but not necessarily Cymbeline's queen, given the disappearance of her son Cloten, in whom she apparently saw something more than we do.

Isabella in *The Spanish Tragedy*, whose distraction over Horatio's death leads almost straight to suicide (but remains within the moderating bounds of verse), is another case in point. To the extent that her madness counterpoints that of Hieronimo, thrown into relief (and indeed evoked when she blames him for

4 See notably Hillman, *Self-Speaking*, pp. 239-46.

delay [Kyd, IV.ii.29 ff.]) is the specific pattern of the revenger's distraction. This pattern has, of course, been much discussed—by me among many others—but it may be possible to add a nuance from the present point of view. Revengers typically deploy their distraction, more or less distractedly, in service to the vindictive act conceived as a source of lost meaning, a device for reconstituting identity, usually at the acknowledged cost of their own death. (The Additions to *The Spanish Tragedy* seem calculated to enhance this schema.) In psychoanalytic terms, this is to invest the act with transcendental significance, so as to hold in place a discursive system that would otherwise fragment into nonsense. An alternative, if private (literally "idiotic") "*je*" is thereby re-constituted. What Kyd's representation (if not invention) of this process in and through Hieronimo enables us to see—again, as interpreters, whose perspective provides a distancing and containing effect—is the constructed, artificial nature of the transcendentalising process.

This is hardly news from the moral point of view, given the ambivalence—to say the least—attached to acts of revenge in early modern English culture, dramatic and otherwise. But it seems useful to reconsider the point discursively, to recognise that the revenger's appropriation of language to produce "something" remains in fact a version of "speech" that is "nothing". Hieronimo's (literal) elevation of the corpse of Horatio to the status of transcendental signified—the "strange and wondrous show" that will enable his speech to "make the matter known" (IV.i.185, 187), proves no means of evading the tongue's inherent deceptive power, as he seems at once to acknowledge and demonstrate in the bloody conclusion.[5]

If we return now (and this leads to my own less spectacular conclusion) to the two types of discursive folly that are self-containing—those of the wise fool and the pretended madman—it becomes easier to see that they are also self-negating, thanks to the presence of a double discourse—a version of "something" that counterbalances the outward show of "nothing". Examples are numerous, and the terms are sometimes manipulated explicitly. Lear's Fool, in proposing that he and his master have effectively changed places, and thereby preparing for Lear's madness, first tells him,

> I had rather be any kind o' thing than a Fool, and yet I would not be thee, nuncle; thou hast par'd thy wit o' both sides, and left nothing i' th' middle. (Shakespeare, *Lr.*, IV.iv.185-88)

5 For a fuller treatment of this issue, see Hillman, "Thomas Kyd".

Then he nails the point down: "I am better than thou art now, I am a Fool, thou art nothing" (193-94). In this light, it is easier to see that Lear's later claim to be something still—"Then there's life in't" (IV.vi.202)—is akin, in a momentary way, to the revenger's illusory arrogation of artificial substance; appropriately, then, purportedly vast but unnamed "revenges" (II.iv.279) figure prominently in Lear's fantasies.

The same play presents us with Edgar's mad disguise, in assuming which he inverts the key terms: "Poor Turleygod! poor Tom! / That's something yet. Edgar I nothing am" (II.iii.20-21). The "something" that is Poor Tom is recognisable, of course, as a Bedlam-beggar, and commentary usually settles for that identification, duly adding notes to Harsnett. I would like to suggest that the character's double discourse may also carry older and more spiritually suggestive baggage. For there is at least one dramatic derivative of the Nebuchadnezzar tradition of folly as divine punishment that may be pertinent, even though it is extant, not in English, but in French. I return to the *Miracles de Nostre Dame par personnages*, but this time to a particularly curious and involved text entitled *Miracle de un parroisien esconmenié*—that is, of a parishioner excommunicated. The latter's considerable problem is that he has been deservedly excommunicated for manifold sins and that, even though he has now repented, the curé who performed the rite has since died; no substitute, apparently, will be accepted by heaven. It will take, predictably, the intervention of Nostre Dame, who enlists the aid of the curé, now conveniently posted to paradise, to lift the curse.

She does so, however, when she is solicited by a pretended fool, none other than the son of the emperor of Alexandria, who has voluntarily taken the penance of folly upon himself to mortify his sinful state. In this guise he endures, like Robert le Diable, physical privation, as well as abundant humiliations and scorn, especially at the hands of sadistic tormentors, but he is far from mute: on the contrary, he maintains a double discourse of folly and pious wisdom, both in extreme form. As a pretended madman ("fol") he spouts ample amounts of non-sense worthy of Poor Tom—his "Tureluru, va, turelu!" (l. 826) might even seem akin to "Turleygod" (Qa "Tuelygod"), a term which has never been explained[6]—but this is always contained within his purpose of doing good, to himself and to others.

6 Fritz, p. 357n5, cites a thirteenth-century occitan romance in which a man gone mad from jealousy sings "tullurutau".

If we choose to see some process of spiritual education in the role assumed by Edgar, as no small number of critics do, there is a precedent here. I am far from suggesting, of course, direct knowledge by Shakespeare of this obscure fourteenth-century text. But that text may just be the key to the survival of a lost tradition, even one involving popular drama, of a kind akin to that which I have posited behind the representation of Joan de Pucelle and Talbot in *Henry VI, Part One*.[7] In any case, a study of the discourses of folly, and particularly of the cohabitation of nothing and something, nonsense and sense, within the same character, should not leap to the conclusion that such doubleness is based merely on an inherited plot element, despite such folktale precedents as the fool-playing Amleth of Saxo and Belleforest. An early modern audience may just have been in the cultural position to know, if not better, at least differently.

7 See Hillman, "La Pucelle".

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