Peter Womack

Nobody, Somebody, and *King Lear*

The approximately contemporary Jacobean plays, *King Lear* and *Nobody and Somebody*, share an ancient British setting, a preoccupation with instability in the state, and an unsettling interest in negation. Peter Womack here suggests that by reading them together we can retrieve some of the theatrical strangeness which the more famous of the two has lost through familiarity and naturalization. The dramatic mode of existence of the character called 'Nobody' is paradoxical, denaturing – an early modern visual and verbal *Verfremdungseffekt*, at once philosophical and clownish. His negativity, which is articulated in dialogue with the companion figure of 'Somebody', is matched in *King Lear*, above all in the role of Edgar, but also by a more diffused state of being (withdrawal, effacement, folly) which the play generates in reaction to its positive events. Ultimately the negation in both plays is social in character: 'Nobody' is the dramatic face of the poor and oppressed.
Peter Womack teaches literature at the University of East Anglia. His most recent book is *English Renaissance Drama* (2006), in the Blackwell Guides to Literature series.

Of all the many sorts of representations of happenings between humans which the theatre has made since ancient times, and which have given entertainment despite their incorrectness and improbability, there are even today an astonishing number that also give entertainment to us.[1]

BRECHT'S astonishment is not altogether friendly. The catholicity of our theatre (which has greatly increased in the half-century since his death) appears to his taste as a feeble readiness to swallow anything. The pleasure of diversity has something homogenizing about it, rather in the way that Jane Austen becomes indistinguishable from Tolstoy once both have been turned into quality television.

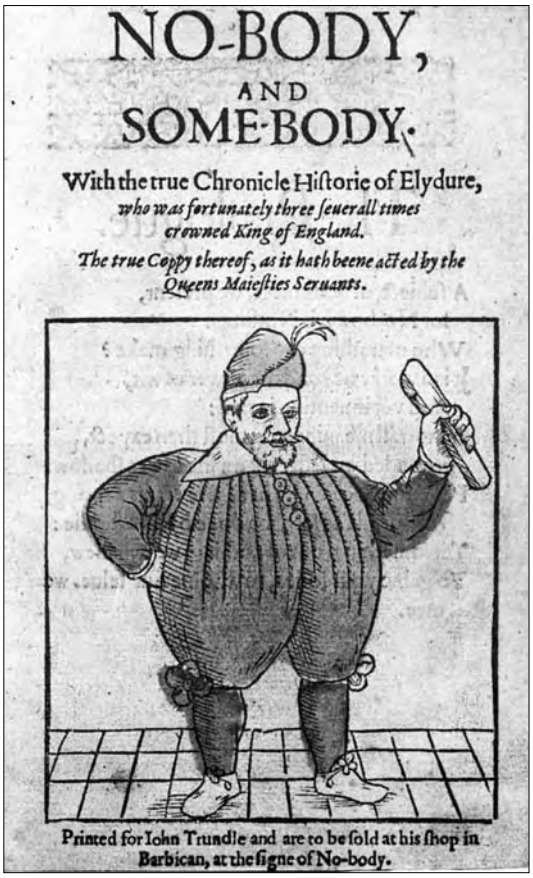
The mechanisms of this assimilation are nowhere more efficient than in the reception of Shakespeare: a tireless theatrical and pedagogical creativity recontextualizes the old scripts, teasing out more and more fresh topics of applicability with the laudable aim of making them live for today's spectators and students. To the extent that this labour of historical rapprochement is successful, *Lear*, *Hamlet*, and the rest become unproblematic components of postmodern culture, their strangeness worn away by so much polishing up. In this situation, one of the tasks of criticism is to make the masterpieces of the past harder to enjoy, to scatter well-judged obstacles in the path of the text so as to prevent contemporary interpreters from finding it entirely satisfactory. This essay is written in that cantankerous spirit. By juxtaposing *King Lear* with the contemporary, anonymous, and rather incompetent play *Nobody and Somebody*, I hope not so much to shed new light on Shakespeare's tragedy as to cast some shadows across the light in which it is already bathed.[2]

The juxtaposition itself is neither novel nor arbitrary: the two plays give a strong sense of coming from the same place.[3] They have a complicated simultaneity. *Lear* was performed at the Jacobean Court at Christmas 1606, and printed in 1608. *Nobody and Somebody* was printed in 1606 and, after undated London performances, was taken by a touring company to Germany, where it formed part of the Shrovetide festivities at the archducal court at Graz in 1608.[4]

Both these early Jacobean entertainments have Elizabethan antecedents. *Lear* is a drastically revised version of *The True Chronicle Historie of King Leir*, which was printed in 1605, but first performed in or before 1594; *Nobody and Somebody* also seems to have been written in the first half of the 1590s, and not published before 1606.[5] The reason for dusting off an old, unpublished, and stylistically dated script was presumably the same in

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X07000103 Published online by Cambridge University Press



both cases: the new King's iconography made much of his uniting the crowns of England and Scotland, and this placed a premium on plays about 'Britain', the unified island which was supposed to have been ruled for generations before the coming of the Romans by the lineal descendants of the name-giving Trojan founder, Brutus.

Both *Lear* and *Nobody and Somebody* are set in this legendary British antiquity and, like other Elizabethan examples of the genre such as *Gorboduc* and *Locrine*, they are appropriately preoccupied with succession and unity, usually dramatized through images of their catastrophic failure.[6] It seems that for dramatists one of the advantages of this dubious period was that it was too remote to have any hereditary or doctrinal connections with present-day royalty, and consequently its monarchs could be exposed to unlimited vicissitudes.[7]

Thus, the distinction of Elidure, the royal protagonist of *Nobody and Somebody*, is that he is crowned King of Britain three times in the course of the play. On the first occasion, the tyrant Archigallo is deposed by the nobility, and Elidure reluctantly accepts their invitation to take his place. Then Elidure is persuaded by Archigallo's repentance to give him back his throne; it is later, when the restored Archigallo dies, that Elidure becomes king a second time. Finally, Elidure is overthrown by two ambitious lords who conspire to divide the realm between them, but who, having taken power, quarrel and kill each other, leaving him to resume his reign once more. Royal authority in the play is almost farcically unstable; some of the humour is clearly intentional, though it is not certain that the anonymous author is in control.

The play takes its title not from any of these events but from its fictional sub-plot, which tells the story of a comic hero named Nobody. We first hear of him as living in the country and doing good to the poor; Archigallo disapproves of this, and dispatches a villain named Somebody to stop it. Somebody perpetrates a range of wicked deeds, and spreads rumours that Nobody is responsible for them. This makes Nobody's life in the country impossible, and he moves to the city, but Somebody pursues him and he moves on again, this time to the Court. In the end, Somebody has him arrested, and a trial is held in the presence of the newly restored King Elidure. Nobody's innocence is vindicated, Somebody is punished, and general justice is done.

The revival of an episodic Elizabethan romance; the prehistoric 'British' setting; the dizzy switching between king and no-king; the frankly fictitious bolted-on sub-plot – the parallels between the little touring vehicle and the great tragedy are already interesting. What makes them intriguing is the additional shared interest in negation – these are plays about nobody and nothing. What does that suggest about the theatre that gave rise to them?

The Picture of Nobody

There are no visual traces of the earliest performances of *Lear*, but, ironically, we do

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Opposite page: Nobody as pictured on the title page of the published English text (1606). Right: water-colour of the actor playing Nobody, probably John Green, from a presentation copy of the German text (1608).



know what Nobody looked like. This is because the Shrovetide performance at Graz was commemorated by a presentation copy of the German text, with a water-colour of the actor on the cover, reproduced above.[8] It shows a lean, bearded man wearing a feathered hat and an enormous pair of breeches that go right up to his neck, his arms coming out at the side-pockets. His grotesque appearance is the product of a pun; he has only arms and legs because he is No-*body*.

This conceit was not confined to the professional stage, but also appeared in pageants and advertisements; it is a recognizable graphic sign – 'the picture of Nobody'.[9] However, there is an inescapable tension between that semiotic reproducibility and the presence of what looks like an individual human face. Hence the drawing's strange mixture of silliness and mystery. The actor looks like a man discharging an official function so alien to him as to leave him helplessly suspended between being and language. This unresolved condition goes beyond the particular pun on 'nobody', which in any case fails to translate into either German (the language of the performance) or Latin (the language of the caption on the drawing).[10]

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The conceit of a person called Nobody is perhaps universal: it can be traced back to the Cyclops episode in the *Odyssey*, and has even there the feel of an existing folk motif.[11] *Nobody and Somebody* has many versions of the same joke. The hero is lucky in love, because the most fickle girl in the world will be true to Nobody. He gets around London for nothing, because the Thames watermen declare that they will give Nobody a free ride. On the other hand, he is beaten up in one scene because he encounters a braggart who has vowed that he will fight with Nobody; and at the end he leaves the Court empty-handed because the King does not want it to be said that he gave Nobody a reward.

But there are two vital differences between this routine and the Homeric example. First, this is a play and not a narrative, so the one who is said to be nobody is physically present, taking up space in the world. And secondly, whereas Odysseus is lying when he calls himself Nobody, we understand that the character in the play simply does have that name – certainly no other is ever suggested for him. Taken together, these developments tighten the joke at both ends, so to speak. At one end, this really *is* Nobody – not, like Odysseus, *somebody* being called 'nobody' for a limited time and purpose. And at the other end, this is unmistakably *not* nobody, because everyone in the theatre can see that there is somebody there.

A Presence and an Absence

This double inescapability makes the stage figure recurrently unstable. No sooner has Nobody established himself in front of our eyes as a human being than another linguistic pirouette reminds us that he is not one, that despite appearances he is the opposite of a person in the sense that whatever is true of everybody is untrue of him, and whatever is true of him is untrue of everybody. And no sooner have we adjusted to that, and got our heads round the idea that he really is Nobody, than we see him giving away money or getting knocked down or complaining about his hard life, so that he establishes himself as a human being again, until the next negation.

In other words, the paradox which in the *Odyssey* is confined to language here reproduces itself in the structure of the *dramatis persona*. When Odysseus calls himself 'Nobody', he is exploiting the fact that the word denotes both an object (because any name suggests the prior existence of the thing whose name it is) and, in the same breath, the absence of an object (because *this* name says 'not'). Polyphemus hears only the first denotation, his fellow giants only the second.

In just the same way, the comic scenes of *Nobody and Somebody* exploit the fact that the actor denotes both a person (because any actor suggests, just by appearing on the stage, the prior existence of what he impersonates) and, in the same breath, the absence of a person (because *this* actor says 'not'). The doubleness which inescapably accompanies negation penetrates not only the words the actors speak, but also the signs the actors *are*. This is why Nobody's costume remains so stylishly appropriate even after the pun that gave rise to it has been lost in translation. On the one hand, we see a person with *no body*, his arms sprouting impossibly from the tops of his legs: what is true of everybody is not true of him. On the other hand, it is obvious that this is not a prodigy but a comedian wearing a ridiculous pair of trousers: the presence of the human being is never in doubt. The irreconcilable duality of his being is restated every time he traipses awkwardly across the stage.

No doubt what made this split sustainable was the continued vitality, through the sixteenth century and beyond, of the sign-system of the moral interlude. Allegorical persons, such as Folly or Wordly Goods, necessarily have a double character, because the transactions of the play require them to be personal at the same time as its argument requires them to be ideal (thus: if a king in such an interlude has a servant called Moderation, the actor is playing *both* one of the king's servants *and* one of his virtues).[12] *Nobody and Somebody* is not exactly a moral interlude; but it eccentrically borrows that genre's formal implication that the play's meaning is not immanent in its characters and situations, instead lying outside them like the solution to a

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puzzle. That is to say, the picture of Nobody has the effect of preventing the theatrical signs around it from acquiring *naturalness*; rather, the play holds together the embodied and the linguistic in a state of jarring incompatibility. In the language of its own age it would be called a 'device' (as on a shield or at a pageant – a thing that has evidently been devised and asks to be decoded). A modern term for its effect might be *Verfremdung*.

Acting in the Third Person

Brecht offered several ways of grasping this much-abused concept; one of the most practical is the exercise of 'acting in the third person'. Rather than basing the performance on identification ('I am worried about money'; 'I am trying to make her accept me'), the actor presents something like a report on the actions of somebody else ('The canteen woman Anna Fierling sells a leather belt and loses one of her sons'; 'Richard of Gloucester courts his victim's widow').[13]

This strategy has several purposes: to take away any feeling of tragic or psychological inevitability (Fierling could have declined the sale and kept the son); to move the centre of attention from private consciousness to social interaction (the important things happen between people, not inside them); and to give the events a historical character, so that even if the story concerns obscure tradespeople or servants, it is told as if they were already legendary, their deeds public property like those of Julius Caesar.[14]

Obviously these intentions emerged from a distinctively modern (and modernist) political and aesthetic situation. The connection is not that the playwrights of the sixteenth century mysteriously had the same preoccupations as those of the twentieth. It is rather that Brecht was trying to unpick an historically established order of theatrical meaning (illusionism, the naturalization of the sign, the sovereignty of the protagonist's subjectivity); and now, looking back with his help towards Renaissance drama, we can see just this order in formation.[15] What Brecht's theatre half escapes, Shakespearean theatre half predates; hence the technical overlaps between them.

Nobody is an exemplary figure in this context, for his presentation *requires* the third person; it is only as something talked about that he acquires his significance. This can be seen in nicely schematic form in an earlier staging of the idea, written in Portugal by Gil Vicente in the 1530s. The arch-demon Belzebub is observing mankind, assisted by a junior devil called Dinato who is to write down what they hear people say, to be used as evidence on the Last Day. They listen to a dialogue between Every-man, who is rich, and No-one, who is a pauper (I will return to that distinction later):

EVERY-MAN:
My name is Every-Man. My whole
Existence is in seeking wealth.
This task employs my time and health
And is the function of my soul.

NO-ONE:
My name is No-one. My one goal
Is conscience.

BELZEBUB:
Put that down in style
And with a flourish. It's so funny!

DINATO:
Comrade, how shall I word the file?

BELZEBUB:
'No-one follows his conscience, while
Every-Man hunts around for money.'[16]

The point of what Every-Man and No-one say – its *truth*, so to speak – only emerges when it is written down in the third person, though the writing is neatly saved as stage speech by the device of the amanuensis. The dramatic action is, as Brecht says, 'literarized', relieved of its immediacy and turned (in this case naively and literally) into a report on conditions.[17] The human speakers' gestures are recontextualized behind their backs by the framing device: theology supplies an estranging mechanism much as it does (though ironically) in *The Seven Deadly Sins* or *The Good Person of Szechwan*.

The English play has no such overtly 'Brechtian' device, but it finds other ways of moving the character into the third person. His first entrance is prepared by a long exchange about him between Somebody and his servant, which makes just Gil Vicente's satirical use of the Odyssean joke:

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Come twenty poor men to his gate at once;
Nobody gives them money, meat, and drink . . .
poor soldiers,
Sick, maimed, and shot, from any foreign wars;
Nobody takes them in, provides them harbour. . . .
Nobody's table's free for travellers,
His buttery and his cellar ope to all
That starve. . . . (316–34)

Then, when this paragon enters in his absurd costume, his first line is:

Come on mine own servant, some news, some news. What report have I in the country, how am I talked on in the city, and what fame bear I in the court? (379–82)

The servant's response naturally gets the character back into the third person. And the immediate listing of the three reporting constituencies – country, city, and court – outlines the rest of the plot: Nobody will try each of these environments, and suffer misrepresentation in all of them, until the final trial produces a just description of him. In dramatic terms, then, he hardly figures as a subject at all: he is wholly made up of predicates.

Back-to-Front Pictures

One effect of this third-person mode of dramatic existence, easily recognizable from the parallel with Brecht, is a dialectical jump into generalization. Nobody is presented as a country gentleman of no great distinction, but he is talked about in Court from the first scene, and in the final public attack on him, it is alleged that

this monster made his residence
Within the country, and dispersed his shape
Through every shire and country of the land. . . . (1839–41)

He is nationally famous, his deeds public property, because he is talked about everywhere as a matter of course. Much as dumb Kattrin reflects and negates everything that is said out loud, and Shen Te's softheartedness forms a reverse image of the hardness of the whole world, so Nobody is the back-to-front picture of Everybody, a character (if that is still the word) which is hardly individual at all, but communal and universal.

On the other hand, the third-person mode is also, definingly, *fooling*. Typically, the speaker who is trapped inside the identity conferred on him by his name is a clown.[18] For an example at random, take the tavern-haunting Master Froth in *Measure for Measure*: 'For mine own part, I never come into any room in a tap-house but I am drawn in' (II, i, 186–7) He is drawn in because he *is* Froth: it is literally by being drawn out of the barrel that he enters the room. It is easy to hear this as the character being witty about his name, but that would be a misunderstanding (Master Froth is characterized as witless). Rather, what is momentarily happening is that the substance is *speaking its nature*, in the way an egg or a feather might do in a riddle. The actor speaks not as a person but as the voice of a thing.

The voice of Nobody sometimes sounds similar: for example, he is in 'especial grace', he says, with the tyrant Archigallo, because 'Nobody loves him, and he loves Nobody' (450). This is a clown's utterance because structurally it is a *joke*. It is not information about either of the characters it appears to be describing (it is already clear that Archigallo hates Nobody). In fact it is not part of the narrative at all, but part of a comic routine, making sense not within the 'world of the play', but out on the open platform in the explicit presence of the audience.

The paradox of Nobody, then, is generic as well as linguistic. His *verfremdend*, objectifying character takes him at once into the most ambitious kinds of moral and political statement and the daftest kinds of gag. This is the source of a good deal of incoherence in the writing, but also of its productive strangeness.

Not . . . But[19]

In a witty reflection on 'The Idea of Nothing', Henri Bergson argues that nothing – *le vide* – is not properly speaking an idea, because to formulate it is a secondary mental operation, implicitly countering a prior affirmation and

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promising a subsequent one. 'Negation is but half of an intellectual act, of which the other half is understood, or rather put off to an indefinite future.' 'Nothing', we could gloss, tacitly means 'nothing that we want', 'nothing that matters to us', 'none of the things we were told would be here'. This deferred positive means that 'nothing' always implies a context of speech and an object of address: 'Negation aims at some one, and not only, like a purely intellectual operation, at some thing. It is of a pedagogical and social nature. It sets straight.' In one word (which Bergson does not use), negation is dialogical.[20]

The structures of *Nobody and Somebody* spectacularly display this logic, for Nobody would be incomprehensible without his pairing: Somebody is everything that he is not, and *vice versa*. Somebody is dressed in a doublet coming as nearly as possible down



to his ankles, not because it reflects his name, but because he is the opposite of Nobody.[21] In the same way, Somebody is convicted of every vice – he is a usurer, a profiteer, a corrupt courtier, a card-sharper, a pickpocket, a rioter, a reckless libertine. These various courses of life cannot plausibly be combined in one person, but Nobody is innocent of every single one of them, so Somebody must be guilty of them all. Moreover, as Nobody's traducer, Somebody is the main mouthpiece of an unfair version of him which is, equally schematically, the opposite of the Nobody who selflessly helps the poor.

On this converse account, which comes from a vivid Northern European tradition of woodcuts and broadsides, when you ask who spilt the milk, or who your wife was with last night, or who has been spreading lies about you, the answer is always the same: it was Nobody (since nobody, after all, has owned up to it).[22] The play both reproduces that domestic register – 'Nobody breaks more glasses in a house / Than all his wealth hath power to satisfy' (870–1) – and extends it so that Nobody is also said to be responsible for a whole catalogue of abuses in the commonwealth: the engrossing of corn, the dissemination of seditious libels, the decay of hospitality. So the plot binds the two of them together in a scheme which manages to be both cynical and Christlike: Nobody takes the blame for the evil done by Somebody.

This insistent binary opposition is also what ties the subplot into the main one. Archigallo's appetite for power is mirrored in Elidure's distaste for it: on the occasions when he gives away his kingdom, he does so with obvious relief, at the same time advising the recipients that it will not bring them happiness. So the crown goes back and forth between the bad kings who want it and the good one who does not; and Elidure appears as a saintly negation of earthly power, partly modelled on Shakespeare's Henry VI. Thus, although the plots only really join up at the beginning and the end, simply alternating for most of the interim, the connection is meaningful: Somebody is hired to work against Nobody by Archigallo in the first scene, and he is examined and condemned by Elidure in the last. The tyrant rules over Somebody; the good king over Nobody.

So Nobody, the innocent man who does not exist, lives on the stage in dialogue with a representation of the world as it is. The dialogue is carried on not only through the symmetrical oppositions of the plot, but also by the language in which the negative character is formed: as we have seen, he is *consti-*

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tuted by speech. For example, the trial begins like this:

SOMEBODY:
I beg against this fellow,
Justice, my liege.
ELIDURE:
Against whom?
SOMEBODY:
Against Nobody.
NOBODY:
My liege, his words well suit unto his thoughts,
He wishes no man justice. (1826–9)

Somebody, the villain, is tricked into speaking more honestly than he intends by the very terms he uses. In the same way, the play is full of commonplace remarks which accidentally construct a character who is a universal benefactor: nobody builds churches nowadays, nobody helps debtors to get out of prison, somebody fathers children and leaves them to starve, but nobody pays for their nursing. By naively attaching a positive being to the negative pronoun, the play dramatises the alternative which is suppressed inside the repeated and despondent 'nobody'.

Like Somebody, but benignly, we have been tricked; we discover that we have said more than we meant to; we have proposed a person who would do what nobody does. Thus negation addresses us, sets us straight; it is not a simple paradox but a 'social and pedagogical' move. Explicitly, and in a more poignant sense than Bergson perhaps intended, Nobody is 'half of an intellectual act, of which the other half is . . . put off to an indefinite future', such that his goodness is an ironic mirror of the badness of the present. At this point it becomes obvious that Nobody's home country is Utopia.[23]

Unknown Opposites

The closest *Lear* comes literally to borrowing the imagery of Nobody is the moment when Edmund's challenge, addressed to 'any man of quality and degree', is answered by a knight with no name. Edmund agrees to fight, and discovers in the moment of final defeat that his 'unknown opposite' is his brother. That is not the only connection between them. They are joined together by the similarity of their names, and by the fact that their shared story is a zero-sum game. Edmund is heir to the Dukedom of Gloucester for the time, and to the extent, that Edgar is not. When Edmund is outside the law, as an illegitimate son at the beginning and then, at the end, as a traitor, Edgar appears as 'the legitimate', but when Edmund is accepted and protected, first by his father and later by those in power, it is Edgar who is outside the law, as a vagrant and the companion of a proclaimed traitor.

It is as if the world has only one place for the two of them: whichever of them is occupying it, the other is cast into a kind of nowhere. As in *Nobody and Somebody*, this binary tension in the subplot is articulated with the central drama of state: the place in the world is Edgar's when the kingdom belongs to Lear, and Edmund's when it belongs to Goneril and Regan. The brothers' story recalls that of Nobody and Somebody in another sense too: that the bad one undermines the good one by accusing him of exactly his own faults. The parricidal attitudes Edmund attributes to Edgar sound convincing because they are his own, just as Somebody's slanders gain credibility from the fact that the crimes he blames on Nobody really are occurring, because he is committing them himself.

Edgar carries the burden of his brother's sins, becoming a ragged, devil-haunted beggar analogous to the household scapegoat of the Nobody woodcuts – the half-crazed wanderer among broken utensils who says 'Nobody is my name that beareth everybody's blame'.[24] It is this darkly negative creature who eventually appears, with his visor down and no device on his shield, to confront the man who is apparently on the point of taking power in the state and over the sisters: Edmund is about to become, decisively, Somebody, but first he has to confront Nobody.

Tom o' Bedlam is one of two characters in the play who habitually name themselves, the other being the Fool. Everything the latter says has the significance it does because it is said by a fool; it is to make that clear that, like Nobody, he has to keep saying what he

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is. For instance, his address to Lear, 'I had rather be any kind o' thing than a fool, and yet I would not be thee, nuncle' (I, iv, 162–3), makes its full impact in Brecht's third person – not 'I pity you', but 'The fool pities the king', which is both a hyperbole of Lear's fall (he is lower than the lowest form of court life) and an Odyssean paradox (only a fool would pity such a king).

Comparably, 'Poor Tom's a-cold', which repeatedly makes the beggar Edgar into an object of narration, estranges his speech so that we hear not the voice of Edgar in disguise, or not only that, but the voice of anyone who has nothing – no friends, no house, no wits. And again as with Nobody, such consistent negation is a kind of universality: as Lear remarks, everyone else on the stage is 'sophisticated', not simply in what they are but mixed with something else; only Tom is 'the thing itself'(III, iv, 98). Nothing flips over into everything; the story is about all of us, but only to the extent that the character ceases to be Edgar and becomes a sort of dramatic pronoun.[25] Fool and madman then attach themselves to their respective fallen monarchs in closely similar gestures:

FOOL:
But I will tarry; the fool will stay,
And let the wise man fly. (II, iv, 76–7)

EDGAR:
Give me thy arm.
Poor Tom shall lead thee. (IV, i, 78–9)

In both cases the move from first person to third person fixes the act of commitment into a sign: it is not just an individual's choice, but a proposition about the nature of the world.

A Shared Theatrical World

In order to *see* these negating elements in *Lear*, it is worth turning back to the picture of Nobody: nothing confirms so immediately that the two plays are from the same theatrical world as the image of this other fool, with his mournful face surmounting his immense breeches. He is grotesque, disproportioned, beneath the dignity of serious drama. As such, he is a visual model for the hovel scenes in *Lear*, which form a sort of sartorial *débâcle*, with the Fool's professional gear, Edgar's indecent rags, Kent's demeaning disguise as a servingman, Lear trying to tear his clothes off, and the King's daughter represented by a wooden stool. As in *Nobody and Somebody*, the forces that produce the play's most universal images also drive it the closest to knockabout and nonsense.

The conjunction appears schematically in the prophecy spoken by the Fool at the end of the first storm scene:

When priests are more in word than matter;
When brewers mar their malt with water;
When nobles are their tailors' tutors;
No heretics burned, but wenches' suitors . . .
Then shall the realm of Albion
Come to great confusion. (III, ii, 79–90)

The doggerel couplets and naive pile-up of markers of time ('when . . . when . . . then . . . ') place the speech in the genre of popular prophecy, picking out another 'indefinite future'. Thus Thomas Dekker uses this same model twice, and on both occasions it is a virginal heroine's retort to the question, 'When will you marry?', so that the list of impossible conditions is a kenning, festive or tactful, for 'never'.[26] Once again, negation sketches Utopia.

The Fool's appropriation is more devious. Spoken in the apocalyptic night, as the social order shatters and the King goes mad, his lines are ironic because what they foretell is happening: the realm of Albion is coming to great confusion now. By a familiar paradox, it is the Fool who understands the most; he is the one who is able, chorically, to articulate the general disintegration. But at the same time, the speech has all the marks of clowning. It is dramatically gratuitous: it is missing from the quarto text, and nothing is needed to cover its absence. It wantonly breaks the mimetic frame ('This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time'). And above all, its content reflects the conventions of nonsense. The era that is predicted is partly a satirical version of ordinary time, 'When priests are more in word than matter'; partly a projected golden age, 'When every case in

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law is right'; and partly a sort of visionary incongruity which might be either, when 'bawds and whores do churches build'.[27]

The jumble of different valuations cancels every potential point of view; this is the discourse of *Sir Gregory Non-sense his news from no place*; once again, the most ambitious kind of generalization is crossed with verbal fooling. The reason is that in this theatre it is the clown, with his roots in improvisation, his dialogical intimacy with the audience, and his irresponsible attitude to mimesis, who is able to negate the spectacle, make it strange, carry the performance beyond individual subjectivity and give the stage person a universal scope.[28]

To put Tom o' Bedlam and the Fool next to Nobody and Somebody is to see, certainly, that Shakespeare has moved this structure in a naturalizing direction. The estranging roles in *Lear* are more or less naturally motivated – Tom is a disguise prompted, initially at least, by the danger Edgar is in, and the Fool has a professional character which did exist, approximately at least, in Renaissance courts. So in both cases the actor is afforded a sort of positive *dramatis persona*, whereas Nobody has no such alibi, but is an arbitrary negative move on the part of the writing itself.

This is no doubt one reason why *Lear* survived, albeit with difficulty, in psychological and illusionistic kinds of theatre over the next three or four centuries. The point of reading it through the lens of a contemporary play that is incompatible with these developments is not to deny that they were occurring (though it might be to deny them the character of progress), but to sharpen our awareness of the obscure resistances to naturalness that formed – and form – an equally vital part of Shakespeare's theatre.

Naked Wretches

Any early modern clown is, of course, plebeian as well as comical. The fool is the opposite of the prince, not only because he is foolish and the prince is presumed to be wise, but also because he is low and the prince is high. And this logic is largely reproduced in the figure of Nobody. As we have seen, the early sixteenth-century Portuguese stage No-one was explicitly a poor man; so is the Germanic Nobody who came to England as a Protestant icon later in the century.[29] The grammatical and metaphysical senses of of the word get easily overlaid by a social sense: 'Nobody' means 'a' nobody – nameless not literally, but in the sense intended by Shakespeare's Henry V when listing the dead at Agincourt:

> Edward the Duke of York, the Earl of Suffolk,
> Sir Richard Keighley, Davy Gam Esquire;
> None else of name, and of all other men
> But five-and-twenty. (IV, viii, 97–100)

Four somebodies, one could say, and twenty-five nobodies (and in *Henry V* the nobodies are indeed mostly represented by clowns).

Our stage Nobody is not a poor man in that sense. He is enough of a conventional dramatic protagonist to have a servant; in fact, it is the servant who is identified in the speech headings as 'Clown'. And much of the goodness attributed to him (Nobody protects poor soldiers, Nobody bails out debtors, and so on) depends on a vague picture of him as rich. But the alignment survives in the account of just that goodness, which is specified, with surprising insistence, in social terms. In the eventual trial, for example, Somebody accuses Nobody of causing 'poor and honest farmers / To sell their leases, and to beg their bread' (1847–8). Asked for evidence, he says:

> Examine all the rich and wealthy chuffs,
> Whose full-crammed garners to the roofs are filled,
> In every dearth who makes this scarcity,
> And every man will clearly quit himself,
> Then, consequently, it must be Nobody.
> (1854–8)

Nobody's defence is pointed:

> If things were done, they must be done by Somebody,
> Else could they have no being. Is corn hoarded?
> Somebody hoards it, else it would be dealt
> In mutual plenty throughout all the land.
> Are there rents raised? If Nobody should do it,
> Then should it be undone. (1884–9)

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And so on through a catalogue of abuses: the game with words becomes the vehicle for a set piece of Estates satire, with Somebody implying an impersonal economics in which the sufferings of the poor appear as nobody's fault, and Nobody insisting on a kindly morality of personal responsibility for one's neighbours. The argument is settled by searching them, and the discovery that in Somebody's pockets there are 'Forged deeds to cheat men of their ancient land' (1994), while Nobody's contain usurers' bonds and forfeited leases which he has bought out and cancelled. So the ultimate distinction between them is founded on the question of social justice.[30] It is as an exploiter that Somebody is condemned; it is as a friend to the commonwealth that Nobody is vindicated.

'As the World Goes'

What is then startling is not the fairly conventional topics of complaint, but the vehemence with which the ironic conceit of a benevolent Nobody represents the social order as *routinely* vicious. In the main plot, the saint-like Elidure is farcically displaced by the ambitions of those around him, and as farcically restored through their self-destructive stupidity; and the sub-plot is virtually the explanation for this fallen condition of affairs – things are as they are because Somebody maintains a normality of robbery and lies, and Nobody helps the victims. The ascendancy of Somebody is a piece of realism; that of Nobody a piece of theatre, a play on words.

Consequently, Nobody's goodness is not so much saintly as gaily counter-factual:

NOBODY: O this city, if Nobody live to be as old again, be it spoken in secret, I'll have it fenced about with a wall of brass.
CLOWN: Of Nobody's making, that will be rare.
NOBODY: I'll bring the Thames through the middle of it, empty Moor Ditch at my own charge, and build up Paul's steeple without a collection. I see not what becomes of these collections.
CLOWN: Why, Nobody receives them.
NOBODY: I, knave?
CLOWN: You, knave: or as the world goes, Somebody receives all, and Nobody is blamed for it. (791–802)

'As the world goes', Somebody gets all the money and Nobody is blamed – this is the world the popular audience recognizes from daily experience. On the other hand, the wall of brass is an allusion to the legends of sorcerers such as Roger Bacon and Dr Faustus, and identifies the speaker as both fantasist and philanthropist, someone who contradicts the way of the world in both a clownish sense (he fails to acknowledge obvious realities) and a heroic sense (he sets himself against injustice).[31] In some impossible festive time, Nobody will triumph over Somebody, the poor will get their due, and the mud will dry up in Moorditch. This is the logic that makes Nobody a clown, and at the same time makes the clown a representative of the people – not merely because his antics give pleasure to uneducated spectators, but also because he embodies their hope, being too merry and ignorant to accommodate himself to the unfairness of the world.

The political action of *Lear* takes place in the realm of Somebody, with its deceptions, its cruelty, its flatly literal contests for power. The effect of the unremitting self-interest of this sphere is to drive more and more of the characters into varieties of non-existence. Kent disguises himself as a servant and presents a minimal identity to the king:

LEAR: What art thou?
KENT: A man, sir. . . .
LEAR: What art thou?
KENT: A very honest-hearted fellow, and as poor as the king. (I, iv, 9–17)

Only much later do we learn, inconsequentially, that his servant name was 'Caius'; the whole alias is curiously perfunctory, little more than a suspension of Kent himself. The play's two wronged children are driven into analogous kinds of nothingness by their fathers' rage: Cordelia famously defines herself by saying 'nothing', and Lear says of her, 'we / Have no such daughter (I, i, 263–4); and Edgar, similarly negated (Gloucester declaring 'I never got him' (II, i, 79), concludes, 'Edgar I nothing am' (II, iii, 21). The fathers in turn are brought to the same nullity. Lear articulates the impossible experience of not being:

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This is not Lear.
Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where
are his eyes? . . .
Ha! waking? 'Tis not so. (I, iv, 201–4)

Gloucester, warned that he cannot see his way, retorts, 'I have no way, and therefore want no eyes' (IV, i, 19), and throughout the following act tries, as it were, to abandon the struggle to be somebody.

Nobody, then, is not in the end a distinct character in *Lear*, but rather a role that wanders around the cast, and into which many of its members withdraw or are precipitated. This state, or space, of being nobody, is a mixture of many of the elements we have seen: the third person, false accusation, Christ-like innocence, clowning, Utopia, poverty, the estranging other-worldliness of 'God's spies'. Above all, this serial nullification of the play's high-born characters opens it up to the enormous absent presence of the wretches whose 'looped and windowed raggedness' they all come to share – stocked, locked out, naked, soaked, mutilated. Hence the extraordinary sense that *King Lear* belongs to beggars and outcasts, even though its *dramatis personae* are aristocrats and their servants.[32] Picturing nobody is the mechanism by which royal tragedy opens its magnificent gates to the poor.

Notes and References

1. Bertolt Brecht, 'A Short Organum for the Theatre' (1948), in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. John Willett (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 182.

2. References to *King Lear* are to the conflated text in the Norton Shakespeare, which is also the source of all other Shakespearean quotations. For the anonymous play I have used David L. Hay, *Nobody and Somebody: An Introduction and Critical Edition* (New York; London: Garland, 1980).

3. Their relation is discussed in Josée Nuyts-Giornal, 'King Lear's Reflection in the Mirror of Nobody: an Iconographical Question', *Cahiers Elisabéthains: Late Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, LIV (Oct. 1998), p. 55–73; and Luke Wilson, *Theatres of Intention: Drama and the Law in Early Modern England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 216–62.

4. See Willem Schrickx, 'English Actors at the Courts of Wolfenbüttel, Brussels, and Graz during the Lifetime of Shakespeare', *Shakespeare Survey*, XXXIII (1980), p. 153–69; and, for an enjoyable eye-witness account, Irene Morris, 'A Hapsburg Letter', *MLR*, LXIX (1974), p. 12–22.

5. The date of *Nobody and Somebody* is discussed by David L. Hay in *Nobody and Somebody*, p. 63–6; that of *King Leir* by Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Vol. VII (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 276–7.

6. This small dramatic genre is discussed in John E. Curran Jr, 'Geoffrey of Monmouth in Renaissance Drama: Imagining Non-History', *MP*, XCVII (1999), p. 1–20.

7. The Jacobean context is explored, with a nose for its ironies, in the final chapter of Philip Schwyzer, *Literature, Nationalism, and Memory in Early Modern England and Wales* (Cambridge University Press, 2004). Schwyzer concludes that despite a superficial royalist historicism, 'Shakespeare made ancient Britain a place where anything could happen' (p. 176). My comparison here adds that it was not only Shakespeare.

8. This drawing is also reproduced and is more fully documented in R. A. Foakes, *Illustrations of the English Stage 1580–1642* (London: Scolar Press, 1985), p. 62–3.

9. Nobody appears with his all-enveloping breeches on the title page of the 1606 edition, which also says that copies are to be sold at John Trundle's shop 'in Barbican, at the signe of No-body' (see Foakes, *Illustrations of the English Stage*, p. 94–5). This shop sign may be 'the picture of Nobody' referred to in *The Tempest* (III, ii, 121). The same figure made an appearance in the entertainment Ben Jonson devised for Queen Anne and Prince Henry when they stopped at Althorpe on their journey from Edinburgh to London in the summer of 1603: see C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson, ed., *Ben Jonson*, Vol. VII (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941), p. 128–9.

10. The German translation is entitled 'Niemandt und Iemandt'. The drawing is headed 'Nemo', and carries the motto 'Neminis virtus ubique laudabilis' ('the virtue of nobody is to be praised everywhere').

11. Towards the end of Book 9, Odysseus relates how, captured by the giant Polyphemus, he cunningly told him that his name was 'Nobody'. So when Odysseus attacked him in the middle of the night, Polyphemus cried out 'Nobody is killing me', whereupon his fellow giants concluded that he must be drunk and went back to sleep.

12. For example in Skelton's *Magnyfycence* (*c.* 1520), where the Moderation figure is in fact called Mesure.

13. See Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 51–8, and Willett, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 200.

14. Whose account of his own doings in Gaul was written, as Brecht did not fail to note, in the third person.

15. The same continuity in discontinuity is suggested by Walter Benjamin when he describes 'the search for the untragic hero' as 'an overgrown stalking-track along which the legacy of medieval and baroque drama has crept down to us over the sublime but barren massif of classicism. This track reappears today, rough and untended as it may be, in the plays of Brecht.' See Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht* (London: New Left Books, 1973), p. 7–8. This is a doubly suggestive formulation: for one thing, Benjamin identifies the 'untragic hero' with Ulysses-as-Nobody (p. 5); and for another, he regards the 'stalking-track' as distinctively German, which adds resonance to the apparent fact that *Nobody and Somebody* had a more vigorous stage life in Germany than it did in England: see Anston Bosman, 'Renaissance Intertheater and the Staging of Nobody', *ELH*, LXXI (2004), p. 559–85. For an earlier experiment of my own in the connections between Shakespearean and Brechtian dramaturgy, see Peter Womack, '*Henry IV* and Epic Theatre', in Nigel Wood, ed., *Theory in Practice:*

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Henry IV Parts One and Two (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995), p. 126–61.

16. Translated by Roy Campbell in *Portugal* (London: Reinhardt, 1957), p. 129–30.

17. Willett, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 43–6.

18. Niemandt in the German version was certainly a clown's role: see Willem Schrickx, 'Pickleherring and English Actors in Germany', *Shakespeare Survey*, XXXVI (1983), p. 135–7.

19. 'Whatever he doesn't do must be contained and conserved in what he does. . . . The technical term for this procedure is "fixing the 'no . . . but'."' See Willett, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 137.

20. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (London: Macmillan, 1960), p. 303–4. 'The Idea of Nothing' was first published separately in *Revue Philosophique* in 1906.

21. Nobody appears on the title page and Somebody on the final page of the 1606 edition.

22. The sixteenth-century iconography of Nobody is definitively traced in Gerta Calmann, 'The Picture of Nobody: an Iconographical Study', *JWCI*, XXIII (1960), p. 60–104.

23. Utopia is of course 'no-place': this is registered not just in Thomas More's original wordplay, but in its vigorous reproduction in popular culture. For example, John Taylor's largely incomprehensible pamphlet *Sir Gregory Non-sense his newes from no place* (1622) is dedicated to Nobody, and claims to be a translation from the Utopian. For more on this, see P. N. Hartle, '"All his workes sir": John Taylor's Nonsense', *Neuphilologus*, LXXXVI (2002), p. 155–69.

24. The original engraving was published by Joerg Schan in Strasburg in 1507; the legend is 'Niemandts hais ich, was jeder man tut, das zücht man mich'; The translation is from an adapted version published in England in the 1530s. The variants are described and reproduced in Calmann's article. In some of the versions of this fool-beggar Nobody, he has a padlock on his mouth to show that he cannot refute the false accusations. Not speaking, not justifying oneself, is another way of being Nobody, powerfully expressive in the theatre, and, of course, in *Lear*.

25. This way of putting it draws on Brian Rotman's view of zero as an arithmetical pronoun – a term which does not represent an anterior object, but is a requirement of the representing system. He argues for the same dialectical reversal: that 'nothing', as a historical development, is the precondition of a conception of 'everything' – because zero signifies the absence of *every* number, it projects, as its contrary, not any particular number but all of them. See Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: the Semiotics of Zero* (London: Macmillan, 1987), especially p. 46–56.

26. Titania, the Queen Elizabeth character in *The Whore of Babylon*, I, ii, 230–51; and Moll Frith in *The Roaring Girl*, V, ii, 216-24, in *The Dramatic Works of Thomas Dekker*, ed. Fredson Bowers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), Vol. II (1955), and Vol. III (1958). It comes as no surprise to find that Dekker, like Taylor, was fluent in the paradoxical language of Nobody: see *Newes from Graves-End sent to nobody* (1604).

27. Is this line 'Churches are built by hypocrites (as now)' or 'Successful sinners repent and turn to God (as never)'?

28. The theory of the popular stage implied here is that of Robert Weimann, *Author's Pen and Actor's Voice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Ch. 4, 'Playing with a Difference'. According to Weimann, the theatrical practices condemned in humanist discourse as disfigured, unnatural, deformed, unseemly, constitute an 'unformulated poetics' of theatrical presence as opposed to dramatic mimesis, presentation against representation. Nobody would have to be a star performer in this alternative aesthetic: he is grotesque because he is anti-mimetic.

29. For example, in a religious tract about the ethics of commerce, John Deacon's *A Treatise, intituled; Nobody is my name, which beareth Everi-bodies blame* (London, 1585), three traders are instructed by an apostolically poor preacher. In the same tradition, Brueghel's 'Everyman' figure, *Elck*, is a merchant in myopic pursuit of riches; Nobody ignores material things. See Ethan Matt Kavaler, *Pieter Brueghel: Parables of Order and Enterprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Ch. 3, 'Wealth and Commonwealth', p. 77–110.

30. The social emphasis is a deliberate one; for the purposes of the plot any ethically charged contrast would do. In Graz, for example, Nobody's virtue was vindicated in (Catholic) devotional terms instead: his pockets contain the missal and rosary he is holding in his picture.

31. Bacon from Greene's play *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (*c*. 1589) and the hero of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* (*c*. 1592) are both fairly recent models of stage magic if we agree to put *Nobody and Somebody* in the mid-1590s. As fantasist-philanthropist, though, Nobody sounds more like Sir Epicure Mammon in Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610), dreaming of the golden age he will inaugurate with the philosopher's stone. Jonson's satiric severity in relation to Mammon's utopianism is revealing: it measures both his identification with an ideal of nature and his distance from the popular stage.

32. A sense eloquently articulated by Grigori Kozintsev in *King Lear, the Space of Tragedy: the Diary of a Film Director*, trans. Mary Mackintosh (London: Heinemann, 1977), p. 198–204.

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