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Making Use of Nothing: The Sovereignties of *King Lear*

by Brian Sheerin

Shakespeare's King Lear *obsesses over iterations of "nothing," especially in relation to the play's monarch. Beyond the usual existential and materialist associations of this word, however, what does it convey politically? This article traces a deep-seated fascination with nothingness in English political writing extending back to Sir John Fortescue. In particular, the proto-republican tradition developed by thinkers such as John Ponet and George Buchanan struggled to theorize a sovereignty absent of ontology—where the monarch is merely a cipher of public will. The political climate in which* King Lear *was performed was thus one in which two conceptions of nothingness found themselves at odds, one (from the absolutist perspective) that would merely negate sovereign identity, and another (from the proto-republican perspective) that would paradoxically rehabilitate it by finding the political potential* within *absence itself. Within this context, Shakespeare's drama becomes neither politically nostalgic nor reactionary; rather, it dramatizes the tragic impossibility of reconciling two ideological preconceptions that differently signify "nothing." Even if "nothing comes of nothing" in the end, by no means has this been inevitable.*

GEORGE Bataille, writing about the nature of sovereignty in his eccentric work of social economy *The Accursed Share* (1949), is characteristically counterintuitive in explaining his subject matter. Sovereignty, he claims, in its purest form is characterized by a paradoxical absence of temporality and ontology in relation to the rest of the world; it is a state in which the individual transcends the day-to-day forces of cause-and-effect, utility, and economy. Like death, sovereignty is an unsettling void or gap in the matrix of productive life; in short, it is "nothing." As he himself puts it, "The thought that comes to a halt in the face of what is sovereign rightfully pursues its operation to the point where its object dissolves into NOTHING, because, ceasing to be

useful, or subordinate, it becomes *sovereign* in ceasing to be."[1] It is no coincidence that the other two volumes of Bataille's study investigate expenditure and eroticism, respectively, for these two topics are also intimately connected with the sovereign moment (or non-moment, as the case may be). Just as time, space, and usefulness become obliterated in the orgasmic fulfillment of sexual desire, so too extreme versions of gift-bestowal also coincide with authentic sovereignty. Potlatch in particular—as a form of expenditure in which one not only gives away but also destroys one's own possessions in huge quantities—encapsulates the driving impulse of humanity toward the "profound freedom" of nothingness, where one may at last grasp oneself apart from economically determined realities.[2]

I have summarized this aspect of Bataille's thought to bring to mind the opening scenes of *King Lear.* Indeed, *Lear* presents at once a sort of literalization and test-case of Bataille's philosophy: here we have a sovereign whose last great act of sovereignty (at least from one point of view) involves the kind of radical bestowal that so fascinates Bataille. In depicting Lear as giving away his kingdom as a series of lavish presents, furthermore, the text diligently highlights a trajectory toward nothingness[3] that begins as gift bestowal. Lear receives nothing in return for his potlatch, and in effect *becomes* nothing to boot: as the Fool jeers in one of his many iterations, "Now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art, now. I am a fool; thou art nothing."[4] Unfortunately for Lear, such annihilation is not exactly what he has in mind, for unlike what Bataille's philosophy propounds, it is precisely Lear's sovereignty that appears to vanish along with everything else. Or is it? What, I want to ask, exactly *is* this "nothing" that Lear becomes, and what is its relation to sovereignty? Or, to appropriate a question from the Fool himself, "Can [we] make no use of nothing?" (1.4.116). From one perspec-

[1] Bataille, *The Accursed Share,* trans. Robert Hurley, 3 vols. (New York: Zone, 1993), 3:204 (emphasis in original).

[2] Ibid., 1:58.

[3] The earliest usage of "nothingness" (as opposed to "nothing") cited by the *Oxford English Dictionary* is from John Donne's *A Nocturnall upon Saint Lucy's Day,* 1627–31. I will therefore prefer the shorter word to the longer one but with the assumption that there is a trajectory of "nothing" into "nothingness" that will be realized only a couple of decades following *King Lear.*

[4] All citations of *King Lear* unless otherwise noted are from the 1623 Folio as presented in *The Norton Shakespeare* (gen. ed. Stephen Greenblatt, 2nd ed. [New York: Norton, 2008], 1.4.158–59). References to the Quarto (Q) version, also drawn from this edition, will be indicated accordingly, and all subsequent citations (both Folio and Quarto) will appear parenthetically within the text.

tive, application of Bataille seems to run aground once Lear's misery plays out. What I would like to propose, however, is that the "nothing" in *Lear* may in fact contain a sovereign "something" after all, when considered in its early modern political context. In particular, the drama seems to anticipate a version of sovereignty that has everything to do with nothing.

I

Because the criticism that exists on the "nothing" in *Lear* tends to evaluate the term in existentialist, representational, or materialist terms,[5] its relevance in political discourse bears elaborating. After all, one of the

[5] A tradition once popular saw Lear's confrontation with nothing as an existentialist experience of pre-Christian "darkness" that also simultaneously anticipated the despairs of a post-Christian world: see William R. Elton, *"King Lear" and the Gods* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1966), 171–263; and Thomas P. Roche, Jr., "'Nothing Almost Sees Miracles': Tragic Knowledge in *King Lear*," in *On "King Lear,"* ed. Lawrence Danson (New York: G. K. Hall, 1981), 136–62. More optimistically, many scholars have seen this experience of nothing as the prerequisite to a psychological or moral insight that can be achieved only through suffering: see Sigurd Burckhardt, "King Lear: The Quality of Nothing," *Minnesota Review* 2 (1961): 33–50; Edward W. Tayler, *"King Lear* and Negation," *English Literary Renaissance* 20 (1990): 17–39; Frederick Turner, *Shakespeare's Twenty-First-Century Economics: The Morality of Love and Money* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33–50; and David Levin, "'Can you make no use of nothingness': The Role of Nothingness in *King Lear*," in *"And that's true too": New Essays on "King Lear,"* ed. François Laroque, Pierre Iselin, and Sophie Alatorre (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 141–64. In the New Historicist tradition, nothing has become associated with representation itself, where "theatricality" at once creates power and threatens to expose the emptiness beneath it: although not specifically on *Lear*, see Christopher Pye's "The Sovereign, the Theater, and the Kingdome of Darknesse: Hobbes and the Spectacle of Power" (*Representations* 8 [1984]: 85–106); David Scott Kastan's "Proud Majesty Made a Subject: Shakespeare and the Spectacle of Rule" (*Shakespeare Quarterly* 37 [1986]: 459–75); and, where the void of power is expanded to include the subjectivity of the aristocracy, Patricia Fumerton's *Cultural Aesthetics: Renaissance Literature and the Practice of Social Ornament* ([Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991], 111–67). Finally, another strain of criticism, to which this essay is both a successor and a modification, has attempted to understand Lear's nothingness in the context of intellectual history approaching "modernism," beginning with John Danby's *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of "King Lear"* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951). In this tradition, "nothing" usually becomes associated with proto-capitalist accounting, where worth becomes reduced to exchange values: see Brian Rotman, *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 78–86; and Richard Halpern, *The Poetics of Primitive Accumulation: English Renaissance Culture and the Genealogy of Capital* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 215–69. Margreta de Grazia has criticized this latter tradition for being too teleological, but her own *"anti*-Early Modern" account of *Lear* similarly links subjective nothingness to the loss of property and material possessions ("The Ideology of Superfluous Things: *King Lear* as Period Piece," in *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 17–42).

most prominent arenas in which this concept of ontological absence appears in early modern England is the political treatise, whether in the vein of "advice to princes" or in heterodox tracts that simply criticize bad governance in general. It seems hardly coincidental, furthermore, that these political texts often have as their focal point a complaint regarding the sovereign's prerogative to give extravagantly. To interpolate from Ernst H. Kantorowicz's terminology of the king's two bodies, a considerable suspicion began to arise regarding whether the sovereign's immortal and authoritative body (i.e., his or her sovereignty) might not be merely a hollow projection with only a conditional relation to the body corporeal, particularly when the latter began making bad spending choices.[6] Might not bad behavior on behalf of the monarch's literal body *ipso facto* negate his or her sovereignty, allowing the concept itself to be preserved incorruptible by definition? In practice, such questioning manifested itself in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as anti-absolutist polemic, working to challenge the Tudor effort to envision the sovereign as "instituted and furnished with plenary and entire power, prerogative, and jurisdiction"—to quote from the decision of Robert Cawdrey's case in 1591—a *jure divino* philosophy which had been gaining traction since the reign of Henry VII.[7] Where the rhetoric of the court increasingly endowed the sovereign with an inviolable *presence* that both authorized and transcended law, a proto-republican[8] strain of thought hailing largely from the Continent would posit sovereignty as something conditional, derivative, and "accommodated."

[6] Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

[7] Quoted in John Guy, "The Elizabethan Establishment and the Ecclesiastical Polity," in *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade*, ed. John Guy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 127.

[8] For my understanding of "republicanism" and its ascent, I have drawn on the following most heavily: for patterns of republican thought on the Continent from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, see J. G. A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Throught and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); and Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For proto-republican political controversy in sixteenth-century England, see Richard Strier, *Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism, and Renaissance Texts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). For developing republican thought in seventeenth-century England, see Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*; Johann P. Sommerville, *Politics and Ideology in England, 1603–1640* (New York: Longman, 1986); David Norbrook, *Writing the English Republic: Poetry, Rhetoric and Politics, 1627–1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Victoria Kahn, *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640–1674* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); Vickie B. Sullivan, *Machiavelli, Hobbes, and the Formation of a Liberal Republicanism in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); and Andrew Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Although several scholars have seen in *King Lear* a critique of absolutism,[9] I wish to open the possibility that Shakespeare may have had a more politically experimental attitude in this drama, exploring the implications of republican rhetoric and the possibilities of reconciling conflicting paradigms of sovereignty in circulation when the play was written and performed. When I say "republican," I am not assuming a distinct faction of English thought, as would develop after 1649, but rather—as David Norbrook has suggested—a "vocabulary" that drew in various ways on more fully developed classical and continental ideas, where the notion of sovereignty was becoming displaced (in greater or lesser ways) from hereditary monarchy.[10] Not only were competing paradigms of authority already well-developed and in open contention by the end of the sixteenth century, but—as I hope to show—they often revolved around disputes over gift giving while utilizing terminologies of "nothing." While the fact that a version of *Lear* received an audience at the royal court must mitigate any radicalism we might wish to attribute to the drama, James I showed himself endlessly fascinated by esoteric debates in political theory; a play bent on tragedizing the conflicts of the very intellectual tradition to which the king contributed—even while hinting at possibilities of sovereignty "beyond" absolutism—was likely to have offered more pleasure than offense.

Ever since John Fortescue more or less introduced political theory to England in the mid-fifteenth century, English political writings had become deeply invested in a rhetoric of presence and absence when theorizing the nature of monarchical sovereignty. Fortescue's *Governance of England* (1471), whose central critique involves the lavish giving practices of Henry VI, is the first text directed at an English audience that is at pains to link bad governance to a peculiar kind of kingly self-cancellation. On the one hand, Fortescue explains that bad giving literally reduces the extent of the sovereign's authority by reducing that over which he has authority. Once the king becomes poor in this way, Fortescue explains,

> he shall by necessity make his expenses, and buy all that is necessary to his estate, by credit and borrowing; wherefore his creditors will win upon him the fourth or the fifth penny of all that he spends . . . and thus be thereby ever poorer and poorer. . . . What dishonour this is, and abating of the glory of a king

[9] See especially Walter Cohen, *Drama of a Nation: Public Theater in Renaissance England and Spain* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 329–32; Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. David Miller (London: Verso, 1983), 42–46; and Strier, *Resistant Structures*, 165–99.

[10] Norbrook, *English Republic*, 1–22.

. . . [f]or his subjects will rather go with a lord who is rich, and may pay their wages and expenses, than with their king who has nothing.[11]

Once a king "has nothing," he is forced then to "make his gifts and rewards by assignments"—that is, as merely promises of payment at a future date when funds became available. But worst of all, "for lack of money the king shall be glad to give away his land," thereby diminishing and enfeebling the kingdom itself.[12] Richard Halpern, although not discussing Fortescue in particular, has traced this same logic of sovereignty as it was expressed in the early seventeenth century, where James I had become the monarch similarly destined to impoverish the state (or so it seemed) through careless expenditure. *King Lear*'s contribution to Jacobean politics, Halpern posits, lies in its revelation that sovereignty may be precisely nothing other than one's property, that there is no "mystical residue of kingship [that] will somehow remain"—as both Lear and James seem to think—after the material proof of kingship is gone.[13] As Fortescue would say, a king with "nothing" lacks the very "glory" necessary for kingship to begin with.

The equation of nothingness with the literal absence of land or material goods might be called the materialist condition of sovereignty. On the other hand, Fortescue explores a second kind of absence alongside the materialist insight, which might be called the behavioralist condition of sovereignty: here nothingness is identified not with lack of possessions but with absence of appropriate kingly performance.[14] Thus, bad giving not only has the potential to end in the "nothing" of material absence but also threatens to nullify sovereignty by the very fact of the action's blameworthiness. He explains in the *Governance* that

it is no power to be able to sin, and to do ill, or to be able to be sick, or to grow old, or for a man to be able to hurt himself. For all these powers come of impotency. And therefore they may properly be called non-powers. . . . So the king's

[11] Fortescue, *On the Laws and Governance of England*, ed. Shelley Lockwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 92.

[12] Ibid., 93.

[13] Halpern, *Primitive Accumulation*, 253.

[14] Kastan, representative of a certain strand of New Historicist scholarship, elaborated a version of this behavoralist theory when he noted that Shakespeare's history plays "expose the idealizations of political power by representing rule as role, by revealing that power passes to him who can best control and manipulate the visual and verbal symbols of authority" ("Proud Majesty," 469). Where this line of thought relies heavily on the idea of visual appearances that are theatrically displayed to the public gaze, the theory that Fortescue elaborates expects much more than merely the appearance of good behavior, insisting (in Thomist fashion) that the virtues of a prince stem from a "zeal" for law that cannot be feigned (Fortescue, *Laws and Governance*, 4–9).

power is greater, in that he may not put from himself possessions necessary for his own sustenance, than if he might put them from himself, and alienate the same to his own hurt and harm.[15]

The logic of this passage is syllogistic: vice is antithetical to sovereign power; bad giving is a vice; therefore bad giving negates sovereign power. Because the power to do harm to oneself or one's kingdom does not constitute "power" at all, such power is in fact anti-power; it is nothing. As slippery as this reasoning might seem, Fortescue employs it as a (or even the) central explanatory moment in all three of his major political treatises to justify a limited monarchy:[16] because a king's very essence is threatened by tyrannical behavior (the chief symptom of which is unruly giving), he or she must ultimately be subject to a presiding body representing the will of the people. Paradoxically, the monarch's power must be alienated in order to be preserved.

Drawing heavily on the proto-republican Italian theorists Ptolemy of Lucca[17] and Marsilius of Padua,[18] Fortescue introduces his ideas in England in a way that would later be characterized as "mixed polity," where the *dominium regale*—or monarchical authority—is balanced and held in check by the equally legitimate *dominium politicum*—or conciliar authority.[19] Most importantly for my purposes is that in theorizing such a split, Fortescue elevates the possibility of sovereign negation in a way that would have far-reaching consequences. Indeed, a strain of English political writers in the next two centuries, frustrated by increasing gestures of absolutism from the court, would embellish and develop his vocabulary of "ontological absence" to critique current regimes. More

15 Fortescue, *Laws and Governance*, 95.

16 See Fortescue's earlier treatises, *De laudibus legum Anglie* (1467–71) and *Opusculum de Natura Legis Naturae* (1461–63), where he attributes his logic to Boethius; English translations of the relevant passages may be found in *Laws and Governance*, 23–24 and 133–36 (respectively).

17 When Ptolemy completed the last two books of *De regimine principum* in Aquinas's name (ca. 1305), he not only downplayed the importance of the hereditary monarch for good governance but then actually hinted that sovereignty was something lent to the monarch by the populace rather than something instilled in him by nature (Skinner, *Foundations*, 1:52).

18 Marsilius, in *The Defender of the Peace* (1324), likewise revised Aquinas by insisting that law defines princely identity—not the other way around—and that such law is in turn legitimated only by the members of the commonwealth (Marsilius of Padua, *The Defender of the Peace*, ed. and trans. Annabel Brett [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], 1.12.8 and 1.15.1–3).

19 Fortescue, *Laws and Governance*, 19–22 and 83; it is worth noting that, according to Norbrook, the earliest usage of the English word "republican" in reference to a form of government (by John Dury in 1636) was in describing a limited monarchy or mixed polity, not the abolishment of monarchy (*English Republic*, 16).

often than not, furthermore, this rhetoric would become particularly acute surrounding the subject of monarchical excess and exploitative gift situations. Thus, John Ponet's *Short Treatise of Politique Power* (1556), aimed against the persecutions of Mary I, crescendos in antipathy when depicting bad giving on behalf of the sovereign: if private abuses of funds are blameworthy enough, he laments,

> how much more ought [men] to be abhorred and hated . . . giving many liveries, procuring and making friends to give them their voyces obtaining of great mens Letters, and Ladies tokens, feasting freeholders, and making great banquetting cheere; not by the consent of the party, but by force and strength.[20]

Such gift giving not only impoverishes the state but also wields a "force and strength" to control and manipulate subjects. By means of its "lawlessness," this kind of behavior also—*à la* Fortescue—negates. The crown, Ponet explains, is by no means part of a natural identity that the monarch inherits; rather, "she hath [the Crown] with an oath, law and condition to keep and maintaine it, not to depart with it or diminish it." As such, having the "Crowne" only to "minister Justice" by the authority of "free-men, and not of bond-men," it follows that "hee or shee cannot give or sell away the holds and forts . . . without the consent of the Commons."[21] Ponet's rhetorical strategy here subtly emphasizes the sovereign's nothingness apart from popularly sanctioned law: "the Prince or Governour," he summarizes, "is nothing . . . but the Minister of the Lawes."[22] It is a reduction that will ultimately allow Ponet to authorize the literal negation of monarchs who do not abide by law, namely by deposing them and killing them on behalf of the body politic.

The refrain of "the Prince is *nothing* but . . ." occurs in several and evermore insistent variations in proto-republican English political theory; it works to define sovereignty by first negating it and only then partially compensating for this lack by filling in a substitutionary signifier. From Fortescue's behavioral condition of sovereignty, where a monarch became increasingly diminished the more that he strayed from law, now arose the assumption that the monarch was characterized intrinsically by an absence. Thus Christopher Goodman, another Englishman disenfranchised by Mary I, would discuss the origin of godly sovereignty in his treatise *How Superior Powers Oght to be Obeyd* (1558) with the same rhetoric of negation applied to biblical precedents themselves. After

[20] Ponet, *A Short Treatise of Politique Power* (1556; reprint, London, 1642), Bv.
[21] Ibid., Ev.
[22] Ibid., D3v.

first establishing that kingship is not something with which a person is "naturalie borne" but rather something given by God and conditional upon upholding his laws,[23] he explains that even Moses and Aaron, the original sovereigns of God's people, "confessed that they were nothinge. As for us (sayde Moyses) what are we? meaning but earth and asshes, the creatures of God, nothinge differing from others, saving for that auctoritie, whereunto they were called."[24] "Auctoritie" here is not only something conditionally lent to these leaders but also something apart from which their very identity is effaced. Increasingly, for subsequent political thinkers, the populace would come to replace God as the lender of such identity.

Moving closer to the end of the century, for instance, radical French texts from the persecuted Huguenots—widely present in England by the mid-1580s—would make the connections between bad giving, bad sovereignty, and nothingness even more explicit. The most influential of these French treatises, *Vindiciae contra tyrannos* (1579), bluntly took as its thesis that "the kingdom is to be given precedence over the king, and that he who received majesty from the people could not impair it on his private authority."[25] Tellingly, the foremost manner by which such majesty becomes impaired is by illegitimate gift giving: "by what right," the author asks, "may the king give away or sell the kingdom or any part of it, since kingdoms consist of the people, not of walls? . . . On the contrary, extensive grants on the part of the king are considered invalid, unnecessary expenses are revoked, and extravagances are curtailed."[26] At the extreme limit of such bad giving could be the attempted donation of the kingdom itself: "The gift of the kingdom of France," the author recalls, "conferred by Charles VI on Henry, king of England, in the event of his death, could provide suitable proof—if any other were lacking—of the scale of his insanity."[27] It is hardly surprising, then, when a few pages later the author summarizes his point by announcing that "Indeed, a legitimate prince is nothing other than the living law."[28] Certainly, by the middle of the seventeenth century, John Milton had ample rhetorical precedent when he announced that "the power of Kings and Magistrates is nothing else but what is only derivative, transferr'd and

[23] Goodman, *How Superior Powers Oght to be Obeyd of Their Subiects* (Geneva, 1558), 60.
[24] Ibid., 162.
[25] Hubert Languet, *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos*, ed. and trans. George Garnett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 123.
[26] Ibid., 124.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., 157.

committed to them in trust from the People, to the Common good of them all, in whom the power yet remaines fundamentally."[29]

II

By the time Milton is writing about the nothingness of kingly power, of course, republican thought had also been greatly facilitated by social contract theory, a development in English political thought that was nevertheless still in its youth.[30] It seems of utmost significance to a political consideration of *King Lear,* however, that one of the first explicit elaborations of social contract was introduced by George Buchanan, the tutor to James VI—later James I of England—in the late sixteenth century (Milton would go on to cite Buchanan as an inspiration for *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*). Buchanan's treatise *De Jure Regni apud Scotos* (1579), published the same year as the Huguenot *Vindiciae* and presented to James when he was thirteen years old, continues the mixed polity logic of both Fortescue and Ponet, adding now a deliberate element of public contract to understand a monarch's obligation to his people as well as the identity of a monarch as sovereign. Writing in Latin, Buchanan describes this obligatory relation as a *vinculum,* a term that in the seventeenth-century translation of this text is consistently rendered as "bond." Buchanan makes his point in the style of Socratic dialogue:

> *Buchanan:* Doth not he who first recedes from what is covenanted, and doth contrary to what he hath covenanted to do, break the contract and covenant?
> *Maitland:* So it appears.
> *Buchanan:* The bond then being loosed, which did hold fast the King with the people, what ever priviledge or right did belong to him, by that agreement and covenant who looseth the same, I suppose is lost.[31]

Writing when he did, Buchanan stood at a crucial juncture in the significance of this word "bond." Around this time, as may be witnessed in the *Oxford English Dictionary,* the obligatory impetus of the term (at least

[29] Milton, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates* (London, 1649), 11.

[30] For a history of social contract theory, see especially J. W. Gough, *The Social Contract,* 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957); Michael Lessnoff, *Social Contract* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1986); and Kahn, *Wayward Contracts.*

[31] Buchanan, *De jure regni apud Scotos, or, A dialogue, concerning the due priviledge of government in the kingdom of Scotland,* trans. Philalethes (London, 1680), 126.

in English) began to bifurcate: where an older strand of signification implied natural, affective, or familial obligations, the other—gesturing toward the conditions of a legal pact called a "sealed bond"—took on more civic, objective, and contractual connotations. In Buchanan, these two meanings have already been recognized as distinct in their Latin counterparts; he explains that parties are united either by *"civili nobiscum, aut aliquo humanitatis vinculo"*[32] ("the civil bond, or bond of humanity," as it was translated).[33] As legal suits concerning sealed bonds saw a five-fold increase between 1560 and 1606 and an almost eight-fold increase by 1640[34]—and as the usage of contractual dealings in general grew exponentially following the decriminalization of usury in 1571 and the institution of *assumpsit* contract law in 1602—it is hardly surprising that the contractual implications of "bond" enjoyed such a rapid rise of prominence during these decades as almost to eclipse its more affective counterpart.[35]

The presence of the "bond" in Buchanan's thought has two important consequences that both impinge on "nothing." On the one hand, the sovereign who breaks the bond with his subjects loses his very nature *as* king, no matter what the outward appearance might convey: asks the writer,

> Will you imagine that [an oppressive ruler] is truely a King, albeit he goes vapouring with a great many in guard about him, and openly be seen with gorgeous aparrell . . . conciliat the people, and catch their applause by rewards, games, pompous shewes, and even mad underminings, and what ever is thought to be magnificent?[36]

Here again, as with Ponet's avowal, extravagant largesse becomes implicated in false sovereignty. But the dualistic nature of Buchanan's thinking brings him to a more extreme conclusion. Because, according to his logic, a king is either ruling within the limits of his contractual obligations or he is a tyrant, then once the monarch falls into the latter category he is to be regarded not only as less than a king but less than a person. Such men, he announces, "are not joyned to us by any civil

32 Buchanan, *De iure regni apud Scotos* (Edinburgh, 1579), H2v.

33 Buchanan, *A dialogue*, 69.

34 Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 112.

35 For a fuller account of the way in which social relations in England became increasingly contractual in nature during the seventeenth century, see Muldrew, *Economy*, 315–33; Luke Wilson, *Theaters of Intention: Drama and the Law in Early Modern England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 68–183; and Kahn, *Wayward Contracts*, 1–79.

36 Buchanan, *A dialogue*, 70–71.

bond, or bond of humanity, but should be accounted the greatest enemies of God and of all men," and should be thrown into the "solitary places" beyond the city walls.[37]

On the other hand, even Buchanan's "obedient" sovereign is also strangely lacking in substance. This is only logical because if a king cannot exist apart from a bond, there is clearly not much there to begin with; "absence" is made, paradoxically, to be a sort of positive condition of kingship, insofar as the good king is little more than a cipher for abstract concepts of law, justice, the public good, etc. On this point, Buchanan nicely anticipates the outcry, especially among monarchs themselves, that this claim in particular would provoke. Here Buchanan's interlocutor in the dialogue becomes especially astute, noting that what the author is suggesting is a series of radical demotions for the sovereign: "I had hoped that . . . you would . . . restore the royal office," he complains, "to that splendor to which it is entitled. You have, instead, stripped it of all distinction and reduced it in degree."[38] Even more incisively, the interlocutor finally observes that "when you trust the power of government to laws and not to kings, beware, I beg of you, lest you . . . oppress him with authority and confine him in chains and a dungeon, until at length it . . . drives him forth into the wild."[39] Kings whose authorities are suddenly brought within the confinement of the bond will be "drive[n] forth into the wild": monster ingratitude, indeed! When Buchanan's pupil eventually became king of England, it is hardly surprising that he echoed the interlocutor's objections of *De Jure Regni* nearly word-for-word (and only then after his subjects had complained of his giving practices). Even as early as the *Trew Law of Free Monarchies*—originally published in 1598 but reprinted in at least four different editions by 1603—James derides those who claim that "there is a mutuall paction and contract bound up, and sworne betwixt the king, and the people," responding that "I deny any such contract to bee made then."[40] To Sir Edward Coke, perhaps the most influential man in court with republican sympathies, James pointedly instructed in 1607 that to imply a king to be "under the Law . . . was Treason to affirm."[41]

[37] Ibid., 69–71.

[38] Charles Flinn Arrowood, *The Powers of the Crown in Scotland* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1949), 58.

[39] Ibid., 70.

[40] James I, *Political Writings*, ed. Johann P. Sommerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 81.

[41] Coke, *The Selected Writings and Speeches of Sir Edward Coke*, ed. Steve Sheppard (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2003), 1:481.

In fact, James seems to pick up on the rhetoric of nothingness himself in his writings, turning it back on its users: for him, it is the populace (or often Parliament) who lacks meaning without its fatherly king and not the other way around. "Limited government," he contends, "is nothing like to free Monarchies, since a body cannot live without a head";[42] the "high Court of Parliament," he says in a 1605 speech, "is nothing else but the Kings great Councell."[43]

III

If we turn now to *King Lear*, I believe it is plausible to see the same vocabulary of negation likewise deployed in two different (and mutually excluding) ways within the conflict of the play and specifically in the crisis of *dépense* that begins it. Because Lear, like James, understands the monarch to be the very epicenter of presence within the kingdom—the head apart from which the body becomes both inert and meaningless—anything that fails to acknowledge this elemental force is by definition without substance. What is more, lavish giving is actively contributive to Lear's version of sovereignty, augmenting (if I may use a Derridean pun[44]) his royal presence precisely at the expense of his presents, his material loss. This is the paradoxical logic of potlatch, in which, as Marcel Mauss says, "one must expend all that one has, keeping nothing back. It is a competition to see who is the richest and also the most madly extravagant. . . . In this way one not only promotes oneself, but also one's family, up the social scale."[45] Kent, in many ways the character most sympathetic to Lear's own frame of mind, comprehends Lear's kingship through a host of mutually reinforcing models of affiliation that help explain Lear's actions even as Kent protests them:

> Royal Lear,
> Whom I have ever honoured as my king,
> Loved as my father, as my master followed,
> As my great patron thought on in my prayers—[.]
> (1.1.137–40)

[42] James I, *Political Writings*, 76.

[43] Ibid., 155.

[44] Guided by the sociological studies of Marcel Mauss, Jacques Derrida utilizes the presence/presents (présente/présence) pairing in his *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 11–15.

[45] Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (New York: Norton, 1990), 37.

By the time that Kent is interrupted, his list has already conveyed a rich image of Lear's subject-sovereign ideology. To think of Lear as a king is also to think of him as at once a master, a father, and a patron. Of course, Lear is a literal father to his suitors in the first scene, but he also stands in a paternal relationship to all his subjects, and his patronage (and "mastery") is defined by this trope. Gift giving for the king is thus more than simply another economy of exchange; rather, it is intimately tied to an affective familial bond that defines the nature of hierarchical obligation to begin with. If, with Kent, we think of Lear's role as a father in the opening scene as being synonymous with his role as a patron, his acts of giving become (for him) a central component of his sovereignty, rather than something that endangers or negates it.

Certainly, what does not seem to be happening between Lear and his two elder daughters is any sort of market exchange or bribery, as some critics have proposed, where the "nothing" that he gets from Cordelia registers merely as the "bottom line" calculation within a profit-driven mentality.[46] On the contrary, Lear's economic terminology is fully compatible with the much more amorphous patronage system, which registered obligation amidst complex codes of social standing, deference, and flattery. As William Scott has observed, Lear's "expectations of reciprocity that go with his gifts resemble the social constraints of the gift economy" and a decidedly Jacobean gift economy at that.[47] The reciprocity that Lear not only respects but demands—both in the form of tributes of love and of a continuing respect for his "name and all th'addition to a king" (1.1.34)—is perfectly consistent with typical monarchical (and absolutist) discourse of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For Lear, the magnificent bestowal of land is clearly not only a means for him to "unburden himself" of responsibility but also precisely a means to burden others with love and obligation through the familial bond of affection; there is no doubt that Lear believes he has sealed a long-term pact precisely by means of permanently indebting others. As he says to Regan, comparing her favorably to her disloyal sister,

> Thou better know'st
> The offices of nature, bond of childhood,
> Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude.

[46] See Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 61–62; Rotman, *Signifying Nothing*, 78–86; and Annabel Patterson, *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 108–10.

[47] William O. Scott, "Contracts of Love and Affection: Lear, Old Age, and Kingship," *Shakespeare Survey* 55 (2002): 40.

> Thy half o'th' kingdom hast thou not forgot,
> Wherein I thee endowed.
>
> (2.2.342–46)

After his daughters refuse to recognize any aspect of the "addition to a king" that Lear takes utterly for granted, his bafflement gradually pares down his objection to its simplest form: "I gave you all" (2.2.415). His is a statement doomed to be endlessly reiterated since it cannot be understood.[48]

On the other hand, excepting Lear himself (and perhaps Kent), no other character in this play registers the gifts of the king as even vaguely indicative of sovereign authority. This is an ideological rift that is vastly disproportionate in its representative members, and it complicates otherwise easy pairings of characters: since the work of John Danby, *Lear*'s populace tends to be grouped into the good (Lear, Cordelia, Kent, Gloucester, Edgar, Fool, and Albany) and the bad (Goneril, Regan, Edmund, Oswald, and Cornwall), where the good roughly embody more conservative values of honor, loyalty, and gratitude, and the bad figure as emblems of proto-capitalist self-sufficiency and proto-Hobbesean cynicism.[49] From another perspective, however, when the ideology of sovereignty becomes the divisive element, Cordelia and the Fool (for instance) have far more in common with Goneril and Regan than with Lear; those devoted to the king on an affective level seem to think his presuppositions just as untenable as do the naughty sisters—it's simply that the latter are eager to take advantage of the misunderstanding rather than attempt to correct it. Although several sympathetic characters honor the king despite his bad decisions, it is hard to find any who think those decisions are not seriously flawed. For these characters, moreover, Lear's extravagant actions not only fail to augment his sovereignty but also actually diminish or negate it: his giving, the flattery that accompanies it, the outbursts of self-righteous rage, the threats of execution without trial, it all means nothing to them (or, at least, nothing that those acts are "supposed" to mean). The dominant emotions here are not awe and gratitude but pity and contempt.

It has traditionally been observed, following the materialist hermeneutic that I outlined in opening, that Lear's nothingness is a quanti-

[48] In his study of recurrence and reiteration, Sigmund Freud actually points to the feeling of ingratitude as characteristic of those whose lives are marked by patterns of repetition (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey [New York: Norton, 1961], 23).

[49] Danby, *Doctrine of Nature*, 52. Also see Nick Potter, "The Tragic Romances of Feudalism," in *Shakespeare: The Play of History* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 100–101.

tative phenomenon that is achieved by a series of deprivations. After all, the trajectory of Lear's existence in the first three acts is obviously one of diminishing "accommodations": after giving away his land, he proceeds to lose his retinue, his shelter, and finally his clothes. At the same time, however, all of this incremental loss of the superflux is also reflective of a deeper, qualitative nothingness that is realized at the outset of the play. Following Fortescue's logic, Lear's bad behavior and bad policymaking—one might even say, his tyranny—render him devoid of sovereignty even before the consequences of those decisions have manifested themselves; it is the enactment of Lear's bad governance (not just the effects of it) that serves to nullify his political identity. The Fool, in this way, simply gives the most coherent explication of what everyone else in the play—"good" and "bad"—already knows: even before the king has lost any knights, any of his "addition," Lear is "an O without a figure" (1.4.158). Far from faulting Lear's gift giving here for being overly economic, the thrust of the Fool's jibes is rather that the king was never economic enough. If Lear sees giving as an extension and reaffirmation of a sort of sovereignty to which subjects can only be infinitely and abstractly indebted, the Fool continually asserts that good governance must rely on moderate transactions where indebtedness remains literal and constrained. His advice is mundanely practical:

> Have more than thou showest,
> Speak less than thou knowest,
> Lend less than thou owest.
> (1.4.104–106)

Again, just as Cordelia's honesty registers as "nothing" beside her sisters' fulsome recognition of Lear's magnificence, so the Fool's pragmatic economics lesson provokes nearly the same reaction from Lear: "This is nothing, fool" (1.4.114). The Fool, undeterred, goes on to explain that Lear has it all backwards: it is he (Lear) who is nothing in a world that has ceased to recognize him. The only difference, explains the Fool, between a "bitter fool and a sweet fool," is that where the latter is dressed "in motley," the former believes it wise "To give away thy land" (Q, 4.123–30). The interchange between Lear and Fool immediately following is especially telling:

> *Lear:* Dost thou call me fool, boy?
> *Fool:* All thy other titles thou hast given away. That thou was born with.
> *Kent:* This is not altogether fool, my lord.
> (Q, 4.131–34)

Here the Fool most closely and pithily echoes the political heterodoxy of the writers that I have mentioned above: he implies that kings are not born but made and that the "title" of king might be "given away" (even without realizing it). What is left when the title is removed is not any mystical or inherited essence but simply the empty persona with which one is born ("fool" from the Latin *follem*, "bellows": one full of nothing but air). Even Kent, rather surprisingly, seems to think there is more than nothing to the Fool's remarks.[50]

Lear and the Fool, as I have intimated earlier, are at an impasse here in a similar way as are Lear and Cordelia in the first scene of the play: each regards the other's foundation for political legitimacy as incoherent. For Cordelia, of course, the rhetoric of infinite obligation and affection—i.e., the rhetoric of patriarchal absolutism—is meaningless (in exactly the same way as it is meaningless to her sisters). But the misunderstanding of sovereignty in this scene centers on an equally slippery concept, namely that of "bond." Most commentators on this play have assumed that when Cordelia introduces this term, the reference is simply to her "filial duty,"[51] often with overtones of a medieval feudal ethic. Franco Moretti maintains, for instance, that "what infuriates [Lear] in Cordelia is her untainted feudal spirit . . . of rights and duties";[52] John Turner, that "Cordelia's *bond* is the feudal equivalent of the Roman *pietas*";[53] and Halpern, that Cordelia's language "initiates a specifically aristocratic game of expense" that will culminate in her transformation into a "feudal military commander."[54] But while there can be little doubt that Lear himself (like Gloucester) understands the word "bond" in a patriarchal and natural sense given his reference to the "bond of childhood" above, Cordelia's usage seems much more ambiguous, especially in light of developing political thought in Shakespeare's England.

Cordelia obviously does have a strong sense of filial duty, but this affection has become completely internalized and privatized; politically, however, it is useless. When asked to use this love publicly to validate Lear's kingship, she can in this context offer only "nothing." Cordelia

[50] Of course, the fact that these lines appear only in Q are an indication of their political sensitivity. "Giving away titles" also has overtones of James's practice of "giving away" knighthoods and other "titles" during the early years of his reign, something intensely criticized by his contemporaries.

[51] "Filial duty" is Greenblatt's gloss on "bond" in *The Norton Shakespeare*.

[52] Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, 51.

[53] Turner, "The Tragic Romances of Feudalism," 100 (emphasis in original).

[54] Halpern, *Primitive Accumulation*, 250.

qualifies this nothingness, furthermore, by linking it with a notion of obligation built on "bond"; her response, although one of the most oft-cited passages in this play, I believe is worth belaboring once more in light of the contextual study I have done above:

> I love your majesty
> According to my bond, no more nor less.
> . . . . . .
> You have begot me, bred me, loved me.
> I return those duties back as are right fit—
> Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
> Why have my sisters husbands if they say
> They love you all? Haply when I shall wed
> That lord whose land must take my plight shall carry
> Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
> (1.1.94–101)

Cordelia's is a very odd sort of love, never adequately explained by critics who wish to see her as an emblem of feudalism in the play: her public affection is something that may be portioned out and applied piecemeal where it belongs. The love reserved for her husband (her marriage, we must remember, is also a political affair, not a private one) must not be expended on her father, or vice versa, and each must be measured just so—almost per the instructions of Portia to Shylock—that they might not turn the scale but in the estimation of a hair. This explicit *quid pro quo* rhetoric in fact bears no resemblance to the discourse of subjects within a feudal context; on the contrary, Cordelia's mentality is much closer to the contractualism and bilateralism of proto-republican writers. This is not to say now that she is suddenly an emblem of republicanism throughout this play but rather that, at this key moment initiating the plot, Shakespeare is highlighting two dominant understandings of sovereignty at work whose irreconcilability can only result in tragedy.

IV

But if Lear indeed betrays some of the attributes of the tyrant, he is at the same time no Richard III, no Cornwall; indeed, Shakespeare's innovation here is to create a tyrant with whom we might even sympathize, someone who might actually convince us that he is more sinned against than sinning. In fact, it is precisely when Lear madly embraces his very nothingness that those who love him suddenly treat him with deference

and respect; paradoxically, it is only after he has no "accommodation" that he seems to regain some aspect of his worth, even of his kingliness. The "nothing" that Lear has entered—both materially and ontologically—turns out to have political potential after all. While it may be true that nothing can come of nothing, the philosophy of republicanism also suggests that true sovereignty itself might come out of nothing; the only cure for tyranny, these tracts explain over and over, involves recognizing the sovereign as comprising absence rather than presence, a void that doesn't give meaning to its subjects but is given meaning by its citizens.

As partially insane as he may be, Lear begins to embody an authority after his descent that is nevertheless still a form of sovereignty, I would argue—simply a radically different kind of sovereignty from that which he has (unwillingly) abandoned. It is a sovereignty that, tragically, cannot yet be fully developed or utilized, due to the circumstances of the plot and the confusion of its protagonist, a sovereignty that nevertheless anticipates the trajectory of the republican model as it enters modernity.[55] Where I began this essay by examining the disjunction of Lear with the economic poetics of Bataille, I wish now to consider a different and perhaps more promising model of sovereignty and nothingness as elaborated in the work of Giorgio Agamben. Writing about the history of sovereignty, Agamben has described the shift toward political modernity commencing with an institutionalization of ontological and legal liminality in the sovereign figure and—consequently—the emergence of new kinds of governmental intervention within the "bare life" of the populace.[56] The sovereign figure within modern democracies, Agamben summarizes, is someone who is at once within and outside of civilization, the city, and the law; in short, he or she is "the Nothing [which] subsist[s] indefinitely in the form of a being in force without significance."[57]

[55] Although I am wary of implicating *Lear* too heavily in a "periodic" teleology, I wish to emphasize that I am trying neither to make Shakespeare into a republican writer nor to make republicanism somehow dependent upon Shakespeare; rather, my point is to show that the author of *Lear* was aware enough of contemporary political controversy not only to bring such controversy to bear on his subject but also to envision a certain kind of compromise to the dialogue in a manner that inchoately anticipates subsequent thought.

[56] Agamben, of course, draws heavily on Michel Foucault for his philosophy of modern sovereignty. See especially Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977); and *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975–76*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 1997).

[57] Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 53.

Explicating the notion of sovereign nothingness, Agamben is fascinated by its relation to the so-called "state of exception"—the condition of crisis or emergency within a political body where normalcy and legality become suspended. Where Carl Schmitt had famously employed the state of exception to defend the necessity of the absolutist leader—i.e., one capable of making decisions apart from the rule of law[58]—Agamben sees republican democracies more subtly reliant on the same phenomenon. In democracies, law tends to be prominently established and celebrated as the supreme authority of the state, only to be found in a continual situation of ambiguity and suspension whereby it may redefine itself willy-nilly according to executive influences. "On the one hand," Agamben posits, "the juridical void at issue in the state of exception seems absolutely unthinkable for the law; on the other, this unthinkable thing nevertheless has a decisive strategic relevance for the juridical order and must not be allowed to slip away at any cost."[59] The relation of the democratic sovereign to the law, likewise, is one of *"Being-outside, and yet belonging"*:[60] one is technically "under the law" and yet at the same time in a position continually to (re)define what that means.

Without making too great of a leap, I think that Agamben's depiction of modern sovereignty here is a strikingly apt description of Lear on the heath, even if Shakespeare's king admittedly cannot be conscious of that framing. If in the first act of the play Lear gives no thought to law simply because he transcends such a concept (meaningless without him), by the third act and following he is obsessed with law and its newly ambivalent relation to his authority. In the mock-courtroom scene of the Quarto, the king does not sit as a judge but as a witness, allowing him simultaneously to profess submission to the courtroom even as he controls it:

> I here take my oath before this honourable assembly [that Goneril] kicked the poor King her father. . . . Stop her there. Arms, arms, sword, fire, corruption in the place! (Q, 13.40–48)

Lear reconstructs himself as both outside of and "yet belonging" to the legal system, a paradox so foreign to James's blatantly absolutist ap-

[58] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Moretti, significantly, employs Schmitt in order to identify absolutism at work in the depictions of sovereigns in Renaissance plays from *Gorboduc* to *King Lear* (*Signs Taken for Wonders*, 46).

[59] Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 51.

[60] Ibid., 35 (emphasis in original).

proach to law that the scene may have been cut from the Folio for just this reason.[61] By the time of his next legal outburst near Dover, Lear seems to have recovered some of his absolutist attitude: he is "every inch a king," before whom subjects quake (4.5.104–5), and yet his keen awareness of being nothing but a frail body—subject to agues and smelling of mortality—alerts us that this is a vastly altered sovereignty from the one with which he began. Again, even while fantasizing the overturning of law, where the usurer hangs the cozener, he sees himself subverting order both from above and below. "Take that of me, my friend, who have the power / To seal th'accuser's lips," he says to an imaginary culprit (4.5.159–60): here Lear is not so much taking the place of law as simply paying off plaintiffs so that the system will not work right while he is around.

The great advantage of modern sovereignty as defined here, proposes Agamben, is that it allows unprecedented access to lives hitherto unreachable by more transcendent figures. Just as the sovereign is able to become a "Nothing," a liminal figure between inside and outside, so by that very fact is he able to bring into view the "empty places" of the *polis* and those that reside therein. Where classical republicanism opened the door for life (*bios*) in the public sphere, modernity has allowed every aspect of "bare life" (*zoe*)—that is, life by the very fact of its birth, un-accommodated man—to become subject to political significance and scrutiny; indeed, life has gained a sort of political "sacredness" in this way. The "sacred individual" (*homo sacer*), being thus exposed, does not so much become set apart in a religious way as legally and socially alienated, caught in a "state of exception" that is a perverse mirror image of the sovereign's own liminality. At the heart of the "sacred" person that the republican society has created may be found once again a confusion between inside and outside, civilization and barbarity, human and beast. As Agamben puts it, the *homo sacer* is like the bandit who exists in

> a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the *loup garou*, the warewolf, who is precisely *neither man nor beast*, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither.[62]

And what better passage could describe the space of the heath in *King Lear*? We may recall the objecting interlocutors in Buchanan's treatise

[61] Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 66–80.

[62] Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 105 (emphasis in original).

complaining that republican ideals would eventually drive the king "into the wild," left in its "solitary places." Not only does Shakespeare literalize this prediction, but he also seems to recognize its political *potential.* It is in this bare space, within this state of exception, that the nothingness of the sovereign brings into significance the nothing of his realm, exposing himself to "feel what wretches feel," in effect politicizing that nothingness, making it a political something.

The scene on the heath is undoubtedly a low point from a materialist and even existentialist perspective, but politically it marks the birth of something profoundly promising—here Lear (even unbeknownst to him) is able to rally his subjects and spur them on to service on behalf of the state, to challenging those who threaten it. After the outcast king emerges from the "impetuous blasts" that have made "nothing of" his white hairs (Q, 8.7–8), something curious happens: not only do Gloucester and Edgar newly pledge their loyalty to Lear, but Lear suddenly begins to acquire again what he had lost, now without even a trace of effort. Cornwall, after having spent the wild night strategizing while Lear suffered outdoors, now asks what has become of "the King." Oswald has a shocking report:

> My lord of Gloucester hath conveyed him hence.
> Some five or six and thirty of his knights,
> Hot questrists after him, met him at gate,
> Who, with some other of the lord's dependants,
> Are gone with him toward Dover, where they boast
> To have well-armed friends.
>
> (3.7.13–18)

Between Lear's returning indoors and Gloucester's being blinded, it appears that a whole faction of supporters has suddenly mobilized in Lear's defense! The fact that his knights are mentioned is especially noteworthy: up to this point Lear's knights have merely been passive (if perhaps riotous) emblems of his status while that status still seemed intact. Following Goneril and Regan's merciless bout of reasoning the need for this retinue, removing the warriors had seemed as effortless as shedding a garment that scarcely keeps one warm. But now, once the king has been radically reduced, these same knights have become "hot questrists," actively following their former master of their own volition, riders who will even join a number of "well-armed" friends they appear to have recruited themselves. Here, subjecthood has transformed into political subjectivity; passive emblems have become active agents; and enforced obedience has turned into voluntary service: this is the

state at its strongest. The sovereign, whose absolutist identity has been negated, is paradoxically made even stronger than before by being attributed that identity by those he once commanded. While the recuperation here may ultimately be futile and tragic, its very possibility nevertheless bears witness to the breadth of Shakespeare's political experimentalism in this play.

At the heart of modern democratic sovereignty is what Agamben calls "the ability not to be,"[63] and here at last we come full circle. For in this zone of potentiality and nothingness, the sovereign exists not as a being but as a giver and as a gift. As Agamben summarizes, "[A]n act is sovereign when it realizes itself by simply taking away its own potentiality not to be, letting itself be, giving itself to itself."[64] What this sovereign is giving away is not land but ontological stability; but this abandonment itself constitutes a giving-back of something even more versatile, namely a liminal state of pure "potentiality." Here, at last, we have an adaptation of Bataille that begins to make some sense of the gift / sovereignty / nothingness complex in *Lear.* It allows us to see that while Lear's literal giving takes away one kind of sovereignty and makes him nothing, this nothingness in turn offers another mode of sovereignty that allows new possibilities of intervention and givenness among the individuals comprising his state. He becomes, as it were, the extreme limit and literalization of the "positive negativity," the "present absence" of the sovereign theorized in the nascent modernity of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Although Lear is tragically unable to capitalize upon his nothingness, it is certainly possible that Edgar, who will succeed Lear in the Folio edition and whose acquaintance with liminality and negation have already been well-established, may have learned the lesson.

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[63] Ibid., 46.
[64] Ibid., 46–47.