

Speak What We Feel: Sympathy and Statecraft

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Questions about the place of the passions in public life have enjoyed a long history in political thought. For Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, and Cicero each person's ability to recognize and manage his emotions proved essential to the founding of civil society. The vexed relationship of self-rule to statecraft features prominently in the writings of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke.¹ This philosophical legacy is borne out in cultural theory's recent turn to affect as a heuristic for thinking through problems around consent, citizenship, and social contract. Unlike their predecessors, however, contemporary thinkers downplay the role of the impassioned individual in discussions of political obligation and authority. For instance, scholars such as John Protevi, Davide Panagia, Jane Bennett, Lauren Berlant, and Brian Massumi have shed new light on the collective and impersonal affective charge entailed by the often unconscious and amorphous processes of joining, authorizing, and resisting various polities.² Attending to the aesthetic, the sub-perceptual, the quotidian, and the non-discursive, these theorists argue, allows for innovative approaches to power as not only manifest in repressive apparatuses but also expressed by more elastic and productive modes.³

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Most broadly, this chapter illuminates the lineaments between earlier investigations of the politics of emotion and current theoretical insights into political affect. Studies of ancient and early modern theories of emotion emphasize that humans were regarded as entities animated by the dynamism between individual soma and external environment. In accordance with a humoral paradigm, early moderns understood emotion as transactional, that is, as never occurring only “in response to a stimulus—whether that stimulus is external or internal, real or imaginary, present or remembered,” but also “almost inevitably, within a dense cultural and social context.”⁴ The notion of a “premodern ecology of passions” sets the stage for my discussion of sympathetic statehood.⁵ I aim to rethink the body’s relation to its environs in light of the early modern belief in the existence of dispersed sympathetic forces that found tangible expression in the natural world. Sympathetic and antipathetic energies, which were immanent within all matter (animal, vegetable, and mineral) moved humans to feel and act.⁶ However, unlike the passions or those humors that were regarded as disturbances visited upon the subject, sympathetic identifications were presumably (knowingly or unknowingly) sought out by the agent, who—or which—inclined him or itself toward the trajectory inherent to all material substance.⁷ A Galenic framework rested on a cosmological perception of the human as a microcosm of the world, and in this respect offered a means of understanding the intimate nature of the relationship between the individual and the diverse circuits of energy affecting him (evident, for instance, in the quality of the air he breathed, fluctuations in his climate, and the effects of his diet). A sympathetic model regarded nature as indifferently—even arbitrarily—enacting its effects; humans experienced and exhibited sympathy when they tended toward or leaned into already existing propensities. Sympathy’s association with involuntary experiences that breached the boundaries of individual bodies may be brought to bear on early modern discussions of political consent that imagined obedience as deriving from unconscious processes, tacitly enabled by unanticipated impersonal intensities that nonetheless factored crucially in the formation and dissolution of various collectives.

In exploring the notion that sympathetic bonds could underwrite political obligation, I turn to Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. This play proves exemplary in that it revolves around specific political issues such as succession, foreign invasion, and resistance to monarchical authority that resonated with Jacobean contemporaries. *Lear* also explores emotion as constitutive of civil polity and thus provides a window onto ways that terrestrial

authority—even before the advent of late stage capitalism—was perceived as adaptable and generative, encouraging rather than merely repressing diverse subjectivities and dispositions. I will argue that the affective centerpiece of *Lear* is not, as critics have claimed, the expression of canonical emotion, in particular the rage associated with Lear.⁸ Rather, I shift away from a character-driven approach to the play, in order to show how sympathetic statehood contributes to a noncathartic ambience, one that gives rise to a “noncathartic aesthetic,” in a play that otherwise, at least at first blush, would appear to privilege histrionics.⁹

In what follows, I focus on the word “nothing,” which I restore to its larger web of political and affective meaning by elucidating the ways it signposts “an impersonal ontological infrastructure, an undersigned system of affinities (which persist alongside antipathies) between and within bodies” that remains in *potentia*.¹⁰ As a placeholder for what could be (as opposed to a term of negation), “nothing” in *Lear* evokes the “nothing” found in late sixteenth-century political treatises and works of natural philosophy. As scholars have noted, English political writing was “deeply invested in the rhetoric of presence and absence,” as proponents of an anti-absolutist polemic leveraged the Aristotelian dictum of *ex nihilo, nihil fit* to argue that sovereignty was “conditional, derivative, and ‘accommodated’.”¹¹ As I will show, a natural law theory of state envisioned political authority as neither originary nor unlimited but always and only instituted by an immanent and impersonal order. In accordance with this perspective, political subjectivity emerges not from enforced obedience but naturally from a zone of potentially and nothingness. If “nothing” is a politically pregnant term, it is also, as I stress, an affectively expectant term in that it registers more than the absence of feeling. A word that functions diagnostically, as Sianne Ngai writes of minor affects, “nothing” in *Lear* allows those who speak this word to “reflexively theorize” the ambiguities between “the subjective status and the objective status of feeling in general,” as the meta-theoretical capabilities of the term derive from its “relatively weak intentionality—[its] indistinctness if not absence of object.”¹² For these reasons, my discussion bypasses the well-known emotionally charged moments in *Lear* and focuses instead on instances of sympathy that grow out of the subject’s tacit compliance to organic principles of “mobility, communication, and exchange, of matter and spirit as well as of thought and feeling.”¹³

A *physis* that gradually evolved into an *ethos*, the keynote of early modern sympathy was correspondence. In the late sixteenth century, to experience “sympathy” was “to be affected in consequence of the affection of

some one or something else; to be similarly or correspondingly affected; to respond sympathetically to some influence.”¹⁴ The belief in an invisible but powerful kinetic force underwrote the Stoic conception of the cosmos as a sympathetic animal permeated by universal breath or *pneuma*, which guaranteed that something affecting one part of the universe would necessarily affect other parts. The conception of an animate, interconnected universe was later revived by the neo-Platonists, such as Ficino and Paracelsus, who argued that nature itself demonstrated tendencies and propensities, which encompassed and could arguably overrule a divine being.¹⁵ Even with the rise of Baconian learning in the early part of the seventeenth century, medicine and natural science retained the concept of sympathy, which continued to factor prominently in developing theories of magnetism, gravitation, and contagion.¹⁶ Although sympathy was not yet understood as a moral sentiment, throughout the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the term was in flux as the principle of correspondence in physical matter was increasingly invoked to describe the experience of fellow-feeling between and among human beings.¹⁷

The word sympathy does not appear in *Lear*; nevertheless, the arc of this tragedy tracks the tension between conflicting sympathetic modes, in this case an occultist conception and a naturalist conception, elaborated as a generational rift. On the one hand, members of the older generation are invested in a notion of terrestrial authority confirmed by a universally sanctioned, quasi-divine system of resemblances. The younger characters, on the other hand, presume that social bonds are encompassed and sustained by correspondences that inhere within nature, which, while not necessarily susceptible to conscious influence, inform political institutions.¹⁸ Marking the gray area between passive compulsion and voluntary activity, naturalist instances of sympathy, as Jane Bennett notes, were discernible only in the dispersed effects of a “generic force, more like heliophilia than an interhuman recognition initiated and enacted in psyches.”¹⁹ In contrast to *Lear* and Gloucester’s shared belief in the intimate relationship between the individual and the universe, a relationship manifested by the enfolding of external and internal perturbations, Edmund’s and Cordelia’s respective invocations of “nothing” and allegiance to the “bonds” of nature locate sympathetic affinities beyond paternalistic authority and cathartic expressions that intertwine political prerogative and cosmic activity.

At stake in these different modes of sympathetic statehood are fundamental questions about the constitutive moment and obligating force of law, as well as the boundaries of the communities subject to its sway. In

other words, did law inhere in divine commandment, which by analogy was realized in the person of the monarch, or did law exist within the natural world itself?²⁰ Concomitantly, was political obedience to be understood as compelled by the sovereign, and as an artificial construct based on the individual self-interest of the contracting subject?²¹ Or, in accordance with emerging natural rights theory, was political consent akin to moral obligation, something that did not necessarily derive from conscious choice but was inherent in the ambient experience of citizenry?²² In this instance, the shared bonds that formed political community would be understood as the by-product of living in accordance with universal principles of conduct that were binding in conscience rather than the result of external force.

The play's opening exchange between Kent and Gloucester about whether "the king had more affected" the Duke of Albany or Cornwall highlights the centrality of emotion to political order by establishing that the sway of Lear's passions will determine his endowment.²³ As critics have noted, Lear's subsequent request that each daughter publically proclaim her loyalty links the hyperbole of infinite obligation and affection to the rhetoric of patriarchal absolutism. As he dismantles the constituent elements of his authority, Lear confronts the pressing question that lies at the center of the play, one that expands the scope of the personal and familial: once we remove coercion and self-interest from the equation, why would a subject maintain loyalty to a monarch?²⁴ By casting both love contests (the initial one in which the monarch dispenses favor and the second in which he receives favor) in light of a "crisis of allegiance," we can see how the problem of political consent is framed as inseparable from a "crisis of the affections."²⁵ As Victoria Kahn stresses, in the early seventeenth century, the family was a more common analogy for political order than the contract, since love for the monarch was regarded as akin to love for the father, a love that was "a mainstay of contemporary arguments for political authority."²⁶ If the loyalty of the subject to her ruler is conceived as at once divinely sanctioned and natural, then political allegiance can be expressed only through the currency of intimacy whose locus is inevitably the person of father-cum-king.

This is the currency that Cordelia famously refuses to traffic in, leading her to declare "nothing" (1.1.85). An earlier self-reflexive aside, "What shall Cordelia speak?" (1.1.60) sets the stage for what follows by troubling the ontology of character, as the line registers as a statement an actress would make when off script. We might then understand Cordelia's "nothing" as an example of what theater scholar Jerzy Limon characterizes as "dialogical silence," an assertion of the refusal to speak, which comes

about when a character makes the conscious choice not to say something and then in enacting this choice separates herself from the imaginary world of the play.²⁷ If, as Limon suggests, a moment such as this throws into relief the constructed nature of character, as well as the artifice of theatricality, it also draws attention to “nothing” as more than a sign of a particular character trait (or flaw).²⁸ Understood as a confounding *modus operandi*, Cordelia’s declaration of “nothing” inaugurates what Lauren Berlant calls a “situation”: an incident that registers as “a disturbance, a sense genre of animated suspension” that “forces one to take notice, to become *interested* in potential changes to ordinariness.”²⁹

Only when we apprehend Cordelia’s “plainness” (1.1.127) as a means of “(consciously, unconsciously, dynamically) renegotiat[ing] the terms of reciprocity that contour [her] historical situation”³⁰ can we relieve the word “nothing” of the burden of providing the conditions for either catharsis or closure. Cordelia’s response is simultaneously a refusal and an assertion; she neither accepts nor rejects anything. Instructive here are Agamben’s and Žižek’s respective readings of Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener*, who famously refuses what is asked of him. Neither theorist attempts to disambiguate Bartleby’s cryptic “I prefer not to” but interprets this phrase as an announcement of potentiality rather than an assertion of will. Bartleby, Agamben suggests, “does not consent, but neither does he simply refuse to do what is asked of him; nothing is farther from him than the heroic pathos of negation.”³¹ For this reason Agamben regards him as a figure of pure potential, “*potentia absoluta*,” whose refusal “keeps possibility suspended between occurrence and nonoccurrence, between the capacity to be and the capacity not to be.”³² For Žižek, Bartleby’s refusal points up the transition from a politics of resistance or protest, which feeds off of what it seeks to negate, to a politics that “opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation.”³³

The political potential of Cordelia’s “nothing” is demonstrated by its mimetic energies. The word is contagious and its model of transmission suggests a nondeterministic theory of agency, whereby various subjects enact—and are enticed to recognize—similitude within and across a variety of contexts as “nothing” becomes untethered from any one particular character and moves recursively from Cordelia’s mouth, to Lear’s (1.1.89), to Kent’s (1.4.111), and to the Fool’s (1.4.113). The echo chamber effect occurs immediately; the word is repeated five times in quick succession in the folio edition:

Cordelia: Nothing my lord.

Lear: Nothing?

Cordelia: Nothing.

Lear: Nothing will come of nothing, speak again. (folio, 1.1.85–89).

By having Lear in escalating anger speak the phrase “Nothing can be made of nothing” (1.4.114) three scenes later (to the Fool), Shakespeare highlights the word “nothing” in the context of the dictum *ex nihilo, nihil fit*, which, implies the Aristotelian challenge to the presumption of *creatio ex nihilo*, the principle upon which divine monarchy rested.³⁴ As Edward Tayler notes, “the metaphysical reverberations” of nothing in this exchange “suggest ironies unknown to the characters and as yet not fully known to the members of the audience.”³⁵

The word “nothing” and its veiled challenge to unquestionable ordained patriarchy also structures the initial exchange between Gloucester and Edmund, when Gloucester discovers the letter Edgar has putatively written outlining a scheme to commit patricide:

Gloucester: Edmund, how now! What news?

Edmund: So please your lordship, none.

Gloucester: Why so earnestly seek you to put up that letter?

Edmund: I know no news, my lord.

Gloucester: What paper were you reading?

Edmund: Nothing, my lord. (1.2.26–31).

“Nothing” returns when Gloucester questions Edmund’s loyalty and is shocked that the sisters and their husbands have designated him a traitor and banished him from his house in retribution. Gloucester exclaims, plaintively to Edmund, “Go to; say you nothing” (3.3.6).

As if to fortify himself against the naturalist implications of “nothing,” Gloucester seeks solace in a comprehensive cosmic system regulated by a universe invested in its human inhabitants. He attributes the rifts in Lear’s kingdom and his own family to “late eclipses in the sun and moon” that “portend no good to us” (1.2.96–97). For Gloucester, even if “the wisdom of nature” (1.2.97), for instance through the findings of natural science, can provide rational explanations for events like eclipses, the significance of such occurrences resides in their ability to mirror familial and civil dissension: “Love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide; in cities,

mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond cracked ‘twixt son and father’ (1.2.99–101). Here Gloucester calls on the cosmos to forge a concept of universal sympathy, imagined as the product of a quasi-divine force.

As the word “nothing” migrates, it comes to delineate a “political physics” whereby the juridical basis of social life is understood as constituted by tacit compact.³⁶ This tacit compact is referenced by the language of bonds invoked by members of the younger generation. Cordelia is adamant that she loves Lear “according to [her] bond; no more nor less” (1.1.93). If Lear understands this bond in the patriarchal sense, as the duty a child owes her parent (editors typically gloss the word “bond” as filial duty), Cordelia’s use of the word introduces another sense, as it references the reciprocity that animates relations among all creatures. For Cordelia, the dynamic between husband and wife, like that between parent and child, is expressed as a bilateralism that attests to an inherent social and political sympathetic order. Typically the play’s opening scene is construed as a standoff between the embodied subject of passion on the one hand (exemplified by Lear’s impulsive rage) and the abstract structure of obligation on the other (represented by Cordelia’s cool contractualism).³⁷ Yet by fixing on the word “bond,” Cordelia references more than the legal implications of the term. In this instance, “bond” indexes an alternate means of imagining political obligation and association whereby obedience derives from the essence of things and is not compelled by the will or command of the sovereign. This is a notion of political consent not as the *source* of government, by which subjects are forced to recognize the divinely sanctioned authority of the monarch, but as the *vehicle* of government insofar as subjects are always already tacitly attuned to the formative forces within nature. As legal historian Otto Gierke, writing about the presumptions of natural law in the early modern period, observes:

By that compact a common life is brought into existence; the means and powers required for that common life are pooled; and a ruling power is instituted, capable of administering all the affairs which have been made, in this way, a common concern.³⁸

Gierke suggests here that law does not consist in its enforceability but in the conviction that individuals comply with that which is the natural expression of human will, which is, in turn, immanent in a supra-personal system. A corollary of these presumptions is that the sovereign cannot exist—he is

nothing—apart from these bonds insofar as the king is “little more than a cipher for abstract concepts of law, justice, the public good, etc.”³⁹

In response to Cordelia’s invocation of bonds, Lear animates the language of cosmology. Upon banishing her he proclaims: “For by the sacred radiance of the sun, the mysteries of Hecate and the night by all the operations of the orbs from whom we do exist and cease to be, here I disclaim all my paternal care, propinquity, and property of blood” (1.1.106–112). Expressing an occultist version of universal sympathy, Lear espouses the belief that the movements of the stars and planets correspond to human emotions. He later calls on the “dear goddess” nature to witness (and validate) his act of cursing Goneril with sterility by suspending nature’s “purpose,” apostrophizing nature as a figure that can “dry up in her [Goneril] the organs of increase” (1.4. 238–249). The storm scene is similarly inflected by Lear’s conversation with “the great gods that keep this dreadful pothor o’er our heads” (3.2.49–50), and punctuated by Lear’s invocation of the natural “ministers” (3.2.20) he perceives to be visiting this “horrible pleasure” (3.2.18) of rain, wind, and thunder upon him.

The tension between cosmology and natural bonds plays out similarly in the dynamic between Edmund and Gloucester. Like Cordelia, Edmund animates the language of bonds when he declares that his services are bound to the law of nature (1.2.2). Moreover, he mocks his father’s assertions of astral and planetary influence. Yet even in his attempt to dismiss the conceit of cosmology, he painstakingly elaborates its propositions, leaving us with an understanding of its force, which at the time of Shakespeare’s play had a firm hold on the early modern political imaginary:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeit of our own behavior, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars; as if we were villains by necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves, and traitors [traitors], by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars, and adulterers, by an enforced obedience of planetary influences; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on (1.2.109–116).

The importance of bonds in Edmund and Cordelia’s worldview betrays a shared orientation toward the ways entities in nature—human and non-human—operate. In their respective departures from a magical idea of sympathy as expressed by Lear and Gloucester, Cordelia and Edmund embrace a naturalist conception that, as Shakespeare shows, can branch

off into direct directions. On the one hand, Edmund's naturalist conception of sympathy, which butts up against his father's occultist notions, challenges the ontological basis for privileging human needs. This leads to a mechanistic perspective, one that would come to be associated with the amorality of Hobbes. This strain, as Gierke points out, was politically and morally "radical to the very core."⁴⁰ On the other hand, Cordelia's belief that natural law serves as the basis for a just polity points to sympathy as an incipient condition of fellowship, which is immanent in the natural patterns that inform the foundation of commonwealth.

Ultimately, *Lear* posits natural sympathy as a restorative epistemology that animates new kinds of interpretative energies, represented in the latter half of the play as "seeing," understood not as witnessing but as a form of knowing akin to discovery.⁴¹ The man who "will not see," as Gloucester explains, is one who "does not feel" (4.1.70–72). Gloucester comes around to "see[ing] it feelingly" (4.6.149). Feeling in this case may be distinguished from emotion, as less akin to passion and more in concert with affect as seeing sets the stage for being moved, that is, inclines one to apprehend not only the suffering of any one particular individual human being (experienced as pity) but also the magnetism that naturally conjoins all forms of matter. Drawing heightened attention to theatrical experience itself, *Lear* identifies the theater as more than a venue for representing feelings. The theatrical process itself, Shakespeare suggests, models for the viewer how to read and potentially absorb sympathetic correspondence. This process is recognized as a quasi-voluntary impetus, as characters (and we) reflect on their (and our) capacities to recognize the state of others, whereby they (and we) are then moved to experience a sense of interconnectedness. Seeing-cum-knowing-feeling is then not a metaphor or analogy for perception: for instance, the clear-sightedness of intellect as opposed to the blindness of passion. Rather it is an argument for the intersubjective dynamics of affect, which are mimetic in principle and potentially ethical in aim.

Cordelia's and Edmund's respective attunement to natural sympathy, as I have been arguing, is keyed to nothing, so long as "something" registers primarily, or only, as the heightened expression of passion. For this reason, it makes sense that Gloucester's and Lear's respective sympathetic moments entail recognizing "nothing" as a collective condition. Gloucester comes to the realization that "distribution should undo excess" so that "each man have enough" (4.1.70–71). This too little, too late observation that most have nothing reverberates with Lear's revelation on the heath:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,
 That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
 How shall your houseless heads and unfed side
 Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you
 From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en
 Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp
 Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,
 That thou mayst shake the superflux to them (3.4.29–36).

Lear's sympathy for the less fortunate overturns the presumption that the sovereign *naturally* sympathizes with his subjects, as advanced by early modern philosopher Edward Forset, who claims that "Gracious Sovereignes have the like compassions and compunctions in the distresses of their subjects, and be in the same sort of deeply peirced [*sic*] & perplexed with any wrong or distemperatures, happening to the meanest of their people."⁴² Forset writes:

We see the head naturally endued with a fellow feeling of any griefes in the whole bodie, in so much as there is scant any disease so weake or small in any part, as doth not affect and disturbe the head also; yea, it holdeth such a sympathie with the verie foot, as that a little wet or cold taken in that remotest place, hath forthwith a readie passage to the head.⁴³

Such moments of sympathy can occur, the play shows, only when something sharply impresses itself upon the person of the sovereign, who is then moved to attune himself to the distress of others, described here as a deep piercing. Importantly, the sovereign is not overwhelmed by his own strong passions but is figured as impressionable, or as in a state of susceptibility. The word "pierce" is highlighted in *Lear* in the context of monarchical attunement when Kent describes Cordelia's measured response to learning of the violence that has transpired in her absence. Kent asks the gentleman, "Did your letters pierce the queen to any demonstration of grief?" In his reply, the gentleman explains that Cordelia's empathic response to the letters "moved her not to rage" as Cordelia was "a queen over her passion" (4.3.13). Here sympathy is contagious, and at the same time constitutive of the reciprocity that undergirds political relations.

The movement toward sympathy in the case of Gloucester, Lear, and Cordelia is, then, less teleological and more tendential insofar as each character becomes enmeshed in the collective ambience of depravation. Edgar too leans into a sympathetic state when, initially "bent on self-preservation,"

he comes to describe himself as one “who, by the art of known and feeling sorrows, [is] *pregnant* to good pity” (4.6.217–218, emphasis mine). Edgar’s declaration of pity in *potentia* is conjoined at the play’s end with his deadpan response to Lear’s death and the political task of rebuilding empire that awaits. As Bruce Smith notes, the play’s conclusion, in both quarto and folio versions, is marked by “radical understatement,” as the survivors manage only half-lines that build anti-climatically to three or four lines but no more.⁴⁴ More in consonance with Cordelia’s “nothing” than with Kent’s emotive outcry, “Break, heart: I prithee, break!” (5.3.311), Edgar’s terse instruction to Kent at the moment of Lear’s death to “Look up, my lord” (5.3.312) and contained summation “He is gone, indeed” (5.3.314) evokes a jarring plainspokenness. A similarly dysphoric tone is heard in Edgar’s final sentiment, “The weight of this sad time we must obey; speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” (5.3.322–324).

If we understand feeling in an affective register, Edgar’s response can be read as sympathetic in that it draws our attention not to morals but to mechanisms. Power structures are secondary effects of affective encounters, and ideologies are secondary expressions of power. Here feeling is recognized as the “reservoir of political potential” of the collective, one that is “an active part of the constitution of that situation, ... one that hasn’t been fully developed [and] that hasn’t been fully capacitated for unfolding.”⁴⁵ As Forset notes, a commonwealth is constituted not by the subjects’ passion for the monarch but by and through correspondences, or as he states, “not because all wealth is held in common” but rather because of “consonance of intentions ... for the preserving of the comfort and continuance of this one bodie.”⁴⁶ Edgar conjures a collective “we” in these final moments, creating a community around the shared acknowledgment that the juridical-political order is founded on the principle that one never affects without being affected. To feel is to say, and to say is a transindividual act. Edgar’s pronouncement supports Cordelia’s “nothing” as a place marker for the not-yet-realized potential of habits, tendencies, experiences, relationships, and ways of imagining that can occur through shared participation in processes beyond the self. Through his revision of the emotive politics that dominate the first half of the play (characterized by melodrama), Edgar exposes the falsity of the premise that a subject’s loyalty to the monarch issues from her love for him. In the place of this fiction, Edgar offers an intuitive account of political obligation.

By bringing into conversation occultist and a naturalist understandings of sympathy, *Lear* stages competing theories of political obligation

as compelled by cosmic conjunction and realized in the person of the monarch and as based in universal bonds found in the natural world, which invisibly and intuitively connect all forms of matter (human and nonhuman alike). Throughout the play, Shakespeare touches on magical, material, natural, and ethical conceptions of sympathy, ideas that at times overlap and at other times compete, allowing us to discern how an astrologically driven sense of sympathy based on planetary conjunction and natality gradually gives way to a more modern sense of sympathy as the basis for fellow-feeling, understood as a universal principle. Insofar as “all things are made up of self-moving matter, which exists in rational, sensitive, and inanimate degrees,” ultimately, nature, the play suggests, and not the monarch is the source of political order.⁴⁷ My analysis of affect in *Lear* thus encourages us to rethink the coexistence of various models of emotion in the period, which in turn offers the opportunity to reconsider the role of feelings in our investigations of early modern power. By tracking the uneven development of the concept of sympathy from a principle of natural philosophy to a psychological state and eventually to a moral stance, we can trace the jagged arc whereby ideas about the reciprocal influence of animate and inanimate matter became yoked to an ethical perspective characterized by the affinity binding all entities.

NOTES

1. Michael MacDonald, “The Fearefull Estate of Francis Spira: Narrative, Identity, and Emotion in Early Modern England,” *Journal of British Studies* 31 (1992): 32–61; Susan James, *Passion and Action: The Emotions in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), “Introduction,” 1–14; Michael Schoenfeldt, *Bodies and Selves in Early Modern England: Physiology and Inwardness in Spenser, Shakespeare, Herbert, and Milton* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Victoria Kahn, *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640–1674* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); and Steven Mullaney, *The Reformation of Emotions in the Age of Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), “Introduction: Structures of Feeling and the Reformation of Emotions,” 7–51.
2. John Protevi contends, “affect is inherently political” (51), Lauren Berlant identifies affect theory as “another phase in the history of ideology theory” (53), and affect, Brian Massumi maintains, is “now much more important

- for understanding power” than concepts like ideology, Brian Massumi (*Politics of Affect*, 32). John Protevi, *Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), Massumi, *The Politics of Affect* (London: Polity, 2015) and Massumi, *The Power at the End of the Economy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015). Emotion, Brian Massumi explains, “draws on a limited selection of memories and only activates certain reflexes or tendencies,” as no one emotional state “can encompass all the depth and breadth of our experiences” (Massumi, *The Politics of Affect*, 5). On the distinction between affect and emotion, more generally, see Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).
3. John Protevi examines the embodied and embedded political subject alongside nonhuman collectives and systems. Davide Panagia cites sensation, “the heterology of impulses that register on our bodies without determining a body’s nature or residing in any one organ or perception,” as key to moments of “interruption” or “disarticulation” that invite occasions for collective political change, Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation*, 2.
 4. Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 8. See also Paster et al., eds., *Reading the Early Modern Passions: Essays in the Cultural History of Emotion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); and Garret Sullivan and Mary Floyd-Wilson, eds., *Environment and Embodiment in Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave, 2007).
 5. Paster, *Humoring the Body*, 9.
 6. For the distinction between sympathies and humors, see Mary Floyd Wilson, *Occult Knowledge, Science, and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 6–11.
 7. On the idea of the passions as powerful forces beyond human control and linked to the idea of passivity, especially as related to Augustine’s idea of passion as perturbation, see James, *Passion and Action*, 11.
 8. For Cicero, there are four fundamental passions: distress, pleasure, fear, and desire. On Aristotle and Cicero’s discussions of the cardinal passions, see James, *Passion and Action*, 4.
 9. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 9.
 10. Jane Bennett, “Of Material Sympathies: Paracelsus and Whitman,” in *Material Ecocriticism*, eds. Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 239–240. [239–253].

11. Brian Sheerin, "Making Use of Nothing: The Sovereignities of *King Lear*," *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 110 (Fall 2013): 793; 792 [789–811]. I am grouping together thinkers who uphold the premise that laws issued by the monarch are not the only edicts that apply to humankind. On the resonances of the Aristotelian claim that "nothing comes from nothing," and the enduring influence of Epicurean materialism, which maintained—in contradistinction to the presentment of divine "ex nihilo"—that matter endures and that it has no cause beyond itself as the first principle of nature, see Louis Roberts, "Lucretius 1.857–58 and Stoic Logic," *The Classical World*, 65 (March 1972): 215–217; Adam Rzepka, "Discourse *Ex Nihilo*: Epicurus and Lucretius in Sixteenth-Century England," *Dynamic Reading: Studies in the Reception of Epicureanism*, eds. W. H. Sheerin and Brooke Holmes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Edward Tayler, "*King Lear* and Negation," *English Literary Renaissance* 20 (1990): 17–39.
12. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 22.
13. Seth Lobis, *The Virtue of Sympathy: Magic, Philosophy, and Literature in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 4.
14. *OED* 1a, cited by Richard Meek "'Rue e'en for ruth': *Richard II* and the imitation of sympathy," in *The Renaissance of Emotion: Understanding Affect in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries*, eds. Richard Meek and Erin Sullivan (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 132 [130–153].
15. Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* Book II, 23–39, as in John R. Milton, "The Origin and Development of the Concept of the 'laws of nature,'" *European Journal of Sociology* 22.2 (1981): 190 [173–195].
16. Ernest B. Gilman, "The Arts of Sympathy: Dr. Harvey, Sir Kenelm Digby, and the Arundel Circle," *Opening the Borders: Inclusivity in Early Modern Studies, Essays in Honor of James V. Mirollo* ed. Peter Herman (Delaware: Delaware University Press, 1999): 265 [265–97]. While the idea of sympathy was born of cosmology and natural philosophy, it came to be justified in light of evolving ideas about the invisible power of atomic effluvia and the impressionability of matter (as advanced by Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius). For Sir Kenelm Digby, air is filled with light, which is a "corporeal substance" made up of a sea of atoms whose agitations we can feel when the wind blows, Digby, *A Late Discourse* (4th edition; London, 1664) 41, as in Gilman, "Arts of Sympathy," 267.
17. The first cited usage of "sympathy" in the emotional sense of sympathizing is in 1607: "To feel sympathy; to have a fellow-feeling; to share the feelings of another or others" (*OED*, 4a), as in Meeks, "'Rue e'en for ruth'," 144. See also Lobis, *The Virtue of Sympathy*, "Introduction."
18. As Nicholas Brooke observes, as strong as, if not stronger than, the Christian ideas driving *Lear* is "the sense of nature; internal and external," Brooke, *Shakespeare: King Lear*, 36 as quoted in Kenneth Graham, "'Without the

- Form of Justice': Plainness and the Performance of Love in *King Lear*," *SQ* 42.4 (Winter 1991): 438 [438–461]. See also Robert J. Bauer, "Despite of Mine Own Nature: Edmund and the Orders, Cosmic and Moral," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 10.3 (Fall 1968): 359 [359–366].
19. Bennett, "Of Material Sympathies: Paracelsus and Whitman," 241.
 20. On *King Lear* as staging the debate between the natural law tradition and positivism, see Paul M. Shupack, "Natural Justice and *King Lear*," *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature* 9.1 (Spring-Summer 1997): 76–105. Critics who have written about the relationship among nature, natural law, and justice in *King Lear* include David Lowenthal, *Shakespeare and the Good Life: Ethics and Politics in Dramatic Form* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997) and Leon Craig, *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).
 21. See Kahn, *Wayward Contracts*, "Introduction," 1–13 and Margot Heinemann, "'Demystifying the mystery of state': *King Lear* and the world upside down," in *Shakespeare and Politics*, ed. Catherine Alexander (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 155 [155–168].
 22. At the end of the sixteenth century, in accordance with constitutional monarchism, the king ruled by reason of God's grace delimited by custom (this would evolve into mixed or republican monarchism), whereas in accordance with absolutism, the monarch was answerable to neither human counselors nor natural law. See Paul M. Shupack, "Natural Justice and *King Lear*," *Cardozo Studies in Law and Literature* 9.1 (Spring-Summer 1997): 69 [76–105]. I use the word "ambient" here to suggest something material and yet intangible; see Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 33.
 23. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, the *Norton Shakespeare*, Second Edition, eds. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 2008), 1.1.1–2. Herein cited within the text.
 24. As Anthony Parr notes, "the organic theory of the state" upon which Lear relies to provide him continued authority is "one which finds the body politic symbolized in the indivisible person of the monarch" and, obviously, "forbids its dismemberment." "New Directions: 'The Wisdom of Nature': Ecological Perspectives in *King Lear*," in *King Lear: A Critical Guide*, eds. Andrew Hiscock and Lisa Hopkins (New York: Continuum, 2001), 128 [118–138]. Edmund Plowden emphatically advised monarchs against dividing their kingdom while still alive or giving away pieces of their kingdom as dowry, Shupack, "Natural Justice and *King Lear*," 83.
 25. Kahn, *Wayward Contracts*, 4.
 26. Kahn, *Wayward Contracts*, 10.

27. Limon, "The Fifth Wall," 53 as in Malgorzata Grzegorzewska, "The War of 'Nothings' in the Tragedy of *King Lear*," *Shakespeare and Conflict: A European Perspective*, eds. Carla Dente and Sara Soncini (New York: Palgrave, 2013): 62 [55–67].
28. Typically, Cordelia's response is interpreted in terms of her character and as an index to her relationship with her father and sisters. As Margot Heinemann notes, Cordelia has been seen as "culpably stubborn, opinionated, self-righteous, and selfish, the inherited mirror-image of Lear's personal failings." Heinemann, "'Demystifying the mystery of the state,'" 156.
29. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 195.
30. Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 53.
31. Giorgio Agamben, "Bartleby, or on contingency," in Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans., Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 256. Sianne Ngai, Gilles Deleuze, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Antonio Negri, and Michael Hardt have also written on Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener* see "'I'd Prefer Not to': Bartleby and the Excesses of Interpretation," Armin Beverungen and Stephen Dunner, *Culture and Organization* Vol. 13.2 (June 2007): 171–183.
32. Agamben, "Bartleby, or on contingency," 267.
33. Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 384.
34. Edward Tayler, "King Lear and Negation," 25. As Tayler explains, a materialist, Epicurian denial of *creatio ex nihilo* may be baldly expressed as the first principle of nature that "nothing can be created from nothing by divine means" (26).
35. Tayler, "King Lear and Negation," 27.
36. John Protevi, *Political Affect*, 187.
37. Alex Schulman argues that Cordelia "breaks apart affective-hierarchical bonds by introducing rational-contractarian ones," *Rethinking Shakespeare's Political Philosophy: From Lear to Leviathan* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 104.
38. Otto Gierke, *Natural Law and the Theory of Society, 1500–1800*, trans., Ernest Barker (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 71.
39. Sheerin, "Making Use of Nothing: The Sovereignities of *King Lear*," 800.
40. Gierke, *Natural Law and the Theory of Society*, 35.
41. On the connection between negation and *anagnorsis* in *Lear*, see Edward Tayler, "*King Lear* and Negation."
42. Edward Forset, *A Comparative Discourse of the Bodies Natural and Politique* (London, 1606), E2v.
43. Forset, *A Comparative Discourse*, E2r.
44. Bruce R. Smith, *Phenomenal Shakespeare* (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 173.

45. Massumi, *Power at the End*, 109.
 46. Forset, *A Comparative Discourse*, G4v.
 47. Lobis, *The Virtue of Sympathy*, 79.

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